



WOLF SERIES: BOOK ONE

THE WOLF AND THE SHEEP

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
PENELOPE SKY

1 THE WOLF AND THE SHEEP PENELOPE SKY

2 THE WOLF AND HIS WIFE PENELOPE SKY

3 THE LONE WOLF PENELOPE SKY

THE WOLF BOX SET

PENELOPE SKY

HARTWICK PUBLISHING

Hartwick Publishing

The Wolf and the Sheep

The Wolf and His Wife

The Lone Wolf

Copyright © 2019 by Penelope Sky

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

CONTENTS

1. Maverick
2. Arwen
3. Arwen
4. Maverick
5. Arwen
6. Maverick
7. Arwen
8. Arwen
9. Maverick
10. Arwen
11. Maverick
12. Arwen
13. Maverick
14. Arwen
15. Maverick
16. Arwen
17. Maverick
18. Arwen
19. Maverick
20. Arwen
21. Maverick
22. Arwen
23. Maverick
24. Arwen
- The Wolf and His Wife
25. Arwen
26. Maverick
27. Arwen
28. Maverick
29. Arwen
30. Maverick
31. Arwen
32. Maverick

33. Arwen
34. Maverick
35. Arwen
36. Maverick
37. Arwen
38. Maverick
39. Arwen
40. Maverick
41. Arwen
42. Maverick
43. Arwen
44. Maverick

The Lone Wolf

45. Arwen
46. Maverick
47. Arwen
48. Maverick
49. Arwen
50. Maverick
51. Arwen
52. Maverick
53. Arwen
54. Maverick
55. Arwen
56. Maverick
57. Arwen
58. Maverick
59. Arwen
60. Maverick
61. Arwen
62. Maverick

Epilogue

From Penelope Sky.

MAVERICK

AS A YOUNG BOY, I USED TO STAND IN THIS VERY SPOT.

Right in the doorway, neither in the bedroom or outside it, I used to blend in with the shadows and stare at my father's back. He'd been taller than me most of my life, so I looked up to him—literally.

He always had the same routine as he stood in front of his vanity. First, he folded his sleeves back and buttoned them. Then the cuff links were added—one of the many pairs he owned. My mother always gifted him a new set on his birthday, finding something sleek he would be proud to wear.

Once the cuff links were secured, he pulled the watch onto his wrist. White gold and flashy, it contrasted against the dark colors he usually wore. His suits were always black or blue, never tan or silver. His change in wardrobe seemed to occur after the worst day of his life came to pass.

His silver wedding ring sat on the vanity where it'd been every day for a year. He always stared at it for a long time, as if he were considering putting it on again.

When I was a child, it was something he never put on—because he'd always been wearing it.

But now he didn't know what to do with it.

He straightened in front of the mirror and admired himself, his shirt still tight on his muscular arms. Sunlight had made his skin tanned and slightly weathered like worn-out leather, but he still possessed the resilience of a young man. Veins

stretched from the tops of his hands and up his arms, protruding from the tight skin. He was tall, a mountain in my eyes, but he'd shrunk down as gravity worked against him all these decades.

Now I was taller than him.

Stronger than him.

But not smarter than him.

Our lives had never been the same since that terrible day one year ago.

We had never been the same.

He lifted his gaze and met mine in the mirror. "Yes?"

When I was a child, he never noticed me because I was too short. But I was a man now...and I'd been a man a long time. Made in his likeness, I possessed his strength, his might. And unfortunately, I inherited all of his flaws—his coldness and his cruelty.

His deep voice reverberated against the wall, filling every room in the old castle like he was the original king who'd ruled it centuries ago. Life hadn't been kind to him, so he'd gradually darkened like the stone that comprised the walls of this enormous keep. It'd been the perfect playground for a family of four. But now that he was just a man of one...it was a large coffin.

I stepped out of the darkness of the hallway and entered his bedroom, the air reeking of solitude. I could feel the loneliness he never showed, the tears he never shed. "You asked for me." Like a good son, I obeyed my father even as a grown man. His lack of affection always disappointed me, but I respected him all the same.

After his watch was secured, he rolled down his sleeves and eyed his wedding ring once again, as if he were tempted to put it on and travel back in time, to fix the mistakes it was too late to correct.

He turned around, his chin up and his shoulders strong. "I have a meeting—and you're coming with me."

THE CAR STOPPED at the black iron gates, an image of a stallion carved into the bars. Once the security detail allowed us through, we drove up the gravel and approached the three-story estate that sat on prime Tuscan land. Summer was just around the corner, so dusk came late. It was almost eight o'clock, and the sky was still tinted with hues of pink and purple.

The car circled the large fountain in the center, and I admired the ancient cobblestone that made up the walls of the mansion. With curved archways for the windows and ivy that grew up along the sides, it was clearly a family legacy. Homes like this were passed down through generations, starting with ancient ancestral royalty until the present time. It was unlikely this property had been purchased in the last five years.

I tilted my face toward my father, keeping my eyes on our surroundings at the same time. "What are we doing here?"

My father glanced at his watch. "Your guess is as good as mine." His door was opened, and he stepped out.

I got out as well, and we were escorted inside, entering an enormous archway with a stunning chandelier. Artwork from the 1800s was on the walls, mostly landscapes of lilies and ponds.

The men guided us farther inside, bringing us into an enormous dining room lined with more historical paintings and sculptures. I'd grown up with money, so I knew what different levels existed. My family made their fortune through legal and illegal means. But judging from this magnitude, this family was aristocracy.

We sat down at the long table, a table that could easily seat fifty people for dinner.

I couldn't even name fifty people that I liked.

The men left the room.

My father sat at the head of the table. With a perfectly straight back and an aggressive nature, he was ready for whatever this meeting would involve.

I was still in the dark about everything. This could be a new client. This could be an enemy. This could be a friend. I really had no idea. “Who are we meeting?” My voice was minimized by the size of the room, the high ceilings that held several chandeliers. Instead of windows showing the outside world, it was just painting after painting.

“Martin Chatel.” My father continued to stare straight ahead, his fingers resting on the mahogany of the table. As if he were the one who had called the meeting, he sat with perfect poise, still as a statue.

Chatel. I recognized the family name.

French.

They had family relations all over Europe, a bloodline that traced back through kings. The wealth displayed on every wall had been respectfully inherited through superiority. My father was no longer in the criminal hemisphere, so I had no idea what our purpose was tonight. Unless he’d had a change of heart? “And why are we here?”

“Martin said he had an offer I wouldn’t refuse.”

I didn’t ask any more questions, knowing my father’s patience for talking had officially expired. My eyes moved to a painting on the wall, a portrait that stood out from all the others because it clearly didn’t belong there. Displaying a modern hand and new paint, it was a piece of art created recently, not hundreds of years ago. A young woman with brown hair the same color as this rich table sat in front of a dressing room mirror, gazing at her reflection as she prepared for whatever production she was about to perform. A brush was on the table, along with makeup supplies. She wore a tight dress and a diamond necklace. She was young, with rosy cheeks, painted lips, and eyes so blue, they were each their own ocean. She looked directly into the mirror, directly into the admirer of the piece. She seemed intelligent but innately innocent. She seemed kind but also callous.

But most of all, she was beautiful.

It was rare for the beauty of a woman to impress me, but I did appreciate art. The piece was special because it seemed so vulnerable, as if she didn't want to sit for the painting but was forced to. I saw two sides to her—a young girl and a woman.

There was nothing else in the room more entertaining, so my eyes stayed with the painting until our host joined us.

Martin Chatel entered the room, thin and pale. He seemed like a man who hadn't seen the sunlight in years, either because he was too busy working to make the time—or he preferred darkness. He sat at the opposite head of the table, even though that meant he was several feet away.

I ignored the interesting painting and stared at the man who had summoned us here.

Martin drummed his fingers against the table somewhat anxiously. “Caspian, it's been a while.”

“It wouldn't feel that way if I had a drink in my hand.” My father's presence was suffocating at times. He could saturate your mind with words, choke you with his derisive looks. He was a strong and fearless man—which made him terrifying.

Martin paused before he released a chuckle. “This isn't that kind of occasion.”

“I've never heard of an occasion where drinking wasn't involved. Even at my wife's funeral, I drank like an ox.” My father stared at Martin across the table, burning him with his coffee-colored eyes, before gesturing to me. “This is my son, Maverick.”

Martin looked at me, his eyes sizing me up. He stared at my blue suit, my well-kept hair, and the priceless watch that sat on my wrist. When he was satisfied with his assessment, he turned back to my father. “I know who he is.”

I suspected my father brought me to these meetings because he wasn't as focused as he used to be. Now he was more reckless, more unpredictable. I seemed to ground him, to give him a second sight. Most importantly, I was stronger. Age

had made my father weak, but youth made me limber and strong.

My father tapped his knuckles against the wood. “So, what is this offer I won’t refuse, Martin? You summoned us here without offering us a drink, so you better not have completely wasted my time.”

“And mine.” Sometimes my presence was dwarfed by my father’s, but make no mistake, I was definitely his son. I was just as cold and just as calculating. Ever since we ended our illegal activities, I’d been living a quiet life running the legitimate family business. But prior to that, I made heads roll.

Martin eyed us both, wearing a collared shirt and tie that seemed wrinkled. The clothes also appeared too big, as if they belonged to someone several sizes larger. For a man dripping with wealth, he looked dirty and poor—as if he belonged on the street. “I can get Ramon for you.”

That name was cursed in our house.

The second the name was whispered across the dining table, my father and I turned abruptly still, our bodies shutting down but our hearts beating faster. There was no greater enemy to our family, no worse crime ever committed.

I turned to my father and saw the sickly expression on his face, the way his skin stretched over his skeleton as every muscle tightened to the most extensive degree. His eyes steamed like frothed coffee, and his hand immediately tightened into a fist.

Martin continued to watch our reactions, knowing he’d said the perfect words to entice us both.

“Your offer better be concrete.” My father forced the words out of his mouth, but his throat was so tight that his words were raspy. There was too much rage for him to hold back, too much anger that surged through his body like a current.

“It is.” Martin closed his eyes for a moment, like he was fighting a sudden bout of fatigue. “I can tell you exactly where

he's going to be in three weeks. I'll give you everything you need to take him down."

My father had never given up his search for Ramon—for the man who killed my mother. My father's hand shook slightly on the table, like he was picturing Ramon's death that very moment. Ever since my mother had been raped and killed, my father had been a ghost. Now he had no purpose for living, and all he cared about was burning Ramon alive. He breathed hard before he spoke his next words. "In exchange for what?" There was no price my father wouldn't pay.

There was no price I wouldn't pay either. We'd spent the last year trying to track down the man who murdered my mother, an innocent person who had nothing to do with business. He snatched her while she was out shopping and did terrible things to her. It made me sick every time I thought about it, and I was glad she was dead...just so she wasn't suffering anymore.

When my father didn't get his answer quickly enough, he repeated his question. "In exchange for what, Martin? If they find out you were the rat, you'll be done. So, what could possibly be worth the risk?"

It didn't matter what Martin asked for—we would give him anything. My father would never find peace until Ramon was tortured and killed. I needed it for vengeance. This man hurt my family—and I would kill his entire family line in retaliation.

Martin shifted his gaze to me. "I want Maverick to marry my daughter."

I assumed he would ask for a fortune. Or ask us to kill some of his biggest enemies. The last thing I expected was a marriage proposal.

My father didn't flinch. "Done."

I did a double take, shocked my father had consented to this so easily. "I didn't agree to that."

"But you will." My father challenged me with his gaze, telling me to be silent and accept the terms.

But I refused. “No.” I held his gaze and didn’t care about my appearance of disrespect. I was willing to lay down my life for his, to do whatever was necessary to avenge my mother, but marry someone? That was a ridiculous request. I turned back to Martin. “What kind of deal is that? Why would you even want me to marry her?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Father snapped. “If that’s what he wants, then fine.”

I turned to Martin. “Explain. Now.” I wasn’t the kind of man a father would want for his daughter. I wasn’t respectful or understanding. I’d killed people for little to no reason at all. I wasn’t romantic or gentle.

Martin looked me in the eye and blinked a few times. “Things are about to change around here... I’ve made a lot of bad deals, invested in stupid ideas, and pissed away more money than I could earn in a lifetime.”

The walls were still standing, but the house seemed empty. He probably didn’t offer us a drink because he couldn’t even afford that. This man had lost everything—and that was why he looked like shit.

“The crows will descend and take everything away. Then the hounds will take the carcasses. My daughter won’t be safe on her own. They’ll come for her next...and do terrible things to her.” He closed his eyes as if just saying the sentence was too much. He might have lost everything, but his love for his daughter was still alive. “The only way I can keep her safe is by marrying her to a strong man, a man who comes from a good foundation, a man that can protect her.”

He’d described me perfectly—but that didn’t mean I wanted her. “I’m not looking for a wife, Martin. Maybe you’ve gotten the wrong impression of me, but I’m not any different from the crows and hounds you described. I’m cruel—and I won’t be any different toward her.”

Martin turned to my father. “But you’re both men of your word. If you promise me you won’t hurt her, that’ll you protect her, then I know you’ll keep your promise. I’m giving you the

thing you want the most—in exchange for what I want the most. It's a fair deal.”

I felt my father's gaze on the side of my face, the burn of his eyes as they drilled through my flesh. All he wanted was Ramon's corpse—he didn't care what it cost to acquire it. But I didn't want to take on a pet, a nuisance.

“You said you never wanted to get married anyway,” Father said. “So it's not like you're making a sacrifice.”

“But I am making a sacrifice,” I snapped. “I don't want to deal with an annoying brat. I don't want her living in my house, running her damn mouth, getting in my way.” I knew avenging Mother was the most important thing in our lives, but I hated what it had to cost. I turned back to Martin. “Why don't you take her and hide somewhere? Move to Iceland and start over.”

“I can't.” Martin inhaled a deep breath, but it sounded as if his lungs struggled to expand all the way, so he coughed into his hand, convulsing at the table.

Everything made sense in that moment. His sickly appearance...his pale skin.

He wiped his mouth with an old cloth that he kept inside his pocket. “I won't be around to protect her. I'm not sure what will claim my life—a bullet or cancer. But it'll be one or the other...and it'll be soon.”

I almost pitied him—almost.

Father turned to me. “Martin, give us a moment.”

I knew how the conversation would go before he even said a word. I watched Martin walk out of the room, and when he was gone, I spoke before my father could give one of his famous speeches. “I want Ramon dead as much as you do, Father. We will find him—one way or another. Our time is coming. Forcing me into this marriage will only speed up the process. Let's take our chances.”

Instead of being angry, disappointment filled his eyes. “There's nothing your mother wouldn't have done for you—”

“I know—”

“Interrupt me, and I’ll shoot you again.”

My mouth shut automatically because I knew he would make good on his threat.

“I listened to you, and now, you’ll listen to me. Your mother sacrificed everything for you and your sister. She gave birth to you, took care of you, put up with you when you were little brats. Now she needs us. Are you going to sit there like a selfish little pig when we have an opportunity to do the right thing?”

“I think Mother would want me to marry a nice girl and have lots of babies. It would be different if she were alive. I would do it in a heartbeat—but she’s already dead. This doesn’t change anything.”

His eyes were so steady, it was disturbing. “It changes everything. You will do this, Maverick. Or I’ll kill you.”

I stared at my father as the numbness set in. Ever since my mother had been put into the ground, he’d become a different person. I’d expected him to recover slowly, to emerge gradually from the dark side of the moon and return to the brightness of the sun. But he was progressively slipping away, disappearing further and further into the unknown.

I still remembered the man I’d once looked up to, the man who wore his heart on his sleeve. He didn’t have to tell us he loved us because he showed it with his smile, with his affection. But now that she was gone, he was gone too. He was just a shallow shell of who he used to be, someone plagued by regret, bloodlust, and terror. I wasn’t his son anymore. I was just a tool in his box. I was just a means to an end. When Mother died, his love for us died too.

In that moment, I felt like I had nothing left to lose. “Fine...I’ll do it.”

ARWEN

MY DIAPHRAGM TIGHTENED AS I HIT MY LAST NOTE. WITH MY mouth wide open and my lungs screaming in pain, I filled the auditorium with my strong voice and brought the production to a close, seeing the curtain close in front of me as I finally ran out of breath.

The lights were bright, roses were thrown onto the stage, and I could see the audience rise to their feet as they gave a standing ovation. The adrenaline I received was more powerful than any other high I'd ever known, better than sex with any man. It was euphoric, dreamlike.

I watched the curtains close as time stood still. Ever since I was a little girl, this had been my dream.

To be an opera singer.

Now I was.

With the curtains closed, the symphony concluded. That only made the applause louder, the sound of whistling and cheers more audible. I stayed on the spot and enjoyed the moment a little longer, cherished the connection I felt with every stranger in the room. They could have spent their Friday night doing anything else—but they chose to spend it with me.

DANTE CAME backstage with roses in his hands. He was tall, handsome, and had the cutest smile, and his eyes lit up as he

looked at me. He came right up to me and kissed me. “You were amazing.”

“Thank you...”

He presented the roses to me. “I could watch you sing every night.”

“And I’d love to sing every night if my voice could handle it.” There was already a vase sitting at my makeup station, so I set the roses inside and added some water.

“So how about I take you to dinner?”

“Singing for two hours does make me hungry.”

“Perfect.” His arm hooked around my waist, and he escorted me out of the theater, making this night even more magical.

I PULLED up to my childhood home and felt the presence of previous generations the second I stepped foot on the grounds. The house had always been large for three people, but now it felt too big for just one.

I entered the house and searched for my father, noticing how it seemed particularly dark. I carried a fresh arrangement of flowers and put them in a vase in the kitchen, just to lighten the place up. My mother used to be the same way, freshening up the house with flowers directly from the garden. She’d been gone a long time now, but I still carried on the tradition.

Father stepped into the kitchen, wearing jeans that were too baggy around his waist and a shirt that also seemed too loose. He was paler every time I saw him, sour like spoiled milk.

He kept telling me nothing was wrong—but now, I wasn’t sure if I believed him.

“There’s my princess.” He walked up to me and kissed me on the head. “How was the show last night?”

“Full house with a standing ovation.”

“Wow, that sounds amazing. This country can’t get enough of that voice of yours.”

“I don’t know about that...but thank you.”

He eyed the pink lilies in the vase, giving them just a glance before he turned back to me. “How are things with you?”

“Good. You know, just lots of work and lots of practice.” I’d been meaning to introduce Dante to my father, but since he was the first man I would bring home, I was nervous about it. My father had always been protective of me, and I wasn’t sure how he would feel about it. But then again, there probably wasn’t a single man he would ever think was good enough for me. “What about you?”

“You know, nothing too exciting.”

We moved to the dining table with a pitcher of lemonade and made small talk. I told him that the opera wanted to add a few more shows, but since I needed to preserve my voice, they would use my understudy. We talked about the weather, the football game, and other things that didn’t really matter.

He started to cough harshly, pressing a napkin to his face as he heaved at the table.

“Daddy, are you alright?” I placed a hand on his shoulder, concerned that this cold wasn’t going away. It only seemed to get worse with every passing week. “Are you sure the doctors said you’re okay? You look worse every time I see you.”

He wiped his mouth and chuckled. “Well, that’s a nice thing to say.”

“Come on, you know what I mean. You don’t seem well... Is there something you aren’t telling me?” Would my father keep something like that from me? Would he lie to my face and pretend everything was okay when it clearly wasn’t?

His smile faded away as his eyes filled with the distinct gloss of melancholy. Like impending tears in a painting, his emotion was clear in the subtleties of his gaze. Sometimes the

cliff face of despair was more obvious than the tears themselves. “I’m fine, princess. But there’s something I need to tell you... You aren’t going to be happy about it.”

“Alright...”

“The money is gone. I can’t pay my debts, I’ve screwed over a lot of people, and soon, men will be crawling all over this place and picking it apart piece by piece. I’ve pissed off some scary men...and they won’t be happy.”

I had both French and Italian blood, and I came from a line of wealthy aristocrats I was proud of. Our fortune was massive, and while I never asked for a penny more of it than what was in my trust, I’d assumed it would always be there when it was time to inherit it. “What...? What are you saying? We don’t have any money?”

He shook his head. “No...not a euro.”

Money wasn’t important to me, but knowing it wasn’t there terrified me. Without my share of the trust, I couldn’t afford my nice apartment, I couldn’t afford to keep performing because it didn’t pay enough. I couldn’t afford food or clothes. “I don’t understand... How did this happen?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said with a sigh. “It doesn’t change what’s going to happen. Bottom line, we’re broke. That means we’re also in danger...”

I couldn’t believe this was happening.

“I’m sorry, princess. I know you’re disappointed in me... I’m disappointed too.”

I wasn’t anything at the moment. As long as we were both healthy, we could figure out a new plan. I would have to get a day job if I wanted to keep performing at night. I’d have to reconsider my career options now that I couldn’t live off our wealth. It was devastating...but doable.

“There’s only one way I can keep you safe...and you aren’t going to like it.”

“Keep me safe? I’ll give up all my possessions and take them to the bank to pay our debts. Whatever it takes.”

“No, not from the banks. I have worse enemies than the banks...”

I didn't ask because I didn't want to know.

“The only way you'll be protected is if you marry into another family, a powerful and rich one, one with enough credibility that they won't bother with you. You'll be unattainable.”

“Well, this isn't the 1800s, Dad. Arranged marriages are absurd in this day and age.”

“Maybe...but it's necessary.”

So he was serious. “You aren't thinking of actually marrying me—”

“I've already found the perfect husband for you—Maverick DeVille.”

I had no idea who that was. “Uh...not gonna happen.”

“Arwen, I know this is hard, but this is about survival. We won't survive unless we do this. You have no idea what kind of men will be hunting me down.”

“What about you? Why don't I just go with you?”

“Because you'll be on the run forever. You'll never have a normal life. You'll never be able to sing again. Maverick can keep you safe. He can keep the dogs away. I know you don't like this, but trust me, this is what—”

“I'm already seeing someone...”

“Well...I'm sorry.”

“You're sorry?” Now that I realized that this was deadly serious, that my father really intended to marry me to some stranger, the terror was starting to suffocate me. “You're sorry that you're making me marry a guy I don't even know? Well, the answer is no. I refuse.”

He bowed his head. “Princess—”

“Don't 'princess' me.” I pushed my hands against the table and stood. “When I marry someone, it'll be for love. It'll be

because I can't live without him. I'm not marrying some guy because I'm scared of your collectors."

"Arwen, you don't understand." He rose to his feet, moving much more slowly.

"I'm not listening to this." I started to walk off, refusing to entertain this nonsense.

"Arwen." His voice grew stronger. "You don't understand what you're up against."

I stopped in my tracks, the tears immediately burning to the surface.

"I won't survive this. And when I'm gone, there's nothing standing between you and death. Arwen, I don't want to say this to you...but these men won't just hurt you. They'll rape you...they'll torture you. I wish there were another way...but there's not. Maverick DeVille is the only way you'll live. So, we don't have a choice."

ARWEN

MY APARTMENT BECAME MY FORTRESS FOR THE NEXT FEW days.

I dodged my father's calls even though I felt like shit for doing it.

I sat at the kitchen table with a bottle of red wine in front of me. It was one of those nights when I didn't bother with a glass. Getting my hit straight from the bottle was the only way to guarantee my satisfaction.

White candles were lit on the table before me, setting up a beautiful ambiance so I could practice my singing. A window that stretched from the floor to the ceiling was beside me so I could see Florence underneath me, the Catholic church just a few blocks over.

But I had no interest in singing.

My life had been turned upside down in a matter of seconds. All my freedom had been stripped away, all of my independence. Now my family was in such trouble that I had to marry some random guy.

Like that was ever going to happen.

As much as I loved my father, I was angry with him. How did he ruin our livelihood? How did he destroy my inheritance? How did he get involved with such cruel men that my life was really that vulnerable?

How could he do this?

I'd already lost a mother. Now I would lose a father.

Dante knocked on the door.

"It's open." I rose to greet him, to greet the only person in my life who could offer any comfort.

He stepped through the door wearing a collared shirt and jeans. He had dirty-blond hair, bright eyes, and a handsome face that was borderline boyish. A hint of a smile was on his lips, and happiness shone in his eyes. But when he saw my expression, all of that joy faded away. "What's wrong?"

"Everything." My chest tightened because air was too painful for my lungs. My life had been so simple a week ago. I'd had a family fortune that would keep me and future generations wealthy until the time stopped, but now I was penniless. My father squandered everything we had—including his life.

"What are you talking about?"

I didn't cry because I refused to shed tears. The last time I'd sobbed my heart out was at my mother's funeral, and it hurt so much that I vowed never to do it again. Crying made me feel weak, made me feel useless. It didn't solve the problem, and it only made me pathetic. "My father just told me he lost everything...all of our wealth."

Dante was still as he stared at me, as if what I'd said was so ridiculous, he couldn't believe it. "What? How?"

"He didn't give me any specifics." And it didn't matter either. Whatever he pissed away our money on didn't matter anymore. Our bank accounts were empty, and our debtors would still come to collect.

"But your family is worth a fortune. How could he just spend it all?"

I shrugged. "I don't know...I really don't." I'd wanted Dante to come over tonight not for interrogation, but for comforting. But I had to tell him this horrific news, how our lives were about to change forever. "He said he was marrying me off to someone because it's the only way he can protect me..." I knew that would be the worst piece of news, the

revelation that would affect us the most. Dante and I hadn't been together long, but the sparks were flying. It seemed like we could have a future together...if we were together long enough to experience it.

Dante's concern slowly stretched away, replaced by a stony look. As if it were a defense mechanism not to react, he kept his feelings bottled deep inside. That boyish charm was gone, and there was only devastation in its wake.

"He said a lot of dangerous men will hunt him down, and unless I want to run for the rest of my life, I don't have a choice. I guess this man is powerful enough that I'll be untouchable...at least, that's what he says."

"Who's the guy?"

I rolled my eyes. "It doesn't matter. I'm not marrying him."

"If you aren't marrying him, then what are you going to do?"

"I don't know... We'll run to France. I still have relatives there."

"Then isn't that the first place they'll look? Will your relatives be safe?" He was speaking reason, but I didn't want to hear any logic right now.

I grabbed the bottle from the table and took another drink.

Dante kept watching me with his pretty eyes. "Who is he?"

"Maverick DeVille...whoever the fuck that is."

Dante's eyes narrowed in recognition. "I recognize that name. His family owns a cheese business outside of Florence. It's been in their family since the days of kings."

"My father wants me to marry a guy who smells like cheese?" I asked incredulously, not the least bit impressed with his family wealth. "If he made wine, then at least he would be somewhat useful. But cheese?" I made a disgusted face. "This is not happening. And how does that make him powerful?"

Dante's eyes lowered as he considered the question. "A lot of wealthy families have ties to the underworld. Maybe he uses the business to launder his money. He's not the first one... Sounds like your father did the same."

Why did rich people waste their wealth trying to get richer in sleazy ways? "This is a nightmare. I keep thinking I'll wake up any second, but I never do." My hair was a mess because I'd been fisting it all night, making it frizzy because I kept yanking on it and spinning my fingers through the strands.

Dante didn't absorb the information quickly. He sighed quietly to himself then moved toward the large window, thinking about the load of turmoil I'd just dropped on him. Our relationship wouldn't survive what was coming. We couldn't run away together because we would get caught. And if we got caught...we would both die.

I refused to marry Maverick, but I had no other options.

None.

But I was more stubborn than a mule, inheriting a decisive attitude from my mother. I didn't take orders like a good soldier. I wanted to be the general, to call out the orders and watch lesser men obey me.

My father wanted me to sacrifice everything I believed in by marrying this stranger.

But I'd rather die...

MAVERICK

BERNADETTE HAD DRIFTED OFF TO SLEEP BESIDE ME. HER LEG was tucked in between mine, and her palm was flattened against my hard stomach. Her parted lips rested against my hot skin, still wet from our kisses. Her breathing was slow and steady, implying she would sleep in such a state of peace that she may never leave.

But I wouldn't allow her to stay.

No one was allowed to stay.

My phone vibrated on the nightstand, and my father's name showed up on the screen.

It was difficult for me to see his name without feeling a rush of hatred. That man's gaze was focused so tightly on one goal, he forgot about all the objects in his peripheral vision—including me. I was just a tool at his disposal. I did his clean and dirty work and never expected a thank-you.

I certainly wouldn't get one now.

I left the bed and didn't bother being gentle. Her head fell to the pillow, and she sighed as her precious sleep was disturbed. Just to be obnoxious and get her to leave, I answered the phone. "Father." The name was nearly ironic coming from my lips. He hadn't felt like a father for a long time. "Caspian" seemed more appropriate at this point. I walked to the table near the window and lit a cigar. Looking out the window, I could see the lights contrast against the beautiful city. Lights were pointed directly at every cathedral,

illuminating the beautiful history of this amazing place. Once the smoke started to smolder, I blew it out of my mouth.

“Martin will introduce you to Arwen tonight.”

So, she had agreed to this arrangement? I hoped the woman had more class than to accept an arranged marriage. If she refused, I would have gotten out of the deal. Also, I would have respected her for it. But now it seemed like I was stuck. “Alright.” My father really expected me to go through with this, to marry and subject myself to domestic torture even though it wouldn’t change what had happened to my mother. I’d be considered selfish for refusing—but he was selfish for asking.

“He’s taking you to the opera tonight.”

Great...I was already going on a first date. I’d just fucked Bernadette thirty minutes ago, so my dick still smelled like her. But now I had to put on a suit and meet a woman I would never care for. She would have my name and my protection—but she would never have me. “Alright.”

“Do you know how to say anything else besides *alright*?” he challenged.

I took another puff of my cigar and felt the rage boil in my blood. “Maybe if you said something interesting, I would.”

MARTIN and I took our seats in the first row, but there was no sign of his daughter.

Maybe she’d had a change of heart.

If only.

Martin didn’t look as sickly when he was dressed in a suit, but his pale skin was more noticeable when the stage lights hit him. “My daughter doesn’t know about my condition...and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention it to her.”

I had no interest in family affairs. I gave a slight nod of acknowledgment. “Where is she?”

“You’ll see her in a moment. She’s the opera singer in the production tonight.”

An opera singer? I imagined a large woman blowing her pipes so the entire auditorium could hear every single note of her monstrous voice. I’d never asked for her age or a description of her appearance. Regardless of how she looked, I would despise her all the same. But if she were considerably older than me...it would just be awkward.

Minutes later, the curtain rose and the symphony began.

Standing in the center in a tight black dress was a petite woman looking out to the crowd like she owned the auditorium. She hadn’t moved her lips or made a sound, commanding the stage with her silence. White gloves reached her elbows, and the pearl necklace around her neck made her seem like royalty. With pink cheeks, lips painted the color of red roses, and thick brown hair that was pinned to the side, she looked like a porcelain doll. Her eyes were the most obvious because they were a startling blue, like the deepest ocean in the world. She didn’t blink once as she absorbed the audience, fearless as a warrior, a soldier who used her voice as a weapon. Then she began to sing...and shatter glass with the power of her voice. Strong and controlled, she weaved a beautiful picture with just her words and the way she sang them. It was loud like a cannon breaking down the entrance to a fortress, but it was so uniquely stunning that it was hypnotizing.

It only took me seconds to recognize her...the woman from the portrait.

SHE FINISHED ON A HIGH NOTE, sucking in the souls of every person in the audience before the curtains came to a close. Roses were tossed on the stage, slipping from the hands of male admirers. The symphony pulled their bows away from their strings, and the silence that followed was almost depressing.

The audience rose to its feet and clapped loudly, echoing off the high, gold-plated ceilings. It seemed to last for five minutes straight before people finally filed to the exits, wearing their suits and ball gowns.

When Martin looked at me, fatherly pride radiated from his smile. “Amazing, isn’t she?”

I hadn’t clapped for her, and I continued to relax in my seat as everyone else dispersed.

“I know I’m asking you for the favor, but you couldn’t do better than Arwen Greco.”

I wouldn’t insult the man with a sarcastic comment, so I remained silent. She was definitely beautiful. If I saw her in a bar, I would have bought her a drink. That voice would be amazing to listen to in bed. But no amount of beauty or talent could make me grateful for this marriage. She could give me beautiful children...but that wasn’t relevant because I didn’t want any.

Martin took me backstage, and after weaving through different members of the production, we approached Arwen from behind. She was sitting at her dressing table, the white bulbs sticking out of the mirror frame to give her the ultimate lighting. She pulled the ribbon and flower out of her hair, letting the thick strands fall across her shoulders and slender neck.

We stopped behind her, and that’s when I recognized this vantage point. This was exactly where she’d been sitting when the photograph was taken, which was then turned into a portrait.

I felt as if I’d stepped back in time, to the moment I met her countenance for the first time.

She looked up and recognized her father in the mirror. Within seconds, her carefree expression faded into one of obvious dislike. Her eyes fell in disappointment, and her anger was seething. It was the same look I gave my father—so I recognized it right away.

She turned around on her stool and rose to her feet, her curves outlined in the skintight clothing that could barely stretch enough to allow her lungs to expand to make those incredible sounds. Her waistline was incredibly slender, so small my fingers could cup one side of her waist completely. Her petite stature didn't mask her womanly charm, especially her fuckable chest. "What are you doing here?" She ignored me completely and faced her father with enough fire that it seemed like she could breathe it out of her mouth like a dragon.

Martin remained calm despite his daughter's rage. "Arwen, I'd like you to meet Maverick—"

It was the first time she looked at me, and she didn't look at me the way other women did. She wasn't the least bit attracted to me, impressed with my broad shoulders or the way I filled out my suit. My structured jawline had no effect on her at all. She was indifferent. "It's *not* nice to meet you. Disregard whatever my father told you. I'm not marrying you." She grabbed her purse then stormed past us and headed to the exit.

With a stony face, I turned back to Martin, realizing I'd made the wrong assumption. This woman despised this plan as much as I did, but instead of being relieved at the notion, I was concerned. Neither one of us wanted to participate in this vile arrangement proposed by our fathers, but if it didn't happen, my mother would never be avenged. My father would never find peace.

Martin sighed. "I'm sorry...she's a little stubborn."

"A little?"

He shrugged. "Gets it from her mother. She'll come around...eventually."

I didn't believe that for a second. "I'll try to talk to her."

Martin released a sarcastic chuckle. "Maybe you are used to making mountains move—but not this one."

SHE LEFT out of the back exit and took the stairs to the sidewalk near the road.

I caught up with her, moving toward her as her heels clapped against the concrete path. She was still in the shadow of the theater, close to the statues of the two lions that protected the grounds of this historical landmark.

“Arwen.”

She stilled at the sound of her name, jumping because she’d assumed she was alone when she ducked out of her secret passageway. She turned on her heel and looked at me with the same fierce expression as before, her purse hanging off her shoulder. Now she looked even angrier at my appearance. “I said I don’t want to marry you—”

“And I want to marry you even less.”

Finally, she shut her mouth, shocked that I was the first man who didn’t want her. She pivoted the rest of her body and faced me, suspicion in her eyes.

“I have no interest in being a married man. There’s no woman on this earth that could possibly keep my attention long enough. I like my life the way it is—working, drinking, and fucking. You may be beautiful, but not beautiful enough.”

She never dropped her guard, but she didn’t seem offended by the rude comment I’d just launched at her. Her hoop earrings shifted with every movement she made, reflecting the distant light from the street corner. It was a warm night, and a gleam of sweat formed down her cleavage. “Then why are you chasing me?”

“Because you’re running.” I spoke like a smartass because I wanted her to know exactly who I was. I was a fucking asshole—all the way through.

“Don’t be a dick.”

“I’m not being a dick. I *am* a dick.”

She stepped closer to me, like she had a knife hidden somewhere in that skintight dress and she was looking for the perfect place to cut me. “Why did you agree to marry me? If you’re as powerful as my father says, then no one can force you to do anything.”

Only one man could. “It’s my father’s wish.” When she was this close to me, I could smell her perfume, her hair spray, and the scent of the dusty curtains of the opera house all at the same time. I could even smell her confidence because it had a scent...of fresh flowers.

“It’s my father’s wish too, but you don’t see me bending the knee like a pussy.”

My eyes widened because I couldn’t believe something so harsh came from such a pretty mouth. “You’ll be bending the knee with your ass in the air every night if your father’s enemies find you. They’ll fuck you bloody then stab you in the gut until you bleed out and die, scared and alone. Then they’ll hang you in the countryside until the police find your corpse, your eyes plucked out by the crows. I’m your only chance of survival.”

She kept up her fearless stare, but her eyes showed a hint of doubt, like my vivid picture scared her on some level—as it should.

“You’re too stupid to understand how dire your situation is. You literally have two options—life or death.”

She continued to hold my gaze, not backing down or intimidated like most people. She was alone with me, her screams too far away to reach someone who could help her. But she didn’t seem to care about the danger she was in. She didn’t seem to understand the magnitude of her defeat. “Then I choose death.” She gave me a final look of dismissal before she turned around and walked off, her heels echoing against the concrete as she made her way further into the dark night.

ARWEN

WHAT WAS I GOING TO DO?

I couldn't marry him.

I wasn't naïve about my current position. Everything Maverick said was true. I had no options right now. I could either marry him or subject myself to the cruel torture of the men who wanted to punish my father.

I wasn't stupid.

I was just stubborn.

My life had been perfect before this happened. I loved my job, I loved the man in my bed, and I loved my independent existence in this luxurious apartment. But all of that disappeared with the snap of a finger.

Now I had to give it all up.

Maverick warned me about the men who would hurt me.

But what about him? Who was he?

Would he hurt me just the same?

I grabbed another bottle of wine from the cabinet and uncorked it, the room filling with the sound of the audible pop. I drank directly from the bottle once again, not wanting to hand-wash all the glasses sitting in the bottom of my sink.

A knock sounded on the door—but I wasn't expecting company.

Then it opened, even though it'd been locked just a moment ago. Maverick emerged into the entryway, wearing dark blue jeans and a black t-shirt. Last time I saw him, his frame had been hidden underneath a suit, but now his clothing showed muscular arms, thick veins, and narrow hips. When he spoke about his bachelor life, it didn't surprise me at all. He picked up ass on the town and fucked pussy until he wanted a different flavor. Why be with one woman when he could have them all?

But that didn't impress me. I'd been with men just like him before. Nothing special about him at all.

A knife was sitting on my table, so I grabbed it and gripped it in my hand, the blade pointed in his direction. "Didn't your mother teach you to knock?"

"Yes. But I was a terrible child." He walked farther into the room, making himself welcome when my hostility was unmistakable. He came right up to me and took the bottle from my hand. "Barsetti vineyards... You have good taste in wine." He helped himself to a drink then sat in one of the dark wooden chairs, resting the bottom of the bottle on his thigh while his fingers still grasped the neck.

I kept my grip on the knife even though he didn't seem hostile.

He took another drink and eyed the weapon in my hand. "Are you going to smear some butter across my abs?"

My fingers loosened at the mockery. "Get the fuck out of my apartment, or I'll stab this in your neck."

"Geez...you are not a lady at all."

"Did I say I was?"

He set the bottle on the table. "Your father made it seem that way. But I guess he was just trying to make a sale."

I was being compared to livestock—and I didn't appreciate that. "Get out."

"No." His long legs stretched out beneath him, his knees apart and his muscles obvious in the places where his jeans

hugged his body. His shirt was tight across his chest because his pectoral muscles were thick enough to make a dent in his clothes. His skin was very tanned, like he didn't spend much time indoors—unless he was fucking. To every other woman in the world, he was a handsome and rich man.

But to me, he was just a bastard. “I said, get out.”

“And I said no.” He nodded to the other chair. “Take a seat.”

“I'm not a dog.”

“Never said you were...even though you're acting like a bitch.”

With lightning speed, I slammed the knife down onto his thigh, intending to stab him as deep as I could.

He moved his leg out of the way then caught me so I wouldn't slam into the hardwood floor underneath his chair. “Be careful. Don't want you to hurt yourself.” He took the knife out of my hand and started to help me up.

I pushed off him and straightened.

“You've got great speed but terrible aim. I can give you some pointers if you want.”

“Sure.” I crossed my arms. “How about we practice on you?”

A slow grin crept onto his face, the first one I'd seen him make. “You're a pain in my ass, but at least you're entertaining. I'll give you that.” He tossed the knife on the table. “You know why I'm here. You need to change your mind because we're running out of time. Make this easier on everyone and take advantage of your only option.”

“I said I'd rather die.”

“Then you must not understand what death means if you choose that.”

“No, I understand perfectly.”

“Alright...” He crossed his legs and rested one ankle on the opposite knee, getting comfortable in the wooden chair.

“Then you must not understand how terrible it feels to be raped by a group of men. How painful it is to be a punching bag. And since you’re so entertaining, they probably won’t kill you...so your one way out won’t be available to you. It sounds like I’m your only option. Never thought I’d have to work so hard to get a woman to marry me when I don’t even want to marry her.”

“I think the answer is pretty obvious—you’re soft.”

His smile disappeared immediately, like I’d provoked the beast within. “Trust me, I’m not soft.”

“You’re begging a woman who despises you to marry you. That’s pretty pathetic, if you ask me.”

“I’m negotiating a deal—a deal that needs to happen.”

“To please your daddy?” I mocked. “I thought women were the ones with daddy issues...”

His gaze darkened once more, like I was poking at a wound that was festering. “My mother was kidnapped, raped, and beaten. Before my father and I could rescue her, they killed her. You wanna know how?” He tilted his head as he looked at me. “They hanged her. Your father came to mine and said he would give us the man who destroyed my family if I married you.” He raised his hand and pointed it at me. “Why would I want to marry some annoying brat who doesn’t understand her father is trying to save her life? Why would I want to marry someone so goddamn stubborn, she actually thinks she has another way out? Why would I want to marry a little girl who thinks she’s some big, tough man? Trust me, the last thing I want to do is see you in a wedding dress and give you my name.” He rose to his feet, towering over me the second he stood upright. “But I have a duty to my family—to my mother. If this is the price I have to pay, so be it.” He stepped closer to me, his face coming near mine as he stared me down with pure loathing.

It was the first time my tongue felt too big for my mouth, when I knew I’d shoved my foot too far down my throat. I shouldn’t pity this man, but I did—and I felt terrible for the

insensitive comments I'd made. "I'm sorry about your mother...and the mean things I just said. I take it back."

"No such thing as takebacks." He stepped back, his presence still dwarfing everything in the room. "I need you to marry me because I have to avenge my mother. You need to marry me because no one will touch you as my wife. We need each other. So, stop prolonging it and just give in."

That was what anyone else would do...but I wasn't like everyone else. "You don't know me very well, but I'm not the kind of person that just gives up."

"Marrying me wouldn't be giving up. You would be choosing life, not death. If you run, you won't make it very far. If you stay, they'll find you even quicker. Taking my name will blanket you with invincibility. My family isn't a family you go to war with—especially not for a woman. You can keep your life, just with a few subtle changes." He grabbed the bottle and took another drink, his head turning and showing the prominent angle of his jawline. It was so sharp, it seemed to be carved out of glass. His chin was covered with a shadow of hair, just as it'd been a few nights ago. With classic dark looks and brown eyes almost the color of coffee, he was pretty on the outside...but dark within.

"I'm seeing someone."

"So? I'm seeing lots of someones." He turned back to me.

"I won't sleep with you."

"Is that supposed to bother me?" The corner of his mouth rose in a smile. "You think you're so beautiful that every man wants to fuck you? Sorry, sweetheart, but I've seen better."

I'd never met a man so cold and cruel. I didn't care if he found me beautiful or not, but he was so vicious, it was hard to believe. But at least he wouldn't force me to do anything I didn't want to do. "I've seen better too."

"I doubt that..."

I couldn't help but roll my eyes at his misplaced arrogance. "Will you hurt me?"

“Depends.”

“Depends on what?” I demanded.

“If you piss me off. Just don’t piss me off, and we won’t have any problems.”

“Well, don’t piss me off, and I won’t kill you in your sleep.”

He chuckled like I was nothing but comical to him. “I always see what’s going on—even with my eyes closed. Any other requests?”

“I want to live alone.”

“No, that won’t work. You’ll have to live with me. The world will have to think you’re really my wife. That means keeping your mistresses...or misters...discreet. I don’t have to do the same thing because—”

“You’re a pig?” I snapped.

“Something like that.”

The more I got to know him, the less I liked. “I want to continue to sing at the opera. It’s my life.”

“Couldn’t care less.”

“I want to have children.”

He opened his mouth to make a comment, but then he closed it again, as if he’d misunderstood what I said. “Wait... you mean you *don’t* want to have children.”

“No. I do want to have children.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Fine. Then I’ll have them with someone else.”

“But they’ll be under my roof. I can’t allow that.”

“There’s nothing you can do to control when I get pregnant or not. So, you can either be the father, or you don’t have to be. Doesn’t make a difference to me. But I will have a family one way or another. Not anytime soon...but someday.”

With that dark countenance, he stared at me with a stony expression, like he was annoyed by the request but felt helpless to fight it. The situation was out of his control, and he knew it. No point in arguing about it. “Is that a yes, then?”

“A yes to what?”

“That you’ll marry me.”

Ever since I was a little girl, I’d imagined a much better proposal than this. For one, the guy would be someone I loved. And second, it wouldn’t be under these horrific circumstances. Plus, the guy wouldn’t be a huge pig.

He continued to watch me as he sat and waited for a confirmation.

I slowly lowered myself into the chair and grabbed the bottle of wine. “I don’t know...” I brought it to my lips and took a deep drink, needing the sweetness of the fruit along with the booze to calm my beating heart.

With one arm resting on the table and an indifferent expression, he watched me. “You do know. You just don’t want to do it.”

I took another drink.

“Your father is trying to help you. Let him help you.”

I nearly spat out the next sip of wine I took. “Help me? If he wanted to help me, he could have not spent our family fortune on god knows what. He could have avoided all these bad men he’s talking about. If he really gave a damn about protecting me, he wouldn’t have put us in such a vulnerable position. It’s not just irresponsible...it’s unforgivable.”

Maverick stared at me with cold eyes, looking at me like I was a painting rather than a person. “You can be a brat and whine about the past, or you can move on. I suggest you move on...if you don’t want to die.”

“I’d rather be a brat than an asshole. This information dropped on my shoulders just a week ago, and I’m supposed to be over it?”

“You should have been over it the moment it happened. There’s no point in living in the past. It doesn’t matter that you used to be some rich little princess. Now you’re piss-poor—unless you grab on to the only life raft you’ve got.” He rested his fingers under his chin as he regarded me. “Life will always throw surprises your way. How you react to them is what defines you. Feeling sorry for yourself is one way to go...but it won’t get you anywhere.”

This man was heartless and lacked any ounce of empathy. He didn’t care about my story and what I’d endured. That indifference would carry on into our marriage, and I would be married to a man I didn’t even like. We couldn’t even be friends. “Have you always been this cold?”

He regarded me with the same expression, frozen down to his core. “You call it cold. I call it pragmatic.” He rose to his feet and towered over me once more. “I’m going to assume your answer is yes.” He turned to the door to leave.

“Wait.”

He turned around.

“I don’t even know you...” I knew nothing about him other than his name. I had no idea what he did for a living, what his favorite color was, what he believed in. We’d shared a bottle of wine and had a conversation, but I knew him even less than I did before.

After another cold look, he turned back to the door. “Does it matter?”

MAVERICK

MARTIN OPENED THE DOOR HIMSELF BECAUSE HE COULDN'T afford his servants anymore. Dressed in pajamas and a t-shirt, he seemed almost too tired to get out of bed anymore. His illness was obvious to anyone who looked hard enough. It was a mystery that Arwen didn't notice with her fierce intelligence.

Or maybe she just didn't want to see it.

I didn't wait for an invitation before I stepped into his entryway. "I talked her into it."

Martin straightened his back, forcing his weak muscles to work to give him proper stature. He stilled once he heard what I said, and his right eyebrow arched so high in puzzlement. "Are we talking about the same woman?"

I was impressed he could crack a joke in his condition. Mortality didn't faze him like it did most people. With melancholy in their eyes and defeat in their limbs, they gave up before the fight was even over. "Yes."

"Then hats off to you." He mimicked a bow. "You really should marry her...since you're the only one that can talk some sense into her. You must be persuasive."

Just bossy.

"Thank you for doing that. And of course, I'll uphold my end of the bargain."

I wouldn't marry her unless he did. "You better. Because if you don't, I won't be kind to your daughter."

His smile dropped with the threat. He could make a joke about anything, even in his condition, but a threat to his little girl, he couldn't brush off as easily. "I'm a man of my word. I assume you're a man of yours?"

"Always."

"Then be good to her. I know she has a bit of an attitude, but the best mares always do. They know what they are worth and don't settle for less. They're beautiful, but they aren't afraid to get their hands dirty. My daughter's qualities are also her flaws. When you get to know her, you'll see just how magnificent she really is. This might be a means to an end for now...but maybe you'll come to love her in time."

Love wasn't in my vocabulary. "I won't hurt her. You have my word."

He released the breath from his lungs, coughing with the effort.

I watched this sick man and actually pitied Arwen. She'd already lost her family inheritance, but soon she would be an orphan as well...and she had no idea. "You need to tell her the truth."

He wiped his mouth with a handkerchief. "I know."

"You need to do it soon. It's cruel to keep her in the dark when she could be spending time with you."

"That's the very reason I haven't told her. After what I did, she has every right to be angry with me. Betraying her the way I have and then dropping the truth on her shoulders...would be so conflicting. It would take away her right to be angry. She deserves to be angry."

"You can't change the past, Martin. But you can savor every minute of the present."

"I know..." His eyes dipped down as he continued to breathe through the ache in his chest.

"How much time do you have?" Every time I saw him, he seemed to look worse and worse. His skin was becoming

pastier, his breathing was even louder, and the bloodshot look to his eyes deepened.

“It’s not a science,” he said. “But a couple weeks. Truth be told, I hope I die before the shit hits the fan. Would much rather die in my sleep than be butchered with a knife. And if I’m really lucky, I’ll even be buried next to my wife before any of that happens.”

It was hard to believe he was capable of such stupidity when he seemed to truly love his family. “Why did you do it?” Men gambled with their fortunes and their lives when they were stupid or greedy—usually both. But this man seemed a little wiser than the rest.

He shrugged. “Just like you said, we shouldn’t live in the past...”

Fair enough. “Then we should have the wedding next week. I’m assuming you’d like to give her away.”

“Yes...” His eyes glossed over as he imagined it. “I know this isn’t the wedding she wants. You aren’t the man she wants. But it’s still the best protection I can give her. Maybe one day, she’ll thank me for it...”

Maybe.

“Even if things change in time, you must stay married to her. Even when the dust settles, you can’t go back on your commitment. Do we understand each other?”

That meant she would be my wife until the day I died. I’d see her face every day, see her resentment as the years turned into decades. Maybe we would have children, and perhaps that familial bond would bring us closer together. Or maybe we would hate each other until our dying breath. “Give my family our revenge, and consider it done.”

WITH A CIGAR IN MY MOUTH, I made the call I’d been dreading.

I wasn't afraid. I just loathed every moment I spent talking to this man.

Father answered. "Is it done?" He'd told me what would happen if I failed. A second bullet wound would be in my shoulder, next to where he shot me the first time. Sometimes I felt like a servant rather than a son.

"Yes."

A congratulation never came. Not even a thank-you. I fulfilled his expectations; I deserved no reward. In his eyes, everything he asked for was so basic, only an idiot wouldn't be able to do it. "Then marry the bitch so we can start preparing."

"It'll have to be a public wedding with guests if we want people to take it seriously."

"How is that my problem?"

"You'll have to be there." It was ridiculous I had to ask my father to come to my wedding—even if it was fake.

He practically growled on the phone. "Fine. How long does the bastard have to live?"

"Weeks."

"Then we need to hurry this up before he croaks. I need to know exactly where Ramon will be—so I can choke him with my bare hands."

ARWEN

I LAY IN BED WITH DANTE BESIDE ME.

Sex used to be good, used to be hot and sweaty. But now that everything had changed, the fire that used to burn our skin had gone out. I was stressed about the future, so my libido had faded. Dante must have felt the same way, because his desire wasn't as potent.

With my face on his chest, I lay beside him, thinking about how much my life would change. I tried to convince myself it wouldn't be that different. I would live with Maverick, but I wouldn't be in a relationship with him. I could still work, still sleep with Dante. It was just a change of scenery.

That's all.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

I watched Dante stare at the wall, his thoughts a million miles away. He was naked in this bed with me, but his thoughts weren't on sex. They weren't even on me. "What are you thinking about?" I propped my head on my hand and ran my fingers down his frame.

He didn't shift his gaze to me. "I don't see how this is going to work."

"What?"

"Us."

My heart stopped beating. "Why wouldn't it?"

"You know why." Bitterness was heavy in his tone.

“Nothing will change. It’s just a display.”

“Maverick DeVille is still a powerful guy. I don’t want to cross him.”

“He said I could sleep with whoever I want—and he could do the same. It’s just a show, Dante.”

“Still...you’re another man’s wife.”

“Maybe...but I don’t belong to him.” I continued to run my fingers down his chest, feeling the grooves of his abs. “Nothing has to change, so I don’t know why you have a problem with it. Our relationship can be the same as it was before.”

He finally turned his gaze to me. “But I can never marry you.”

My fingers stopped moving when I finally understood. He didn’t have a problem with my marriage. He didn’t have a problem with Maverick. But he had a problem not making me his.

“It’ll always be a secret. It’ll be an affair. We’ll have to keep our relationship private, which means no public dinners, no family gatherings...just sex. That’s fine for the meantime, but it won’t last forever.”

I hadn’t thought that far down the road. I just assumed I could have everything I wanted—on the side. But now I realized how unfair it would be to the other person. They would always be second best. The gravity of what I was giving up really hit me. I would never truly fall in love because a man would never love a married woman.

It hit me hard.

A knock sounded on the door.

My eyes turned to the open bedroom door through which I could see the entryway. It was almost nine in the evening, far too late for a random visitor. I slipped out of the sheets and pulled on my robe.

Before I could even leave the bedroom, Maverick walked inside my apartment.

“Do you mind?” I stepped out of the bedroom and shut the door behind me, hiding Dante’s naked body from view.

Maverick’s eyes glanced at the door, catching a glimpse of my lover before he turned back to me. With no apology, he pulled an envelope from his back pocket and tossed it on the kitchen table. In a t-shirt and jeans, he once again looked fit, having the kind of body that seemed bulletproof. “No. You can finish when I’m done.”

Was this how our lives would be? He would barge into my room whenever he felt like it? “Knock. I’m warning you.”

“Or what?” He challenged me, not the least bit afraid of my ferocity.

“This.” I slapped my palm across his face.

He barely turned with the hit, and even when my hand collided with his face, he didn’t seem angry. If anything, he seemed amused.

“Don’t barge into my apartment again.”

“Otherwise, you’ll slap me again? Fine. I don’t mind it.”

Jesus, he was infuriating.

Maverick behaved like nothing was odd, like it wasn’t awkward that I had a man in my bed at that very moment, behind a closed door. He acted like I hadn’t just slapped him, like he had every right to step on my property as if he owned it. “Talk to your father. You’ve dragged it out long enough.”

This man hardly knew me, but he spoke to me like my family affairs were his concern. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Believe it or not, I’m helping you.”

“I find that hard to believe...”

He cast his cold gaze on me then gestured to the envelope he’d dropped on the table. “We’re getting married on Saturday. Buy a dress—something nice. There will be lots of people there.”

“What people?” I asked, as if that was the most important sentence he said.

“My people.” He dismissed the conversation by turning away.

I grabbed the envelope and spotted all the cash stuffed inside, tens of thousands of euros. “What the hell is this?” I threw it at his back. “I don’t need your money.”

He turned back around, annoyance spreading into his hard gaze. “Now isn’t the time to be proud.”

“I’m not being proud. I just don’t need your money.”

“You need a nice dress.”

“And I will get myself something.”

“With what money?” he demanded. “You literally own nothing now. Everything in this apartment will be seized in weeks. You’ll be my wife, which means I don’t want you to look like a slob. Make yourself look decent so our wedding day will be a little less terrible—and a little more believable.”

“Wow...I despise you.” Every conversation we had was worse than the last. Soon, he would be just down the hall and a million times more annoying. I would have to spend whatever money he gave me because I didn’t have any other choice.

He opened the door and turned back to look at me like I was nothing to him. The room could have been completely empty given the indifference written on his face. “A wolf doesn’t care if the sheep likes him. All he cares about is eating the sheep—and you’re my sheep.”

ONCE I ACCEPTED MY FATE, I showed up at my father’s house.

I’d been bitter about everything and everyone. I was disappointed in my father for destroying our wealth. I was angry that a bastard like Maverick would be my husband. I was hurt that Dante didn’t want to be with me for the long term.

Every single cornerstone of my foundation had been ripped from underneath me.

I wouldn't be surprised if I lost my job at the opera for no reason at all.

That was the kind of luck I'd been having.

My father was quiet as he sat across from me, but he wore a small smile like he was happy to see me.

We hadn't said a word to each other. I let myself into the house because there were no servants to do it anymore. Now I sat across from him at the table, hardly able to look him in the eye because I was so upset with him.

How could he do this to us?

My father gave me the floor, providing me the opportunity to speak first.

But I had nothing to say. I was only here because I couldn't avoid him forever. On Saturday, I would marry a man I hated...and I didn't want to do that alone. My father was all I had. It would be strange if he weren't there...even if it wasn't the happiest day of my life. "The wedding is on Saturday." I finally forced the words out, accepted the terrible truth. "I bought a dress..." I'd always thought shopping for my wedding dress would be a beautiful affair. My friends and I would drink champagne and eat chocolate-covered strawberries as I tried on every beautiful designer dress. But instead, I walked to the closest shop to my apartment and picked the dress I liked the best.

I didn't even try it on.

To make it worse, I handed over the cash Maverick gave me.

And signed my soul over to the wolf.

"That's nice," Father said. "I'm sure it'll look stunning on you. But you could wear jeans and a t-shirt, and you'd still be the most beautiful bride."

Flattery wouldn't work on me—even if he meant it. "I'm still so angry all of this is happening. The only reason I'm marrying Maverick is because he foretold my fate if I rejected him. He's a cold and irritating man, but I'll admit he's better

than the alternative..." At least the man wouldn't rape me. At least he wouldn't hurt me...I think. I tried to stab him and he didn't retaliate, so I was probably safe. "But I'm losing Dante...I'm losing my freedom...I'm losing everything." My hands rested on the table, and I finally lifted my gaze to meet my father's eyes. "I'm so angry with you for all of this. This is entirely your fault." It was a cruel thing to say, but I didn't care. "I'll never marry a man I love because of you. I'll never have the family I want because of you. You've given me to Maverick to protect me, but if you really wanted to protect me, you should have made different choices." It pained me to speak to my father this way, but the situation was crushing my chest.

My father looked at the table as he gathered his bearings. After a deep sigh, his shoulders sagged, and he looked at me again. "You're absolutely right, princess. It is my fault. I shouldn't have been so arrogant. I should have been more cautious. Now I'm leaving you with nothing... It's terrible."

Hearing his admission didn't make me feel better. It didn't give me any satisfaction to be validated. The pain was exactly the same.

"I'd do anything to take it all back..."

I knew he would. My father had made a mistake, but he wasn't evil. "I know..."

"I wish this wasn't happening. I wish you weren't marrying a man you don't love. I wish for a lot of things...but wishing doesn't get you anywhere."

No, it doesn't.

"But Maverick is a powerful and honorable man. He'll keep you safe."

I wasn't looking for a man for security. I was looking for a man for love.

He saw the disappointment in my eyes. "I understand if you hate me."

His actions were enough to garner that reaction, but I couldn't bring myself to feel that way. "I don't. I never could."

His hand moved on top of mine, like that meant the world to him. “Princess, there’s something I have to tell you...”

My eyes lifted to meet his. So much terrible news had been dumped on my plate already. Could there possibly be more? Why couldn’t the universe give me a break? Why couldn’t life be fair...the way it used to be.

He squeezed my hand as he took a deep breath, wincing like his words were painful before they even came out of his mouth. “I have cancer...and I don’t have much time.”

ARWEN

JUST WHEN I HIT ROCK BOTTOM, I FELL A LITTLE FURTHER.

Now everything was numb, ice-cold, and fragile. My fingers were frozen to the bone, my heart stopped beating with the same vitality, and my legs weren't strong enough to hold my weight. The idea of marrying Maverick killed me...but this was so much worse.

So much fucking worse.

I couldn't show my tears, not when my father was the one who had to die. My job was to be there for him, to help him through this difficult time and make him as comfortable as possible. He only had weeks left, so I put aside our issues and was the daughter he needed.

I stayed at the house, cooked all of his meals, watched TV with him, and helped him with anything he needed. We watched his favorite movies, looked through old photographs, and tried to remember happier times.

But when he was asleep, I let myself cry.

Let myself sob into my darkest night.

I sat at the dining table with a cup of hot tea in front of me, watching my tears splash into the steam. When my father left this world, I would be the last of my line, the last of my kind. With no brothers or sisters, I was completely alone in this world.

Maverick would be my only family...by name.

I still didn't want to marry him, but my father's demise made me understand how alone I truly was. He wouldn't be there for advice. He wouldn't be there for guidance. I would be completely on my own—with vultures following me.

Perhaps Maverick was my savior after all.

My phone rang, and Dante's name popped up on the screen.

I answered it, tears audible in my voice. "Hey..."

He sighed when he heard my sadness. "I'm so sorry..."

"I know." I wiped my tears with the back of my thumb and willed myself to stop crying. Crying wouldn't change anything—but I was so devastated.

"Is there anything I can do?" His deep voice came over the line, carrying the weight of his sorrow.

"No. But I'm going to stay with him until...it's time."

"I understand. If there's anything I can do, just let me know."

"Okay..." I stared into the hot tea in front of me, wishing this were a nightmare I would wake up from. I wished this were just a bump in the road. But the harsh truth was my reality...and it was unbearable.

"So, it's still happening on Saturday?"

"Yeah..." I really had no choice now. There was no going back...but there was nowhere for me to go. Dante certainly couldn't keep me safe. He would be murdered with me. "You told me how you feel about it, so I understand if you want to stop seeing each other..." The last thing I needed was to lose the only comfort that I had, but I knew he couldn't fix this for me. No one could.

"No...I'm not ready for that."

"Good." I needed a man to get through the dark nights I was about to face. "Me neither."

WHEN I OPENED the large mahogany door, I looked up into the face of Maverick.

With his dark hair, coffee-colored eyes, and the shadow of hair along his structured jawline, he stared at me with that stony expression, as if he had no grasp of what a smile was. The bright sunshine of the summer behind him brought a darkness over the front of his body, matching the dark blazer he wore and his dark jeans.

I kept my hold on the door handle and stared him down, matching his stoniness with my coldness.

He shifted his weight slightly, straightening his shoulders as if I were an opponent rather than his fiancée. Whenever this man was near me, his posture was always hostile. Maybe that was directed at me—or maybe that was just how he was.

“Are you going to invite me inside, or should I just barge in like usual?”

My hand gripped the handle because I was tempted to slam the door in his face. “Why are you here?”

“Your father told me you were looking after him.” Instead of waiting for my invitation, he stepped inside and pushed past me.

I stared at the landscape through the door, the red geraniums blooming out of the pots along the walkway. It was a beautiful day, but I was in no mood to enjoy it. I shut the door and turned around. “You knew the entire time.” I crossed my arms over my chest.

“Yes.” At over six feet, he made a dent in the enormous room. His muscled shoulders stretched out his blazer, and his veined hands peeked out from the ends of his sleeves. His jeans were snug, showing the definition of his muscular legs in some places. He was a beautiful man with a beautiful body—but an ugly soul.

“And you didn’t think you should mention that to me?”

“It’s not my place.”

Hearing that my father was dying was horrifying—no matter who said it. “He’s sleeping right now.”

“I’m not here for him.”

“I hope you aren’t here for me—because I’m not yours yet.”

The corner of his mouth rose in a smile, like he found my attitude comical rather than intimidating. Sometimes, Dante was put off by my brashness, and other men didn’t appreciate it either. They said I was too much to handle. But Maverick clearly thought I was a joke. “I have something for you.” He pulled out a small black box from his pocket then stepped toward me. He snapped open the top and revealed a princess cut diamond ring with diamonds along the band. The diamonds were clearly flawless—because they were practically blinding.

I stared it, shocked that Maverick was capable of picking out something so elegant and stunning. It was exactly the ring I’d always dreamed of getting. It was so simple but so sleek. I yanked my gaze away from the brilliant diamonds and looked at him again.

“You like it.”

“I never said that.”

He pulled the ring out of the box then grabbed my left hand. “You don’t need to.” In something akin to a romantic gesture, he slipped the ring onto my finger. Except it wasn’t romantic at all, just a formality. He kept his eyes glued to mine as he released my hand.

It was a perfect fit. Just to be stubborn, I didn’t raise my hand to admire it, even though I would the second he was gone.

He slipped the box back into his pocket. “I’ll be back tomorrow. Your father and I have business to discuss.”

“I’ll let you know how he’s feeling. He’s getting worse by the day.”

“Then we can’t put this off.”

“Thanks for being so sensitive about it...”

He stepped closer to me and lowered his voice. “I’m sorry your father is dying. But my mother is already dead. Don’t expect me to cry a river for you.”

“At least you still have a parent...” This man was evil—right down to the bone.

His eyes shifted back and forth slightly as he looked into mine. He could command soldiers with that look, lead countries with that stare. He was strong and ominous, every bit as unnerving as my father described. If there had to be someone looking out for me, it seemed like there was no one better. “The grass is always greener on the other side...”

MAVERICK

FATHER REACHED THE DOOR FIRST. “HE BETTER NOT DIE today, not before he gives me what I want.” He pounded his fist against the door, slamming his knuckles into the wood like he was there to capture the fortress rather than just pay a visit.

If Arwen thought I had no compassion, wait until she met my father. “We’ll get what we want. But let’s be delicate. The man only has weeks, if not days, to live.” I didn’t have much pity for Martin—but I did pity his daughter.

My father turned on me like I’d insulted him. “Was anyone delicate when your mother died?”

God, I knew he’d say that.

When his cheeks started to puff, I knew he was losing his temper. “Was anyone sensitive to my wife being raped—”

“We’re here and he’s alive. So let’s just get what we came for. No need to make a scene.”

“What did I say about interrupting me?” He grabbed me by the neck and started to choke me.

I threw my arm down and pushed him off. “Enough.”

“If I had my gun, I’d shoot you.”

You’d think I’d be numb to his cruelty, but it was like a fresh wound every single time. “Then how would you hold up your end of the deal? I’m the one marrying her—like you asked.”

His eyes narrowed. “I’d shoot to wound, not to kill.”

“Be careful. Because I shoot to kill—every time.”

My father stared at me coldly, his eyes turning aggressive at my threat. He'd been getting away with his offensive behavior for almost a year. His wife died, so he thought it entitled him to be the world's biggest ass.

I could only tolerate so much.

Arwen opened the door. “That's quite a loud knock you've got there...”

My father looked her over, unimpressed, and then stepped inside the house without issuing any kind of greeting.

She watched him move past her before she cocked an eyebrow and looked at me. “I see where you get it from.”

That was the worst insult she'd ever given me. I followed my father inside. “How is he?”

My father wouldn't even tolerate the simple question. “It doesn't matter how he is. He made a promise to us, and he will keep it...unless he wants his daughter to end up like your mother.” He walked off and headed to the dining room in the rear of the house.

She watched him go, her eyebrow staying raised like she couldn't believe his audacity. She turned her gaze back to me, still in shock at his rudeness.

“Now I don't seem so bad, huh?” I smiled even though I didn't feel an ounce of joy inside my body, then headed to the entryway.

“I'll get my father...” Arwen took the stairs.

When I passed the kitchen, I took a bottle of wine and a few glasses then joined my father.

He was huffing and puffing like a wolf about to blow the house down. He looked straight ahead and drummed his fingers against the table, so noticeably anxious that he made all the figures in the paintings anxious too.

I poured the wine and pushed the glass toward him.

He ignored it.

Maybe it was an evil thought to have, but sometimes I wished my father had died and my mother had lived.

At least she was a good person.

Martin walked into the room moments later, looking worse than the last time I saw him. He walked a little slower, breathed a little heavier, and it seemed like his skin was about to drip off his face.

Arwen pulled out the chair for him and helped him sit down. Concern was in her blue eyes, and she looked after her father with obvious love. She wasn't the fierce woman with an attitude that could bite. Now she'd been reduced to her rawest emotions, her fears. Her father was going to die, and there was nothing she could do to help him...but she tried anyway. "How about some water?" She rubbed his shoulder as she looked down at him.

"Yes, thank you."

She walked off, her diamond ring shining on her left hand.

My eyes went to the portrait of her on the wall. Now I noticed a distinct contrast between the painting and her physical appearance. That ring made all the difference in the world, and without her wearing it, she seemed like a changed person. It subdued her somehow, like a bridle on a horse.

My father cut right to the chase. "Ramon. Where is he going to be and when?"

Martin turned to me. "It's nice to see you again, Maverick. I'm sorry I missed your visit yesterday—and thank you for the beautiful ring—"

"I asked you a question." My father took over the conversation once more, ignoring anything else that wasn't relevant to what he wanted. He was focused on one task only—to the detriment of everyone around him. "I don't give a shit about your pleasantries. We made a deal, and you need to spit it out now or I'll—"

"You'll what?" Arwen stepped into the room, carrying the glass of water in her hands. She wore a dark blue dress that complemented her dark hair. Pearls encircled her neck, and her

hair was pulled to the side, hanging down in a braid. The glass hit the table with a noticeable thud as she faced off against my father.

Arwen didn't understand boundaries.

But neither did my father.

Martin cleared his throat. "Princess—"

She raised her voice a little louder, matching my father's rage with her own. "Or you'll *what?*"

My father stared her down, clearly surprised someone was standing their ground against him. He didn't know if he should get up and slap her in the face or just smash her head into the wall.

"Asshole, this is how deals work." She placed her hand on her hip. "You get your shit when both sides of the deal are completed. I haven't married your son, and you haven't gotten your information. That means we don't owe you a damn thing yet. So shut your mouth, or I'll shove this bottle of wine so far up your tight ass—"

My father launched to his feet. "You—"

"No." I was in between them, so I rose to my feet and blocked them from each other. My father wouldn't hesitate to hit a woman. I'd seen him do it before—just not to my mother. I grabbed his arm and kept him steady so he wouldn't launch himself at Arwen. "We both need something here. So let's all shut our mouths and focus on what matters. Father, sit." I turned to Arwen. "Be silent."

She grabbed the water again, still staring at my father with obvious threat. She wasn't scared of him like most people—because she had no idea what kind of crimes he could commit. She walked to the other side of the table, her heels clapping against the floor as she moved. Then she set the glass of water in front of her father.

I guided my father back down into the chair. "Let's get what we need and leave."

When my father's attention was directed to the reason we came here, he calmed slightly. He lowered himself to his chair, his back rigid with tension, and finally stared at Martin.

I looked at Arwen. "Leave us."

Her attitude fired up again. "So you can berate my father ___"

I stood instantly, my next words exploding like a command. "Don't make me ask you again." I was ordering her out of the room for her own good, because I couldn't protect her from my father if she provoked him too much.

"I'm not a dog," she said calmly. "I don't obey orders—"

"Princess." Her father patted her hand. "Let the men talk. I'm getting hungry, so how about you start dinner?"

She was too smart to believe anything he said. She stared at me with those narrowed eyes and tightly pressed lips, like this was far from over. Then she turned on her heel and slowly left the room, her hips shaking from left to right because of her feminine curves. When she was finally gone, so was the tension.

My father got right down to business. "I need all the details, Martin. Since you're almost dead, time is of the essence."

WHEN MY FATHER got what he wanted, he stormed out of the house and left me behind.

He didn't need me anymore. He disappeared just as abruptly as he'd arrived. He didn't say another word, didn't even give his condolences to Martin about his illness.

I drank my glass of wine until it was empty.

Martin stared at the painting of his daughter for a long time like I wasn't even in the room. "When I lost my wife, I was the same way. Bitter about everything. I didn't lose her in such

a violent way, so I can't even begin to imagine how your father feels."

"Don't make excuses for him."

"I'm not." He turned his gaze back to me. "He marches in here like the villain—but he's trying to be the hero."

He was no hero in my eyes.

"I'd like you to take this painting with you. I noticed you admiring it last time you were here."

Admiring was a generous word. "It doesn't match the other pieces in this room."

"It's not supposed to. I just loved it so much that I thought it belonged there. Everything in this house will be stripped away—I'd like that to survive. Take it with you."

I had no interest in taking a portrait of a woman I didn't even like. "Martin, I'm marrying your daughter because I have to—not because I want to." There was no affection for her in my heart. I was barely impressed by her beauty—even though most men found her stunning. I'd been around beautiful women for so long that they all looked the same.

"Maybe...but your children might want this painting someday."

I hated imagining a reality where Arwen was pregnant with my child—a little brat inside her. They'd piss and shit all over the place.

Martin slowly rose then made his way to my end of the table. "That ring you gave her really is beautiful. Just between you and me, I think she's already gotten attached to it."

I could tell she liked it the second I gave it to her. Her reaction was very sudden and short, lasting only the length of a blink of an eye. But I caught it. She still didn't like me, but she obviously liked pretty things. "Will we see you on Saturday?"

"I'll make it to Saturday—but not much further." He spoke of his death so pragmatically, like he wasn't the least bit scared.

“You seem oddly calm about this whole thing.”

“Well, I lost my wife five years ago. When you lose the love of your life, nothing is ever the same. You always feel a little lost. Thankfully, I had Arwen to give me some joy through these years, but truth be told, I’m looking forward to being reunited with her.”

It was beautiful...in a sad way.

“I wish I could be around longer to see the incredible things my daughter will accomplish...but I’ll watch her from upstairs.” He placed his hand on my shoulder and gave me a gentle squeeze. “I know you’ll take care of my little girl. If you’ll defend her from your father, you’ll defend her from anyone. Goodnight.” He dropped his hand and left the room. A moment later, his steps were audible on the stairs.

Arwen came back to the dining room and cleared the glasses. “My father went to bed?”

“I think so.”

She still had an edge to her, obviously not quickly forgetting the conversation with my father. “Has he always been like that?”

“No.”

“Really?” She held the wine bottle by the neck, cocking an eyebrow like she didn’t believe that for a second. “He just woke up one morning and decided to be an asshole?”

“No,” I said calmly. “My mother died, so he decided to be an asshole.”

Her rage dimmed slightly, like a fading star on the other side of the galaxy. “My father went through a phase after my mother was gone...not quite as bad, though. He was more sad than angry.”

Yes, but her mother hadn’t been tortured. “I’m not his biggest fan either, so you aren’t alone.”

“He doesn’t treat you like that, does he?”

I wasn't going to complain about my father issues to her. I didn't even know her. "Your father said he's looking forward to the wedding. I was thinking maybe afterward we could make him comfortable at the hospital."

"As nice as that sounds, we can't afford it. Our accounts are empty."

"I'd pay for it, obviously."

She gripped the neck of the bottle tighter, her pride wanting her to refuse the offer. But her concern for her father's well-being was clearly more important. She even managed a kind response. "Thank you..." Her voice trembled as she said the words, like she was barely holding on to her composure. When she launched an attack against my father, she didn't skip a beat. But now that she was alone, emotion overwhelmed her. Her bottom lip trembled, but just for a second.

I looked away, not wanting to deal with her tears. "It's no problem." I pushed my glass toward her and admired the way her ring reflected every single point of light that emitted from the chandelier. "Need anything else before Saturday?" I wanted to change the subject, to steer away from the heartbreak on her mind.

"No..." She grabbed the bottle and brought it to her lips.

I watched her tilt her head back and down the contents, her throat shifting as the liquid descended to her belly. Her neck was so slender, her waist so petite. It was hard to believe such an incredible voice could come from a woman so tiny.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "What's going to happen on Saturday?"

"We're getting married...or have you forgotten?"

She flashed me a look of menace, the evidence of her tears gone. "After the wedding. Are we going on a honeymoon? Because I need to stay with my father."

I wasn't whisking this woman off to an exotic location to fuck her brains out. I did that every night with an endless line of beautiful women. "No."

“Are you expecting to consummate the marriage?”

The corner of my mouth rose in a smile. “If you want to fuck me, just tell me. Don’t beat around the bush—”

“Go fuck yourself.” She stormed off into the kitchen, bringing the glasses and bottle with her.

I couldn’t wipe off my smirk as I followed her into the other room. “The answer to your question is no. There will be somebody in my bed—but it won’t be you.” I leaned against the counter and watched her set the glasses at the bottom of the sink, drops of red wine still visible at the bottom of the bowls.

“Thank god.” She washed the dishes then dried them with a linen cloth. “Where will we live?”

“I live on the property where our family business is. It’s about twenty minutes outside of Florence.”

“Does it smell like cheese all the time?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Odd question—but no.”

When the glasses were dry, she placed them in the cabinet with the glass doors. “After meeting your father, I don’t find you quite as irritating...despite that sex comment.”

“Yeah...he always makes me look good.”

“I need to drive into Florence for practice and my shows. So I’ll need a car.”

“Done.”

She dried her hands on the towel then examined me, her eyes filled with endless thoughts. “How is this going to work? We just live our lives however we wish, but we live under the same roof?”

“You have a better idea?” I didn’t care what she did on her own time. I didn’t even care if I never saw her. All I needed to know was she was safe—to uphold my promise. We didn’t have to share a single meal together or even talk. But for public events, she would have to be the woman on my arm.

“Do I bring my lovers back to the house?”

It was hard to imagine strange men coming to my property. I didn't care that they were fucking my wife. But I didn't want them snooping around. "I'd prefer if you went to their place. I'm not thrilled about the idea of random men staying at my estate."

"Fine. Will you wear a wedding ring?"

The question was absurd. "No."

"So, I have to wear one, but you don't?"

"It's different."

"You mean, it's sexist?" she countered.

"Actually, yes. I'll get one for the ceremony, but after that, I'll never wear it. It's not uncommon to see a man without a wedding ring. In fact, it's more common." I turned my head back to her and studied her steely gaze. "You want me to wear one?"

"Not at all. Just curious."

"Any other questions?" I didn't have any rules laid out because it was unnecessary. This was a total sham. All we had to do was pretend once in a while.

"Is there anything you expect out of me?"

I didn't have any expectations at all. "I already told you my life is about working, drinking, and fucking. Don't get in the way of that, and we won't have any problems. It's that simple." I pushed off the counter and righted myself. "I'll see you Saturday."

SHE GLIDED her palm over my abs and slowly moved it up to my chest, worshiping the fitness of my body. Her nails slightly clawed at my skin before she made her way down to my happy trail once more. Naked and with perfect, firm tits, she was another notch on my bedpost. "So, you're getting married tomorrow?"

“Yes.” With one hand behind my head, I stared at the high ceiling and the original moldings that were present when this estate was built hundreds of years ago. It’d been renovated, but some of the classic touches remained.

“She doesn’t mind sharing her fiancé with another woman?”

I wasn’t her fiancé. “No.”

Her hand moved down to my soft dick, wanting to get me hard again so I could make her come.

I was spent for the night.

She pouted at my resistance. “Come on...fuck me.” She gently massaged my balls.

My dread for the following day disappeared as she forced my dick to harden. I would take her on all fours, so I could stare at that fine ass as I pounded her until she buckled underneath me.

“There he is...” She pressed her face into my lap and started to suck.

I closed my eyes and enjoyed it, listening to the loud sucking noises her lips made as she tried to get the whole thing in her mouth.

My phone started to ring on the nightstand. I glanced at the screen even though I intended to ignore it, and I saw my sister’s name on the screen. There was no woman in the world who could get me to ignore that phone call.

I pushed her off me and took the call, walking to the window with the phone pressed to my ear. “Lily, will you be there tomorrow?” When I stood at the open window, I looked across the lit grounds to the iron gates that separated my property from the public.

Her silence was her answer.

I stared at the darkness of the night and felt the disappointment in my chest. “How are you?”

“I don’t know... About the same.” She sighed into the phone, like it was pressed right against her ear as she lay in bed. “I take three steps forward but two steps back.”

“At least you’re making some progress.”

“But not enough progress...”

This wedding was a hoax, but it was the only wedding I would ever have. I wanted my sister to be there, the only person in my family I actually liked. But Mother’s death and Father’s ludicrous behavior pushed her to the edge...and now she was too far gone. “I understand.” I couldn’t push her if she wasn’t ready.

“I’m sorry I won’t be there...”

“Me too.”

“Who’s the girl?”

“Her name is Arwen. She’s an opera singer.”

“She sounds accomplished... Do you like her?” Distant tears were audible in her voice, probably pained that she couldn’t give me the answer I wanted. But she had to work on herself right now. Nothing else was important.

She had an attitude that rivaled a stallion. Her mouth could unleash insults faster than bullets left a gun. She wasn’t afraid to slap me when I deserved it—and even stab me if I deserved it. “She’s fine.”

“She’s fine?” Lily knew I was marrying Arwen because I was being coerced into doing it, but she still found my response comical. “Is she pretty?”

She had an hourglass figure and a lovely face to match. Even if she didn’t have such an incredible voice, she could probably charm the crowd on looks alone. Men tossed roses on the stage every night, not because of her pipes, but because of her tits. “She’s fine.”

Lily chuckled, and since it was so rare, it was beautiful. “I guess I’ll see for myself...eventually.”

“When you’re feeling better, we’ll get lunch.” I tried to keep her positive because that was essential to her recovery. I was the only coach she had because Father seemed indifferent to her illness. To him, she was just a brat looking for attention, but since I experienced the same heartache, I actually had some compassion.

“Maybe,” she said, her voice escaping as a whisper. “How’s Father?”

“We don’t have to talk about him.”

“We’re both thinking about him.”

He was the monster who didn’t live in a dark cave. He walked directly in the sunlight, stomping everything in his path. “He’s the same.”

“Do you think he’ll come back when he kills Ramon?”

He was too far gone at this point. Killing Ramon wouldn’t suddenly make him human again. It would just cross off an item on his list—then he would never have anything else to work toward. “I doubt it.”

“Yeah...me too. What does he think of Arwen?”

Just like with everyone else, he didn’t give a damn about her. “I don’t think he thinks anything.”

“I feel bad for her. Her new father-in-law is the devil.”

I didn’t respect Martin for the quandary he put himself in, but I did admire his parenting approach. He was affectionate and loving toward his daughter—and even to me.

“How does she feel about all of this?”

“She’s dreading it as much as I am. She has her own life—I have mine. We’ll just be two strangers under one roof.”

“I guess that’s not so bad.”

When we ran out of things to talk about, we sat in mutual silence, listening to each other breathe. I leaned against the wall and kept my gaze out the window, remembering how different my life used to be before Mother was taken. We were

a family—all four of us. Now we were all in separate places—mentally and physically.

“I’ll let you go, Mav. Good luck tomorrow.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you soon.” I hung up and kept my gaze out the window, hating my father even more than I had before. He still had two members of his family left, but once Mom was gone, he wanted nothing to do with us. He failed to realize how much his daughter needed him...how much she was drowning. So I had to step up—because she had no one else.

ARWEN

I STOOD IN FRONT OF THE MIRROR AND LOOKED AT MYSELF IN my wedding dress, seeing a reality I'd never imagined in my wildest dreams. The designer gown was perfect, so elegantly designed and fitted to my dimensions perfectly. Any bride would be happy to wear it.

But it meant nothing to me.

The only item I possessed that mattered was the diamond necklace around my neck, a gift given to me by my mother. Her own mother gave it to her when she turned eighteen, so it'd been in the family for generations.

In just a few moments, I would walk out of this room and see the three hundred wedding guests Maverick and his father had invited. Some of them were aristocratic members of society, so of course, I knew them. Others were their family members who would soon be my family members.

But mostly, they were strangers.

My father was dressed in a gray suit and tie, looking well despite his frailty. He approached me from behind, a smile on his face as he admired me in my wedding dress. "Wow." His hands moved to both of my arms, and he gave me a gentle squeeze. "Maverick is gonna fall in love with you."

Not a chance. "Thank you, Daddy." I had my hair in loose curls, letting the long strands stretch down my shoulders. I'd applied my makeup exactly as I did at the opera, pumping my lashes with mascara and giving my eyes a smoky look with the eyeliner. My lips were painted a tint of pink, a rosy color that

wasn't overbearing. I was marrying this man because I had to—and I wanted to look like myself.

He continued to look at me in the reflection in the mirror. “I know this isn't how you imagined your wedding day. Your mother isn't here, and your fiancé isn't the man you wanted. But I think Maverick is a good man...and you might become fond of him.”

I couldn't imagine feeling anything for him besides annoyance. Every word that came out of his mouth was an insult. He had no regard for anyone's feelings and always blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

He watched my eyes fall. “He's a man of his word. And in a world like this, that's so rare. He promised me he would never hurt you. He promised me he would take care of you. I believe him. That says a lot about his character.”

That didn't mean he was bearable.

“He's successful...and you must have noticed that he's handsome.”

I didn't notice at all. “Daddy, I know you're trying to make me feel better, but it's okay. I'm doing this to survive. I'm doing this so I can still have the life I want—with a few sacrifices. Maverick and I had a conversation, and we found a way to live our lives separately but also together.” I turned around and looked at him. “No, it's not what I want...but it could be worse.”

IT WAS A DREAM WEDDING.

White chairs on a perfectly manicured lawn as the Tuscan sun shone overhead. Pink and white flower petals were sprinkled on the ground, and the three hundred guests rose to their feet as my father walked me down the aisle.

My father kept his body strong as he guided me forward, refusing to let anyone know he was struggling to live every

second of every hour. He smiled despite his pain, happy to be a witness to my wedding—even if it wasn't a fairy tale.

The harp music played as I made my way forward, approaching the man waiting for me at the end. In a black suit and tie, he watched me come toward him, his brown eyes unblinking as he studied me. His expression was stony like always, but he allowed a hint of affection to enter his gaze. Everyone would notice if the groom hated his new bride, so he adopted a lie to match the story.

When he allowed his aggression to fade away, he was actually handsome to me. With the sun on his tanned skin and the shadow shaved from his chin, he looked like a man who could have been in my fantasies. He was tall, fit, and he carried himself like a man with pride.

But his soul didn't match his looks—and he was vile.

I made it the rest of the way, wanting this moment to pass so we could move on and forget about it. The only positive memory I would have of this day was walking with my father. I knew it was probably the last time we would ever be together like this, when he would be healthy enough to get out of bed. He would no longer be the man to take care of me—because he was now handing the responsibility to the man waiting for me.

When we reached Maverick, my father kissed me on the cheek. "I love you, princess."

"I love you too, Daddy." I hugged him, and I let the embrace linger for a long time. I should have pulled away sooner, but I didn't want to. It was the last time I would get the chance to hug him in the sunlight.

My father patted me on the back, understanding the emotions that were swirling around inside me. He was the one to pull away first, because he knew I would never move otherwise.

I walked the rest of the way and looked at Maverick, doing my best to control my trembling lip. Marrying this man wasn't nearly as bad as losing my father, and in that very moment, I

felt like I was living with his ghost. I knew this moment would be a memory all too soon.

Maverick watched me, dropping his artificial look of affection as he stared at my trembling lip. His eyes fell as he looked at me, and in that instant, there seemed to be a hint of compassion. He did the unexpected and wrapped his powerful arms around my waist and pulled me to his chest, making my head turn the other way so I would have a moment of privacy.

The crowd aww'd at this gesture, assuming Maverick loved his new bride so much that he couldn't keep his hands off her.

But I knew he was just giving me a moment to say goodbye to my father, to swallow the sorrow at the loss. That made me hate him a little less, made me wonder if he did have a soul under that intimidating façade. My father seemed certain Maverick would take care of me...and maybe he was right.

Maverick gave me as much time as he could before he stepped back.

It was enough for me to breathe a few times, to steady my bottom lip, to keep my eyes dry and my makeup intact. It was a momentary reprieve from the unbearable reality of my world. I'd lost everything—and now I would lose the most important thing to me.

Maverick faced me, his eyes glued to my expression so hard he didn't even blink. He didn't stare at me like he was in love with me, but he stared at me like he could look at me forever.

The priest performed the ceremony, asking us to repeat lines when necessary.

In a daze, I did my part.

Maverick spoke with a powerful voice, fooling the audience into thinking he actually wanted me to be his wife.

I hadn't even considered the last part of the ceremony, the moment we would become husband and wife and share our

first kiss. Now the moment loomed over both of us, the first contact we would share with our lips.

And it would be the last.

Maverick moved toward me again, his arms sliding around my waist as his neck bent down so his mouth could meet mine. He squeezed me against him as his mouth descended, landing on my lips with the softness of a cloud.

I kept up the act by wrapping my arms around his neck and letting my lips brush against his. His mouth was softer than I'd expected.

The kiss only lasted a couple of seconds, and it occurred in the midst of clapping and cheering. Maverick didn't just peck me on the lips and pull away. He made it seem real, moving his lips against mine like he wanted to kiss me. His lips gently tugged on mine, every touch purposeful. A warm breath escaped his lips and filtered across my skin, smelling like mint and scotch mixed together. The taste was distinctly manly in a way I couldn't describe.

For a moment, I forgot I was kissing Maverick.

Because I actually liked it.

GUESTS DRANK their champagne and ate the slices of cake that were passed around. A rustic Italian feast had just been devoured for dinner, so everyone enjoyed themselves like they were at a five-star resort.

Maverick and I moved to the center of the clearing where we would have our first dance. One of his arms hugged the small of my back while he gripped my other hand. Placing our joined hands against his chest, he started to guide me on the dance floor as the classical music played.

We didn't say a word to each other as we danced, everyone watching us like we were a couple in love.

Maverick was in his element, taking the lead and guiding me like he had with so many other women. He knew how to dance, how to sway to the music without looking awkward. He was confident no matter what he did—even dancing with his bride.

He lifted my arm and spun me around before he brought me back into his chest, his head tilted down toward mine. His cheek rested against my temple so we wouldn't have to hold eye contact throughout the song.

The sun had set, so the lights strung across the property shone a little brighter. Candles glowed on the tables. The centerpieces were filled with white lilies and pink roses. Whoever Maverick hired to design this wedding did a fabulous job—too bad it meant nothing to either of us.

With all the strangers surrounding me, I felt alone. That forged a surprising alliance with Maverick. When my father was gone, he was all I would have left. It made me feel a little closer to him, made me feel less isolated. “Thank you for what you did earlier...” He'd come to my rescue so I wouldn't sob at the altar, break my father's heart with my tears. Without a euro to my name, I thought I would have to stay home and watch my father die in pain in his bed. But Maverick said he would give my father everything he needed to give him some dignity for his final days. He knew I was on the verge of tears, but he didn't make me feel worse about it.

“I understand this is hard for you.” He turned his head and looked me in the eye. It was the first time we'd ever been this close together, our eyes locked on each other. His eyes provided a perfect reflection of the bistro lights hung across the property, acting as a mirror. Like warm coffee on a winter day, his eyes were the most gorgeous shade of brown.

I hadn't noticed the depth of their beauty before.

With confidence, he held my gaze like this moment wasn't unbearable. When he didn't spit out insults, he was actually pleasant. It was strange to think this man was now my husband, that I would wear his last name for the rest of my life. We were joined together, husband and wife.

I could feel his black ring against my fingertips, the thick band he would only wear for the evening. It wasn't a traditional ring, not made of gold like most. But it suited him well...even though he would never wear it.

“My father speaks highly of you.”

“Not sure why.” He continued to guide me across the floor, carefully maneuvering my long dress and not stepping on it.

“He said you keep your promises...and that's rare these days.”

“That doesn't mean I deserve a good reputation. I'm not a good man, and I don't pretend to be. I'm too much like my father and not enough like my mother.”

“Well, he thinks otherwise.”

“He doesn't know me well enough.”

“Or maybe you just don't know how to take a compliment.”

His eyes narrowed on my face as his hand squeezed mine a little harder. “I don't want to insult my wife on our wedding day, so I suggest you choose your words carefully.”

I smiled. “That's romantic...”

“I'm not a romantic guy.”

“Yeah, I've noticed.”

He turned his gaze away and kept dancing. He seemed to tune me out, like I wasn't even there.

“Why do you have such a poor opinion of yourself?”

“I don't. I just understand what I am.”

“And why are you a bad man?”

“Do we need to have this conversation now?”

“Something else you want to talk about?” I countered.

“We could not talk at all.” His eyes scanned the people around us, hardly giving me any attention.

“Alright...” Just when I thought I could connect with him, he pushed me away.

He danced with me in silence, preferring the palpable tension to conversation.

“When the night is over, where will we go?”

“Inside. I had my men gather your things from your apartment. You can go back tomorrow and pick up whatever else you need. The banks will seize it soon, so I suggest you grab what’s important.”

When the night was over, the mansion looming over us would be my new home. “And my father?”

“He has a room made up for him. We’ll take him to the hospital tomorrow.”

Maverick may be my husband, but he didn’t have to take care of my father. He didn’t have to spend any money on him. But he seemed to shoulder the responsibility without argument. “Thank you. It means a lot to me.” If Maverick were more like his father, he would dump my father on the lawn and not think about him twice. The man did possess compassion; he just tried to brush it off like it was nothing.

He didn’t look at me, ignoring my gratitude.

It didn’t matter what kind of peace offering I made, Maverick never took the bait. Even if he had the chance to connect with me, he didn’t want to. He was determined to be as distant with me as possible, to not even allow friendship to blossom.

The song finally concluded, the torture coming to an end.

Maverick dropped his arm from my waist, like he couldn’t wait for the opportunity to walk away.

Then everyone clanked their forks against their glasses, the tradition that enticed the bride and groom to share a kiss.

Maverick hid his annoyance as he turned back to me, knowing we would have to share a few more kisses before the night was over. His arm moved back around my waist, and he pulled me into him again.

We couldn't connect through conversation or friendship. We were charged the exact same way, our attitudes clashing together like two bolts of electricity. We would never see eye to eye on anything.

But there was chemistry when we touched—however faint it was.

He lowered his mouth to mine and kissed me again, his full lips taking mine like last time. With the same precision, he took my mouth and made it his. His hand squeezed the back of my dress as he pulled me closer, making all the guests clap eagerly.

My hand pressed against his torso and felt the hardness of his body through his clothes. My fingers flinched when I came into contact with the hard wall, surprised by his unnatural strength. My hand slowly softened as I got used to his ripped physique, my breath filling his mouth as an unexpected jolt of desire fluttered through my body.

He pulled away and looked me in the eyes for a moment, like he knew exactly what I experienced when I touched him. But instead of making a smartass comment, he kept his thoughts to himself.

MAVERICK

THE LAST GUEST DIDN'T LEAVE UNTIL THREE IN THE MORNING.

The servants worked outside to clear the tables, silverware, and endless decorations that stretched across the property.

My maid took Arwen and her father to their rooms so I could go to the third floor and retire to my bedroom. I hadn't expected the wedding to last for so long, but once people had wine in their bellies, they turned chatty and lingered.

I would have liked to have a woman in my bed tonight, but it was too late now and I was too tired. I stripped off my tie and draped it over the back of the armchair then let my jacket fall off my shoulders. My fingers popped open every single button until the collared shirt fell down my arms. My watch came next.

A knock sounded on my bedroom door.

I turned around to face the entryway, unsure why Abigail would disturb me at this hour. There was nothing so important that she needed to bother me right this moment. "Come in."

The door cracked and then revealed Arwen, still in her wedding dress. With a sweetheart neckline and sleeves of lace, her dress was elegant but also formfitting. It highlighted her many curves, her plump tits, and narrow waist. Her hair was thicker than I'd ever seen it before, and she looked ready for a performance at the opera. Every person who watched her walk down the aisle thought she was stunning.

She must have followed me to my bedroom because Abigail wouldn't have brought her here without my permission. We'd shared several kisses throughout the night, and I suspected that was why she was here now. She hated me, but not enough to ignore the chemistry between us.

She stepped inside and shut the door behind her.

I'd never intended to pursue a physical relationship with her, but if she wanted to fuck, I wouldn't say no.

A man didn't say no to easy pussy.

She walked up to me, her blue eyes so damn bright. Her emotions were easy to read because she had the most hypnotic expression. She had men in her bed because she could get any man she wanted. With those full lips and nice tits, her admirers probably jerked off to her every night.

My hand slid into her hair, and I kissed her. My lips felt hers, but this time, it wasn't for show. My fingers found her slender neck, and I caressed the skin as I cradled her head and deepened the kiss, thinking about how I wanted to fuck her. She probably had a nice ass—but those tits were gorgeous.

She pressed her hands against my hard chest and pulled away. "That's not why I came here..." She licked her lips and dropped her gaze, like she was embarrassed she'd misled me.

I wasn't embarrassed I'd made the wrong assumption. I was annoyed I wasn't getting sex tonight. "Then why are you here? Don't barge into my room like that."

"I knocked..."

"Then don't come to my door again. I'm not in the mood to talk. If you want to fuck, take off your clothes and get on the bed. If you came here for a chat, get the fuck out. I've already done enough for you. I don't need to put up with this shit."

She stilled in front of me as if she couldn't believe my outburst. "My father is asleep, and I can't find Abigail." She turned around and showed me the back of her wedding dress. "I can't get this off by myself, so I thought you could help me. But since that doesn't fit into your two categories, I'll just go."

I'd rather sleep in this thing instead." She marched to the door, her head held high with rage.

I didn't feel bad for my outburst, but I did feel bad that she would have to sleep in that stiff gown on her wedding night. A woman never struggled to get her dress off on her wedding night...because her husband would always happily remove it.

I was her husband now. "Get back in here."

She stopped in the doorway and slowly looked at me over her shoulder. Normally, she would march off, but any extra time in that skintight dress was probably unbearable.

"Now." With my bare feet hitting the hardwood floor, I stepped closer to her. My bedroom was nice and cool, a break from the heat outside. I could feel the cool air brush over my bare skin.

She stared at me for another moment before she returned to me, her dress dragging along the floor because she must have slipped off her heels in her bedroom. She walked up to me, glanced at my hard chest, and then turned around.

I stared at the thirty-six buttons and sighed. She never would have been able to get this off without me, not even with a pair of scissors or a knife. My hand moved under her neck and gently pulled the hair away, a waft of her perfume hitting my nose. My fingers started at the top, and I unbuttoned the very first one, seeing the dress give just a smidge with the release. My fingers kept going, undoing one after another.

She was silent as she waited for me to finish, not interested in making conversation after my outburst.

I kept working, the fabric slowly coming apart and revealing more of her bare skin. Her straight spine was flanked by two sets of muscles, her fair skin unblemished and beautiful. There wasn't even a freckle in sight. She was completely smooth, untouched. I stared at her back as I went lower and lower, moving to the top of her ass. I couldn't see the top of her underwear yet, but if I kept going, I eventually would.

When the back of her dress was loose, she gripped the front and kept it pinned to her chest. “Thank you.” She didn’t give me another look as she headed to my bedroom door and walked out.

I stared out the open door even though she was long gone. Now my slacks were tight and uncomfortable because of the enormous bulge right in the front. I could feel the pulse in my dick as desire ran through my veins. Something about that gorgeous skin made me white-hot. The sight of the outline of her tits, the way her spine curved so deep at the base, the way her skin erupted in bumps as the cool air brushed against it...it all aroused me.

THE NEXT MORNING, I sat at the kitchen table and drank my coffee while I went through emails and notes on my phone. The newspaper sat beside me, but unfortunately, I didn’t usually have time to read it.

My father’s name popped up on the screen as the phone rang.

Well, there went my morning.

“Morning.”

My father never issued a greeting. Even hello was too much for him. “Is he going to die soon?”

What a lovely question first thing in the morning. “Odd question.”

“My sources tell me he doesn’t have much time. He hasn’t paid his debts and delivered what he promised. The guys are going to move in any day. For his sake, I hope he’s dead soon. I’d rather die on a morphine drip than with a blade in my stomach.”

I didn’t share most of my father’s opinions, but I agreed with him on that front.

“If he’s got some time left, I suggest you slip him something so he can go with some dignity.” He hung up.

I lowered the phone from my ear and considered what my father had just advised. Arwen wouldn’t want me to kill him prematurely, but she didn’t understand how terrible it would be if he didn’t die naturally. Those men would make the last few hours of his life unbearable. If we did it soon, we could bury him next to his wife, and the men would move on.

Arwen entered the room, led by Abigail.

“Would you like some breakfast, Mrs. DeVille?” Abigail grabbed the pot of coffee and poured it into the empty mug on the table.

Mrs. DeVille. Fuck, I had a wife.

“Yes, thank you,” Arwen answered. “But please call me Arwen...”

Good.

Abigail finished pouring the coffee then headed to the kitchen. “Breakfast will be ready in just a moment.”

Arwen eyed me but didn’t sit down.

I stared at her with my phone in my hand, knowing we were both thinking about the same thing. I would have taken her to bed last night if she’d wanted me to.

“Can I join you, or will you scream at me?”

Alright, I deserved that. “Yes, you may stay.”

She pulled out the chair and sat down. She cupped the mug with both hands and brought it to her lips, taking a deep drink like she needed the caffeine to fully wake up. New makeup was on her face, and her hair was still wavy from the night before. It was the first time we’d sat together to share a meal, and it was the first time I’d noticed just how beautiful her complexion was, how her fair skin complemented those blue eyes so perfectly. She took another sip then lowered the cup to the saucer.

I was grateful she hadn't walked in until after my father hung up on me. The conversation would have brought her to tears. I set my phone on the table and looked at her, noting the slight bags under her eyes because she clearly didn't sleep well in her new home. But the exhaustion didn't take away her beauty. Nothing could compete with those vibrant eyes.

"When my father wakes up, I'm going to admit him to the hospital..." It seemed like she was testing the waters, to see if I was still going to support his treatment—and his death.

"Do you need any help?"

"No, I don't think so. I'll be at the hospital with him until...it happens." Right on cue, her bottom lip started to tremble, and her eyes glossed over with moisture.

I didn't deal well with emotion—probably because I didn't have any. But I didn't want to be a dick and tell her to leave and shed her tears somewhere else. "When my mother was taken, I wanted to get her back. I hoped she would be returned to us and we could be a family again. But at the same time...I hoped she was dead. I didn't need to know the details to understand how much she was suffering. Death would finally give her freedom. So when I heard that she had died...I was relieved. No one could hurt her anymore."

Arwen blinked her tears away and lifted her gaze to look at me.

"Just think of it that way. All the suffering will be over... and he'll be free."

ARWEN

MY FATHER WAS MORE COMFORTABLE AT THE HOSPITAL. WITH Maverick's money, he got a large private room with a nice view and a big-screen TV. It was quiet, so he got to relax and take a lot of naps. Now that we were at the end of this horrible journey, his strength was slipping away and he was exhausted no matter how much he slept.

But at least he was comfortable.

Days passed, and he wouldn't last much longer.

When my father was asleep, Dante stopped by for a visit. I moved into his chest and held on to him as I cried quietly, being careful not to wake my father.

Dante's hand smoothed over the back of my hair, and he pressed a kiss to my forehead. "I'm so sorry..."

My wedding ring was so heavy on my hand that I never got used to it, so I was always aware of the commitment I'd made to Maverick. But it was all just a meaningless display so I could kiss this man without feeling guilty.

Dante tilted my head back and kissed me on the lips. "Is there anything I can do?"

I pressed my lips tightly together and shook my head. "No...it'll happen any minute now."

He continued to run his fingers through my hair, consoling me in whatever way he could manage. After he held me by the door for thirty minutes, we took a seat together at my father's bedside.

Dante held my hand, his fingers careful not to touch the large diamond on my ring finger. “How was the wedding?”

I shrugged. “Beautiful...but meaningless.”

“Is Maverick good to you?”

He was spiteful and aggressive, but not a complete dick. He had his good moments...and his bad moments. But it could be worse. He could be violent with me. When I’d said I wasn’t there to sleep with him, he could have easily forced me...but he didn’t. He didn’t control my life, giving me the freedom to do what I wanted, when I wanted. I didn’t have any right to complain. “Yes.”

Dante continued to hold my hand, our fingers interlocked on his thigh. There was nothing he could say to ease the pain of losing my father, of becoming some man’s wife. All we had was this moment together—and nothing more. We just sat together, holding on to our connection before it was extinguished forever.

Minutes later, Maverick walked inside. He was dressed in his usual attire, dark jeans and a t-shirt. A watch sat on his wrist, but that was the only jewelry he wore. His boots thudded against the floor as he made his entrance. His gaze went to Dante first, probably recognizing him from my bedroom a few weeks ago.

Dante lifted his head and looked at him, tensing noticeably when he guessed exactly who he was.

Maverick stared at him for several seconds, noting the way our hands were joined together at my father’s bedside. He looked at me next then moved to the other side of the bed. He slipped his hands into his pockets and watched my father.

I felt the tension rise in the room as the two men breathed the same air. Dante disliked Maverick because he was married to me, but his hatred didn’t run deeper since he was good to me. But it was still awkward for him, especially when I continued to wear my beautiful diamond ring.

Maverick seemed indifferent to him, but I knew him enough to understand he didn’t like Dante in the room. His

mood was dark, his silence profound. His displeasure was so obvious that I was certain Dante could feel it.

I knew it would only get worse until one of them left. “Dante, I’ll call you later.”

Dante pulled his hand away and didn’t argue. “Alright.” He leaned in and kissed me on the mouth.

I kissed him back.

Then he left the room.

Maverick continued to stand there, watching my father sleep.

I stared at him, waiting for him to have some kind of an outburst.

But he didn’t say anything about Dante. “He’s not looking too good.”

“He doesn’t have much time left.”

He looked at the monitor and checked his vitals like he understood what any of it meant. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“You’ve already done enough for me, Maverick.” He paid for my father to stay in the hospital, and for a room like this, it was probably ten thousand euros every single day. It was a generous offer, regardless of how rich he was.

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t mean it.” He finally turned his gaze toward me, watching me, his powerful shoulders straight. He filled out his clothes well, all the muscles pulling the fabric in just the right ways. I’d seen him shirtless once before—and the man was ripped. I’d love to watch water drip down all the grooves of his abs before it made it into his happy trail. He looked just as hard as he’d felt against my fingertips.

“I know. But you’ve already been so generous.”

Compliments bounced off this man like air particles. They never broke the skin and penetrated deep inside him. He was

incapable of accepting anything positive and always responded cynically. “Dante doesn’t care that you’re married?”

It was an odd question—and very sexist. “Do your ladies care that you’re married?”

His espresso-colored eyes took me in without blinking.

“Our relationship won’t last. Since he can’t marry me, he doesn’t want to be my lover for the rest of our lives. He wants a wife and a family someday...and I can’t give that to him.” I wasn’t necessarily in love with Dante, but I could see it going somewhere. We’d only met a few months ago. Maybe if we had more time, things would be different. It was a lost opportunity, but I didn’t resent Maverick for that. He was just as unhappy about this marriage as I was. There was only one person to blame—but he was about to die. “I suspect that will always be a challenge for me. Men don’t want to be a secret.”

“That’s exactly what they want. They want to be your lover—no strings attached.”

“Maybe in the beginning...” Every time I tried to have a fling, it always turned into something more. Even when I didn’t want to see them again, they wanted to take me out to dinner. Sex always led to a relationship.

“Then you must be good in bed.”

I imagined he probably was too. “As a matter of fact...”

A ghost of a smile crept onto his lips, a glimpse of his human side. Whenever he softened, his eyes turned from black coffee to a warm cappuccino. He was much more handsome that way, when he didn’t look like he wanted to kill someone. “That makes two of us.”

I rolled my eyes.

“You can say it, but I can’t?”

“I was graceful about it. You’re blunt.”

“And that’s the difference between a man and a woman.”

I crossed my legs and leaned back against the couch, wearing a pink sundress with my mother’s necklace. Summer

was upon us, and the days were growing warmer. I loved the Tuscan heat, but I wouldn't be able to enjoy it this summer... not when my father was gone.

He continued to watch me, studying my expression. "What are you thinking?"

My eyes shifted back to him. "Does it matter?"

"Your tone changed. I could see it in your eyes."

"Well...every few minutes, I'm reminded where I am... what I've lost." My eyes moved back to my father. "It's hard to forget."

Maverick walked around the bed and joined me on the couch. He took a seat, his heavy weight making a much bigger dent in the cushions than Dante did. Dante was just as tall as Maverick, but Maverick had at least an extra thirty pounds of muscle. He was lean but strong like a horse. His knee touched mine as we sat together.

"You don't have to stay with me... I'm sure you have stuff to do." I didn't know exactly what he did for a living. I didn't even know how his family had ties to the underworld. Truth be told, I really knew nothing about him. I didn't know about his finances, where anything was in the house, and if he had a swimming pool.

Maverick didn't move. "I'll stay...for a little while."

EVEN THOUGH I knew it was coming, I was still devastated.

I cried myself ugly, my face was swollen from the sobs, and my eyes bloodshot red. I convulsed because the sobs racked my body. The tremors made my fingers and toes numb. He passed away in his sleep, pain-free on a morphine drip, but knowing he wasn't here anymore still killed my soul.

Now I was in my bedroom, sitting on the couch and staring at the stone-cold fireplace. Tears streaked down my cheeks

and splashed onto my black dress. My fingers rested against my lips, feeling the drops as they made their way to my chin.

A knock sounded on the door.

I stayed quiet.

The door opened, and Maverick walked inside. I could tell by the sound of his heavy feet. “It’s time.”

The funeral was today. We would have the service at the church then transport his body to the cemetery nearby, placing him on top of my mother so they could be together for eternity. I’d watched him stop breathing, and that felt like the most final goodbye I could give. Going to the funeral would just destroy me even more—but I couldn’t skip it.

Maverick was patient with me. He hadn’t snapped at me since my father had passed away. He didn’t go out of his way to be nice to me, but he didn’t pick any fights either. He came farther into the room and approached the couch. “Arwen.”

I didn’t look up at him, the tears still coming.

He stood beside me, still like a statue.

I covered my eyes with my hand and took a deep breath, willing my tears to stop so I could make it to the church with a dry face. My fingers smeared away the final tears, and I rose to my feet. I avoided his gaze, embarrassed by the way my face must look right now, red and blotchy.

His arm circled my waist, and he guided me to the door. It was good that he was there because I still didn’t know my way around this maze. He got me to the car and we drove away, heading to the church in the heart of the city.

Dante wouldn’t be there because I couldn’t make a public appearance with another man, especially when my father’s enemies were ready to collect what they’d lost. My apartment was gone, and my bank accounts were closed. I didn’t have a penny to my name—my maiden name.

Maverick looked out the window as we made the drive to the city.

I rested my head against the window and tried to stay positive. My father wouldn't want me to feel like this, to be this devastated. He would want me to accept his departure and know he'd lived a happy life.

But that was easier said than done.

EVERYONE WHO KNEW my father was in the church. They gave me their condolences and congratulated me on my wedding. Other people shed their tears for my father, so I wasn't the only one. Like any real husband would do, Maverick had his arm around my waist, being a public crutch to my misery.

We sat in the pews and listened to the service performed by the priest. I sat in the very front with Maverick by my side. We were the only people in the front because I was the only family he had left.

My fingers clutched the speech I'd written the night before. As his daughter, I should say something, tell everyone in that church what a great father he was. But the ink was splotched with my tears, and my hands shook because I couldn't keep my composure. I wasn't afraid to address hundreds of people inside a church.

I just didn't think I could stop crying long enough to get a few words out.

The priest then addressed me. "Now Martin's daughter, Arwen, has a few words to share with us."

I hadn't stopped crying, and the idea of saying the words I'd penned the night before broke my heart. He'd told me he had cancer less than two weeks ago. I had to accept his death in a short amount of time, but I hadn't accepted his departure enough to speak even somewhat coherently. I clutched the paper with a shaking hand and willed myself to rise to my feet and complete my duty.

But I couldn't move.

I couldn't stop crying.

All eyes were on me, and I was too depressed to even feel embarrassed.

Maverick took the paper from my hand and stood.

I stopped crying long enough to look up and see him walk up the steps to the pulpit, my speech in hand. In a black suit with a matching tie, he looked as handsome as he did on our wedding day. With dark eyes that matched his attire, he looked fit enough to be the model for his own line of cologne. Commanding the room in a way even the priest couldn't do, he stood at the pulpit and addressed everyone. "I'm Maverick DeVille, Arwen's husband." With broad shoulders and a calm façade, he looked out at all the people watching him, not the least bit intimidated by their stares. "My wife has been crippled by the loss, so I'll speak on her behalf. Before I read what she's written, I have a few words of my own. When I met Martin Chatel, the one thing that was most obvious to me was the love he had for his daughter. Nothing else mattered to him, and when he understood his days were limited, all he could think about was the wellbeing of his beloved Arwen. We'd intended to marry a year from now, but Martin said it would mean the world to him if he could walk his daughter down the aisle. He told me he would live long enough to see it through—but not much after. He was always kind to me, telling me how much he appreciated the way I cared for his daughter. His fatherly love was obvious to anyone who could feel, and I could feel it anytime I was in the room with him. Above all else, that is the greatest compliment I can give him. He was a good man—and an amazing father."

Tears continued to stream down my face, and I was so grateful that Maverick took the reins when I could barely stand. He was a much better speaker than I was—at least right now. If I were to speak, my words would be muffled by the sobs of sorrow that screamed out of my chest.

He surveyed everyone in the room then turned to the note I'd written. He glanced it over and then he started to read from it. "Ever since I was a little girl, my father called me princess. He got me a plastic tiara, and I wore it every single day for an entire year. When I started school, I was told I had to leave it

at home—because a princess doesn't always need her crown. Even when I became a grown woman, he never called me by any other name. I was always 'princess.' I don't know how I'll live the rest of my life without hearing that nickname again, but I know I'll always be his princess." Maverick tilted his head down and read the next paragraph, grasping what I wanted to say before he spoke again. "Watching him lose my mother was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. Once she was gone, he was never the same. He still loved me, but that light in his eyes was permanently gone the moment her soul left this earth. I try to remember that he's with her now, that they're finally together again—looking down on me. He wouldn't want me or anyone else to be so devastated by this loss. Even at a time when he was barely able to get out of bed, he put a smile on his face, put on his suit, and walked me down the aisle like it was the happiest day of his life—not mine. I'll miss my father for so many reasons, but the biggest reason of all—he was my closest friend. But one day I'll see him again. It may be a long time from now, but once my soul leaves this earth, I'll find his and mother's once again—and we'll be a family. On that day, he'll smile and once again call me his princess." Maverick folded the note and slipped it into his pocket before he left the pulpit and returned to his seat. As if he hadn't just helped me in my time of need, he stared straight ahead like nothing unusual had happened.

I didn't understand this man at all. Sometimes he was cruel. Sometimes he was kind. He was an enigma, an absolute mystery. I would have to appreciate his good moments and push through the bad. My hand reached for his on his thigh, and I interlocked our fingers. "Thank you."

He didn't say a word. Instead, he squeezed my hand in acknowledgment.

EVERYONE HAD LEFT THE GRAVESITE. I was the only one who lingered, unable to leave both my parents buried in the soil for

all eternity. I was their only remnant of mortality, their only connection to this world.

I stayed there for so long that the sun started to set on the horizon, taking the heat with it. Everyone else had left in their cars a long time ago, unable to bear the summer temperatures.

Maverick stayed near the road, giving me the space to mourn my father in private. The driver waited for us to finish our afternoon, and while Maverick could have left without me and sent someone back to pick me up, he waited.

Maybe he wasn't as much of an asshole as I'd thought.

Minutes later, he walked across the grass and came to my side. We were alone together now, so there was no need to put on a show, to pretend we were newlyweds suffering through a tragedy together.

But he moved his arm around my waist anyway. "It's getting late. We can stay a few more minutes, but we should get going." He was the gentlest he'd ever been, not ordering me around like he had in the past.

"It hurts to leave him here. When I walk away...it'll really be final. This day will come to a close, my father will be dead, and then I'll move on..." I unclenched the tissue in my hand and wiped my nose.

"He'd want you to move on."

"I know...it's just hard."

His hand started to move up my back, gently massaging my muscles through the thin material of my dress.

"Don't forget where he really is. Physically, he may be in the ground. But his soul is up there...with your mother. He's moved on—and so should you."

I wiped my tears away with my tissue then clutched it in my hand once more. "Is that where you think your mother is?"

His hand paused in the middle of my back. "If there is a heaven, that's exactly where she is."

MAVERICK

LIFE WENT ON FOR EVERYONE ELSE, BUT FOR ARWEN, HER whole world seemed to stop.

She stayed in her room day after day, preferring solitude and the memories that haunted her. Sometimes she took the meals that Abigail sent, but she rejected all the rest. Everyone handled grief differently, but she handled it like someone had poured acid over her eyes.

I shouldn't care about her condition. When she was locked in her room, she left me alone. It was like she didn't exist at all. I returned to working, drinking, and fucking like I didn't have a wife on the second floor.

But she kept popping up in my mind.

I guess I missed the fiery woman who screamed at me outside the opera house. I missed the woman who told off my father without batting an eyelash. I missed the woman in the painting.

I walked to the second floor and approached her bedroom. It'd been four days since I'd last seen her, and Abigail reported to me that she'd spent her time sleeping, taking baths, and watching TV. She hadn't left her bedroom once.

I rapped my knuckles against the door.

Her response was solemn. "I'm not hungry, Abigail."

I let myself inside and found her standing in front of her closet, wearing a purple dress as she slipped on her sandals.

Her purse was on her shoulder like she intended to leave the house even though it was almost eight. “Going somewhere?”

She righted herself and turned to look at me. “I’m sleeping at Dante’s tonight.”

Dante was the guy I’d seen at the hospital. He was a good-looking guy, tall, but not muscular the way I was. He was also the same guy in her bed, the one who wanted to marry her until I came into the picture.

She came toward me, her hair and makeup done. Her spirit had improved, but there was still distinct melancholy in her gaze. But she must be in a better mood if she was ready to leave the house for the first time. “I’ll be home in the morning. I took some time off from the opera, but they’re expecting me again tomorrow night.”

I couldn’t ask her to stay because that’s not what we agreed on, but I felt odd letting her leave my property on her own and venturing into the city to be with her lover. But I was just with someone last night, fucking until my headboard made another dent in the wall. I had to let her go because it wouldn’t be right to ask her to stay. “Alright. I’ll give you a long overdue tour of the house tomorrow. And if you’re interested, you can see the factory where we produce, mix, and age the cheese.” It was a family business that had been handed down for generations. Now it was in my hands because my father had other ambitions that had nothing to do with food.

“Yeah...that sounds nice.”

I continued to stand in the doorway, but I had no idea what kept me there.

She glanced at the door then looked at me again. “Something wrong?”

“Abigail told me you haven’t left your room in four days. I wasn’t sure if I should be concerned or not.”

“It’s been hard...but I’m a little better now. I don’t think I can cry anymore.”

The funeral and the days that followed were her darkest. A part of me actually pitied her, seeing the way she crumbled

into so many pieces. I didn't have the nerve to be a dick because it seemed so harsh at the time. Her tears actually made me feel terrible... Maybe that was why I hated it when she cried.

"Thank you for everything you did at the funeral." She dropped her gaze as she held on to her purse, like she was remembering all the events in the privacy behind her eyes. "That was so hard for me, and you were...my rock."

Publicly, I was her husband and I acted that way. But I also saw an innocent woman going through a difficult time. Her father screwed her over then died right afterward, taking the easy way out. Now she had to live with the consequences of his stupidity...it wasn't fair.

"And what you said about my father at the funeral...that was really nice."

I didn't come here expecting her gratitude. I let the words bounce off me.

She waited for me to acknowledge what she said, but when nothing happened, she dropped it. "I'll see you tomorrow, then." She maneuvered past me and walked out the bedroom door.

I didn't turn around to watch her leave. I focused on the sound of her footsteps, listening to them trail away until she was gone.

I WAS asleep when my phone rang on the nightstand.

No one would be stupid enough to call me at this time of night, so whatever it was, it was important.

Becky moaned at the sound, kicking me under the sheets.

I answered the call without checking who it was. "Maverick."

"Sir, it's Liam down at the gate." Liam was the head of my security for the property. My estate didn't just include my

private property where my residence was. It also included the factory where we produced the high-quality cheese that was distributed all across Europe. I had a large territory to maintain and protect.

“What is it?” My eyes were still closed because I was half asleep.

Becky moaned like she wanted me to be quiet.

“A group of men pulled up in a Hummer. Five armed guys. The leader is asking for you. His name is Kamikaze.”

Not that asshole.

“The gate is locked and they haven’t tried to enter the premises, but he’s asking for you. Says you can face him now, or you can face him later—your choice.”

Kamikaze was basically the devil. He made underground deals all over the world, commissioning the sale of weapons, humans, drugs, and anything else you could think of. He was a third party in commerce—but not the middle man you could just cut out. I’d done business with him before—only a handful of times. “Did he say what he wanted?”

“No.”

I didn’t want to send him away so he could sneak up on me later. I would just lie there in bed and wonder what was going on in my own front yard. I didn’t appreciate his unexpected visit, but when someone raised the stakes, I had to do the same. “I’ll be there in five minutes.”

I WALKED down the driveway and approached the closed gates. My hair had been hastily styled with my fingertips and I’d washed the sleep out of my eyes, so I looked like I’d been up at three a.m. like these assholes. “Open the gate.” I had armed men all over the place, and these guys obviously didn’t want a war if they only had five men altogether. Just because they were armed didn’t mean they were hostile—all men were armed.

The iron gates swung inward and opened onto the dirt path that extended a quarter mile before it connected to the main road.

Kamikaze was in the front, with his big, square head and nearly seven feet in height. His arms bulged with pounds of muscle, and he looked suited for war. A shotgun was draped across his back, like he was prepared to blow someone to pieces in close proximity.

His size didn't scare me. "This better be important to show up on my doorstep like this. Drop your phone in the toilet?"

Kamikaze smiled, showing all of his white teeth. Combined with his large cow-like eyes, his grin looked maniacal. He stepped closer to me, ignoring all the guns trained directly on his forehead. "It's very important. Martin Chatel cost me millions—and now he's dead."

In the back of my mind, this is what I'd feared. The hounds were on the scent and looking for someone to blame for their losses. This was the price I had to pay to avenge my mother. I had to protect Arwen from this double-decker bus. "Explain how that concerns me."

He stepped closer. "Because you married his little bitch."

I kept my gaze locked on him, my chin angled up because he was five inches taller than me. I was considered to be a big man, six three with two hundred pounds of muscle. But this guy was a fucking mutant. What the hell was Martin thinking, making a deal with this freak? "I don't see the relevance."

"Don't be coy with me. That bastard set me back millions—hundreds of millions. The banks took all of his possessions, and I'm the one left hanging."

"Then you should have gotten some collateral."

He came even closer to me. "She *is* the collateral."

I didn't move an inch, not backing down to any man. He may be bigger, but I still had the upper hand.

"The sins of the father are not the sins of the daughter. She had no idea what he was doing with their money. He lost

everything—and so did she. You want to take her for all she’s got, but she’s broke.”

“She’s not broke anymore...not when she’s married to you.”

“I’m not giving you anything, Kamikaze. You already knew that before you came here, so I hope you have something better to say.”

He cocked his head slightly. “I do, actually. I want her.”

“Her? As in my wife?”

“Yes. You already knew that, so I hope you have something better to say.” He echoed my own words back at me, knowing I was trying to downplay this as much as possible.

“I’m not giving her to you. And even if I did, it doesn’t fix your problem.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. A beautiful woman like that could be sold for tens of millions, if not more. She could work off her debt to me—one fuck at a time. With tits like that and pipes that can shatter glass, men would pay a lot for her. And I’m not the only man Martin screwed over—so men would pay a fortune for their revenge.”

Arwen would fight him hard, and that resilience would only make her more desirable. I hadn’t fucked her, but I could understand the desire. She was beautiful, curvy, and she could definitely sing. “I’m not giving you my wife. Come near her, and I’ll kill you.”

“I understand you had nothing to do with Martin’s idiocy. I’m an honorable guy. You think I’d just take her from you?”

We had different definitions of honorable.

“No,” he said with a laugh. “I’ll pay you for her. That’s fair.”

If she knew this conversation was taking place, she would lose her shit.

“I’ll give you a very generous offer—five million.”

Martin was dead, and I had the information I needed to kill Ramon. It would be easy to hand her off and go back to my old life—along with some change in my pocket. But I'd made a promise to that man—and I would keep it. "No."

His eyes narrowed in displeasure. "Ten."

"Let me save you some time. She's not for sale." I turned back to the gate, dismissing the conversation. "I'm sorry the deal with Martin went south. But my wife isn't for sale—for any price."

I SAT at the dining table staring out the window that overlooked the backyard, the space where we held the wedding. I could have rented out the most beautiful church in the city or picked another place to hold the ceremony, but the grounds of my estate were perfect. And since we had the wedding on such short notice, it was our only option.

I sipped my coffee and opened the newspaper.

Footsteps sounded behind me, a pace that was far too quick for Abigail. She always moved around the house at a remarkable speed, but she somehow seemed so poised and calm as she did. Her shoes wouldn't make such a ruckus. So it could only be one person.

In the same clothes she'd worn the night before, Arwen entered the dining room. "Morning." She placed her purse on the table and took a seat, her makeup gone and her hair a little messier than it was when she left last night.

It was the first time I'd seen her not wearing pounds of mascara and thick eyeliner. With the foundation gone, her complexion really shone through, unblemished and beautiful. Her skin was lovely, and her eyes seemed to stand out even more when she was bare.

She poured herself a cup of coffee then added two cubes of sugar.

I stared at her for another moment before I turned back to my newspaper. I didn't ask about her night because I didn't give a damn. While she was getting fucked by Dante, I was fucking what's-her-name.

She stirred her coffee and took a drink. "How was your night?"

A group of assholes showed up at my doorstep and caused trouble. So, it was pretty shitty. "Fine." I still didn't ask about hers.

She seemed to understand I was in a mood, so she stopped asking questions.

Good. She was learning.

My date for the evening walked into the room when she finally woke up. "Sorry I slept in so late. After you left in the middle of the night, I couldn't get back to sleep." With her shoes in her hand and messy hair, she didn't even give Arwen a second glance. She knew I was married, but since I'd told her we had an open relationship, she didn't bother being discreet. She leaned over me and kissed me on the neck. "Call me later."

Once a woman asked me to call her, I never did. When expectations were established, I lost interest.

She walked out and left us to enjoy our breakfast.

Abigail brought in the plates then went back to the kitchen.

Arwen didn't ask about the woman I'd spent the night with. "Did you leave last night?"

I didn't lie to make my life easier. It was too much work because you had to keep track of every lie you ever told. I'd rather just be honest and piss people off. But if I told Arwen about Kamikaze, it would terrify her. The woman had already been through enough in the last two weeks. I wasn't going to tell her some assholes wanted to buy her and sell her into sexual slavery. "Pipe busted on the grounds. I had to fix it."

"Don't you have men for that?"

I looked up from my newspaper. "I'm quicker."

She set down her coffee and started to eat. She must be in a better mood because she hadn't had an appetite recently. A long night with Dante seemed to recharge her.

I didn't know anything about Dante, but he didn't seem good enough for her. They weren't going to last, so I guess it didn't matter anyway. "You're at the theater tonight?"

"Yes. For practice."

I folded my newspaper then straightened so I could eat my breakfast while it was still hot.

She smeared Abigail's homemade jam across her toast and took a bite, rolling her eyes just a little bit like she couldn't believe how good it was. "I love jam..." After a few more bites, she ate the entire thing then moved on to her eggs.

I didn't expect us to eat together every morning, but she seemed to have invited herself to share the ritual with me. I'd tell her to leave, but it was too soon to be a jackass. When enough time passed, I could start to be myself again.

"Are you still going to give me a tour of the house? I can barely remember how to get to my room."

"If you're up for it."

"Definitely. I've never told you this before, but your home is beautiful."

Her family estate used to be glorious at one time, but now it was long gone. The banks would remove anything they could sell, and it would be put on the market for someone else to purchase. Her ancestral home had been passed down for generations—and now it would belong to someone else.

She sipped her coffee. "You really can't take a compliment, can you?"

I took a bite of my food and stared her down, chewing slowly as I considered what to say. Threatening her was my automatic response, but I was still trying to be sensitive because of her father's passing.

She smeared more jam onto her toast. "When you don't like something, you just ignore it?"

“Would you rather have me yell at you?”

“No. I just wish I understood why you refuse to acknowledge every positive thing I say.”

“If you’re fishing for a response to every compliment you give, then it must not be genuine.”

“It is genuine. I’m just trying to understand you.”

I brought my coffee to my lips and took a drink. “Save yourself some time and don’t.”

I TOOK her on a tour of the house, showing her the large kitchen Abigail thrived in, the three separate dining rooms, the different living rooms, and then the private gym on the second floor.

She looked at the cardio machines and all the equipment I used on a daily basis. “Wow. This is the size of a regular gym. You’re the only one who uses it?”

“You can use it too if you like.”

“I’m not big on exercise.” She walked to the biceps curl and stared at the machine like she had no idea how it worked. “Singing is my exercise.”

Then she must have good genes, keeping a figure like that. I’d only seen her eat a couple of times, and she had a full meal. I walked out of the gym then took her to the drawing room on the third floor. The room didn’t have much of a purpose, but it had the best view of the property. There were a couple of couches facing each other and a grand piano tucked into the corner. Sleek and black, it didn’t have a spot of dust because my staff kept this entire place perfectly tidy every single day.

Her eyes lit up when she spotted the instrument. “Maverick, do you play?” She approached the piano and slid her hand along the smooth exterior, touching the glossy finish.

She moved to the bench and lightly pressed her fingers against the keys, exploring the whites and the blacks.

“No.”

“Then why do you have it?” She tested out the notes, as if she were checking that the piano was still in tune.

“Ask my interior decorator.”

I had a lot of priceless possessions in this house, but this seemed to be the only thing that truly impressed her. With a loving gaze, she stared at the keys and made love to each one with her fingertips. Gentle sounds filled the room, random notes that didn't create a song.

I watched her head dip to observe the movement of her fingers, watched the way she instantly became immersed in the instrument, like she was about to perform on stage. Her eyes filled with innate joy, like this was the first time she'd felt happiness since her father passed away.

“Do you play?” It felt like a stupid question when I saw how attached she'd already become.

“Yes.” She hesitantly pulled her hands away from the keyboard and rose to her feet. “Can I play it sometime? When I'm rehearsing?”

The question seemed odd considering this was her home now, but my bedroom was right down the hallway so I could probably hear every sound she made. “This is your home now. Do whatever you want.”

WE DROVE a golf cart to the factory a few acres away. The facility had workers that showed up every day, stirring the cheese in the big pots, melting the wax onto the cheese wheel, and professionals dating and storing the cheese until they were properly aged. They had to check in with security at the gate every day before they came onto the property.

Arwen was fascinated by everything.

I took her through the factory, showing her the different parts of the assembly. “Our cheese is native to Italy because we have special bacteria that is indigenous to the area. It doesn’t grow anywhere else in the known world.” I stood off to the side with her as two men stirred the cheese wheel that was forming in the center of the pot. “We inoculate our cows with it, and that produces the special milk we use to make the cheese.” We kept moving through the factory, seeing the different steps until we arrived at the storage room. Hundreds of cheese wheels were stacked high in their cubbies.

Arwen walked down the aisle and examined one at eye level. “This is humongous. Do people buy the entire wheel?”

“Yes. Mainly restaurants.”

“That must be expensive. It’s got to weigh twenty pounds.”

“It is expensive. They can range from two to four thousand euros.”

Even though she’d been rich all her life, her eyes still filled with surprise. “Wow...how long are they aged?”

“The minimum is three years. But we have cheese wheels that are ten years old. The longer they age, the more they’re worth.” I kept walking and headed to the very rear of the building, stepping inside the large office where I took care of the business.

She followed behind me, examining my oversize desk and the bookshelves on both walls. She picked up a book at random and glanced at the title, seeing that it was a manufacturing book about the cheese process. She turned it then looked at my mahogany desk. Behind it was a picture window with my three-story home in the distance. “How long has the business been in your family?”

“Longer than I can remember. At least ten generations.”

“Wow...even some of the historic wineries don’t date back that far. That’s amazing.” She studied my plain desk, seeing the closed laptop that sat in the center. There was nothing else on the surface besides a single pen. “You’re extremely organized.”

“Minimalist.”

When she looked out the window and admired the house in the distance, the sunlight blanketed her face perfectly, making those blue eyes shine like they were two orbs. With her arms across her chest, she stood there for nearly a minute before she turned away. “If you ever need any help, I’m happy to lend you a hand. I don’t know much, but I’m a fast learner and a hard worker.”

My business was self-sufficient. It worked on a tight schedule, and I oversaw the big things. My foreman was in charge of all the day-to-day stuff. I never expected her to be part of my world. “I have all the help I need.”

“Alright...the offer still stands if you ever change your mind.”

WHEN WE RETURNED to the house, she turned to me. “You didn’t show me your office.”

“I just did.”

“Your home office.”

“I don’t see why you need to see that.” Or my bedroom.

Her nostrils flared like she was irritated by the comment, but she held back her rebuttal, being more compatible because I’d been nice to her. She swallowed her retorts and kept the peace instead of insulting me like I deserved. It was a diplomatic move for her. “I’m going to take a nap before I head out for the show.” She headed to the stairs. “I’ll see you later.” When she got to the point where she couldn’t stand me anymore, she made a good excuse to get away from me.

I watched her ass move back and forth as she climbed the stairs with a straight back. It was strange to think that I would have to share my life with this woman, that I should probably show her my office. In my mind, I kept thinking this was short-term, but it wasn’t.

It was a lifelong commitment.

I caught up with her. "Follow me."

On the second landing, she turned to me, clearly uneasy about what I wanted.

"Come on." I took the lead and moved to the third floor. I didn't check if she was behind me because the sound of her shoes was audible enough. I went past the bright windows and approached the door across the hall from my bedroom. "This is my office." I stepped inside the large room. There were two couches that faced the dark desk situated near the window. Decorated in dark colors with a stash of brandy and scotch in plain sight, it was my personal space. There was a box of cigars on the table.

She stepped inside, and the first thing she noticed was the cigars. "You smoke?"

"Occasionally."

She didn't take a seat as she examined my room, her arms crossed over her chest like she was afraid to let her guard down in my presence. "It suits you..."

I grabbed the decanter of brandy and two glasses. "Would you like some?"

"I'm not a brandy kind of girl."

"Water, then?"

"No, I'll take the scotch." I paused for just an instant as I set the glasses on my desk. She seemed like a girl who could only handle a weak bottle of wine. I would have never guessed that she had a palate for something stronger. I swapped out the brandy for the scotch and filled both glasses.

She took a seat then accepted the drink. Bringing it to her lips, she took a decent swallow and didn't even cringe when the booze dropped into her stomach. With perfect posture and crossed legs, she sat like she was still every bit of royalty.

I sat across from her and grabbed a cigar. "Mind if I smoke?"

“As long as you don’t smoke alone.”

I stilled again, not expecting her to participate in such a disgusting habit. She seemed like a woman who would berate me for smoking, because she was a perfect know-it-all. Or maybe she just didn’t care how long I lived.

She placed the cigar in her mouth, her full lips snug around the tip. She leaned forward and craned her neck out, the front of her dress giving way and revealing cleavage that was impossible to ignore.

But I didn’t look. I held the lighter to the end until it started to burn. She sucked at the same time, making the ash smolder into orange embers. With two fingers, she pulled the cigar out of her mouth and let a wall of smoke rise to the ceiling.

I was so mesmerized, I almost forgot to light my own cigar. I’d never seen a woman smoke like that, at least not a woman of her station. She seemed too prissy for it. I got the end burning and brought the smoke into my mouth, immediately feeling the calming sensation as it absorbed into my blood. I released a deep breath and let the smoke escape my nostrils.

With her drink in one hand and the cigar in the other, she leaned back against the couch and got comfortable, looking just like one of the guys. She slowly puffed on her cigar and let the smoke rise to the high, vaulted ceiling.

I hated to admit it, but she looked pretty sexy.

I left my drink on the table and moved to my desk to retrieve the folder. I returned and set the cigar in the ashtray so I could go over the papers. “This is for you.” I pulled out a couple bank cards and set them in front of her. “This one is for monthly expenses, gas, food, shopping, whatever.” I pushed another toward her. “This is for emergencies, and if you need to make a purchase up to a million dollars. If you need more cash than that, you’ll have to get approval from me—and I’ll probably say no.” I picked up the cigar again and took another puff.

She eyed the cards without taking them. “I don’t need this.”

She was broke, so unless Dante was buying her everything, she didn’t have any cash. “I think you do.”

“I get paid from the opera. It’s not a fortune, but it’s enough to cover food, gas, and anything else I might need. I don’t have rent or a car payment, and all my meals at the house are free. It’s a nice gesture, but I don’t need your money.” She set her cigar in the ashtray and changed her focus to the scotch.

I just threw a ton of money at her, and she turned it down. No one in their right mind would do that. “You should still keep these in case you need them.” If she really did pay for her own things, then it wouldn’t be like she existed at all. She was just a woman who slept in one of the rooms and shared meals with me. She could have easily taken the cards and gone on a shopping spree, but she didn’t seem interested. She was used to being rich, but now she didn’t seem to care that she wasn’t anymore.

She left them on the table but didn’t argue with me.

“How much do you make at the opera?”

She took a long drink then licked her lips. “Maybe a thousand euro every two weeks.”

“That’s nothing.”

“I don’t have any bills, so it’s plenty. Otherwise, I would just put the money into your account anyway.”

I wouldn’t take a dime from her.

“So, I’ll just cash my checks and spend that.”

I’d dreaded marrying this woman, but now it didn’t seem so bad. She didn’t rip into my wallet right away, and she did make an effort to be nice to me...even if it annoyed me sometimes. She could never get me to like her, but she was getting me to respect her—which was impressive. “Your name is on one of my accounts, so you can go to the bank if you need something.”

“Why would you do that?” she asked, dead serious. “Maverick, I don’t need your wealth. I’m only here because I need the protection. But I don’t need your money, and I certainly don’t need to be on your account.” She sipped her drink again then eyed her cigar.

I closed the folder and picked up my cigar again. “How long have you smoked?”

She took a deep puff and let the smoke rise from her mouth and drift toward the ceiling. “A few years. I only do it once in a while...maybe two times a year.”

So, much rarer than I did.

“You?”

“I’ve been smoking for ten years.”

“And how often?”

“Weekly.”

She didn’t give me a judgmental stare, but there was a slight pursing of her lips. “That’s not good. You should cut back.”

“I should do whatever I want.” There were so many things in this world that could kill me. I chose to live how I wanted, and that was on the dangerous side. I finished the scotch and left the glass on the empty table before I rested against the cushion of the couch.

“How old are you?”

The question was unexpected, and it also indicated how little she knew about me. Given how angry she was at her father at the time, she’d probably never had the opportunity to ask about me—especially since she’d refused to marry me. “Almost thirty.”

“That could mean anything. That could be twenty-six.”

“Twenty-nine.” And my birthday was on Saturday. When I said almost, I meant it literally. I didn’t know anything about her either, other than the fact that she was an opera singer, and that was only because her father took me to a performance. I’d

never cared to learn about her either because she would never mean anything to me. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-two.”

Jesus, she was young. This woman was almost ten years younger than me. I never would have guessed it, not because her appearance suggested she was close to my age, but because she possessed the attitude of someone much older. She had wisdom, she had grace, she wasn't an obnoxious party girl that had only been drinking for a couple years.

“So, you're an old man.” A slight smile stretched across her lips, like she was teasing me.

With the amount of shit I'd seen, I certainly felt like an old man. “I feel like one.”

Her firm legs were crossed at the knee, her slender calves noticeable underneath her dress. Her skin reminded me of the color of my cheese, just before it was covered in the wax seal and stored on the wooden shelves. It was such a beautiful color, like a blush rose petal that had never been harmed by the sun's damaging rays. I forced my eyes down into my drink, careful not to stare at her.

“My father never explained your role in the underworld. It seems like you and your father have bloody hands.”

“We aren't different from everyone else. Sometimes we make illegal trades, sometimes we buy things that shouldn't be for sale, sometimes we break the rules just for the hell of it. My father and I used to be more involved in drug trafficking across the shore to Turkey. There's a lot of money in that. But things started to get too serious, and we were in too deep. We built a reputation for ourselves because we never let anything stand in our way. But all of that changed when we pissed off Ramon and he wanted revenge. So he crossed the line and took my mother. We got out of the game and never went back.” It had been a stupid decision on our part all along because we didn't need the money in the first place. Our greed cost us my mother's life. All that money we'd made was covered in her blood now. It was tainted.

“I’m sorry.” Even when she wasn’t singing, she had the most beautiful voice. It was whimsical, somehow musical. She could express her emotions so easily because the sound of her voice was so heavy with her thoughts. So when she whispered those words, it was obvious she meant them. “When will you kill him?”

“Next week. Your father had contact with one of his suppliers. That’s how he knew he would be returning to Florence. My father and I have been trying to track him down for a year, but since he was hiding in Croatia, it was too difficult. But now we have our chance.”

“I hope you get what you want—and it gives you closure.”

Killing Ramon wouldn’t bring my mother back, but it had to be done anyway.

“Have you talked to your father lately?”

“I avoid him like the plague.”

“I don’t blame you.” She finished her scotch then set the glass on the table. Her cigar was still burning, so she took another puff then left it in the ashtray. A string of smoke escaped from her lips.

When I’d stepped into that hospital room and watched Dante leave, I didn’t like him immediately. A real man wouldn’t have allowed her to marry someone else. He wouldn’t have given up on her. A woman like this should have been with a man who could have protected her from Kamikaze and all the other assholes that hated her father. That was how I knew Dante wasn’t good enough for her—not even close. “What do you see in him?”

It took her a moment to understand the question. Her eyebrows rose slowly as she regarded me, deducing exactly who I was talking about. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Doesn’t seem like your type.”

“And you know my type?” she questioned.

“I just assumed you were interested in men—not boys.”

Sparks flew in her eyes. “Dante is a good man, and I might have married him if this hadn’t happened. He’s kind and good to me. He’s much better than that trashy woman who didn’t bother putting on her shoes before walking out the door.”

I didn’t take offense to that because I didn’t give a damn about what’s-her-name. “She means nothing to me, so I don’t care if she is trashy. But you love this guy, so it’s a different story. If he really loved you, he wouldn’t have stepped aside and let you marry someone else. That’s why I don’t understand what you see in him.”

“I never said I loved him.”

“You said you would have married him.”

“I said I *might* have married him if things were different. We only met a few months ago, so we didn’t have much time together before all of this happened. And I never would have wanted him to interfere because it would have cost him his life.”

“And if he were your man, he wouldn’t have cared.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You don’t seem like the kind of man that’s ever been in love, so you shouldn’t talk about it like you understand it.”

“I’m not talking about love. I’m talking about being a man—two very different things. And in my eyes, Dante is no man.” I rose to my feet and left the glasses and ashtray on the table. “Fuck whoever you want—but I think you can do better.” I moved around her couch and headed to the door.

“That’s ironic,” she said without turning around. “I could say the same about you.”

ARWEN

FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS, I WORKED AT THE OPERA AND SLEPT at Dante's. Annoyed by Maverick's comments, I avoided him. His opinion shouldn't matter to me, but I was tired of trying to lay a tolerable foundation between us and have him destroy it every time. Just when I thought I could talk to him, he proved me wrong.

It was hard to believe he was the man who'd held my hand through my father's funeral, the man who'd acted as my crutch to survive those horrible days. Unexpectedly, he could be the most compassionate man I'd ever met—but he could turn on you.

I went to the theater that night and performed, getting lost in the music as I played to an audience I couldn't see. The stage lights were so bright on my face that everything in the background was just darkness.

But it still made me feel alive.

Singing had been my passion since I could remember. Now I used it to nurse my broken heart, to focus on something so my mind wouldn't drift away. Everything in my life had changed drastically—this was the only thing that stayed the same.

When the curtains closed, Dante came backstage, roses in his hand.

I smiled at the gesture and resisted the urge to kiss him since I had to be discreet with my affairs now. But I knew my emotions were written on my face; I was grateful that this man

was still around. He was the only remaining person from my former life, a reminder of how my life used to be.

“You were amazing. I could watch you sing forever.”

“Thank you.”

“Want to have dinner at my place?”

“There’s no place I’d rather go.”

WE ATE at his dining table, enjoying the food that was delivered to the apartment. We couldn’t go out anymore because we couldn’t be seen together. Our time together was spent in this apartment, mainly in his bed. It started to feel like an affair as time passed. It started off as a relationship—but now it was just a secret.

He stopped eating and set his fork down, his eyes filled with troubling thoughts. He didn’t wear that handsome smile or show affection in his eyes. Something weighed his shoulders down, haunted him.

I knew what it was. And I knew what was coming.

“I can’t do this anymore...” He lifted his gaze and looked at me, apology in his eyes. “You used to be mine, and now I have to share you. Every time we’re in bed together, I have to see the ring on your finger. Every time we’re in public, I have to pretend to be just your friend...”

Even though I knew this was coming, it still hurt.

“I know you aren’t sleeping with him and I trust you, but I still feel like the other man.”

I wanted to fight for us, to tell him nothing had changed. But I cared too much about him to persuade him to stay with me. All of his points were valid. He wanted the real thing, a real relationship. I couldn’t give him that.

“We can never go out to dinner, hang out with my friends...do anything. And I met this woman...”

Now it really started to hurt.

“I told her I was seeing someone, so nothing has happened. But being around her makes me realize what I want... I’m sorry.”

He wanted her—not me.

“I wish things could be different.”

I wasn’t going to cry over a man. I’d cried so much in the last few weeks that my tear ducts were spent. He wasn’t worth my heartache. If he wanted to be with someone else, then it was over before I even saw him this evening. Maybe Maverick was right. Maybe this man wasn’t good enough for me. If he really loved me, he would love me despite the restrictions...or he would fight for me. Dante wanted to do neither. “I understand, Dante. You’re completely right. This isn’t a relationship, it’s an affair.” It was just sex behind closed doors. All the romance died when I forced Dante to be a secret. I swallowed my pain and my pride and just let it be.

He rested his hand on mine. “I really am sorry. I know you’ve been through so much—”

“Really, I’m fine. Please don’t feel bad for me.” I looked him in the eye to give my words more credibility. “This is my life, not yours. There’s no reason for you to drown just because I’m obligated to go down with the ship.”

Dante studied me, true pain in his eyes. He clearly hated this conversation, hated to hurt me.

Despite what he’d just done, I knew he was a good guy. He would make a woman very happy. He would be a faithful husband and a good father. With enough time, he would forget about me entirely and struggle to remember when there was someone else in his life besides his wife. That was how it should be.

And he deserved that.

I CLEARED security at the gate at one in the morning.

I drove to the house up the road and pulled into the enormous garage that housed his expensive toys. Instead of driving a Bugatti or a Ferrari, I drove a Mercedes. He offered something more luxurious, but I didn't want a car I was terrified to drive.

I slipped off my heels and walked into the house, relieved it was so quiet. Abigail had gone to bed, and the rest of the servants went home for the day. That allowed me to take my time going up the stairs, to let my shoulders sag from the sadness and exhaustion.

I made it to the second landing and almost bumped right into Maverick.

In just his sweatpants, barefoot and bare-chested, he stood in my way, his tanned skin tight over strong muscles. The veins ran all the way from the tops of his arms to his hands, a design of webs that showed just how fit his physique really was. His skin had its own smolder, like a drop of water would immediately turn to steam because he naturally ran so hot. His hair was a little messy because he'd obviously been sleeping when I pulled up to the house. The slightly tired look in his eyes was somehow sexy, probably because he had to let his guard down to fall asleep. "Why are you home so late?"

I didn't feel like being interrogated right now. I walked around him and headed to my room, my heels in one hand and my purse in the other. "You said I could come and go as I wished."

His footsteps sounded as he followed me. "You told me you wouldn't be home until tomorrow."

"Well, I changed my mind. What's the big deal?" I made it to my bedroom and stepped through the doorway.

He joined me, coming inside, something he rarely did. "It's a big deal because my security calls me every time someone drives to the gate past ten."

I opened my closet and slid the heels inside their cubby. "Then tell them not to call you."

He walked right up to me, clearly growing furious by my dismissal of everything he said. “Don’t be smart with me. Don’t tell me you aren’t coming home and then pull up at one in the morning.”

“I’m sorry,” I said sarcastically. “I didn’t realize my own home was off-limits to me.”

“Just don’t say one thing and do another.”

“Well, shit happens.” I tossed my purse on a shelf and stepped away from him.

He watched me walk away, his muscular arms resting by his sides. His unnaturally tight stomach looked harder than a slab of concrete. A knife couldn’t even penetrate his exterior because he was so hard. He made Dante seem soft, even though he was also a fit man. “What kind of shit would make you walk to your car by yourself and drive here in the middle of the night?”

I didn’t want to give Maverick the satisfaction of being right, but the truth would come out eventually. Why not now? “Dante dumped me.” I fell into the chair and crossed my legs, doing my best to ignore his focused stare. “He was tired of being a secret and found somebody else. I wasn’t going to stay there a second longer. If I’d known I couldn’t come here, I would have slept in my car.” I knew Maverick would gloat about his assessment of Dante, calling him a boy. He would kick me while I was down, rise victorious in my ashes. It wasn’t like me to avoid someone’s gaze, but I couldn’t bear to see the arrogance on his face.

Maverick stood still for a while before he moved to the spot beside me on the couch. Just like at the funeral when we were surrounded by watching eyes, he sat right beside me, his thigh touching mine. The second he was next to me, I could smell his lingering cologne, the cotton from his sheets. He didn’t smell like a woman, so I assumed he’d been in bed alone tonight.

I continued to stare at the cold fireplace, hoping he would just leave and we would never discuss this night ever again.

His next words were surprising. “I’m sorry.”

Just when I thought the worst of him, he surprised me.

“He was the last person from your former life...and losing him must be difficult.”

I was shocked Maverick understood my feelings so well. Losing a boyfriend wasn’t the difficult part. It was losing all the pieces that used to comprise my old life. Now everything had fallen away, and I was a whole new person...a person I didn’t like.

“But he wasn’t good enough for you anyway, Arwen. At least you aren’t wasting any more time.”

“All I have is time to waste. There’s nothing to look forward to. I’ll never meet a man and fall in love. I’ll never hit the milestones that other people do. I’m married and I’m rich—but I don’t have anything.” My life was empty.

“That’s not true...you have me.”

I finally turned my gaze and looked at him, surprised by what he’d said.

“I promised your father I would protect you—and that’s what I’ll do. You may feel alone in the world, but you do have that. We may not love each other or even like each other. But we’re still allies.”

And just like that, my opinion of him shifted. There was a big, beautiful heart inside that hard chest—he just hid it most of the time. His words could be so hurtful, but sometimes, they could be so beautiful. “Sometimes I don’t know if I hate you or I like you...but right now, I like you.”

He showed a slight smile, a rare sight. “Wait until tomorrow...you’ll change your mind again.”

FROM WHAT I GATHERED, Maverick woke up early every morning, worked out, had breakfast, and then went to work at the building on the other side of his property. He was hardly

around the house during the day, and if he wasn't at work, I wasn't sure where he went.

We didn't see each other that much.

Sometimes I wondered if Maverick and I could be friends. Maybe we could do stuff together instead of sharing breakfast once in a while. But I remembered his kindness was used sparingly. If I hit a low point, he was there for me. He dropped his hostility and became the shoulder I needed to cry on. But once I was myself again, he turned back to the coldhearted jerk who didn't mince his words.

I spent a few days recovering from my breakup with Dante, trying not to imagine what his new love interest looked like. Was she a brunette too? Was she interesting? Had he already slept with her? I told myself it didn't matter, because deep down inside, I knew Dante made the right decision. He couldn't stay with me just to make me feel better. He needed to move on with his life—because he deserved a full life.

It was just depressing to know I would never have the same thing.

On Saturday, I was performing at the theatre, so I did my hair and makeup and prepared to leave, hoping I would run into Maverick before I left. I hadn't seen him in a few days. Since he was the only person who knew what I was going through, he was my confidant...not that he wanted to listen to my problems.

When I approached the stairs, I ran into Abigail. She had a small plate in her hands with a cupcake in the center. With chocolate frosting and a single candle, it looked like a miniature birthday cake.

“What's that for?” She brought food to my room during my darkest days, but now that I'd been feeling better, I came to the dining table whenever meals were ready. It wouldn't make sense for her to bring a treat.

“Mr. DeVille. It's his birthday today. He hates to celebrate, but I always like to leave this on his nightstand...just to

acknowledge it subtly. He never mentions it, but he does eat it...so I think he appreciates it.”

“Today is his birthday?” I asked in surprise. He’d said he was turning thirty soon, but I’d had no idea how soon.

“Yes.” She kept walking and headed to the next set of stairs.

“Is he home?”

“No. He left about an hour ago.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“He went out with some friends. Where specifically, I’m not sure.” She walked up the stairs until she was out of sight.

I wished I’d known it was his birthday today. He obviously didn’t want me to know because he’d rather pretend it didn’t exist, but he was my husband. I should know these things.

MAVERICK

“NOT TONIGHT, MAN.” KENT SLAMMED HIS HAND DOWN ON the table. “Drinks are on me. I don’t give a shit if you’re a billionaire, birthday boys never buy their own drinks.” He turned to the waitress who set the drinks in front of us. “Don’t take his money, alright? His number is okay but no cash.”

She addressed him but smiled at me. “Got it.” She tucked her tray under her arm and walked away, her ass shaking in her tight skirt.

The guys were at the bar talking to two women they’d spotted the second they walked in, and since Kent and I weren’t as hard up as the others, we took our time before we started the hunt. It was never smart to go after the first piece of ass you spotted. It was essential to figure out who had the nicest ass first.

“So, how’s the wife?”

I had no idea what she was doing tonight, but since it was Saturday, I assumed she had a performance. “She’s probably singing at the theatre.” Kent knew the marriage was totally bogus, but he was still fascinated by the arrangement. “I haven’t talked to her in a while.”

“How does that work? You just don’t see her for a couple of days?”

With one arm over the back of the booth, I drank the scotch, remembering the afternoon Arwen and I drank together. “It’s a pretty big place. She sleeps on the second floor

on one side of the house. I'm on the top floor on the opposite side."

"But you're fucking her, right?"

The only time I came close was on our wedding night. I didn't have much interest in her at the time, but when I thought she wanted me, I wasn't going to say no. That was purely for convenience, nothing else. "No."

"No?" Kent asked incredulously. "You're joking. You haven't fucked your own wife?"

"No." I took another drink.

He shook his head like he couldn't believe what I said. "Mav, not to be a dick, but she is gorgeous. On your wedding day, she was the sexiest woman there. She's probably the sexiest woman everywhere she goes."

I wasn't impressed as easily as he was, but I didn't deny that she was a looker. Ever since I'd been forced to marry her, my desire had been inhibited. She was a commitment I didn't want to have, not a sexy one-night stand I could kick out the next morning. She was an obligation...and that wasn't sexy. But as I'd gotten to know her over the last six weeks, I'd started to see her in a new way. She was a smart woman with incredible resilience. Sometimes she fell down...but she always picked herself up again. She'd garnered my respect... somehow.

"You can't sit there and tell me you disagree," Kent said. "It's just not possible."

"Yes...I think she's beautiful."

"Then why are you out drinking with me and the boys when you could be fucking her? Any piece of ass you pick up in here won't compare."

My relationship with Arwen had evolved since the night we'd met. There was an alliance between us, a partnership that was based on something akin to friendship. But she didn't want a physical relationship with me. She knew she could have me if she wanted me...based on our wedding night. Sometimes I caught glimpses of her looking at me, admiring

my bare chest. When we kissed, I knew she could feel the heat between our lips. But perhaps that was just biology mixed with chemistry—nothing more. “That’s not how our relationship is.”

“What are you talking about? She’s your wife.”

“She doesn’t want to sleep with me.” I stared ahead and surveyed the people in the bar. It was my birthday, and I wanted to pretend it wasn’t happening by drinking with the guys. I wanted to pretend I didn’t care that my father forgot it was my birthday...and my sister didn’t remember either. Birthdays were just countdowns until death, but I thought it would mean something to my own family. My mother wouldn’t have forgotten.

“Are you sure about that?”

I nodded.

“Is she sleeping with other people?”

“We have an open relationship.” I didn’t care who she slept with, and she didn’t care who I slept with. I just hoped she would open her legs to a man who actually deserved her, not more boys trying to be men. As I got to know her, I realized she deserved more than most people. She had a good heart and a beautifully proud spirit.

“Does that bother you?”

“No.” My answer came out instantly.

“I don’t know...if I had a wife who looked like that, I would be the only one allowed to fuck her.”

I could control her if I wanted to. I could lock her up in the house and make her mine. I could strip away all her rights and turn her into a prisoner. I could threaten to kill any man she talked to, and when she got so horny she lost her mind, she would finally give in and fuck me. But I didn’t want to be that guy. “I don’t see her that way...as my wife. She’s just a means to an end.”

“And when are you finally going to cash in your reward?”

“Next week.”

“Need any help?”

I shook my head. “No. This is personal—and we want to get our hands dirty.” There would be torture followed by a gruesome death. I’d watch the entire thing, leaving my father to do the dirty work because it meant more to him. It would be grisly, but when it was over, we could wash our hands and move on.

THE BLONDE I was talking to was an easy mark. Her hand kept grabbing my thigh under the table, moving up until her fingers brushed the hard outline of my dick in my jeans. She made it clear she had no issues with getting right to the point.

Kent was beside me, talking to a brunette about the scars on his hand. He traced them with his forefinger like he was mapping out the stars with all the cuts he’d received from his underground knife fights.

It was obvious when a pretty girl walked inside because all heads turned to the entryway. This one caught my attention in particular because every single person in the bar looked—the women included.

When she made her way past the congestion at the bar, she stepped farther inside, wearing a tight little black dress, black heels, and her hair was its own special production. With a small gift box tucked under her arm, she scanned the area like she was searching for someone.

I almost didn’t recognize her. I’d seen her dress up before, but this dress had a dramatic slit up her thigh and a tightness around her chest that made her tits look like fresh eggs on a platter. Her ass must have looked amazing because all the men behind her craned their necks to get a look at it.

The blonde kept talking and squeezing my thigh, oblivious to my otherwise-directed attention.

Arwen finally spotted me, and there was a slight joy that entered her gaze—like I was exactly who she was looking for.

She headed to the table, her perfect figure moving flawlessly. Her hips shook from side to side, so womanly that they made me a bigger man on the spot.

Even Kent forgot about his girl when he noticed Arwen.

Arwen reached the table, unaffected by the woman who was sinking her claws into me. “Happy Birthday, Maverick.”

The blonde moved closer to me, clearly not wanting to share.

I didn’t understand so many things. How did she know it was my birthday? How did she know I was here? Why did she get me a present? I was speechless for a moment, my dick so hard it started to hurt inside my jeans—and it had nothing to do with the blonde.

Kent kicked me under the table, snapping me back to reality.

I dropped my arm from around the blonde. “Give us a couple minutes.”

The blonde was clearly pissed. She looked at me like I’d just slapped her. “Someone else will snatch me up in a couple minutes.” She slid out of the booth and marched off, angry she didn’t get what she wanted.

Arwen immediately looked apologetic. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“Sit down.” I didn’t want all the men in the bar to keep staring at her ass as she stood in front of my table.

She slid into the booth and placed the present in front of me. “It’s not much, but I wanted you to have it.”

I ignored it, looking at her with the same bewilderment. My arm moved over the back of the booth once more, subconsciously claiming her so the dogs would stop sniffing. When I glanced at her left hand, I noticed the princess cut diamond ring I gave her, shining more brilliantly than any other piece of jewelry anyone else wore. “What are you doing here?”

“Liam told me you were celebrating your birthday here with friends... I thought I was also a friend.” Her attitude slipped into her tone, offended that I wasn’t touched by the gesture.

I didn’t see her as a friend—but I didn’t tell her that. “How did you know it was my birthday?”

“How about you stop asking a million questions and just open your present?” She sat up straight with her arms on the table, the curve in her back so deep that it made her ass look even bigger.

I stared at her, slightly embarrassed she was there, but I was even more embarrassed because I was touched by the gift.

Kent watched us. “Asshole, your wife got you a birthday present. Put a smile on your face and open it.” He slid out of the booth with the girl he’d been flirting with. They traveled to the bar to get another drink.

Leaving me alone with her.

She kept watching me, and when I didn’t open it, her eyes started to fill with sadness. “I finished at the theater, and I wanted to stop by and give this to you. I didn’t mean to embarrass you or ruin—”

“You just caught me off guard. That’s all.” And I never let anyone catch me off guard. I grabbed the present and ripped through the wrapping, revealing a picture frame. It was a photo of my mother and me. It had been taken on Easter Sunday. She was in a white dress with her fingernails painted in pastels. I wore a collared shirt she’d gotten me for my birthday. It was the last holiday we’d celebrated before she died. My hand started to shake as I held the picture, remembering that spring day so perfectly.

“I noticed you don’t have any picture frames on your desk... I thought you could put this up. Abigail found the picture for me.”

The only reason Abigail helped her was because she liked her...and she wanted me to lighten up.

Arwen kept watching me as I stared at the picture.

It was difficult to pull my gaze away because I wished my mother were still here. I wished I could put the frame down, then look up and see her face. My heart had hardened into stone, so I hardly ever felt anything...but this made me feel so much. When I couldn't look at it anymore, I turned the picture over onto the table. "Thank you..." I still hadn't looked at Arwen yet, unsure what to say to her. She'd just chased away an easy lay, but I couldn't care less about getting pussy anymore.

She pulled the picture back toward her. "I'll take it back to the house for you. I thought I could hang out with your friends, but it looks like you guys are all doing the same thing..." Picking up women to take home.

"How did you know it was my birthday?"

"I caught Abigail sneaking a cupcake to your room."

She did it every year—even though I asked her not to. "I'm pretty tired. I think I'm ready to head home."

"I didn't mean to scare off your date."

"If I really wanted to take someone home, I would make it happen." Now the idea of taking home a random woman felt anticlimactic. I didn't feel the angry bitterness in my chest anymore. Now there was warmth there...so I didn't want something meaningless.

"Alright." She rolled up the wrapping paper and grabbed the picture frame. "I guess I'll see you at the house." She slid out of the booth and rose to her feet.

Once again, every man in the room turned to gawk at her, to check out her perfect legs, petite waist, and sexy-as-fuck tits.

I didn't like it.

I got to my feet and circled my arm around her waist.

She flinched at the touch but brushed it off just as quickly.

When we walked out, I saw the blonde give me the coldest stare. She felt replaced by a woman so beautiful she couldn't

possibly compete. Kent winked at me from the bar then gave me a thumbs-up, telling me to go for it.

We left the bar, and I walked her to her Mercedes a few blocks away at the curb. I didn't want her walking around dressed like that. I was surprised she made it to the bar without being accosted by ten different guys.

I opened the door for her.

“Wow, I didn't know you had manners.”

I looked down at her, realizing how short she was even in heels. I towered over her so easily, getting a perfect view of her bustiness. “It's rare, but it happens.”

WE RETURNED to the house and walked into the entryway.

She had the picture frame tucked under her arm, her long hair cascading around her shoulders. She smelled so good, like a field of flowers. When she performed at the opera, she didn't work up a sweat, even though her vocal cords were commanded to do the extraordinary. She even went to a bar afterward, not wiped out by the exertion it must have taken.

She gripped the rail and climbed up the staircase, her feet still in the five-inch heels.

I walked beside her, more aware of her attractiveness than ever before. Kent didn't need to point it out to me because I always knew she was beautiful. I just never entertained the idea because there was so much resentment in the way.

We reached the second floor, and she extended the picture frame to me. “If you don't want to put up the picture, it's no big deal—”

“No, it should go up. I just have to decide where.” I glanced at it and held it at my side. If she'd gotten me something else, like a shirt or a watch, I probably would have been a dick to her. The night would have gone quite

differently. But when I realized how sentimental the gift was, I didn't have an angry bone in my body.

She gave a slight smile. "I was afraid you would get mad... It seems like you're always mad."

In her defense, she was right. I was usually brooding over something. Sometimes I was stressed about work, sometimes I was thinking about how much I hated my father, and sometimes I remembered all the terrible things that had happened to my mother. It was enough to make anyone angry all the time. "I am always angry."

"Well...I hope you had a good birthday." She turned her body slightly, like she was about to walk ahead and go into her bedroom.

"I did. But there's something else I want for my birthday." Before I knew what I was saying, the words were out of my mouth and in the air. Maybe I'd drunk too much scotch, or maybe I thought I had a real chance because of the thoughtful gift she'd just given me. Or maybe she just looked so damn hot, I wanted to lift up her dress and fuck her right up against the wall.

She stiffened in place, like she knew exactly what I meant. Her eyes focused on my face, and her breathing changed. Her tits firmed against her dress, her nipples piercing through the thin material. She could have turned away and brushed off the comment, but she continued to linger.

I stepped closer to her, my lips aching for those full and delicious lips of hers. My imagination skipped ahead and pictured our naked bodies on my bed, her hard nipples being sucked raw by my anxious mouth. I opened her legs and tasted her there too, seeing if she was sweet or sour. Then I finally got my dick inside her—and fucked my wife.

She didn't step back, but her lips parted slightly.

My hand slid into her hair, and I cradled her face so I could take her mouth. I moved closer and felt my dick nearly break through my zipper. With my arms locked behind her knees, I pictured myself sinking deep inside her tight little pussy. I

imagined being buried to the hilt, taking this gorgeous woman who every man dreamed of fucking.

My fingers tightened in her hair, and I rested my mouth closer to hers, feeling the anticipation heighten just before the kiss. I'd kissed her before, but it was an obligation, a performance. This was the first time I truly wanted her, not just because she was offering herself. I desired her like a man desired his fantasy.

My arm wrapped around her waist, and I brought her into me as I kissed her.

Fuck.

I felt her soft lips as a shiver ran down my spine. Smooth and slightly wet, they tasted like scotch and lipstick. I pulled her breath out of her lungs and into mine as I kissed her, claimed her mouth as my property. My fingers tightened a little more as I tilted my head and deepened the kiss.

Her lips moved with mine, shy at first, but then aggressive and sexy. She took a breath as she felt me, her hands moving to my stomach so she could feel my abs through my shirt. She pressed hard into me as I flexed for her, letting her feel what a real man felt like. A tiny moan escaped her lips, so small it could barely be heard.

Maybe I imagined it.

I imagined her soaked panties. I imagined fingering her pussy and getting my fingers coated in her arousal. I imagined staring at her sexy asshole as I fucked her from behind. I imagined heart-pounding, dirty, dirty sex.

Her hands migrated up my stomach to my chest, studying the grooves and muscle of my frame. When she got to my shoulders, she squeezed them with her slender fingers then cupped my face, feeling the friction of my facial hair as she touched my chin.

My hand covered both of her ass cheeks, and I squeezed.

She was a sexy kisser.

I had another floor to go before we reached my bedroom, but I had condoms in my pocket, so I would fuck her in her room. I started to back her up and guide her to the first flat surface I could get her to.

But she stopped kissing me instead.

She pulled away with her hand resting on my arms, her eyes downcast as she avoided my gaze by looking at my chest. Her lips were still parted, and she breathed deep and hard because that kiss knocked the wind out of her like it did me. Then her fingertips touched her bottom lip, like the electricity between us had numbed her mouth in the process. “Goodnight...” She pulled away and walked into her bedroom.

I watched her go with a hard dick in my pants. The second I tried to take it further, it spooked her. I was tempted to go after her, to press her head into the mattress and force her ass in the air so I could take her anyway. I’d never been overcome with such an urge to take a woman violently. This was my house, and she was my property. I could do whatever the fuck I wanted.

But before I did anything rash, I breathed through the pounding arousal in my dick and calmed myself. I could make this happen if I wanted to, but it would go against my promise. I’d vowed to protect her and take care of her.

Not force her to fuck me.

Even though my hands were balled into fists and my rage circulated in my blood, I turned around and went to bed.

ARWEN

I ALMOST DID SOMETHING REALLY STUPID LAST NIGHT.

I almost slept with my husband.

When he kissed me, I knew I should have pulled away... but I didn't. Once his lips were on mine and I felt that incredible body with my fingertips, I got lost in the lust. I pictured myself on my back while that beautiful man fucked me until I came around his dick.

But that was a terrible idea.

I could barely tolerate the man when things weren't complicated. What would happen once we started sleeping together? Would it be just a one-time thing? Or would it cause problems? Maverick and I weren't in a monogamous relationship, so we were more like coworkers. You don't shit where you eat.

If this was a lifelong commitment, I couldn't see us casually sleeping together without consequences.

I didn't see Maverick for a few days because I spent a lot of time at the theater...and I was purposely avoiding him. He seemed to be busy with work anyway, so we didn't cross paths. Soon he would be taking out Ramon, so that might keep him busy for a few days.

But eventually, I would have to face him.

I wasn't the kind of person to shy away from conflict, but I was dreading this conversation with Maverick. He wasn't

much of a talker, so he might pretend it never happened, choosing to be a passive-aggressive asshole.

Not that that was much better.

When I came home from the theatre, the moment arrived. I stepped inside the house and found him standing in the entryway, sorting through his mail while wearing a black suit. His powerful physique filled out the garment so well, making it fit him like a glove. He hardly ever wore suits, so he must have had serious business that afternoon.

There was no way around him without getting his attention, so I sucked it up and moved to the stairs.

He didn't look up from the letter he was reading. "How long are you going to drag this out?" He flipped to another envelope and checked it before moving on to the next. He didn't bother to look up and read my reaction. He seemed to feel it.

I slowly turned back to him, knowing he was right. I couldn't be a coward forever. "Until now, I guess."

He tossed the envelopes onto the center table, which held a massive sculpture that rose toward the chandelier hanging from the high, vaulted ceiling. His dark eyes showed his irritation. He wasn't the gentle man he'd been a few nights ago on his birthday. He'd reverted back to the asshole he was before. "If you don't want to fuck me, don't lead me on. You've done it twice now."

My jaw almost dropped to the floor. "I did not lead you on —"

"You follow me to a bar on my birthday, dressed like you're trying to torture me, and then you give me a photograph of my mother?" He tilted his head as he examined me with cold eyes. "Don't backpedal. That's exactly what you did."

"I'm not backpedaling. I was being a friend. That's what we are, right? Maybe you've never had a relationship with a woman that wasn't straight sex, but that was me being more than just a quick fuck."

He still looked pissed. “I would have preferred the fuck.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re a pig.”

“I’m a man.” He stepped toward me, crowding me into the banister of the stairs. “I’m a man who likes to fuck beautiful women. If you don’t want to be one of those women, then stop with the bullshit. Just stay out of my way and pretend you don’t exist.”

“So, it’s one or the other?” I asked incredulously. “I either sleep with you or live under a rock?”

“That’s a good way to put it.”

I wanted to slap him again. “I didn’t sleep with you because it would complicate things. Would it be a one-time thing? Would we forget it ever happened? Would we keep doing it? Would we continue to see other people? It’s just easier if we don’t go down that road.”

“You are my wife. Husbands are supposed to fuck their wives. You’re overthinking it.”

“So just casually?” I asked.

“Yes. You were fucking Dante casually. How is that any different?”

I didn’t want to talk about the man who dumped me. “Leave him out of this.”

“You told me you were going to have lovers. Why can’t I be one of those lovers?”

Maverick wasn’t like the men I took to bed. He was more handsome than all of them combined, but he was also a huge dick. Sometimes he was kind, but sometimes he was equally cruel. “Because I don’t like you.”

His eyes fell, as if the words actually hurt him.

“You’re nice to me once in a while and then a dick to me ten seconds later. Like right now, you’re a completely different guy than the last time we were together. Our relationship is already complicated enough. Add fucking into the mix, and it’s gonna be a shitshow.”

He kept staring at me with eyes as strong as espresso. “It’s not complicated—you’re what’s complicated. We could fuck like every other man and woman out there, no strings attached. Sometimes we screw, sometimes we don’t. No big deal.”

“It never works that way. Every man I’ve ever been with always wants more.”

His eyes narrowed before a sarcastic laugh exploded from his mouth. “You won’t have that problem with me. The only reason I want to fuck you is because of the way you look in a tight dress. That’s all I’m ever going to want from you—so get over yourself.”

Now I really did want to slap him so hard his cheek would be red for a week. “I’m just telling you—”

“You’re the one who’s going to want to fuck me. I see the way you look at me, I feel the way you kiss me. You’ll get sick of boys like Dante and want to be fucked by a real man. Don’t wait too long...because I might lose interest.”

“Wow...you’re the one who needs to get over yourself.”

He grabbed the stack of mail from the table and tucked it under his arm. “Stay out of my way.” He moved toward me as he approached the stairs, his shoulder coming close to mine. “I mean it.”

“You weren’t kidding when you said I would change my mind.” I turned and watched him reach the first step of the large staircase.

He stopped his progression but didn’t turn around to look at me.

“You were right. I do hate you.”

AN ENTIRE WEEK PASSED, and I did what he asked—stayed out of his way.

I had breakfast in my room, went to the gym when I knew he was finished with his workout, and I minded my own

business.

It got lonely after a while.

He had a large swimming pool with a beautiful deck that overlooked his property, so I spent time in the sun while reading. When it got too hot, I dipped in the water for a cooldown. Having servants that would refresh my drink and bring cheese platters and bowls of fruit was a dream come true.

But I still felt empty inside.

Now that Dante was gone and my father was dead, I felt like the only person on the planet. I didn't realize how much I talked to Maverick until that bridge had been burned. We'd had a great night together at the bar for his birthday. He seemed to like the present I got him. But things went south... and now our friendship was gone too.

I couldn't live like this forever. I couldn't be at war with my only ally.

But I didn't want to sleep with him to make peace.

It would make me feel like a whore.

It would be a lie to say the thought didn't cross my mind. When we kissed at the top of the stairs, my lips were so hot, they felt like they were on fire. My lungs inhaled as much air as possible because kissing him was just so damn good.

A man had never kissed me like that before.

If he kissed that well, I imagined he could do everything else just as well.

Maybe his ego really did come from somewhere.

I was sitting in my room alone watching TV when I started to think about Maverick. Distance made the heart grow fonder, and I began to despise him less. I remembered how good he was to me during my darkest days. He held me at our wedding so I could shed a few tears for my dying father. He gripped my hand at the funeral. He comforted me when I sat in the darkness and wished I were dead. He was such a bastard...but he could be a good man too.

He wasn't my enemy.

He was my ally.

I had no idea if he was home, but at this hour, he would be in his office or bedroom. Dinner would have finished an hour ago, so there was nowhere else he could be. I took the stairs to the third floor and approached his bedroom door, knowing I would be greeted with a demonic threat. Maverick could be the most intimidating man on the planet if you got on his bad side. That ice-cold expression would be on his face, those coffee-colored eyes full of hatred. He would probably insult me a couple of times before I could even get a single word in. He might even slam the door in my face.

I raised my fist to knock on the door, but I stopped when I heard what he was doing.

“Maverick...” A woman's sexy voice filled the room with a moan. The sound of the creaking bed was audible a second later, along with the tap of the headboard against the wall. His pace was quick, like he was dominating that mattress, like he was conquering her. The woman's breathing was so loud, I could hear it through the closed door. She panted louder and harder, like she was just seconds away from coming.

I should have walked away in revulsion, but I stayed. Like a creeper, I kept listening through the door, imagining how that fit man looked naked. He seemed like he was rocking her world, and now I couldn't stop picturing it in my head. How was he fucking her? Was he on top doing all the work? Was she riding his dick up and down? Was he as big as his ego suggested?

I should leave now and stop wondering.

But I stayed. I wanted to hear him moan, hear him come. I wanted to hear him enjoy himself so I could add it to my imagination. I was attracted to him when we kissed, but now I realized how deep that lust ran.

Why else would I still be standing there?

I took it a step further and cracked open the door. My eye focused on the tiny slit I'd made, and I could see them fucking

on his bed. Just as I imagined, he was on top. He had a blond woman underneath him, his muscular arms were pinned behind her knees, and he was pounding her like a man with the endurance of a racehorse. He kept giving her his entire length, hitting her until he was balls deep inside her.

Now I realized he really did have something to be arrogant about...

His chiseled body looked even sexier with a sheen of sweat, of exertion that showed how hard he pushed his body. His shoulders were more powerful bare, and his stomach tightened even further every time he thrust. With muscular legs and a tight ass, he looked like a moving sculpture. His eyes were trained on the beautiful blonde underneath, watching her tits shake up and down as he kept her in a tight ball, fucking her into the mattress as she came.

Now I couldn't stop watching.

Her toes curled as her head rolled back, incoherent moans rising to the high ceiling. Her nails clawed at his chest, sliding past the sweat and muscle. "Yes...fuck...yes." She arched her back, and her nipples hardened as if every single cell in her body felt the powerful pleasure.

Maverick kept going as if he wasn't finished. The woman had clearly gotten her fix, but he wanted to keep fucking her anyway. Keeping his load in check so he could keep going, he continued to fuck the woman like he could last all night.

She moaned like she knew this stud would keep pleasing her.

It was time to shut the door and walk away. I'd violated his privacy enough. I shouldn't even have come to his bedroom at this time of night, knowing what he usually did up here.

I felt the heat in my cheeks, the urge to linger until he finished. I wanted to see how he looked when he came, if he was still the ferocious asshole I encountered on a daily basis. Or did he soften just a bit? Did he give in to the passion and let his guard down? Did he look even more handsome when he filled the tip of the condom?

I wanted to find out, but the last thing I needed was to get caught.

He might break his promise and hurt me.

I closed the door gently and could still hear them fucking like dogs. The heat rushed up my body and made my fingertips go numb. My lips felt so lonely, as if Maverick's kiss was the only thing that would make me feel complete.

I forced myself down the hallway and remembered how good his kiss felt, remembered being in those powerful arms as his big hands gripped me. I remembered how petite I felt when he grabbed my ass like it was a piece of meat. He was such a good kisser...the best I'd ever had.

Now I wondered if he was the best fuck I'd ever have.

MAVERICK

MY FATHER HAD ALL THE SCHEMATICS ON THE TABLE, SHOWING the exact spot where we would be once the mission was launched. Bottles of brandy were everywhere, most of them empty. Burned-out cigars were sprinkled like decorations. Once my mother died, he stopped giving a damn about his health.

I'd never cared about mine.

With a cigar in his mouth, he made the notes on the table. "You'll be here with your men." He marked it with a red X. "I'll come in from the side. Even if he's more armed than we anticipate, he'll have a battle on two fronts. We'll kill all his men, take whatever artillery that can be salvaged, and capture him alive." It was the only time my father had been calm in a year. He spoke about the plan in a bored voice, like this wasn't as climactic as getting the information in the first place. "We'll keep him in the barn at the center of your property."

I had dairy cows in the pasture, their prized milk used for producing cheese. There was a barn out there, far away from the other buildings so the smell of shit wouldn't reach my nose when I fucked a woman in my pool. "But not for long, right?"

He puffed his cigar and let the smoke rise to the ceiling. "We'll see what my mood is like..."

I'd expected him to keep Ramon on his own property, but perhaps that was too disturbing for him—to have the man who raped his wife in his home.

"Any questions?"

“No.”

My father studied me, letting small wisps of smoke escape from his parted lips. He watched me for a long time, as if he were having a conversation with me inside his head. “We can’t afford any mistakes. Do you understand?”

I wouldn’t make any mistakes. “Yes.”

“I’m counting on you, Maverick. Fuck it up, and I’ll never forgive you.” He puffed his cigar again.

I wanted to press the hot ash directly into his neck and make him scream. “You won’t kill me?” I couldn’t keep the edge out of my voice. “That’s a step up...”

He put out the cigar in the black ashtray. “They say disappointing your father is the worst punishment a son can feel.”

I’d been nothing but a disappointment to him for the past year, and it certainly did feel like a punishment. I wanted to rise to my feet and slam a bottle of brandy over his head, but I convinced myself this was the end of his malice. Once he got what he wanted, he would have closure...and that closure would kill this dark spirit that had taken over his body. He would feel human again...and be a father again. “That’s debatable.”

I HADN’T SEEN Arwen in a week.

When I told her to stay out of my way, she listened.

She didn’t show her face during meals, and she didn’t cross my path when I came and went. It seemed like she’d taken my threat seriously. Sometimes I forgot she lived there altogether...and that was a gift.

She’d rejected me twice—and now I was done.

If she didn’t want to fuck me, that was one thing. But she teased me. She kissed me and liked it. She touched my stomach like she wanted to unbutton my shirt and slide it

down my arms so she could see what she'd just touched. She felt the same chemistry, felt the same desire. We would live in this house together until one of us died.

And she didn't plan on fucking me even once?

That seemed unlikely.

Eventually, she would cave. She would open her legs and ask me to fuck her—and I would turn her down.

See how she liked it.

I stopped at the table in the entryway and saw the pile of mail that needed to be sorted. Most of it was bullshit, paper that shouldn't have been used in the first place. Too tired after meeting with my father, I decided to deal with it tomorrow and headed up the stairs.

I'd been thinking about our plan so deeply I almost didn't notice Arwen standing there.

In a purple dress with one strap that crossed her shoulder, she had her hair and makeup done like she was off for a night at the opera. Her eyelashes were so thick, just as they were the last time I kissed her. Her makeup was applied so well, it almost looked natural—even though it was stage makeup. The strange thing about Arwen was how good she looked with or without makeup. She looked amazing, no matter what.

I had no idea what she wanted, but the second she spoke, something stupid would come out of her mouth. Just looking at her pissed me off. She'd teased me too many times now, and I just wanted her to disappear. Marrying her had sucked in the beginning—but now it was unbearable. I gave her a cold look before I kept walking.

“Maverick.”

I ignored her and rounded the landing so I could move up the next flight of stairs. When I hadn't detested her so much, I'd given her my attention when she asked for it. When she'd needed a friend, I'd been there for her. When she'd needed a shoulder to cry on during her father's funeral, I'd been there for her.

But now I wasn't there for her anymore.

I could hear her footsteps behind me. She wore heels, and they gently echoed against the rug that covered the hardwood floor.

I kept going, refusing to give her the time of day. Tomorrow night, I was finally getting vengeance for my mother. I wouldn't let Ramon slip through my fingers—and I would kill every man who tried to protect him. I didn't have time for whatever bullshit she wanted to throw at me.

“Maverick.”

I headed to my bedroom, prepared to slam the door in her face.

“Would you just talk to me?”

I turned around when I was on the threshold. “No.” Her beauty had no effect on me, not like it did on everyone else. I'd given in to her looks because I'd had too many drinks in my system, but now I had a clear head. I'd been getting pussy every night, so my dick wasn't hard up anymore. I turned back into my room and shut the door.

She caught the edge and pushed it open again. “Abigail told me you were at your father's.”

I slowly turned around, my eyes narrowing. “Anything she doesn't tell you?” It was so damn humid this evening, the heat was suffocating. Indifferent to her presence, I pulled my shirt over my head and tossed it on one of the armchairs, knowing Abigail would pick it up tomorrow when I went to work.

Her gaze immediately went to my chest, her eyes showing a brief instant of vulnerability.

I wasn't falling for that shit again.

She forced her eyes back to mine. “Are you going to kill that man? The one who hurt your mother?” She stepped farther into my room, inviting herself inside even though she wasn't welcome. The last time she was there was on our wedding night—and she asked me to take off her dress.

When she asked about my family, I had a hard time ignoring her. Despite the hatred between us, she seemed to care about my grief. She wouldn't have given me that picture if she didn't understand how much my mother meant to me. "We're going to capture him tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow?" she whispered, a tone of surprise in her voice.

"Yes." I sat in the chair and took off my shoes and socks, doing my nightly routine like she wasn't there. I left them on the ground then stood again, ready to take off my jeans the second she got out of my face.

"Will it be dangerous?"

I respected this woman because she had beauty and brains—but right now, she had neither. "Obviously."

"Will you be alright?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

She tilted her head slightly, the frustration in her eyes. "You should give your mother the vengeance she deserves, but she wouldn't want you to risk your life for her. I never met her, but I can tell you she would want you to walk away if there was any chance you could get hurt."

Yes, that was exactly what she would say. "Doesn't change anything. Now, get out." I'd almost gone to the bar to pick up a woman for the night, but I'd skipped it because I was too tired. Now I wished I had someone—just to get rid of Arwen.

Like the annoying little pest she was, she stayed. With her large eyes, she looked at me as if she wanted to say something, but the words wouldn't leave her full lips. With only one strap to her dress, her other shoulder was bare. Just like her face, her shoulder had the most beautiful complexion, skin that looked as soft as a rose petal.

The longer she stayed, the more annoyed I became. "Get. The. Fuck. Out." I stepped toward her, attempting to intimidate her with my size. I always had to kick women out of my room, but I'd never had to force someone like this.

Sometimes I had to be an asshole to get what I wanted, but I never had to be *such* an asshole.

She stood her ground. “I’m worried about you.”

“Well, don’t be.” I didn’t need this woman to care about me like a real wife. She was just leeching off my protection, using me to keep psychopaths like Kamikaze away. I was tempted to tell her that a monster wanted her to sell pussy for cash, but I wasn’t *that* much of an asshole.

She looked up at me through those thick eyelashes, her eyes even more alluring with all the dark makeup surrounding them. Her dress wasn’t as revealing as the one she wore last week, but it still hugged her womanly curves in all the right places. With perky tits, a slender waist, and an ass so high, it seemed like she did squats every day, she had the kind of body a man was meant to grab on to.

“You don’t care whether I live or die. So, cut the shit.”

Hostility entered her expression. “That’s not true, and you know it—”

“Last week, you said you didn’t like me.”

“I meant that in a romantic way. I didn’t want to sleep with you because I don’t see you like that—”

“You know I wasn’t looking for romance. I never look for romance. I look for good sex—exclusively.” I stepped closer to her, hoping she would eventually give in and take a step back. But she stood her ground, letting our faces come so close to each other. “You don’t care about me, and that’s okay. Because I don’t care about you.” My eyes shifted back and forth as I looked into hers, seeing the insult slowly enter her gaze then fester. I wanted to hurt this woman so she would leave me alone. It’d been a long day—and I’d smoked and drunk way too much. When I made my point, I turned away.

She grabbed me by the arm, her slender fingers digging into my skin. Her grip was feisty, as if she was prepared to fight me in order to keep my attention. She yanked on my limb and pulled me back to her.

The only reason it worked was because I allowed it to happen. I turned back to her, prepared to yell in her face and strip her down to tears. The past week had been peaceful because she'd removed herself from my existence. But now she was grabbing me, like she somehow owned me.

Before I could say a word, she moved into me and planted her lips on mine, two soft clouds pressing against my scotch-soaked lips. Her fingers gripped me a little tighter once our lips came together, fitting perfectly just like last time.

The fight left my veins, all the insults dropping from my mind. Once I tasted a woman, I abandoned all thoughts of the outside world. All I focused on was the smell of her hair, the softness of her skin. I'd kissed this woman before, and it was just as good as last time—even better because she was the one who'd kissed me.

Was that the reason she'd come here tonight?

When she knew I wouldn't slip away, her fingers relaxed on my arm and she kept kissing me, her lips more aggressive than last time. She breathed into my mouth as she caressed my bottom lip, her lips wet from the kiss.

I kissed her a little harder, my body finally humming to life when I realized this was real. My hand moved to her neck, and my fingers dug under the fall of her hair. When my arm wrapped around her petite waistline, she moaned into my mouth.

I guided her backward, gently pressing her into the wall next to the door. My mouth took hers harder, and I slipped my tongue into her mouth for the first time. Heat burned in my blood when I felt her small tongue greet mine, just as anxious.

My hand bunched up her dress, making it rise up her thighs until it reached her waist. She didn't pull away when it got too intimate, not like last time. My fingers kept gripping, pulling it higher up until it gathered around her waist.

She kissed me harder, her mouth begging mine for more. When she rubbed her tongue against mine, she made the sexiest sigh, hitting a musical note that resonated in my soul.

Her hands explored my shoulders, feeling all the individual muscles before she slid them down over my chest, pressing her palms into my body like she wanted to test just how hard I really was.

I could show her instead.

I gripped the back of her knee and lifted her leg against my hip, wrapping her leg around my waist as I pinned her against the wall. My dick was hard in my jeans, the tip reaching the waistband of my pants. I pressed into her perfectly, my shaft giving her clit the ideal pressure to make her hips buck automatically.

She moaned against my mouth, her eyelids lifting slowly so she could look at my eyes. Her hands latched on to my arms for balance, and she was so far gone with lust that she was a whole different woman. Her lips parted, and she breathed as she felt every single inch of my hard dick.

Now I wondered if she was as good in bed as she claimed.

She rested her head against mine, her eyes downcast as she felt me grind against her. As if she'd never felt a dick so big and so hard, she was unable to do anything other than enjoy the pleasure screaming from her clit. Her nails started to dig into me because she was so anxious. If my dick felt this good through jeans and underwear, it would feel a million times better inside her.

Her hand cupped the side of my face, and she pulled me in for a kiss, her mouth even more aggressive this time. She slowly rocked her hips into me like we were fucking against the wall. She got herself off on the hardness of my cock, the fullness of my lips. Her fingers cupped the back of my head, and she kissed me like I wasn't just some lay for the night. She kissed me like I was the man she was hopelessly in love with.

She was good.

With her lips still kissing mine, she moved her hand to my jeans and slipped the button loose. Her fingers grabbed the zipper and started to pull it down, letting my bulge press through my boxers a little more. She pushed my jeans down

and then reached for my boxers, prepared to get them off so we could fuck right here against the wall.

I stepped back and pulled my jeans up.

Her leg dropped and her hands returned to her sides when she had nothing left to grab on to. A look of bewilderment and rage started to creep into her features and erase the lust that glowed in her eyes.

I zipped up my jeans and fastened the button. "Get out."

"You can't be this spiteful."

I opened the bedroom door. "I am." I stood with my hand on the doorframe, waiting for her to pull her dress down and walk out of the room. I could have glanced down and looked at her sexy legs and the black thong that barely covered anything, but I kept my dark eyes focused on her horrified face.

When she realized that this was really happening, that she was getting a bitter taste of her own medicine, she slowly pulled her dress down, licked her lips like there was a drop of scotch in the corner of her mouth, and held her head high as she walked out of my bedroom.

Before I shut the door, I gave her another livid stare. "Not so fun, is it?"

She turned around, her eyes narrowed like she wanted to grab my neck and strangle me.

I slammed the door in her face.

ARWEN

I SAT ON THE COUCH IN MY BEDROOM, STILL EMBARRASSED from the night before. When I went to his room, my heart was full of concern for his departure. He was about to embark on a dangerous journey for vengeance, the very thing his marriage to me had purchased. But anytime there was warfare, there were casualties.

I didn't want him to be one of those casualties.

He was a difficult man who was spiteful and rude, but he had good qualities...when he chose to show them. There were lots of times that he'd been good to me when he didn't have to. It made me forgive his flaws and appreciate his kindness. That meant I didn't want him to die...especially when he was trying to do the right thing for his mother.

And if he died, what would happen to me? I would be broke, homeless, and unprotected.

I needed him.

There wasn't a knock on my door before he stepped inside. He usually respected my space, but after things went south, he seemed to hate me.

"Do you mind?" I stood up and faced him. "I could have been naked."

"Wouldn't have made a difference to me." He tossed a small bag on the coffee table. It made a noticeable thud when it hit the wood. "I'm leaving in a few hours. Wanted you to have this."

“What?” It was hard to look at him and not think about my back against the wall, my clit throbbing against his big dick. When my leg was anchored around his waist and our lips were locked together, I forgot who we were. In that moment, we were just a man and a woman. My panties had been soaked when I’d returned to my bedroom, and while I was humiliated by the way he rejected me, I’d still touched myself before I went to sleep.

Maverick was still hostile, like his vengeance hadn’t been enough for him. “Cash. Fake IDs and passports.”

I glanced at the cloth bag before I turned back to him. “And why do I need those?”

“In case I don’t come back.” He pulled a pistol out of his back pocket and handed it to me. “Know how to use this?”

I’d never held a gun in my life. “No.”

He showed me the safety before he set it down. “It’s loaded. Be careful.”

I didn’t want to live in a reality where I needed it. “You could just not leave and take the gun back.”

“I have to do this.” He was in jeans and a t-shirt like it was an ordinary day. It didn’t seem as though he would disappear into the night and kill his biggest enemy. His hard body stretched his clothes as they had the other night. It was hard to look at him and not picture him shirtless. “Even if I knew I was going to die, I would do it anyway.”

“I hope not...”

“She would do it for me.” He came closer to me, speaking to me like someone could be eavesdropping. “If I don’t make it back, take a car and disappear. These IDs should last you for a while. There’s enough cash for you to start over. But lay low—because people will be looking for you.”

“Please come back...” I didn’t realize how much I needed him until I was forced to think about my life without him. So far, I’d never felt insecure or afraid. He gave me everything I needed, took care of me the way my father took care of me. He’d become the foundation I’d built my new life on. I hated

being here, but now I realized I really had no other choice. “Not just because I need you...but because I want you to come back.”

He watched me with unmoving eyes. His stare was so focused, it almost seemed like he didn't hear what I said. “I'll come back. A wolf won't leave his sheep unprotected for long.” He moved back slightly.

“I thought the wolf ate the sheep...?” I crossed my arms over my chest, fear in my heart.

“I guess I'm not hungry yet.” He turned away and headed to the door.

I stared at his strong back, the muscles stretching his shirt in different places. It was almost seven in the evening, and the light was disappearing from the horizon. My stomach was full from dinner, and while I lived in a comfortable fortress where no one could bother me, I suddenly felt alone. I only had one man in my life—and he was leaving. “Maverick?”

Unlike last night, he actually stopped. He slowly turned around and looked at me, giving me the opportunity to say what was on my mind. But the offer was fleeting. He didn't have the patience to wait long, especially when he was annoyed with me.

I came close to him, my fingers possessing the memory of his hard jaw. My lips still felt his. I could even imagine his hard dick against me. I did last night when my fingers were between my legs. But my attraction faded into the background when I was faced with the harsh reality of his absence. He was about to leave me—and he may not come back. I moved into his torso and wrapped my arms around his waist. My cheek found a home against his hard chest, and I closed my eyes, never wanting to let go. It was the first hug I'd ever given him, and the affection felt right. My feelings for him were so contradictory, like we were two survivors stranded on an island. We didn't like each other, but we had to put aside our differences if we wanted to live.

He didn't hug me back. His arms stayed by his sides as he allowed me to touch him.

“Please be careful...” I respected and hated this man at the same time. There were some days when I hated him more than liked him, but then the very next day, it would be the exact opposite. Every day was an adventure. But right now, I knew I wanted him to come back in one piece.

I released my grip and turned away, accepting his coldness without insult. He'd never been an affectionate man, and he wouldn't start now. All he wanted from me was sex and obedience. Since I couldn't provide either, I was worthless to him.

His hand grabbed my arm, and he yanked me back into him. One hand slid into my hair, while the other gripped the small of my back, squeezing the fabric in his fingertips so it rose up my thighs. Before I could process what was happening, his mouth was on mine. He kissed me just the way he had last night, like no time had passed at all. We picked up where we left off, our tongues sliding together as we exchanged breaths. His hand gently yanked on my hair, controlling the tilt of my head the way he controlled the arch in my back. His full lips moved with mine, opening, closing, filling me with his masculine energy.

My hands glided up his shirt and explored my favorite part of his body. My fingers played with the grooves of his abs, brushing against warm concrete before I stroked them up his chest, feeling the hard planes of strength. His skin was so warm to the touch, his muscles so hard. I'd never touched a stronger man. He made my former lovers seem soft by comparison.

He suddenly pulled away, ending the kiss and taking his affection with him.

“No...” I abandoned my pride and moved into him again, my nails clawing into his skin so he couldn't get away. My mouth claimed his as he'd claimed mine just seconds ago. “Come on...please.” I didn't realize how much I wanted this man until I couldn't have him, until I'd had a taste. Watching him fuck that woman in his bed made me want to be fucked just as hard. I was so lonely in this castle, in this empty world. The only somewhat meaningful relationship I had was with

my husband...so I wanted him between my legs. I wanted him to chase away the loneliness, to make me feel safe.

He pulled away again, an arrogant grin on that handsome face. He pushed the door closed without taking his eyes off me. "Just wanted to get the door."

"Oh..." Embarrassment flooded through me when I realized how much I'd just begged this man to stay with me. It was instinct...whispering the word please. He'd hung me out to dry last night, and I couldn't go through it again, not when I already knew how extraordinary the sex would be.

He came back to me and brought his lips close to mine. "Looks like I've punished you enough." His hand returned to my hair, and he kissed me again, dominating the embrace by taking the lead. As he backed me up to the bed, he lifted my dress up my thighs until it was bunched around my waist. His fingers slid over my bare ass and hooked around my thong, playing with it as he kissed me while still holding a handful of hair.

I'd never wanted a man more in my life.

My fingers found the hem of his shirt, and they trembled as I pulled the material over his head. Now I knew this would really happen, that he wouldn't pull away and leave me hanging again. His punishment taught me how much I wanted him, that I shouldn't throw away another opportunity. I didn't know what this meant for us, but it didn't seem to matter. Whether this was a one-time thing or the beginning of an unspoken relationship, it didn't matter. There was no way I could live under his roof for the rest of my life without giving in once in a while. Besides, tonight could be his last night on this earth. If it didn't happen now, it might never happen.

My fingers got his jeans loose, and I pushed them down until they fell around his ankles.

He gripped the material of my dress and pulled it over my head, revealing my figure in just my black bra and matching thong. Wrapping his fingers inside my thong again, he looked down at me, appreciating my curves and making me feel sexy with just a glance of that dark gaze. His other hand traveled

down until he found the clasp of my bra. With a snap of his fingers, he got it open...and let it drop to the floor.

I wanted to stare at his perfect body as he stood in his boxers, but I was too entranced by the expression on his face. He looked at me like he'd never wanted a woman more, like he didn't know what part of my body he liked the most. He stared at my tits like he'd never seen a woman naked before. His large palm cupped the left one, and he gave it a manly squeeze before his eyes lifted to meet mine. "Damn." That was all he said—and that was all he needed to say.

His thumb swiped over my nipple as he lowered his mouth to my neck. His warm lips collided with my skin, and he started to kiss me everywhere, his warm breath falling across my skin like the Tuscan breeze. With one hand on my tit while the other still squeezed my ass, he enjoyed me like a starving man in the buffet line.

I closed my eyes and rolled my head back, letting him devour me. My pussy ached because I wanted him so much, wanted a big dick inside me to make me feel like a woman. It was an out-of-body experience because I didn't feel like myself at all. I felt like the most beautiful woman in the world when he kissed me like that.

The harder he squeezed my curves, the harder I breathed. He gripped me so tightly that I nearly yelped in his ear, but I liked the firmness of his grasp, the way he treated me like I could handle the pressure.

His hand pushed my thong over my ass, and his fingers slid down to my entrance. His arm was long enough that he could easily slide two fingers inside me, curving all the way around my ass to reach.

I sucked a breath between my teeth when I felt him penetrate me, my eyes closing as I felt him slide into my slickness. Now I could feel how wet I was, feel the moisture as it stuck between my thighs.

He kept his lips near my ear. "Damn, again." He slowly fingered me as he turned to look me in the eye, to watch my reaction to his large fingers inside my small slit. He wore the

same expression that he'd had with the blond woman, a look that said he was really enjoying this.

My fingers pushed his boxers down, getting them over his hips until his cock came free. With a thick crown that looked fit for a king and a shaft that rivaled a baseball bat, his dick was probably the source of his arrogance...and I couldn't blame him for it. He had a man's dick, impressively thick and beautifully long. The vein along the shaft was pulsing, leading right up to the crown. I stared at it the way he stared at me. "Damn..." He was bigger than any other man I'd been with, thicker than any other man I'd been with. He'd make me a fully new woman because he would stretch me out to wider capacity.

He stepped out of his clothes and shoes, glorious in his nakedness. He had the perfect physique, strong, tall, and powerful. With tanned skin and tight muscles, he was the kind of man who could bring home a different woman every night...which he did. The only imperfection was a scar on his left shoulder, a discoloration that showed it was an old injury, not a birthmark.

I imagined taking him on my back, the best way for me to come with a man. But with a dick like that, it probably didn't matter what position we were in. I moved to the bed and got on all fours, my back arched as deep as I could so my ass would be high in the air. I kept my head up and looked at him over my shoulder.

He stared at my ass with his hand around his dick. He slowly jerked himself as he gazed at my dripping pussy. He'd managed to transfer my slickness from his fingers to his length, giving himself lube to jerk off easily.

I studied the way his wrist moved as he jerked himself from mid-base to his balls. He couldn't even get his entire dick with the motion because he was too big. I didn't know how that dick was going to fit inside me, but once it was there, I would never want it to leave.

He fished a condom out of his jeans. Slowly, he rolled down the latex until it hit his balls, securing it in place so he

could fuck me hard without slipping. He left a large pouch at the front—like he intended to give me a big load.

When he finally let his knees sink into the mattress, I felt the dip of the bed as my stomach tightened. I'd never been so eager to be fucked by a man, to have a dick sink all the way inside until he tapped against my cervix.

He positioned himself right up against my ass then directed his tip to my entrance.

I could feel the push, feel the enormous crown struggle to sink inside my tight little cunt. I'd been with many men, so I was no virgin, but I could barely get him to fit. It didn't matter how aroused I was, it wasn't enough to get him to slide inside with no resistance.

Maverick gripped my shoulder and kept me still as he pushed himself inside. The crown finally stretched me apart so he could make his entrance, slowly sliding through my moisture so the rest of the shaft could follow.

Jesus Christ. I closed my eyes because it hurt...it hurt so fucking good. My pussy couldn't take another centimeter. His size was my breaking point, and I felt like I was losing my virginity all over again.

He kept sinking until his balls hit my ass. "Fuck..." His fingers dug into my shoulder while his other hand slapped my ass.

I panted because it felt so good. We'd barely even started, and I wanted to come around his dick already. I wanted to get on my knees and bow to this man for being god's gift to women.

He pulled my shoulder back so I was arched, relying on him to keep me held up at this angle.

He was buried deep inside me, both arms holding my body against his chest. He gave me a few gentle pumps, getting used to the tightness, before he started to pound into me.

I held on to his arms for balance and bounced back into him, moaning right from the beginning. My pussy fucked his dick as hard as his dick fucked me. Our bodies smacked

together because we were both working so hard, slamming into each other so we could enjoy the high our bodies produced.

My head tilted back, and I moaned like a whore who was paid to scream. “God...yes.”

His hands tightened on my arms, and he slammed that big dick inside me. “You like that?”

“Yes...yes.” It felt so good, I wanted to cry. It hit the sweet spot, satisfied my cravings. All this time, I’d been having sex with boys, when I should have been having sex with men. This was a dick worth coming around. This was a dick to beg for. “Don’t stop...please.” My hands moved to my cheeks, and I pulled them apart, just so he could fuck me even deeper.

His hips worked a little harder, and like a machine, he fucked me nonstop, his endurance deserving of a medal. He worked his body hard to please me, to tear my pussy apart with his girth.

It hurt the entire time, but I loved the pain. I loved the way it made me feel...like I’d never really been fucked in my entire life. I bit my bottom lip and moaned, tears in my eyes because of both the pain and the pleasure. Instead of taking minutes to come, it only took a couple of seconds. I kept my cheeks apart and closed my eyes as the flash of heat traveled through me, burning the tips of my fingers and toes. A veil of desire spread across my vision, making everything blurry because I couldn’t focus on seeing...only on feeling. I didn’t care that I hated this man, that I didn’t want him to have a bigger ego than he already did. I came around his dick and whimpered his name. “Maverick...” My hips started to buck automatically as tears glistened in my eyes. I’d always been a moaner when I had an orgasm, but never a crier. But now I cried for this man...because it was so damn good.

A moan escaped from his throat, like he could feel how tight I was getting around his length. He increased his pace just a little more, to give me all of himself as he finished. He lasted long enough to let me finish, to enjoy every second of the orgasm until it started to fade like smoke to the ceiling.

Then he came. With a masculine grunt, he shoved his length deep inside me and shuddered as he released, his come exploding into the space in the condom. His hands tightened on my arms, and he moaned again.

I kept my cheeks apart, knowing he was probably staring at my asshole as he finished.

After making me come like that, he could stare at whatever he wanted.

He finished then pulled out, making my pussy feel several inches wider than when he first entered me. He released my arms a second later, letting my body fall forward because I hadn't been expecting it.

I let my body drop to the mattress because I was tired and satisfied. My pussy throbbed because of his size and destruction, but it also throbbed because it felt so damn good. I'd never been fucked like that. I'd never come like that.

Maverick disposed of the condom in the bathroom then pulled on his clothes. He didn't say a word to me or even look at me. Like I was just a stranger he would never see again, he flattened his shirt against his stomach then walked out.

I didn't know what I was expecting him to do. Sex wouldn't change his behavior. He would still be the indifferent asshole he'd always been. He would barge into my room without knocking and then leave it just as abruptly. I wasn't a date, so there was no reason for us to sleep in each other's beds.

Even though it wasn't even eight yet, I dug under the covers and closed my eyes...falling asleep just minutes later.

MAVERICK

MY MOTORBIKE WAS ON THE GROUND, HIDDEN IN THE HIGH blades of grass. With a bulletproof helmet on my head and the communication device clipped to my ear, I could hear what the men were saying over the intercom—including my father.

“They’re two miles away.” My father gave orders to the rest of the men, falling into the role of dictator so well. His voice was level and calm, even though his entire purpose was riding on this event.

“Got it.” I sat in the countryside with the stars as company. There were other men hidden along the route, but since they were invisible, it was easy to forget they were there. On this summer night, the stars were bright overhead, brilliant because Florence was an hour into the distance. A slight breeze moved across my neck, giving me a respite from the helmet and leather jacket.

My thoughts drifted to Arwen, but when they became sexual, I tuned her out of my mind. I couldn’t afford to be distracted by the good fuck I’d had a couple of hours ago. Who knew sex with your wife could be so fun?

A minute later, the Hummers sped down the road. Ramon was meeting with one of his clients for a drug deal. Little did he know they would never make it. Once the headlights were gone and they were several feet in front of us, I kicked the bike to life and started to follow them. “I’m on his tail.”

“Alright. We’ll begin the assault now. Sneak up behind them—don’t let them see you.”

I kept trailing the Hummers, staying a good distance away so they wouldn't see me in their rearview mirrors. I saw the lights of my dad's team up ahead. The Hummer crossed the road and blocked their path.

That's when the shots began to fire.

The intercom was silent.

I accelerated down the road, the bike quiet compared to all the commotion up ahead. I was only a few feet away when something took a turn for the worse.

Yells sounded through the intercom.

Now my father wasn't so calm. "I need backup."

Ramon was my first priority, but not when my father's life was at risk. I didn't need to think twice about it before I reacted, changing my goal instantly. "I'm on my way."

"No." He yelled into the intercom. "Get Ramon. He's all that—" He screamed over the line.

My wrist cranked the gas, and I sped past the three Hummers. Gunshots were firing off everywhere, sparks of light in the darkness. My eyes scanned the blackness as I searched for my father, frantically trying to find him.

I skidded to a halt across the pavement when I saw my father fighting off two men. Every time a gun was pointed at his face, he managed to slam it down before he took a bullet to the head. He'd obviously been disarmed. Otherwise, he would have shot the assholes right then.

I jumped off the bike and sprinted toward the commotion, pulling out my pistol when I got close. I shot the first guy and forced him to the ground, but another had his gun aimed at my father. My father was too busy staring at me in horror to notice.

"Move!" I sprinted toward the gun, aiming my gun so I could take him out before he could pull the trigger. But even if my shot was enough to stop him, his finger would squeeze the trigger automatically. I only had one option.

I fired my weapon then slammed into my father, pushing him to the ground.

Then the pain shot up my arm, the nerves firing off in protest. I'd been shot before, and the shock was the worst part. The body immediately went into survival mode, dulling the senses to keep the systems calm.

I slammed into the pavement and gripped my arm, feeling the blood soak my jacket.

My bullet hit the man in the neck, but he was still alive.

My father picked up my dropped gun and finished him off. When he turned to look at me, I expected to see fatherly terror in his eyes. I expected him to rip off my jacket, apply pressure, and finally give me respect for what I had done.

But it wasn't forthcoming.

"I told you to get Ramon."

I gripped my arm to stop the bleeding. "You're kidding me, right?"

"No." He walked over to me and pressed his foot against my wound. "When I tell you to do something, you do it."

I groaned as the blood poured out. "Jesus!"

He pulled his foot off and continued to stare at me with disappointment. The gunfight started to die down as the tables turned. Our men seemed to have gained the upper hand, and Ramon's men didn't have a chance. If Ramon fled, he wouldn't get far.

"I saved your life, asshole."

With that icy-cold countenance, he looked at me like I was dirt on the bottom of his shoe. "My life means nothing without Ramon. You better hope he didn't get away. Otherwise, I'll step on your arm until I break it."

AT SIX IN THE MORNING, we returned to my estate and drove to the barn that was out of sight from all the roads. To any onlooker, it seemed like an ordinary barn, something the cows used to get out of the rain. Little did they know, it would double as a prison.

I didn't make a complaint about my arm. I wrapped gauze around it and applied pressure to stop the bleeding, but now that the adrenaline had passed, all I was left with was the pain. I rode in the front seat with my father, Ramon knocked out in the rear.

This was a fucking nightmare.

We parked the Hummer then proceeded to drag Ramon's unconscious body into the barn. I helped even though a bullet was still lodged in my flesh.

My father didn't bat an eye over it, didn't even care.

We dragged Ramon into the cell designed to hold his body. It had a bucket of fresh water, a bucket for shitting, and hay on the ground for sleeping. We dropped him in the center of the concrete stable, watching the bastard lie there unconscious. He had one window at the very top, but it was too small for anyone to climb through.

My father spat on him before he shut the door and locked it.

I studied my father as he secured the padlock, wondering if he was feeling victorious now that his enemy had been captured.

But he seemed like the same bitter man as before.

"What now?" My workers would steer clear of his cell. One of my men would make sure he had food and water every day, plus a fresh bucket to shit in every day. But it would be pointless to keep him for long when he was of no use alive.

"Nothing." He walked away from the door and headed back to the car.

"You aren't going to torture him right away?" I caught up with my father, my heart beating so hard because of the pain in

my arm. I broke out in an intense sweat because it was getting more difficult to keep going when I was getting weaker by the second.

“No.” We got into the car. “I’ll let you know when I’m ready.”

After all this work, he was just going to let him sit in a cell? I’d assumed my father would start to torture him immediately, even if he was unconscious.

My father turned down the dirt road and approached my estate, ready to drop me off. When he pulled up to the house, he hit the brakes instead of turning off the car. He clearly expected me to jump out and walk inside without another word.

How did my father turn into this? “I’m fine, by the way.”

He stared straight ahead, ignoring my sarcasm. “You’ve been shot before. You’ll be shot again someday. It’ll be fine.”

“You aren’t the least bit concerned?” I cocked an eyebrow. “I could have died.”

He sighed in annoyance. “But you didn’t. Now go inside. It’s been a long night.”

I lingered in the car, so angry, I didn’t know what to do. If my father was going to be this cold, I shouldn’t have bothered helping him in the first place. I married a stranger to get this information, but he brushed off my sacrifice. I took a bullet for him, but he didn’t give a damn. There was nothing I could do right—only wrong. “I turned thirty a couple of weeks ago...” Birthdays were an arbitrary celebration. I didn’t even like birthdays. But it stung the most that he’d forgotten it. Mom used to force us to gather around a birthday cake and exchange presents. Making me have a memorable evening with our family was her gift to me—a gift of love. Now that the glue that held the four of us together was gone, we were just three strangers.

My father still didn’t look at me. “You want me to give you a present or something?”

The sarcasm in his voice made me wish I hadn't taken that bullet for him. If I'd just done as he asked, he might be dead right now. I would have mourned his passing since this sad conversation never would have taken place. We finally completed the job we set out to do—to give my mother justice. But he was still the cold bastard I despised. I grabbed the handle and opened the door. “I wish I'd let you take that bullet...and I wished it had killed you.”

I SAT at the counter in the kitchen with my arm extended. Abigail pulled back the gauze and revealed the damage. She had her suture kit ready to go, but she still looked disappointed when she saw the wound that destroyed my flesh. “Mr. DeVille...what happened?”

I grabbed the vodka on the counter and took a drink. “I was shot—obviously.”

She was my servant, but she didn't hesitate to give me an attitude. She glared at me before she took the warm towel and wiped away the dried blood that stuck to the skin of my shoulder. “Don't be a smartass.” When all the blood was wiped away, she grabbed her tweezers and gently slipped the tips inside my flesh to fetch the bullet.

I took another drink even though I didn't care for vodka.

The sound of quick footsteps ended in the kitchen, and Arwen's gasp entered my ears a moment later. “Oh shit...” She came to my side and watched Abigail pull the bullet out of my flesh and drop it onto the plate sitting on the counter. Arwen's hands gripped my healthy arm, and she looked terrified by the scene that unfolded in front of her. “Are you alright?”

“If I were going to die, it would have happened hours ago.” I watched Abigail open her suture kit and begin to close the wound.

“Maverick.” She kept staring at me, her hand gripping my arm. “What happened?”

“Is that not obvious?” I asked, still being a smartass.

“If you weren’t being sutured right now, I’d slap you.” She was in a black nightdress, a halter top that was so thin, it showed her hard nipples through the fabric. It was difficult to believe we’d been fucking just twelve hours ago. Now a bullet had just been pulled out of me.

“I’d help you.” Abigail kept her eyes on her hands, closing up the wound with the thread.

“Should you go to a hospital?” Arwen asked.

“No.” I never went to the hospital. I’d have to be on my death bed to resort to that.

“And you don’t think you should?” Arwen asked incredulously.

“No. I’ve been shot before—not a big deal.” My father certainly thought it was nothing to worry about.

Abigail finished her task then closed everything up. “I’ll get you some antibiotics tomorrow just to make sure you don’t get an infection.”

“Thanks, Abigail.” I rolled down my shirt sleeve and hopped off the stool.

Arwen followed me. “Are you sure you’re okay? Who gets shot and brushes it off like that?”

“Men.” I headed up the stairs.

She stuck to my side. “What happened tonight? Is your father okay?”

I wished he weren’t okay. “We got Ramon. He’s in the barn.”

“Here?” she asked in surprise. “Why?”

Because that’s what my father wanted...and he always got what he wanted. “It’s convenient.”

“So you’re going to torture him a couple of acres away?” She followed me all the way up the stairs and to the hallway that led to my room.

“Yep.” I reached my bedroom and walked inside, eager to take a shower to wash off all the grass and dried blood. “I’m not in the mood for chitchat. Get out so I can go to sleep.”

“How can I leave you alone when you’ve just been shot?”

Instead of being touched by her concern, I was just annoyed. “There’s nothing you can do for me. Now, let me go to sleep.” I started to strip off my clothes without waiting for her to leave. She’d already seen me naked, so it didn’t matter.

She stood by the door, still watching me with that concerned gaze.

“Don’t make me ask you again.” I didn’t want to be an ass when her only crime was compassion, but I was seriously not in the mood tonight. “I’ve been up for almost thirty-six hours. We aren’t doing this now.”

“You’ll say the same thing in the morning.”

Yeah, I probably would.

“I know there’s something bothering you, something you’re keeping from me.” With her arms crossed over her chest, she watched me like she was reading words that appeared on my forehead.

My father couldn’t care less if I died...that was the secret I was keeping from the whole world. “It’s none of your business, Arwen. Now, get the fuck out—before I make you.”

ARWEN

WHEN I CAME DOWN FOR BREAKFAST THE NEXT DAY, Maverick was nowhere to be seen. “Did he already leave for work?”

“No.” Abigail stood at the sink and washed the dishes she’d used to make breakfast. “He’s resting in bed today. I told him if he moved, he wouldn’t get anything to eat. He made the right call and decided to stay put.”

“Good.” He shouldn’t be running around with a wound like that. “Anything I can do to help?”

“I don’t think there’s anything anyone can do. Mr. DeVille can be a bastard sometimes...” Abigail was a woman in her midforties, someone who was a faithful servant but also spoke her mind. And her heart seemed to be in the right place. “All we can do is hope he gets the rest he needs. But you know how he is...”

Yes, he was a huge bastard. “Yeah, I do.”

I headed to the third floor and walked down the hallway to his bedroom. The door was closed, so I tapped my knuckles against the wood, thinking of the time I’d spied on him when he was fucking someone. It was a huge violation of his privacy, but I couldn’t help it...and I didn’t regret it. It led to me getting the best night of sex in my life.

His deep voice sounded like a distant drum. “Come in.”

I stepped inside and saw him sitting up in bed. Shirtless and in just his sweatpants on top of the sheets, his white gauze

was visible around his shoulder. He was scrolling through his phone, probably assuming I was Abigail who'd come to clean.

I shut the door behind me. "You look better today."

When he heard my voice, he looked up from his phone and abandoned whatever he was doing. He was calmer than he was yesterday, and the shadow along his jawline was thicker because he'd skipped the shave that morning. His eyes were the same color as his coffee on the nightstand, dark brown. "Yes?" Like we hadn't had sex just a few days ago, he was cold and hostile.

I sat at the edge of the bed. "Wanted to see if there was something I could do for you."

"No." He looked at his phone again.

This man couldn't accept compliments. He couldn't accept help either. He couldn't accept anything. "I can help at the factory if you need anything. Or if you just want some company, I can help with that too."

"I know you don't know me very well, but I'm not much of a talker."

"Yeah...I picked up on that."

He lowered his phone again. "Then go."

I noticed he had no problem being sympathetic if I was in pain. Whatever it was, he was there for me. Not once did he make fun of me. He always turned into the crutch that supported my grief. But for whatever reason, he wouldn't let me do the same for him. He kept everything bottled up inside, refusing to acknowledge whatever was bothering him. "You don't trust anyone, do you?"

His eyes slowly turned to me, narrowing slightly like those words hit a sensitive nerve. "No. But you don't trust anyone either."

"That's not true...I trust you."

He set his phone on the bed beside him, still looking strong despite the injury he suffered. His chest was still as strong as

ever, powerful muscles constantly throbbing under his tight skin. “You shouldn’t.”

“Why not? You promised you would never hurt me, and you kept that promise. You’re there for me in my darkest times. You’ve never put me down when I already felt terrible. You always pick me up. I trust you more than I trust anyone else in this world.”

“You said you didn’t like me.”

“I don’t always have to like you to trust you. You can be an asshole sometimes, but that doesn’t mean you’re a liar. You’re there when it matters, and that’s what counts.”

He shifted his gaze away.

“You told me we were allies. If you’re my ally, that means I’m yours.”

He turned back to look at me. “What’s your point?”

“That you can trust me. I know you well enough to see when something is weighing you down, when you have a boulder on each shoulder. I know you well enough to see the irritation in your eyes...and know it has nothing to do with me. You obviously don’t have anyone to talk to, but you can talk to me.” I stared at him and hoped he would open up to me, tell me what happened last night.

But he was still cold.

“Maverick...”

“Why do you want me to talk to you so badly?”

“Because I care about you. I was happy when you returned, but devastated when I saw you’d been shot. I’m glad you’re okay... I mean that.” The only time he flinched was when something heartfelt came from my mouth. His eyes blinked and he tensed slightly, like my words hurt him rather than helped him. When I knew he wouldn’t respond in any way, I finally gave up. I didn’t understand this man, and if he never let me in, I would never understand him. I turned away and looked at his bedroom wall.

Silence stretched for a long time, as if Maverick didn't have a single thing to say to me. He was closed like a steel gate. Nothing could get through—not even a key. Eventually, his deep voice broke through the silence. “My father is the reason I got shot.”

My eyes stayed on the wall, but my heart started to clench in pain and rage. I slowly turned back to him, flabbergasted by what I'd just heard.

He leaned his head against the headboard and looked away, like eye contact was too much for him. “I was supposed to go after Ramon, but I could tell my father was in trouble by listening to the comms. I went after my father instead...didn't think twice about it. When I got there, I shot one of the men. But another was about to take out my father. I pushed him out of the way and took the bullet myself...”

He risked his life to save his father...even though that man was an asshole. If that wasn't loyalty, I didn't know what was.

“Instead of being pleased, he was disappointed. He stepped on my arm and made it bleed more. He said Ramon was the only thing that mattered...and I was stupid for disobeying him.”

“You saved his life, and that was his response?”

A wounded expression came over his face, looking lost. “Yes.”

I hadn't liked his father the second I met him, but I hadn't thought he was capable of something so malicious.

“And he's shot me before...when he didn't get his way.”

My eyes widened.

His hand moved to his injury. “Same spot, actually. At least the scars will be in one place...”

“Jackass.”

He made a slight shrug. “As stupid and insignificant as this sounds, he didn't remember my birthday. It really bothered me for some reason, made me realize how much my mother held the four of us together.”

What kind of father was he? “The four of you?” I’d never asked if he had a sibling. If he did, I didn’t notice them at the wedding.

“I have a younger sister.”

“Oh...did I meet her at the wedding?” There were a lot of people around that day.

He shook his head. “She wasn’t there.”

What kind of family was this?

“I know your father did a stupid thing, but even when your mother was gone, he still loved you. I respected him for that. Everything I said at the funeral...I meant it.” He finally turned his head back and looked at me, finding the strength to meet my gaze when there was pain in his eyes. “When my father dropped me off yesterday, I said I wished he were dead... He didn’t seem to care.”

Maverick’s story made me miss my father more. He was always affectionate and kind to me, never downplaying his love even in front of his friends. “I don’t understand how your father can be that way. There’s no excuse. Why do you still talk to him?”

“Our lives are too intertwined. We used to work together, the cheese company is technically his because he’s still family, and I guess I thought things might change when we got Ramon. Might give him closure. It’s hard to believe, but when my mother was still here, he was a good guy. He was affectionate, he did remember my birthday. But after what happened to her...all of his compassion disappeared. He turned into a whole different person.”

When my mother died, my father was different too. But he never stopped loving me as a result. “That’s no excuse...”

“No, it’s not. But I guess I still hope that he’ll come back...someday.”

That was never going to happen. But I kept my opinion to myself.

“There. I told you everything. Now what?” He turned cold again, like he resented me for opening up.

“Now, I can share your pain. Now, I can understand you. Now, I can make you feel less alone.” My hand moved to his, and I interlocked our fingers, just the way I had at the funeral. I stared at our joined hands and felt the pain in my heart. He didn’t deserve this. No son deserved to be treated so poorly by his father. “Thank you for telling me...”

“You weren’t going to leave me alone until I did.”

“But still...” I lifted my gaze and met his.

He watched me for a long time, his brown eyes a little less hostile. He didn’t pull his hand away and let our fingers rest together. Even when he was in pain, he still wore the most handsome expression, his jawline so tight, he seemed to be brooding all the time. But the look was sexy on him.

“I noticed you have a TV in here.” It hung on the wall above the fireplace, directly facing his bed.

He watched me, unsure why I’d said that.

“Since you don’t have anything to do today, how about we watch movies together? We can watch a couple of your favorites, and I can watch a couple of mine.”

“I don’t watch TV.”

“Then why do you have it?” I countered.

He smiled slightly, like he knew he’d bested me. “Honestly? When I watch porn, I watch it on TV. Easier than using a laptop.”

It was a dirty thing to say, but I admired him for being honest. It was one of the things I liked about him, the fact that he didn’t care about my opinion. If I thought he was an asshole, he would still act like an asshole. “I didn’t think you watched porn.”

He cocked an eyebrow, like I’d just said something crazy. “If a guy tells you he doesn’t watch porn, he’s full of shit. Just so you know.”

“That’s not what I meant. It just seems like you get the real thing a lot...”

The corner of his mouth rose in a smile. “Sometimes it takes too much work. You just want to get off and be done with it. No talking. No drinking. No sleepovers.”

“Well...how about we find something to watch?”

“You want to watch porn in here?” he asked, lightening up a little more.

“No.” I smacked his hand playfully. “I meant, let’s find a movie to watch—one that isn’t X-rated.”

“You don’t like porn? You should give it a try.”

“I do like porn,” I said honestly. “I just don’t watch it on my TV. And I probably don’t watch it as much as you do.”

He nearly did a double take at my response. “You don’t seem like a woman who would be into that.”

“I told you I was good in bed. I didn’t just get my moves from experience...”

Now he looked at me with new eyes. “Maybe you’re right...maybe we can be friends.”

I rolled my eyes and rose to my feet. “I’m going to change. I’ll be back in a bit.”

“You could just take one of my shirts. It’s not like I haven’t seen you naked.”

I opened one of his drawers and pulled out a shirt, something that fit him snugly but would be a blanket on me. “Alright.” I moved to the bathroom.

“You can’t change out here?”

“Nope. You don’t just get to see this whenever you feel like it.”

“You are my wife...”

I smiled before I shut the door. “And that means I run the show.”

MAVERICK

MY DAY WAS SPENT IN BED—WATCHING MOVIES.

I hadn't done that since I was a kid.

And I'd never had a woman in my bed without fucking. Arwen lay next to me under the sheets, eating the popcorn Abigail brought up an hour ago. She stayed on her side of the bed and didn't try to cuddle with me.

Good. Because I would have pushed her off.

When the movie ended, she propped her head on her hand and looked at me. "What did you think?"

"Porn would have been better."

She rolled her eyes but chuckled at the same time.

I was surprised I'd told her so much about my life. I never told anyone anything, not my friends or my sister. The idea of sharing those intimate thoughts and feelings made me feel weak. Actually saying them out loud made me feel like a pussy.

But it also made me feel better.

I didn't know what this woman was to me anymore. On the outside, she was just my wife. But in reality, she was my friend...and someone I was attracted to.

How could I not be? Even with messy hair and a baggy shirt, she was still stunning. There was a kernel stuck in her teeth earlier, but I somehow found it cute rather than

grotesque. I ended up spending the entire day with her, doing absolutely nothing.

I wasn't the kind of man that did nothing. The only reason why I did today was because my injury forced me to. But spending it with her made it seem a little less unbearable.

She set the empty bowl on the nightstand then looked at the time on my alarm clock. "Wow...time flies when you're having fun."

I followed her gaze and realized she was right. We'd spent the entire day in bed, eating and watching whatever she picked out. I wasn't bored like I'd thought I would be.

She adjusted her pillow then lay down again, her hair falling perfectly over the soft cotton. The sheets were around her waist, and my t-shirt didn't fit her curves well because it was many sizes too big. But she happened to lie in the perfect position, at the perfect angle, and she looked beautiful.

Her thick eyelashes cast a light shadow over her blue eyes. Sometimes her mascara would smear on my pillowcases, but I didn't mind in the least. She was the first woman to wear one of my t-shirts to bed, and it looked better on her than it ever did on me.

Now I ignored the TV and watched her instead. My mind drifted back to the evening when she'd begged me to fuck her. All of her restraint disappeared, and she finally gave in to the throbbing desire between her legs. My cock sank inside her, finding a home inside that wet slit. She had the sexiest ass, so I was happy to fuck her that way, like she was a bitch in heat. I stared at her asshole as I came, in love with the lovely curves of her body.

The pain in my shoulder dulled when the arousal took over. Now I wanted to take her on her back, to stare at those sexy tits as I fucked her hard into the mattress. I wanted to see her expression when she came. Listening to her moan was just as beautiful as when she sang, but I wanted to see it with my own eyes, see those plump lips part as she screamed.

She kept watching the TV, oblivious to my intentions.

My cock hardened in my sweatpants the longer I stared at her. Ever since our night together, we hadn't discussed what happened. It seemed to be a memory neither one of us mentioned. I wasn't sure what would happen when we were finished. I enjoyed fucking her, so I assumed I would want to fuck her again.

I definitely wanted to fuck her again.

I wanted a casual relationship where we didn't talk about it all the time. It seemed like she could handle it. After all, she was the one who assumed I would become obsessed with her...which was ridiculous.

So I went for it.

I rolled toward her then dug my hand into her hair, capturing her attention as I lowered my head. My lips found hers, tasting like butter from the popcorn. My free hand snaked up her thigh until my fingers felt the soft material of her panties. Once my mouth was on hers, I felt the electricity burn my spine from top to bottom. It even hit my dick, making it twitch with a jolt. My shoulder screamed in agony, but that wasn't enough to stop me.

Her lips were hesitant at first because she hadn't been expecting my kiss. But once she felt it, her hand went to my bare chest, and she dug her long nails into me. After a few breaths, she kissed me harder, giving me her tongue right from the beginning.

She was a damn good kisser.

We fell into a rhythm naturally, taking and giving in perfect succession. I knew how to suck her bottom lip to make her nails dig into me a little harder, and she did a sexy swipe with her tongue that was so amazing, my dick nearly broke through my sweatpants. I could feel the hardness of her ring whenever she touched me, the piece of jewelry that bonded her to me in the eyes of the world.

I gripped the back of her panties and slowly started to pull them down, but I stilled when I felt the pain in my shoulder. A

hot explosion of agony ran through the nerves and made me still.

Arwen stopped kissing me when she felt me tense up. The arousal slowly died away in her gaze, replaced by concern. It was the same way she looked at me when she realized I'd been shot. It was like she really cared...which was more than most people could say.

My lips returned to hers because I wanted to keep going. I refused to give in to weakness, to let my pain hold me back. I'd been shot before, and I kept up my daily routine, not letting my injury become a handicap. Even if it hurt more this time around, I wouldn't let it slow me down.

She gripped my healthy arm and forced me to roll to my back. "Maverick, you're injured."

"I'm fine." I moved up again.

She pushed me back down, finding a burst of strength that belied her small stature. "No."

"No one tells me no."

"Well, that's about to change." She kept one hand planted on my chest then straddled my hips, sitting right on my hard dick and keeping me still. "The more you push yourself, the longer it'll take to heal."

"You think I care?"

"You should. And why hurt yourself doing something I could do?" She grabbed her shirt and slowly peeled it over her head, revealing her perfect body in a black bra. She tossed the shirt aside then reached behind her back to unclasp it.

Once her tits were on display, I shut my mouth. Perky and round, they were the nicest pair of tits I'd ever seen. Lovely flesh with small nipples, they were perfect for tit-fucking. They were also perfect for staring at. My cock twitched against her bottom.

She ran her fingers through her hair then flipped it over one shoulder, regarding me with a cool and confident gaze.

Now she sat in just her panties, a cute pink thong that looked so beautiful against her pale skin.

My fingers found their way into the material, getting wrapped up in the lace as my breathing increased. My cock could already imagine how tight her pussy was, how good it felt to be inside her. He twitched harder against her, excited for the panties to disappear so he could slide right in.

She grabbed the top of my sweatpants and boxers and pulled them down, letting my eager cock come free, already drooling at the tip. She moved my bottoms until my balls were free of the fabric before she climbed back up my body and held herself on top of me, her long brown hair dragging across my skin.

My hands immediately went to her tits, my thumbs brushing across her pebbling nipples. I squeezed the firm flesh and looked into her eyes, no longer frustrated that I wasn't the one on top.

She leaned down and kissed me, giving me her tongue right away.

I moaned into her mouth and squeezed her tits, slipping away into the cloud of sex.

She kissed me with the same sexiness as before, taking her time when she felt my lips. When her tongue swiped across mine, it was the sexiest thing ever. Even when she took all the control, she somehow made it sexy. I was always in charge—but I didn't mind handing over the reins.

She suddenly broke away, leaving my lips in agony as she turned around. With her ass in my face, she leaned down and dragged her tongue along my dick, starting with the tip and moving to the base.

Holy fucking shit.

She pointed my cock in the air then shoved it into her mouth, sliding down as my dick moved deeper and deeper down her throat.

And her beautiful ass was in my face.

Fuck, I could come right then.

My hands squeezed her cheeks as I felt her warm mouth take me over and over. I breathed hard, barely able to keep my eyes open because I was slipping away so fast. My cock wanted to fire a cannonball of come deep into her throat.

I peeled her thong down and stared right at her asshole, the sexy little hole that tormented me. Farther I tugged until her pussy was revealed, shining with the arousal that lined her perfect lips.

If she kept this up, I would come before I even got the chance to please her.

She shoved my dick far into her mouth, so far that she nearly gagged. Then she turned back around, pushing her underwear off her hips so she was completely naked.

My arms automatically pushed me up so I leaned against the headboard, my fat dick soaked in her saliva. My eyes were a little unfocused because I was so hard up, I could barely control myself. The image of her ass in my face would stay with me forever—and even replace my porn videos for a while.

She helped herself to my nightstand and fished out the stack of condoms sitting there. My wedding ring sat at the bottom, untouched since the day I took it off at the end of our reception. With all the confidence in the world, she ripped the foil packet while holding my gaze, like the burning ache in her legs wasn't enough to disrupt her composure. She lowered the latex onto my dick, and like she'd done it a million times, rolled it to the base.

I'd never wanted a woman more in my life.

She straddled my hips once again, and with her hand to guide her, slowly lowered herself onto my length, sinking down until she had every inch lodged deep inside her. Her nipples turned hard, her breathing became uneven, and she rolled her head back like she hadn't been expecting such a fat dick.

My hands went to her hips, and I squeezed her hard, my fingers digging into the softest flesh I'd ever felt. My cock throbbed inside her, making itself at home in her perfect pussy. I inhaled a deep breath and felt my lungs stretch as all my nerves fired off in pleasure. The pain in my shoulder was forgotten.

Her arms wrapped around my neck, and she pressed her face close to mine, her breathing filling the silence between us. The TV faded into background noise that neither one of us noticed. Her pretty eyes were locked on me, her pussy expanding to take every single inch of my dick—length and width.

My fingers kneaded her perfect ass, squeezing the muscle and pulling it apart as I imagined that sexy asshole just sitting there. I was buried to the hilt inside her and so happy, forgetting all the bullshit that happened the night before.

I was fucking my wife—and loving every second of it.

She started to move up and down, arching her back at the same time to really feel the grooves of my dick. She watched my expression like she was turned by my arousal the way I was turned on by hers. With our eyes locked together, we got off on each other, writhing and panting in ecstasy.

Damn, she knew how to ride a dick.

I gripped her ass and assisted her in her movements, picking up the pace because I wanted to fuck her so hard. I wanted to pound that pussy like it'd never been pounded before. But I was the one sitting on my ass, so I had to make her do it.

She rose to the challenge.

She moaned in my face, the noises she made so innately sexy. She hit the most beautiful notes, like keys on a piano. I recognized the melodic voice she used in the theatre, the way she projected herself to an auditorium full of people. As a result, her moans sounded like an erotic song.

Sexiest thing I'd ever heard.

I spanked her ass as she rode me, loving that perky ass on my dick. I wanted to fuck her through the night, fuck her until she came over and over. My dick wanted to live inside this pussy forever, to visit her warm mouth and tight asshole from time to time. I protected this woman far more than she realized, and I thought I deserved hot sex in exchange. She had to work for my protection, work if she wanted to be a naïve sheep living in a meadow with no worries. As the wolf, I never let my guard down. I peered into the night and saw monsters while others assumed they were shadows. I anticipated the worst and hoped for the best. I never slept, not unless I knew my sheep were safe.

Not unless I knew my wife was safe.

IT TOOK days for me to recover. Maybe it was a slower process than last time because I'd already been shot in the same area before. The nerves and tissue were permanently damaged beyond repair, and now I just added more fuel to the fire.

Arwen spent time in my room and kept me company.

We screwed a lot.

She climbed on my lap and fucked me over and over.

I didn't mind in the least.

Every night, she excused herself and went to sleep in her own room.

I was finally on my feet again, the wound closed up without sign of infection. It still hurt a bit, but unless I started to move it again normally, it would take much longer to heal. I showered and got ready for the day, skipping my usual workout because my body wasn't ready for that just yet.

When I came downstairs, Arwen was already there. She looked at her phone while she munched on toast, eggs, and sautéed veggies. Her coffee was steaming hot. She looked up when she saw me sit across from her. "You look good."

I could never take a compliment, not even now. I ignored what she said and poured myself a cup of coffee.

Arwen ignored my silence and sipped from her mug. “Are you going back to work today?”

“Yes.”

“Take it easy. Don’t overdo it.”

“Don’t worry about me, alright?” Just because we were fucking pretty often didn’t mean I owed her anything. As far as I was concerned, we were still two people living under the same roof—and nothing more.

“If you weren’t sneaking off into the night and getting shot, I wouldn’t have to worry.”

I grabbed a piece of toast and smeared it with butter. “I don’t need you to worry about me, so don’t bother.”

She cocked her eyebrow slightly. “If I don’t worry about you, who will?”

It was a cold thing to say, but I probably deserved to hear it. She was the one who consoled me on my darkest days, comforted me even when I refused to wear my pain on my sleeve. “Just because we’re sleeping together doesn’t mean anything has changed.”

“I never said anything had changed.”

“But you’re acting like I owe you something.”

She shook her head slightly. “You do owe me something—your friendship. You’re the one who told me we were allies. You can stop pushing me away every time we get closer. Trust me, I’m not looking for anything more than sex from you. So you can cut the shit and chill out.”

This woman wasn’t like the others. “I just want to keep it that way.”

“As do I. But I would like for us to be friends and to stop being dicks to each other. Why can’t we have that?”

I guess I was too scared to get close to anyone. My mother was gone, my father hated me, and my sister went off the deep

end. I'd lost everyone who mattered to me—and it sucked. They say it's better to have loved and lost than not to have loved at all... but that was bullshit. "I just don't want anything more."

"What makes you think I would ever want more from you?" Her eyebrow was still raised. "I think you're a good guy, Maverick. I'm obviously attracted to you. But I'm not looking to make this marriage into a real relationship. You and I are so different that it would never work anyway. But I don't see why we can't have some sense of trust and friendship. I expect you to bring home women, and I'll hook up with men. Sometimes we'll hook up with each other, but that's it. All I want from you is some kind of closeness...because I'm really lonely."

I kept my smartass comments to myself when she revealed something so vulnerable. She'd never said that to me before, admitted she wasn't the strong woman she projected herself to be.

She shrugged. "I've always wanted to fall in love and get married...but now I can't. Logic would argue that I should try to fall in love with you, but that spark just isn't there. They say people fall in love within the first forty-eight hours of meeting someone. If it hasn't happened by now, then we clearly aren't right for each other. But if we really are going to be husband and wife for the rest of our lives, there should be a solid foundation between us. We should be able to trust each other, especially when neither one of us has anyone else."

It was easy to believe her because she seemed so genuine. I never got the impression that her concern for me stemmed from something romantic. Maybe she really did just care about me in a friendly sort of way. "Alright. Then we'll be two people who have casual sex, who are honest with each other, and are friends. But I mean it when I say we'll never be anything more. I will continue to sleep with whoever I want, and I expect you to do the same." I liked my life the way it was. I could give her a partnership and friendship, but that was the extent of my generosity.

"I don't have a problem with that."

I gauged her expression as she said it, and it seemed like she meant it.

“I have one question, though.”

I automatically tensed, afraid she would throw a curve ball at me.

“My father said I need to stay married to you forever. But is that really true? Ten years from now, will I really still be in danger? By then, his enemies will have moved on. I’ll be forgotten. Is it really necessary for this marriage to be infinite?”

The same thought crossed my mind months ago. I knew she was asking because she was seeking hope. She wanted to know that she might still meet her dream guy and settle down, that this arrangement wasn’t forever. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. When someone dies, the world keeps on turning. People shift their focus to other things.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“I know—because your question can’t be answered. I’m not a fortune-teller that can see the future. It’s possible the dust will settle and the world will forget your father ever lived. Maybe that will happen in two years, maybe twenty. Or maybe it’ll never happen at all. We’ll have to be patient and see. In my experience, the world moves on quickly. People adapt, chase the next big thing. And in the underworld, everything changes in a split second. They’ll find a bigger fish to catch and forget all about you.”

“So, you think our odds are good?”

I shrugged. “I promised your father I would stay married to you forever. So, at the end of the day, it’ll be your call.”

“So, I could walk away right now if I wanted to?”

“You can walk away whenever you want—but I don’t recommend it.”

“Does that mean people are after me?” She abandoned her coffee and breakfast, leaning forward over the table as she considered what I’d said.

I drank my coffee and ignored her question.

“Maverick.”

I held her gaze but continued to be quiet. “Let me worry about that, alright?”

Her eyes slowly fell when the truth hit her in the face. Her shoulders started to sag, and the fearlessness she always wore was long gone. She wasn’t the rambunctious woman with an attitude made of fire. Now she was scared...the fear written on her face. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you’re my sheep. You’re supposed to keep your head down and graze. I’m the wolf—and I’ll chase away the other dogs. That’s how this works. That’s why you married me.”

That didn’t chase away her fear. She still looked afraid. “Who is it? What do they want with me?”

To rape her—and then charge money so other men could rape her. “It doesn’t matter what they want—they won’t get it.”

She leaned back in her chair, disconcerted but also touched. Now she understood how instrumental I was to her survival. If I weren’t around, she would have been captured long ago. “Thank you...”

She didn’t need to thank me. I protected her because I got something out of it. Now I would continue to do so because I was a man of my word. “Don’t be scared, Sheep. As long as I’m living, nothing could ever hurt you...I promise.”

I WAS SITTING at my desk at the factory when my father called me.

The last time I spoke to him, I told him I wished he were dead.

Knowing him, he would pretend it never happened.

I answered. “Yes?”

“Meet me at the barn.” He hung up.

I listened to the line go dead as my suspicion was confirmed. My father cared so little about me that wishing he were dead meant nothing. When I said those words, I meant them, but I also hoped it would spur a conversation, that we would finally discuss the demonic nature of our relationship. Everything would be out in the open and I could tell him how I felt...but now I realized that was futile.

Nothing would ever change.

My father’s soul died the day my mother did. All his love and compassion disappeared too. All that was left was a bitter and hateful old man.

I got into the truck and drove several acres until I reached the barn in the distance, the smell of the cows entering my nose the second I opened the door. The barn was enormous, big enough to house all of my animals during the worst storms.

I walked inside and stopped at the scene before me.

Two women were tied up, their knees against the pile of hay underneath them. Their wrists were bound behind their backs, and their mouths were taped shut. The older one had tears streaming down her cheeks. The younger one looked to be a teenager—and she was in a panic, screaming against the tape that kept her mouth closed.

I lifted my eyes and looked at my father standing over them. “What the fuck is this?” I shut the barn door behind me so no one else could see the criminal activities my father was up to—not that they would say a damn word.

With murder in his eyes, he was unaffected by the two sobbing women at his feet. “Ramon’s wife and daughter.” He kicked the mother, forcing her to land on her side on the hay, moaning when he struck her right in the rib cage.

I’d seen my father do worse, so I wasn’t surprised by his cruelty—but I was surprised by his insanity. “And what are you going to do to them?”

“Exactly what Ramon did to my wife.”

My jaw almost dropped to the floor. “Father...”

“His daughter is quite pretty.” He looked down at her, a girl who couldn’t be a day older than twenty. “And young. You’ll take her. Ramon will watch as we rape and torture his family.”

Jesus fucking Christ. “Have you lost your fucking mind?”

He walked over to the door where Ramon was locked away. He used his key to open it and then swung the door outward.

Ramon took one look at his family and sprinted.

My father slugged him in the stomach then forced him back. “Move, and I’ll kill them both.”

Ramon collapsed against the wall, horrified by the sight.

My father grabbed both of the women and dragged them into the cell.

Ramon immediately clutched both of them and cradled them into his side even though he was powerless to protect them from my father’s menace. “Caspian, don’t do this. Do whatever you want to me, but don’t—”

“Don’t what?” My father stepped farther into the cell. “Don’t rape your wife? The way you raped mine?”

Ramon shut his mouth, knowing he couldn’t argue with the words that flew out of my father’s mouth.

“Don’t rape your daughter?” my father asked. “The way your men raped my wife? My son will take her first, and then my men will take her. When they’re both begging for death, I’ll torture them and hang them in this very barn—so you can watch their corpses rot in the Tuscan heat.” He backed out of the barn.

“Caspian, listen to me!” Ramon struggled to his feet. “I’ll give you whatever—”

My father turned around. “The one thing I want is my wife. Give her to me, and we’ll call this whole thing off.”

Ramon breathed with his panic, his face covered in sweat as he tried to think of a solution to this problem, to spare his wife and daughter from gruesome deaths. But money couldn't fix this problem. Nothing could fix this problem.

My father grabbed the door. "That's right...you killed her." He slammed the door then locked it. "Enjoy your last night with your family. We begin tomorrow." Sobs sounded from the door as the women started to heave in terror. As if nothing had happened, my father brushed it off and walked toward the barn doors.

My eyes followed him before my feet did the same. "You can't be serious."

"I am." He pushed the doors open then approached his truck. "He gets exactly what he deserves."

I wanted justice for Mom as much as he did, but I knew she wouldn't want this. She wouldn't want us to hurt two innocent people. "It won't make you feel better. It won't make losing Mom easier."

He turned around, flashing me another look of disappointment. "I thought this was the one thing we were united on. Now you're telling me you're a coward."

"I'm not a coward. I just don't want to rape someone." Just when I thought my father couldn't get any worse, he did. Just when I thought he couldn't be crueler, he was. He'd completely lost his sense of humanity.

"I don't want to rape those women either, but we have to."

"But we don't." I threw down my arms. "Mom wouldn't want this. Yes, she would want you to kill Ramon but not hurt his family. They had nothing to do with this."

"And neither did she." He'd already made up his mind, and he wasn't going to change it. He displayed the coldness of a statue that stood in the snow, his expression permanent.

"Ramon didn't touch me or Lily."

"But Lily is a lunatic in a mental institution, and my son is a coward."

“She’s not in a mental institution...she’s in rehab.”

“Whatever.” It didn’t matter; he couldn’t care less. “We’re doing this.”

“I’m not.” I didn’t care if my father hated me forever, but I wasn’t going to rape someone. I wasn’t a good man, but I wasn’t evil either. Plus, I had absolutely no desire to force a woman to do anything. I got more pussy than I could handle. “And you think Mom would want you to fuck someone? Rape someone?”

“It doesn’t matter what she wants. I need Ramon to suffer the way that I suffered.”

“But it won’t change anything!” I threw down my arms again. “Mom is dead, and she’s not coming back. This rampage isn’t healing your wounds. It’s making them bigger, making them fester.” Now I understood why he didn’t torture Ramon right away. Even before he captured him, my father knew he was going to take Ramon’s family—and he didn’t tell me because he knew I would never approve.

Once again, my father looked at me like I was worthless. “Fine. I have plenty of men who would be happy to oblige. I shouldn’t have depended on you in the first place.”

“Yes...you shouldn’t have depended on me to rape someone.” My mother would roll in her grave if she knew I did something like that. She would be screaming right now if she knew my father had taken this so far. “Don’t do this. Please. I didn’t marry Arwen so we could rape and murder innocent people.” I’d never begged someone to do anything, but my pride couldn’t stop me from doing it now.

He opened the door to his truck and turned back to look at me. “Get in my way, and I’ll kill you—and your wife.”

ARWEN

AFTER I FINISHED MY PERFORMANCE AT THE OPERA, I CHANGED my clothes in the dressing room then slipped out the back to head to my car in the rear of the building. The street was usually deserted, and there was plenty of parking because it was designated for staff only. With my keys in hand, I approached my black Mercedes.

“Arwen.” A deep voice sounded behind me, masculine and authoritative.

I knew it wasn’t Maverick, but I turned around to size up the man who followed me. He held flowers in his hand, lilies and roses, and he wore a collared shirt and slacks, like he’d been in the audience just minutes ago. To top it off, he was handsome.

He smiled at me before he came closer. “Okay, I know this looks super creepy, so let me explain. I asked the stage guys to give these to you, but they said you’d already left. I got your name from the program they hand out. That’s how I ended up here...chasing you in the dark like a weirdo.”

He seemed so normal, I realized. Something I wasn’t used to.

“I wanted you to have these. You put on quite the show.”

“Thank you.” I took the flowers from him, and automatically, I smelled them. “They’re beautiful.”

“And I was hoping I could ask you out...even though I see that beautiful diamond on your left hand. I’m not the kind of

guy that normally goes for married women, but you kinda stole my obsession the moment I saw you.”

I never took my ring off unless I was home. Now it was an extension of me, a piece of jewelry I flaunted because I loved it...even though it didn't actually mean anything. “My husband and I have an open relationship...” I wouldn't give him the specifics because it was a secret I needed to hide.

“That works out nicely for me. So, can I take you to dinner?”

I would love to walk to a restaurant together and share a bottle of wine, a spur-of-the-moment meeting with a handsome stranger. My entire life was ahead of me, and anything could happen. If only I were unattached, I could really enjoy it. “I can't really be in public. How about we order a pizza and go to your place?”

His grin widened, like the suggestion was better than the one he'd had. “Perfect.”

THE SEX WAS GOOD. It was unplanned and spontaneous, and the mystery was so exciting that it made the sex better than it really was. This handsome man could be anyone, a long-term lover or maybe the man I'd fall in love with.

Maverick gave me hope that I could still have all of my dreams. When enough time passed, we could drop the charade and sign the divorce papers so we could go our separate ways. I could get married the right way. Fall in love with someone first—and then vow to love him for the rest of my life.

I had to admit that sex with Maverick was better. He was bigger, more dominant, and he could kiss more masterfully than anyone else. But that was just casual sex between two friends—and it meant nothing to either one of us.

I lay in bed next to Henry, his naked body wrapped around mine. He had dirty-blond hair and blue eyes, completely different from Maverick in every way. He was strong and

muscular, but he didn't have that chiseled physique I was used to.

Henry ran his fingers down my back. "Sleep over."

Maverick was under the impression I was coming home, and I needed to tell him if my plans had changed. If I didn't at least text him, he would blow up my phone with a vengeance. He didn't care where I went or who I slept with. He just wanted to know where I was and when I would be coming home. "Let me call my husband and let him know."

His eyes narrowed slightly, clearly surprised by the mechanics of my marriage. "Wow, you guys are really open."

"Yeah...we're good friends."

"If you were my wife, I wouldn't share you with anybody." He leaned over and kissed my neck and shoulder, devouring me with anxious lips.

I wanted to stay and let the kisses continue, but if I didn't make that call now, I never would. Then Maverick would scream at me. "I'll be right back." I slid out of bed, grabbed my phone, and walked into the living room. I paced the floor buck naked. I held the phone to my ear and listened to it ring.

He answered after a couple of rings. "Everything alright?" His voice deep and menacing, Maverick somehow sounded angry all the time. He was irritable and cold, making him somewhat heartless. He cared about some things, but he was so stony that he refused to care about other things. But tonight, he seemed particularly flustered.

"Yeah. I just wanted to tell you that I won't be home until tomorrow. I met someone."

Dead silent.

I expected him to brush off my announcement like it didn't matter, but he was so quiet on the other end, it seemed like he'd hung up. "Is that okay...?"

"It's fine." He spat out the words harshly, like it was anything but fine.

It didn't make sense. He'd just given a long speech about how I would never mean anything to him, how the sex would be casual and nothing more. But now he seemed so angry, he was seething. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

Living with this man had taught me so much about his composure, about the way his tone changed when something was on his mind. I also could read his expressions well, know when he was trying to keep me at a distance so I wouldn't discover his secrets. "It's not nothing. Now, tell me."

"Goodnight, Arwen." He hung up.

I listened to the line go dead, having no idea what Maverick was so upset about. It couldn't be me. He couldn't possibly be jealous or possessive. That meant it was something else...maybe something important.

I walked back into the bedroom. "I can't stay tonight. I'm sorry."

He groaned. "That's too bad. Another time, then?"

"Sure. That sounds good." I picked up my clothes off the ground and started to dress.

"Did your husband realize he was making a mistake letting you sleep with another man?"

"No. He's pissed about something else and refuses to tell me what it is." I pulled on my dress then slipped on my heels. "So I'm going to drag it out of him. Sometimes, men can be so difficult...and my husband is the most difficult man I know."

I MADE it to the third floor and noticed his office door was open.

He was sitting at his desk, a bottle of scotch beside him without a glass, and his lips rested against his joined fingers. His eyes were closed, as if he were ignoring a migraine or thinking about something particularly disturbing.

I stepped inside, my heels announcing my presence.

He lifted his chin from his fingers and looked at me, the surprise on his face showing he clearly hadn't been expecting me to walk through the door. His brown eyes were full of malice, and if that bottle had been new, he'd drunk half of it on his own. He stared at me for a moment before his gaze shifted away. "Why are you here?"

I moved to the couch and slipped off my heels. "Because you're pissed about something."

"I'm always pissed."

With my heels off, I got back to my feet and approached his desk. "No, you aren't." I grabbed the bottle and dragged it toward me. "Now, tell me what's bothering you."

"You should have stayed in bed with your boyfriend." He leaned back in his chair, putting distance between us when I came too close. The only time he did that was when he was truly bothered by something.

"He's not my boyfriend. And you're more important." I took a drink straight from the bottle then returned it to his desk.

He continued to watch me, rage in his eyes.

"Don't worry. I won't drink it all." I scooted the bottle closer to him. "I'm here now, so you may as well tell me what's going on. I can tell you're angry by the way your shoulders are hunched, by the dismissive tone in your voice. We agreed we were friends—and friends tell each other stuff."

He watched me for a long time, still as a statue. He rose to his feet unexpectedly, his physical fitness giving him the grace to move quickly and fluidly. He grabbed the bottle off the desk as he made his way to one of the couches.

I sat across from him, just as I did when we first smoked and drank together.

He took another drink before he set it down. When his elbows rested on his knees and his body hunched forward, his clothes tightened against his powerful frame, showing how

strong he was. If anyone else moved like that, it would only highlight their flaws. His hands rubbed together, the veins on his hands protruding from his tanned skin.

I waited for him to speak his mind, to tell me what troubled him so much.

“My father has completely lost his mind...and I don’t know what to do about it. I don’t think there *is* anything I can do about it.”

My father had been the beacon in my life, the foundation under my feet. A day never went by when I didn’t know he loved me. But Maverick’s relationship with his own father couldn’t be more different.

He took another drink then rubbed the side of his head with his palm, rubbing the aches and pains away.

“What did he do?”

With his eyes downcast, he shook his head slightly, like he didn’t want to say. “Ramon captured my mom, raped her, tortured her, and then killed her. That was why my father wanted Ramon so much...to give my mother justice.”

This was all old news to me, but I stayed patient and kept quiet.

“I thought it was strange my father kept Ramon in the barn for so long. He’s been in there for almost a week...”

It was strange. Caspian worked so hard to capture that man, but once he had him, he abandoned him.

“But it all made sense when I went to the barn this afternoon.” Maverick still couldn’t look at me, like it was too difficult to meet my gaze and get the words out. “My father captured Ramon’s wife and daughter...and intends to rape and torture them.”

When the words fell on my ears, I finally understood why Maverick was so disturbed. His father lacked a heart or a conscience, but this was surprising, even for him. “What...?”

“The daughter is about twenty. He told me to rape her while he raped the mother.” He dragged his hands over his

face like the conversation had scarred him.

“You can’t be serious.” Ramon’s actions were inexcusable. He deserved to be butchered into pieces. But his wife and daughter...they had nothing to do with this. “Those women probably had no idea Ramon did that to your mother. They’re no different than a stranger on the street. He can’t do this.”

“I know...that’s what I said to him. When I refused to rape the girl, he looked at me like I’d stabbed him in the back.” He dropped his hands and grabbed the bottle again. “He said his men will step up and do what I can’t...” He took another drink, this time a much bigger gulp.

That man was evil. “Who the hell tells their son to rape someone?”

He stared at the bottle, his gaze lifeless. “Told you... It’s a fucking nightmare. My mother wouldn’t want this. I told him that, but he won’t listen. I told him it wouldn’t make him feel better, but he didn’t listen to that either.”

“Where are they now?”

“Locked in the barn with Ramon. My father wanted them to be together for one more day...just to make it worse when he takes the women away.”

I understood he was a grieving man who’d lost the love of his life, but this was insane. “You can’t let him do that, Maverick.” Those two women were just people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

“I tried to talk him out of it.”

“Well, try again.” How could I sit by when those two women would be tortured tomorrow? “I understand why Ramon has to die. He should die. But his wife and daughter didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I agree, but my father doesn’t see it that way. Ramon tortured his wife, so he wants to torture his.”

“That doesn’t make it right.” I couldn’t keep my voice down. Slowly, it rose higher and higher.

“I know.”

“And Ramon didn’t touch you or your sister, so why did your father drag Ramon’s daughter into this?”

He shook his head. “Because he’s a psychopath.”

“You have to do something, Maverick. You can’t just sit there and turn the other cheek. These women are going to be raped and tortured to death. It’s not right.”

He bowed his head. “I don’t have any options.”

“Yes, you do. Take them out of the barn. This is your property.”

“It’s a legacy property. He still has some ownership over the place.”

“Whatever,” I hissed. “Free them. Get them out of here.”

He lifted his chin to look at me. “There’s nothing I can do. My father can’t see reason when it comes to this. If I break them out of the barn and make it look like they broke out themselves, he’ll just hunt them down again. If I free them myself, he’ll hunt them down again. There’s nothing I can do. His mind is made up, and he’s not going to change it.”

“So, you just give up?” I asked sadly. “Those are innocent people...”

“Not once have I said I’m a good guy. I’m not the hero who saves the damsel in distress. I don’t think these women deserve what’s coming to them, but I’m not going to get killed for their sake. If Ramon really gave a damn about protecting his family, he wouldn’t go making enemies with people like my father. He didn’t have to rape and murder my mother. That was his decision, and he has to live with it.”

I would never make a case for Ramon’s defense, but his wife and daughter were a different story. “Your mother wouldn’t want this...”

“But she’s not here,” he said bitterly. “It doesn’t matter what she would want.”

“It does matter. You can’t let him get away with this.”

Both of his hands balled into fists, like he was losing his temper. “The only way I can stop this from happening is by killing my father. I hate the son of a bitch with a passion, but I don’t want to pop a couple of bullets into his skull. So, do you have a better idea?”

I sat there with dread in my heart, knowing I couldn’t come up with a plan that would fix the problem. I’d seen Caspian with my own eyes and understood how distorted his sense of reality was. Even if Maverick managed to help these women, Caspian would hunt them down again. Their only chance of survival was to return to wherever they were from, and Ramon’s men could protect them. Somehow, Caspian had kidnapped them the first time, but it would be nearly impossible to do it a second time.

When I didn’t say anything, he sighed. “It’s not right, but there’s nothing anyone can do. My father has his mind made up, and nothing will change it. I say we just forget about it...” He grabbed the neck of the bottle and rested it on his thigh.

I knew Maverick had a much different perspective of himself. He considered himself cold and cruel, the spitting image of his father. But if that were true, he wouldn’t be trying to drink his sorrows away, to repress the memories because they were too hard to bear. It was killing him inside to know this was happening...because he cared.

There were a few things I didn’t like about his character, but the more I got to know him, the more I respected him. He was cruel in his own way, but he was also extremely kind... and generous. He’d been my rock since the beginning, the support I leaned on to get through the day. Our marriage was a sham, but I relied on him the way every wife relied on her husband.

Why didn’t his father see him the same way? Not as a disappointment...but as a good man he should be proud of.

PINNING the flashlight between my neck and shoulder, I focused the light on the door so I could grab the handle and slide it open. It was three in the morning, and the sky was so dark that stars and planets made it look blanketed in Christmas lights. I pushed inside and saw the piles of hay on the ground.

All the doors to the stalls were open—except one.

There were hooks drilled into the wall, a place to hang keys. There was only one set, so I assumed that was what I needed. I grabbed them then moved to the door, my footsteps loud against the hay underneath my feet.

Their bodies stirred on the other side. “Dad...” The woman whispered to her father as she heard me slip the key in the door.

“It’s happening.” Another female voice entered the silence.

The second I opened this door, Ramon could overpower me. I didn’t have a weapon, and if I let Ramon go, then that wouldn’t be right. I wasn’t a fan of violence, but he needed to be punished for what he had done. So I couldn’t let him go... only the women. “My name is Arwen. Maverick is my husband. He told me what’s supposed to happen in the morning.”

They were silent, not moving or breathing.

“I don’t think it’s right. I think Caspian is taking it too far. So, I want to let you go...but I have to make a deal with you first.”

“Please let us go.” The older woman turned aggressive, slamming her fists into the door. “Please. At least let my daughter go.”

Listening to them was just as bad as the horror I imagined. “I’ll let you both go...but Ramon has to stay. I don’t have a weapon, so I can’t keep you inside this cell once I open it.” Maybe being honest wasn’t the best way to go. He might just break down the door, kill me, and then run off. “So you have to make a deal with me. When I open the door, you stay put... and let the women go. If you give me any reason to doubt you, I’ll just go back to the house now. So, you need to decide what

kind of man you want to be. Do you want to save your wife and daughter? Or do you want to be a coward?”

They whispered to one another, their voices barely audible.

It didn't take long for them to make a decision. Ramon spoke next. “Please save my family...”

I could hear the sincerity in his voice, the way it cracked with emotion. I could hear his beating heart, his gratitude. It was just a single sentence, but it conveyed so much. “Alright...” I turned the key and opened the door.

Ramon was hugging both of them, letting his wife cry against his chest while his daughter whimpered. “I love you.” He kissed each one on the head. “Both of you.” Despite the barbaric thing he had done, he was still a man...someone with feelings and a breaking heart.

It was almost too hard to watch.

The daughter came out first, followed by the mother a moment later. Both had tears streaming down their faces, knowing this was the last time they would ever see him.

I started to shut the door again.

Ramon pressed his palm against the wood, keeping it steady.

I tensed, afraid I'd just fallen into his trap. He was much bigger than I was, a thousand times stronger.

“Thank you...” He held my gaze before he dropped his hand and allowed the door to close.

I locked it and put the key back on the hook.

“Now what?” The mother had her arm around her daughter, her eyes puffy with tears.

“I'm gonna put you in the trunk of my car and drive you out of here. Then you can keep the car and drive wherever you want to go.”

She stared at me in disbelief, as if she couldn't believe a stranger would do such a thing. “Why are you doing this?”

My answer was simple. “Because it’s the right thing to do.”

I WOKE up late that morning since I’d snuck out of the house in the middle of the night. I didn’t get back into bed until nearly five. By the time I woke up, it was way past breakfast time. I made my way downstairs and hoped I could get an early lunch.

Flashbacks of the previous night came back to me, of driving out of the gate while security watched me strangely. When I made it to the road, I popped the trunk and handed over the keys. Both women hugged me because they were so grateful.

Then I’d walked back to the gate and returned to the house.

When I entered the dining room, Maverick was still there. Normally, he’d be at work right now, but he sat in front of his mug of coffee like he’d been there for hours. Dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans, he looked casual, his plans for the day unclear.

I lowered myself into the chair and filled my mug with coffee.

Maverick’s eyes were still directed out the window, the espresso color of his gaze matching the contents of his cup. His jawline was smooth from a morning shave, but a hint of a shadow was still visible because his hair grew back the second he swiped his razor over the area. It was a beautiful summer day, and the brightness outside reflected in his cold eyes. He didn’t turn to look at me, either ignoring me or so focused that he didn’t notice I had joined him.

There was some leftover toast, so I smeared the jam across the cold piece of bread. The coffee was barely warm too, but since I was so late, I didn’t complain. After the long night I’d had, I was hungrier than usual. Running around all night caused me to work up an appetite.

Minutes later, he finally turned his gaze back to me.

With the subtlest expression, he could show his rage so well. His chest rose and fell at a slightly rapid rate because he was livid. His eyes broadcast his fury because he hadn't blinked once since I'd joined him. Now he looked at me like I wasn't a friend, a lover, or his wife. He looked at me like he'd just marked me as the enemy. "You let them go, didn't you?"

I knew security would notify him when I returned to the estate on foot in the middle of the night. The car was gone, and I had no explanation for what happened to it. Foolishly, I thought there was a chance I'd gotten away with it when he didn't break down my bedroom door to choke me.

He continued to stare at me as if he was expecting an answer.

That look was so terrifying that I broke eye contact and looked into my cup.

His gaze was still searing hot. "You gave them your car and let them get away."

I drank from my mug, feeling like a child who was avoiding the terrifying expression of a parent. I was too scared to look up, too scared to face whatever punishment he would give me. He'd never laid a hand on me or made me feel unsafe, but he'd never used that tone of voice with me either.

"Look. At. Me."

I lowered my mug then finally lifted my gaze to meet his.

Now, he was even more livid. "You told me we were allies. Allies don't stab each other in the back like this."

"I didn't stab you—"

"Shut your mouth. I'm talking—you're listening."

The only reason I listened was because I felt so guilty about what I'd done.

With wide eyes and a promise of violence in his limbs, he looked at me like I was the sheep he was about to slaughter—not protect. "You're my wife, and you're supposed to obey

me. How dare you go behind my back and do this? You have no idea what you're doing. You have no idea what game you're playing. You're supposed to be loyal to me and no one else. This is a violation of that trust. And once trust is broken, it can never be mended."

I swiped my tongue across my lips, my heart hammering a million miles a minute. I had to save those women, but I also felt terrible for how much I'd upset him. "I didn't mean to—"

"What did I say?"

I shut my mouth again.

"This is why I don't trust anyone. You let your guard down for a goddamn second, and shit happens."

His words hurt me far more than I expected. I didn't want him to think I was disloyal to him, that my decision had anything to do with our relationship. There was so much pain in my chest, heartbreak that came from an unidentified source. Knowing I hurt him hurt me. Knowing I made him regret trusting me killed me. This relationship was the only good thing I had in my life. He was the only man I could depend on. "Maverick, please..."

He raised his hand, and that was enough to shut me up. "You have no idea what you've done. You have no idea the consequences I'm about to face. If letting them go in the middle of the night was such a simple solution, I would have done it. You're a stupid girl who doesn't understand how the real world works. You're a liability that I now have to pay for ___"

The sound of the front door flying open and slamming against the wall reached down the hallway and entered our ears. It was such a loud explosion, like a car crashing into a brick wall.

I flinched in my chair.

Maverick didn't react at all, like he'd been waiting for the sound. "Leave. Now." He stayed in his chair, his eyes averted as he listened to the sound of marching footsteps approaching the dining room. He was calm but tense at the same time, his

back turned to whoever was approaching. “Don’t make me ask you again.”

I listened because that was what he wanted. I got out of my chair and headed to the staircase.

Caspian entered the room a moment later, looking twice as tall when he was furious. His eyes were wider than I’d ever seen them, and invisible flames burned from all of his limbs as he stormed into the house.

Maverick rose from his chair and faced him, moving with calmness despite the wrath he was confronted with.

Caspian stopped in front of him, looking at his son like he wanted to shoot him right between the eyes.

I should have kept moving up the stairs, but I stayed, watching the way Caspian showed all of his rage in just a single look. The loathing was paramount, the hatred profound.

Caspian turned still as a statue, but it was just a pause before the storm. “You are so fucking worthless.” Spit flew out of his mouth because he was shaking from head to toe. Hands balled into fists. Eyebrows furrowed. “Your mother would hate you as much as I hate you. I’ve never been more disgusted with my own bloodline. My wife gave me a son to carry on my name, but she gave me a coward I wish had never been born.”

Jesus Christ.

Maverick took the abuse without blinking, appearing oddly calm despite the insults thrown in his face.

Caspian launched his attack an instant later, slamming his fist into Maverick’s face. Despite his age, he packed so much force into the hit and forced Maverick back. The movement was so quick that I couldn’t see it coming.

Maverick fell back from the momentum of the blow and crashed into the hardwood floor.

Caspian stood over him and kicked him hard in the ribs. “I’m gonna drag you outside and hang you just the way Ramon hung your mother. I’m gonna watch the life disappear

from your eyes as you gasp for air like a drowning rat.” He kicked him again.

I covered my mouth, my eyes watering.

Caspian grabbed Maverick’s neck with both hands and started to squeeze, a maniacal gleam in his eyes. He pressed his fingers into his skin and cut off his air supply. “You would die for those whores? You would rather let them go and betray your family than honor your mother’s memory? Where did I go wrong with you?”

Maverick didn’t seem to be fighting back, like he’d lost the will to live. Listening to his father threaten to kill him probably sucked the life out of him, probably disturbed him so much that he didn’t have any drive to win the battle. It was easier just to give up than to live with a father that hated him.

Caspian wasn’t stopping.

Maverick had given up.

But I couldn’t let him throw in the towel. “It wasn’t him. I was the one who let them go.” I moved to the bottom of the stairs, gripping the handrail for balance because I knew something terrible was about to happen. I didn’t have a gun or a knife, and the dining table was too far away.

Caspian’s head popped up, and he looked at me as he kept choking his son.

Life came back into Maverick’s eyes when he heard the words fly out of my mouth. He’d been still just a moment ago, but now his hands reached up to grab his father’s wrists.

“Maverick had nothing to do with it.” My fingers tightened on the wood. “I told Maverick to let them go, but he refused. So I snuck out in the middle of the night, released them, and hid them in the trunk of my car as I snuck them outside the gate.” I wouldn’t stand by and let Maverick be punished for my betrayal. Even if I didn’t survive what was to come next, I didn’t care.

He released Maverick’s throat then rose to his feet, those brown eyes focused on me like I was prey.

Maverick heaved on the ground, gasping for air because he'd been without it for over a minute. He grabbed his throat and sucked the air into his lungs, clearly on the verge of passing out.

Caspian took a step toward me, his gaze darkening like a billowing cloud in the distance. Heavy with rain, it was about to drop on both of us, a storm unlike any other. His eyes narrowed as the blood lust filled his gaze.

I knew I was going to die.

He took another step toward me then pulled a knife out of his pocket.

Shit.

Maverick continued to heave on the floor, his body and mind disabled.

I took a step back, moving up the stairs.

Caspian gripped the knife and watched me with the same stare his son possessed. Eyes the color of coffee and filled with the same rage, he looked like a butcher about to slice me into pieces. He didn't blink, not once since his attention had been directed on me.

I was in a bad spot, backed up onto a staircase. There was nowhere for me to run, and this man was probably much faster. If he couldn't reach me, he could just throw the knife at me and kill me instantly.

“If you think you're safe because of the deal your father made with me, you're wrong. The contract became null the second you betrayed my son, betrayed me. I will gut you like a fish and leave your body on your father's grave.”

I could have kept my mouth shut and let Maverick suffer the consequences, but I couldn't live with that guilt. Maverick was a man I respected, even if he pissed me off sometimes, and I didn't want him to suffer at the hands of his father for another second. The thought made me oddly calm, chased away the fear that caused my anxiety. I could try to run, but I wouldn't get far. I'd rather die with a knife in my front from

fighting than one in my back from running. “Instead of focusing on what you’ve lost—”

He didn’t listen to a word I said and used my speech as a distraction. He sprinted at me, about to reach the first step and lodge that knife into my belly. He moved at an incredible speed, like he was a man still vibrant in his youth.

My instincts kicked in, and I screamed.

Caspian fell to the ground and dropped the knife, stopping just inches from me.

I fell back, unable to keep my balance with all the mayhem.

Maverick had managed to lunge forward and grab him by the ankle. He yanked on his body and dragged him away from the knife.

Caspian kicked him away then crawled toward the knife again.

Maverick was no longer submissive. He jumped to his feet and yanked his father back, dragging him across the floor so the knife was out of reach. “Stop it.”

“You little...” Caspian rolled onto his back and then climbed to his feet, slamming his fist into Maverick’s face. “How dare you defend that whore?”

Maverick blocked the hit then punched his father in the face.

Caspian fell back, clearly shocked that his own son had hit him. He wiped away the blood dripping from his nose onto his fingertips then looked back at him, appalled. “You choose her over me?”

Maverick maneuvered to the stairs, his hands up and ready for a fight. Now his body stood in the way, protecting me so Caspian couldn’t get to me. “You need to calm down.”

“Calm down?” He dropped his bloody hand, his voice rising in offense. “She took away the one thing that mattered to me.” He inched closer. “I worked my ass off for that. Your mother deserves justice—”

“That’s not justice, Father. It’s sick. Mom wouldn’t want that, and you know she wouldn’t. You’ve lost your goddamn mind, and you’re so twisted, you can’t even see it. Arwen didn’t want those two women to suffer when they didn’t deserve it. She can think clearly—you can’t.”

He stepped closer. “After everything I’ve done for you, this is how you treat me?”

“What have you done for me?” Maverick continued to place his body in front of me, lining up his frame so he protected me at all times. “When Mom died, you died too. You’re a ghost of the man you used to be. I used to be proud of you, used to look up to you. But now you’re heartless, hateful of everyone in this world because you lost the one person you loved. Lily and I don’t matter—”

Caspian lunged at Maverick, slamming his large body into his frame and landing a punch against his jaw. He used all of his energy to cause as much damage as possible, to make Maverick bleed and hurt.

Maverick took a few hits because he was shocked by his father’s savage attack. He fell back, his head about to hit the corner of the bottom stair.

Even though it would hurt, I fell and slid my body underneath him, using my thighs as a cushion so he wouldn’t crack his head open and bleed everywhere. But that put me in line with Caspian, easily accessible.

Caspian took advantage of my position and grabbed me by the neck, squeezing me so hard I couldn’t breathe right from the beginning.

Maverick recovered quickly and kicked his father off. Punch after punch, he planted his fists into his father’s body, turning into a beast with enough adrenaline to power a rocket. He slammed his fists into his father’s face and his stomach, driving him back to the other side of the room. Caspian’s face was battered by the time he collapsed on the ground, breathing hard as his son stood over him, blood on his knuckles.

Caspian raised his gaze and looked at his son, blood dripping from his mouth and his nose. Bruised and swollen, his face looked like he'd been stung by a swarm of hornets. He leaned against the wall as he looked at his son with pure disgust.

Maverick was still, waiting for his father's next move.

Caspian slowly rose to his feet, finally showing the effect his age had on his body. He didn't carry himself with strength, but defeat. But the look he gave his son showed the promise of war, of torture, of bloodlust. He sent Maverick a cold stare, as if he might continue the fight even if he lost. But then he turned around and walked off, moving with a slight limp and sagging shoulders.

Maverick held his position until his father was out of the house. He looked through the window and watched him get into his car and drive away. Once he was really gone, he released the breath he was holding and turned to me.

Now he looked even more furious with me.

Like he blamed me for everything.

MAVERICK

I SAT IN MY OFFICE WITH A CIGAR IN MY MOUTH, absentmindedly puffing the smoke and letting it disappear from my mouth. There was a painting on the other side of the wall, of Paris in the early 1800s before it became industrialized. It was moody and dark, showing the mud after a bad storm. I didn't pick out most of my artwork, but I'd chosen this one because it spoke to me.

I stared at it now, doing my best to think about nothing.

My neck was visibly bruised because of the way my father had strangled me. My face was tinted from the fists I took to the face. I looked like I'd gotten my ass kicked even though my father got the worst of it.

It was the only time I'd ever struck my father.

I didn't feel good about it—even though I didn't have a choice.

If I did nothing, he would have killed Arwen... Not that I should care.

She betrayed me, after all.

When my cigar burned out, I lit another one.

Didn't give a shit if I got cancer.

My father and I didn't have a good relationship, but this made us complete enemies. Now I had two wars to fight. I had to make sure Kamikaze didn't come near Arwen, and I had to make sure my father didn't kill her either.

Or did I?

My father was right when he said she breached the contract. She defied our wishes and took matters into her own hands. That was direct disobedience. I had every right to leave her.

Maybe I should.

The door opened, and she appeared in the doorway, apology in her eyes and concern in her stature. She searched my gaze for permission to enter the room.

She wouldn't get it from me.

She stepped inside anyway and approached my desk, her hands together in a timid fashion. She was in jeans and a t-shirt, her dark hair pulled over one shoulder. Her face was free of makeup because she'd probably spent all afternoon thinking about the shit that had happened earlier in the day.

The longer I stared at her, the angrier I became.

She stared at the cigar in my hand, like she was too ashamed to meet my gaze. She kept her look there for nearly a minute before her eyes lifted to look into mine. Her blue gaze conveyed her sorrow, her obvious regret. "Maverick...I'm so sorry." She took a deep breath like the words made her chest clench in pain.

Those words meant nothing to me.

"I wasn't thinking. I just—"

"No, you weren't." I puffed on my cigar again.

"I just couldn't let those women be tortured..."

"This is how I know you're stupid." I pulled the cigar out of my lips and let the remaining smoke rise from my mouth as I spoke. "You have no grasp of an ecosystem. My father and I live in the same system. You manipulate one aspect, and it changes everything that surrounds it. You saved those two women—but now my father and I are enemies. You took away the one thing that mattered to him, and now he won't stop until he kills you—and me."

Her eyes dropped in regret.

“I want a divorce.” His voice was cold.

When her eyes lifted again, there was true terror in her gaze, like the idea of losing me was more than she could stand. She knew she needed me for everything, from shelter to protection. Without me, she was nothing.

I waited for her to argue, to beg me to change my mind.

But she didn't. “Would that help the situation with you and your father?”

No, it probably wouldn't make a difference. I smoked my cigar again.

When she knew I wouldn't answer her, she didn't press me. “I understand...”

The second I kicked her out of my house, the dogs would descend. Kamikaze would grab her and turn her into a slave, unless my father got to her first. He would just kill her, shoot her between the eyes. If I were her, I'd hope to run into my father first.

She stared down at her fingers as she gripped the edge of the desk. “I'm sorry, Maverick. I don't regret saving those women, but I regret what I put you through. You don't deserve to be treated like that by your own father. I know I'm the one to blame for this...but your father is the one who needs help. His response to the situation shouldn't have been violence. He shouldn't have marched to his son's door with the intention of killing him. I know I triggered these events...but he's the one who's wrong.”

“That's not how the real world works.”

“I know, but you should consider talking to your father. He clearly needs help...and he's only becoming crazier.”

He became more barbaric every time I saw him. “Take the cash I gave you and go.”

She froze. “I gave it to the women...so they could disappear.”

This just kept getting worse and worse. “I’m not giving you another penny.”

“I wasn’t going to ask.”

“Good. Get out.” I didn’t want to see her ever again. I wanted this liability out of my house.

She lingered at my desk, her eyes downcast. Without me, she had nothing—and she knew it. In that moment, she probably understood she’d thrown away a great thing. She probably understood how much I did for her, how much I protected her. But my kindness had expired, and there was nothing she could do about it. “I’ll leave in the morning.”

I was hoping she would leave now, but I would take it.

She was still rooted to her spot in front of my desk. “When my father told me I had to marry you, I was furious. My whole life had been taken from me. But as I got to know you, I realized you were a good man...with a big heart. I started to care for you, admire you. I even started to see you as my friend. I’m sorry I betrayed you. That was never my intention. I just wanted to do the right thing. I didn’t realize how much it would cost you...and I apologize for that.”

Heartlessly, I stared at her with the burning cigar between my fingertips.

She waited another moment to see if I would say anything. But when I didn’t, she gave up and turned away. “Goodbye, Maverick.”

I watched her walk out the door, both disappointed and relieved by her departure. “Goodbye, Sheep.”

LILY SAT across from me at the table in the dining hall. Other members of the rehab facility chatted with family members over dinner, pretending everything was normal even though they were battling addiction.

Lily took a few bites of her dinner but left most of it untouched. She was a pretty woman, but she looked sickly with the amount of weight she'd lost. She used to have beautiful, thick hair, but now it had thinned out from lack of nutrition. Her skin didn't glow the way it used to. Now it looked just as pale as her eyes. "How are things with you?"

"Not good." I hadn't visited her in a while, which made me feel guilty. It made me feel even guiltier because I only came tonight because I needed someone to talk to. But then again, she forgot my birthday, so we were even.

"What's wrong?"

I told her everything that had happened with Father.

Lily's lifeless expression instantly changed. Horrified by every single aspect of the story, she was agitated. "What the hell is wrong with him? He's even worse than I realized. How could Mom's death make him so psychotic?"

I didn't have an answer, and I was tired of guessing. "I'm divorcing her."

Lily stared at me, her food abandoned and her eyebrow raised. "Why?"

"I can't be married to someone I don't trust."

"You didn't know her when you married her, so you obviously didn't trust her then."

But things had changed since our wedding day.

"What about the men who are after her? Won't they get her?"

"Not my problem."

"And you're just okay with that?" she asked incredulously.

"If she wanted to stay married to me, she shouldn't have betrayed me."

"She didn't betray you," Lily argued. "She wanted to save those women, and I can't fault her for that. How could Father possibly think that's okay? You were okay turning the other cheek while those women were tortured?"

“No, but I didn’t have any other choice.”

“Well, Arwen obviously couldn’t live with that...and I don’t blame her. She obviously wasn’t aware of the repercussions at the time, but she did the right thing. Mom would be happy if she knew what Arwen did.”

Maybe. We would never know.

“Maverick, if you leave her, she’ll be raped and tortured too. You’re really okay with that?”

Arwen was a strong woman who didn’t take shit from anyone, but Kamikaze was a mutant. With his almost seven feet of height, she would have no chance against him—and he would probably be the first one to fuck her. She’d be subjected to a life she didn’t want, a life that made death preferable. And if Kamikaze didn’t get her first, then my father would...and he would execute her.

“I know you’re upset right now, but leaving her isn’t an option. You couldn’t live with yourself if something terrible happened to her. She didn’t betray you for her own gain. She did it to save those innocent people. Cut her some slack.”

“Now Father and I are enemies...and I should just forgive her?”

“You’re enemies because Father is batshit crazy. At some point in time, shit was going to hit the fan anyway. He’s so unstable that he can’t even think logically. Who kidnaps innocent women to rape them? And then who tries to murder their own son for saving them? He’s the problem—not her.”

I stared at the food, recognizing her clear logic.

“Honestly, I like this girl...and I think you do too.”

“I never said I liked her.”

“You said she broke your trust, which meant you trusted her in the first place. That’s impossible for someone like you.”

I hated the fact that my little sister was smarter than me.

“And if you trusted her at any point, she must mean something to you.”

I didn't know what Arwen meant to me. I liked fucking her. I considered her to be a friend. When it came down to it, I'd picked her over my father and saved her life. It would have been easy for me to let him kill her. It would have fixed all my problems. But I'd protected her, not because of my promise, but because I wanted to.

Lily kept watching me. "Go home to your wife, Maverick. And hope that she's still there."

ARWEN

I TOOK THE CLOTHES MAVERICK PAID FOR BECAUSE HE HAD NO use for them. I may as well keep them, especially since my wardrobe was limited. All of my stuff fit in a single suitcase—reminding me how insignificant I was.

Once I was outside the gates, I had no idea what I would do.

I had nowhere to go.

Dante popped into my mind, but I had too much pride to ask him for help. He'd moved on to someone else. I wasn't on his mind anymore. I could call up my recent lover and ask to spend the night, but that idea made me feel cheap.

It was the first time I was actually scared. Once I was on my own, men would be chasing me. Caspian would try to kill me. I was homeless, so I would be easy to find. I could probably get into the theater and sleep backstage, but that was an obvious place to track me to.

I hadn't wanted to marry Maverick in the first place, but now I realized it was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

He was the man who took care of me.

But I threw that away when I saw those women. I did the right thing and protected the innocent—but I paid a price for it. If I could do it all over again, I probably would have done the same thing. I couldn't live with that guilt—and neither

could Maverick. My actions set off terrible repercussions, but there was no other option.

I sat on my bed with my suitcase against the wall. Maverick said I could stay until morning, but I wasn't sure what the point of staying was. It would be easier to sneak into the theater now when people were there. I could stop by and say I forgot something but hide in a closet until everyone went home for the night. There were showers there as well as a couple of cots.

I could make a home there until I figured out what to do next.

It would be okay...right?

A knock sounded on my door before Maverick walked inside.

I glanced at him then turned away, unable to handle the disappointment in his eyes. When his father was strangling him to death, he'd given up like he wanted to die. But once my life was on the line, he did everything he could to protect me—even against his own father.

Maverick sat on the bed beside me, keeping a foot of space in between us.

I stared at the floor. "I've decided to leave now instead of waiting until morning..." I didn't have a car because I gave it to Ramon's wife and daughter. I couldn't afford to waste money on a cab, so I'd have to walk if he wouldn't give me a ride. I'd never felt so helpless in my entire life. I literally had nothing...except for a few hundred bucks.

Maverick was quiet. Maybe he was here because he had the same thought. He didn't want me to be in his house a second longer. "Remember the time I left in the middle of the night to fix a broken pipe on the property?"

I only remembered it because some woman named Becky had made a peculiar entrance while we had breakfast. With her heels in hand, she kissed him on the neck and walked past me, not at all concerned that I was his wife. "Yes."

"That was a lie."

I turned to him, watching the side of his face.

“Your father had made a deal with a man named Kamikaze. Some kind of investment. He came to my front gates to collect you.”

My blood turned to ice.

“Said he would turn you into a sex slave to raise the money your father owed him.”

I’d been scared to survive on my own, but now I was terrified. This man would hunt me down and force me into prostitution. Now I wished I had a gun so I could blow my brains out. I’d rather die than be subjected to that torture.

“I wouldn’t give you up, so he offered to buy you from me.” He brought his hands together and stared at his palms. “I told him you weren’t for sale—at any price.”

I had been dead asleep, and Maverick kept me safe. He didn’t even tell me about it, probably because he knew it would disturb me. “Thanks for the heads-up...” Now I realized how much I needed Maverick, that he was the only thing standing in between me and torture.

“You won’t survive out there. If Kamikaze doesn’t get you, my father will. You won’t even last a week.”

My hands started to shake because I’d never been this scared in my entire life.

“So, I take back what I said... I’ll stay married to you.”

I turned to him, surprised he had changed his mind.

He rose to his feet again. “It would be a shame that you saved those girls but there’s no one to save you.” He headed to the door. “You broke my trust when you snuck around behind my back. You betrayed me when you took matters into your own hands. Don’t expect me to trust you again.” He opened the door.

I went after him. “Maverick.”

He stopped in front of the door. It took him a second to turn around, like he was considering ignoring me.

“Thank you for letting me stay...” If he’d kicked me out on the street, I would have been raped and killed. Changing his mind meant I got to live...and that meant he saved my life. “Without you, I wouldn’t have anything. And I realize that now more than ever. You’re a good man...and I hope I can earn your forgiveness someday.”

His eyes were lifeless, like those words meant nothing to him. “Don’t count on it.”

THE WOLF AND HIS WIFE

WOLF SERIES: BOOK TWO

**THE
WOLF
AND HIS
WIFE**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
PENELOPE SKY

ARWEN

WE SEEMED TO GO BACK IN TIME.

Maverick and I were strangers once more.

He went about his life and pretended I didn't exist. When he wasn't at the house, he was at work. Even late into the evenings, he seemed to stay at the office just so he wouldn't have to see me.

The man hated me.

Women came and went, replacing me in his bed.

I wasn't jealous of his lovers. I was jealous that I lost my wolf. Now, we were two strangers who never spoke to each other, who forgot about the connection we'd once had. We weren't even friends anymore.

It was all my fault.

Henry fell asleep, so I slipped out of bed and picked up my dress off the floor. The bedroom was dark, with the exception of the dim light from the street that entered through the window. After I finished a performance, I came here for affection...since I wasn't getting any at home.

As the soft fabric fell down my body and over my hips, I felt unsatisfied. The sex was good but not nearly as good as it'd been with Maverick. That man had hands that were meant to grab a woman. He had lips that knew how to kiss a woman. He had the perfect touch to make my toes curl, to make the air halt in my lungs as I writhed in ecstasy. I didn't usually compare lovers because they were all at about the same level.

But now that I'd been with Maverick, I understood why so many women wanted to sleep in his bed.

Henry stirred when he heard me grab my heels. "Leaving?"

I'd been hoping to slip out without waking him. "Yes. I have an early morning tomorrow." That was a lie. I had nothing to do. My life revolved around the opera, and that took place in the evenings. I spent my days in a mansion without anyone to talk to.

He got out of bed and came up behind me. "You should stay anyway." His arms circled my waist, and he placed a kiss on my neck.

"No, I can't." I moved out of his reach and sat on the armchair so I could put my heels on.

He stood naked in front of me, his eyes filled with disappointment.

I ignored his nakedness and stood up again, grabbing my clutch off the table. "Goodnight, Henry." I headed to the door, my heels echoing off the hardwood floor.

He followed me, his large feet making a dull thump with his movements.

Before I could open the door, he grabbed me by the wrist and turned me around. I looked into his gaze, seeing the desire to yank me back and never let me go. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, afraid he might actually do that.

He leaned in and kissed the corner of my mouth. "Come over tomorrow." He knew exactly when I was working because the production schedule was public information. So he always knew when I would be just down the street.

I didn't see this fling going anywhere. The sex wasn't good enough to keep having, and I found myself lying in the dark thinking about Maverick. I stressed about our relationship, how I would earn his trust again. He seemed to be the only thing on my mind...and Henry couldn't make me forget about it. The relationship didn't feel right, so it was time to move on. "This isn't working, Henry."

His eyes fell like I'd punched him in the stomach. They narrowed in offense and disappointment, like he hadn't seen my rejection coming. His fingers loosened on my elbow. "Why is that?"

I respected a man who had pride when he got dumped. The ones who begged and argued were clingy and annoying. He seemed to be the latter. "It doesn't matter. Take care, Henry." I walked out so I wouldn't have to see the irritated look on his face. I'd been down this road many times, ending a relationship with a man who wasn't ready to let go. Dante had been the first man to leave me—and it hurt. But that was how life worked... I didn't need to explain myself. Henry and I only had slept together a few times. It wasn't like it meant anything. I walked out the door and didn't look back.

"Arwen."

A conversation would just prolong the inevitable, and I wasn't in the mood for a lengthy discussion. It was late and I was tired. I wanted to sleep in my own bed and start a new day tomorrow. So I ignored him and kept walking.

I SAT ALONE at the breakfast table like I did every morning.

Maverick didn't join me anymore. He must take his meals in his office or somewhere else in the three-story mansion.

I poured cream into my coffee and watched the swirl develop. The table was covered with pastries, bread, and fruit. It was more food than a single person could eat, but Abigail insisted on serving me like I had the stomach of four grown men.

My eyes were focused on my coffee, so I didn't notice Maverick approach the table.

He pulled out a chair and took a seat.

I lifted my gaze and looked at him, nearly doing a double take when I saw his handsome countenance. It'd been a while since I'd seen him, and now I noticed his hair was a little

shorter because he'd cut it. The shadow on his jawline was a little thicker as if he skipped the shave that morning. Unfortunately, there was still a hostile expression in his eyes, like he was just as annoyed with me as he was a week ago.

I didn't realize how much I'd missed him until we were finally in the same room together. My fingers rested on the handle of the mug as I stared at him, taking in his features like it'd been months since I'd last seen him.

He grabbed the pot and poured the coffee into his mug, his t-shirt gripping his physique nicely. He returned the pot then took a long drink, letting the caffeine wake him. He grabbed his silverware then turned his attention to his food.

I kept staring at him, watching him ignore me as he enjoyed his breakfast.

With his eyes downcast, he acted like I wasn't there at all.

"How are you?"

He lifted his gaze as he took his time chewing his smoked salmon, his eyes still filled with pieces of coal. "Ramon is dead."

I'd figured Caspian had butchered him a long time ago.

"My father tortured him then tossed his body into a river."

Ramon got what he deserved, but I did pity his family. When I rescued them, they knew it was the last time they would ever see him...and they knew what would happen to him before he finally died. "Did that make your father feel better?"

He took another bite, taking his time before he answered. "I doubt it."

"Have you talked to him?"

"No."

"Then how do you know he killed Ramon?"

"His men told me." He grabbed his coffee and took another drink.

“Did it make you feel better?” Did Maverick sleep better knowing the man who’d raped his mother was finally dead? Did it give him the closure he needed to move on?

He stared at me for a long time, debating the answer behind his eyes.

I waited for him to say something.

He never did. “How are things with your boyfriend?”

He would never ask a question like that because he didn’t care. He was clearly being sarcastic, changing the subject so we wouldn’t have to talk about his father anymore.

“He’s not my boyfriend...and I ended things.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “Wasn’t feeling anything.”

“Did he fight for you like all the others?” he said, still sarcastic.

Maverick was the only man I’d ever slept with who didn’t want more of me. He didn’t become obsessed or possessive. He wasn’t impressed with me, probably because he’d been with so many beautiful women. “He wasn’t happy about it, but he’ll get over it. What about you?”

“What about me?” he asked, still eating.

“I noticed a lot of women have been staying here.”

“That’s not unusual.”

“Do you like any of them?”

He set down his fork and stared at me. “I don’t *like* women. I fuck them and then move on.”

He seemed to have moved on from me and didn’t miss me at all. I missed the sex, but he seemed to get what he needed from other people. He was an amazing lover to me, but to him, I must be replaceable. “I’m really sorry about—”

“I don’t want to talk about it ever again.” He dismissed me and picked up his fork again. “Let’s move on.”

“Well...I hope we can be friends again. Because I really miss you.” I stopped the emotion from entering my voice, but I could feel it crackle in my throat. Living in this mansion alone was a form of torture. I had no one to confide in, no one to share my life with. I missed watching movies with Maverick, missed talking in his office. He was my closest friend in the world, but now he was gone.

His eyes didn't react while he listened to my confession. “Friendships are built on trust. We don't have trust, so I don't see how we could ever be friends again.”

“Maverick, I will always be loyal to you. I made a mistake, and I'm sorry for that—”

“But you said you wouldn't change your decision even if you could. That doesn't sound like an apology to me.” His eyes flashed with hostility.

“Yes...but I would have done things differently.”

He turned back to his food.

“I know you must care about me. If you didn't, you would have kicked me out. You changed your mind for a reason.”

He kept eating.

I watched him, hoping for a reaction. “I understand you're mad at me right now, but I hope I can make it up to you somehow. If there's anything I can do, tell me. I'll do it. I want us to trust each other, to depend on each other. I want you to know that I respect and admire you...and I want things to be how they used to be.”

He finished chewing his food before he raised his chin and looked at me. “I'm a simple man, Arwen. My requirements are small. Just don't fuck with me, and we won't have any problems. But you did fuck with me...and now I've got so much shit to deal with. I won't sweep that under the rug and forget about it.”

“I understand...but maybe eventually you will.”

His eyes were so cold. “The only reason I changed my mind was because I knew what would happen to you if I let

you go. You wouldn't have lasted a week. Kamikaze probably would have found you first—and raped you.”

My lungs deflated in fear.

“So, I let you stay...because you didn't deserve that. It doesn't mean I like you. It doesn't mean I forgive you. It doesn't mean I want anything to do with you. It just means that I didn't want you to be raped and murdered. Don't take it too personally.” He pushed his plate away and grabbed his coffee.

“I do take it personally. You've been there for me in the past, and you're still here for me now. That means a lot to me. I want you to know I'll always be there for you...whatever you need.”

He drank from his mug and ignored my offer. “I have a dinner party tomorrow night. You're coming with me.”

The change in subject was so sudden, it nearly gave me whiplash. “What's this dinner party for?”

“It's one of my clients, a ridiculous social affair. I have to do them from time to time, and I have to take my wife along. Abigail picked out a dress for you. Just be ready by five.”

Maybe spending time with Maverick could repair some of the damage. Maybe we could be close again, be friends again. “I have a performance tomorrow night...but I'll have my understudy take care of it. “

“You have a performance tonight as well?”

“Yes...you should come.” Maverick had seen my show months ago, but we'd changed a few songs to keep it fresh. It would be nice to see him in the audience, to see him support my passion like a real husband.

He took another drink of his coffee then stood up.

“Do you think things will settle down with your father?” Was he still intent on killing me? Was he still enemies with Maverick? If we gave it enough time, would that problem subside?

He gripped the back of the chair as he looked at me, his eyes like two lasers. He had masculine knuckles, cords in his neck because his body was so tight. His dark hair was styled and ready for the day, making him deadly handsome. “He’s my problem—not yours.”

WHEN THE SHOW ENDED, the curtains closed. Applause sounded from the auditorium, still making its way to my ears because it was so deafening. Once the lights were off my face, the temperature dropped by nearly ten degrees. I grabbed the sides of my dress and lifted the fabric as I headed backstage.

I exchanged hugs and words of congratulations with the cast and crew then made my way to my makeup station. My hair was pulled free from the pins then I dropped the enormous gown and changed into something less puffy for the drive home.

“Arwen.” Henry’s voice sounded nearby, desperate and clingy.

I turned around, surprised to see him standing right behind me. I was clear when I dumped him last night, and I didn’t expect him to come to my show just to get my attention for another five minutes. He’d texted and called me a couple times last night, but I assumed he would give up by the next day.

Guess not.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded, immediately uncomfortable that he’d caught me off guard.

“I just wanted to talk to you. Last night, you just left—”

“No. Last night, I said I didn’t want to see you anymore. It’s nothing personal, Henry. It was just a fling, and I’m not interested in having that fling anymore. We weren’t in a relationship to begin with. We only slept together a handful of times. You’re making this into a bigger deal than it needs to be.” Maybe I was jumping the gun, but I’d been in this

position so many times that I was tired of having this same conversation over and over again.

“You think I’m just going to let you go without a fight?” he asked incredulously. “Come on, I’m not stupid.”

“And I’m not yours to let go.” I held up my left hand, where my large diamond reflected the lights from the mirror. “I’m married, Henry. This was never going to go anywhere, and you knew that. You need to back up and give me some space.”

“I’m not asking you to marry me. I just don’t see why we can’t—”

“Because I don’t want to. Our fling ran its course, and I’m ready for something new.” Men never had to have this conversation with women. They had their one-night stands without explanation. But when the tables were turned, women weren’t given the same opportunity.

His hand moved to my wrist. “Arwen, come on—”

“I said no.”

He grabbed my wrist again.

“Grab my wife again, and that’s the last thing you’ll ever grab.” Maverick’s voice was more threatening than a loaded gun. His tone announced his hostility along with his promise of cruelty if his orders weren’t obeyed. He emerged from nowhere, deadly in his suit and tie. With his hair perfectly styled and his brown eyes steaming, he moved beside me and stared Henry down. His hands rested in his pockets, and he didn’t take a fighting stance because he didn’t need to. His presence was terrifying enough.

Henry took a few seconds to react, to size up his opponent before realizing he had no possible chance against this formidable man. His fingers loosened, and he dropped my wrist, taking a step back.

Maverick came closer to my side, claiming his territory with his proximity. He slowly stepped closer to Henry, his eyes turning dominant like a wolf on the hunt. He stopped just inches from Henry, considerably taller. “Don’t come near my

wife again. I'll chop off both of your hands if you do." He kept his voice low so no one else could overhear the tense conversation taking place.

I was the one being rescued, but even I was scared.

Henry probably shit his pants. He finally stepped back and maneuvered around Maverick, leaving the backstage area and returning to the front of the stage. His eyes were downcast, like a submissive dog that had bowed to the alpha.

Maverick didn't turn to watch him leave. He directed his gaze on me next, his hands staying in his pockets. He'd managed to threaten a man without raising his voice or making a fist. And he did it so calmly, like the interaction nearly bored him.

I wasn't afraid Henry would hurt me, but I was irritated that my lover had become my stalker. Every time I wanted to slip away, he grabbed me tighter. It was a nuisance, like I didn't look over my shoulder already as it was. But my wolf came and scared off the monster...and I was grateful.

He watched me for a long time, his eyes trailing down my long hair and the tightness of my dress. He looked me over intimately, just the way he did when we were in bed together. The perusal lasted a short while before he looked me in the eye again, like the attraction never happened in the first place.

"Thank you."

"You weren't kidding. You really do have an effect on men."

Not on this man. "Why did you come tonight?"

"You asked me, remember?"

"But you didn't say anything."

He glanced at the people around us, the other cast members who had changed and were prepared to go home for the evening. He turned back to me, his shoulders wide in his suit. He looked beautiful naked, but he looked delicious in a suit. He had the perfect body that made his clothes fit him so well. "I rarely say anything."

“Yeah...I picked up on that. What did you think of the show?”

“I didn’t pay attention to the show—only you. And you were amazing—as always.”

This man rarely issued a compliment, so I took it straight to heart. “Thank you.” Maybe my words got to him, made him miss our friendship the way I did. I couldn’t think of any other explanation for why he was there, why he showed up to watch me perform songs he’d already heard.

“Let me walk you to your car.” His arm circled my waist, and he guided me outside through the hallways, back to the place where we’d met the very first time. Down the steps and to the car, he guided me until we reached my black BMW, the new car he’d bought me since I’d given away my old one.

I pulled out my keys and hit the button to unlock the doors. “I’ll see you at the house.”

He opened the door for me, being a gentleman. “I’m going out. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I stilled before I lowered myself into the front seat, suddenly disappointed that Maverick would be visiting a bar to find a woman to take home. He’d stopped by my show on the way since he was in the city anyway. Why did I expect anything different? “Alright...be safe.”

“Sheep, I’m always safe.”

MAVERICK

I BROUGHT THE WINEGLASS TO MY LIPS AND TOOK A DRINK, noting the flavors of berries, oak, and even age. My fingers gripped the stem of the glass as I let the smoothness roll across my tongue, savoring the richness that had been perfectly fermented.

Tony stood beside me, his eyes moving past my frame as he watched something on the other side of the room. “I never congratulated you on your wedding. It’s only been a few months, so you must be in the honeymoon stage.”

Far from it. “Thank you.”

He continued to stare.

I followed his gaze and watched where it landed. Arwen stood in a black cocktail dress, skintight and backless, with five-inch heels that made her height more compatible with mine. With a glass of wine in her hand, she talked to some of the guys who had cornered her, becoming a highlight of the evening since most people recognized her from the opera.

Tony was married, but he didn’t seem to care if his wife noticed the subject of his obsession. “You lucked out, Maverick. She’s one hell of a beauty.”

She turned heads everywhere she went. I noticed it anytime we were in public together. Men couldn’t control themselves and eye-fucked her like their fantasy might be reality someday. “Thank you.”

“How did you meet?”

I went with the truth. “At the opera. She performed, and I went backstage to talk to her.”

“And the rest is history?” he asked.

I swirled my wine. “Something like that.”

“The sex good?”

I lowered my glass and stared at him, finding the question offensive. I was used to men saying inappropriate things about my wife’s legs and her gorgeous ass, but I let them slide because her sexiness was impossible to ignore. But I didn’t appreciate a question so intimate. I never talked about my lovers like that, not with Kent or anyone else. “How’s the sex with your wife?”

When he grew uncomfortable at the question, I’d made my point.

Tom walked up to me, wearing a dark blue suit with a black tie. Everyone in the room was an affluent member of society, the rich and aristocratic of Italy. They were business owners, models, and designers. I put up with the boredom because they were excellent connections to have for business purposes. He reached me and gripped me by the shoulder. “We’ve been trying to convince your wife to sing us a song. She’s too shy, so how about you give her a nudge?”

Like that woman ever listened to me. “She’s stubborn.”

“You’re stubborn too, so you’re perfect for the job.” He clapped me on the back then guided me across the room.

Arwen was surrounded by admirers, both men and women, trying to get her to serenade everyone in the room. Despite her talent, she was unusually humble about it. It was something she never talked about with me, only if I asked. Her eyes settled on me when I came close, and I saw the gentle look of affection she always gave whenever I was concerned. She’d despised me when we first met, but now she turned to me the way she used to turn to her father. “I know why they’ve sent you...”

I came close to her, circling my arm around her waist and holding her close. I acted like her husband, not just to put on a

show, but so the guys would stop eye-fucking her right in front of me. She didn't mean anything to me, but she was still mine. I didn't like it when people eyed my things. "Just a song."

"I don't know...so many people here."

"Not more than an entire auditorium."

"But I don't know these people..."

"You don't know anyone at the theater either."

She opened her mouth to argue once more.

"Sheep, just do it."

She closed her mouth at the use of her nickname, her eyes softening at the affection.

"I scared off your admirer. You owe me."

"I owe you for a lot more than that, Maverick." Her arm rested on mine as her hand gripped my bicep. Her affection for me was peculiar because she seemed to admire me and respect me, but all she wanted was my friendship. She wanted to be my lover sometimes, but she didn't want to be the only woman in my life. It was a strange relationship, so deep and so shallow at the same time.

"Then sing." My hand released her waist, and I stepped away, leaving her alone in front of the fireplace while everyone gathered around to hear those amazing pipes release a beautiful song. Without accompanying instruments, it would be a song from her voice alone—but it would still be perfect.

She gave a nervous smile and brought her fingertips together before she finally opened her mouth to sing. Without even warming up, she managed to produce the perfect notes through no effort, creating a song that mesmerized everyone—including me.

Tony stood beside me, not taking a single drink from his glass through the entire performance. No one else moved an inch. They hardly even breathed. They were all equally entranced by the music she created, by the vivid picture she painted with just her voice. Not a single person cared about anything else at that moment.

At the end of her song, her voice reached so high, it resonated with the particles in the air, made the entire room shift with the energy. Empty glasses on the table shattered when she hit the highest note, exploding because of her power.

Then she ended the song.

Everyone looked around at the destroyed glasses then applauded, even more impressed with her talent at such a more intimate level than in an auditorium.

I was the only one who didn't clap—because I wasn't surprised.

SHE SAT beside me at the table, cutting her fork into her cheesecake and bringing a taste to her lips. “Damn...this is good.”

My arm rested across the back of her chair, keeping the dogs away from my wife. Every man in that room was an acquaintance I socialized with on a regular basis, but they couldn't control themselves around Arwen. They turned into horny teenagers who were obsessed with the most beautiful girl in school. They eyed me with envy, wishing she were theirs instead of mine.

I'd never thought she could be instrumental in business. That night, I got more invitations for collaborations than I'd ever had. Restaurant owners asked for bigger shipments of my product, and other acquaintances asked for aged wheels for their dinner parties. They came flooding to me—all because of the woman I married.

But I would never tell her that.

She cut into her cheesecake again and took another bite. “Maverick, you have to try this...” She wiped the fork down her tongue then closed her eyes as she savored it. “I've never had cheesecake this good in my entire life.”

When I looked up, I saw a few men watching her, getting off on the way she got off on her dessert.

Fuck, these men couldn't keep it in their pants.

"I'm good." I grabbed her fork and put it down, cutting her off from her affair with her dessert. "That's enough."

"Uh, I'll eat all that I want." She grabbed her fork again. "I don't care if my hips get bigger."

"That's not what I'm worried about." I grabbed the fork again and put it down. "You're making every man in here hard as a rock." That included me. "Now, if you can't stop eating like a porn star, then you can't eat."

"What?" she asked, keeping her voice low. "You're being ridiculous."

"No, I'm not. Do as I say. Don't make me ask you again."

Normally, she would tell me off or smear the dessert across my face, but since we were surrounded by people, she kept her mouth shut. She also probably played nice since she'd fucked up so badly. She owed me—and she knew it.

She picked up the fork and kept eating, this time behaving like a normal person. She cut down the sexiness and did her best to blend in with everyone else.

Good.

"Should we offer to pay for the glasses I broke?"

"No. That would be offensive."

"How so?"

"Because that implies he can't pay to replace them. You know how rich people are."

"I guess it's been a while now..." She turned her gaze back to her cheesecake and took another bite. "I've got a few hundred bucks in my account, so I guess the cost of a single glass is a big deal to me."

"You're my wife—which means you have billions in your account."

She kept eating and ignored what I said. She still hadn't used any of the money I put in her account. She lived off her

meager checks from the opera to buy her clothes and accessories.

I was annoyed with her stubbornness, but I also respected it. She valued her independence and didn't want to spend my money on superficial stuff she didn't need. She was a simple person now.

"People here seem to admire you." She set down her fork and looked at me, guests mingling around us as the night drew to a close.

"You're confusing admiration for respect."

"Or maybe they're the same thing."

They weren't in my book. I pulled back my sleeve and checked the time. It was getting late, almost eleven. We still had a long drive back to the house. "We should get going."

"I wish I could take this cheesecake home."

"I can have Abigail bake an entire round for you."

"No, that'd be a terrible idea."

"Why?"

"Because I'd eat it all."

I LOOSENED my tie once we were in the car and popped open the first button. We were in my Bugatti, so I sped out of the city and into the countryside, pushing the car to a hundred and eighty kilometers per hour.

None of the cops would dare to pull me over.

She looked out the window from the passenger seat, her dress riding up on her thighs because it was so short. She would normally tug it down, but since it was just the two of us, she let it be.

I tried not to stare.

She had been the most beautiful woman in that room tonight, and that gave me a great sense of pride. She was a trophy I owned, a piece of real estate everyone wanted. Having a wife used to be a pain, but she'd become useful. At least it helped my image...and my business.

And I couldn't help but agree with everyone else... she was exceptional.

Her hair was in curls, her makeup was dark, and she'd painted her lips the sexiest color, a deep red that almost looked burgundy. Diamond earrings sat in her lobes, and that dress fit her perfect body in the sexiest way.

We didn't talk during the drive home, and we didn't have music on either. It was just silence.

My eyes were on the road when I felt her hand reach for my thigh. Her fingers gently dug into my slacks, her sharp nails reminding me of the way she'd cut my back in the past. After the squeeze, her fingers continued to rest there, subtly inviting me to her bed tonight.

It was tempting.

I turned to her and saw the way she looked at me, the way her mascara made her eyelashes look so thick. They made her eyes stand out so beautifully, especially when she wore dark colors that enhanced their vibrancy. Her lips were delectable in that shade, the perfect color to smear against my base after as she gave me a deep kiss.

I eye-fucked her the way everyone else had that evening.

I forced my gaze back on the road so we wouldn't crash, slightly distracted by the way her fingers kept digging into me. Her hand moved higher until she found exactly what she was looking for—my hard dick.

We arrived at the house minutes later, tensions running high. She wanted me, and with the way she looked tonight, I wanted her too.

But I was still pissed about the stunt she'd pulled. My father was now my enemy, and I had to watch my back every second of the day because I never knew when he would strike.

That made me push her away, made me wish I didn't find her attractive at that moment.

We went into the house and walked to the second floor, where I would drop her off before continuing on my way to my bedroom on the next landing. I wanted to dismiss her and turn away, but her fingers snaked into mine until they were locked together.

It reminded me of the way she'd gripped my hand at the funeral, how she conveyed so much emotion in that simple embrace. She'd squeezed our fingers together, tears streaking down her face. She'd told me I was her rock...the only man she could count on.

It always turned me on when she needed me. And she needed me now.

She faced me, her hand still held in mine. In those heels, she was much taller than usual, her back dipping at a beautiful angle to make her ass stick out even farther. She moved into me, her fingers releasing from mine so she could push her hands up my chest. Slowly, her fingers dug under my jacket until she pushed it off my shoulders, leaving me in just my collared shirt. She wanted me—and she didn't want there to be any misunderstanding.

She stepped closer to my chest and pressed her lips to mine, her eyes still open as she looked at me. Her lips landed softly, like a teardrop on a pillow. She inhaled the second she felt my mouth, like the chemistry was just as strong as ever. Her eyes closed, and her hand slid into my hair as she brought me in for a passionate kiss.

I let her pull me, let her have me. My lips moved with hers, and the taste of cheesecake was impossible to ignore. I could taste the sweetness as it combined with her desire, making it the best thing I'd ever tasted. My hands moved to her ass, and I bent my neck down as she continued to pull me into her.

She moaned into my mouth.

My hands gripped her ass under her dress, feeling the soft skin of her cheeks as well as the lace of her thong.

“Fuck me.” She spoke against my mouth, enticing me with her touch. Her demand came out heavy, the words weighed down with so much desire. She pulled off the order so well, making it sexy enough for a fantasy.

I knew every man in that room tonight wished he were me right now.

But that wasn't enough to make me drop my pants. That wasn't enough to invite her into my bed for the night. It didn't matter how sexy her legs were, how good of a kisser she was. She'd crossed me—and I still wasn't over it.

I ended the kiss and pulled back. “Goodnight, Sheep.”

She stood there with parted lips, wounded by the way I'd rejected her. Disbelief was in her gaze, as if she couldn't believe I'd turned her down—again. Desire was still in her eyes, like she would take me if I changed my mind. “Maverick —”

“I'm still pissed at you.” As her husband, I would always protect her from clingy assholes who didn't understand the meaning of no. I would defend her from the sexist comments men couldn't hold back. I would buy her a new car when she gave her old one away. But I wouldn't turn the other cheek when she betrayed what I cared about most—trust.

“It's just sex...”

Any other guy would have the same thought. It didn't matter if she stabbed me in the back; she was still so damn fuckable. It was just meaningless sex, sweaty and dirty fucking. It shouldn't matter to me. But for whatever reason, it did. “I get sex all the time, so I don't need this.” I turned around and headed up the stairs, adding to the harsh words I said to her as I blew her off. “I don't need you.”

I DIDN'T SEE Arwen the next day.

I got up early, worked out, and then went to the office. I kept busy, working on orders and making sure my important clients got exactly what they wanted. Some of them spent ten thousand dollars on a single wheel of cheese because it'd been aged for almost two decades. Those had to be handled with the highest care.

At the end of the day, I sat in my office and looked out the window, watching the sun go down. It was the end of summer, so the sun set a little earlier than usual. I liked to watch the colors change from blue to pink and purple. With a glass of scotch in my hand, I found it the most relaxing part of my day.

When night had completely fallen, I left my office and drove back to the house. I wasn't necessarily avoiding Arwen, but I didn't look forward to seeing her. I hadn't blown her off because I was uncomfortable with her reaction. I just didn't feel like talking about it.

Abigail had dinner waiting for me downstairs, so I ate before I went up to the third floor. The second I was at the top of the stairs, I heard the most beautiful voice.

"Seasons change, plants come back to life, but you're gone forever...and I've already said goodbye." Piano keys were being played lightly by master fingertips. The music was soft and quiet, completely opposite from the burst of song she produced in the auditorium. This was intimate and sexy, just her and the piano.

I walked down the hallway, passing the door where the piano stood behind the closed door.

"My heart withers with broken strings, while you've gotten your wings..."

I stopped outside the door, listening to the beautiful way she hit her notes without even trying. She wasn't just an excellent singer, but a master of her craft. I didn't recognize the song, and I wondered if she'd written it herself...because it reminded me of her father.

I kept going, the sound of her voice growing quieter as I entered my bedroom. Even when I shut the door behind me, I

could still hear her voice, hear the melancholy she conveyed so well.

Instead of hopping in the shower or pouring myself a drink after the long day I'd had, I continued to stand there and listen, my ears straining to hear the beautiful lyrics that resonated with my soul.

Just as always happened when she sang in front of everyone at the party, I was hard. I was hard anytime I heard her sing, both times I'd watched her sing at the opera. Something about her voice pulled at my desire. Now my dick didn't think twice before expanding in my pants. All I needed was the melody of her voice, and I was ready to go.

Ready to fuck.

I tried to ignore the lovely music, but I couldn't. I hummed to myself as the song instantly got stuck in my head. Images of her on the piano flooded my mind, her legs open as I thrust into her, our tangled bodies playing the keys with our passion.

I rejected her last night—but now I wanted her more than ever.

I left my bedroom and returned down the hallway, approaching the drawing room where the grand piano stood in the corner. I'd never played the instrument myself, nor did I have a particular love of music. It was simply an elegant piece to decorate this mansion.

I cracked the door and peered inside. Her chin was down and her eyes were focused on the keys, so absorbed in her music that she didn't even notice me. Her lithe fingers moved across the keyboard, gently stroking the black keys then the white. She wasn't reading music, playing something from memory.

I inched farther into the room, seeing the way a few strands had come loose from her bun. They hung in front of her face, the dark locks matching the color of the piano. She was in a halter top dress, deep blue and short. Her rounded shoulders looked elegant as she held herself with perfect poise.

She was a musician practicing her craft, a professional that understood the notes and keys better than most people.

I grew more mesmerized by the second, entranced by her beautiful mouth and the breathtaking sounds she made. Now I was a dog just like the rest of the guys, trapped under her gorgeous spell.

I slowly approached the piano, the volume of the music growing louder. When my hand rested on the surface of the instrument, she finally realized she wasn't alone.

Her slender fingers stopped playing the keys, the music coming to a halt and making the silence sound so ugly. With embarrassment in her eyes, she lifted her gaze and looked at me, as if she'd been discovered doing something wrong—not something magical. “Jesus...you scared me.”

I stood at the piano and watched her, seeing the beautiful glow in her eyes fade away as her concentration was broken.

She pulled her hands away from the keys and stood up.

“Keep playing.”

She held her stance as she stared at me, considering what I'd said. Then she lowered herself back down but didn't return her hands to the keys. Arwen was never self-conscious about anything, even getting rejected by a man. But knowing I'd been watching her this entire time clearly unnerved her. It was the only time I'd ever seen her so unsure of herself. “I think I'm done anyway...”

I took a seat on the couch facing the piano, watching her and hoping she would change her mind.

The silence continued—because she was so damn stubborn.

“Did you write that song?”

She turned to me, slightly horrified I'd heard it. “Yeah...”

“It was beautiful.”

She looked down again, dismissing my comment.

“You know I don’t lie, Sheep. If I say something, I mean it.” I wouldn’t inflate her damaged ego with false praise. If she’d sucked, I would have stormed into the room and told her to quiet down. I wouldn’t be sitting there now, staring at her with new eyes, if I didn’t mean my words.

She lifted her gaze again.

“You write a lot of your own music?”

“All the time.”

“I never knew that.” I’d never asked her about her musical talents. I’d never really been interested in her, not the way most men were. To everyone else, she was beautiful, talented, and fascinating. I took her for granted. “Was that song about your father?”

Her eyes immediately filled with emotion, like I’d pressed an invisible button that made her lose her sanity. It was a touchy subject for her, losing the only man who ever loved her. “Yes...” She sniffed then looked at the piano again, like it was her safe place.

“I liked it.”

She stared at the keys for a long time before she stood up. She brushed her hands over her dress and smoothed it out before she stepped toward the couch. “I didn’t think you could hear me.”

“I like hearing you.” The second I heard the music, it washed my stress away. It made my muscles relax, made my body hum to life. It made me aroused, made me want to hear music from her lips while I was inside her.

She stopped and stared at me for a moment, like those words meant something to her. But she turned her head and stepped away, dismissing them altogether.

My hand grabbed her wrist, and I steadied her.

She still didn’t look at me.

I slowly tugged on her arm, pulling her in my direction so she would come into my lap. But I didn’t pull on her so hard

that she didn't have a choice. She could either move with my suggestion, or she could move away altogether and walk out.

She let me pull her. Closer and closer she came, her knees hitting mine once she was close to me.

My hands grabbed her hips, and I pulled her onto my lap, making her legs straddle my hips so she was directly on top of me. Her dress rose up her thighs, and I took it a step further and pulled it above her hips. Last night, my desire couldn't outweigh my rage, but right now, I wanted this woman. The music had stopped, but I was still under her spell, still hypnotized by her voice.

I rested my neck against the back of the chair and looked up at her, my hands feeling her curves. I started at the bottom of her ass, touched the curve of her cheeks, then slid into the valley of her back. Farther up I went, taking the dress with me. I slowly pulled it over her head and tossed it onto the couch.

Her perfect and perky tits were right in my face, so round and firm with nipples made for sucking. They were pale but flushed with color as her heart brought blood to the surface of her skin. Little bumps erupted across the surface, showing her arousal as well as her discomfort.

I took a moment to look at her, to stare at this perfect woman on my lap. In just her panties, she was a wet dream. She was the sexiest woman I'd ever been with, possessing the kind of beauty that would make other girls spiteful. My hand reached up and yanked the tie from her hair, letting the strands fall across her shoulders. Still slightly curled from last night, they reached the bottom of her tits, the perfect length.

My hands cupped her ass, and I brought her close to my chest, making her face hover over mine. My big hands squeezed her beautiful globes, kneading them with my long fingers. I'd slept alone last night, and my dick was pissed. Now he was harder than he'd been the night before, horny and anxious.

Her hand slid into my hair, and she looked me in the eye as she held herself over me. Her lips descended slowly, her eyes watching my reaction as she combined our mouths together.

The landing was perfect, making both of us breathe hard at the connection. My hands squeezed her ass again, and she pulled my hair until it tugged on my scalp.

Like every other time we'd kissed, it was so good. With the perfect ratio of lips to tongue, we were in sync anytime our bodies combined together. Sometimes women kissed too quickly and rushed to the passionate embraces when there hadn't been time for it to build up. But Arwen knew exactly how to kiss a man, to make my lips yearn for hers.

My dick pressed against my zipper as it fought to get closer to her, slip inside her perfect slit. My body ached for hers. My fingers trembled at the prospect of feeling her.

I wanted to fuck my wife so damn hard.

She pulled my shirt over my head then worked the top of my jeans to get them undone. Without taking her lips off mine, she tugged them off my hips and far enough down so my cock could come free. Her hands found him and gently stroked him, her thumb swiping across the lube that formed at the tip of my crown.

One of my hands slid into her hair, and I gripped her tit at the same time, my dick throbbing in her hands. Nothing would stop me from having this woman now. A meteorite could strike the earth, but it wouldn't slow me down.

My hand reached into my front pocket, and I pulled out a condom. With a quick tear, I got it free and rolled it down to my base, securing it before I made the journey into her tight cunt. I grabbed her hip and pulled her down, forcing her to sink slowly until my enormous dick was inside her.

She moaned when she felt me, her eyes fading into pure lust. She wanted me with the same desire as last night, like she needed me to get the climax she craved. Her arms circled my neck, and she kissed me as she arched her back and moved up and down, slowly pushing her body down my length until her lips kissed my balls. Over and over, she repeated the same movements, pushing my length deep inside her and making her shiver.

Fuck, my wife was good in bed.

My hands returned to her luscious ass, and I guided her movements, my balls aching because I couldn't wait to fill the tip of the condom. Before I even approached the finish line, I could feel the load deep in my shaft, feel the amount of arousal I was about to spill out.

Things got hot and heavy quickly. She breathed hard against my mouth as she worked her body to fuck me. She held on to the back of my neck and moaned loudly, grinding her clit against my body to give her that extra push she needed to turn into a writhing puddle of ecstasy.

I watched her face, seeing her in a whole new way. She was so beautiful when she was getting fucked, her cheeks red and her lips anxious. Sometimes she bit her bottom lip when my cock felt particularly good, when it was hitting the perfect spot to make her hips buck on their own. Her nails clawed at me, and sometimes a pained moan escaped her lips, like she couldn't tolerate the pleasure. "Wolf...I'm gonna come so hard." Her nails started to slice me as she lost her mind, as the pleasure exploded inside her and made her writhe.

My hands gripped her ass and guided her up and down, feeling the tightness surround my dick once her pussy clenched around me like an iron fist. I'd fucked this cunt enough times to understand its subtleties, the way it tightened before it released. I could feel her pleasure through our combined bodies, feel how good she felt.

Tears sprung to her eyes, and she moaned in my face, her nipples sharp like two knives. "Yes...yes." Her voice trembled with her release, the moisture in her eyes welling up until two tears streaked down her cheeks.

Damn, she came hard.

Her hips stopped pounding into me as she slowed down, as the pleasure faded from her fingertips and toes. She caught her breath as she latched on to me, still enjoying the aftershocks of goodness in her veins.

The tears were so sexy to me that I came with a grunt, turned on by her emotional response to my dick. Every woman had a different reaction to a climax, but criers were rare. Arwen released tears like it was the biggest event of her life, the biggest climax she'd ever had. Seeing my wife in tears turned me on, made me release a load before I could control it.

She lowered her body until I was completely inside her, letting me come with my balls against her ass. "Give it to me..." Her palms rested against my chest as she looked me in the eye, watching me get off on her like it turned her on the way it turned me on.

I felt my dick shiver as I delivered my load, as I filled the tip of the condom to maximum capacity. My fingers dug into her ass as I finished, as my hips gave a final buck. The climax was enough to make all my muscles cramp with tightness. When I finished, I kept her on my lap, wanting to be inside her as my dick slowly softened.

I looked at her face, admiring the same arousal in her eyes that I knew was in mine. She was never more beautiful than when she'd been satisfied. A woman like that should be fulfilled every single day of her life. I'd always thought if I took a wife, I would always be the best sex she ever had.

And I had a feeling that was true with Arwen.

ARWEN

NAKED AND WRAPPED IN THE SHEETS, I LAY BESIDE MAVERICK. My arm was draped over his waist, and my leg was tucked in between his. I wasn't sure how we made it from the drawing room into his enormous bed. A faint memory of him carrying me across the hall came to mind, his powerful arms supporting my body as he placed me on the cloud of sheets.

My eyes opened, and his body came into view, just as tight in the morning as it was in the evening. His tanned skin had beautiful grooves of hard muscle, gorgeous cuts I liked to dip my fingers into. Sleep was still heavy in my gaze and I was too tired to move, so I lay there and stared at this beautiful man.

As I remembered last night, I could feel the memory of tears in my eyes. I remembered the way they had watered when he made me come, more than I ever had before. He was a much better lover than Henry had ever been, better than any man in my past. He was so confident in his gaze, sexy in his kiss, and dominant in his grasp. He touched me the way a man should touch a woman, full of spark.

I wanted to stay there forever.

Maverick was the foundation my life was built on. He was my closest friend, my protector, and my lover. All of those attributes combined together and solidified what he really was—my husband.

My husband.

It had a nice ring to it.

He gently reached for the phone on his nightstand and tried not to disturb me as he moved, thinking I was still asleep. He scrolled through the list of emails waiting for him, all of them pertaining to the business he ran right on his property. He skimmed over most of them, opening a couple but not composing a reply.

I wanted to stay still so I wouldn't have to leave.

He grew impatient and started to move out of my embrace.

My fingers immediately tightened against his frame, keeping him in place because I didn't want him to slip away just yet. He probably had to complete his workout before heading to the office, but I wasn't ready to let him go.

He sat up and looked down at me, his sleepy gaze studying me beside him. His hair was a mess from the way I'd played with it all night long, and that only complimented his sexy look. His brown eyes looked into mine but he didn't say a word, his chin becoming dark with the shadow of his beard.

My hand slid into his dark hair, and I pulled him close to me, getting that large body on top of mine. I pulled him gently, then tugged harder, urging him to smother me into the mattress with his size, suffocate me with his smell. "I want you..." With my lips pressed close to his, I whispered my desires, admitted my neediness. My best nights of sleep happened in this bed, with my wolf beside me. It was the safest place in the world, the one place where no one could ever touch me.

He moved between my legs as he held himself on top of me, his powerful arms flexing as he held up his frame packed with muscle. His thighs kept mine wide apart, and he brushed his lips over mine, teasing me.

My fingers fisted his hair, and I brought his lips to mine, kissing him just as passionately as I did last night. He'd found me in my most vulnerable state, my fingers striking the keys of the grand piano. I'd sung under my breath, whispered a tune from my weeping heart. My walls were down, and I was exposed for what I was—a heartbroken woman. He accepted me that way, admired me that way.

He kissed me so good, caressed my lips like I was the only woman he ever wanted to kiss. Heated breaths fell across my lips, and a sensual tongue entered my mouth. Everything he did was sexy, from the way he breathed to the way he touched me. When he was on top of me like this, it was the sexiest thing in the world, to be pinned down by this animal with nowhere to run.

Not that I wanted to go anywhere.

When my nails started to slice his back in longing, he pulled away and grabbed a condom from his drawer. With expertise, he ripped open the packet and secured it over his base, leaving a large tip because he expected to produce a big load. Then he slipped inside me, stretching me like he'd never taken me before. Slowly he sank, inch by inch, until his balls tapped against my ass.

How could I take another man to bed when Maverick was the best?

When every other man was a disappointment?

When no one could compare to this man?

I couldn't focus on my lips on his because he felt so good between my legs. My mouth rested against his, and I breathed through the pleasure, feeling like a real woman when I was stretched like this. "Maverick..." I could feel the tears in my eyes already, feel the climax before it even arrived.

His eyes looked into mine, as if he was waiting for the tears to fall. "I love it when you cry, Sheep."

I SAT at the dinner table alone, hoping Maverick would join me. He'd been at the office all day, on the opposite side of his property inside the factory where he made Italy's most exclusive cheese.

Abigail set the table—for one.

“Maverick won’t be joining me?” She seemed to be the only person who knew anything about his schedule.

“No. He’s working late.” She set the basket of bread in front of me, along with a new bottle of wine.

After the sex we’d had, it seemed like everything was fine. Our old relationship had returned, and our connection had stabilized. We weren’t enemies anymore. I didn’t want to sleep around with men who would only disappoint me, so that meant I wanted to be with Maverick more...but there were boundaries. We couldn’t be regular lovers, just casual sex. If it ever escalated into anything more, he would push me away instantly. “Have you seen Caspian?”

“Not since the day he and Maverick bloodied each other.” She poured the wine then left the bottle on the table.

“Where does Caspian live? Is he close by?”

She straightened then raised an eyebrow, confused by my question. “Why?”

“I know Maverick hasn’t talked to him, and I wish they could work it out.”

“Mr. DeVille is stubborn. And his father is even more stubborn. I don’t think their story has a happy ending. Ever since his wife died, that man hasn’t been the same. Not to me, any of the other servants, and definitely not to his kids.”

I’d forgotten Maverick had a sister. He never talked about her. “Maybe I could talk to him...”

“And get yourself killed?” she asked incredulously. “That won’t do anyone any good—unless you kill him on your way down.” She didn’t hide her venom for the man who was so cold to Maverick. She clearly had great affection for her employer.

“I just want to talk...not fight.”

“I don’t think you’ll have the option.”

I wanted to press her for information, but I knew I wouldn’t get anything. She was far too loyal to Maverick to

give me any help. And if she knew what I had in mind, she would tattle on me right away. “Thank you for dinner.”

I SAT on the couch in my room with the TV on. It was getting late, and I suspected Maverick was home by now. A part of me hoped he would come to my bedroom, even if it was just for a quick chat. But the silence continued, leading me to believe such a visit would never take place.

I grabbed my phone and texted him. *Do you have company for the evening?* This man was so handsome, so confident, and so sexy that he was magnetic. He attracted the attention of every person in the room, like honey attracting a swarm of bees. Finding a beautiful woman for a night of meaningless passion was easier than opening a bottle of wine. He could get laid whenever he was in the mood. So it wouldn't surprise me if he were already with someone else, forgetting about our night together like it didn't happen.

A few minutes passed before the three dots popped up on my phone. *No.*

My heart gave a slight thump in excitement. *Do you want company...?*

I always want to fuck—if that's what you're asking.

I didn't just want sex. I wanted to spend time with him, ask him about his day. I wanted to share a bottle of wine and run my fingers through his dark hair. I wanted connection, intimacy.

I went upstairs and stepped inside his bedroom.

He was sitting up in bed, wearing just his sweatpants as his powerful back leaned against the headboard. His ankles were crossed, and his bare feet reached toward the end of the bed, athletic with a prominent arch. Every feature he possessed was somehow masculine, somehow sexy. An iPad was sitting in his lap, and his eyes were glued to the screen like he was reading something.

I shut the door behind me and stepped inside.

He finished reading whatever held his attention then he lifted his gaze to meet mine. His hair was still styled from his shower, and his jaw was clean from his shave. He watched me with those eyes that reminded me of a hot cup of coffee on a cold morning. They were penetrative, intimate. He set aside his device without taking his eyes off me.

I moved to the other side of the bed and stripped out of my clothes, keeping my panties on.

His eyes trailed over my body, examining the curve of my tits and my waistline. He seemed to like the white color of my underwear, the way it matched my pale skin. His eyes were focused on me, slowly turning from calm to intense.

I pulled back the sheets and slipped into bed beside him. The second my body softened into the mattress, I felt comfortable. The mattress was probably identical to the one I had in my bedroom, but this felt so much better. With my body turned on the side, I looked up at the beautiful man who hadn't taken his eyes off me.

He finally scooted down then turned over, his head resting on the pillow right beside me. He didn't ravish me right away, taking his time as he undressed me with his gaze. His cologne was fragrant, the scent that made ovaries melt.

My hand moved to his chest, and my fingers pressed into the area where two slabs of muscles met right in the center. Slowly, my hand explored until it found the drumbeat of his heart, the gentle thump as his body worked to stay alive. He was warm to the touch, scorching hot. My eyes followed my movements, appreciating all of his beauty. "How was your day?"

"I thought you came here for sex."

"I did. But I still want to know how your day was."

He turned contemplative, like he considered ignoring the question. "I had a lot of shipments go out today. Some of my wheels have aged to perfection, and now everyone wants them. They had to be loaded onto the truck for delivery."

“You help with that?”

“No. I just make sure it gets done. I have foremen who help with management, but my father taught me that if you want things done right, you have to do them yourself...and he was right.”

My fingers glided down to his hard stomach, feeling the hard grooves. “Have you spoken to your father?”

“No. And when I do, I know it won’t be pleasant.”

“Have you considered reaching out to him? You know, soften the tension.”

His eyes were nearly the color of his hair, deep brown. His tanned skin reminded me of olive oil, so stunning. “Softness is weakness in my world. It’s essential to be respected—especially by your enemies.”

“Your father is your enemy?”

He gave a slow nod. “Unfortunately.”

“I hope it won’t always be that way.” Especially since I was the reason they were pitted against each other. The last time they were in the same room together, it seemed like one of them was going to die.

If he was still angry with me, he didn’t show it. “My father is stubborn.”

“Only because he’s upset. He’s not thinking rationally.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

I wished there were something I could do to repair the damage between them, to bring father and son back to the same side. Caspian was despicable, but he was still Maverick’s father. I wanted them to have the relationship I had with my father...to be close. “What’s your sister’s name?”

A slight reaction took place on his face, a dilation of his eyes. He wasn’t as relaxed as he was a moment ago, the subject making him tense. He’d never talked about her before, only mentioned her in passing. “Lily.”

“Pretty name...”

“She’s a pretty girl.”

My lips slightly lifted into a smile, moved by what he said. “You two are close?”

His eyes dropped. “We’ve gotten closer since my mother died. Dealing with our father made us allies. We’re both hardheaded and stubborn, so we didn’t always get along. But you know what they say, tragedy always brings people together...”

“I’ve never seen her come by the house before. Do you see her often?”

He kept his gaze averted. “No.”

“Why? Does she live somewhere else?”

He turned back to me, hostility in his gaze. “You ask a lot of questions.”

“Just curious... You know everything about me.”

“I doubt that.”

“I’m not asking to be nosy. I just like talking to you.” It was easy to look past his rough edges when I knew how good he was underneath. He was protective and honest, the kind of qualities any woman would want in a man. When he let his walls come down, he was irresistible.

“She’s here in Florence—but she’s in rehab.” He watched my gaze and studied my reaction.

It was hard to stay stoic when the information was so surprising. “Oh...I’m sorry.” I’d never dealt with addiction or knew anyone with a problem. But I saw Maverick drink like he could easily be addicted himself.

“She and my mother were really close. It wasn’t just her death that devastated her. It was also how she died...it really disturbed my sister. She quickly slid into drinking. When she developed a tolerance for that, she moved on to something stronger...and just slipped away. My father made it worse and pushed her to her breaking point. To this day, he’s never visited her in rehab. He’s never even talked to her about it... just disowned her. Apparently, it’s too hard to pick up the

phone and check on your own fucking daughter.” Bitterness exploded out of his mouth like a burst of flame. “So, now it’s just the two of us...and I have to be what she needs.”

He seemed to take care of everyone around him, including me. But who took care of him? “She’s lucky to have you.”

“I’m all she’s got.” He looked away again, his eyes filled with sad thoughts. “This is why I prefer fucking instead of talking. Nothing good ever comes from talking.” His eyes shifted back to mine, a little darker than before.

My hand slid to his arm, my fingertips gently sliding over the mounds of muscle. “That’s too bad...because I like talking to you.” I slid my body closer to his and hooked my leg over his hip, bringing our faces just inches apart. My hand slid into the hair at the back of his neck, and my fingers caressed the soft strands. The instant I started to touch him this way, he relaxed a bit. It seemed to be his favorite spot, his weakness.

His eyes stayed on mine, a little less hostile than before. His hand rested on my thigh and slowly slid up to my ass, his large fingers warm to the touch. When he reached my thong, he gently tugged on the lace, like he wanted to pull it off.

When I came to his bedroom, sex wasn’t the biggest issue on my mind. When he had been seriously injured, we lay in bed and watched movies all day, forced to cuddle and talk. That’s what I wanted the most from him, to have that kind of relationship. After I’d pissed him off, it disappeared. Slowly, it began to rebuild, his anger fading away.

I wanted to look in those beautiful eyes forever, but the comfort started to soften me, started to make me slip away. My eyes closed and my fingers halted in his hair, locked around the strands I loved to play with. This house was an impenetrable fortress, but I never felt as safe as I did when I was by his side.

It only took me a minute to drift off to that moment between consciousness and sleep. I was on the edge, about to tip over and fall into the abyss. That was when I felt Maverick’s movements. He pulled the sheets down and over my body, spreading them on top of me and tucking me in.

Then I heard the click of the bedside lamp as he turned off the light. His body returned to mine, and he lay in the same position as before, tugging my leg over his hip.

Then he let me sleep.

MAVERICK

I PULLED THROUGH THE OPEN GATES AND APPROACHED THE two-story castle. Just like my estate, my father's place was situated in the countryside, still living in the same home he'd shared with my mother.

Sometimes I worried it was poisoning his mind. Her ghost haunted the hallways. Her presence in the walls and furniture constantly reminded him of what he'd lost. He turned his injured mind into a madhouse.

Just as I stepped out of the car, he strode out the house. Summer was over, and fall was subtly rolling in. A night like this would still have been filled with heat just a month ago, but now it had touches of coolness. He wore a black jacket over his collared shirt, his dark hair matching his mood.

I walked toward him, my gun stuffed into the back of my jeans. It was loaded and ready to fire. All I had to do was click off the safety. I'd never thought I needed protection around my father, but now I saw him as a serious threat. He'd nearly killed me at the house—and he would have killed my wife if I hadn't stopped him.

He stopped in front of me, several feet in between us since this was a hostile meeting. The outdoor lights provided enough illumination so I could see the sour look on his face—and I was sure he could see mine. He was probably packing under that jacket. Why else would he be wearing it?

He was the one who had called this meeting, so I stood silently as I waited for him to speak first. Maybe this was all a

ploy to kill me, to take a cheap shot under the flag of truce. If he were anyone else, I would eliminate him immediately. It was always a bad idea to let a threat go unchecked. But our shared blood made me soft, made me hope for a more optimistic resolution.

He stared at me with the same hatred, like he was ashamed I carried the DeVille surname. With beady black eyes that blended in with the night, he watched me without blinking. “Have you put her down yet?”

His men kept tabs on Arwen and me, so he already knew the answer to his question. He was just trying to make a point. “Arwen is different from us. She saw two innocent women who needed to be rescued—so she rescued them. I know that thwarted your plans, but it wasn’t personal.”

His eyes narrowed. “You aren’t a teenager anymore, Maverick. Why are you still so weak for pussy?”

I stood my ground and didn’t react, even though it was such a crass thing for a father to say to a son. “You’re the one who made me marry her. All of this happened because of you. You brought a stranger into the family. If you hadn’t done that, then she wouldn’t have let the girls go. Cause and effect.”

He took a step closer to me. “It was necessary.”

“We would have found Ramon on our own—eventually.”

“If she’s such a burden, then put a bullet in her damn head. Be done with it.” His hands hung at his sides, and they both tightened into fists. “All she had to do was keep her head down and shut her mouth, and she would have had a nice life. She’s lucky to wear such a respected surname as DeVille. But if she doesn’t understand loyalty, she doesn’t deserve it. Put her in the ground.”

Her father was long gone, and she did betray my family when she snuck around behind my back. She hijacked our plans and took matters into her own hands. If one of our men did the same, they would be executed. We had every right to dispose of her, to give her the ultimate punishment. I’d be a bachelor once more, having that house to myself without a

wife to protect. She was a woman who easily attracted the obsession of men, so I had to chase them away with my frightening growls and sharp teeth. Not to mention, I had a seven-foot mutant to worry about now. Killing her was the pragmatic choice. It was a choice I was justified to make.

“Maverick.” My father lowered his voice, turning lethal. “Kill her.”

I could go home right now and put a bullet in her head. I could stand over her bed while she was sound asleep. She wouldn't even know what happened because it would be over so quickly.

He took another step closer to me. “Did you hear me?”

It was dead silent in the middle of the night. Of course I heard him.

“She doesn't deserve your protection, Maverick. She's a two-timing whore. She deserves to die a whore's death.”

My eyes narrowed on his face, unnerved by the insult she didn't deserve.

“Kill her. Or I'll kill you.” Now, we were close together, our eyes locked and full of menace. “Put that bitch in the ground, or I'll do it myself. And then I'll throw you in with her.”

My father had threatened to kill me several times now, and each one was more painful than the last. Without my mother on this earth, I was easily expendable. There was no love in his gaze, no affection in his heart. At least Arwen remembered my birthday. At least Arwen asked how my day was. At least she was there for me when this demon never was. “I choose her.”

The rage that took over his face was indescribable. Two explosions happened in his eyes, and his eyebrows furrowed as if he couldn't believe what I'd just said. Like a billowing cloud about to drop a storm, his eyes grew darker and darker.

“Goodbye, Caspian.” I turned my back to him, knowing there was a serious chance he would draw on me and put a bullet in my back. But if my father really did such a thing, I

wouldn't have much motivation to live anyway. I'd lost my mother, my sister was in rehab, and my father disowned me. I had no one.

There was only one family member left, one person who shared my name.

My wife.

I WORKED around the clock for the next few days. As long as I stayed busy, I didn't think about the threat Caspian had unleashed. He wanted to murder my wife and toss my body in with hers. I wasn't afraid of death because I saw it as merciful. When the human body collapsed under intense pain, opting out was the best gift that could be given.

But it disturbed me that my own father wanted to murder me.

If my mother were still alive, she'd beat the shit out of him.

I finished dinner with a client in the city, one of my big vendors that operated restaurants throughout the country. We talked numbers and increasing production to meet those demands, and then we parted ways.

I walked to my car in the darkness, thinking about the business I'd just grabbed. When my family business had existed in the underworld, our lives had revolved around money, drugs, and territory. The cheese business took a back seat. But now it was my only priority since I had become a law-abiding citizen. It was a much more relaxing livelihood.

But I couldn't enjoy it because I had two psychopaths for enemies.

I turned the corner and was approaching my Bugatti when my phone rang in my pocket. I glanced at the screen and saw Arwen's name. I got into the car, started the engine, and then took the call through the car. "Yes?"

“We haven’t spoken in three days, and that’s how you greet me?”

I turned the car around and sped through the streets, driving like an asshole because I was an asshole. The corner of my mouth rose in a smile at her attitude, noting the way she told me off when others were too scared to do the same. “It’s been a long day.”

“I doubt it.”

With one hand on the wheel, I tried to focus on the road instead of picturing her beautiful face. She was probably at home in her bedroom, wondering when I would be back. “Is there something you needed?”

“Do I have to need something to talk to you?”

I wasn’t used to this kind of relationship, where I had someone I spoke to on a daily basis. We didn’t discuss business or crime. We didn’t discuss anything in particular, just as I would with a friend. She became someone in my inner circle, someone like Kent. But I also fucked her...which was interesting. “Most people want something from me.”

“Well, I want to talk to you. I guess that’s something.”

My eyes stayed on the road, but my mind was focused on the sound of her voice. Even when she wasn’t singing, the tone of her words was heavenly. If I didn’t know she was a singer, I would have guessed it just by listening to her talk. It was soothing to my ears, calming my irritated nerves and dropping my blood pressure. Having an affectionate wife should irritate me, but I appreciated her concern...considering my own father didn’t give a damn about me. “And what do you want to talk about?”

“How about we start with your day?”

My mother used to ask me that when I came home from school. She even asked me that when she called me as an adult. Even though it was undeniable that I had aged into a grizzled man, she still talked to me as if I’d just walked in the door from school. It used to annoy me, but now I missed it. “I just finished dinner with a client. He wants to place a big

order, but since the production process is so finite, it's complicated. We found a solution to the problem."

"That sounds fun. Talking about cheese over dinner isn't a bad way to make a living."

And being the wife of a rich man wasn't a bad way to make a living either.

"What are you doing now?"

"Driving home."

"Alone?" There was a slight hesitation in her voice, as if she feared there was a woman sitting in the passenger seat at that very moment.

"Yes. Too tired to hit the bars."

"It doesn't seem like you've been home much for the last few days. What have you been up to?"

"Why does this feel like an interrogation?"

"It's not. Like it or not, you're my closest friend, Maverick."

I'd noticed the way she'd become closer to me, coming into my room to talk rather than screw. She texted me more often than she used to, telling me about her day when I didn't ask. "I've been working a lot."

"A lot is an understatement."

"Alright...I've been working nonstop."

"It seems like you're avoiding me..."

She hit the nail right on the head. "Because I am."

"Why is that?"

I didn't want to have this conversation on the phone while I was speeding through the countryside in my expensive car. "I'll be home in fifteen minutes. We'll talk then."

I GREETED Abigail then headed up the stairs.

Arwen was on the second landing waiting for me. She was in silk pajama shorts that barely covered her ass and a white tank top that was so thin, it showed the outline of her nipples. Her skimpy clothes showcased the curves of her frame, the feminine beauty of her gorgeous body.

I almost forgot why she was waiting for me.

I walked past her and kept going, pretending to be unimpressed.

She came up behind me and followed me into my bedroom.

When I got inside, I immediately started to take off my slacks and collared shirt. She'd seen me naked so many times that I felt comfortable stripping like she wasn't there at all. When the buttons were undone, I peeled off the shirt and tossed it onto the armchair.

Her shiny hair was pulled into a high ponytail, and her makeup had already been washed off for the night. Her fair skin had a natural glow to it, like the moon as it reflected the light from the sun. Her blue eyes watched my movements, dissecting everything I did like she knew me better than anyone. "So?"

"So." I dropped my pants and stripped down to my boxers.

She moved into me, coming so close she might kiss me. Her perfume was still fragrant, and she smelled like flowers, roses on a summer day. She was nearly a foot shorter than me in heels, so she moved her face into my chest.

I watched her, unsure what she was doing.

Her arms encircled my waist, and she rested her cheek against my chest, hugging me.

I stood there as she blanketed me with affection, ignoring the fact that I'd just told her I'd been avoiding her. The insult didn't seem to offend her, not if she still wanted to hold me. With my arms by my sides, I continued to stand there and wait for her to finish.

When I didn't return her affection, she pulled away. "You won't even hug your wife when you get home?"

"I didn't realize we had the type of relationship that included hugging."

She crossed her arms over her chest, her eyebrow raised. "You can't accept a compliment just the way you can't accept affection. Your father really did a number on you..."

I'd never considered my behavior to be a reflection of my relationship with my father—but I knew she was right. During my final conversation with him, he threatened to kill me...and it wasn't the first time that had ever happened.

"Why are you avoiding me?" Once I'd rejected her, she turned cold, getting right to the point.

Sometimes I resented her because of my growing attraction. Instead of getting sick of her like most women, I desired her more. And when she wore that tiny little outfit, it made me hard in my boxers, and since the material wasn't thick, she could see it if she looked down. The more I allowed her into my life, the more I hated it. "I saw my father a couple of nights ago."

"Oh...that must have been fun."

"Yeah...that's one way to describe it."

She shifted her weight to one hip, waiting for me to explain further.

"He told me to kill you." He'd made his desires transparent. If I wanted to keep my relationship with my dad, I had to show him my loyalty. That meant I had to execute her...as if she were one of our men who crossed us. He didn't seem to understand right from wrong, or the difference between man and woman. He wanted her to face the same consequences as someone else...but that wouldn't be right.

Her eyes shifted back and forth as she looked at me, clearly unnerved by my confession.

"I said no."

She tried to keep her face stoic, but her shoulders relaxed as she released the air from her lungs.

“Now, we’re enemies. This will only end one way—when one of us is dead.”

She shook her head slightly, her eyes filled with pain. “He’s so far gone...”

He wasn’t a man I recognized at all.

She stepped toward me again. “Why did you say no?”

Killing her would have been easier. She knew that. I didn’t have a good explanation. Why would any man choose a woman over his father? I wasn’t a man with a moral compass. I would have let those women be raped and tortured in the barn without losing sleep. But I chose to protect this woman. “I made a promise to your father.”

She raised an eyebrow. “But that promise changed when I crossed you...I know that now.”

“Do you want me to kill you?” I asked incredulously.

“No. But we both know that isn’t the reason.” She stepped closer to me, moving in on me just the way my father did a few nights ago. “So, what is the reason? The real reason?” Her arms dropped to her sides, and she looked up at me with those beautiful eyes.

I held her gaze and didn’t blink. “Those women didn’t deserve to suffer. You made the right call—even though you betrayed me to do it.”

“That didn’t answer my question, Maverick.” She hardly blinked as she stared at me, pressing for an answer she wanted to hear. “You’ve declared war with your father because of me. Why is my life that important?”

She’d phrased the question powerfully, giving me no wiggle room. I held her gaze with a hard dick between my legs, susceptible to the attitude in her voice, the fire in her eyes. “If I didn’t declare war with him now, it would just happen later. Like you said, he’s too far gone. It doesn’t matter whether I make a stand now or later...but I choose now.”

“And it has nothing to do with the way you feel about me?” She circled closer, not giving up. Now her face was close to mine, close enough that I could see every detail of her beautiful features. “Because I’ve come to care for you, Maverick. I think you care about me too.”

I became her husband because I’d been forced. It was a role I’d never wanted, but I fell into it easily because she needed me so much. She needed me to guide her during our first dance as husband and wife. She needed me to take care of her father when she couldn’t afford his medical bills. She needed me to hold her hand when he died. She needed me for everything—and I was there for her. It started as an obligation but quickly became a way of life. Now I was used to taking care of her, used to checking on her. And I was used to having someone care about me too. “I don’t want you to die...”

Her hands moved to my arms, her fingertips lightly pressing into my skin. She closed the gap between us and rose onto her tiptoes so we could be eye to eye. Then she closed her eyes and rested her face against mine.

We stood there together, neither one of us saying a word.

My eyes closed and I relished the feeling of her cheek on mine, feeling whatever pull existed between us. This woman was barely my friend and barely my lover, but she somehow meant something to me. I was a heartless man who preferred the easy way out, but this time, I chose the hard way. I chose to protect my sheep.

Her lips moved to mine, landing on my mouth perfectly. The kiss was subtle, gentle. Her lips felt mine, waiting for me to reciprocate before she kissed me any harder. When my lips didn’t move, she pulled back and looked me in the eye.

“I do care about you, Sheep...”

ARWEN

MAVERICK'S WEIGHT PRESSED ME INTO THE MATTRESS. HE covered me completely, holding up his body on his powerful arms as his hips thrust to move inside me. Covered in sweat from the exertion and with a sexy look in his eyes, he was the ideal man to be on top of a woman. He rocked his body over and over, his length burrowing inside me until his balls tapped lightly against my ass. The sex was slow, our bodies moving together at an unremarkable speed.

But the sex was so good. My toes were cramping over and over, and my nipples were sore because they'd been hard for so long. My knees were wide apart, giving him plenty of access to move between my thighs and enjoy me.

For the second time, I came. I whimpered against his mouth, my eyes stinging with tears once more. They burned as they built up then streaked down my cheeks to my lips. I'd never been a crier in bed, but this man brought me to tears every single time. It was always so good that it was heavenly, like I should be thanking someone upstairs.

The condom separated us, but I could still feel the hard grooves of his dick, especially the large crown at the top. Sometimes I wished we were just skin-to-skin, but I knew the request wasn't optional. So, I enjoyed it as-is...because it was still so good.

Maverick wore the sexiest look in bed, focused on the woman he was with, while keeping his fit body in motion. He seemed more aroused by the expressions I made than the way

my tits shook back and forth. Sometimes he would moan, but for the most part, he was a quiet lover, choosing to listen to me instead of being vocal himself.

But when he came, it was always so sexy.

His jaw clenched, almost as if he were angry about something. Then his eyes smoldered, treasuring the pleasure in his body before he exploded between my legs. His chest puffed up as he took in a deep breath to hold. Then he shuddered as his body took over, as his hips bucked to get his dick deeper inside me while he finished. His forehead rested against mine, and he moaned as he came, a little louder than usual.

My fingers snaked into his hair, and I caressed the strands as I felt him relax. My husband was the best lover I'd ever had, and watching him find the same satisfaction turned me on. I wanted him to feel as good as I did, to love fucking me as much as I loved fucking him.

After a few more seconds of rest, he rolled off me and cleaned off in the bathroom.

I lay in his big, comfortable bed, ready to fall asleep.

He came back minutes later, naked and beautiful. He got into bed beside me but didn't cuddle with me. He'd only done that once and hadn't done it again since. Now that the sex was over, he was distant. He seemed to be doing it on purpose, as if forcing himself to draw an invisible boundary in our relationship. Sometimes he let me get closer to him, but if I got too close, he pulled away.

I opened my eyes and looked at him, spotting the coldness in his eyes. Our tender moment was long gone. To him, it had already been forgotten. "Maverick?" I propped myself up, my head resting against my palm.

He stared at the ceiling, one hand behind his head while the other rested on his chest. "Yes?"

"Has there ever been a serious woman in your life?"

The air around him turned noticeably tenser, like he had sucked all the life and joy from the room. "I don't ask you

about your past, so why ask about mine?”

“That’s what friends do.” He immediately turned into the spitting image of his father, but I didn’t have the heart to tell him something so insulting—even if it was true. “I’ve had a few men in my life, but nothing too serious. I’ve loved boys in the past, but when I look back on them, I realize that wasn’t love. It was just... I don’t know.”

“I didn’t ask.”

“Maverick, come on.”

He turned his head toward me, his eyes cold.

“It’s three steps forward and two steps back. Every time.”

He knew exactly what I meant, so he faced the ceiling again.

“Stop pretending you don’t care about me. Stop pretending our relationship doesn’t make you happy.”

He clenched his jaw but didn’t make a rebuttal. “No, I’ve never been in love.”

“Ever had a girlfriend?”

He was quiet for a long time. “No.”

“So, when you lost your virginity, that was a one-night stand too?” I asked incredulously, assuming he had to have had some meaningful relationship in his life.

“That was just a fuck in the back seat of a car. You’re the closest thing I’ve ever had to a relationship.”

“So, only when you were forced to get married did you actually try to get to know someone?”

He shrugged. “I’m not much of a talker. I’m an even worse listener.”

“I don’t think that’s true...”

He kept his eyes on the ceiling.

“Why are you like that?”

“Why is anyone the way they are?” he asked. “No one really knows.”

“Well, why don’t you want a relationship with a woman?”

“I don’t like anyone,” he blurted. “That’s just how I am. I’m not a big people person. Being in a relationship requires talking and dates... I can barely get out a few sentences all day. And I can barely listen to a woman speak for five minutes without losing my libido. So, I strike fast. Get what I need, then get out.”

“So, it has nothing to do with sowing your oats?”

He shrugged. “I guess not. What did you see in Dante?”

“He was handsome, kind...and he was good to me.” I hadn’t thought about him in a while. He was probably happy with the woman he’d replaced me with. He’d probably pitied me in the beginning, but now I was just a distant memory.

“He wasn’t that good...if you ask me.”

“It just wasn’t meant to be. I don’t blame him for walking away.”

“I do. Coward.”

I dropped my hand and returned my body to the bed, my hair stretching across the pillow. “Before all of this happened, he used to talk about us getting married and having two kids. But everything changed the second I put on this ring.”

He didn’t say anything to that.

Since he was in a dark mood, I stopped talking. His attitude could change within a few heartbeats. Now he was brooding in his silence, thinking about something he would never share with me.

“I’m sorry about your father... I know it must be hard.”

Slowly, he turned his head back to me.

“Even if he is wrong, even if he is an ass, he’s still your father...and I’m sorry.” I wasn’t entirely to blame for the divide. His father had turned into an asshole a long time ago. I was the only one who’d stood up to him, who’d done the right

thing when even Maverick didn't care, but I didn't want to see my husband suffer.

“Whatever.”

I knew it hurt him more than that, but he obviously didn't want to talk about it. “Maybe you should tell your sister what's going on.”

“Like she doesn't have enough on her plate already.”

“It's still good to tell her...in case he contacts her. I was also hoping I could meet her.”

He kept watching me, slightly surprised by what I'd just offered. “Why would you want to do that?”

“She's my sister-in-law, right?”

“Because of a sham marriage.”

Like a drop of acid in my eyes, the comment burned. “Still...until death do us part. If she's important to you, she's important to me.”

He faced forward again, his eyes on the ceiling. He turned contemplative, his mind a million miles away. Even though there was only a foot between us on the bed, it seemed like we were on different planets. “I'll think about it.”

TODAY HAD BEEN a lot harder than I expected.

I'd been dreading it all week, but I didn't think it would be as painful as I feared.

Somehow, it was.

I drove to a flower shop in the city and stared blankly at the selections, unsure what to get. Knowing my father, it wouldn't matter. He would tell me not to waste money on something he would never see.

But it made all the difference in the world to me.

On the verge of tears and unable to make a decision between the selections, I just grabbed a bouquet at random and paid for it. By the time I made it to my car, my tears had destroyed my flawless makeup.

Was I an idiot to think I could do this alone?

I hadn't been to my father's grave since the funeral, and of course, Maverick had been with me. With his hand holding mine and strength in his touch, he'd carried me through that day because I was too weak to do it myself.

Now I realized I couldn't do this without him.

I needed him like I needed air.

I stemmed my tears and made the call, the phone pressed to my ear as I watched people walk up and down the sidewalk. It was a sunny day and the temperature was mild. The phone rang as I waited for him to answer.

When it seemed like voice mail was about to pick up, he answered. "What is it?" Fiery and pissed off, he sounded like his day wasn't going well. Men spoke in the background, running their mouths as they argued about something.

"Uh...everything okay?"

"Arwen, I've got shit to do, and I don't have time for a heartfelt conversation. Call me when you actually need something."

Shocked by the cold way he spoke to me, I was nearly speechless. Tears were in my eyes once again, and the shock constricted my throat. It was difficult to get any words out, so I was only able to say one. "Okay..."

He hung up.

I set the phone in the center console and felt the tears burn my eyes. Drops of sorrow ran down my cheeks, and I felt stupid for calling him. Maybe I could never trust Maverick to be the same person every single day. He changed too much, flipped a switch without notice. I wiped my tears away and got on the road, my chest tight because of the pain.

My phone started to ring. His name was on the screen.

I was in full sobbing mode, so I ignored it, wanting nothing to do with him. I was an idiot for thinking I could call and ask him for support. I'd become used to his kindness, but I'd forgotten how quickly it evaporated.

He called again.

I ignored it.

I was just a few miles from the cemetery when he called for the third time. He'd ended our conversation so abruptly that I didn't understand why he wanted to talk to me so much now. Did he realize he was an ass the second he hung up on me?

I got tired of listening to the phone ring through the car system, so I answered. "What?" I kept my voice strong and disguised my tears as best as possible, but I was still heartbroken that the one person I relied on was so cold to me. I shouldn't have allowed myself to count on him in the first place.

There was a long pause. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing..." This time, I could hear silence in the background, as if he'd excused himself from whatever business he was doing to give me more than a few seconds of his time. Hot tears rolled down my face and slowly approached my lips, full of my heartbreak. Now I wasn't sure what I was more miserable about—the date or my husband.

"Your GPS shows you leaving Florence but going in the opposite direction of the house. Where are you going?"

I didn't care to answer him. "I know you're busy, Maverick. I'll just talk to you later." Now I couldn't disguise my tears, and they escaped in my voice, carrying my devastation on my vocal cords.

"Sheep." He stopped me from hanging up on him with just his voice. "I'm sorry I was an ass, alright? I've just got a lot on my plate right now."

"That's fine. I'll let you go—"

"Don't you fucking hang up on me."

I drove farther into the countryside, the flowers in the passenger seat.

“Talk to me, Sheep. What’s going on?”

“It’s my father’s birthday... I was going to the cemetery to visit. I thought maybe...never mind. I know you have more important things to do, so I’ll talk to you later.” Before he could yell at me through the speakers, I hung up.

I kept driving and didn’t hear the phone ring.

The fight was over.

When I approached the gates, he called me again.

If he called me just to scream at me for hanging up on him, I’d crash this nice car into a tree just to piss him off. “What?”

He took a long pause. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes, alright?”

That wasn’t what I expected him to say. “You don’t have to ___”

“I want to.”

“Maverick, it sounds like you’re busy. I’m sure you have things to do.”

“You’re more important. You’re always more important... and I’m sorry I didn’t make that clear.”

WHEN HE ARRIVED fifteen minutes later, I got out of my car with my flowers in hand. I’d cleaned up my makeup as best as I could in the car, but the puffiness of my eyes couldn’t be hidden. The mascara had dissolved into my skin and gave it a blue tint that made me look particularly pale. That morning, I’d thought my makeup and hair had turned out perfect...but now I looked like a train wreck.

Maverick looked exactly the same as usual, masculine, fit, and strong. With his brown eyes glued to my face, he walked toward me, dressed in a black t-shirt with matching jeans. His

shiny watch was on his wrist, and his jeans fit his muscular legs perfectly. Apology was in his gaze, like he knew he'd fucked up.

I was embarrassed that I'd called him in the first place, that I'd allowed a man to understand how much I needed him. If it were anyone else, I would keep my pride and never shed a tear. When Dante dumped me, I didn't have a reaction. Even when Dante was mine, I never asked him for anything. He came to the hospital to comfort me, but he did that entirely on his own. I was a proud woman who refused to admit any kind of weakness. But since the beginning, it'd been different with Maverick. I relied on him like a wife relied on her husband.

He came to my side, and his arm immediately wrapped around my waist. He took the flowers from my hand and pulled me in for a gentle kiss on the lips. It was the first time he'd greeted me like I actually meant something to him, the first time he'd held me like his wife under the sun.

He pulled away then guided me to my father's resting place.

He placed the flowers on the grave, directly under my father's name. Then he came to my side and wrapped his arm around my waist once more, becoming my rock the way he was last time. He squeezed me into his side and stayed quiet, not re-opening the conversation we'd had in the car.

I stared at my father's name and felt new tears emerge. "He was only fifty-seven..." He'd died so young, far too soon. Maybe if he'd seen a doctor sooner, things would have been different. Maybe he wanted it to be this way because he knew he didn't have any other options. My hand covered my mouth to stifle my tears when they became too much. I'd already grieved at his funeral and in the weeks afterward. Now, it started all over again, like a scab that had been picked at until it bled. "He would be fifty-eight today."

Maverick's hand squeezed my waist, holding me close to him as the tears streamed down my cheeks. He kept his silence, letting me cry and express my pain.

My mother's name was next to my father's, and sometimes I couldn't believe that she'd been gone for so long. Five years came and went. I hoped they were together in heaven, their spirits playing in the clouds.

I stood there for thirty minutes, and not once did Maverick say a word or drop his comfort. He was there for me just the way he was before. If he had somewhere to be, he didn't admit it. It seemed like he had all day to stand there beside me.

When my tears finally ran dry and my heart was stitched back together, I turned away. "I'm ready to go..." I turned my back on the grave and walked to the black car, wondering how my father would feel about Maverick if he were still alive. When Caspian wanted to kill me, Maverick stayed on my side. It was something I had to remember on his bad days, that he was a good man underneath that hostility.

He walked me to my car door. "You want to get something to eat? Something to get your mind thinking about something else?"

I didn't have an appetite at all. The only thing I wanted to do was go home and press my fingers to the keys of the piano. Music got me through my darkest times. "No. I think I'm just going to go home." I opened the door.

He closed it. "I'm here. Use me." He placed his body in front of the door so I couldn't open it again. He forced me to back up, to move to the rear of the car. We were the only visitors to the cemetery, so we could have any conversation we wanted. Not even the dead could hear us. "I'm sorry I was an ass to you before. If I'd known you needed me, I wouldn't have talked to you that way."

"How about you just stop talking that way anyway? Sounds like a good rule of thumb." The criticism flew out of my mouth quickly, my suppressed rage taking the reins.

He obviously pitied me when he didn't fire back. "I'll work on it..."

I was frustrated about my life, disappointed this was where I'd ended up. Both of my parents were gone, and I was

married to a man who would never be more than my friend and occasional lover. My life felt stale.

He studied me, one hand resting on top of the car. “If it makes any difference, I really do feel like shit. I hate watching you cry...”

“You told me you liked it.”

“In a very different context.” He lowered his hand, his eyes still focused on me. “I wouldn’t have picked you over my father if I didn’t care about you. Hearing your tears through the phone was like glass scraping against a chalkboard.”

“If that’s the case, stop flipping back and forth. Stop being kind to me one minute and then cold the next.”

“Sorry...it’s just how I am.”

“Well, that’s not how you should be with me. You can trust me and I can trust you. We’re all each other has now...”

That seemed to mean something to him because his eyes softened. He went from being a brooding man to being a kind soul. “I’ve never been married before...I’m not sure how this works.”

“If you aren’t going to kill me, then this is a lifetime commitment. That means we need to be good to each other, every single day. We need to be there for each other. We need to trust each other. Stop keeping me at a distance, and let me in. I’m the most reliable person in your life right now.”

He fit in with the Tuscan countryside behind him, a beautiful Italian man with great appreciation for the soil, the trees, and the gorgeous landscape that surrounded us every day. He drank wine like water, he perfected cheese for a living, and he knew how to make love like a man passionately in love. “I’m not good at letting people in. I don’t think I’ll ever be good at it.”

“Why not?”

He turned his gaze and surveyed the fields around us, Florence in the distance. “I’ve lost my mother...my sister... and now my father. I’ve had my heart broken too many times.”

“But you haven’t lost your sister and your father.”

“My sister is a completely different person now. Our relationship isn’t the same. Memories that I have with my family will need to be locked in a vault because I’ll never make new ones. My mother was the nucleus that held us all together, and the second she was gone, we all broke apart. I don’t need to explain that my father is different too...that I’m not a son to him. Even the tightest relationships fall apart. Friends say they’ll be close forever, and then life gets in the way...and they don’t speak for years. Nothing ever stays the same, nothing is ever concrete. The people you love are the ones you lose.” It was the longest monologue he’d ever given me, an open window into the clouded thoughts in his mind. He displayed his vulnerability and finally spoke his mind freely, showing me his old wounds and how painful they still were.

I understood his pain because I’d lost both of my parents, but he had a different kind of pain that I’d never had to carry. When my mother was gone, my father was still there. But every member of his family quickly disappeared, like they’d never been there at all. He couldn’t take a compliment because he hardly ever received them, and he couldn’t accept love because he hadn’t gotten that either. His mother’s death had traumatized him in so many ways. Now he was afraid to let me in, let anyone in, because it seemed pointless. “I’m not going anywhere, Maverick.”

He didn’t blink as he looked at me. “Doesn’t matter. My father and sister haven’t gone anywhere...but they aren’t the same.”

MAVERICK

IT WAS AN UNUSUALLY COOL EVENING, SO I STARTED A FIRE.

The flames leaped to life in the hearth and filled my bedroom with enough warmth to push the cold air through the cracks in the windows. With a glass of scotch in my hand, I took a drink as I sat up in bed, watching the flames dance.

The second I yelled at Arwen on the phone, I'd felt like shit.

Especially when I heard the tears.

I wasn't sympathetic or compassionate, but something about her pain tore me up inside. I couldn't stand it. When she sang or spoke, it was the most beautiful sound. But her tears were another story.

Work had been a nightmare because we'd increased production and made errors in the process. As a result, we lost an entire batch of product and wasted the entire day. My temperature was running hot, and she called at the wrong time.

I guess I should have controlled my anger better.

I'd never been good at that sort of thing.

A knock sounded on my bedroom door. My hand returned the glass to the nightstand, and I stared at the door, knowing Abigail wasn't the one on the other side. Arwen hadn't texted me, but she was more comfortable stopping by my bedroom when she assumed I didn't have company. "Come in."

She opened the door and came inside, in her sleep shorts with messy hair. She continued to grip the handle as she lingered in the doorway. Even though her eyes were on the bed, she didn't immediately dive for it.

I was in my boxers as I sat on the mattress, getting ready for bed even though I wasn't tired. Now that she'd walked in the door, wearing shorts that let her ass hang out, I was even less tired. But after the day we'd had, I suspected she wasn't in the mood for sex. And after being such an ass, I would be wrong to demand it.

She continued to stand at the door, like she was afraid to ask for what she wanted.

I grabbed the sheets beside me and pushed them down, inviting her to sleep.

She shut the door then crawled into my bed. Her sexy legs disappeared under the cotton sheets, and she pulled the hair tie out of her ponytail so the strands would come free across the pillow. Her eyes were still puffy from all the crying she'd done that afternoon. No amount of makeup could cover it.

I slid down under the sheets then turned off the lamp at my bedside. When the room was blanketed in darkness, the flames illuminated the walls. The gentle crackle and pop of the fire filled the silence.

She looked at the flames before she looked at me again. "Can I sleep with you tonight?"

My wife needed me, and I'd be a dick if I kicked her out. "Yeah."

She stuck to her side of the bed and didn't try to cuddle with me.

I didn't care to show affection to a woman. There was only kissing and touching before sex. Then there was just fucking. After the fun part was over, there was no reason to share another embrace. She stuck to her side of the bed, and I stuck to mine.

But I knew that wasn't what she wanted.

What she needed.

I scooted closer to her and wrapped my arm around her waist, bringing us close together under the sheets. The curve of her back was so prominent that it was easy to slide my arm into place, easy to drag her closer into me.

Her eyes opened and she visibly melted, like affection was all she needed. She rested her head against mine with her hand on my chest. Her eyes closed again, and she breathed a happy sigh, like she this was all the medicine she needed to heal.

My fingers moved into her hair, and I gently pulled the strands away from her face, showing her almond-shaped eyes and those full lips. I'd never been with a woman more than a couple of times, and I'd never slept with a woman without actually fucking her. But Arwen was a very rare exception.

She was the only woman who could get my attention and keep it.

She was the only woman who could call and ask for anything.

She was the only woman I would choose over my father.

Because she was my wife.

She carried my name and my ring, identifying herself as my property everywhere she went. It increased my social standing and gave me a sense of pride. I was heartless and idiotic at times, but I knew I had a trophy on my hands.

A priceless heirloom.

"Thank you for coming today," she whispered into the darkness, her voice barely louder than the sound of the flames.

"I'll always be there for you, Sheep." Now that I'd turned my back on my father, I really had to keep her safe. She had two enemies lurking in the darkness, two monsters that blended in with the shadows. I had to stay on guard and keep watching, protect my little sheep from being eaten.

Protect my little wife.

“You’re all I have in this world...and I’m so glad my father made me marry you.”

She’d despised me when we met. I could see it in her eyes, not just hear it in her words. She was the most combative woman I’d ever known, sparking an attitude from gasoline and flames. She had the fierceness that would make her a good crime lord of the underworld. Now she was singing a much different tune...turning a new key. She’d softened like a rose petal as it fell off the bud. She was delicate without her roots, vulnerable to the world around her. But she let me take care of her...needed me to take care of her. It made my dick hard to listen to her openly need me, to admit I was the only man she could rely on. It didn’t just inflate my ego. It made me feel valuable.

“I didn’t know what I wanted in a husband...until I met you.”

“I DIDN’T REALIZE how much you liked to socialize.” She rose out of the car and took my hand for balance. She was in a skintight dark blue dress with a mermaid cut. A diamond necklace hung around her throat, complementing the wedding ring on her left hand.

“Can’t stand it.” I tossed the keys to the valet then circled my arm around her waist. “But that’s how the real world works. Money likes to talk to money.” I guided her up the steps and down the long path that led to the front of the house. It was already lit up inside, people chatting in the windows.

“Wow, this place is beautiful.”

“Once belonged to a count.”

“I bet there will be people here who knew my father... Is that a problem?”

“Why would it be?”

“Because he pissed away our family inheritance.”

I stopped before reached the next landing of stairs. “Couldn’t care less. You don’t weigh me down. People appreciate you because of your talent, not judge you because of your father’s stupidity. And don’t forget you’re a very wealthy woman now—as a DeVille.” I guided her up the stairs once more, helping her maneuver in her insane heels. Her hair was in curls and pinned to one side, and she’d done something special to her makeup to make her look particularly gorgeous. She would steal all the attention tonight.

She smiled slightly. “Well, that’s a good way to put it...”

We approached the entrance with my arm around her waist, a beautiful couple that looked happy to be together. I hated these social events, but she made them easier. She stole all the focus, so people didn’t want to talk to me nearly as much.

When we reached the entryway, she stared at the people mingling inside, all wearing beautiful gowns and fine suits. Everyone there was dressed in their finest, working to impress everyone else at the party.

But my wife was definitely the most impressive.

With her beautiful dark hair pinned to the side, her unblemished skin glowed like the bistro lights strung around the property. Her dress had a deep V in the front, showing off the cleavage of her perfect tits. The diamond glittered with rainbows, but it didn’t distract from the beautiful woman who wore it.

It was one of my favorite dresses I’d ever seen her wear because it highlighted every sexy curve she possessed, from her waist to her ample tits. Sometimes I wondered if she was aware of how beautiful she was, if she understood that she was the most gorgeous woman in every room she entered.

It didn’t seem like it.

We walked inside and were surrounded by conversations and music. A grand piano was in the corner, and a musician played light music that fit the ambiance of the party. There had

to be at least five hundred people there, holding glasses of wine and champagne while appetizers were passed around.

It was bigger than the last party we went to, so her eyes were wide. “Whoa...this is a lot of people.”

“And I only know about half of them.”

“You know half of them?” she asked incredulously. “How can you remember that many names?”

I shrugged. “When it comes to business, the brain is always a little sharper.” A waiter arrived with a tray, so I grabbed two glasses of champagne for us. “See that guy with the dark-rimmed glasses?”

She followed my gaze.

“That’s Dario Nardello, the mayor of Florence.” I nodded to the woman beside him. “That’s his wife, Maria.” With my hand on her waist, I guided Arwen farther into the room. “The blonde in the black dress is Nadia Contretti, a model known for her iconic images in Florence.” I could have kept naming people, but that would put her to sleep. “They are prominent figures but also acquaintances. Most of the night will just be small talk, bullshit.”

Her eyes stayed on Nadia. “Do you know her?”

“Yes. That’s how I know her name and what she does for a living.” I couldn’t block the sarcasm from my voice.

She gave me a look full of attitude. “You know that’s not what I was asking.”

I stared at her blankly, having no idea what she meant. “Speak your mind because I can’t read it.”

“Did you sleep with her?” She turned blunt.

My eyes gently shifted back and forth as I looked into her gaze, surprised she would ask such a question. She didn’t cross the line into my personal life and rarely expressed interest in it. “Because she’s a model, you assume I slept with her?”

“Am I wrong?” she challenged.

She had me backed into a corner. “No.”

She smiled slightly, as if in victory. “I figured.”

“A bit of an assumption.”

“You two have nothing in common in terms of business, so I doubt there was much talking going on.” Her voice was borderline condescending, as if she judged me for having an affair with a beautiful woman.

It was almost as if she were jealous. “Since when do you care who I sleep with?”

“I never said I cared.”

“Seems like you do.”

She stepped in close to me, looking up at me with eyes that matched the color of her dress. With her dark makeup, she looked more alluring than usual, so when she copped an attitude, it was somehow sexy. Now, she was so close, she could kiss me if she wanted to. And the closer she became, the more it seemed like her lips were about to touch mine. We hadn’t kissed in public unless it was for a show. But this one would be genuine.

She moved in until her lips lightly pressed against mine, soft like rose petals. She kissed me as she held on to my arm for balance. The embrace was unexpected. She told me she didn’t care who I slept with, but now she was kissing me like she wanted me to be hers.

It was ironic, considering Nadia wasn’t nearly as beautiful as Arwen was.

But I would never tell my wife that.

She pulled back, a slight smile on her lips, like she knew a secret she would never share.

“Maverick DeVille.” Franco Mancini approached us with his wife in tow. He was the owner of one of the most historic hotels in the city, a building that had been standing for hundreds of years. It’d been renovated but contained the same unique architecture that made it timeless. “Nice to see you, young man.” He shook my hand.

“You as well, Franco. How’s the hotel business?”

“No complaints,” he said with a smile. “And the cheese business?”

“I have no complaints either.” I smiled politely then introduced the woman beside me. “Franco, this is my wife, Arwen.” It was strange to say those words out loud, to introduce this woman as my wife. It started off as a ploy, but now it felt more real than ever. “Arwen, this is Franco Mancini. He owns the historic Le Sirense hotel here in Florence. And this is his wife, Carla.”

“Nice to meet you both.” She shook hands and allowed Franco to kiss her on the cheek. “I’ve seen your hotel, and it really is beautiful. Had lunch a couple of times.”

“Thank you,” Franco said. “It’s in a lovely spot.”

Carla smiled at both of us. “You two look really happy... definitely newlyweds.”

My arm returned around Arwen’s waist.

“Just like with cheese, you have great taste,” Franco said. “I’ve known you for a long time, Maverick, and I’ve never seen you so happy. That’s what happens when you fall in love... Same thing happened to me.” He looked at his own wife. “And you’ll be happy for a very long time.”

“PLEASE SING SOMETHING, MRS. DEVILLE.” Charles, the host of the party, practically begged my wife to serenade the room with her beautiful voice. “We would be so honored if you would sing us a song.”

Even though Arwen was certain of her capabilities, she always looked shy when someone asked her to perform. She turned to me and silently asked permission.

I didn’t want to let her go because she made this party more bearable, but I knew I couldn’t hog her forever. “Just one song.”

Charles took her by the wrist and pulled her away. “Thank you so much, Mrs. DeVille. I’ve seen you at the opera so many times...”

I stayed in the back with my glass of champagne, knowing people would swoop in for conversation any moment. We’d spent the evening talking to dozens of people, making small talk about the end of summer and work. Nadia didn’t come near me because she spotted me with my wife and steered clear.

I still didn’t know if Arwen was jealous or not.

Arwen sat at the piano with her chin tilted toward the keys. She avoided the gaze of everyone in the room as they stared at her and waited for her to play her song. She was used to attention, used to having an auditorium of people stare at her for hours, but these intimate gatherings softened her. Maybe it was because she played her own music instead of whatever the production provided for her. Perhaps it really was more intimate.

Her fingers stroked the keys, and the music filled the room. The tune was slightly quick, beautiful, and resonating, and she wove a vivid picture without singing a word. Then the words followed seconds later. “The kiss of a thorn, a painful sting. But the kiss of a petal, it becomes serene. Tough like hardwood and wise with rings. An ageless soul, too bitter to sing...” She captured the attention of every single person in the room. Even the waiters stopped serving because no one was interested in food or drink.

My eyes were focused on her, my dick hard in my slacks. The second her voice turned poetic, I was stripped down to my masculine basics, reduced to a man that wanted the most beautiful woman in the room. The songs she sang were much better than the ones given to her at the opera. Her words were always so profound, but also cryptic.

“Damn, that woman can sing.”

I stilled at the sound of his deep voice, recognizing it even though I’d only heard it a handful of times. With my glass in my hand, I slowly turned to the man who’d come to my side.

At nearly seven feet with a maniacal gleam in his eyes, he stared at my wife like he had the same thoughts I did.

My heart picked up its pace, my fingers crushing my glass a little too hard. My eyes focused on the white teeth that were visible in his carnal smile. He was almost unrecognizable in his suit since he always wore casual clothes to our meetings. I hadn't expected him to appear, but when it came to money, it didn't matter how it was earned.

He finally turned his gaze on me, his eyes gray like steel. "I understand why you aren't eager to sell her."

Her music continued to play in the background. "The rock beneath my feet, the crutch for my knees, he's held my hand so sweet, never asked me to say please..."

I didn't carry a weapon, and even if I had, it would destroy my reputation if I'd drawn it at a party like this. All I could do was hold his gaze and watch him grin with joy, enjoying the fact that I was clearly caught off guard.

Kamikaze held a glass of champagne like he was a refined man who deserved to be there. "I'll make you a deal—"

"If you think you can just take her from me, you're mistaken. Cross me, and you cross all of my men. You walk onto a battlefield and start a war. We both know that's not something you want." I kept my voice low so the surrounding crowd wouldn't hear me, but they seemed more absorbed in Arwen's singing anyway.

He smiled slightly, like this was all some kind of joke. "I'm not going to take her from you, Maverick. Come on, I thought we had more respect for each other than that."

His words meant nothing because I knew this was still a threat—just veiled.

"I'm willing to offer a fair market value price for her. I'm not trying to rip you off, Maverick."

Maybe it was just business to him, but it was incredibly insulting to me. "She's not for sale—"

“Forty million.” He took a drink of his champagne then wore a gloating smile.

Forty million was an astronomical amount for a human being. She wasn’t the Duchess of Cambridge or the Queen of England. My father wanted her dead, and now this psychopath wanted to buy her like a cow for good steak. “No.”

“Fifty.”

“No.”

“Sixty—”

“Not for fucking sale.” I stepped closer to him, ready to break his jaw right there in the middle of the room. “How many times do I have to say it? You’re gonna have to take her from me because I will never sell her.”

He chuckled. “Wow...that must be good pussy.”

He was clever to choose this party as the backdrop for our conversation—because I was paralyzed from doing anything.

“I’ll cut you a deal. Keep in mind, I don’t do this often. I’ll buy her from you for a fair price, sixty million—but I’ll give you a cut of the proceeds she earns through her lifetime. That’s million-dollar checks every year until she gives out.”

My jaw was so tight, it was liable to snap and break. The idea of Arwen being a slave to barbarians made me see so much red that I turned blind to all the other colors. All of this was happening because of her piece-of-shit father, and it made me lose all respect for his memory. I couldn’t even get myself to say no because I was too pissed.

Kamikaze could read the answer on my face. “I’ll take that as a no.”

“She’s not for sale. She’ll never be for sale. Move on to something else, Kamikaze. I won’t change my mind.”

“I sure hope you do. I’ve always liked you, Maverick. I would really hate for things to get ugly...” He pivoted his body toward mine, looking me right in the eye. Arwen sang from the piano, her song slowly coming to a close. Kamikaze stared at me for a long time, his eyes shifting back and forth as

he gauged my reaction. “And you know how ugly shit like this becomes.”

ARWEN WAS CORNERED by her admirers, fielding questions about her singing and skills on the piano. Glasses of champagne kept being placed in her hand, and she kept drinking and drinking, bursting with laughter as her cheeks blushed with the alcohol.

I kept my arm around her waist so she wouldn't fall over and embarrass herself, but I wasn't really paying attention to her because my eyes continued to scan the room for signs of Kamikaze.

It seemed like he was gone.

I didn't want him anywhere near Arwen.

As the night continued, she got hammered. Laughing her heart out and making new friends, she was definitely the subject everyone would talk about for weeks to come. No one cared about me—just my beautiful and fascinating wife.

I finally pulled her aside when she'd had too much. “We should get going.”

“Come on.” She meant to pat her hand against my chest but hit my chin instead. “This is fun. You know which parties to hit.”

“Nope. Party is over.” I escorted her out of the house and to the valet at the end of the long pathway.

“Come on, live a little.” She wobbled on her heels and almost tripped down one of the stairs. “Whoa...I thought I jumped out of an airplane for a second there.”

I scooped her into my arms and carried her the rest of the way.

“Wow...you're so strong.” She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me on the neck.

I carried her to the car and got her into the passenger seat. I had to buckle her safety belt because even that was too hard for her. Then I drove home, listening to her mumble about nonsense in the seat beside me. Then she started to hum...but that was actually nice.

When we got home, I carried her inside and up the stairs. When we reached the second floor, I turned to carry her to her bedroom.

“No...I want to sleep with you,” she whispered in my ear, her melodic voice innately seductive.

I didn't want to sleep with a drunk woman, but maybe keeping her with me was smart. I wouldn't want her to choke on her own vomit and die. The only way to make sure she lasted through the night was if I was beside her the entire time.

I turned around and carried her to my bedroom.

She was light in my arms and still beautiful with smeared makeup, and I felt lucky this woman came home with me every night. Every man in that room wanted her, married or not. But I was the one who got to have her. Kamikaze wanted her more because it was obvious how alluring she was, how much a man would pay to have her for the night.

The thought made me sick to my stomach, so I stopped thinking about it.

I set her on the bed with her legs dangling over the edge. I loosened the straps of her heels then pushed them off so her feet could finally relax.

She lay there, her eyes closed like she was dead tired.

I turned her over and found the zipper at the back of her dress. I tugged it open and loosened the dress so I could pull it down her body toward her hips.

When her tits popped out, her eyes opened. Firm and round with cute nipples, her tits pointed straight up as she shook her hips to get herself out of the gown. She watched me, studying the way I stared at her body without shame.

I got the material to her ankles then tossed it over the chair.

When I came back to her, she already had pushed her thong off, leaving her completely naked on my bed. She spread her legs when I came near, beckoning me to stand between her thighs and fuck her.

I didn't care that she was drunk. She was my wife, and I could fuck her whenever I wanted. My palm pressed against her flat tummy, and I slid my hand up between her voluptuous tits. I touched her warm cleavage and watched her suck in a deep breath, filled with desire. My eyes worshiped her perfect figure, from her slender stomach to her nice pussy.

She grabbed my hips and tugged on me, wanting me to lean over her so she could kiss me.

I fell forward and held my body up with my arms, my lips just inches from hers.

With parted lips and lazy eyes, she looked at me like she wanted me to stick it to her good. "You're the only man I want to go home with..." Her palms planted against my chest, and she pressed her lips to mine. She kissed me slowly but passionately, giving me her eager tongue as her fingers loosened my tie and unbuttoned my shirt. She pushed my shirt off my shoulders then moved to my slacks. The belt came off and the zipper was undone. "Now I know what it really means to be with a man..."

My cock nearly exploded in my boxers because this felt like a dream. I'd done dirty talk with beautiful women, but I'd never experienced something like this...when the most desirable woman in the world made me feel like the most desirable man.

I pulled away in my eagerness and dropped my boxers. A condom was on my shaft in seconds, and then I grabbed her hips and dragged her to the edge of the bed. I was prepared to fuck her deep and hard, to sheathe my dick until only my balls hung out.

I pushed my head inside her and slowly made my entrance, gliding through the slickness she'd already produced. She was so wet for me...matching the words she whispered to me. I

closed my eyes as I moved all the way into her, buried inside the slit of heaven.

She gripped my wrists and moaned, her head rolling back with her plump lips wide apart.

I lowered my body on top of hers so I could kiss her again, feel her lips while my dick treasured her cunt. Even through the condom, I could feel her so intimately, feel how wet and tight she was.

Her fingers moved into my hair, and she gasped against my mouth, “Yes...I was jealous.”

I rested my forehead against hers and felt my dick twitch.

“Very jealous.”

ARWEN

“MORE COFFEE?” ABIGAIL STOOD WITH THE STAINLESS-STEEL pitcher.

My fingertips rested against my temple as I tried to combat the migraine that throbbed in my head. The pulse was so powerful, and the strongest cup of coffee in the world couldn't change that. I pushed my mug closer to her anyway. “Please.”

She poured the coffee, the liquid the same color as Maverick's eyes.

“Thank you.”

“Long night, huh?”

“Yeah...something like that.”

Abigail gave me a non-judgmental smile. “A big meal always gets me back on my feet.”

I'd already thrown up, so my stomach was empty. I should probably put some food in it. “Good advice.”

She walked away.

I grabbed my fork and dug into my salad, my eyes squinting in the afternoon sunlight. Fall had reached Tuscany, but it would still be warm for a few months. When the cold arrived, the charm would disappear.

Minutes later, Maverick joined me. In a t-shirt and jeans, he looked thoroughly rested, like he'd slept better than he ever had. He skipped the coffee because he'd already had some that morning and poured himself a glass of iced tea instead.

Jealous, I stared at him.

He grabbed his fork and dug into his salad, eating across from me like it was a normal day. He felt amazing, and I felt like shit. “Don’t drink so much next time.”

“I can’t turn down good champagne...”

“You drank more than just champagne,” he teased. “You were downing wine and hard liquor throughout the night.”

I couldn’t remember that. “No wonder I feel like shit...”

He drank his iced tea and looked at me. “Remember much of it?”

“I remember playing the piano. Was I any good?” I remembered singing one of my songs. That was the last clear memory I possessed. Everything turned dark after that.

He rolled his eyes like it was a stupid question. “You were phenomenal. Everyone fell in love with you...like they always do.”

“No wonder I drank so much. I hope I didn’t embarrass you.”

“No. In fact, you make me look good.” He kept eating his lunch, stabbing the tomatoes and mozzarella with his fork before placing them into his mouth. The meals Abigail gave him were always low in carbs and high in protein. It was the only way he could keep a fit body like that. He suddenly stopped eating and rolled his left shoulder like it was sore. He released a quiet sigh as he rubbed the area.

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah.” He dropped his hand and kept eating. “It hasn’t healed all the way. Gets sore from time to time.”

I left my chair and walked around the table behind him. My hands pressed into the back of his shoulder, and I dug into the area, gently massaging the area until I located the tightness. His muscles were full of knots, and I gently rolled them until they were smooth.

Maverick was tense at first, but his muscles slowly relaxed, and he gave in to the goodness of the massage. He stopped eating and just sat there, enjoying the way my fingers relieved the unwanted pressure.

I rubbed his back for a few minutes, letting him relax completely before I pulled my fingers away. When I returned to my chair, I saw the relaxed look in his eyes, like he could fall asleep right at the table. “Thanks...”

“Sure.”

He leaned forward again and dug his fork into his lunch. “I was going to visit my sister tonight. Would you like to come?”

I’d asked to see her before, but it didn’t seem like he was interested in connecting us. He’d obviously had a change of heart. “Yeah, I’d love to.” I didn’t know anything about his sister, but if she was a kind person, unlike his father, I definitely wanted to meet her. I was sick of the darkness that surrounded the DeVille family members.

“Alright. Hopefully, you have enough time to sober up before that happens.”

“I just need another cup of coffee...and maybe a nap.”

THE REHAB CENTER was in Florence. In a large building just a couple blocks from the opera house, the facility was a spacious and luxurious space that allowed its residents to have a safe place to heal. It felt like a resort more than a place to keep people confined. The staff was extremely helpful. The floors were a beautiful hardwood, and the walls were warm gray with white trim. We entered the dining area that more closely resembled a five-star restaurant than a cafeteria.

When we approached the booth, she was already sitting there. With the same dark hair, brown eyes, and olive-colored skin of my husband, she looked exactly like a DeVille. But one thing set her apart from Maverick and her father.

This girl could actually smile.

Her eyes lit up when she saw her brother. They became even brighter when she saw me. “You actually brought her. Good, I was afraid you would lock her in a closet and never let her see the sky.”

“I’m not a monster.” Maverick scooted into the booth without embracing her with affection.

I took the seat beside him. “It’s nice to meet you, Lily. Maverick has mentioned you a few times. I didn’t even know he had a sister until I asked him directly.”

“He’s embarrassed of me.” She admitted. “But that’s okay. I’m embarrassed of him too.”

I definitely liked her more than Caspian. She was in rehab because she was struggling, but she knew how to take a joke and be cheerful. Maverick and his father were brooding all the time, day and night.

“You have any siblings?” she asked.

“No.” I shook my head. “Only child.” As a result, I was the only living person left of my family lineage. Maybe having a sibling would have made losing my father a little easier.

“You’re super pretty,” she blurted. “Maverick showed me a picture, but it didn’t do you justice, not that you don’t photograph well, of course.”

“Oh...thanks. You are too.”

“So, what’s new with you guys?”

Maverick wasn’t talkative, so he barely said a few sentences. “Just working a lot.”

“And Father?” she asked. “How’s he?”

Maverick only gave a shrug.

Lily watched him for a long time before she looked at me. “You probably know that our father is an asshole, right?”

“Yeah...he’s a little cold.”

“A little?” she asked with a laugh. “That guy is something else. Maverick told me you saved those two girls. I know it’s

not my place to give an opinion, but I think you did the right thing.”

That meant the world to me. “Thanks...”

“It’s easy to hate my father because of his behavior, but it’s hard for me to forget how he used to be. As difficult as it is to believe, he used to be a great father. He would take us to the park, swim with us in the backyard, and spend a lot of time with us. But as time goes on, Maverick and I understand he’s not that man anymore...and he probably never will be again.”

That must be the hardest part, hating someone when they used to be so good. “I’m sorry. I can’t imagine how hard it is for both of you.” I saw the way Maverick carried the weight every single day. It always bothered him, always haunted him.

Maverick spoke up again. “He told me to kill Arwen.”

Lily cocked an eyebrow. “What?”

“He told me to kill her since she released those girls. I refused. Now we’re enemies...”

Lily dragged her hands down her face then looked at the table. “Jesus, this is a nightmare.”

“I’m sorry.” I hadn’t meant for this to happen, but I felt like I should apologize.

“It’s not your fault,” she said with a sigh. “He’s lost his mind... He lost it a long time ago.”

“I’m still sorry...” I saw the way it affected both of them. They were grown adults, but having an unhinged father was devastating to both of them. “You guys don’t deserve this. I wish there were a way to make him see reason.” He threatened to hurt his own son all the time and hadn’t visited his daughter once in rehab. The man clearly didn’t care. Now he wanted to kill me...which was enough burden for Maverick to carry.

“He can’t see reason,” Maverick said coldly. “And he never will.”

WHEN WE FINISHED DINNER, Maverick excused himself to wash his hands in the bathroom.

That left Lily and me alone at the table.

“Is my brother treating you right? And don’t worry, you can answer honestly. I won’t tell him anything you say.”

Sometimes he could be a dick, but for the most part, he was wonderful. “Yes...he’s a good man.” He made sure I got home after a night of drinking, and when some guy didn’t know when to back off, he took care of it. He took care of me in so many ways. “He’s rough around the edges, a little heartless at times, but I wouldn’t change anything about him.”

She kept her fingers around her glass as she watched me. “He told me he asked for a divorce when everything went down. Said you betrayed his trust. But the fact that he trusted you to begin with was interesting. That was how I knew you were special...because you are special.”

She was definitely the kinder sibling, the observant one who could see past the hostility to the goodness underneath. “He and I have a good relationship. In the beginning, it was hard for us because neither one of us wanted to get married... especially to someone we didn’t know. But we’ve become friends...started to trust each other. I lost my father and have felt so low, but he’s always there for me. Sometimes, he pisses me off, but he always makes up for it.”

She smiled. “It seems like my brother is more than just a friend to you.”

“Of course. He’s my husband.” Now I used that term literally because it was the best way to describe our relationship. That was exactly what we were—husband and wife. We were friends; we were lovers. We worked together and supported each other.

She continued to smile. “I know he cares about you. He doesn’t actually say those words or give anything away...but he does.”

I’d known that for a long time. “I know this is a lot to ask, but do you think you could help me with something?”

“With Maverick?” she asked with a slight laugh. “That guy is so stubborn... I don’t think there’s anything I can do. You’re the only one who has any effect on him.”

She had a lot more effect than she realized. “The reason why Maverick and your father are at odds is because of me... and I want to fix that.”

“I don’t see how you can.”

“Maybe if I could get him alone, we could talk about it... and I could make him understand how he’s treating Maverick, how he’s lost sight of the things that matter. I don’t just want to convince him to drop his vendetta against me. I also want him to be better to both of you.”

Lily stared at me like I was crazy. “The second you’re in a room with him, he’ll kill you. That plan is a terrible idea. Stay away from him.”

“The same thought crossed my mind. If I showed up on his doorstep, he’d probably shoot me.”

“Good...I’m glad you aren’t being stupid.”

“But if you asked him to come down here to see you...I would be safe.” He wouldn’t bring a gun into the building, and there would be too many witnesses around. He couldn’t sit across the table from me then choke me with his bare hands. It would give us plenty of time to talk, under the banner of truce.

Now Lily was even more shocked. “I don’t know...”

“It’s harmless. What could possibly go wrong?”

“I don’t know, but Maverick says nothing but bad things about him now.”

“They’re all true.” Every single one of them. “But I have to try. Maverick can’t reason with him...you can’t reason with him. Maybe if I talked about my relationship with my father, it would help him understand how he’s acting.”

She shook her head. “Maverick would be pissed at me...”

“But you’re his sister, so he’ll forgive you. Besides, what if this works? What if this chips at his armor a little bit? What if

this helps repair the relationship? If we don't start to reverse the damage now, it'll just get worse and worse until it's beyond fixing. Please help me, Lily. It's just one conversation."

She glanced at the bathroom, checking for her brother. "I don't want to put you in danger."

"What's he going to do to me here?" I challenged.

"I don't know...but I like you. I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

"It won't. And this means a lot to me. If I could fix this, Maverick would have what he wants most in this world...his family." It was all I wanted for him, for him to feel loved. He was unable to take a compliment, to accept any kind of goodness because he didn't feel like he deserved it. He was a giver—not a receiver. But I didn't want him to live his entire life that way. "He's coming back... Please say yes."

Lily relaxed her shoulders as she gave in. "Alright...I'll do it."

MAVERICK

ARWEN WAS AT THE OPERA FOR THE EVENING, SO I WENT OUT for a drink with Kent. The bar was quiet on a Wednesday night, a few girls standing at the bar, while the booths were full of people catching up.

With a scotch in my hand and shoulders full of fatigue after a long day at the office, I stared into the amber liquid and remembered the conversation I'd had with my sister last night. On the surface, she seemed perfectly normal, as if she didn't struggle to keep her hands off booze and more sinister substances. But she wouldn't still be there if she felt well enough to walk away. She had an empty apartment waiting for her, a whole life that needed to be lived.

Kent rambled on about shit that happened at work. "The guy wouldn't pay, and I nearly pulled my knife on him...but then sense hit him hard in the skull." He drank from his glass then glanced at the two women in the corner. He was in a gray blazer with black jeans, his hair dark like mine. He was easy to pick up women with because he had a lot to offer.

I kept looking into my glass, my mind a million miles away.

Kent kept looking at the women. "I wouldn't mind a blow job from one of them, but that's about it."

I hadn't even looked at them.

Kent turned back to me when I didn't say anything. "Something on your mind?"

“My sister is still in rehab, and my father wants to kill me... I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“Then kill him first. There’s your solution.”

I despised my father for a lot of reasons, but the idea of killing him didn’t sit right with me. In my twisted brain, I still believed he could come back from this dark place...somehow. Even if he really would kill me if he had the chance, I wasn’t sure if I could do the same to him. I didn’t possess much compassion, but it felt inherently wrong to murder my own kin. “That’s not the solution I want.”

“Then try talking to him.”

“He won’t listen.”

“Then we’re back to square one...kill him.”

That seemed to be my only alternative.

“And he wants to kill your wife too?”

He wasn’t the only one. “He mainly wants her dead... He’d probably spare me if I didn’t get in his way.”

“Dude, your dad is a psychopath.”

“I know.”

He shook his head and took another drink. “I understand he lost his wife, but how does someone flip a switch like that?”

That was the reason my finger didn’t squeeze the trigger. I still remembered the kind man he used to be like it was yesterday...because it really wasn’t that long ago. Lily and I used to come over every Sunday for dinner. My father and I would talk about work or sports, and Lily and my mother would bake cookies in the kitchen after work. I never really appreciated it until it was gone. Now, all the members of my family had disappeared...and I only had Arwen. She carried my last name and seemed loyal to me, so I guess she was family.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Maverick. There’s no easy solution. But letting it continue until he makes a move is no

solution either...unless you don't care if he kills your wife."

Killing my wife would solve all of my problems—every single one. But she was the one thing that was worth protecting. She'd become my friend, my ally. She was the star of every party I took her to...and the bigger star in my bed. She was a good person and didn't deserve the wrath of those evil men, and that meant I had to protect her. "I do care."

Kent ran his fingers along the rim of his glass. "How's that going?"

"What?"

"You know what."

I didn't share any details about our relationship because it felt wrong. I wanted to protect her privacy. She was also my wife...and I didn't want to talk about fucking her to someone else. "It's fine."

"Fine?" he asked. "I figured it would be more than fine with a woman like that."

I took a long drink. "Let's talk about something else."

Kent smiled slightly. "Alright." He turned back to the women at the bar. "You want the brunette, and I get the blonde?" He'd just said he didn't find them that attractive, but we weren't picky on nights like this. It was obviously a test, to see exactly where I stood.

I glanced at them, thoroughly unimpressed. The more my eyes wandered to the tail in this city, the more I realized how special my wife was. She had legs for days, tits perfect for sucking, and she was an incredible lover. Made everyone seem plain by comparison.

"Maverick?" Kent pressed me into an answer.

I took another drink and let the booze burn my throat. "Sure."

I WALKED in the door late that night and headed to the kitchen. I grabbed a glass from the pantry and filled it with water. After all the booze I'd had, I needed something pure. I let the water drip down my throat and cleanse the alcohol from my blood.

Abigail revealed herself from the other side of the room, her hair in a braid with pajamas on her body. She could be dead asleep, but if she knew someone was in the kitchen, her eyes popped wide open. "Long night?"

I finished my glass of water then left it on the counter next to the sink. "A bit."

"Can I make you something?"

"No. Not hungry." I'd sat at the bar and listened to the brunette drone on about whatever she was talking about. When she grabbed my thigh, I pulled away. When she tried to kiss me, I rejected her on instinct. Kent went home with the blonde, and I left the bar alone.

Abigail kept watching me. "Arwen came home not too long ago. She's probably still awake."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Abigail knew my marriage was bogus. It was just an arrangement to get what I wanted—what my father wanted. But Arwen had obviously charmed Abigail just like she did with everyone else.

"It's rare for you to come home alone with scotch on your breath...that's all."

Only Abigail could talk to me like that. Anyone else would be fired. But I needed her way too much to ever let her go, so she got away with pretty much everything. "Just wasn't my night."

"Or maybe it was." With a knowing look in her eyes, she gave me a smile. Then she walked out of the kitchen to let me think about what she'd just said.

It didn't take me long to ponder her meaning. I came home alone because I wanted to be alone. If I hadn't found a woman I liked at that bar, I could have just gone to another. But the urge to find a woman for the night had disappeared. Why search for something you already had?

I left the kitchen and headed upstairs to the second landing. When I reached the top, I ran into Arwen.

In a nightdress with her face washed clean of makeup, she stilled next to the banister, clearly surprised to bump into me on her journey. Her eyes took me in with her guard up, but slowly, she turned docile. “You’re home late.”

“I was out with Kent.”

“Yeah...I can smell the scotch from here.”

“I always smell like scotch.”

She smiled slightly. “And you’re alone... That’s unusual.”

I wanted to tell her that I didn’t find anyone I liked, that I searched but was unable to find anyone that interested me. But that would be a lie, and I didn’t have the energy to weave a bullshit story. The reason I was alone was because I wanted to be alone. She knew it...I knew it. “What are you doing?”

“Going to the kitchen.”

“Thirsty?”

“No...just wanted a snack. I never eat before a performance because I want to look as slim as possible, but then I’m so hungry afterward.”

I had no idea why, but I found that cute. “Want me to make you something?”

“No,” she said with a laugh. “I was just going to rummage through the fridge until I found something good.”

“I’ll come with you. I could use a snack too.”

We returned to the kitchen, and she opened the fridge and let the light fill the dark room. “Hmm...there’s lots of options here.” Her nightdress was short and showed her sexy legs in the light from the refrigerator. With one hand on her hip and her head tilted to the side, she examined the contents. “Leftover ravioli...that looks pretty good.”

Abigail probably knew we’d returned to the kitchen, but she didn’t appear to offer to cook anything so she could leave

us alone. I watched Arwen pull out the container and set it on the counter. “Want to split it?”

I wasn’t hungry. “Sure.”

She put it in the microwave for a minute before she pulled it out again. She set it on the counter and grabbed two forks. She put one ravioli into her mouth and moaned like she hadn’t eaten in weeks. “Cheese ravioli...so good.”

I put one in my mouth, unimpressed because I was used to Abigail’s culinary perfection. “How was the opera?”

“Good. Uneventful.” She kept eating, standing with me at the counter. “How was Kent?”

“Good. Uneventful.”

She chuckled. “I doubt you would spend so much time with him if that were the case.”

“We talked about my father...shit like that.” Sometimes, we had a good time. Sometimes, we talked about serious stuff.

“That sounds like a deep conversation.”

“He told me I should kill my father...but I can’t do it.” I set my fork down and leaned against the counter as I watched her continue to eat. I loved the way her plump lips parted as she slipped the ravioli inside. Her mouth was sexy, regardless of what she did with it.

“There’s still hope.”

I shook my head. “I really don’t think there is.” My father had threatened to kill me several times now, even though once was already enough. “But it’s hard for me to forget that he’s my father...the person who taught me to ride a bike and become a man. I have to remember that’s not who he is anymore, but there’s something deep inside me that believes he might change.”

“He might...”

I shook my head again. “It’s not gonna happen.”

She took another bite then watched me with sad eyes. Even without makeup, she was stunning. With that thick hair and

bright eyes, she always had the appearance of a doll. She set her fork down and returned the lid to the container. "I'm sorry..." She moved in front of me and placed her hands on my chest. "You don't deserve to go through this... I wish I could fix it." Her eyes looked at her hands against my chest, her fingertips feeling my hard torso through my shirt. She slowly lifted her chin to meet my gaze, her eyes still sympathetic.

Despite all the times I was a dick to her, she still cared about me. She felt my pain, carried my burden. She needed me when times got tough for her, but she always reciprocated that support. Her words seemed so genuine, I could actually feel it in my heart.

She continued to watch me, looking like a dream as the moonlight entered through the windows. Her eyes sparkled, no matter what, even if there wasn't a single light shining from the ceiling. Her eyes were focused on me, two diamonds set in a beautiful face.

My hands moved around her waist, and I pulled her closer to me, bringing our foreheads together. I squeezed tighter, feeling her petiteness through the thin silk of her dress. I could feel the contours of her body so easily, like there was nothing separating us at all.

She closed her eyes and moved her hands to my arms, her fingertips gripping my bare skin. Her breathing picked up like she knew exactly what was going to happen next.

I was hard in my jeans, hard for the first time that day. The women at the bar did nothing for me, not like this woman did. Her beauty was unparalleled, her sexiness was scorching. My hands slid to her perfect ass, and I squeezed it.

She moaned because she loved it when I did that. She loved it when my manly hands squeezed her so tight.

My fingers bunched up the material of her dress until her ass poked out of the silk. In just a simple white thong, her creamy skin always looked so delicious. My mouth moved to hers, and I planted a gentle kiss on her lips, my cock stirring in my jeans the second we made contact.

She breathed hard into my mouth, like it was the first time we'd ever kissed.

My hand slid into her hair, and I kissed her in my kitchen, kissed her like we were alone in my bedroom. My mouth turned aggressive instantly, devouring her lips like they were my favorite dessert. My other hand moved down her ass and between her legs, my fingertips finding her clit through her panties. I rubbed the area hard, making her gasp in my mouth when her nerves were set on fire.

I could feel the moisture on my fingertips already.

“Maverick...” Her hands moved under my shirt and felt my chiseled physique, her fingers sliding into the grooves of my abs. She wanted me so much, was so undeniably attracted to me. She told me I was the best she'd ever had, that I was a real man.

That was a compliment coming from a woman like her.

She undid my jeans and let them slide to the floor before she pulled my shirt over my head. She pulled off her own panties next but left her silky dress in place.

I lifted her onto the kitchen counter and moved between her thighs, my lips still kissing hers. My cock hung in the air, dripping wet and throbbing. I'd been depressed just moments ago, but now I was more aroused than I'd ever been. My balls were so tight with eagerness.

I grabbed a condom from my pocket and rolled it down to my base.

Her arms hooked around my neck, and she breathed against my mouth as she felt me slowly inch inside her. My large head stretched her apart as it entered her tightness. Then it sank farther and farther until I was balls deep.

She sighed into my mouth, her body full of a big dick. “Yes...”

I held on to her ass and scooped her into my arms so I could pound into her. I'd never fucked a woman in my kitchen, but it was better than any fantasy I could have dreamed of. The

most beautiful woman in the world was taking me, enjoying me, and asking for more.

I watched her stunning reaction, watched her lips part with a sexy moan that sounded like the loveliest music. Her pussy was so fucking wet that I wished this piece of latex weren't separating us. I wished I could feel her skin-to-skin, come deep inside her, and watch it drip between her thighs.

She lay back against the counter and lifted up her dress so I could see her tits.

I grabbed her hips and pulled her into me as my hips thrust to slide farther inside her. Her tits shook with every push, her nipples hard and sexy. I closed my eyes because it felt so good to fuck this woman. Anywhere, anytime, it was the best I'd ever had. My balls tightened toward my body as I prepared to explode with arousal, to fill her cunt with everything I had. Her moans bounced off the tiles and the hard surfaces, amplifying its volume. Her hands latched on to my wrists, and she bit her lips as she tried to stop herself from screaming.

Why would I want someone else when I could have this?

When I could have my wife?

ARWEN

WITH LEGS MADE OF LEAD AND A RAPID HEARTBEAT THAT wouldn't slow down, I rounded the corner to the rehab center and found Caspian sitting in one of the booths. A hot cup of coffee sat in front of him, the rising steam visible this far away. An obscure painting was on the wall, and most of the dining area was empty with the exception of a few guests.

There he was...my father-in-law.

His hands were joined together in his lap, and he stared straight ahead, his shoulders wide and his eyes unblinking. He had dark hair like his son, though there were sprinkles of gray within the locks. But his eyes were exactly the same, pools of espresso. His facial structure was similar to his son's, innately masculine. Maverick must have inherited his softer features from his mother, making him so handsome.

There was still time to turn around and call the whole thing off.

But seeing him there gave me some hope. Lily had called and asked him to come...and he did.

He wasn't completely heartless after all.

I entered the dining room and caught his attention. His eyes flicked to me, and with a predatory gaze, he watched me approach his table. Just like Maverick, he never gave the impression he was surprised or caught off guard. Like he'd been expecting me the entire time, he was calm.

I approached the table, my heart beating like a drum. I slid into the booth and sat across from him, his bold eyes boring into mine as if they could cut right through me. His wrath was palpable, his desire for murder practically audible. Maverick was nowhere nearby. He was probably at the office at the house, nowhere close enough to help me. I suddenly felt like an unguarded sheep, not nearly as secure as I was when my wolf was keeping his eyes on the perimeter. I was really on my own...and I felt it.

Caspian stared at me with unblinking eyes. He took in my features with a coldness that felt like ice. He slowly moved his hands to the surface of the table, showing me that he didn't have a weapon in hand. He leaned forward slightly, trying to intimidate me with his glare.

I got the attention of the waitress. "May I get a coffee?"

Caspian's glare deepened at the way I'd brushed him off.

The hot mug was placed in front of me.

Just to be obnoxious, I took a drink.

Caspian didn't move.

I set the mug down and regarded him again, coldly but still playful.

"You're a stupid girl. My son is doing everything he can to protect you, and you're sneaking around behind his back. He should kill you for that kind of disobedience."

"Disobedience?" I cocked an eyebrow. "I'm a woman—not a dog."

"You're a bitch if you ask me."

Just when I thought this man couldn't get worse, he raised the bar. "I didn't arrange this meeting so you could insult me. I didn't arrange it so I could insult you either—even though I should."

"Then what do you want? Other than a death wish?"

I wanted him to be a good person, but that didn't seem possible. "First of all, I wanted to say I'm so sorry about your

wife...”

The apology tugged at his iciness very slightly. He couldn't hide the surprise from spreading across his face—not this time. He was tense and prepared for an attack or an insult. Instead, he got sympathy.

“Maverick tells me she was a wonderful person and mother... I'm sorry that all of you had to lose her. She didn't deserve what happened to her, and I'm glad Ramon died a terrible death.”

Now his face was stoic. “If you really meant that, you wouldn't have interfered.”

“I do mean it. But I don't think his wife and daughter deserved the same fate.”

“We can argue about this all day, but I won't change my mind. He raped and killed my wife. I should have done the same to his.”

“Torturing and killing him was sufficient.”

“Not to the man who was married to her,” he said coldly. “Not to the man who raised a family with her, who planned to grow old with her and die with her. How dare you tell me what kind of justice I deserve! You're a stupid girl who doesn't know a damn thing.” His hands shook slightly as he fought the fury from taking over his body. His mind was so deeply enmeshed in his sick need for violence that he couldn't think clearly at all.

“My father did some shady things I had nothing to do with. Now some very bad men want to punish me for his crimes. I know how it feels to be the innocent person who's guilty by association. I know how it feels to be scared because of something you didn't even do. I know how those women felt...because I am those women.”

His rage didn't dissipate—not at all.

“When I took them out of the barn, I kept Ramon in place. It would have been wrong for me to free him because he deserved the punishment you set for him. He even agreed. He was just grateful I'd saved his girls that he stayed voluntarily.”

“Which makes your crime even worse,” he whispered. “Your father asked me for a favor, and I saved your ass. I gave my son to you, a man strong enough to keep the bastards away. This is how you repay me?”

“Let’s not forget we made a deal—no one did any favors.”

“Giving you a good husband is much better than giving me details about Ramon.”

“But you accepted that offer and forced your son to marry a stranger.”

He cocked his head to the side, his eyes narrowed. “I don’t think my son has any complaints about that anymore.”

I certainly didn’t. I came home to a man I respected and admired. I came home to a man I wanted to sleep with every night. He took care of me, kept me safe, gave me whatever I wanted. I’d hated my situation in the beginning—but now I knew I’d hit the jackpot. “Nor do I.”

“I assumed. No other reason for you to risk your neck like this.”

I was putting myself in danger, but the risk had been worth it. My interest wasn’t just in saving my neck. It was giving Maverick what he deserved. “Your son and daughter need you, Caspian. You’ve turned into a demon since you lost your wife. They need the man you used to be... They need a father.”

“My children are both adults. They don’t need me anymore.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I whispered. “I needed my father up until the day he died...and I still need him now. You need to drop these hostilities with Maverick and treat him with affection and respect.”

“I will do so when he deserves it.” He kept his voice even, only his tone changing with his passion. To any onlooker in the room, we probably looked a father and daughter catching up over warm cups of coffee. In reality, a storm was building.

“He’s your son—he deserved it from the day he was born.”

His dark eyes shifted back and forth slightly as he looked into mine. “Maverick has forgotten where his loyalties lie. I asked him to kill you, and he refused. He’s made it clear that a nice ass is more important than family.”

“I’m not a nice ass...” I was so much more than that. Maverick wouldn’t wage a war with his father over sex. “Your mind is unhinged, and you aren’t thinking clearly. You threatened to kill him several times before this happened—”

“To straighten him out. He’s grown too soft for my taste.”

This moment made me appreciate my father even more. He was wrong to make his mistakes, but he always loved me. He was always good to me. “Maverick tells me that you used to be different when your wife was still here. You were a good man...a good father. He hopes that version of you will come back someday.”

It was the first time he didn’t have a reply. He lifted his mug and brought it to his lips for a drink, keeping his eyes on me.

This meeting was a waste after all.

“If Maverick wants to repair his relationship with me, then he needs to put a bullet between your eyes and leave your body in a ditch. Then we can talk.”

“What good will that accomplish?”

“Justice—for me.”

“I didn’t hurt your wife. I had nothing to do with it.”

“You had everything to do with it when you took those girls away from me.” He was singular in his thoughts, only focusing on one thing to the exclusion of all else.

“Would you have felt any better if you’d raped and murdered them?” I questioned. “Would it really have made all that much of a difference? Would the reality of her death be less bitter to swallow?”

His eyes began to narrow once more. “Yes.”

“Liar.” My hostility began to rise. “It would have made no difference. I’m sorry that your wife is dead, Caspian. But she is dead. Killing more people won’t bring her back. Spilled blood won’t make you sleep better at night. If you want to honor her memory, keep your family together. You’ve been doing a terrible job so far.”

His hands came together, and his fingers tightened forcefully.

“You need to let this go. You need to focus on the family you have left. Maverick won’t say this to your face, but he’s hurt... He’s hurt that things have gotten this bad. He misses having a father. He misses spending time with his family on Sundays. Now all he has is a father who is only disappointed in him. He has a father who doesn’t care that his sister is in rehab—”

“Don’t sit there and tell me my faults. Your father was a worthless scumbag who didn’t give a damn about you. If he had, he wouldn’t have pissed away every penny he had so his daughter would be left destitute and married off to a stranger. Judge me all you want, but I can do the same to you.”

“I’m not judging you—”

“You are judging me—and I don’t like it.” He rose to his feet and got out of the booth. “Your little ploy worked this time, but if I see you again, I won’t hesitate to put a bullet in that pretty mouth of yours.”

My good intentions evaporated in my face, and I seemed to have made everything worse, not better. I’d made Caspian feel insulted, and I only boiled his rage at a higher temperature. “I want my husband to have his father. Forget about me...and think about him.”

He stayed near the table as he looked down at me. “You’re the wedge between us. You’re the reason my wife didn’t get the justice she deserved. If you want to make this right, if you want your husband to have some kind of relationship with his father, then you’ll do the right thing.”

“Even if the right thing would devastate him?” I challenged. “I’m the best thing that’s ever happened to your son...and he’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Tearing us apart would accomplish nothing. Your son’s happiness should be the most important thing to you.”

“No,” he said coldly. “My wife’s memory is the most important thing to me—not the opinion of a whore.”

THE CURTAINS FELL, and I headed backstage to dab at the sweat that marked my forehead. I pulled the pins out of my hair and let it come loose from my scalp. People gave their congratulations as they passed by on their way to their stations.

I looked in the mirror and wiped off the bright lipstick with a tissue. I tore off the fake eyelashes too. As more pieces of my stage makeup came off, I started to look like myself, like the person I actually knew.

The second I stopped hustling, I thought about my conversation with Caspian yesterday.

Nothing had changed.

If anything, that man wanted to kill me even more.

I didn’t risk my neck to save my own ass. I wanted to fix the broken relationship between father and son, to give Maverick what he wanted more than anything. But it blew up in my face...because Caspian was the biggest asshole on the planet.

I felt a presence in my vanity mirror, a dark expression that followed me everywhere I went, even in my dreams. My gaze lifted, and I spotted the espresso-colored eyes staring into mine. With a slight smirk on his handsome face, he was delighted to catch a glimpse of me when I hadn’t noticed.

My heart raced as I stared at Maverick, the butterflies soaring in my stomach and my blood running hot. He made me feel weak in the knees but strong everywhere else. He

made my breath hitch slightly, like I didn't get quite enough air with every single breath. My hands pushed against the vanity as I rose to my feet, feeling the faint smile form on my lips as I met his gaze.

Even in heels, he was still taller than me. With that dark hair and those dark eyes, he was lethal in his charm. When he wore a black suit, it only made him more appealing. His smile widened as he stepped toward me, his arms circling my petite waist as he pulled me into his chest. My husband held me tightly then kissed me.

Kissed me good.

His hand gave my ass a gentle squeeze before he pulled away.

I liked it when he did that—even in public.

“You were great, Sheep.”

“Thank you...”

He stepped to the side and revealed his friend Kent. “You remember Kent. You met a couple of months ago.”

“Yes, I remember.” We hadn't talked much, but I remember him sitting across the table, his lips locked with a pretty girl's. He was Maverick's height with the same level of attractiveness—even though he wasn't my type. “Nice to see you again.”

“You too.” He smiled before he leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. “Damn, you can sing. It's incredible that such a small woman can make such loud music. You must be tired after singing for two hours.”

“I usually have some lemon and water after a night like that, but I love every minute of it.” I felt Maverick come to my side and wrap his arm around my waist, playing the dutiful husband in the public eye. But his affection didn't feel forced or fake. Now it felt natural...like he wanted to hold me at his side.

“Do what you love and never work a day in your life, huh?” Kent stood with his hands in his pockets, glancing at the

pretty girls as they walked by. He turned his attention back to me. “Maverick and I were going out for drinks but decided to stop by and see the show.”

Last time Maverick went to a bar, he came home alone. I felt relieved when there wasn't another woman on his arm. It'd been a while since he'd brought a stranger home, and I'd gotten used to the exclusivity. I liked it just being us...no one else. But if he was going out for drinks tonight, then maybe our exclusivity had come to an end. “That's nice. Thanks for stopping by.”

“Want to come with us?” Maverick tilted his gaze down so he could look at me, his cologne fragrant. It immediately reminded me of sex, when the sweat from his body made it release from his pores. “We can watch Kent make an idiot out of himself.”

“I never make an idiot out of myself,” Kent argued. “I always go home with someone.”

“But you get slapped too,” Maverick teased.

Kent rolled his eyes. “That happened one time. I was a little drunk and tired, and I just wanted to get to the point.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

Maverick turned to me. “He walked up to a woman and, point-blank, asked if she wanted to come over to fuck. Didn't buy her a drink or even ask her name.”

Kent sighed. “Like I said, I was tired...”

I could understand why that would be a turn-off for any woman. It was impersonal and rude. “I'm sure it would work if you did it...” If I saw Maverick across the room, I'd do anything to get him to come home with me. I'd be the one buying him a drink. I'd be the one pushing the other girls out of the way so I could have his attention.

He stared at me for several seconds, his stony expression absorbing my words like it took a few moments to process them. I just gave him the biggest compliment of his life. “Doesn't mean much unless it worked with the right woman.”

I held his gaze, the pulse loud in my ears and rampant in my neck. “I still think it would work...”

“YOU DRINK SCOTCH?” Kent asked in surprise.

“She smokes cigars too.” Maverick brought his glass to his lips and took a drink.

I swirled my glass before I brought it to my lips. “My father drank and smoked a lot, so I just picked it up...”

Kent gave me a look of approval before he pivoted his body in the booth and examined the women in the bar. With predatory eyes, he scanned the room for a warm body to take home.

I imagined Maverick did the same thing—but tonight, he wasn’t.

His arm was around my shoulders, and his body was pressed close to mine. Sometimes his fingers dug into my hair gently, the touch light and sexy. With his thighs spread apart under the table and his shoulders looking broad in his suit, he was the hottest man in the joint.

And he was my husband.

“What about her?” Kent nodded to the blonde in the corner. “She doesn’t look like a weirdo who will ask for my number later.”

“Asking for a number makes a woman a weirdo?” I asked.

Kent shrugged. “You meet a woman in a bar to hook up. Pretty self-explanatory.”

“But you might want to hook up again. And you’ll be glad you have that number.”

“I doubt it.” Kent looked at me before he turned back to the girls. “What do you think, Maverick?”

He stared at the girls and shrugged. “They all look the same to me. I would just pick one and go for it.”

“You know...” Kent turned back to Maverick. “You’re a lot more boring as a married man.” He finished his drink and left the glass on the table before he scooted out of the booth and buttoned the front of his jacket. Then he walked up to a brunette standing at the edge of the bar and initiated a conversation.

Maverick turned back to me. “Want another?”

“I’ve had enough for tonight.” I pushed my glass away so I couldn’t be tempted anymore.

“You don’t seem drunk.”

“I hold my liquor well—like a lady.”

“I think ladies don’t drink much in the first place.”

“Then I’m not a lady.”

He chuckled as he looked at me, the smile reaching the corners of his mouth.

My hand moved to his thigh under the table, and I resisted the urge to press my face into his neck and close my eyes. My body wanted to relax into this man, to be as affectionate as I wanted. It was past midnight, and I’d already had such a long evening...and he looked as comfortable as a pillow. “You can join Kent if you want. You don’t have to stay here because of me...”

Maverick looked into my gaze and watched me for a long time, his eyes focused like nothing would interrupt his concentration. His fingers moved in my hair slightly, and his thumb brushed against my cheek. He was a rough man, but he could be so gentle when he wanted to be. He could be anything he wanted to be...if that’s what he wanted. “You know this is the only place I want to be.”

MY EYES WERE LOCKED on to his beautiful brown eyes, and my entire body was on fire. I could come a million more times if he lasted that long, but I’d already enjoyed myself plenty of

times to get through the night. My nails clawed at his muscular torso, and I got off on watching his perfect body work to fuck me.

His muscular arms were pinned behind my knees, and his strong back arched to pound into me at an ideal pace, kissing my clit with his hard stomach and then doing it again just a second later. His enormous dick buried itself deep inside me every time, hitting the perfect spot like a finger to a button. He kept tapping it over and over again, making my body convulse in euphoria.

He'd worked long enough to please me, and it was time for him to reap his reward. I grabbed his hips and directed his pace. "Your turn..." I bit my bottom lip as I guided him back and forward, forcing him to slow and down and finish. He thickened slightly inside me, his dick pressing hard against every side of my channel and giving it a final stretch before he released.

His body relaxed before the final shudder, the final bucks of his hips that were accompanied by a sexy moan that filled the bedroom. It was the sexiest noise he'd ever made, a masculine hum that complemented the dark furniture and deep tones of his bedroom. He rested his forehead against mine as he finished filling the tip of the condom, his chest more beautiful when it was covered with a shiny gleam of sweat.

My hands moved to his ass, and I gripped both cheeks just as he did to me.

He smiled slightly before he pulled out of me and walked into the bathroom to dispose of the condom.

I'd considered asking him to stop wearing condoms altogether. I'd been on the pill for a long time, and I didn't see the point in wearing something if we were both clean. But if we wanted to do that, it would mean monogamy. It seemed like Maverick was already in that place, but what if he wasn't? What if I pushed for more and got his rejection instead? I decided to let him make the decision when he was ready.

My eyes felt heavy because it was already after one in the morning. It'd been such a long night, but so deeply magical

that I wouldn't change anything. I sang my heart out at the opera, having no idea that my husband was sitting in the audience watching me.

Maverick came to bed, turned off the light, and then got under the covers with me.

I knew he wasn't on speaking terms with his father, but I expected Maverick to figure out what I'd done eventually. He hadn't mentioned it, so I assumed Caspian had kept that information to himself.

What would Maverick think once he found out?

He pressed his hard chest against my back and wrapped his arm around my waist. His face rested against the back of my neck, his nose buried in my hair. The darkness surrounded us both, our bodies warm in the luxurious bed.

I was so tired, but I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to stay there forever, to live in the moment. Wordlessly, we snuggled together, his fingers resting against my left hand where my wedding ring sat on my finger. I'd gotten so used to his bed that I never wanted to sleep in mine alone.

There was never a more comfortable place other than the one right here—next to him.

MAVERICK

“YOU’RE SO PUSSY-WHIPPED.”

I sat at my desk in the office across the hall from my bedroom. With a cigar in my mouth and my laptop in front of me, I worked while Kent talked on speakerphone. “I’m pussy-whipped, but not in the way you’re suggesting.”

“I disagree. You’re so hung up on her.”

“I am married to her...”

Kent chuckled. “Man, I remember when you told me you didn’t give a damn about her. It would be easier if she got hit by a car and died or something.”

Hearing that sentiment repeated back to me made me sick. It was hard to believe I’d said those words—and meant them. But now, I didn’t want anything bad to ever happen to her. She wasn’t a burden in my life. She was the one thing I looked forward to the most. “Things change.”

“Which is why I’m saying you’re pussy-whipped.”

“I wouldn’t take it that far. I’ve always been obsessed with pussy.”

“But you’re obsessed with just one, specifically.”

“Whatever. My libido is the same.” I took a puff and let the smoke float from my mouth. It was midafternoon, a little early for a cigar, but the urge had hit me. “What happened with your lady?”

“We humped, then she left.”

I chuckled. "That's a nice way to put it."

"Paints a vivid picture, huh?" His laugh echoed back at me. "So, are your bachelor days over? If so, I need to find a new wingman."

Technically, I was married. My bachelor days ended a long time ago. "I don't know... I wouldn't put it like that."

"You seem committed to her. It would be stupid to argue."

"I am committed to her. She's my wife, and it's my job to take care of her. But I wouldn't say I'm committed to her sexually. We'll have our fun, but it'll eventually burn out like all other relationships. We'll go back to sleeping with other people. Then we'll do it all over again..."

"That's romantic," he said sarcastically.

"A lot of men have mistresses. Keeps the relationship healthy. There's no man on earth who can honestly say he's happy with monogamy that spans decades. It's not natural. It makes everything stale."

"If that's how you really feel, you might want to tell her that."

"She knows." We'd talked about it in the past, about casual sex between husband and wife. She would have her lovers, and I would have mine.

"I don't think she does, man. I see the way she looks at you..."

I was tired of talking about my love life. "I'll swing by later today for the game. Talk to you then."

"Fine, blow me off." He hung up.

I hit the button on the speaker and kept working, the cigar still sitting in my mouth.

A few minutes later, Arwen poked her head into the room. "Working in here today?"

"Just paperwork." I set the cigar on the rim of the ashtray.

She strode into the room while swaying her hips, looking sexy in a sweater dress with black leggings underneath. She had the kind of body that could pull off any kind of outfit. Right now, she looked like a perfect ten.

I kept staring at her instead of my computer.

She grabbed the cigar and smashed it into the glass bowl. “You smoke too much.”

“Occasionally.”

“If you smoke too much occasionally, you still smoke too much.”

I grinned slightly at her wit.

“I’m serious. Cancer is a real thing.”

“I’m not scared of cancer.”

Her face suddenly turned cold.

I didn’t realize what I’d said until the idiotic words were already out of my mouth. They were insensitive and stupid. “I didn’t mean it like that... I’m sorry.” Her father passed away from lung cancer, and he wasn’t a heavy smoker. There was no reason why the same thing wouldn’t happen to me.

She dropped her glare. “I don’t want you smoking anymore.”

“I don’t see the harm in lighting up once in a while.”

“Once in a while is like twice a year. Every week is not once in a while. You’re technically a smoker.”

I shrugged. “It suits me.”

“Well, it doesn’t suit me.” She came around my desk and opened the top drawer where my stash was. She grabbed them and stuffed them into her pocket so she could throw them away later.

“I don’t appreciate you telling me what to do.”

“Join the club.” She returned to the front of the desk, copping an attitude no one else could pull off. “I want you to live a long time, Maverick. And not just to keep me safe.” She

turned around and walked out, her perfect ass shaking back and forth.

I stared at it until she was out the door.

Now, my dick was hard in my jeans, and I couldn't remember what I was working on.

Only one thing was on my mind.

SHE WAS SUPPOSED to leave for work at the opera, but I had other things on my mind.

I had her on all fours on my bed, her back beautifully arched and her perky ass pointed to the sky. My hand dug into my nightstand, bumping against the wedding ring I hadn't worn since my wedding day, until I found a condom to roll down my dick.

"I'm gonna be so late..." She looked at me over her shoulder, her pussy gleaming as the slickness dripped from her entrance.

"Doesn't look like you care." I got onto the bed, my knees sinking into the mattress on either side of her hips. I pointed my head at the open slit and slowly pushed inside, getting through the first squeeze until my shaft glided inside. My hands gripped her waist, and I slowly inched deeper and deeper, pushing through her slick tightness until my entire base was sheathed.

She moaned when she felt all of me, her hands gripping the sheets underneath her.

Nothing made me feel more alive than this—being buried inside a woman. With her beautiful ass in my face, her little asshole on display, and such a sexy back, she was perfect. Her brown curtain of hair stretched down her shoulder blades, perfectly styled for the performance she was about to give.

But I was going to fuck her before that happened.

I held on to her hips and tugged her into me as I thrust, giving it to her deep the entire time. I was in the mood to sink deep inside of her pussy, to have every inch covered to the hilt. I wanted to feel her intimately, claim her before an auditorium of men gawked at her.

She was gorgeous—and she was mine.

I grabbed a fistful of hair and gave a gentle tug. “You want to go?” She was bouncing her ass back at me, her back arching deeper to get the angle just perfect. She moaned continuously, each separate cry fusing together into one long tremble. “Sheep, I asked you a question.”

She clawed at the sheets harder. “No...”

“You want your husband to keep fucking you?”

She bounced back on my dick a little harder. “Yes...”

I stared at the beautiful woman underneath me as I continued to fuck her, continued to get the greatest pleasure around my dick. It was so good, feeling her slickness like that. It was the best pussy I’d ever fucked, best pussy I’d ever looked at. “Good. This is going to be a while.”

ARWEN

MY THOUGHTS DRIFTED BACK TO MY HUSBAND OFTEN.

Every minute of the day.

When we weren't together, I wondered what he was doing. When he was inside me, I wondered if he enjoyed me as much as I enjoyed him. He was the best sex I'd ever had, the best man I'd ever been with. The idea of going to someone else when I had him at home every night seemed absurd.

Marrying him started off as a nightmare...but somehow turned into a fairy tale.

I barely made it in time before the show started. But I certainly had no regrets. I was thoroughly pleased before I had to stand in heels for two hours and sing loud enough to shatter glass.

I stepped onto the stage, gave my performance, and like every other night, it went quickly. Time passed differently during a performance. There was so much to do and focus on, there was barely any time to think about anything else.

When the show ended, I returned backstage and sat at my vanity. Now I always hoped Maverick would appear behind me, giving me a kiss after my performance. I pulled the pins out of my hair then ran my fingers through the strands. My false eyelashes and lipstick were removed next. When I sensed a heated stare on my face, my heart started to race. I could feel his intensity. My lips softened into a smile because I knew I would see his espresso eyes when I looked in the reflection.

When I lifted my gaze to look, I saw someone else.

A pair of blue eyes stared back at me from a square face. A hard jawline led to a square jaw, every single square tooth visible in his strange smile. Maybe it was a smile to him, but it looked like a grimace to everyone else. His other features were difficult to determine in the small mirror, but he seemed to be tall—abnormally tall.

When my eyes focused more, he stepped out of the line of the mirror and disappeared.

WITH MY CLUTCH IN HAND, I left out the back door and took the steps to the sidewalk. My car was parked a few yards away, the only car in the parking lot because I was one of the last people to leave.

My heels echoed against the concrete once I reached the sidewalk. I hadn't brought my coat, so I had to suffer the cold evening air on just my bare skin. My dress was thin, but backstage was so stuffy that anything thicker would be a million degrees too hot.

Soon, I wasn't the only set of footsteps in the area.

Another set accompanied mine—distinct and heavy.

I didn't turn around to make it obvious, but the approach unnerved me. There was no other car in the parking lot, so where was this person going? And judging from the heaviness of the thuds, it was definitely a man.

Then I noticed two men emerged from separate directions.

I started to panic.

I pulled my phone out of my clutch, doing my best to seem casual even though I was fucking terrified. Three men were converging on me, and now it was overwhelmingly obvious what their intention was.

I wished Maverick were there.

But he was twenty minutes away.

I kept walking, unsure what to do. If I sprinted into a run, one of them would catch me in seconds. There was nowhere for me to go. Nowhere for me to hide. I took my one shot and pulled up Maverick's name on the phone.

The second I hit send, the guy behind me took off.

"Ah!" In heels, I ran as fast as I could and dropped my clutch in the process. My phone was still in my hand, and I dodged into the passageway between the theater and the bank beside me. All I could hear was the fear in my deep breathing, the terror I felt as my heart worked to pump enough blood into my system. "Shit, help! Help!" I called for anyone to help me, hoped Maverick was listening over the line. With a quick look on his GPS, he could figure out where I was.

"Shut your mouth." An enormous hand grabbed the back of my head and slammed me into the wall. "No one is gonna help you."

My body collided with the wall, and the air left my lungs. I barely had time to stuff my phone down the front of my dress and slip it in my bra. "Let go of me!" I kicked back.

This man was bigger than a horse, so it was like kicking a mountain. He laughed then pressed me into the wall until I was squished like a bug. "I was gonna take you home, but after seeing how pretty you are when you sing...I think I'll fuck you now." He yanked up my dress and pushed down my panties.

This couldn't be happening. "Let me go."

"Fight, bitch. I was hoping you would." He pushed me against the wall again and grabbed both of my wrists with a single hand. He was more than a foot taller than me, a fucking giant. He pressed my cheek hard against the wall then forced his big dick right between my ass cheeks. "Damn, you have a nice ass."

I wanted to scream for Maverick, but I couldn't say a word. My eyes watered in panic, and I wanted to give up because there was nothing else I could do. This was the

beginning of the end, the start of a life of torture that would kill me. "Please..."

"Please beg." He spoke in my ear. "It's one of my kinks."

I tried to buck him off, but it was no use. I would just break my back in the process.

His dick throbbed against my ass cheeks, a monster with its own brain. "You have a small cunt, so it'll be a tight fit. But we'll make it work." He licked his palm and smeared it along his crown and base.

A police car drove past the street, the lights and sirens on. They weren't coming for me, but they were enough of a distraction to make my assailant turn to look.

Then I dropped down and hit the ground.

He grabbed me by the hair and tried to yank me back. "There's no running from this, baby."

My teeth clenched down on his hand, and I bit him like a damn animal. Blood gushed into my mouth and everywhere else.

The man yanked his hand back, but he chuckled like it was a game. "You want to play rough, huh?"

I got to my feet and sprinted. I ran across the street, almost got hit by a car, and kept running. There were only a few cars on the road but no pedestrians. The ones who were around immediately covered away when they saw the commotion.

I fished the phone out of my dress. "Maverick!"

"I'm coming to get you!" He spoke a million miles an hour, knowing I didn't have time. "You're on del Corso?"

"Yes."

"Turn left."

I would have asked why under normal circumstances, but this wasn't normal. I ran as hard as I could, ignoring the aches from my feet and the possibility of breaking my ankle in my heels. Years in show business taught me how to move in the damn things. "I'm going."

“Keep going past the next two stop signs.”

“I can’t run that long!”

“You’re gonna have to!”

I didn’t look back as I kept running, crossing traffic just to confuse the asshole behind me.

“There’s a narrow alleyway with a blue bicycle to your left. Take it.”

I did it without hesitation.

“Keep going until you see another narrow passageway with clothes on a line.”

I turned left, getting into a tighter space between two buildings.

“Left.”

I was going back in the direction I came, back to the busy street.

“Cross the street and go left.”

“I can’t keep this up for long—”

“Do what I say.” The sound of his revving engine was in the background.

I kept going.

He directed me through various passageways, getting me away from the assholes without covering much ground. I kept going, crossing streets and turning in circles as I shook off my attackers.

I’d passed the same building a couple of times. When I rounded it for the third time, he told me to go inside.

“What? I can’t get in there.”

“There’s a keypad on the entrance. Find it.”

There were double glass doors leading to some kind of private entrance. I found the keypad on the left. “Got it.”

“Type in 64831 then pound.”

My breathing was haywire, and I could barely keep my fingers straight. I somehow didn't make any mistakes, even though I was losing my shit.

“You should have enough time before they catch up with you.”

A beep sounded and the doors opened.

“Get inside.”

I stepped inside the doors, and they closed a second later.

“Take the elevator to the third floor.”

I got inside and hit the button. I leaned against the wall and tried to catch my breath, my feet bloody and my dress torn. The door opened to a loft.

“Disable the elevator by hitting the blue button.”

I didn't care if I could never get to the bottom floor. I smashed that button with my palm so damn hard, I nearly broke my hand. The doors opened, and I stepped into a living room, decorated in the same style as Maverick's home. “What is this place?”

“It's my place in the city. There's a pistol hidden underneath the coffee table.”

I got on my hands and knees and grabbed it. It was the first time I'd ever held a gun, and now I realized just how heavy it was. It must be loaded with this amount of weight. Feeling it in my hand reminded me this nightmare wasn't over. That giant could crawl up the side of the building like an animal if he really wanted to.

“I have to go, Arwen.”

“Wait, hold on.” He couldn't help me over the phone, but letting his voice guide me was an immense comfort. “What's gonna happen?”

“I'm almost to the city. My men have been dispatched, so we'll scare him away from the area. Keep your eyes trained on the door. I'll be there as soon as I can.”

“How are you going to get up here?”

“The stairs.”

“Oh...of course, there are stairs.”

“Keep that gun, but I’m sure you won’t have to use it.”

I leaned against the wall and slid to the floor, terrified because that cruel man could still get to me. He’d lifted up my dress and pushed his hard dick against my ass like he owned me. I’d never felt so violated, so disgusted. If he walked through that door, I would empty that clip so fucking fast.

“I’m gonna be the one that walks through that door, alright? Don’t shoot.”

“Okay...”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

I wanted him there now. I wanted my wolf. “Please hurry...” I kept the tears out of my voice but barely. I’d never needed this man more in my life than I did right then. If it weren’t for him, no one else would help me. I would be snatched off the street and raped and tortured. He was the only person who actually gave a damn about me. “Please...”

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, a door opened.

I rose to my feet and pointed the gun, my finger on the trigger even though I didn’t know how to use it. I just needed to look formidable, at the least.

But thankfully, it was Maverick.

Dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans, his muscled frame entered the apartment, and his concerned expression landed on me.

I set the gun on the counter, relieved I didn’t have to use it. My shoes were on the carpet, coated in blood from my feet. My dress was ripped in the places where that asshole had grabbed me. But now that my gaze took in Maverick, I knew I would be safe.

With pain-filled eyes, he walked toward me, his expression anxious.

I threw myself into his arms and rested my face against his chest, relaxing for the first time since the chase started. Shedding tears in front of other people was something I never did, but with him, I showed my most vulnerable side without caring. Tears soaked into his t-shirt, and I gripped him around the waist as I shook in his embrace.

His hand cupped the back of my head, and he rested his lips against my forehead. “Sheep, it’s okay...”

“Did you kill him?” When that man was dead, it really would be okay.

His silence gave me the answer I didn’t want to hear.

I pulled away and looked into his expression, not caring that I looked like absolute hell.

His hand moved to my cheek, his thumb grazing over my soft skin. His eyes shifted back and forth slightly as he looked into mine, like he was absorbing all my pain into himself. “By the time I got here, he and his men had scattered.”

“Kill him, Maverick. I want you to kill him.” I was ordering someone’s death like an executioner, but I didn’t feel any remorse for it. If I hadn’t been able to slip away, he would have raped me right in that alleyway, then did it again...and again.

His hands moved to my arms, and he gave me a gentle squeeze. “I will.”

I got what I wanted, but I still wasn’t satisfied. “He yanked up my dress and almost raped me—”

“Please.” It was the first time he dropped his gaze, like he couldn’t handle the horror story I was about to tell. “Just don’t...” He stared at the ground for a couple of seconds before he lifted his gaze to meet mine.

When I saw the hurt on his face, I knew how real this was. I knew this wasn’t just a relationship we were forced to be in.

We really were husband and wife. We really were a team that would do anything for each other.

“I’ll kill him,” he whispered. “I promise.”

“Do you know him?”

“He was the one who showed up at my gates that night. He was one of the men your father crossed.”

Now I was livid with my father for being so stupid. “Why did my father have to get involved in that?”

“I know what he did was wrong, but I’m sure he had no idea what it would turn into. Your father was a good man who loved you, who would do anything for you. Don’t hate him.”

It was the last thing I’d expected Maverick to say. “Thank you for coming... Thank you for protecting me... I don’t know what to say. I can’t even begin to express how grateful I am that I have you.” More tears poured from my eyes, but now they weren’t from fear. My affection for this man had deepened to a whole new level. I respected him, admired him...and would die for him.

He circled his arms around me and pulled me into his chest. His hand rested against the back of my neck while he cradled me, letting me shed my tears onto his clothes and skin. “I’ll always be your wolf, Sheep.”

MAVERICK

I HID MY ANGER FROM HER.

The last thing she needed was to see me blow up and lose my mind.

I was livid that Kamikaze pulled this stunt right under my nose. He basically declared war on the DeVille family.

Good thing my wife was smart enough to get away.

I was sure that pissed him off.

I drove back into the countryside with her in the passenger seat. Her dress was ripped in the places where he'd grabbed her, and her feet were bloody from running for her life. With her cheek tilted toward the window, she watched the darkness blur past outside. She hadn't said more than two words since we got into the car.

My knuckles were white because I gripped the steering wheel so hard. I was livid that someone had tried to attack her on her way to her car, but I was also pissed that Kamikaze had crossed me like that. I refused to sell her, so he decided just to take her.

Now we openly despised each other.

It would result in a war with lots of casualties...like I didn't have enough on my plate already.

But that wasn't her fault. She couldn't control her beauty, the fascinating allure that surrounded her. And whenever she opened her mouth to sing...she captured the hearts of

everyone in the room. Kamikaze fell under her spell just the way I had so many times...so he had to steal her from me.

Killing Kamikaze wouldn't be easy. He had a lot of loyal men, men who wouldn't stop fighting until their skulls were demolished by bullets. This wasn't the last attempt he would make. He would try again.

So I had to kill him.

It would be much easier if I weren't at war with my father right now. He had a horde of men I could use. Not to mention, he had a disturbed mind obsessed with bloodlust, so he was the perfect ally to have at the moment.

But Arwen had fucked that up.

We returned to the house and walked inside, most of the lights off because it was past midnight. I didn't ask if she wanted something to eat because she probably didn't have an appetite.

We headed to the stairs and started to walk up.

She winced, grabbing the banister for support. Her eyes closed, and she grimaced like the pain in her feet was simply too much.

She was lighter than air, so it was easy for me to scoop her into my arms and pull her to my chest. One arm supported her shoulders while the other hooked underneath her knees. With her cheek pressed into my shirt, I carried her the rest of the way.

I stepped into my bedroom and set her on the bed, feeling the defeat in her limbs. She lay down right away, like she had no energy to remove her torn dress from her body. Kamikaze disturbed her so much that she was practically broken.

With lifeless eyes, she lay there, probably remembering the horrific event again and again.

I pulled the zipper down on the back and got the ruined dress loose before I removed it altogether. I tossed it into the hamper with the intention of throwing it out in the morning. She wouldn't want a reminder of what happened tonight.

I took off her panties too, knowing she wouldn't want those either.

I pulled the sheets down and tucked her inside before I removed my clothes and set my gun on the nightstand. I went into the bathroom and did my nightly routine, washing my face and brushing my teeth before I returned.

She hadn't moved.

I turned off the lamp before I got into bed beside her, her back facing me.

I'd already saved her, but that wasn't enough. She'd had a taste of my world, the cruel reality of dealing with men like me. She'd saved those women from the barn, but she'd never imagined she would be in their shoes herself.

I pressed my chest to her back and wrapped my arm around her waist, reminding her I was there. Surrounded by these four walls and an indestructible fortress, no one could touch us. And even if they could, I would be the last man standing. "You're safe, Sheep. I won't let anything happen to you...I promise." I'd made a vow to her father that I would protect her from the psychopaths that wanted to use her, but my commitment didn't stem from just that. I wanted to keep her safe because that's what she deserved...not to be assaulted in an alleyway.

She turned around and faced me, her blue eyes gazing into mine like she thought I was her hero. Her fingers gently touched my arm, and she was nude under the sheets, her tits barely covered by the thin fabric. She was naked and beautiful, but sex wasn't on my mind. "I know you will, Maverick. It all happened so fast... I haven't had time to process it until now. I was in survival mode and just trying to get to the next place. But now that I'm here, safe and sound, I'm more disgusted by that man than I was before."

He was garbage. "I'll kill him. He won't be around for long."

"He's enormous...the guy was like seven feet tall."

“Doesn’t matter how big he is. He bleeds like everyone else.” A bullet to the skull would kill him just like it would kill me. In hand-to-hand combat, it might be a little different. If he landed a single punch in the wrong spot, he could kill me. But I had speed to compensate for that.

“I still don’t want anything to happen to you. I want him dead, but I don’t want to lose you in the process.” She had been terrified just minutes ago, but now she was worried about me. When her mascara was smeared down her face and her lips were tight with unease, she somehow looked more alluring. When she was scared, she allowed me to console her...and that was sexy.

“No matter what, he needs to die. He crossed me, and I can’t let that go unpunished. And if I don’t kill him, he’ll just try to take you again. In his eyes, you’re already his property. You’re his investment.”

“I’m no one’s property—except yours.”

I did my best to control my dick’s reaction, but it was in vain. My cock hardened automatically at her confession, growing plump and full of blood. But I kept my mind in the game, focusing on what mattered. “He was at the party where you played the piano. We spoke privately while you sang, and he offered me more money. When I refused, he offered me a cut of your profits.”

Her cheeks drained of blood and turned pale. Shock entered her gaze, like her mind couldn’t believe something so vile.

“Then it became clear that he was planning to get you one way or another—so I might as well take his money.”

“Who the hell does he think he is? My father may have scammed him, but that’s not my problem.”

“That’s not how the real world works, unfortunately.”

Her eyes filled with rage, offended that she could be seen as a product rather than a person.

“I have to kill him before he kills me. No other way around it.”

“Can I help?”

I wouldn't let her be anywhere near him again. “No. I have to take care of this on my own.”

“How? You've got men and he's got men. This will be a war.”

“Unless I can figure out a better way of doing it...” An idea came to mind, but I wasn't thrilled about it. It only left me a fifty percent chance of survival, and those odds simply weren't good enough for me. “They call him Kamikaze for a reason. He's unhinged and a psychopath. He's just as likely to kill himself as he is to kill his enemies. He's unafraid of death, so he does crazy-ass shit. That gives him the upper hand because you never know what he might do next.”

“I hate this guy more and more...”

“Sometimes, when he's at a stalemate, he plays Russian roulette with his enemies.”

When her eyes widened, it was obvious she knew exactly what that entailed.

“He's pulled the trigger on himself before...but he managed to survive.” A bullet shattered his skull and sank into his brain, but doctors were somehow able to remove it and keep him breathing. He didn't lose any mental abilities.

“And he still plays it?” she asked incredulously. “That didn't deter him?”

“No. That's why they call him Kamikaze.”

“Well, you aren't doing that. We'll find another way...” She scooted closer to me and rested her head against my chest.

I didn't want my life to be decided by a lone bullet in a barrel, but Kamikaze was too powerful of an opponent to conquer on my own—without my father's help. I was just as likely to die in bullet warfare as I was to roll the dice.

How could my life be worth gambling for Arwen? She was someone I'd been forced to marry, someone I didn't even want when we first met. But now, I really did see myself as her husband...and that's what husbands should do. They should do

whatever it took to protect their wife...even if it meant their own death in the process.

I WOKE up the next morning with her on top of me. She was snuggled so close, her body using mine as a crutch to get through the night. She seemed to feel safer the closer she was. When we were practically a single person, she felt the most secure.

After what she'd been through, I let her get away with whatever she wanted.

My hand stroked her hair, and I admired her beautiful face, loving the beautiful fairness of her cheeks. There wasn't even a freckle on her skin, making her look like a porcelain doll. She had the face that could grace billboards and star in commercials. But instead of being a famous face, she was in my bed.

I stared at her for another minute before I rolled her to her back then scooted out from between the sheets. I skipped a shower and pulled on my clothes before I quietly slipped out the door. I headed downstairs, skipped breakfast, and went to my office at the factory. My workers were producing twice the amount of product we normally shipped, but since my cheese was in demand, we had a lot of orders to fill.

I took advantage of the privacy in my office and made the call I'd been thinking about all night. If I were to avoid it altogether, it would make me seem like a pussy. I didn't have a plan right that second, but it was better to face him without a clue than avoid him instead. I made the call and held the phone to my ear.

Ring.

Ring.

Maybe that asshole wouldn't pick up.

Ring.

His booming voice came over the line, like we were old friends sharing an inside joke. “Maverick. I thought I would be hearing from you today. Was hoping to see you in person...but this will do.”

“Trust me, you don’t want to see me in person right now.”

He laughed. “Ooh...big man.”

I was glad my father and I got out of the business when we did. I didn’t have the energy to deal with crazy people anymore. Kamikaze was a pain in the ass, and every second he was still alive was obnoxious. “I warned you not to cross me.”

“I know,” he said with a chuckle. “But all of that went out the window when you lied. I have a debt that needs to be repaid, and your little bitch owes me.”

“Lied about what?” I never told him a lie because we hardly spoke to each other. I spent most of my time not talking rather than digging myself into a hole I couldn’t get out of. “I have better things to do than be a coward.”

Instead of laughing, he turned quiet and formidable. “Maverick, I know your marriage is a hoax. You cut a deal to get what you needed—and I respect that. But you need to respect the fact that her father owes me millions—and she’s going to give it to me. We can still be allies. This doesn’t need to get ugly. We just need to understand each other.”

I looked out the window, but I couldn’t enjoy the beautiful fall morning we were having. There was dew on the grass and the leaves of the trees. The summer heat had faded away, replaced by an inviting breeze that licked the sweat off the skin. But all I could feel was the deep pounding of my heart, the shock that his announcement gave me. My marriage was bogus, but I didn’t expect him to know that. He seemed confident in his assessment, so someone must have told him... but only a couple people knew the truth.

“Just give her to me, Maverick. You can go back to your bachelor life, and I can get what’s mine. We both walk away winners.”

My dreams would be haunted by her face, and my heart would be scarred by the guilt. I wouldn't be able to close my eyes without thinking about what was happening to her, whether it was Kamikaze or some sheik who'd traveled across the ocean to pay a fortune to fuck her. I'd rather blow my brains out then carry that burden. "Despite what you've heard, it's not a hoax...at least, not anymore. She's my wife and she's mine. She's not for sale, and she's not for the taking."

He was dead quiet, like the phone might have lost the signal. "Looks like her value just went up."

My heart dropped into my stomach.

"She steals the obsession of every man around her... including Maverick DeVille. Her pussy must be one hell of a ride."

"Don't talk about my wife like that."

The sick bastard laughed. "It's nothing personal, Maverick. She's the best investment I'm going to find, and I won't stop until I get her. I suggest you save your own ass and let it be. If you force me to kill you, I will."

Now the line had been drawn in the sand, and there was no going back. War had been declared. My only two options were to fight or surrender.

And I definitely wouldn't surrender. "It looks like you're forcing me to kill you. And I will."

I SHOT two of his men near the front gates and barged into the house from the rear. I knew my childhood home better than he realized, and sneaking into the place wasn't difficult. I broke the window instead of picking the lock just to be an ass.

I made my way inside and found him sitting in the dining room.

Instead of pulling out my gun and pointing it at his head, I stilled in the entryway and stared at him.

He was alone. A decanter of scotch sat beside him along with a full glass in his fingertips. The remains of his dinner looked like fish with a side of lemon. On the wall was a painting of my mother on their wedding day. There was no way for him to have known I was coming, not when I killed his men and got here so quickly.

So this was really him.

Sitting alone in the dark—booze for company.

He looked up and met my gaze, not the least bit surprised by my appearance.

That meant my suspicion was right—he betrayed me.

I stepped into the room, my pistol sitting on my hip. My footsteps sounded loud against the hardwood floor, just the way my mother's heels used to echo when she carried dinner into the room.

He kept his hand on his glass like it was a life raft.

I stopped in front of him, stared into those heartless eyes, and then drew my weapon.

He still didn't flinch. He looked at me and ignored the barrel pointed right in his face. "Perfect solution. Kamikaze wants to torture her—and I want that woman to be tortured." He brought the glass to his lips and took a long drink.

I cocked the gun. "And you're willing to die for that solution?"

"Die?" he asked. "You're my son. I know how weak you are."

I pressed the tip of the barrel right against his skull.

He still didn't react. "Then do it."

My hand started to shake as my finger held the trigger. All I had to do was make a quick squeeze and his brains would explode on the wall behind him. My mother was dead, and my father would join her. It was probably exactly what he wanted—since there was nothing left for him in the land of the living.

With a bored expression on his face, he watched the gun shake in my hand. “You aren’t going to do it, so don’t bother with the gesture.” He lifted his hand and gently pushed my gun aside.

I dropped it, feeling like less of a man for not pulling the trigger. “That’s the difference between you and me. You’re an asshole who will kill his own son. I won’t kill my own father.”

“It’s still better than threatening to do something that you’ll never do. It hurts your credibility, makes you seem weak. Next time you point that gun at my head, have some balls and actually shoot. At least I’ll have some respect for you if you do.”

My shoulders sagged in defeat, and I stared at my father with new eyes. Just when I thought my opinion couldn’t get any lower, he somehow made it possible. “I can’t kill you because you’re going to help me.”

“Do what?” he asked, his eyebrow raised.

“You started this mess with Kamikaze. You’ll finish it.”

His eyes shifted away, and he chuckled. “Actually, I didn’t...” His underlying meaning hung in the air, but he never elaborated. He kept whatever secret he had to himself.

I refused to play his game, so I didn’t ask. “We’re going to take him out together. I’m not letting him take my wife.”

“Stop calling her that. She’s just a pawn in a big chess game.”

“No. You’re the pawn now.” I tapped his shoulder with my gun. “You’re going to help me keep her safe.”

“I’m not, Maverick. I wouldn’t have told Kamikaze the truth if that were the case. He’ll get rid of her, and that will fix our problems.”

“No, it’ll fix your problem...if you can even call it a problem. Mom is dead. Arwen isn’t going to change that.”

“But she’s a little bitch who deserves what’s coming to her.” He clenched his jaw as if he hated her more than Ramon.

Now I looked at my father with new eyes. He was a psychopath like Kamikaze, just in his own way. “You did a really fucked-up thing when you went behind my back and told Kamikaze the marriage is bogus. If you ever want to make it up to me, you’ll help me kill him. Otherwise, I’ll never forgive you.”

He took another drink of his scotch, uninterested in what I’d said. “All I care about is putting that little bitch in the ground. I don’t care about your forgiveness, and I certainly don’t want it.”

Why couldn’t I just lift my gun and kill him on the spot? Was my father right when he called me weak? He was just as guilty as Kamikaze. He didn’t deserve a free pass just because of our relationship. He wouldn’t hesitate to kill me, so I should do the same. But when I looked at that man, I still saw childhood memories. I still saw birthday parties and afternoons when he taught me how to kick a ball. I still remembered Christmas and every other beautiful moment we had.

So I couldn’t do it.

I was livid that he’d risked my wife.

I was livid that he was a terrible father.

I was livid that he became such a piece of shit.

But I still couldn’t do it.

Maybe I was weak.

I turned around and left the dining room, unable to stare at his arrogant expression a moment longer. I turned around at the threshold and barely made eye contact when I said my final words. “If Mother is watching down on us right now... she’s so disappointed in you.”

“I HAVE A SHOW TONIGHT, but I don’t know what to do. After what happened the other night...I’m not sure I want to go back.” She stared at her dress with her back turned to me, her

arms crossed over her chest. Her perfect frame was beautiful in just the black thong she wore, her curves so enticing, I was practically salivating.

I wanted to throw her onto the bed and fuck her.

But it would be insensitive to rush into things. I'd heard her whimpers and cries over the phone when Kamikaze had her pinned. I heard him threaten to rape her right in the open. I didn't have a visual on the moment, but the mental picture was enough to haunt me. She was the one who actually lived it. "I'll send my men with you. They'll keep you safe."

"No." She eyed a black dress hanging in front of her, but she didn't take it. "I don't trust anyone."

"You can't give up your part in the opera. Don't let some asshole make you change your life."

"It's a small compromise not to be raped." She shut the closet doors and turned back to me, her perfect tits on display.

It was hard to have a serious conversation with her when she looked like that. I kept my eyes locked on to hers and resisted the temptation to stare at her hard nipples and beautiful curves. "I'll go with you."

She tightened her arms across her chest, blocking her tits from view. "You will?"

I nodded. "I'll sit in the audience. And then I'll walk you to your car." I wasn't much better than a group of men assigned to the job, but she obviously felt more comfortable with me than anyone else. I had other things to do, like plotting my revenge against Kamikaze, but I couldn't let Arwen give up all her joys because of her fear.

"You'd do that?"

"You must know by now that I would do anything for you." When I drove to Florence to rescue her from Kamikaze, I was putting my life on the line. Anytime I went head-to-head with that man, it was a dangerous game. He didn't play by the rules like everyone else, so you never knew what trick he might pull. He didn't exactly have a code of ethics like most

people. That was probably why he'd survived so many decades.

Arwen's father's cancer was a bit of unexpected luck, if you asked me. He'd died on a morphine drip in the hospital, holding his daughter's hand as he passed peacefully in his sleep. If Kamikaze had gotten his hands on him, his death would have been excruciating.

"I just know you're busy..."

"This isn't forever." I opened the doors of her closet and grabbed the black dress off the hanger. "I'll take care of him eventually, and you'll have your freedom back. You'll have more freedom than you've ever had before."

"When are you going to kill him?" She unzipped the back of the dress and began to step into it.

"Not sure yet." How did you kill a monster like that without losing too many men in the process? If nuclear weapons weren't so destructive, that would be a good option. "But let me worry about that."

She got the dress on then turned around so I could zip it up the rest of the way.

I dragged the zipper to the base of her neck, making the dress mold to her perfectly. She had the most fascinating curves, a petite woman who had a real ass and impressive tits. Everything about her was perfect. I hadn't noticed when we first met because I was oblivious to everything around me. I'd decided to hate her before I even met her because of the situation. Maybe if I'd met her in a bar or somewhere else, I would have appreciated her beauty the way everyone else did.

She turned back around, giving me a slight smile even though her eyes were still full of hesitation.

"I confronted my father last night. He's the one who told Kamikaze our marriage was a lie."

Her eyes fell as her lips pressed tightly together.

"That was why Kamikaze went after you. He knows about the deal we made. He considers you to be his, the debt your

father never repaid. It's clear that one of us will have to kill each other before we find peace."

"It'd better be you," she whispered. "It has to be you..."

"I know." I wished it were that easy.

She moved into me and pressed her forehead against my chest. Her arms rested on mine, and she closed her eyes, doing her best to stay calm even though it was obvious she was scared. "Let me help you. We can do this together."

"I don't want you anywhere near him."

"But I can be bait. I can lure him out somewhere and—"

"No. I'll take care of it on my own."

She pulled away and lifted her gaze again. "You don't have to. I know you made a promise to my father—"

"That's not the only reason why. You saved those women because it was the right thing to do. I'm going to save you because it's the right thing to do. I would never be able to sleep ever again if something happened to you. So, I will handle this." I wasn't looking forward to the confrontation. Anytime two armies met on the battlefield, almost all the men died. Bullets were wasted over money, even though both sides were rich. Or they were wasted over women. In some ways, that was worse. I dropped her embrace and pulled away. "We should get going."

ARWEN

KNOWING MAVERICK WAS OUT THERE GAVE ME THE GREATEST sense of security I would ever find. He was just one man with one gun, but he made me feel so safe. I preferred his protection over a dozen men who were strangers. At least my husband actually cared about me. He wasn't holding a gun for a paycheck. He was doing it because my life was invaluable to him.

I finished the performance then returned backstage. The cast and crew moved around like every other night, giving each other hugs and kisses in celebration. My eyes kept drifting to the mirror to see the reflection behind me, to make sure the large man with the frightening smile wasn't staring at me like last night. The second we'd made eye contact, a warning burned in my stomach. If I had better sense, I wouldn't have walked to my car by myself in the middle of the night.

I kept looking in the reflection but saw no sign of him. It seemed too obvious to hit me at the opera again, but maybe it was so obvious that it would cause me to drop my guard... making it the perfect opportunity.

I unclasped my earrings then pulled the dozens of pins out of my hair, knowing Maverick would be there any minute.

I'd been struggling with an internal demon for the last few days. All of this happened after I confronted Caspian at the rehab center. Our conversation had to be the trigger that set

him off, that made him run to Kamikaze in the first place. That was his punishment for the stunt I pulled.

Seemed harsh to me.

I didn't want to tell Maverick the truth because it would probably piss him off. He would be livid with me for going behind his back once again. But it seemed wrong to leave him in the dark, to not tell him this vital piece of information. If Caspian told Kamikaze that, what else did he say?

Maybe they were both plotting against us.

Maverick appeared behind me, his hands moving to my shoulders as I sat on my stool.

The second I felt his touch, all the tension left the muscles across my frame. An invisible blanket of protection surrounded me, made me feel invincible. His affection was like a drug to me. He made me feel so many degrees of happy.

I pulled the last pin out of my hair and rose to my feet to greet him. Handsome as always, he wore a well-fitted suit with a dark tie. At over six feet, he was tall, dark, and sexy. When I looked into those brown eyes, I knew I never wanted to look at anyone else again. I didn't want to take another lover. I didn't want to meet a man at a bar when I could go home to the man I actually wanted.

And I didn't just want him because of the way he protected me.

His arms slid around my waist. "You were amazing...as always."

"You'd say that even if I weren't."

"True." He smiled as he leaned in and kissed me on the mouth. "But that's a good thing...because you can never go wrong." He kissed me again before he pulled away, stopping the affection before it escalated from PG-13 to X.

"Is this your husband?" Ruby was one of my costars. We sang a duet together in the middle of the show. With pearls around her neck and a smile on her face, she looked Maverick up and down with approval.

“Yes, it is. Maverick this is my costar Ruby.”

Maverick took her hand and kissed her on the cheek. “Lovely to meet you.”

“You too. Well, I’ll let you lovebirds enjoy your night.” She walked away behind Maverick then mouthed, “Damn, he’s hoooooot.” She winked then kept walking.

I stopped the smile from spreading across my face.

Maverick had a glint of humor in his eyes, like he knew something.

“What?”

“I’m hot, huh?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, keeping a straight face.

“There are mirrors everywhere. Tell her I said thank you.”

MAVERICK KEPT his arm around my waist as he walked me to the car. It was dark, with the occasional streetlight illuminating the stairs and sidewalk.

I kept looking up and down the street, waiting to see if three large men would emerge from the shadows.

But no one ever did.

“I have men watching the entire block.” He kept his eyes forward as he guided me to the black car. He opened the passenger door. “They aren’t here.”

I got into the seat, and then we drove away. My eyes kept scanning the darkness for anything unusual until the buildings passed and it was just the open road.

Maverick drove with one hand on the wheel. “He won’t try the same thing twice.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because it would be stupid to repeat the same experiment twice and expect different results. You’re on your guard now. I’m armed. It would just be a waste of ammo at this point. He doesn’t want to hurt you. He wants you to be in perfect condition for his purpose. So, he’s not gonna shoot up the entire street and hope he kills me and all my men without touching you. Too much of a gamble.”

“Do you think he’d try to break in to the house?”

“No. That would require a lot of manpower. The smart thing would be to draw us out somewhere and then do it.”

“Well, that’s not going to work on me. I’m not going shopping or to the movies anytime soon.”

He sped through the darkness while keeping his eyes on the road. “If he’s smart, he’ll try to take me instead of you.”

I turned my head his way.

“Because he’ll use me to get you to surrender.”

And it would work.

“But we can’t let that happen.”

“No...we can’t.” The last thing I wanted was to be raped and tortured until someone finally killed me, but I would prefer that over something happening to Maverick. I’d rather be raped a million times than let anyone hurt him.

“If that ever does happen, don’t do it.”

“You know I would.”

“But it would be a waste. He would get you out of hiding and kill me anyway. Trust me on that. That’s how he plays.”

I pulled one knee to my chest and looked out the window, taking comfort in the darkness that surrounded us. It was difficult to hide in a luscious landscape like this. Headlights were visible from a mile away.

Maverick was quiet for the rest of the drive home.

We pulled into the garage minutes later, then headed inside. Now that I felt safe behind the walls along the

perimeter and inside the stone structure of the house, I was exhausted. My body was so tense with discomfort because I'd spent all my energy being prepared for the seven-foot monster to jump out of nowhere.

I didn't bother going to my bedroom to change first. I headed straight for his bedroom and let him unzip the back of my dress. Once it came loose, I let it fall to the ground and then got into bed.

Maverick took his time pulling out his belongings from his pockets. His wallet sat on the dresser along with his watch. His phone came next. In clothes like that, he looked like one in a million. With beautiful golden skin and soft eyes made of caramel, he was as beautiful as he was delicious.

He stripped off his jacket and tossed it on the armchair then pulled his tie loose. Slowly, he unfastened each of the buttons on his collared shirt until he peeled it off and revealed a tight eight-pack with perfectly tanned skin. His body was so strong, practically bulletproof.

He loosened his belt and pushed his slacks down as he kicked off his shoes. Items of clothing fell to the floor until he stood in just his boxers, his thighs muscular and tight. Dark hair covered his calves and thighs, but it stopped at his waist. His torso was a smooth surface of muscle and skin.

His ass was the best part. It was tight and built like a brick house.

I could stare at his perfection all night long, watch it like it was a dirty movie.

But instead of it being fake, it was real...because he was the man I married.

He grabbed his phone and checked a few things before he made his way to the bed, his eyes still on his phone. He stopped at his nightstand, like he was prepared to put it down once he was finished reading whatever was on his screen.

I rose onto my knees then yanked down the front of his boxers, revealing a soft cock that was still impressive in its size.

He lowered his phone and looked down at me, his cock thickening instantaneously.

I put it between my lips and started to suck, feel it fill my mouth like an inflating balloon.

A quiet moan escaped his lips, and he tossed his phone onto the nightstand like he didn't give a damn.

On all fours with my ass in the air, I did my best, but his dick quickly became too big for my mouth so I only stuffed half of it inside. My tongue flattened, and I pushed it as deep as I could without causing my throat to gag. It was the first time I'd put his dick in my mouth, and I wasn't sure what had taken so long. I'd never been a fan of giving head, but I didn't mind doing this in the least. This was a cock that should be kissed, should be licked, should be eaten. It deserved it at all.

His hand moved into my hair, and he kept it out of my face as he watched me, transfixed by the way I sucked his big dick into my little mouth.

He got a little bigger and a little thicker, and tears sprang to my eyes because of the pressure on my throat. I struggled to breathe and keep my jaw unhinged like this, to arch my neck perfectly to suck his dick just right. The tears streaked down my face, just as they did when he made me come.

His hand cupped my cheek, and he brushed his thumb over my tear, smearing it across his finger as he watched me suck him off. He brought it to his mouth and tasted it, like he wanted to know how salty my tears were. "Look at me."

My eyes lifted to meet his as I kept sucking his dick. I stared at the beautiful man as he stood over me, as he watched me enjoy him so expressively. I wished I could take more of him, but this was all my anatomy could handle. He seemed to enjoy it all the same.

"You know how to suck dick."

Only when I felt like it.

He grabbed my neck and slowly pulled his dick out of my mouth. Once it left my tongue, it bounced down and hung

between his legs, the veins thick and visible and the blood making his skin turn slightly red.

He pulled open his nightstand and grabbed a condom.

His black wedding ring sat there too, something he hadn't touched since our wedding day.

Then he shut the drawer again.

I was tired of using condoms. I was tired of feeling the latex separate us when we were monogamous. I wanted to feel this man come inside me, feel him fill me the way a husband should fill his wife.

But he rolled on the condom without thinking twice about it.

He got on top of me, widened my legs with his thighs, and then sank into me with an appreciative moan.

Once he was inside me, I stopped thinking about the layer between us. I just thought about him and those beautiful espresso eyes as they looked into mine. My hands were in his hair, and my lips were on his. Together, we moved our bodies, feeling each other and enjoying each other like there was nothing else in the world we would rather be doing. I breathed hard against his mouth as he picked up his pace, slamming into me good and hard. Soon, we were both covered in sweat, both lost in the clouds of desire.

“You feel so fucking good...” I grabbed his ass and pulled him deep inside me, thinking about Ruby's comment at the theater. She thought he was hot, just like everyone else. But I was his wife—the only woman in his bed. He was mine and no one else's.

He moaned as he pounded into me harder, his powerful legs keeping my knees apart. He panted with the exertion, his temples flushing red because he was consumed by the sex.

I'd never had sex this good with anyone else. It was either attributed to Maverick's bedroom skills...or he was the man I was most attracted to. It took two to tango, and we danced together so well, especially when he took the lead.

“I’m gonna come...” I gripped the back of his neck and felt my body tighten around him. His dick felt so much bigger when my pussy constricted in the explosion. It made clenching around his dick so much better, gripping it like I didn’t want to let go.

“Yes, Sheep.” He held his face above mine and watched me, sweat dripping from his forehead onto my skin. “Come for me.”

After the way Kamikaze had assaulted me, I thought sex would be the last thing on my mind. But rape and sex were two different things, so they weren’t related in my head. Making love to my husband was good and pure, borderline beautiful. It was so different that it couldn’t be compared, being blanketed by affection from this man as he took me deep into the night. My nails dug into his ass as I finished, as I gushed around his cock with a climax that made my toes curl.

Once I was finished, he slowed down. He always brought things to a slower pace when he was about to explode. He wanted to make it last as long as possible, to enjoy the moment when he filled the tip of the condom with his ecstasy. With his gaze focused on mine, he gave his final pumps, his brown eyes filled with deep longing.

“Give it to me, Wolf.” I wanted him to combust in a fiery explosion the way I did, to receive an enormous reward for all the work he’d just done. I wanted his body to go haywire, for his hips to buck automatically as the pleasure burst in every single vein. The only thing I wished was that there was nothing between us, that he would fill me with all the come that was about to go into that condom.

He rested his head against mine as he finished, as he grunted through the pleasure that made his back tighten. His dick thickened inside me, and he shuddered as the euphoria came to an end. He slowly softened on top of me, filling the condom and turning limp soon afterward. His face rested in my neck, and we breathed as our sweat smeared against each other’s bodies.

My fingers moved into his hair and gently caressed the strands as I still felt him between my legs. I loved his weight on top of me, like a suit of armor that would deflect any bullet directed at me.

He finally got off and went into the bathroom to clean off.

I was still warm and sweaty, so I lay with the sheets kicked off, the moisture slowly evaporating from my skin.

He returned moments later, cold water splashed across his face. He turned off the lamp and got into bed beside me, sticking to his side because he was probably still hot. The dark surrounded us, enveloped us.

The shadows acting as a curtain, I tried to hide behind them as much as possible. “There’s something I have to tell you...” I focused my gaze on the ceiling so I wouldn’t have to see the anger corroding his face.

“What’s your secret?”

“It’s gonna make you angry.”

He sighed in the darkness, his anger slowly replacing the sexy ambiance we’d just had a moment ago. “At least you’re getting me prepared.”

“I asked your sister to bring your father to the rehab center so I could talk to him. He was sitting in the dining room when I surprised him. I sat down, and we had a long chat...”

Maverick didn’t give any reaction to what I said, but the silence was so damn loud. He could express so much disdain with so little effort. His anger made the temperature of the room rise a few degrees, slowly getting hotter until we both started to boil. He turned on his side and propped himself up, looking down at me with an expression that was more lethal than a bullet. “You went behind my back...again?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“No, that’s exactly what it was like.” He didn’t raise his voice, but he didn’t need to. His anger was potent. “After all this time, do you really not understand how dangerous my father is? What he could have done to you?”

“He wasn’t armed—”

“He doesn’t need to be armed to kill you. His bare hands are more than enough.”

In hindsight, it did feel stupid...especially with everything else that followed. “I tried to repair your relationship with him. I told him how sorry I was about his wife... I told him you wanted to have a better relationship with him.”

Maverick rolled his eyes. “That’s the dumbest thing you could have said to him.”

“Yeah, I realize that now.”

“He doesn’t give a shit about that. All he cares about is what he wants—which is killing you.”

Obviously.

“You provoked him, and his response was to tattle on me to Kamikaze. I won’t hand you over, so he’s letting that psychopath do his dirty work. This is why you don’t do shit without my authorization.” He got out of bed and gripped his skull. “You think you know better, but you don’t know a damn thing—”

“That’s not why I did it. I just wanted you to get your father back—”

“And that’s never going to happen. I know that better than anyone.” He opened the bedroom door. “Get out, Arwen.”

I sat up in bed, shocked that he wanted me to leave when I was buck naked and still sweaty.

He kept his hand on the door. “Go.”

“I don’t want to go.”

“I don’t give a shit. You went behind my back a second time—”

“I was trying to help—”

“You trying to help is going to get you raped and me killed.” He grabbed me by the wrist and yanked me out of bed.

“With all the shit I’ve done for you, this is how you repay me? You do realize that I would die for you, right?”

I faced him as the tears welled up in my eyes. “I’m so sorry...”

“That’s not enough. An apology is just an admission of wrongdoing.”

“That’s not what my apology means. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I was just trying to help you—”

“Get out.” He dropped his chin and stared at the floor, like he didn’t want to look at me a second longer.

I didn’t step into the hallway. This bedroom was my sanctuary. This man was my protector. My bedroom was all the way on the other side of the house, and that was too far. “Please let me stay with you... You’re the only reason I can sleep at night.”

With one hand on his hip, he continued to stand there and look down at the ground. His chest rose and fell with his deep breathing because he was continuing to combat the rage.

I stayed put. “I don’t want to leave you... Don’t make me go.”

Something I said must have changed his mind because he shut the door. Without looking at me, he walked back to bed. His heavy body fell on the sheets, and he lay there, his eyes on the ceiling.

I returned to bed and gave him his space. I wanted to cuddle into his side and apologize again, but I knew he didn’t want to hear it. The only reason he’d let me stay was because I practically begged.

He didn’t have the heart to kick me out when he knew I was scared.

I turned on my side and looked at him, knowing he would never meet my gaze. “I thought if I put your family back together...you would be happy.”

He was quiet. With his eyes on the ceiling and a still body, he seemed oblivious to what I said. “The only way you can put

my family back together is if you bring my mother back from the dead. My father only cares about her, not the rest of us.”

It seemed that way, but I couldn't believe that was really true.

“I'm trying to keep the promise I made to your father. But if you keep undermining me, that's never going to happen. You say we're a team, but you never act like it. You take matters into your own hands like you have some master plan that's going to save us all. You're just a stupid girl who doesn't understand a goddamn thing. Know your place.”

Those words stung because I'd heard them before—from his father's lips. In his anger, he was just like the man who raised him. They possessed the same heartless coldness, the same harshness. “Maverick.” I reached across the bed and rested my fingertips against his arm. “I don't remember exactly when it happened, but something is different between us. There's something here, a bond deeper than friendship and desire. We care about each other very much, would easily take a bullet for each other. There's been no other man in my bed because you're the only person that I want...and I know you feel the same way.”

“What's your point?” he asked coldly.

“My point is...I had good intentions. It doesn't make it right. Doesn't make me less ill-advised. But I was trying to help you, trying to take the most diplomatic approach. I was doing it for you...because you mean everything to me. I'll never do anything behind your back again.”

“You've said that before.”

“But now I really mean it. You and I...we're a team.” I rested my hand on his and hoped he would reciprocate my affection.

But his hand lay there, lifeless.

“It's you and I...forever.” Now, I wasn't married to his man because I had to be. I was married to him because I wanted to be. There was no other man I could picture spending my life with. No other man could compare to what I already

had. I wanted Kamikaze to be killed and Caspian to disappear. With our enemies out of the way, it could just be us...together.

When I least expected it, his fingers came to life and squeezed my hand.

And I squeezed his back.

MAVERICK

I STUDIED THE WAY SHE HELD THE GUN. HER FINGERS GRIPPED the handle, but she was so inexperienced that it was tilted slightly sideways. If she pulled the trigger, she would miss the target by several feet. “Like this.” I grabbed her wrist and righted it.

“I’m not that bad, am I?”

“When I walked into the apartment, you pointed that gun at me with the safety on. If I could tell, so could he.” I guided her fingers to hit the button and turn off the safety. “Always have this on when the gun is in your purse or on your hip. But don’t forget to turn it off the second you draw it.”

She aimed the gun at the red target in the field. The cows were in the barn, so they wouldn’t run off and accidentally get hit.

I grabbed her elbow and straightened her arm. “Use your other hand to support you.” I placed her other hand on the gun. I’d been using guns since I was fifteen years old, so it was so obvious to me when someone couldn’t handle one. “When you fire, there will be a bit of a kickback. Shoot.”

She closed one eye and tried to aim closer in on her target, her shoulders tight and her posture rigid.

I stepped back, already knowing the outcome before she even pulled the trigger.

Her fingers squeezed the trigger—and she missed. The loud bang reverberated over the land of my estate, like an echo

that could shatter eardrums. The cows started to moo in the barn, hearing the sound just as well as we could.

I came back to her side. “Keep the gun steady. If you shake, the second you pull the trigger, you’re never going to hit anything.”

“They make it look so easy in the movies...”

“It is easy. You just have to know what you’re doing.” I helped her set up once more. “Again.” I stepped back.

She aimed once more. This time, she hit the target—but at the very edge.

I came back to her and tilted her head. “If you focus on the circle here, it’ll help you hit your mark.”

“I never see you use it.”

“When you get the hang of it, you don’t need it. Guns like these are used for close range. When a guy is standing right in front of you, you should be able to hit him without aiming.” I moved several feet behind her.

She kept shooting, emptying the barrel as her bullets flew through the air. She finally hit the target every time—and even got a bull’s-eye.

“Reload.” I came to her side and handed her the ammo.

She grabbed the box and pointed the gun down to access the barrel.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What?”

I hit the button for the safety. “Always turn that on if you aren’t using it—especially when you’re loading ammo while the gun is pointed at your feet.”

I WAS CAUGHT up at work, but I chose to sit in my office just to be out of the house.

I was still pissed at my wife.

Even if she meant well, she still tiptoed around behind my back. Nothing I hated more than a stupid person thinking they were smart. She was idiotic for thinking she could approach my father for a heartfelt one-on-one conversation.

She really thought it would be that simple?

I sat at my desk and enjoyed a cigar while I looked out the window. I'd trained Arwen to use a gun, and she was proficient enough to be able to kill someone who charged her at close range.

At least she had a resource if I wasn't around.

I had every right to be upset and kick her out of my bedroom, but when she'd asked to stay, I couldn't refuse.

This woman made me so fucking soft.

Maybe my father was right. I really was weak.

It was embarrassing to have your wife fight your battles for you, to admit I had a broken heart and I missed the way my family used to be.

Pussy shit.

Of course, my father didn't care.

I leaned back in the leather chair and kept smoking, letting the nicotine calm my body. I still hadn't figured out what to do about Kamikaze. Would I round up every man I had and provoke him into uncharted territory? That seemed stupid.

But waiting for him to ambush me was stupider.

There was a real possibility Kamikaze would kill me and Arwen would become a slave.

Death wasn't what I feared most—it was the latter.

Kamikaze respected me, so he would make the kill clean. He would just shoot me in between the eyes and put me down. There would be no torture or humiliation. For a psychopath, he could be pragmatic at times. My fate would be far more bearable than what Arwen would have to suffer through.

That was why I had to win.

For her.

But how did you defeat a man like him? We had become allies because it would be stupid to be enemies. Our Italian blood ran deep in the soil, back several generations. There was mutual respect for our culture. He did illegal shit; I did illegal shit. But we kept our mouths shut and looked the other way.

But then Arwen's father ruined all of that.

This never would have happened if my father hadn't forced me to marry her. We never would have met, so her fate wouldn't have mattered to me. People were tortured and killed every day. It was irrelevant.

But even if I could back in time and change things...I wouldn't.

“So much for working late.”

I turned around and saw Arwen standing in the doorway, her arms crossed over her chest with threat in her eyes. She glanced at the cigar sitting between my fingertips then looked at me with a promise of punishment.

She sauntered into the room and approached my desk. In jeans and a t-shirt, she was prepared for the cool breeze outside the house. Fall was deepening, and now summer was just a memory.

She snatched the cigar out of my hand. “What did we talk about?”

“You're going to berate me for smoking, but you're the one who snuck behind my back and cornered my father?” I took the cigar back and placed it between my lips. “I'm the only thing standing between you and Kamikaze. If I want to smoke, I'll fucking smoke.” I puffed heavily, refusing to participate in this husband and wife routine. She really did feel like the lady of the house.

“If you want to live, you won't.” She pulled the cigar out of my mouth and stabbed it in the ashtray.

I had all the power in the relationship. I could backhand her across the face and kick her out of my office. I could do anything I wanted, and she would have no power to stop me. But I let her boss me around, let her take away my cigars like she owned me.

“Keep drinking. But stop smoking.”

“Life is short. If the smoke doesn’t kill me, something else will.”

“And what if something else doesn’t?” she questioned. “I need you to live a long and healthy life.”

“Why? With me gone, you would inherit an immense amount of wealth.”

She tilted her head slightly, offended by that statement. “I would rather be poor with you by my side than live in that mansion alone.” Her sincerity was obvious in the tone of her voice, the way she held my gaze with hurt in her eyes.

My father thought I was weak. My sister lived in a different reality. Arwen seemed to be the only person who cared about me for me—with all my good qualities and my flaws. It didn’t seem to matter what I did; her affection was unconditional.

“No more smoking, Maverick. I mean it.” She opened the top drawer of my desk and found my stash of cigars. She grabbed them and dumped them in the scotch sitting beside me.

I stared at the damage then looked back at her. “That’s €5,000 scotch.”

“Then it really taught you a lesson.” She leaned toward me, gripping the back of my chair for support. “Don’t let me catch you smoking again. I promise you’ll regret it.”

I stared into her eyes and watched the fire dance. When I got lost in the beauty of her face, I forgot how much she’d just pissed me off, how she’d destroyed my cigars and my prized booze. All I could think about was the sexy curve of her bottom lip, the way I’d kissed it just the night before. This

woman infuriated me, but she somehow earned my respect at the same time.

She straightened and dropped her hand from the chair. “When are you coming home?”

“When I finish my drink and cigar.”

“Well, I took care of that.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“Then I guess I’m coming home now.” I pushed the chair back and rose to my feet, my height towering over her petite size.

She tilted her chin automatically to meet my gaze. Her long brown hair was a curtain around her shoulders, and her white t-shirt set off the beautiful color of her eyes. Even when she wasn’t in a ball gown singing her heart out to her admirers, she was still absolutely stunning.

She planted her hand against my chest and rose onto her tiptoes, slowly bringing her lips to mine. When they came together, she gave me the softest kiss, her lips tasting like red wine. She closed her eyes while she enjoyed it, then pulled away.

Kissing her felt natural. Kissing was usually the prelude to sex, but with Arwen, it wasn’t necessarily the prelude to anything. Sometimes, it happened...just to happen. And it felt good all on its own even if it didn’t develop into something more. It was about the affection, the connection.

She pulled her hand away from my chest. “I hope you aren’t still mad at me.”

“You know how stubborn I am.”

“Yes...but I also know how forgiving you are.”

“When have I ever been forgiving?”

“You’ve forgiven me once. You let your father live because you still see the good in him...even if it’s not there. You’re a lot more compassionate than you give yourself credit for, Maverick.”

I'd held that gun to his forehead, and I didn't pull the trigger. That was a sign of weakness, not compassion. "That's not a good thing."

She interlocked our fingers then guided me out of the office. "I disagree."

WITHOUT WAITING FOR PERMISSION, she made herself at home in my bedroom.

She left her clothes and accessories in her room on the other side of the house, but she helped herself to my bed every night—like it was half hers.

I sat up in bed and scrolled through my phone when she walked inside. Sometimes I thought I should object to the direction this relationship was going. It started off casual, but now it actually felt like a marriage. We were a man and a woman who slept together every single night. I never verbally agreed to that. It just happened.

I didn't mind it. But I didn't like the position it put me in.

I lifted my gaze from my phone, not prepared for what I was about to see.

In an open silk robe, she stood wearing black lingerie with garters on her thighs. Little black bows adorned the silk of her thong and bra, and her dark makeup made her look ready for a photo shoot.

My phone slipped from my grasp and landed in my lap.

She sauntered farther into the room, her eyes locked on me like I was the only man in her thoughts. She approached the bed because I was immobile, still surprised at what I was witnessing.

I didn't see lingerie often. My flings were too short for that kind of planning.

She pulled the robe off her shoulders, and it slipped to the floor. Then she pushed her black thong over her hips and let it

slide down her legs until it joined the other article of clothing. Her pussy was perfectly shaved, her cute clit ready for my pelvic bone.

I was still rigid because I couldn't process what I was looking at. My cock practically pierced my boxers, and my throat ran dry because she was so stunning. She had the perfect body to show off that lingerie.

She climbed onto the bed then straddled my hips, my boxers at my thighs so she could slowly sink down until I was perfectly situated inside her. Her hands reached behind her back and unclasped her bra. When the material was gone and her tits were on display, she really looked phenomenal.

I stared at her tits before my eyes flicked up to lock on hers again.

“I want to show you how sorry I am...” She palmed against my chest and sat directly on my dick, her soft slit smearing my length with her slickness.

I closed my eyes because it felt so good, to feel bare pussy like that. I'd never been with a woman without a condom, only fingered them. Feeling just a bead of her arousal was like a drop of heaven.

Her arms circled my neck, and she pressed her tits against my chest, her hard nipples dragging lightly against me. Her mouth was close to mine, her soft lips desperate for my kiss.

I had the most beautiful woman on my lap—and she was my wife. “I forgive you...”

“I haven't even done anything yet,” she whispered against my mouth.

My hands squeezed her hips, and a shiver ran up my spine. “That's how good you are.”

MY DRIVER PULLED up to the entrance of the theater, and I got out of the car, taking Arwen's hand so I could help her to her

feet. She was in a stunning black dress, the fabric hugging her sexy frame perfectly.

I pulled her close and guided her up the stairs.

“It’ll be nice to go to the theater without performing in it.” Covered in diamonds and looking every bit like a DeVille, she was my crown jewel. Her hair was in tight curls, and she had it pinned back to show off her perfect face.

“Don’t be surprised if they ask you to sing at some point.”

“And I’ll oblige...because they won’t take no.”

The usher guided us to the private box where I was meeting the guys. The show had already begun, so we greeted each other quietly then took our seats.

Her hand immediately went to my thigh, her wedding ring shining in the darkness.

My hand rested on top of hers, and I glanced at her beside me. She was already focused on the stage, her eyes reflecting the bright lights. A slight smile was on her lips as she immediately became absorbed in the story.

She didn’t notice me looking at her, so I continued to enjoy my vantage point. The light hit her cheeks perfectly, showing off the beautiful contours of her face. Her bow-shaped lips were phenomenal in that red lipstick. She outshone all the actors onstage, dulled the beauty of the other women.

When she worked for my forgiveness, she got more than just that.

The show was over an hour later, and the lights came on as we rose to our feet. Now, proper introductions were made. I introduced my wife to the few people who hadn’t met her yet, and everyone else who did know her was thrilled to see her once more.

We were escorted to a private room in the back of the theater, a fancy dining hall where the aristocrats used to have their private meals after the conclusion of the show. High-top tables were everywhere, and large windows gave prime views

of the city. Waiters passed with glasses of champagne and trays appetizers.

She sipped her champagne and watched the occupancy of the room rise, more people from our party joining us. “I never expected a man like you to attend so many parties. You seem like someone who would be home every single night if he had the choice.”

“Networking is the most important aspect of business.” It was how I got eighty percent of my business, just from a mere introduction. Other acquaintances vouched for me, and then my credibility was established. “But you’re right.” I took a sip of my champagne. “I hate this shit.”

“Good thing you have me. I think I’m a little more approachable.”

She was definitely my better half. “A lot more, actually.” My arm curled around her waist as more people came up to us for a chitchat. Everyone recognized her from the opera because going to the theater was the biggest hobby for most of them. They got lost in conversation, and naturally, I was forgotten.

I didn’t mind. If I could be a fly on the wall, I would be.

I excused myself to get another drink, but I never made it to the bar.

Standing in the corner making small talk with someone was the seven-foot asshole I hated.

His eyes shifted to mine, and he raised his glass like he was giving a toast. His pearly white teeth reflected the light from the chandelier. They were so bright, it was obvious they weren’t real. He’d had dentures put in his mouth long ago after all his teeth got punched out.

He was probably armed, but so was I.

I remained calm and didn’t seem the least bit offended by his presence. I continued to the bar, ordered my drink like everything was fine, and then made my way over just as his guest stepped away.

“Nice party.” His flute of champagne was particularly small in his large grasp. He downed it until it was empty then placed it on a passing tray. His hands slid into his pockets as he surveyed the guests at the party.

Knowing he was only twenty feet from my wife made my blood boil. I knew what he’d tried to do to her, how he intended to use her to line his pockets with gold. The anger was so paramount that I was motionless. All I could do was stare at him. The second I reached for my gun, he would reach for his—and a lot of people would die.

“Your wife looks good in diamonds.”

“Because she is a diamond.”

He chuckled. “That’s a good way to put it.”

“What’s your plan? Take her in front of three hundred people?”

“No. If I made a scene, I would never get invited again.”

How did he get invited to begin with? “I have a feeling you weren’t given an invitation in the first place.”

He smiled, showing his obnoxiously white teeth. “Just talk like you’re rich, and people think you’re rich. That’s all you have to do to survive at these hoity-toity social parties.” When another waiter walked by, he snapped his fingers to get his attention then took a drink off the tray. “Then you can have all the free food and booze you want.”

“I doubt you’re in a position where you need free anything.”

“I don’t know...Arwen’s father hit me pretty hard. The bank repossessed his homes and antiques, so I was left with nothing.” Now that the subject had been broached, it turned hostile. His eyes were on me, full of warning. My instinct was to get Arwen out of there, but being surrounded by three hundred people was the safest place she could be. And since I was there, I could keep eyes on him at all times. “Maverick, I don’t want it to be this way. You and your father are good men.” His hand moved to my shoulder, and he squeezed like we were old friends.

I pushed off his hand. “Touch me again, and I’ll stab that flute into your neck.”

He brushed off the threat like it was of no consequence at all. “We both know how this is going to go. A lot of men are going to die. A lot of resources will be wasted. If we spend too much time focused on each other, we won’t notice what our other enemies are doing. I’ve already offered to pay you generously. So, take the money, and let’s end this.”

He could offer me a billion dollars, and I still wouldn’t be tempted. “You could make me king of the world, and I still would turn you down.”

He shook his head slightly, like he was disappointed. “The butcher should never get too close to the livestock. Rule number one, Maverick.”

“I promised her father I would keep her safe in exchange for the information. I have to fulfill that promise.”

“But he has to fulfill his promise to me.” Now that the conversation had deepened, his mood soured. He poked his finger to his chest as he stepped closer and leered down at me. “He made me that promise first. I get priority.”

“She had nothing to do with that.”

“Boo-hoo.” He finished his drink then left the glass on the end table like an asshole. “Her father is dead, so what does it matter?”

“It matters because I keep my word.”

He studied me as his features softened. “That has nothing to do with this, and we both know it. You have to ask yourself if you’re willing to deal with this headache for a piece of ass. Don’t forget that’s all she is—just a piece of ass.”

She’d never been that to me. “Let this go, Kamikaze. You have a million ways to make money.”

“But I shouldn’t have to. She should make the money for me.”

She may be my sheep, but she was no animal. “I don’t want men to die for this war. I don’t want to use my ammo for

this stupidity. But I'll do it if you force me. I'll do whatever it takes to protect her. If that's how it has to be, that's how it has to be." Now, the conflict had been established, and there was nothing left to do but fight. We were officially enemies. The crowded room didn't make me feel any safer than if we were alone in a dark field.

Kamikaze shook his head slightly. "That's unfortunate, Maverick. That means one of us will live—and one of us will die."

"Doesn't have to be that way. Just let it go."

"I won't let it go just as much as you won't," he said bitterly. "But I want to minimize my losses. I've got a lot of other shit to worry about. So, this is my proposal."

I already knew what was coming.

"Russian roulette—you and me."

My eyes glanced higher and noticed the scar on that was visible through his hair. A bullet had torn through his skull and became buried in his brain. Somehow, the motherfucker had survived. But he wouldn't survive it again.

If we played the game and I got the bullet, I hoped I would be as lucky.

But probably not.

"You're a man of your word, Maverick. So, should we agree on a time and a place? Or would you rather do this the old-fashioned way?"

He had just as many resources as I did. It would be a battle resulting in many casualties. I was equally likely to die from a stray bullet. When it came to clashes like that, there was always one victor and one loser.

This option minimized the bullshit.

I glanced at Arwen on the other side of the room. Oblivious to the conversation we were having, she laughed with her companion and continued to enjoy the fresh glass of champagne that had been placed in her hand. Was this woman really worth my own life? I could hand her over right now, and

the whole thing would be over. I turned my gaze back to him once my mind was made up. "Let's do it tomorrow."

ARWEN

MAVERICK WAS QUIET FOR THE REST OF THE NIGHT. HE ONLY said a few words to his acquaintances. With a glass always pressed to his lips, he spent the evening drinking. He ditched the flutes of champagne and went straight for the liquor.

Just like last time, everyone asked me to sing a song. I sat at the piano and played a new song I'd written just weeks ago. When I looked at Maverick, he wasn't paying attention. He stood at the window and looked out at the street, indifferent to my song.

A switch had flipped in his head.

We said goodbye to everyone and then got inside the car waiting at the curb. The driver pulled away and took us to the estate in Florence. I wanted to ask what was bothering him, but since we had no privacy, I stayed quiet.

He stuck to his side of the car and didn't blanket me with affection. He was so cold, it didn't seem like I was there at all. His thoughts plagued him and dragged him to the bottom of the deepest lake.

Twenty minutes later, we entered the house. It was late and Abigail was already asleep. This place had felt like a prison when I first arrived here, but now it was the most beautiful home I'd ever been in. Just the entryway alone was marvelous, with ceilings so high I could barely make out the chandelier at the top when the lights were off.

"What's bothering you?" We took the stairs, side by side. I lifted up my gown so my heels could rise onto the next step

without snagging on anything.

He ignored my question.

“You were fine when we got there, but now you’re dead inside.”

We made it to the second landing then turned to go up the third. With one hand in his pocket and his shoulders slouched, he didn’t seem to hear me. His thoughts were a million miles away, still focused on the subject that had stolen all his attention.

I made it to the third landing then dropped my dress. “Maverick.”

He walked ahead of me and entered his bedroom. He pushed the door open and immediately slipped off his jacket and set it on the armchair. His fingers popped open his shirt buttons, and then he pulled that off too. The tie landed on the floor.

My heels were killing me, so I slipped them off. “What’s going on?”

He loosened his belt then fell into the armchair. He was bare-chested with tight abs, and his eyes were heavy from all the liquor he ingested. The top button on his pants was popped open, and some of his happy trail was visible.

If I weren’t so alarmed by his behavior, I would sink to my knees and suck him dry.

With his fingertips resting against his temple, he watched me. “Kamikaze was there tonight.”

That simple sentence was enough to explain everything. My chest tightened in terror, and my heart started to race with unease. He had been in the same room with me, somehow hidden among the three hundred faces enjoying themselves at the party. He was seven feet tall, so I had no idea how I’d missed him.

“He and I had a chat.”

The man turned up when we least expected it. Maverick obviously had no idea he would be there. Otherwise, he

wouldn't have brought me. A man so big could still be so sneaky. My fingers reached to the back of my dress, and I pulled down the zipper because my gown suddenly felt too tight.

"I tried to talk some sense into him...but that's not possible." His eyes shifted away, and he looked at the empty fireplace. He stared at it without blinking.

I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling a sudden draft.

"We decided to settle this tomorrow." He dropped his fingers from his temple and finally looked at me for the first time. He seemed defeated, overwhelmed, and even a little resentful.

"What does that mean?"

He pushed against the wooden armrests and rose to his feet. "Russian roulette."

It was worse than having Kamikaze storm the gates and try to kill everyone. This precisely laid out the odds, so I knew how likely it was that Maverick would survive. It was all dependent on the position of one bullet in one chamber—and when he pulled the trigger. "No...you can't do this."

"I have no choice." He stood in front of me, his chin tilted down so he could look me in the eye.

"Yes, you do. This can't be the best option. You said you would kill him and—"

"The odds of survival are the same. He's got a ton of men, and so do I. We're just going to kill a bunch of people and waste our resources to settle this. I tried to convince him to let this go, but he refused. He's not going to stop until he has you."

"Well, I'm not letting you do this. I'm not letting you play this sick game for me." I couldn't imagine the two of them sitting across from each other at a table and taking turns putting guns to their foreheads. With every click of the gun, Maverick would be a little closer to getting the bullet. "I would much rather hand myself over—"

“And I’d rather you not.” He stepped closer to me, his eyes full of determination. “I’d rather die than let that happen to you.”

“But if you die, then it happens to me anyway. Your life isn’t worth that, Maverick. I would never want that to happen to you—”

“I have a plan to get you out of there.”

“What’s the point if you’re dead?” Tears cascaded down my cheeks, and my voice kept escalating higher and higher. “No. We aren’t doing this. I won’t allow you to do this for me. Even my father wouldn’t want you to.”

His voice dropped. “I’m not doing it for him.”

“But still...”

“If Kamikaze gets the bullet, our problems are solved. He’ll be gone for good.”

“What if he survives again?”

“Doesn’t matter. The decision will still be made. And there’s no way that guy is going to survive a second bullet to the head.”

“Maverick, I don’t like this—”

“And I don’t care.” He stepped away from me then pushed off his slacks. His shoes came next, then he stood in just his black boxers. “This is how we’re settling this.”

“That’s outrageous—”

“It’s the only option we have.”

“How do you know he won’t trick you? Put a bullet in every chamber of the barrel and make you go first?”

“Someone will show us the barrel. He may be a psychopath, but he’s not a cheat.”

My fingers shoved into my hair, making my perfectly styled hair frizz as I dragged my hands down my face. I smeared my tears against my skin, ruined my expertly applied makeup.

“This matter will never be settled until he’s dead or I’m dead. I don’t want to talk about this anymore.” He turned to the bed and pulled back the covers. It might be his last night on earth, but he acted like his doom didn’t await him. How could he be so calm about the worst night of his life?

“That’s too bad because we aren’t done talking.”

He leaned against the pillow and looked at me, his eyes full of lethal warning. “I won’t change my mind. You don’t understand my world the way I do. Without my father’s army to help me, I’m just as likely to die anyway. Kamikaze is not a man you want to fight. This is the simplest solution.”

“Letting me surrender is the simplest solution. I would much rather do that than let—”

“And I wouldn’t. He’s just as likely to get the bullet as I am. It’s an even match.”

“But every time someone pulls that trigger, your chances get worse.”

“And so do his.” He got out of bed again and walked up to me. “Nothing you say is going to change my mind. I know how much you like to sneak around behind my back, but you aren’t going to hand yourself over to him. The gates are locked, and you aren’t getting through.”

That was exactly what I would have done—but he was too smart for that.

“Now, let me get some sleep.”

“You can actually close your eyes and drift off right now?”

The two bullet wounds were noticeable in his shoulder. Old scars that would never truly heal, they blemished his perfect skin, but they also added character. This man was a soldier, a fighter. He’d promised to protect me, and he kept that vow—even when no one else would. “I’m pretty drunk. So, yes.” He turned back to the bed and got under the covers. The lamp was clicked off, and he lay there, his body relaxing into the mattress.

I stood there as my loose dress began to slip off my shoulders. The night had started off so grand, a social event with champagne and good company. My husband was the most handsome man in the room—and I felt lucky to be on his arm. But now, the good things in my life had come to an end—snuffed out like a lit candle.

I stared at his exhausted form on the bed and felt my heart clench from the pain. A life without him wasn't a life worth living. He was more than just the man I'd been forced to marry. He really was my husband now. He was the man I wanted in my arms as well as in my bed.

I slipped off the dress then got into bed, only wearing my panties even though there would be no sex tonight. He was too drunk, and I was too depressed. It was obvious Maverick was worried about tomorrow because he'd drowned himself in so much booze, he wouldn't have to think about it. His life was held in the balance by chance. All that mattered was where that bullet was in the barrel.

Maybe he really didn't have other options. But his defeat reminded me of the afternoon when his father stormed into the house and tried to kill him. Maverick had pretty much rolled over and allowed it to happen—as if he wanted his father to kill him.

It was obvious depression was a major component of his character. Dealing with his mother's terrible death, his sister's illness, and his father's hatred was enough to make him give up on everything.

Maybe he felt like he had nothing to lose.

I lay beside him and watched his face. His expression restful and calm, it didn't seem like he cared what would happen tomorrow. Forfeiting his life was easy because he didn't have anything to lose. He would rather die to save me than live his life to the fullest.

Even though he didn't want my affection, I scooted closer to him and laid my arm across his stomach. My face rested next to his, my lips touching his shoulder. After a deep breath that made me shudder, tears welled up in my eyes then

streaked down my cheeks. My fingers tightened against his skin, and I held my breath to keep the sobs at bay. “I can’t lose you...”

I DIDN’T SLEEP that night.

I kept clinging to Maverick like it was the last time we would ever be together. This man had become my whole world, and not just because he took care of me. He was my friend, my lover, my everything.

When he woke up the next morning, his eyes weren’t filled with as much intoxication, but it was obvious he was a bit hungover. He sat up in bed then ran his fingers through his hair. After he glanced at the clock on the nightstand to check the time, he looked at me. As if everything had rushed back into his brain, his eyes hardened with the event that would take place today. “You didn’t sleep.”

“No.” I sat up and kissed his shoulder, wanting to drown this man in kisses. I wanted to feel him beside me every night until time claimed our bodies. I didn’t want to lose him to a bully on steroids.

He turned his face toward mine then placed a kiss on my upper cheek, his lips brushing past my messy hair. Then he slipped out of the bed and got to his feet. With a muscular back and powerful thighs, he looked like a gladiator without his armor. He stretched his arms over his head, his back rippling in response. As if it was an ordinary day with ordinary events on the calendar, he walked into the bathroom and got his day started.

I lay back on the pillow and stared at the ceiling—sick to my stomach.

HE WALKED down the stairs to the dining room, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt with a gun on his hip.

I followed him. “You’re just going to act like everything is normal?”

“How else am I supposed to act?” He reached the bottom of the stairs and then entered the dining room. Breakfast was already laid out, omelets with coffee. He took a seat and filled his mug, like he was about to go to work the second he was finished.

I sat across from him, flabbergasted he could be so calm. “Like this might be your last day on earth.”

He took another drink. “People die every day. I’m going to die just like everyone else. Whether it happens now or in thirty years doesn’t make a difference.”

“It makes a *huge* difference.”

He shrugged. “Everyone has different opinions about death. I don’t have an opinion. I just accept it.”

“How can you talk like that? How can you be okay with all of this? This isn’t even your fault—”

“We can argue about it all day, or we can just enjoy our breakfast. If I really do only have a few hours left, this isn’t how I want to spend them.” He grabbed his cloth napkin and pulled the silverware from the interior. With hunched shoulders, he leaned forward and shoveled the food into his mouth.

It would be easy to admire him for his bravery, but I knew his courage stemmed from a dark place. “You aren’t afraid to die because you want to die...”

He stopped eating and lifted his eyes.

With heartbreak in my veins, I held his gaze and felt my heart sink into my stomach.

“I’m not suicidal.”

“No...but you don’t want to keep living either.”

He turned his eyes back to his food and kept eating. “Sometimes, I get tired. There’s so much bad and very little good. And the good things that happen to you don’t last forever. Then you’re haunted by the memories.”

I knew he was referring to his perfect family. Everything was great...until it wasn’t. “You still have a lot to live for... I want you to live.”

“But I would rather die than let something happen to you. I have to protect my people too. If I let us shoot it out, Abigail would get hurt, along with other people I care about. This is clean and has dignity. And you keep assuming I’m going to lose.”

“The odds aren’t great, Maverick...”

“They’re good enough if you ask me.” He stabbed his fork into his food and placed it in his mouth. “I’ve been a part of this world my entire life. I know how these things go. You’ve been sheltered and oblivious for the last twentysomething years. This is a difficult pill to swallow, but you need to be strong.”

“Maverick...I can’t lose you.” I repeated the same words to him that I’d whispered last night. “You mean everything to me now. This started off as a nightmare, but everything has changed. You’re my husband, and you’re supposed to take care of me. But I’m your wife, and I’m supposed to take care of you too—”

“That wasn’t the deal. I take care of you—”

“It’s the deal now. There has to be another way...”

He stared at his plate then shook his head. “There is no other way, Sheep.”

“You could give me to him...” I didn’t want to be a slave to that man. He would rape me, along with all his other men. Then assholes would pay big money to fuck me. I’d get knocked around, and my existence would be so terrible, I’d wish for death. But it was still better than watching Maverick shoot himself in the head.

His eyes narrowed like I'd just offended him down to his core. His shoulders tightened, and the affectionate mood in the room was quickly wiped away and replaced by rage. When he tightened his jaw, I knew my suggestion wasn't taken. "Never."

The breath I was holding escaped my lips. "Why? Why would you risk your life for me?"

He held my gaze, his dark eyes matching the black liquid inside his mug. A full minute passed, and all he did was stare, his eyes shifting back and forth slightly because they were too intense to stay still. "The same reason you would risk yours for mine."

HE SAT on the couch across from me, a cigar in between his lips. His large shoulders leaned against the back of the seat while the smoke drifted from his mouth. His eyes were tilted to the window behind his desk, and they reflected the autumn sunlight as his mind turned over his thoughts.

Since it might be his last day alive, I didn't scold him for the cigar.

In fact, I lit up myself. "When is this happening?"

"Not sure."

"So, this could happen anytime?"

His phone vibrated in his front pocket, and he fished it out. With his eyes on the screen, he said, "We're about to find out." He took the call and pressed it to his ear. "Chickened out?"

I was flabbergasted he could answer the phone so nonchalantly. A loaded gun would be pointed at his temple in just a few hours. With a simple squeeze, that bullet could be in his brain and his mind would be lost forever.

Kamikaze's voice was audible because it was so loud and deep. "Nah. I'm looking forward to this. How about your barn?"

“Neutral turf.”

“Alright. How about Giovanni’s place?”

“That works for me.”

Was that a person? Or a restaurant?

“Let’s meet in an hour,” Kamikaze said. “Unless you’ve decided to chicken out.”

I wanted to grab the phone and offer to hand myself over, but it wouldn’t make a difference.

Maverick was just as calm now as he was before the phone rang. Relaxed on the couch with a thick cigar in his hand, he seemed like he could fall asleep because he was surrounded by peace. “I’m feeling pretty lucky today.”

Kamikaze chuckled. “That makes two of us, Maverick. And I want her there. The second you’re dead, I’m gonna bend her over the table and fuck her while you lie dead on the floor.”

MAVERICK

WAS I SCARED?

No.

Was I lying?

No.

I had a plan set to get Arwen out of there if things went south. But if she didn't escape, at least I wouldn't be alive to witness the pain of her torment. I would cease to exist—which meant I wouldn't suffer anymore.

In a twisted way, I looked forward to the game we were about to play. If I won, it would solve all my problems. Arwen could lead a full life without looking over her shoulder, and I would never have to deal with that giant again.

I was risking a lot—but I could also gain a lot.

She was shocked by the calm way I approached the dilemma, and her assumption was right. I wasn't afraid to die—because I was tired of living. When my mother perished, so did my entire family. I felt like the last of my bloodline. My father had pulled me into a dark underworld I never should have been a part of. If he hadn't, Mother would still be alive. Lily would be happy. My father would still be the same man.

Now, he was a stranger.

The only family I had left was my wife—but sometimes that wasn't enough.

Before we left, I locked the door to my office and made the call. I already knew how the conversation would go, what I would say and what he would say in return. I could predict the entire exchange, down to the scoffs and laughs. But I called anyway...hoping I would be wrong.

He answered. "Didn't expect to hear from you."

So, he had no idea what was about to happen. "Kamikaze and I are about to play Russian roulette. The victor gets Arwen. Just thought you should know I might be dead in thirty minutes." There was still a piece of my old soul inside me, the boy who looked up to his father. I was a grown man with a lot of accomplishments, but I still needed the validation from the man I'd admired. It was twisted.

He was quiet—which was expected.

I had expected more than just his silence. "If I die, this is on you." He'd stabbed me in the back when he ratted me out to Kamikaze, which was disgusting, considering he'd made me marry her in the first place. I actually wanted to die so the guilt would fester inside him until it opened a wound in his stomach.

"You're forgetting your other option."

"Do you want me to take that option because you actually give a damn? Or just so you can get your revenge?"

He turned quiet again.

"I'm not giving her up. She's my wife—and I'd die for her." I didn't want to be disappointed further, so I ended the call and crushed the phone in my fingers. I stared at the wall, ignoring the historical painting my art dealer found for me. Every aspect of this room was tailored to my mood so it was a safe haven, but that comfort couldn't chase away my feelings. It couldn't chase away the hatred that burned in my heart.

ARWEN SAT RIGHT beside me in the back seat on the drive, her hand gripping mine as the tears continued to stream down her

cheeks. She would calm herself enough to still them, but then minutes later, they returned. She was a spectrum of emotions, a wide variety of sadness.

Her arm linked through mine, and she held my hand on her thigh. She'd finally stopped trying to change my mind about my decision, especially now that we were only ten minutes away. I was a stubborn man, and her pleas meant nothing to me.

This was how it had to be.

She turned her face into my shoulder and let her tears drip onto my t-shirt. Tears or no tears, she was stunning. When she gripped my body and clung to me for comfort, it was so sexy. It made me want to have the driver pull over on the side of the road so I could take her in the back seat.

I might actually do it if I weren't thinking about my own death.

At least it would be painless. The lights would be out instantly, and the suffering would be over.

Best way to go.

The car pulled up to the restaurant. It belonged to a mutual friend and had been closed down for the day. It would just be the two of us with a couple of our men. No need for weapons and armies. Only one of us was walking out of there alive.

The back door was opened, but Arwen squeezed me harder so I couldn't get out.

I turned my gaze back to her and let her hold on to me. "You've got to be strong in there, alright? He feeds off fear. He wants to see you scared. He wants to see you cry." My thumb streaked across her cheek and wiped away the last drop of moisture. She hadn't put on any eye makeup, so there wasn't a mess left behind. "Keep it together."

"How could anyone keep it together?"

I squeezed her hand before I let go. "You will." I stepped out of the car, and she followed behind me. We entered the empty restaurant and found Kamikaze sitting at one of the

tables in the center of the room. It was a table for six—and he sat right in the middle. Facing me with a glint of joy in his eyes, he grinned and showed all of his teeth. A gun sat on the table, the gun that would kill one of us.

Arwen sucked a deep breath when she laid eyes on him. It was the first time she'd seen him since he'd assaulted her, and even though she'd had a day to prepare for this meeting, that wasn't enough.

I walked in first, my four men moving with me.

Kamikaze stretched out his hand and gestured to the seat across from him. “Not a bad night to get shot in the head.” The blinds were closed on all the windows, so the interior of the restaurant was invisible to the public. Little bottles of olive oil were on the tables, along with tablecloths and silverware. Paintings hung on the walls, and while there were no cooks in the kitchen, it still smelled like freshly prepared pasta.

My men pulled out the chair for me so I could sit across from him. “It's not a bad night for *you* to get shot in the head.”

He grinned at my comeback. “We'll see in just a few short minutes.” He turned his head and shifted his expression to Arwen, who was standing behind me in the corner. His eyes took her in, the arousal entering his gaze the second he looked at her. Just like all her other admirers, he eye-fucked her right in front of me.

“Don't look at her.”

His eyes shifted back to me.

“She's still mine until that bullet fires off.” I wouldn't have him gawk at her the entire time, claiming her before he had any right to.

His grin fell away, but he did as I asked. “Anything you want to say before we get started?”

“I'm not much of a talker.”

He chuckled. “Neither am I. That's why I've always liked you.” He gestured to the gun, signaling for his men to follow his orders.

One of the guys grabbed the gun in the center of the table then opened the barrel. He showed it to both of us—proving that it was empty.

I nodded.

Kamikaze did the same.

He grabbed a single bullet from his pocket and dropped it in a single slot. His thumb clicked in the barrel then he gave it a hard spin, making the bullet cycle into a random position. The gun was placed on the table once again, between the two of us.

Staring at the gun forced me to accept reality. This was happening. On the first go, I had a one-in-six chance of blowing my brains out. With every turn, the odds got higher and higher...until one of us finally croaked.

Kamikaze snapped his fingers. “Can we get some drinks over here? We’ll both take a scotch—neat.”

The guys scrambled around until the glasses were placed in front of us.

Arwen stayed in the corner, her muffled tears slightly audible. She sniffled occasionally, doing her best to stay strong but failing miserably. Good thing Kamikaze respected my wishes and kept his gaze on me.

“Coin toss?” He brought the glass to his lips and took a drink.

I gave a slight nod.

The same guy who handled the gun pulled a euro out of his pocket. He held it up for both of us to see, then he placed it on his thumb. “Call it in the air.” He released his finger and launched the coin to the ceiling.

I kept my gaze locked on his as I heard the coin flip into the air.

Kamikaze made the call before it landed back in his palm. “Heads, he goes first.”

Going first gave the best chance of survival because the odds of not getting the bullet were the greatest. But regardless of who went first, they were still shitty odds.

The man caught the quarter and looked at the landing. “Heads.”

Arwen sucked in a deep breath through her teeth.

I didn’t blink an eye over it. I still had a chance to survive this.

Kamikaze smiled like he disagreed.

I brought my glass to my lips and took a long drink before I reached for the gun. Silver and heavy, it was an antique. It was the kind of weapon used for special occasions like this, not in open combat. It was far too valuable to use on a random person. This gun was meant to give a dignified death.

I examined the weapon and felt the heft in my hand before I pointed it at my temple.

“Oh my god.” Arwen immediately lost her cool. She started to hyperventilate and sob. “No...”

Kamikaze kept his eyes on me.

My finger hugged the trigger, and I looked into the eyes of my enemy, feeling my heart rate pick up slightly when I understood I could die in the next few seconds. I would squeeze the trigger—and either live or die.

Kamikaze held up his glass, like he was making a toast.

My fingers tightened on the trigger, but I didn’t pull it just yet. I could hear Arwen struggling in the corner, her tears throbbing out of her throat. I wanted us both to walk out of there alive. But just because I wanted that, didn’t mean it would happen.

Squeeze.

The gun clicked, but the bullet never came.

Arwen sucked in another deep breath, her cries still audible.

I set the gun in the middle of the table and grabbed my scotch again.

Kamikaze snatched the gun, pointed it at his temple, grinned like a psychopath, and then pulled the trigger—in less than a couple of seconds. Like a man with a death wish, he didn't take the time to savor the scotch on his tongue, the air in his lungs. He was such a maniac that there was no need to pause. It actually gave him a high.

He slid the gun back toward me. “We're at fifty-fifty, Maverick.”

The gun sat in front of me, the silver weapon looking more intimidating now that my odds had just decreased significantly. This was the third try, which meant I had a twenty-five percent chance of getting the bullet.

I didn't like those odds.

Arwen became louder, not bothering to try to be quiet anymore. Her distress was like a car alarm in the middle of the night.

I picked up the gun and pointed it at my head.

Now I didn't feel so good about this.

“No...please.” Arwen abandoned her attempt at being strong. She was coming apart with every second—and I couldn't help her.

I had to win—but I had no control over that.

Kamikaze swirled his glass before he took a drink. “What are you waiting for, Maverick?”

My finger wrapped around the trigger, and I kept my hand steady. It didn't matter how fearless a man was. When an enemy shot you in the head, you held your head high until the end. But to pull the trigger on yourself...that took a whole new level of courage. It went against biological nature to kill yourself so brutally. But I had to pull the trigger—no matter what happened.

Squeeze.

“Stop...” Arwen slid down to the floor, openly weeping in both terror and relief.

I pushed the gun toward him. My reaction was still stoic, but my heart relaxed now that the threat was over. Hopefully, he got the bullet on this round. He would be dead, and all my problems would be solved.

If only I were that lucky.

Even though he had a sixty-six percent chance of blowing his brains out, he moved with the same quickness as before. He pointed the barrel right into his temple and squeezed the trigger.

The gun clicked with the empty chamber.

Shit.

“No...please.” Arwen rushed to the table and started to plead with Kamikaze. “I’ll come with you, okay? I surrender. Just let him walk away—”

“Sit the fuck down.” I refused to look at her. This was between the two of us—and she shouldn’t have interfered. “Now.”

Kamikaze didn’t look at her either.

Arwen gripped my shoulder. “Please...please take me with you.”

I pushed her off. “Don’t make me ask you again.”

Kamikaze waited for me to pick up the gun.

One of my men grabbed Arwen and dragged her away.

I picked up the gun, its weight more noticeable in my grasp. It seemed to get heavier with every turn, like the bullet inside with turning from lead to stone. My hand didn’t shake even though there was a slight tremor in my fingertips.

Arwen screamed from her position against the wall. The men kept her pinned down so she couldn’t rush me again. She didn’t understand that Kamikaze wouldn’t take her deal even if he wanted to. He was committed to this—and he had to see it through.

It was the first time Kamikaze dropped his indifferent attitude. His hands came together in front of his mouth as he stared at me, wishing that bullet to be inside the chamber. If the bullet didn't pierce my skull, then we knew the outcome of the match.

This turn was just as important as the last.

"Maverick..." Arwen said my name through her tears, a complete mess in the corner.

I tuned out her hysterics and held the gun steady against my temple.

Kamikaze didn't crack a smile or taunt me. He held his breath as he waited for me to decide our fates.

In just a second, I would be dead—or I would be the victor.

My blood ran ice cold, but sweat started to mark my forehead. If I died tonight, my life would have been short-lived. I would die a young man, following my mother into the afterlife. My sister would probably kill herself, and my father would be alone—until he put a bullet in his own brain.

My finger steadied on the trigger.

Squeeze.

My eyes closed as I heard the click of the barrel.

Instead of me dropping to the ground dead, everything went quiet as silence ensued. Then the slight sounds picked up again, like my own breathing and Arwen's sobs. Everything grew louder, reminding me I was truly alive.

I opened my eyes and looked into his.

He lowered his hands to the table, taking his loss like he didn't feel anything. His hard expression didn't change. His smile wasn't forthcoming, and he didn't break the tension with an inappropriate joke.

I set the gun in the center of the table.

Kamikaze stared at it for a long time, his eyes soaking in the sight of his own murder weapon. He wouldn't survive

another bullet to the brain. This would kill him.

Even though Arwen knew I would live, she cried even harder.

I didn't like this man and shouldn't pity him. He'd hardly been an ally to begin with, but he was never an enemy before. He'd tried to rape my wife and sell her like a mule. But it was still depressing watching a man grappling to accept his own death. "I'll make a deal with you. Drop this for good, and we'll forget the whole thing." Kamikaze could be useful in the future. He owed me his life, so if I ever needed a favor, he would make it happen.

Kamikaze stared at the gun for a few more seconds before he lifted his gaze to meet mine.

"Just don't come near my wife again, and we have a deal." It was a generous offer, and he'd be stupid not to take it.

"And be your bitch for the rest of my life?"

"I wouldn't put it like that."

He grabbed the gun and dragged it toward him. "We made a deal—and I'll keep my end of the bargain." He brought the barrel to his forehead. "I wouldn't have given you the same mercy."

"You don't have to—"

Squeeze.

The gunshot went off, loud in the small enclosure of the restaurant. Drops of blood sprayed everywhere, covering the other chairs and the table in between us. His heavy body jolted with the momentum then crumpled to the ground with a loud thud.

His men stood their ground and did nothing.

I stared at the spot where he'd been. A terrifying man had just met my gaze, and then, instantly, he was gone. It reminded me of my mother in the strangest way...the fact that she was there one moment then gone the next. Life was fleeting and could be snuffed out within the snap of a finger.

Arwen rushed to me and wrapped me in her arms. Her face moved into my neck, and she held on to me like she needed the support to stand even though I was the one who'd almost died. She squeezed me tightly then cried into my ear, sobbing for so many reasons.

I was still numb from the transaction, still pumped with adrenaline that overwhelmed my system. My mind wasn't as sharp as it was because I was in a fog, still recovering from the near-death experience. That could be me lying on the floor, bleeding out everywhere.

But somehow, it wasn't.

ARWEN

MAVERICK WAS THE ONE WHO ALMOST DIED.

But I was the mess.

The second Maverick stepped away from Kamikaze's dead body, I launched myself into his arms and sobbed into his chest. I already forgave him for pushing me away, for talking down to me like I was a dog that didn't know how to heel. I was just so relieved he was okay, that the bullet had been meant for his opponent instead.

Now that Kamikaze was dead, Maverick's arm wrapped around my waist, and he cupped the back of my head. He brought me close to him and let me cry into his chest, supporting me as I combated the horrific sight I just witnessed.

I watched a man shoot himself in the head.

I didn't care about that. I only cared about the man who was still standing.

"I'm alright, Sheep." He rested his lips against my temple, becoming the affectionate man I remembered. Now that the threat was over, he dropped his hard-core attitude and returned to the sensitive man who shared my bed.

"I was so scared..." I'd never been so terrified in my life. When I thought that bullet might be for Maverick, I'd thrown myself at Kamikaze and prayed he would take me. I gladly would have gotten on my knees and did anything he asked to spare Maverick's life.

“I know.” One of his men came to him and handed over the silver gun.

Maverick eyed it before slipping it into the back of his jeans.

“You’re going to keep it...?”

“It’s tradition.”

MAVERICK SAT in the back seat with me, his arms around me as I continued to process the trauma I’d just witnessed. My body wouldn’t stop shaking with fear even though Maverick was with me now. The fact that he had to go through it at all was still troubling.

But now, Kamikaze was dead.

There was no one who wanted to kill me anymore.

My husband saved me. He’d calmly put that gun to his temple and pulled the trigger over and over. “You were so brave...” When Kamikaze had cornered me in the alleyway, I fought against him, but I also panicked. I didn’t keep the calm composure Maverick did. I was fucking terrified.

His chin rested on my head, and he looked out the window as the landscape passed by. The afternoon had faded to night quickly as fall deepened. Lights from the passing houses became brighter in contrast.

I hugged his waist and relied on him as my crutch like I always did. This man married me because he had to, but now he protected me because he wanted to. He was willing to lay down his life for mine just to keep me safe.

How did I get so lucky?

We returned to the house and walked inside like it was an ordinary evening. My arm hooked through his as we walked into the house. I wasn’t this affectionate on a daily basis, but almost losing him made me value him even more.

The smell of dinner was noticeable from the kitchen.

Abigail came out, wearing a black apron with a spot of sauce on the tip of her nose. She wasn't smiley like usual, looking at Maverick like he was a friend rather than her employer. Her eyes took him in, like she wanted to see his face herself. "You're back..."

Maverick stepped away from me and gently placed his hand on her shoulder. Wordlessly, he gave her a squeeze to acknowledge her feelings. He dropped his embrace then turned away.

Abigail's eyes watered as she watched him walk away, affection so bright in her eyes, it was impossible to miss. "Dinner will be served shortly." She smoothed out her apron then turned around to walk back into the kitchen.

I followed Maverick into the dining room and watched him pour himself a glass of wine as if everything was normal, as if he hadn't just watched a man shoot himself in the head. He poured a glass for me as well before he set the bottle down.

I sat across from him—numb. "She loves you..."

"Of course she does. I'm her boss."

"I don't think that has anything to do with it." That woman loved him like family. It wasn't a sibling kind of love or a romantic one. It wasn't even motherly. It was just love in its purest form.

He took a drink then licked his lips. "I'm starving."

The sight of blood had killed my appetite. "I don't see how you could be..."

His fingers rested on his wineglass as he stared at me across the table. He was oddly calm about the whole thing, just as indifferent as he was before we left. He swirled his wine then set the glass on the table again. "It's over. Time to move on."

"But you could have died—"

"But I didn't. Everything worked out. Kamikaze is gone."

All I should feel was grateful in that moment, but I was still shaken up about the entire thing. It would take me weeks to get over it. It was the most gruesome thing I'd ever seen. I would rather be raped a million times than let Maverick shoot a bullet into his own skull. "You were so calm... Did you think you weren't going to get the bullet?"

"No."

"So, you thought you were?"

"On my last round, I didn't know what was going to happen."

And he still acted totally normal? That was a sign of strength I'd never seen in my life. "How could you feel the cold metal of the barrel against your temple without panicking? How could you experience that moment without drowning in terror?"

He drank his wine again. "There are worse things than death."

"But not many things..."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore." Abigail came into the room with the hot dish and set it in the center of the table with two serving spoons. She also brought a salad and a basket of fresh bread. She looked at Maverick the same way she had just a moment ago, like she was so happy he was home. She excused herself quietly then left the room.

I watched Maverick dish the food onto his plate, pretending this was a normal night. He brushed off the event like it wasn't traumatizing, like it was something everyone experienced at some point in their lives.

I wasn't hungry, and I wasn't in the mood to pretend nothing happened.

I rose from my chair and felt his gaze move to my face. "I'm going to bed." I left my glass of wine behind and turned my back to him, letting him eat alone. I wasn't ungrateful for what he did for me, but I wasn't in the mood to pretend I hadn't almost just lost my husband. The evening was

emotional for me. I'd lost both of my parents, and now Maverick was all I had left.

What would I do without him?

I STOOD in the shower and let the warm water soften my stiff muscles. Strands of my wet hair stuck to the back of my neck, and I entertained myself by watching the rivers of water run down the tile to the drain below my feet. Blood felt caked onto my skin, stuffed under my fingernails. I needed to get clean, needed to wash away the guilt I felt in my stomach.

Maverick almost died because of me.

I admired him for being so strong and dignified about the whole thing. I used to be that way, logical and pragmatic about all situations in life. But now I was an emotional woman who became distraught over her husband's well-being. I shed tears so quickly, and my heart was always on the verge of collapsing. Life was so much easier when I didn't care about anything. But now I cared so much about that man.

I cared about him more than anything else in this world.

He changed me in so many ways...and not necessarily for the better.

Distracted by my thoughts and the warm water, I didn't notice Maverick entering the shower until the door clicked behind him.

I pulled my hair over one shoulder then turned to look at him, seeing his fit body and tanned skin. His old bullet wounds were noticeable because they contrasted against his perfect skin...but they also made him more beautiful. Those scars were a part of who he was, the battles he'd won and lost.

The indifference finally disappeared from his gaze, and he looked at me with the affection I craved. He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. His warm chest pressed into my back, and he tightened his arms against my stomach.

I let him tug me into him, let myself fall back into his hold.

His lips placed a soft kiss against my neck. Another one was placed behind my ear. He bent his neck down to get my shoulder, to give me a kiss with a subtle bite.

I closed my eyes and got swept away in his embrace.

His hard cock pressed into my back, and he draped his arm over my chest so he could keep me in place. Then his kisses turned more aggressive, the edge of his teeth slightly scratching me as he kissed me harder and harder.

The water ran down us both as he kissed me like an animal, kissed me like a wolf claiming his mate. He pulled me harder against him and kept going, kissing me like he never had before. He kept tugging on me even though I couldn't get any closer. He grabbed my hips and pulled forcefully, wanting me to feel just how hard he was.

His mouth moved to my other shoulder, and he claimed the skin just like on the other side. His lips sucked my skin, and his tongue tasted the drops of water from the shower. When his mouth moved behind my ear, his hot breaths were audible over the falling water. His breaths sounded like growls, and his fingers started to feel like claws.

I closed my eyes and let him have me, let him take me however he wanted.

OUR WET BODIES lay on the bed, the moisture soaking into the duvet and the sheets. My wet hair immediately drenched the pillows underneath my head. My thighs were guided open by his knees, and his large body positioned itself over me. His narrow hips fit between my thighs, and his thick arms locked behind my knees. He held himself on top of me, supporting most of his weight on his arms like the exertion was so easy for him.

His mouth lowered onto mine, and he kissed me the way he did in the shower, so possessively. His took my mouth and

claimed it as his, his hungry lips sucking and kissing mine. His tongue reached inside my mouth and danced erotically with mine, making my pussy just as wet as the rest of my body.

I'd given myself to him because he was the only man I wanted. This man was my husband, and he owned me—and I wanted him to own me. There was only one man I wanted to fuck me, to have me every single night in the same bed. He turned me on like crazy, making me a volcano that could erupt at any moment. He made my other lovers seem like a childhood phase. I thought I could have loved Dante, but being with Maverick made me realize how wrong I was.

He rested his lips against mine as he guided his length to my entrance. His thick crown pushed inside my eager lips, getting through the tight tunnel before he slowly sank the rest of the way.

My nails dug into his muscular arms, and I moaned.

He moaned too.

Slowly, he sank deeper and deeper inside me, gliding until our bodies were perfectly connected together.

God...that felt right.

He held my gaze for a few seconds as he felt me, as his cock absorbed the slickness that lined my channel from beginning to end. The grooves of his dick were so easy to feel because he was thick like a tree trunk. Feeling his balls against my entrance just made the pleasure better. He had me pinned underneath him, taking a moment to embrace the connection of our bodies.

My fingers moved into his wet hair as I felt how much he stretched me. We'd been together so many times, but it never had felt this good. It never had felt this intimate, this beautiful. Skin-to-skin and heart-to-heart, we were connected as deeply as two people could possibly be.

It felt so damn good.

I breathed hard in his face, little moans coming from deep in my throat. My fingers cradled his cheeks and I kissed him, so full with his fat dick inside me. He was all man, from his

length to his width. It felt like the first time...like a wedding night.

I brought his lips to mine and kissed him. It was sensory overload, the way he felt between my legs and the way his dick felt inside me. He'd turned me on so much in the shower, the way he possessed me like a wolf possessed his sheep. I'd turned to melted butter long before we got to the bed.

His sexy lips moved with mine, and he started to rock into me, sliding his enormous dick through my slick pussy. He moaned as he felt me, moaned as his length pushed through my tightness over and over.

My husband was inside me for just a few seconds before I released. The heat entered my entire body, making it shake like an earthquake. My thighs stayed apart because of his arms, and by the time the sensation hit my pussy, I writhed on the bed. My fingers gripped his hair, and I stopped kissing him so I could enjoy the best climax of my life. Stuffed full of his cock and wrapped in his protection and devotion, it was heaven. "Maverick..." I opened my eyes and looked into his as it hit me so hard. "Yes..." I watched his eyes darken as he watched me. He made me come the second he was inside me because I'd been so eager for him...so eager for my husband.

He kept his pace slow so he could watch me enjoy him. He studied my reactions, watching the way my eyes filled with tears as I surrounded his dick with my come. He watched my mouth widen into a scream. His hips worked slowly to thrust inside me, to slide through the cream I produced just for him.

When I finished, I brought his face close to mine and held on to him. "I want your come inside me..." I grabbed his ass and directed his thrusts deep inside me, wanting him to explode with his eyes locked on mine.

His cock was so thick, it started to hurt. He crushed his body to mine, his hard stomach grinding against my pelvic bone. Without increasing his pace, he hit me deeper and deeper, his entire body tightening as he prepared for the goodness that would make him shudder.

My nails cut into his skin, and my pussy tightened in preparation for the seed he was about to give me. I wanted to take my husband's come, feel his satisfaction inside me. "Come on..."

He rested his forehead against mine as he gave his final pumps, his hips moving a little quicker as he shoved himself inside me. When he hit his trigger, his entire body tightened, and he closed his eyes as he succumbed to the climax. A sexy groan escaped his throat as he shuddered, his cock releasing inside me. He pumped me full of his come, the heavy substance so warm.

It was everything I had fantasized it would be, the kind of pleasure that made my toes curl until they cramped. My hands gripped his back, and I brought him close to me, his cock still hard inside me. "Again."

MAVERICK RESUMED his life like nothing had changed.

He got up early, worked out, and had breakfast before heading to work. He stayed at the office most of the day then drove into the city to meet with clients. He was closed off and a little cold during the day, but when he came to bed, he was the aggressive wolf that kept the sheets warm.

I drove to the factory on the other side the property and found him sitting at his desk in his office. His laptop was there, along with piles of paperwork and an empty ashtray. He sat in the leather chair and looked out the window, enjoying the sight of the house in the distance. From this angle, he could see the road that led to the factory, so he probably saw my car as I approached.

He didn't turn around to look at me.

He could pretend that night didn't affect him, but it clearly did. It still left noticeable scars in his eyes, a trauma that he couldn't easily forget. Even though Kamikaze threatened me and he was a horrible man, Maverick hadn't been eager to kill

him. He was willing to sacrifice his life for mine, but he wasn't bloodthirsty like most men.

I leaned against the doorframe and stared at him.

His chin was propped on his fingertips as he examined his property. With the cooler weather, he wore dark blazers over his t-shirts and traded his shoes for boots. He'd gotten a haircut recently, so it directed more attention to his handsome face. He was a beautiful man...and he was mine.

I stepped farther into the room and rested my fingertips against the mahogany wood. The picture frame I gave him for his birthday sat there. His pretty mother smiled at the camera as she posed with her son. It was one of the rare times I could actually see Maverick smile rather than pout. I picked up the frame and looked it before setting it down again.

He still didn't look at me.

He always seemed to be in a mood. "What's bothering you?"

"Why do you assume that something is?"

"Because I know you."

He finally dropped his propped elbow and gave me his full focus. His eyes looked like steaming coffee, and his lips looked kissable. Whenever they devoured my naked body, they were so aggressive. He ate my pussy just as hard as he ate my mouth. He stared at me with that dark look.

"There's always something bothering you."

He smiled slightly, finding that truth comical. "True."

"So, what is it this time?" I came around the desk and leaned against the hard wood. With my arms crossed over my chest and the window in front of me, I waited for his tale.

He turned his gaze out the window once more.

"Is it Kamikaze?"

He shook his head slightly. "I don't care about that."

"Then what's on your mind?"

He didn't blink, his eyes taking in the landscape. "I called my father before it happened. Told him what Kamikaze and I were about to do. He didn't say much..."

He didn't need to give me the details to convey his pain. Even with Maverick on the verge of death, his father didn't care about him. That man was so cold that I didn't understand how his blood hadn't frozen over.

"And he hasn't contacted me since. He probably heard the outcome of the matchup at some point, but still...I expected something." Maverick wore the same stoic expression whether he was angry or solemn. He hid his emotions well because his eyes never gave him away. But I could see the subtleties in his shoulders and arms. I could see it in the way he carried himself, the way his eyes slightly shifted downward. "All of this happened because my mother died. Sometimes I wonder where I would be if she hadn't. Would my family still be together? But then it makes me question that relationship altogether. If it was only good when things were good...was it ever real?"

It should be the same through the good and the bad, but I felt that was an unnecessary statement to make.

"It makes me wonder if he ever wanted kids. My mother must have forced him. Now that she's dead, he wants nothing to do with us. You'd think I just get over it and move on with my life...but it still bothers me." Maverick was vulnerable with me without shame. He wore his heart on his sleeve and showed his true colors. He'd slowly allowed me inside his heart and his mind. Our partnership grew stronger, and our marriage became more real. It really felt like we were a man and a woman devoted to each other, there for each other always.

I moved to his chair and sat in his lap. My arm wrapped around his shoulders, and I rested my head against his. Blanketing him with empty words wouldn't make him feel better, especially when I had nothing substantial to say. It would be easy to lie and say his father loved him...deep down. But I couldn't say that unless I actually believed it to be true. Saying nothing at all was all I could offer him.

His arm wrapped around my waist as his head rested on my chest.

“I may not be the DeVille you want...but I’m still a DeVille. And we’ll make our own family someday.”

MAVERICK

WHEN ARWEN ENTERED THE BEDROOM, SHE SPOTTED THE gown hanging from the bedpost. Champagne pink with a plunging neckline in front, it was sexy but also classy. My shopper picked it out for her and assured me it would be the perfect dress.

When her eyes almost turned into heart shapes, I knew she had been right.

Arwen walked up to the dress and touched the fabric with her fingertips. “Oh my god...please tell me this is for me.”

“You better not think it’s for me.”

She ran her fingers down the fabric before she picked it up and held it against her frame. “I can tell it’s going to look great. When is the party?”

“Tonight.”

“You never give me much notice, huh?”

I shrugged then continued to look through my mail at the table.

She carried the dress to the full-length mirror and held it up to her body as she examined it. “So, what’s the party for?”

“One of my clients is having a celebration.”

“A celebration of what?”

“I don’t know. Being rich?”

She turned to me. “You never throw parties.”

“Because I don’t need to blow up my ego.” It was big enough already.

“Do you think they’ll ask me to sing?”

“No. They’ll expect it.” After I finished looking through the mail, I turned to look at her. I watched her stare at the dress with loving eyes, falling in love with it right on the spot. When she smiled like that, her beauty was unparalleled. I watched her for a moment longer before she caught my look in the reflection. “Is that okay?”

“It’s fine. I have a new song anyway. I think they’ll like it.”

“They’ll like anything that you sing as long as you wear a low-cut dress.”

She rolled her eyes but smiled at the same time. “Thank you for the dress. I love it.” She walked over to me and rose onto her tiptoes to kiss me on the lips. It was an ordinary kiss, but it was packed with so much affection, a quick touch from a grateful wife to her husband. She lowered herself back to the floor and walked away.

My eyes followed her, my chest filled with a warmth that could melt chocolate. Seeing her eyes lit up like that made my mouth want to smile. Giving her gifts she loved made me feel valued. Making her happy made me happy. When I put that gun to my head and pulled the trigger, I was doing it for her—and it felt right.

Just six months ago, we hated each other.

But now...everything was different.

She went to the dresser and found the black jewelry box sitting there. “Ooh...is this for me too?”

“I want you to wear it tonight.”

She cracked the box and found a pair of diamond earrings sitting inside. She had more jewelry than she knew what to do with it, but she found each piece special. She immediately took them out of the box and slid them into her earlobes before she checked her appearance in the mirror. “They’re beautiful.

They'll look perfect with this dress." She turned back around, still beaming. "Thank you for spoiling me."

"You're my wife...you should be spoiled."

WE PULLED up to the luxurious three-story estate, and the valets opened the doors for us.

Arwen whistled under her breath. "Talk about fancy..."

I gave her a hand and helped her to her feet. She wore sky-high heels, the kind that didn't even allow the arch in her foot to touch the bottom of the shoe. I supported her as she righted herself and stood up straight. "It's been in the family for generations."

"You only socialize with super-rich people?"

"What other kind of people are there to socialize with?" I took her hand in mine and guided her past the water fountain and toward the entryway of the large home.

"Uh, normal people."

"Normal people are boring." I looked down at her, seeing her diamond necklace around her neck and the perfect way she'd applied her makeup. Before I even walked inside, I knew my wife would be the most beautiful woman there. She stole the show every single time—even when she wasn't in the theater.

"Why don't you have a party at your place?"

"I don't like people."

She chuckled. "You like me."

I brought her in closer to my side. "Don't let that go to your head."

She smiled then hooked her arm through mine, her long lashes bringing out the color of her eyes. Now that Kamikaze was gone and she stopped thinking about that gun pointed to my head, she'd relaxed into a whole new person. She didn't

look over her shoulder or hunch in fear. There were no more monsters waiting in the dark.

That meant she didn't need to stay married to me anymore—but she never mentioned it.

Neither did I.

I had a feeling we never would.

We entered the party, grabbed champagne, and talked with a few acquaintances. Some of them were people Arwen already knew, but most of them were associates she hadn't had a chance to talk to.

Nearly every man eye-fucked my wife.

I took it as a compliment.

Mingling lasted for hours as appetizers were carried around by waiters. Our glasses kept getting replaced, and the volume in the room rose as people became chattier. Women wore their best dresses, and men had donned their best suits.

These parties weren't so boring now that I had a wife.

She did most of the talking—even though she didn't even know these people.

Fine by me.

I was done with the champagne, so I left her behind to grab a scotch from the bar. I placed my order then felt someone approach me. The piercing gaze they directed at me was hostile. It was something I could sense.

I grabbed my drink and turned to look at the man who wanted to cause trouble.

It was my father.

He never left his house anymore unless it was to kill someone, so it was a surprise to see him at a social event that required a suit. The last time I saw him dressed that way was at my wedding. I took a drink as I looked at him, swallowing the booze as well as my damaged feelings. "Nice to see you get out, Caspian." I couldn't call him my father anymore. It was a name too intimate to use at this point. He was an enemy,

not an ally. He was a stranger, not a friend. “Surprised to see me? Thought the bullet in the chamber would be for me?”

He kept the same stony expression on his face.

“Looks like I disappointed you...again.” I needed to accept the difficult truth—my father hated me. It didn’t matter how much I hoped otherwise. The truth was difficult to swallow, but I had to get it down my dry throat anyway. “I should get back to my wife now. Try anything, and I’ll watch your brains splatter on the wall—just the way I did with Kamikaze.” With my drink in hand, I left him by the bar and returned to the beautiful woman in the pink dress. She’d just said something to make her admirers laugh.

I came to her side and placed my arm around her waist.

She glanced down at my drink. “No more champagne?”

“Too sweet for me.”

“You mean, it’s not strong enough,” she teased.

The group laughed again.

I shrugged in response.

Lydia, one of the wives of my associates, addressed the one topic I didn’t want to discuss. “I saw your father is here this evening. Seems to be getting better after losing your mother. How’s he doing?”

Arwen immediately dropped her smile.

I wanted to tell the world that my father was a worthless asshole who should be dead instead of my mother. But I kept my mouth shut. “He’s taking it one day at a time.” After a few more exchanges, they walked away and left us alone together.

Arwen turned to me. “What did he say?”

“Nothing.”

“Maverick,” she pressed.

“No, he really said nothing. I blew him off at the bar then came back to you.” I didn’t turn back to where he’d been standing moments ago. I didn’t want to acknowledge his

existence at all. I wasn't the least bit scared of him or what he might do. "Don't worry about him."

She watched me with obvious concern. "You think he'll try to—"

"No." I brought her into my side and pressed a kiss to her temple. "Let's forget about him, alright?"

She nodded and went quiet.

Julian Levy stood up on a chair so everyone could see him across the room. He held up a glass of champagne then addressed the crowd. "Thanks for coming out, everyone. Nothing better than seeing happy faces swimming in champagne and bruschetta. I hope you all have a lovely evening." He raised his glass. "But we also have a special guest here tonight. I'm sure you all recognize her from her performance at the opera. Where is she?" He scanned the crowd and looked at Arwen.

"How are they not sick of me yet?" Arwen asked.

It wasn't surprising. I raised my glass in the air. "She's right here, Julian."

A blush entered her cheeks and nearly matched the color of her dress.

"Great," Julian said. "Can we borrow your wife for a song?"

I took the glass of champagne from her hand. "I know I can't hog her all the time."

Arwen looked at me with a hint of dread in her eyes, as if she still couldn't tolerate the idea of so many eyes on her. She won the affection of everyone in the room, like a magnet that attracted everything in its vicinity.

"Play that new song you told me about." I kissed her cheek before I let her go.

Arwen didn't want to walk away just yet. She still lingered beside me like that was the only place she really felt safe. After she gave herself a nudge, she finally walked away and pushed through the crowd until she reached the piano.

It was classic, black, and elegant.

I handed her glass to a waiter and waited for the music to begin. I was in the rear, but I was tall enough to see her easily. The high ceiling would still echo the music she played, so I would be able to hear it as clearly as if she were standing right beside me.

She smoothed out her dress and took a seat on the bench, her shoulders perfectly straight and her stomach tight. Her head tilted down toward the keys, a loose strand of hair falling with her movements. Her slender fingers gently landed on the keyboard, and she took a deep breath, like the magic was running through her fingertips at the touch.

This was the woman in my bed every night, the woman who made music every time she moaned for me. Her cries were ethereal, bringing a heavenly light into my previously dim home. When we met, she despised me and I despised her. But somehow, we brought out the best in each other. She made me more compassionate, and I taught her to shoot like a professional.

I took a drink as I waited for her to play, watched her struggle with her anxiety even though she knew she was a pro. Her voice could shatter crystal, and her fingers could create the most beautiful music in the world.

She finally started to play.

The sound of the piano filled the room, a tune that began slowly. Once she added her voice to the song, it instantly became a masterpiece. “Summer, bright as day. You took my hand and wiped my tears away. Leaving a past that haunts and stepping into a future so dark. I felt myself slip. I felt myself fall. But you caught me...after all.” Her fingers danced across the keyboard faster as she headed into the chorus. “With arms that never let me go, a thumb perfect for the spilled tears, you’re the man who completes me. The man who owns me. The man who loves me.”

The crowd was silent as they watched her, affected by her music like it was a spell. The chitchat disappeared because her music was so enchanting. It splashed images in everyone’s

mind, added to the ambiance of the low-burning candles and flutes of champagne.

“When I lost my way, the meadow become so dark. Flowers turned to thorns and winds turned to storms. Like a lone sheep, timid and afraid, I stood alone. Alone. Little did I know, he was always there. Warm coffee on a winter morning, his eyes like drops of chocolate. He was always there...even if I never knew.” She didn’t look up from the piano and became lost in the song, playing like she didn’t know any of us were there at all. “With arms that never let me go, a thumb perfect for the spilled tears, you’re the man who completes me. The man who owns me. The man who loves me.”

Heads started to turn in the crowd, searching for my reaction. Several people had the same idea, so they all turned toward me.

She continued to play. “I can see the stars when he lifts me into the air. I can feel my fragile heartbeat when he comes near. My past is forgotten, buried in the ground. My maiden name is erased as he conquers. Cold sheets used to touch my chest, but now a deep heartbeat keeps the pace of my dreams.”

More heads turned my way.

She went into the chorus one more. “With arms that never let me go, a thumb perfect for the spilled tears, you’re the man who completes me. The man who owns me. The man who loves me. With a heart that will never let you go, lips perfect for yours, I’m the woman who completes you. I’m the woman who loves you.” Her fingers hit a few more keys before the song ended. Silence filled the room, and now, most of the attention was directed at me.

I continued to stare straight ahead and refused to look at the ground. All eyes were on me, and I squeezed my glass a little tighter, uncomfortable with the unwanted attention.

People finally started to applaud for her, and the attention was taken off me.

I downed the rest of my scotch and set it on a passing tray.

Arwen stood up, and the applause grew louder.

I turned around and walked off, the cacophony of noise like nails against a chalkboard. The lights suddenly felt too bright, the collar around my neck too tight. I found the front door and stepped into the cold air, letting the sting of coming winter lower the heat that exploded in my blood.

The second the breeze touched my skin, I felt a little better.
But it wasn't enough.

ARWEN

I SPENT THE NEXT HOUR TAKING QUESTIONS ABOUT MY MUSIC. The crowd surrounded me, and I didn't have an opportunity to find Maverick. I assumed he would come to my side, but he never showed up.

“That was a beautiful song.” A woman I didn't even know rested her hand over her heart. “It takes me back to when Victor and I first got married. Maverick must have been very touched.”

I hoped he was. “Thank you. Please excuse me.” I parted the crowd and ignored people's questions as I searched for Maverick. He didn't seem to be anywhere in the main room, and since all the men wore black suits, he was difficult to spot. It was warm in there, so I decided to check outside.

There he was, drinking a glass of scotch while he let the nighttime air lick the sweat off his skin. He stood alone as he looked across the perfectly manicured lawn of the historic estate. The valet and other workers were there, but the rest of the guests were still inside.

I walked up to him, instantly cold once I wasn't in the protective bubble of heat the house provided. “There you are. It's hot in there, huh?”

“A bit.” He finished the rest of his glass and handed it to a waiter as he passed. “Ready to go?”

He didn't compliment my performance. He didn't even look at me. Both hands were in his pockets now, so he had no intention of blanketing me with his usual affection. Just an

hour ago, we were husband and wife. Now we were something akin to strangers. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah.” He caught the valet’s attention to retrieve the car.

The man took off at a run as Maverick walked toward the roundabout driveway with the large fountain in the center. He didn’t take my hand and guide me down the stairs.

I followed behind him, feeling like a dog that got her nose slapped. “Why are you being like this?”

“Like what?”

“Well, for starters, you haven’t looked at me.”

The valet pulled up with the black Bugatti then tossed the keys to Maverick.

Maverick caught them. “I know what you look like.” He opened the passenger door for me then moved to the other side.

I was so shocked by what he said that it took a second for me to move my feet and get inside the car.

Maverick drove off, driving far faster than necessary and speeding back to the house like he was racing against time.

I looked out the window, refusing to believe this was really happening. “I’m so disappointed in you... I thought we’d moved past this.”

Maverick didn’t acknowledge what I said. He kept his eyes on the road, both hands on the wheel even though he usually only drove with one. He didn’t bother glancing in the rearview mirror and drove as fast as he could, wanting to get away from me as quickly as possible.

I wanted to slap him.

We returned to the house several awkward minutes later. We pulled into the garage then entered the house.

He was on a mission to get away from me. He didn’t wait for me to catch up, even though my ridiculous heels made it impossible for me to match his stride. He entered the entryway and approached the stairs.

“Maverick.”

He stopped on the bottom step but didn't turn around.

“You need to get over this bullshit. Be a man and buck up.”

He slowly turned around, one hand resting in his pocket. It was the first time he'd really looked at me since I finished my song. Like we were back in time, he stared at me like he hated me. It was six months ago, and he despised having to welcome me into this house. “Get over what bullshit?”

“Your bullshit. This all goes back to your inability to accept affection, love, even a damn compliment. The second you get something, you pull away. Be a man and accept what I said. Be a bigger man and say it back.”

His eyes shifted back and forth quickly as he looked at me, his body rigid with anger.

Was I stupid for assuming he was ready for this? Our feelings for each other were so obvious. Kamikaze was gone, and not once had he asked me to leave. I'd never tried to go either. We were together every night, ditching the condoms and making love as husband and wife. Did he really fail to grasp all of that? Hearing that someone loved him really scared him that much? “I'm not going to go away, Maverick. I'm not going to die, disappear, or turn my back on you.” I wasn't going to become a thing of the past like his family. I was there to stay—forever. I was Mrs. DeVille, and I was staying that way. There was no one else I wanted to be with, and there was no one else he wanted to be with. We were together—until death parted us.

Without answering, Maverick turned around and walked up the stairs. His strong frame carried him to the second landing smoothly, and then he turned to take the steps up to his bedroom.

I stayed at the bottom in my pink dress, feeling abandoned and forgotten. That night started so beautifully, but then I expressed my feelings in the best song I've ever written, and it scared him.

I should be livid at his reaction.

Pussy.

But if he wanted to act that way, that was fine with me. He could take all the time he needed to sulk in his bedroom and brood while he was at the office. After he finished throwing his hissy fit, he would come to his senses and ask forgiveness.

And I would have a hell of a time making him earn it.

I STAYED in my room all day and didn't bother venturing to other parts of the house. Maverick would make sure he didn't cross my path. He would take his meals in his office and avoid me like the plague.

Asshole.

I was hurt that I'd put my feelings on display and he'd shot me down so coldly. Those lyrics came from my heart. They were real, and I didn't regret writing them down. I didn't regret composing that song.

I just wished Maverick would let go of his issues.

Losing the love of his family messed him up badly. His father was an ultimate asshole, so Maverick was incapable of accepting love, only insults. His shell had hardened so much that nothing could penetrate his exterior while his guard was up.

I thought his guard wasn't up around me.

I thought we were closer than that.

He could pretend he was incredulous about my feelings, but that was bullshit.

And he could pretend he didn't feel that too...but that was also bullshit.

In time, he would come to his senses. I just had to be patient.

I watched TV for most of the day then wrote music for the second part of the afternoon. I was hurt by his reaction, so it was the perfect time to compose something raw, a deep catharsis. Loving a man incapable of love was quite the task to take on.

But I was willing to try.

When night deepened, my impatience started to get the best of me. We weren't boyfriend and girlfriend who lived separate lives in different places. We were husband and wife, two people with the same last name.

We shouldn't be acting like this.

He should be the bigger man and come to my bedroom. Even if he didn't want to talk, we should still be sleeping together. We should be screaming at each other but making love when it was all over.

Now that I had a husband I adored, that was exactly what I wanted to do...for the rest of my life.

I left my bedroom and headed down the hall to take the stairs. I knew Maverick felt the same way; he was just incapable of accepting love without any demands in return. He wasn't used to someone caring about him for him...and nothing else. Maybe I needed to be patient. Maybe I needed to hold his hand and get him through this. The man had put a gun to his forehead and pulled the trigger several times for me...of course he loved me.

I'd almost reached the staircase when I heard a woman laughing.

"No wonder why you're in such good shape if you walk up these stairs every day."

I stopped in my tracks because it wasn't Abigail or one of the maids. She sounded trashy, like a dumb girl he'd just picked up at the bar. But that couldn't be true because Maverick would never do that to me.

Then I heard someone else. "I bet you could carry both of us up the stairs."

I heard Maverick's chuckle. It was deep, masculine, and sexy.

My heart fell into my stomach as my knees went weak. The ring on my left hand suddenly felt too tight, constricting the blood flow to all the body parts that needed it right now. I wanted to turn around and walk away, but I wanted Maverick to see my reaction, to let that look haunt him for the rest of his life.

He made it to the top of the stairs, a beautiful woman on each arm. "Your asses are gonna be a little plumper after this trip."

Both girls laughed because it was *so* funny.

My brain didn't react right away because it was sensory overload. My worst nightmare was looking me right in the face—and I didn't know it was my worst nightmare until it actually happened. Not once had we confirmed our commitment to each other, but it seemed so obvious that it didn't need to be said. We were together now...husband and wife. This felt like a betrayal.

It was infidelity.

Maverick turned the corner with the girls, not noticing me standing there.

I knew he wasn't trying to sneak around. He didn't care whether he got caught or not.

But I wanted him to know I was there. I wanted him to see the heartbreak in my eyes, to know he'd fucked this up permanently. "Maverick."

He stopped before the bottom step and barely turned his head to look at me. His arms stayed on the girls, like his allegiance was to him and not me.

Tears were hot in my throat, but I refused to let them rise to my eyes. If Maverick wanted to stoop this low, he wasn't worth my tears. If love made him do something stupid like this, then maybe I'd been wrong. Maybe what we had wasn't love.

Maybe it'd never been love.

He held my gaze, his brown eyes like two solid walls. He wasn't letting anything inside his emotional armor. I could be in tears right now, and he wouldn't give a damn.

That was why I saved my breath and didn't say a word. Nothing mattered in that moment.

He didn't care.

So why should I?

MAVERICK

I SAT AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE WITH MY BLACK COFFEE IN front of me. Bags were under my eyes, and the remnants of sleep wouldn't leave the crevasses. I was exhausted from the long night, but it was impossible to keep sleeping. The two girls took up all the space in the bed, and they kicked me every few minutes.

I'd been with two women before. It was always a good time.

But I hadn't enjoyed myself.

I kept thinking about my wife.

She told the whole world she loved me and assumed I felt the same way. She humiliated me in front of a crowd of my peers and expected me to be touched by it. Our relationship suddenly shifted and became something else—something I wasn't ready for.

I never said I loved her.

If I felt that way, I would tell her.

My entire body shut down, and my walls shot up to the sky.

I didn't want what she wanted—and I made that abundantly clear.

But now I sat alone at the table, my coffee cold and my breakfast untouched.

The girls came down moments later and helped themselves to the food I would never eat. One was blond and one was brunette. Without trying to be polite, they grabbed whatever they wanted off the table and made a mess. They used the same knife in the butter as the jam, and they had no manners, so they were just obnoxious.

“So, what do you do?” the brunette asked before she bit into her toast and got crumbs all over the table. “Born rich?”

I stared at her and didn't bother responding. I just wanted the two girls out of my house. They wouldn't get another invitation to bed. Sleeping alone seemed preferable in hindsight.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Boots echoed against the wood, and the sound became louder as she drew near. Her pace was full of attitude, announcing her anger without the need for words.

I looked up and saw Arwen, a woman more beautiful than the two ordinary girls I'd slept with. She stared at me like I was nothing, a piece of gum on the bottom of her shoe. There was so much malice in her stare, like she hated me more than she'd ever hated Kamikaze. A stack of papers was in her hand, fresh white paper with a clip at the top. She pretended the girls didn't exist as she tossed the packet at me.

It landed in front of me and almost spilled my coffee.

I didn't look down to see what it was. I kept my eyes on her, noting the pain that existed underneath the rage. She shed her tears for me when she thought I might die, but they weren't forthcoming from this. She was too strong for that, way too damn stubborn.

With one hand propped on her hip, she stood in black jeans with a white top and leather jacket. She was dressed like she was ready to leave the house. Those blue eyes weren't so pretty anymore. They were cold as steel and malicious as blades. “I want a divorce.” She let the words sink in for a moment before she turned around and walked off, her boots sounding against the hardwood floor once more. Her ass shook

left to right as she stormed to the stairs and excused herself from the dining room.

I looked down at the papers she'd tossed at me. Her signature was at the bottom, and all she needed was for me to fill in the blanks. It looked legitimate. She must have called in a favor to someone to get this processed so quickly.

When I turned to the page that detailed her settlement in the divorce, I was surprised by what I saw.

She didn't want anything from me.

Not even a euro.

THE LONE WOLF

WOLF SERIES: BOOK THREE

**THE
LONE
WOLF**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
PENELOPE SKY

ARWEN

I HAD ONE OF THE SERVANTS PACK MY THINGS INTO SUITCASES and carry them downstairs.

The only thing I left behind was my pink dress—because I never wanted to look at it again. It would only remind me of the night my husband broke my heart. It would remind me of the night I put my heart on the line and lost my only family.

I gave my bedroom a final look before I walked out forever.

I made it to the front of the house where my black BMW was parked. In the divorce settlement, I didn't ask for anything besides my car and some cash to start my life over. It was only a few thousand euros, just enough to get me an apartment until I picked up a second job bartending or waitressing.

Those bimbos obviously wanted him for his money, but I never had.

If Maverick wanted to continue to be used by women who didn't give a damn about him, that was fine with me.

His loss.

By the time I made it to the car, Maverick had exited the grand front doors and walked down the path toward me. In dark jeans and a gray t-shirt, he looked as beautiful as ever—but I didn't see him that way anymore.

My trunk and back seat were stuffed with my things. Now all I had to do was drive away and forget this period of my

life. My first marriage lasted less than a year. Hopefully, my second one would be more impressive.

“Arwen.” He caught my attention before I opened the door and got inside the car.

My hand stayed on the handle, but I didn’t get inside. The winter breeze was cold, and the ground was muddy from the rain we got the night before. Boots were on my feet, and my jeans kept me warm from the frigid air. With sunglasses on the bridge of my nose, I looked at him. “I’ll come by and pick up the papers in a week.” I opened the door.

He came around the front then forced it to shut under his palm. “What are you doing?”

“What am I doing?” I asked incredulously. “I’m leaving your ass. That’s what I’m doing.” I grabbed the handle again.

This time, he blocked it with his body so I couldn’t get inside. “That’s not what we agreed on.”

I laughed because it was such a stupid thing to say. “There’s a lot of other things we didn’t agree on, too.” I pushed him in the chest. “Get the hell out of my way. I owe you a slap, and I’m not afraid to use it.”

He stood his ground because a threat like that couldn’t scare him. “What are you going to do? Where are you going to live?”

“You aren’t my husband anymore, so don’t worry about it.”

“I *am* still your husband.”

My smart mouth wouldn’t quit today. “You weren’t my husband last night.”

He kept up his stony expression.

“Seriously, get the hell out of my way. The last thing I want to do is look at that stupid face of yours. Kamikaze is dead, so I don’t need you anymore.”

“My father is still out there.”

“I’m not afraid of that old pussy.” I pushed him again, but he didn’t budge. “I can take care of myself.”

He slid his hands into his pockets.

“Move.”

He stood his ground.

I rolled my eyes then walked around the car to the other side. I crawled in through the passenger door then locked all the doors so he couldn’t yank me out of it.

He turned around and banged his fist on the window. “Arwen.”

I started the engine and put the car in drive. Then I rolled down the window. “I don’t want to be married to you, Maverick. You’re the last man I want in my bed. You’re the last man I want to look at every day. I’m a big girl who can take care of herself, so don’t worry about me.”

“Then you should take some more money.”

The offer was offensive. I shook my head slightly. “I’m the only woman in the world who doesn’t give a damn about your money. It can buy you pretty things, but it can’t buy you happiness. I’d rather work my ass off for my shit then take a coin from you.” My foot hit the gas, and I drove off, his visage fading in the rearview mirror as I drove farther away. I hit the button and made the window roll back up and kept on going, the entire contents of my life packed in that car with me.

I drove to the edge of the property and reached the main road. The house was still visible in my rearview mirror, and I could see him standing where I’d left him. With his hands in his pockets and his eyes on my car, he waited to see me drive away for the last time.

I turned the steering wheel and hit the gas. “Goodbye, Wolf.”

I GOT A FURNISHED APARTMENT. It was small with a single bedroom and a kitchen that was also the dining room. I could only fit a single couch, and my bedroom was only big enough for a queen bed and a single nightstand.

It wasn't luxurious, but at least it was home.

Now that I was really on my own, the weight of everything hit me so damn hard.

Like a pile of bricks had been dropped on my head—and my heart.

I sat the kitchen table with a bottle of white wine as a friend. My lips sealed around the edge of the bottle as I took a large drink. The booze burned my throat and made my stomach tight, but it didn't numb my heartbreak.

I could have ignored his actions if I wanted to keep living there. Most women would probably do that. Keep a cheating husband as long as they got to be rich. But since I loved that cheating husband...that wasn't an option for me.

I sat in the dark and let the tears come to the surface. It was the first time I'd allowed myself to feel the harsh pain. I'd been choking it back up until this point, but now that it was really over, I let myself feel it.

It was like a hammer to the gut.

Tears sprung from my eyes and streaked down my cheeks. My sobs echoed in the small kitchen as I replayed that moment in my head. He walked up the stairs with those two girls at his sides, intending to fuck them in the bed where I slept every night. Our beautiful lovemaking was replaced by something meaningless.

Was I stupid for loving Maverick DeVille?

Was this my fault for letting my heart get so weak?

No...because I thought he loved me too.

I didn't misinterpret what happened. We were together. It felt real. He risked his life for mine, and he was the best husband a wife could ask for. We were intimate, honest, beautiful. I wouldn't trade it for anything else in the world.

Then he threw it all away.

All because I told him I loved him.

How stupid was I?

MAVERICK

I SAT IN MY OFFICE ACROSS THE HALL FROM MY BEDROOM. Now that Arwen was gone, I was smoking cigars on a daily basis, and my scotch reserves were slowly being depleted. There was no one nagging me about my health, so I did whatever the hell I wanted.

Abigail knocked on the open door before she stepped inside. In her arms was the pink dress Arwen had worn to the party a few nights ago. It was on the hanger, unwrinkled, like she'd taken care of it. "She left this behind. I can arrange to get it to her. Or if you prefer, I could just throw it away."

I sank in my chair with my fist propped under my chin. "I'll take it to her."

"I can handle it for you, Mr. DeVille."

"No. It's okay."

Abigail gave me a look of pity before she draped the dress over the back of the couch. "Anything else I can get you at this time?"

I brought the cigar to my lips. "Close the door on your way out."

I CALLED HER THREE TIMES, and she never answered.

I knew where she was staying because my men kept tabs on her. She had a small apartment that was walking distance from the theater. It was close to where she'd been living before we got married.

I carried the dress to the second floor then knocked on her door.

Her apartment must be small because I could hear her footsteps so easily. She had a small budget even with the money she took from me, so she could only afford the bare minimum. I stood on the other side of the door as I listened to her approaching footsteps get louder.

She opened the door and looked at me with the same cold expression as before.

I didn't know what I'd expected when she opened the door. Maybe less ferocity now that she'd had a few days to calm down. But she was even angrier than she was when she left my property.

Her eyes glanced down to my hands. "Please don't tell me you came all the way here to give me that."

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"This." She snatched it out of my hands and carried it to the garbage can next to her counter. She stuffed it inside, getting it stained with the mustard she'd used on her lunch. She pushed it down until it was all the way inside before she came back to me.

That dress cost a fortune. She could have sold it for extra cash.

She looked at my hands again. "Where are the papers? All I need you to do is fill in the little tabs I marked on the side. You do paperwork every day. I know you can figure it out." She crossed her arms over her chest and didn't invite me inside her apartment.

That was when I noticed she still wore her wedding ring. My eyes flicked back to hers. "This is a bad idea, Arwen. You're living in a hole with no one to protect you. My father is still the same psychopath he's always been—"

“I’ll take my chances.”

“I made a promise to your father—”

“And you have no problem breaking promises. Maverick, get out of my face and don’t come back. Sign those papers and drop them, or give them straight to your lawyer. I want to change my name back to Chatel as soon as possible. I don’t want to be your wife anymore.” She kept up a hard expression and stood her ground even though she was upset. Taking a break for a couple of days hadn’t calmed her down at all.

“I didn’t break any promises. We’ve always had an open marriage—”

“Fuck. You.” She held her hand in front of my face to shut me up. “It was different, and you knew it was. You could have handed me over to Kamikaze and spared yourself so much grief, but you didn’t.”

“Because I promised your father I wouldn’t.”

“You didn’t have to pick me over Caspian.”

“Yes, I did.”

“You didn’t have to make love to me like it was all you ever wanted. You didn’t have to take me to your bed every night for months. Our relationship was different. It turned into something else, and the second things got real, you turned into a damn coward.”

I heard all the insults, but I also heard the pain in between her words. “I assumed there would be times when it was just the two of us. Then we would go back to other people. Then we would go back to each other—”

She slapped me across the face.

I turned with the hit, my cheek immediately reddening because she’d hit me so hard. I slowly turned back to her, surprised she had the nerve.

There wasn’t a single regret in her eyes. “I told you I loved you, and your response was to pick up some stupid girls and fuck them. Is that how you treat your wife when she puts her

heart out there like that? Your friend? The person you trust? You think that's okay?"

"You didn't tell me. You told the whole fucking room."

"With a romantic song I wrote just for you. I'm *so* sorry for being such an ass. At least I would respect you if you were honest about what happened. But this chickenshit act isn't sexy at all. We both know you ran scared because you felt what I felt. You're incapable of accepting love because you're so screwed up in the head, so you backstab the one person who's on your side, the one person who actually gives a damn about you. If that's your choice, then fine. But I don't want to be married to a prick like that."

My blood was boiling under the skin because of the insults and the slap to the face. But I didn't have a comeback to anything she said. I stood on the threshold while my nerves continued to fire off in distress.

"I don't want your protection. I don't want your money. All I want from you is a divorce." She pushed me in the chest so I would back up from her front door. "Then I never want to see you again."

ARWEN

THE SMALL APARTMENT DIDN'T FEEL LIKE HOME.

Not because it wasn't enormous and luxurious like Maverick's estate.

But because he wasn't there.

I lay in bed alone, the covers wrapped around me to keep me warm. My diamond ring still sat on my left hand because I didn't have the strength to take it off yet. He'd come to my door and delivered my dress like there was a chance I'd forgotten it by mistake.

No, I just didn't want it.

Then he tried to justify his behavior.

There was no justification for what he did. I'd laid my heart at his feet, and he stomped it into pieces. He rejected my love and fucked someone else...two someones. It was such a cold response after everything we'd been through together.

I still hadn't gotten over it.

Like it had just happened, I was still crying and cradling the pieces of my broken heart. I lay in the small bed and wished he were there with me. Without his deep breathing as my lullaby, I was stuck in my own thoughts. Every sound outside the window made me jolt. No matter how I tugged the sheets, I didn't get warmer.

I still missed him...despite what he'd done.

Tears burned in my eyes as I stared at my wedding ring. A princess cut center stone with diamonds in the band, it was such a beautiful ring. I became attached to it instantly...and then I became attached to the man who gave it to me.

I'd fallen in love with my husband.

I didn't see it coming, not in the beginning, the middle, or even now. Slowly, the affection deepened into something more. I admired all of his qualities, and as time passed, I became more enamored of the man he was.

Even after he hurt me, I still considered him to be a good man.

Just not the man for me.

I should take off the ring and put it in a drawer. I should sell it at a jewelry shop or return it to Maverick.

But I wasn't ready for that yet.

Until I signed those divorce papers...I was still a DeVille.

I wondered if Maverick was drinking at a bar, trying to decide which woman he wanted to take home. Had he forgotten me so easily? Did he miss me at all? Or did he go back to his previous life as if nothing had ever happened between us?

Was he fucking someone else that very moment?

The thoughts made me cry harder.

MAVERICK

I SAT AT THE BAR WITH A DRINK IN MY HAND. IT SEEMED LIKE that was all I'd been doing for the past week.

Drinking.

Winter hit Florence hard, and the streets were icy with bitter cold. Windows were constantly fogged up, and a heavy jacket was necessary even for the short walk from the car to the bar. Smooth liquor was a requirement to keep the organs warm.

Kent moved into the seat beside me. "She was hot but talked way too much."

"You can't think of a way to shut her up?" There was a mirror against the wall of the bar, so I could see my reflection. My tanned skin was paler than usual, and my eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep. I'd been smoking too much, drinking too much. Work was pushed to the side because I couldn't focus.

"Of course I could. But she keeps talking about her cats, and it's just a turn-off."

I swirled my drink. "That is weird."

"The hot ones usually are."

Arwen wasn't weird. She was classy, smart, funny...the perfect woman.

Kent pivoted in his chair and studied my face. "You look like shit. Like roadkill on a summer day kind of shit."

I took another drink. “Thanks for the compliment.”

“What’s going on with you? You’ve been out every single night this week. Where’s the wife?”

I didn’t have a wife anymore. I hadn’t submitted the divorce papers yet, but she and I were no longer together. I was a free man who could screw anyone I wanted, but I found myself sleeping alone every night. “She’s gone.”

“What do you mean?”

“As in, she left me.”

“She left you?” he asked incredulously. “I thought she had to be married to you.”

“Kamikaze is dead, so she doesn’t need me anymore.” I stared into my glass, my fingers still hugging the sides.

“I always got the impression that she *liked* being married to you.”

She did. In fact, she loved it.

If I were honest with myself...I did too.

Kent kept staring at me, waiting for an answer. “You aren’t going to tell me the whole story?”

“She left me. What else is there to say?”

“But why?” he pressed. “What the hell did you do? That woman is sex on legs. Why would you screw that up?”

In my eyes, I didn’t screw it up. I had every right to sleep with whomever I wanted. She did too. I just chose to exercise that right at the worst time. “We were at a party, and she basically told the entire room that she loved me...”

“So?”

I stared into my glass. “What did she expect me to do?”

“I don’t know... Did she expect you to do anything?”

No, but it was awkward. She’d changed the entire dynamic of the relationship when she dropped that bomb. We were just two people together because we had to be. We’d become

friends and lovers in the process...but love was never supposed to be in the mix.

Kent leaned against the counter as he examined my face. “Maverick?”

“What?”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“No. Because it’s a stupid question.”

He leaned back then turned his face toward the mirror against the bar. He drank from his glass and let the hostility subside between us.

The silence made me feel worse. The alcohol made me feel worse. Everything made me feel worse.

After a long period of tension, Kent spoke again. “I can tell this is bothering you. You’ve never been much of a talker, but I can read you pretty well. Whatever happened with Arwen is killing you inside. We both know it. I suggest you make it right.”

I pushed my empty glass to the edge of the counter and got the bartender to refill my drink. I pulled it back toward me and took a sip. A haze was constantly over my eyes, like I’d just woken up and couldn’t fully gain consciousness. I’d been exhausted since the day she left, even though I hadn’t done anything. “After she told me how she felt, I was an ass to her. I ignored her.”

Kent stared into his glass.

“Then...I picked up a couple of girls and slept with them.”

He slowly turned his head back to me. “That’s pretty cold, man...”

“What was I supposed to do? I’m not interested in that kind of relationship. That’s obvious.”

“Maybe it wasn’t obvious to her.”

I kept my eyes on my glass.

“So, she left when she caught you?”

“She didn’t catch me. I wasn’t exactly hiding it...”

“Wow.” He shook his head. “You tell someone you’re in love with them, and then they bring someone home right in front of you. I’m not a touchy-feely kind of guy, but that would suck.”

My fingers gripped the glass tighter.

“Then she just left?”

“Gave me divorce papers the next morning. She packed up her stuff and left.”

“And that’s it?” he asked. “You guys are officially over?”

“No...I haven’t signed the papers yet.”

“Hmm...” He took a drink then set the glass on the counter. “Why not?”

I shrugged.

“Did she take half of everything?”

I wished she’d been greedy. It would make it easier to let her go. “No...she didn’t take anything.”

“What?” he asked incredulously. “She’s entitled to half your estate, but she didn’t ask for anything?”

“Except her car and a few thousand euros.”

Kent continued to stare at me in disbelief, his eyebrows raised in surprise. “Shit...she really does love you.”

The only thing she wanted was me. When she couldn’t have that, she left. She didn’t want to be part of my life anymore. She wanted to move on like our marriage had never happened. I pushed away my glass because I wouldn’t be able to drive home if I had any more.

“And you don’t love her?”

I stared at my own expression in the mirror, my eyes almost the same color as my scotch.

“You can see it in two different ways,” Kent said. “If she doesn’t mean anything to you, you got yourself out of a bogus

marriage and you have your life back. But if she does mean something to you...you fucked that up pretty badly.”

When she threw the divorce papers at me, I hadn't been expecting such a venomous reaction. I knew she would be angry, but I didn't expect her to pack up her shit and leave. She wasn't doing it for a production. She actually wanted to get away from me because being my wife was unbearable to her.

I'd never anticipated the consequences of my actions.

I'd tried to stop her, but she wouldn't change her mind.

My father was still out there, but if he hadn't done anything by now, maybe he never would.

That meant Arwen really didn't need me for anything.

That should make me feel relieved...but relief was the last thing I felt.

“Yeah... I did fuck up.”

IT WAS ALMOST ten when I arrived at her doorstep. The lights were off, so she was probably in bed already. I raised my fist and tapped my knuckles against the wooden door. I could break through her lock if I wanted to, but pissing her off right away wasn't the best idea.

Especially since she was already pissed off.

Heavy footsteps sounded, and then the door opened.

A half-naked man looked at me, wearing nothing but his black boxers. He was built like a brick house with a hard jaw that no doubt attracted the ladies. With green eyes and a well-structured face, he was a handsome guy. He looked at me with hostility, like he didn't appreciate my visit at this late hour. “Can I help you?”

I was blindsided by his appearance, by his square pecs and tight stomach. With tanned skin like mine, his looks rivaled

my own. I'd been replaced so easily, with a man just as good-looking. He may not be rich, but he fulfilled her needs just as well.

He tilted his head slightly and kept looking at me. "I said, can I help you?"

My eyes flicked past his shoulder, and I saw Arwen in the kitchen, wearing his t-shirt with her hair pulled over her shoulder. Her blue eyes were locked on mine, her face indifferent to the events that had just unfolded. She had no idea I would stop by at this time of night, but she didn't seem to care that she'd been caught with a lover.

My eyes turned back to his. "I want to speak to Arwen."

The guy kept one hand on the door and turned to Arwen. "You want to talk to this guy?"

"No." She brought the glass of water to her lips and took a drink.

He turned back to me. "You heard her. Goodbye."

My heart raced as I looked at the scene before me. I'd assumed Arwen was sleeping alone every night, thinking about me. But she was already sleeping around and adding notches to her bedpost. She'd already moved on. "Arwen..."

The guy pressed a hand to my chest. "She said no—"

I grabbed his wrist and twisted it down within an instant. "Touch me again, and see what happens."

She slammed her water glass down then came to the door. "Brandon, give me a second." She grabbed his arm and pulled him away, keeping us separated from each other. Blanketed by his t-shirt, she opened the front door then came face-to-face with me. "Did you bring the papers?"

I came empty-handed—and she knew it.

Her eyes focused on mine, growing more hostile as the seconds trickled by.

I'd come here because I'd had too much to drink. It was an impulsive decision. Now I wished I'd just gone home so I

wouldn't have to see that gray t-shirt drown her petite frame. I wouldn't have to smell his cologne on her skin. I wouldn't have to wonder how long she'd been sleeping with him.

"Maverick." She raised her voice. "Unless you have the papers, you have no business being here. Leave."

I should walk away, but I didn't. Rage pounded in my veins, along with an overwhelming sense of jealousy. "Arwen, I'm sorry." I forced the words out even though it was difficult to say them. Knowing she was already sleeping around gave me a sense of urgency I never would have predicted. I never apologized for my actions, even if I was in the wrong. In my eyes, every decision I made was justifiable. But when I saw my life fall apart right before my eyes, I had to do something.

"You're sorry?" She cocked her head as well as her eyebrow. Her arms crossed over her chest, and her mood turned even fouler. "What exactly are you sorry about? For being such a coward? For fucking someone else? For fucking two women? For not facing me like a man and having a big-boy conversation?" She stepped closer to me, as if she wanted to slap me like she did before. "I don't want your apology, Maverick. I just want you to disappear." She grabbed the door and started to shut it in my face.

I grabbed the wood and pushed it back. "I know I didn't handle that situation very well. You dropped a bomb on me—"

"Stop making excuses. You knew I loved you. It was so fucking obvious, Maverick. Don't pretend like you had no idea. All of this happened because you have no idea how to accept someone's love." She poked her finger into my chest. "You turned into a coward. I told you I loved you, and you hurt me in the worst way possible. You used to be the man I trusted more than anyone else. Now I realize you're just weak."

I was taking punches to the stomach, one fist after another. "I didn't handle it very well..."

"No, you didn't. Now we're done."

"I said I was sorry."

“So?” she snapped. “You cheated on me, Maverick. You don’t just apologize and make it better.”

“I didn’t cheat on you—”

She held up her left hand where her wedding ring still sat on her finger. “We were married, Maverick. It was you and me. We had something special. You’re telling me that you regularly bed women without a condom? You take the same girl to bed every night? You risk your life to save someone? No. We were married, Maverick. We were actually husband and wife. Instead of having a fight and sleeping in separate beds for a couple of nights, you took it too far. You did something you can never take back. I forgive you because you did so much for me. But I don’t want you back.”

My entire body stilled when I heard her decision. She was so repulsed by me that she didn’t want me, not even my money or my looks. I was nothing to her, just another man who didn’t deserve her love.

She pulled the ring off her finger and threw it at my chest.

It bounced off my frame and landed on the ground between my shoes.

“Goodbye, Maverick.” She walked inside then slammed the door in my face.

I looked at the diamond ring on the ground. It was the first time I’d ever seen it without her finger slipped through the band. She slept with it on, showered with it on. She had never taken it off since the day I gave it to her.

But now it was lying on the floor...like a piece of trash.

ARWEN

BRANDON BUTTONED HIS JEANS THEN PULLED HIS T-SHIRT OVER his head, covering his muscled frame with a layer of cotton. His hair was messy from rolling around in my bed all night long, and there was still a sleepy look in his eyes. He walked to the counter and picked up his mug of coffee to take a drink. “So...I didn’t realize you were married.”

He hadn’t mentioned Maverick last night. We went back to bed and pretended it didn’t happen. But now he’d had a change of heart. “*Was* married.” I was wearing my wedding ring when Brandon approached me after the show. He was with a few associates who complimented me backstage. After flirting back and forth, he invited me out for a drink—and I said yes. He didn’t seem to care about my commitment then.

“It doesn’t seem like you’re divorced.”

“We got divorced the second he cheated on me.”

He set his mug down and kept looking at me.

I poured myself my own cup of coffee. “I’d rather not talk about it, if that’s okay.”

He was tall and handsome, reminding me of Maverick in a couple of ways. He filled out a suit well and had a nice package. He was a good kisser and a better lover. I didn’t compare him to Maverick once because I’d blocked him out of my head for good. Brandon had the prettiest green eyes and light brown hair. He was so pretty that it seemed like he would be married or have someone waiting at home for him. “Fair enough.”

“Well, last night was fun...” But now it was over, and I wanted him to leave. I’d gotten a new job as a waitress at a bar just a few blocks from my house. It wasn’t the ideal occupation, but it had flexible hours, which was exactly what I needed if I wanted to keep singing. I would never be able to afford anything more than this apartment, but that was okay with me. At least I had a car.

“It was.” He ran his fingers through his short hair, looking sexy without even trying. “I’d like to do it again.”

It was the polite exchange lovers always had the morning after. “Me too.” I stepped away and prepared to walk him to the front door.

“But I actually want to do it again.”

I stopped and turned around.

He walked around the corner and came toward me. “Let’s have dinner tomorrow night.”

“You can’t be serious,” I said with a chuckle. “My dumbass husband came to the door last night, and you want to keep seeing me?”

“Why not? I’m not scared of him.”

He should be.

“And it’s ex-husband, right?”

“Yeah...” It would take a while for me to get used to that.

He lingered in front of the door. “So?”

“I’m not looking for anything serious right now.”

“I didn’t realize eating was so serious.” His arms circled my waist, and he pulled me close. “Come on, we’ll have a nice meal, share a bottle of wine...and then we’ll have hot sex. What else would you rather be doing?”

Images of my life with Maverick came back to me. We had dinner together at the same time every night. Then we went to bed, talked a bit, or watched TV. Then he took a shower, and we ground together underneath the sheets. It was so simple and domestic...but it was beautiful. I shook the thought away

and focused on the new man in my life. “As long as it doesn’t get serious, I’m in.”

“Good.” He smiled then kissed me. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

IT TOOK me a while to get used to not wearing my ring. There were instances when I would suddenly panic because it seemed like it had fallen off my finger and hit the floor. But then I remembered I hadn’t been wearing it in the first place.

I wondered what Maverick did with it.

When he came to my apartment, he apologized for what he did. But that offer felt so meaningless. An apology didn’t change the past; it didn’t fix my broken heart. It didn’t change anything. It was pointless. Our relationship as we knew it died the moment he walked up the stairs with those two women. There was nothing left to talk about.

I wanted a divorce.

I wanted to fall in love with the right man.

I was stupid for thinking it was Maverick.

I performed at the opera that night, but my lungs weren’t as powerful as they used to be. A little piece of me died when Maverick hurt me, and I couldn’t regain my former strength. There was no drive to be the best I could be. The last time I sang my heart out, it chased my husband into the arms of someone else.

I finished my performance then returned backstage to pull the pins out of my hair and wipe away my ridiculously bright lipstick. I balled up the tissue and tossed it in the bin before I ran my fingers through my curls and tried to smooth out my strands. My car was parked in the front rather than the back because there was no one looking out for me anymore.

I was on my own.

I was just about to rise to my feet when I felt a stare in the mirror. Two chocolate-colored eyes looked into mine, intense and apologetic at the same time. In his grasp was a single red rose.

After Maverick had hurt me, I couldn't look at him the same. When he used to surprise me at the opera, butterflies soared in my stomach. My smile couldn't be contained because it became bigger with every passing second. Such joy would grip me because he was the person I looked forward to seeing the most.

All of that was gone.

I stared at him in the mirror and didn't rise to my feet. "Again, I don't see any papers..."

He walked to my side and placed the single rose on my desk.

When he was close to me, I could smell his cologne. The scent immediately brought me back to the memories of his sheets. They smelled just like him, with a touch of laundry detergent. I rose to my feet and ignored the gift he'd brought. "I have a phone. You could call."

"You never answer my calls."

"Still would save you a lot of time." I moved past him to pull my coat from the back of the chair.

He grabbed my wrist and steadied me, possessing me while a crowd of people moved around us without understanding how intense things had just become. His hand rested on mine on top of the chair, and he slowly came closer to me. "Let's talk in private."

"What is there to talk about, Maverick?" I pulled my hand from under his then picked up my coat.

"A lot of things."

"You had plenty of time to talk, but you chose to fuck instead."

He cringed slightly, like that insult actually wounded him. His gaze fell to the floor, his usual confidence not as prevalent

as it normally was. He slid his hands into the pockets of his jacket, and he lifted his gaze to look at me again.

“Why do you keep doing this?” Just when I thought I understood Maverick, I realized I didn’t understand him at all. He was the one who ruined our relationship, yet he was the one still fighting for it. But why? “You obviously don’t want to be married to me. If you did, you would have said you loved me too, and we would have gone to bed as husband and wife. That option was available to you, but you rejected it. So why do you keep showing up on my doorstep? Why are you here now?”

He stared at me for a long time, ignoring the people walking around in the background. “Let’s talk in private.”

“No.” I wasn’t taking him back to my apartment like he was part of my life. He was part of my past now, and that was where he needed to stay. “We had all the time in the world to talk about things when we were together. You chose to push me away. Accept the consequences of your actions and leave me alone.”

He kept the same expression, but his eyes narrowed when my coldness caused him pain. His hands stayed in his pockets, and he didn’t try to touch me. Cornering me in a crowded room worked out in my favor because there wasn’t anything he could do.

“Goodnight, Maverick.” I turned to walk away.

He grabbed me again. “Arwen, listen to me.”

I pushed off his hand. “Listen to what? What do you want? Don’t stand there and tell me you want us to be together because that’s never going to happen. You don’t get to cheat on me to figure out what you want. That’s not how it works. I deserve a man who doesn’t have to sleep around to determine what he wants.”

“I didn’t cheat on you—”

“That’s how it felt, Maverick.”

“Look, you hit me with some serious shit—”

“I’m tired of going in circles. You keep making excuses for what you did, and that’s fine. But if you’re trying to get me back, that’s not going to work. Your excuses don’t impress me. They don’t make me second-guess my decision. Nothing will make me reconsider going back to you. I suggest you sign those papers and just let it go. I don’t want you, Maverick. You’ve been dumped.”

MAVERICK

MY WEEK PASSED WITH AGONIZING SLOWNESS.

I had the same routine every single day, taking in a few drinks throughout the day. I spent a couple hours at the gym, took care of the cheese production, and then sat in my office with a cigar in my mouth.

The estate was so large that I always felt like a small ant in a large hill. But once Arwen had come there, the place felt a little smaller, a little fuller. She filled the empty halls with her lovely presence.

Now I felt alone in this castle.

The isolation had never bothered me before. I thrived in it. But now the quiet sounds of the ventilation system and the vacuum cleaner down the hall reminded me she wasn't there. Her bedroom had been cleaned out, so there was no evidence she'd been there at all.

Only her memory remained.

Every time I tried to talk to her, her hostility was always the same. She never wanted anything to do with me, never wanted to have a conversation with me. She used to look at me like I was the most important man in her life.

Now she hated me.

I should just let this go. Arwen had made up her mind, and she wouldn't change it. I should move on and forget about it. I was fine before we met. I would be fine now that she was gone. I preferred the bachelor life anyway.

But I still thought about her...all the time.

I still missed her.

I wasn't sure what I wanted anymore. The second things got real between us, my first impulse was to push it away, to sabotage what we had.

Mission accomplished.

Now I was stuck with regret, stuck with the pain of my stupidity.

If I didn't want that kind of relationship, then what did I want?

Without her, what did I have?

THE SECOND I walked in the door, she was the most noticeable person in the room. Her hair was slicked back in a tight ponytail, and hoop earrings hung from her lobes, her long, slender neck on display under the bar lights. She picked up a big bottle of vodka and filled the glasses lined at the table.

The men at the counter eyed her like they couldn't believe their luck.

I wanted to grab her by that pretty ponytail and drag her out of there. She only took the job because she needed the money, and the reason she needed the money was because I screwed everything up.

I entered the room and noticed the eyes directed at my wife. Most of the guys stared at her, even if they already had a woman on their arm. Some of the women looked at me, but tonight, I wasn't interested.

I sat at the corner of the bar and waited for her to notice me.

Her tip jar was almost overflowing—with hundred-euro bills.

This woman didn't even need to strip to get paid like one.

She smiled at a new customer and made him a gin and tonic. A few phrases were exchanged back and forth before she moved on to her next admirer. Slowly, she made her way toward me, running the bar without effort. When she approached my chair and lifted her gaze to meet mine, her smile immediately dropped from her face.

I sat straight on the stool, my suit fitting my shoulders perfectly. I wore all black—the color she preferred to see me in. I held her gaze and hoped she wouldn't pour a drink then throw it in my face.

All eyes were on her, so she didn't cause a scene. "What are you drinking?"

"You know me best."

She grabbed a bottle of the most expensive scotch she had behind the counter and poured it into a glass. She wore a low-cut black blouse that showed off her incredibly beautiful skin. She pushed the glass toward me, fire in her eyes.

I took a drink. "Thank you."

"You aren't welcome." She turned and flipped her hair at the same time, showing her attitude like a pissed-off mare. Then she moved down the bar and kept working, pouring drinks for all the assholes who asked for her number. Her tip jar started to overflow, but the bills kept getting pushed down.

I sat alone and watched her the entire night, wondering when her shift would end so I could get a few moments of her time. Even though my presence must have startled her, she kept doing her job like nothing had happened at all.

She came back to me, a new drink in hand. "This is from the lady at the end of the bar."

I pushed the glass to the side because I had no intention of drinking it.

She rolled her eyes. "A little late for that, Maverick."

SHE WORKED UNTIL CLOSING.

She served the final rounds, finished the transactions, and then locked the doors when everyone left.

I was glad she didn't bother trying to kick me out.

She returned to the register and wrapped the bills in rubber bands before she shut and locked the drawer. She poured herself an extra shot before she left the dirty glasses in the sink.

I stayed at the counter and kept drinking.

Now that the music was off and the conversations had ended, her heels were audible against the hardwood floor. She slowly walked toward me, the same rage in her eyes as all the other times that she'd seen me. "Alright, I'm tired of this." She stopped at the counter and gripped the edge with both hands. Her nails were painted black, and her makeup was dark and smoky. Black was the perfect color on her, especially when her skin was beautiful like a white flower. "Say whatever you want to say, Maverick. Take all the time you need. Let's finish this conversation so we can move on with our lives."

I finally had the floor, but only because it was the best way to get rid of me. Whatever. I would take it. I pushed my glass toward her then tapped my fingers against the counter.

She lifted the bottle and refilled it.

The lights were low, and the street outside was dark. We were the only people out at this time of night. Everyone else went home, either with a lover or alone. My fingers wrapped around the glass, and I studied the resistance in her eyes. There wasn't a hint of who she used to be. She used to be my closest friend... Now she hated me. "You're right. I can't accept love from anyone. I don't know why... I guess it happened after my mother died. My father has been a hard-ass ever since, and now I've developed some kind of complex."

Instead of unleashing a smartass comment, she just listened.

This was the only chance I would ever get with her, so I wouldn't squander it. "I've never felt good enough for him..."

so I don't feel good enough for anyone."

"Your father is an asshole, Maverick. Don't let his opinion of you determine your own worth."

"I know, but it just happened." I brought the glass to my lips and took a drink. After I licked the drops away, I kept talking. "We both agreed this would be a marriage of convenience. You needed something, and I needed something. I never expected it to turn into this..." I lowered my gaze. "I've been with a lot of women, and not a single one has meant anything to me. Then I met you...and I started to care about you. Coming from a heartless man like me, that's pretty impressive."

She pulled the glass from my hands and took a drink.

"I knew things were different between us before the party. I could feel it... I knew it was happening. Instead of picking up a woman at the bar, I preferred to stay home with you. You stayed in my bed every night, and I liked it. It felt right. But I wasn't ready for what you put on me..."

She opened her mouth to argue, but then she controlled herself and made her mouth shut again.

"It was a fucked-up thing to do, and I admit that. You told me how you felt, and I was a dick about it. I guess I panicked. I've never wanted to get married, and then I found myself married...really married. I didn't want that. So, I reverted back to what I used to do..."

Her eyes shifted down, like the mention of my betrayal still hurt her.

"I shouldn't have done that, Arwen. Not that it matters... but I didn't even enjoy it. I thought of you the entire time."

She grabbed my glass again. "So romantic..." She brought the glass to her lips and took a drink. When she set it down, she wiped her mouth with the back of her forearm.

"If it matters...I haven't been with anyone since you left." I'd been alone in that bed every night, regretting the stupid decision I'd made. Every time I walked into a room with my

wife on my arm, I knew I had the most beautiful woman in the room. But I threw that all away when my emotions got to me.

“No. It doesn’t matter.”

She’d been sleeping around—and that was a nightmare that kept me up all night long. Knowing another man enjoyed her the way I used to made me sick to my stomach. I knew exactly how she felt when she saw me with those two girls. It fucking hurt. “I have an offer for you.”

“I doubt there’s anything you can entice me with.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the black wedding ring I’d only worn once. I’d slipped it onto my finger at the ceremony, but at the end of the night, it fell into my drawer next to my stash of condoms. I held it with the tips of my fingers so she could see it under the dim light.

She stared at it, not breathing for a moment.

I slid it over my knuckle and onto my finger. It fit just as snugly as the first time I’d put it on. “My father still might try to hurt you. He doesn’t drop his vendettas easily. You’re living paycheck to paycheck and working two jobs to make rent. You still need me.”

“I’d rather stand on my own two feet than rely on someone.”

I rose to my feet then rested my hand on top of hers.

She stilled noticeably when she felt my touch, and unlike last time, she didn’t pull away.

“Let’s try this again. But this time...let’s do it right.”

Her eyes filled with a storm of emotions. She was equally angry and touched. Her fingers shook slightly against mine, but she didn’t pull away.

“I promise to be faithful to you, to care for you, and to be your lawfully wedded husband.” I repeated my old vows back to her. “We’ll take things slow, but this won’t be a sham anymore. This is real—from this day forward. I want to try this again...if you’ll give me another chance.” My fingers gripped hers a little tighter as I waited for the answer I wanted.

Now that I was on the precipice of getting her back, I realized how much I wanted it. I wanted to take her home and never let her go again.

Silence passed, and it seemed like she might say yes. There was no venom in her eyes, not like before. But then she pulled her fingers away and dropped her gaze. “No.”

My hand went cold.

“It wasn’t a sham, Maverick. It was real. And you slept with someone else.” She took a deep breath to still the tears that built up behind her eyes. “I told you I loved you...and you didn’t say it back. As if that wasn’t hard enough... But then you went and did that...” When she couldn’t fight the emotion anymore, the tears escaped.

And I felt like shit.

Every time I saw her cry, it made me feel terrible. But never as terrible as this.

“My answer is no,” she whispered through her tears. “I’ve listened to you say your piece. Now please leave me alone.”

“Sheep—”

“Don’t call me that again.” Her eyes darted up, her tears mixing with her anger. “You were supposed to protect me—but you didn’t protect me from yourself. You’re not my wolf, and I’m not your sheep... Not anymore.”

ARWEN

I COULDN'T LIE. WHEN HE MADE THE OFFER, I WAS TEMPTED to take it.

Because I still loved that man.

Despite what he did, I couldn't shut down my heart and turn off my feelings. I couldn't pretend that the sight of his wedding ring didn't mean something to me. I couldn't pretend that growing old with him wasn't something I still wanted.

But I found the strength to say no.

He didn't deserve me.

He didn't love me.

Brandon became the man in my life. He was in my bed most of the week, but we weren't anything serious. He was just the man I used to stop thinking about the man I actually wanted.

Brandon didn't mind since he was getting laid.

I spent my time working my two different jobs. It started to feel routine, balancing two different occupations to make ends meet. Sometimes, I would perform at the opera then bartend directly afterward.

It was exhausting.

But I would never be able to afford the things I needed unless I kept working.

The longer I didn't have Maverick in my life, the more I appreciated that lifestyle. Without my family inheritance, I had nothing. I was left with the coins in my bank account and the checks my employers wrote. I still had to budget for utilities and groceries, and I could never afford any new clothes.

That wasn't the reason I loved Maverick, so I wouldn't go back to him for that—even if it was the easy way out. Maybe someday, I would be a big star and my salary would be higher. Maybe one day, I could have a nice house of my own.

I held on to that dream and kept believing.

The bar was about to close one night when a familiar face walked inside. Maverick wore a t-shirt and a dark blazer, drawing the attention of all the women in the room. He strode to the bar with one hand in his pocket, and when he reached the spot where he'd been last time, he took a seat.

My heart jumped into my throat at the sight of him. I'd thought I would never see him again, unless he was handing me divorce papers. But here he was, appearing a week after our last conversation.

When I reached the counter in front of him, I noticed he was still wearing his wedding ring. Maybe he took it off the second he got home and put it back on to see me, but I suspected he wouldn't do that.

Proactively, I grabbed a bottle of scotch and filled a glass.

He took it but kept his eyes on me. "How are you?"

"Fine. You?"

He shrugged. "I've been better."

I'd been better too. "Why are you here?"

"Just want a drink."

"All the way in Florence?" He had enough liquor in the house to survive for years without leaving it. Plus, he had servants who would run out and fetch anything he asked for. There was no reason for him to drive all the way to Florence and sit at this bar—unless it was to see me.

“I like Florence.”

“No. You like sitting in dark rooms with a cigar in your mouth.”

The corner of his mouth rose in a smile. “You really know me.”

When I dropped my hostility for a few minutes, it was actually nice to talk to him. I was so lonely in that apartment, even when Brandon slept over. I didn’t like to cuddle with him, choosing to stick to my side of the bed. We didn’t talk much either because I wasn’t interested in his character. He was just a pretty man who knew how to fuck, how to make me forget my husband for a few hours. “Did you submit the papers to your lawyer?” He still hadn’t dropped them off, so I assumed he took care of it—even though he was still wearing his ring.

“No.” He took a drink then licked his lips.

“Do you need me to do it?”

He shook his head.

“You’re going to make this as difficult as possible, aren’t you?”

He held his glass by the rim and swirled the contents. “It’s my job to do what’s best for you...and I don’t think divorcing me is the best thing for you.”

I rolled my eyes.

“You need a man to take care of you. Living in a shabby apartment by yourself—”

“Don’t insult my shabby apartment.”

His mouth shut and his eyes narrowed. “A woman like you shouldn’t be living alone. My father might be a problem, but even if he isn’t, you’re a target. Men see you in this bar, and they might follow you home.”

“That’s what the police are for.”

“But the police aren’t as powerful as me.” He tapped the glass against his chest. “You could be rich and pampered. You

could be safe. I can give you the whole world...if you'll be my wife."

"We've already had this conversation, Maverick." Having him as my protective husband in the beginning was a blessing, but I fell in love with him for other reasons. I could go back to him if that was all I wanted from him...but I wanted so much more.

"We're having it again."

"My answer will be the same."

"Then I'll just have to keep trying to change your mind."

I gripped the bottle on the counter and stared at him coldly. Another woman would forgive him in a heartbeat. This was Maverick DeVille...handsome and rich. With that charming smile, he could get away with anything. But I wasn't like other women. I needed more than that. "Goodnight, Maverick."

WHEN I WALKED out of the bar that night, Maverick was hot on my tail.

With my black bomber jacket around my shoulders, I stepped into the nighttime chill. The air was dry and cold, burning my nose the second the frigid air came into contact with the skin. My hands slid into my pockets, and I tightened the jacket around my body.

He appeared at my side. "This is exactly what I'm talking about. You shouldn't be walking home alone in the cold."

"I live just a few blocks away."

"Makes it easier to follow you."

I kept walking, keeping a foot of space between us. "Just leave me alone, Maverick. I gave you the chance to say your piece. I listened to every word. But now you need to let it go. I've made my choice."

He walked beside me, his height towering over mine. His hands were in the pockets of his blazer, and vapor emerged from his nose and mouth. With his height and build, no one could catcall me on the street or bother me. He was bug spray that kept all the gnats away. “Arwen—”

I stopped in my tracks and faced him. “What do you want?”

He slowly turned toward me, sharing the narrow sidewalk with me. There was no one else on the street at this time of night, just us and the freezing cold. “I think it’s obvious what I want, Arwen.”

“But it’s not obvious why. Why do you want to be married to me? You obviously don’t love me and you don’t want what I want, so why are you wearing your wedding ring and refusing to grant me a divorce? It doesn’t make any sense, Maverick. And don’t say it’s because you want to keep me safe.”

His hands stayed in his pockets as he stared at me, the exhalation from his nose looking like cigar smoke. His dark eyes blended in with the night, and he stared at me like a hungry wolf under the bright moon.

“Why do you want this?”

He bowed his head for a moment and stared at the ground. After he gathered his thoughts, he raised his chin. “I like being married to you...”

I crossed my arms over my chest.

“I care about you. I miss you.”

“But you don’t love me,” I pressed. “That’s pretty important in a marriage.”

“It is,” he said with a nod. “Give me some time to get there. I want to try, Arwen. We could get divorced and start over from the ground up, but I don’t want to do that. I want us to have what we had before, but to try to make it work in our own way. Truth be told, I don’t want to go home with someone else. I don’t want to sleep alone. I don’t...want to live like this. I know I fucked up, but give me a chance to make it right.”

I was a good husband to you, but I'll be better this time around."

It was a testament to my love for him that I actually considered his offer. My heart beat for this man in a special way. My family was gone, but I felt like he'd become my new family. DeVille fit me far better than Chatel ever did. I had a husband I respected and admired, someone I cared so much for. I'd fallen in love in a way I never had with anyone else. Brandon made me feel lonely, and every other guy was a poor substitute for what I really wanted.

"Sheep..." He stepped closer to me. His boots crunched against the cold concrete, and his hand gently slipped into my hair. His fingertips brushed against my cheek before he cupped my face. He brought his head close to mine, his lips just inches away.

I melted—like always. There was nothing I wanted more than to abandon my apartment and go home with him. I missed those crisp sheets. I missed his fireplace near his bed. I missed sleeping so soundly because I knew nothing could ever hurt me.

But then I remembered I wasn't the last person to sleep there. Two obnoxious gold diggers had taken my place. With their arms and legs draped around his body, they'd claimed him as theirs. I was so easily replaced.

I grabbed his wrist and pushed his hand down. "I can't forget what you did. I can't stop thinking about it. It makes me want to cry every single time."

He released a deep breath as his hand slowly lowered to his side.

"I want to fall in love with a man who wants to fall in love with me. You may be a good man who took care of me, but that's not good enough. I want commitment, loyalty, and integrity. I want a man who would never, ever hurt me. That isn't you..."

"It is me," he whispered. "Give me a chance."

I stepped away. "No." I turned to walk off.

“Sheep.”

I turned back around. “Please don’t call me that anymore.” He had no idea how much pain this caused me. I wanted to jump into his car and drive to our happily ever after. That apartment would never feel like home, not the way his estate did. Walking away from him was the hardest thing I’d ever had to do. I would never love anyone else the way I loved him...but I had to try. “Bye...”

He stayed on the sidewalk and watched me walk away. He didn’t try to change my mind again. He didn’t threaten to stay married to me forever. He finally let me go.

Finally let me walk away.

BRANDON WATCHED me pull on my jacket then fix my hair. He stayed in bed, the sheets bunched around his waist. With tanned skin and a pretty face, he was a great man to share a mattress with. “Your mind always seems to be somewhere else.”

“Not always.”

“No. Always.” He got out of bed and started to get dressed. “Divorce is hard...especially when you don’t want to get divorced.”

“I thought I said I don’t want to talk about that.”

“You did—but you’re always thinking about it.” He pulled his shirt over his head then came closer to me. “It’s alright. Now I understand that I can’t compete with this guy. No one can.”

“There’s nothing to compete with. We’re over.”

“You’re not over him.”

I held his gaze. “I never said I was...” I was sleeping with Brandon so I could forget about Maverick, but the haze wasn’t as strong as it used to be. The high Brandon gave me became weaker and weaker every time we were together.

He bowed his head slightly. “Well, I like you. But now I’m starting to worry that you’ll never like me.”

“I said I wasn’t looking for anything serious.”

“Yeah, but things change.”

It wouldn’t change for a long time. I had been with Maverick for over six months. Feelings like that didn’t just go away...not easily.

“Can I walk you to work?”

“No...I’m okay.” I headed to the front door and grabbed my keys on the way out.

Brandon walked with me until we reached the sidewalk. “You want a ride?”

“No. I’d rather walk.”

He continued to watch me like he hoped I would change my mind. He was a beautiful man and it was surprising that he had his attention set on me, but I didn’t feel anything. There wasn’t that burning chemistry like there was with Maverick. He gave a slight nod before he walked away. “I’ll see you later, then.”

THE BAR WAS quiet that night.

Only a few people were sprinkled at the counter and the tables, mostly couples who’d met up for a drink before bedtime. I kept looking at the clock and waiting for the night to end...even though I had nowhere to be.

When I had nothing to do, I sipped a hot cup of tea with a lemon wedge, resting my voice as much as possible. Singing at the theater and then talking to the customers at the bar strained my vocal cords.

It was just an hour before closing when a group of four men walked inside. I knew something was wrong because they

weren't the usual demographic of the patrons who came to this bar. They were all dressed in black—and they were older.

The man in front was Caspian.

“Shit...” My hand immediately reached for the bat hidden underneath the counter.

Caspian was dressed in a three-piece black suit, looking like he belonged somewhere much fancier than a small bar in downtown Florence. He smoothed out his vest as he came toward me, carrying himself just the way his son did. Age didn't inhibit him or slow him down at all. He was still lethal.

The men raised their guns and pointed them at the patrons.

Caspian locked his eyes on me and slowly approached the bar, those brown eyes full of victory.

Even if I bashed in his skull, one of his men would gun me down. I'd lie on the floor in a puddle of my own blood.

His men ran everyone out of the bar, keeping their guns aimed at their heads until they finally left the room. The glass doors were shut and locked.

Now I was on my own.

Five armed men against one bat.

I couldn't even reach for my phone and call Maverick. He wasn't my husband anymore, so I shouldn't want to contact him in the first place...but I had no one else.

Caspian lowered himself onto the barstool and pulled out a silver pistol. He laid the gun on the counter between us, like he dared me to reach for it.

I held the bat at my side.

He must have been able to see my grasp in the mirror behind me, because he smiled like he was amused. “I may be old, but I'm a quick draw. I'll put a bullet in that pretty little head long before you smash that bat into my skull. And it'll take a few hits before you cause any real damage.”

“You underestimate me.”

“No...I learned my lesson.” He smiled in a sickly manner. “Now make me a drink.”

My instinct was to defy him because I didn't appreciate being bossed around. But I didn't have any options, not when his four men were staring at me with their guns now back on their hips. I was cornered like a rat, and there was nowhere for me to run. Hopefully, the customers who had just been kicked out would call the police...even though it probably wouldn't make a difference.

When I didn't talk back, he smiled. “We're off to a good start. Scotch—neat.”

I grabbed the bottle and filled the glass.

“Pour one for yourself as well. You're going to need it.”

I filled another glass and set the bottle aside. The bat leaned against the counter, and I didn't bother holding on to it. I pushed his glass toward him, coming in close contact with the gun. If I were quick enough, I could grab it and shoot him before his men shot me.

But I didn't take the risk.

He brought it to his lips and took a long drink, his eyes staying on me. “Enjoy your new profession?”

“Enjoy putting guns to people's heads?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” He took another drink and licked his lips just the way his son did.

“You came here to kill an unarmed woman?” I shook my head in disappointment. “That seems cowardly if you ask me.”

“Taking away a family's justice is cowardly as well.”

“No. That was heroic.” I only had minutes to live, so now was the time to speak my mind. “I told you I was sorry about your wife, but I stand by my actions. Innocent people didn't deserve to die.”

“My wife was innocent.” His big eyes stared into mine. His eyes were different from Maverick's, much larger in appearance. They were the same color, hot espresso or scotch.

“And she didn’t deserve to die.”

He picked up the glass and swirled the contents without watching his movements.

“What now? You’re just going to kill me?”

“You don’t seem scared.”

I was scared. I just hid it pretty well. “I feel bad for Maverick. His own father hunted down his wife and killed her in cold blood.”

“Ex-wife, right?” He cocked his head slightly to the side.

I guess Maverick and Caspian were on speaking terms.

“You’re living in a run-down apartment and working two jobs to make ends meet. Interesting.”

I didn’t want to draw this out with useless chitchat. It was my fault for not taking Maverick’s warning seriously. If I wanted to live, I should have stayed with him. But after seeing him with someone else, my will to survive disappeared quickly. Now I had to face the consequences of those actions. Maverick would have to carry the guilt of my death forever. “Lots of other people do it. I’m not special.”

“But no one would walk away from a rich husband the way you have.”

“He was more than just a rich husband...” When I thought of Maverick’s qualities, his money never crossed my mind. His success was such a small part of who he was. His good heart was the best thing about him.

“Why did you leave him?”

This man had a gun sitting on the counter, but he wanted to talk like we were friends. “What makes you think I left him?”

“Because my son would never leave you. He played Russian roulette against a madman to save your life. He’s been far more loyal to you than he ever was to me. So why did you leave a man who gave you everything?”

I gripped the edge of the counter. This conversation wasn’t going the way I expected at all. It was an interrogation about

my personal life, not an execution for my crimes. “It’s none of your business.”

“He’s my son—it is my business.”

“Then why don’t you ask him?” I snapped. “Oh, that’s right. You don’t have a relationship with him.”

His wide eyes stared at me without any reaction.

I took a drink.

Caspian didn’t press the question to me again. “My dislike for you is very clear. I didn’t like you before you crossed me, and now, I like you even less. But you need to understand what my son has done for you. He’s a very good man. Whatever his faults may be, they don’t compare to his good qualities.”

My eyes softened. It was the first time I’d heard Caspian say anything positive about his own son. It was the first time he’d talked about goodness and love...not hate and murder.

“Give my son another chance. His actions couldn’t have been that egregious because he’s incapable of being cruel. Not to mention, that man has done everything to keep you safe. He provides for you, protects you. He was willing to put a bullet in his brain to keep you alive. If you continue to focus on his one wrongdoing, then you’re a much dumber girl than I realized.”

I listened to every word he said, but my mind was also thinking so many things at once. “Let me get this straight... You’re here to tell me to forgive your son?”

He drank his scotch.

“You aren’t here to kill me. You’re here to play cupid.”

He lowered his glass, his eyes narrowed at the provocation.

“So, you do care about your son.”

He finished his drink and pushed the glass toward me. “My vendetta against you is on pause at the moment. Killing you in your bed while you sleep felt cheap. Too easy. You should be at home with your husband, not sleeping around with whatever

pretty boy you find on the street. My son needs his wife.” He grabbed his gun from the counter and slipped it into the back of his slacks as he stood up. “But make no mistake, Arwen. When the right time comes, I will kill you. I will slaughter you like a pig and use your meat like a Christmas ham.” He rested his hand on the counter between us, his fingers balled into a fist. “Tonight, I’m doing the right thing for my son. But tomorrow, I’m doing the right thing for me.”

THAT WAS the strangest conversation I’d ever had—but I took it seriously.

Caspian didn’t kill me that evening, but tomorrow was a new day. The conditions would change, and we would be enemies once more. Knowing his son was upset that he’d lost his wife, Caspian had intervened because he wasn’t that heartless after all.

But then he turned back to being cold once he was done.

Very strange man.

The next day, I packed up all my things and stuffed them into my car and made the drive back to Tuscany. Caspian knew where I worked, where I slept, and proved he could kill me whenever he felt like it. Living on my own wasn’t safe. I needed a strong fence, a security team, and a man who could protect me.

I didn’t have another choice.

I drove across the countryside and left my former life behind. My apartment would be inhabited by some other poor person. My job at the bar was abandoned because I couldn’t work there anymore, not after watching Caspian’s men point guns at everyone’s heads. I hadn’t changed my mind about my relationship with Maverick, but I looked forward to returning to his estate.

It was home.

I checked in at the front gate, and the guys let me pass through. I knew Maverick would be notified of my return. The guys would tell him that my car was stuffed with my belongings, as if I intended to return permanently. Before I even made it to the front of the house, Maverick would know exactly what my intentions were.

I was a weak person who was unable to take care of herself. I didn't have the strength or the training to fight off a man like Caspian and his crew. I didn't have the cash to buy a powerful fortress that could keep all the assholes off my property. I was just a woman without means. I was crawling back on my knees to a man who cheated on me...because I didn't have a choice.

But deep down inside...I was happy to be there.

As the house became more visible, I noticed a man step out of the large double doors and walk down the path to the enormous driveway. With square shoulders, tall height, and purpose in his gait, he headed down the path and approached the road. He was in a black blazer and dark jeans, and his face became more visible as I slowly approached. With dark brown hair and matching eyes, he was a beautiful man who could easily appear in a cologne commercial.

I pulled up to the house and turned off the engine.

Maverick stayed on the sidewalk.

I gave myself a few more seconds to prepare for the conversation. I was there for refuge because I had nowhere else to go. My family was buried in the ground, and my husband was all I had left. As always, I turned to him...because he was my only family.

I found the strength to get out of the car and face him.

I walked around the front of the car, my eyes downcast because I was ashamed to be crawling back to him. He'd tried to get me back, but I'd rejected him every single time. Now I was only here because I didn't have any other choice. He would either accept me with open arms or turn me away because I was only there because I needed something.

I hoped it was the first one.

When I stopped in front of him, I lifted my gaze to finally look at him. It was a sunny day in the middle of winter, and the clear sky only made the air chillier. It was so bright that sunglasses were needed, but neither one of us carried them. I looked into his dark eyes and didn't see a single hint of resentment. "I'm here because—"

"I don't care why you're here. I'm just happy that you are." His arms wrapped around my waist, and he cradled me into his chest. His chin rested on my head, and he squeezed me like he never wanted to let go.

I closed my eyes because it felt good to be wrapped in his embrace. It was far better than any night I spent with Brandon. The love I had for this man immediately grew the second our bodies were wrapped together.

He moved his lips to my forehead and gave me a gentle kiss.

I pulled away and lifted my chin to meet his gaze. His features were softer than they'd ever been because he was so relieved to see me. It was the most vulnerable he'd ever been, as if he couldn't believe this was really happening. "I want you to know that your father came to the bar when I was working last night..."

His hands loosened from my waist and slowly moved to his sides.

That was when I noticed his wedding ring. He still wore it, even though he wouldn't have had time to run to his bedroom and put it on before meeting my car in front of the house. That meant he'd already been wearing it. "He told me I should come back to you because of everything you've done for me... because you care about me."

Maverick clearly didn't know what to say to that. His father never expressed any concern for him, but now he'd tracked down his wife to fix his relationship. His shoulder visibly tightened as the skepticism entered his gaze.

“He suggested I come back to you...because he still intends to kill me. But he wanted to do the right thing for you first.” I still didn’t quite understand it, how a man could help his son but still focus on his own self-interest. The gesture was considerate coming from Caspian, but also just as twisted. “That’s why I’m here...because I have nowhere else to go. He knows where I live, where I work... I don’t have a choice.” I didn’t want Maverick to think I was there by my own choice, that I wanted to give this relationship a try because I’d had a change of heart.

Maverick’s expression didn’t alter as he watched me.

“I just wanted you to know that... Do you want me to go?” I knew he wouldn’t turn me away, but I wanted to ask anyway. Just as we had been in the beginning of this marriage, we were back to being in an arrangement. I needed something from him, but in this case, he didn’t need something from me.

“You want me to protect you from my father?”

I nodded.

“And you don’t want anything else?”

“No...my feelings haven’t changed.” I basically wanted a place to live where I would be safe. I wanted to have the best protection possible. Leaving the country wasn’t an option because I didn’t have the money to pull it off.

“You can stay with me.”

I knew he would take me in, but I felt grateful anyway. He was the only person I could count on.

“But I want us to try again. I want us to try to make this marriage work.”

There was a condition for my refuge, a payment for my safety.

“Give that to me...and we have a deal.”

MAVERICK

WHEN SHE ARRIVED AT THE HOUSE, I ASSUMED SHE'D changed her mind because she missed me. She forgave my actions because she loved me enough to let it go. Our relationship didn't start off conventional, so the severity of my crime was debatable—especially when I did so much for her. When her car pulled up to the front of the house, I thought that was a new start.

But it turned out my father had threatened her.

She still needed me.

Instead of being annoyed, I seized it as an opportunity. She needed something from me, and I wanted something from her. It wasn't right that my father threatened her, but it did play into my hand well.

Now she was back.

The servants returned her things to her bedroom. Everything was back to the way it'd been originally, with her nice dresses hanging in the closets, her jewelry on the nightstand. Her makeup and hair supplies sat on the counter in her private bathroom. She's been gone for almost a month, but she somehow made the room smell like her the second she walked inside.

I lingered in the doorway and watched her sit on the couch, her eyes distant as her mind lived in some other space. Her fingertips rested against her lips, painted black like her mood. Her hair was pulled back in a bun, a few strands coming loose.

Now that she was surrounded by my fortress, she was safe once again, but she looked as lost as before.

Even though I was staring at her for minutes, she never noticed I was there. With her legs crossed and her body tense, she wasn't at ease in her old home just yet. I watched her for a few more minutes before I cleared my throat.

Her head snapped in my direction. After a quick dilation, her eyes relaxed as she took in my appearance. Embarrassed that she had been oblivious to my stare, she turned away, and I noticed her cheeks redden slightly.

“Doesn't feel the same?”

“No, it does...” Her arms stretched across the fabric of the armchairs, and her fingers tapped against the edges. “Feels exactly the same.”

“You don't have to stay in here.” It was presumptuous to invite her into my bedroom, but I wanted to make the offer anyway. We'd never actually lived in the same quarters before, but I knew I wouldn't mind sharing my space with her. My closet was big enough, and it wasn't like I needed the privacy anymore. Once that ring was on my left hand, I became a married man...a real married man.

“I need my own space.” She still wouldn't look at me. Her feelings toward me hadn't changed. Every conversation we had ended the same way, and it seemed like her mind-set wouldn't budge. She told me she would try, but she obviously wasn't ready to put much effort into it just yet.

“You know where to find me if you need anything.”

She still didn't turn around to look at me. As if she was picturing my infidelity that very moment, the thought was scarring enough to make her cringe.

Now that she was under my roof, there wouldn't be another man in her bed. When she returned to Florence for work, she wouldn't be sleeping elsewhere. She'd already had her lover, so we were even. “I expect your fidelity, Arwen. You better have broken things off with Brandon.”

She slowly turned her head toward me but didn't meet my gaze head on. "That's ironic..."

"I had my slipup, and you had yours. We're even now."

"Even?" she asked incredulously. "Me telling you I loved you then you sleeping with someone else isn't the same at all. No, we aren't even."

"But if we're trying, then we're wiping the slate clean."

"Whoa." She rose to her feet and finally looked at me head on. "I said I would try, but that doesn't mean you get a free pass. I'm still hurt by what you did. It still keeps me up late at night. I appreciate your taking me in, but that doesn't earn your vindication. It doesn't right the wrong you made."

"You're going to need to forgive me, or this is never going to work."

"Well, you can't force me to forgive you. You can't expect me to forget about it overnight."

"But I want this just to be the two of us. That's all I'm asking." It was wrong for me to expect her to let it go so easily. She hadn't taken me back in the first place because it still bothered her. If we were living under the same roof and being monogamous, then she was bound to forgive me in time. I just had to be patient...even though it'd already been the longest year of my life.

Her eyes became less hostile, and she turned away. "Alright..."

THE MEN DIDN'T SHOOT me on sight, so they obviously expected me to show up at some point.

I entered the grounds then stepped through the main door. My childhood home was exactly the same, distinctly nostalgic. Dark hardwood was under my feet, and there was charcoal trimming along the floors and ceiling. It hadn't changed since

my mother had spruced up the place. My father would never make a single change for the rest of his life.

My father was sitting in the living room when I walked inside, a cigar smoldering in the ashtray. He was drinking with one of his men. A bottle of scotch sat in the center of the table, and their glasses were both full of another round.

He looked up at me—dark eyes identical to mine. “You looked a lot better in that suit you were wearing the last time I saw you.”

I took a seat on the leather couch and glared at the man across from me. He was the head of security, but he was chummy with my father. He handled my glare as much as possible before he finished his glass and dismissed himself.

My father pushed the bottle toward me. “You can have that. I’m sure you don’t need a glass.”

I wasn’t in the mood for his games. “You threatened my wife.”

He tilted his head slightly and shrugged. “Not quite. I told her she should go home to her husband. *Then* I threatened her.”

“Doesn’t matter what the order was.”

“I think you should be thanking me. She’s home because of me, right?”

I had no idea how I would have gotten her back otherwise.

“She needed to be reminded of her station. She needed to remember what she was losing by walking away.”

“She’s too good for me, and we both know it.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said with a chuckle. “But I can tell that woman loves you...and I can tell she means a great deal to you. Whatever your differences are, you could work them out. I doubt she left just because Kamikaze is dead...which means you screwed it up at some point.”

“How would you know if she loves me?” I doubted Arwen blurted that out when he had a gun pointed at her.

“Because I was there.”

I ignored the bottle of scotch he'd offered me. When I thought about the moments when it was obvious how she felt about me, there was no one else in the room. It was us together in the shower, deep under the sheets, or just looking at each other across the table.

“I was there when she played that song for you...in case you don't remember.”

After everything that had happened with Arwen, the details of that night slipped my mind. I barely remembered the conversation I had with him at the bar. It wasn't much of a conversation because he didn't say a word.

“I had more important things on my mind.”

“Clearly...” He shook the ice cubes in the glass and took a drink.

“So you openly admit you want to kill the woman who loves your son?”

He shrugged. “Wouldn't have to be this way if she hadn't gotten in my way.”

“You should thank her. She stopped you from doing something you would have regretted.”

“I don't regret anything.”

“Really?” I asked bitterly. “You should regret getting involved with Ramon in the first place. That's the reason Mother got killed. All of this happened because of *you*. You may have lost your revenge because of Arwen, but all of this happened because of you. Stop putting the blame on other people, and put it where it belongs.” I rose to my feet, sickened by the empty look in his eyes. “Stay away from my wife. If I see you anywhere near her, I'll kill you. And I mean that.”

He lifted his gaze to look at me, his elbows resting on his knees.

“You didn't protect your wife the way you should have. I won't make the same mistake.” I turned away and left the

living room, knowing full well I could pull out my gun and shoot him right between the eyes. When faced with a loaded pistol across from Kamikaze, I didn't hesitate to compete in a deadly match of Russian roulette. I certainly wasn't afraid of anything—like pulling the trigger. But even now, I still couldn't put a bullet in his brain and watch the light leave his eyes. I hated myself for that.

“Maverick?”

My feet halted on their own even though I wished I could keep walking. I wished this man didn't have any effect on me, that he didn't have this invisible power over me. In my eyes, he was still my father, the man who raised me. I slowly turned back to him. “Do what you have to do. Just know I'll do the same.”

ARWEN SPENT her time in her bedroom for the next few days. She watched TV in her living room, had meals by herself, and rarely ventured out unless she went to work in Florence.

As much as I wanted more from her, I kept being patient.

I spent my time at the gym and working in my office. My thoughts always strayed to the woman living in my house, the woman who wanted nothing to do with me. Ever since she'd come into my life, she complicated things. My relationship with my father was never the same. Even my relationship with myself wasn't the same either. There was no one else who could make me face Kamikaze in a standoff like that, but she made me do the most unexpected things.

Now, we were a million miles apart.

She still despised me for what I did. My infidelity was a sign of betrayal, a stab to the back. We were so close, and just when we got closer, I pushed her so far away that she never wanted to come back. The unconditional love that used to be in her eyes was long gone, like the sun that set over the horizon. Sometimes there were hints it was still there, but in

the end, it was just the memory of the sun's rays that reflected in my mind.

My behavior had been thoughtless and stupid. It was that much stupider because I didn't even want to sleep with anyone else. I'd forced myself to do it just to make a point...even though I didn't even remember what that point was. When faced with something as intimate as Arwen's feelings, I didn't have the capacity to accept it. Anytime I had ever loved anyone, I lost them. The more you cared, the more you had to lose. I'd liked our relationship the way it was, and I didn't want it to change.

But it changed anyway.

Now a wedding ring sat on my left hand, and I was committed to one woman for the rest of my life. Well, as long as she would have me. This was supposed to be a means to an end, but somehow it became very real.

Arwen was really my wife—not just on paper.

Now, I wished I could go back in time and punch myself in the face instead of picking up those women.

I understood why she was upset about it. I understood why she didn't look at me the same. But I wanted her forgiveness anyway.

After her silence had lasted several days, I returned to her room in the hope of a conversation. Even if she just wanted to tell me off, I preferred that over her lack of communication. The bedroom door was open, so I stepped inside.

She sat on the couch and wrote in a small notebook. Her pen danced across the pages as she added her words with beautiful penmanship. The format of the lines resembled a poem, so I wondered if she was writing a story.

I let myself inside and allowed my footsteps to announce my presence.

She tore her gaze away from her notebook and looked at me. As if no time had passed at all, she was still ice-cold.

I could talk about the distance between us, but since that had failed so many times, I decided to focus on something else. “What are you working on?”

Her body had been rigid just moments before, and it took a few seconds for her to relax. There would be no interrogation about our relationship, and that made her thaw just a bit. “A song.”

She didn’t invite me, but I took a seat in the armchair across from her. “Can I hear it?”

“It’s not done. These are just the lyrics. I don’t have any music for it.”

“How’s it coming along?”

She closed the notebook and capped the pen. “Pretty well until you came along.”

I missed the camaraderie we used to share. We were friends and allies. I would even say she was my closest friend. But that comfortable relationship had been replaced by standoffish expressions and cold comments. “I talked to my father the other day.”

She set the notebook on the counter beside her. “How’d that go?”

I shrugged. “He’s still a psychopath...”

“Some people never change, huh?” She tossed the pen on top, and it rolled toward the edge of the table.

“Seems that way.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I just wanted to talk to her, even if we discussed a subject I hated. “He doesn’t make any sense. He told you to come back to me because that’s what I needed. But he also still intends to kill you. His warped mind can separate the two like they’re distinctly different when they aren’t.”

“I don’t understand it either.” She crossed her legs and rested her fingertips against her lips. It was a cool evening, so she was in black leggings and a loose-fitting sweater while the

gas fire roared in the hearth underneath the TV. Her hair was styled, but her makeup was gone. She looked ready for bed, and that was when she looked the most hypnotizing. The fatigue in her eyes was sexy. Her body was relaxed and should have been draped over something—like me. She became more vulnerable, too tired to fight any obstacle that might get in her way. If she was dressed like that, then that meant she was cold sleeping without me.

Maybe I should take all the covers off her bed so she'd be forced to sleep with me...or freeze.

“When he came to the bar, I was surprised by everything he said. It was the only time I've ever heard him say something nice about you.”

“Nice?” My father was capable of saying something nice?

“He said you were a really good man. I should appreciate everything you've done for me.”

I'd taken a bullet for him, and he was still disappointed in me. But then he threw a curve ball like this. I'd never wanted to be a son who lived for his father's approval, but that was exactly what I was doing. It somehow validated my sense of manhood...even though it shouldn't. I was a much better man than he was because I never would have risked my wife's safety in the first place. As I'd already proven, I took my wife's protection seriously. My father became arrogant in his capabilities and gambled something he couldn't afford to lose. “I've never heard him say anything like that to me...ever.”

“I was surprised too. Caught me off guard for a second. There was a gun sitting on the counter between us, and four of his men had their palms resting on their guns. He'd just chased off the customers who had been drinking in the bar, but then he told me to go home to you... It was odd.”

“Yeah...”

“Maybe he really is as straightforward as he seems. Maybe he does want to do the right thing for you by getting me home...but he also wants his revenge too. How can he want both at the same time? Beats me.”

Losing his wife sparked a mental illness he could never recover from. He was far too gone—and he wasn't coming back. "I went to his house a few days ago. It's easy for me to get access to him. I walked right into the living room with a gun stuffed in the back of my jeans, but I didn't draw. I could have put a bullet in his brain, but I'd never pull the trigger. I tried once before and chickened out. Every time I see him, I chicken out again."

"You aren't chickening out."

My arms rested on my knees, and I stared at the floor.

"Not killing your father doesn't make you weak."

"But he's not my father." I lifted my chin to meet her gaze. Even though the topic of conversation was dreadful, it was nice to talk to her again. "He's another Kamikaze. He's another enemy I have to dispose of."

"But do you think he'd ever really hurt me? He had his chance but didn't take it."

That man was completely unpredictable. "I won't underestimate him. You're too valuable to make an assumption like that."

It was the first time her eyes had softened in an entire month. "That means you'll have to kill him."

He was the last parent I had, and putting him in the ground seemed so wrong. He was my father, the man who gave me his last name. My wealth and connections came from his lineage. Putting a bullet between his eyes felt so wrong—but he didn't give me another choice.

"Unless he has some kind of revelation."

"Not gonna happen."

"I don't know... He did try to patch us up."

That was a curve ball. "But he doesn't know what happened." I suspected if he did, his opinion wouldn't change. Arwen should still be grateful she had me to take care of her. She should be grateful she had her own wolf for protection.

“I suspect his response would be the same.”

I rubbed my palms together before I leaned back in the chair. The gas fireplace emitted heat to the room, but it didn't provide the spark and crackle of real flames like my fireplace did. It was a much quieter ambiance, a new renovation this old house had needed. Even if we didn't say another word to each other, it was nice just to sit there together. Shadows of loneliness started to shroud me in depression. I'd never needed intimacy, but without Arwen, I was lost in the woods. I took it for granted when I shouldn't have, and now I was the only one to blame. I'd managed to earn the love of a beautiful woman, but I hadn't cherished it.

She turned her gaze on the fireplace and pulled her knees to her chest. It was almost ten in the evening, around the time when she used to fall asleep beside me. Her arms crossed over her chest, and she leaned her head back on the cushion of the couch.

With her gaze averted, I watched her. I watched the way her lips softened and parted slightly. I watched the way she tightened her clothing around her to keep warm even though I was right there. Her eyes grew heavy under the weight of fatigue, and that made her face more serene. When she was fired up and pissed about something, she was beautiful. But when she was subdued and calm like this...she was cute.

Cute wasn't in my vocabulary, so I didn't say it.

“I have a dinner party tomorrow. I'd like it if you came with me.”

Her eyes flicked back to me, a little less tired than before. “You're the most social person I know.”

“Not by choice.”

“You always have a choice.”

“It's good business practice.” I stayed in touch with lots of wealthy people and kept my brand fresh in their minds. It added respect to my product, and people associated it in their minds with luxury. Bringing my beautiful wife only made me

more appealing. Ever since she'd started to come around, my profits had nearly doubled. "Will you come?"

"I have a choice?"

I echoed her own words back to her. "You always have a choice."

"I'm not that interested in going to a dinner party...not after the last one. But I have to uphold my end of the bargain, right?"

She could do anything she wanted, and I would never kick her out. If she were smarter, she would have figured that out. I'd given her the freedom to do whatever she wanted the moment she became my wife. She had powers no one else would ever possess, but she was oblivious to it. "Right."

"Then I'll go. But I'm not performing a song—no matter how much they ask."

I'd have to talk to the host about it beforehand. Otherwise, the request would be made anyway. "I'll take care of it."

She turned her gaze back to the fire, her eyes growing heavy once more.

I'd been sleeping alone ever since I could remember, but now I struggled to get to sleep without her beside me. It'd been over a month since we were last together, but my mind still hadn't gotten used to the solitude. The bed felt too big now. "I'll let you get some sleep." I rose to my feet and walked to the door, knowing I would retreat to my cave and sleep alone. It was the longest I'd gone without getting laid, so my mind was in the gutter most of the time. There was nothing I wanted more than to peel off her leggings and push her knees to her chest so I could fuck her into the mattress. When we were together without a condom, I realized just how good sex could be. It had made my threesome even more anticlimactic. I traded in perfect sex with the perfect woman for something mediocre... It was my biggest regret.

She didn't turn around. "Good night."

I WALKED to her bedroom door and tapped my knuckles against the wood. “Ready to go?”

“I just need a minute.”

I backed away and moved to the armchair in the hallway. This dinner party was more laid-back than the others, so I wore a casual suit and tie and had selected a cocktail dress for Arwen. My elbows hit the armrests, and my hands came together to rest. My fingers naturally moved closer together until they gripped the band of my ring. Absentmindedly, I fidgeted with the piece of jewelry. It quickly had turned into a habit, and anytime I found myself pondering anything, that was exactly what I did. The ring was still new to me and took time to get used to. The moment I put it on, I never took it off because that was how serious I was about this marriage. I wasn't just making it work for show anymore. I actually wanted to be married.

She opened the door and stepped out in a backless dress and ridiculous heels. Her hair was pulled up to show off her beautiful spine and the small muscles that flanked it on either side. Her pale skin was brighter in contrast to the gray fabric of the dress, making her fair skin look kissable.

I missed kissing her.

I rose to my feet and buttoned the front of my jacket, my eyes following her as she walked past me. My eyes took in the sight of her gorgeous figure and her perfect ass, and my cock ballooned to full mast in less than five seconds.

Damn.

She didn't look at me with the same lust. I'd shaved and worn a jacket that fit my strong shoulders well. Any other woman would at least give me a few seconds of her time. But Arwen acted like I wasn't there at all.

I caught up with her before she reached the stairs. “Here.” I pulled her wedding ring out of my pocket and handed it to

her.

She gripped the banister at the top of the stairs and looked down into my open palm. My jeweler had cleaned it and gave it an extra shine so she would be tempted to take it. A small hesitation came over her face, like she'd missed that ring for her own personal reasons. Then she turned away and headed down the stairs. "I'm not ready..."

THERE WERE ABOUT fifty people at the house, and I knew most of them. I hated sparking conversation with new people, but it was necessary for networking. Talking to people I already knew could also be boring. I lost either way.

But my wife shone like always, so she stole the show.

I walked into the main entryway and admired the painting on the wall. It was an original portrait of Christopher Columbus, just before he died in Spain. It was massive, taking up most of the large wall. I preferred historical art pieces because they were darker, more realistic. Modern art had pops of color that were borderline fantastical.

"Beautiful, right?" Sabrina sauntered to my side with a glass of scotch in her hand. She was a young widow. Her husband had passed away in a horrific car accident, and she was still shopping for a new husband.

"Yes." I didn't take my eyes off the painting.

"Your wife is pretty." She stood at my side, her fingers clutching the glass of scotch. With jet-black hair and green eyes, she was a beautiful woman. I'd be lying if I said I didn't notice—since I'd slept with her once. It wasn't long after her husband was gone that she'd wanted comfort and jumped into my bed.

"I know." I swirled my glass and took a drink.

She smiled. "I thought you said you would never get married."

She tried to dig her claws into me, but I didn't take the bait. She was already wealthy from her late husband's inheritance, but she still wanted more. She wanted to be a well-kept woman with a husband who ran the show. "Things change."

"Then you must really love her."

I continued to stare at the painting.

She pivoted her body toward mine, waiting for an answer that I would never give her. "Or do you?" Her hand moved to my arm.

My instincts kicked in, and I pulled my arm down, getting away from the soft touch of her delicate fingertips. "I'm not yours to touch, alright?" I turned my gaze on her, cold and unkind.

She brushed off the rejection with a slight smile then walked off.

Heels sounded a second later as Arwen entered the room, passing Sabrina on the way. Both women looked at each other, Sabrina smiling with her lips but not her eyes. She gave Arwen a glance-over before she kept walking.

Arwen came to my side. "What are you doing in here?"

"Admiring this painting."

"Did that woman admire it too?"

I lowered my glass and turned my gaze toward her. "Yes."

I knew her well enough to understand when she was jealous, and she was definitely jealous in that moment. Her eyes flashed in hostility, and with her superb intelligence, she could read a room so well. She must have felt the cold flame between two former lovers. She must have noticed the way Sabrina looked at me, caught a glimpse of her hand on my arm. Arwen had been smiling minutes ago, but now her lips were pressed tightly together in a frown.

I didn't make her ask for the information she wanted. "We hooked up a few times when her husband passed away."

She crossed her arms over her chest and stared at the wall. It was a priceless painting, worth tens of millions, but we didn't truly appreciate it. "She seems like she wants to hook up again..."

"No."

"People grab your arm like that often?"

I wanted to tell her there was no reason to be jealous, but I couldn't. I'd betrayed her trust. "When we were together, I told her I wasn't interested in marriage, so she moved on. I'm married now, so she feels a little stung."

"But you aren't really married..."

I didn't wear this ring on my left hand for looks or comfort. I wore it to show the world my commitment. "I *am* really married." I positioned myself in front of her, forcing her to look at me instead of the painting. "It doesn't matter if she wants me because I'm committed to you."

SHE REACHED THE SECOND LANDING, her perfect body shifting from left to right as she carried herself. In high heels and a dress that required perfect posture at all times, she handled herself with grace.

My eyes stared at her back until I reached the second floor.

She turned around to say goodbye, cutting me off from her bedroom. "Good night, Maverick."

I knew it would take time to fix the destruction I'd caused, but the wait was torture. It was worse when she wore a dress like that, the shape of her tits visible underneath the thin fabric. I wanted her on my bed, our naked bodies together, husband and wife. But Sabrina only made me look worse, so of course, Arwen was in a bad mood. "Arwen?"

She stopped and looked at me over her shoulder, her pose so perfect, it could be a painting.

With my hands in my pockets, I came closer to her, unsure what I would do once we were face-to-face once more. If I had full authority, I would grab her face and kiss her. But I had no power over this woman...none at all.

I moved into her body and slid my arm around her waist, my warm palm feeling the smooth glide of the curve of her back. The second my fingertips came into contact with her bare skin, I felt the small shock that exploded in my veins. It'd been so long since I'd touched her like this...felt her like she was mine.

She tensed at my touch but didn't pull away.

I secured my arm around her waist, and I pulled her close to me, desperate for the affection I'd once had access to on a daily basis. I could have hugged her whenever I wanted to, but I never took the time. Now, it was a luxury I couldn't have at my beck and call. I had to go for it and hope she wouldn't shove me off.

Thankfully, she didn't.

I kept her close and rested my chin on her forehead, my eyes closing like I might drift off to sleep. My other arm spanned across her back and reached for her other shoulder. Once she was against me, I tightened my hold just a little more. Her smell wrapped around me, taking me back in time to when she trusted me.

I missed when she trusted me.

She'd always had this look in her eyes...like I was the person she looked up to.

She rested her forehead against my chest. When she didn't pull away, I knew she wanted this too. She still missed me even though she was angry with me. She still lived for this kind of affection. Brandon had been a distraction for the night, just as the girls were to me. They didn't mean anything to either of us.

This did.

I kept my eyes closed and fantasized about lifting her into my arms and carrying her to bed. Vivid images of us kissing,

touching, dropping clothes all over the floor came to me. I wanted to bend her over the bed and kiss the skin everywhere, devour her like a hungry wolf. I wanted to yank on her hair and use it as a leash to keep her obedient. I wanted us to be together, to go back to what we were.

But this was the most I would get.

I could hold on forever, but I knew I shouldn't. If I asked for too much, it would push her away. My arms slid down her back, and I let her go, hoping her scent would stay on my skin once my clothes were off. When the depression took me, I could just remember this embrace...and tell myself that I could still fix this.

“What was that for?” she asked, her fingers sliding past my arm until I left her touch.

If that wasn't obvious, she couldn't read me very well. “Because I miss you.”

ARWEN

BY THE TIME I GOT OUT OF THE SHOWER, BRANDON HAD blown up my phone with text messages.

Call me.

Did you move out of your apartment?

Are you alright?

Messages popped up every few minutes. When I'd left my apartment and returned to Maverick, I'd sent Brandon a cold text and said I was done seeing him. We were never serious, so I didn't feel the need to give a more detailed explanation.

He obviously didn't think I was serious.

I patted my hair dry with a towel then returned to the bathroom. I finished drying and styling my hair before I came back to the bedroom, a gray robe tied around my waist. When I glanced at my screen, I saw I had five missed calls.

I sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the phone.

A knock sounded on the door.

“Come in.”

Maverick stepped inside. He was wearing tight jeans and a black blazer, the dark shadow on his jawline prominent because he'd skipped his shave that morning, but it brought out the color of his eyes.

My phone kept lighting up with text messages, but I ignored them.

He sat on the edge of the bed beside me, his arm brushing against mine. “Want to have dinner with me tonight?” After he’d hugged me in the hallway, he’d left me alone for a couple of days. He never pressed his advance too much. If he tried too hard, I would only step back.

I usually had meals in my bedroom, but I could go to the dining table for once. “Yeah, I’ll meet you down there tonight.”

“I meant we would go out to dinner. Take a drive to Florence.”

Not once had we done that. The only time we’d had a meal outside the house was at one of his parties. But the two of us had never faced each other across a table in a restaurant.

The phone in my hand kept blowing up with more messages from Brandon. It became so frequent that I turned the phone to silent.

“That’s not how you get rid of a guy.” He grabbed the phone out of my hands and called him.

“What are you—”

“No, it’s Maverick DeVille, Arwen’s husband.” He’d been soft-spoken just a moment ago, but he quickly fell into an aggressive role the second he felt threatened. “Your relationship with her is over. Call her again, and I’ll kill you.” He hung up and tossed the phone back at me.

Brandon must have taken the threat seriously because he didn’t call or text again.

“How about that dinner?”

“How did you know that was him?”

“Because he’s a man who lost you... I know exactly how that feels.” He rose to his feet and turned around to look at me. “We’ll leave at six. Wear something nice.”

“Is this a social event?” Were we meeting another couple in the city? Meeting a few business associates?

“No. Just you and me.”

HE SHIFTED gears as he accelerated to a higher speed. The road across the Tuscany countryside was abandoned and dark, like an open racetrack just for him. He sped his fancy car down the road even though we had all the time in the world.

If someone else were driving, I would grip the side handle and be terrified the entire way. But since Maverick was a man in control of everything, I wasn't afraid he would lose control of the wheel.

His watch reflected the lights from the dashboard, and the long sleeves of his blazer fit his muscular arms well. His slacks were tight in the right places, and with his recent haircut, he looked like a model waiting to be photographed.

It was strange seeing him wear that black ring all the time.

It was even stranger that I wasn't wearing mine. I constantly felt for my ring, absentmindedly fingering the spot even though it was gone. I'd worn it so long that it had become a part of who I was. Once I took it off, I'd felt a little lost. If I wasn't Mrs. DeVille, I didn't know who I was.

He entered the city and gave his car to the valet at the restaurant. His arm moved around my waist, and he escorted me inside, scoring a private table in the back without even having to give his name. It was a quiet restaurant, scattered with couples. Candles burned on every surface, making it the ideal place for romance.

I shed my coat and placed it over the back of the chair.

Maverick helped me sit down. He pushed in my chair then placed his palm on the back of my neck, sliding it under my hair. The touch was brief, only lasting a few seconds, but it was enough to make bumps emerge on my skin.

He moved across the table from me and took a seat. He got the waiter's attention right away and ordered a bottle of wine for us to share. He seemed to know exactly what he wanted without checking to see if they offered the particular bottle.

I picked up the menu and stared at the selections because I suddenly felt awkward sitting across from him. It was the first time we were face-to-face like this, sharing a meal like a normal couple.

We were anything but normal.

“How long are you going to look at that menu to avoid me?”

I kept looking just to be a smartass. “Until I find something good.”

“The gnocchi is recommended.”

“That does sound good...” I kept my head down. “What are you getting?”

“Whatever you’re getting.”

“That’s boring.” I finally set the menu down as the waiter approached and poured the wine. Just before he walked away, Maverick grabbed the menus and handed them over. “We’ll both have the gnocchi—and get these off the table.”

The waiter walked away.

Now Maverick stared me down without restriction. “That’s better.”

The glow of the low-burning candles and the dim lighting in the room made it seem like the most romantic place in the city. All the couples were talking quietly over their dinners, some were young and had just discovered the heat of a new relationship, while others had veteran relationships that had deepened over time. But it was obvious that every single person in there was in love.

Me included.

Just looking at Maverick was enough to remind me why I fell for him in the first place. He was the strong and silent type, the kind of man that used actions rather than words. If something needed to be handled, he took care of it. He was a hard worker who ran his business with pride, and he treated his employees well. He was honest to anyone he encountered.

And he was also selfless and brave. He'd hurt me so much, but I never felt unsafe with him.

Maverick held on to his glass of wine as he watched me, his brown eyes focused on me to the exclusion of everything else in the room. I was the only thing that mattered, the only woman who had his attention.

When Sabrina gave him a rubdown the other night, I immediately wanted to claim my property and chase her off. My unease disappeared when I remembered Maverick wouldn't reciprocate her advances even if he wanted to. There'd been lots of offers throughout the last few months, but he didn't take them. Only when things got real did he turn to someone else. It was no excuse for what he did...but I understood Maverick wasn't a two-timing liar.

That didn't mean I was ready to forgive him. I couldn't see that happening for a long time.

The silence continued, and it didn't seem like Maverick was in the mood to talk. He thrived in tense silence. It gave him the upper hand in every situation. He could tolerate the void that made everyone else uncomfortable. He swirled his glass then took a drink.

"How was work?"

He took his time getting the red liquid down his throat. "Same."

"Then how was your workout?"

He shrugged.

"You asked me to dinner, but you don't seem to want to talk."

"I don't want to talk about stuff like that."

"Alright...then what is there to talk about?"

"You."

"There's nothing interesting going on in my life...other than the fact that your father wants to kill me."

"You've been writing new music. How's that going?"

When I'd composed that song about him, it only took me thirty minutes to complete it. When I was emotionally charged, the words just flowed out of the pen and onto the paper. "Good. I've been writing a lot lately." I had a lot of material to cover.

"Have you ever thought of being a musician?"

"I already am."

"You're an opera singer. I meant, have you ever considered being a contemporary singer. Just you and the piano. I really think people would love it. I know the opera doesn't pay you much, so if you had your own production, maybe things would be different."

"I don't know...that sounds like a lot of work."

"It's not work if you love it, right?"

"I just meant doing both."

"You don't have to do both," he said. "You can quit the opera whenever you want."

Not everyone was rich like he was. "I can't quit. I need to work."

"But you don't." He leaned forward with his hand still wrapped around the stem of his glass. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. If you want to save your voice for your own act, that's a great idea. My money is your money. You're my wife—on and off paper."

I'd never used the money he gave me. I had debit and credit cards that he allowed me to have, but not once had I used them for anything. I cashed my checks from the opera and spent that on gas, clothes, and anything else I needed. Taking even a euro from him had never crossed my mind.

"Sheep."

I stopped ignoring his stare. "I asked you to stop calling me that."

"Well, I'm not going to. Listen to what I said." His left hand rested around the glass so his ring was always in view.

Dark like charcoal and deep like his eyes, it was the perfect ring to suit his appearance. It was still strange to see him wear it...but it looked just right at the same time.

“I don’t want your money.”

“It doesn’t matter if you don’t want it. Legally, it’s yours. If we really filed for divorce, you would have every right to take half of it.”

“I’m aware.” It would have been easy for me to demand half his estate because I was entitled to half his holdings. My love for Maverick had nothing to do with the assets he possessed, so therefore, I didn’t want anything. I didn’t touch anything that he’d worked so hard for. “I’ve never been interested in your money. You’re the only thing I’ve ever been interested in.”

His chest rose slightly as a deep breath entered it. His eyes softened as he let the air escape through his nostrils.

“I heard those two girls talking. I could see the dollar signs in their eyes. I could see the way they looked at you as some kind of sugar daddy. If you want a pretty girl who only cares about your money, mission accomplished. But I’m not one of those girls. I actually know you, Maverick. I like you...respect you.”

His eyes filled with guilt.

“So, no, I don’t want your money.”

“I asked you to try. That’s part of the deal.”

“Why do you think I’m here?” I countered.

“I’m sorry I fucked things up, but I’m here now. I want this marriage to work. If I didn’t, I would just shoot my dad and let you go out on your own. Even if he were dead, I still wouldn’t want you to leave. I would want you to stay... because I want us to be together no matter what. I know I should have said this sooner and I shouldn’t have screwed things up, but I’m fighting for you now.”

It was impossible not to soften when he said things like that. Maverick DeVille was telling me he wanted to spend his

life with me. He was basically asking me to be his wife. It was a marriage proposal...but a real one.

“You’re my wife. What’s mine is yours. I want to take care of you. I want to spoil you. I want to pay for your coffee and gas.” He placed his hand over his chest. “I *want* to do those things.”

He was just making it worse.

“Let me take care of you.”

If this were two months ago, I would completely let go and give him what he wanted. I would rely on him completely, allow him to give me the world. But now that he’d hurt me, I was scared to accept those kinds of gifts. “All I really want is you, Maverick. We should work on our relationship before we talk about things like that. I can’t let you take care of me when I don’t trust you. Trust takes time...sometimes a really long time.”

His eyes shifted down to his wineglass as he swallowed his disappointment. He pulled the glass closer to him and stared at the table, his face somehow more handsome when he was brooding. “I’ve got all the time in the world.”

WE SAT in silence the entire drive home.

It was a long trip just for dinner, especially when we had a private chef at the house. It was our first official date, and Maverick had probably wanted to make it special.

One hand stayed on the wheel, while the other rested on the gear shift. When he drove fifteen minutes without shifting, he could pull his hand away, but he left it there like he hoped I would grab it.

I craved affection, but I wasn’t ready to pretend nothing had happened. If we were really going to make this marriage work, then I would have to forgive him eventually. But even if I did forgive him, that didn’t mean the trust would come with it.

He parked the car in the driveway, and we entered the house. It was quiet because Abigail had gone to bed. It just started to sprinkle when we walked up the stairs, the large windows showing the falling rain outside.

Christmas was just two weeks away.

It had slipped my mind.

We walked up the stairs to the second landing.

Maverick turned to me and immediately locked his arms around my body, holding me just as he did a couple days ago. His hold was aggressive, like he'd been counting down the minutes until he could hold me again. His arms rested in the curve of my back, and he brought me as close as he could.

I let it happen because I was too weak. I couldn't fight it, not when it felt like home.

His hand slid under my hair, and he held the back of my neck. His head angled down so he could look at me, press his forehead against mine as he held me at the top of the stairs. His eyes moved to my lips, the longing evident.

He shouldn't bother kissing me. I wouldn't let it happen. The last person he kissed was one of the stupid bimbos that came over. I hated to think about kissing the same lips they'd kissed. They used to be mine...until he gave them to someone else.

Maverick was smart and didn't try. "Thank you for having dinner with me."

"Thank you for taking me."

His fingers continued to caress my hair as he held me, the storm getting louder outside. Winter was a cloak of gray, dreary and dead. It brought water to the soil and mud to the surface. It was my least favorite season, but trying to stay warm with Maverick made it a little better.

It would be nice to invite him to bed, to have a strong man sleeping beside me. Sharing my space with Maverick became a luxury I never had before. My lovers slept over, but I'd never had a man like him. Now I missed it.

But not enough to give him an invitation.

“Goodnight.” I pulled away.

“Arwen.”

I turned back around but didn't touch him again. It didn't matter how handsome he looked in that outfit or how much I missed that hard body underneath those clothes. It was too soon to pretend everything was okay.

He pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. “Just so you know...”

I took it from his hand but didn't understand what it meant. I unfolded it and recognized all the labs that were ordered for a typical STD panel. Everything was negative. I folded it again, but if he expected me to be touched by what I'd seen, he was stupid. “A bit presumptuous?”

“I just want you to know you have the option.” He slipped his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “I'm not going anywhere. I'm not going to be with anyone but you. So, whenever you're ready...I'm ready too. Just the two of us. I promise.”

When we were together, I'd been eager for this conversation, for the moment when we would really cut out all other lovers. Condoms would be dispensed with because they would be unnecessary. It was just the two of us...and we wouldn't be separated by anything. We'd only made love that way a couple of times, and they were the best nights of my life. I wanted to have them again...just not now.

Maverick gave me a slight nod before he turned around and headed up the stairs. He probably hoped something would happen tonight. If he'd been celibate like he promised, it must have felt like an eternity.

But no, I wasn't ready.

We weren't ready.

THE WINTER SEASON brought inhospitable weather, so there was nothing to do but stay indoors. I couldn't use the pool or jog around the grounds because we were in the middle of a storm. So, I did something unexpected—I went to the gym.

I'd just reached the hallway when Maverick stepped out of the double French doors. In just his sweatpants and workout shoes, he had a streak of sweat on his bare chest that shone under the lights. It was the same way he looked during sex, hot, sweaty, and pumping with blood. A towel was over his shoulder.

When he crossed my path in the hallway, he looked over my outfit. "Is this a dream?" he teased.

I smacked his arm playfully. "I'm bored, and there's nothing to do outside. The weather is too crazy to go anywhere. So, I thought I would walk on the treadmill or something." When my eyes glanced up his body, I noticed my ring sitting on a chain around his neck. I stared at it for a couple of seconds and wondered how long he'd been wearing it.

"So the only way to get you to exercise is through boredom?"

"I guess..."

He gave a slight smile, his pretty eyes lighting up. "You know, there are other ways to exercise..." He brushed his arm against mine as he walked by, pulling off the comment when no one else would have been able to.

"I prefer doing it alone."

He stopped and turned around, his eyebrow cocked at my choice of words.

"You know what I mean..."

"Yes. But I'm going to pretend I don't."

WHEN IT FINALLY STOPPED RAINING, I headed to Florence before my performance and went shopping. Christmas was just around the corner, and I wanted to pick up a few things for Abigail and the servants.

I also wanted to get something for Maverick.

He was a difficult man to shop for, being as he already owned anything he could possibly want. He had a three-story estate and only used the second floor for the gym. The rest were guest bedrooms that were never filled.

Sometimes I wondered why he lived there at all. It was too big for one person.

Well...I technically lived there too.

I didn't have a lot of money like Maverick, so I couldn't afford the designer stuff he usually wore, but I found a shirt that would look great on him. The color of Bordeaux wine, it was a collared shirt that would suit his large frame. He would never wear it to a fancy event, but maybe he would wear it around the house. It was still steep for my budget, but I got it anyway. If he didn't like it, I could wear it with a belt and some leggings.

I went to the theater and prepared for my performance. After a wardrobe change and new makeup, I went on stage, sang my heart out, and then finished the show. As much as I loved being a singer, the repetitive nature of the job had started to wear me down. It wasn't good for my vocal cords either. The director wanted to use me more often than the understudy, but that meant I had to sing three times a week...which was a lot of work on my throat. Sometimes I wondered if I should take Maverick's suggestion and just do my own thing. But that would force me to rely on him completely, financially. If that were the case, I wouldn't have even been able to buy his Christmas present on my own.

I was pulling the pins out of my hair, deep in thought, when Brandon approached me from behind. "Uh...what are you doing?" I turned around in my chair and stared at him blankly, relieved Maverick wasn't there to put a gun to his head.

“Your husband picked up the phone, and we never got a chance to talk.”

I got to my feet, my eyebrow cocked like he was crazy. “Brandon, I ended things with you a while ago.”

“Through text,” he snapped. “We never really talked about what went wrong. You didn’t even give me a real chance.”

“Brandon, nothing went wrong. I just got back together with my husband.”

“But do you *want* to be with him?” he asked. “Because it doesn’t—”

“Yes.” I didn’t think twice about my answer, and that was scary. Even after what he did, I knew he was the man I wanted to be with. My heart ignored his faults because it only cared about his positive qualities. I saw so much of the good and not enough of the bad. I was already getting soft for him once more, and we hadn’t even spent much time together. I drove to the city early just to get him a Christmas present when I didn’t have to do a damn thing. “Brandon, I’m sorry if I hurt you, but I was clear about what our relationship was.”

“You aren’t wearing your ring—”

“Because she doesn’t need to wear it.” Low and threatening, Maverick’s terrifying voice fell across our shoulders like a heavy fog. In a black suit with combed hair, he owned the backstage with his presence, murder in his eyes. His shoes tapped against the wood as he slowly came closer. “She’s still my wife.” He stopped in front of Brandon and stared him down hard, his eyes steady with violence. “She’s mine—not yours. Now, run.”

Brandon turned his gaze back on me.

I stopped him before he said anything stupid. “Run.” Maverick wouldn’t be patient for long.

Brandon made the right decision and walked away.

Maverick watched him go without turning his head. His eyes followed Brandon until he left the area and returned to

the auditorium. In his hand was a single red rose, and he set it on my dressing table. “For you.”

“You didn’t need to threaten him like that—”

“He’s lucky I didn’t kill him. I’m a man of my word. Luckily for him, I’m not today.” He stepped closer to me, his black ring matching his attire. The wedding ring was so sexy on him. It was a fantasy, seeing him as a devoted husband... especially when I was his wife. “If he bothers you again, I will kill him. Let’s just hope he finally gets the hint.”

“He will.”

He picked up the rose and held it out to me.

I brought it to my nose and smelled it. The scent of rain overcame my senses. “Thank you.”

“You were wonderful tonight. You’re always wonderful.”

I placed the rose back on the table. When I returned in a couple of days, it would be wilted. But it was difficult for me to throw away anything Maverick gave me. It was the reason I’d worn my wedding ring for weeks after I’d left. It just felt wrong to take it off. I wondered if it was hanging on a chain underneath his clothes at that very moment.

“Can I take you home?”

“My car is here.”

“My guys will drive it back.”

“Oh...then, yes.”

He noticed my bags sitting beside my table. “Are these yours?”

“Yeah, I picked up a few things for Abigail and the girls...”

He picked them up and carried them for me. “Would you like my jacket?”

“No. I have mine.” I grabbed it off the back of the chair and pushed my arms through the sleeves.

He held the bags with one hand and helped me.

It immediately reminded me of the way my father would help me put on my coat. He did it when I was a child, and even when I became an adult, he still did the same thing...always helping me.

We suddenly felt like a married couple, like a husband and wife going home after a long day. My throat tightened when I realized how comfortable it was, how much I wanted it. When my jacket was secure, I faced him again.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing...I’m just not looking forward to walking in the rain.” Our wedding day had been such a painful event, but Maverick had made it as bearable as possible. He’d taken my hand and guided me the entire way, helping us navigate the lie so everyone would believe it was true. He’d been guiding me all along...since the moment we met. He was the one who’d entered my apartment and convinced me to marry him. If I didn’t, I would die. And marrying him was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

Love couldn’t be contained or controlled. It couldn’t be shoved in a can with a lid on top. Since it was ever-growing, it was always getting bigger, always filling the space with pressure until the lid popped off. That was how it’d been with us since day one. It was a slow burn, hatred turning to dislike, and dislike turning to admiration.

Maverick kept watching me, noting the way my eyes changed. “It feels right to me too.”

HE CARRIED my bags into my bedroom and set them on the coffee table. “You’ve got a lot of stuff here.”

“I got Abigail a box of chocolates and a couple of bracelets I found at my favorite boutique. I never see her go out, so maybe this will give her a reason to get dressed up.” I picked up the bags and placed them in my closet so Maverick wouldn’t spot the collared shirt.

“That was nice of you.” He slid his hands into his pockets, and he looked like a powerhouse in that suit. With a clean jawline and a masculine face, he already looked handsome even without a designer suit tailored to fit him perfectly. All the things that others needed to be presentable were unnecessary for someone like him. He already carried himself like a leader, like the most admired man in the country.

It was hard to believe he was mine...if I wanted him to be. “She does so much for me. I thought she deserved a nice Christmas. Do you get your servants anything?”

“I give them jobs, don’t I?”

I pressed my lips together tightly and forced back the smile that came to my mouth. It was a predictable answer and fit him so well. I slipped off my jacket and hung it in the closet before I came back to him. My fingers flicked on the fireplace because I was cold the second my shoulders were free of the warm jacket.

He glanced at my appearance in the tight dress. The look was subtle and quick, but it was still noticeable at the same time. He kept his hands in his pockets and his shoulders straight, eyes trained on me.

I waited for him to walk out. “Thanks for the ride home.”

“My pleasure. I’ve got to keep the dogs away.”

“That was the only reason you came?”

He shook his head slightly. “I came to see you. That was the only reason.”

I stopped a few feet in front of him and crossed my arms over my chest. The more I felt the pull between us, the more I tried to fight it. Maverick had done a terrible thing, and I didn’t want to forgive him so quickly. He really hurt me, and it wouldn’t be right to sweep it under the rug...but my heart wanted something else. With every passing day, I missed his bedroom more and more. I wanted to be the recipient of his amazing kiss, be the woman under him in the throes of passion. I wanted to be his wife.

Maverick waited patiently, like something might happen. If I were willing, he would slide his hand under my hair and kiss me as every piece of clothing dropped to the floor. His desperation was palpable, his desire filling the air around him. It'd been over a month since he'd last gotten action, but he remained faithful to me because I was the only woman he wanted.

It was going to happen anyway, so I may as well go for it.

But I couldn't bring myself to do it. "Goodnight, Maverick."

His eyes fell in disappointment, and a quiet breath escaped his nostrils. Like he was a deflated balloon, his shoulders slowly sagged and his chin tilted toward the ground. "I can't last much longer..."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Was he giving me an ultimatum?

"It doesn't mean anything." He stepped closer to me, his hands sliding out of his pockets. "When I watch you sing, it turns me on like crazy. Your voice...your mouth...everything. Then when it's just us two, all I can think about is how beautiful you are, that you're my wife and no one else's. There's nothing in this world that turns me on more. I could be with another woman, but that would be unsatisfying. I could be with myself, and that would be a letdown too. I'd rather just keep waiting...even though it's driving me mad in the process."

My arms tightened over my chest, like they were a protective barrier that could actually stop him.

Maverick read my body language with disappointment. He bowed his head slightly then turned to step out of the room. "Goodnight." He headed to the door without looking back. His expansive shoulders looked beautiful in his jacket, and his narrow hips led to a tight ass. It couldn't be seen directly, but the tug of the fabric made it obvious.

I watched him go without asking him to stay.

But I missed him the second he was gone.

MAVERICK

CHARLES AND I TALKED ABOUT BUSINESS AT HIS HOUSE. WE had a few rounds of scotch and a couple appetizers, but we spent most of our time discussing his needs for his businesses. He had a few restaurants across Europe, not just Italy, and fulfilling his need for my exclusive product wasn't as easy it seemed. Our wheels weren't produced by machines because the process was far too delicate. It required a hands-on approach, which made it expensive, and also difficult.

“You're asking for a lot—but I'll do my best.” This business was a family legacy. Handed down through the generations on my father's side, it was a great source of pride for the DeVille family. The food industry wasn't that interesting to me, but my family's hard work through generations to achieve this kind of success was fascinating. It made me feel connected to my grandfather and my great-grandfather...and even my own father.

“Excellent.” Charles shook my hand as he guided me to the front door.

Juliet escorted Sabrina to the front door at the same time. They must have gotten together since Charles was busy with another meeting. The second Sabrina saw me, her eyes lit up like this was a turn of events that she wanted.

I shook hands with Charles then kissed his wife on the cheek. “Thank you for the scotch. It was very smooth.”

Sabrina said goodbye as well, and when she noticed me step out the door to leave without her, she said, “Maverick,

would you be a gentleman and walk me to my car?”

The asshole inside me wanted to tell her to fuck off. It’s what I would have said to someone else. But that would be a poor way to start my new business relationship with Charles. “Of course.”

Sabrina finished saying goodbye then wrapped her coat around her body. She walked out with me, keeping so close to me we looked like lovers to anyone who noticed us. Charles had a place in the city, so we stepped out onto the sidewalk and headed to our cars a street over. It was quiet because it had rained just hours ago. The sidewalk and street were damp with the recent rainfall. It was actually slightly less chilly because of the blanket of clouds overhead.

Her heels tapped against the concrete as we walked together. She kept her jacket tight around her to cover the sleeveless dress she wore. “You two have fun?”

“Money is always fun.” I was in dark jeans with a leather jacket. House calls between men weren’t meant for suits. Neither one of us cared unless it was a formal dinner party.

“Juliet and I are planning a charity dinner in a couple of weeks. Just ironing out the details.”

“I’m sure it’ll be lovely.” We turned the corner and approached the line of cars at the curb. “Which is yours?”

“The white Maserati.”

I escorted her to the driver’s door, knowing Sabrina would try something since she’d asked me to walk her to her car. She didn’t care about her safety. She just wanted attention. She couldn’t have me anymore, so she wanted me more—even though I was married.

She turned around and leaned against the door, having no intention of getting inside. She smiled slightly, her dark lipstick outlining the prominent curve of her lips. “I have a place just down the street.”

“As do I.”

“Then which one is closer?”

I'd never cared about matrimony or fidelity. Lots of men I knew had affairs on a regular basis. I'd never had an opinion about it because it didn't matter. I'd never wanted to get married because monogamy was too cruel for even a short period of time. Lying and sneaking around weren't my game. But now...I felt completely different about it. If you were married, you made a promise to someone, and you shouldn't break that promise. It disgusted me that Sabrina saw the wedding ring on my left hand but didn't care. She saw my wife with her own eyes but still didn't care. Losing her husband made her numb to everyone else's pain. "Sabrina, I'm married."

"So is everyone else."

"I'm not like everyone else." My wife was at home, clueless to the conversation I was having at that very moment. If she knew, she would be livid. But when I came home, she would continue to be angry with me and ignore me. I was committed to a woman who still couldn't forgive me for what I'd done. I was so damn hard up from my celibacy, and she would never know if I fucked Sabrina at my apartment. But that was not the man I wanted to be. I wanted to go home to my wife and be with her...because she was the only woman I wanted anyway. "Goodnight, Sabrina."

Her hand reached out and grabbed me by the arm. "If you're playing hard to get, it's working."

I twisted out of her grasp and stared at her coldly. "Touch me again, and I'll break your hand."

When the game was over, her eyes started to smolder with offense. Her playfulness evaporated, and she was left with the cold sting of rejection. When she invited a married man to bed, not a single one said no...until now.

I walked off and left her behind.

"I'M CUTTING YOU OFF." Kent grabbed my glass and pulled it away. "You're gonna crash into a brick building if you keep

this up.”

“I’m fine.” I drank like I had an indestructible liver. Booze never slowed me down, and even when I had too much to drink, I was in control of my faculties. Most of the time, people couldn’t even tell I’d been drinking.

“Trust me, you look like shit.” He kept the glass out of my reach. “I might have to call your wife to come get you.”

“Don’t get her involved in this.”

“I think she’d like to know you’re totally shit-faced.”

“I’m not her problem.” After I walked away from Sabrina, Kent and I met up for a drink. He flirted with a few women, but he stuck to my side and didn’t leave with a buddy for the night.

“She’s pissed at you. Doesn’t mean she stopped caring about you.”

“She should stop caring about me...” Now that Kent noted my stupor, I did feel drunk. My eyes weighed as much as bowling balls, and I had to think about my words before they emerged from my mouth.

“Sabrina just threw herself at you, and you said no. You’re a good guy, Maverick.”

I scoffed. “If I were a good guy, I wouldn’t have fucked things up to begin with.”

“I understand why she’s angry, but don’t be so hard on yourself. You’ve done a lot for that woman, and now that you’re ready to be in a real relationship, you’re the most loyal guy in the world. She needs to let this go.”

“You think so?” I reached for my glass again.

He pushed it farther away. “Nice try, asshole. And yes, I think she does. This relationship didn’t start on good terms. It’s taken a while to find your stride.” He grabbed my phone off the counter.

“What are you doing?”

He scrolled through my phone book and found her number.
“Getting your wife to pick you up.”

“Why don’t you just take me home?”

“I’m not driving all the way out there. Forget that shit.” He held the phone against his ear.

“She’s probably asleep—”

Her voice was audible when she answered. “Maverick, everything okay?” Like always, her voice sounded like music.

“This is Kent. We met a while ago. Your husband is totally trashed and needs a ride home.”

“Is he alright?” she asked.

“He’s fine,” Kent said. “Won’t throw up. But he definitely can’t drive.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” she said. “I’ll come get him.”

Kent hung up and set the phone on the counter.

“You asshole. I’m trying to fix this relationship, and you tattle on me? She’s gonna see me at my worst.”

“That’s what marriage is, asshole. You’re there for each other through the good and the bad.”

“I’m supposed to be there for her...not the other way around.”

He took a drink of his scotch, even though it was torture for me. “That’s your problem, Maverick. You think everyone deserves everything...but you don’t deserve anything. That’s exactly how you got yourself into this mess. You’d think you’d learn...”

WHEN SHE GOT THERE thirty minutes later, the alcohol had soaked into my blood and hit me a little harder. I sat at the

counter and did my best to seem normal, but the room was starting to spin.

“She’s here, man.”

I didn’t embarrass easily, but I was humiliated that she had to see me like this.

She came to my side, her hand moving to my back. “Got carried away, huh?”

I stared at the counter.

“He’s a bit shy right now.” Kent helped me to my feet and placed my arm over his shoulder so she could suspend my weight.

I almost pushed him off because of my pride, but once I realized how unbalanced I was, I used him as a crutch.

Kent guided me outside and to the black BMW at the curb. “He got shit-faced pretty hard tonight.”

“I’ve never seen him look like this before.” She followed behind us.

Kent opened the passenger door and helped me into the seat. He even buckled my safety belt before he shut the door.

I rested my head against the leather and closed my eyes, my thoughts in hyperactive mode. My chest felt tight from all the alcohol. My blood was boiling from the heat. My blood alcohol level must be astronomical.

“Why did he take it so far tonight?” Her muffled voice came from outside the car.

“I think he’s just stressed.”

“About what?”

“Well, Sabrina threw herself at him again. Invited him back to her apartment. Obviously, he said no.”

Fuck you, Kent.

“Oh...” Her beautiful voice was weak.

“I know it’s none of my business, but Maverick is a good guy, and he feels like shit for what he did. He’s in this

relationship now... Cut him some slack. He's done a lot for you. He's trying to be what you deserve. Trust me, this guy gets ass handed to him like change, and he hasn't taken any offers. Just let it go."

If I weren't so drunk right now, I'd punch him in the face.

Arwen didn't respond to his comment. "I should get him home. Thanks for calling me." She got into the car a second later and started the engine.

I looked out the window and noticed it had just started to rain. I didn't have the courage to look her in the eye and thank her for coming to get me. I didn't want to face her at all, not after what Kent said to her. Like a coward, I closed my eyes and pretended I didn't hear anything at all.

I WOKE up when we returned to the house then made the laborious journey to my bedroom.

"You want me to call for help?" she asked as she walked beside me.

I did my best to walk perfectly straight, to pretend I wasn't drunk out of my mind. My movements were slow, and my steps weren't full of purpose. My chin was tilted toward the ground because looking up caused the room to spin. "No."

I reached the staircase and held on to the banister—because I had no choice.

Arwen stayed beside me with her hand resting on my back. She walked with me slowly, keeping my pace without rushing me.

It took an eternity to get to the top floor.

Why did I decide to have my bedroom all the way at the top?

We reached the hallway, and my muscles relaxed now that we were so close. I didn't throw up on the ornate rug or trip down the stairs. I made it into my bedroom and started to peel

off my clothes. Somehow, I got stuck in my jacket, unable to pull my arm out of the material. It seemed like I was tangled in a pile of ropes.

“Here.” Arwen grabbed my jacket and got me loose. She folded it then placed it over the back of the chair.

My t-shirt was easy, so that was a simple process. I got my jeans undone and pushed them off. My shoes were kicked off, and I didn’t think before I pushed my boxers down too. I was so drunk that I didn’t want any piece of clothing on me at all.

“Um...”

I made it to the bed then collapsed on top, the world spinning now that my physical orientation was different. My body stretched out across the mattress, and I didn’t get under the sheets because I’d felt so warm in my clothes. A headache was pulsing at my temples, and my entire body felt like it got hit by a semi.

Arwen sat at the edge of the bed then slid her fingers into my hair. Soft and delicate fingertips grazed across my forehead and deep into my scalp. Once her touch glided to the back of my head, she massaged my skull and released the pressure from my headache. “Can I get you anything?”

I opened my eyes and looked at her above me, her hair messy because she got out of bed to pick me up. She didn’t wear makeup and her jeans and t-shirt were plain, but she was a million times prettier than Sabrina would ever be. “No.”

“How about some painkillers?”

“I’m fine...”

She opened my nightstand and found a bottle of pills. She must have noticed all the condoms were cleaned out of my drawer because she paused to look inside for an instant. There was already a glass of water that Abigail brought when she did the turn-down service in my room. “I know you just want to sleep, but you should be proactive about this. I have a feeling you’ve never been hungover before.”

I was hungover all the time. It just didn’t affect me that much.

“Come on.” She guided me to sit up.

I grabbed the pills and shoved them into my mouth before I downed the water to wash them down. I returned to the bed once again, my body softening in defeat.

Arwen pulled down the sheets and got me tucked into bed. She placed the covers up to my stomach before she opened my dresser and pulled out a t-shirt.

“I’m too hot to wear anything...”

“It’s not for you.” She changed out of her clothes and prepared to pull the shirt over her head.

I didn’t care how drunk I was; I was going to look. I turned my gaze on her, but my vision was blurry. I couldn’t make out anything except the hazy outline of her curves.

She came back to me then got underneath the covers.

Was she really going to sleep with me? Was this all I had to do to get her into bed?

She got comfortable beside me then ran her fingers through my hair again.

I felt like shit, but I also felt so damn good. This woman was rubbing me, lying with me, and looking after me. Her affection surrounded me, made me feel like I’d fallen backward in time. I closed my eyes and ignored the migraine, choosing to cherish this moment.

“I thought I had to get you to stop smoking. Now I have to get you to stop drinking too.”

“I’ll never drink this much again.”

“Good...now I don’t have to kick your ass when you feel better.”

Her words brought a smile to my lips. I reached for her impulsively and tugged her against my frame, wrapping our bodies tightly around each other. I hiked her leg over my hip and buried my face in her neck. It was better than sex because it was more intimate. It meant so much more than a good lay.

If I got to choose between the two, I would have picked this every time...even though I couldn't have sex anyway.

She let me hold her. A moment later, her fingertips returned to my hair.

“Sheep...I miss you.” I closed my eyes and felt myself drift away. My arms were locked around her body, and I would never let go. I used to have this every single night until I threw it away. Now that I had it again...I wouldn't let it slip through my fingertips.

“I miss you too...”

ARWEN

I TOOK THE BREAKFAST TRAY FROM ABIGAIL. “THANK YOU.”

“Is he awake?”

“No. He’s knocked out cold. But maybe when he smells the coffee, he’ll open his eyes.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

I returned to the bedroom and set the tray on the table. It was full of pastries, coffee, fresh fruit, and two hard-boiled eggs.

Maverick was still in bed, dead asleep even though it was almost eleven. He hadn’t moved from his spot since he fell asleep last night. When I got out of bed, I had to fight for my freedom from his grip.

I walked to the bed and looked down at him, his face a major improvement compared to the night before. It wasn’t so sunken and pale. Life and vitality were slowly returning to his skin, giving it a healthy color. The alcohol was destructive to his system, and once it’d been metabolized, he finally came back to life.

I sat beside him and ran my fingers through his hair.

My touch caused him to take a deep breath and slowly wake up from his drunken stupor. His eyes opened slowly, and he took in the sight of my face for several seconds before he registered what he was looking at. His fingers rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and he groaned like he just got hit by a truck. “Fuck, I feel worse than I did last night...”

“No. You’re just sober now, so you can actually feel it.” My fingers continued to caress his hair, gently coaxing him back into reality.

“Then maybe I need a drink...”

“How about coffee instead?” I filled a mug then set it on his nightstand.

He slowly pushed himself up and rubbed his sleepy eyes again. His hand reached for the coffee absentmindedly, floating in midair, until I guided him where it was supposed to go. He lifted the mug and brought it to his lips. “Smells good.” He took a couple of sips before he set it down again.

I’d slept by his side, getting the best night of sleep I’d gotten in a while. His bed was just as comfortable as I remembered—and his touch was even better. When Kent told me about Maverick’s night, I was jealous some beautiful woman wanted to get in his pants so bad...and I was also touched that he didn’t cave. He wasn’t getting sex from me, but he didn’t look for it elsewhere. If he really wanted to be with another woman, he could easily hide it from me. He seemed serious about this relationship now...unlike before.

“I’m sorry you had to drive out there and pick me up. I’m embarrassed by the whole thing...” He didn’t look me in the eye as he made his confession, so it seemed like he meant every word. He was an innately confident man, but underneath that hard shell was a vulnerable soul. “I would have called one of my men if I were thinking clearly.”

“I didn’t mind getting you, Maverick. I’m just happy you didn’t drive home.”

“I probably would have walked to my apartment instead.”

“I have a feeling you wouldn’t have made it that far...or remembered where it was.”

He rubbed his temple as he chuckled. “Yeah...guess not. And Kent is a jerk-off that would have left me there.”

“I doubt it. He did call me.”

“I would have preferred it if he took me home himself.”

“I wouldn’t.”

He dropped his smile and tilted his gaze back to mine. Although foggy with a hangover, Maverick’s clear mind was still there.

“I didn’t mind picking you up, Maverick. I’m your wife. It’s my job to take care of you.”

Anytime he received unconditional affection, he immediately shifted away like it disgusted him. He was incapable of being the recipient of something good, of receiving something rather than giving it. He looked away, right on cue. But then he had a change of heart and looked back at me once more.

“I want to take care of you.”

His chest rose with the big breath he took, but he kept his gaze focused on mine. He didn’t brush it off like all the other times. After a slight nod, he whispered, “Thank you.”

It was the first time I saw a change in Maverick. Sometimes he hovered between being a good man and an asshole, but this was the first time he’d taken a definitive step toward a different life. He crossed a line that could never be uncrossed. He made a gesture he’d never made before.

My hand moved to his, and I gave it a gentle squeeze, my heart releasing the deadly toxins it had absorbed from his malice. Now, it seemed like things were really different, like we were a team.

His hand squeezed mine in return. “I didn’t throw up, right?”

“No. You don’t remember?”

“I remember you picking me up but not much else.”

“Why were you drinking so much, anyway?”

“It was a long day. I had a lot of work to do at the office, and then I met Charles in the city. Whenever I meet anybody, there’s always a lot of drinking involved. Then I met up with Kent at a bar...and that was a terrible idea. I’m a heavy drinker who handles my liquor well. Never really crossed that

line before. But somehow, it happened last night. When I hit my threshold, it was too late... I was long gone.”

“I think you need to sober up for a week to give your liver a break.”

“Yeah...I’m sick of scotch anyway.”

“Wow, you really must have learned your lesson.”

“Of course I did,” he said. “The whole thing is embarrassing. How can a man take care of his wife if he’s so drunk, he can’t take care of himself?”

“Because he’s a human being who can make mistakes too. Relationships aren’t one-dimensional. It’s about giving and taking. It was one of the few times you needed me, and I was glad I could be there for you. You’ve done so much for me...” He’d saved my life multiple times and became the rock underneath my feet. He supported me in every way possible, from cradling my heart to holding my hand.

“But I was happy to do those things.”

“I know.”

He grabbed his coffee again and took another drink. “First time I’ve had breakfast in bed. Abigail must have known it was bad.”

“She knows you pretty well.” I watched him drink, watched his throat tighten and shift as he let the warm liquid fall into his stomach. He drank half of it before he returned it to the tray. “So...Sabrina wanted to jump your bones?”

Maverick looked across the room, his eyes settling on the flames that burned in the fireplace. “Did you start this?”

“Yes.”

“That’s impressive. Logs are pretty heavy.”

“And I’m pretty strong. Don’t change the subject.”

He grinned slightly but still avoided my gaze. “What do you want me to say?”

“The truth.”

“Yes...she wanted to sleep with me. Now, what’s for breakfast?”

I’d hated that woman the moment I saw her touch my husband on the arm. It was obvious she was a seducer the second I looked at her. She fished for affection from all the men around her, wanting their obsession because it kicked up her validation. She’d already slept with Maverick, but she wanted him more—just because she couldn’t have him. “Is that her type? Married men?”

He shrugged. “I think she prefers powerful men with fat wallets.”

“Well, this powerful man and his fat wallet are taken.”

He turned his gaze back to me, a ghost of a smile on his lips. “Yes...they are.” He looked into my eyes, his brown eyes shifting back and forth as he watched jealousy turn into annoyance. When I got like this, I was easy to read. “She lost her husband years ago, and she’s been shopping for a replacement.”

“Then she needs to stick to bachelors.”

“She wants the best of the best. Their marital status doesn’t matter.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“Most men have affairs. It’s not that surprising.”

There was nothing less attractive in a man. Sneaking around and lying about his whereabouts to have a mistress made him less of a man. At least Maverick was up front about his intentions. Now he seemed to be a truly devoted husband. He wore his wedding ring everywhere he went and carried my ring on a chain. I could see it now, lying against his bare chest. “You aren’t like that...”

“No, I’m not.” He grabbed my hand again and rested it on his lap. “And I will be faithful every day for the rest of my life. Not because I’m bound to be, but because I want to be. I could be crazy drunk, and I still wouldn’t do it.”

My anger toward him was fading more and more. Evaporating like water on a summer day, my temper was slowly dissipating. That anger was being replaced by affection at an equal rate. I didn't want us to be divided any longer. I wanted us to try to be husband and wife...to give this a real shot.

"Please." He pulled me closer to him, bringing our faces close together. "You said you would try. Please try for me."

He was the most irresistible first thing in the morning like this, with tousled hair and a sleepy gaze. His tight frame was so warm and inviting. His strong body looked even sexier when my wedding ring hung down his chest, like he was carrying a torch for me. My arm circled around his waist, and I pressed my face into his neck. "Okay...I will."

"WOW...THAT IS A BIG-ASS CHRISTMAS TREE." At the bottom of the stairs in the entryway, the tree extended all the way to the second floor. It had to be at least twenty feet tall. Decorated with ornaments in gold and white, it was a beautiful piece for the house.

Maverick came down the stairs dressed for work. "Yeah. It'll be great for the party."

"Party?"

"I'm having a Christmas party here. Thought it would be a good way to make a lasting impression before springtime."

"I thought you didn't do parties."

He shrugged. "It's part of business."

"Well, I'm looking forward to it."

"Good. I need you." He stood beside me and examined the ornaments, his eyes lifting up to see every foot of it. It'd been a day since he woke up with a migraine, and he was finally getting back to his usual schedule. Cutting out the booze gave

him an extra boost of energy. “Want to have dinner with me tonight?”

“Not out of the house.”

He turned his gaze back to me, his eyebrow raised.

“It’s supposed to rain tonight. I’d rather stay home.”

Once he understood I wasn’t blowing him off, he looked at the tree again. “It seems like it’s always raining.”

“Yeah...I hate winter.”

“I should head to work. I’ll see you later.” He turned toward me, like he might give me a kiss goodbye. Instead, I got a slight smile and an affectionate look. Then he walked off, his ass perfect in his jeans.

Even though the rift had been healed between us, nothing had changed. He didn’t try to make our relationship physical, and neither did I. It was the first time I’d said I would actually try... I just didn’t know what that meant.

MAVERICK HAD WATER WITH DINNER. Booze seemed to be temporarily gone from his life at the moment. He sat across from me and didn’t blink an eye over the red wine I had with the dinner Abigail supplied.

“How long have you known Kent?”

He shook his head slightly. “I can’t even remember. Almost ten years, I guess.”

“Was he at our wedding?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t remember seeing him.”

“There were so many people there. You probably did meet him but just don’t remember.”

“Is he your best friend?”

He shrugged. "I don't identify with that term. But he is my closest friend...if that's what you're asking." He finished his food and left his half-eaten plate on the table. A green salad with fish and vegetables had been our dinner.

I ate all of mine because everything Abigail made was delicious. I liked my food simple but flavorful, and she did an excellent job of constructing that. It wasn't packed with extra oils and spices until it was heavy and overwhelming.

Now that my walls were down, things were starting to feel the way they used to. We were friends who could talk about anything together. Conversations rolled off the tongue easily, and it was relaxed.

I'd missed it.

When we finished dinner, we made our way upstairs to the second landing.

My heart started to race because I knew something was going to happen. It'd been a long time since we'd been together, and it was obvious he was anxious. I was anxious too. I'd been sleeping with Brandon for a while, but that wasn't as passionate and satisfying as it was with Maverick. It didn't compare, actually.

When we reached the second landing, Maverick did the unexpected. He turned to me, one hand in the pocket of his jeans, and dismissed me. "Goodnight, Arwen."

He didn't try to kiss me. He didn't dig his hand into my hair and pull me close. He didn't kiss the back of my neck like a hungry wolf wanting to rip me to shreds. It was so unexpected that all I could do was stare.

He walked to the foot of the next set of stairs. "My previous offer still stands. If you want me, you know where to find me." He walked up the stairs and disappeared from my sight. His footsteps grew quieter until they were completely silent.

I'd expected him to chase me, to pin me up against the wall and take me. I'd expected the wolf to come for me, to claim me as his own the way he used to. But I remembered all

the times I'd rejected his affection. He took my hand and asked for my forgiveness so many times, but my answer was always the same. He couldn't read my mind now. He couldn't know what I wanted. I didn't even know what I wanted until he walked away.

I headed upstairs to his bedroom and let myself inside.

His jacket and shirt were over the back of the chair, and his jeans were left on the floor where Abigail would pick them up in the morning. The bed was empty, so he was in the bathroom, probably brushing his teeth and washing his face.

When he heard me enter his space, he stepped back inside. He was barefoot and in just his boxers, his tanned skin contrasting against the chain around his neck. My diamond ring immediately reflected the low-burning flames in the hearth. Little rainbows cast across the wall.

He stopped and looked at me, watching me enter his bedroom.

I was the one making all the decisions now. I came to his bedroom because I wanted him...whatever that might mean. Jumping into bed with him again seemed premature, but there was nowhere else in the world I'd rather be. I didn't want to sit in my bedroom alone and blankly watch TV. I wanted to be there...with him.

Tall, muscular, and so handsome that I couldn't blame Sabrina, he stared at me. His boxers hung low on his hips, the prominent sex lines of his hips making a noticeable V. His stomach was tight with his eight-pack, something no amount of booze could erase. The man stayed in perfect shape no matter what came his way. His brown eyes were welcoming like a cup of coffee in the morning, the perfect temperature to chase away the frost.

I crossed the distance between us and moved closer into him, watching the way he stared at me in anticipation. It was unlike him to be so docile, but perhaps he was scared making a move would only push me away. My heart beat like a drum, my palms turning sweaty even though it was raining outside. A fire burned in the fireplace, the crackling sound matching

the heat underneath my skin. I stopped in front of him, my eyes level with his chest. My old ring twinkled at me, like it was winking. This was hidden underneath his clothing everywhere he went, including the night when Sabrina tried to steal him away. Why wouldn't she want him? He had it all—looks, money, and respect.

My hands moved to his muscular arms, and I pressed into the warm skin. The dips between the different grooves were so prominent, so unmistakable. I could feel the power hum under his skin like a distant melody. I lifted my gaze then rose onto my tiptoes, bringing our faces closer together.

When my intentions were clear as a blue sky, his arm hugged my waist while his free hand slid into my hair just the way I liked. His fingers dug deep, wrapping around the strands like he was using it as a rope. He pulled me tighter, letting me feel just how hard he was in his boxers.

I rested my forehead against his and appreciated the surge of affection that burned in between us. The chemistry was hot like an erupting volcano, my hormones burning like they were on fire. I could feel his chest rise and fall, sense the labor of his breaths. His desire matched mine, hot and fiery.

I missed this.

I'd never had this with anyone else. Not Dante. Not Brandon. Not anyone.

His hand slid to the back of my neck, his fingers possessive. "My sheep..." His thumb brushed across my cheek. He looked at my mouth like he was claiming it with his gaze. His arm tightened a little harder, and he turned into the wolf I remembered. Authoritative and powerful, he took control of me like it was the most natural thing to do, like he'd been waiting all his life to do it.

I didn't want Sabrina or someone else to have him. I wanted him all to myself. "I never want to share you again..."

His eyes shifted back and forth as they looked into mine. With just the simplest expressions, he said so much. His fingers tightened even more. "You never have to."

“I never want you to hurt me again.”

“Never.” His hand moved up my back and pulled me into him as he kissed me. With open lips and a slight growl, he felt my lips with his own and gave a gentle suck. He breathed quietly as he felt the burn between our mouths. The first touch was the slowest, was the longest. His hand cradled the back of my head, and he released an anxious breath.

I could feel the pleasure in his veins, feel the passion in his touch. He'd been waiting for that kiss as long as I had. He'd been looking forward to this like it was the most important thing in the world.

He kissed me again...and again.

His hand was in my hair, and his arm tugged me against his chest. His kisses were mixed with heavy breaths, pants of desire. Open. Close. Kiss. Suck. Lick. Repeat. He tugged on my bottom lip with his teeth before he released me, only to do it again a second later. His tongue swiped against mine before another warm breath filled my lungs.

No one could kiss like Maverick DeVille.

His cock throbbed against my stomach, the large girth twitching noticeably. It seemed to swell longer and thicker as our kiss continued, the crown noticeably enlarged. He wanted to break free of his bottoms so he could get to me as quickly as possible.

I didn't expect sex when I walked through the door. I just wanted something from him...anything. But now my fingers pushed his boxers down over his muscled ass so his cock could come free.

His hands immediately pulled my shirt over my head then unclasped my bra. When I was in just my jeans with my tits bare, he palmed one tit and flicked his thumb over the hard nipple. His lips rested against mine, but he didn't kiss me, focusing on the way I felt in his grasp.

I sucked in a deep breath every time his thumb felt me, every time my nipples pebbled just a little harder.

His other hand grasped my other tit, and he moaned. Like a teenager feeling up a girl for the first time, he thoroughly enjoyed it. His strong fingers kneaded my tits aggressively, palming and claiming each one of them. His anxious breaths fell across my skin as he continued to feel me up. With an aroused expression, he looked into my face as he watched my reaction, watched me come apart under his touch.

A man had never touched me this way before. A man had never been so confident in his embrace, had hands that could stroke a woman so perfectly. He glanced at my lips then my eyes, watching me bite my bottom lip as I arched my back, pressing my tits farther into his hold.

My hand reached for his dick, and I gripped it in my fingers. It felt like a pipe running with hot water. It was hard as steel and hot like steam. I felt the grooves along the edge of his crown, the pulsing vein protruding from his shaft. My thumb swiped across the hot skin as I squeezed him in my grasp.

He twitched every time I gave him a squeeze.

His hands dropped from my tits and unfastened my jeans. He pushed them over my ass then lowered himself to his knees, his mouth kissing the valley between my tits. His tongue tasted me as he pulled my pants and panties down to my ankles. Just like the wolf that he was, he started to eat me. His kisses turned aggressive, accompanied by deep growls. His hands palmed my cheeks, and he lowered his kisses to my belly. Kissing me everywhere and squeezing me into him, he enjoyed me like it was all for him.

The chain hung around his neck, the ring tapping against my body as he moved.

Any doubt I had disappeared the instant he kissed me. I didn't think about the two women who had slept in the bed that belonged to me. I didn't think about the resentment and the pain. Now it felt like just the two of us, husband and wife.

He rose to his feet and scooped me up at the same time, cradling me in his arms and holding me flush against him. He was so strong that carrying a full-grown woman was no

problem. His hands gripped my ass as he held me against his chest. My legs were open to his torso, my wet pussy pressing against his warm skin.

He carried me to the edge of the bed but didn't lay me down. His lips found mine, and he kissed me again, this time slow and passionate. His lips caressed mine like he had all the time in the world, like sliding into my body wasn't the highlight of his night. He sucked my bottom lip then breathed into me, a sexy moan coming from that masculine throat.

My nails scratched his back then dug into his hair. My ankles were locked together around his waist, and my feet could feel the flames from the hearth behind him. My ankles dug into him a little deeper as the kiss continued. I pulled at his soft strands and never wanted to share him with anyone else ever. I never wanted to sleep with another man. For me, this was all I wanted. I'd never directly told Maverick that I loved him because he wasn't ready to hear it, but when he was ready, he was the only man I wanted to share those words with. He was the only man I wanted to father my children, to be my husband until we were old and gray.

He rolled me onto my back and moved on top of me at the same time, his narrow hips fitting perfectly between my thighs. His heavy weight caused the mattress to dip and my body sank underneath him. It'd been so long since we'd been together that I forgot how perfect it was, how well we fit together.

His cock pressed against my clit and became slathered in my moisture so easily. With a slight tilt of his hips, he smeared his base with my arousal and became coated in the lubrication. Drops leaked from his tip and dripped onto my stomach, sticky and warm. His arms anchored behind my knees, and he held himself on top of me, the hunt still in his eyes. Now that we were naked together, he didn't hold back. He claimed his prize like he'd earned it.

He grabbed his base and pointed his head at my entrance. After a quick thrust, he pushed past my tightness and slowly sank deep inside, stretching me to capacity as he pressed deeper and deeper.

My nails dug into his arms, and I took a deep breath as I felt his large dick claim me. He was bigger than Brandon, bigger than any other man I'd been with. It felt so right when we were together...especially without a barrier separating us.

When he was balls deep, he closed his eyes and moaned. His forehead rested against mine, and he breathed through the pleasure, his cock twitching now that it'd been reunited with the one place where it wanted to be. "Jesus Christ..." He slightly rocked his hips, testing the slickness and the tightness.

My fingers felt the definition of his arms, the way his muscles swelled under his tanned skin. I could feel the power of his physique, the way he held his beautiful body so effortlessly on top of me. He enjoyed me like he forgot how good a woman felt. Like there'd been no one else before me who mattered, I was the only person he would actually remember.

He was already a sexy man who looked handsome with any expression he gave, but he looked particularly delicious on top of me. With his mouth clenched tightly and his body rigid with pleasure, he was the sexiest man I'd ever seen. He opened his eyes and looked at me once he realized this was real, that he'd finally gotten me back.

My fingers slid past his cheek and into his hair as I pulled him close to me. I was stuffed full of his length, stretched so wide apart, I couldn't take anymore. It'd been so long since we'd been together that I forgot how good it felt...and how painful it was too. I brought his face close to mine and kissed him.

My ring rested against my chest between my tits, shifting up and down with his movements. The metal was cold to the touch in the beginning, but as the air heated up between us, the metal turned warm and inviting.

He kept his pace slow and kissed me at the same time, his long length delving deep inside then pulling out to my entrance. He pushed all the way in once more, taking a deep breath as he plunged so far. Moans escaped his mouth as he

thrust inside me. His pace always stayed the same, even and slow.

My fingers clutched his hair, and I kept him close as my body melted into a puddle. All my nights had been spent alone, remembering how good this used to be. Now that it was happening again, I could hardly believe it. I could hardly believe that my memory had been so clear...because it was exactly the same.

He kissed me harder as he rocked his hips and pushed deep inside me. Slowly, he moved, giving me all of him every single time. He breathed hard, and his body became coated with sweat as he worked to please me, as he brought us both into euphoria.

Now that I had this back in my life, I never wanted to lose it again. Sex wasn't this good with just anybody. It was only amazing when it was with the right person. Despite the rocky relationship we had, I knew this was where we were both supposed to be. We were supposed to be together...just like this.

MAVERICK

IT WAS THE BEST NIGHT OF SLEEP I'D EVER GOTTEN.

The trials of my life had finally passed, and everything was in order once more. There shouldn't be a random woman beside me every night, a face and name I would easily forget. It should only be one person.

My wife.

When I opened my eyes, I found her next to me. With her hair a mess and her soft skin peeking out from under the sheets, she was a living angel. Her blue eyes were hidden behind her lids, but knowing they were there made her angelic. With sleep still heavy in my eyes, I watched her for a bit, content to see her lying there.

She inhaled a deep breath then stretched her legs, like a cat waking up from its nap.

It was the first time I'd gone to bed fully satisfied. I'd tried jerking off a couple of times, but it never left me feeling so full. It was always a hollow release, a painful reminder that I couldn't have what I really wanted. But I spent the night buried inside the same woman over and over. With nothing in between us, I filled her with load after load...washing away any trace of Brandon and making her mine.

My life was finally back to normal.

It felt so good.

I had a long day ahead of me, but I chose to ignore responsibility and stare at her instead. It'd been a long time

since she'd been in that bed with me, not counting the night I was drunk out of my mind. I hadn't been sober enough to really enjoy her presence at the time.

Now I could.

The backs of my fingers brushed up against her skin. Soft like a rose petal and smelling just like a new blossom, she was as beautiful as a porcelain doll. She had the attitude of a mule but the beauty of a goddess. That made her even more appealing to me.

She woke up moments later, her beautiful eyes taking me in with restful laziness. She stared for a couple of seconds before her curved lips spread into a smile. She closed her eyes once more then reached her hand for my side. Slowly, she brushed her fingertips against me, feeling the outline of my muscles. "Morning, Wolf."

"Morning, Sheep." I moved over her and placed a kiss on her forehead. Her sexy figure was draped in the sheets, hugging her beautiful curves and barely covering her perky tits. She turned to me for protection and guidance, relying on me as the one person who could keep her safe. It inflated my ego...and made me feel like the luckiest bastard alive.

She propped herself on her elbow then ran her fingers through her hair, being sexy without even trying. She kicked off the sheets slightly and revealed the top half of her body, her sexy tits and hard nipples. She scooted closer to me then wrapped her arm around my stomach. Her head moved to my shoulder, and she sighed in relaxation.

My arm circled her waist, and I kept her anchored to me.

"I'll never get out of bed..."

"That's fine with me."

"But I need to eat...drink...and pee."

"I think you can make it."

She chuckled into my shoulder. "Do you have work today?"

"I always have work. I also need to prepare for that party."

“That’s right. That should be fun.”

I wasn’t much for socializing. All I cared about was getting respect for my family name and earning some cash.

“A Christmas party...there will be lots of champagne, decorations, and cheese.”

“Yes, lots of cheese.”

“I’m excited.” She leaned into me and kissed me on the mouth. “I’ll have to find something to wear.” She scooted out of bed and prepared to get her day started.

I grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her back into the bed. “You can find something to wear later.” I moved between her legs and smothered her back into the mattress. “For now, you’re still mine.”

ABIGAIL RAN over the list of everything she would have for the party. “Is there anything else you wanted?”

“No. Looks like you’ve already taken care of everything.” I smoked my cigar behind the desk, the rain pounding against the windows behind me. A winter storm had arrived, but it was expected to clear just before the party. “As always.”

She folded up her list. “Forgive me for asking, but would you like me to invite your father?”

Abigail and I never discussed personal matters, but since she shared occupancy of my estate, she was aware of everything that happened on the premises. She knew my father and I didn’t see eye to eye. She probably had no idea my father wanted to kill Arwen, but it was better if she didn’t know that piece of information. “No.” Even if we were on speaking terms, I doubt he would have wanted to come anyway. He used to be social when my mother was alive, but now that she was gone, he had absolutely no reason to show his face anywhere.

Abigail didn't blink an eye over my answer. "Alright. Need anything?"

"No."

She let herself out.

With my cigar between my teeth, I turned back to my laptop and took care of business. Running a cheese company wasn't as interesting as my involvement in the underworld had been, but at least it was simple. I had a wife now, and I wouldn't make my father's mistakes by living a life of adrenaline. It wasn't worth it—no matter how much money was on the table.

A few minutes later, Arwen walked inside. Carrying an article of clothing covered by a white plastic bag, she seemed to have found the dress she would be wearing that evening. She was all smiles and joy as she walked in, but when she noticed the cigar in my mouth, her eyes changed to two pits of burning hell. She threw the dress over the back of the couch. "Want me to slap you?"

I pulled the cigar out of my mouth and let the smoke rise from my nostrils. "It's pretty hot...I wouldn't mind it."

She stomped to the desk and snatched the burning cigar out of my hand. She smashed it into the black ashtray, pounding it unnecessarily hard like this was really personal. It turned into mashed potatoes right under her fingertips. "If you want me to be your wife, then this has to go."

"Are you going to hold that over my head every time you want something?"

She didn't blink. "Yes."

I smiled slightly. "How about a compromise? I'll do it once in a while—"

"No. You're quitting here and now. Or I walk."

I rubbed my fingers across my jawline, the scent of smoke still on my fingertips. This woman could coerce me into doing anything because she had all the power. Just like a tyrant, she

knew she could do whatever she wanted—so she did.
“Alright.”

“I mean it. If I catch you with a cigar again, I’m gone.”

I just got her back, and I wasn’t losing her again. I opened my top drawer and pulled out the box of cigars sitting there. I pushed them toward her, throwing in the towel for good.

She eyed the eight untouched cigars then looked at me again. “I want your promise, Maverick. You’re a man of your word.”

I gave a slight nod. “Alright...I promise.”

She grabbed the box and tossed it in the garbage.

I felt a slight pang of sadness when I watched them fall to the bottom of the can. Good cigars gone to waste. It was like watching my former life disappear, watching bachelorhood become a memory. All the things I used to love were no longer important. I shed my former life and took on a whole new role.

Wasn’t as scary as it used to be.

She came back to the desk with her hands on her hips, as if she expected me to argue with the law she’d just laid down.

It was a small sacrifice, so I didn’t complain.

She grabbed the dress hanging over the back of the chair and pulled off the plastic cover. Underneath was a pastel blue dress that reminded me of a winter wonderland. With subtle sparkles in the material, it seemed like it was filled with small ice crystals. It was low cut in the front which was great for her awesome rack, and it flared out along the waist and reached down to her feet. “What do you think?”

“I’m not big on fashion, but I can tell that will look stunning on you.”

She held it up to her frame and smiled. “Thank you.”

With some diamonds around her throat and on her wrist, she would look like the perfect queen—and I was her king.

She returned it to the bag to keep it clean and safe. “Is there anything you need me to do to help out?”

“No.”

“Do you want me to play any music?”

I was certain everyone would expect it, especially in my home. It would be nice to have her sit at a grand piano near the Christmas tree and fill the halls with her beautiful song. Even if she sang a song about her undying love for me, I would hang on to every word. “Only if you want to.”

She smiled. “If it makes you happy, then I want to.”

I wanted to listen to her beautiful voice fill my home all the time. It brought life into this house, chased away the darkness that slowly crept into every crack and corner. Painful memories filled this entire place...but slowly she erased every single one. “I always want you to.”

THE SEX WAS BETTER than I remembered.

All my other fuck-a-thons felt hollow and unsatisfying. Sometimes it seemed like I was doing it just to do it...even if I didn't like it. I didn't know what else to do with myself. Sometimes I wanted to prove a point...but I had no one to prove it to.

Sex with my wife was the best I'd ever had.

I didn't want to be a monogamous man hard up for a single woman. I didn't want the commitment, the mediocre fidelity. But I was happiest with Arwen. I was definitely more satisfied. I could be alone and continue to make a point...but who would care about any of the points I tried to make?

This was where I wanted to be.

This was the woman I wanted to be with.

She crawled on the bed and got on top of me, buck naked with her hair framing her perfect tits. Her eyes sparkled like flecks of gold in the sand as it washed up onshore. She lowered herself on top of me, her soft and warm skin rubbing against mine.

With my back to the headboard, I slid my hand up her gorgeous legs until I gripped her cheeks. I felt the tight muscle under my fingertips as I stared at her firm tits. She was so beautiful that my cock couldn't stop twitching.

I'd never seen anyone more beautiful in my life.

Why would I want someone else when I could have the most desirable woman on the planet?

Marrying her began as a chore...but it became the best thing that ever happened to me.

Her hands pressed against my chest, and she palmed my muscles, feeling how hard my frame was. She rocked her hips slightly, grinding her wet pussy over my hard length. She was a good lover, letting me take the reins but occasionally taking them herself. She ground a little harder then moaned, getting off on how hard my dick was.

Now I appreciated her attributes even more. I appreciated her petite shoulders, her perfectly proportioned tits, her slender belly, and her sexy hips. She was stunning from head to toe—and she was all mine.

I unclasped the chain from around my throat and slid the ring into my palm. The diamond had been hanging there for a long time, accompanying me everywhere I went. It was on me during my shower, underneath my shirt while I worked out at the gym. It was part of me now, a vigil for the woman who shared my name.

She looked down and watched me handle the ring.

I grabbed her left hand and started to slide it on.

But she pulled away. Her hand left my hold, and her fingers contracted into a fist, denying my advance in the most brutal way possible. That ring had sat on her finger for so long, but now she had no connection to it anymore. "I'm sorry... I'm just not ready."

The ring stayed between my fingertips as the anger rushed through me. Just when it seemed like everything was okay between us, she stabbed me in the gut when I wasn't paying attention. My fingers tightened around the ring, but then I

forced my body to relax. I was the reason all of this happened in the first place. I hurt her...and it would take a long time to fix everything I'd broken.

I swallowed my pride and my anger and returned the ring to the chain.

“You don't need to keep wearing it...”

“I want to.” I clasped the necklace around my throat and let the ring tap against my chest a couple of times before it stilled. Now the moment between us was ruined by the offer I made, by the rejection she so easily issued. Just when I thought our past was really behind us, I was reminded that she was still hurt by what I'd done. I needed to be more patient. I needed to make her feel secure in this relationship, that I wasn't going to turn cold if things became too serious again.

She stayed on my lap and watched me with apology in her eyes. She probably felt just as shitty rejecting me as I did being rejected. Her eyes moved down to my chest, and her hands rested at her sides. She was still in my lap, but the electricity between us was long gone.

I'd been so eager to be inside her, but now all of that heat vanished. I was reminded of how I let her down, how I was an unfaithful husband. I'd never questioned my own worth, but when it came to Arwen, I didn't feel good enough.

I slid her off my lap then walked into the bathroom. I'd already showered that morning, but I turned on the water and got inside. The warm water flattened my hair, and the steam fogged the glass. Drops of water ran down the tiled walls, and the heat made me forget it was raining outside. Something about a hot shower could clear my thoughts better than booze and cigars. Noise was canceled out by the falling water, so it made it easy for me to ignore the world around me. I closed my eyes as the water washed my thoughts away.

The door opened and closed behind me.

I didn't open my eyes because I knew exactly who it was. She could have returned to her bedroom and given me the space I needed... But I didn't really want space. I wanted us to

be what we used to be, even though that seemed impossible. I opened my eyes and turned around.

Her hair immediately flattened with the humidity, and her skin glistened from the steam. Her tits tightened against her chest as her nipples pebbled in the heat. She moved closer to me, her chin lifting to meet my gaze as she drew closer. "I still want you..." Her hand moved to the center of my chest as she stepped under the water and let her strands stick to her wet skin. Her makeup started to run under the water, but I liked the way it began to drip. It reminded me of her tears, when her eyes would glisten because her climax was too much to take.

I wouldn't turn down a beautiful woman in my shower, so I disregarded her earlier rejection and felt my body come to life with desire. My cock inflated to full mast and started to ooze from the tip. Now that this woman was mine again, I wanted to be inside her always. I wanted sex every night and every morning. I was a married man, and I wanted to enjoy it as much as possible...especially when I was married to a woman like her.

I cornered her against the wall then hiked her leg over my hip. With the water running down us both, I pressed her into the warm tile and sealed my mouth over hers. Moans echoed in the small enclosure, but were soon swallowed by the falling water. I hiked her leg a little higher and rubbed the base of my dick against her anxious pussy. With just the right pressure, I could make her shudder, make her wince from a mixture of pleasure and pain.

She held on to my shoulders and kissed my anxious lips, her tits dragging against my chest as we moved together. She was suffocated in my arms, crushed between the tile wall and my heavy body. Her deep breaths turned to moans, and soon she was fisting my hair in desperation.

My hand guided my crown past her tight entrance, and I slowly sank inside, feeling a warmth that was even better than the hot shower. I moved farther into her until my length was happily sheathed, surrounded by her heavenly slickness. I hadn't fucked a pussy like this all my life, and now there was no going back.

This was all I wanted. It was the best cut of meat, the best flower on the vine, the best everything. Why would I want to settle for second best when I had the first-place winner right here? My cock claimed it as a permanent home.

Her nails scratched down my back as she felt me, her eyes glistening with moisture instantly. Her head rolled back, and she bit her bottom lip. “Maverick...” She said my name in the sexiest way with that angelic voice. She turned a single word into a beautiful song instantly.

My arm scooped under her leg and kept it pinned up as I thrust deep inside her, my dick wanting to venture farther and farther even though there was nowhere left to go. Whenever I fucked this woman, I always had to have her as deeply as possible, to enjoy every single inch of that perfect pussy.

One hand went to my ass, and she tugged me into her, taking my large size bravely. Even when it hurt her a bit, she continued to push through, savoring the pleasure and denying the pain. She kept biting her bottom lip over and over just to stop herself from screaming.

My arms picked her up completely, and I pinned her against the wall, letting my ass work to fuck her hard in place. I sank in deep with every stroke, drove my cock as far as it would go before I pulled out once more. I breathed hard against her mouth as I felt all the muscles in my body tighten from desire. Sex never fatigued me. It felt so good that it spurred me on indefinitely. I wanted to keep going forever... and never wanted to stop.

WE LAY side by side in bed, the flames in the hearth dying out until there was nothing left behind but hot embers. The only light came from the crack under the door into the bathroom. Sex in the shower led to sex on the bed, making the sheets damp because we didn't bother to dry off in between.

Now, we lay there, silent.

She turned on her side and looked at me, her hair damp and messy across the pillow. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“Be careful what you wish for...”

“I have nothing to hide.” She already knew my greatest crimes and my worst flaws. There was nothing I could say or do to lower her opinion of me.

“Alright...am I the only woman you’ve been with without a condom?”

I was expecting a more philosophical question, especially when the answer to her question was so obvious. “Yes.”

“Really?”

“Would I lie?” With one arm propped under my head, I glanced at her face then looked at the ceiling again.

“No...but I’m surprised.”

“Why?”

“You’re in your thirties.”

“I don’t see why age has anything to do with it. I’m a wealthy man from a noble bloodline. A woman might say she’s on the pill, when in reality, she wants to trap me in a hold I can’t escape. I always wear a condom—no exceptions.”

“Then what about me?”

“You’re an exception.”

“You just said no exceptions.”

“You’re special. You’re my wife.”

A slow smile crept onto her lips, affection burning in her eyes. “I do feel special.”

“Have you been with a man like that before?”

She nodded. “A few.”

Disappointment rushed through me, but it was a stupid feeling to have. She was a beautiful woman who had men

dying to be her one and only. Of course, they wanted to be monogamous and committed to her.

“But I like it the most with you.” Her hand snaked across the bed to mine. “It feels so good when you’re inside me... when I can feel you when you aren’t there anymore. It’s hot and heavy.”

This was turning me on all over again. “You like my come, Sheep?” I scooted closer to her on the bed, wrapping our bodies around each other. I hooked my arm around her back and pulled her deep into me, practically making us a single person.

“Yes.”

I rested my forehead against hers and closed my eyes. The peaceful feeling that washed over me was unlike anything I’d ever felt before. It was more potent than any drugs I could take. It was serene, divine. She made my brain shut down so the darkness couldn’t get into the crevices of my mind. She made me feel complete...like there was nothing else I needed.

KENT CAME up to my side, looking dapper in a suit and tie. He already had a glass of champagne in his hand as he admired the enormous Christmas tree in the entryway. The string quartet played music for everyone to hear. “Wow...this place is nice.” He whistled under his breath.

“Are you wearing a suit?” I asked, mildly surprised.

He brushed his hand over his shoulder. “Yes. And I look good in it.”

“Didn’t realize you owned one.”

“Shut up. I don’t want to punch you at your own party.”

“And I don’t want to stab you so close to Christmas.”

He took a drink of his champagne then examined the crowd of people mingling. Dressed in ball gowns and suits

with booze in their bellies, they somehow enjoyed the festivities and didn't grow tired of them.

This party had barely started, and I was already tired of it.

"Where's Mrs. DeVille?"

I shrugged. "Sweeping someone off their feet, I suppose."

"You two getting along?"

We were fucking a lot. So, yes. "Things are better."

"She still wanted to be married to you after your drunken episode?"

Not only did she still want to be with me, but she also took care of me. She was there the entire time even though she could have handed off my care to Abigail. She ran her fingers through my hair and watched over me the whole night. "I guess so."

"Hold on to her, Maverick. Not too many women will stay around after that shitshow." His eyes surveyed the crowd.

"Did I even invite you to this?" Abigail sent out invitations weeks ago, but I was certain Kent's name hadn't been in the pile.

"Yes. At the bar."

"When I got so drunk I couldn't remember anything?"

"Yep. I thought I could pick up a fancy lady for the evening."

"Most of them are married."

"Most," he emphasized. "But not all. And marriage is just a piece of paper... Who cares?"

My eyes narrowed on his face as the offense went straight to my heart. I imagined Kent making a move on Arwen when I wasn't in the room. Even with a wedding ring on her left hand as a sign of her commitment, he still thought it was appropriate to test the waters. It bothered me all the way down to my core. "It's not just a piece of paper. It's a lot more than that..."

He turned his gaze back to me, his lips rising in a smile. “It is, huh?”

“Yes.”

“So, things are going well with the missus, then? Lots of fucking?”

After we were together again the first time, it happened nonstop. Every night we were making the headboard tap against the wall, and every morning we were having quick fucks before we started our day. I’d confide those details to him if Arwen were just a random woman...but she was my wife. “There’s a widow here named Sabrina. She’s your type.”

“Widow?” he asked. “Is she old?”

“My age.”

“Oh...a lonely young woman. That sounds exactly like my type.”

“She was the woman who hit on me a couple of weeks ago.”

“Gotcha.” He nodded slightly. “So, she’s definitely down to get nasty.”

“She likes rich men. I’m not sure if you’re rich enough.”

“I may not be a billionaire like you, but I’ve got plenty to offer.” His eyes moved across the room and stopped when he noticed something. “Damn, is that your wife in the blue dress?”

My eyes followed his gaze. She stood in a blue gown with slender straps over her shoulders. With a deep cut in the front that accentuated her perfect rack, she looked like a princess living in my castle. Her brown hair was pulled back, and the gown trailed to the floor, fitting her curves so well. She stood out from everyone else because she was so gorgeous. “Yes... the one and only.”

Kent whistled again. “No wonder you put on that ridiculous wedding ring.”

Ever since it slipped over my knuckle, it hadn't come off. Now I was used to wearing it all the time. The weight suited me, and the color suited me even more. "I put it on because I'm married."

He chuckled. "And it looks like you're happily married."

"Yeah...I think I am." I watched her talk to people whose names I couldn't even remember. It seemed like she was the host of the party because she walked up to everyone and made them all feel welcome. She'd never been particularly funny, but she managed to make people laugh so easily.

"I guess if I were married to that woman, I'd be happy too."

"Well, you aren't," I said darkly. "Don't forget it."

He nudged me gently in the side. "Don't worry, I know she's off-limits. No fooling around with your friend's sister, mother, ex, and the woman he loves."

"You forgot wife."

"Woman you love...same thing."

ARWEN

I RECOGNIZED SABRINA FROM A MILE AWAY. IN A TIGHT BLACK dress and a smile so fake, she was obnoxious just to look at. The woman preyed after my husband like he was available for solicitation.

No, bitch. He was mine.

But I took the high road and ignored her. It would only give her more satisfaction to know she got under my skin. Maverick didn't fall for her seduction, so there was no reason to be threatened by her.

I just wished he hadn't invited her.

"Okay, don't tell Maverick I told you this." Kent appeared at my side, looking a little different because he wore a three-piece suit and had his hair combed back. "But you look so damn hot tonight."

"I definitely won't tell him that." He'd smash his glass against Kent's skull and make a huge scene in the middle of the party. "He'd lose his temper so fast. And thank you."

"You're welcome." He clinked his glass against mine. "Do you find these parties as dull as I do?"

"They aren't so bad. I've met a lot of interesting people through Maverick."

"If you want to meet interesting people, go to a strip club."

I rolled my eyes. "You and Maverick are nothing alike. I'm not sure how you're friends."

“That’s where you’re wrong. We are alike. Well...we used to be. Things have changed for him. He used to be the shit-talking asshole that I am now. Ever since he met you, he’s mellowed out a lot. No more strip clubs. No more women in general. He’s become the pussy-whipped husband he vowed he would never be.”

“He’s not pussy-whipped.”

“Trust me, he is. That guy loves you.”

That was a scary word for us. The second Maverick received my devotion, things got ugly. “Did he say that to you?”

“No, but it’s obvious. I’ve watched him stare at women for ten years. Not once has he ever looked at them the way he looks at you.”

I lowered my gaze, touched by what he said.

“The guy wouldn’t be playing house like this unless he wanted to. That’s the biggest indicator right there. Wearing his wedding ring everywhere he goes...turning down easy pussy...a man is only like that for one specific reason. You’re that specific reason.”

Maybe his mistake should stay in the past where it belonged. It was obvious things were different now...very different.

“So, can you point me in the direction of Sabrina? I hear she’s hot.”

I’d rather her dig her claws into Kent than my husband. “She’s standing over there...in the black dress. She’s got dark hair.”

Kent scanned the crowd until his eyes locked on his target. “Damn, she’s sexy. Alright, this party just got better.” He finished off his drink then handed me the empty glass before he walked off to get a date for the evening.

It was the first time I’d had a few seconds to myself. I’d been chitchatting since the first person walked inside, and now I got to catch my breath as I carried the empty glass to a

passing waiter. Most of the time, people wanted to talk about my performance at the opera or music in general. Very rarely did people actually ask me about the cheese business, which was good because I really knew nothing about it. Maybe I should be more involved since I was a DeVille, but it seemed like something Maverick wanted to handle on his own.

“The holidays are the worst, don’t you think?” His misery was palpable, and his tone was condescending. Even with a drink in his hand and a suit, he still didn’t look like he belonged there. His dark hair was combed back and he carried himself like an aristocrat, but I could have picked him out of the crowd in a heartbeat.

“Not if you have someone to spend them with.”

“The one person I want to spend this holiday with isn’t here...” With one hand resting in the pocket of his slacks, he brought the glass of champagne to his lips and took a drink. He admired the enormous tree for a moment before his gaze turned back to me.

“You have two other people you should want to spend the holidays with...” My father was probably happy to be reunited with my mother, but I knew he would miss spending the holidays with me. I could never compete with his love for my mother, but I always felt just as important. The desires that drove this man were perplexing.

“They don’t want to spend the holidays with me, so it doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter,” I corrected. “Because they do want to spend the holidays with you...if you just dropped this attitude and became a father again.” Maybe I should be scared that he’d caught me off guard. Maybe I should be scared that he was there at all. But we were surrounded by a crowd full of people. The only way he would be able to kill me was by pulling out a gun and shooting me right on the spot. Everyone would know he was a murderer, and he wouldn’t be able to show his face in public ever again. Caspian was too smart for that, so he was there for a different reason. “If you came here to intimidate me, it won’t work. I’m not afraid of you.”

“You aren’t?” he asked almost comically. “Then you’re very stupid or...just stupid. I’m a very dangerous man. Maverick obviously hasn’t told you about the things I’ve done —”

“I don’t find you dangerous. You want to know why?” I grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing waiter. “Because a dangerous man doesn’t convince me to go back to my husband. He doesn’t play cupid for his son. He doesn’t give any kind of warning before he pulls the trigger. You care about your son. You aren’t very good at expressing that and you’re clearly embarrassed by it for some reason, but it’s obvious that you do.”

His expression fell into a cold simmer.

“So, no, I’m not afraid of you. I’m afraid that you’re going to take too long to make things right with Maverick and he’ll never forgive you. That’s what I’m worried about. If you don’t want to spend this Christmas alone or every Christmas afterward, then drop this disdain. Let it go, Caspian. There’s still time to make things right... Don’t piss away your last chance.”

“SO, CHILDREN ANYTIME SOON?” An older gentleman holding a cocktail asked Maverick the question. With his wife beside him, they were another pair of aristocrats I hadn’t met. No matter how many parties I attended, there always seemed to be someone new to meet.

I joined their conversation as Maverick absorbed the question and considered his response. “I think we want to enjoy each other a little longer. We’re still newlyweds...even though we’ve been married almost a year.”

“Isn’t that sweet?” his wife said. “Enjoy the phase as long as you want.”

My hand gently touched Maverick’s arm, and I politely excused us both. “Let me borrow my husband for just a

moment.” I guided him away so we could speak in private in the center of the crowded room.

“Thank you for rescuing me. I’m not even sure who those people are.”

“You invited them.”

He shrugged. “I’m terrible with names. Even more terrible with faces.”

“Well, I hope you never forget mine.”

“Never.” His arm moved around my waist, his fingertips gripping the fabric of my dress as he pulled me closer. His handsome face was close to mine, affection bright in his eyes. He probably wished everyone in that room would disappear so we could have a moment to ourselves.

I almost forgot the reason I wanted to talk to him. “Your father is here...”

His fingers slackened on the back of my dress as his eyes changed. They were affectionate just a second ago, but now they were steaming with hostility. He didn’t raise his gaze to scan the crowd in search of his archnemesis. “You’re certain?”

“We had a pretty hefty conversation...so, yes.”

He dropped his hand from my waist altogether. “Did he hurt you?”

“No.”

“What did he want?”

“Honestly, I’m not sure.” My eyes scanned the people around us, and I did my best to seem calm, like Maverick and I were having a lighthearted conversation instead of an extremely tense one. “I told him I wasn’t afraid of him. He didn’t appreciate that very much.”

“You should be afraid of him.”

“Why would I when you’re here?”

His eyes stayed locked on mine for several heartbeats, his face a closed curtain. His eyes remained indecipherable as he

processed the situation and the appropriate response. A million thoughts sped through his mind, all traveling at the speed of light. “What’s his game?” He pulled his eyes away from my face and looked around the room as he searched for Caspian in a sea of faces.

“No idea. But I don’t think he’s as threatening as he pretends to be. If he were, he wouldn’t have persuaded me to come back to you. He would have broken my neck at the rehab center. He wouldn’t be coming to a holiday party.”

“You shouldn’t assume.”

“I don’t like your father, but I think he misses his family... and doesn’t know how to fix things.”

He shook his head. “I took a bullet for him, and it meant nothing to him.”

“Maybe he’s had a change of heart.”

“That man doesn’t have a heart to change in the first place. Stay by my side for the rest of the night. I don’t want to take any chances.” His eyes kept scanning, and he didn’t bother to pretend everything was okay for everyone else in the crowd.

Caspian was a despicable man with a maniacal sense of reality. After losing his wife, he forgot what love felt like. He forgot what his kids meant to him. I definitely didn’t like him, but I wasn’t completely convinced of his evilness. I believed there was a chance, however small, that Caspian would realize the error of his ways...and pull his head out of his ass.

MAVERICK

MY FATHER CRASHED MY HOLIDAY PARTY AND CONVERSED with everyone like he belonged there. A trick was up his sleeve because I could never get him to attend any of my functions when we were still allies. He was only doing this to taunt me, to remind me that my wife was still at the top of his kill list.

Now I really wanted to kill him.

My finger had never been able to squeeze the trigger, but when my wife's life was on the line, my finger wasn't so hesitant.

Keeping up conversations with my guests was practically impossible because my mind was elsewhere. Arwen stayed at my side like I asked her to and did a better job pretending everything was perfectly fine. It was her mistake not to take my father seriously, but I wouldn't let her pay the price for her stupidity.

I finally spotted him several feet away, holding a glass of champagne while engaged in conversation with one of my guests. He sipped his drink then laughed at whatever comment was just said, fitting right in with the festivities. I turned my lips to her ear. "Stay here." My arm slid from around her waist, and I walked across the room as I approached my father, the notorious asshole.

"You have a lovely holiday as well," my father said as he finished his conversation. He hardly looked at me but seemed to understand I was there. He took another drink of his

champagne then faced me. “I noticed you haven’t had a drink all night. Expecting?”

After my horrific night on the town, I still hadn’t regained my appetite for booze. The scotch had burned a hole in my liver, and the idea of alcohol still didn’t seem appealing to me. I was a man with booze in my system nearly all the time, but I’d realized I’d hit my limit. Now it was time to take a step back and let my body cleanse itself. “It’s pathetic to stir up trouble at a Christmas party. I thought you had more honor than that.”

“All is fair in love and war, right?” He smiled before he took another drink from his glass. With one hand in his pocket while a perfectly tailored suit hugged his muscular frame, he behaved like this was a perfectly normal conversation.

“For cowards, yes.”

His gentle smile disappeared, and he turned his expression on me. “You’re the coward, Maverick. Your wife betrayed our family, and you allowed it to happen.”

“I didn’t allow it. I had no idea what her ambition was. If I had known, I probably wouldn’t have stopped her, but that’s beside the point. I didn’t know.”

“You know now, but you choose to do nothing.”

“Because I stand by my wife’s side. She did the right thing, and you know it. That’s what Mom would have wanted, it’s what Lily wanted, and it’s what I wanted. The three of us are still a family. You’re the one who’s dead—not Mom.”

He appeared crestfallen, punctured by what I’d said like a knife had been stabbed into his lung. He lowered his glass and stared at me with unblinking eyes, as if he were repeating my words in his mind over and over again. Speechless, he continued to stand there like he didn’t know what else to do.

It was the first time my words had wounded him. It was the first time I’d had any kind of impact on this heartless man. The fog around his gaze had finally dissipated, and he listened to something that flew out of my mouth. My speech came

from the heart, but I didn't expect it to have any kind of emotional impact whatsoever.

But it seemed to mean something to him...finally.

ONCE THE PARTY was over and the guests were cleared out of the house, Arwen and I headed upstairs to bed. It was nearly three in the morning, and she'd had too much champagne because she could barely walk.

She gripped the banister to steady herself as she carried herself up the stairs. When she lost her balance, she held on tighter and righted herself. Then a loud laugh escaped her lips, like she found the whole scene comical. "I thought I tripped, but then I realized I didn't trip...but then I did trip."

I turned around and came back to her. "Too much champagne tonight?"

"Looks like I'm a drunk mess just like you." She laughed again.

I scooped her into my arms then cradled her against my chest. Even up three flights of stairs, she was like carrying a pile of feathers. I made my way to the second landing then proceeded to the third.

Her arms locked around my neck, and she rested her cheek against my chest. "Big, strong man..."

Even though my night had been overshadowed by the tense conversation with my father, an involuntary chuckle escaped my lips. "You're just small."

"I'm not that small."

We reached the third landing, and I carried her into the bedroom.

"I'm so drunk right now, but I still want sex. Good sex."

I set her on the bed then peeled off my jacket. "Sounds good to me."

“You don’t mind taking advantage of your wife?” She rose to her feet then unzipped the back of her dress. It fell to the floor and revealed her naked form and her sheer thong. She peeled that down her legs and didn’t bother taking off her heels. She got back into bed.

“No.” I turned around and removed my tie and collared shirt. My foul mood couldn’t chase away the arousal I felt in that moment. My drunk wife was asking for sex, and I was happy to deliver. I took off my slacks and shoes then peeled off my boxers.

When I turned around, she was asleep.

Flat on her back with her hair a mess across the pillows, she’d fallen into a deep sleep almost instantly. Her lips were parted, and she gave a quiet snore because she was so tired.

I approached the bed and swallowed my disappointment. It would be easy for me to wake her up, but disturbing her seemed innately wrong. Even when she was a mess on the bed, she was still angelically beautiful. I grabbed each ankle and got her sparkly heels off before I pulled down the covers and tucked her in.

I took care of her just the way she took care of me.

That night, I’d been so embarrassed by my stupid behavior. I never allowed myself to be weak, to be in a position when I couldn’t take care of myself. I could barely walk, but my wife was by my side the entire time.

Now I did the same for her.

Marriage wasn’t just about fidelity and honesty. It was about being there for each other equally... I was starting to learn that.

I turned off the lights and got into bed beside her.

She wasn’t usually a snorer, but she started to snore like a water buffalo.

I lay in bed with my arm propped under my head as I stared at the ceiling. The party had been a success, and I’d found more partnerships than I’d expected to gain. But seeing

my father there had thrown off my entire mood. He was the black cloud in my sky, the tick of a bomb about to explode. He was a nuisance that wouldn't go away, a person determined to ruin the brighter moments of my life. Maybe all of that was about to change.

Or maybe it was about to get worse.

ARWEN

THE SECOND I OPENED MY EYES, I KNEW I WAS HUNGOVER. I wanted to pull the sheets over my head and ignore the sunlight poking through the curtains. The only reason I wanted to wake up was to pop a couple of pills and swallow them with a glass of water.

How much champagne did I drink last night?

When a knock sounded on the door, Maverick opened it, exchanged brief words with Abigail, and then returned to the bed. “Get up.”

“No...”

“You have to face the day sometime.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Abigail brought breakfast, including your favorite jam.”

My eyes opened. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” The weight of the bed tray dipped into the mattress beside me. “Now, get up and eat.”

I finally pulled the sheets down and cringed at the sunlight. “Why are all the blinds open?”

“Because it’s noon.”

“You want me to go blind? When you were too drunk to function, I kept this place as dark as a planetarium.”

He stayed on the bed for a second as if he wanted to resist my request, but then he caved and walked to all the curtains

and closed them.

“Much better.” I picked up a piece of toast and smeared jam across the bread.

He sat up in bed beside me, dressed in sweatpants without a shirt. His hair was styled like he’d already taken a shower and started his day. A cup of coffee was on the nightstand beside him, so he sipped it as he watched me eat. “Headache?”

“Three.”

“Three headaches?” he asked in bewilderment.

“Yes...it feels like three headaches.”

He grabbed the bottle off his nightstand and dropped a few pills into his hand. He placed them on the bed tray. “That should get you moving.”

I swallowed them dry then kept eating. There were also scrambled eggs and a couple of pancakes, but I only took a few bites because I wasn’t that hungry. I focused on the freshly baked toast and the jam that came from Abigail’s secret recipe. “Did you have a good time last night?”

He held the mug between his hands on his lap. “As good of a time as I could have.”

“I liked it, and not just because I didn’t have to sing.”

“And my father didn’t disgruntle you at all?” He brought his mug to his lips and took another drink.

“No. Did he disgruntle you?” I’d kept drinking throughout the night and never asked if Maverick had confronted his father. Caspian may be a dangerous man, but my instinct told me not to be afraid of him. He may be a terrible father, but he wouldn’t kill his son’s wife...even if he wanted to. He had the perfect opportunity in that bar, but he didn’t take it. He put his son first...because he loved him.

“We said a few things...then he walked away.”

“And what was said?”

He stared into his coffee mug for a while, the liquid matching the color of his eyes. He brought it to his lips and

took a long drink before he answered. “I told him my mother wasn’t dead. He’s the one’s who’s dead.”

I ignored my toast because his words were more powerful than my appetite. I dropped the jam-smeared bread back on the tray and gave him my full attention. “What did he say to that?”

“Nothing. He walked off.”

It was a brilliant thing for Maverick to say, a shockingly accurate description of his father. His mother was gone, but her spirit kept Maverick alive. She continued to give him hope and inspiration. His father was the one who changed so much he was hardly recognizable. “I wonder how he felt about that.”

He shrugged. “He would never tell me.”

I picked up the tray and moved it aside so I could sit directly beside Maverick. My pounding headache would have to be ignored so this conversation could continue. There was nothing that haunted him more than his complicated relationship with his father. “I think your father is sad, lonely, and lost...and he doesn’t know what to do about it. Killing Ramon didn’t make him feel better, and he knows killing Ramon’s wife wouldn’t have made a difference either. But he needs something to focus on because he has nothing left. He misses you and Lily, but he doesn’t know how to fix that relationship. He doesn’t know where to start.”

“You give him too much credit.”

“No. I’m not saying he’s a good man. I’m just saying he’s very mentally ill and doesn’t know how to fix it.”

Maverick kept looking into his mug.

“I know you don’t want to, and you shouldn’t even have to, but I think you should reach out to him...give him an olive branch.”

“I hope that’s a joke. You know how many olive branches I’ve extended?”

“I know... But try again.”

He shook his head. “I need to kill him. I’ll always look over my shoulder until I know he’s gone.”

“There’s another option...”

“I don’t think there is, Arwen.” He set his mug on the nightstand. “I’ve tried fixing my relationship with my father many times. I’ve proven my loyalty a million times over. But he doesn’t care about those instances. He only cares about my betrayals.”

It was wrong for me to inject my opinion into something so complicated. Maverick had been hurt by this abusive relationship so many times that his emotions were a wide spectrum of pain. I couldn’t understand everything he’d been through because this had been going on long before we met. “I understand why you’re angry at him. I understand why you even hate him. But I think he was a man deeply in love who lost his wife. His mind snapped, and it was easier to be hateful than feel all the pain. When he looks at you and Lily, he probably sees your mother...and that’s hard for him.”

“Even if that’s true, that’s supposed to be okay?”

“No. Not at all. I’m just explaining his behavior. Now that he’s had enough time to cope, to kill Ramon, he’s probably at a dead end. His survival strategies don’t work anymore, and now he’s forced to face reality. He could have killed me, but he didn’t. Instead, he guided me back to you. That speaks volumes.”

He was quiet.

“And when I spoke to him at the rehab center, I think that was a wake-up call for him too. He witnessed me working to repair your relationship, not tear it apart, and I risked my safety to do it. He’s never said it, but I can tell he respects me for my actions.”

Maverick had nothing to say.

“I think you should try one more time, Maverick.”

“If he can crash my Christmas party, he can make a phone call. He can stop by the house for a conversation. You’re acting like he needs help facilitating this, but that’s ridiculous. He can do anything he wants—if he wants to do it.”

“Maybe he has too much pride—”

“Then he needs to suck it up.” The temperature of the room rose slightly, matching the palpable rage exuding from his core. The conversation was over the second he snapped. “He’s done enough damage. It’s time he starts fixing it.”

“I just think—”

“This is over.” He shut down the conversation with his tone, the vein in his forehead starting to protrude underneath the skin. He kept his eyes straight ahead, rage and indifference mixed together within his gaze. His gentle breaths turned to deep inhaleds of air. Slowly, he calmed himself once more, letting the silence absorb the hostility that filled the room just seconds ago.

Since he wasn’t in the mood, I didn’t press further. “Do you have plans tomorrow?”

He grabbed the coffee mug off the nightstand. “No.”

“You don’t spend the holidays with Lily?”

“She wants to stay in the rehab facility. She has a few friends coming.”

Tomorrow was Christmas Day. It was the first holiday I would celebrate without my father. We used to exchange gifts on Christmas Eve and then have dinner on Christmas Day. It would be impossible to really cherish the holiday without him. “So, it’s just the two of us?”

He nodded. “Just the two of us.”

“That sounds nice...” It was my first Christmas as a married woman. There wouldn’t be a big feast with family members gathered around, but at least we weren’t alone. We always had each other...until we started a family. “My father and I used to exchange gifts on Christmas Eve while we ate pie.”

“My family used to do the same too. Want to exchange gifts tonight?” Now that the conversation about his father had been shut down, his mood picked up slightly.

The offer surprised me. “You got me something?” I picked out a nice collared shirt that would look perfect against his

olive complexion and dark hair. It wasn't of designer quality, but since he was so fit, it would probably look great on him anyway. But I hadn't expected him to do the same for me.

He turned his head in my direction, locking his gaze on mine for the first time. "Of course I did."

MAVERICK SHOWERED THEN WENT across the hall to his office to finish up a couple of things before we would share a bottle of wine and exchange gifts under the Christmas tree. We'd spent the afternoon in bed, making love, talking, and eating. That was already magical. And now it was about to get better.

But Caspian kept crossing my mind.

Caspian said one thing but did the exact opposite. He threatened to kill me, but he let me go without a scratch, and he showed up to the Christmas party without causing a scene. He seemed to be in such a deep pit that he couldn't get out of it...couldn't apologize and make things right with his son.

That's what I believed, at least.

While Maverick was distracted, I wanted to take my car and drive to Caspian's place to make things right.

But my husband would never forgive me. I promised I wouldn't sneak off like that ever again, and I had to keep that promise. How could I expect him to keep his word if I never kept mine?

That meant I could only make a phone call.

That wasn't breaking the rules.

Getting Caspian's number was easy because Maverick left his phone in the bedroom. I managed to pull up old conversations and write down the phone number. Then I went to my old room and locked the door behind me. My clothes still hung in the closet, and my accessories were on the counter. I'd never officially moved in with him, but I suspected that would happen soon.

I sat on the edge of the bed and made the call.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

It was Christmas Eve, so maybe he wouldn't pick up. I doubted he had plans for the evening. He didn't seem like a man with many friends—only enemies.

He finally answered. "This better be important." His voice came out as an annoyed growl. He didn't even know who I was or what I wanted, and his immediate impulse was to be an asshole.

"It is." I let the sound of my voice do all the talking. He didn't know me very well, but he would guess my identity quickly.

When he was quiet for a couple of seconds, it was obvious he'd figured it out. "Nice party last night. I had a great time."

"It didn't seem like it."

"Anytime there's a drink in my hand, I'm in a decent mood."

"Then I wish you were drunk all the time," I countered. "Perhaps you would be a good father...and a decent father-in-law."

He chuckled even though there was nothing funny about this. "I doubt it. And I underestimated you. When I married you off to my son, I assumed you were a dumb pretty girl. I guess I was wrong."

"Very wrong." Caspian had treated me like a shadow since the day he met me. He never introduced himself and barely said a few words...even though I would be the mother of his grandchildren.

"I'm not much of a chatter, so if there's something you want to say, get on with it."

"An asshole...as always."

“Now you know where Maverick gets it from.”

“Your son is not an asshole,” I said firmly. “He’s one of the greatest men I’ve ever known. And he gets that from his mother—not you.”

When Caspian didn’t laugh off my comment, I knew it had pierced his invincible armor. “What do you want?”

“I want you to bury the hatchet and make things right with Maverick. It’s what I’ve always wanted—and I know you want the same thing. You came to that Christmas party without any agenda. If you weren’t there to cause trouble, then what were you doing?”

“Maybe I just wanted a drink.”

“You can get a drink anywhere, Caspian.”

“Then maybe I was there to kill you.”

“It didn’t seem like it. What were you planning to do? Stab me in the middle of a crowded room?”

“I’ve done it before.”

I was certain he had. “But that wasn’t why you were there, and we both know it.”

Silence.

“Come over tomorrow. Spend Christmas with your son.”

More silence.

“Caspian?”

“No.”

“So, you’d rather spend Christmas alone?”

Silence.

“Caspian,” I pressed. “Apologize to your son and put this behind you. He will forgive you. I know you don’t want it to be like this, but you don’t know how to fix it. Apologizing to Maverick is a good start.”

“I’m not apologizing to him.”

This man was more stubborn than his own son. “Why?”

He returned to his favorite response—silence.

“Caspian, if you wait too long, you’ll lose your chance altogether. As each day passes, Maverick becomes more bitter. Wait too long, and he’ll be indifferent to you. He won’t need an apology because he won’t care about your relationship anymore.”

Nothing.

“Maybe your behavior feels justified because you lost your wife. But remember that Maverick and Lily lost their mother. They’re hurting too. It’s not just you. I know you were lost in your despair and things got out of hand. You didn’t even realize how bad things were until recently. But if you just apologize, you can both move on from this—”

“I’m not apologizing, Arwen. Maybe my kids deserve an apology, but I’m not giving it to them. I’ve been an asshole for a long time, and a few simple words aren’t going to make a difference.”

“You’d be surprised...”

“Maverick doesn’t want me in his life, and that’s fine.”

“That’s not true...he does want you in his life. But he wants his father, not this dark tyrant that threatens to kill everyone all the time.”

He sighed into the phone.

“Why won’t you just apologize? I know you don’t want to kill me. I know you don’t want things to be this bad with Maverick. I understand you have a lot of pride, but pride is a flaw in a man, not a quality.”

He was quiet for a long time, like he would prefer silence as his response. But then he spoke, surprising me. “When Maverick faced Kamikaze for Russian roulette, I placed one of my guys in the room. His job was to make sure the bullet was in the right chamber and to make sure Maverick went first.”

All the muscles in my body tensed as my lungs stopped working. That afternoon had been one of the worst days of my life. I’d thought I could lose my husband at any moment.

Every time their fingers squeezed the trigger, I was both relieved and terrified. Now that I knew Caspian had been pulling the strings behind the scenes, my heart tightened all over again. “Tell him that.”

“No.”

“He should hear it from you, not me.”

“No.”

I couldn’t comprehend this kind of stubbornness. “Are you embarrassed?”

Silence.

“So, you’ll save your son’s life, you’ll convince his wife to return to him, but you won’t apologize?”

After a long pause, he responded. “Enjoy your Christmas, Arwen.” Then he hung up.

I set the phone on the bed beside me and crossed my arms over my chest. I couldn’t believe the conversation I’d just had. While I gained more information, I was no closer to getting these two men back together. Caspian would never apologize to his son. The only option I had was getting Maverick to go to him...but that seemed just as impossible.

WE SAT on the rug in front of the Christmas tree, presents tucked under the branches. It was a cold night, the kind where the frozen air pressed frost against the windows. A fire burned in the large hearth, and we shared a bottle of wine, skipping the glasses and going straight for the bottle.

Maverick leaned against the armchair and stared at me, dressed in his sweatpants with a black t-shirt. Every time he took a drink of wine, he licked his lips, and he made it look so sexy. His hair was styled, and his powerful chest stretched his t-shirt. The Christmas party was no longer on his mind, and he was calm and carefree. He must have stopped thinking about his father.

“Open mine first.” I grabbed the medium-sized box and handed it to him. Wrapped in white paper with holly leaves on the front, it was a present I’d wrapped myself. Abigail would have done it for me, but it seemed a lot more special if I did it myself.

He took the box and examined it, as if he was trying to guess what it was before he ripped into it. “Hmm...lingerie?”

I rolled my eyes. “No.”

“Are you lying?”

“Why would I get you lingerie for Christmas? You’re beautiful, but I don’t think it’d look good on you.”

“But it would look perfect on you.” He shook the box, and the sound of the material inside made it obvious it was a piece of clothing. “Ooh...that’s a good sign.”

“Open it.”

After he gave me that handsome smile, he slid his thumb under the wrapping and ripped through the tape. He pulled it apart until he got to the white box underneath. After ripping through more tape, he opened the lid and revealed the wine-colored collared shirt.

“I know it’s not fancy like the stuff you normally wear...”

He held up the shirt and examined the front, the sleeves stretching down. “I love it.” He set it down again and popped open all the buttons so the shirt would come loose. He pushed his arms through the sleeves and got it on before he buttoned the front once more. “Fits perfectly.”

It did look good on him, just as nice as his designer clothes. Sometimes, I used to picture what my life would be like, how I would spend the holidays with my husband. I imagined buying him presents and watching him open them under the tree. Fantasy was never as good as reality...but this was. It felt right. It didn’t feel like this was an arranged marriage neither one of us wanted. Now it felt like we were two people deeply in love...spending Christmas together. “It looks nice on you.”

“Thank you.” He came to my side and sat beside me against the couch. One arm moved over my shoulders, and he leaned in to kiss me, his lips tasting like the wine we’d been drinking. His hand supported the back of my head as his mouth moved with mine, giving me more than just a simple kiss.

The flames were warm against our skin even from this distance, and the smell of pine needles entered my nose and made it feel like Christmas. But neither of those were as magical as the kiss we just shared. It felt like a fairy tale.

He pulled away and allowed his fingers to explore my hair, his eyes full of affection and something deeper. “Now open yours.”

I grabbed the small box and set it in my lap. “I already know what it is.”

“Do you?” he asked, his smile widening.

“Lingerie, obviously.”

He chuckled. “Open it and find out.”

I ripped through the wrapping and opened the box underneath. Inside was a black picture frame. Inside was a picture of us...on our wedding day. The photographer got a picture of us dancing together, his head bent down to kiss me. I remembered the moment perfectly. All the guests clanked their spoons against their glasses and enticed us to kiss, so we did. In that moment, I’d felt the jolt of attraction, the undeniable chemistry that started to burn our first day as husband and wife. I remembered that kiss so well, I could actually still feel his lips against mine. My eyes couldn’t pull away from the picture because I was so entranced by the memory. “I love it...”

“I love it too.”

I stared at it a bit longer before I turned my gaze back to him, not even aware of the tears that were in my eyes. “So sweet...”

“I guess I can be sweet...for you.” His fingers brushed the hair away from my face so he could get a better look at me.

With a new expression he hadn't shown in the past, he watched me for a long time, a mixture of a million emotions deep in his gaze.

If I hadn't known it before, I certainly knew it now... I loved this man.

He leaned his forehead against mine then closed his eyes, embracing me in front of the Christmas tree and the fireplace. Our gifts were quickly forgotten as we became wrapped up in each other, cherishing the silence as well as our gentle breathing. We were tender and loving, and it seemed like I wasn't the only one that felt this way...like I wasn't the only one deeply in love. Maverick had been a different man when he became my husband, and he'd slowly morphed into someone I couldn't live without. He was strong, brutish, and stubborn, but he was also loving, devoted, and affectionate. His rough edges became soft like pillows, and all the hostility he possessed turned into something kinder.

His fingers massaged my hair, gently playing with it as he held me close. "I love you."

My eyes were closed, but I pictured the way his lips moved as he said those words. The sound of his voice was so beautiful, just like the sound of the crackling flames in the fireplace. His tone was deep and masculine but also sincere, and the words were the sexiest thing I'd ever heard him say. It made me warm from my fingertips to my toes.

When I opened my eyes, I felt the tears slip down my cheeks. "I love you too..."

He pulled away so he could look at me, so his thumbs could catch my tears. "I'm sorry that I wasn't the best husband when we first got married. But I'll be the husband you want every day for the rest of my life."

"You are the best husband... I wouldn't change anything about you. You were there for me when I lost my father. You were there for me when I needed to be saved. You were there for me when I needed a friend. I don't love the way we got here, but I wouldn't change any of it for anything. I would do it all again in a heartbeat."

He brought our faces close together again. “I never wanted a wife. But now I can’t imagine being with any woman besides you. I want you every day for the rest of my life. I want to be buried beside you until the sun burns out. I want to have children with you...grow old with you.”

My hands cupped his face as more tears spilled down my cheeks. “Me too...”

THE SOUND of the fire in the hearth was unnoticeable because our heavy breathing drowned it out. We’d spent the early part of the day screwing, but now we moved together like that never happened. With my ankles locked together at the top of his ass, I rocked with him as he drove deep inside me.

Over and over.

My fingers cherished the feeling of his powerful back, starting at his shoulders and making their way down the flanks of muscle that hugged his spine. When he hit me in just the right place, my nails came out like claws, and I carved into his back, leaving scratches that would last for days.

He was always so beautiful when he was sexy and fatigued. His body always performed to its full potential to please me, the muscles working hard to lift his body and then slide it back down so he could ram his cock deep inside me.

I loved making love to my husband. “Maverick...” I no longer felt the rush of lust that used to swell inside my veins. Now, I felt the deep passion that stemmed from love, that grew from a lifelong commitment neither one of us would break. I wanted this man for the rest of my life. I’d never wanted a substitute who couldn’t compare.

My fingers scratched at his ass before they moved into his hair once more. I ground my hips and rocked with his movements, so close to a climax I could already feel it. My toes curled preemptively, and my limbs clenched as my body constricted around him.

He must have felt me tighten around him because he started to pound into me hard, driving me into an orgasm that brought tears to my eyes. His powerful ass worked hard to give it to me good, to give me every inch so deeply.

My arms latched on to his body, and I gripped him firmly as I rode the high, my blood burning because it felt so good. When I came with other lovers, the tears never sprang to my eyes because the sex had never been so good. Only one man could make me cry—and that was my husband.

He watched my expression change as it showed all my feelings, as my mouth flew open with a moan and my eyes watered with emotion. My cheeks flushed bright red, and I bit my bottom lip so I wouldn't scream right in his face. He loved the performance I gave. It was obvious in the way his expression became so focused, the way his eyes didn't blink because he didn't want to miss a single second.

My face moved into his neck as I finished. The euphoria became overwhelming, so powerful that I needed to shield my look just so I could tolerate it. I gripped my husband like he was a life vest and held on for dear life.

It felt amazing to the very last second. Once the high passed, my body relaxed and the tears stopped.

Oh god, that felt so good.

Maverick continued to rock into me, his cock hardening just a little more as he prepared to finish.

I pulled my face away from the crook of his shoulder and met his look once again. My ring dragged along my chest as he moved, tapping against me with his thrusts. I watched him work to reach his climax, watched his glistening body move hard and fast to get to the end. His powerful arms pressed into the bed and kept his body up as he worked his hips. Deeper and deeper, he drove until he hit his threshold.

With a sexy moan, he came inside me.

I grabbed his ass and pulled him deeper, wanting every drop he could give. Sometimes his climaxes were better than mine just because I could feel his seed deep inside me. I

moaned when I felt him fill me, felt my husband give himself to me.

The memory of the other women was long forgotten because it didn't seem important anymore. It didn't seem to matter at all—to either of us.

When he finished, he kissed me softly on the mouth, giving me a kiss that was slow but still passionate. His dick softened inside me, but he still made me full anyway, made me feel like the most desirable woman in the world.

The woman he loved.

He gently pulled out of me then rolled onto his back, his body softening now that he could relax. He didn't have to excuse himself to the bathroom to wash off like he used to. Now we could just lie together when we were finished, tangled up in each other's arms in mutual satisfaction.

He lay on his side and looked at me, his chest rising and falling more slowly now that his body had caught up on rest. A shadow was along his jawline, and his coffee-colored eyes were filled with a brighter hue. His new shirt lay on the ground, and my picture frame was on his nightstand. Well, my nightstand now.

My hand went to his chest and touched the ring that hung on the chain. The diamond was as bold and brilliant as ever, a reminder of the commitment I'd made to him. I wanted to wear it because I missed it. I also wanted to wear it because I was ready to be everything we promised. I was ready to be his dutiful wife, the woman who would take care of him and put up with his bullshit for all eternity.

He kept his eyes on me.

My hands moved to the back of his neck so I could unclasp the chain.

He grabbed both of my wrists then brought them to his lips for a kiss. "I'll give it to you some other time."

"Why can't I have it now?"

He kissed my hands again. “Because I’m not ready to give it to you yet.”

MAVERICK

CHRISTMAS MORNING WAS JUST A CONTINUATION OF Christmas Eve.

Perfect.

Abigail left breakfast in front of the door so we could take it whenever we wanted it. We spent the morning lying in bed in front of the fire, watching Christmas movies, and being snuggled up together under the sheets.

Lots of lovemaking happened in between.

I'd never fucked the same woman so much in my life. And I'd never made love to someone before. It didn't matter how slow and mediocre the pace seemed from the outside. It felt so good in the moment, even when we were barely moving because we spent most of our energy kissing.

It felt good to be in love.

My wife was amazing. I wouldn't change a thing about her. I hated my father so much, but now I was grateful he made me agree to this arrangement. If I hadn't...this never would have happened. I would have been a lonely bachelor with no sense of belonging. It would have been unfulfilling... and depressing.

She snuggled into my side and kissed my shoulder. "When did you know?"

She could have been asking a million different things, but I knew exactly what was on her mind. "I've always known."

“Always?” she asked incredulously. “That seems unlikely.”

“I did... I always knew.” I’d played Russian roulette with a psychopath to buy her freedom. I wouldn’t have done that for just anyone. Maybe my sister and maybe Kent, but that was it. I wouldn’t have chased away her admirers unless I felt like I owned her in some way. I wouldn’t have been scarred by the sight of Brandon in her apartment if I didn’t love her. “I don’t know when it happened exactly. It was so slow and unnoticeable at first. I always knew it was there but pretended I didn’t. When you told me how you felt, I couldn’t lie anymore. It forced me to confront my feelings, but I was too much of a coward to do it. Having you back has made me so happy that I couldn’t contain it anymore. It just slipped out.”

“Well, I’m glad that it slipped out. I always thought you felt the same way. When you took on Kamikaze, I didn’t believe you did that out of obligation. It seemed like it was more meaningful than that.”

I would have given my life for her because I wanted to. “It was.”

She rubbed her hand across my chest then pressed another kiss to my shoulder. “When Kamikaze was gone, you didn’t ask me to leave. We could have gotten a divorce, but you never asked for one.”

“Because I didn’t want to be divorced. I didn’t want to admit that I loved you...so I just didn’t think about it. But now it’s all I can think about.”

Her fingers continued to caress my body, to feel the hardness of my muscles and the softness of my skin. “I loved you a long time ago...even when I still hated you.”

“You hated me and loved me at the same time?”

“Yes...”

I smiled slightly. “I’m hard to love, so I believe that.”

“You aren’t hard to love anymore. You make loving so easy.” She leaned into me and pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth. When she was finished, she rested her forehead

against my chin and stayed there for a while. The happiness was suddenly sucked out of the room as if by a vacuum, and a foreboding feeling replaced it. She didn't say a single word, but her energy was distinct. We were perfect just a second ago, so what had changed so drastically?

I pulled away so I could look directly into her gaze, see her expression head on. "What is it?"

A forced smile stretched her mouth. "You know me so well, don't you?"

"You're my wife." Now I was used to saying that phrase, letting it roll off my tongue so easily. "I know you pretty damn well."

"Well...hear me out, alright?"

My eyes narrowed.

She leaned against the wooden headboard and stared at me. "I talked to your father yesterday..."

It took less than a few seconds for the calmness in my blood to evaporate like boiling water. My serenity was washed away and replaced by revulsion. A sense of betrayal swept through me. She told me she would never pull a stunt like that ever again, but she did it anyway. "He could have killed you ___"

"I talked to him over the phone," she said quickly. "I never left the house."

Relief started in my shoulders then slowly migrated everywhere else. I was still annoyed she'd talked to him at all, but at least the terms were better. I stared at the flames for a few minutes to calm down before I shifted my gaze back to her. "And?"

"And...I think you should talk to him."

"That's a joke, right?" The asshole crashed my Christmas party and tossed around a couple of threats. I wasn't going to call him just so I could hear more—especially on Christmas.

"I understand why you have no motivation to reach out to him. He's been extremely difficult and doesn't deserve your

patience. But I think you should try anyway.”

“And say what, exactly? What’s the point of this conversation?” I’d tried to be there for my father over the last two years, but he continually disappointed me. That man was so far gone that he would never come back.

“Bury the hatchet.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Let me get this straight. He’s the one who’s been a fucking pain in the ass, but I’m the one who’s supposed to fix everything? He has my number, so if he wanted to apologize, he could do it at any moment. The ball has been in his court for a long time. I’ve been a good son—but he hasn’t been a good father.”

“I know...you shouldn’t have to make any effort. But I think you should.”

“No.” I turned my gaze away.

“Maverick...”

“I took a bullet for that man. I married a stranger for that man. I’ve done everything for that man. If he wants to make things right with me, he needs to do it. He owes me a big fucking apology.”

“I know he does, but he’s stubborn.”

“What a coincidence,” I said sarcastically. “So am I.”

Her hand moved to my arm, and she rubbed it gently. “I don’t know why this is hard for him, but it obviously is. He’s not good at expressing himself or being vulnerable.”

“Neither am I... I am his son.”

“You’re definitely better than he is.”

“That’s debatable.”

“Please talk to him.”

“Why is this so important to you?” I turned back to her.

“Because he’s your father, Maverick. I know you still love him...and I know he loves you.”

My father hadn't said those words to me since I was a child. I found it unlikely that he loved anyone. Now I wasn't even sure if he loved my mother since he was willing to rape and kill two innocent women. She never would have wanted that. "He threatened to kill my wife..."

"But he never did."

"And that makes it okay?" I asked incredulously. "The guy is a psychopath, and you know it."

"I think he's just a broken man who needs help...but is too stubborn to ask for it."

"What do you expect me to do? Go over there and apologize to him?"

"No."

"Demand him to apologize to me?"

She sighed. "No."

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

She squeezed my arm. "Forgive him."

The request was so ridiculous, I wasn't sure if I'd heard her correctly. "How can you forgive someone when they don't apologize?"

"You can...as long as you love them."

Love certainly wasn't an emotion I felt toward my father. He'd made me so angry for the last few years. He'd disappointed me, hurt me.

"Just talk to him, Maverick. It's Christmas."

"So? He didn't remember my birthday."

"I'm sure he did, but it was too hard to acknowledge."

What kind of excuse was that?

"I know it's a lot to ask. I know you've been the victim of his behavior when you shouldn't be. I know he's the one who should be on his knees apologizing to you. But you need to be the bigger man and end this. If that's not enough reason for you, think about me."

Having no idea what she meant, I narrowed my eyes.

“If you bury the hatchet and forgive him, he’ll have no reason to hurt me. Then you never have to worry about that.”

Keeping her safe was always my top priority, and it was such a strange feeling to protect her from my own father. If he was willing to talk to me and drop this war, that alone would be worth it. Maybe he and I would never be close again. Maybe there was too much to forgive.

“Talk to him.”

“It’s Christmas.”

“That’s exactly why you should talk to him.”

THE FRONT ENTRANCE was deserted because of the holiday. I pulled up to the house without being screened or being patted down for weapons. There were a few lights shining through the windows, but the place still felt deserted. Once upon a time, it used to be lively and warm. My family had dinner parties in the winter and barbecues in the summer. Now it looked like an abandoned house.

I moved to the front door and rang the doorbell. My father had cameras everywhere, so he would know it was me long before he opened the door. My wife was at home alone on Christmas, but she sent me here because it was important to her. Now I stood on the doorstep in my jeans and jacket, battling the cold outside.

A moment later, he opened the door. With the same hostile dark eyes as mine, he stared me up and down as if he was sizing me up as an opponent, not cherishing the sight of his only son on his doorstep.

I almost turned around and walked off.

Stubborn as always, my father didn’t invite me inside and waited for me to speak first.

“Thought we could talk.”

One hand stayed on the door, and his wide shoulders blocked the entryway so I couldn't invite myself inside. He regarded me like a stranger rather than his own flesh and blood. "Your wife put you up to this?"

"You think I would have come over here by my own choice?"

A ghost of a smile entered his lips, a slight brightness burning in his eyes. "She knows how to make things happen... impressive." He dropped his hand from the doorknob and turned to walk inside the house—leaving the opening clear for me. His powerful shoulders were straight as he walked into the house, carrying himself like a proud soldier. He snatched a bottle of aged scotch off the counter and carried it to the large dining room where we used to celebrate the holidays. The mahogany wood was just as elegant as I remembered with the exception of one scratch I'd made as a child.

I sat down and ran my fingers over the crack, feeling the slight dip that had been caused by my knife. Memories of my childhood came flooding back to me, all the good times I'd had in this house. I'd been lucky to have a good mother and father to raise me. Losing that blessing made me feel sick to my stomach every time I thought about it.

My father filled my glass then slid it across the table toward me.

I didn't drink it.

He took a drink from his own glass as he watched me with killer eyes. When he returned the glass to the table, it was with a noticeable thud. The solid wood made a formidable echo when anything tapped against it. "You aren't going to drink?"

"I've cut back." I pushed the glass to the side, still slightly repulsed by the sight of alcohol. There was some booze lingering in my bloodstream because I was so damn drunk a couple weeks ago.

"It doesn't look like you've cut back. Seems like you quit cold turkey."

"Just taking a break."

My father had no problem drinking alone. Without an ounce of self-consciousness, he brought the glass to his lips and took another drink.

I couldn't believe I was there. I was sitting across from the man I despised, my eyes locked on his with a mixture of annoyance and disbelief. How would this conversation even start? Where should we begin? I refused to apologize and so did he, so what kind of compromise could we find? "Arwen pressured me to come here today." It was a bland start, but it was something.

"She's pushy."

"Yes...a bit." My eyes moved away, and I looked at the paintings that had been on the walls since my childhood. There was a watering can with daisies poking out of the top. There was another painting of red geraniums overflowing from a jar. My mother always loved flowers. Instead of hiring a gardener, she tended to the flowers herself. It was only fitting that the flower paintings surrounded her portrait on the wall.

He stared at the glass between his fingertips.

The silence stretched on, and the more time that passed, the less inclined I was to speak.

He was the same way.

"She thinks we can reconcile." My hands rested on the table, and I interlocked my fingers like I was having a meeting I didn't really care about. "What do you think about that?" I knew I wanted my father to apologize to me, to show some sign of emotion, to be the man I remembered. I wanted my father back, not this grizzled and bitter man. There was still a possibility of putting this behind us, but I couldn't do all the work. I shouldn't have to.

He tipped his glass toward himself and peered inside to look at the contents. Even though there was no ice inside, he shook the glass gently before he took a drink. His tanned skin looked like weathered leather from being outside so much. His eyes matched the drink in his hand, and his thin lips were constantly pulled back in a slight grimace. He was such a

hateful person, losing all sense of love the moment my mother's heart stopped beating. "That's a pretty big hatchet to bury."

I'd come all the way here on Christmas, and he was still being difficult. Why was I surprised? "As much as I want to kill you, the rest of my body won't cooperate. My finger won't squeeze the trigger because it feels so wrong. You once called me a coward because of it...I disagree. The young boy inside me still remembers when you bought me my first fire truck and taught me how to play football. If I kill you now, then there's no possibility of this relationship getting better...and I don't want to end that possibility if I don't have to. You haven't been my father for a really long time, but the stupid boy inside me still believes you might come back...that a miracle might happen." I couldn't look him in the eye as I spoke because it was too humiliating. My masculinity was at stake when I poured my heart out like this, when I showed my vulnerability. The only person who saw me like this was my wife—and that was already difficult enough. "I don't know how I disappointed you as a son when I'm proud of who I am. I don't know how losing Mom could make you so indifferent to the two children you made with her. If she were alive now, she would be so disappointed in you. She's not here anymore, so it's your job to love her children—and you failed miserably. You should apologize to Lily and me and hope we have the compassion to forgive you."

His hand released his glass, and his elbows rested on the table. He watched me quietly, his eyes still and his breathing almost unnoticeable. He was difficult to read because his face lacked any expression. We were the same in that regard. I was almost impossible to read...as my wife pointed out.

He hadn't threatened to kill me yet, so that was a good sign. I didn't expect him to break down in tears and admit all of his faults, but I did expect something from him...some kind of guilt.

"Losing your mother was difficult. I always assumed we would grow old together. Maybe in your eyes, I'm already ancient, but I expected us to live longer than this. I assumed I

would die first so I would never have to feel this kind of pain. She's been gone for two years, and it still hurts as much as the first day she left."

The room turned eerily silent as he shared his thoughts with me. There was no apology in his words, more of a justification, but it was still more than he'd ever revealed before. I knew he loved my mother because he wouldn't have lost his mind if that weren't the case.

"Time stopped that day. Everything stopped. I forgot who I was. I forgot how to live. All I cared about was killing whoever was responsible for her death...as if that might bring her back to life. Reality was unbearable, so I focused on my goals with precision. As a result...I forgot everything else. That includes you and Lily."

That was more than I'd expected him to say, even though it wasn't an apology. "I took a bullet for you, and you screamed at me."

He looked away, his eyes focusing on one of the paintings. "Because that bullet would have killed me...and I wanted to die."

My eyes dropped for a moment, saddened to hear how depressed my father was.

"Living without her is unbearable. I wish I'd died that day instead of her. I'd gladly take her place in a heartbeat. She's much stronger than I am, so she would have survived my passing..."

As a married man, I'd begun to look at life differently. I was a brand-new newlywed because I only recently started to take my marriage seriously, and I already couldn't imagine my life without her. I'd lost her once, and it was a difficult pill to swallow. I worked my ass off to get her back because bachelorhood was mundane and lonely. Now that I had her back, I never wanted to let her go... But someday we would part. I would either lose her or she would lose me. It was a terrifying thought.

It made me understand my father a little better.

He reached for his glass but didn't take a drink. "Did I tell you how I met your mother?"

I nodded. "In a coffee shop."

"True. But the reason we met was because our families asked us to. It wasn't an arranged marriage, but it was pretty close. I was a young man and enjoyed all the perks of being a wealthy bachelor. She was a beautiful woman who could have any man she wanted. Neither one of us was interested in settling down at the time. She was in her early twenties...very young. But when we met...we just knew. Our families were ecstatic that we tied the knot, and we lived a happy life together."

"I never knew that..."

"She didn't like to tell people that story. Made it seem less romantic."

Now I found it more romantic.

"When I think about how she died..." He took a deep breath, and his nostrils flared. His eyes drifted down to the table, his thoughts a million miles away. "It still haunts me. She's at peace, and I know she forgives me...but it still haunts me."

"It haunts me too..."

"Experiencing something traumatic like that breaks you. What would you have done if Kamikaze took Arwen away and did unspeakable things to her? Would you have gone home and returned to work like nothing ever happened?"

I would have lost my mind too. "You were the one who told Kamikaze my marriage was a sham...so that almost did happen." He'd stabbed me in the back and took the coward's way out. It was despicable. The memory got me worked up all over again.

"Yes...I suppose."

"So you wanted him to do your dirty work because you were too much of a coward to do it yourself." Our

conversation had been going somewhere for once, but my rage caused a bump in the road.

He raised his gaze and stared at me. “Your wife caught me off guard when she cornered me. I didn’t appreciate that.”

“Yes, she’s smarter than you. Didn’t realize you would take that so personally.”

He took a drink. “If it weren’t for me, she would still be living in that piece-of-shit apartment bedding pretty boys. I kept her legs closed and returned her to where she belonged.”

My eyes narrowed as my body tensed. “Don’t talk about her like that.” She had bedded other men, but that was only because I’d bedded other women. It was a retaliation, not an impulse. “She left because I fucked up. I don’t blame her for leaving.”

“What did you do?”

I was surprised Arwen didn’t tell him. “That’s between us.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have gotten her back if it weren’t for me. Don’t forget that.”

“I won’t,” I said. “Just like I won’t forget when you encouraged Kamikaze to kidnap my wife and rape her.” I should take the glass in front of me and smash it over his thick skull.

His eyes turned down once more. “I shouldn’t have done that... It was impulsive.”

“Cowardly. That’s the word you’re looking for.”

“It worked out in the end.”

I cocked my eyebrow. “I almost died. I had to point a gun to my head and pull the trigger over and over again. My brains almost exploded across that restaurant as my body thudded to the floor and created a huge pool of blood.” I remembered exactly how Kamikaze looked when that bullet took him out of existence. It was messy and disgusting. It could have been me. “I called you before I left, and you didn’t give a damn—about your own son.” I’d come all the way here on Christmas

Day when I should have been home with my wife. This man didn't deserve my time. He wasn't on his knees begging for forgiveness, so I was talking to a brick wall. Maybe he did lose his mind when he lost my mother—but that was no justification. I was hurt, still tender like a recent wound. It killed me to feel this kind of indifference from my own father, the man who raised me.

I came here in the hope of resolution, but now I was only reminded how worthless he was. My anger rose to rage, and when I hit my critical level, there was no chance of calming down. My hands pushed against the table as I shoved myself out of my seat. The chair flew back, and I prepared to storm out. "This was a waste of time. Goodbye, Caspian." I would never call him my father again because the title simply wasn't fitting anymore. I wasn't sure what he was. A stranger.

"Maverick."

Any other time, I would have stopped at his command like an obedient dog. Even when I was enraged, I could never ignore my father. It was disrespectful and strange. But those days were over—and I kept walking. It was time to walk out of that house and never come back. It was time to be with my real family.

I headed down the hall and approached the front door. To my surprise, I heard footsteps behind me.

"I did care, Maverick. Of course I did."

"Didn't seem like it." I reached the door and opened it. The second it was cracked, the cold draft blew into the house. There was no sign of rain or snow, but the cold and dry air was immediately harsh against my skin. I knew I was leaving my family's home for the last time—and I would never see it again.

"The reason you're alive is because of me."

Just when I was about to step out into the elements, I steadied myself and let those words sink in. My hand was still on the door, and I stared at my black car in the driveway. The wind was picking up, and the trees on the property were

starting to sway. His words shouldn't entice me to stay, but now I couldn't leave. I turned back to him, hoping I wouldn't regret it.

“I had one of my men facilitate the game. He remembered where he put the bullet in the chamber and made sure you went first. When he flipped that coin into the air, he never showed either of you what it said—because he lied.” His boots thudded against the floor as he slowly approached me, his shoulders not as powerful as they were when he'd first let me into the house. Now his weight sagged him down, made him droop toward the earth with age. “I made sure Kamikaze died and you lived. Like I would ever let anything happen to you.”

Now I ignored the coldness on the front doorstep and locked eyes with my father. That afternoon was one of the most terrifying experiences of my life. While I'd kept a straight face for Arwen and Kamikaze, I was dying on the inside. At any moment, this life could have been over. “Why didn't you tell me?”

He shrugged slightly as he sighed under his breath.

“Because that would require you to admit that you cared?”

“Maybe...” It was the first time my father had chased me down so I wouldn't leave. It was the first time he'd stopped his psychological warfare. Now he was just a man...a father. Vulnerable and defenseless, he let himself be weak...even if it was short term.

In disbelief, I continued to stare at him. My father actually had done something on my behalf. During that conversation, he seemed so indifferent to my potential death that it numbed me down to the bone. “Why is that so difficult for you?”

“I don't know. Maybe because you remind me so much of your mother.”

“I look nothing like her.”

“But you have her spirit. You have her attitude, her strength. Whenever I look at you, it reminds me how I let her down, how she would give anything to stand where I am now so she could look at you. My family has been ripped apart...”

and it's all my fault. It's easier to stop feeling than to let that depression spread through your veins like a disease. She's dead because of me...and that truth has been very difficult for me to accept." He dropped his gaze and looked at the floor like he couldn't stand it anymore. Now he was just a broken man, not a crazy dictator. His armor had been shed and his weapons abandoned. There was no more fight in him.

My anger disappeared.

"I lost my mind because the pain was too difficult to swallow. It was self-preservation, the only way I could function. I focused on killing Ramon because I thought it would give me some kind of release...but it never did. I wanted to do the same to his wife and daughter because I had nothing else to do with my time, except sit with a drink in my hand and think about the terrible things I'd done. Getting angry with your wife and threatening to kill her gave me something else to focus on. It was better than actually accepting responsibility for all my wrongdoings."

It was the first time I'd really seen my father in two years. It was easy to forget how he used to be because that version of him seemed long gone. But here he was...still the same man I used to know. He was buried under guilt, pain, and remorse... but he was still there. "Lily and I lost her too. We needed you, especially her."

"I know..."

"Mom would be disappointed if she knew you'd been acting this way since she died."

"I think she does know. I think she's watching me now and wishing she could smack me upside the head. I was a terrible husband, and now I'm a terrible father. Your mother's greatest mistake was falling in love with me."

I remembered the way they used to kiss on the couch when they thought I wasn't looking, the way my father would carry anything remotely heavy so she wouldn't have to worry about it. I remembered the way he complimented her every time she got dressed up for a party. When I looked back on my parents' marriage, I remembered seeing two people in love. They rarely

fought and worked equally at the relationship. My father never would have gotten involved with the underworld if he'd known it would cost him his wife's life. "If she had the choice to do it all over again, I'm sure she wouldn't hesitate. She wouldn't trade in that life for anything else in the world." Even if she'd known she would die a gruesome death, she never would have traded in being a mother to Lily and me, to being a wife to my father. She could have married someone else and lived a long and happy life...but she wouldn't have done it.

"You're probably right, but that doesn't make me feel better."

"You couldn't have known that was going to happen."

"I still should have done a better job protecting my family. I hope you learn from my mistakes."

I'd inherited a lot of things from my father, but recently, I'd only inherited his flaws. I became a reclusive bachelor who was incapable of feeling anything besides lust and thirst for booze. I had a wife who clearly adored me, but I'd never returned her affection until she was gone. I mirrored his foul mood and asshole attitude. It wasn't obvious to me until that moment. His depression had sunk into me and infected me like an illness. "I already have."

My father kept the distance between us and didn't try to embrace me. But he also didn't apologize. That seemed like something that would never happen because he was too stubborn.

But that was okay...because I got more than I'd ever expected. My father had been looking out for me when I didn't realize it, and that meant so much to me. It made me feel less alone in this world. "So...does that mean you'll stop threatening to kill my wife?"

He smiled at the cruel joke. "I suppose."

"She said you were never going to do it anyway."

"She's a smart woman. Reminds me of your mother."

She reminded me of her too...when she gave me thoughtful gifts, smiled at me like I was her whole world, and picked up my clothes off the floor and hung them over the back of the chair even though Abigail would take care of it the next day. “I was so pissed off when you made me marry her.”

“But it was the best thing that ever happened to you, huh?”

“Yeah...it is.”

“Arwen has bigger balls than you and me. When she set me up at the rehab center, I understood exactly who I was dealing with. I was annoyed she caught me off guard...but I also respected her for risking her safety to do something good for you. Telling Kamikaze was a mistake that never should have happened...but it led to his ultimate demise, so I guess it worked out.”

“Yeah...I guess.”

Now he stared at me like he didn't know what else to say.

I didn't have anything to say either. I needed time to process this lengthy conversation, to let the shock soak in. My father and I had made peace, and I could hardly believe it. I turned to the door and stepped out. “I guess I'll see you later, then.”

“Yes, I suppose. Merry Christmas, son.”

A hug didn't seem appropriate. Even when we were on good terms, we never did that sort of thing. But it felt strange just leaving after the intense moment we'd just shared. “Would you like to come over for dinner?” I didn't want my father to spend the holiday in our family home all alone. It might be weird to have him over for dinner, but it was better to offer than just to leave him there.

His eyes didn't blink as he stared at me, like he couldn't believe I'd extended such an offer. After everything he'd put me through, it was probably a surprise to get an invitation. I was even surprised I'd made the offer in the first place. He gave a slight nod. “If that's okay with your wife.”

“She was the one who forced me to come in the first place. And now I understand why...”

He nodded. "I told her about Kamikaze. I'm surprised she didn't tell you herself."

I already knew why. "She wanted me to hear it from you."

ARWEN

MAVERICK WAS GONE FOR A LONG TIME, SO I TOOK THAT AS A good sign.

Unless one of them killed the other.

With those two men, I really had no idea what might happen. Maverick had too big of a heart to kill his father, but he'd been putting up with a lot of bullshit for a long time. He might snap and do something he regretted. Caspian was harmless. He wouldn't have protected his son if he'd wanted him dead.

Hours later, Maverick's footsteps were audible in the hallway. The sound was distinct because it sounded like a man's approach, not Abigail's light footsteps. I was sitting on his bed with the fireplace in full flame, the picture of us together on my nightstand. I assumed I would move in to his bedroom even though we'd never actually talked about it. But if he loved me, why would he want me anywhere else?

Maverick walked inside and immediately shed his dark coat. It slid down his powerful arms before he tossed it over the back of the chair. His dark eyes were set on me, impossible to read because he always looked like a blank page in a book.

"You're alive... That's a good sign. Is he?"

He nodded then approached the bed. He took a seat at the edge, his gaze forward so I could only see the side of his face. His hands rested on his thighs as he stared toward the bathroom. "Yeah."

“Then that must have been a good conversation.”

“It went better than I thought it would. He didn’t apologize...not that I expected him to. I hoped it would happen, dreamed it would happen, but that will always be just a fantasy. My father is too proud to say those words...even if he should.”

“Then what did he say instead?”

He sighed before he answered. “That he loved my mother with everything he had...and losing her was agonizing. He wishes it’d been him instead of her. He lost sight of everything after she was gone, drowning in guilt and depression.”

“So it was an explanation.”

He shrugged. “I guess. He was difficult to talk to in the beginning. I got so angry with him that I stormed out. When he called my name, I didn’t even bother turning around. But then he told me he rigged the roulette so I would win...” His eyes fell to the floor, and he turned stony as he became lost in thought. He’d had to deal with the fear of his father despising him, and now he realized his father actually did care about him. It was a lot to soak in.

“He cares about you, Maverick. He just struggles to show it.”

“Yeah...I guess you’re right. I guess you’ve always been right.”

My hand moved to his back, and I gently rubbed his strong muscles, moving from the back of his shoulder down to his hips. Maverick never used to confide in me, but now we were confidants to each other. “Did he say anything else?”

“It’s hard to look at Lily and me because he knows my mother misses us, would do anything to look at our faces every single day. He feels responsible for her death, so he pushes us away. It’s not right, but I get it.”

“Now that it’s been a few years and he’s lightened up, maybe he’ll change. Just the fact that you had this conversation indicates he’s changed.”

“I guess.”

My fingers moved into his hair next. “Do you feel better?”

After a long pause of indifference, he nodded. “Yeah...a bit. I really thought my father hated me.”

“He never did.”

“And I really thought he hated you, but I think he’s fond of you.”

My fingers left his hair then traveled down his arm until they returned to the bed. “I don’t think he ever wanted to kill me, but I don’t think he liked me much.”

“He respects you. That’s as close as you’ll get.”

“That’s interesting. I feel like all I’ve done is insult him.”

“That’s probably why he respects you. You aren’t afraid of him.”

“If he was someone I should be afraid of, I would be. Kamikaze terrified me. Your father was a wannabe bully. He was just a broken man who needed a wake-up call.”

“Then maybe he feels gratitude toward you.”

“Maybe,” I whispered. “I’m just glad the two of you could connect in some way. A father and son shouldn’t be this distant from each other. Sometimes resentment festers into rage and you forget you’re family...and you need help rectifying that situation. There are a lot of things I don’t like about your father, but when he told me what he did for you with Kamikaze, I knew he would do anything to protect you. It made me forgive him for the things he said to me, for the way he treated you. Sometimes it’s hard to forgive people who’ve wronged you, but you have to start somewhere.”

“I told him you forced me to go over there.”

“He probably assumed that on his own.”

He gave a faint chuckle. “Yeah.” It turned quiet as he stared at the floor, still reflecting on the conversation he’d had with his father.

“You think he’ll talk to Lily?”

“I’d be surprised if he didn’t. She’s the one who needs his support right now. By the way...I invited him for dinner.”

That was the moment I knew everything would be okay. It may not be perfect. There probably would be a lot of tense exchanges across the table and awkward stares, but at least we would all be together. We couldn’t forget what happened in the past, but it would start to get better...slowly. “That’s great.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not at all. I’m very happy he’s coming.”

“Even though he threatened to kill you so many times?”

“No. Those were empty threats. I have an extra box of chocolates, so I’ll give that to him as a present.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t expect anything.”

“Well, I can’t eat them. I’ve already eaten too many holiday treats. And it’s the gesture that counts.”

He finally turned his gaze on me, his eyes softer than I’d ever seen them. His hand moved to my thigh, and he leaned in close to me, like he might kiss me. “Thank you for making this happen. Wouldn’t have been possible without you.”

I cupped my husband’s face and looked deep into his beautiful eyes. “I will always take care of you...just as you’ll always take care of me.”

MAVERICK WORE the collared shirt I got him for Christmas, and of course, he looked stunning in it. It was the perfect color for the holiday, the perfect cut for his sexy physique. I wore a long-sleeved red dress and heels. We entered the formal dining room and shared a bottle of wine. Neither one of us made conversation because we were both listening for the sound of the door.

It was the first time I would dine with my father-in-law. I suspected it was the first time Maverick would spend the evening with his own father since his mother died. It was a tense Christmas, but I wouldn't have it any other way.

I wished my own father were there to spend it with me.

The front door opened and closed, and then Abigail escorted him to the dining room. "It's nice to see you, Mr. DeVille. May I take your coat?"

"Please."

Maverick sighed before he rose to his feet, like he was dreading this even though he was the one who had extended the invitation.

I got to my feet too. "It'll be alright."

A glass of wine was on the table, so he grabbed it and took a long drink. His sobriety was only a memory the second his father walked in the door.

Caspian entered the dining room a moment later, his eyes immediately going to the decorated Christmas tree in the corner. As if it brought memories into his mind, a soft smile entered his lips before he addressed his son. "I haven't eaten anything today, so I'm excited for this." He extended his hand to shake Maverick's.

It was probably too soon for a hug, so Maverick took his grip, and they completed the handshake like gentlemen. "Abigail is an amazing cook, so I'm sure it'll be worth it." Maverick mirrored his slight smile, and it seemed genuine. He was nervous just seconds ago, but seeing his father enter the room with no pretense of hostility calmed him down.

Caspian turned to me next. He kept a foot in between us and didn't extend his hand to shake mine, probably deeming it too masculine. "Mrs. DeVille, nice to see you again."

"Arwen is fine."

He nodded then took a seat at the head of the table.

Right on cue, Abigail filled his wineglass and served the meal. A Christmas turkey was placed in the center, along with

stuffing, potatoes, steamed carrots, and freshly baked rolls.

Maverick reached for the food first and made his own plate.

Caspian and I followed his lead.

Like a normal family on a normal Christmas, we dined together.

Caspian drank the wine without complaint and didn't ask for scotch. He didn't make conversation as he ate his food, preferring silence to mundane conversation. He probably didn't know what to say, and if he did say something, he might regret it.

I stared at Maverick because I didn't know what else to do.

Just like his father, Maverick had his eyes downcast as he ate.

I cleared my throat to finally address Caspian. "So—"

"I'm sorry for all the death threats I made." He addressed the elephant in the room when no one else did. He grabbed his linen napkin and wiped the crumbs from his lips before he kept speaking. "Truth is, I didn't know what else to do with myself. Since you disobeyed me, I thought your actions should be punished. But at the end of the day, it really doesn't make a difference. Whether those women lived or died, it wouldn't have helped me sleep better at night."

"It would have made you sleep worse. I didn't disobey you—I helped you." I hated the use of that word, like I had to listen to his rules because I was an inferior woman. I didn't appreciate the way Caspian spoke about obedience, but I should focus on getting along with him, not insulting him.

Caspian watched me with cold eyes but didn't make any threats. "The only reason I married you off to my son was because I needed that information about Ramon. I had to kill him to get some peace. Watching the light leave his eyes did give me some sense of satisfaction. My wife deserved revenge, and I wasn't going to stop until she got it. But something very good came out of that because you make my son happy. You're good for him."

“Thank you...” My fingertips rested on the stem of my wineglass.

“Most people wouldn’t have had the strength to confront me like that. And you’re so smart that it’s concerning. I think you’ll teach my son a few things.”

“Maverick is a very capable man,” I said loyally. “He’s taught me a lot...”

Caspian gave a slight smile. “Then you’re perfect for each other.”

I took a drink of my wine and looked at my husband across the table. “I couldn’t agree more.”

AT THE END of the night, we walked Caspian to the door.

I held out the box of chocolates to him. “Merry Christmas, Caspian.” It wasn’t much, just a cheap box of caramel chocolates I picked up while shopping, but it was probably the only gift he would get this year.

He took it in his large hands and stared at the red bow on top. With a moment of hesitation, he examined the box like he couldn’t identify what it was. Then a small smile came over his lips, and he raised his gaze to meet mine. “Thank you. And thank you for putting up with my son...and me.”

“Yes, you’re both a handful,” I said with a chuckle. “But you both have qualities that I like.”

“I can see that in Maverick...not so much in myself.” He tucked the box of chocolates under his arm then said goodbye to his son. “Thank you for inviting me. This was nice. Much better than sitting at home alone.”

“Yeah.” Maverick kept his hands in his pockets like he didn’t want to give or receive affection. “It was nice.”

After staring at his son for a while, Caspian opened the door and stepped out into the darkness. He got into his car,

started the engine, and then drove away. His red taillights were visible until he reached the gate and turned onto the main road.

Maverick shut the door and bolted the lock. Like he'd been holding his breath for the last few hours, he released the air stuffed in his lungs and let his shoulders relax.

“That went well.”

“Yeah, it did.” He leaned against the door with his hand on the knob. “I was waiting for it to go to shit at any moment.”

To me, it seemed like the road would be a smooth one. It might not be perfect and it would take a long time for trust to be rebuilt, but at least they were on the right track. “I don't think you have to worry about that. I know it's hard to let your guard down, but I don't think your father has a trick up his sleeve. The last two years have been hard for you, so I understand if your guard stays up for a while. Rome wasn't built in a day.”

“You're a lot more pragmatic about this than I am.”

“That's because I haven't been his victim for two years.”

“He was an ass to you.”

I shrugged. “I have a pretty thick skin.”

“No. It's soft, beautiful, and kissable.” He pushed off the door and came close to me, his arms circling my waist as he forgot about his father. When his eyes settled on me, he didn't think about anything else besides us. “I have a surprise for you.”

“You already got me a great present yesterday.”

“I know, but I have something better for you. Want to see it?”

I already had the perfect husband. What more could I possibly want? “You know I won't stop thinking about it until I do.”

“Alright.” He took my hand and guided me up the three flights of stairs until we entered his bedroom.

When I walked inside, I expected to see a wrapped present on the bed or a gown lying across the back of the chair. He usually bought me clothes and jewelry, and he nailed it every time. I stepped inside and took a look around, not seeing anything out of the ordinary. “Where is it?”

He opened the door to the walk-in closet. “Here.”

When I looked inside, I saw all my clothes hanging on the rack opposite his. My heels and shoes were placed in the cubbies, and there was a box that held all of my jewelry.

“And here.” He moved to the bathroom and showed me all my hair supplies sitting on the counter. My makeup, brushes, and everything else I used was there, along with a fresh arrangement of winter flowers. “Last but not least...” He walked to the other side of the bed then nodded to the nightstand.

It took me two seconds to figure out what he’d done. He’d had his servants move everything from my bedroom to his while we had dinner, officially moving me in to his bedroom. Our bedroom.

I went to the nightstand and opened the drawer. The little things I had tucked away were there, from hair ties, to old pictures, to miscellaneous things I didn’t know what to do with. “This felt like my bedroom a long time ago...” I shut the drawer and turned around. “I’d love to live with you, but I have to warn you—” I shut my mouth when I noticed him on the rug on one knee. A brown box was in his hand, and he gripped the velvet-covered container like he was about to open it at any second.

I was already married to this man. We’d already had a wedding, already had a future together. But we’d never had a proposal—and I couldn’t believe I was getting one now. It felt right the second I looked at him, the moment my brain caught up with my heart. My hands automatically cupped my face like this was a dream come true, like I hadn’t seen him wear his wedding ring every single day for the last few months.

With his eyes glued to mine, he popped open the box. The same princess cut diamond I’d been wearing for almost a year

sat inside, just as beautiful and shiny as the first day he gave it to me. I'd grown attached to that ring the moment I saw it even though it took much longer to become attached to him. "Will you marry me, Sheep?"

It was a comical question to ask considering I was already married to him, but I'd never been asked that question before, so my lips threw out the answer my soul wanted to give. "Yes."

He pulled the ring out of the box and slipped it onto my finger.

Now that I was reacquainted with my ring, I never wanted to take it off. I'd felt so lost without it. Even when I'd first left him, I still wore my ring every single day. The only reason I took it off was because he came after me and reminded me of what he'd done. I stared at the beautiful diamonds on my left hand and felt my soul start to throb at the connection I felt immediately. Our marriage hadn't always been perfect...but I wouldn't have it any other way. "I love it. And I love you."

He rose to his feet and slid his arms around my waist. "I know you do." His lips found my hairline, and he kissed me on the forehead as his hands tightened around my hips. He slowly tugged me closer into him until our foreheads were pressed together.

My arms rested on his, and I closed my eyes as I felt everything fall into place. I fell in love with my husband and couldn't imagine being with any other man. He was strong, smart, sexy as hell, and the best lover I'd ever had. He was my protector, my friend, and everything that I would ever need. There was a gaping hole in my chest that my late father left behind, but Maverick filled it so nicely. Now I didn't need anything else but the man who'd given me his last name.

"Will you marry me again?"

I opened my eyes and lifted my gaze to meet his.

"Put on a wedding dress, exchange vows, and live happily ever after."

“You want to do that again?” My words came out as a whisper because I was surprised by the romantic gesture. He’d already married me once. I didn’t see why he would want to do it again.

“Yes. But do it right this time.”

“It’s almost January...”

“We’ll go somewhere warm for the honeymoon.”

We didn’t have a honeymoon the first time because neither one of us was attracted to the other. We’d both viewed that day as an obligation, something we wanted to get past as quickly as possible. Then we’d stayed on opposite sides of the house and barely interacted as friends.

“Not that we’ll be outside much...” He wore that charming grin that made me fall in love with him all over again.

“I’d love that.”

“You already have a dress, and I have a suit. I don’t think we need much else.”

“No...but I’m not taking off my ring again.”

“Neither will I. We’ll just renew our vows.”

“And where will we go on our honeymoon?”

“Wherever you want.”

“Somewhere tropical would be nice...”

“Have you ever been to the Maldives?”

I’d barely left Italy. I took the train through France and the rest of Europe, but I’d never ventured farther than that. The warmest place I’d ever been was Greece at the height of summer. “No.”

“Then that’s where we’ll go. We’ll have our own bungalow over the water, order room service for all our meals, and make some babies.”

“Babies, huh? Didn’t realize you wanted a family.”

He shrugged. “I’m not repulsed by the idea anymore.”

I chuckled. “That’s romantic…”

“Missing my mother and being estranged from my father makes me want to have a family of my own.”

“Well… I’m not looking to be a mother right now. Let’s not forget I’m almost a decade younger than you. Maybe we could wait a couple of years?”

He didn’t show a hint of disappointment. His eyes burned with affection, and his lips rose in a slight smile. “We’ll wait however long you want to.”

“Besides.” I pulled him closer and pressed our heads together. “I want to enjoy you a little longer…”

MAVERICK

IT WAS A FROSTY AFTERNOON IN FLORENCE. A CLEAR SKY WAS just as formidable as rain and wind because it was so damn cold. Most of the people on the street wore gloves, but I ran ten degrees warmer than everyone else, so I didn't bother.

I entered the rehab facility and passed the check-in desk. I wanted to tell Lily everything that had happened with Father, but I didn't think it should be done over the phone. Since I was getting married...again...I hoped she'd be there for the ceremony. It was more important than the first one anyway.

I passed the dining room, and that's when I stopped in my tracks.

Lily sat in a booth with my father across from her, two coffees in front of them. Still steaming but untouched, they acted as placeholders to distract from the tension. Lily was slumped forward with her head slightly down because she was unable to meet my father's gaze.

My father seemed remorseful...even a little ashamed.

I stood there and tried to decide what to do. It seemed wrong to disturb them when they were in such deep conversation. My father probably had shown up there to apologize, and that was exactly what my sister needed. She was in rehab because she felt so lost in the real world. Making up with our father was probably what she needed to stand on her own two feet again.

Just when I was about to turn away, my father looked up and noticed me.

Our eyes locked, and I stopped breathing altogether. It was strange to look at him without seeing that hostility rise into his features. He always used to look at me like I was a bitter disappointment, a borderline enemy. But that look wasn't forthcoming. Now he just looked like my father...and nothing else.

Then he nodded for me to come over.

I walked to their table and looked at my sister. Old tearstains were visible down her cheeks, and her eyes were puffy like a waterfall had recently cascaded from her eyes. It took a few seconds for her to lift her gaze and meet my stare. "Hey, Maverick."

"Can I join you?"

She nodded.

I took a seat beside my sister and felt the weight of the moment crush me. It was the first time my family had been together since my mother passed away. It was the first time the three of us were under the same roof, as a family. It wasn't the same as it used to be, not when my mother's laugh wasn't there to fill the pockets of silence. There was a deep hole inside every one of us without her presence. But at least we were together now...and I was happy.

"DAMN, I didn't expect to see you with a drink in your hand so soon." Kent sat across from me in the booth at the back of the bar, his long-sleeved shirt covered by his gray blazer. His skin was fairer every time I saw him because the sun wasn't there to kiss it a golden brown.

The scotch was in front of me, but I took my time drinking it and refrained from ordering another. Now that I understood what my limit was, I knew I could drink the way I used to—but not a sip more. That was one of the most humiliating nights of my life, and I didn't want to repeat it. My wife would still love me the next morning. She would still take care of me

throughout the night. But I didn't want to repeat it anyway. "I'm getting my feet back in the water."

"You aren't you without scotch in your system, so I'm glad to see it. And since you have a wife to come pick you up when you get carried away, even better. You aren't my problem."

"Good thing we're friends," I teased.

He held up his glass and tapped it to mine.

I returned the gesture. "And assholes."

He chuckled then took a drink. "So, you and your dad are square?"

"Well, we're starting to be square. We have a long way to go."

"At least he doesn't want to kill your or your hot wife."

I was about to drink from my glass but shot him a glare instead.

"What?" he asked incredulously. "You didn't give her the time of day in the beginning. I was the one who reminded you that she was sex on legs, and that's when you finally woke up. So, you're welcome."

I let it slide. "She and I are getting married tomorrow."

He almost spat out the drink he'd just took. He managed to keep it locked behind his lips until he could swallow it and force it down his throat. He wiped his forearm across his mouth to catch the drops that escaped. "Back up. Did you get divorced?"

"No. But we're doing another ceremony."

"You haven't even been married for a year," he said incredulously. "What's with the fairy-tale shit?"

"The first wedding didn't mean anything to either of us. She was coerced and so was I. But now that we want to be together—"

"So, you finally admit you love this woman?"

When I said it to her on Christmas, I didn't think twice about it. She'd looked so beautiful under the Christmas tree, the lights reflecting in her bright eyes. Her gift was thoughtful, showing her affection that had never disappeared, even after the terrible things I'd done. It was nice...just to sit there with her, to have someone to spend the holiday with. Before I knew it, the words were flying out of my mouth and exploding into the air. "Yeah."

Instead of teasing me, Kent gave me a smile. "Good. Finally got your head on straight. Women like that don't pop up often."

"Sounds like you have a crush on my wife."

He shrugged. "She got a sister?"

I rolled my eyes. "Only child."

"Damn." He slammed down his drink playfully. "If her parents can make beautiful babies like that, they should have made more."

"You'll find someone, Kent. You can have whoever you want."

"But I don't want just anybody. Sabrina was a good lay, by the way. But she's totally a bitch."

"Oh, I know," I said with a chuckle. "It's a turn-off to see a woman go after a married man."

"Never cared about that before."

"Well, I care now." I'd never respected the institution of marriage until I'd participated in my own. Then I started to understand the depth of love, the real meaning of commitment. There was nothing stronger than the love between a husband and wife. The fact that someone would come in between that...was disgusting. If another man tried to steal my wife, I'd be devastated.

"So, is this more of a vow renewal?"

"I guess. But it feels like a wedding to us."

"She going to wear her old wedding dress?"

I nodded. “And I’ll wear my suit.”

“Where are you going to do this?”

“At the house.”

“Like, in the middle of winter?”

“Yep.”

Kent took another drink. “Shit, it will be cold.”

“Yep. So we’d both better drink a lot.”

“We?” he asked. “I’m coming to this thing?”

“I would hope so. You’re my best man.”

For a short span of time, he dropped his joking manner and allowed himself to actually feel the moment. His eyes softened, and an unstoppable smile spread across his lips. “Even though I think your wife is hot?”

I shrugged. “Everyone thinks my wife is hot.”

“I’ll probably think she’s sexy in her wedding dress.”

“That makes two of us.”

He held up his glass to mine again. “Then I’d be honored, man.”

“Me too.”

WE GOT lucky with the weather. Not a cloud in the sky. It hadn’t rained in a week, so the soil wasn’t muddy. The sunlight provided an extra few degrees of temperature, but the lack of a cloud bank made it considerably colder.

But that didn’t dull the warm feeling inside my chest.

I woke up that morning next to my wife and then got ready to marry her again.

Not a bad way to start my day.

It only took me thirty minutes to get ready, so I stayed in the dining room downstairs with Kent and my family so Arwen could take her time getting dressed. I hoped she wouldn't let the memory of her parents overshadow her happiness. Obviously, she would be sad they both weren't there to witness this important event in her life, but I hoped she would know they were watching anyway.

Now that Lily had settled things with my father, she'd left the rehab center and moved into my apartment in Florence. I never used it, so she may as well take advantage of the vacancy. She was at the house now, wearing a long-sleeved dress with her hair done in curls.

I took a seat and stared at the bottle of scotch in the center of the table.

Kent got my attention from across the table and mouthed to me, "Your sister is cute."

I rolled my eyes.

My father noticed what Kent said, so he gave him the death stare.

Kent brushed it off by refilling his glass of scotch. "So, nervous?"

"No." I drummed my fingers against the table. "I feel like I'm getting a second chance to make this right. When we first got married, it was a terrible day for us both. It took a long time for us to respect each other, to tolerate each other. But now, I'm already in love, and I'm looking forward to the future."

"Wow, my brother isn't an asshole after all." Lily smiled at me, telling me she was teasing me.

"Not anymore, at least," I replied.

"Nah, he's still a dick if you ask me." Kent took another drink from his glass.

My father sat there, still like a statue and quiet like death. "Arwen is a lucky girl. And you're a very lucky man."

I still wasn't used to compliments from him. Hard to believe they were real.

A few minutes later, heels echoed on the hardwood floor before Arwen made her entrance. In the same white wedding dress she wore on our wedding day, she looked just as beautiful.

Actually, she looked more beautiful.

I stared at her for a couple seconds, treasuring the way the sunlight hit her so perfectly. It made her dress glow and her happiness shine. Her hair was done the way I liked, and her dark eyeshadow made her look mysterious and sexy. I'd taken her to bed many times, but now it felt like it never happened. Now it felt like the first time all over again.

Everyone else was quiet, speechless from her appearance.

I got out of the chair and walked toward her, buttoning my suit jacket as I went. It was the only time I could recall feeling nervous in my adult life. Even when I was gambling with my life in Russian roulette, my stomach didn't feel quite as unbalanced as this. My nerves didn't fire off in trepidation and excitement. My eyes stayed on her as I walked to her, appreciating the sight of her in her wedding dress for the first time. I'd stared at her as she'd come down the aisle, but I'd never truly cared what I was looking at. But now it was special to me... Everything was special.

My initial instinct was to bend my neck and kiss her, but I'd have to save that for later.

She smiled when she watched my head dip down toward her. "It'll have to wait."

"You know I'm not patient."

She rose on her tiptoes and used my arms for balance. Then she placed a kiss on my cheek. "Then that will have to do."

My arm secured around her waist, and I walked her outside into the cold. We were getting married under the same tree where we got married last time, at the edge of the front of my property. "Would you like my jacket?"

“No.” Her happiness seemed to be keeping her warm.

The five of us moved to the tree at the edge of the grass along the stone pathway. The priest who married us last time was there, holding the bible in his hands at his waist. He looked exactly the same, wearing a thick coat with glasses.

The ceremony didn't happen the same way it had last time. She didn't walk down the aisle to me. There were no guests except for my family. It was just us two, so we didn't need any more.

Kent stood beside me while my sister and father filled up the rest of the space. They were quiet as they watched me get married a second time. Lily hadn't been there the first time, but it didn't matter. That ceremony wasn't as important as this one.

I took Arwen's hands in mine and squeezed her fingertips.

She stared at me with the same look she gave me every day, a look that said she loved me without the use of words. Almost a year ago, she was in tears, knowing her father only had weeks to live and she was marrying a stranger she didn't even like. But now, everything was different. She was happy to be there, happy to squeeze my fingers in return.

I'd never imagined a day like this, a moment when I would face a woman and want to spend my life with her. My moodiness had dissolved, and now I felt optimistic about the future. This woman put my family back together...put me back together.

The priest began the ceremony, reading a section of the bible then proceeding forward. We didn't say our own vows last time, just made it cut-and-dried, but now we wanted to share our hearts.

“Maverick,” the priest said. “You first.”

I'd scribbled a few notes in my bedroom but didn't bring the paper with me. “I never cared about being a good husband or making you happy. I didn't appreciate you when every other man in the world would kill to make you his wife. That was how depressed I was, unable to feel anything going on around

me. But you fixed me when I didn't realize I was broken. You made me whole when I realized I was incomplete. I never thought I'd actually want to be married to someone for the rest of my life, to have one woman in my life every single day. But you've made me fall so deeply in love with you, I can't imagine my life any other way. I wasn't good to you before, but now I promise to be the husband you deserve, to be faithful to you every day until my heart stops beating. I promise to protect you with my life. I promise to be a good father to our children. I promise to be whatever you want me to be...because I never want to lose you."

She blinked her eyes a few times to stop the tears, but then she couldn't hold them back. Her eyes grew wet, and a few tears streaked through her makeup and formed tiny rivers down her cheeks. Even with slightly smeared makeup and wet eyes, she was still the most desirable woman in the world. Anytime her tears appeared, I thought of the way she came when we were in bed together...and then my thoughts ran rampant. She controlled her emotions well enough to speak, and then she said her vows to me. "Maverick, I despised you when I became your wife..."

Kent, Lily, and my father all laughed.

A small smile was still on my lips. "Yeah...I know."

"You were moody, argumentative, and just a jackass. Anytime I tried to start a conversation, you were so cold. It made me feel so isolated when I had no one for comfort. But then all of that started to change when you showed your true colors. You were my rock when the worst things happened to me. You were my voice when I couldn't speak, my legs when I couldn't walk. You got me through my darkest hour. You became my closest friend. I never thought I would actually start to like my husband, but as time passed...I slowly fell in love with you. With every passing day, that feeling became stronger and stronger. Then I was so desperately in love with you that I couldn't imagine loving another man all my life. You weren't what I pictured in a husband, but you're exactly what I want. I couldn't imagine spending the rest of my life with anyone else, couldn't imagine having children with

anyone else. You're all that I'll ever need, Maverick. I feel so lucky to be Mrs. DeVille."

The avalanche of compliments crushed me, and I couldn't believe the source was her beautiful mouth. This woman loved me despite my flaws, forgave me despite my sins. She loved me for me...and that meant the world to me. I was a difficult man who had mood swings that could be triggered at any moment, but she was patient and understanding. She saw the good in all the bad.

The priest finished the ceremony. "Maverick, do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife—"

"I do." I blurted out the answer before he could even finish. I didn't want to waste another second holding my breath when I wanted to release the truth into the sky.

She smiled, her eyes still wet.

"And do you, Arwen, take this man—"

"I do."

I smiled in return.

"Then by the power vested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife."

Kent and my father applauded while Lily threw rose petals into the air.

My arms circled Arwen's waist, and I pulled her close to me so I could kiss her as my wife, to kiss her the way I should have on our wedding day. My arms locked around her back, and I crushed her into my chest, never wanting to let her go. My mouth found hers, and I kissed my wife, our lips landing like two sets of pillows. Soft and sexy, her mouth was the perfect oasis for my tongue. I kissed her with more passion than our last ceremony, my hand sliding into her hair as I disregarded the people staring at us. I kissed my wife how I wanted to because she was my wife...and I could do whatever I wanted.

Her returned affection was just as magical.

When I found the courage to pull away, I rested my forehead against hers and stared into her eyes. It was my job to take care of her, but she was the one who took care of me. She was the one who brought out the best in me, made me realize I was a good man after all. We would balance each other until time ran out. “Are you ready for our honeymoon?”

“You know I packed three days ago.”

I grabbed her hand and turned to my family. “Thanks for coming...but we have somewhere to be.”

“What?” Kent asked. “We aren’t going to cut some cake? Dance a little?”

“Pictures?” Lily asked.

“No.” I shook my father’s hand then hugged my sister. “We have enough wedding pictures.” I turned to Kent and shook his hand.

He wagged his eyebrows at me. “Have fun on your honeymoon. Hopefully, you come back.”

I smiled. “I might not. And that would be okay because I hate your ugly face.”

“Whoa...that’s how you talk to your best man?”

“It is when you won’t stop checking out my wife.”

He shrugged. “Good point.”

When I turned back to my wife, I saw her hugging my father.

I hadn’t seen my father hug anyone besides my mother... and that was two years ago. Stunned, I watched him embrace her then whisper something in her ear. When they broke apart, he patted her shoulder and gave her a slight smile.

Did that just happen?

Arwen came back to me and grabbed my hand. “Alright, I’m ready to go. When does our flight leave?”

Hand in hand, we walked back to the house. “I can’t believe my father hugged you.”

“Before you freak out, just remember he’s a lot like you. He’s rough around the edges but soft on the inside. He’s like a caramel chocolate.”

“What did he say to you?”

She looked at me, a knowing smile on her lips. “That’s between me and my father-in-law.”

“You really aren’t going to share?” I asked, surprised she would keep such a secret from me.

“I’ll tell you on our honeymoon. How about that?”

“Alright...even though I won’t be in the mood for talking.” We approached the hired SUV waiting for us. Our suitcases were already stuffed in the back, and we were ready for our week-long vacation in the Maldives.

“Should we change first?”

“We can change on the plane.”

“That’s gonna be hard with those little bathrooms.”

“My bathrooms aren’t little.”

She stared at me with an eyebrow raised. “*Your* bathrooms?”

“I have my own plane. I never mentioned that?”

“Uh, no.”

“Well, I guess you know now.” I opened the back door for her.

“I’ve never been on a private plane.”

“First time for everything.”

She scooted into the back seat, and I sat beside her.

The driver pulled away and circled the roundabout as he headed for the main road.

Arwen sat in the middle of the back seat and tucked her arm through mine. She leaned toward me and rested her head on my shoulder, her white dress taking up most of the back of

the vehicle. Her brilliant wedding ring reflected the winter sun, and she got some of her foundation on the material of my suit.

I turned my head toward her and pressed a kiss to her forehead as we drove away.

“You’re the best husband anyone could ask for,” she whispered, her fingers squeezing my arm through my sleeve.

I kissed her forehead again, my hand moving to her thigh. “You made me the best husband anyone could ask for...which makes you the best wife.”

EPILOGUE

ARWEN

EVEN THOUGH THE PRIVATE ISLAND IN THE MALDIVES WAS beautiful, with gorgeous beaches, nice restaurants, and a walking path that displayed beautiful views all around us, we stayed in our private bungalow and hardly ever left.

It was all about making love and ordering room service.

That was fine with me.

We had a secluded deck directly over the water with our own pool. When we weren't between the sheets, we were lounging in the sun with drinks in our hands, watching the sunset every night without a care in the world.

"It's beautiful here." I stood at the edge of the pool and looked over the side so I could see the ocean water below. It was shallow, full of small sharks, stingrays, and little fish. "What if we never go home and just stay here forever?"

He came to my side with a drink in his hand, standing in his swim trunks with a muscled chest. "We could."

"It is really cold back at home..."

"Another good point."

"Abigail can take a vacation."

"Nah. She'll be cleaning that house nonstop anyway. She's a hard worker. That's why I let her mouth off to me sometimes."

I chuckled. "You let her mouth off because you know she's right."

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

I set my drink down and sat on the edge of the pool. The water ran a little warm from being exposed to the sun all day, so it felt like bathwater. With the sun setting over the horizon, a cool breeze came across the ocean and brushed through my hair. It was such a relief to feel the humidity stick to my skin and make it shine. I preferred summer over winter in any contest.

He came to my side and joined me. “So, what did he say?”

“You’re on your honeymoon, but you’re thinking about your father?”

“I’m just curious. I’ve never seen him embrace someone like that.”

When Caspian hugged me but only shook his son’s hand, I was just as perplexed. This man threatened to kill me on several occasions, so it was unbelievable that we’d ever buried the hatchet. But somehow, we did. He was a bitter and mean man, and what he needed was compassion and kindness. It was the perfect antidote to most problems. “Alright, you really want to know?”

“Yes.”

“He said I was part of the family now, which means he’d do anything for me at any time. He said I was a daughter to him...and that his wife would have loved me.”

Maverick stared at me for a while, at a loss for words. “Yes, she would have...”

“I know it’s hard to see right now, but your father is a good man. It’s just taking him some time to get there. I was patient with you, so you should be patient with him.”

Maverick was quiet once again, processing all of his emotions. “That was a nice thing he said to you.”

“Yeah...he does have a heart under all that bullshit,” I said with a chuckle. “Just like his son.”

“Yes, we’re two sensitive assholes.” A slight smile formed on his lips. “I hated my father because of his behavior, but I

never realized we were exactly the same. Everything that I am...comes from him.”

“I don’t know about that, but I see what you mean.”

His arm draped over my shoulders, and he brought me close to him as we both looked at the dying light on the horizon. “So...how many kids do you want?”

“I thought we weren’t starting a family for a couple years.”

“I know. But I’m curious.”

“Two,” I answered. “You?”

“Two is perfect. And it’s good you don’t want to have kids right away. We need as much practice as possible.”

I leaned into him and chuckled. “I think we’re pretty good at it already.”

“We could always be better.” His hand moved to the back of my head, and he brought me in for a kiss. Like any other time he kissed me, it seemed like he wanted me more and more. He fell more in love with me every passing day, every passing week.

And I was falling in love with him more with every passing second.

I was falling in love with my husband...my wolf.

FROM PENELOPE SKY

I hope you enjoyed my deliciously dark romance. For those of you who are new to me, I've got something else for you to enjoy. It's called *Wife*. And it's basically about a man who falls hard for the woman he loves...but she leaves him. Years later, she needs a husband for protection, and he offers himself. Is it for love? Or revenge?

Here's a sneak peek:

"Mom, is it the eighteen hundreds? I don't need an arranged marriage."

"With your father gone, we need someone to oversee our empire. I'm too old to get re-married, and you haven't had much luck finding a husband..."

"Because I'm not looking for one." It took all my strength to keep the bitterness out of my voice. "And I can oversee our company. I'm perfectly capable—"

"I put some feelers out there and got some takes. There's one young man that I'm fond of. Hades Lombardi."

You've got to be kidding me. Not him. Anyone but him.

"I invited him over so you two could get acquainted."

No need. I already knew him—very intimately. "Mom—"

She gestured to the butler, and he went to retrieve the man my mother wanted me to marry. "Just remember, your father was a stranger when your grandfather arranged it...and I loved him very much."

Even with all his mistresses? All of his lies?

Hades stepped out onto the patio in a dark blue suit and tie. His eyes immediately went to me, like he enjoyed every second of my discomfort. His look was exactly as I remembered, so intense it swallowed me whole, but there was a sheen of rage across his visage now. It wasn't like old times when we were happy. This was about revenge. Revenge because he asked me to marry him before—and I said no.

I was in trouble.

He sauntered right up to me, ignoring my mother like she wasn't even there.

“I'll let you two get acquainted...” She returned through the French doors and left us alone.

He hadn't blinked since he locked his gaze on me.

“I'm not going to marry you—”

“Yes, you are.”

“I get a say in this—”

“No, you don't. We both know I rule this city—and I'm the only one that can protect you, your mother, and all of your holdings. Not to mention, I rule the bedroom too, as I'm sure you remember.”

My cheeks flushed even though my eyes remained sharp like daggers.

“We will marry at the earliest convenience, and you'll spend every night of that marriage earning my forgiveness. On your knees. On the bed. On your back with your legs wrapped around my waist. Is that understood?”

“No—”

His lips were on mine, in a soft but fiery kiss, his arm hooked around the small of my back. “Yes.”

B E T R O T H E D

Wife



PENELOPE SKY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

[Order Now](#)