

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
AIRICKA PHOENIX



TWISTED  
*Obsession*

# *Twisted Obsession*

**AIRICKA PHOENIX**

TWISTED  
*Obsession*

Twisted Obsession 2023 by Airicka Phoenix

[www.AirickaPhoenix.com](http://www.AirickaPhoenix.com)

This book or parts thereof may not be reproduced in any form, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without prior written permission of the copyright owner and/or the publisher of this book, except as provided by United States of America copyright law.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Editor: Kathy Eccleston

Illustrator: Airicka's Mystical Creations

Formatting: Amber Garcia

Images from Canva

Published by Airicka Phoenix

Soon to be available in eBook and paperback publication.

# Contents

## [Blurb](#)

1. [Kamari](#)
2. [Darius](#)
3. [Kamari](#)
4. [Darius](#)
5. [Kamari](#)
6. [Darius](#)
7. [Kamari](#)
8. [Darius](#)
9. [Kamari](#)
10. [Darius](#)
11. [Kamari](#)
12. [Darius](#)
13. [Kamari](#)
14. [Darius](#)
15. [Kamari](#)
16. [Kamari](#)
17. [Kamari](#)
18. [Darius](#)
19. [Kamari](#)

## [The End](#)

## [Author Notes](#)

## [About Airicka Phoenix](#)

# *Blurb*

—Kami—

Once upon a time, I kissed my best friend's older brother, the heir to the Medlock family fortune and the one man who held my heart in his hands. I knew what he was and who he would become, and I didn't care ... until he was taken from me.

Charged with murder, I lost him for four years, years I waited because there could be no one else for me, because I loved him with every shred of my broken heart.

Then the heir returned, no longer a boy but a man with hunger in his eyes and a bounty on his head. He warns me to stay away, and I know I should listen, but I was never good at following orders.

—Darius—

One upon a time, I took something I shouldn't have — a kiss from the lips of my sister's best friend. It shouldn't have meant anything, yet it stirred something in me, something hot and primal.

But I know better now. I have seen the evil lurking in the bowels of our city waiting to devour sweet, innocent, little girls who don't belong. She might set my blood on fire and tempt my soul, but Kamari Reid needs to stay away from me, away from my world before the men looking for me find her.

Because here's the thing, I don't give a shit what happens to me, but if they touch her, I will annihilate every last one of them even if I have to burn the city to the ground.

*To those who love the dark and twisted side of Booktok,  
But also, Amber & Katherine (you know why and I love you  
deeply!).*

*Maria, Donna, Kimmy, and Amanda,  
May your bookshelves never run out of space,  
And may you never be interrupted while reading.*



## CHAPTER 1

# *Kamari*



**B**oth light and shadow are the dance of love.

I traced the looping scripture with my fingertip, letting the fresh ink smudge, bleeding Rumi's words together and across my skin. The black stained the delicate pink but the shadows of it stay on the page.

Light and shadows.

He goes on to talk about lovers and loving and timelessness, but I found myself rewriting about lights and shadows.

The poem was in my head, wrapped around my soul. I woke up that morning with it dusting my dreams and glittering in the pale light of dawn coming in through my window.

It was his.

The last time he read to me from the book he'd been lost in, those words had been on his tongue and in the air between us. I had absorbed them into me, memorizing them long after he was gone.

I exhaled into the artificial air collecting in the packed car.

"What?" Seated like a porcelain doll behind the wheel, Lavena Medlock spared me a sidelong glance over the sleek frames of her *Gucci* glasses.

I shut my notebook and stuffed it into the bag at my feet. I replaced it with the novel I couldn't get into but was trying. The worn cover felt paper thin between my fingers.



“Nothing. Just ready to stretch my legs,” I lied, wisely averting my face to the streak of green and brown blurring by in a rolling landscape of wilderness and space.

I would have died for her.

I would have given my life for the three women in the car with me without question or hesitation. They were my sisters in every way, except blood but I couldn't tell them about the light and shadow. I couldn't tell them why my chest hurt every day, or why the emptiness in my soul kept expanding until I knew it would one day consume me whole.

They would understand and accept and say all the necessary things one does when someone you love is hurting, but they couldn't make it go away.

“We're almost there,” Lavena assured me. Her red lips lifted on each side in a warm smile.

She wasn't wrong. We'd been on the winding rut of road so often over the last several years that we could have driven it with our eyes closed — a poor decision given the shallow turns and steep drop-offs.

I returned her comfort by settling back in the warm leather and opening up the first page for the eighth time and staring at the first line.

“Can you accidentally premeditate a manslaughter?” In the back seat right behind mine, Sasha Trevil interrupted my façade.

I didn't need to glance back to know she had her phone on, the harsh glow illuminating wide, brown eyes. She'd been bent over the device for almost seven hours, her apprehension a heavy musk in the confined cabin.

I couldn't answer her question. I had no legal background and the little I'd forced myself to pick up was during Darius's trial three years, five months, two weeks and three days ago. I would have been no help.

“As your future lawyer, I am going to pretend you didn't just ask that.” Adjacent to me but seated behind Lavena, Kasumi Deluche lowered her own phone and fixed the full

weight of her impatience on the woman in the seat next to her. “You can’t plan an accidental murder. Either it was planned or an accident. Not both.”

“I think I’m losing my mind. I’m never passing this test. My dad is going to disown me and I’m going to be the laughingstock of the entire family.”

“You already know all this stuff,” Lavena cut in before Sasha could finish. “You’ve been training since we were children. You were top of all your classes at the academy. Your records have gone unbeaten in eight years. You’re just nervous. You’ll get right into it as soon as you get your first contract.”

“I think I just need to get out of my own head, you know? I put it off too long. It’s my own fault.”

We all knew just how hard Sasha had tried to evade the final exam. She’d done everything short of faking her own death, but we all knew it would catch up to her eventually.

“As long as you remember the five rules of executing a clean and proper hit, you will be fine,” Kas assured her evenly.

“Okay, that’s enough shop talk.” Lavena slapped the wheel with the heel of her left hand. “We’re on vacation, goddamn it. We are not Daddy or the uncles.” She flicked a spool of glossy blonde over one shoulder. “We’re here to enjoy what’s left of the summer.”

She drummed lazily on the leather with long, elegant fingers tipped in a vibrant red to match her lips. They reminded me that I needed to book an appointment when we got back; the clear, shiny gloss needed a touch-up and so did my toes. The shop had been so busy in the weeks leading up to my vacation that I hadn’t found the time.

My thumb nail picked absently at the corner of the already abused copy of *L.M. Montgomery’s The Blue Castle* in my lap. The crumpled little edge was pinched and pressed in a futile effort to uncurl it, but the spiderweb of cracks and folds that marred the simple cover ran deep. It was one of the hazards of buying books from used bookstores; there would always be a

roadmap of someone else's time with the book. But that was my favorite thing. I loved the little secrets people concealed within the pages, the notes, and highlights of their favorite parts. I loved reading through a book and finding a fellow book lover's words back to me. The majority of my books were used, and their deformities only made me love them all the more.

The damaged corner came off under my careless picking and fluttered down into my lap. I sighed as I stared at it, seeing it, but not really. It only brought to mind another book a million years ago, a different lifetime when I had someone I could share them with, someone who appreciated the breaks and creases as much as I did, someone who understood the importance of each word cut into paper.

The girls read.

I'd seen them crack open a book or two in the past, but they didn't need it the way I did. They didn't haul tattered copies of their favorite volumes around or even see the need for the physical when digital was so much more convenient. I owned an ereader. It was a gift still wrapped and unopened at the back of my closet.

Darius loved paperbacks.

Not hardcovers.

Not digital.

He liked flipping the pages through his fingers in a fan of black and white. He liked stuffing the copy into his pocket after I would hand it to him. I always made sure I got him the smallest version for that reason.

I missed him.

I missed our talks and the way he'd focus on every word I said as if I were giving him directions to dismantling a bomb. I missed our book swaps and the random texts he would send of something he'd see that would remind him of a book we both just finished. I missed the way he'd almost smile when I would get outraged by his outlook on a villain character. I missed our normal, non-book chats. I missed the ink, metal,

and musk scent that lived on his skin, and the way he'd always slide an amused sidelong glance in my direction when his family was being a tad bit extra.

I missed him so much it fucking hurt to think about.

There were other things, inappropriate and highly off limit things I missed, but those were never allowed to see the light of day. They hurt more than all the others put together.

Occasionally, I cracked the box open just an inch and let myself linger on the memories of his lips devouring mine, his hot breath scraping across my skin, his hands tearing at my clothes, but only in the darkness of my bedroom at night. Those thoughts only ended one way — with me finishing what he started alone in the cold expanse of my bed.

The helpless spine cracked beneath my grip, and I quickly loosened my white knuckled fingers. I ran my thumb along the fragile dip keeping the pages together as if in apology. All those thoughts were neatly tucked back up and replaced in its box with all the other things threatening to spill free. They could never come out while the girls were around, particularly Lavena. She could never know how I'd betrayed her and would do so again without a moment of hesitation if given half the chance.

I slanted a glance in the other woman's direction. Her attention was on the road, her fingers drumming to music only she could hear. The radio, all music was banned from the car if Sasha was in it. For some inexplicable reason music and motion made Sasha nauseous. An oddity that baffled all of us, but it made for long, silent drives when we were all headed somewhere together. I didn't mind it so much. The silence was fine compared to the deafening thunder of bass and screeching Lavena was fond of.

"Enzo wants to know if we'll be back Monday morning or evening," Sasha broke into the silence.

The woman in the seat beside me smirked, showing sharp little canines were her red lips curled up at one corner. "You should tell Enzo to join us. I haven't seen him in such a long time."

“He’s in the middle of a job,” Sasha explained, the rapid patting of her fingers dancing across the screen.

Lavena scoffed. “You can tell him we’ll be back when we get back. He’s not the boss of me. At least, not outside the bedroom.”

“Gross,” Sasha muttered, going back to her message. “I don’t want to know what kind of weird kinky shit you two are into.”

Lavena and Enzo were an open secret we all knew about. They attended functions together and occasionally hooked up, but they dated other people and lived their separate lives and that was how Lavena liked it.

“Shit. My signal died.” Kas gave her phone a hard shake as if to knock the sense back into it before tossing it down into the knitted bag by her feet with displeasure.

“Mine, too.” Sasha pitched hers down onto the seat between her and Kas. “Remind me again why you keep choosing bum-fuck nowhere for our vacation.”

Lavena smirked. “Because you addicts need a break from your fucking devices. Your brains are turning into literal garbage.”

“Speak for yourself,” Kas countered. “Some of us have school—”

“Bullshit,” Lavena cut in. “What school, you liar? You just want to cyber hump that lumberjack from Alberta.”

Kas kicked the back of Lavena’s chair. “Fuck you!”

“I don’t think I’m your type. I look like shit in plaid.”

Sasha burst out laughing. I had to bite back my own twitching lip at the look of outrage, and slight amusement on Kas’s face.

“You’re such a bitch.” Despite the insult, there was no heat behind the weirdly affectionate words.

“But you love me,” Lavena pointed out without a shred of doubt in the matter.

Kas rolled large, dark eyes. “Maybe.”

The rest of the trip went on in silence. Walls of brush and winding asphalt kept us company the deeper we plunged into the wilderness. I tried to read the paperback nestled in my lap and failed for the ninth time. Instead, I was left watching the rushing scenery and wondering if the new shipment would be arriving that weekend and if Kaila would know what to do with it once it did. A few times, I almost reached for my phone before remembering there was no service in the middle of nowhere and there wouldn't be any at the cabin. I could probably call the shop from the landline, but I didn't want Kaila to think I didn't trust her abilities, which I did, of course. But what if she put the wrong dress on the wrong mannequin or put a thousand-dollar gown in the window to get sunbaked?

“You look stressed enough to throw up,” Lavena observed, snatching me away from my near panic attack. She darted anxious glances between me and the road. “Are you going to throw up?”

I laughed before I could stop myself, although it sounded tight and winded. “I'm not going to throw up. Your mom has a new shipment coming in this weekend and I know Kaila can handle it but—”

“But you're a control freak who needs to make sure everything is exactly right,” she finished with a tiny smirk.

I frowned at the word, *control freak*. “Your mom trusts that as manager of *Le Hush*, the store would run smoothly, and I intend to make sure it does.”

Lavena rolled her eyes. “Mom has like a hundred shops. She'll be fine if things fall apart for one weekend.”

The very thought of things falling into chaos in my absence made my stomach hurt. My nerves itched with the need to call or text Kaila. I knew I'd left a thorough list and had walked her through it twice, and even had her walk me through it a few times, but the uncertainty made me shift.

“Uh oh, better pull over, Lavena. I think she actually might hurl.”

I reached back with my book and smacked Kas on the thigh. "I'm not going to hurl!"

"Children!" Lavena yelled over my squeal and jerking back when Kas made to wrench the paperback out of my hand. "Don't make me pull over."

I saw it on Kas's face before she could open her mouth. "Don't say it!" I threatened, pointing my index finger at her.

"Kami's going to hurl!" she drawled, enunciating each syllable.

I smacked her a few more times before she snatched the book from my fingers and yanked it out of reach.

"Hey!" I made to lunge for it, restrained partially by my belt, but she pulled back, smirking like a demon cat. "Lavena!"

"I'm not getting involved," the blonde replied without missing a beat. "You're both grown adults. Figure it out."

It was Sasha who came to my rescue in the end. She wrestled the book from Kas and passed it back, earning an elbow in the side for her efforts.

"I will pummel you," she threatened the other woman.

"Do it when we stop," Lavena shouted over the ruckus. "Because if I hit Bambi's mother because you two are being idiots, I will make you eat her raw."

"Ew!" Sasha and Kas simultaneously cried.

"Then settle down." She wiggled her shoulders and relaxed against her seat. "Enjoy the scenery or something. Have a snack."

"Yes, mommy," I teased, regaining my seat properly and adjusting my belt comfortably across my chest.

Eyes that were too similar to Darius's peeked up over the gold rims of her sunglasses at me. "I like it when you talk dirty to me, Kami baby."

I burst out laughing, despite the tightening in my chest.



We lapsed back into a comfortable silence broken only by Kas's muttered curses every time she failed a level on *Candy Crush*.

"It's rigged," she declared each time. "Why do I bother?" Yet she went right back to trying again, filling the car with the faintest tinkling.

I tried to read again. I opened to my saved page and stared at the same cluster of words until they bled together. My brain was too twisted around all the ways the shop could fall into disarray and refused to focus on anything else. I had to keep reminding myself Kaila was my best employee and she knew what she was doing. It wasn't as if I hadn't left her to watch over the shop before. She'd just never received a shipment before on her own. I always made sure to be there, to properly catalogue and categorize the pieces. Maybe that made me controlling, but these weren't cheap dresses at some clearance mart. Each gown cost more than an average person's yearly salary and each piece was custom made so even the slightest damage could be a complete write off.

Willing myself to take a breath, I silently cursed Lavena for her bad timing. She'd chosen the worst weekend to take off. Ultimately, there was no other choice but to accept my fate and hope for the best. Kaila had been with me for almost three years. She knew the drill. I left her detailed notes. I'd done all I could to prevent any casualties.

I hoped.

Medlake Lodge — a play on the Medlock name — dominated over the lush landscape of wilderness deep in the heart of the Canadian Rockies, a fortress of bullet proof glass and wood anchored alongside a flowing lake cutting far into the forest. It crouched hidden far from any main roads, nestled in the only clearing for miles and encompassed by a rolling dome of endless blue. It was one of my favorite properties the Medlock family owned, and it had almost nothing to do with the magnificent reading nook they'd built inside just for me.

Tangled ropes of roots and dirt evened out to smooth asphalt. Bowed branches swayed overhead, a welcoming

canopy before parting to a circular driveway orbiting a stone fountain. The marble bowl sat dry and littered with twigs and branches. In all the years we'd visited, I could only remember it ever being turned on once. Marcella had forbidden it. She didn't see the point of wasting water and I agreed. The building was empty for most of the year. Occasionally, a friend or family would use the place, or we would during the summer, but no one was ever there long enough to properly enjoy the flow of splashing water.

Lavena's Mercedes Benz rolled up the property driveway, the tires gliding smoothly across the pavement. Tangled branches swayed and dipped overhead, waving us across the looping path to the wide set doors.

"We're here!" Lavena sang, putting us into park and cutting the engine.

She didn't even wait for the rest of us before kicking open her door and sliding out into the balmy afternoon. The fading streaks of sunlight glinted off the stubbornly polished windows and shimmered across the marble stairs as we followed suit. The world around us had fallen into that serene hush right before dusk. It whispered through the trees as the rest of us followed the enthusiastic blonde with equal measures of relief and exhaustion.

Loose bits of rock and twigs crunched beneath our heels as we made quick work grabbing our things. Needle sharp prickles spiked up my thighs and gathered around my stiff knees with every step I took. The pressure of being cramped in a vehicle for nine hours tightened the muscles of my back and twisted a knot in the spot between my neck and shoulders. I tried rolling both, working out kinks and fighting back whimpers.

The only one floating effortlessly around the hood of the car and making her way to the front doors was Lavena. The crazy woman with her seven-inch ankle boots pulled over tight, pale jeans flounced straight up the marble steps, one hand buried in the mouth of her *Gucci* bag. The violent crack of her heels immortalized her ascension, sending shockwaves through the silence. The jingle of her keys replaced her strides.

Metal teeth snaked in place in the lock. The knob was twisted, and the door was shoved open.

“I’m taking a hot bath,” Sasha grumbled, staggering her way forward, bags bumping against her hips.

“Nap,” Kas muttered, yawning to emphasize. “I need a nap and food, and a toilet.”

I tried to think of what I wanted once we were inside, but all I could conclude was just getting inside. I wanted to kick off my sneakers and that was where my fantasies ended. I probably wouldn’t have said no to a bag of chips if one was presented, but I didn’t feel the need for it. So, I said nothing as I followed my friends up the stairs and into the lit foyer.

“Why are the lights on?” Lavena mumbled, low enough to insinuate she was speaking to herself, but loud enough that it caused the rest of us to stop just over the threshold.

“Maybe it was left on by accident,” I supplied, eyeing the dripping chandelier guarding the entrance.

“That is unlikely,” she muttered, blue eyes rolling down and across the vast space. I barely noticed her reaching into the bag looped over her elbow until the sleek, gray Glock rested in her palm. “You guys stay here.”

“Lavena,” I protested, stepping forward. “I’m sure—”

Sasha held up a hand to silence me. Her eyes were narrowed in the direction of the grand staircase winding up to the second floor. “There’s someone here.”

The bag that cost more than my entire wardrobe was set gingerly down, careful to make the least amount of noise as the owner pulled a slender handgun from inside. She motioned for me and Kas to move back towards the front door.

Kas took my arm when I didn’t follow directions and tugged me back.

“We can’t let them go alone,” I murmured, knowing we were as useful as a bag of bricks, but not wanting to leave our friends to face whatever it was alone.

“Let them handle it,” Kas whispered.

By *them*, she meant Sasha and Lavena, and I knew she was right; they were the most qualified to deal with such a situation. I knew I trusted them with my life without question, but I still watched them step deeper into the lodge with my heart in my throat. A weird fuzz had settled across my brain, muffling everything, except how hard I was breathing.

“I know you’re in here!” Lavena yelled into the abyss, the unexpected cry nearly unlatching my bladder; I jumped, but Lavena wasn’t finished. “Get the fuck out into the open before I start spraying the fucking place with bullets.”

There was a heartbeat of silence that seemed to stretch on forever. It echoed through the halls and rooms, a promise that left no capacity for doubt. I was just beginning to think they’d been wrong when a figure emerged from the corridor ahead, unfolding from the shadows like an ominous omen and moving forward. Lavena and Sasha had their guns up and aimed, neither one was bound to miss at that range.

“Hands up, asshole!” Lavena commanded. “Don’t make me paint the walls with your brain.”

A soft, gruff sound rose from the moving figure, a broad silhouette with wide shoulders and long, toned legs. The noise, I realized was laughter, a low, throaty chuckle that sent a familiar prickle all the way down my spine. Then the figure spoke, and the world cracked beneath my feet.

“Are you really going to shoot your own brother, snotface?”

## CHAPTER 2

### *Darius*



**T**ime was such an odd concept.

It flowed so differently on the outside. There never seemed to be enough of it. Hours bled into each other with a reckless abandon that made it impossible to keep track while in captivity, behind the walls of concrete and steel, every second yawned into eternity. Months were decades. Years ... years were eons.

Centuries.

Infinity.

There was always too much.

I could have filled a pool and drowned myself in the seconds I couldn't sell, trade, or barter. I was forever accumulating infinities until it was all I had spilling through my fingers, an endless supply of time.

I tossed the unsmoked cigarette into the bowl of sand I'd scooped earlier from the lakebed. It joined the other crushed butts and scattered ashes. I stared at the foul habit that had followed me home and sighed into the fading afternoon.

Bad habits seemed to be all I had left.

Bad habits and time I was losing at an alarming rate on the outside. Out in the real world with no one monitoring my every move, time evaded me. There was never enough. Days slipped into afternoons that plummeted into dusk. I kept blinking and the time kept shifting, and I couldn't keep up. I

didn't know how to fall into step with the minutes running from me.

Maybe I was losing it.

The uncles often spoke of inmates who couldn't handle the chaos of the real world after doing years behind bars. Adjustment became a drug that wound up sending them back or ending their lives, depending on the person. I told myself I wouldn't be like that. I was a Medlock. Weakness just wasn't in our DNA.

Yet, I stood on the back patio of my parent's summer lodge, watching as another sunset mocked me into oblivion.

I snorted at the irony and peered up at the glistening blue and liquid gold rippling in the distance. The tiny island drifting at its very heart seemed to beckon a visit, but for what purpose? It was a lump of sand. It held no purpose for me. There was nothing there. Nothing I couldn't easily get staying exactly where I was.

I eyed the carton of *Virginia Slims* with its last four non-menthol cigarettes. A yellow lighter peeked out from amongst the foil, cheap and barely working. I probably should have felt bad for stealing them off some kid at the gas station. He couldn't have been more than sixteen, but his punk ass attitude had pissed me off. Little shit had cut me off at the coolers, grabbed the last bottle of *Pepsi* then had the audacity to smirk and say, "*Better luck next time, old man.*" He was lucky I didn't knock his picket fence teeth down his throat. But I held my patience and temper, reminding myself I just got out of prison for murder, and I wasn't going back for some mouth breather.

I grabbed a *Coke* and got into line behind him. I watched him empty his pockets of all its contents and count out three dollars in loose coins. I snagged the pack when he bent down to pick up a scrap of crumpled paper that slipped out of his fingers.

I like to think I taught him a valuable lesson that day — don't be a dick, but I wasn't holding my breath.

I stuffed the pack into the back pocket of my sweats, kicked in my chair, and started inside mind fiddling with the idea of a greasy, extra cheesy grilled cheese sandwich when I was interrupted by a shrill ringing that echoed through the cavernous space. Part of me wished I could unplug the damn thing, but I also knew I couldn't without the full wrath of my parents raining down on me.

It was part of our agreement. I could stay at the lodge but the demon machine stayed on. Father insisted the orders came from both him and Mother, but this had Mother all over it. I knew she worried I was sitting in darkness wallowing in my own self-pity.

I wasn't.

Did I regret losing all those days and months of my life? No. I would do it again. Family meant sacrifice. Protecting the people I loved was my job as the eldest sibling and heir.

Did I know how to return to regular society? Also no. That was proving to be harder than I expected. I knew I would eventually have to. I had an empire to run and business that needed my attention. But the idea of being closed in by people again made my skin crawl.

Confinement in itself taught everyone something about themselves. I learned I didn't like being closed up with other people. I didn't like having to always be on alert, always watching my back. I hated the silence that wasn't actually silence. I hated the coldness that seemed to radiate from the very walls. I hated the emptiness, not just of my cell, but my very essence. I was surrounded by hundreds of other men, some allies, majority of them not, but there was a profound absence that echoed at night when I would try to sleep.

The uncles who were not related to me by blood called that feeling the missed fuck.

*"It's because you miss having a wet pussy to slide into at night,"* Bronzo, a shriveled husk of a skeleton with too much hair everywhere had wheezed from his side of the cafeteria table. *"You should ask your dad to send you a playmate while you're here."*



I wasn't going to do that.

For one, I wasn't about to casually call my Father and request a woman to be sent to the trailers for me once a week for a conjugal. He would do it, but the idea of someone being sent to me like some sacrificial lamb filled me with a thick coating of cringe I couldn't stand.

But that wasn't entirely it.

There was a much larger reason I refused to acknowledge even to myself, a reason I had no right hanging on to.

I snatched up the phone. The cold linoleum pressed into the soles of my feet as I brought the receiver to my ear.

Alexander Medlock greeted me from the other end. His dark, baritone sent a comforting wave rolling through me, the comforting blanket of a parent.

*"How are things?"*

I tossed the cigarette pack down on the table mounted on the wall next to the phone. "Same as yesterday."

I heard a grunt and I knew he knew nothing could possibly change for me in twenty-four hours in the middle of the Rockies, but I also knew my mother wouldn't accept that response without proof.

"How's Mom?" I asked.

*"Good. She's here."*

Immediately, a secondary voice came through the speaker. *"Hello sweetheart, how are you? How are you feeling? Do you have enough food still? I can have someone bring more."*

A grin tugged at the corner of my mouth. "Hi Mom. I'm okay. I have enough food. Thank you."

*"What about clothes?"*

"I have enough clothes."

*"What about—?"*

*"Marcella, my love, he's fine."*

*“How can you know if you don’t ask?”* my mother argued, voice thick the way I knew it got when she was about to cry.

I loathed the idea that she was hurting for me. I would have given my right arm to save her from that.

“I’m okay, Mom. I promise.”

I heard the faint snuffle. *“I know you are, baby. It won’t be much longer, okay? Just a few more days, then you can come home.”*

I knew she was counting those days religiously. I probably should have been as well, but I wasn’t at the lodge simply to amuse myself. I may have needed a day or two to get my head on straight, but the reality of the situation was that I couldn’t go back.

Not yet.

*“Have you heard anything?”* Mom pressed.

I would have pointed out that only a handful of people knew I was out, and only two knew where I was — her and father, so unless they called me with news, I was completely in the dark, but Father spoke up before I could.

*“We’re going to discuss that. Why don’t you get going? You’ll be late and you know how your mother feels about tardiness.”*

*“Oh, she can wait!”* Mom huffed indignantly. *“I’m talking to my son.”*

*“Marcella...”*

Mom sighed. *“Fine. I love you, baby.”*

“Love you too, Mom. I’ll see you soon.”

I heard the vicious crack of her heels fade out of the room followed by the distinct bang of the office doors closing behind her. Then silence for a pregnant moment before the quiet sigh.

*“I’ve had to stop her from driving down at least four times since this morning.”*

I felt myself grin slightly, not at all surprised by my mother's stubbornness. "I'm honestly surprised she hasn't shown up yet."

Father gave a soft grunt. *"She's been hovering over my desk since dawn, waiting for me to give her the good news that you were on your way back. Eventually, we'll have to tell her why we decided for you to lay low for a little while but not until we figure this shit with Volkov out."*

I pressed hard to keep my tone even. "So, there's still no word on what he has planned?"

The low whine of his chair adjusting to his shifting weight muffled the low exhale I could just make out.

*"Nothing,"* he murmured. *"I got mixed responses when I asked if he knew of your release. My informants haven't heard anything but I suspect he knows you're out by now. I spoke to the uncles yesterday and there's been talk of your release so it would have been a matter of time, which would explain his silence. For months, I'd been hearing noise of him running around the city, doing business. He opened a club in the neon district a few months back and spent a lot of time there until recently. I don't know what he's cooking up, but if the chatter stands correct, he wants your head on a spike. You probably have a few more days before he starts getting tired of waiting for you."* He exhaled loudly. *"It's been a battle trying to keep all this from your mother and sister. Your mother would lose her mind with worry and your sister, well, you know what Lavena is like."*

I did know. Lavena would immediately go into full protective mode. She would charge into Volkov's office with a gun and a head full of steam. She'd be reckless and irrational, and in danger. Volkov would not hesitate to use her to send me a message in the most gruesome way possible, just like he would only put up with my absence for so long before he started lighting fires to lure me out.

"Do we have a plan?" I asked. "I can only lie low for so long before he gets tired of waiting."

*“Not much we can do,” he pointed out. “We go on as if we’re not watching our backs. We keep you guarded the best we can until Volkov makes his first move. That’s all we need. Until we have a reason to attack, we proceed as if we’re ignorant to it all, pretend we suspect nothing. We tell no one of this. Not your brother. Not your friends. Definitely not your mother or sister. Volkov can never know we’re expecting an attack. He needs to be fully assured in his plan.”*

“I can be home tonight,” I offered.

His chair gave several squeaks as if he were rocking slightly. “No,” he said at last, *“stay the rest of the weekend. We’ll start first thing Monday. The next few days will give me a chance to put the table together and bring the others in on the plan. I will also increase security. Not drastically. We don’t want to raise suspicions, but enough to make sense.”*

I hung up after a brief acknowledgement of his plans and studied the bit of plastic mounted just inside the kitchen, a relic that was both outdated and necessary. My mother had one put in at every property we owned in case of an emergency. Medlake Lodge was the only location it made sense; there was no cell reception there.

A pen and notepad rested on the table next to it. Lavena’s loopy handwriting was still on the first page in blue ink.

*“Edmund eats boogers.”*

I rolled my eyes, amusement, and that weird fondness one gets for their siblings tangled together in my chest.

I loved my siblings. Of course, I did. There were days growing up that I pressed my parents to dump them off the nearest bridge, but I would take a bullet for them. I would give my life to keep them safe. That was what being an older brother was; I could want to strangle them but no one else was allowed to touch them. Fuck, hadn’t I taken Edmund’s place behind a wall of steel and concrete because he was a kid and didn’t belong in there?

But that didn’t seem to be the end of it if Uriah Volkov was on the move. He was a problem, a loose end I needed to deal

with quickly and quietly. If left unchecked, he could become a deeply embedded thorn that required surgery to remove after causing irreparable damage.

I was starting to pick up the phone and call for a car, despite my father's objections, when I heard it, the soft snap of twigs, the hushed whisper of voices in the distance, the slam of car doors. I didn't think for a minute it was Uriah, but someone was there, and they were not being stealthy about it.

With my father's 9mm freed from the hidden compartment inside the pantry, I moved to greet my guests just as the front door swung open. I couldn't make out the conversation, but I didn't misunderstand the voice threatening to blow off my skull if I didn't come forward.

I knew that voice.

It took my brain a moment to truly recognize it, having not heard it in a damn long time, but it took all my willpower not to bolt out there and pull that little shit into my arms. There was a very high probability she would shoot me if startled. So, I took each step gingerly, keeping my own weapon loosely at my side and my tone light when I spoke.

I was not expecting the scream. It tore through the foyer in a deafening howl, yet it was nothing to the brutal clatter of her weapon as it was unceremoniously pitched to the floor. It struck the marble and spun, pinwheeling into a patch of fading light and lay still as its owner tore across the room. I had just enough time to think how displeased Father would have been when the full force of my sister's weight slammed into my chest, driving me back on my heels before I caught her and myself.

She felt smaller, or maybe I'd been gone too long. Her hair was longer ... and blonde. I had memories of an auburn bob during my trial. I slid my fingers through the heavy strands and pressed her closer.

"Hey kid," I murmured into the top of her head. "Miss me?"

“No!” she sobbed into the front of my t-shirt, her arms cracking my ribs. “You fucker!”

I felt my lips twitch, but I bit back the grin. “Love you, too.”

I held her tight as her shoulders shook. My fingers combed the satin waves down her back, soothing her the way Mom would have.

Lavena played so well at acting tough, but I knew my sister better than anyone. She had a heart unworthy of this world and it hurt for everyone. I watched her break a girl’s nose for pushing Edmund off the swings, then cry because she hadn’t been there to stop him from getting hurt. I watched her take on an entire prison system to see me, even though she knew that was against the rules. Lavena was the army everyone needed on their side.

Sniffling and a hot mess of snot, tears, and make up, Lavena drew back and blinked up at me. There was concern and happiness in her blue eyes as she took me in. That delight dissolved a full second later into fury and five angry knuckles stamped into my shoulder with the full strength of her weight — just like I’d shown her.

“You asshole!” she snarled. “Are your fingers broken? You couldn’t take two seconds to call your sister and let her know you’re out of fucking prison?”

Shoulder stinging, I glowered down at her. “Jesus, Lavena.”

“Don’t *Jesus Lavena* me, you inconsiderate weasel.” She scrubbed the back of her hand under her nose. “I have been worried sick. You selfish prick! You declined all my calls, all my visits. You ... you cut me out.” Her eyes welled up again and her chin trembled. “Nothing for four years.”

There was a prickle of guilt. A tickle. Easily ignored as I studied her face, a face I hadn’t seen since my trial, a face that meant the world to me, even when she was a pain in the ass. Hurting her was unforgiveable, but I would do it again in a heartbeat, because that was the rule. She was not allowed to

visit me. She was not allowed to call. Once I was behind those bars, the only way to keep her safe was to pretend she didn't exist. I would not apologize for keeping her away from the eyes and thoughts of the filth in that place. She could hate me all she wanted. I was fine with that.

“You know the rules, kid.”

She sniffed loudly even as tears trickled down her cheeks. “When have the rules ever applied to us?”

“This time. Enough,” I warned when she opened her mouth. “Knock it off, and don't hit me unless you want frogs in your bed again.”

Fury pulsed anew in her narrowed eyes. “You promised you'd never do that again.”

“Then don't hit me.”

Her lips twisted with displeasure, but she kept them mashed together.

It was only with her silence that I finally raised my attention to the others clustered just feet away, watching in still silence, unsure of what to do. I didn't blame them. I didn't know what to do either.

“Ladies,” I decided with an inclination of my head.

“Darius,” Sasha murmured. “Good to see you out.”

“Does my father know you were ... released?” Kas asked at the same time. “I thought you had a few more months.”

“I didn't break out,” I muttered. “I'm sure Howard knows. They released me early.”

Kas eyeballed me, reminding me a lot of her father's suspicious once-over when I explained that I would be taking the blame in Edmund's place.

“I believe you,” she said at last, though she continued to stare me down in a very lawyer manner. “It's not weird you being holed up here in this secluded, hidden fortress with no one privy to your location or status. We never had this talk. Welcome back.”



Kas and Sasha both exchanged glances, neither having much else to say as they shot me a wave and headed back out to the car. Lavena stayed, her fingers tight around my hand not still gripping my gun. Her big eyes watched me, searching and assessing my every move. I wasn't sure what she was looking for, but I knew her silence wasn't going to last.

“Are you staying?” she asked at last.

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her I was heading back. I already knew she would fight and argue, but there wasn't much she could do to stop me. I was set on that. I was prepared to go toe-to-toe with her on the matter when a movement caught the corner of my eye, a barely visible shift that somehow dragged all the air from the room and replaced it with the familiar scent of honey, roses, and something I never could put a name to yet it had haunted me in my dreams. It had lingered on my skin in the morning, tangled in my sheets. She was there without ever being there, her moans a soft echo fading in my ear. I'd open my eyes, fingers already extended and curling over the edge of the one-man cot, subconsciously knowing it was impossible for her to be there yet still hoping.

Fuck.

“Go wash your face,” I told my sister, feeling the words stick to my throat and having to force them out.

“But—”

I nudged her in no real direction. “Go. We'll talk later.”

She shot me a scowl but marched out into the open doorway after her friends, leaving me alone with the one person on earth I wasn't ready to face. The one person I was going to destroy before the weekend was over. Her there was all the more reason I needed to leave.

Now.

“Darius.”

Fuck!

The quiet hurry of her sneakers as she moved towards me sent all the alarm bells screaming. My mind and body

dismantled at the seams, useless fucking pieces of shit abandoning me when I already didn't know what to do.

I abandoned my gun to the floor with a deafening crack and I raised my hands, and I caught her.

No.

It wasn't in my arms because I was a fucking coward. It wasn't in my chest where she belonged. I closed my useless, trembling fingers into the soft skin of her arms, and I stopped her before she shattered what was left of my resolve.

I kept her away.

I kept her at arm's length as if she were a bomb ready to blow up my whole fucking world.

"You're home," she croaked, delicate fingers reaching for me. "I can't believe..."

She had no idea how wrong she was. This wasn't home. The Alexander wasn't home. Home was an unattainable dream I'd given up on the moment my cell door clanged shut behind me.

"Kami." Her name hitched out of me in slivers of broken glass. "Stop."

Eyes the exact shade of the Sahara Desert tore into my soul, wet with tears and raw ... raw with pain and confusion. She stared up at me, begging for answers I couldn't give.

"What—?"

"Get your things," I told her as I'd told Lavena, but for very different reasons; I was losing. I could feel my hold slipping on the chain restraining my control. She needed to leave before I hurt her even more.

"But..."

"Kami!" Her name snapped out of me, hard and brittle, and pleading, but she didn't hear that. How could she when all I felt rolling over me was fury and bitter rage at my own weakness?

Her arms dropped to her side, and she pulled away from me. Her fingers tangled together, small and unsure. Her bewilderment, her hurt was my fault. I fucking did that. I stepped over a line I had no right to cross. I made her believe something I couldn't deliver. It didn't matter that it was unintentional. It didn't matter that I had no control over what happened next.

She waited.

She waited for me.

All those years she could have moved on and she didn't because she thought I could give her the man she used to know, but that Darius Medlock was gone. He was never coming back and I didn't know how to tell her she'd waited for a ghost.

There wasn't a hole deep enough in hell for someone like me.

"Go," I whispered.

Pleaded with my soul.

Kami drew in a breath. Her throat muscles bobbed, but her gaze was level when they met mine.

"Welcome back."

Without another word, she turned and left me standing in the fading light of day, a fist sized hole in my chest.

It was necessary, I told myself all the way back to the safety of my room, two guns in hand. Kami wasn't Lavena. She wasn't Sasha or Kas. She wasn't trained for my world. She wasn't equipped. The man I was forced to become had a target on his back and a running clock that could expire at any moment. What did I have to offer her, except heartbreak and fear? She was better off with someone who could give her a normal life with kids who wouldn't need bodyguards and background checks of everyone they come into contact with. Her house would be a home, not a fortress with enough security to safeguard the president. She would be ... happy.

Without me.

She would be safe.

What else mattered?

The guns, mine and Lavena's, were set in my nightstand drawer and closed in. I sat on the edge of my bed and stared through the thickening shadows at the wall dividing my room from the bathroom. My mind warred with my gut to leave, to follow the plan I had before, to call a driver and start the drive back to civilization. Yet, I didn't move. I watched the sun bleed and run down the paint to pool across the carpet in shredded tendrils. Night hit fast and hard in the wilderness, a fact I'd forgotten about until my first night there. I toyed with this knowledge, letting it consume all the other thoughts and urges until the conclusion became that I would wait for morning.

It was too dark.

It wasn't safe.

The driver would have to drive nine hours then nine hours back in the night.

That wasn't fair.

I could wait a few more hours.

What's the worst that could happen?

Outside my door, I heard the creak and groan of bodies hauling luggage up the stairs. I could hear the chatter and hushed whispers as they moved past my door. I picked each distinct footstep shuffling over worn carpet. I held my breath, counting the *thump, thump, thump* of my heart with every passing second until the last footsteps stopped just outside. The light of the hall slipped her silhouette through the crack under the door to fill my darkened space. I had no memory of pushing to my feet or moving closer until I was inches from the hard surface, inches from the devil on the other side, my lungs tight around my last inhale.

*Go away*, I begged silently, even as my fingers itched to reach for the knob.

I could wrench it open, grab her, pull her inside and finish what we started that rainy April. I could pin her to the door, my own personal butterfly as I took back every minute we lost. I did none of those things.

She moved away before my madness could take life. The other voices had long since faded, her friends already in their rooms, their familiar spaces, the ones they called theirs on every visit.

Kamari would be no different. She would slip into her room, the room separated from mine by a thin, fucking wall, a wall that muffled nothing, not the sound of her movements, not the sound of her lithe frame slipping beneath cotton sheets, not the soft sighs of her dreaming. It would all be amplified, a surround sound to remind me just how close and yet out of my reach she was.

It wasn't fair.

But that was life, a cock tease with no mercy.



Lavena let herself into my room an hour later without so much as a knock. She swung my door open and stalked in, face freshly scrubbed, and makeup reapplied. She'd swapped her jeans and tank top for shorts and some wraparound top that looked too complex to understand. Her feet were bare, probably why I hadn't heard her coming.

"Okay, spill." She flopped down on my bed unceremoniously and stared at me hard.

Standing in the center of my room with a towel around my hips and annoyance a heavy cloud around my shoulders, I glared at her. “Do you fucking mind?” I snapped.

“I gave you space, now I want answers.” She folded her arms. “When did you get out?”

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered under my breath as I turned to grab the clothes I’d laid out on the dresser. “You’re insane, you know that?”

“Doesn’t change the facts.”

Exasperated but unsurprised, I stalked back into the steam-soaked bathroom and shut the door with a kick of my heel. It was a small relief that that was the one place Lavena wouldn’t follow, but I could only hide in there for so long before she bulldozed her way in. Nevertheless, I took my time pulling on my gray sweats and black t-shirt. Droplets rained from the end of my hair with every sweep of my fingers combing through the damp strands. I stood before the gilded mirror and examined my face, tracing the familiar lines and hollows, searching for spots I might have missed during shaving.

We’d all inherited my father’s blue eyes and dark hair. I usually kept it short and tidy at the back with longer strands at the top, but let it grow out over the years. The strands hung over my shoulders in waves that I left down when exiting the washroom to face the little shit on my bed.

Lavena was splayed across my mattress with one of my thriller novels hovering inches from her nose. Her Glock rested by her hip, a clear indication that she’d gone through my things. She barely glanced up when I approached.

“These are stupid,” she decided, tossing the paperback onto my pillow, and pushing up onto her elbows. “I know who the killer is if you want to skip the boring stuff.”

I scoffed, taking the edge of the bed. “Reading the last chapter of a book doesn’t count as reading “

Her wide eyes rolled. “Getting to the end to find out what happens is the whole purpose of reading, right? So, I already know the end. I’ve accomplished the purpose of reading.”

It was an age-old argument, one I had secretly missed, but still shook my head at. “Don’t you have friends waiting for you somewhere?”

I delivered the question as if I cared where Sasha and Kas were, but I knew — even if she didn’t — who I was actually asking about. Part of me wondered what Lavena would say if I ever told her just how deeply, stupidly in love with her best friend I was. I knew my sister well enough to know she would take it in one of two ways — she’d tell me to stay away before I ruined her friendship or I’d wake up with her standing over my bed, wielding a butcher knife, threatening me not to hurt Kami. With Lavena, it was really hard to know which way things could swing. Rather than ask, I pushed the thought aside.

“They’re unpacking,” she replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. “I’m already done.”

Of course, she was. My sister may have dressed like the women who traveled with twenty bags, but Medlocks didn’t travel with luggage. All our properties, every place we stayed already had everything we needed, a blessing I hadn’t recognized until the morning I arrived at the cabin in my court clothes and nothing else, in desperate need of a shower and a real meal.

“Stop avoiding my questions,” she pressed. “When did you get out and does Father know?”

I relented. “A week ago, and yes, Father knows. I called him from the bus stop right after I was released.”

She took that in with furrowed brows and a look of deep contemplation narrowing her eyes. “How’d you get here?”

I shrugged. “Partially by bus, but mainly by foot.”

It had been hell.

Hand stitched, designer dress shoes were not made for long hikes through the wilderness in the dead of summer, under a blazing sun with no water and no food. My ankles had been raw where the shoes had cut in and my toes had throbbled. Two hours in, I’d almost opted to chuck the fucking

things into the bushes and carry on barefoot. It was solely the fear of sharp rocks and stepping on worm guts that kept them strapped securely to my feet.

Lavena sucked in a breath. “You walked? It’s a five-hour car ride from the nearest town.”

I had to laugh, even if it was brittle and ironic. “Oh, I know.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” she snapped, anger and hurt creating razor blades of her words. “I would have picked you up. I would have been there.”

I freed the fingers bunched around wads of comforter and smoothed the white knuckles lightly with my thumb. “I know you would have, Lavena. But I just spent four years behind bars. I wasn’t in the right place for people. I needed a minute.”

Blue eyes wet with injustice and grief peered at me through fans of thick, dark lashes. They examined my face, possibly searching for lies. I must have passed because she exhaled and allowed her shoulders to slump.

“I hate the thought of you having to face any of that alone. I hate that you had to take that fall! It wasn’t fair. Howard could have fought harder. He shouldn’t have let you plead guilty.”

“Hey,” I squeezed her fingers to silence her when her voice rose again, “it was me or Edmund. I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

Her chest heaved with her sharp, shaky inhale. “It wasn’t fair.”

“Who told you life was fair?” I leaned back, releasing her hand.

A tear trekked down her cheek, and she quickly swiped it away. Her head tilted away from me, and she stared hard at my dresser as if it had personally committed a slight against her.

“I can’t believe Dad didn’t say anything.” She rubbed an aggressive hand under her nose. “He knew we were coming up



here this weekend. He wished us a fun time and told us to put on sunscreen.”

I scoffed. “I literally just got off the phone with him when you pulled up. He didn’t say a word.”

Lavena sighed. “Is it over then? Are you coming home now?”

I pulled my gaze away to focus on my dresser. “Yeah,” I muttered, pushing off the bed and climbing to my feet. “I’m heading back in the morning.”

Blue eyes fluttered in confusion. “Tomorrow? Why? Why can’t you stay? I’ll hardly get to see you—”

“What do you mean? I’m out. I’ll be at the apartment. I’ll see you every day.”

“Yeah, but you just got out. Why can’t you stay until we leave? It’s only three days. Come on. Please? I fucking missed you.”

She fixed pleading eyes on me, her lips puckered, but it was the tears that tested me. It was the hurt in her voice. I couldn’t.

“Fine,” I muttered. “I’ll stay the weekend.”

A brilliant smile erupted across her face even at she swiped at the damp streaks on her cheeks. “Really?”

I waved away her excitement. “Yeah, yeah, you’re such a pain.”

Squealing, Lavena leapt off the bed and bounded towards me. Her long arms looped around my shoulders and dragged me into a choking embrace. A wet kiss was stamped into the side of my cheek.

“You’re the best brother ever!”

I grumbled my response and wiped my cheek. “Remember that the next time you’re being a shit.”

She wasn’t listening. “Everyone will be so thrilled!” She pulled back to beam into my face. “We’ll throw a huge welcome home party, and we’ll get that cake you like from

that tiny bakery downtown. It'll be the talk of the town for years to come. I'll make sure of it."

The very idea of having to deal with people I didn't like before I went into the slammer had me grimacing. "Lavena—"

"Oh!" she exclaimed unexpectedly, face a mask of furious outrage as she tore away. "You will never believe who came sniffing around right after you got arrested." She didn't even give me a chance to guess when she blurted, "Liya."

That was a name I hadn't thought of in a while and had expected never to hear ever again. Just the sound of it had the muscles all along my spine stiffening.

"What did she want?"

"What Liya always wants — attention. Bitch was in tears, sobbing about how she missed you and she'd wait until you got out." She paused to shake her head. "I have never felt so embarrassed or disgusted for another person. Told her to go suck a doorknob. Girl couldn't keep her legs closed when you were actually together. No way anyone believes she didn't comfort jump her way through every bed in the city. She's foul."

As far as mistakes went, Liya took the cake. We'd both been young, and it had seemed like a good idea. Our friends used to run in the same circles, and she'd been movie star gorgeous. Her dad was some low-end leader of some back-alley gang, giving her an understanding of the life, a requirement for whoever I was with. It had all made sense on paper at the time. At least until I found out she'd been sleeping with the sons of every mafia leader up and down the coast. There weren't many of us, but enough to make me reconsider our relationship. That was a year before my arrest, so, Liya was welcome to sleep with whomever she wanted as long as she stayed out of my bed.

"Anything else I missed?" I asked instead, changing the subject.

"Where do I even begin?" With that, she looped her arm through mine and turned me in the direction of the door. "I've

been helping Dad with the books. Grandma says I'm a natural, unsurprising, I know. Dad has me overseeing the management for the Titan. Mom doesn't think it's a good idea, not after what happened with Milo."

I wanted to point out that Milo put himself in that situation. He knew it, too. He let his temper get in the way of an escalating situation that resulted in five deaths by his own hands.

"I asked him about that," I told my sister as she propelled me in the direction of the hallway.

"Milo?"

I nodded. "We shared a block. He'd occasionally join the uncles in the yard and I asked him what happened."

Lavena stopped and faced me. "What did he say?"

I tried to recall his exact words. Milo wasn't known for his conversation skills. The few times we'd actually chatted, his answers were always short and cryptic.

*"Was having a bad day."*

I could see Lavena trying to process the information the way I had and fail as I had. "What does that even mean?"

I shrugged. "That's all he said."

"He killed five men with a pool stick because he was having a bad day?"

I nodded. "Seems so."

"What...?" She shook her head. "I know he's Mom's little brother, but how?"

He technically wasn't, though.

I was seven when my mom's parents brought a thirteen-year-old Milo into our lives. He'd been wild, and violent, and angry with the world. He'd been brought to the house in filthy, ratty clothes stained with blood. He hadn't been fed and his entire body was a road map of abuse. He'd refused to talk to anyone for months but he'd lash out at the slightest provocation. Yet somehow, my grandparents had kept holding

out hope, refusing to let him pull away. In the end, it must have worked because he stopped trying to run away. He stopped keeping knives under his pillow. He stopped getting into fights at school. He finished high school and got a job running Titans. One night, he just killed a bunch of people and was sent to prison for ten years.

“It’s his last year,” I said, remembering one of the uncles saying so. “He should be getting out later this year.”

Lavena hummed thoughtfully. “I wonder if he’ll take his place back at the Titan.”

“Probably.”

She hummed again and started walking. “Well, he better not think he’s in charge. Our profits are up by sixty percent since I took over and I’m not just handing that over to some crazy person.”

It was my turn to stop and stare at her. “Milo isn’t crazy.”

Lavena raised an eyebrow. “Five people, Darius. For no reason other than because he was having a bad day.”

“I’m sure there was more to it than that.”

She shrugged. “I don’t care. I worked my ass off making that place successful. I’m not letting him ruin that.”

I let it slide.

I couldn’t speak for Milo.

I had no idea what actually happened.

I barely knew the guy and we were together almost every day for four years. He was probably the closest thing I had to a best friend in that place. He’d had my back a few times when any of the other groups tried to start anything. He only had to look at a guy to warn them to back off.

But it still wasn’t up to me to decide what he would do once he got out.

“How’s Mom?”

My change in topic got the reaction I’d been hoping for.

“Crazy.” I was pulled into the hallway and towards the stairs. “I seriously think she’s lost her mind. You would not believe what she bought the other day because Dad was late arriving to their anniversary dinner.”

I grimaced. “I don’t know if I want to know.”

“Matilda’s,” Lavena said anyway.

“The clothing boutique?”

She nodded. “She said she went for some retail therapy to overcome the trauma of being forgotten and fell in love with the place, so, of course, she had to have it.”

“Christ...” I muttered, rubbing my free hand over my face. “What did Dad say?”

Lavena blinked up at me. “What do you think he said?”

“Nothing,” we both replied in unison.

“He keeps letting her buy all these clothing stores. She’s seriously collecting them the way some women collect diamonds. She owns like thirty of them. It’s insane.”

Lavena continued to chatter away, going over all the things I’d missed while guiding me down to the main floor.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked when we hit the foyer.

“Kitchen,” she stated simply. “I’m hungry and it’s supper time, and I’m not letting you out of my sights.”

## CHAPTER 3

# *Kamari*



I couldn't focus.

The evening crept in, folding the night like a warm blanket around me and I barely noticed beyond the fact that someone had lit a fire in the pit and shadows lurked just outside the golden halo.

I told myself I needed to snap out of it. I was being too obvious. The others would notice and ask questions I couldn't answer because I had no answers. I had no idea what happened or where I went wrong. The lake of euphoria I'd been floating in at the sight of Darius standing in the foyer was destroyed by everything else that immediately followed.

How had I been so wrong? How had I allowed myself to create such a world of fantasy and deluded myself into believing it to be fact? Was I honestly so pathetic?

Swallowing back the hot surge of heartbreak bubbling up in my throat, I forced myself to focus on anything that wasn't Darius Medlock.

"Well, you can't honestly expect anyone to understand something so intricate when they've never seen such a thing before," Sasha was saying when my attention moved past the roaring fire to where the other woman sat on the wide U-shaped bench making up the outer walls of the in-ground patio.

"But why would you do that?" Kas leaned forward, resting her palms on her knees. "If you don't know, don't touch it."

“Curiosity.” Sasha’s shoulder went up in a bump. “How else will we know what life was like back in the day?”

“Do you honestly think that makes it okay? You’re literally grave robbing.”

“She’s not wrong,” Lavena piped in, kicking off her sandals and pulling the ankle of her left leg under her. “You can’t just go into another country and steal their stuff. They call it studying culture to cover up for theft.”

“I’m not saying steal things. I’m saying, for historical purposes, it should be okay to study the graves without taking anything.”

“But people are assholes and stealing is what they do,” Lavena finished, leaning back. “Half the museums in the world are guilty of this, which is why I don’t feel bad when people like Florence helps liberate certain pieces back to their countries.”

“Florence!” Kas gasped, clapping her hands together once and turning to Sasha. “How is your aunt?”

Sasha shrugged. “Fine, I think. I got an email from her a month or so back. She was in Morocco.”

“We should go to Morocco,” Lavena sighed, closing her eyes and tilting her face up to the evening sky.

The fire popped and a wet log squealed. The others continued their chatter, flowing from topic to topic with no effort. I tried really hard to calm the voices asking why. I tried contributing but I could find nothing to add. So, I sat still and listened to the dragonflies skipping over the lake, the frog plopping into the water, the crickets in the grass. The world around the lodge was turning in for the evening, curling up to rest while the predators stretched and unfurled from their holes. I considered turning in and hiding under my blankets until the hurt stopped, but I knew it couldn’t be so easy. Eventually, dawn would come and he would be there in my space, taking up my air, my sanity. I couldn’t escape him, not in four years, not in three days, not ever. He was a tattoo etched across my heart, permanent and painful.

“Darius.”

I jumped at the sound of his name slicing through time and space. The wicker armrest squeaked under the unexpected clench of my fingers as my body reflexively flinched, teetering between needing to bolt and hide.

But the winding path to the house glinted in the dusk, pale and empty, absent of the devil.

My gaze swung to Lavena, confusion twinning with the mini panic attack that had my heart pattering a bit too fast. She was laughing at something Kas was saying. It took a few tries before I could hone in on the conversation.

“So, my dad says to Alexander, I can’t just request his own cell and Alexander says, then buy the prison.”

Lavena laughed. “That definitely sounds like something my dad would say.”

I thought of the days leading up to the trial, the months of pacing the floors with Marcella, waiting for news. Then the conviction and the sentencing.

It could have been worse. It could have been so much worse. He could have gone in forever. I could have lost him for good. The very thought still woke me from a dead sleep, soaked in sweat and on the verge of throwing up. I had to remind myself, a tired affirmation every time the numbing fear crept in that he would be out soon. Four years was nothing. I just needed to keep moving forward each day until I got him back.

Well, I had.

He was home.

He was a stone’s throw away and he might as well have been on another planet.

I rubbed at the places his fingers had curled into my skin, their weight hot and betraying.

*It was just a damn kiss, Kami!* The voice hissed, disgusted by my pathetic behavior.



*It was two*, I thought as if that made a difference.

God, maybe I was pathetic waiting on a man I had zero ties to beyond a kiss ... or two.

“Kam?”

I was standing.

I had no memory of pushing to my feet yet I stood there with my friends watching me as if I had lost my mind — maybe I had.

“I...” I motioned stupidly to the house, at a complete loss for words.

“Are you going inside?” Sasha snatched up her empty iced tea glass. “Could you grab me one, too, please?”

Grateful for the excuse, I took the glass and hurried up to the very place I had zero desire to be anywhere near when he was there somewhere in its shadows. But he was in his room. That was where he’d been all through dinner. He hadn’t even come down to grab the plate Lavena had made for him. I told myself I was relieved but knowing he was just a staircase away had filled me with a weird surrealism I didn’t know what to do with.

The kitchen sat in puddles of inky black that dripped from the ceiling to pool across the counters and collect in corners. I left the lights off as I padded the ten steps barefoot across cold linoleum, the glass in hand.

It was with me standing in the open doorway, the cool air of the fridge brushing all the skin not covered by my tank top and shorts that I completely forgot what Sasha was drinking. Three different bottles stared back at me with different colored liquids, each one open and dispensed. I brought the cup to my nose and gave a sniff.

Fruit cocktail?

I took another sniff, kicking myself for not paying attention. What was wrong with me?

Exasperated, I turned to set the glass down on the island behind me, prepared to smell each bottle until I found the right

one.

It took all of two seconds to realize I wasn't alone. The muted light of the fridge spilled around the broad silhouette of a man with the body of a god and a face painted in shadows. The unexpected invasion elected a squeak of surprise from me that was followed by the release of the cup in my hand. It slipped from my fingers and exploded into a million clear shards around my feet. The sound was momentarily the only one for several seconds while I clasped a palm over my startled heart and gaped.

He wasn't wearing a top. The elastic waistband of his gray sweats hung mockingly too low on narrowed hips and there was nothing stopping my eyes from consuming all that exposed skin illuminated by the feeble light. Kas would have been appalled by the waste of energy and letting out all the cold air but she wasn't there to see what I was seeing. She would understand.

He was a masterpiece of perfection, an intentionally crafted specimen designed to liquefy a woman.

Her thoughts.

Her body.

Her will and senses.

He was steel wrapped in muscles and ink I knew he hadn't had before going in. His beautiful chest was etched and crossed by a series of words twined around symbols I couldn't make out, but the color was dark, cut in deep and I'd never been so curious, but thoughts of meanings vanished when my attention wavered to his face.

Hard, glacier pools of endless blue studied me from the wall of darkness separating us, watching me as I watched him. The weighted silence drenched the air with everything I wished I could say, everything I wished he would do. I was on the crumbling edge of a ravine needing to jump off but wanting him to push me.

My skin flushed with heat even as goosebumps rose along my arms and tightened my nipples. My core rippled, a familiar

pang of longing. It was a desperate flutter to remind me I hadn't had a man since freaking high school, long enough that I was sure I wouldn't even know what to do with a penis. But I wanted his. God, I wanted him so far up inside me I could taste him.

As if summoned by the warped desires of my thoughts, Darius eased into the patch of light with such a fluid motion, he could have melted into the darkness and rematerialized before me. Or maybe my brain malfunctioned.

The fridge door was closed, cutting off my only source of air and light.

I gasped.

"Don't move," he murmured from the edges of space I couldn't see with a husky rasp that had zero business muddling my thoughts.

"Darius..."

"Shh."

I pressed my lips together and listened to the helpless patter of my heart as he drifted closer. I was about to warn him about the glass when his hands closed around my waist. The unexpected contact stole a shaky breath from my lungs that sounded much too loud and reedy in the silence. The fingers biting skin through the fabric of my top tightened. A heartbeat passed before I was lifted effortlessly. The loss of gravity had me reaching for him. My fingers curled into the warm, taut skin of his shoulders and I held him as he moved me over the destroyed cup. My legs instinctively closed around his hips, a reflex I hadn't meant but felt so natural, I almost missed the way he stiffened. The hands at my sides had fallen to my backside, his palms hot and firm on my ass cheeks where my shorts had gone up. I was sure that hadn't been the plan yet there we were, two intertwined bodies hidden by darkness and confusion. I was very aware of the erection cradled against my sensitive mound, the weight and thickness too visible through the thin material of his sweats.

Shit.

I knew I should get off him, but I couldn't move. I had dreamt of this moment, of being in his arms again for so fucking long. All I wanted for months was for him to hold me like this when he was finally free. I'd had daydreams of him walking into the room and catching me up into his arms and crushing me close.

But maybe I'd been wrong. Maybe it had only been a kiss, a random spur of the moment mistake that he didn't even remember. He was Darius Medlock after all. He probably kissed a lot of girls for no reason. Maybe I was the only one who it had mattered to.

"Kami." I hadn't realized I was crying until his arms were around me, sliding with weight and purpose across my back, crushing me close. "Fuck, baby, don't cry."

I tried to stop. I really tried. I wedged my face into the curve of his neck and squeezed my eyes shut. I held my breath, but that only made it harder, made the gasps louder as I fought not to sob.

He swore again and I felt him move away from the fridge and the broken glass. I wasn't sure where we were going until I heard the scrape of wood on linoleum. He sat with me still straddling his hips, my legs dangling over the edges of the chair, my arms aggressive bands around his neck.

"Stop," he murmured softly into my shoulder, his hands moving in soothing circles across my heaving back.

"I'm trying," I rasped into his neck.

He sighed and held me. He said nothing even when the tremors stopped and I was only sniffing. It wasn't until I raised my head that he finally broke the silence.

"Okay?"

I nodded, swiping across my cheeks and nose with the back of my hands. "I'm sorry."

"Fuck, Kami, why don't you ever fucking listen?"

I sniffled and frowned at the anger threading through the gentleness. "What do you mean?"

Rather than respond, he gripped my waist and got me to my feet. He towered over me, a hulking shadow I could barely make out, but I could hear the sharp, guttural inhale that sounded like it was getting shredded through a grater.

“Go. Just ... go.”

Baffled, I stared up at where I could only guess his face was. “What did I do?”

“Everything!” he barked at if expecting the question. “You...” with a deep growl, he pushed back, putting too much space between us. “You are the most infuriating woman.”

I opened my mouth to respond, my own tempers prickling, but he cut me off.

“If you speak right now, I won’t be held responsible for my actions.” My jaw snapped shut as if willed by some invisible force. “Good,” he muttered at the sound of my teeth clicking closed. “Because God himself wouldn’t have been able to save you from the ass paddling I’ve waited four fucking years to give you.”

I stiffened even as every nerve ending sizzled awake. My backside tingled and I had to work very hard to keep my voice even.

“Why...?”

He moved too quickly. His hands were ten fingers of hot steel around my throat. His thumb fixed against my lips, sealing them shut. Something cold and hard slammed into my back hard enough to earn a gasp of surprise.

His fingers flexed between gentle and business and I moaned his name because God help me, I was already going to hell.

Darius growled. His breath rushed across my face, burned against my lips. “Why do you think, Kami?” he bit out. “What did I tell you not to do but you kept doing? What crazy, reckless thing did you do that would make me want to put you over my knee and tan your hot, little ass?”

He started off strong and angry, but by hot, little ass, his voice was a gruff, aroused snarl that triggered a flood of release between my leg. The scalding, wet mess made me shift and squeeze my thighs closed.

“I don’t know ... I can’t think...”

The pad of his thumb wedged beneath my chin and my face was forced up to his.

“What about waltzing into a maximum security prison in a tiny, pink dress and your fuck-me heels like some goddamn...?”

It clicked then.

His words filled in the image of the last time I’d seen him. The last time our eyes had locked across the grimy visiting room at the prison. He’d been in the same blue jumpsuit as the inmates, his hands cuffed at his midsection, his arm gripped by a guard. I’d been so excited, I’d made sure to look my best. The pink dress wasn’t tiny. It was form-fitting with full sleeves and a u-shaped collar. It was decent and cute. The heels, well, he’d always had a problem with those.

But he’d taken one look at me and gone rigid. The very air around him all but solidified with a rage and purpose that momentarily washed over me in a wave of ice. He’d torn away from the guard just long enough to reach my table, lean in close and snarl, “*What the fuck are you doing here?*”

Startled, flustered, and confused, I mumbled something he’d ignored.

“*Get out,*” he’d hissed low just for me. “*Get the fuck out and don’t ever come back. Do you understand me?*”

I’d tried to argue.

“*Ever!*” His blue eyes cut straight through me. “*I swear to God, Kami, if you come back...*”

He didn’t finish. He cast a swift glance over the other bodies in the room, jaw set. He’d shot me another glance full of absolute fury before storming back to where the guard stood and out of sight.

He'd blocked my visits. I had no idea that was a thing that could happen, but I learned that he'd specifically requested I be kept out the following week. Then the week after that. I returned every week for six months and was turned away each time. Even my letters were sent back unopened. Maybe that should have been a hint that he didn't want to see me, but I had been so ridiculously adamant to see him, to assure him he wasn't alone or forgotten.

Then, Lavena explained it one evening over drinks with the girls. We'd been piled together in a booth at Sasha's favorite bar, a tiny hole in the wall in a ratty part of the city where even the rats were addicted to something. She claimed she loved the music, but none of us missed the glances exchanged with the sexy bartender with the full sleeve of tattoos and eyes perfect for the bedroom.

We were all on our third, maybe fourth drink when Kas mentioned her father meeting with Darius in the morning. I'm not ashamed to admit I used it to nudge the door open on that conversation.

*"Have you talked to him?"* I asked the other woman, who hadn't been blonde at the time. She'd been a redhead with a severe, chin length cut that made her look like the heroine from a noir movie.

Lavena threw back her martini, set her glass down and scowled at it. *"Nope. Dad pulled me into the office yesterday to tell me to stop, like I'm one of those girls who have a thing for guys in prison and not his fucking sister."*

*"Come on, Lavena, you know why,"* Kas grumbled and earned an indignant huff from the other woman.

I'd been around the Medlock family long enough to know not everything they did was on the up and up. I knew they did ... morally gray things occasionally. I knew Alexander was more than just a really lucky businessman. But there was still so much about their world I was still learning.

*"Why?"* I blurted before either of them could change the topic.

*“It’s not safe,”* Kas replied when Lavena rolled her eyes and raised a hand to catch the bartender’s attention. *“It’s an unspoken rule that women do not visit the men in prison.”*

I started to shake my head. *“I don’t understand. Why—?”*

*“In case I get kidnapped,”* Lavena cut in sharply. *“There are a lot of people in that place who would like nothing more than to get even with a Medlock.”*

*“You can’t have weaknesses in there, something the others can use against you,”* Kas continued. *“Wives, daughters, girlfriends, sisters, moms, these are all people who can be exploited to hurt the people inside. So, we stay away until they get out.”*

*“What if they never get out?”* I whispered.

Kas shrugged. *“Then you never see them.”*

I realized then that Darius was trying to protect me. So, I relented. I shelved my drive and determination. I stayed away from him and the prison, assuring myself he would eventually be free, and I could see him any time I wanted.

“I ... I wanted to make sure you were okay,” I whispered now in the stillness closing around us like a suffocating blanket. “I didn’t want you to be alone.”

The brush of his breath inches from my upturned lips had my stomach quivering.

“You put your life at risk, kitten. You put me in a position where I would have to break out and kill the fucker who touched you.” The thumb brushed back along my jawline. “You ever put yourself in danger like that again, there won’t be a place on earth you can hide where I won’t find you and put you over my knee. Do you understand?”

I resisted the urge to tell him that wasn’t a very convincing threat, but I nodded.

“Good.”

There was a moment when our every exhale tangled together in wisps, where he was so close it made no sense why we weren’t kissing already. He couldn’t use just any excuse to



push me away when his desire, his need for me was just as palpable as mine, when it was nudging me in the belly.

“Take me—”

“No.” His refusal was immediate and unflinching. “I can’t. I can’t give you what you want, Kami. I can’t be the person you deserve. Being anywhere near me ... if you get hurt because of me...” He raised the hand still on my neck and lightly brushed back a lock of hair off my temple. “I can’t keep you, kitten.”

Whatever else he was going to say, whatever protest I could have made was silenced by the sound of voices approaching the back door. I felt the ghost of his fingers across my lips then he was gone, and I was left to put on the performance of a lifetime as my best friends barged into the room.

“Jesus Christ, Kami!” Kas cried, coming to an abrupt halt on the threshold, causing the other two to slam into her back. “Why are you just standing there in complete darkness?”

She slapped the light switch next to the door. I winced and shielded my eyes. Mostly because I didn’t want them to notice I’d been crying, but also, the harsh glow was blinding. I turned away and started in the direction of the broom closet.

“I broke the cup,” I rushed out. “I was just getting the broom.”

“Where?” Sasha asked.

I pointed in the direction of the fridge. “Be careful. It’s on the floor.”

“I’ll get the broom,” Kas offered as Sasha hurried to find the pile.

“I’ll get the trash,” Lavena supplied, moving towards the cupboard under the sink.

“We should use a box,” Sasha advised, already bent over the mess, long fingers plucking up the broken pieces. “It’ll go through the bag.”

Lavena didn't pivot from her path. She rummaged through the cupboard and unearthed a box of sponges and a box of SOS pads. The pads were dumped in with the sponges and the newly empty SOS box was handed to the other woman. Kas returned with the broom and dustpan, and I stood there, watching them clean up my mess.

We retired to the plush sitting room once the glass was properly and responsibly dealt with. The ornate wood and glass coffee table was pulled out of the way and a makeshift bed was crafted on the floor with all the drinks and snacks piled on top. Sasha and Kas threw themselves down, each grabbing a bag of chips. I took a seat in my favorite armchair, a stiff piece of furniture with crushed velvet upholstery in burnt orange and fat buttons that always dug into my spine, but it was mine. It went with nothing else in the beige and black room and I knew Marcella hated the thing, but she let me keep it.

“Okay, so I've decided something.” Lavena passed around glasses of white wine before taking hers to the loveseat and flopping down. “But you can't freak out.”

The three of us exchanged wary glances.

“What a way to keep us in suspense,” Kas muttered, raising her glass, and crossing her legs on the mound of blankets.

Sasha popped a chip into her mouth and chewed, eyebrows raised. “Well, I'm intrigued.”

“I've decided,” Lavena paused dramatically to peer into each of our faces, “we're getting matching tattoos.”

No one spoke for a moment. We stared at the crazy pants in our midst with varying degrees of disbelief.

“Like real ones?” Sasha asked at last.

Lavena rolled her eyes. “Of course, real. Why would we get fake tattoos?”

“Why would we get real ones?” Kas countered.

“Because everyone got so weird with the whole exchanging blood incidents,” Lavena retorted.

Kas’s lips pursed. “You don’t say. Maybe you should have realized that before you cut my hand.” She held up her palm, thrusting the thin, white scar towards the blonde.

Lavena had the decency to grimace. “Okay, maybe that wasn’t my best idea at the time, but we were ten and *My Girl* made it seem cool.”

“So, you waited for me to slice open my hand before realizing, actually, I’m not doing that?” Kas cried. “It was your idea. You should have gone first. I had to get a tetanus shot *and* stitches!”

“I think we’re getting off topic.”

Kas pitched a packet of Twinkies at the other woman. It hit Lavena’s shoulder.

“See, this is why I said not to freak out!” Lavena cried. “We’re obviously going to go to a professional.”

“Oh, really? A whole professional?”

Lavena narrowed her eyes. “Well, I couldn’t find a half one, Kas. Will you stop being so dramatic?”

“I like it,” I cut in before Kas could retort whatever had her eyes narrowing and her lips pulling thin. “I think it’s a great idea.”

Lavena’s pretty face lit up. “See? Kam’s in. Sash?”

Sasha popped another chip into her mouth and chewed methodically while contemplating her choices. “Sure. Why not as long as Lavena isn’t the one doing the inking.”

Kas rolled her eyes. “Fine, but she’s getting in the chair first and I need to see her get stabbed before I’m getting anything done. My trust is broken.”

“Rude!” Lavena gasped.

“You know what else is rude?” She thrust her palm out at Lavena again. “Five stitches!”

“We should ask Enzo,” Sasha interjected. “He just got a new one the other day and it’s pretty nice.”

Lavena frowned. “The angel?”

Sasha shook her head. “No, it’s a cross with a dagger coming out of the bottom.”

Lavena seemed to think about it a moment before brushing it off with a shrug and returning to the topic. “So, we’re all in agreement? Matching tattoos?”

The vote was unanimous, but we all agreed that we had to choose the design together and all agree on the design.

I didn’t have any tattoos. I wasn’t opposed to the idea, I just hadn’t thought about it. I liked the idea of sharing one with three of the most important people in my life, though, especially for my first one.

I thought of the ones on Darius, the rows of neatly chiseled words. I wished I could have seen them better. Who was to say I would get the chance again? He’d been so clear on keeping me away for my own good. A stupid reason. I wasn’t safe with or without him. At least with him, we were together.

Maybe he just needed time. He’d been locked up for so long with so many bad people that maybe he just needed to get his head straight. I was already prepared to wait as long as necessary for him to get out. What was a little longer if it made him more comfortable?

“Earth to Kam.”

I blinked and focused on the faces watching me.

My cheeks warmed. “Sorry?”

“What are you thinking about so hard over there?” Lavena teased.

“Probably the shipment,” Kas answered for me.

“Maybe she’s thinking about pizza,” Sasha helped.

“We literally just finished eating.” Lavena muttered then stopped and looked at me. “Are you thinking about pizza?”

I started to shake my head when Kas blurted, “Maybe she’s thinking about Bob.”

That sent a ripple of cackles and hoots through the group and a flood of mortification through me.

“Do you still have him?” Sasha poked my bare leg just under the kneecap with a finger.

I flushed and nudged her back with my toe. “I still hate you guys for that.”

“Oh, come on!” Lavena laughed. “It was literally the only way we could get you laid.”

“Especially after that creep,” Kas added, face twisting into a mask of rage.

“Yes!” Sasha practically slammed her glass down on the carpet next to her. “That motherfucker.”

I put my hand up before they could start. “It was literally years ago, I got away, and everything is fine.”

Kas’s eyes narrowed. “I still think you should give us his number.”

“I’ll settle for his name,” Sasha muttered. “I’d happily make him my first hit “

“Nope, we’re not taking him out,” I argued, folding my legs under me and dragging the knitted throw higher around my hips. “He got his in the end and he will never do that to another girl. I made sure of it.”

“I told you that Taser would come in handy,” Lavena remarked, swirling her wine dramatically. “I still think you should let me get you a gun.”

“I will not carry a gun around!” I cried, horrified. “Have you met me? I’ll end up setting it off looking for mints and blow a hole in my own foot.”

“That’s what the safety’s for.” Sasha laughed. “But back to your battery-operated boyfriend.”

“Uh, ew,” Lavena interrupted, disgust and outrage curling her lips downwards. “It was rechargeable. Nothing but the best

for my bestie's birthday." She shot me a wink that had me pitching a couch pillow at her head.

The other two laughed and I shook my head. "I'll get you back for that one of these days."

"Did you bring good ol' Bob with you?" Kas teased.

I had, but I wasn't telling them that. *Bob*, as they had affectionately named the slender, silicone encased vibrator had been the perfect gift at the perfect time. It was just small enough and strong enough to hit all the notes, but also quiet enough that no one would hear it in the dead of night. I knew I would never live it down if I admitted just how often I actually pulled him out of his drawer.

"I think you guys have had way too much to drink," I said instead. "Especially when my sex life is the topic of discussion."

"Wait, sex life?" Sasha leaned forward. "What sex life?"

"Unless our little Kami has finally found someone?" Lavena cajoled teasingly. "Maybe that cute handyman that comes poking around the shop every weekend? What was his name?"

"Lance," I blurted before I could stop myself, and immediately regretted the slip when all three squealed and scooted closer.

"Why is *Lance* coming to the shop *every weekend*, Kami?" Sasha prodded.

"Can you guys calm down?" I laughed at the hopeful looks lighting up their faces. "Lance is very sweet, and the place is one short circuit away from burning to the ground. He's been very helpful."

"I bet," Lavena purred, wiggling her eyebrows. "The man certainly has the hands for being ... helpful." She held up her dainty palm up and wiggled her fingers. "Man hands."

Sasha and Kas *oo'd* and *ahh'd* like she'd described his penis. Maybe she had.

“You know he’s not coming around to ... fix circuits, right?” Sasha eyed me knowingly. “Only circuits he’s interested in fixing are yours.”

“Stop!” I begged, covering my face with the hand not holding my drink. “I don’t want that in my head. I’ll never be able to look at him again.”

“Well, maybe it’s time to stop dancing around it and jump him,” Sasha decided with a definitive nod.

Lavena nodded vehemently. “Next time he comes in, lock the door, flip the open sign, and just rip off your clothes. He’ll know what to do.”

I was on the verge of pointing out what a flawed plan that was when a shadow filled the doorway. The scent of him unspooled into the room, stealing the air, and making me lightheaded at the sight of him. I became too aware of every flex of his gorgeous frame as he crossed the threshold and dominated the space. My heart ached even as I willed my body not to shift, to give nothing away as he drew closer.

“Look who decided to join us.” Lavena scooted over to make room for her brother on the sofa. “Wine or beer, dear brother?”

“Neither.” All that sinewy muscle and limbs folded into the provided spot. “Am I interrupting?”

“Nope, we were just discussing the importance of ... plumbing.”

The two on the floor bobbed their heads in solemn agreement, despite their twitching lips.

“Nothing works properly if the pipes aren’t maintained by an expert,” Sasha added.

“Is there something wrong with the plumbing?” Darius asked, bemused.

I would have facepalmed if I could get away with it.

“Kami’s having plumbing troubles,” Kas supplied helpfully.

Darius's gaze shifted to me. "At the apartment?"

"Please stop listening to them," I muttered, wishing he would also stop watching me as if my broken plumbing was of the utmost importance.

"No, no, maybe Darius knows a really good plumber," Lavena interrupted.

"Lavena," I warned through gritted teeth, my face burning. "Enough."

Getting the hint, she put her hands up and sat back. "Fine. Then I guess you'll just have to get Lance to look at your pipes and hopefully he can figure them out."

There was a moment, a brief flicker of a heartbeat when I met Darius's eyes and understanding flashed in his. I didn't know whether I was further mortified or relieved he was fully in the loop. I realized when his eyes darkened that I was neither. The rush of heat and panic that plowed through me was palpable.

"Lance?" Darius never released me from the cold, hard question, not even when directing the question to his sister.

I didn't know whether to assure him there was nothing between me and Lance or point out that he literally wanted nothing to do with me, thus, had zero say in who I took to bed. Neither seemed like a safe option. So, I said nothing.

"He's the dreamy handyman Mom hired for *Le Hush*," his sister provided helpfully. "And we all think he has the sweets for our little Kami. We also think she should just go for it, you know? Throw herself at his mercy and let him—"

"Okay, enough!"

Murder.

I was going to murder her, then hire Sasha to help me bury her body.

"Dreamy handyman coming to help the shy damsel with her leaky pipes sounds like a really bad porn," Kas decided, downing the rest of her wine.



“Why are her pipes leaking?” Sasha wondered.

Kas shrugged. “Maybe she’s just that horny.”

Holy Christ.

I loved my sisters. I loved them more than my own life. There was literally nothing I wouldn’t do for them, including hide a body. But sometimes, I wanted to hit all three of them in the face with a shovel.

“Can we talk about literally anything else?” I begged, casting each of them a withering glower, struggling to convey my discomfort without outright telling them to shut the fuck up.

They got the hint.

I was relieved when they pivoted to a different line of conversation, one that didn’t involve me, my pipes or anything leaking. I tried to listen, but Darius hadn’t lifted his attention off me. There was a darkness in his eyes, a watchfulness that made me too aware of my own skin. He seemed to be analyzing his next move, like a panther lying in wait. Beneath the throw, I shifted, the crotch of my shorts rubbing a little too hard against my mound. It took strength not to adjust the denim down, or move again, but he seemed to sense it; his eyes narrowed at my movement.

“I’m going to bed.” Lavena lunged up to her feet with unexpected abruptness, long arms stretched to the ceiling.

“Me too.” Sasha followed suit.

“I’m not tired yet,” Kas began only to have Sasha grab her elbow and forcibly yank her up.

“It’s your turn to paddle tomorrow and I’m not taking over because you’re too tired.”

The trio seemed to be in such a hurry that I wasn’t quick enough to catch up when they were already moving to leave.

“Guys?” I started to push the throw off my lap only to have a pillow flop into it by Lavena.

“It’s your turn to clean up,” she stated, already headed towards the door with the other two hot on her heels.

I sat there, dumbfounded, racking my brain trying to remember when that had become a rule. We usually cleaned up together. Everyone tidied up their own mess. The sitting area was a tangle of rumpled blankets, discarded pillows, and empty wine glasses.

“What the hell?” I muttered before realizing I wasn’t alone.

Darius grinned as he unfurled from his seat with the grace and elegance of a predator. “I’ll help.”

“You don’t have to...”

But he was already snatching up pillows and shaking off crumbs. Swallowing down my exhale, I stood and began gathering my own blanket. I folded the material and tossed it neatly over the back of the armchair. I organized the pillows back into place, then reached for the mini bed Sasha and Kas had made on the floor.

I heard Darius come up behind me as I bent and gathered the throws. My spine prickled with awareness, but I kept my focus, fixing all my attention on aligning each corner. I was painfully aware of him snatching up the pillows with his big hands and placing them on their rightful sofas. When he returned to help me with the blankets, I panicked.

“I got this,” I blurted.

He already had the cream-colored knit in his grasp. It was shaken out and the corners were brought together.

“You’re upset with me,” he said instead, ignoring me completely.

I turned to him, slightly confused. “I’m not upset with you,” I said honestly.

He paused in his folding to meet my gaze. “Hurt then.” I couldn’t lie to that. My attention shifted to my hands, and I heard him sigh. “Kam—”

“Don’t,” I whispered. “I’m fine. I’m a big girl.”

The throw dropped from his hand, unraveling as it hit the ground by his feet. His now empty fingers extended to touch my elbow. The calluses on each fingertip scratched my skin, sending a tingle up my arm.

“Kam,” he said again lightly, luring me with his warm, husky murmur to peer up into his hypnotic eyes. He bore down into my face, his expression a mixture of regret and annoyance. “Go to bed, kitten. I’ll finish this.”

He took the blanket from my grasp and turned away from me.

Just like that, I was dismissed. He couldn’t even take two seconds to face me, to tell me in the light why we couldn’t be together. He needed the cloak of darkness like we were some kind of sin that needed to be hidden.

“You’re being an idiot,” I snapped before I could stop myself, before my brain could register what exactly I was flinging at the hard wall of his back.

A full heartbeat erupted between us, a hush before a brewing storm. I felt rather than saw the rising tension in his shoulders and back as he straightened to his full, murderous height

His chin turned slowly over one shoulder until I was captured in the hard glint of his eyes, but I was fueled by every ounce of my own emotions. My happiness at seeing him. My confusion by his rejection. My pain at waiting so long for a man who could so easily push me away. There was no going back.

“What did you say?”

In it now, I plowed on. “You’re being an idiot,” I repeated slower, but with a very clear tremor in my voice. “You think I’m the same eight-year-old little girl you used to know who needs protecting—”

He turned, a dangerously slow turn on his heel until I was under the full scrutiny of his gaze. “You have not been an eight-year-old in my eyes in a very long time.”

“Your sister’s friend then,” I corrected. “Some helpless girl who—”

“Not even that.”

I swallowed hard, kicking myself for not properly thinking out my argument before confronting him. “What then? Why —?”

“Who do you think I am, Kamari?” He took a step forward with the hard annunciation of my name in a way I had never heard him use before. “What do you see when you look at me?”

The man I’d been in love with since I was eighteen came to mind, but there was a halo of fury radiating around him, warning me to pick my words carefully. Proclaiming my love for him would probably get me strangled.

“I don’t know what you’re asking,” I said instead, going for dumb.

“Don’t do that,” he growled. “You’re too smart for that game.” He drew in a breath. “We kissed.” The gruff confession was seemingly shredded through his teeth. “That’s enough.”

“For who?”

Eyes the dark of night pierced through me, penetrating straight to my soul. If possible, he grew in size, expanding to loom over me with the power and strength of a bull.

“Back down, kitten,” he murmured, so quietly I almost didn’t hear him. “I mean it. Stop now and go to bed.”

“But I want—”

“What?” he snarled, a mask of something hot and primal darkening his features. “What do you want, Kami?”

“You,” I confessed so softly, I almost didn’t hear it myself. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

His nostrils flared. His fingers clenched at his sides. “Do you know what comes with wanting me? Pain. Death. Long, lonely nights. You think what I am, what I do is romantic. It’s

not. I will ruin you, kitten. I will steal everything you are and everything you have. I will leave you in broken pieces and you will hate me. Is that what you want?"

I was breathing too hard. My blood was roaring between my ears, muffling everything, but the anguish in his voice.

"What if I still want it?"

"Then you're fucking crazy." He looked away from me to something along the far wall behind me. A muscle danced in his jaw, a vicious flex of a man chewing steel. "Go to bed, Kami."

"No."

Eyes wide with the same surprise I felt snapped back to me with such force I almost jumped. "What?"

"You want me, too," I forced through the sandstorm raging in my throat.

He blinked as if I'd just said the stupidest thing he'd ever heard. "Of course, I fucking want you. All I've wanted every night for four years was you. You're all I think about all the fucking time. Wanting you isn't the problem, Kami. Taking you, destroying you, and you loathing me afterwards with every breath..." he sucked in a breath as if bracing himself to finish. "I would rather die than have you hate me."

My heart hurt with a ferocity that made my stomach hurt. Hot tears of anger and pain welled in my eyes, obscuring the sight of him.

"Why do only you get to decide?" I threw at him. "Why don't I get a say?"

"Because," he took a single step forward, but the heat of his fury slammed into me, "you won't make the right decision."

"Then you are an idiot," I snapped. "You're a fool and a coward—"

"Enough!" he growled, lips pulling back over gritted teeth. "I am a lot of things, but I am not a coward."

“Then touch me.”

His head snapped back as if I'd struck him. “I've been in prison for four years, kitten. I haven't had a woman in five. If I fucking touch you right now ... if you keep pushing me...”

He broke off abruptly and spun away. I watched him stalk to where he'd dropped the blanket and bend at the waist to snatch it up with a vengeance that made the corners snap.

My insides were quivering. My heart was a mess and I felt almost faint, but my mouth opened, and the two most damning words spilled out.

“You'll what?”

## CHAPTER 4

### *Darius*



“**Y**ou’ll what?”

The challenge had been issued.

The ball was in my corner.

It was up to me now how I was going to handle this ... handle her. Putting her over my knee occurred to me. Paddling her tight ass until she couldn’t sit right seemed like the perfect solution to such a bold and dangerous taunt.

But I knew if I got her on my knee, her ass within reach, it wasn’t a spanking she’d be getting and that stopped me.

“I’m going to pretend you did not just say that to me,” I said instead, careful to keep my back to her, my eyes fixed on the armchair she’d been sitting in when I’d made the foolish decision to join the group. “Leave, Kami. I’m not going to say it again.”

I counted each beat of my heart, monitoring how long before I could trust myself to move without jumping her.

“No.”

My eyelids slammed shut as if that single word had the power to spear me straight between the shoulder blades. My resolve wavered, a violent tectonic shift of my fault line taking the floor out from under me. It crossed my mind that I could have snatched up one of the many reasons she’d handed me to keep her at bay. I could have agreed about her age, her relationship with my sister, the fact that I was convicted and incarcerated for murder, that it had only been one fucking kiss

in a different lifetime, and it didn't still haunt me. The possibilities were endless, yet I couldn't bring myself to do it. I couldn't push her away. Now, she'd thrown down the metaphorical gauntlet and I was left to accept the challenge or run like a true coward.

Five years of abstinence won, five years of wanting this damn woman, five years of cold showers and distractions. My body had pivoted on its heels before I could stop it. It swung to face the temptress standing too close for her own good. Little witch didn't even bat an eye. She stared at me with quiet desperation and a pleading that made me ache inside, and not for the first time, I wondered if she had any idea just how expressive her features were, how easily she could be read. Maybe it was that tiny glitch in her DNA that made her so alluring, so ... vulnerable. In a world where every expression was closely monitored and judged for weakness, her lack of walls fascinated me.

The full curve of her bottom lip tucked in between her nibbling teeth, a nervous habit I didn't think she knew she did, and I hated and thrived in the knowledge that she was uneasy. Her trepidation fueled something in me, a flame that built into an inferno, hot and hungry. It made me want to sink my fingers into the soft skin of her arms and close all that unnecessary space between us.

So, I did.

I ate up the five feet in two strides. I hooked ten fingers into all that lush, glorious hair and I dragged her into me. Her gasp tightened my hold. It sent a molten river of desire crashing through me.

"You asked for this," I snarled into her upturned face, her parted lips, her wide, dark eyes. "Remember that." I fisted the silky strands knotted between my fingers just hard enough to coax a whimper from her. "Remember I told you to fucking run. I told you this was a bad idea."

I kissed her before she could change her mind.

I dominated the soft pillows of her mouth, forcing them apart with my teeth, my tongue invading. She tasted sweet, a



mixture of cherries and wine. Her moan vibrated around me, a lusty purr of submission. Her fingers hooked into the material of my top, holding her to me as she went up on her toes. The effort didn't bring her anywhere close to my height, but it was enough to have my hands drop from her hair and circle her waist. I hoisted her up and her legs immediately swung around my hips.

I took her to the sofa with our lips locked and her entwined around me. Neither of us relinquished our battle or slowed our assault, even when I lowered her amongst the throws and pillows and moved over her.

“Don't stop,” she panted against my mouth, her fingers fumbling with the hem of my top.

The material was torn up and over my head. It was pitched somewhere out of sight by one of us and I was back to her mouth, her chin, her neck. I made a path across her throat and down into the little hollow with my tongue. Her fingers were in my hair, urging me to keep going and I nearly laughed; crazy girl had no idea nothing short of a nuclear bomb was going to stop me now. Lavena herself could stroll into the room and I was still going to fuck the shit out of Kami. She wasn't escaping, not now, not until we were both sore and exhausted.

My fingers twisted into the thin straps of her top, my lips over the hot swell of her left breast.

“Last chance, kitten,” I growled, allowing her one final out.

“If you fucking stop, I'll kill you in your sleep,” she bit out, fingers working on the snaps of her shorts.

With a snarl that sounded nothing like me, I ripped down her top, spilling full, perfect breasts into view. The soft mounds fit snug against my palm, the tips hard, sensitive points. I circled them with my thumb, rolling them lightly and sending Kami bucking under me with a guttural moan. Her hips drove up against mine and I pushed back, grinding the full heat of my arousal into her mound.

“Foreplay next time,” she hissed, thumbs hooking into the waistband of my sweats. “I’m ready. Fuck me!”

Christ, who was this woman?

The shy, little bookworm I’d grown up with was dragging my bottoms over the curve of my ass, demanding and greedy. It was all I could do to keep from coming in my pants.

“Easy, baby,” I breathed. “This will end before it begins if you—”

She had my cock out and in her hands. The heavy weight gave a vicious and violent throb against her palm. I may have whined her name. I couldn’t think past the buzzing in my skull. Everything after that was a blur of ripping clothes and ragged breaths. I had a vague recollection of asking about protection and her giving a response about an IUD, but I couldn’t be sure before I was plunging home.

The world exploded.

Time shuddered to a stop.

Kami cried out, her body a tight, hungry fist around my dick. Her arms and legs clasped around me, a crushing clamp, holding me in place. As if I could move. She hadn’t been kidding about being ready; she was soaked, dripping around me and onto the cushion. I made a mental note to get Mom a new sofa, but that was a different problem for when my brain wasn’t leaking out of my ears.

“Oh my God,” she sobbed into my shoulder, her body giving a brutal shudder beneath me that rippled up my cock.

I squeezed my eyes shut and begged the gods not to embarrass me. Unlike the other men on the cell block, I hadn’t beat my meat every morning in the shower. I hadn’t jerked off in a sock in my bunk. I’d pushed it down and out of my mind every day. It was sheer willpower and determination that kept me from pumping five years’ worth of cum into Kami’s welcoming heat.

“Okay,” she panted. “I’m ready.”

I realized she'd been waiting for her own body to adjust. She had no idea I wasn't moving because I physically couldn't and not because she'd needed a minute, but I took the win.

I fucked her.

I drove into her with the wild abundance of a man who hadn't had sex in years. I slammed into her again and again, using my knees and the armrest above her head as support, and Kami met every brutal onslaught with a downward thrust of her hips. She dug blunt nails into my ass, dragging me harder into her. Her walls rippled and sucked, getting tighter the closer she came to the cliff. I needed her to go first. It was more than a matter of pride. It was pure, selfish necessity. I needed to feel her come on me, around me. To suction and milk me into her body.

“Come for me,” I hissed into her ear. “Come on, kitten.”

She gave a heaving sob that matched the clench of her pussy. Her eyes squeezed closed.

“Shit!” she whined, then again, louder, “shit, shit, shit ... Darius!”

“Open your fucking eyes!” I growled at her, quickening my pumps, hitting her with every bit of my strength.

Her lashes flew open, and I watched as she came with savage and merciless release. Her claws raked down my back, tearing flesh as I ripped her apart.

My release felt endless. I sprayed her walls and felt it come free of her body in squirts, destroying my mother's sofa. Kami must have felt it too because she gasped and peered down our bodies at where I was still twitching inside her.

“So much...” she groaned, spreading her thighs even wider for me.

I pushed in deeper, my gaze never leaving her flushed and sated face. “We might be here a while,” I panted, exhausted and sore.

To my eternal torment, her eyes lifted to mine, and she whispered, “I want all of it.”

I kissed her with mindless starvation. I crushed her in my arms. My cock had stopped pulsing, but I kept it inside her, not ready to leave her warmth. It was her body that ejected me, spilling me out with a thick glob of release. We both shuddered at the unexpected release and the cold air nipping at cooling skin.

I braced my forearm on the cushion next to her head, careful not to catch hair when peering down at her. She offered me a lazy smile that clenched around my heart.

I fucked Kami.

The realization of my action hit me as both a victory and a tragedy. Being inside her was all I'd wanted for so long. Finally having her only opened the floodgates. It only made me want her again and again. I wanted to live inside her. I wanted to wake up every morning and go to bed every night buried in all that wet heat. One time was supposed to be enough, but...

Kami's face lifted, eyebrow raised. "Again?"

"Tired?"

Her grin was sly and mischievous as she reached between our bodies and guided my already hard dick to her opening.

I lay with Kami curved into my arms an hour later, tucked against my chest, our bodies sticky with sweat and sex. The air was thick with it. Our breathing had slowed. The tremors had stopped. We lingered in that fuzzy afterglow where time didn't exist and tomorrow would never come, yet I still gripped her tight, knowing that reality would eventually shatter our cocoon of solitude and we would have to face all the consequences.

"Kami?"

She hummed quietly against the hollow of my throat. Her fingers traced light circles against my sweat slickened back.

I smoothed a coil of hair off her cheek. "No one can ever know about this. Not the girls, definitely not Lavena. Not anyone."

The lazy trails of her fingers stilled. For a moment, her silence was the only loud noise in my head.

“Okay.”

I waited for her to continue, to add stipulations, to argue, but she lay quiet once more. I almost didn't want to say the rest, but things had already gone too far. We ... I had caused so much damage. I allowed things to get so complicated and dangerous.

“We can't do this again,” I whispered into the satin strands of hair at the top of her head. “We can't ... once we leave the lodge, we can never be together again.”

I didn't miss the tension in her limbs, the harshness in her every breath. “Why?” Her head lifted then, and I was forced to look into her beautiful face when I hurt her; that was my punishment, I realized. “Please give me a reason. A good reason,” she stressed when I opened my mouth.

I decided on the truth. Maybe it would be horrific enough, reason enough to appease both our broken hearts.

“Uriah Volkov has put a hit on my back.”

Her hurt dissolved into panic, and I immediately wished I hadn't said anything. “What—?”

I touched her cheek. “I'm going to figure it out, but until I do, it's going to be very messy for a while.”

Denial furrowed her brows, highlighting the tears gleaming in her eyes. “No, Darius, I won't let—”

I kissed her.

“Easy, kitten,” I soothed. “There's nothing you can do. I'm handling it, but until I do, I need to not be worried about you. Do you understand?”

She shook her head. “But why? Why is he doing this? You did the time.” Her bottom lip quivered, creating a tremor through her raspy words.

“I killed his son.”

“You didn't—”

“But I did,” I reminded her gently. “I confessed to it. I did time for it. I’m responsible.” Her bottom lip slipped between her anxious teeth. “I will fix this,” I tried to assure her.

“Then don’t go back. Stay here or go somewhere, anywhere. I’ll go with you and—”

Despite the urgency in each rushed plea, I felt myself grin at her suggestions. “No, you’re not and neither am I. I’m not a coward and you can’t live without the girls. We both know that. Not to mention our parents.” I kissed her again, lingering on the sweet taste of her. “Do you trust me, kitten?”

She nodded without thought or hesitation.

“Then trust that I will fix this, okay? I will not leave you unless there is absolutely no other choice.”

A tear slipped the corner of her eye and rolled until it clung to the tip of her nose. I gently brushed it away.

“I don’t like the *no other choice* option.”

I gave a quiet chuckle. “Neither do I, but I won’t lie to you.”

Her exhale was shaky and broken by a faint sob. “I just got you back.”

“Hey.” I pulled her down and rose up on my elbow to peer down into her shattered expression. “Look at me.” I tipped her chin up until she had no choice but to meet my eyes. “You can’t tell Lavena about this, okay? Or the others. I can’t worry about both of you, and I don’t trust her not to do something stupid to protect me.” I smoothed a thumb along the curve of her cheek. “Promise me, Kami.”

Her throat muscles bunched. “I…”

I could see the war tearing her up inside. I knew I was asking the world of her. I knew there was a damn code they lived by, and I was asking her to break it, but this was my sister’s life. One word from Kami and Lavena would go into full battle mode. She would face Volkov and he would not show her mercy; a sister for a brother, a daughter for a son would seem like poetic justice in his eyes.

“He will kill her,” I murmured. “He will do it slowly and with as much pain as he can get out of her.”

I was scaring her. I could see it in the pinpricks of her eyes, the shallow hitches in her breathing, but that was what it had to come down to.

“I promise, but what if he goes after her anyway?” she whispered. “She should know so she can protect herself.”

I shook my head. “That’s not how things work. There’s still a ... code, an honor system. He won’t touch her unless she puts herself between us. He wants me and I want it to stay that way.”

She made a weak whining sound that I shushed gently by claiming her lips. The kiss was longer, deeper, and laced with every shred of apology and assurance I could offer without giving her what was left of my soul. She held me with bruising arms, gripping me as if terrified I might vanish.

“I didn’t want things to be this way,” I promised her. “If I could go back to that April with you in the rain ... I would still answer that call, but I wouldn’t have waited that long to kiss you.”

Her fingers touched the side of my face before brushing back through my hair to cup the back of my head. “I’ve lost you before I even had a chance to have you.”

I shook my head. “You will always have me.”

“Not the way I want you.”

I lowered my gaze, unable to stand anymore of the despair in her eyes. “You don’t belong in my world, kitten. I couldn’t stand it if it destroyed you.”

“But I have to sit in the shadows and watch it destroy you?”

I lifted my focus to her face. “I was born into this. I know my fate. I accept it.”

“I don’t.” A tear slid down the corner of her eye and disappeared into her hairline. “I don’t accept losing you. I don’t accept being without you.”

“Fuck, Kami.”

I held her for the second time that night while she cried for me, and I knew it wouldn't be the last. There was still so much more heartache I would force on her before it was over. I couldn't protect her from it. No one could. That was the hand we were dealt, but we had three days still to steal what little time we could before we were separated for good.



Pale fingers of dawn were creeping in through the windows when I lifted a slumbering Kami up into my arms. Her tiny frame settled perfectly in all the right places. Her head found its spot against my shoulder, her face in my neck. Her skin smelled of sweat and roses, and me. My scent lingered with hers on everything.

My skin.

My hands.

My brain.

It seeped into my very soul, creating a fragrance I knew would haunt me for the rest of my life.

*At least I have that,* I told myself as I took her to her room. If that night was the only one I would have with her, at least I had it.

*Was it selfish?* I asked myself as I pulled the sheets around her naked silhouette. Was I being too paranoid? Men in my position lived full, mostly unhindered lives. They married and had children and ultimately wound up in prison or dead. Those



were our options. Some of us got clean-ish. We straightened out our businesses and kept the shady stuff to a minimum. But the Medlock empire was too vast for that. It was five generations of building and monopolizing the industry. My family had at some point had their hands in everything. If it could be profited from, we were already dominating it.

We weren't good people.

Sure. We gave generously and heavily to organization and charities. We made it a rule to give back forty percent of every earning to make up for all the bad things we did to make that money. Did it atone for our sins? Maybe? Who was I to say but one thing was very clear — men like me didn't get happily ever afters. We didn't get full and comfortable lives. The general rule was to never bring someone into the life that didn't grow up in it. Their innocence, no matter how much you prepare them would get them killed.

Kami had no idea what she was asking. She liked the idea of my world because Lavena and the others were in it, but she couldn't possibly know what would be expected of her, how much she would lose, and I couldn't watch that. I couldn't lose her.

Maybe I was selfish.

Maybe submitting to what we both wanted desperately was the lesser of two evils.

Maybe a short life with her was better than a long one without.

I brushed back a dark lock of hair off her neck and shoulder. I let my fingers linger on her cheek. She stayed asleep, giving me too much opportunity to study her when all her defenses were down.

Defenses.

I almost laughed.

She had none.

She had zero self-preservation.

She talked to everyone.

I'd never met anyone so fucking open and trusting. She followed the girls home randomly one day just because Lavena told her to for God sakes. But that made her Kami. That unbelievable sweetness. Everyone who met her loved her. She just had that pull with people.

It would also be the very thing that would get her hurt.

A kind heart was easy to manipulate.

A soft heart was easy to kill.

Tugging the sheets more tightly around her, I left to clean our mess. I brought her clothes up and left them at the foot of her bed. I straightened the throws and pillows around the sitting room. Then, I pulled out the compact upholstery cleaner and set to work erasing all traces of us off my mother's sofa.

It was full morning by the time Lavena found me on the back porch, cigarette at my lips, and a million thoughts clamoring around in my head.

"You better not let Mom catch you smoking." She pinched the smoke from my fingers and took a deep inhale before passing it back. The smoke escaped her lips in a white plume. "She'll make you smoke the whole pack."

I snorted. "There's only three left. I think I'll survive."

My sister clicked her tongue. "Not if you're smoking. Stuff'll kill ya."

She was already dressed for the day in jean cut-offs and a black tank over a bikini top. Her hair was twisted up in a messy knot and held in place by two chopsticks.

"How does it feel being back?"

I shrugged. "Unreal. Like I'll wake up and be in that cell again."

I didn't tell her I hadn't slept hardly since returning out of that very fear. The few times I dozed off, I'd come awake gasping, drenched in sweat, blinking around my surroundings as if expecting the walls to be too close, too white.

Freedom seemed to be mocking me, toying with my reality, taunting me as if waiting for my guard to drop only to snatch it all away. I had yet to mentally process the two worlds and the abrupt shift between them. I hadn't even been given a warning when they released me. They'd pulled me from my cell three months early, hauled me to the warden's office where I was told I was being released for good behavior — whatever that meant. I wasn't given directions. I wasn't eased into the process. I went from getting chucked into a shoebox for four fucking years to getting tossed out just as abruptly. The entire time I stood outside the prison gates, staring at the miles of nothing ahead of me, the dirt road, the miles of dead grass, I waited for them to come running out, laughing that they were just fucking with me.

No one came.

No one stopped me when I boarded the bus.

No one pulled us over at the gas station where I was told I was on my own.

No one was waiting for me when I found the only payphone on the face of God's green earth and collect called my dad.

Collect called.

That was still a thing I never thought would last.

But apparently I was free.

Lavena nodded once then slid her arm through mine. Her head rested on my shoulder. "Was it awful in there?"

"It wasn't great."

I'd had it a lot better than most of the guys in there. I had the uncles and Milo, and the Medlock name. I was given a lot of space, which suited me fine. I made a few connections, formed the necessary acquaintances, but kept to myself.

"Make any friends?"

There was a rule in prison — be careful what you say to the person you share a block with. They were always the first to turn on you if it meant getting a lesser sentence. The only

person I could almost see myself possibly calling ... not a friend exactly. Not even an acquaintance. I didn't know what, but maybe Milo.

“If I had to trust someone to have my back, I guess it would be Milo.”

Lavena clicked her tongue. “I guess being mom's little brother, he would have had to watch out for you.”

I gave a grunt. “How were things here?”

She shrugged. “We were all upset, but I think Edmund took it the hardest.”

I glanced down at her blonde head resting on my shoulder. “Why?”

“He thinks if he hadn't gone to that party or gotten into that fight with that Volkov kid you would have been home.”

I turned, detaching myself from her grasp. “That *kid* was a grown ass man. He had sixteen years and a hundred pounds of muscle on Edmund. He approached an eighteen-year-old and started a fight thinking he could prove something. Edmund got lucky by accident. I took the fall because he didn't deserve to be punished for defending himself.”

Her blue eyes narrowed. “You don't think we haven't told him? He won't listen.”

I made a mental note to talk to my baby brother, to give him a hard shake if necessary. Ivan Volkov had been a thirty-four-year-old asshole on a power trip and buzzing on coke. He saw a kid from a rival family and thought he could prove something. If Edmund hadn't managed to push him over the railing down fifteen feet, he would have killed Edmund, and no one would have batted an eye then. The only reason the cops got involved at all and the matter wasn't settled between the families like any other situation was because some jogger watched Ivan hit the ground. He was the only witness. The only one who saw someone with dark hair running away. At that distance, he couldn't even be sure it wasn't me when I came forward. Edmund and I were almost the same height and build and we both had dark hair.

I hadn't hesitated stepping forward when the uniformed police officers showed up at the apartment. I ignored Edmund's roar of protest and offered them my wrists. My father hadn't stopped me, nor had my mother or Lavena. All three stood and watched as I was marched from the building. Edmund was the only one who had started after me, panic wild in his blue eyes.

"What are you doing?" he'd cried, grabbing the back of my top. "I was—"

"You're going to call Howard," I cut him off sharply, yanking out of his grip and looking past him to where Dad stood, jaw tight. "Let me go."

The last time I saw my brother's face was as the elevator doors slid closed between us. There was fear in his eyes and guilt. I'd hoped he would realize that was the only way, but apparently, he hadn't.

"I'll talk to him," I said, turning my head to watch a bird swoop down and snatch something off the surface of the water. I stabbed what was left of my dead cigarette into the ashtray on the patio table and faced my sister. "Ivan got lucky it was Edmund and not me. If Edmund hadn't killed him, I would have."

## CHAPTER 5

### *Kamari*



I woke up sore the next morning. My thighs throbbed and my back ached, and that was nothing compared to the tenderness in my vagina. My entire body hummed with a reminder of just how out of shape I was in that department. I probably should have stretched first. I probably should have done some squats and maybe took a ride on a horse for a few miles. Who would have thought so many muscles could get used and abused in a single night? I certainly didn't.

“Fuck...” I whined, rolling off the mattress in the most undignified manner. My limbs protested the unnecessary motions, but I managed to heave myself up onto my feet and stood in the silence of my bedroom, very certain I hadn't started there the night before.

I didn't dwell on the mysteries. I waddled my way into the bathroom. I flipped on the shower and stepped under the spray without waiting for the temperature to adjust.

It was between rinsing the shampoo and applying the conditioner to my hair when brutal reality slapped me upside the head.

I fucked Darius Medlock.

We fucked hard and aggressive, and holy shit.

I had fantasied about that moment a million times and always reminded myself that it probably wouldn't be as good as the buildup in my head, but holy ... shit. The man had broken my vagina. They said it was a thing in books and movies, but I never believed it, yet I knew without a shred of

doubt that no man would ever, ever compare to what we did on Marcella's favorite sofa. He had ruined me. Ruined sex. Even Bob — bless his little electronic buzzer — wasn't going to fix what were now top shelf orgasms.

What the hell was I going to do?

He'd been very clear we weren't going to make this a thing, whatever this was. He'd also been very clear on a lot of other things I didn't know what to do with.

Darius wasn't a liar.

He wasn't like other men who made up long and dramatic stories to get into a girl's pants. If there was danger in us being together, I believed him. Of course, I did. I had no reason not to. But I hated it. I hated that I finally got him, that he was finally in my arms and some asshole with a grudge was ruining it for me. I was mad enough to find Uriah Volkov myself and beat him with my stilettos. The man had some nerve coming after Darius when his son was the one responsible for everything that happened. What's more, Darius had done the time. He paid the price. Ivan Volkov was a skeeze and the world was a better place without him, even I knew it.

But the one thing I'd learned ages ago was that blood was never enough. Volkov would come after Darius. Someone in Darius's family — most likely Lavena — would go after someone in Volkov's family, and the cycle would go on forever. That was how these stupid feuds always ended until it became one giant massacre where no one survived, and while I hated that Darius was making me keep all of this from Lavena and the girls, I knew ... I knew he was right. Lavena would go on the immediate defense. She would never sit by while someone she loved was being threatened. She would absolutely do something dangerous and reckless, and stupid and get herself killed.

I closed my eyes against the spray and held my breath until all I heard was my own heartbeat between my ears and the water hitting my abused body. I listened to the soft whoosh as

I let the air out, wincing as every inch of me thrummed viciously.

Three days.

That was what he'd essentially offered me. Three days to pack six years of wishing, wanting, and fantasizing into. Getting into bed with him hadn't been my only goal. Was it a large part, absolutely, but I wanted him. All of him. I wanted a lifetime with him by my side. My want and need for Darius had started as a crush, but I loved the man.

I'd been in love with him since the first time he'd locked eyes with me, and I saw that deep, dark, twisted hunger that made my stomach knot up.

I'd been in love with him since the first afternoon I walked into the kitchen and found him reading my favorite book because I'd mentioned it to him.

I'd been in love with him since he walked into the living room to find me crying after my first — and only — boyfriend dumped me for another girl and asked — freakishly calm — where he lived. He'd already started for the door, his phone in hand when I ran after him to stop him and even then, he'd looked down at me, his expression a blank wall and said in the scariest, most reasonable tone, "*I was only going to talk to him.*"

But I knew Darius.

Talking would not have been on the agenda. That was probably the exact moment I realized just how deep my feelings ran for that man. It had terrified me initially, but the longer it went on, the more conversations we had together, the more obvious being with him became.

I loved him.

There was no other way to explain it.

I accepted him.

I accepted his world and everything in it.

I didn't care what he did for a living or how his family made their legacy.



I didn't care that his solution to most problems was to make the problem disappear.

Maybe that made me a terrible person.

Maybe that meant my moral compass was broken.

It didn't matter because even if he wasn't in my life, I had no choice but to accept all those things. My sisters were equally as dangerous, if not more so. If I rejected him for all the things that made him Darius Medlock, I would have to reject the Deluches and the Trevils. I would have to reject everyone I ever cared about.

I wasn't going to do that.

Not for anyone.

I chose a light, wraparound sundress in mint green and pulled my white, two-piece swimsuit on underneath. I kept my hair down but strapped an elastic around my wrist. With my sandals dangling from my fingertips, I padded downstairs to meet the others, stopping only briefly in the sitting room to check on the sofa in case of stains I would need to clean before the others noticed — or worse, Marcella Medlock noticed on her next trip up to the lodge. That woman could spot a blemish from a mile away and she would definitely have questions I was not ready to answer.

The room was spotless, the wine glasses, snack bags, pillows and throws cleared away. The coffee table was returned to the center of the room, polished clean. Even all evidence of my night with Darius was absent from the white colored cushion. It was only when I touched the slightly damp patch that I realized Darius must have come back after tucking me into bed and tidied up. It brought a tiny grin to my face as I turned and made the rest of the way to the kitchen.

Kas looked up from the bowl of oatmeal she was preparing at the island. "Took you long enough," she said. "We've been waiting for actual hours."

I struggled to maintain a cool expression, a normal face that didn't allude to why I'd fallen into a temporary coma. "I was up late reading."

Kas pursed her lips and gave a roll of her eyes. “Of course, you were. We’re out on the deck.”

I nodded and gestured to the toaster. “I’m just going to grab some toast.”

Licking a chunk of sliced banana off her thumb, she bobbed her head a few times before scooping up her bowl, spoon, and orange juice. “See you outside.”

With that, she shuffled her way out to the back patio doors, leaving me alone in the kitchen to make my way to the bread box. I pulled the bundle out and popped two slices into the toast. I found jam in the fridge along with a carton of grape juice. I set everything on the counter and waited.

“I can’t get last night out of my head.”

I spun to face the voice in the doorway, the man watching me with dark, hungry eyes that made my toes curl into the linoleum. He stood with his hands tucked casually in the pockets of his black sweats. His dark locks freshly washed glistened in the soft morning light spilling from the kitchen windows. A damp coil hung over his brow, a threat to my senses. All it made me want to do was run my fingers through all that thick, silky mass and cup the back of his head and lower his mouth to mine, but I stayed with my feet planted and my back against the island.

“Morning,” I murmured instead.

He moved into the room, his every stride measured. He didn’t stop until he was a powerful force looming over me, his gaze roaming down the front of my dress all the way to my toes.

“Morning.” A hand lifted and lightly skimmed a strip of hair off my temple. “How are you feeling?”

Exhausted.

Sore.

Tender.

Unacceptably ready for another round.

“How are you?” I asked instead.

An eyebrow lifted. “That wasn’t my question.” He slid his fingers deeper into my damp curls and forced my face up to his. “Did I hurt you?”

I shook my head.

His head dropped and my lungs hitched. My lips parted with my gasp and stayed open for his kiss. My eyes almost closed.

“Are you lying to me, kitten?”

My head immediately rocked from side to side as far as it could with my hair still tangled between his fingers.

He searched my eyes, lingered on my mouth before dropping to the heavy rise and fall of my chest down the collar of my dress.

“Yes, you are.” His gaze slid back up to mine, the pupils dark hollows absorbing the blue. “There was nothing gentle about the way I fucked you last night and given how tight your pussy was, it’s been a while.”

I swallowed audibly, the pussy in question giving a pang of remembrance. “I’m a little tender, but...”

“But?” he coaxed when I faltered under his unwavering scrutiny.

I licked my lips. “I wouldn’t stop you if you fucked me like that again.”

His eyebrow winged up. “Right now?”

I nodded without hesitation.

“Right here on the kitchen counter?”

His lips ghosted mine, momentarily making me forget everything, except a pathetic, “please.”

His answer was the sweeping invasion of his tongue pushing between my lips in a hot, greedy kiss that curled my toes into the cool tiles. My fingers found the warm, smooth

line of his shoulders and glided up the back of his neck to comb into his hair.

“Say it again,” he ordered, forcing his knee between my thighs pushing them apart.

The hard muscles of his thigh slammed up into my mound, taking me up onto my toes. His hands twisted into the thin straps holding my dress in place. They were dragged down to reveal my white bikini top, my nipples sharp, dark circles against the fabric.

I realized what he was about to do even before his mouth descended. The hard peaks were caught between his teeth and fingers. They were sucked and bit. He palmed one while terrorizing the other, soaking the material, turning it transparent.

“Darius...” I whined, back arched as far as it would go over the island’s edge, offering him everything.

The damp material was yanked aside, and the nipple was pulled into his mouth. I watched him suck and circle the tip, my hips grinding feverishly against his thigh, fighting for my release. He seemed to realize it too when he bent and hooked my thighs up on each arm, pulling them wide and away from any contact.

My snarl of protest was met with a smug flick of his gaze up to my face. “What do you say, kitten?”

Needing him inside me like my next breath, I gasped, “Please!”

His smirk was one given by the devil, evil and taunting. He set me down just long enough to free his magnificent dick, the head thick and beaded with precum. My thighs were as wide as they could go when he reached for me, his arms returning to hook under my knees. I was lifted.

“Again,” he growled. The crown penetrated my world. “Say it again.”

“Please. Fuck me. Please, Darius.”

He filled me with a sharp thrust of his hips. I had to catch my own scream behind my teeth. I tore into my bottom lip as he slammed into me with a savage violence that made me see stars.

Abruptly, he stopped and put me down.

I thought for a moment maybe he'd heard the girls come in and was about to pull my clothes together but he ceased my fumbling.

“Turn around and spread.”

I did immediately and eagerly. I turned to the island and my forgotten breakfast. The items were pushed aside, giving me space to lean over, offering him my backside.

He wasted no time hiking up the back of my dress, moving the crotch of my bikini aside and sliding in again. His thick head breached my opening and the rest glided in, stretching me to capacity. The maddeningly slow invasion had my head dropping forward and my hips bumping back, impaling me completely on him.

“You feel so good,” I whimpered, rocking against him.

His response was to push deeper, feeding me every last inch until I was crying out at the pain and winding pleasure. I sobbed his name, my hand going to the hard nub between my thighs begging to be stroked.

My hand was slapped away.

“I didn't say you could touch her.”

My eyes squeezed shut at the cruel whisper of his finger replacing mine. The caress was feather light, no more than a flick, yet my thighs trembled with the strain for more.

“She's mine now, kitten.” He gave her another maddening brush. “You had her to yourself long enough. She belongs to me. You touch her only when I say you can, understand?”

He pinched her between his thumb and finger, and I wailed. My forehead struck the counter next to my clawing fingernails with a crack that would have hurt any other time,

but barely registered. My hips bucked wildly over the dick doing nothing to help me.

“Please,” I sobbed over and over again, on the verge of tears as he sadistically kept me teetering.

“Fuck, baby, the way you beg...” He skimmed my clit in light little strokes. “Makes my cock hurt.”

I came with a violence that muffled the world. Everything plummeted into a vacuum of abstract colors. I must have screamed because Darius had his hand over my face, over my mouth, silencing the howl I thought had been in my head. His dick moved in slow, even rocks along my throbbing walls, each one mirroring the easy skims of his finger barely grazing my clit.

I was still making whining, sobbing sounds when I returned to earth in time to feel his fingers slid down my chin. He probably hadn't meant to catch his fingers on my lips but my delirious brain obediently opened, welcoming in two fingers that I immediately wrapped in my tongue.

“Kami!”

I sucked lightly as his thrusts deepened, quickened. I felt the urgency in the drive of his hips, the unmistakable approach of his release.

I moaned around his fingers and dipped the tip of my tongue up the V.

He came with a grunt of my name. Hot ropes of release sprayed my walls, thick and endless. It ran down my thighs when he pulled free and splattered the floor between my spread feet.

Six heartbeats passed where the only sound was our joined gasps and the crack of my heart. His fingers stayed between my lips, pressing on my tongue, his skin salty.

“Fuck, kitten,” he groaned at last. He eased his wet digits free and used my own saliva to gloss my bottom lip. “You might just be the end of me.”

“Regrets?”

His laugh was weak and gruff at the same time. “This is the only death I’ll accept willingly.”

I turned in the circle of his arms to face his beautiful profile, his stunning eyes and rich scent. That close, he was a head taller and a wall of power that made her feel so small and protected.

I touched his face, the sharp line of his cheek to his lips. “No death willingly.”

He kissed my fingertips. “Kami.”

My palm replaced my digits, silencing his words, silencing his misunderstanding of mine. “No death ... willingly,” I repeated slowly, and waited until I saw the understanding darken his eyes.

He kissed the skin asking for his silence. Then he pushed closer. His arms encircled my waist. I was drawn against the warmth of his chest. His lips found the spot between my eyebrows. I raised my face and was rewarded with a second kiss on my offered lips.

“I will never leave you, not without a fight.”

I closed my eyes and planted my face into the hard muscles of his chest, over his heart. “Then keep me.”

His arms tightened. The weight of his fingers in my hair tightened. “There will always be another Uriah Volkov. There will always be another threat, another incident. I will never escape this.”

I lifted my eyes to his resigned expression. “So, we move on after this weekend? We find different people, have children, live different lives, occasionally see each other on holidays and pretend these three days never happened?”

I felt the hardening of his muscles flexing around me, the sharp inhale, the hard kick of his chest under my palms. His lips parted in response.

“Kam, where the hell are you?”

I flinched at Lavena’s voice coming from the patio doorway, just around a single wall, barely a dozen steps away.

“Coming!” I called, never taking my eyes off the man watching me. I heard her mumble something, but it was followed by the thump of her feet retreating. “I have to go.”

He unwound himself from around me when I tugged. Neither of us said a word when I hurried to meet my friends.



We took the canoes out to the tiny island in the middle of the lake. It was an hour commitment, but we dragged our boats onto the sand and laid out our picnic beneath a tangled canopy of branches. Sasha and Kas immediately stripped down to their bathing suits and jumped into the water, leaving me and Lavena to enjoy the early morning sun.

“If they delivered this far out, I would live here,” Lavena decided, beautiful face turned up towards the stray sunrays poking through the leaves.

“No, you wouldn’t,” I sighed from my reclined position, my book open in front of me. “You hate nature.”

Lavena clicked her tongue. “You’re not wrong. This dirt is murder on my *Louboutin*’s.” She exhaled and flopped down on her towel. “We need to go to France.”

I peeked at my best friend over the edge of my read. “Why?”

“Do you need a reason to go to France?” she countered, turning her head towards me, sunlight glinting off the frames of her dark glasses. “It’s France.”



“I guess not.” I pulled my book back up, not really registering the words, but needing the distraction.

I tried to put Darius and our conversation on hold in my brain. I tried reminding myself I was with my friends and there would be time later to think about everything else. There was also the fact that they would know something was wrong and lying to them wasn't an option.

“Do you think this will ever change?”

Dropping my reading façade, I tucked the bookmark back into its place and set the novel aside to fix my full attention on the woman next to me. “The cabin?”

Lavena shook her head. “Us.”

I held stiff against the guilt balling up in my throat. “What do you mean?”

A pale, slender shoulder jerked up in a shrug. “I don't know.” She rolled onto her side and propped her head in her hand. “Do you think we'll always be like this. Us all here together like this?”

It was my turn to shrug. “I mean, maybe? Eventually, things might change. Like we might have spouses and children. What?” I asked when Lavena made a face.

“I don't plan on having either of those things.”

Lavena aversion to conventional relationships wasn't anything new, but the line of questioning had me really looking at my best friend, at her delicate, porcelain features and her brilliant, blue eyes. Freckles littered the narrow arch of her nose and lightly dusted her cheeks.

The Medlock genes were next level in the three siblings. Each one had the confidence and beauty that came with having everything at their fingertips. Lavena had a little extra, in my opinion.

“What if you find someone you really care about and—?”

“He would be an idiot to stay.”

“That's not true,” I whispered. “What about Enzo?”

Lavena raised a shoulder. “What about him? He’s great, and I do care about him, but I would never marry him. He knows that. He’s welcome to find someone willing to settle down with but it won’t be me.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why can’t it be you? You’ve been together for three years.”

She put up a finger to stop me. “We’ve been fucking for three years. It only started because I was in a bad place and he was there to get me through it, but he knows the rules.”

I sighed, genuinely exhausted by all the rules. “Why are there so many rules?” I asked.

“Because they’re necessary. Just like normal people, we have rules that keep order. Without them, it would be a blood bath out there. Rules remind us that there are limits and consequences, like thinking it’s a good idea to be with someone like us.”

“What’s wrong with—?”

“Everything.” Lavena sat up, her pale eyes focused. “Anyone who thinks this life is glamorous or romantic needs a reality check. We are not relationship material, and unless you were born into this life, it’s dangerous.” She paused to glance over to where Sasha and Kas were having a race, their lithe bodies cutting through the water with barely a splash. “Do you remember when Walter fucked up the books and Dad went to jail for six years?” Her attention returned to me. I nodded. “Mom was alone with three kids and a whole empire to keep together. The uncles warned her to start selling everything because they didn’t think Dad would be getting out alive. Leaders don’t last long in those places. There are too many rivals who want blood or power, but Mom laughed ... hard! She asked them who they thought they were talking to. Alexander Medlock may have been momentarily preoccupied with other matters, but they would be answering to her until his return and if they ever talked about her husband dying again, she’d make sure it was the last thing they ever did.” Lavena stopped to smirk, pride radiating. “Mom was pretty bad ass. But the point is, she came from the life. Her marriage

to my dad had been arranged to unite their territories. Mom grew up knowing what to do, how to run and operate the business.

An outsider would get eaten alive. Most of them run. They pack up like little bitches and disappear. Most get silenced and vanish. Now.” She put both hands up, palms facing the sky. “Let’s say Enzo finds someone and she stays,” she lifted her right hand higher, “she gets to watch the person she loves most in the world get brutally murdered, because that is always how this story ends. On the other hand,” she lowered the right to raise the left, “now, she’s a liability. He will be so focused on keeping her safe that he won’t notice the gun until he’s dead. Ultimately, no matter what, he will die, and she will be left alone, unless she dies too.” She lowered her hands. “Those are the only options, Kami. That’s all this life is. Enzo, once Morpheus dies, will be next on the throne. His job will be to have babies and pass the Trevil name along. Then he will die.” Echoing pain stared back at me from a face tense with anger. “I’m not strong enough and I’m not stupid enough to handle that. I can’t give him my heart just to lose him in the end.”

Each explanation cut into my gut, severing my heart from the rest of me. The truth of her words left a hole in my chest as wide as Montana. It could have been its own galaxy, a solar system of emptiness so vast and wide, nothing could survive.

I hadn’t taken any of that into consideration. I hadn’t thought once that I could be the reason Darius dies. I never thought my love for him could take him from me forever. But I should have. I should have realized just how vulnerable I was making him.

I wasn’t from his world.

I wasn’t born into it like the others.

I had no idea what was expected of me or how to handle anything.

All my life, I watched Marcella walk into every room as if she owned it. Her power and confidence were unparalleled, and she did it with such grace. Could I ever pull such a thing off? It was unlikely.

“Hey, you okay?”

Grateful for my own shades covering my eyes, I nodded. “Of course. Just thinking about what you were saying.”

Lavena sighed looked out over the water where the girls were stroking their way back to shore. “Let’s not talk about Enzo anymore. I want to talk about what’s really pissing me off.” She shoved her glasses back into her tangle of hair pulled into a messy bun at the top of her head. “Darius was out for like a week and Dad knew, and he never said a word after I tried so hard to see him.”

“You almost got arrested.” I recalled with a grin.

“Exactly!” She shook her head. “I can’t believe that he’s been out all this time and never once tried to let me know.”

“You can’t blame him,” I murmured. “I read that people who come out of a long prison stint have a hard time reentering society. He was gone for four years, Lavena. I don’t think it’s weird that he needed time.”

Lavena seemed to think about that for a moment, blue eyes squinting out over the sparkling water where Sasha was struggling to hold Kas under.

“I guess,” she grumbled at last. “I’ve just been so worried about him, you know? I never liked that he took the fall for what was clearly an accident.”

I had to look away from the penetrating prod of her gaze searching my face. “It was for Edmund. I don’t have siblings, but I would do the same for you, Sasha, or Kas. You guys are the closest things I have to sisters.”

Lavena recoiled as if I’d slapped her. “Closest thing? Bitch, we are sisters. What the hell are you talking about?”

I felt myself laugh despite the lack of humor I felt in the situation. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

She made an impatient noise and stretched out her long legs. “I’m not upset that he took the fall. I probably would have set the prison on fire if Edmund was in there, but I hate

that Darius didn't fight harder. He didn't even let Howard fight properly."

"The evidence was undeniable," I reminded her. "It would have been worse if they let it go on too long. He only got four years, which is a huge win given the charges. Murder could go up to twenty or more."

The thought of losing Darius for twenty years made my insides hurt. Four years had been bad enough.

"I would never have let him go that long," Lavena stated simply, swiping her glasses back down. "I would have broken him out and got him out of the country."

To a regular person, that would have sounded like a joke, but I knew she meant it, and I knew I would have helped her.

I wasn't someone without family. My parents were still alive, and I still had all four of my grandparents, and a few aunts and uncles, and cousins. My family wasn't as vast as Lavena's, but they were good people. However, the Medlocks had adopted me into their folds the first day Lavena brought me home with her, some random eight-year-old who didn't even attend the same school as her or live in the same neighborhoods. They had accepted that I wasn't like them and still treated me like I was.

The reality of the situation was that I would not have been there on a beautiful island in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by three of the most important people in the world to me if it hadn't been for Lavena. The girl was insane in all the ways that mattered, but she had saved me that day and I would never forget it.

"What are you looking so dopey about over there?"

Kas and Sasha were making their way towards us, dripping wet and grinning.

I shrugged at Kas's question. "Thinking about the afternoon we met."

Sasha *aw'd*, snatching up her towel and twisting her hair into it. "I remember that. God, that was ages ago."

“I can’t believe I just let you guys just take me home with you!” I laughed, nudging Lavena.

“I can’t believe you listened,” she argued. “You were a dumb kid. We didn’t even bribe you with candy.”

“I think about that day sometimes,” Sasha said. “It was so weird how it all came around, you know?”

“My grandma calls that fate,” Kas stated, dropping fully soaked down on her towel. “She says we always meet people for a reason.”

“I have to agree,” Lavena said. “That whole day could have gone completely different if we’d done what we were supposed to be doing, like going straight home from school and not wandering the streets like the hooligans we were.”

“And I was supposed to be home, eating my after-school snack,” I added. “Instead, my dumb ass took the wrong bus, panicked and got off that bus somewhere on the opposite end of the city all because my bus was late, and I didn’t realize until it was too late. If you guys hadn’t come along and kidnapped me...”

“Kidnapped?” Sasha and Lavena cried in unison.

“Girl, you practically skipped home with us.” Sasha laughed.

“I seriously did,” I agreed, shaking my head. “I just accepted that I no longer had a home and abandoned myself to my fate.”

It was fun to laugh about it years later, but at that moment, cold, scared and hungry, it had been the most traumatic event of my life. I had truly believed I would never see my parents again, that somehow, the bus had simply taken me to an entirely different country and not forty-five minutes away from my house. Seeing three little girls my age wandering up the street towards me had filled me with such unimaginable hope I had immediately burst into tears. The trio had stopped and stared at me, none of us equipped to handle that situation until Lavena had made the decision for all of us.

*“You’re coming to live with me,”* she’d decided with a certainty that left no room for argument. She’d given me her hand and I’d accepted without question. I basically let her take me home with her like some lost pet.

Marcella — bless her heart — had stared from me to the trio surrounding me with a warm smile edged in confusion.

*“Girls?”* She’d eyed me a second longer before facing her daughter still holding my hand. *“Who’s this?”*

Lavena had shrugged. *“Don’t know. We found her outside. She lives with us now.”*

Marcella’s eyes had gone enormous on her beautiful face. *“Lavena Josephine Medlock did you kidnap this child off the street?”*

*“Kidnap?”* Lavena had seemed confused by the question. *“There were no ropes or duct tapes involved ... this time. I just gave her my hand. She followed. Tell her, Kas.”*

*“It’s true, Mrs. Medlock. I was there. I saw the whole thing.”*

*“See? I learned,”* Lavena stated, proud of herself.

Looking back, that probably summed up what an idiot child I’d been, but it hadn’t clued in then.

*“You...”* Marcella cut herself off, deciding her daughter was going to be no help and turned to me, her smile forcibly calm, but authoritative. *“Hey there, sweetheart, what’s your name?”*

From there, it took her all of fifteen minutes to find the name of my school, call it and have them call my parents, who had been waiting for me at the bus stop, frantic when I didn’t show. I was placed on a high stool at the vast and gleaming kitchen counter with a plate of cookies and a tall glass of milk. I’d forgotten all about being terrified as Lavena dumped all her dolls between us and introduced me to each one. I remembered Darius stalking in at some point to grab a Coke from the fridge, eyeing me suspiciously as he popped it open and took a sip. He watched me the entire time over the rim like I was some new painting that he couldn’t recall ever seeing before.

*“Another one?”* he’d asked his mom, who had only shaken her head in resignation.

I didn’t have any friends at my school. The other kids had always been so intimidating. Clustering together in their own little packs, they’d felt impenetrable and hostile, but the girls had accepted me and gone out of their way to include me as if I’d always been one of them.

By the time my dad came to pick me up, I’d been adopted by the trio. Lavena had marched right up to him with Sasha and Kas flagging her to tell him I was required to return that weekend for a very important playdate.

The rest had been history. Sixteen years later, we were still as thick as thieves.

“I really was a dumb child,” I decided with a wince. “If you guys hadn’t found me, I probably would have hopped right into the first windowless van that pulled up promising puppies and candy.”

The two laughed, but Lavena pursed her lips and slapped my knee.

“You weren’t dumb, and you didn’t go home with some pervert in a van. You went home with us. We wouldn’t have let anything happen to you, and we still won’t.”

Feeling the sting of tears, I offered her a weak smile. “Stop. You’ll make me cry.”

“And that’s our cue for wine!” Kas declared, reaching for the basket.

The morning slipped into a lazy afternoon. We swam and chatted about days gone by. We laughed about our ex’s and made ridiculous and not so ridiculous plans for the future.

“Christmas in France,” Lavena decided. “I will not take no for an answer.”

That seemed to settle the matter and we all agreed to a Christmas in France.

It wasn’t until the sun began to dip and the air carried a slight nip that we packed things up and headed for our canoes.



“Can we order Chinese?” Sasha whined once we hit the mainland and tied our boats to shore. “I’m not in the mood to cook anything.”

“Only if you want to drive five hours into town and pick it up,” Lavena called over her shoulder as she made her way back to the house.

Grumbling, Sasha followed her.

Kas and I exchanged glances, both of us sharing a tired grin.

“Honey, we’re home!” Lavena bellowed from the backdoor.

It wasn’t that I’d forgotten that Darius was there somewhere in that massive structure haunting its silent corners. He’d been a flame in the recess of my mind the entire day, flickering every time my thoughts strayed to anything that wasn’t him, perpetually reminding me he was a small lake away.

But I was still getting used to the fact that he was there, a free-ish man. I wasn’t used to him stalking into the kitchen, a looming silhouette of hot, sweaty skin and tousled hair. He moved like a dancer, precise and intentional. Every motion hummed with its own heartbeat I felt slam into my chest. His bare torso glistened in the pale light radiating from the windows, reminding me just how much I enjoyed the feel of all that skin, sweat, and muscles rubbing against me.

“You’re back,” he remarked, swiping the forearm of his left arm across his brow. “Have fun?”

The question was asked of the room at large, but I didn’t miss the extra lingering glance he offered me before sliding to where his sister was dropping her beach stuff on the kitchen table.

“You could have come,” she said instead.

Darius shook his head. “I didn’t want to get in the way of your girl time.”

“So, you decided to take a swim in your own sweat instead?” Lavena countered, eyeing the tall, dark, delicious state of him.

“I was in the workout room,” he muttered.

Lavena wrinkled her nose as she brushed past him, leaving her mess on the table behind her. “Well, I hope you’re planning on taking a shower. You stink. Also,” she called loudly over her shoulder, “you better help with dinner tonight, you freeloader.”

Darius rolled his eyes but said nothing as his sister disappeared from sight down the hall. Sasha and Kas followed, taking their stuff with them; we were all too used to Lavena’s routine when it came to messes. She’d do what she needed to do and return to gather up her things once she was ready to. We just learned to leave them for her to deal with later.

“Can I borrow your hairdryer?” Sasha was saying as the pair headed towards the front of the house. “I forgot mine.”

I didn’t hear Kas’s response.

Darius had caught my wrist as I went to follow them. His warm fingers closed around the delicate bones and drew me to him.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

I hadn’t forgotten my last words to him before I’d left, nor had he it seemed, but I still had no answers. Between the longing in my chest and the terror in my head, I didn’t know what to listen to. On the one hand, I was still disparately in love with the man. On the other hand, I wanted him to live even if that meant living without me. It was all a matter of just how much I was willing to let go.

“Yes,” I whispered at last. “Are you?”

He gave the tiniest bob of his head. “I want us to talk.”

It was my turn to nod. “Can we do it later? I want to take a shower.” I caught his hand when he started to release me. “Come with me?”

His focus sharpened on my face, hard and watchful. “Are you inviting me to shower with you, kitten?”

I realized I must have been sending him a lot of crazy signals and winced. My grip on him released and I started to take a step back, but he caught me with a single, hard arm hooked around my middle. I was lured into the heat of his chest.

“Only if that’s okay,” I said quietly, unable to meet those unfathomable eyes. “I don’t want you to think—”

“Oh, I’m thinking plenty. Most of it involves getting you naked.”

I was absolutely okay with that. There was plenty of time to talk and figure things out after, I told myself as I tugged him towards the stairs, but he stayed stationary.

“What?” I asked when he slipped free.

“Too risky,” he said. “You go up first. I’ll be up in a minute.”

I should have known I couldn’t just drag him upstairs to my bed. The girls could be anywhere.

I started to mumbled an apology, but he silenced me with a hard, but silencing kiss that made my stomach muscles bunch up. Then he let me go and sent me on my way with a smack on my behind that sent a whole sparkle of fireworks snapping through me.

“Get going, kitten,” he commanded. “I’ll be up in a minute to help you get all the hard-to-reach places.”

There was no point denying I had almost no feeling in my kneecaps as I shuffled unsteadily down the hall and up the stairs. My skin was miles of sensation, hyper aware of every brush of fabric across my thighs, my belly, my breasts. I tried not to notice when hitting the top landing and spotted all three girls had their doors open as they unpacked their bags and chatted to each other loudly from their respective rooms.

Resisting the urge to swear, I twisted open my door and slid inside.

I took my time emptying my pack and tossing wet towels and swimsuits into the laundry. I shook the sand out my towel and hung it up to dry. I picked clothes for the evening, a comfy pair of cotton trousers and a matching lace camisole. Both were draped across the bed. With a fresh towel in hand, I stepped into the bathroom for a shower.

I was in the process of rinsing shampoo and lake water from my hair when the shower door slid back on its track and a cold brush of air skated down my back. I barely had time to gasp or even turn when strong, familiar arms closed around me from behind and pulled me into a hard chest. The glass panel rolled back into place, trapping me in the steam and Darius's embrace.

"Jesus, you scared me," I breathed, blinking water from my eyes, and squinting up at the man nuzzling the curve of my neck with tiny kisses.

"You extended an invitation, kitten," he murmured into the skin of my jaw, just below my earlobe. "I thought I would use it to preserve water."

I felt myself grin. "I'm all about conservation of water."

He nipped at the curve of my ear with his teeth. His large hands drifted up to cradle the weight of each breast. A part of me had to suppress a giddy giggle at the knowledge that Darius Medlock was naked and in the shower with me. It was a reality I had only dreamed of for years, a reality that faintly still felt like a dream.

"I love your tits," he drawled huskily into my ear, emphasizing the words with a deliberate and steady skim of his thumbs over the hard, pink peaks. "I love how they fit perfectly in my palms."

As if to prove it, he cradled each mound, spreading long fingers over and giving a squeeze. That single gesture rocked me straight to my toes. A punch of arousal had my core giving a hard flex, desperate to feel him stretching my walls.

"Darius..." I whispered, cotton mouthed despite the rush of water cascading over us.

“Hm?” he purred lazily, rolling my puckered nipple beneath the pad of his thumb.

I had nothing to say. Words had eluded me, left me lost and drifting in a hot wave of arousal that had my back arching into his caress, into the slow plucks of his fingers. When he stopped unexpectedly, I had to bite back a whimper. I watched with my lip caught between my teeth as he reached for my body wash. He ignored my loofah as he poured a puddle of rose scented liquid into his palm and rubbed his hands together in front of me. Then his hands returned, slippery with soap and hell bent on destroying me.

He started with my breasts, gliding, and teasing each one until I was squirming and whining. Then he was sliding down my belly to the neat trimming of hair covering my lips but stopped just long enough to get the body wash off his fingers before resuming his tease over my clit.

My moan was deep and guttural, topped off by the eager parting of my thighs to accommodate his exploration. He didn't leave me hanging. His fingers eased apart my folds to find my slick opening ready for him.

“I've thought about eating her all day,” he murmured, pressing first one then two digits in and snatching the air from my lungs. “I want to open you wide and fuck you with my tongue while you ride my face.”

The image his words provoked nearly kicked my knees out from under me. I had to grab the walls on either side of me as I lost my ability to stand, relying solely on where he'd impaled me to keep me up. His free hand drifted from soapy nipple to soapy nipple, teasing each in turn until I was sure I'd go mad.

“I'm ready,” I half sobbed, just in case he couldn't feel the swollen walls of my sex sucking at his fingers.

“Oh, I know,” he growled darkly, pushing deeper, pressing the heel of his hand harder against my clit. “It's killing me not to fuck you up against the glass right now.”

I opened my mouth to ask what was stopping him when he unexpectedly withdrew, not just from inside me, but from me

entirely. Hands that had been exploring my body seconds ago maneuvered my suds covered chest under the running water, letting the white streaks run down my front and disappear down the drain. I was rinsed off. Then he helped himself to my body wash and shampoo, scrubbing off sweat and leaving me standing there baffled.

Had I hoped he would continue once he was clean, I was left mistaken when the faucet was switched off. I watched in confusion as he turned his back on me to reach for the latch on the sliding door.

The deep, crimson scratches cutting down the stretch of skin from shoulders to ass cheeks stilted my words. My eyes widened as I took in my own handy work running in four jagged lines. They looked tender and painful, like he'd lost a fight with a cat, but all I could think was I needed to apologize.

"Your back," I blurted before I could stop myself.

He paused to cast a glance over his shoulder at the marks I'd left on him.

"Hm," was his unhurried response.

"Did I hurt you?" I took a step closer wanting to but refraining from touching the injuries. "I didn't—"

He straightened and turned until his eyes were my only focus. "Don't say it."

"But I hurt you."

A dark brow lifted. "Do I look hurt?"

I thought of the darker, deeper areas where my nails had anchored into his skin as the passion had blinded me to everything else, even control of my own muscles.

"I made you bleed," I whispered, horror overtaking my concern. "I'm so—"

He kissed me. "I told you not to say it, kitten."

Breathing hard, I touched the side of his face. "I can be more careful—" I tried again, only to have his features deepen

into a dark frown.

“Don’t you dare.” His palms cupped my backside, and I was pulled hard against the erection rising between us. “Having you come undone for me like that...” he broke off with a low, guttural growl that flared his nostrils, “don’t ever hold back with me. Do you understand? I want all of it. I want every bite mark, every scratch. I want to wear every single one of your orgasms like a fucking badge on my skin.”

He barely let me finish my weak gasp when he slammed his mouth over mine in a bruising assault of lips and teeth. His fingers squeezed my ass, holding me in place to feel the grind of his hips against mine. I reached between our damp bodies and took the hard, scalding length of him in hand, marveling at the weight and girth. His snarl fueled the motion of my wrist working his dick in slow, even strokes.

“Kami,” he breathed against my lips.

My sexual experiences were limited to the single boyfriend, but I’d watched enough videos over the years to feel almost confident in my knowledge to drop to my knees. I ignored his startled expression when bringing the plump head to my lips. I never took my eyes off him, not even during the slow kiss followed by a flick of my tongue across the opening, collecting his salty tang. I kept our gazes locked as I sucked on his head, enjoying the tightening of his jaw, the fire in his stare, but it was his soft, audible gasp when I engulfed him deep in my throat that spurred my seductress side to life.

The couple of time Ben had asked me to do it, I hadn’t felt either way about it, but the feel of Darius’s fingers in my hair guiding me over him, the savage, ravenous glower darkening his face, the heavy rise and fall of his chest ... I could have stayed down there forever. I didn’t even care that the shower floor was biting into my kneecaps, or that my neck was getting sore. All I wanted was to feel him come in my mouth. I wanted the thick ropes to fill my throat. I wanted to taste him.

But I never got the chance when he pulled out of my mouth with a pop. My whimpering protest was silenced when he forcibly shoved me over, twisting me onto my hands and

knees on the shower floor. He was behind me and in me before I could finish my gasp. The vicious and brutal invasion tore a wail from me that was ignored by him when he grabbed me by the shoulders and dragged me back into his lap. My thighs were torn open wide and anchored apart by his raised knees. I had a clear view of where we were joined, where my sensitive core was impaled and stretched around the rock-hard rod of his dick. I'd never seen anything so fucking hot.

“Is this what you wanted?” he hissed into the back of my shoulder blade, anger and arousal thickening his voice.

“Yes,” I panted, grinding against him, taking him deeper, needing him as far in as I could take him. “God, yes! Don't stop.”

It was the wrong — or maybe the right — thing to say because with a snarl that was more beast than man, he fucked me. He fucked me with a violence and aggression that would have hurt if I wasn't meeting every thrust, every vicious slap of our bodies. His hands were at my breasts, at my clit, pinching and rubbing, and driving me up the wall.

“Don't stop! Don't stop!” I half begged, half threatened, using the walls on either side of us to leverage my weight and plunge down over him again and again.

Darius grabbed me on one of my dives and hauled me down hard, forcing me to take him to the hilt. My scream echoed off the steam slick walls of the bathroom. My body heaved as my orgasm tore through me. My head flung back, pushing my vulnerable breasts straight into his waiting hands. The nipples were twisted as I convulsed and bucked wildly. I was only vaguely aware of his heat exploding inside me, joining my own fluids in a mess that ran down his balls and puddled beneath us.

“Oh my God...” I panted, body slumped and sated against his chest. “That felt so good.”

“Mm,” he agreed lazily into the side of my neck. “I like how you look stretched around my cock.”



Ready for a long nap, I had to force my head off his shoulder to peer down to where we were still joined. Despite it being over, he continued to hold my knees apart, exposing my parted lips and the shiny bundle of nerves in between to the cooling air. But past that, his semi flaccid dick was coated in a thick, white layer of our combined release. The same slickness coated my lips and inner thighs. I was about to suggest we take a second shower when his right hand lifted and lightly ghosted over my still twitching clit.

My body shuddered violently. The motion spilled his cock out of me, but that didn't stop him from repeating the gesture.

“Darius...”

My shaky protest was ignored as he teased the switch, rolling and tracing the bump until I was lifting my hips to welcome the single finger he eased inside.

“Get dressed, kitten,” he whispered into my ear, all the while dragging his slippery finger up around my clit before disappearing to the last knuckle back inside. “We promised Lavena we'd help with dinner.”

“Don't stop. Not yet ... please,” I pleaded, watching the motions of his hand stirring my body awake all over again.

“Don't worry.” A second finger joined the first, nearly making me lose my mind. “I have every intention of finishing this tonight.”

“Tonight?” I repeated stupidly, unable to comprehend anything, except the view before me.

“Tonight,” he promised into the wild, little vein at my neck. His fingers glided up to paint my clit, my lips that were then spread apart, leaving my switch naked and vulnerable to the cooling air. “I'm going to eat her. Then I'm going to fuck her repeatedly and violently just the way she likes it. I'm going to cum so deep inside you, you'll taste me on your tongue. Then I'm going to make you suck your pussy off my dick before I fuck you again.”

I was dying.

I was sure of it.

My entire body was in coiling chaos, wrapped in his filthy and delicious promises and the images they ignited. I was a restless mess of squirming hips and a throbbing core. He hadn't penetrated or touched my pussy since spilling all his dirty plans into my ear and my sex burned. The clit bared to the world pulsed. One touch from him and he could have ended my suffering.

"Darius, please," I begged.

"Shh," he whispered against my jaw. "Don't waste your sweet begging just yet. You'll need them for when I'm actually torturing you."

"Shit..." I sobbed, eyes squeezing shut and head falling back against his shoulder.

"Oh, and no panties tonight. I want nothing between me and her."

## CHAPTER 6

### *Darius*



**H**er sweet suffering fueled me. It woke something dark and primal living dormant deep inside, fanning a brewing tension that took all my control to restrain. I liked watching her struggle. I liked watching her every tentative move, her quiet, desperate glances, the way her cheeks flushed when our gazes met. I lived to turn her body against her as it came apart under my touch.

She was doing pretty good so far, I had to admit. The stolen brushes of my fingers over her bare ass cheeks under the short, loose dress she wore, the skim of my fingers between her pussy lips, the brush of my finger over her nipples when no one was looking were taken in silence. I could see her trying to fight her body's natural responses, but it wanted me, and it was aware of my every move when I got too close. The very vibration around her intensified until she was practically shaking.

I liked watching her eyes glaze when I fingered her right there with her friends in the room with us. I liked watching her nipples harden through the fabric of her top when I teased them from behind. I was thriving in my slow dismantling of her senses.

Kami, though, wasn't some innocent player in my games. The little brat knew exactly what she was doing when she bent to grab a bowl from the bottom cupboard and spent too long with her exposed ass in the air, her wet, creamy pussy bare and swollen. She knew what she was doing, the fire she was provoking, but she still fanned them when she'd brush her

hand over my dick, when she'd close her fingers around him and stroke before moving away.

No. My little kitten was no helpless victim in my torture. I could already tell our fucking was going to be wild, violent, and bloody once it happened. My back tingled in memory, but I was ready for it.

As if aware of my thoughts, she peeked up through thick lashes and met my gaze.

She smirked.

*Brat.* I wanted to snarl. Instead, all I could do was tighten my grip on the metal tongs in my hand and pretend to focus on the slabs of chicken sizzling in the pan.

“Do you think thin or chunky?” Lavena asked from the stove top next to mine, peering past me to where Kami was focused a little too hard on dicing tomatoes.

“Well, you better tell me now before I start,” Kami mumbled, long fingers wrapped around a firm, shiny vegetable.

I tried not to think how those very same fingers had been gripping my cock not twenty minutes ago, holding it in place as she took me deep into the hot cave of her mouth. I hardened at the very memory of that moment, of her kneeling before me, our gazes locked as she...

“Flip!” Lavena shattered my daydream with a hard elbow to my side. “You’re going to burn them.” I hastily flipped the chickens over. Satisfied that there were no charred marks, she turned her attention back to Kami. “I think nice chunks will make the salad look better.”

“So ... diced?” Kami clarified.

At Lavena’s nod, she set to work cutting the tomatoes into cubes. I watched her from the corner of my eye, wishing my sister wasn’t hovering next to me like a crazy mother hen watching her chicks. It was under the guise of stirring the wild rice, but we all knew what a lunatic she was when it came to the kitchen. Every slice had to be methodical and accurate. Every measurement had to be exact. She had zero interest in

the culinary arts, but cooking brought out a side of her that would have made a drill Sargent proud. Kas and Sasha, being wise and in full control of their brains had both disappeared with promises to start the fire on the patio and set the table, giving my sister a wide berth. Kami and I hadn't been paying attention and thus were relegated to Lavena's abuse.

"I'm going to check on Kas and Sasha, and the table," Lavena muttered, turning the fire down under her boiling pot and stalking towards the doorway. "Watch my pot. Don't let it boil over and keep an eye on the chicken."

I guessed she was talking to me, but all I could register at the moment she was out of sight was that I was finally alone with Kami. I wasted no time abandoning my chicken cuts and marching to where she stood divided from me by an ocean of glossy marble. Her head came up, but I was already there, sliding my fingers through her damp locks.

"Put the knife down," I commanded, and was thrilled when it immediately clattered out of her fingers to hit the juice-stained cutting board. I pulled her to me.

"The chicken," was the only protest she offered as I dropped my head down to hers.

"Fuck the chicken," I growled before claiming her mouth.

She dissolved against me, arms binding around my shoulders, feet arching up to meet my height. Her lips opened under mine, eager and willing.

I groaned, crushing her to me.

We both smelled of sweet roses, a lingering fragrance of her body wash, but beneath that, I was on her skin. It was my scent covering her. It was me mixed with her and I wanted to drown in it. I wanted to bottle it and keep it in my pocket.

I wanted to keep her.

I pulled back to peer down into her upturned and dazed expression. Her dark eyes stared back, so wide and trusting.

So trusting.

I knew I would kill anyone who betrayed that trust, who hurt her. I would annihilate and demolish their whole fucking world. I would kill everything they loved for her in the most barbaric and gruesome method possible.

“Fuck, Kami,” I growled, pulling her in for another brutal assault of lips. “What are you doing to me?”

Her answer was the twist of her arms around my neck, her fingers in my hair. She kissed me with a heat and passion that was more addictive than heroin.

“I smell burning!”

The crack of Lavena’s approaching strides tore us apart. I hurried back to the stove just as the first hiss of boiling water bubbled over the rim of the pot and struck the element with an angry hiss. I snatched up the spoon and gave a stir when Lavena appeared in the doorway, expression a thunderous cloud of annoyance. Behind her, Kas and Sasha peeked in, eyebrows raised.

“You had one job!” my sister snapped.

“Two, actually,” I argued, mentally willing the bloody rice not to spill over more as the frothing continued.

Huffing, Lavena stormed over and snatched the pot and spoon from me. Both were dragged off the flame and set aside. The element was snapped off.

“Flip!” she barked, motioning to the chicken.

I did obediently, wincing only slightly at the blackened edges.

Lavena stared with wide eyed horror, the kind one gave someone who has committed the worst crime imaginable.

“That one is yours!” Without waiting for me to protest, she snatched the tongs from me and turned to wave Kas over.

Just like that, I’d been demoted, shunned to a corner of the island, away from the stove, but only mere feet from Kami.

She slanted me a fleeting side eye, the corner of her mouth quirked on one side. I gave her a shrug as I reached one arm

across the space and snatched one of her tomato chunks.

“Hey!” she protested, scooping up the rest and dumping them into the bowl at her elbow, away from me. “I worked hard cutting those to a very specific size.”

“I was just making sure you did it correctly.”

Her eyebrows lifted and the point of the knife was levelled in my direction. “I’ll have you know I’m very good at following orders.”

She seemed to realize the implications behind her words and immediately mashed her lips shut. Her cheeks blazed a crimson that made my dick swell. Her gaze dropped to the board, but not before darting them in Lavena’s direction.

No one was listening to us. Lavena had her back to us and was barking instructions at an increasingly annoyed Kas while Sasha had made herself scarce most likely back to the patio. It was just me and her in our little world.

I couldn’t stop looking at her, watching her, studying the way she snuck a peek at me through her lashes, and wanting nothing more than to test that proclamation extensively. It killed me not to be able to ask her follow up questions to her bold declaration. I was dying to know just how good she was at following orders, but there were too many eyes and ears and when I asked, I knew I would want a demonstration.

“What are you reading?”

The question caught her by surprise, but it was the only thing I could think to do to keep from dragging her up onto the counter and fucking her senseless.

“I brought a few different ones,” she said at last. “I couldn’t decide which I would be in the mood for. The one I took to the island today is a World War II book about an eighteen-year-old female spy in Germany. It’s very detailed and beautiful. The girl’s family is taken, and she has to join the enemy to find them.”

She plowed on, listing off her favorite parts and characters. I listened, fascinated as always by the animation in her voice, the way her eyes lit up when she got to an exceptionally good

part. I loved her love of books. I loved that she had no preferred genre and would read whatever was put in front of her. I loved that she could go on for hours on a single book. I loved that she could pick up on things everyone else seemed to miss. She astounded me.

“It’s wonderful,” she finished at last. “You should read it.”

Kami was the only person on earth I would accept reading recommendations from. Before my time inside, we would swap books twice a week and have endless conversions about the ones we liked or didn’t. We had an entire debate about the love affair between Lord Byron and Caroline Lamb. It had gotten so heated, Mom had to break it up, but it had been inspiring and intelligent and well thought out. That kind of passion in knowledge was so rare and she was one of the few people I could sit with for hours and talk to without feeling my eyes cross.

“Did you read anything good while you were away?”

Enthralled by her enthusiasm, I didn’t understand the question straight away.

“We didn’t have a very big selection...”

She didn’t seem to be listening when she gave an excited gasp and dropped the knife. The other two in the room glanced back as startled as I was, but Kami stared at me with the biggest, brightest eyes.

“I have a book you need to read!” Salad forgotten, knife abandoned on the board, she hurried over and grabbed my hand. “I have a copy in my nook. It’s life changing.”

“Hey!” Lavena called after us as Kami yanked me towards the door. “The salad!”

“I’m coming back!” Kami promised without slowing in her sprint.

“You’re lying!” Lavena yelled after us. “That room is a—”

I never heard what Kami’s reading nook was as she hauled me up the stairs to the last door at the end of the hallway. I laced our fingers together, taking advantage of the situation



while I could. Kami didn't seem to notice, too excited by the idea of sharing her book to notice much else.

The door opened to a steep set of stairs to what used to be the attic. At the top, she released me to hurry to the row of shelves along the far wall, leaving me to linger by the door and wait for her.

The idea of the nook had been mine. It had been meant as a joke after Kam and Lavena got into a heated argument over Lavena being too loud and disrupting her reading, and Lavena shooting back that they were on vacation and Kami should stop reading. As a smart-ass teenager, I'd teased that Kami should just have her own soundproof reading room to lock herself away in. My parents who had been arguing for days over what to get Kami for her birthday that wasn't yet another gift card to a bookstore with an obscene amount of money on had immediately loved the idea. A private reading space on vacation was exactly what she needed, they decided.

The reveal, though, watching the joy and tears on Kami's face, the radiating euphoria as she took in the space, the three walls of all her favorite books, the dozens of comfortable reading spots, the lights, and everything a bookworm needed...

It may have started out as a joke but in that moment, I felt like a superhero.

"Found it!" Kami hurried back to me, a tattered and faded paperback in hand. The destroyed sight of it had me peering up at her with a raised eyebrow. "I found it in a thrift store," she explained. "Someone has even written notes in the margins and their thoughts are just ... beautiful. Whoever they were had such a deep soul. I would love to meet them and—"

I kissed her.

It was light and brief, and so rude interrupting her, but I'd been dying for years to taste all that addictive joy radiating off her.

"Sorry," I murmured. "I couldn't help it."

She smiled sweetly and looked down. “I know I’m weird...”

“You’re amazing.”

Her cheeks pinkened. “Will you read it?” She offered me the book as if it were her most treasured possession, like I would crush her heart if I refused.

I accepted her gift and studied the dull, yellow cover of a cottage in the middle of a prairie, surrounded by tall grass and bare trees. The sky above it was yellow with dark smudges in the clouds. The title was torn off, and only part of the author’s name was visible.

“They really did a number on this guy, huh?”

“I think it was very well loved,” she corrected, staring at the paperback with a fondness that was too endearing to ignore.

I chose not to ask what it was about. I didn’t read the faded back. I accepted her word that I would enjoy it and tucked it into my side. Then I reached for her. I pulled her into my chest with a gentle tug.

“Will you read it with me?”

Her dark eyes widened even as her face broke into a brilliant smile. “Really?”

I nodded. “I want to hear the story with your voice.”

She kissed me this time. Her arms curled around my shoulders, and I wasted no time pulling her up, allowing her legs to bind around my hips.

I fucked her slowly on the floor of her precious nook, her wrists pinned by mine to the ground as I sank deep inside her waiting heat, her pale dress a bunched puddle twisted across her naked chest. I rode her with hard, shallow thrusts that she met with downward rolls of her hips, her heels digging into the carpet.

I fucked her until her walls grew hot and slick, until her breathing wheezed into whines, until her thighs quivered

around my hips. I fed her my cock until she gasped my name and bowed her body under me.

I pulled out.

My hands tightened on her wrists, keeping them anchored to the plush carpet. My hips held her quivering thighs open, giving her no way to ease the ache I knew she was feeling. She bucked and begged, and I watched her face morph from confusion to panic to fury. Her belly heaved with every sound that left her. Her arms trembled under my hold, her fingers bunched balls of tension.

“I hate you!” she snarled, body writhing with her denied orgasm. “I hate you. I fucking hate you!”

I didn’t take it personally.

I fed on her agony.

I relished in her every pathetic little whimper as she begged for my cock.

I nudged the thick, purple head of my dick past the sucking ring of her pussy, but no further. I was so careful not to give her anything that would set her off. I held still as she fought to impale herself on me.

“Only good girls who don’t say mean things get their pussy stretched on my cock,” I taunted, pulling out then back in. “Bad girls have to wait until I feel they deserve it.” I bent my head, careful to avoid her bared teeth when I kissed her neck. I drew in deep the sweet scent of her desperation and groaned. “I have never wanted anyone so completely at my mercy, but I want you ... I want to fucking destroy you, kitten. I want to do things to you that will make you blush in the morning.”

“Then why are you stopping?”

I grinned against her cheek. “Because we need to go back downstairs.”

“But I’m so close...”

I growled despite myself and nudged my aching dick deeper into her heat, stretching her walls and sending her

bowing beneath me with a mewl of joy. “Do you want to go downstairs with my smell on you...?” I nudged deeper. “In you. My cum running down your legs at the table, slippery between her lips. What would you tell the others when they ask, kitten?”

“Then cum in my mouth,” was her solution and I fucking lost it.

I slammed the rest of the way, hitting her base with a force that tore a scream from her. My fingers twisted through hers and I dug my knees into the floor, and I pounded into her, my need to empty inside her almost blinding me to my actual plans.

But control prevailed and I ripped free of her seductive web. I tore to my feet and stood over her, legs wide, breathing ragged. I never took my eye off her flushed and aroused body splayed across the floor of her private space. I immortalized the sight of her damp lashes, her pouty lips, her soft, perky tits, and swollen pussy forever into my brain.

“You’re going to fucking wait, kitten.” I panted, gaze fixed on the pink, swollen switch begging me to flick it between her slippery lips. I knew I shouldn’t, but I heard myself tell her to pull her knees up and show me my tiny hole, the place I wanted to crawl into and stay in forever.

Kami went scarlet from her tits all the way to her forehead at the crude request, but she tucked her hands beneath her knees and pulled them to her chest.

“Christ,” I breathed under my breath, fingers curling around my sticky cock and stroking. “She’s so fucking perfect.” I watched Kami sink her teeth into her bottom lip, eyes transfixed on the hand jerking my dick. “Like that, baby?”

She nodded, widening her thighs as if in invitation, and fuck, was it ever inviting.

“Where do you want him?”

The little demon had the nerve to tease her middle finger over her clit and down to her opening. She circled it, then used

two fingers to hold it open for me.

“Here.”

“One day, I want to paint you like this. I’d hang it somewhere only I could look at it. When I die, it would have to be buried with me.”

The ghost of a grin touched her lips. “Can you paint?”

“Nope.”

Kami burst out laughing.

I felt myself grin as I tucked myself away and bent to help her stand. Gravity slid her dress down into place, hiding all her beautiful parts from me.

“I am so angry.” Yet, she laughed as I took her hand and led her out of the nook. “Like I’m horny and furious. I can’t even wrap my head around it. I want to hit you and beg you at the same time.”

I snorted. “Yeah, it really sucks, but...” I used our joined hands to pull her against me, “you’ll thank me when I make it better.”

Her eyes narrowed despite the glimmer of laughter. “We’ll see about that. You better pull off some serious magic.”

I nipped on her bottom lip as my only response.

We arrived just outside the kitchen door. I gave her ass a smack before nudging her inside. The others barely glanced up when we returned. Lavena shoved the plate of cooked chicken into Kami’s hands. I barely had time to put my book down on the counter when the salad was thrust into mine.

We ate on the patio under a canopy of stars. Nightlife tittered around us, filling what little silence we had with their nocturnal chatter. The air was thick with the scent of sunbaked dirt and grass, the smell of summer and freedom. I remembered missing the mundane nothingness that came with normal living when I was sharing a concrete shoebox with a carjacker named Mike. He’d been a good guy, and I made a mental note to check up on him once I got back to the apartment.

I didn't consider him a friend, but he hadn't been a dick. He kept to himself, kept his area clean and didn't talk too much. I really couldn't have asked for more.

"But the whole thing doesn't make sense," Kas broke in loudly, startling me out of my thoughts. "If hurting your parents is a sin, then we are all guilty of that the day we were pushed into this world by our mothers."

"C-section baby," Sasha volunteered, raising the hand wielding her fork.

Kas rolled her eyes. "My point is, if everything is a sin, then nothing is."

"I don't think that's what the bible meant," Kami piped in. "I think it's more like if you intentionally hurt your parents. Getting born isn't your fault."

"Are you planning to kill your parents, Kas?" Lavena asked, only partially kidding.

"Of course not!" Kas dropped back into her seat with a huff. "I'm talking about the unfairness of society. From the minute you're born, you're immediately stuffed into this box. You're raised to be a specific way, conditioned to believe whatever the people around you believe because it's the only side you know. Then, those people get pissed when you realize, wait, there's more to this story and I don't believe everything I was told."

There was a moment of silence as the other three women shared a glance.

"You okay, Kas?" Sasha asked, lowering her fork to her plate, and turning her whole attention to her friend.

Kas shrugged and gave a shake of her head. "It's just not fair. That's all I'm saying. Look at us for example. We could get out. We don't have to be in the family business, but we all know what that means if we do — we lose our families, and I don't know about you guys, but I happen to love my family. The thought of losing them kills me. So, I might not have the same expectations placed on me as you and Sasha do, but what if I wanted to just be a regular environmental lawyer? What if

I didn't want to go into criminal law? What if Sasha wants to be a vet and not a contract killer?"

Sasha winced as if the word *killer* had the power to slap her. "Cleaner."

Kas grimaced and immediately turned to her friend, hand extended. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

Sasha smiled and accepted the offered fingers with a squeeze.

"I get what you're saying," Lavena cut in. "I've never wanted to be anything else—"

"Because being a Medlock is all you've ever known or because you legitimately never considered a different life?" Kas interjected.

To my sister's credit, she gave the question a lengthy thought before answering. "I've thought about it. I remember when we first started hanging out with Kami, I wondered what my life would have been like if my parents were something normal like dentists, but I love my life. I love all the good my family does for the city. I love that I could walk down a dark alley at night protected in the knowledge that I am the scariest thing there. I'm a fucking Medlock and I'm proud of that."

"Do you not want to be a criminal lawyer?" Kami asked Kas when Lavena fell silent.

Kas shook her head. "I do. I actually enjoy the whole thing and I'm good at it. I'm just ranting I guess."

"I hate what my family does," Sasha blurted a little too loudly and immediately mashed her lips together when all eyes went to her.

"There's nothing wrong with that," Lavena murmured gently. "You have the hardest job amongst us."

Encouraged by the nods from the others, Sasha sucked in a deep breath and continued. "I don't mind the paperwork. I don't mind setting up the hits. I hate the follow through. I hate the cleanup..." she broke off to rub both hands over her face. "I hate the stress of wondering if I forgot something. I wake up

at night in a cold sweat just thinking about being the first member of my family to get caught in nine generations. Nine!” Her head came up, eyes wide with panic. “Nine generations. Can you even...?” She blew out a breath that bordered on a sob. “I’m supposed to be calm and methodical, and organized but ... I can’t ... I can feel my brain shutting down. I forget everything. What if I’m on a job and—?”

“Hey.” Kas placed a gentle hand on her arm, stilling the spill of words crashing through the silence. “Deep breath.” Obediently, Sasha sucked in a breath. “Another.” Kas walked her through several more breaths before offering her a comforting smile. “I will not let you get caught, understand? I swear. They could find a selfie of you with the corpse, and I’ll still get you off, okay?”

As if to seal the promise, Kas held up her pinky finger the way I’d seen them do a million times as children.

“I will take it as a personal insult if you don’t call us to help you melt your first body,” Kami added, extending her arm across the table, pinky out.

“Seriously!” Lavena agreed. “What kind of friend are you if you don’t include us?”

That got a shaky chuckle from Sasha as she hooked her pinky through each of theirs at the same time. She wiped the corner of her eye with her free hand.

“What would I do without you guys?”

“Apparently, hog all the fun for yourself,” Lavena muttered, extracting herself and sitting back in her seat.

“I have never melted a body,” I muttered around a nibble of chicken. “But I will help you carry it wherever you need.”

Sasha shot me a grateful, albeit shaky smile. “Thanks, Darius.”

While the others fell into other lines of conversation, Kami met my gaze and the tiny smile she gave me was everything.

While I knew enough about the other two at the table like what their families did and how they contributed to the growth



and maintenance of the Medlock empire, I didn't know Kas or Sasha the way Lavena did. I didn't spend time with them. Our conversations usually consisted of passing greetings, maybe the odd statement. They weren't my friends.

Kami was different.

Kami was my obsession.

She was the anomaly in our mix.

Her very existence created a vortex in my world that pulled everything to her, including me, yet everything about her warned me to stay away.

She was too young.

She was my sister's best friend.

She was innocent.

The list went on for miles, all the logical reasons why Kamari Reid was better off with someone else, someone normal, someone who could give her ... normal things. What could I possibly give her?

The world.

I would give her the fucking world.

I would give her everything, except safety and the promise of happiness. I couldn't guarantee either.

My burnt chicken was nudged into the creamy sauce puddles around it by my fork. It left a streak across the plate.

I wasn't in the habit of playing with my food. It wasn't a prison thing, but a mom thing. Marcella Medlock would have had our hides if everything on the plate wasn't gone.

My mom may have been a wildly successful entrepreneur and one of the wealthiest women in four cities in her own rights, but she was a normal mom. We had bedtimes, curfews, chores, and even had to do our homework every night. We didn't have maids or cooks. We have two private jets, one for business and one for personal and none of us were allowed to touch them unless it was a family trip. We worked for our own money and had our own bills from the moment we were old

enough to recognize what money was. I'd had a job since I was six helping my dad. Every weekend and after school, I would be at his office helping him with sorting and organizing paperwork, filling the staff kitchen, keeping the printer running and delivering the mail. The tasks increased as I got older until I was sitting in meetings and offering opinions. One day, I would eventually be sitting in my father's place, and it would be my kids starting in the mailroom, but I knew how to work and how to deal with problems, all problems. That was what I did — I solved them.

Kami was a problem I had no training on. I was completely out of my depths. At least with Liya, we had chemistry. We had some pretty good sex. On paper, she was exactly the sort of woman someone in my position needed. I wouldn't have been worried about her being alone — or I guess given that she was sleeping with half the city, maybe I had some worry — but I wouldn't have worried about her being left alone to defend herself. Liya would still have had her family to protect her. Kami's parents were law abiding dentists. They would be in as much in danger as she was, and I couldn't ask her to do that to them. I couldn't ask her to choose my world over their lives, and I sure as shit didn't expect her to agree.

I set my fork down and sat back. I watched Kas unspool a story with her entire body, her arms waving, fingers dancing in the air, her sleek, black hair shining in the warm light of the fire. Her brown eyes were wide as if even she was baffled by the whole thing. I hadn't been paying attention to the start of the tale, but I heard enough to gather it was something to do with her younger brother and her father trying to build a treehouse, maybe a shed. It was unclear, but the end had the others gasping when the whole thing collapsed under a heavy wind. It made me grateful that Howard was a better lawyer than he was an apparent carpenter.

“That reminds me of when my dad and Enzo tried to build shelves for the weights at the gym.” Sasha emphasized the ridiculousness of the decision with a role of her eyes. “I told them the brackets weren't strong enough for all those weights, but do they listen?”

“They never listen,” Kas agreed, shaking her head.

“The whole damn wall came down!” Sasha finished. “And they damaged the floor. Mom was pissed!”

“My mom walked out, saw the mess and immediately walked right back into the house.” Kas laughed. “But you could hear her just going off in Japanese.”

“So, don’t call Howard or Morpheus to put up my bookshelves,” Kami noted, head bobbing in acceptance.

“You should ask Lance,” Sasha teased, digging an elbow into Kami’s side. “I bet he would *love* to help put up anything you ask him to.”

Even in the semi darkness, Kami’s cheeks darkened. “You guys are making way too much out of this. He’s just really sweet and helpful.”

“You think everyone is sweet and helpful,” Kas muttered, waving her fork at Kami across the table. “Like that prick I told you to stay away from.”

Intrigued, I found myself leaning forward, listening attentively for more on this prick.

Kami huffed. “First, you guys badger me to date. I do and you tell me not him.”

“He attacked you!” Sasha exclaimed, arms leaping into the air in outrage. “The guy was a fucking psycho, Kami.”

“And I knew it,” Kas added with several sharp jabs of her finger into the table. “I could smell the crazy coming off him through the phone and I told you.”

“I was already in his car when you told me,” Kami muttered.

Kas groaned and rubbed a hand over her face. “Fuck, I get so mad every time I think about that motherfucker.” She hit the table with a fit. “If we’d only gotten there a few more minutes earlier...”

Now, I was deeply invested.

“What guy?”

The conversation screeched to a halt and all eyes pivoted to me as if only just remembering my existence. Rude. But I was more interested in the rest of this story and this guy I would be paying a visit to the first chance I got.

“It was nothing—” Kami started but I cut her off, eyes fixed on the other three, waiting for one of them to fill me in because I knew Kami would sugar coat what I needed to hear.

“What guy?” I repeated.

Sasha and Kas exchanged glances with each other, then with Lavena, neither of them saying a word.

So, I faced my sister. Her gaze met mine from across the table, hers calm and level. The look of a feral cat who just feasted on a whole chicken coop. It was the look of satisfaction and amusement. As if what I was asking was somehow entertaining in her mind. But I recognized that look. I knew that twisted glimmer. I was also very much aware that while the others had argued about this asshole, she had said nothing, as if the matter was somehow irrelevant.

Lavena raised her wine and took a sip. “No one of any importance. Kami took care of him. Didn’t you, Kami?”

Kami nodded immediately. “I did.”

Lavena set the glass down and leveled me with a look that said, see? The problem was solved.

My ass.

The fact that the other two were still enraged by the event while she sat unbothered only solidified my theory.

No one was finding this guy.

I should have known Lavena wouldn’t have let something like that slide. She would not have let him live. Why she hadn’t told the others was a question for another time. I frankly didn’t care. I was more enraged I wouldn’t be getting my hands on him.

I sat back, resting my elbow on the iron armrest and my chin on my loosely bunched fingers. My gaze met Kami’s and I felt the overpowering urge all over again to find this guy and

beat him to an inch of his life. Maybe beyond. What right did he have to put his filthy hands on what was mine? Had he honestly thought he could get away with it?

I guess, technically, he hadn't gotten away with it, but he'd hoped. And herein my problem; Kami was too trusting. She was too ... good. She never saw the evil rotting the belly of the city. She genuinely believed people were inherently decent when in fact, the majority of them would slit her throat for the watch on her wrist and I wouldn't always be there to protect her and that terrified me.



“Company?”

Head bent over a sink piled with soapy dishes, I didn't hear Kami slip into the kitchen until she stood in the back doorway, her thin arms clasped around her center.

“I'd never say no to yours.”

I flicked the soap from my fingers and motioned to the dishtowel I'd already set aside for her, anticipating her arrival. She plucked it up with a grin and stepped into the space at my side.

We worked in a comfortable silence that was broken only by the clink of ceramic and the rush of water. Occasionally, the laughter and raised conversation from the fire pit threaded through our moment, but we continued to work side by side as we had a million times in the past. Kami was the only other person I knew, besides myself, who enjoyed the methodical process of cleaning. Whenever we ate at my parents', we were

the ones who volunteered to do the dishes. I washed. She dried. It was a routine I'd missed being away from her.

When it was all finished and the counters were scrubbed and the floor swept, I tucked my hands around her waist and lifted her onto the counter. Her squeak of surprise was followed by a grin as I scooted her to the edge and stepped between her knees. Her arms encircled my shoulders, capturing me and pulling me closer. I found my face buried in the soft column of her throat, my palms flat along the delicate line of her back, pressing her tighter to me. My lips lingered on the pattering vein beneath the warm skin. Her sweet fragrance, a haunting aroma of roses and me.

Fuck, I smelled good on her.

Her fingers skimmed through my hair in rhythmic strokes that made me want to nuzzle in deeper and nap. Her lips lined the column of my neck with tiny, kissing nibbles. She'd locked her legs around my hips, and I could feel her gently stroking the back of my thigh with her feet. I relished in the moment, in the feel of being utterly surrounded by the most beautiful woman in the world, to be loved by her so fully.

She hadn't said it, neither had I, but I wasn't an idiot. No one, absolutely no one waited for a man for four years because of some ridiculous crush, because of a ten-minute kiss a lifetime ago. I knew she loved me. I knew it as certainly and completely as I knew I loved her. Knowing it, however, didn't solve the problem it brought.

How the hell was I supposed to live the rest of my life without her?

How was I going to keep her?

How was I supposed to leave the lodge the next day and go on acting as if I wasn't missing a whole, damn part of myself?

"Darius?"

I folded her tighter against me. "Yeah, baby?"

She was quiet for a long moment, long enough that I raised my head. Her warm, brown eyes rose to meet mine and the shadows in them tightened the muscles in my gut.

“We need to talk.”

I stroked back a wisp of hair off her cheek, letting my fingers linger.

“What is it?” I asked.

She returned the gesture, her cool fingers skimming the curve of my cheek down to graze my jaw. She traced the line down to my chin. Her beautiful face was so thoughtful, painfully so, as if whatever she was about to confess into the universe would break her heart.

“The day after tomorrow,” she whispered so low I almost didn’t hear her. “When we leave here and go back.”

I hadn’t wanted to talk about it. Talking about it made it real, like it wasn’t something inevitable and I could simply stop it by ignoring it. I knew the responsible thing to do was have that conversation, to iron out the fine lines of our situation, but I couldn’t bring myself to. Even after she’d gone to the island with the girls and I had the lodge to myself for hours, wandering it aimlessly, wandering the surrounding forest, debating joining them just across the lake, I couldn’t plan a future without her in it. My very soul had refused. Yet every version of her staying with me, standing by my side resulted in losing her in a horrific and tragic scenario that ripped at my heart. In every version, the conclusion had always been the same — it was better having her in my life at a distance than not having her in the world at all. That was the only way.

I nodded. “Okay?”

She drew in a breath to steel herself against whatever conclusion she’d come up with. “I did some thinking while I was out with the girls today and I think I finally understand that...” she licked her lips, eyes focused on the hollow of my throat as if she couldn’t quite bring herself to meet my eye, “that this is how it has to be, right?” Her eyes were pleading and hurting when they carefully lifted to mine, and I fucking hated it. “This is what’s best.”

“What do you mean, Kami?”

“I’m not like you and Lavena, and the girls. I’m not ... Liya,” she dropped her gaze again, missing the furrowing of my brows, “your world and mine are different and I don’t want to be a liability.”

I caught her chin and lifted her face to mine. The jostle dislodged a tear and it slid down her cheek.

“What are you talking about?”

She sniffled. “I’m a danger to you.”

I could only stare at her, bemused.

“I make you vulnerable,” she went on quietly in a flat, logical tone I really didn’t like.

“You think you make me vulnerable?”

She raised wet eyes to my face. “Don’t I? You’ll always worry about me, worry if I’m safe, worry if I’m late or if I don’t get to my phone in time and you won’t remember to keep yourself safe. You’ll be too preoccupied with me, and I could never ... if anything happens to you...”

She wasn’t wrong ... entirely.

She made me vulnerable.

I would always put her life above my own.

I would take a bullet for her without being asked.

But she was also right that I would worry. Every time I didn’t hear from her, every time she was a minute late coming home, my world would crumble until she was in it again safe and whole. I would watch the shadows around her and never pay attention to the ones around me. I would throw myself between her and every evil with zero regard to anything else.

And that couldn’t happen.

I had an empire relying on me, other lives, so many other lives trusting me to care for them, protect them. I had a family trusting me to make the hard choices. My legacy, the legacy built on the Medlock name for generations, a foundation of years built on blood and sweat needed me to stay focused.



I loved Kami.

I loved her with the rage and chaos of an ocean storm. It was violent and desperate, and endless, and all-consuming, but it was also dangerous.

For her.

For me.

For all the people depending on me.

Loving her meant being willing to sacrifice everything and everyone I swore to protect.

“It’s okay.” She touched the center of my chest with the flat of her palm. “You don’t have to say anything.” But I should. There had to be something to make this hurt stop. If there was, she didn’t give me a chance to think of it when she went on. “I am annoyed this keeps happening.” She gave a humorless chuckle. “First, I lost you to Liya. Then prison. Now this.” Her thin smile wobbled. “I’m beginning to think maybe ... maybe we were just never meant—”

I kissed her to stop whatever bullshit thing she was about to say.

“You’re wrong!” I growled against her mouth.

Her eyes swam as she stared up at me. “Am I? Tell me there won’t always be someone ready to take you from me?”

My molars ground together, grinding my feverish and desperate words to pulp to be swallowed again.

She smiled a smile that would forever break my heart and touched my cheek. “It’s okay. At least, I got this weekend.”

“That’s enough?”

Her laugh this time was sharp and brittle and broken by the emotions that made her chin wobble. “No. A lifetime wouldn’t have been enough, but I’ll take it over nothing at all.” She sniffed and wiped her eyes. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe, Darius, even if it’s letting you go.”

Her rationality made all the sense in the world, and nothing had ever infuriated me more.

“I don’t want this.”

She nodded at my shredded confession. “Do you have a better solution?” When I didn’t answer, she sighed. “I do have a few conditions.” Her chest lifted with her deep inhale. “When this weekend ends and we go back, you can’t touch me. You can’t look at me. If we’re alone in a room, one of us has to leave.”

I jerked back as if she’d lost her mind. “I can’t look at you?”

I expected her to laugh and make a joke, but she looked on the verge of bursting into tears. “No!” she snapped, voice breaking. “You can’t. Don’t ... I can’t...” she paused to suck in all the air in the room into trembling lungs. “This is already killing me, Darius, and if I walk into a room and I see you and you’re looking at me the way you’re looking at me now and I can’t have you ... I ... it hurts so much.”

I pulled her to me, into me. I crushed her against my chest with a pressure I knew was too much, but she only held tighter. Her arms cracked ribs as she mashed her face into the curve between my shoulder and neck. Her back heaved against my palms and the sound could have been a dagger piercing me through the heart.

“I won’t,” I promised, ready to say anything, give her anything to never make that sound again. “I promise.”

Part of me couldn’t help agreeing with her decision; there would never be a time when the sight of her walking into a room wouldn’t take my breath away. That wasn’t something I could control. But maybe if I didn’t look, it wouldn’t hurt as much.

“One more thing.” Her words were muffled by my top, but I heard them as if she’d shouted. “You need to find someone else. The sooner the better.”

I jolted. “What? Why?”

“Because I can’t trust myself.” She drew back and looked up into my face with a solemn sincerity that left no doubt in my mind that this was something she had thought long and

hard about. “I won’t be able to stay away from you. I can’t. I know...” she broke off with a sharp shake of her head. “But I’m not the kind of person who would take another woman’s man. If you’re with someone, I won’t...”

“Be tempted?” I partially teased.

But she nodded. “Exactly.”

I would have laughed at the insanity of her idea, but I couldn’t wrap my head around it. She honestly believed that that was the solution to this fuckery — me finding someone else. She really thought it was that fucking easy.

“So, you think I can just replace you with another woman?”

To her credit, she actually thought about it, and for a second when her eyes widened with realization I almost thought I’d gotten through to her, then she said, “No, you can’t.” Thoughts of triumph died horribly when she added, “Maybe not a normal woman, but if she’s someone from your circle, she’d be okay, right?”

I stared at her, mind absolutely blown.

How could someone so brilliant be so oblivious?

“That’s not how it works, Kami.”

But she was set on this idea. “What if you ask your dad or even your mom. They must know so many—”

“Kami!” I took hold of her shoulders, prepared to shake the senses back into her. “It’s not that easy. I can’t just find another woman.”

She stared at me. “Why not? There has to be—”

I did shake her this time. “Because I...” I cut myself off. Confessing I fucking loved her wasn’t going to make this situation easier. Saying it when she was trying so hard to break free of me would only hurt her more. “Because I just can’t,” I finished harshly.

“Can you try? Please? For me?”

Fuck me.

“Goddamn it, kitten.”

She kissed me.

After all that, after putting both our emotions through the blender, she brushed her pouty lips over mine. Her arms curled my neck, holding me to her as I deepened the strokes. Maybe it was the knowledge that we were on the clock, but nothing had tasted sweeter.

I wondered how the hell I got to this point. How had I fallen so fucking deep for the one person I shouldn't have? How had she burrowed so deep under my skin that extracting her now was excruciating? How did this happen?

The memory was immediate, as if my traitorous brain had been prepared to throw it back into my face.



It had been summer. I was just leaving my father's apartment office on my way to meet Liya for lunch and there she was, sitting with her long legs bent under her on the sofa, face buried in a book. She was always buried in a book, I'd realized. For as long as I could remember; if she wasn't with the girls, she was reading. But it was the battered book pressed up to her nose that gave me pause mid stride.

*The Count of Monte Cristo.*

I hadn't read it since college. It had been one of my favorites and the fact that someone else was reading it had made me veer off course until I stood before her, blanketing her with my shadow. She'd blinked and raised her big eyes up

at me and smiled. For a second, just one, maybe two, I was struck by how beautiful she was. Her dark lashes were long and thick, the shape upturned under arched brows. There was such soft purity in their depths, as if she'd seen the world and loved everything about it, like nothing could ever possibly go wrong and there was hope in everything.

I'd asked her what she was reading, despite already knowing and she'd held up the front for me to see.

"It's my go-to when I'm in a book slump."

I chuckled at that. "Mine's *The Grapes of Wrath*."

Her pert little nose had wrinkled. "I never could get through that one."

And just like that, I found myself sitting on the opposite end of the sofa with her, talking at length about Edmond and the *Chateau d'If*. It was the most words we'd ever spoken to each other, and I hadn't wanted it to end. By the time Lavena had emerged from her room dressed to go out, twenty minutes had flown by, feeling like only minutes. Kami had smiled at me as she'd gotten to her feet.

"Here," she'd said, holding out her copy, a ratty, smelly, discolored thing that probably needed to be burned.

I declined, telling her I could grab a copy on my way out, but she'd waved it at me, insistent.

"I think you'll like this one. Whoever had it before, made a bunch of notes in the margins and I think they're very well said."

She wasn't wrong. Someone had defaced nearly every page with neat, loopy pencil marks, sparking outrage in me.

"Why would anyone do this?" I muttered.

Kami laughed. "I love it. It's like having a fellow bookworm's thoughts right there with you."

I still didn't like it, but I accepted her gift. "Don't you want to finish it?"

She shrugged. "I have another copy at home."

With that and a wave, she joined my sister and left the apartment.

Why anyone would have more than one copy of a book baffled me almost as much as why anyone would want something that was ruined, battered, and destroyed by another person. It turned out that nearly all her books were all the same. She intentionally found the most destroyed books possible and kept them. When I asked where on earth she was finding them, she casually shrugged and said, “Bookstores, flea markets, and occasionally library sales. Those are my favorite.” The more wrecked the book was, the more she seemed to love it.

“They were loved,” was always her response. “Or they need love.”

But I read the copy she gave me and the next time I saw her at my parents’, we wound up forgetting everyone at the dinner table and spent the entire night talking.

It just seemed to snowball from there. I started looking for used bookshops in every city I went to and picked up dozens of books I thought she might like — intentionally flipping through the pages for the most written on. I took pictures of different parts of different cities that were based on books we’d read and would send them to her, thrilled when she would tell me how much she loved them and had them printed to tuck into the proper books. During family trips, I found myself going with her to visit libraries and bookstores, spending hours together in the dusty stacks and leaving with a pile of books that we would comb over at the nearest cafe.

When things fell apart with Liya, Kami was the one I went to. She was waiting for me at our favorite cafe with a coffee, a muffin, and two copies of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. It seemed to have become our private weekend thing whenever one of us was feeling our worst. Neither of us said a word as we sat and read our copies and drank our drinks.

She was far too young for me, I knew that, but I fell in love with her mind before anything else. I fell for her intelligence and thirst for everything. She was my friend. The

only person who seemed to understand me the most. I didn't fall for her as a woman until much later.

It was Halloween, to be precise.

That was my marker, the timeline in my head for when I found myself realizing truly and fully that Kami was a woman. I knew she was, of course, but it seemed to click in that moment in a way that reverberated through to my very core. It hit me with a ton of bricks, momentarily crippling my whole world. It left me so shaken, I couldn't breathe.

The girls were headed to a party at the Titan, a club we owned. Lavena, Sasha, and Kas were crowded in the corridor of the apartment, fussing, and arguing. I stood leaning against the doorframe leading into the sitting room, waiting to leave already. Unlike them, I had business that required my attention and I wanted to get back before the roads were packed with drunk idiots in stupid costumes.

My sister was a cop, ironically enough, in a leather halter, shorts that were definitely too short, and boots that went to her thighs. A utility belt hung around her waist, crammed with furry cuffs and an assortment of other things I didn't care about. A blue cop hat sat on her auburn bob, finishing the ensemble.

Kas was a ninja or a mummy. The entire getup consisted of white bandages knotted across strategic places. She was one loose thread away from being naked.

"What are you?" I asked Sasha, eyeballing her blue jeans, tight, black tank top and long, brown trench coat.

"A reporter."

"Seriously over dressed for a club," Lavena snapped at the same time. "How are you going to dance in that? You are not getting laid."

Sasha rolled her eyes. "I didn't have anything else, okay? I was busy."

"Then say so! Jesus, I have like a million things."

Lavena grabbed her arm and hauled her in the direction of her bedroom. Kas pursed her lips, gave me an amused eyeroll, and followed the pair.

I was still standing there, checking my phone, making sure Ky, the club's manager hadn't left. I couldn't have the little rat leave until I'd had a few words with him. Turns out, he'd been running an illegal gambling hall in the backroom and cutting us out of the profits. That couldn't slide. He needed to be dealt with, but if my sister continued to take forever, he was going to leave, and I would have to spend more time tracking him down.

I was about to yell for them to hurry up when the front door clicked open, and the final member of the posse slipped in.

The kick in the balls was nothing to the sharp and devastating punch in the sternum.

Kami with her long, dark hair brushed down around her shoulders in soft, shiny waves met my gaze and smiled, and holy fuck.

Buttery leather encased every soft, satin inch of her, yet not enough of her. The dress was too short, too low, too open, too fucking tempting. It barely hit the top of her long, supple thighs in a loose flare. That was the only loose part. The top was a corset that cupped her gorgeous breasts like two lover's hands and pushed them up as if in invitation. A neat little bow knotted the lace down the center and hung between those glorious mounds, teasing me to give one fucking tug. The whole thing was staying up by the sheer will of God.

"Fuck..." I heard myself groan against my will.

Kami blushed and dropped her gaze. Her tiny hands brushed at the useless scrap of fabric hanging around her hips. "Do you like it?"

No.

I fucking hated it.

I had never hated anything more in my life.



I had never wanted to rip something off someone so badly that my hands shook.

“What are you supposed to be?” I snapped a bit harsher than I intended.

I prayed she'd say your wildest fantasies or your new toy, but her hand jumped up to the tiny, black ears poking out through her hair.

“A kitten,” she replied because God hated me.

I was pushing away from the only thing holding me up and moving towards her without a shred of consent from my brain.

“Kitten,” I breathed, the single word rumbling up my chest in a gruff growl that was highly inappropriate.

I knew it the moment her dark, smoky eyes widened, and her bright, red lips parted. I knew it the moment her tits hitched in their useless confines.

Lavena and the others — bless them and fuck them — took that moment to barge in, a chaotic clatter of heels and laughter. They saw Kami and squealed as they rushed her, saving her from me, because at that moment, all I wanted to know was what she had on under.

If anything.

And how to get it off.

We took my car. Lavena jumped into the passenger's side seat, leaving the other three to cram into the back. Kami sat behind me. I could feel her there, a radiant heat burning my back. While the others chatted loudly, excited for the evening, she sat quiet and still, a tiny, helpless kitten watching me back through the rear-view mirror.

At the club, I opened her door and watched her slide one long, toned leg out, the tiny foot encased in a high, black pump. I gave her my hand, supposedly offering my assistance when all I wanted was to touch her.

She accepted it and rose slowly before me, dark eyes fixed on mine.

“Thank you,” she whispered once she stood before me.

“You look beautiful, Kami,” I murmured, thrilled when her shy smile filled her cheeks with color. “You’re going to have me digging a lot of holes tonight.”

Her brows furrowed in confusion, but I was saved from explaining when Lavena called her over and she left me to my downright filthy thoughts. My pants had never felt so fucking tight, or my chest. Both seemed to be competing to see which of them would burst first.

I spent the entire night in the office, watching her from the one-way mirror overlooking the whole main floor. I told myself it was to keep douchebags from harassing them or trying something, but I couldn’t even say where my sister or the other two were. My eyes refused to leave Kami. She’d become a flame, and I was an obsessed moth drawn to her heat and radiance. I wanted to burn in her. I wanted to catch fire and become nothing but ashes under her touch. I wanted to be so far up inside her she bowed in two and screamed my name for the whole world to hear. I had never in my life hurt so badly for a woman, and she wasn’t the first woman I’d seen in a leather dress. Hell, I’d seen Kami in a fucking bikini. I’d seen her in dozens of beautiful dresses. But something about her that night...

I was addicted.

I was so absorbed and obsessed, I couldn’t think straight.

Maybe I just needed to get laid.

It was a possibility.

It had been a year since Liya, and I just never had time to find another woman. Maybe I just needed to find someone and take them back to my apartment. Hell, bring them up to the office. I’d never fucked anyone up there, but I...

Kami took the ears off and set them on the table. She laughed at something Kas said and did a little twirl on the heel of her deathtraps. The skirt flared. I couldn’t see from high up, but several other heads pivoted in her direction.

Fury roared up, claiming the place of my hunger. My fingers balled as their table was crowded by stupid, little pricks dressed up in the douchiest costumes. A pimp? A gangster? Come on. None of them would know what to do with someone like Kami if they got her. They would never treat her right, not the way she deserved. They would only hurt her, and I would end up with blood stains on my shirt.

A pirate leaned a little too close to her. Kami hedged a step back, smiling politely. He motioned in the direction of the bar. She shook her head and picked up her nearly empty martini glass as if to show him. The pirate's smile slipped as mine peaked.

"That's right, you stupid fuck," I muttered under my breath.

He noticed a stunning blonde in a pink, feathery dress, and immediately lost interest in trying to win Kami and disappeared into the crowd.

I watched Kami's face, waiting to see disappointment or rejection, but she downed her drink and met eyes with Lavena. She said something and gave a shrug as if to say, *what ya going to do?* Both started laughing.

The four hit the dance floor. Under the flashing lights, Kami was breathtaking, her hair gleaming, her body swaying to the music I couldn't hear in my soundproof bubble. Her skirt swished and moved around her legs, never going high enough to appease my curiosity.

"Boss?"

I'd forgotten about the three behind me, my purpose even being there. Yet, it was annoyance that fueled me when I faced the small, sweaty man sitting in the chair, flagged by two of my best bouncers and occasional muscle.

I glanced back once to see where Kami was, if she was still okay before addressing my duties.

I may have taken care of business a little too aggressively, but a lot had happened that night. I was still reeling from the avalanche of emotions I was feeling over Kami, the relentless

boner cutting into my zipper, the fact that I was having to deal with this shit when I should have been watching to make sure Kami was okay down there, surrounded by all manner of assholes. By the end of it, though, Ky owned up to his mistakes. He apologized through a mouthful of blood and swore he would never do it again.

“No, you won’t,” I agreed, accepting the rag Matthews passed me and wiping the blood off my knuckles, my face ... my damn shirt. Christ. Always with the shirts. Maybe I needed to start wearing an apron. “But you got something here. Under the right eye, it could be worth exploring.”

Through swollen, black eyes, Ky tried to find me with the sound of my voice. “You want me to keep the games?”

I walked over to the windows and peered down to where I’d seen Kami last. She wasn’t there anymore and tried not to panic as I searched the sea of weaving bodies. I forgot all about Ky until I spotted her again at the bar, body bobbing to the music. She was watching the bartender, waiting for her drinks, I guessed.

A thin, pale vampire slinked up to her in his blood teared top, dusty vest, and fake fangs. His hand settled on Kami’s hips, pushing her forward into the counter as he ground his pelvis into her ass. Kami spun awkwardly in her heels and trapped between the fucker and the bar. Her expression was a mask of fury as she planted her hands into his chest and shoved. The prick seemed to take that as an invitation to move in deeper, trapping her in the circle of his arms as he fought to land a kiss.

The roar in my ears could have swallowed the ocean. It blanketed the world of everything, but the murder I was about to commit.

I was out the door and down the stairs before even I realized my feet were moving. I was only vaguely aware of Matthews and Harper on my heel, moving the crowd aside.

I spotted Kami first. She stood by the bar, surrounded by a small crowd of onlookers, but unharmed. She blinked in

surprise when I stepped into her path. Then she spotted my blood splattered clothes.

“Oh my God!” she cried, reaching for me. “Are you hurt?”

“Where is he?” I snarled back.

She seemed to struggle between my safety and my question. “Who?”

“The dead guy who put his hands on you,” I growled, and had the pleasure of watching realization dawn on her beautiful face.

She motioned over my shoulder, and I turned to find Lavena and Sasha standing over a figure curled into a fetal position on the floor. Kas stood just behind them, a wine bottle in hand like a weapon. But I only saw the weeping dead man at their feet.

I stepped forward and grabbed him by the vest and hauled him to his feet. His face was bleeding. There was a lot. It gushed out from between his fingers and poured down his front to create actual bloodstains on his shirt.

“You have no idea how badly you fucked up,” I told him over the pounding thrum of music. “But you’re about to.”

The kid was barely twenty-one. He was a student at the university and drunk beyond reasoning. I broke three of his fingers and dislocated his jaw before warning him that if I ever saw him anywhere near my club again, I would peel the skin off him. Then I had him hauled from the club and chucked into the back alley like the trash he was.

Kami was back at the table with the others. No one was sitting, but neither did any of them look like they were having fun anymore. They stood in a close circle. Kas had her arms around Kami from behind, her chin resting on Kami’s naked shoulder as Lavena and Sasha faced her, both throwing words at her that she kept shaking her head at.

All four turned to me when I returned, but I only had eyes for one.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

Kami nodded. “Thank you.”

I moved closer. I told myself it was to see her better under all the flashing lights and swaying shadows, but I knew that wasn't it. Simple truth was, if it weren't for all the bouncing and hopping bodies everywhere, my hands would be all over her, checking every inch for even a scratch. The little fuck had seven more fingers and ten more toes I would have happily snapped like twigs.

“If he comes back, come get me,” I told Lavena. “I have a pine box with his name on it.”

With a last, lingering glance at Kami, I took myself back up to the office where Ky waited, still tied to the chair.

Yes, I killed him. He stole from me and the club. I couldn't let that stand. But I did mean it when I told him we would keep the games going in the backroom. It seemed to be successful and profitable if run correctly.

I was in the process of helping Matthews and Harper drop Ky's body down on a tarp when there was a knock at the office door. The three of us exchanged glances.

“I'll get it,” I told them, pushing to my feet and moving in the direction of the door.

Halloween made my life so much easier. No one ever noticed anything. The weirder the scenario the more normal it seemed. Any other day, blood on my clothes raised questions. On Halloween, it was perfectly acceptable. So, I didn't worry about it when cracking the door open a sliver and peering out.

Kami with her sweet face and lethal figure stood on the first step, chin tilted up at me.

“Hi,” she whispered. “Busy?”

I shook my head, careful to keep my body blocking her from seeing the dead man in my office. “Just taking care of some business.”

Her gaze dropped to my shirt and the fresh spray of blood — knife wounds were just as messy as a gunshot — and I had

a feeling she didn't buy my story, but she didn't call me on it. "I wanted to say thank you again."

Her gratitude baffled me. Had she honestly thought I would do nothing while that fucker put his hands on her? Did she think I would simply toss him out and let that be the end of it? Kid or not, he was lucky I let him leave with the piece hanging between his legs still intact. He had no idea the zero level of tolerance I had for pricks like him in my club.

"I don't want your thanks, Kami. I would have happily skinned him alive for you. I still will. Just say the word."

I saw the bob of her Adam's apple, the dilation of her pupils. She was at the perfect height to my midsection. With her chin tilted far back and her cheeks flushed, it was hard not to imagine undoing my belt and...

"I don't want that," she murmured. "He doesn't deserve your life if you get caught."

"Oh, kitten," I let my grin curl slow and cutting across my face, "but I would go in with a smile. Guys like him just need to be reminded of what happens to little pricks when they touch things that don't belong to them."

She blinked. "Are you calling me a thing?"

*You could be a thing, I wanted to tell her. You could be my plaything, my pretty, little toy.*

But I didn't.

I swallowed my response and focused instead on her face, on her lips, on the rise and fall of her breasts. My gaze dropped to the knot on her corset, the only piece of string holding that whole dress in place. It would have been so easy to tug it loose and let her breasts spring free into my hands. I'd pull her into the office, strip her naked and fuck her against the glass. That's all I wanted, to sink deep inside her and have her beg me not to stop. I'd twist all that lush, glorious hair in my hand and pull it back as I took her from behind. With those heels of hers still on, she was the perfect height to get the best angle.

This obsession I suddenly had with destroying and ruining Kami blew my mind. It made no sense when it was the same Kami I had pumpkin spice tea with just the morning before. It was the same Kami who sat at my parents' table just the previous night, nibbling on spaghetti and talking to me about the new book to movie adaptation of the book we were both reading. That hadn't changed. I hadn't changed. Why did it feel as if some enchanted veil had been lifted all of a sudden, revealing her to me for the first time?

“Darius?”

I sucked in a breath and lifted my attention back to her face and the look of knowing in her eyes. I almost smirked at the matching want reflecting back at me.

“Go back to your friends, kitten. Enjoy the rest of your night. I'll be here if you need me.”

I closed the door before the answer in her eyes touched her lips and she damned us both, because as much as I would have given my soul to have her splayed across my bed sheets, she was off limits.

I stayed the whole night in case anyone else thought it would be a good idea to test me. I stayed in the silence of my office and away from the temptation of the woman below, but she found me with Lavena at her side. Literally at her side, holding her up as she staggered over the ice picks strapped to her feet.

I was out of my chair before the door closed behind them. “What happened?”

Lavena jostled Kami higher. “One too many shots. She always thinks she can keep up with Kas. She never learns that no one can keep with that lunatic, not even me. But she tries.”

I went to them, and Kami was heaved into my arms. I caught her, her lithe frame fitting perfectly in line with mine before I hoisted her up into my chest. Her tiny weight settled in place as if she were made from that very spot. Her head nestled into the side of my neck, her breath warm and even against my skin.



“I can do another,” she slurred. “I’m ready.”

I snorted despite myself. Lavena met my gaze, her own lip quirked at the corner.

“Sure, you can, champ.”

Kami grumbled something and snuggled against me, a lost kitten seeking heat. I was painfully aware of every stitch of naked skin under my hands, every waft of her musky scent, every exhale. Still, I cradled her close, taking advantage of my good fortune.

“What am I supposed to do with her?” The question was a spiritual one meant for the heavens, but Lavena answered.

“Can you take her back to the apartment? Enzo just texted to meet up for an after party and it’s on the other side of town. I don’t trust cabs or Ubers. Kas is coming with me, and Sasha has already gone home.”

The instructions were clear enough and nothing I hadn’t done before. Usually, however, I wasn’t having an existential crisis. I definitely never took Kami home alone before.

But I accepted the mission.

Take Kami home.

Couldn’t be that hard. She was barely awake. I just needed to get her back to the apartment, tuck her into bed and leave. In the morning, things would be different. I would be different. I would realize how insane I was acting all night and never think of my dick and Kami in the same sentence again.

It was foolproof.

Easy.

I got her to my car. I carried her as if she were a child who had fallen asleep on the sofa. I cradled her with equal gentleness as I maneuvered through the crowded streets. I kept to the shadows, to the walls, tucking her out of view from the waist down whenever anyone got too close; there was no other way for me to keep the world from seeing her pussy where the back of her skirt swung free, but I was going to fucking try.

At the car, I gingerly set her down, keeping a secure hook around her tiny waist as I unlocked the door.

“Darius?”

I glanced down at the dark head nestled against my chest. “Yeah?”

Her back lifted with her deep inhale. “You smell so good. Am I allowed to say that?”

Despite myself, I gave a short chuckle. “I don’t know. I honestly don’t know much of anything tonight.”

Her face turned into the hollow between my pecs, and all my humor vanished. “I want it all over my skin.”

*She’s drunk*, I told myself as I yanked open the door, needing to get her out of my arms and at a safe distance.

“Okay, baby, watch your head.”

I helped her slide into the seat, made sure her legs and hands were tucked in and her belt was secure before closing her in. I took the long way around the back of the car, needing the few extra seconds to will my brain back into focus.

Kami had her eyes closed, head tilted back when I got in behind the wheel. Her fingers were limp and palms up in her lap. Her thighs had just enough gap between them to fit a man’s hand easily.

I started the car and pulled into traffic.

“Darius?”

“Yeah?”

Her eyes glowed in the streetlights as she turned her head to me in the shadows. “I’m cold.”

My hand immediately reached for the dial only to be stopped by hers shooting out of the darkness and capturing it. I wasn’t fast enough — or maybe strong enough — to stop her when she clasped it tight between both of hers and drew it between her thighs.

“Shit,” I breathed, my sharp inhale stuck in my chest. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t know,” her quiet confession was worse than if she’d come out and said she wanted me to touch her.

“We should stop.”

Yet my hand stayed on her thigh. My fingers remained curled loosely around the warm, supple flesh, inches from where I could feel the heat radiating from her.

“I’ve tried all night,” she murmured tightly. “I’ve been so wet. My panties were soaked.”

“Fuck!”

I slammed on the brakes, narrowly missing the red light. The car screeched to a halt. A group of howling bar-hoppers hooted and hollered their way across the crosswalk, waving foam fingers and neon, feather boas. There was no rhyme or reason behind their costumes, but I couldn’t give a shit when Kami was practically vibrating under my palm and her words were bouncing off the walls of my skull.

“You’re drunk,” I told us both firmly. “You don’t know what you’re—”

“You don’t want me?”

I squeezed my eyes closed tight at the shattered little whisper coming from the woman beside me. It was all I could do to keep from dragging her hand into my lap and showing her the rock-hard evidence of just how badly I fucking wanted her.

“Not when you’re too drunk to know what you’re saying,” I countered, feeling pretty good about myself for coming up with such a logical explanation.

It seemed to work.

She asked no follow up questions, didn’t say another word as we drove the rest of the way to the Alexander. She didn’t even seem to notice I never took my hand off her.

In my designated parking spot in the underground parking, I killed the engine and turned to the sleeping woman who wielded all the power to destroy my world. Her chest rose and fell with every gentle breath. A stray coil of hair had slid over her shoulder and hung protectively across her left breast. I had to fight all my demons to keep from hooking the strand with a finger and slipping it free.

“God, kitten,” I whispered, giving myself a split second to stroke her inner thigh with the pad of my thumb. “You make me so fucking hard.”

My companion gave a little huff of air that could have been a gasp or a moan. Her body twitched in her seat, a wiggle that sent my fingers higher up near the apex of her being. Her hand settled over the back of mine.

“Show me,” she rasped, eyes still closed.

I snatched my hand back and threw myself out of the car. I told myself I wasn’t running, but I sure as hell wished I could. Instead, I was rounding the car to her side.

With more patience and gentleness than I considered myself capable of, I pulled her out to stand in the silent parking garage with me. Her entire weight settled in my arms, and I maximized the opportunity by holding her too close, too tight.

Her drowsy eyelids parted and I found myself lost in her hunger, in the want darkening her eyes. She pressed her palms into my chest and slid them up to curl around the back of my neck.

“Darius?”

“Yeah, baby?”

She sucked her bottom lip in between her teeth. “Would you fuck me if I wasn’t drunk?”

The sound of that word on Kami’s lips was nothing compared to the image of taking her right there up against the side of my car. I could take her up to my place. I could throw her on the bed, rip off her dress and sink home. There were so

many different ways I could show her just how fast she'd be naked if she weren't drunk.

But it was also not that simple.

Sober Kami would never have asked such a question. She never would have confessed to her soaked panties. Sober Kami was sweet and shy and innocent. Drunk Kami didn't seem to have a filter and enjoyed causing my suffering.

"If you remember this conversation in the morning and you still want me to fuck you, I will," I decided, confident she would not remember it.

"Promise?"

I went against my own better judgment and skimmed a curled knuckle over her cheek. "I promise."

A sleepy, sloppy grin curled her lips. "Darius?"

I let my thumb glide over her bottom lip. "Yes, baby?"

"Call me your kitten again." Her fingers slid up to tangle in the strands of hair at the back of my head.

My eyebrow arched. "Are you my kitten, Kami?"

Despite everything she'd said up until that moment, she blushed and dropped her gaze to my chin. "Yes." She stole a hesitant peek up at me. "Can I be?"

I felt the growl crawling up my chest to wedge in my throat, a guttural vibration that made me tighten my hold on her even as I fought against my own body not to kiss her because I knew it would not stop there if I tasted her lips.

"Why do you want to be my kitten, baby?"

The mouth I was desperately trying to avoid pulled into a tiny, shy smile. "Because the way you say it and look at me..." she broke off, expelling a huff of air. "Makes my pussy want things."

I shouldn't have asked. I realized that after, yet my stupid brain was on a roll.

"What things?"

Arousal shone in the endless desert of her eyes as her fingers twisted in the material of her ridiculous skirt. “Your fingers. Your cock. God, I’m so wet. Touch her, Darius.”

Fuck.

Fuck!

I grabbed her hands before she could lift the only thing keeping me from losing my mind. “Do you want everyone to see your panties, Kami?”

She gave a drunken giggle. “What panties?”

“You were bare ass all night in that dress?” I snarled, fingers finding their way into her hair and fisting, thrilled when she whimpered.

“I took them off after I came to see you at the office.”

I watched the formation of each word forming on her plump lips, fascinated by everything she was telling me.

“Why?”

“The way you were looking at me on the stairs...” she gave a little moan and a little shiver that had me backing her right into the car.

“How was I looking at you, Kami?”

“Like you were imagining fucking me.”

I felt myself smirk. “I was. I was picturing you against the glass, naked and getting railed by my cock.”

Her eyes glazed slightly. “Fuck,” she whined, thighs pressing together.

“Where are your panties, kitten?”

Glassy with a desperate and horny plea I understood completely, Kami sucked in a breath. “I don’t know.”

Both my eyebrows lifted. “You lost them?”

“I think so?”

“At the club?”

She bit her lip and grimaced. “Maybe. I had them. Then I think I put them down ... I needed a drink. But the more I drank to forget how badly I hurt, the more I wanted you. The shots didn’t help and ... I don’t know what happened to them.”

“God,” I groaned. “I need to get you to bed.”

“Will you come with me?”

I tightened my hold on her hair and gave a gentle, but firm tug that evoked a sharp cry from her. “I told you, if you remember this in the morning and still want me in your bed, you can come find me.”

She reluctantly agreed.

We didn’t speak of it again as I led her into the elevator and up to the floor she shared with the girls. I was deliberating how I was going to get her out of her dress, cleaned up and in bed without climbing into bed with her when the door opened and God gave me a fucking break because Sasha stood on the other side in her bathrobe, face scrubbed and pink slippers on her feet.

She gave me a warm smile. “Lavena said you’d be bringing her home. I’ll take her. She’s going to stay at my place tonight so I can keep an eye on her.”

I had never loved my sister more than I did in that moment when I passed a tipsy Kami over to her friend and ran as if the devil himself were on my heels.

She never did come to find me the next morning.

Part of me knew she wouldn’t remember any of it; she was way too far gone, but the other part of me had hoped. I’d secretly waited for her text or call. I watched her later that week at a family BBQ as she chatted with my parents and did all the things she normally would have, except remember.

I let it go.

It was clearly not meant to happen. Even the universe had backtracked on its promise to give her to me. Instead, I was the only one who remembered that night. It was a memory I would take to the grave with me.



“Darius?” I blinked and raised my head to focus on the woman in my arms. She touched my face lightly. “I should get back to the girls before they wonder what happened to me. Are we still on for tonight?”

I kissed the heel of the hand resting on my cheek. “Nothing is stopping me from fucking you blind tonight.”

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth and grinned. “Good, because after everything you’ve put me through all evening, if you don’t fix it, I will hunt you down, Mr. Medlock.”

Despite the weight on my chest, I felt myself chuckle. “Oh, I’ll fix it, kitten.”

She smiled as she slid off the counter. “Are you coming out?”

I shook my head. “Go enjoy your evening with the girls. I’ll come get you when they go to bed.”

With a final brush of her fingers on my arm, she was gone, and I was left to lean against the counter and figure out what the hell I was doing.



## CHAPTER 7

# *Kamari*



“What’s everyone’s week looking like?” Lavena kicked off her sandals and folded her legs on the cushion. The firelight shimmered across the glossy manicure, illuminating the crimson polish on her toes. “I was thinking of hitting Titans this Wednesday for their lady’s night.”

“You’re the manager,” Sasha reminded her. “You can literally get in free at any time.”

Lavena rolled her eyes. “Yes, but there are always more men on lady’s night, and we can hunt for a few really nice ones for us to play with.”

“I’m in,” I blurted before my brain could argue me out of it.

I wasn’t surprised by the startled glances I was shot. I was usually the one who had to get talked into one of these adventures by Lavena who would use the excuse that I was too old to be sitting around letting my vagina collect dust. The large majority of the time, none of us actually went home with anyone. We just enjoyed watching the show as people danced and had fun. We’d giggle over cute guys and occasionally have a drink or two with them, but we all wound up just going back to each other’s apartments to watch movies. I didn’t expect this to be any different, but I had to try.

I had to get my head in the game.

Moving on seemed to be the only way to keep Darius safe. I didn’t even care if I liked the other person or if we stayed together. For all I cared, the ideal person would be someone I

could say was my boyfriend, occasionally brought to events and never saw otherwise. At least, that was the best-case scenario. There had to be someone like that out there.

It was a dumb idea. I knew it. But if Darius wasn't thinking about me then he would have more time thinking of ways to keep himself protected and everything would be fine.

“Seriously?” Kas broke into my thoughts.

I smiled and shrugged. “Why not? It'll be fun.”

“You want to ... hook up with someone?” Lavena hedged cautiously.

My stomach twisted at the thought, but I kept my smile in place. “I don't know. Maybe just see how the night goes.”

The three exchanged bemused glances but Sasha was the one who broke it with a clap of her hands.

“Hell yeah!”

The other two high fived and cheered along with her, and that seemed to settle it. We agreed to meet at Titans after I finished work that Wednesday.

“I have some things I need to deal with, but I'll meet you guys there,” Lavena promised.

The Titan was Lavena's baby. I suspected it had more to do with the illegal gambling den in the back than the actual club, but she seemed to thrive in the weird chaos. I went back there with her once and the level of anxiety that clouded that place had me leaving to wait for her in the club area.

The club itself had a whole other meaning for me. It was the place Darius first looked at me the way I always dreamed he would. It was the night everything changed between us. That whole experience lived in my memory, drenched in a fog of glitter. I remembered most of it, the important parts, anyway.

He bursting through the crowd, covered in blood to deal with the drunk guy who grabbed me. The rage and violence that rolled off him as he swooped down and hauled the kid up ... I lost all the sensation in my limbs.

The way he'd looked me over at the beginning of the night, the raw hunger and lust in his eyes when he caressed my breasts, my legs, my lips, I would have submitted to him right there if he'd asked me to drop to my knees.

The whole night was him fucking me with his eyes without ever laying a hand on me and I was driven mad with how much I needed him. I could barely think. My core throbbed as if it had grown its own heartbeat and all I wanted was for him to just do what his gaze kept promising.

Going to his office was my last attempt to get him alone, thinking maybe he didn't want to do anything in front of his sister and the others. And God, the way he undressed me on those stairs haunted my dreams for weeks. When he turned me away, getting stupid drunk to forget it all was the only solution. I didn't even care. I just needed to numb one of the two pangs claiming my body and soul. The rest was a blur. I remembered nothing else until waking up the next morning feeling like death in Sasha's bed.

I wanted to think it was better that way, but who was I kidding? Waking up with Darius would have been much better. But that night changed something between us. There were moments of pure, brutal tension that ripped between us with just a glance. I could feel him undressing me from across a crowded room. His eyes were more focused on mine whenever we talked, as if every word I spoke was priceless. He'd find reasons to brush against me, little skims of his fingers along my spine in passing, grazing my arm to guide me, brushing his fingers over mine when I passed him something.

If it wasn't for the unfiltered, unrestricted, animalistic glint in his eyes, I would have chalked it all up as my overactive imagination, but he was not being subtle about wanting me and I wasn't stupid, but he seemed to be waiting for something and short of ripping my clothes off and throwing myself at him, I didn't know what that was.

"Kami," I was jolted out of my thoughts by Kas slapping my thigh. The sting made me flinch and hit her back.

"Ow!"

Kas smirked at me. “We’ve been calling you for like twenty minutes—”

“Like a second,” Sasha argued and was ignored.

“Where have you been this whole weekend? You seem so preoccupied.”

“She’s probably worried about her precious delivery,” Lavena protested for me.

It was weak and cowardly, but I latched onto the excuse and agreed she was right.

“You’re okay though?”

Kas eyeballed me with lawyer eyes, and I had to steel myself to answer with a weak nod and a muttered, “Yeah, fine.”

“You know what isn’t fine?” Sasha interrupted. “Tomorrow. Tomorrow is not fine. I am not looking forward to going back. I don’t want to go back. In fact, I think we should just run away.”

I agreed.

Wholeheartedly.

Just run.

Go somewhere far, far away and live on the beach somewhere with no responsibilities or heartache.

“And go where?” Kas asked.

“Anywhere.” Lavena laughed. “We can literally go anywhere. Between my contacts and Sasha’s, we can change our names and literally disappear forever.”

“I could never do that to Suki. She would be heartbroken.”

“Bring her along,” Sasha cheered. “Your baby sister is our baby sister. She’d love the adventure.”

Kas snorted a laugh. “The girl is scared of her own shadow. Adventures are limited to brief walks through open fields because parks have too many people and hiding places. Don’t even get me started on fairs.”

“You know what I think she needs, a girl’s shopping spree,” Lavena decided. “We’ll start slow,” she said quickly when Kas opened her mouth. “We’ll get some lunch somewhere very open. Then we’ll just wander around downtown, window shopping until she sees a store she likes and go from there.”

Kas shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know why she’s like that. Mom sneezed the other day and she actually wet herself. Suki, not my mom.”

Concern bubbled up in my chest as I edged forward. “Have your parents taken her to see someone? That doesn’t sound like she’s just a little jumpy.”

“Yeah, that’s actually a little concerning,” Sasha agreed.

“How’s she doing at school?” Lavena cut in, features hard and careful. I knew that look. It was the look just before something was set on fire or someone was about to get a piece of her mind.

Kas waved the hand holding the wine glass. “She says it’s fine.”

“Kids being nice to her?” Lavena pressed.

Kas shot the blonde a raised eyebrow. “She’s going to Carlton. Were the kids nice when we were there?”

Lavena was silent a long moment, blue eyes fixed on the lake as she took sips of her drink. “You know, I think I’m going to visit the old torture dungeon. See what’s changed. Maybe drop in and visit Suki. Haven’t seen that little twirp in a hot minute. I miss her paintings.”

“Lavena...” Kas began.

Lavena cut a sharp, level gaze towards her. “What?”

Kas sighed. “What are you going to do?”

Lavena blinked. “What do you mean? I literally just told you.”

“Bullshit you did. Don’t start anything.”

“I think,” I cut in quickly before the two could start, “what Lavena is trying to say is that—”

“No, no, I’m not, Kami. I’m not trying to say that at all,” Lavena snapped in, eyes never leaving Kas. “What I’m saying is that I am going to go in there and level that fucking place if I get even a whiff that someone is hurting Suki. I will burn it to ashes and maybe shit on those ashes. Those motherfuckers are a hundred percent responsible for whatever is wrong with her. I would bet my last fucking dollar on it, and I am going to find out.”

“She’s not wrong, Kas. Remember what it was like when we were there?” Sasha whispered. “Suki doesn’t have friends like you had us. She’s completely alone in there having to deal with all that.”

“And remember how our parents were when we told them?” Lavena added. “No one believed us.”

A crimson flush had blossomed high in Kas’s cheeks, illuminating the tears and hate glistening in her eyes. “You don’t think I asked her about that?”

“Suki won’t tell anyone, you know that,” Sasha murmured gently. “She’s a sweet kid and doesn’t want to get into trouble.”

“And given how scared she is, someone put the fear of God into her,” Lavena added. “I’ll bet anything it was the gaping cunt Mrs. Lancaster. That flaming, piece of human waste. She should be your first mark, Sash. Rid the world of that stupid bitch.”

Lavena dropped back and downed the rest of her drink in an angry gulp.

Unlike them, I didn’t attend the elite, private academy, but I’d heard the stories over the years. I watched each of them struggle after a *hard day* as they would call it. None of them ever told me what actually happened behind those walls, but I suspected Carlton wasn’t the top education system in the country, producing some of the brightest students known to man because they offered cookies and naptimes.

“If it’s not and she gets kicked out...”

“I will personally fund her entire education at literally any other school,” Lavena promised.

“The fact that Carlton is a tradition in our families is insane,” Sasha muttered. “My parents reserved spots for *my* kids the day I was born. That’s how ridiculous it is.”

“My kids will never go there,” Lavena grumbled, reaching over and snatching the wine bottle off the stone table and refilling her glass. “I don’t know if I’ll ever have any, but if I did, they wouldn’t set foot in that cursed place.”

“I think you would be an amazing mom if you ever decided to have kids,” I told her.

Lavena shook her head, taking a large swallow of her drink before speaking. “I’m a better aunt. I’d rather spoil my niece and nephews and burn down schools for them.”

“I want kids,” Sasha said with a little smile. “Like two, maybe.”

“Ugh, no thanks,” Kas groaned. “Gross. I hate babies. I hate everything about them.”

“How do you hate babies?” I cried, stunned.

“Easily. They stink. They cry. They won’t tell you what they want, they just scream like idiots. They have too much baggage and don’t get me started on the crying.”

We all stared at her until she sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Do you guys remember my Aunt Milly? My dad’s sister?” at our nods, she continued, “you guys know she has like twenty kids.”

“She has six,” Sasha argued.

“Same thing. They are a nightmare. Jesus. She asked me to watch them for two hours one weekend and ... guys, never again. Never. I would rather deep fry my entire body in hot grease and roll around in a pile of salt. Oh, and the best part? She didn’t even pay me because *they’re my cousins*. What bullshit is that? I deserve a fucking medal of bravery. Those

little monster..." she made a fist and shook it. "They need their own padded cell."

"They might actually like that," Lavena muttered.

Sasha and I laughed. Kas seemed less impressed by the joke.

"No kids for me."

"I say no kids because, as much as I love my life, I would be too terrified to bring a small human into it," Lavena explained. "What we do, how we live our lives ... how can I justify that level of selfishness?"

"Not wrong," Sasha sighed. "I don't know if I want my kids in my family's line of work. Thankfully, I have four other siblings who can carry on the tradition, but it scares me."

Lavena nodded vehemently, motioning to Sasha with her drink as if to say, *right?* "I was telling Kami earlier how stupid it was for a normal person to have a relationship with someone like us."

"Definitely stupid," Sasha sighed, nodding slowly. "I don't get that at all. Why do people think what we do is glamorous?"

"I don't think anyone thinks it's glamorous, but if you love the person..." I began.

Sasha shook her head immediately. "Girl, no. There are women out there who think dating a mafia guy is some golden standard until they realize it's a long, lonely, painful life."

"The women not from our world have no idea what bullshit it all actually is, and ninety-nine percent of the time, they're the reason their soulmate gets murdered," Kas peppered in, head shaking side to side.

"Maybe not that high," Sasha argued. "Jesus, Kas, you really like embellishing those numbers."

Kas smirked. "I'm a lawyer." She turned back to me, grin gone. "People get sloppy when their head isn't in the game. Why do you think there are so many arranged marriages amongst us? There are no feelings. You marry this person you



met a few times, join your empires, have a few kids to pass it all down to, and die.”

“And the wife knows the rules for when their man does die or goes to prison,” Sasha added. “There are no messy emotions. It’s all a business.”

“Lavena’s parents are an exception.” Kas motioned to where Lavena sat reading the label on the wine bottle. “Sometimes, they do fall in love, but still, Marcella knows the drill.”

I thought of my conversation with Darius in the kitchen and almost felt better for it. It may have felt as if my insides were being clawed to shreds by a rusty dagger, but I’d done the right thing. I’d given him a chance. I would not be the reason he died.

Part of me, however, remained angry.

I spent four years waiting for him to be released.

Before that, I waited two years for him to even notice me. Granted, he was with Liya during the first year, but I waited.

I felt like I had spent half my life waiting for him only to keep losing him every time I got close. How was that fair? Why was the universe working so hard to keep us apart? What did I do to deserve this constant and merciless pain?

Maybe I needed to cut my losses.

Maybe that was what I was being told.

Maybe I was pushing for something that wasn’t meant for me.

I wedged a loose fist into the ache between my breasts and watched the gentle lap of the lake roll over loose stones. I concentrated on the silver ripple across the dark surface, the starless sky. It was easier counting the things around me than remembering why my insides hurt so much.



He'd created a fort of pillows and blankets piled high in the center of my reading room when Darius pulled me from my room later that night. The lodge lay in dark slumber, the girls passed out in their respective rooms, oblivious to the two of us tiptoeing past their rooms to my nook.

"In here?" I asked, remembering the feel of his hands on me earlier, dragging me to the floor, twisting my clothes up until I was naked before pushing himself inside me.

Darius nodded, moving past me to take a seat in a chair brought up from the kitchen table. It was positioned at the foot of the makeshift bed. The book I'd given him rested on top. He plucked it up and held it in his lap as he watched me.

"Come here, baby." I went to him and was positioned between his feet. "Strip for me."

I only had the dress on. It took no time at all to be standing before his hungry eyes naked, aroused, and embarrassed. It was ridiculous because he'd seen me naked. Maybe not so closely, but close.

"How are you so fucking perfect?" he breathed, not touching me.

Warmth coasted though me, tightening my nipples inches from his face. He made a quiet hum of pleasure that made my core flex.

"We're going to play a game, kitten. If you win, I will let you cum."

I chuckled. "I like that."

He smirked. "I thought you might." He passed me the book. "I want you to lie down, spread your leg on either side of the chair and read."

I blinked. "That's it?"

He pulled off his top and I was momentarily distracted by the sheer beauty of his torso, the hard muscles of his shoulders, the stacked bricks doubling as his abdomen. Until he spoke. "I'm going to play with your pussy, but you will not stop reading or cum. If you do, I'll win."

I bit my lip. "What do you win?"

His grin turned my legs to jelly, and my stomach lurched with a brutal need to feel him inside me already. "If I win, my horny little kitty, you will owe me a future debt to collect at the time of my choosing. When I do, I get you, no questions asked, whenever, wherever I want you."

I thought of all the ramifications of such a deal, but decided there was no way he was going to win. I just had to focus on the book. I was really good at ignoring the world when I needed to.

"Deal."

He smirked and I wondered if I'd made the wrong choice.

"Lie down, little kitten and show me my pussy."

I lay down, keeping the chair between the wide V of my legs. At that vantage point, there was very little he could miss.

I opened the book and started reading. The cool air in the room, brushed my nipples and teased my exposed clit. I kept my knees bent and splayed the way no decent woman would ever. But I wasn't feeling decent. I was horny and restless, and I needed him inside me. I could feel where I was dribbling down the crack of my ass to stain the blankets. I knew he noticed it too; there was no way he could miss it.

Yet Darius waited.

He sat still and patient, listening to three chapters, letting me believe nothing was going to happen. I was ready to check around the book to make sure I had his full attention when something brushed my inner thigh. The contact made me jump but I kept reading, the words stuttering only slightly.

The item, warm and deliberate ghosted inward to the dip where my leg met my swollen sex.

I moaned the next set of words. My hips rose with no shame.

Darius didn't disappoint. He worked his finger over my lips, parting them and nothing more.

My body twitched, a quivering mess of need.

One finger rubbed down the center of my being from cap to hole and disappeared inside my body.

I cried out at the invasion.

“Don't stop reading, kitten.”

I lost the words for a moment and had to start from the beginning.

The finger moved inside me, unhurried. Yet, it wasn't enough. Even with me meeting each penetration with downward rolls of my hips, the cliff evaded me. I was ready to beg, to promise him anything he wanted just to let me jump.

Somewhere, I was vaguely aware of him readjusting his position. His touch vanished only briefly, as did the legs of the chair as it was moved aside. I kept my knees wide without being told, not wanting to give him any reason to stop when he returned.

Something hot and slippery flicked up my clit. It circled the hood in a figure eight before gliding down to meet the finger.

It rolled up once more and I cried his name as one hand dropped to the back of his head. My fingers hooked into his hair. The words blurred.

I had to start over, each word a breathy whine as he replaced his finger with his tongue, and I saw stars. His name tore out of me in between two sentences and two fingers stretching me open so he could get his tongue deeper inside me.

Legs flailed on either side of his head as I fought to find a perch. My fingers clawed at his head, dragging him closer, holding him to me.

I started over, fumbling over my tongue, tripping on his name and begging him not to stop while simultaneously gasping out the story on the page.

He sucked my clit into his mouth, and I bowed in half. The book slapped me in the face as both hands dove to the back of his head, holding it as I rolled my mound harder against his mouth.

“Are you giving up, kitten?” he teased watching me as he nipped the key to my very soul.

“God, don’t stop,” I begged. “I’ll give you whatever you want.”

A brow lifted on a face I could only see from the eyes up. “Anything I want?”

I nodded feverishly. “Anything. I’ve never been licked there before. God, Darius, your mouth...”

His eyes were vacuums of raw heat watching me up the flushed plain of my body. He never broke eye contact when pushing his tongue inside me. My eyes squeezed closed.

“Open your fucking eyes, Kami!” His growl had them flying open. He circled my switch with the tip of his pink tongue, watching me, the warning clear with the smooth flick. “Good girl,” he praised when my eyelids started to close but I caught myself. “I want you to watch me eat my sweet little pussy until she cums in my mouth.”

“Yes!” I whined, grinding against his mouth.

He fucked me with his tongue and fingers, alternating until I couldn’t tell which was inside me anymore.

“Why have you stopped reading Kami?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to remind him he told me to watch him, but I couldn't risk him stopping if I gave him cheek. So, I located the book, found the page with trembling fingers and started at the top.

I had no idea what was happening on the pages. I wasn't even sure I was speaking actual words when he rose onto his knees, weight braced on the hand next to my hip. The other hand slid two fingers inside my vagina and brushed up along the upper wall. He repeated the gesture, taking his time stroking a path inside me with hooked digitals.

“Darius?”

“Shh,” he whispered. “Keep reading, kitten.”

It was two restarts and the eighth pass with my nipples in his mouth that I jumped with a startled gasp. The unexpected nudge over something inside me almost had me sitting upright.

“Easy,” he coaxed, urging me back down. “Deep breath, baby.”

I gave a grunt as he hit the spot again. “Darius...?”

“Let it happen,” he murmured.

I had no idea what was happening never mind letting it, but the churning storm rising up my belly had my fingers twisting into the blankets. My body instinctively rocked against his hand even as I resisted the pressure.

“Something's wrong...”

“Does it feel wrong?”

I couldn't answer when my world ripped out from under me. Explosions of light and sound drowned the scream I felt tear through me. A liquid flood of heat surged from my body, searing my thighs and drenching Darius's hand still guiding my thrashing body through one of the wildest orgasms of my life. I was fairly certain I saw heaven for that full minute as I met his every rapid pump of his wrist to the end.

Not giving me a second to catch my breath, he was flipping me over. The sticky release on his hand smeared my belly, my hip, my breast as he pinned me down and plunged home.

“Darius!” My wail was met with a snarl as he drove his dick over that spot, over that magical switch he’d discovered. I felt that cliff’s edge racing up to meet me at an impossible rate a second time. I was screaming and bucking against him with a wild abandon that would have horrified me any other time.

“Fuck me! Harder. Don’t stop!”

“Stop?” He laughed. “No baby.” He pounded harder, fingers cutting bruises into my hips as I came for the third fucking time. “Why do you think I brought you in here, kitten? So your friends don’t hear the things I’m doing to you. So they can’t fucking save you when you’re screaming like you are and begging for my cock.”

I couldn’t think of a single thing.

Nothing as he dragged me up onto my knees, him still inside me from behind. His hands closed over my breasts.

“Are you coming again, Kami?” he taunted, squeezing my nipple with one hand and my throbbing clit with the other.

“I can’t stop,” I sobbed as my body broke around him. “I can’t stop. Oh my god! How...?”

He chuckled hot and cruel into my ear. “She’s my cunt. Say it, Kami. Who does she belong to?”

I was barely down from my fourth? Fifth? Orgasm when he twisted my hair in his hand and pulled my head back, hips slapping into my ass, driving him too far up inside me.

“I can’t do another...” I sobbed.

“That wasn’t my question.” He pulled harder on my hair. “Who does she belong to?”

I wanted to tell him he broke her so obviously him, but I was coming again.

“You. She belongs to you. Please. Please, Darius. No more. I can’t.”

He groaned and rubbed lightly at my pulsating clit, soothing her while simultaneously arousing her.

“You’ve made such a mess, kitten. Your pussy juice is everywhere. Fuck, my dick is covered. You’re covered. The bed is drenched. I have half a mind to send you home tomorrow smelling like you’ve been fucked senseless.”

“I think I have been,” I wheezed. “I think you ... I think you broke my vagina.”

He purred, deep and husky against my ear. “She’s not broken, sweetheart. Does she feel broken?”

She felt ruined for all other men, but I wasn’t about to give him that ego boost.

“Definitely can’t do that every time.”

“No?” He pressed a little harder on my over-sensitized clit, making me bite my lip. “Only special occasions?” He took my hiccup of a moan as an answer. “Birthdays? Holidays? When I catch you alone in a room?”

I wanted to point out that we were never doing this again once we left the lodge, but who was I to break the buttery warm fantasy he was weaving around us?

“I don’t think I have another one in me,” I breathed, despite the faintest crackle of heat tingling beneath his gentle coaxing.

“Not even one more?” he murmured gruffly into my jawline. His thumb teased my nipple, rolling the sending peak in time to the motions of his other hand. “Cum for me, Kami. I want to feel my pussy milk me inside—”

I didn’t hear the rest as my abused body broke one final time, a weak, exhausted collapse of my foundation to the flicking of his finger and the hard thrust of his dick.

He came with a growl. His teeth sank into my neck as he exploded inside me, mixing himself with my mess. Both ran



free when he dislodged. It splattered between our parted thighs to join the much bigger damp stain on the blanket.

I could have slept for a week, a month. My whole body throbbed. I wanted nothing near my vagina for at least an hour and my head was swimming with exhaustion, but I still dragged myself off his lap and turned to face him. His eyes no more than a thin band of blue consumed by darkness met mine with question. I said nothing as I pressed my palm flat against his chest and shoved him onto his back. I knew he let me. He went down too easily given I barely had any strength. Sweeping side my hair, I bent over his semi-flaccid and sticky penis.

“Kami...”

I ignored him as I cleaned him. I ran my tongue up the shaft and over the head still leaking slightly. I replaced the musky tang of our combined release with a sheen of saliva. I pulled him in deep, cradling him in my throat and getting rewarded with a deep, pleading snarl of my name. My hair was bunched up in his big hands, leaving mine free to take him between my palms and suck him with all the hunger brewing up in me. I sucked him with an enthusiasm and lust of someone proving a point; if this was the last time I had his dick, I was going to make damn sure he never forgot me. Every time he was with another woman, I wanted him to think of me.

The thought of him putting my dick in another woman sent a spiral of rage through me I really did not like.

“Easy, baby. Too tight.”

I loosened my fingers but grazed up the shaft with full teeth, tearing a vicious growl from him that nearly scalped me where he was gripping my hair.

“Teeth!” he growled.

I met his furious gaze with his head caught between my lips, my fury over a mystery woman who didn't even exist yet consuming all rational thought.

“He’s mine!” I snapped before I could stop myself, before I could even realize I was thinking it.

“Not if you’re not nice to him!” he shot back.

I bit back my warnings to keep him away from other women, fighting not to be that woman, especially when I had been actively telling him we needed to see other people. Maybe all those orgasms had knocked something loose in my head, making me believe crazy things.

Yet despite my insanity, I felt myself grin. Then laugh at the look of irate indignation darkening his features.

“I’m sorry.” I gave his head a light kiss. “You okay?” I watched his facial muscles flex between staying annoyed and submitting as I followed the thick vein running down the smooth side to the base, never taking my eye off him. I retraced the underside with the flat of my tongue. “Forgive me?”

He garbled something incoherent and guided my head up and over his cock. The thick, clear release at the top coated my tongue, provoking me to circle the opening and lap it up. I moaned going down to where my hand was already a fist.

“Relax your jaw,” he bit out through his teeth. “Hold your breath going down.”

I followed the directions, taking him deeper to the back of my throat without gagging. I put the new trick into practice to bob over him, following his directions to pump faster, hold him tighter. I knew it was working when his hips started jerking to meet my motions, when his fingers tightened on my hair. My name came out of him in a desperate plea that made my toes curl. That seemed to be my warning when his balls gave a twitch, and he sprayed my mouth with creamy ropes of release that I swallowed without hesitation. I kept sucking, wanting all of it. I only stopped when he pulled me up his body to his mouth.

His kiss was breathless and hard, a desperate man seeking salvation only I could provide. I tried to pull away, but his

hands are tangled in my hair, his tongue is in my mouth, sharing the tang of himself.

“Wait. I just...” I motioned to his flaccid dick resting on his abdomen.

He quirked an eyebrow. “You think I’ve never tasted myself?” He laughed when my cheeks darkened. “The only reason I haven’t tasted all my hard work running down your legs is because I know you’re sore and the last thing I want is to hurt you.”

I chuckled. “Your hard work, huh?”

“You think it was easy pulling out of you when you’re so warm and tight and inviting?”

My stomach was a swirling mess of erratic butterflies and giddy arousal. I broke eye contact only to have his finger close around my jaw and lift my attention back to him.

“Eyes up, kitten. Whether I’m inside you or not, I want to see everything you’re feeling.”

Holy Christ, this man was going to be the death of me.

“You really don’t play fair,” I whispered.

His smirk was devastating. “I never said I would.”

I felt myself chuckle as I settled my head on his chest. “No, I guess you didn’t.”

He kissed the top of my head. “Don’t fall asleep, kitten,” he said when I yawned.

“Why? I’m so tired.”

His response was to haul me to my feet. I was bundled up in a blanket and led down the stairs only to freeze at the bottom.

The door was open.

“Did you?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I thought you did.”

I clapped a hand over my mouth, horror pulsing white hot through me as I met Darius’s eyes in the semi darkness. “Do

you think they heard?”

We were both quiet a long moment, listening for signs that someone was awake and aware of our uncontrolled fucking; the soundproof room was only soundproofed when sealed closed.

“I don’t think they did,” he murmured when only our low breathing filled the space.

I didn’t know what my friends would think or say if they knew about me and Darius. I imagined they would be upset. I’d lied to them for years, something we never did. That was rule number one in the best friend handbook, but part of me was glad I hadn’t told them. They’d made it very clear what they thought on the matter. I didn’t want to be one of those stupid women who thought dating the heir to a criminal organization was sexy. I didn’t love Darius because of his status or wealth. He wasn’t a business perspective. I loved him. That was it.

He took me to his room. I’d never been inside before. Even when we vacationed at the lodge while he was away, his room remained firmly sealed. It wasn’t any different from my room, except his furniture was a heavier, darker oak and his sheets were simple white where mine were a forest green. I didn’t see much more than that when he tugged me to the washroom and closed us in.

He’d filled a tub with scalding hot water that still continued to steam, which made me wonder just how hot it had been originally. The room smelled of something like lavender and honey, but faint. There weren’t any candles or rose petals — thankfully. I wasn’t sure how I would have felt about that level of preparedness.

“Here.”

A glass of icy, gold water was lifted off the vanity counter and pressed into my hand.

I eyed it, then him. “Why?”

“Because I said so,” he replied, tapping the underside, urging it to my lips.

I drank, not realizing just how thirsty I was until the cool liquid touched my tongue. I was panting by the time the last bit hit my stomach in a rush of frigid cold liquid.

“Good girl.” He wiped the single escaped droplet clinging to the corner of my lip with the pad of his thumb. He sucked it into his own mouth, watching me the entire time, unleashing chaos through my already hypersensitive senses. He took the glass and set it aside. “Drop the blanket and get in.”

“You’re very bossy,” I remarked, but did as he said, sliding the blanket down my shoulders and dropping it to the floor.

Darius smirked. His arm hooked around my middle and I was jerked flush into his front. “Tell me you don’t like it.” The heat that swelled through me started in my belly and pooled all the way up into my cheeks, intensifying his smug amusement. “Thought so. Now, in.”

He helped me into the foamy water, holding my hand until I was submerged to my chin before he slid in behind me. His hard, solid frame settled against my back, tucking me between his long legs.

“You okay?” he asked, arms sliding around my middle.

I nodded, resting my head back on his shoulder. “Just ready for the longest sleep ever.”

“I’ll get you there, but this first.”

I yawned. “Why?”

“I don’t want you sore in the morning.” His lips touched the slope of my shoulder. “Was I too rough?”

I tilted my face back to peer at him. “No, I never knew I liked it like that but here we are. I’m as surprised as you are.”

His chuckle warmed my skin. “Oh, I’m not surprised. I knew.”

“You did? How?”

His eyes were endless night skies just on the cusp of dawn when they lifted inches from mine. “It’s in your eyes, kitten.

Why do you think I'm so obsessed with looking into them? They tell me everything.”

Well, shit.

I kissed him.

The man was turning me into a hot mess on the last night we would ever be together. I would have yelled at him if I wasn't living every second of it in high definition.

That night, I slept in his possessive embrace, tucked firmly against his side with his chest as my pillow and his heartbeat my personal lullaby. His breath teased the hairs at the top of my head where his lips and nose nuzzled in time to my lazy strokes of his stubbled jaw with the pad of my thumb. I sprinkled kisses to the skin beneath my cheek before wedging my face into the side of his neck and letting the swaying swing of slumber lull me to that calm, quiet place right before full sleep. I was soothed by the hands tracing my spine, the fingers playing the bumps like a pianist. I was soothed by his gentle murmur of my name.

“Kitten?” I wanted to respond, but I was already too deep. His arms tightened around me. “I'll figure this out. I promise.”



The choking gasp woke me.

It ripped through the room, sending the figure in my arms tearing upright as if electrocuted. I came awake with my heart in my throat, my mind a wasteland of fog. The room hummed with that eerie, predawn silence that hovered just before the

birds started their day. The world beyond the drapes was still and dark; not much time could have passed since climbing into Darius's bed.

The man himself was a bent silhouette next to me, his ragged gasps echoing through the shadows.

"Darius?" I pushed upright, keeping the sheets around me as I reached for him. "What's wrong?"

His skin burned with sweat and fever. I felt the moist heat before I even touched the sweaty slope of his spine.

He flinched as if the contact had burned him. I jerked my hand back. Concern warring to try again, to reach him while I knew to give him a minute.

"No," he breathed, reaching blindly for my fingers. He clasped them too tight in his trembling ones. "Don't let go."

I didn't need to be told twice. It was all the consent I needed.

I went to him.

I crawled into his lap, legs and arms winding around him, closing him up as tight as I could.

He didn't pull away.

He didn't tell me to let go.

He locked both arms around me and pulled me closer. His face found its home in my shoulder, nestling deep as he expelled his nightmares into my skin. I felt him shift and he dragged us down to the sheets, keeping me draped over him like a security blanket, fastening me against his very soul as he breathed me in.

"I'm here," I whispered into the tiny, hammering pulse at his throat. "I won't let go."

His exhalation ruffled the hair at my temple. His heart slammed into my chest, erratic and scarred. I stroked his hair, the side of his face. I littered kisses across his throat, his chest. I murmured reassurances until he'd stopped shaking, until his breathing had calmed, and he was no longer suffocating me.

“I’m sorry,” he rasped several minutes later.

I shook my head. “You have no reason to be.”

He sighed into my shoulder. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

I raised my head and rained tiny kisses across his beautiful, ashen face. “I don’t care. Wake me. I’m right here.”

He groaned my name and clasped me tighter. “I just need a minute.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He sighed into my temple and stared up at the ceiling. “Christ.”

I bumped my nose to his lightly. “Want to talk about it?”

He gave a shake of his head. “It’s stupid.”

My hands sunk into the pillow beneath his head as I rose up to peer down at him. “No, it’s not. Tell me.”

The rough skin of his palm scratched the curve of my spine from shoulder to ass then back. His eyes watched me on the soft mist of predawn. “I forget sometimes that I’m not in there anymore,” he murmured. “It’s worse when I sleep at night. I ... I think I’m still there when I open my eyes, like all of this is a dream.” His throat muscles worked as he reached up and touched a lock of hair dangling against the side of my face. “That you’re a dream.”

Heart in pieces, I flattened his palm against my cheek. “You’re here ... with me. This isn’t a dream.”

He exhaled softly. “I think I would lose my mind if it were.”

“How can I help convince you?”

The hand under mine drifted up and back into my hair. “Just ... hold me, kitten. I just need to feel you.”

I did.

I held him until his gentle breaths were in my ear. The crushing hold of his arms loosened but remained securely



enclosing me. I stayed draped over him, keeping him warm and safe.

“I love you,” I told him, brushing the words over his lips. “I love you so much.”

He didn't stir and I burrowed back into my place against his shoulder and closed my eyes.



The dawn chill woke me.

It crawled across naked flesh, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its path. A shudder coursed through me, prompting my knee up to my stomach. I dragged the sheets up to my ears and reached for the man who should have been there only to find an ocean of ice that spanned far beneath the patch of sunlight making its way across the room.

“Darius?”

The aggressive peep of birds outside the window answered with the whisper of the wind, but no Darius. The clock on the nightstand taunted me with the still too early hour, early enough to afford us a few more precious minutes in bed together. But he had the right idea. It was return to civilization day, the final day of our trip. In a few short hours, we would be crammed into Lavena's car, driving back nine hours. He was most likely enjoying the last few minutes of peace.

Or he'd had another nightmare and hadn't wanted to wake me.

Fog of sleep gone, I kicked off the sheets and grabbed the blanket Darius had wrapped me up in the night before. I tiptoed to the door and cracked it open just enough to check to make sure the coast was clear. When I spotted no one and heard nothing, I sprinted to my room and shut myself inside.

I dressed quickly in loose, cotton shorts and a bulky, off the shoulder sweater that hung comfortably around my hips. I bunched the sleeves up to my elbow as I hurried to find Darius.

I found him on the back porch, a cigarette in hand, looking out over the lake. His dark hair hung in reckless tangles around an unshaven jaw and hard, focused eyes. He had his forearms perched on the railings, his broad back bent with the position. I didn't miss my crisscrossing marks marring his beautiful skin, or the new, fresh ones. The sight of them, of him brought a smile to my lips and a tingle in my belly.

The man had no business controlling my senses the way he did. He had no right to make me fall for him so fucking hard. I wanted to be angry at the injustice of a whole other person having so much power over me and yet, there wasn't a soul on earth I wanted to submit to completely. I had no idea what that meant or what I was supposed to do with that information, but he could ask me to do anything, and I would without question.

I briefly wondered what that said about me. Kaila would have called it a red flag. She would caution me against letting any man wield that kind of control and maybe she was right, but Darius wasn't any man. I'd known him my entire life. I knew him better than almost anyone. You can't hide the type of person you are for that long, especially when I practically lived with the Medlock family most of the time. I'd seen him with his past girlfriends. I'd seen him with his friends and family. I knew who he was and what he was capable of. I still loved him to the very root of my core.

Maybe I was biased because in the couple of years before his arrest, Darius Medlock had become an unlikely friend. He could never be what the girls were to me. He could never take that place, but our friendship was different. It filled a spot Sasha, Kas and Lavena hadn't been able to fill — books. They

weren't rabid readers like I was. Sure, they listened when I went off about one, but they didn't understand the way Darius did. They didn't get into debates with me on topics or characters. They didn't get passionate or excited.

Darius was my heart. He saw books for what they were — windows. Portable pieces of joy, longing, and thoughts all on paper. Our conversations were endless. From the moment he quoted a passage from *Count of Monte Cristo*, I was done. My heart never stood a chance. He won me over so quickly and effortlessly.

The man had always been a main character in my life. From the age of eight, I'd been fascinated by the quiet, charismatic boy I would occasionally see whenever I went to visit Lavena. He'd be just out of the way, never really getting involved in his sister's business unless she made him. The first time Lavena made him sit with us during a tea party, I couldn't speak. I sat frozen in the tiny chair next to his, staring aggressively at the tiny, ceramic teacup I was handed, willing my hands not to tremble.

I got better as time passed. I had the girls and Darius was rarely at the apartment anymore. He spent most of his time working with his father or with his own friends. He didn't have time for a gangly, shy bookworm. So, I moved on. I dated. I lived a pretty average childhood. Then he waltzed back into my life, a fully grown man with a gorgeous girlfriend and zero interest in an eighteen-year-old.

I never liked Liya.

It wasn't because she had the one man I wanted or that she was stunningly gorgeous, intelligent, or well connected. I hated that she was from Darius's world. She understood him on a level I never would. She was accepted in a way I, as an outsider, never could be, and she never let me forget it. Then she broke his heart, and I hated her for a whole other reason. I was livid and furious, and if I knew how, I would have fought her, but I wasn't a fighter. I could maybe hold out for a bit, but I never stood a chance in a fight, especially against Liya; she had that street edge I could never master, but for Darius, I would have done my best, because even during that time,

Darius was a friend and I protected my friends, especially from viperous bitches climbing a ladder.

Then it all changed.

I wanted to blame Marcella for tearing down whatever wall had been standing between me and Darius since Halloween. I couldn't imagine how much longer we were going to keep up that dance, but it all came to a head that glittery, festive afternoon.

We'd been talking about turkeys, minding our business in the doorway leading to the sitting room. His family and my dad sat ripping through shiny paper, laughing, and enjoying the giant tree Marcella always had to have. We stepped away to talk without the noise and commotion. Our debate between turkey or ham for holidays needed privacy and a modicum of quiet.

"Turkey is too dry," I pointed out.

"Ham is too salty."

"You can't glaze turkey," I reminded him.

"You can't make soup from leftover ham," he said, standing too close.

He was always too close and never close enough. My back was molded into the doorframe with him tilted into my space, his eyes pools of molten heat pulling me under.

"You could," I protested, then added in a mumbled, "it just wouldn't taste very good."

Darius laughed and my stomach pitched. My core pulsed with the desperate need to feel him against me, in me.

Since Halloween, all I wanted was to have him. I just wanted his weight pinning me down. I wanted him to stretch me open inch by inch on his cock while I begged him for all of it.

"Kami." It wasn't the first time he'd had to pull me back to the present and the room full of people a stone's throws away.

"I'm sorry," I breathed. "I think I'm—"

“I’m not complaining.” Had his voice always been so thick and deep?

Fuck.

I squished my thighs together, shifting awkwardly as I tried to ease the thrumming. A hot gush of liquid drenched my pants, and I swore out loud under my breath.

“Kitten.”

I didn’t know what kind of power that single word possessed, but I nearly came just standing there. My body wrapped around the raw authority in his vibration and bulked. I felt the tickle of arousal coat my lips and stain my already ruined panties.

I saw his hand lift from his side, fingers extended as if to touch me. My eyes shot to his face, begging him to do it while warning him not to. The decision was made for me.

“Oh my God!” Marcella gasped loudly from her place on the sofa next to Alexander.

The others around the room stopped opening presents the same time Darius and I froze in the doorway, startled by the excitement radiating off the woman. Her enormous brown eyes were on me and Darius, glittering with laughter and too much excitement.

“Look who’s under the mistletoe!” she crowed, clapping her hands once. “You know what that means.”

Both Darius and I glanced up simultaneously, bemused by the tiny bushel of weeds bunched together above our heads. In all the years I’d shared the holiday with the Medlocks, that was the first-time mistletoe was added to the decoration, or I’d somehow missed it, but based on the surprised stares from the others, I didn’t think so.

Darius and I exchanged awkward glances, his expression both amused and annoyed.

He turned to his mother. “Mom, I don’t think—”

“It’s tradition!” she scolded. “Go on.”

I wanted to point out it was only a tradition if it was something that occurred yearly, unless she meant in general, but I was frozen to the hardwood. My sock clad feet were rooted in place. The attention on us now, the eyes boring into us, were relentless and insistent. They wanted a kiss, and nothing was going to change their minds, not even the fact that Darius was scowling at them in a way that would have made me immediately reconsider all my life choices.

“Just do it!” Lavena shouted.

A muscle jumped in Darius’s jaw. I only noticed because I couldn’t take my eyes off him. Maybe it was the paralyzing fear, or my already highly aroused brain soaked in desperation and need, but I was all too aware of how sharp and rugged his features were, how dark and intense his eyes were beneath impossibly long lashes, how beautiful and perfect his mouth was. Kissing him was all I wanted, all I could ask for but not like this, not surrounded by everyone in our lives watching. What if I slipped and jumped him? What if I lost control and begged him to fuck me right there?

I was on the verge between running and staying when he turned to me. My heart kicked in my chest in panic. I no longer had any idea whether or not I was breathing. The shouts and sounds around us faded to a dull roar in the background. The others vanished. It was just him, me, and the screaming voices in my head.

The man didn’t move right away. He could have swung in, slapped a sloppy kiss to my lips and run off, but he simply stood there, magnetic gaze watching me back, something hot and primal swirling in their dark depths. The hunger dried my mouth. It muddled my thoughts. I wasn’t thinking when I flicked the tip of my tongue over my bottom lip. It was a natural reflex, yet I was aware if nothing more when that simple gesture captured his attention. He followed the motion the way we both knew he shouldn’t. He must have realized it too because a muscle bunched in his cheek. His eyes were hard and focused when they moved up to mine again.

“Hurry up!” someone yelled.

Neither of us noticed. The spell surrounding us was too strong, too potent. I was mesmerized by the wall of heat rising off him, the intensity pulling me in. That close, he was a looming force towering over me, drowning me in the rich scent of musk and leather. My lips parted to say something. Fuck if I knew what. Literally anything to get him to kiss me already. Darius's nostrils flared with his sharp inhale as if already knowing.

"Don't speak," he warned.

Dizzy, I forced a hard swallow and a weak, "Darius..." that had fire leaping in his eyes.

His head dropped, closing all the space between us so rapidly I actually moaned.

The sound prompted something out of him I would vaguely call a growl before his hot breath was on my cheek, inches from my tingling lips.

"What did I fucking say, kitten?"

The hiss was followed by a hard, warm kiss to the spot before he yanked away.

"That's not a kiss!" his mom booed.

"That's all you vultures are getting," he shot back, and I was the only one who heard the tightness in his words, the slight breathlessness.

I buzzed as if livewires had been imbedded under my skin. The rest of the night had me on the edge of what felt like sanity. Every sensitive spot on my body tingled with relentless need for release. I could hardly wait to leave, to return to my apartment, to strip down to nothing and bring myself over.

When my dad rose to finally leave, I jumped up with him.

"I thought we were hanging out," Lavena protested.

"We are. I'm just going to see my dad out and I have to check on something at my apartment."

"Like what?" Lavena pressed.

I could feel the eyes watching me, waiting for an answer I didn't have.

"None of your business, brat." Darius pushed to his own feet. "I'm heading out, too."

There was no reason for it, but my heart all but exploded in my chest. It thumped with an aggressive force that made my bones rattle. I tried to tell myself he was headed to his own apartment, and this was not a sly way of sneaking into mine but, holy, my brain jumped to all the conclusions.

Every nerve ending was aware of him and me and my dad packed in the elevator. My dad made small talk and thanked Darius for letting him join the Medlock family for the holidays.

"I'm sorry Cecily couldn't come."

"She's going to try next time," Dad promised as he always did.

Darius nodded. "Tell her I look forward to it and that she was missed."

"I will and thank you for the card. She really enjoys them," Dad said, holding up a thick, white envelope I knew was the Medlock yearly gift to my mom.

Darius had never met my mother. Not once. None of the Medlocks had except Lavena. But every year, the whole family sent her a card with a gift card to get herself something online so she wouldn't feel alone or left out. I had no idea what the amount on it was, but Mom always ended up having a shiny, new appliance of some sort when I went to visit. That level of understanding and kindness was why I loved that family so much.

Mom had *enochlophobia*. It was something that seemed to get worse over time. Growing up, I was that child who didn't have either her parents at events. When I graduated high school, only my dad was in the stands. It never bothered me because it had always been that way and I understood. She couldn't do it and I wasn't going to make her feel bad for something she couldn't control. Plus, my dad made up for it.



He attended every sport, every school outing, every event. He took a million pictures and videos and he'd watch them with my mom at home who I knew felt horrible for not being able to be there; I'd heard her tell my dad a hundred times through sobs she wished she wasn't like that. I couldn't be angry with her.

But the Medlocks never questioned why that was. They didn't make my mom feel bad for not trying. They accepted her as they had accepted me.

I hugged my dad, a strong, bear of a man with my eyes and kind, smile lines around his mouth in the foyer of the Alexander, told him I would come by that weekend to see Mom and waved him off. I watched him leave in the sprinkling snowfall outside and disappear around the corner.

Darius was in the elevator when I turned. He stood braced against the back wall, fingers curled into the handlebars running beneath the mirrors, his eyes sharp and focused on me. I was only barely aware of the doors not shutting, not cutting the invisible cord joining us, freeing me from the devil who haunted my every waking hour.

"Get in, kitten," he said when I couldn't move. "I'm going to solve your problem before we even reach your floor."

To say I almost broke an ankle getting into that damn box was an understatement. I didn't even care that he grinned when I hurried inside, trapping myself with the one man on earth who could make me climax with just his voice.

He pushed away from the wall and crowded into my space, pressing me into the corner with his heat as he reached past me for the buttons. He stayed as the doors closed. His palms anchored into the wall on either side of my head, and I was pinned beneath his ferocity.

"What did you need from your apartment, Kami?" His face lowered, tangling his low growl with my ragged breaths. "Or should I guess?"

All the moisture in my mouth evaporated, taking with it my ability to stand. I held tight to the railing, to my sanity.

“Darius...”

“Yes, baby?”

I bit my lip hard to stifle the words and pleas building on my tongue.

His hand, five strips of fire captured my jaw and jerked my chin up. “Tell me. I can’t make it feel good if you—”

His phone rang because the universe wasn’t fair and mocking my pain amused someone up in heaven.

*Don’t answer it*, I wanted to plead, but knew it had to be important just from the way his features went from aroused to furious just from the ringtone.

“It’s okay,” I told him when his nostrils flared, and his jaw clenched.

“No, it fucking isn’t,” he muttered back. “It’s work.”

“We can finish this later?” I whispered, uncertainty making my voice weak.

He pressed in, lips inches from mine.

Inches.

They almost skimmed.

His phone went off again.

He pulled back, chest heaving, face a cyclone of desire and rage. “I’ve never been so fucking jealous of your fingers.” His own fingers slid to the delicate skin of my throat and flexed. I moaned and he smirked. “Just remember, next time, it’s going to be mine.”

He pinched the button on the wall and allowed the door to slide open on a group of baffled people wondering why the elevator wouldn’t open.

They gasped when Darius stormed through them. They looked from him stalking down the foyer to me huddled in the corner, breathing hard and flushed. No one said what they were thinking when joining me in the box.

I didn’t see him again for almost a week.

The day before New Year's, Alexander was shot coming out of a restaurant with Marcella. The bullet missed his heart by an inch. He was in the hospital for weeks.

I saw Darius when he and Marcella returned from the hospital, exhausted and pissed. No one stopped me or made a single comment when I leapt off the couch and went to him. My arms encircled his neck, gripping him tight as he returned the embrace with brutal force.

“How is he?” I asked, voice hoarse from crying.

“Resting.”

I would have stayed there forever, lost in his warm embrace, but there were too many people, and it was not the time.

I pulled away and turned to his mother and held her just as tightly. “Are you okay?”

Her beautiful, brown eyes were red and swollen, the makeup faded and smudged, but there was fire there, a snapping rage I understood because had it been Darius, I would have felt the same.

“I will be once I find who did this.” She said, turning to her eldest son. “Find them. Bring them to me.”

With Alexander on bed rest, Darius was the head of the Medlock empire. He was responsible for running the operation until his father returned. It was also up to him to find whoever did this and set an example, and because we lived separate lives in separate apartments doing different things, I barely saw him for months. I saw him briefly every so often in passing as he was leaving his dad's office, phone to his ear or when the girls were shoving me out the door on our way somewhere. Each and every time, our eyes met in that tiny second, but it was always too late.

It was a rainy night in April when the shop bells gave a startled jingle and Darius stalked in, cheeks pink from the cold. His dark coat was pulled tight around his broad frame, damp with glittering raindrops. He didn't have an umbrella,

and the way his locks shone in the light, slick and reckless made my stomach muscles tighten.

“Hi,” I blurted, all too aware this was the first time we’d been alone since Christmas. “How are you? How’s your dad?”

He scraped back a loose coil of inky black hair off his brow and the simple gesture did things to me it really shouldn’t have.

“He’s good.” He moved to the bit of glass and metal keeping me from leaping into his chest. “How are you?”

I shrugged because telling him I’d missed him seemed humiliating. “Been keeping busy.” He made a rumbly sound of understanding in his throat but seemed lost in what else to say. “What brings you?”

He studied the ropes of diamonds, pearls and sapphires nestled amongst beds of satin and velvet beneath gleaming glass, but I knew he wasn’t actually seeing them, not based on the deep furrow in his brow.

“I...” he paused to clear his throat. “I was going to tell you Mom sent me to get the bank slips for the week.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Did she?”

He shook his head. “She has no idea I’m here.”

“Oh,” I murmured. “Why then—?”

“You.” The light from the display case shone across his face, casting shadows where the lines were sharp points. It glinted across the blue surface of his eyes under the weight of his dark lashes as he peered through them at me. “It’s been four months, Kami.”

I nodded slowly. “I know.”

“I don’t like that. I don’t like...” he lowered his chin, his fingers curling around the edges of the counter. “It should not have been that long.”

I abandoned my place and circled to stand before him. My hand found his arm. “A lot happened. You dad was shot and you—”

“No, kitten, don’t make excuses for me. I let things slip.” He reached for me, and I held my breath for the first contact of his fingers on my waist. “I should have worked harder to make time.”

“But I understand,” I tried to explain. “I didn’t like it, but I get it. You had a lot thrown at you all at once. Your father was attacked. You had the business to look after, and you had to find the people responsible. That’s not easy to do by yourself.”

“No, Kami.” His arm slid the rest of the way around my middle, and I was yanked into his chest. The impact sent showers of fire raining through me. My nipples tightened through the sheer material of my top and I was sure he could see them as clear as day. “That’s no reason to not see you for four months. It’s not an excuse. I had no idea that much time had passed, or I would never...” His cold fingers tucked beneath my chin and my face was lifted to his. “Forgive me?”

I probably should have been angrier, maybe even outraged for being forgotten for that long, but I wasn’t. His father was shot. There was nothing more important than finding the people responsible and returning the favor. I believed that with all my heart. I knew he would never just vanish on me unless it was something important and this was important.

“Only if you come back to our weekly coffees,” I said instead. “I’ve missed you.”

There.

I said it.

His smile was sweet and beautiful as he peered into my face. “I missed you, too, kitten. I missed you so fucking much.”

Maybe it was because I was just used to bottling up *those* feelings from him, never daring to say anything so intimate, but hearing him repeat the words made them feel less mortifying.

“So, this weekend?”

I saw it on his face, a flicker of uncertainty, no doubt assessing his workload, his calendar, his appointments. The

millions of things on his plate that needed to be completed.

“I’ll be there,” he stated, face set. “I promise.”

“If you have something else—”

The fingers still cradling my chin gave me a gentle nudge. “Hey, I said, I’ll be there, okay? I don’t give a shit if there is something else. It can wait.”

Giddy, I pulled my lip between my teeth and smiled up at him. “Okay.”

“How are you getting home?” He cut in at the same time.

The apartment was two blocks away. I didn’t own a car and grabbing a cab for such a short walk seemed like a waste, so I said, “Walk?” I hadn’t meant for my answer to come out as a question.

“When?”

I checked my watch. “Ten minutes?”

He gave a short nod. “I’ll walk you.”

I wasn’t going to argue. I closed in record time, leaving what could be left for the next day when I opened. I grabbed my purse and my coat and faced the man who hadn’t moved since walking in. He opened the door for me and waited as I set the alarm and locked up.

It wasn’t pouring. The rain was a light mist that glittered under the lamplight. I pulled my coat closed tight, attempting to keep the dampness from crawling down my collar.

“Did you work in those?”

I glanced up to find him eyeing my stilettos. The glossy black matched my pencil skirt and white blouse.

“Yes? They’re comfortable.”

He shook his head. “A bear trap is comfortable. Those are death traps.”

I rolled my eyes, grinning. “A bear would disagree.”

He grunted and I didn’t miss his grin before he looked away.

We continued the first block in silence except for the click of my heels and the rush of traffic speeding past. While we were waiting for the lights, the gentle drizzle increased, becoming a rapid fire from above. By the time we sprinted across — attempted to in my case — it was a full downpour.

Darius grabbed my hand and dragged me under the patio awning of a nearby bakery. The water cascaded over in a wall that cocooned while simultaneously trapping us in our shelter.

I laughed. “I can’t believe there’s two of us and neither of us thought to bring an umbrella.”

“Would it matter?” he cocked his head to peer at me through thick lashes. “How far do you think you would get in those monstrosities in this weather?”

I puffed out my cheeks in indignation. “What do you have against my shoes, sir?”

“You’re a danger to society,” he muttered.

I gasped. “I will have you know, I have never tripped or fallen—”

“Not what I said.” Eyes the black of storm clouds slid to me. “You in them, kitten, are dangerous.”

It was the first time he’d used my nickname in that toe curling growl since Christmas and my brain malfunctioned. I could almost see the sparks as my entire system sizzled to life, yet I couldn’t think of a single intelligent thing to say. I was, however, perfectly aware of the fact that we were alone, completely isolated from our friends and family, sheltered by rain — and he was still holding my hand.

I sucked in a breath and raised my eyes to his face only to find him already watching me with that same hunger that made my knees weak. The long, warm fingers threaded through mine, each digital infiltrating until our palms meshed. His free hand lifted and caught my chin. My face was tilted to his.

“Stop me.”

I would have laughed if I had any air in my lungs. All I could manage was a weak, “No.”

His teeth flashed with the slow curl of his mouth. “Perfect answer.”

With his fingers cutting five strips of control into my jaw, he lowered his mouth over mine. Months of wishing and fantasizing came to a crescendo, a firework display of heat and strength. He dominated, using our joined hands to hook behind my back and lock me into place against the radiating inferno coming off him in dark tendrils.

I was drowning.

I was lost in the sea of desire, and he was my shore. I clung to him and everything he offered as if my very life depended on it. The strap on my bag slipped off my shoulder and I let it clatter to the ground at our feet.

Darius released my hand. I immediately seized the moment to twine my arms around his neck. My fingers found the damp strands of hair at the back of his head, threading, and fisting, and dragging him closer.

His groan punctured through me, a guttural sound of approval and want that shot a sharp spear of arousal through me.

“Fuck, baby.”

I flicked a tongue across his bottom lip, demanding entrance. I was met with a snarl and the hard yank of my hair twisted in his fingers. My head jerked back, exposing my throat to the teeth he dragged across the soft stretch of skin to my jawline. I was too aware of the many layers of clothes between us. He must have been too because he started unfastening the belt on my coat.

I let him.

He could have bent me over one of the patio tables and fucked me and I would have let him.

“I’ve wanted this ... wanted you for so fucking long...” he broke off to dip the tip of his tongue into the hallow of my



throat.

“Me too,” I breathed, working the buttons on his jacket.

I was about to invite him back to my apartment when his phone rang. It broke into our secluded piece of heaven and destroyed everything ... again!

He was arrested the next day and I lost him for four years.

I always wondered what would have happened if he hadn't answered that call, if Edmund hadn't gotten into that fight with Ivan Volkov and if he hadn't shoved Uriah Volkov's son over a railing in the heat of the moment. I wondered what our lives would have been like if Darius had gone home with me, if we'd spent the night in my bed.

But it had and nothing was going to change that, except the knowledge that he was back. He was home again.

I pulled back the patio door and stepped out into the nippy morning. Darius peered over one shoulder, a plume of smoke evicting in a slow, sexy stream from between his gorgeous mouth.

“Morning, kitten.” He pushed away from the railing and went to stab his cigarette out in the ashtray.

“Morning.”

Hands free, he motioned me to him. My middle was caught the moment I was close enough and I was lifted onto the wooden beam. My knees were nudged apart to fit his sides. His arms secured me at the waist. At that height, his face was at my chest, which was exactly where he buried his face, right between my breasts. I felt myself smile as I held him there.

“Five AM is for serial killers and crazy people,” I murmured into the top of his head.

Warmth spread through the material of my sweater with his quiet chuckle. “Which am I?”

“You tell me.” I kissed his crown and yawned loudly. “Why are you out here? It's freezing.”

He squeezed me tighter. “Taking my last smoke, thinking.”

I glanced at the crushed remains of several butts stabbed out in the ashtray. “I didn’t know you smoked.”

“I don’t.” He raised his head and kissed my chin. “I just quit.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Just like that?”

His shoulder jerked under my left arm. “We’ll see.”

“What were you thinking about?” I asked instead.

“Going back tonight.” His forehead settled on my shoulder. “I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“Why do you think that?”

“I have missed so much time and so much has changed in four years. I don’t know if...”

“You are by far one of the most brilliant men I know,” I told him quietly. “I don’t think there’s a single thing you can’t accomplish.” I touched the side of his face, drawing it up so I could peer into his eyes. “You have your parents. You have Lavena and Edmund.” I kissed him lightly. “You have me. We won’t let you fall.”

He straightened. “Will I still have you?”

The sheet of ice I was treading on cracked a fraction, warning me to proceed with caution.

“You will always have me,” I murmured. “Even if—”

He silenced the rest with the capture of my lips with his. His hands fisted into the back of my top, gripping me tight.

“Don’t say it.”

I didn’t.

Maybe that made us both weak and pathetic, but I was prepared to deny it all until the very last second. I was going to enjoy every minute with him, every second I could squeeze into my memory box. I didn’t care what that made me.

## CHAPTER 8

### *Darius*



**M**y time with Kami ended too soon when the others finally left their beds. Breakfast was made and chores were handed out; mother would have our heads if we left the place anything short of perfect. Every last inch of it needed to be scrubbed and tidied if we ever wanted to be allowed back.

I was given the yard. I mowed the lawn, cleaned out the fire pit and brought in the cushions to the storage. I swept the patio and emptied my ashtray. The chairs around the table were stripped of their cushions and piled against the side of the house and stashed beneath their cover. I brought the canoes to the boathouse and locked them up.

The funny thing was it was all memory. It was as if no time had passed, and my mother was somewhere in the house about to stalk out at any moment to tell me to hurry up.

It made me smile. I missed my mom's OCD. I missed her sweet nature that could flip into a violent and vengeful storm when someone she loved was in danger. I just missed her. I missed both my parents. I missed my apartment and my things. I missed my clothes.

I missed my life.

Maybe Kami was right.

Maybe I was ready.

I didn't have much choice, but it was less painful once I had a better picture of the things I was excited to see.

The other four were organizing their luggage in the foyer when I descended the stairs, looping the last button on my cuff into place on my blazer. I tugged the lapel down over the white button up and the leather holster cradling my gun against my ribs. Provided by the prison, but they felt right. The cut still fit across my shoulders and hugged my waist. The trousers fell where they should and sat comfortably at my hips. Despite the requirement of it all, I missed my cozy sweatpants and t-shirts, even if they were not befitting Darius Medlock, the heir to a billionaire dollar empire.

I heard a yelp followed by a series of crashes from the group below. The slap of skin hitting marble had me rushing the last few steps to find Kami and Sasha in a tangled heap of flailing limbs across the floor. Suitcases lay toppled over around them. Kami lay half across the other woman, her soft, mint green sundress twisted around her thighs. Her legs caught over a fallen bag. Sasha was trying to free herself from her own duffle and Kami's purse. Kami was fighting not to put her weight on her friend's gut while simultaneously trying to kick the bag out from under her feet.

Kas was beside herself, laughing hysterically. Lavena seemed mildly amused, but actually attempting to pull Sasha free.

"Both of you stop moving!" Kas said unhelpful.

Sasha's arm had hooked through the band of Kami's purse, upending the content. Scattered makeup, hairbrush, loose pieces of paper and a paperback novel crunched beneath their struggle.

For a split second, Kami almost had herself free. She'd nudged the bag away with her foot and started to push up when the arm Sasha had looped through her empty purse flew out. The resounding crack, the sharp cry of pain from Kami as her friend accidentally backhanded her had me charging forward.

"Stop moving," I ordered, not caring that the words were a bark of authority.

Everyone froze.

I stepped over the chaos and pulled Kami to her feet. My arm stayed firmly around her middle as I moved her away from the mess and turned her against my chest. My finger tucked beneath her chin and tilted it to inspect her injuries.

“Are you okay?”

A bright, red welt was blooming across her cheekbone. I didn't think it would leave a bruise, but I started to touch it, to soothe it with my thumb.

Kami caught my wrist, her eyes wide, and I realized my mistake a little too late.

I dropped my hand and arms from around her and stepped back, careful not to glance in my sister's direction. Kami didn't either as she hurried back to Sasha.

“I'm fine,” Sasha shouted from the floor. “No one rush to help me up.”

Kas snorted as she bent down and helped her friend before Kami could get there. “Come on, cupcake. Up you get.”

Sasha huffed as she brushed the dust from get backside. “What the hell, Kami? What happened?”

Face a scarlet mask of guilt, Kami dropped to gather her things. Curiosity had my head titling a notch to peer around the patch of hair forming a curtain between us.

“I ... I guess I lost my footing,” she mumbled, scooping her things back into her purse. “I'm sorry. Are you okay?”

Sasha bent to help her, passing her papers and pens. “Yeah, are you? I'm so sorry I hit you.”

Kami waved away the apology. “I deserved it.”

I did not think so.

Accident or not, the idea that anyone would be stupid enough to hurt her in front of me had my brows furrowing. Had Sasha been anyone else, their apology would have been done on their knees.

“Juan's outside with one of the cars,” Lavena cut into my thoughts. “I thought you were riding with us?”

I shook my head. “I’m not going back to the Alexander. I’m heading to the office, and I’m not sitting nine hours in your backseat.”

Lavena rolled her eyes. “Well, aren’t you fancy? Sorry my car isn’t big enough for your fat head.”

“I have room if one of you wants to join me,” I said as a blanket offer, but only hoped one of them would take me up on it.

“Well, I can’t,” Lavena said, glancing out to the others. “Anyone want to spend nine long ass hours in a limo with this fancy pants?”

Kas shrugged. “I would but I already have my stuff in the trunk.”

Sasha shook her head. “No thanks.”

Kami, bag pulled over her shoulder, rose and turned to me, a sweet smile on her face. “I’m okay. Thank you.”

I started to pull in a frustrated breath, but Lavena beat me to it. “So, someone has to go with him. I didn’t realize how much of the stuff in my closet needs to be cleaned out since last year. It’s a lot. I don’t have the trunk space with all the other stuff so it needs to go into the back seat. Sasha?”

Sasha shook her head. “It took a long time to get my butt print just right in your car.”

“I’m not unloading my shit,” Kas grumbled.

“I guess that leaves you, Kam.” Lavena turned to the final member of her team. “Think how fun it’ll be. Nine hours to talk about all the books you’ve read since you guys talked last.”

Kami’s eyes widened. “Oh, I have so many!” she reached for her bag. “I have a list.”

“Of course, you do,” Lavena and I said simultaneously.

I exchanged glances with my sister, both our expressions amused.

“And Darius can tell you about the one he’s reading. The one where the priest is the killer.”

Most people would have withered under my glower. Lavena flashed her teeth and jerked back when I shot out a hand to grab her and possibly strangle her.

Smirking, she pivoted on her heels and stalked in the direction of the stairs, yelling about seeing us at home.

“I’m guessing you didn’t know,” Kami murmured, a grimace on her face as the snap of Lavena’s heels up the stairs echoed through the foyer.

I sighed. “Nope.” I cocked my head in her direction. “It was just starting to get good, too.”

Kami hissed through her teeth. “She did that to me once. I wouldn’t talk to her for a week. She never did it again.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Is that the trick?”

She shrugged as she moved to right her suitcase. “For you? Probably not. You’re the older brother. I think it’s like mandatory to harass you.”

I took the bag from her. “Lucky me.”

“Have you considered hiding your books?” she recommended as we started for the door.

“She’s like a ferret. She snoops through everything.”

Kami laughed, but the sound immediately died when something like realization widened her eyes. She spun and hurried back to where Kas and Sasha stood, lips pursed in amusement.

“Oh, remembered us, did you?” Sasha teased.

“It hurts being forgotten over a dead tree,” Kas added as Kami rushed to embrace them both, apologizing.

They agreed to meet up for dinner later that evening and Sasha asked if they wanted to catch a cab together on Wednesday.

“I’m working until five but need to go home to change first,” Kami said.

“I’m looking over some case files for my dad. I probably won’t be ready until at least seven,” Kas added.

“So, let’s say eight?” Sasha hedged.

“Nine might be better,” Kami murmured, and Kas nodded.

They hugged again and Kami hurried back to me, her smile an addictive curve across her lips.

God, what I wouldn’t have given to taste it off her, to hook her center with my arm, fold her into my heat and dip my tongue into her mouth.

Later.

We had nine uninterrupted hours all to ourselves in an isolated car with a privacy window and tinted glass. I had a lot of ideas to pass the time. She would be naked for the majority of it, and I would get my fill of her before reality took her from me permanently.

Juan, a long-time driver of my father’s inclined his dark head when I approached with Kami’s single suitcase. He accepted the bag and offered me the black tote he held in a swap.

“Welcome back, sir,” he murmured in his gruff accent.

I thanked him, asked him about his wife and kid.

“Still making me old.” But the grin on his face was all love.

I told him to give Barbara and the girls my best and turned to Kami who peered up at me with the sun illuminating the gold in her eyes. I opened the back door and let her slide into the soft leather before shutting it and making my way to the other side.

The moment I was in, the door closed behind me, her chin was in my hand and her lips were under mine in a claiming, consuming lock. Her hair twisted through my fingers, caging her to me until I was satisfied.



“Take off your panties, kitten.”

My little temptress never batted an eye, nor did she glance away when dragging up the hem of her dress and hooking her fingers into the elastic band on her cotton underwear. They were freed down her legs and tucked in her purse.

I bit back my amusement as I reached across her and slid her belt into place across her lap.

“Where’s your book?” It was pulled from her bag and held up for me to see. “Read.”

I knew she didn’t need to be told twice. It was flipped open, and she immediately dropped into it.

I watched her, studying her focus and clarity with an application I missed. A pack of elephants could have stampeded past the car, and she would never have noticed. Part of me wished I had that kind of single-minded focus, but we were trained from birth to notice everything, to be hyper vigilant of our surroundings. Getting caught up in a book as profoundly as Kami would get us killed. But I knew I would never allow for her to lose that innocence, that absolute trust. I would make sure she never had to look over her shoulder.

Resisting the urge to brush back a lock of hair and disturb her, I pulled the bag Juan had given me into my lap and pulled out the single item nestled inside.

The box containing a sleek, black phone had a note taped to the top with only one word scrolled across it in my father’s writing — preloaded.

To some that could have meant there were games or music already set up for me. To me, that meant there was information I would need to return to my duties. Most of it would require service to access, but I still swiped it open and started the process of scrolling through the many apps and folders already set up inside.

Kami flipped a page, and I placed a palm on her thigh. Her warm skin glided beneath my fingertips where the hem of her dress had pulled up. The fabric puddled in her lap, a green, cotton pool I was anxious to peel off her.

The woman at my side shifted when we felt Juan climb into the driver's seat and start the engine. Her head pillowed on my shoulder, an endearing gesture that had me turning my lips into the top of her head.

Neither of us said a word as the car rolled away from the lodge and began the journey towards civilization. I was vaguely aware of Lavena's Mercedes rolling after us several yards back. My attention stayed on the notes and pages across my screen. Every so often, I would try to connect to one of the apps only to be told I had no service and needed to wait. Kami turned the pages in her book, paying no mind to me.

The silence was calming.

It was so familiar.

It was like all the other times I sat with her at coffee shops, minus the part where I eased my hand beneath her skirt and cupped her pussy.

Kami moaned. Her hips pressed forward into my waiting palm, but she continued reading.

She wasn't soaked.

A small pool of moisture slickened her opening, but I knew I could easily change that.

"Pull your top down," I told her. "Show me your tits."

She wasted no time setting her book facedown across her thigh and reaching up to twist the straps on her shoulders between her fingers. They were dragged down her arms, releasing her high, firm breasts into view.

I loved how uninhibited she was, how willing to do whatever I said without question. Her unrestrained trust in me was so dangerous.

So addictive.

She had no idea the things I wanted to do to that tight, little body of hers if she let me.

"Keep reading," I told her.

Her paperback returned to her face, and she returned her head to the shoulder connected to the arm attached to the hand now fingering her.

I went back to my phone, paying no real attention to anything specific. At one point, Kami hooked the leg closest to me over my knee, opening herself better for my hand. I rewarded her with fingers that she welcomed with a groan.

She pulled her dress back over her stomach to watch my hand moving inside her. I watched her, watched the nibble she had on her bottom lips.

“Like that?” I asked her.

She nodded. “But I prefer you.”

I dropped my phone into the cup holder at my elbow and worked the belt on my trousers without ever slowly my other hand’s mission. I freed my cock.

“This?”

Her big, dark eyes worked over my stiff appendages standing straight up from the center of my body.

“Fuck, yes,” she breathed. “Can I have him?”

I almost laughed at her request. “He’s all yours, kitten.”

Her head tilted, her face inches from mine. “He’s mine?”

I gripped the thick base. “Come mark him.”

She was undoing her belt and shoving aside her book before I even finished.

I yanked off her dress and tossed it into her seat as she crawled into mine with me. I caught her waist and turned her away from me, giving me full reign over every inch of her.

She sank down on me with a deep, guttural moan of my name. Then louder when I pulled her the rest of the way, forcing her to take all of it.

“I like you like this,” I murmured into the back of her shoulder. “Filled and stretched around my cock. Your clit

swollen and sensitive. How many flicks before you cum on me, Kami?"

It was four.

I barely touched her.

But I hid my smirk as she arched in my arms, her walls slick and tight around me.

Breaths ragged, she dropped back against my chest, her head resting on my shoulder. "God, I'm going to miss him."

The choked wheeze made me chuckle. "Oh, kitten, do you honestly think you're getting away from me that easily?" I twined a lock of hair around my finger and tugged. "You made me a promise last night. Two of them, actually. Your body is still mine to do with as I see fit, and I'm not done using it."

The hot, velvet glove encasing my dick rippled.

It tightened and washed me with a rush of arousal.

"Promise?" she whispered, head turning to brush gentle kisses to my jaw.

I captured her searching lips while my fingers rekindled a new fire between her thighs that she welcomed with an immediate widening of her knees, planting her heels into the warm leather on either side of my thighs.

"You swore to give me anything I wanted if I let you cum. I did. Repeatedly, if I recall." My palm pressed into her pelvis, and I rocked her back and forth over me. "You also lost our game. You stopped reading and you came ... repeatedly."

Her gasp was a mixture of outrage, lust, and amusement. "That's not fair."

My free hand worked up to cradle her exposed throat. My fingers curled into the soft flesh.

"Not fair?" I squeezed once, basking in the widening of her eyes, the dilating of her pupils, the sharp hitch in her lungs. "I fucked your pussy until you begged me to stop, kitten. I made her squirt all over my dick ... twice." I rolled my finger over her clit, dragging it from peak to end in slow, lazy pulls

that had her thrashing in my lap. “I held my end of the bargain, wouldn’t you agree?” She whimpered something I cut off with another flex of my fingers. “Are you going to break your word, Kami? Do I need to remind you what kind of man you’re dealing with and how dangerous it would be to not pay your debt?”

The little witch giggled. “What will you do? Take my orgasms back?”

“Yours?” Now I snickered, low and throaty against the side of her face. “No, sweetheart, none of those were yours, just like your pussy, your ass, your mouth are no longer yours. They belong to me now and I will use them however, whenever I want. I will fill you with my cum every chance I get and I don’t give a fuck if there’s other people around. I will make you wait for yours, beg for yours until you’ve learned your lesson.”

“Darius...”

She was no longer smirking and that made me smirk.

“Remember what only one afternoon felt like? Now imagine a week. Maybe two.”

Her bottom lip puckered. “No, please...”

Christ, her suffering.

Her squirming and begging.

Her teary eyes as she pleaded for release.

What was it about her sexual distress that made me want to never end it? What was it about torturing her to the point of absolute madness that made my dick hard enough to explode?

“You know what I want to hear,” I told her, ghosting a finger ever so lightly over her clit.

“I’m sorry,” she panted. “I’ll be good.”

“Yeah, you will,” I growled into her cheek. “Because you’re my good little kitten, aren’t you?”

She nodded vehemently.

“Prove it. Fuck me.”

She threw herself into the command. Her body bounced on mine hard and determined. She rode me as if her next breath depended on my cum inside her pussy. I tormented her clit, pinching it between my fingers and tugging with every downward grind of her hips. Kami squeaked the first time, but seemed to enjoy it as she slammed down harder each time.

I came first, drenching her walls seconds before she joined me.

I waited until both our breathing calmed before I reached for a tissue from the compartment and helped clean her up. I helped her back into her dress and handed her a bottle of water from the mini fridge. She eyed it a moment with a grin, but downed most of it when I raised an eyebrow. I put her back in her seat, strapped her in and pressed her book into her hand.

Without a word, she slid the best she could into my side. Her arm wound around mine and she laid her head on my shoulder as she went back to her book.

We stopped three hours later at a gas station. I urged Kami out to stretch her legs and get some snacks while I waited for my sister’s car to pull up behind us. When the highway remained still and empty, I asked Juan when he’d seen them last.

“I’m not sure, sir,” the driver replied, seeming unconcerned. “About twenty minutes, perhaps? I was encouraged by your father not to waste time.”

I wasn’t concerned. Lavena and the others could take care of themselves, and Uriah had no idea where I was. There was no way. The game of cat and mouse wasn’t going to start until I got to the city.

Nevertheless, I continued to watch the horizon until Kami joined me with a plastic bag dangling from her fingers.

“Where’s Lavena?” she asked, squinting in the same direction I was.

“Still coming,” I assured her, reaching to lightly touch her lower back. “Come on.”

We both took a last lingering glance down the road before getting back inside the car.

I held her tucked against my side for the next four hours, her fingers gliding through mine as she told me all she'd done since I last saw her. I listened attentively while marveling at how small and slender her hand was, how neat and elegant her nails were. She didn't wear any jewelry, but I knew a square cut emerald with a delicate band of diamonds would have been perfect. I wasn't sure what made me think emeralds. Maybe it was her dress, but the color suited her.

“Darius?”

The warmth of her touch radiated through the soft material of my top where I pressed her palm flat over my heart. “Yeah?”

“You owe me a promise, too.”

I lowered my gaze to the face she tilted up towards me, my eyebrows furrowed. “What promise, kitten?”

The afternoon light, what little was penetrating the darkness of our cabin shimmered across the desert landscape of her eyes. “The last time I saw you, you promised we would see each other that weekend for coffee. You never showed.”

My finger traced the delicate line curving her cheek. “I know. I thought about that while I was sitting in the holding cell. I remember thinking about you and what you were doing, if you were at our café without me.”

Sadness pulled at the corners of her mouth, turning them down. “I haven't been back since I was there with you last.”

I skimmed her lips lightly with mine. “I'm sorry, sweetheart. It was never my intention.”

She shook her head. “I just want what you promised.”

God, this woman.

I was a man who did what he said and said what he did. I didn't believe in gray areas or maybes. I didn't trust people who couldn't stick to their word. But I found myself making excuses, creating little loopholes in my own decisions to keep

this woman in my life and I had never been so disgusted with myself.

“I can’t be anywhere near you until I deal with Uriah, Kami. You can’t be more than just my sister’s best friend, someone I ... someone who doesn’t mean anything to me. Don’t,” I warned when I felt her withdrawing from me, her face a mask of terribly concealed hurt. “Look at me,” I waited until I had her full attention before continuing, “You were right yesterday in the kitchen, you do make me vulnerable. I would give my life for yours without a moment’s hesitation. If anything happens to you, Kami, anything because I was too weak to protect you...” I drew in a breath to muffle the sharp jab in my chest. “They would have to dig two graves because this life would mean nothing to me without you.” I brushed away the tear that slipped down her cheek. “Not having you by my side is going to be hard but losing you forever will destroy me. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Despite the second teardrop clinging to her lashes, Kami nodded. “But what about our books?” she whispered, and any other time, I would have laughed at the question, but I understood her heartbreak; we had too many unread books we’d collected over the years, too many that we swore we would read together.

“We can still read them.” I brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “How else are we supposed to get through them all? But coffee dates may have to wait a little while.”

She sighed and rested her head back on my shoulder. “This is going to be so hard.”

The silky strands of hair at the top of her head tickled my lips and cheeks as I brushed a kiss to the spot.

Neither of us spoke for the rest of the drive beyond the occasional comment. Kami read her book and I finally had enough bars to check my work email.

Someone, I guessed my father’s assistant Luis, deserved a raise. Every email had a folder based on the year that was then in a subfolder based on topic and importance. Each one was marked by color and came with detailed notes.



A secondary email highlighted all the other businesses we took care of that wasn't in the books. Luis had pulled his organizational magic there, too. Every correspondence was labeled the same way as the previous email. It made life easier just going through each one methodically, not really stopping to read anything from the previous year.

I read the most recent ones, the ones highlighted in red to get myself caught up and anything in the last six months. Once I fully understood where the company stood up until that point, I pulled up my contacts and located my father's name.

*"We're almost in the city,"* I typed out. *"We should be arriving within the next couple of hours."*

I hit send and was about to put my phone away when a thought occurred to me.

"Baby?"

Kami hummed softly.

"Let me see your phone."

Her bookmark was slid into place between her pages, and she straightened. She didn't ask a single question when unearthing her phone from the side pocket of her bag and unlocking it. It was handed to me.

I programmed my number into her phone and passed it back.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" she teased, eyeing the series of numbers before lifting her attention to me with a raised eyebrow. "Now, I have the power to harass you any time I want."

I captured her chin and brought her face to mine. "It's not harassing when I expect you to use it as often as you need."

Her bottom lip caught between her teeth, and she stared up at me, her eyes bright with everything twisting up in my chest. It dawned on me in that moment that our time was rapidly coming to an end. We couldn't have been more than an hour and a half away from the Alexander. Once I dropped her off,

once that door closed between us ... it would be like the last three days never happened.

“Darius?” Her soft fingers brushed my cheek. “What’s wrong?”

I ignored her question.

Anything I said, any way I could possibly express the jagged ball of glass in my gut would only complicate matters. It was better if I just kept my mouth shut.

“What are your plans for the rest of the evening?” I asked instead.

She knew what I was doing. I saw it in the flicker in her eyes before she responded. “Unpack. Maybe some laundry. I have dinner plans with the girls tonight, but that’s it. Why? What are you doing?”

Work.

I told her as much.

“I have to catch up.”

She nodded in understanding and reached for my hand. “You will rest, though, right? And eat? You can’t just work.”

I felt myself grin around the knuckles I brought up to my lips. “I will try to remember.”

“You can’t—”

I kissed her.

I tasted her concern and her love for me.

I tasted her sadness that tasted so much like mine.

I stayed that way with her pressed in my arms, her lips warm and welcoming under mine.

I stayed in the confines of that moment for as long as possible, sketching her into my mind, folding her sounds and taste into the scrapbook of my thoughts. Every caress, every sip of her lips, every brush of our lips connecting was the most intimate I had ever been with a woman. It surpassed fucking. It went beyond the basic make out. Those dwindling minutes of

her and I entwined together could have been encased in gold and displayed in a museum.

“I think we’ve arrived,” Kami murmured into the side of my face where she’d been pressing feather light kisses to my temple.

My arms tightened around her middle. My face turned into the curve of skin between her neck and shoulder.

I wasn’t ready.

How had nine hours just slipped into non-existence?

What had we done in that time?

How was it not enough?

“Come to dinner with us?” she whispered, voice thick enough that I realized she was having just as hard a time letting go.

I shook my head. “I can’t.” I pulled together the shredded remains of my pride and my strength and pulled back. I let myself stroke away the tears on her cheek before giving her my best grin. “Stop looking at me like that, kitten. I’m not going to war. I’m one floor away.”

We both knew that wasn’t the issue, but she offered me a wobbly smile and nodded. “You’re right. I think I’m just tired.”

I touched her face again, just once more before I steeled myself and pushed open the door to the late, city air.

The sensory overload plowed into me with a ferocity that rocked me back on my heels. The chaos, the blaring noise, the rush of bodies had my nerves prickling, my senses screaming. The hand I had around the door, holding it open, tightened, pressing white knuckles up through my skin. I tried not to look at everything and everyone all at once like some rabid, crazy person as crowds pushed past me in a rush.

*Breathe!* I urged myself, suddenly desperate for a fucking cigarette. It would mask the tremor in my hands that I balled into fists.

Looming structures of steel and glass punctured into the sky, a sky darkening as night spilled into day, reminding me of claws, of gaping and hollow eyes watching me from everywhere. They were all too close and too far, surrounding me and yet not close enough.

For a moment, I couldn't breathe.

A fist had closed around my chest, cutting off my air, my senses.

Panic welled, triggering the alarm bells in my head.

"Hey, look at me." Someone was holding my sweaty hand and tugging on my arm, urging my attention down, down to a golden landscape of warm, brown sand. Kami watched me, her expression set, but soft. "I'm here. I'm right here. Deep breath."

I was hurting her.

I could feel the rigid tension of my fingers grinding into her tiny one, but I knew if I let her go and she vanished, I would truly fall apart for good.

"I'm..."

"It's okay," she whispered. "Don't let go, okay? Let's go inside."

I couldn't have let go even if I tried.

I let her thank Juan.

I let her hold me together as we made our way inside.

"Sir!" Lewis, the elderly doorman, bowed his head deeply when I entered the extravagant foyer of the Alexander. "It's so wonderful to see you again. Welcome home."

I gave him an inclination of my head, all the emotion I could allow myself when my senses felt raw and shredded.

Kami beamed at him with her beautiful smile and said some words I couldn't hear through the roar of the ocean. She didn't let that smile slip until we were alone in the elevator and the doors had closed behind us.

I blew out a breath the moment I was confined in a box no bigger than a closet. My muscles unfurled, unclenching as I pulled another gulp of air in. Then another. Kami murmured encouragingly until I could open my eyes again and peer into her face.

“Hey.” She gave me a smile. “Okay?”

I exhaled again, emptying out all the anxiety balled tight in my chest. “I’m sorry—”

She stopped me with a feather light skim of her lips over mine. “You never have to apologize.”

I stared at her collarbone, unable to look her in the eye. “I don’t know what happened.”

“You were in prison for four years,” she reminded me not unkindly. “It’s going to take a minute to adjust to the outside and that’s okay. Just take deep breaths and think of something that makes you feel safe.”

I was hooked on her face then, her eyes, her lips, her sweet smile.

*You*, my brain immediately replied.

She was my safe space.

My anchor.

She kept me together.

But I didn’t tell her that.

I brought her fingers to my lips and kissed the red welts I’d created.

“Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head. “Didn’t feel a thing.”

She was lying, but I couldn’t find the energy to call her on it. I didn’t say anything when the elevator slid open on her floor, and I had to let her go. I had to stay in the box while she gave me a tiny wave and let the doors close between us.

Then I was alone, letting the mechanical coffin take me to the top floor, the penthouse, my childhood home. I grew up

running wild through those corridors. I grew up memorizing every chip and scratch.

My stomach tightened the closer I rose to home, to my family and things. I knew it would take some adjusting, but I'd never been more determined to throw myself into work and forget everything else until I could get my nerves back in order. Once I did, I would find my parents and hug my mom.

There was something about going to prison that made you miss your mother. Maybe it was the comfort and safety she provided my entire life, but it was the first thing I planned on doing once I saw her. The other was thanking my dad for making sure I didn't get my ass jumped. I knew he'd pulled a lot of strings to ensure I left that place reasonably unscathed. Even if I had the uncles watching my back, it was my dad who made sure all the proper palms were greased and I was grateful for that.

Lewis must have called up.

I should have known he would, yet I was startled to find my parents and Edmund standing in the apartment foyer, anxiously watching the elevator arrive.

"Darius." My mom's face bloomed into a smile that could have moved galaxies. It stretched her tearstained face, exposing straight, white teeth and a love that swelled off her in a wave. I felt it slam into me even before she was hurrying across the distance.

I met her halfway and scooped her against my chest. Her arms curled around my shoulders, tight enough to cut what little air I had collected, but I didn't need to breathe.

"Oh sweetheart," she sniffled into my shoulder. "I missed you so much."

"Missed you, too, Ma."

I breathed in her familiar scent of rose water and sunlight, flooded by the memories of growing up snuggled against her chest at night while she read to me, while she ran long fingers through my hair and kissed my cheek. I gave her a hard squeeze before letting her go. She followed suit only to latch

her arm through mine and hang on as I straightened my shoulders and faced the man I was practically a carbon copy of.

“Son.” My father extended his hand. I went to accept it only to have his fingers curl around mine and yank me in for a one-armed embrace. “Welcome home,” he murmured.

I gave my father a hard thump on his back. “Thanks Dad.”

With a matching pat, Alexander Medlock pulled back to look me over. “Okay?”

I nodded but kept quiet because nothing was okay and felt like they never really would be.

“Did the uncles look after you?” Mom asked, peering up at me.

I nodded again. “Milo wanted me to say hi.”

The concern folding her brows smoothed and her lips bowed into a brilliant smile. “Aw, how is he? Your grandma was asking about him at lunch the other day.”

“He’s alright. He has a few more weeks. Said he’d come by to see you when he’s out.”

Mom beamed at my father. “Oh, how wonderful! I’ve missed him so much.”

She gave my arms a squeeze and moved back to let the last person in the room step forward.

He’d grown in my absence. The lanky, idiot teenager I’d left behind had shot up into a broad chested man with stubble along his jaw and a wariness I didn’t think I liked. Edmund had always been the goofy one, the one that made the adults cringe with his ridiculous jokes, the one always ready to try something extra stupid just to see what would happen. This was not the baby brother I remembered. This Edmund had a wall around him, a guarded aura reserved for people who’d seen things and come out the other side jaded and angry.

“Edmund?” I ventured.

His mouth flattened into a straight line. “Welcome home.”

I raised an eyebrow, but replied, “Thanks.”

He seemed to hesitate, blue eyes bouncing from me to our parents watching the exchange with mixed expressions of delight and calm. The muscles of his throat bunched with his hard swallow and his gaze returned to me.

“Thank you,” he blurted. “Thank you for what you did. Thank you for...” his head fell forward, sending a chunk of hair tumbling down over his brow. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re going to make me hit you,” I murmured, immediately drawing his attention to my face, his eyes wide, “for ever thinking you need to thank me or apologize. I’m your brother. It’s my job. Besides,” I gave him a grin, “*someday, and that day may never come, I will call upon you to do a service for me.*”

Despite the hard knot along his jaw, Edmund’s lips twitched. The annoyance in his eyes was a familiar one I would get often when quoting his favorite movie.

“I’m still allowed to—”

“No, you’re not.” I fixed my attention on the other two, taking in their faces. I hadn’t thought I would ever see them again for a while in the beginning. That first year, I was so sure they would change their mind and extend my time. My parents’ faces were one of the few things I wanted to see above all else, especially my mom’s and Kami. “I’m going to stop by my apartment for a moment but will be heading into the office tonight.”

“That can wait until morning—”

I shook my head. “I want to get started.”

He seemed on the verge of protesting, but I had already turned to my mother. I brushed my lips over her soft cheek and promised to see her in the morning.

I turned back in the direction of the door, prepared to make the ride down to my apartment and I nearly made it when my father’s voice pulled me short.

“Did your sister come home with you?”



I stopped to face him. “They were behind me when we left. They should be arriving shortly.”

“Were they excited to see you?” Mom pressed.

I raised a shoulder and let it drop. “Your daughter pulled a gun on me. Kas accused me of escaping and Sasha was, well, Sasha.”

I started to turn away again.

“Kami wasn’t there?” Mom hedged.

I eyed her, not at all fooled by her nonchalance. “She was.”

“And did you say hi?”

I turned my entire body to fully face the woman studying me. “No. I just ignored her the entire weekend like a normal person.”

“Tone,” father muttered with a badly concealed grin.

I sighed. “Yes, of course I said hi.”

“Was she excited to see you?”

Subtlety was never a strong suit where my mother was concerned and her unexpected fascination with Kami had my eyes narrowing.

“Why, Mom?”

Marcella Medlock had the nerve to blink her big, brown eyes at me as if I had somehow baffled her.

“Well, you guys were pretty close, weren’t you?” she tilted her head. “I thought you were friends.”

I supposed she wasn’t wrong. Her logic made sense even while my suspicions tingled.

“She gave me a book,” I said.

Mom seemed to be waiting for me to say more, but I gave her a grin and continued out of the apartment. My feet ate the distance to the elevator just short of a sprint. I didn’t exhale until I was shut inside the box and heading downwards.

The Alexander had thirty floors and five hundred luxury condos stacked in neat, pricy layers. The majority of our residents were celebrities, CEOs, and politicians. Very few could afford the exorbitant price. The only exceptions were Kas, Sasha, and Kami. Their units were right beneath the rest of us with my parents' being at the very top, followed by mine, then Lavena and Edmund sharing a whole floor. My floor was shared with Milo but had been empty for the last ten years. Mom still kept it clean and maintained but essentially, I had the place to myself until his return.

I arrived on my floor with its familiar red carpeting and cream walls. The paisley pattern felt almost surreal as I crossed the narrow hallway to the last door at the very end and let myself in.

The air smelled different.

It was my first thought as I stood in the foyer overlooking my entire life dipped in shadows. It held nothing and everything. It was familiar and completely foreign. I couldn't recall what it had smelled like before, but I guessed the lemon polish was new. The un-lived vacancy of a place, absent of inhabitation for a long length of time made me think Mom had kept it dusted, aired, and tidied. Not a single item was out of place when I walked amongst my things and really appreciated them for the first time.

I wandered down the hall to my bedroom. I placed my bag with the empty phone case and Kami's gifted book on my bed and just stood there, hands on hips, staring at the wild tangle of civilization outside the wall of windows overlooking my city. The veranda beckoned me to get closer, to breathe in the air of freedom but the smog and weight of this air didn't compare to the air of the lodge, and I wasn't ready to let that go.

Leaving the view, I started back towards the bed when the phone dinged in my pocket. The unfamiliar vibration against my thigh almost made me jump.

I freed it and peered down at the single word from an unknown number.

*“Hey.”*

I studied the greeting, knowing exactly who it was just from the fact that every contact my father thought I needed was already saved, business and family. The only person he wouldn't think to add but had my number was the one person I would have given anything to be with at that moment.

*“Hey kitten.”*

Her response was immediate, as if she'd already been typing it out. *“I don't want to bother you. Just wanted to see how you were.”* It was followed by a smiley face and a cute, *“Hi.”*

*“I fucking miss you,”* I wrote only to delete it and say instead, *“Just left my parents.”*

*“Were they excited to see you?”*

I felt myself grin at the question as I tapped out a response. *“I think so. What are you doing?”*

*“Unpacking. I think I brought half the sand from the island back with me.”*

*“Build your own island,”* I suggested and set the phone down on the bed, exchanging it for the bag I'd dumped there.

I unearthed the book with its torn cover and examined the pages. Someone had highlighted whole paragraphs with dull, yellow ink. Black pen defaced the edges. Whoever the vandal was had had many opinions about everything, but all I could think about was Kami reading out the words to me in between choked whines as I played with her tight, little body. I had absolutely no idea what the book was about or what she'd even read, but it was now my favorite book in the whole world.

*“Do you think the building owner would appreciate that?”* said her text when I picked up the phone again.

*“I know the guy. I'll put in a good word.”*

I could almost hear her laugh when she replied, *“Thanks.”*

I tucked the book into my back pocket and adjusted my blazer overtop. My phone was immediately back in my hand. She hadn't said anything else, and I wasn't ready to let the conversation go.

*"What's the plan after you finish building your island?"*

I probably should have let her go, let her finish doing what she was doing. We weren't at the lodge anymore and things couldn't be the same. We couldn't be the same. But I couldn't stop. I couldn't bring myself to end it the way I knew was necessary.

*"I'm going to finish unpacking and take a shower before getting ready for dinner."*

My finger hit the call button before I could second guess my actions. Kami answered on the second ring, excitement, and mild confusion in her tone.

*"Hi, what's—?"*

I stopped her. "Don't."

There was a pause on her end, a heartbeat of a second I expected before the question. *"Why?"*

Maybe I should have given it a little more thought, but I knew my response would have been the same.

*"I want my scent on you a little longer."*

She didn't pretend to misunderstand.

She didn't even give herself a minute to think about my request.

I heard her soft inhale, then, *"Okay."*

Her murmur of quiet obedience settled in my chest for the rest of the night. Even as I sat in the silent hush of Lyxicon's headquarters, her unwavering response wormed into my thoughts, jumbling the words printed across the contract pages. I restarted the process multiple times before I had to force myself to accept the inevitable.

I set the pen down and stared at the city skyline shimmering against the navy sky. The city below hummed

with the bustle of traffic. The warm day had faded to a soft, cool night, and all I could think was whether or not Kami remembered to grab a coat. Ridiculous really given she'd done fine without me for the last twenty-four years.

I also wondered what she was wearing and what time she would be back. All things I had no business caring about but couldn't put away.

I glanced at my phone, debating the wisdom of texting her, and having no one idea what.

Christ, I was a fucking mess.

## CHAPTER 9

# *Kamari*



“To another successful trip.” Lavena raised her glass in a toast.

The rest of us followed suit, clinking our drinks to hers.

“I’m so tired,” Sasha moaned, dropping back in her seat, her half-eaten burger pushed to the middle of the table. “I need a vacation from the vacation.”

“I think there should be a rule that you take a week off after every vacation just to recover from the vacation,” Kas sighed.

“Let’s do it,” Lavena decided. “Instead of a week, we take two weeks every time. One week for the actual vacation, then a week to recover.”

While Sasha and Kas exchanged glances, I laughed. “I am not taking two weeks off.”

“It is a bit much,” Kas agreed.

“Especially when a few days is exhausting on its own,” Sasha added.

Lavena huffed. “This will help!”

The majority ruled.

Lavena pursed her lips but let the topic drop.

Chuckling quietly, I reached for my phone and poked the screen on.

Nothing.

I wasn't hoping or expecting, but the lack of any messages had a flicker of disappointment flaring through me that I had to push aside to focus on my friends. But no sooner had I loosened my grip when a tall, dark shadow slid up behind Sasha and covered her eyes.

"Guess who," came the deep, guttural drawl from Enzo Trevil.

Like Sasha, her brother possessed the same smooth, olive skin and thick, dark waves. His fell in coils to his shoulder and hung in reckless strands over eyes the exact gray of a stormy afternoon. Twin dimples collected on either side of his perfect lips when he grinned at Lavena over Sasha's head, but there was nothing friendly about it. If anything, the look was one of a very large cat who had finally captured the canary.

"*Charlie Hunnam?*" Sasha guessed, feeling the long, lethal fingers blocking her vision. "Have you finally come to take me away on your motorcycle?"

We laughed.

Enzo rolled his eyes and removed his hold, allowing Sasha to peer back over her shoulder at the man. She made a face and clicked her tongue.

"Boo."

Enzo flicked her on the forehead. "Who are you booing, runt?"

Sasha swatted at him, but he was already moving around the table to the only available seat next to Lavena. He folded six feet into the empty spot and stole one of the abandoned fries from Lavena's plate.

"I thought you were on a top-secret mission," Lavena said.

Enzo rested an elbow on the table and stole another fry. "And how do you know about it if it's so top secret?"

Lavena raised an eyebrow. "Because I'm me and I know everything."

He hummed softly, chewing on the bit of potato and eyed his sister who had suddenly become fascinated by her water

glass.

“I’m still working,” he said after a moment.

“You deserted your post just to come and steal my food?” Lavena eyed him and the fry disappear between straight, white teeth.

Enzo was disturbingly beautiful. The kind of beautiful that belonged on the pages of some glossy magazine, but it wasn’t only his appearance. He had the aura of a predator, a creature that lived in the shadows and hunted for sport. Maybe it was the intense focus behind his eyes or the brutal calm that seemed to radiate off him, but he could clear a room with just a look. I’d seen him do it. It was terrifying to witness.

“I heard you were back,” he replied in that smooth as honey purr that left no doubt in any of our minds he was about to steal Lavena for the rest of the night. “I came to see you.”

Lavena’s eyes narrowed. “Who told you I was back?”

Full lips curved into a brilliant grin exposing all his teeth. “I’m me. I know everything.”

Despite the knot of annoyance crinkling her brows, I saw the faint hint of Lavena’s amusement in the twitch of her lips.

“Did you need something?”

Even from across the table, I heard the muffled creak of Enzo’s chair as he leaned towards her. “What kind of answer would you like, Lavena?”

“Whichever one will get you back to wherever you need to be.”

There was no denying the heat in the man’s eyes, the impatience and frustration. Lavena may have been ignoring it, but I saw it and I’d never connected so closely to another person.

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

Lavena pursed her lips. “And?”

Her chin was caught between his fingers. “And you know I fucking hate that.”



She swatted his hand off. “That sounds like a *you* problem.”

His broad shoulders lifted with the slow breath he inhaled, his pale eyes never wavering off my best friend’s face. “Do you really want to play that game with me, princess? You know it won’t end well, especially with all these people here.”

Lavena never batted an eye, but I didn’t miss the hint of a blush creeping into her cheeks. “Try it. I will gut you right here on the table.”

Enzo’s grin could have cut glass. “Is that a challenge?”

“Bite me.”

When his fingers closed around her jaw again with authority and raging sexual tension, the rest of us at the table immediately mumbled our excuses and scrambled out of our seats. We each tossed money down for our meals and left without saying a word to Lavena or Enzo.

“Jesus,” Kas grumbled, swinging the strap of her purse over her head. “Those two need to sort out whatever the hell that is.”

“I need bleach,” Sasha whined. “My brain needs scrubbing.”

I didn’t say anything as we hailed a cab to share back to the Alexander. I thought of Lavena and Darius and their similar attitude towards relationships. At least with Darius, his motives made sense and I knew if there was a way, he would be with me. I hated it with every fiber of me soul but it was what it was. I couldn’t change it. I had no sway or power to stop a blood feud.

Lavena ... I understood her need to protect herself against the heartache of losing someone she loved, but they’d already been together for so long. Sure, she claimed it was only sex, but...

“Kam?”

I blinked out of my thoughts and focused on Kas’s pretty face peering in at me from the open door of the cab. We’d

arrived. The Alexander loomed tall and fierce overhead, a brilliant beacon against the dark backdrop. The cabby watched me from behind the scuffed protective glass, his small, wizened face concerned in the pale light of the cabin.

“I’m sorry.” I started to dig into my purse for money.

“We paid already.” Kas motioned for me to get out. “Get out of the man’s car.”

Mumbling another apology, I scrambled out of the seat and stood with the other two on the sidewalk. The cabby took off and I exhaled.

“Do you guys want to come over and hang out?” Sasha asked as we headed towards the night doorman holding the door open for us.

I considered going back to my apartment and crawling into bed, but I knew I’d only lie there, surrounded by darkness and silence, hoping my phone would ring. So, I agreed to join the other two in a Buffy marathon.

We separated at our doors to change into comfy clothes. I took a few minutes longer to wash my face and check my phone. After some deliberation, I left my phone on my bedside table before heading to Sasha’s; I didn’t want to be that person who got caught up on whether or not a man would text her, especially knowing he wouldn’t.

Suppressing the pang in my chest, I joined my friends for the evening.

There was nothing from Darius when I crawled into bed hours later. I told myself to get used to it as I pulled the blanket over my head and closed my eyes.

\* \* \*

My alarm jolted me from a dead slumber. The obnoxious tinkling assaulted my last nerve as I rolled over and slapped at my phone. Nothing happened, except it spinning out of control and sliding off the table to hit the carpet, still screaming.

I released a series of cuss words that would have horrified my mother as I dove head first over the edge of my mattress to

snatch the evil thing.

The silence was a beautiful thing as I wiggled up into a sitting position, phone cupped in my palm. I blew out a breath and shut my eyes, willing my startled heart to calm when the thing in my hand buzzed. Jumping all over again, I peered down at the screen.

*“I finished the book.”*

My heart went into a frenzy as I reread the message. Giddy excitement had me catching my bottom lip between my teeth as I wrote back.

“Already?”

*“It was hard to put down.”*

Delighted by his response, I crossed my legs and plunged into all the necessary questions. “What did you think? What was your favorite part? What did you think of the ending? Did you agree with the last reader’s notes?”

A long pause extended between us where I assumed he was typing. I kept my phone in hand as I hurried to the bathroom to shower and get ready for work.

I was setting my clothes out when a knock sounded through the apartment. I glanced at the time and knew it was most likely Sasha; she picked me up some mornings to grab coffee before we parted for work.

“Door’s open!” I yelled. “Bedroom!”

There was a pause. Then the subtle click of the latch opening. I heard footsteps in the hall leading to my bedroom.

“Help me pick an outfit,” I shouted, pulling out the two chosen ones. “I’m considering the black skirt with the red blouse or...” I turned to the door, both outfits held up. “The green dress with the gold belt...”

The figure in the doorway wasn’t Sasha.

“The green one.”

Darius stood in my apartment, a haunting vision in a tailored gray suit, his damp hair pulled back from a freshly

shaven face and bound by an elastic at the base of his skull. He was beautiful, and magnetic, and smelled so good; the rich scent of musk, man, and exotic spices soaked the air, filling my space with him.

“Hi,” I blurted for lack of anything better.

He swept back a rogue lock of hair that had escaped its confines and my stomach flipped. Him dressed like that had nearly gotten me and Sasha killed the day before. I didn’t know what it was about him wearing a suit but watching him coming down those stairs looking like sin incarnate had sent my whole system into a tizzy. It still was as I studied him now in the once safety of my bedroom.

“Hi,” he responded.

“I thought you were Sasha,” I explained, fidgeting with the hangers digging into my fingers. “We sometimes go for coffee before work.”

He reached into the pocket of his trousers and pulled out the book I’d loaned him. “I came to drop this off and answer your questions.” But rather than hold the book out, he eyed me. “Do you always keep your door unlocked?”

I laughed. “This is the most secure building in the city, and literally no one has access to this side, except family. Besides,” I tossed the skirt and blouse down on my rumpled bed, “it’s a pain running to open it every time the girls drop in. It’s just easier this way.”

“You could just give them a key,” he suggested, dropping a shoulder against the doorframe.

“Oh, we have keys to each other’s places,” I shot him a grin, “this is easier.”

“It’s not safe, Kami.”

I set my chosen outfit down over the other one and faced him properly. “There is nothing in the world that can touch me here.”

He didn’t say anything for a long moment. “Lock it. Please,” he added when I opened my mouth.

Any other time, I would have waved away the concern, but I was struck by the hard set of his jaw, the plea in his beautiful eyes. He was afraid for me. This feud with Volkov was putting him on edge.

“Okay.”

Satisfied, he straightened. His gaze moved along my barely clad frame with a hunger and need I recognized and felt to my core. My fingers tightened around my towel, a strip of fabric keeping me from what we both wanted.

His attention flicked between my eyes and my lips before settling down on the book in his hand.

“I stayed up all night to finish this book,” he murmured. “Because I needed a reason to see you.”

I bit my lip. “You didn’t like it?”

He raised his head, amusement sprinkling the frustration darkening the pale surface of his eyes. “I did. But it could have been the worst pile of garbage, and I would have plowed through it because...” he hesitated. The book smacked the side of his thigh once. “You didn’t text.”

My lips parted in surprise. “Darius...”

He put a hand up. “I know, baby. I know I’m breaking the rules. I know I shouldn’t be here. I know I’m supposed to let you go.” He peered deeply into my eyes from the five feet separating us, his pain mirroring mine. “It’s taking everything not to find Volkov and settling this once and for all just so—”

“No!” I was across the room before he finished. “Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare...” I broke off when my voice cracked. “You promised.”

“Kami—”

I stabbed him in the chest with my finger. “You promised!” I snapped again. “You promised you wouldn’t take unnecessary risks. You said—”

He captured my hand and brought the fingertips to his lips. He kissed each one lightly, his eyes never leaving mine.

“I won’t hide from him, kitten. Eventually, I will have to face him.”

I knew that.

I knew Darius wasn’t a coward.

I knew he would have to face Volkov.

Of course, he would.

This was a war and eventually, all wars meant a battle. I just didn’t want him to. I didn’t want him anywhere near Volkov. I didn’t want the risk of losing him forever. If it were up to me ... I didn’t finish the thought. I couldn’t. It ended with us being together and I knew I had to be realistic.

“Could you talk to him?” I offered stupidly instead.

The warm fingers on his free hand swept back locks of hair away from my temple and tucked them behind my ear. “He wants blood. He won’t settle for less.”

“But maybe...?”

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t settle for less if it were me. I would abolish his entire bloodline.” His thumb caressed my cheek. “I would destroy everyone he’s ever loved.” It brushed my bottom lip. “I would make him watch as I picked them off one by one and let him hear every one of their screams.” He tipped my chin up. “I would send him pieces of them every day as a reminder that I was coming for him next. He only wants me. I would want them all.”

Talk of such gruesome acts of violence with such calm detachment should have horrified me, but all I felt was a warm ripple of warmth course through me, muddling my brain to everything, except how much I loved this man.

“I don’t want him to want you.” I touched the front of his top with my free hand, smoothing the soft material over the heat of his chest. “I don’t want him anywhere near you. The thought of him hurting you...” I gritted my teeth. “I want to kill him myself.”

His kiss was feather light brushing across my lips, yet the weight of it crushed my heart.

“What do you think I would do to him if he touches you, kitten?”

Hand still flat against his chest drifted up to cup the back of his neck, holding his face bowed over mine.

“I just don’t want to lose you,” I whispered. “I don’t ... I can’t handle it.”

His kiss was harder, desperate. It caught my words and me in its web of promises he had no right making when we both knew better. But I didn’t stop him. I knew I should. Every voice in my head screamed my idiocy but my body couldn’t give a shit when it felt like it was finally home again. Even my heart couldn’t protest how right it felt being enveloped by his arms, his heat. Both ignored reason for that brief moment of weakness.

*I love you*, I wanted to tell him. It burned in my throat and teetered on my tongue. Instead, I kissed him back one more time, hard and filled with everything I wished I could tell him before pulling back.

“We have to stop,” I breathed.

His fingers slid into my hair and cupped the back of my skull, holding me in place as he rested his brow against mine. “One more second, kitten.”

I didn’t protest.

I let my curled fingers brush along his cheek to his jawline. I kissed him lightly. I was about to let him tip my face back for a deeper kiss when the front door unlocked with a muffled click.

For a full second neither of us moved. The very air around us seemed to still as Lavena’s voice filled my apartment.

Standing in my bedroom doorway, clad in a towel with Darius before the sun even had a chance to touch the sky was going to raise a lot of questions I didn’t know how to answer.

Panicking, I grabbed Darius and pulled him to the bathroom and shut him in just as Lavena appeared where we’d been standing seconds below.

“You’re not dressed,” she observed.

Trying to act as normal as possible, I hurried to the outfits I’d tossed onto my bed and picked up the green one.

“Just got out of the shower. I’ll be ready in a minute.”

Lavena flopped down onto my bed and crossed her long legs at the ankle. “No rush. I’ll wait here.”

Struggling not to grimace, I gathered my clothes and slipped carefully into the bathroom ... and turned.

Darius stood directly behind me, eyes the calm of the ocean before a storm.

I shut the door quickly and faced him fully with my clothes held against my chest.

“Did you get Mom’s text this morning?” Lavena called from the other side.

I shook my head, eyes never leaving Darius. “No.”

He took the bundle from my arms and set them on the counter. The book he was there to return was placed next to them.

“Mom and Dad have invited the families for dinner tonight at Ollie’s to celebrate Darius’s release,” Lavena yelled.

“I haven’t checked my phone yet,” I mumbled, barely paying attention when the solid wall of sinewy muscles and radiating heat had all but crowded me in my own bathroom.

“What time do you get off work tonight? Kas and I can swing by and pick you up.”

“Um...”

My brain faltered when Darius reached into the pile and freed my bra and panty set, a matching pair of soft lace in sexy black. His eyebrow lifted, but he said nothing when he separated the two and knelt at my feet with my thong between his fingers.

“Kam?”

I had to clear my throat to speak. “Six,” I blurted.



“I’ll text Kas and see what time she—”

I was no longer listening.

Darius had grabbed a fistful of my towel and yanked, stripping me completely naked before him.

“Darius!” I gasped, struggling to keep my voice down.

The man placed a finger to his lips, peering up at me with those eyes.

The elastic of my panties was stretched open and held for my feet to slide through.

With the exception of my parents, no one had ever dressed me before. Never as an adult at least. It was an odd concept as I braced a hand against his shoulder and slid my left foot through the hole.

Darius leaned forward and brushed a kiss to my inner knee, then my inner thigh. His hair tickled my mound the higher he climbed.

“No. Wait,” I panted, cupping the back of his head as he reached my lips.

He kissed them with an open mouth assault, parting them with his tongue and rolling over my clit all the way to my opening.

I swore without thinking and threw back my head. It hit the door with a crack that I didn’t feel.

“Kami?”

“I’m ... I’m fine!” I lied to my best friend while holding her brother’s mouth to my pussy. “Tripped.”

“Jesus, be careful.”

Darius met my eye, my puffy lips spread around his lips as he tongue fucked me against my bathroom door.

It dawned somewhere at the back of my muddled brain that this went against everything we swore to no longer do just the day before, but his fingers were inside me, working a new magic over my rational thought process.

“No...” I managed to whine even as I helped him lift my leg over his shoulder for better access; my forgotten panties dangled from my ankle.

His fingers pushed deeper, working my opening in rolling thrusts that curled my toes into the linoleum.

“Hurry up!” Lavena yelled, from the other side of the door.

“I’m trying!” I snapped back without thinking, frustration over being interrupted evident in my voice.

Darius snorted with my clit still between his lips. The vibration brought me back, but my focus was gone.

“I can’t,” I breathed, annoyed and needy. “I’m too distracted.”

He released the swollen muscle and rose before me, a dominating force towering over me.

“Look at me, kitten. There’s no one but me.”

I started to tell him that wouldn’t work when he bent to drape my left leg over his bent elbow. The momentum pushed me flush against the cold surface of the door, eliciting a weak gasp. His free hand stayed inside my body, two fingers nestled deep in my channel as he brought his lips to my ear.

“Should I stop?” he drawled, hooking his fingers against my outer wall. “Should I leave you like this, your pussy swollen and sensitive? Should I finish tonight at dinner in front of everyone?”

Horried, yet wildly turned on by the idea, I groaned into his shoulder. The material of his jacket bunched beneath my fists as I held him to me, desperate for the release he promised.

“I can slip my hand beneath your skirt at dinner and finger you until you come right at the table, but you’d have to be so quiet, kitten. You can’t be moaning and whimpering like you are now, or everyone will know what a cock hungry, little pussy—”

I came.

I came so hard and fast I saw stars. The world collapsed into a vortex of silence a split second before roaring back with my heart pounding in my ears and my teeth closed around a mouthful of his jacket.

He was still murmuring when I could hear again, his words hot and dirty, just the way I liked it.

“Yes, kitten,” he purred lazily into my ear. “That’s it. Again.” He trailed slippery fingers out of me and over my quivering clit before plunging back in faster and harder. “Soak my hand with your come. Get your scent all over it. I want to smell her on my skin until dinner time.”

I came again.

Not as hard, but enough to make me groan and rub against his palm like a kitten seeking attention.

“Time to go, baby,” he murmured when I slumped against him. “Or I will fuck you next. I’ll pound into your hot, wet pussy with the rock-hard cock in my pants and let your ass slam into the door while you scream for me to fuck your slippery cunt harder.”

He was still fingering me as he breathed the threat into my ear, and I let him. I let him bring me back to the edge even as I knew Lavena was waiting and he would make true on his promise.

“Then stop,” I pleaded. “You’re making me so wet and...”

He slammed his fingers up hard inside me, silencing my attempts at reason with him.

“And what, kitten?” he taunted, cruelly. “What am I doing to *my* pussy. She’s mine, right? She belongs to me. I can do whatever the fuck I want to her, whenever I fucking want. The same goes for your mouth, your ass, your tits. Your whole fucking body, Kami, belongs to me. Say it!”

“Yours,” I whined.

I was coming again, and he was smirking like he’d proven his point.

“Good girl.” He withdrew his fingers and raised them between, showing me the white smear of cream coating two fingers and running into his palm in a small puddle that he brought to his tongue and lapped. The fingers were cleaned next. Each digit was sucked between his lips until all traces of me were gone. All the while, he stared into my eyes, bold and taunting.

“I didn’t come for breakfast, but I appreciate the spread,” he teased into my ear.

I had to stifle my laugh behind my hand.

Darius grinned as he set my leg down gingerly. The muscles in my hip protested the notion of being forced to work, but I ignored it as I worked to pull my panties on the rest of the way. Darius passed me the bra and watched me closely as I cradled my tits in the supportive cups. The lace lifted them gracefully as if in offering, barely keeping them from spilling over.

“Fuck, kitten,” he breathed. “I think I know what I want for Christmas.”

I chuckled softly, reaching for my dress. The satin material shimmered under the soft light of the bathroom as I tugged the zipper down.

“What’s that?”

It went over my head, and I pulled it over my frame, taking note of how tight it was across the chest, waist and hips before settling high around my thighs.

Darius stepped up behind me and reached for the zipper. I scooped my hair up and over one shoulder.

“Nothing we have time to get into right now.”

I was zipped into my dress. The nape of my neck was brushed with a light kiss before he stepped back to let me do my hair and makeup. I did in record time while Darius watched me from his seated place on the tub’s edge. I could feel his scrutiny, could feel his eyes boring into my shoulder blades, undressing me. But I somehow kept my hands steady as I put my face on.

“Good?” I asked once the final touch was in place, and I faced him.

He stared at me for too long, his eyes too penetrating. His unwavering attention made me shift uneasily.

“What?”

He shook his head slightly. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Kami.”

Heat crawled up my neck to flood my face even as my heart gave an excited jitter in my chest.

“Thank you.”

He pushed to his feet and closed the distance between us. I held my breath as he drew closer until he towered over me.

“Why are you wasting your time on me, baby?” He captured my chin and tilted my face up to his. “I’m a lost cause. You deserve better.”

I opened my mouth to respond, to tell him I had no room to love anyone else when he had claimed every inch of my heart when a loud bang nearly sent me out of my skin.

“Holy Christ, Kami!” Lavena pounded on the door. “You’re already hot as fuck. Let’s go!”

Darius smirked. “She’s not wrong.” Warmth crept into my cheeks, making him chuckle. “Go. I’ll text you.”

He kissed me, long and slow before pushing me towards the door.

I shot him a final glance, taking in the breathtaking sight of him before slipping out into the bedroom.

“Finally!” Lavena cried. “What took you so long?”

I gestured to my dress. “It’s not easy getting into this thing.”

“Why didn’t you say something? I would have helped.”

The argument continued as I strapped on my heels, gathered my purse and keys and followed my best friend to the elevator leaving my apartment door open for Darius to get out.

Kas and Sasha met us in the foyer, both dressed for work — Sasha in a dark gray track suit and Kas in a black skirt set. Both were leaning against the front reception desk.

“What took so long?” Kas garbled around a wide yawn. “I have a million files to get through before court this morning.”

“I’m sorry. It was my fault,” I confessed. “I ... I was having some complications.”

“Are you okay?” Sasha asked, looking me over as if searching for injuries.

I assured them I was as we left the building and headed for our favorite coffee shop around the corner.

The routine was illogical. I was the only one who worked within walking distance. The other three had to walk back, get their cars and drive to their respective destinations, but we did this every morning since moving into the Alexander and no one had complained yet.

“Why do I feel exhausted?” Kas yawned, emptying half the sugar dispenser into her black coffee with two shots of espresso.

“I’m telling you, we need a vacation from the vacation,” Lavena muttered, swirling the cold foam into her ice coffee. The chunks of ice rattle against the sides of her plastic cup. “No one should be expected to simply return to normal life after that much stimulation.”

Sasha and I exchanged side long glances, both of us smothering tired grins behind our drinks. Mine was a warm chai latte. Sasha had a small green tea with honey.

She moved up next to me and slid her arm through mine and tugged me to her side as the other two argued over the pros and cons of Lavena’s idea.

“Excited to see if the store is still standing?” she teased me.

I hadn’t had much time to think about the store in all honesty. There was so much else on my mind, but I gave her a roll of my eyes and a little shoulder bump.

“Maybe a little but I’m sure Kaila has it covered.”

I had every confidence in Kaila. She’d been my rock when I needed her. I couldn’t ask for a better employee. She wasn’t the problem. My need for perfection was.

With our drinks in hand, we made our way back out onto the sidewalk. We stood to one side as the early morning traffic bustled past us.

“About tonight,” Lavena announced, ice chips rattling around her cup with every deliberate swirl of her drink. “Are we meeting up at Ollie’s or are we meeting at the apartment?”

“I’m going to be at the office late,” Kas sighed. “I’ll meet you guys there.”

“I need to run home and change first,” Sasha added.

“Same,” I piped in.

The consensus in the end was that we would meet up in the lobby at eight. Kas would arrive at the restaurant when she could, and we would keep in touch throughout the day. With that, we waved goodbye and headed in separate directions.

The new shipment of elegant gowns glimmered in the windows when I arrived at *Le Hush*. I stood on the sidewalk, keys in hand, studying the sleek lines of the new, fall line. Kaila had done a wonderful job creating a story of elegance and beauty behind clean, gleaming glass. The nondescript mannequins with their featureless faces stood poised in their new outfits, showcasing what was to be the trend of the season.

Marcella never skimmed on fashion. Her whole life was the art of clothing. She spent hours with designers, sitting front row at every fashion show and cultivating relationships with everyone from the janitors to the directors. She had an eye for the most exquisite collections, and she had yet to be wrong. Every piece she ever brought in was gold and snatched up months in advance by eager, wealthy women. This selection was no different.

The fall line looked radiant in their bold, autumn colors and tight lines. Deep, royal blues and dramatic black tones

were perfect for the impending slide into winter when the darker shades would brighten to whites and brilliant reds to suit the holiday season.

The bell above the door jingled softly in the still emptiness of the shop as I let myself into the soft scent of roses. One quick glance at the new displays assured me Kaila had followed my instructions to the letter. Everything looked perfect, as I knew it would; Kaila was a unicorn, and I didn't know what I would have done without her. She was the only person I trusted to treat the store the way I would, and I always made sure she knew just how much I appreciated everything she did by adding extra to her pay at every opportunity thanks to Marcella's generosity. She always believed a dedicated worker was someone who was compensated well. In turn, she made sure all her stores were given bonuses and commissions on top of a well over average salary.

*"Why would anyone want to put their heart into a job when their head is full of worry? Help your people pay their bills and they will in turn give you their loyalty and hard work,"* was her moto, a stance I fully agreed with. So, I always made sure my team was cared for.

I deposited my bag behind the counter and set to work opening for the day. It was a task not checking my phone every minute, but there was so much to do before I had to close for the day, run home, change, and meet the girls for Darius's welcome dinner. I just had to focus.



## CHAPTER 10

### *Darius*



**M**y coffee cooled at my elbow as it sat ignored by me. The dark liquid rippled with every scribble of my own across various lines.

Lourdes, my very efficient secretary, stood at my shoulder, hands clasped in front of her, watching my every pen stroke with the no-nonsense of a grade schoolteacher making sure I got my E's correct.

"One more, sir," she kept saying as she flipped to a new page and a new line for me to defile with my scribble.

"Are these getting sent to my father?" I asked, passing her the fully signed contract.

"Yes sir." It was piled on top of the other six in her possession. A fresh one replaced it. "This is the final paperwork for the new building Mr. Medlock purchased earlier this year. It needs the final signatures to start the renovations."

I paused on this one. "Shouldn't my father be looking this over? I don't even know what this building is being renovated into."

Lourdes eyed me over the thin wires of her round glasses. "It's for the casino. I was informed by Meredith that you were given the emails explaining all of this."

I searched my memory trying to remember if I'd seen an email mentioning a casino.

"I don't recall a casino," I stated after a moment. "Put this aside until I've spoken to my father."

She said nothing as she pulled the contract away and straightened. “You have a meeting with Cormac McGavin at one, right after lunch. I will have him on line one for you. At three, you will be needed—”

I never found out what was needed of me when the phone on my desk rattled to life.

Lourdes had it up and at her ear before the second ring. “Mr. Medlock’s office,” there was a pause, then, “yes ma’am. Just a moment, please.” I was trying to think who Lourdes was calling *ma’am* when the receiver was held out to me. “Your mother, sir.”

I accepted it.

“Mom?”

*“Hi baby, I’m sorry to call you at work, but your father is being simply unreasonable that I had no choice.”*

I sat back in my seat. “What happened?”

My mother exhaled as if she’d been holding the entire world’s problems on her shoulders. *“It’s just awful, Darius. He’s making such a fuss about dinner tonight. I had everything booked at Ollie’s. I know it’s your favorite restaurant and I wanted to celebrate your homecoming with the family, but your father...”* she broke off with a huff that made me think he was there listening. *“He’s telling me you don’t want dinner out.”*

I would have cursed if my mother didn’t have the hearing abilities of a bat. There was no way to avoid a dinner no matter what I said, but Father was also correct that going to a public place without proper security was also risky. A compromise needed to be made.

“It’s not that I don’t want to have dinner at Ollie’s, but I was hoping for just a family night at home.”

Mom was silent just long enough that I began to wonder if we’d been disconnected. When she broke the tension, her voice held all the hints of disbelief and annoyance.

“Our apartment isn’t big enough for that many people,” she remarked shortly. “How will I fit everyone?”

Lourdes, sensing this was going to take a while gathered up the files we’d been working on and left me to deal with my mother alone.

“Mom, how many people were you hoping to invite?”

“Everyone!” she cried, exasperation heavy in that single word. “Everyone is so excited to see you. Your grandma. Your aunts and uncles, and cousins. Everyone!”

I rubbed my palm over my face. “Can we not fit everyone at the penthouse?”

“You know your uncle Marty doesn’t like crowds.”

Biting back the retort hot on my tongue, I softened my tone, reminding myself this was my mother and I loved her. “Mom, we’ll fit. We have Christmases at your place every year and about twenty other events year-round. Uncle Morty never seemed to have a problem before.”

Mom let out a low whine that signaled my tiny win even before she spoke. “I just wanted it to be somewhere nice.”

“Being with you guys and seeing everyone is all the nice I need,” I added as an extra bit of topping.

In the end, Mom made the decision that she would call everyone and have the dinner relocated to the penthouse, but not before making it very clear that she wasn’t happy about it. I was feeling pretty good about putting out that forest fire when I called Lourdes back in.



The penthouse was a madhouse of activity when I stepped off the elevator and into a three-ring circus with no ringleader. Bodies moved in waves through the halls and poured into different rooms, a flurry of fabric, too much hairspray and many faces I had never seen before.

The ding of the elevator closing behind me alerted the hoard. They turned as if as one, and I was swarmed.

Arms and hands grabbed and pulled and squeezed. Wet, sometimes fuzzy lips mashed into my cheeks as I bathed in an array of perfumes so strong, my eyes burned. I was dragged through the mob to where my parents stood in the sitting room, surrounded by even more people.

“Darius!” Mom catching sight of me, hurried forward, arms wide, a flute of champagne in one hand. She embraced me, lips going to my ear, and I almost missed her low hiss. “I have no idea who half of these people are.”

I pulled back to peer down into her beaming face, not missing the absolute fury in her eyes. “Where did they come from?”

Teeth flashing between bright, red lips, she hooked her arm through mine and dragged me to where my father stood. “Plus ones, darling, and I am so happy everyone could make it.”

A bold-faced lie, but I wasn’t about to call her on it.

I caught my father’s eye, not missing the tension in his jaw or the way he moved to press himself right at my mother’s

side. He was thinking what I was — this was out of control. Having a house full of strangers at a time like this was asking for trouble. Maybe the restaurant idea had been the better idea, but it was too late to think about it now as I was pulled and shoved, and introduced to people I would never see again. It was all overwhelming and I could feel the growing tightening in my chest as faces pressed in around me. Bodies clustered, hot and insistent. No one seemed to recognize the concept of space as they invaded mine.

I stepped on a foot trying to retreat and a skirt hem when I tried to move forward. Someone touched my face, and I swatted the clammy hand away, my breathing rapid and ragged in my ear.

“Get the fuck off me!” I snapped at someone, the lack of air hurting my lungs and throbbing at my temples.

No one heard me, or no one was listening.

The room was too loud.

The music was pounding in my bones.

Laughter and chatter stabbed ice picks into my ears.

I could feel a rapidly climbing madness bubbling up my throat.

“Darius.”

A small, cool hand closed over my clenched fist, and it was as if someone flicked a switch, shutting everything off. I exhaled for the first time. It was shredded and wet in the cavity of my chest. I glanced down to find Kami peering up at me, her features light and warm, but her eyes watchful and focused. She gave my fingers a light squeeze that I felt straight swaddle me like a comfort blanket before she turned her attention to the people around us.

Her expression never wavered as she greeted them calmly and effortlessly, all the while, I could feel her nudging me back, tugging me behind her as she maneuvered us backwards to where my parents stood on the outskirts of the chaos. Only when we were out of the swarm did she release me and turn to greet my parents. She hugged them and said things I didn't

hear. I was only faintly aware of Lavena and the girls already there, focused on something Edmund was saying. I took the moment of reprieve to inhale and exhale several times, retraining my lungs on how to work properly. It helped, but just barely. There were still so many people.

“There’s nothing I can do,” Mom was saying to whatever question my father had asked. “I can’t just tell people to leave.”

My father pulsed with an air of disapproval. There were deep creases between his eyes that matched the lines around his mouth, but we both knew she was right. The party had only just started. Asking people to leave was rude and would absolutely start a lot of backlashes.

“I can pull the fire alarm,” Lavena offered.

“Don’t you dare!” Mom hissed.

“This technically is a fire hazard,” Kas supplied helpfully. “There are way too many people in this space and not enough fire exits.”

“Which would cause mass panic and deaths if you pull the alarm,” Kami pointed out wisely. “But there are way too many people here.” She looked to my mother. “We need to get them out before someone gets hurt.”

“I can pretend to faint.” Lavena suggested. “Edmund, catch me.”

“Stop it,” Mom muttered before Edmund could get into place behind Lavena. “You’re not helping.”

“Well, you’re shutting down some of my best ideas.”

“Those are your best ideas? Fainting and false fires?” Sasha grumbled.

Lavena rolled her eyes. “I could start a real fire, but something tells me you guys will say no to that, too.”

Mom ignored her completely. “I said, family only. Why would you bring a bunch of random people to a private dinner? I don’t even think we have enough food for everyone.”

She pressed a hand to her chest and looked to my father. “I just wanted a nice, family dinner. Now what?”

The irritation softened in my father’s features as he slipped a hand around her middle and tugged her to his side. He pressed his lips to the side of her head and mumbled, “I’ve taken care of it.”

Mom jerked back, eyes wide. “You ... what?”

As if perfectly timed, a small cluster of men in navy uniforms appeared in the hallway. The music was shut off as all heads turned to the newcomers.

“Alex!” my mom hissed, horrified as police officers declared a noise complaint and something about safety regulations that was drowned by a loud stream of protest.

“You called the cops?” Lavena muttered just under her breath, amusement curling the corner of her lips. “On your own party?”

Father shrugged but said nothing as people were ushered into the elevator and down the stairs in two single files.

“Cella. Cella!” Grandma Josephine — the only person on the planet allowed to call my mother Cella — elbowed her way briskly through the moving throng of people to stand before her daughter. “Cella, what’s happening? Are we being raided? Do I need to slip into the bathroom and empty—”

“We’re not being raided, Ma,” Mom sighed as Grandma clutched her massive bag to her abdomen. “I think someone reported all the noise.”

Grandma Josephine blinked heavily mascaraed eyelashes. “Noise? We were practically mice up here.”

Mom narrowed her eyes. “Do you have your hearing aids turned down again?”

Grandma Josephine deliberately avoided her attention to me. “My sweet, beautiful angel. I didn’t even see you.” She took my face between her soft, warm hands and kissed both of my cheeks. “Come see me, okay? I’ll make those cakes you like, and you can tell me everything.”

Thirty plus years and I could never tell her I hated fruit cake with a passion beyond imagination. I smiled and promised I would and watched her march up to one of the police officers and square off with him in all her four feet glory.

“You’re harassing the wrong people. There’s a gang of misfits outside my apartment every day at three pm, just swarming the sidewalk like they have the right. You should be asking them what they’re doing.”

Mom face palmed. “They’re kids, Ma. They’re going home from school. We’ve talked about this.”

Grandma huffed. “They all look suspicious, and I know suspicious. I was married to your father for twenty-six years.”

“I love Grandma.” Lavena smirked as the officer gently took Grandma’s elbow and guided her to the elevator, promising he’d look into the gang of misfits first chance he got. “I strive to be that level of delulu at her age.”

Mom shot her a withering scowl but said nothing as she turned to my father. “When did you call them?”

“An hour ago, when the first wave hit our home.”

Mom had the decency to grimace. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea it would get so out of control like that.”

“It’s not your fault,” Sasha assured her. “People have no consideration sometimes.”

Mom put her hand over the one Sasha gently placed on her arm. “I told everyone this was for family only and we would have something bigger for everyone else once Darius settled in.” She shook her head slowly. “I’m so disappointed no one listened.”

Officer Johnny Hans, one of the officers on Father’s payroll broke away from the group still leading people out of the apartment and approached us.

“Mr. Medlock,” he said, coming over to offer Father his hand.



Father stepped forward and accepted it with a firm shake. “Johnny, thank you for coming on such short notice. It was getting a bit out of hand.”

The officer grinned. “Never had anyone call us on their own party before.”

“That’s what I said,” Lavena muttered.

“I figured it was the safest way to ... disband this situation without hurt feelings or causing arguments.”

“There was some argument,” Hans mumbled, rolling his dark eyes, “but everyone left fairly easily, minus that one lady who tried to run one of my guys over with her wheelchair.”

Mom grimaced. “Aunt Meredith. Oh, you didn’t...”

Hans shook his head. “We let her go with a warning.”

Mom exhaled. “I am so sorry.”

“If it makes you feel better, at least she didn’t try to hit you with her bag. That thing is full of bricks,” Kas said.

“Or the bodies of her victims,” Sasha grumbled.

“It’s not that big,” Kas protested.

“Maybe it’s just parts of her victims, like trophies,” Lavena supplied helpfully.

“Girls!” Mom swatted at them to stop talking.

Hans, both amused and uncomfortable, took a step back. “I should be heading out.”

Father walked him and the other officers to the elevator, leaving the rest of us to stand and stare at each other as the ruined evening finally registered.

“The shortest party I have ever been to,” Lavena piped up first.

“And the best plot twist,” Sasha added. “I never saw that coming.”

“Mr. M really knows clear out a room,” Kas agreed with a shake of her head.

“Poor great aunt Dahlia,” Mom groaned. “She’s going to be so upset.” She turned to me. “She was so excited to see you.”

I said nothing.

Every part of me felt exhausted and drained, as if my emotions had nosedived on a roller coaster. All I wanted was my bed ... and Kami.

At the thought of her, I finally took a good look at her in her short, tight, black dress with the deep V neckline trimmed in flowy, loose fabric and velvet, black pumps. Her dark hair was piled in a messy updo at the top of her head with stray strands curled to frame her beautifully made face.

God, she was perfect.

As if sensing my eyes, hers turned up to mine and her red lips curved into a sweet smile that kicked me square in the chest.

“That settles that.” Father returned, smoothing down the front of his blazer. “Now, we can have dinner as a proper family without all that nonsense.”

We took our seats around the sitting area. I found myself across from Kami and Edmund, and I’d never been so annoyed with my brother, more so when the two fell into a light conversation about traffic first thing in the morning. It was ridiculous to want all of her time, attention and thoughts, but I hadn’t talked to her since that morning and all I wanted was to hear her voice.

“How does it feel to be back in your own bed?” Sasha asked from the armrest next to mine.

Lonely.

“Too much bed,” I said instead. “I thought I was lost on some alien planet made of fabric this morning.”

It wasn’t entirely true.

I woke up reaching for Kami only to have my hand fumble across the folded pages of the book I’d stayed up all night reading twisted in the sheets. I’d lain there, absorbing the

predawn, studying the faded, tattered pages in my hands and wondering if finishing the whole thing in a single shot just so I could have a reason to see her made me pathetic. It probably did but I needed it, needed to see her again.

“How are things at the office?” Sasha pressed, drawing me back.

The conversation went on that way for a while. It wasn't the longest one we'd ever had, but it was comfortable. Sasha reminded me a lot of her brother. Both had this calming quality about them that made me think of cats —approachable but will eat your face if you set them off. She asked what my plans were now that I was out and if there was anything I missed about being locked up. I had to think about that one. Those walls were all I'd known for four years, but was there something I missed?

Milo, maybe.

We hadn't shared a lot of words, but he had a stillness about him that got me through a lot of my time inside.

“The food,” I teased and got a chuckle from her.

“I have heard really good things about prison food,” she observed with a slow nod of her head.

“Are we just staying here?” Lavena interrupted the room. “We spent a lot of time getting ready for this alleged party. Can't we go somewhere now that it's a bust?”

“We're not going anywhere.” Father's tone held a finality that would have warned anyone with sense not to push, but Lavena had a talent for ignoring warning signs.

“So, we're going to sit here and stare at each other all night?”

“We're going to enjoy our time together,” Father replied. “This is our first time together since your brother's return.”

“Plus, there is so much food,” Mom commented. “We need to get through at least some of it.” She pushed to her feet. “Could you and Edmund help me get things onto the table?”

“Actually, darling, I need Edmund and Darius for a moment,” Father interrupted.

“I can help.” Kami and Sasha were on their feet in unison.

The pair exchanged amused glances.

“I can help, too.” Kas rose with less enthusiasm.

We stayed in our seats as the rest of the group started in the direction of the hallway. Kami caught my eye in passing and smiled before disappearing from sight, leaving me with my brother and father.

Father waited until the crack of heels had faded into silence before facing us.

“We don’t have much time before your mother returns.” He clasped his hands together and let them dangle between his knees as he leaned forward. “I think we need to bring Edmund into this situation with Volkov.”

There was a level of earnestness in the older man’s eyes that made me think he’d given this a lot of thought, and this was the only conclusion left to him. I had no objections to bringing my brother into conversation if for no other reason than because he was as much a part of this as any of us. I would never blame him for what happened, but he was partially responsible for everything that happened and everything that was about to happen.

Edmund was cutting lines between the two of us, his dark eyes wide. “What about him?”

It struck me that I wasn’t always going to be able to protect him. He wasn’t a child anymore. During my time away, he’d grown into a man who was fully capable of mapping out his own life. It was unclear how I felt about that, but there was definitely sadness at the loss of the chubby cheeked kid who would follow me around like I had all the answers to life’s problems.

I said nothing as Father filled him in and I watched as the color drained from his face, turning it ashen a full second before it went red with rage.

“That’s bullshit!” he spat, bounding out of his seat and pacing the length of space between the set of armchairs on either side of the coffee table. “Ivan started it. He came up to me. He pushed me.”

“None of that matters anymore,” Father cut him off. “We can’t focus on the past. We need to find a solution and deal with this matter now quickly and quietly without your mother or Lavena hearing about it.”

Edmund dropped down into his seat and covered his face. “This is all my fault.”

“That doesn’t matter anymore either,” Father stated with zero sympathy. “We need to get ahead of Volkov, but more importantly, we need to know everything about him. That requires us to work all our channels. I want eyes and ears everywhere. I want to know when Uriah takes a shit. His habits are now our habits. We will make friends with his friends and his enemies. We need to fortify our walls, so he has no choice but to second guess all his decisions before making them. The only way we’re getting through this is by becoming an unstoppable force, so powerful that he would be an idiot to come at us.”

He paused to let that sink in.

“I have a few guys who work the docks where he gets his shipment. They know the night guards in Volkov’s pocket. I could probably turn them to our side with the right incentive.”

Father considered that for a moment. “That would hurt him in the short term, but taking his shipment would only infuriate him to attack sooner and harder. I like the idea, but let’s save it for last if we need it.” He turned his attention to me. “I think it’s time you found a partner, Darius. Someone in power. Someone who would have your back if things go south. Someone whose family name linked to yours will make anyone think twice.”

A cold, oily sensation filled my gut. “A partner?”

Father nodded. “Do you think I got to where I am on my own? I had your mother’s name, her family and their

influence. We build kingdoms based on the partnerships we create. This is what you need now, and I have just the person — Abilene Beaumont.” He didn’t even pause to give me a chance to ask the proper questions, and I had so many before he charged on. “Her family has the wealth and power to surpass even ours. With her by your side, Volkov would never dream of coming near you.”

“Abilene?” I broke certain my father was mistaking her for someone else.

But he nodded. “I’ve already spoken to her, and she has agreed to meet with you over dinner to see if your futures can align. She’ll have questions, no doubt and stipulations. Your mother had a binder when we first met. She wouldn’t even consider a second date if I didn’t meet the requirements.”

“Abilene Beaumont?” I stressed again.

Irritation pursed my father’s lips, apparently misunderstanding my confusion. “Abilene is exactly the person we need on our side right now. Do you understand the importance of your union with her?”

I did understand the importance and I knew he meant well, but...

“Abilene is great—”

A soft scuffle had our head turning to the figure darkening the doorway.

My heart jumped and plummeted simultaneously as I stared in horror at Kami’s stricken expression, the one she quickly masked behind a bright, apologetic smile that I didn’t believe for a second.

“Supper is on the table,” she announced and immediately darted off without another word.

It took every ounce of my willpower not to bolt after her, to not grab her, drag her away from everyone and explain ... what? I had no idea what my father was talking about or why, out of every living person in the world, Abilene Beaumont seemed to be the person he considered a perfect match for me,

but his reasoning made no difference when that was how Kami had to hear about it.

“We’ll finish this tomorrow.” Father decided, pushing to his feet. “I was able to get you a lunch date with Abilene this weekend. I expect you to attend and do whatever is necessary to persuade her.”

He didn’t bother elaborating his statement before he was gone from the room, leaving me alone with a still and silent Edmund.

“Did you know anything about this?”

I faced my brother and the words faded on my lips as I took in the hard set of his jaw and the livid fury behind his eyes. They flicked up once to meet mine before darting off.

“I know nothing about anything,” he muttered before marching out into the hall, leaving me staring after him, bemused.

It took very little convincing to encourage my thoughts to reprioritize back to the more important matter on hand — Kami. I had no idea what I would say to her, but I knew something needed to be, even if it was to explain that I had no idea of my father’s plans.

The dining hall was filled with chatter when I joined the familiar faces. Everyone sat in their usual spots, leaving empty my usual spot next to Kami. Years earlier, my place had been at the far end of the table, next to my father. When Kam and I started our book talks, I’d been moved closer to her so we could talk without interrupting the others or being interrupted. I had never been so happy that tradition remained when I slid into the seat. No one seemed to notice or care when I leaned in.

“I didn’t know.”

Kami’s head turned to me and she gave me what I could only guess was a tired little smile. “I know.”

I didn’t know what else to say.

Actually, I had a lot to say, possibly too much, but I couldn't with so many eyes and ears around us. The restraint picked away at me throughout most of the meal. I was only vaguely aware of my mom making plans to reattempt the party at a more accommodating location. Lavena, Sasha, and Kas seemed to be onboard with the idea, offering suggestions and encouraging a situation I would have rather cut my own arm off than attend.

Kami made no comment as she picked idly at her food. Occasionally, she nodded or made some non-committal sound but seemed content moving a piece of fried broccoli from corner to corner on her plate. Her silence was a scream I was powerless to do a damn thing about. It took every ounce of restraint I possessed to keep from touching her, just a nudge to get her attention, to see her thoughts in those expressive eyes. I knew if I could just get her to look up, just for a second...

I didn't.

I didn't trust myself.

My moment to get her alone came when everyone was helping clear the dishes, distracted by where to stow all the extra food and who had more space in their fridge.

Kami offered to stack the containers of leftovers by the front door, the ones that were getting divided between me, Edmund, and the girls while the others continued to fill and seal them. I took the opportunity and slipped into the hall after her, waited until she'd placed the first pile down before capturing her hand and tugging her into the first room we came across — the powder room.

"Talk to me," I murmured.

Kami exhaled quietly. "What's there to say?"

"I didn't know," I stressed. "I don't know why my father thinks—"

Small, pale hands pressed flat against my chest, silencing me. "You have to do it." Big, solemn eyes lifted to my face. "It doesn't matter why, but your father is right. This is the right move. I don't know who Abilene Beaumont is, but if she's as



influential and powerful as your father says, this is our only solution.”

I stared at her, stared into the face of the one person I loved more than life itself and I couldn't believe the words coming from her beautiful lips.

“Kami, you don't—”

“I do though,” she corrected, misunderstanding my protest. “She will keep you safe. She will be the partner you need. I hate it,” her face lowered with the sharp hiss of the words, “but I will do whatever is necessary to keep you alive even if that means I have to lose you.”

I caught her chin and raised it back to mine. “But I don't know if I can.”

A deep hollow appeared between her brows. “That's too bad, Medlock. You know as well as I do that life isn't fair and we all do things we don't want all the time. I have a family I have to worry about. I have you and the girls, and your family. These are people I would risk my life for in a heartbeat. So do you. This is so much bigger than both of us. It's not about our l...” she broke off abruptly and rephrased the words I knew she was about to use. “What we have. What we feel and want isn't important when there are so many people we're putting in danger because of it. We can't be selfish or stupid. If making this small sacrifice will protect the people we both love, we need to be adults about it and do it.” She sucked in a sharp inhale of air as if that solidified her decision. “So, you will listen to your father, and you will do whatever you need to do to ... to convince Abilene Beaumont that this is a good idea.”

How could she be so rational when every word she spoke so calmly tore into my chest as if she were carving them there? How could she be so sure, so absolutely decided when I knew in my very core that it was wrong? It was unfair and the mature thing to do, but she didn't understand. She had no idea who Abilene was. She didn't understand how absolutely insane this request was, but she was right. I had to be a leader about this. I had to be the man my father raised me to be. I had

to put feelings aside and use logic and control. This was no longer about what I wanted, but what was needed.

“Kami...”

She touched the side of my face. The absolute heartbreak and devastation in her eyes reflecting the one I could feel thrashing deep in the pit of my stomach.

“Kiss me,” she whispered. “Just one more time.”

I did.

I would have even if she hadn’t said a word.

If this moment in a cramped bathroom was all we would ever have again, I couldn’t just walk out without tasting her one final time. I would have pressed her like a flower in a book into my very self if possible and carried her with me always, but all I could do was crush her into my chest until she whimpered into my mouth and her bones cracked beneath my hold. With great reluctance, I yielded, relaxing the fist in her hair, unclenching the arm hooked around her waist. I softened the motions of our mouths, allowing myself to savor.

*I love you*, I wanted to tell her, died to tell her. It burned in my chest and begged to melt all across her lips. But both our hearts were breaking already. I couldn’t add to her pain, or mine if she said them back. All I could do was break my bones releasing her when she pulled away and watch as she slipped out of our sanctuary, leaving me alone.

## CHAPTER 11

# *Kamari*



I wasn't a coward.

I didn't hide from problems or pretend they didn't exist, and I wasn't hiding now, I told myself. I wasn't angry. I really wasn't. What I was, to the very core of my being was sad and accepting. The two things were conflicting and confusing, but they resided in the place in my chest where I used to hold unrealistic hope.

I knew my time with Darius had been limited. We were always at the mercy of a vengeful clock. What we'd shared that weekend had been a fleeting gift, one that came with conditions we'd both agreed to pay. I myself had told him he needed to find another woman and shouldn't have been surprised that his father would find him someone.

Someone from his world.

Someone he wouldn't have to worry about.

Someone who understood the rules.

It was no surprise that his parents would know just the person. Of course, they would. There was no shortage of eligible, ideal women in Alexander and Marcella's wealthy circle.

Abilene Beaumont.

Even her name sounded regal. She sounded elegant and beautiful and sophisticated. She sounded exactly like someone Darius needed at his side, someone whose social standing

would keep him safe and that was all I wanted. I just couldn't stop the ache in my chest or undo the knot in my gut.

It was three days since that dinner, three days of my throwing myself into work and cleaning and avoiding any prickle of thought that contained Darius Medlock. I scrubbed my apartment with a single-minded vengeance that would have shamed a surgical room. I hauled boxes of clothing and anything I hadn't touched in more than a month to the donation bin. I spent hours buried in the backroom of *Le Hush*, unpacking new shipments and reorganizing stock. I scrubbed all the shelves and cabinets until they gleamed. I brought in a carpet cleaner and spent all night clearing out the main area and steaming the carpets until they looked almost new. In all that time of mind-numbing cleansing and avoiding, I kept my phone off. I left the apartment early and returned late. I took the stairs to avoid the lift.

I did everything in my power to avoid everything and everyone because I was carved out. I was hollow and empty, and dead inside, and I didn't know how to explain that to my friends without telling them everything. So, I ran, and I hid, and I knew it wouldn't last forever, but I needed the time and space.

Maybe that made me an awful person.

Maybe it made me an even worse friend.

We talked about everything. We went through every life's bumps together. There was nothing they didn't know about me or I them, except this. I didn't know how this would all play out. I didn't know if this was the thing that made me lose them, too. Deep down, I didn't think so, but there was always that 1% chance and it terrified me.

By the end of the fourth day, I knew my dodging days were over when the sound of keys in my locked apartment door disrupted my pathetic pity party. I knew it would be the girls even before their stream of angry chatter filled my foyer.

I pulled my comforter tighter around my pajamas and waited for the inevitable confrontation.

“Well, I see you weren’t brutally murdered in your sleep,” Lavena snapped, seeing me in my blanket burrito on the sofa with a half-eaten tray of Oreos and a nearly finished carton of chicken wings. She eyed the combination with recoiling horror. “Jesus, I didn’t think it would be this bad. What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing!” I barked back. “I’m at home. I can eat whatever I want.”

Just to prove it, I took an aggressive chomp of the Oreo still in my hand.

“Oh, shit,” Kas mumbled from over Lavena’s shoulder, dark eyes surveying the rumpled state of me. “Are you sick?”

Lavena scoffed. “Plain chicken wings and Oreos. She’s definitely some type of sick.” She wagged a finger between the two. “That’s foul. You should be arrested for ruining chicken and Oreos.”

I rolled my eyes. “I haven’t had a chance to go grocery shopping. It’s all I had in the kitchen, okay?”

She sniffed. “Get up. We’re going out for proper food and a very in-depth conversation about why you thought you could try and hide from us.”

The very idea of unwrapping myself, dressing, and facing other people had me tightening my grip on the blanket. “I don’t want to—”

“Too bad. I don’t care what you don’t want to do. You’ve been avoiding us for days and you no longer get a vote since you’re clearly mentally incompetent.”

“Hey!” I protested, earning a raised eyebrow.

She marched deeper into my apartment, followed by the other two. “Do you deny it?”

I could only pick idly at the bit of crumb stuck to my hair.

“Rude,” Kas grumbled, plopping down in the armchair on my left. “Why are you avoiding us? Is it because I borrowed your filigree bracelet?”

“No ... wait, what?” I stared at my best friend who blinked wide eyes at me.

“Nothing.”

“So, what then?” Lavena stalked over and dropped down on the sofa next to me, spraying cookie crumbs everywhere and nearly upending the cookie tray. “You’ve been weird since we left the cabin. What’s going on?”

I shrank in my blanket. “It’s nothing.”

Her eyes widened, sending her eyebrows up towards her hairline. “So, we’re lying to each other now?”

I winced, dropping my gaze, ashamed. “No.”

She placed a small, manicured hand on my knee, her tone and expression softening. “What’s going on?”

Sasha, the only one still standing moved to perch down on the coffee table across from me, face earnest. “Seriously, Kam. How are we supposed to fix whatever it is if you don’t tell us what’s wrong?”

I had a golf ball lodged in my throat, turning my friends into blurred outlines behind a wall of tears. I fought to blink them back, to swallow them down before it all spewed out in a rush of hysterical weeping. I tried to hide the tears by focusing on the half-eaten cookie in my sweaty fingers when Sasha’s hand rested over mine in what she probably thought was a comforting gesture.

The errant droplet clinging to my lashes for dear life plummeted and splattered across the back of her hand. I heard her murmur my name before several familiar arms enclosed me from all sides, a pressing fold of sisterhood and the purest love as everything from assurances to bodily harm on the person responsible were voiced. I wedged my face into Sasha’s shoulder, soaking her t-shirt as I let all my misery pour out for the first time in days. No one stopped me until I’d heaved my last sob. Someone stuffed a tissue into my hand, replacing the cookie now crushed somewhere in my lap.

Up until that moment, I hadn’t realized just how much I missed my girls, how much I needed them to pull me together.

Those few days without them, I'd worked so hard to stuff everything down and ignore it when all I needed was my friends.

"You okay?" Sasha murmured, sweeping back strands of hair off my damp cheeks.

I started to nod only to have Kas narrow her eyes. "No lying again. What happened?"

Sniffing, I scrubbed my nose and eyes. "I don't even know where to start."

"Well, you've been a total weirdo since we got to the lodge, so start there," Lavena decided, folding one leg under the other and scooting closer. Her hand continued its slow, circular rubbing of my sweat-soaked spine through the heavy blanket.

"You're going to think so badly of me," I murmured, twisting the moist tissue into a ball.

"Well, that's the dumbest thing you've ever said," Kas teased. "I'd hit you if you weren't already down."

"We would never think badly of you," Sasha reiterated.

I took a deep breath, knowing there was no going back. I couldn't help wondering if I'd made matters worse by giving in to my feelings for Darius, not just for my heart, but my relationship with my friends.

"Is this about Darius?" Lavena raised a questioning eyebrow when my head jerked up in her direction.

"What?" I mumbled stupidly.

"Yup," Kas murmured, as if I'd given myself away.

"Definitely Darius," Sasha agreed.

Lavena leveled all the weight of her attention on my face. "What did he do?"

"He didn't ... how did you—?"

"Know?" Lavena finished and I nodded.

“Because we’re not idiots, and you guys are not subtle. Holy fuck you guys are not subtle.”

Sasha and Kas made quiet noises between agreement and amusement.

I looked between each of them, my head spinning. “What do you mean?”

Lavena narrowed her eyes in a very clear, *are you joking*, gesture. “Do you really not know how loud you are?”

The implications of her statement was a baseball bat of pure, raw mortification straight in the face. The violent surge of horror exploded with blistering heat up my neck.

“You heard us?”

“Sweetheart, the entire country heard you,” Sasha murmured a little too kindly, like she was trying to ease me into the horrifying knowledge.

“Oh my God!” I slapped my hands over my face, the skin scorching to the touch. “Oh my God!” I moaned again, pulling the blanket up to my forehead. I stayed that way long enough that I was breathing my own hot air. When I finally dragged the comforter down just low enough to peek at the smirking faces of my friends, I wanted to die all over again. “No...”

Lavena nodded. “Kas didn’t know if we should save you or get you a movie deal with a porn company.”

“You’d make bank,” Kas agreed.

“Stop it!” I shoved her.

She laughed. “Hey, we weren’t judging. We were glad you were finally getting some that didn’t run on electricity.” She laughed harder when I shoved her again.

“Joking aside though,” Lavena pulled my focus back to her, “it sounded consensual. It was not—?”

Horrified by the implications, I shook my head. “No! I mean, yes, it was.”

She nodded, searching my face. “Okay, so now that we got that out of the way. What’s up? Did he say something to you,



‘cuz I know where he sleeps?’”

I pulled the blanket back around me tighter. “No, it was my fault. I’m just a fucking idiot.”

“Hey! Whoa there,” my friends chimed in unison, their expressions outraged.

Lavena’s voice rose over the others. “First of all, you will not talk to yourself that way, do you understand? Second of all, tell us what happened.”

I took a breath, using the precious few seconds to try and decide where to even start or how much to say. I’d promised Darius I wouldn’t tell Lavena about Volkov and I would hold that promise simply because I knew Lavena. She would not take that information lightly and if my stupidity got her hurt or killed, they would have to dig two graves, but I knew my friends well enough that they wouldn’t simply let this go without answers.

“It wouldn’t have worked out,” I mumbled at last. “We’re just too different. Plus, he’s your brother and I’m...”

“My sister?” she finished and winced. “Okay, maybe that’s not the best choice of words right now, but you’re family. My soul sister.”

“This is different.”

“How? I’ve been fucking Enzo for three years. As long as you’re okay and happy, and this doesn’t come between our friendship, I really couldn’t care who you sleep with ... except my dad. Don’t sleep with him. He’s off limits.”

I burst out laughing. “He’s a very handsome man but I’m sure I can contain myself.”

Lavena nodded. “Good. Now, I think my brother is a moron, but I do know he cares about you. I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

Something dangerous and delicate like hope flared in my chest. “You have? When?”

“We were all present for Christmas,” Kas pointed out. “We could have cooked the turkey with the amount of heat coming

off you two. Holy Christ!”

Sasha nodded. “And the way that man looks at you...” she blew out a breath. “If a man looked at me that way, we’d never leave the bedroom. Like ever again.”

There was a ripple of laughter from the rest of us that she met with a grin.

“Then there’s you,” Lavena went on, “getting all red and flustered every time he makes eye contact with you.”

“I do not!” I gasped, feeling my cheeks warm.

“Oh please!” Sasha cried. “Girl, you’re no Meryl Streep. Your acting is shit. If my life was in danger and your acting was the only way to save me?” She threw up her hands. “Just shoot me.”

“Hey!” I protested, both amused and insulted. “Ouch.”

“Baby, I’m sorry.” Sasha took one of my hands in both of hers and looked deep into my eyes. “I love you. I would literally kill for you but lying isn’t your strong suit, okay?”

“She’s not wrong. My dad says if you ever commit a murder, your lawyer will have a hell of a time convincing people you didn’t do it. Your face is too...” She glanced at the other two for the word.

“Expressive?” Sasha guessed.

“Open?” Lavena tried with a shrug.

“Honest,” Kas decided at last. “You can’t hide shit. I knew you had a thing for that man since we were teens! The way you’d walk into walls when he walked into a room was hard to miss.”

“I figured it out after we got the call that he was arrested,” Sasha chimed in. “We were all devastated, but you ... you looked like someone just tore out your heart.”

Lavena sighed. “Apparently, I’m the only unobservant one, because I didn’t clue in until like months after. Do you remember when I’d make daily trips to the prison to see him?” At my nod, she continued, “well, during that last visit when

Warden Asshole threatened to arrest me, he said, *if I see you or that other one, I will arrest you both. This isn't some yacht club.* Of course, I had no idea what he was talking about and asked him to show me this other person, thinking it was that bitch Liya. I was ready to go all manner of crazy on her ass. Instead, I see you. You visited him almost as much as I did. You were the only one besides me. It took me a second, I won't lie. You didn't visit my dad when he went in. You didn't even try, but every week for months? Why? And why wouldn't you say anything to me about it?"

Guilt curled cold fingers around my throat. "Lavena, I'm so sorry."

"For what? Loving my brother? For being there for him in his darkest hour? For believing his innocence? For waiting for him for four years even though I kept pushing you to move on? I'm the one who should be sorry."

"For what?"

"For my brother being such a dick."

The very idea that they would blame Darius for my behavior had me straightening. I caught Lavena's wrist. "He's not! He honestly isn't."

"Is it us?" Lavena pressed. "Because we—"

I shook my head. "Maybe a little at first, but no. It's no one's fault. It just is."

"Okay, I am very confused now," Kas mumbled. "You want to be together, but you can't be together. It's not because of us or Darius, but you're still sitting here looking like a trash panda rather than being with the guy you love. Is anyone else confused?"

The other two nodded, all eyes fixed on me, waiting for me to unravel the mystery and chaos that had become my entire life, but as an apparently terrible liar, I had to be careful how much more I could tell them.

I settled for a partial truth.

“Alexander has decided it would be a good idea for Darius to marry someone better suited for him.”

I had no actual knowledge of this. It was exclusively based on what little I’d heard at dinner, but it was pretty obvious that that was where it was all headed.

The absolute chaos and outrage my words invoked was an understatement. Questions ranging from furious to threatening pelleted me from all corners until I had to put my palms over my ears and yell for silence.

“Who?” Lavena demanded the minute my hands lowered.

“Better suited?” Kas exclaimed. “Who is better suited than you?”

“How did you find out? Sasha shouted, overlapping Kas. “Did Darius tell you?”

I put my hand up again to stop them. “Everyone stop yelling!” I yelled.

Lavena raised her palm when the other two opened their mouths, but her sharp, narrowed eyes stayed on my face. “Who told you?”

I hesitated. “No one? I overheard Alexander talking to Darius at dinner the other night.”

Lavena blinked. “My dad knew about this?”

“He’s the one who found her,” I murmured, dropping my attention to the blanket.

“Who?” Lavena interrupted. “What’s the bitch’s name?”

Despite everything, I didn’t blame Abilene Beaumont for getting the life I wanted. It wasn’t her fault she was born into a position where the only way she could keep her position was to marry. The whole thing seemed so barbaric and outdated but it was keeping Darius alive, so I wasn’t complaining.

“She’s not a bitch,” I argued. “She’s just doing what she’s told, too. We don’t know her story. She could be very sweet.”

The trio exchanged glances.

“Do you think the combination of old chicken wings and stale Oreos has muddled her brain?” Kas mumbled to Sasha. Then to me, she snapped, “This bitch is trying to take your man. She’s not sweet. She needs to be killed.”

“Jesus, Kas!” I gasped. “She’s not taking my man. I don’t understand why you guys are so angry—”

“We don’t understand why you’re not,” Sasha shouted, cutting me off. “How are you so calm right now?”

“I’m not calm!” I snapped, feeling myself crack a little inside all over again. “I’m ... broken and I hurt so much, but this is how it is, right? She’s the ideal person for him and...” I cut myself off because I couldn’t argue my reasoning properly without telling them everything. I had no defense, and I was suddenly so tired. I was exhausted and drained, and I just wanted to tip over on the sofa and sleep until the ache in my chest was gone.

“What do you mean ideal?” Lavena asked.

It took several seconds of picking my words carefully before dropping them into the space. “I get why you guys are upset about this,” I began, careful to keep at my focus on the pale thread lines woven into the comforter. “You’re thinking about me and my feelings, but Darius needs someone who is from his world, right? Someone who understands—”

“Have you been doing drugs?” Lavena interrupted sharply. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You said!” I shouted, frustrated. Frustrated at her for not just dropping it, at myself for everything. “At the island, you guys said that only stupid women wanted men in the life and those were the kind of women who got their men killed because they weren’t from that world and didn’t understand the way of things and—”

“Kami.” Sasha took my hand again and squeezed gently. “Sweetie, we weren’t talking about you. The women we were referring to are outsiders.”

“Like me,” I murmured, hating the hot tears burning my eyes. “I’m an outsider. I’m not like you guys.”

“You have always been one of us,” Lavena said softly. “You are family, Kami.”

“What if I get him killed?” I whispered. “You said only an idiot would—”

“Me,” Lavena cut me off. “That’s me. Those are my problems and my fears. Will nothing bad ever happen? I don’t know, but you seem to forget something, you have us. You’re not alone and you never will be. We will always have your back. Darius never has to worry about you.”

She had no idea how wrong she was. It was sweet and heartwarming to be so loved and cherished, but Darius had made up his mind to keep me away from that world and I’d made up my mind that I needed to protect him.

I swiped at the lone tear and sighed. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“But it does.” Sasha shook the hand she was still holding, making the whole arm wobble. “You are going to march upstairs and—”

“It won’t work,” I snapped, wishing they would stop. “This is what he wants.”

“He said that?” Lavena asked.

I answered with a non-committal shrug.

“Who is this woman?” Kas demanded. “What makes her better than you?”

Everything, but I knew they wouldn’t understand.

“Give me a name,” Lavena pushed, digging her phone out of her pocket and pulling up the browser.

“Abilene Beaumont,” I relented, hoping that once they saw what a big deal she was, they would drop the subject.

Instead, all three stopped and stared at me with varying degrees of confusion.

“What did you say?” Lavena lowered her phone to her lap.

I repeated the name and got the same expressions with an added exchange of glances with each other.

“What? Who is she?”

“Are you sure you heard that correctly?” Sasha asked.

“And you *heard* my dad say marriage?” Lavena stressed.

Their combined confusion only intensified my own uncertainty. Suddenly, I wasn't sure of anything.

“Well, not marriage by name,” I murmured. “He was telling Darius Abilene was the right choice in a partner and she would have stipulations just like Marcella had when she and Alexander first started dating. But I am definitely sure he said Abilene Beaumont. I'm sure of it.”

“Maybe your dad's on drugs,” Kas said to Lavena.

“Is there something wrong with her?” I demanded, terrified that maybe I shouldn't have judged her based on such a lovely name. Maybe she was a monster, someone cruel and horrible.

“Wrong? No,” Lavena explained slowly. “She's always been really nice the few times I've met her at dinners and whatnot. We've known her family for a while and occasionally do business. Her great, great, great something grandfather started a weapons empire selling guns and stuff. He made a killing—”

“Lavena!” Sasha hissed.

Lavena rolled her eyes. “No pun intended, okay? Anyway, her family is still wildly powerful. They have a huge contract with some military and some non-military people and are definitely the sort of people you don't fuck with.”

*So, perfect*, I wanted to say, relieved.

She really was exactly what Darius needed.

“Anyway,” Lavena went on, “I'm positive you missed something in the conversation.”

“I didn't,” then with less certainty, “I don't think I did.”

“Kami, Abilene Beaumont is ninety-two years old. There is no way Father wants Darius to marry her.”

“Or maybe he does?” Kas argued. “The Beaumont fortune is nearly unmatched.”

“Abilene has six granddaughters. Why wouldn’t Father ask for one of them?”

“It would be smarter to go for Abilene. Once she dies —”

“Oh my god, Kas!” Sasha exclaimed.

“What? She’s not going to live forever. Her days are literally numbered. Maybe she wants a young stud before she croaks.”

“Jesus...” Sasha sighed, staring at the other woman with horror.

Kas met my gaze and seemed to realize what she was saying. She winced. “Sorry.”

Sasha rocked her head slowly from side to side, disgust still evident on her pretty face before she turned to Lavena. “Maybe it’s not Abilene he’s interested in. Maybe he’s trying to get Darius with one of the granddaughters and he needs to go through Abilene first.”

“That would definitely make more sense,” Kas agreed, nodding vehemently.

“No,” I murmured. “He definitely said Abilene.”

“Okay, we need to figure this shit out.” Lavena clapped her hands together once as if to focus. “I don’t care if Abilene Beaumont has all the money in the world and the fountain of youth, she’s not marrying my brother. So, we need to get her out of the picture and—”

“And what?” I cut in, needing to make them stop and accept as I had. I couldn’t have them breaking this deal Alexander had made. I couldn’t let them ruin this chance for Darius. “Look, I really appreciate you guys trying to help, but this is the right move. I’m okay with it. Seriously,” I raised my voice when Lavena opened her mouth, “please. Don’t do anything. Don’t talk to your dad or Darius about this. Don’t go



after Abilene. This is honestly what I want, and I am begging you guys to please leave it alone.”

The silence could have been cut with a knife. My friends stared at me in the deafening calm of my words with confusion and suspicion, but thankfully no one pressed.

“If this is what you want...” Sasha whispered at long last.

I nodded. “It is.”

Another moment of quiet as Lavena leaned back, features neutral.

“Fine,” she voiced finally. “We’ll drop it. Now,” she shoved my shoulder, “go take a shower because you stink. Put on a clean top and let’s go get food. I’m starving.”

I argued because it was expected, but ultimately allowed myself to be shoved off the sofa, letting the comforter pool to the ground. I padded into my bathroom to drown myself in the hottest shower known to man, giving myself time to collect my emotions and energy the best I could. I told myself on repeat that I was doing the right thing. What I’d told Darius that night stood true and I needed to accept it.

This was no longer just about me or him and what we wanted. Our selfishness would only lead to someone getting hurt. It could be him, or Lavena, or my parents. If he didn’t marry Abilene, he would spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder and the longer he did so, the more he would push me away anyway out of sheer paranoia. No matter what, our time had come to an end. At least with Abilene by his side, he would be safe.

My skin blazed red and felt raw and sore when I pulled on jeans and a light, fluffy sweater several minutes later. I wove my hair into a thick plait down my back and brushed on a light coat of makeup before making my way back to the living room.

No one had moved from their spots when I returned. My mess was cleared away, the comforter was folded in one of the armchairs, and the cushions were plumped. My friends

l lounged across the furniture as they always had, chatting as if none of the Abilene stuff had ever happened.

“I honestly expected the floor to collapse,” Kas was saying when I rounded the corner.

“Who were half those people?” Sasha added.

Lavena shrugged. “Fuck if I know. I don’t think even Mom knew. They just showed up.”

“That is crazy,” Kas cried. “Who just randomly shows up to someone’s party? That was one time,” she corrected when Sasha and Lavena raised an eyebrow in her direction. “It was different.”

All three glanced up when I entered the room.

I offered them a little grin. “Where are we going?”

“Well,” Lavena bounded to her feet, blonde curls bouncing on her shoulders, “the vote is Thai or Greek with me and Kas voting Thai. You’re the tie breaker.”

“Technically,” Kas began, “if Kami picks Greeks, she wouldn’t be breaking the tie but creating it.”

Lavena groaned. “We need a spare friend, someone to break ties.”

“I’m not making another friend. You guys are already a lot of work,” Sasha teased.

“Thai is fine.” I laughed. “But Greek—”

I was pelted with pillows as loud groans and boos filled the room.

“Let’s just walk until we come across the first eatable place,” Sasha suggested, pushing up with a little bounce on the balls of her feet.

“Unless it’s a coffee shop or bakery,” Kas stipulated. “I hate coffee shop sandwiches and soups. They’re all the same.”

“Fine, we’ll stop at the first legitimate restaurant we come across,” Sasha corrected.

It turned out we lived surrounded by a million coffee shops. We didn't hit a single actual restaurant for almost five blocks. There seemed to be some debate about how none of us ever noticed, but we all agreed it was probably because we normally drove to a specific location and never had an actual reason to go out hunting. In the end, we found a steakhouse and piled through the glass doors. The assault of frying meat and spices stirred in my empty belly, creating an echo chamber of hunger that could probably be heard from space. The aggressive rumble had my friends glancing back at me, eyebrows raised in amusement.

"Don't look at me," I muttered, biting back my grin.

"Now that we are all present and seated, I think we have a very important topic up for decision," Lavena declared once our hostess had ushered us to a window seat and left us to browse the leather-bound menu. "As you all know, Mother has been on a warpath, and I have been enlisted as support. As my nearest and dearest, you are — by extension — also enlisted to support."

"Is this about the party?" Kas waved a gold-plated fork in Lavena's direction. "Because I have planned parties with you and your mother before and I swore to myself that I would voluntarily lobotomize myself with a rusty ice pick before ever subjecting myself to such torture again."

"Yeah, I would love to, but I already have very detailed plans to be violently sick on those days," Sasha apologized.

Lavena scoffed. "Nice try, besides, I have already talked her into hiring people to do all the hard work so all we have to do is make sure Mom stays away from them so they can do their job. We'll work in shifts. While two of us handle the details, one of us keeps Mom busy somewhere else."

Sasha and Kas exchanged glances, silently weighing the pros and cons of agreeing to this parlous mission.

"You deal with your mother, and we will take care of the rest," Kas negotiated.

Lavena considered the offer. "Fine."

“What about me?” I piped in. “I want to help.”

I was a huge fan of parties. Not the high school ones full of awkward teenagers getting drunk and making messes. I loved adult parties with beautiful dresses and glittering jewelry, and tiny finger foods. I enjoyed seeing people in stunning outfits under soft lights dancing to a live band. There was never a downside to a party, in my opinion. Yes, they were exhausting, and they were so much work, but for those few hours, I loved them. I even liked helping set them up just to see everyone enjoying it.

Lavena beamed. “I was hoping you would say that. I have just the job for you.”



There was very little that couldn't be accomplished when money wasn't an issue, especially when Lavena and Marcella were involved. A welcome home party for the heir of the Medlock fortune was going to have all the bells and whistles. No stone would be left unturned, no streamer that wasn't precise. It would be the talk of the century if the two had anything to say about it.

But I had my concerns.

A massive party was just the sort of opening Volkov would need to try something, wasn't it? Something like this wasn't my area of expertise, but it couldn't be safe. I kept telling myself that it wasn't my place to worry, especially if Alexander or Darius hadn't said anything. Maybe they had a plan.

Nevertheless, I worried.

I winced every time the guest list expanded to add a few more people. At one point, even Lavena lost count of the caters and had to phone Marcella.

I wanted to find Darius.

I wanted to hear him reassure me that it was all handled, that they had everything under control and a whole army of black op soldiers. But I didn't. I held my tongue and worked on my given task. I kept a smile and acted excited every time talk of the party came up because of course I was excited; Darius was home. It was the best reason to throw the biggest, brightest party, but I was a wreck. I couldn't shake the feeling that this was a horrible idea.

The bell above the shop door jingled and I jumped, dropping the rope of delicate, gold loops in my hands. They clattered in a heap across the yard of fabric I'd draped over the counter to check for contrast.

My head jerked up, my heart racing with both anticipation and fright.

It wasn't Darius. I knew it wouldn't be, yet...

"Hi there." I smiled at the older gentleman stepping over the threshold.

He greeted me with a smile of his own and a slight inclination of his head. The light shone off the thick helmet of gel slicking back his dark strands into a thin, straggly ponytail at the back of his neck. Under the thick mustache, a gold tooth glinted.

"I'm hoping you can help me. My wife and I are attending an event this weekend and I want to surprise her with a dress."

"You've come to the right place," I assured him, circling the counter to join him on the main showroom floor.

It wasn't an unusual request. We'd had the odd male customer buying something for his partner. They rarely ever knew much about the size or importance of color matching skin tones, or even the cut their wives liked. But this man had

come with a plan. He knew his wife's measurements right down to her shoe size. He chose a stunning full-length gown in peacock blue with a waterfall of bead work down the front and full, sheer sleeves that he paired with an exquisite set of diamonds from the display case and matching sandals.

He waited patiently while I wrapped everything up and paid a small fortune without batting an eye.

"I really think she will love these," I told him, setting the bags on the counter between us.

"Oh, I know she will," he said confidently. "My Ida has exceptional taste and I make sure she gets anything she wants." He hooked his fingers through the loops and pulled the bags to his sides. "I will have to tell her about this place. There are a few pieces I think she would like to add to her collection."

Hopeful for another sale like the one we just had, I pulled out one of our business cards from the tiny holder on the counter and held it out to him. "I would be delighted to help her find whatever she needs."

He accepted the thin, black card with the shop information and looked it over. "Can you put your name on the back, just so she knows who to ask for when she comes in?"

I did. I scrawled my name across the back and passed it back.

"Kamari," he read out loud. "That is a beautiful name. Is this your shop?"

I shook my head. "I manage it."

His eyebrows lifted with interest. "Good for you. Must be a lot of long hours."

I shrugged. "Sometimes, but it's worth it."

"Your husband or boyfriend doesn't mind?"

Despite the slight unease by the question, I chuckled. "I'm not currently seeing anyone."

The man clicked his tongue as if that were the most outrageous thing he'd ever heard. "That's ridiculous. You are a beautiful young lady, if you don't mind me saying. Any man would be lucky to have you. In fact..." he juggled all the bags to his right hand and used his left to pat the front of his blazer, then his sides. "Shoot. I left my phone in the car, but I have three sons your age. All good looking with good jobs, and manners. That's so important, you know?"

It was the most common response I got, but usually from older women trying to marry off their grandsons.

"Thank you, but I'm really not looking right now."

He snapped his tongue again. "Well, I'll still send my wife in. She can convince you. She has a million pictures of them on her phone."

I thanked him again and watched as he left.

The door hadn't even closed fully behind when it opened again, and a familiar face strolled in.

"Hi!" I greeted, smiling broadly, genuinely delighted to see him.

Lance returned my smile with a little wave from the hand not holding his rusty toolbox hanging at his side. "Morning! I see you made a sale already."

I motioned him in. "I did. How are you?"

He let the door close behind him as he stepped deeper into the shop. He was in his usual jeans, the denim faded and stained and a clean, white t-shirt under a worn, comfy flannel. His hair was pushed back from his warm, friendly features, intensifying the pale blue of his eyes. He was without question gorgeous. The kind that could play a sexy cowboy in a *Hallmark* movie. I'd never considered the idea in the past, but I studied him now, trying to see if maybe...?

"Good. I'm good. Thank you. I know I usually drop by on the weekends, but I was in town and thought I'd see if there was anything you'd like me to look at while I'm here?"

I usually made a list of odd jobs that needed doing throughout the week, things I probably could have done myself but since he came by so frequently, I just left them for him. Plus, I had a small budget for maintenance and the shop was in fairly good shape otherwise.

“I have a dead light in the backroom and a wobbly socket cover behind the counter if you wouldn’t mind having a look. There’s also a couple of other things. Let me find my list.”

His grin widened as I flipped open my calendar and rifled through my loose papers for the pad I usually wrote quickie notes on. I found the slip and passed it to him. He looked it over once before tucking it into his back pocket.

“Which socket?” he asked,

I shifted back when he wiggled into the tight space behind the desk with me. I watched him crouch down and examine the socket I pointed to. It was literally a loose screw, a two second twist of a screwdriver. He finished in even less time and stood with dusting his jeans as if he’d been on the ground for hours.

“That should do it,” he announced, eyeing his handiwork.

He was much taller up close. I had to force my head back to meet his warm, blue eyes. Unease urged me to take another step back, to find a way to circle the counter without making it appear as if he made me uneasy, because he didn’t. I was fully comfortable in his presence, but that close with him peering down at me...

It was at that moment I realized, no. I wasn’t attracted to him. Not the way the girls thought I should be. I couldn’t see myself dating him or even kissing him. He was sweet and very attractive, but Darius was a standard too high for any man to reach and I wasn’t ready for that leap.

Offering him what I hoped was a light smile, I edged around the counter, dragging the dress I’d been working on for Kas with me, careful not to let the jewelry I’d laid over top spill to the floor.



“Kami, would you mind if I asked you something?” he started, hesitation making the skin crease a little on the left side of his face. “I hope it won’t sound too forward.”

My fingers tightened into the satin, creating creases in the shimmering fabric. “Okay?”

“I would never ask if I didn’t think you were an amazing person,” he pushed on quickly. “You’ve been so kind, generous, and I really hope this won’t jeopardize our working relationship, but I was hoping you would do me the absolute honor of attending my wedding.”

I blinked, brain stuttering between the premade rejection on my tongue and disbelief. I gaped at him for what was probably longer than he expected because he flushed and shifted uncomfortably.

“I know it’s a strange request...” He began nervously, edging backwards out of the desk area. “Like I said, you’ve been so kind, but I understand if you want to keep things professional. I was just...”

I touched his arm before he could get any further. “I’m so sorry. You caught me off guard.”

He broke into a sheepish grin. One large hand lifted to rub the back of his head. “Michael is always telling me I need to word things better.”

“No, this was entirely on me.” I offered him a smile, relief unraveling the band around my chest. “So, you’re getting married?”

He nodded, light practically radiating from his smile. “At the end of the year. I’ve been going around picking up odd jobs to save up. Michael says I’m being crazy, but he deserves the best day I can give him, you know? Even if it means a little more work, I’m okay with that, which is why I really appreciate you letting me help out around here as much as you have. I know a lot of this stuff didn’t really need me, but you still hired me and I just ... it’s meant a lot.”

Feeling the hot ball of emotions lodging in my throat, I could only manage a few awkward nods before I could clear

the tightening.

“Yes, of course, I’ll be there. I would love that very much.”

Lance beamed. “I can’t wait for you to meet Michael. He’s just the most wonderful man.”

I chuckled. “I can’t wait.”

Still grinning ear to ear, Lance pivoted on his heel and started towards the backroom and the burnt lightbulb when a lightbulb went off in my head.

“Lance?” I called before he could duck inside. He paused and glanced back “What are you and Michael doing Saturday?”

A large shoulder jerked up. “Nothing. I don’t think. Why?”

I grinned, shaking out the dress and laying it flat on the counter once more. “How would you like to be my plus two at the party of a century?”

## CHAPTER 12

### *Darius*



“Shouldn’t you be getting ready to meet Abilene?”

Dressed remarkably down for Alexander Medlock in black trousers and a dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, my father stepped into my office, interrupting the stream of endless thought I’d been having while watching the city go about its business below the window.

I turned away from the wall of glass to face the other man. “I’m as ready as I will ever get,” I stated, tucking my sweaty palms into my pockets. “You’re the one who is underdressed.”

He stopped halfway into the room, leaving almost ten feet between us. “I won’t be joining you.”

A sliver of panic stiffened my spine. “You said—”

A hand lifted between us. “I know what I said, but I think this is something you need to do on your own. It will make you look weak if your father has to come with you to broker this arrangement.”

It was impatience and uncertainty that hardened my voice when I closed the distance in three strides. “I don’t even know what the arrangement is. You dropped this into my lap with no explanation and now you’re sending me in there blind to face a woman who I haven’t shared more than six words of greeting with, a woman who could easily be your grandmother.”

“What does her age have to do with anything?” he retorted, his annoyance matching mine.

“You don’t think it matters in the woman you plan for me to marry?” I countered, beginning to feel like maybe my father had finally lost his mind.

No. I didn’t believe that.

My father was the most brilliant and calculating man I knew. He would never put a plan into motion he hadn’t torn apart and built back up perfectly. He was an architect of manipulation and strategy.

But there was bafflement in his recoil.

There was the look of someone not certain he’d heard correctly.

“Who said anything about marriage?”

He had, hadn’t he? I couldn’t have misunderstood something that enormous, could I?

“You said partnership,” I stated in a tone even I wasn’t confident in.

“Partnership,” he agreed with a slow nod. “Why on earth would you ever think I would...?” He stopped, took a deep breath, and started again. “Your meeting with Abilene is to discuss a partnership between our houses, an extension of our power and protection. Jesus Christ, Darius.”

Shredded between relief, frustration, and further confusion, I threw up my hands. “You told me nothing!” I shot back, raising my voice the way I never had to my father. “I haven’t seen you in a week and our last conversation on this matter ended with you deciding Abilene was the one I needed in my life.”

Father pursed his lips, his expression harboring barely restrained patience. “Because I assumed you would use commonsense, Darius. The woman is almost a hundred. She hasn’t married in over sixty years. Why the hell would she marry you?”

Hearing it all out loud, it was evident that I may have misunderstood quite a bit.

“I apologize,” I said, willing my temper to calm. I motioned him to the sitting area tucked into the corner of my office. “Drink?”

Expelling a huff, he moved to take the armchair. “I need one after that conversation.”

Biting back an ill-timed grin, I moved to the drink cart and poured two whiskies.

He downed his in a single swallow. “Okay, let’s start from the beginning,” he set the tumbler down on the coffee table, “you are going to go to lunch, and you are going to charm Abilene Beaumont. You are going to convince her that attaching her horse to our cart is a good idea. By joining our forces, we can expand both our territories, not to mention we can offer her exclusive rights to our ports and transporting companies. That’s it. When she agrees, tell her you can have the paperwork written up and sent to her lawyers by tomorrow. The sooner we get this all wrapped up, the better I can sleep with your mother planning this suicidal party day in and day out.”

I sipped my drink, mulling over the plan he’d placed before me, recognizing a much more rational proposal than the one I’d dug myself into. Part of me couldn’t believe I ever thought my father would want me to marry some random person old enough to be my great grandmother, but it had crossed my mind — frequently.

A snort from my father had me looking up. He watched me with amusement in his eyes and a smirk on his face.

“I can’t believe you honestly believed I was marrying you off.”

Sneaking my own grin behind my drink, I shook my head. “Can you blame me? All that talk about you and Mom and her binder of stipulations.”

Father rolled his eyes. “I meant that Abilene would most likely have her own requirements to enter into this partnership, but they would most likely not be as thorough or extensive as your mother’s were. Besides,” he snatched up his tumbler and

made his way to the cart to pour another drink. He returned and dropped into his chair. “She would skin me alive if I even suggested you marrying anyone that wasn’t Kami.”

I choked on the gulp of whiskey I’d taken. My father watched me with calm amusement in his eyes as I coughed and sputtered.

“What?” I wheezed, throat burning, eyes stinging.

Alexander Medlock studied me, one eyebrow raised in question and a smug knowing. “That is the plan, isn’t it?”

“I don’t...” I began when he sighed and sat back.

“Do you have any idea how much money I had to pay the warden to keep him from throwing her and your sister into the slammer with you?” He didn’t wait for my answer. “A lot. That man could comfortably buy his own island and retire. They were a pain in my ass for nearly a year. A year! But you know what really confused me?” Again, he did not wait for an answer. “Why was Kami so hellbent on seeing you? Lavena, I understood. She’s always been persistent and she’s your sister, but Kami?” He clicked his tongue and took a sip of his drink. “She’d always been a sweet girl, but to visit that place day after day for someone they weren’t very close with — at least to my knowledge — was baffling, especially when she certainly never tried to come see me when I was incarcerated.” He shot me a teasing smirk. “It was your mother who put the pieces together for me. According to her, I — despite my many observant abilities — was clueless to what was right in front of my face. Apparently, a blind bat could see that Kami loved you and had for a damn long time. A woman wouldn’t fight that hard against law officials or wait that long for someone they were mildly fond of.”

There was so much to unpack, but all I could manage to choke out was a pathetic, “Mom knows?”

My father chuckled. “Son, everyone knows. I wish I could tell you, you did a great job hiding it, but you should know better than to think you can hide anything from your mother or sister. They can sniff out a secret better than a bloodhound. That is why, you need to get Abilene on our side before they

learn about Volkov because they scare me far more than Uriah ever could.”

*Everyone knows.*

The horror that phrase shot through me was crippling.

Everyone knows.

Did Volkov know?

No. He couldn't. He would have gone after her already. Wouldn't he? Unless he was waiting for me to get out so I could feel just how powerless I was when he went after her.

“Darius?” My father was watching me, expectation arching his brow.

“What?” I heard myself rasp.

“You did know, didn't you?”

I stared at him, trying to sift through all the thoughts jumbled up in my head. “What?” I said again.

He searched my face. “That Kami loves you.” I shook my head, more to clear it than anything else, and he swore. “I thought you knew. I never would have said—”

I put a hand up to stop him. “I knew ... know.”

He relaxed. “Oh, thank God. The way you were just sitting there like you swallowed a fly had me worried.” He settled back once more. “So?”

“So, what?”

He waved his drink in my direction. “Do you love her back?”

This was probably the most personal conversation I'd ever had with my father. It wasn't that we weren't close, but we seldom had heart-to-hearts, or *man-talks*. I didn't know how to answer him.

“Does it matter?” I muttered at least. “You know better than anyone it would never work.”

“Explain.”

His absolute lack of understanding at that moment made me want to kick a wall. The sudden and violent need to lash out, to upend the room and rage was the very thing that calmed me. I wasn't one for fits of temper. I wasn't raised to lose my patience or my wits. I took a deep breath and did the very thing my father taught me to do — I broke it down into rational chunks.

“She’s not one of us,” I listed, ticking off each reason as if addressing a board of thirty and delivering key issues in the company. “She’s lived a fairly normal life with a normal upbringing with normal parents. She might have an idea of what we do and, to some degree, what we’ve done, but she doesn’t actually understand the extent of our business. She doesn’t know the protocols and procedures that would come with joining a family like ours. She doesn’t know the dangers that come with attaching her name to ours. She doesn’t understand the risks, not just for herself but her family. Loving her would mean accepting that I’m okay with her getting hurt or worse.”

Listening patiently with one finger curled lightly at his chin, my father cocked his head to one side when I stopped. “You’ve listed all the reasons she shouldn’t be with you, but you never answered my actual question — how do you feel about her?”

My temper prickled and I swallowed it the best I could. “Why does that matter?”

“Because,” he sat forward, adjusting the lapel of his blazer, “she would be your partner, not a business merger. If we try hard enough, we can talk ourselves out of literally anything. Why bother breathing if we’re all going to die eventually?” he shrugged when I narrowed my eyes at his example. “Am I wrong?”

“She’s innocent,” I bit out through stiff lips.

“Oh, without question,” he agreed, his expression pensive. “Of our families, Kami is definitely the one I worry about the most.”

“Then why—?”



“Let me tell you what I know when I think of Kami,” he interrupted. “For seventeen years, I have had the privilege of watching her grow from an awkward and shy child into an intelligent, dedicated, beautiful woman. For seventeen years, she’s been a daughter to your mother, a sister to your siblings and a loyal friend to you. The Trevils and Deluches, two of the city’s most dangerous and ruthless families adore her. They trust her and so do I. Explicitly. But let me tell you what else,” he unfolded his legs and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “When a woman waits for you when she has no reason to, when she is loved so completely by your family, when she has proven herself time and again that she belongs in your world with you, the only person standing in your way is you.”

It was impossible to keep my resolve when he was shattering everything I was holding on to.

“It’s more complicated than that,” I murmured, recognizing the weakness in my words even as I spoke them. “I may not always be here. Who will protect her when I’m ... when something happens? When there’s another Volkov? Another threat?”

He at least seemed to consider that.

He studied the ripples at the bottom of his nearly empty glass, letting the amber liquid slosh against the crystal sides.

“Who protected her when you weren’t here before?” he said at last, eyes lifting to meet mine, a calm danger behind the stare.

I started to shake my head. “I don’t—”

“I did,” he countered evenly. “Your mother did. Your sister, Kas, Sasha.” He placed his glass down on the coffee table and pushed to his feet. “Kami is the most protected woman in the city. She has an entire army behind her. She will never not be protected.”



The conversation with my father looped endlessly through my mind as I waited for the car to pull up to the address Abilene's people had forwarded to me. The diner was located clear across the city near the suburbs, settling just before the city limits ended. It was a long enough drive that I had too much time to think and not enough distractions. Several times, I had to stop myself from dialing Kami just to hear her voice.

It had been a fucking week, and I was going through withdrawal. Hard. I missed her. I missed her smell and the way she fit into me. I missed just having her there. Hell, I missed the sound of her turning the pages on a book. It was most likely that very reason why I felt my father's words so deeply, why they'd managed to poke holes into my shield. The possibility that he could be right terrified me. The thought that maybe ... just maybe I could...

I set it aside.

I had to get my thoughts in order if I was going to face Abilene. She was my main focus and the battle I had to win. After that, I would figure out the rest.

The sun warmed my face as I exited the car and made my way to the single-story structure shaped like any other house on the block. The only difference was the giant, colored sign above the door declaring the place a family establishment since 1906.

"Want me to come in with you, boss?" Terrance eyed the building as he held open the car door for me.

It was probably a reckless move, not bringing backup with me. No situation was a completely safe one and backstabbing happened frequently, but if Abilene wanted to betray me, it would happen regardless.

I waved away Terrance's offer to come in with me and started the climb up the wooden steps.

The soft drawl of jazz greeted me at the threshold laced with the warm scent of fried tomatoes and herbs stirred by the slow rotation of the fan overhead. Dozens of tables sat clustered throughout the place, their chairs turned over top, but there wasn't a soul in sight.

"Hello?" I called.

A heartbeat passed before I heard, "Back here!"

I moved slowly, but with calm purpose around the counter and into the kitchen.

Abilene Beaumont, a short, stout woman with steely gray curls and face permanently fixed somewhere between fifty-five and sixty peered up at me over the rim of a steaming pot. Her gray eyes matched the water bubbling inside. She had a wooden spoon clasped in a white-knuckled grip, idly stirring the chunks of pasta floating to the surface.

"Darius," she said and motioned me closer with her free hand. "Are you hungry?"

I wasn't, but I offered her a smile. "How can I not be? It smells delicious."

It wasn't a lie. Whatever sauce was simmering on the next element was making my stomach whine.

"Good. The plates are over there." She gestured to a small stack of plates with cutlery on one of the steel counters. "Go ahead and set them up on the table and I'll drain this."

The table she indicated was a wooden, uneven slab of wood in the corner of the kitchen. It made no difference to me as I draped my coat over the back of a chair and set to work setting two spots.

Neither of us spoke until we were seated on opposite sides.

“Cheese?” she offered, holding up a bowl of freshly grated parmesan.

I accepted and watched as she sprinkled a handful on my spaghetti. Her fingers were dusted on her floral apron.

“Eat!” she urged with a wave of her hand.

I did. I twirled long noodles around my fork and took a bite, fully aware that she watched my every move until I swallowed.

“It’s delicious,” I said.

Satisfied, she grinned and picked up her own fork. “It’s an old family recipe. My great, great grandmother killed a woman for it, stole her recipe and kept it.” She said it with such a matter-of-fact tone, I couldn’t be sure if she was joking or not, so I let it go. “Eat up. We’ll talk when you’re done.”

I cleared off my plate the way my mother taught me. All the while, we made small talk about me being out and what I’d done since my release.

“My brother took up sheeping after he was out the first time,” Abilene said easily. “You know what sheeping is? He bought sheep,” she answered when I shook my head. “He just grows them.”

“Sheep?” I wondered how one grew sheep.

“He has a whole farm full of them.”

I let it go.

“I know a lot of people take up different hobbies after getting out.”

Abilene nodded. “This is mine. After I got out, I bought this place.”

“In 1906?”

She stopped and blinked at me, her fork hovering over her plate. “You think I’m that old?”

I winced inwardly but kept my outward features calm. “I didn’t mean...”

Abilene stared at me for so long, I nearly shifted in my seat. I wasn't expecting the rumble of laughter that followed. Her head dropped back as she roared.

"You should see your face." She sniffled and wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron. "Are you done eating? Do you want more?"

I declined as politely as possible and rose, gathering up both our dishes. I scrapped the leftovers into the compost and rinsed everything clean before placing them in the dishwasher.

"Leave the rest," Abilene said when I reached for the pots on the stove. "My daughter's coming later. It'll give her something to do. Come. Sit."

I sat.

My companion brushed a withered hand across the table in front of her, dusted her hands and dropped them into her lap. She watched me the entire time as if trying to read into my soul.

"You probably don't remember this, but we met once several years ago. I think you were twelve, maybe thirteen. It was during some BBQ, luau type event. Exceptionally dull. You came to ask if I wanted to play chess."

"I do remember that," I said but didn't add that the identity of the other person had been a blur to me until that moment. I'd simply found a chess set while snooping through the host's house and she was the only person at the party who had been sitting away from everyone else, looking bored out of her mind.

"You were not very good at it, if I recall," she pressed, a ghost of a grin touching her lips. "You kept trying to protect your queen, going so far as sacrificing all your other players, even the king."

I drew in a breath. "You still won in the end."

Abilene chuckled. "That depends entirely on who you ask. Life is a lot like chess. You realize that the older you get, especially in this business. You always need to be one step

ahead.” She narrowed her eyes. “Are you still protecting your queen?”

I struggled to maintain eye contact. “Trying to.”

She hummed quietly. “I was surprised by the news of your arrest. I never would have believed it if it weren’t for your confession. It made me sad to hear. I thought the darkness of this city finally made you like everyone else. It happens, unfortunately. But then I saw you in court and I looked into your eyes and what do you think I saw?”

It took me a full second to realize she was waiting for an actual answer. “I’m not sure.”

“What I knew all along — you are not a killer. That’s not the sentiments of a sentimental, old woman thinking of that little boy sitting across from her with utter focus on his face. You don’t have the eyes of a killer and believe me I’ve looked into plenty of those. There’s a weakness in you, a gentleness that doesn’t fit the things we do. Don’t get me wrong, I know you’re fully capable of the horrible stuff, too. It’s there. I see it. But you’re not a killer, not yet.”

“I’m not sure I understand where you’re going with this,” I murmured, trying to keep up.

Abilene reached into the pocket of her apron and unearthed a pack of cigarettes and lit one. She offered me the box with the cheap, blue lighter tucked inside. I took one, thinking, *so much for cold turkey.*

“Did you know I have tea with your mother every Sunday afternoon?”

I blew out the smoke caught in my lungs, watching Abilene through the gray tendrils. “I didn’t.”

“She meets me after I’m done with church, and we sit and chat. She’s quite the lady.” She rose and padded over to pluck up a black, stone ashtray and bring it back. “It started by accident. We were at the same coffee shop. It was Sunday and I’d just left prayer with you on my mind.” Her ashes were flicked into the dish. “And there she was looking the way all mothers do when their sons get in trouble. We sat and chatted,

and I think she needed that. I think we all do in moments like that. Just another woman in the business who knows what it's like, but she told me what you did. She told me about your brother."

I hissed through my teeth without thinking and Abilene laughed.

"Don't go getting angry with her. This was the first time her baby had gone away for something he didn't do. It's enough to get anyone. Plus, your mama isn't a stupid woman. She recognizes people for what they are just like I do. It did make my heart lighter knowing I wasn't wrong about you, though." She pulled in a hard drag and held it. It blew between us when she released it. "And that's what I told the judge when I invited him over for dinner the night before your sentencing. Volkov was pushing hard for life. He wanted you to rot behind those walls, but I wasn't about to give that vulture the satisfaction."

I didn't interrupt even while my brain screeched at her words. I had always wondered how my sentence could be so short. Calling it an accident hadn't seemed like a good enough alibi for tossing someone over a balcony, yet the judge had practically slapped me on the wrist and sent me on my way. Even Milo had commented on it on my first night there, calling me damn lucky.

"You got my sentence reduced?"

She'd said as much with a casualness that seemed unreal, yet I couldn't bring myself to believe it, even when she watched me now with impatience as if she were wondering if I was hard of hearing.

"There are certain people who belong in that place, Darius, and there are people who don't."

"Why would you do that?" I heard myself ask.

Her exhale reminded me of my mother's when she'd had all she could of me. "Because I believe that people who cover for their little brothers don't deserve to rot in prison, do you? I

couldn't get you clean off, but I was going to make damn sure you didn't do more than you had to."

I stared at the woman seated comfortably across from me, drenched in smoke and confidence and it dawned on me for the first time just how far the hands of Beaumont actually reached. Sure, everyone knew their wealth and power, but this was something else. This was power on a level beyond anything a single person should possess.

"I don't know what to say," I murmured, apprehension tight around my chest. "Thank you."

Flakes of ember showered across the tabletop with the dismissive flick of her wrist. "I don't need thanks. I'm not telling you all this to get your gratitude." Her cigarette was stuffed into the ashtray. I added mine, realizing it had burned nearly to my fingertips. "I know why you're here, Darius. Just like I know why you need my help and why I know I will accept."

It took some effort to swallow past the dry well of my throat and rasp, "Why?"

"Because I like your mother, but also, and mainly because I don't like bullies. I won't stand for them. Uriah Volkov is a bully. His sons are bullies. His wife ... well, if you can't say something nice, am I right? The fact of the matter is, Darius, we need more people like you running this city once the tides change hands. Otherwise, we'll have people like Ivan and his foul brothers destroying everything good we've built, and I have grandbabies I need to protect. The world is not a lesser place without trash like Ivan, but it would be without people like you. Your first instinct is always to put others before yourself. I saw that in you since you were a little boy. I'm relieved to see that hasn't changed. But I do expect something in return."

It was a struggle not to react. I knew it was coming. Nothing was ever done freely, not when strings needed to be pulled and she pulled a few by the sounds of it.

"I can offer our ports and—"



Abilene scoffed. “Do I look like someone who needs more ports? I own half of the Pacific.” She shook her head. “I want you to look into someone for me.”

I waited for her to realize the odd request, but she merely continued studying me. “Have you considered asking Morpheus or—?”

The thin arches of her brows furrowed. “If I wanted Morpheus to find this person, I would have already asked, but since you owe me, I think this is a good way to pay me back, don’t you?”

I considered it and realized she had a point.

“What do you want to know about them?”

“Everything.”

I dug into my pocket for my phone. “Who?”



The drive back through the city was a blur of lights and uncharted emotions. My father’s texts sat unread and unopened in my pocket, my ability to answer his basic questions nonexistent.

I knew Abilene Beaumont. I’d known her like one would know the neighbor at the end of the block, faintly and at a distance. There was always polite conversation at events or the occasional nod of greeting in passing, but our interactions were never memorable. At least not to me, yet she had played such an enormous role in my life without me even knowing. She’d basically been the fairy godmother I didn’t even know I

had. I didn't know what to do about that, except do my best to live up to the expectations she'd mentioned.

I pulled my phone out and flipped on the screen. There was no need to scroll when her number was the first one pinned to the top. My thumb hovered over her icon, trembling with hesitation.

But what would I say? *Oh, guess what, we can be together at long last. I found a fairy godmother who will protect us.* It sounded ridiculous even in my own head, but I needed to tell her something. I needed to assure her that I would be okay and so would she. It just didn't feel like news one shared over text or a random phone call. This was an in-person kind of news.

I checked my watch.

It was still early. Maybe I could visit her apartment.

My gaze wandered up to the window and the world speeding past my window, not really looking for anything, yet for something to help me decide when I spotted it.

"Terrance, stop the car!"

Terrance gave a visible start, but immediately rolled us to the shoulder and cutting the engine. He turned his head over his shoulder to peer at me with concern.

"Everything alright, sir?"

I gave him a nod even as I threw open my door and rolled out onto the sidewalk. I vaguely heard Terrance follow suit as I sprinted through oncoming traffic to the opposite side of the street.

It sat in the window like some divine sign from heaven. Everything about it was ... magic.

I was through the shop doors before I could stop to think, to reconsider. I didn't care. It was perfect and I needed it.

## CHAPTER 13

# *Kamari*



I learned a long time ago to never simply just show up at my parent's house. I also knew that, even if I texted my mom the night before or the morning of to let her know I was coming, I had to text her again once I left and again when I arrived, but before actually going up to the house. I knew I could never let myself inside, despite having a key, but needed to wait until I heard the door unlatch from the inside. I also knew to never ring the doorbell, knock, or make any noise while I waited. And I was never allowed to bring anyone with me, not even if they waited outside.

I couldn't be sure if there had always been that many rules growing up, but there seemed to be a few new ones every year that Dad would text me and I would add to the list. I asked him once if she even went outside anymore and his response was silence then a mumbled, *when she's up to it*. If he was concerned by the decline, he hid it well, not wanting anyone to think badly of the woman he'd been married to for almost forty years.

My mother's severe anxiety was the reason I didn't visit as often as I would have liked. I didn't call or text her unless I necessarily had to and only if I was dropping by, and because she didn't like unexpected noises, I limited texting or calling my dad during the evenings. Over the years, it was just a habit. I knew I had parents who I loved, but I couldn't pick my mother out of a lineup. The few times I was actually allowed into the house, she'd stayed twenty feet away, or never even came into the same room. She didn't speak often so most of the time, I was just having a conversation with myself in an

empty room. Dad said she liked it when I visited and she enjoyed hearing about my day and what I was up to, but she went months without wanting to see me.

I wasn't angry. A lot of the tightness in my chest was hurt and sadness. I tried to be understanding and sympathetic, but as time went on, I felt more like I was bothering her with my attempts. I even tried setting a scheduled day once a week to visit. I wound up sitting outside the door for hours until Dad told me to stop because it was making her nervous. I offered to cut back to twice a month so as not to overwhelm her and had the same results. Eventually, the happy medium seemed to be only if I absolutely had to.

I studied the phone in my lap, debating just leaving the boxes on the front porch. Dad could get them when he arrived home from work. But I thought of porch pirates and just how expensive the outfits inside the boxes were and concluded that I had no choice.

*"Hey Mom, I'm pulling up to the house. I'll text you when I get to the door. Please open. I would like to see you."*

I hit send just as the cab driver came to a rolling stop outside my childhood home.

From the outside, the two-story house with the white paint and newly neatly set pathway surrounded by precisely trimmed grass was the ideal dream. All most people saw was how perfectly spaced every shrubbery was from each other or how evenly built the front porch stairs were. What I saw was not being allowed on the grass to play because I would create dents in the soil and break blades. I had to take my shoes off at the bottom of the steps in case I left scuffs in the paint. If a person could live in an eggshell, this was it.

I asked the cabbie to wait, knowing deep down I wouldn't be there for very long, if I was allowed inside at all. I gathered up the boxes and made my way up the path. At the bottom of the porch, I peeled off my sneakers and continued up in my socks.

The boxes wiggled in my hold as I dug out my phone and texted my mother that I'd arrived.

Seconds passed.

Silence echoed from the vacuum sealed chamber on the other side of the door, despite there being a whole person somewhere inside, clutching her phone and summoning the courage to unlock the door for her daughter.

There was no response.

Not on my phone.

Not from inside the house.

I sighed, not sure what I'd been expecting but never really surprised by the results. Part of me begged my limbs to lift and knock, for my voice to shout that I was outside, to please see me for two seconds. But that would be a mess my dad would have to clean up. He'd have to come home early from work and calm her down. Because of him, I took a deep breath and knelt.

I set the boxes on the porch and unearthed a pen and paper from my purse. In quick loops, I wrote my father a note that I tucked into the side of the door, telling him I was leaving their outfits for the party in the garage and to text me if anything was wrong with them.

I already knew Mom wouldn't be attending. The dress would get hung — I assumed — somewhere in the closet with all the other dresses I'd brought her over the years. Dad would see how my mother was holding up, if she was okay being left alone at night. Mostly likely, he wouldn't come either. A few hours during the day weren't an issue, but Mom had a fear of the house in the dark.

I used my alarm code to disengage the garage panel and slipped the boxes down next to the door before shutting and alarming it up again. I glanced at the house one last time, hoping to at least catch a glimpse of my mom's face in a window before I left, but there was nothing. Not even the flutter of lace to indicate life.

I pulled my phone out and texted her again. *“Hey Mom, I'm leaving. I left a note on the door for Dad.”*

I hit send and returned to the cab.

There was no response.

There never was.

She hadn't texted or called me in two years. Our entire thread was me standing outside the house asking her to let me in and being ignored.

I sent my dad the next message as the cab turned into traffic.

*"Hey Dad, just left Mom. Didn't get to see her but left your outfits for Darius's welcome home party this weekend in the garage. I hope you'll come. Love you."*

His response came through five minutes later.

*"Hey baby, I'll be home in a few hours. Sorry I missed you. I'll talk to your mom about the party. We might not be able to, but I'll drop off a gift for Darius if that's okay. Lunch this weekend? We can do it at the house or somewhere else if Mom's not feeling well. Love you back."*

I felt myself sigh. *"You don't need to send anything. Darius will understand if you can't make it. Lunch sounds great. We can try that new Jamaican restaurant you told me about."*

*"Hey, sounds good. How was your trip with the girls? I got your text. I'm sorry I didn't get back to you. It was a rough weekend."*

Mom went through phases of extreme emotional spirals ranging from hysterical over a fork in the sink to over the moon giddy for no reason. The moods were erratic, instantaneous and violent. Dad tried to hire a nurse to stay with her while he was at work and Mom threatened to cut her open with a knife only to break down wailing when my dad got there.

I've suggested care homes, or an institution. Somewhere she could be properly medicated and supervised, but Dad wouldn't have it.

*"You know how she gets around strangers and crowds. She'd think we'd abandoned her."*

Stressing to him that she could potentially hurt him one day didn't seem to work either, so, I relented. I kept my thoughts to myself and continued to live around the landmine of rules keeping me out of my parents' lives.

The cabbie returned me to the Alexander. I made my way inside with a bright smile for Lewis and Stephanie — the pretty brunette behind the reception desk — that immediately slipped the instant the elevator doors closed behind me. The weight of emptiness piggybacked all the way up to my room and the three other boxes sitting on my counter waiting to be delivered.

But I gave myself a moment.

I stood with my back to the door and pulled in several deep inhales just the way my childhood therapist had taught me. I closed my eyes and focused on nothing but the slow pull of air into my lungs and the steady exhale. I hadn't had to use my breathing techniques in a while, but this week was shaping out to be a test on my sanity. There was so much coming at me from all directions, so many emotions I didn't know how to compartmentalize, so many people who needed me to keep myself together. Maybe Lavena was right. Maybe we did need a vacation from the vacation if this was the reality I would need to come back to.

Partially steadier, I tossed my bag down on the counter and gathered up the boxes containing a dress, shoes, and accessories for each of the girls and made my way to each of their apartments. The items were deposited on their beds, completing my mission.

That was my task for every party and every event. It was my job to dress everyone, to find the best items for my friends to wear. Having access to a whole store dedicated to the top beauty and fashion brands helped, but it was my passion. I loved doing it. I thrived on the opportunity to match strings of pearls and diamonds with silk and lace. I loved imagining how each color would complement Sasha's flawless, olive tone, or Kas's lush, dark strands, or Lavena's dazzling blue eyes. I loved seeing their faces when they fell in love with the outfits

as much as I had. Did I have the eye like Marcella? Absolutely not, but I enjoyed it.

I sent a text in our group chat to let them know their packages were delivered.

*“Can’t wait to see them!”* Sasha immediately replied.

*“Thanks Kami,”* Lavena said, adding a million hearts and star emojis.

*“Pictures! I don’t want to wait,”* Kas added with a sad-faced emoji.

*“Cheater!”* Sasha scolded.

The chat continued to go off as I stowed my phone away and realized I hadn’t eaten all day. My stomach was in full protest mode, and I still had a million other things I needed to do.

As if on cue, my phone rang. Marcella’s pretty face flashed across the screen when I pulled the device out.

“Hey!” I said, happy to hear from her. “How are you?”

*“Oh, Kami, I’m so glad you picked up. Are you free?”*

I wasn’t, but I would have dropped everything for her.

“Always. What do you need?”

*“Can you come up to the penthouse? I am a mess, and I could use your help.”*

I was already moving towards the elevator before she finished speaking. “I’ll be up in two.”

She thanked me profusely before hanging up.

A mess was an understatement when the doors opened to a full, blown circus. People with boxes and props, and yards of fabric bustled in every direction. A tall, thin man with a walkie shouted incoherent directions at someone who kept breaking up during their response. Somewhere, someone was flipping aggressively through the speakers, blasting music of every variety without settling on anything. Someone screamed and it



was followed by a crash that had me bolting into the sitting room.

Marcella stood in the middle of the chaos, a vision in a two-piece suit set, staring with wide-eyed horror at the man sprawled across her now shattered coffee table.

“Oh my God!” I cried, rushing forward.

“I’m so sorry,” the man was saying, struggling to shake off the shards of glass littering the carpet.

“Don’t move,” I told him, but not sure how exactly to get him up without cutting him. “Are you okay?”

“I slipped. I am so sorry.”

“Paris, stop apologizing and stop moving,” Marcella cried, moving up behind him to tuck her hands under his arms. “We’re going to lift you on the count of three, okay? Don’t wiggle. Kami, take his arms.”

With the help of a few others, we got Paris free. We did our best to brush the glass out of his dark hair and clothes. All the while, he apologized over and over again until Marcella took his shoulders and forced him to look at her.

“Stop,” she told him firmly. “It’s just a coffee table. It doesn’t matter as long as you’re okay. Go to the bathroom, check to make sure you’re not cut. Then go into the kitchen and get yourself a drink and some food and collect yourself. It’s fine.” She turned to a small, pale girl on her right. “Stacy, can you make sure Paris is taken care of?” Once the pair had left the room, she turned to a group watching from the corner and waved them over. “Can you three clean this up, but please be careful. I think there’s a box in the hallway closet.”

Once all the directions were given and there was nothing left, she turned to me.

I gave her a weak smile. “Hi,” I said.

She offered me a tired grin. “Hey sweetie, thank you for coming. Christ, it’s been hell.”

“I can see that. What do you need me to do?”

The rest of my day was spent helping the decoration committee organize and transport all the pieces to the extravagant manor Marcella had rented out in the country. I ran into the girls on multiple occasions, but none of us had a spare second to stop and chat. Waves and calls of *text me* were called from across distances.

By the time nine pm had rolled around and I had nothing left on my list and I could finally stagger my way back into the penthouse, I was sweaty, exhausted, starving, and ready to bite the next person who came near me. It must have been showing on my face because when Alexander got home he took one look at me and raised an eyebrow.

“I know that look,” he said, smart enough to conceal his amusement. “Come.”

I was in enough of a bad mood to tell him I wasn't moving from my place holding up the hallway wall but didn't. I let him lead me into the kitchen where he threw open the fridge and pulled out one of the spare *hors d'oeuvres* platters and placed it on the crowded island between us.

“Marcella will murder you and I am too tired to stop her,” I told him dryly.

Alexander chuckled. “I won't tell if you don't.”

I had no strength to argue when he nudged the dish closer to me.

I didn't even taste the first two. They were shoved down my throat one after the other. I almost moaned, or I did because my companion chuckled.

“How's the preparations coming along?” he asked after I'd down three more of the flaky pastries with shrimp.

“I have no idea,” I confessed, slowing down enough to breathe around chews. “But hopefully as done as possible.”

He hummed softly. “I'm sure everything looks wonderful.”

I hadn't lied when I said Alexander was a gorgeous man. He truly was, even with his dark hair streaked with silver and lines around his eyes. He was an exceptionally breathtaking

individual. It was easy to see him in Darius and even Edmund. Both sons had that rugged magnetism, but still, neither Alexander nor Edmund compared to Darius, in my opinion.

“How are you?” I asked, now that I was no longer some rabid, starved animal and remembered my manners.

The right corner of his mouth flicked up. “The same. Just trying to—”

“Alexander Laurence Medlock!” Marcella stood in the doorway, a glorious silhouette of horror illuminated by the hallway light behind her.

We both jumped.

“Darling,” Alexander began.

“Do not *darling* me.” She stalked deeper into the space until she stood next to me, but across from her husband. “Those are the spare dishes for the guests tomorrow.”

Alexander, unaffected by his wife’s outrage, gestured to me. “You would rather if Kami starved?”

The anger immediately vanished as Marcella’s head pivoted to me, her expression horrified. “Oh, Kami, I am so sorry. Did you even eat today? I had you running all over the place and got so caught up in everything I didn’t even ... eat! There is so much food. I think I might have ordered too much anyway.” Ignoring or not hearing my assurance that I was fine now, she rushed to the fridge and began pulling out more plates.

“No! Honestly, I’m okay now.”

She waved my protest away by putting a container of dip in front of me. “This is all just extras anyway. The rest of the food is already at the hall. If you don’t eat this, it’ll go to waste.”

I opened my mouth to argue when the clump of approaching feet announced the arrival of everyone else. Kas, Sasha and Lavena stumbled into the room with a disheveled and exhausted Edmund at their heels. They all took one look at the cluttered assortment of food and lunged. If Alexander

hadn't grabbed my arm and maneuvered me to his end of the counter, I may not have survived the rush.

"I am so hungry," Kas groaned, shoveling a whole floret of broccoli into the dip and stuffing it into her mouth.

"I have never been so happy to see food." Lavena agreed, packing three sausage rolls into her mouth. "I'm pretty sure you're supposed to feed your slaves, Mother."

Marcella huffed, spearing bunched fists into her hips. "Everything was so chaotic. Why didn't you guys stop and eat?"

Lavena raised her head, half an asparagus poking out from between her lips. "When did you let us? Kas stopped to sneeze, and you told her to sneeze later."

Marcella grimaced. "I'm sorry, Kas."

Kas, practically face down in a plate of dumplings, waved the apology away.

"At least we're done now, right?" Sasha dunked a baby carrot into the dip and munched on it. "There's really nothing left to do."

While Marcella assured us that all the big jobs were done and we could finally rest, Lavena skirted the island and snatched the tray of chicken rolls out from under Edmund's reaching fingers, ignored his sputter of protest and shoved the whole thing into my hands.

"Why are you standing there like a weirdo? Eat."

We ate far more than we probably should have before taking the seemingly endless journey on the elevator to our floor. There were incoherent mumbles of goodnight as we each disappeared inside our apartments.

The sharp crack of something taking the toe of my sneaker and skidding across the floor had me fumbling for the light switch. The warm, yellow light flooded my hallway and the single, white box in the middle of it. Darius's warning to keep my door locked prickled at the back of my brain even as I was

reaching for the tiny card tucked beneath the crimson ribbon and turning it over.

*“Thought of you. Wear me tomorrow.”—D.*

## CHAPTER 14

### *Darius*



I wasn't opposed to parties. Growing up with my mother and sister, parties were a fact of life. Whether they were throwing one or attending one, my presence as heir to the Medlock empire was always mandatory. I learned early on to accept my fate graciously and never complain.

However, attending a party in my honor, surrounded by people I barely remembered or cared enough to see again already had me wishing the night to end. My only saving grace was the promise of seeing Kami. That knowledge alone had gotten me through a long night of tossing against sweat soaked sheets. It was the thing that kept me from marching downstairs and banging on her door. I needed sleep. I hadn't had a decent full night since that last night at the cabin. I was exhausted and frustrated, and all I fucking wanted was to throw Kami over my shoulder and take her to bed. I just needed her arms around me, caging me safely against my dreams.

But I knew that wasn't possible. Not until we'd talked. I had so much to tell her, so much she needed to process before we could figure out what to do next.

Unfortunately, party first. I would deal with the rest in the morning.

Expelling the tight knot of weight pressing down on my chest, I adjusted the Medlock, gold cuffs I'd borrowed from my father. My reflection did the same in the gilded frame. He seemed as ready to end the night as I was. The dark suit and crisp, white blouse folded with perfection across his frame, complimenting his broad shoulders and lean waist. Despite it

being a new addition to my wardrobe, it resembled every other party suit I'd ever worn. The familiarity helped ease some of the tension as I turned away from the mirror to face the lavish bedroom in some manor Mom had rented for the night.

At a glance, I would have wagered they had a lot of newlyweds. Every inch of the place was white satin and lace with romantic and feminine undertones. Only the dark wood of the furniture had any real depth. It was where I'd been told to go and get ready. My suit was already on the bed when I arrived and I was left undisturbed, yet the place wasn't so big I couldn't hear the continuous jingle of guests arriving at the front door somewhere downstairs. I could hear the exclamations of excitement and the laughter. The band was already rolling through the first set, drowning out the sea of chatter.

Somewhere down there was Kami.

I hadn't seen her when I arrived. Mom was the one who met me in the foyer and directed me straight upstairs, but Kami had to be there somewhere. Most likely, she was with Lavena, mingling with the guests, chatting, waiting for me to make some grand entrance like some damn bride on his wedding night.

I would have muttered a curse, but Mom took that moment to slip into the room before the quiet echo of her knock had even had a chance to fill the space.

"Hey baby," she said, a vision in soft, glittering silver. Her pale curls were piled on a messy, yet elegant twist at the top of her head and held in place with a comb I recognized as my great grandmother's heirloom. "Don't you look handsome." She crossed the room to adjust the satin bow at my throat. She was still beaming as she brushed light hands across my shoulder and down my arms. "Everyone is downstairs and so excited to see you. I had to make a lot of promises to make this night happen after that whole dinner fiasco, but honestly, I think it actually helped weed out a lot of people, you know? Your great uncle ... cousin? Hendrik declined, thank God. Last thing we need is to have the silverware—"

“Mom?” I interrupted without meaning to.

Her big eyes shot up to mine. “Yes?”

“How did Dad know to contact Abilene Beaumont?”

It always amused me when people considered my father the biggest threat to them when in reality, my mom was the one they needed to worry about. She had the face of an angel, the manners of a southern belle and the fury of a goddess. My father had no patience for games. He would outright kill a man and go on with his day, whereas my mother played the long game. She took a weird sort of pleasure in dismantling a person’s entire life brick by brick in the most traumatic fashion. She enjoyed watching their world burn to the ground.

“What do you mean, sweetie?” she asked.

“I know about your tea with Abilene every Sunday. I know you told her about Edmund. Why?”

She stared at me long enough to make me fidget. Her scrutiny made me feel like I should have known the answer already.

“Your father is a brilliant man,” she stated evenly with a defiant tilt of her chin. “But even he is limited on his own.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I said, and earned a roll of her eyes.

“Why does this matter right now? There are nearly two hundred people downstairs waiting—”

“Because you don’t like tea, yet you inexplicably find yourself in a café on the very opposite end of the city exactly the minute Abilene Beaumont gets out of church giving you the perfect opportunity to have a long and heartfelt conversation with her where you break one of our first rules by telling her about Edmund. She thinks you were vulnerable and needed a friend, but I know you and a steel trap has more weak points than you. But somehow, not long after, she has dinner with a friend who happens to be my judge and my sentence is mysteriously lessened. Then, Father just happens to pull Abilene’s name out of thin air just in time...”



I broke off when her eyebrow lifted. “In time for what, Darius?” Her eyes were steel and brittle amusement. “You’ve figured it out this far. Keep going. In time for what?”

I drew in a breath. “You know about Volkov.”

Full lips painted a violent red pulled back in a smile that would have terrified anyone else. “Here is what I know, my dearest heart.” Her palms flattened against my chest plate. “I am simply a mother who will do anything to protect her babies. That’s my job. It’s in my DNA to destroy and annihilate anyone foolish enough to think they will ever get past me to you.” Her right hand lifted and touched my cheek. “And you’re wrong. I’ve become quite fond of tea.”

With that, she took a step back and started for the door. She paused only briefly with her hand on the doorknob to tell me to come down when I was ready.

Then she was gone, and I was left with the fading vibrations of her words caressing my soul. My amusement tilted up the corners of my mouth until a faint chuckle escaped.

That was the mother I knew. Not some weak wisp who went crying to strangers. She was cold and manipulative as she was warm and generous. She was playing battleship while everyone else was playing cards.

Still smirking, I tugged down the hem of my coat and accepted my fate. It was now or never, and it was too late to run; Mother would have guards at the door.

The cacophony of chaos spilled into the foyer, a heavy wave of sounds and smells coming together to create a living, breathing force I had to step through to get to the party. Part of me hoped I could slip through the throng of bodies, find Kami and sneak her off somewhere without anyone being the wiser, but I knew that wouldn’t happen even before the first exclamation punctured the air.

“There he is!” someone shouted, drawing all the attention to me.

Faces painted in hues of purple and shadows from the swaying lights clustered above pivoted and found me in the doorway, already regretting my choices.

I needed Kami.

I knew it even before I was physically grabbed and pulled into the sea of faceless forms all trying to shake my hand and congratulate me on my freedom. But it was the compression of bodies moving against me that had my spine prickling. It made me wonder why it was necessary to be so close. Why did they feel the need to crowd and rush, and invade? I had the sudden urge to shove the next person who got in my way and tell them to fuck off. I didn't care who it was.

A man thumped me on the back hard enough to dislodge a spleen and was gone before I could knock their teeth in. I was still simmering when sharp, red claws grabbed my upper arms.

“My goodness, you have become even more handsome, if that were possible,” one of my mother's friends cooed, a woman I vaguely recognized from some function a million years ago. She had a buxom figure with lips so puffy, she could have been having an allergic reaction. Her breasts, each one the size of a toddler's head practically spilled from the flimsy cups of her turquoise dress with her jiggle. I kept trying to back away as they bounced forward. “You know, I heard you work up a lot of frustration being locked up.” Her hand slid up my chest to touch my bowtie. “Did you find that's true?”

“Meriam.” Mom appeared out of the crowd like an angel, a champagne flute in one hand and a smile of razor blades on her face. “How nice of you to come. How's your hand?”

I could have caught on fire for the way Meriam snatched her fingers back. The woman behind her nearly dropped her drink when Meriam bumped back into her with her hasty retreat.

Without missing a beat or waiting for a response, Mom hooked her arm through mine and hauled me back in the direction she'd come.

“What happened to her hand?” I asked once we were a safe distance, and I could finally unhook my death from her death grip.

“Hmm?” Mom asked, waving at someone across the room.

“Her hand.”

Mom’s large, brown eyes blinked up at me full of innocence I definitely didn’t believe. “Poor thing caught it in a locker at the club. Broke every bone. Terrible, really. Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem like she’s learned her lesson about touching my sons. Oh! Look, there’s Louisa and Morpheus. I wonder if Sasha came with them. I should go say hi.”

Releasing me, she disappeared in the direction of the Trevils, leaving me standing in the middle of the crowd gaping after her.

“Where is she going now?” My father came to stand in the place my mother just vacated, blue eyes watching his wife’s retreating back.

“She spotted the Trevils,” I said, following his gaze to where my mother now stood laughing with Louisa, a stunning woman with platinum waves framing feature crafted for the silver screen. She had the grace and beauty of someone who should have been making a living breaking men’s hearts, not killing them in their sleep. Next to her, a commanding force of almost seven feet, Morpheus towered over his wife in his dark suit and puncturing black eyes. His wild mane of dreadlocks was twisted up into a hefty knot at the back of his head, giving him added height.

As a kid Sasha’s father used to terrify me, which I supposed was the point; the man was a paid assassin, but as an adult, I’d grown to like him.

My father sighed. “I don’t know why she needs me here when she keeps disappearing every time I turn around.”

I laughed before I could stop myself. “There’s still time to escape. Say the word and I’ll get the car.”

His mouth quirked. “Don’t tempt me.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to beg to leave. No one else was trying to get any closer to me, yet the fact that I was surrounded from all sides, crowded and confined was making my heart race. The suit was making my skin itch, and I could feel myself beginning to sweat.

“I sent you a text about that item Abilene requested,” I breathed, fighting not to fidget with the noose around my throat. “I didn’t hear back.”

Father glanced at me. “I’m putting the paperwork together. It’s going to take some time. The item in question hasn’t been seen or heard from in years.” His pale eyes looked over me. “Are you alright?”

I began to nod but the air was too thick and heavy. It stank of overpriced perfume and sweat, and food. I had to grit my teeth to keep from gasping like a fish desperate for water.

“Breathe in through your nose, exhale through your mouth,” he guided me softly, positioning himself carefully in front of me as if we were having a private conversation. “Clear your thoughts and count your exhales.”

It was easier said than done when there were so many people everywhere, so many eyes watching, waiting to see me fail. I couldn’t look weak. I couldn’t let them see my hands shake.

“Hey.”

Someone touched my shoulder and my restraint snapped. I lashed out, ready to knock the person onto their ass.

“Darius.” My father caught my arm. “Why don’t you go take a minute with your brother?”

Edmund stood at my shoulder, eyes wide, but silent. He didn’t try to touch me again but motioned with a nod of his head for me to follow him. I did because being there in the airtight box with all those faces and music was going to drive me insane.

He brought me to a study off the main hallway. The door closed behind us with a click and I exhaled for what felt like the first time. I stood in the middle of the space, pulling in

every drop of the lemon scented furniture polish clinging to the air.

“Fuck, I hate parties,” I muttered, rubbing an unsteady palm back through my hair, not surprised to feel the sweat on my brow.

“No, you hate the people,” Edmund corrected, pressing a glass of amber liquid into my hand. “There’s too many all over the place and they always want to touch you. It’s so weird.”

Despite the jittering in my stomach, I laughed at the deadpan annoyance on my brother’s face. “You’re not wrong.”

I downed the drink, relishing the burn as it pooled in my gut. Edmund gave me the second one in his hand I’d assumed was for him. I didn’t ask questions when tossing that one back, too.

“Thanks,” I hissed through my teeth.

He bobbed his head and took both tumblers from my much steadier grip. “Feel better?”

It was my turn to nod. “I don’t know what happened.”

“I think anxiety. Maybe PTSD? I’m not a doctor.”

I sighed and dropped into one of the seats facing the massive, oak desk. “I can’t remember if I always hated crowds or if that’s a new thing.”

“Probably both.” Edmund took the seat next to me. “After what happened with, you know...?” At my nod, he continued, “I can’t go into clubs anymore or high places. The shrink Mom’s making me see says it’s residual trauma or something. He doesn’t know everything, at least, he doesn’t know the truth. He thinks ... doesn’t matter, I guess.”

He picked at the nail on his thumb the way he used to as a kid when he was nervous.

“It wasn’t your fault,” I murmured. “None of it.”

Eyes that mirrored mine lifted to meet mine. “I should have walked away.”

I shrugged. “That didn’t stop him from following you, remember?”

He didn’t seem to have a comeback for that. His attention reverted back to his nail. The anxious picking stopped only when he bunched his fingers into fists between his knees.

“I fucked up,” he whispers as if talking to himself.

“No, you didn’t.”

He rocked his head vehemently from side to side. “I did. It was my fault.”

I laughed, recognizing nonsense when I heard it. “Look, I told you, I don’t blame you. It wasn’t you’re fault—”

“I started it.” Guilt and misery darkened his eyes when he raised them up at me. His chest rose and fell as if the rush of those words had knocked the wind out of him. “It ... I went after Ivan that night.”

I struggled to maintain my calm, my temper, but more importantly, my voice when I answered, “What do you mean?”

His gaze dropped back to his hands, but I didn’t miss the tremor woven through the confession. “I was an idiot. I was drunk and I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t know who she was when I—”

“Who, who was?” I cut in.

He sighed and dropped back into his chair. “I don’t know. I met her on the dance floor and we just ... clicked. I can’t explain it any other way. She was...” he trailed off a moment as if drawing on the memory and trying to put what he had in his head into words. “I can’t ... I don’t even know what her name was, just that I...” he broke off, a dark stain creeping into his cheeks. “I had no idea she was there with Ivan until he stormed over to us and grabbed her. Hard. Like I heard her cry out over the music and I just ... I saw red. I can’t even explain it because I’ve gone over it in my head a million times and that’s the only way to describe it. Ivan told me to back off and I knew I should have listened, but he was yanking her off the floor and she looked so scared, and I ... I lost it. I went after

them. I remember yelling at him to let her go. He shoved me and, well, you know the rest.” He peeked at me, expression pleading for understanding. “I’m so sorry, Darius.”

I stayed quiet. Not because I wasn’t angry — I was. I was livid —but because there was so much going on in my head that I couldn’t process anything.

“Does Mom and Dad know?” I finally managed.

Edmund shook his head. “I haven’t ... you’re the only person I’ve told.”

“Why did you lie?”

His chin dropped nearly to his chest. “I was terrified, and the lie just came out and ... I didn’t think you would take my place. I thought it would be me and then it was too late, and I didn’t know how to fix it.”

“Why are you telling me now?” I could hear the ripple of hurt and betrayal in my own voice and I saw my brother flinch as if struck by them.

“I don’t know.” Five, stiff fingers sliced back through inky strands. “I’ve been going over it all week since you’ve been home, going back and forth on whether or not to tell you and ... I don’t want to lie to you anymore.”

I exhaled.

Part of me wanted to hit him for being such an idiot but I’d been in his shoes. Maybe not to that extent, but I would have done the same. I would have done worse if it was Kami. I couldn’t entirely fault him for protecting another person. It was the lying that infuriated me. Despite the truth, I would still have taken his place. I wouldn’t have let him see the inside of that hell, not for standing up for someone who needed him. It didn’t matter that it was some random girl in a club or that she was with Ivan, my brother, despite being younger and smaller, had gone up against someone twice his size with a laundry list of offenses to protect another person.

“Anything else?” I sighed again.

Edmund shook his head. “That’s it. I swear.”

“Well, you’re a fucking idiot,” I decided after a few more minutes of silent deliberation. “Going after Ivan Volkov was a suicide mission. You’re lucky you’re not the one dead.” I ignored the bobbing of his head, his rushed ramblings, and apologies. “I’m pissed that you lied to me.”

“I know. I’m so sorry—”

I continued to ignore him as I plowed on. “Despite that remarkably idiotic decision, you were doing it for a good reason.” I met my brother’s hopeful gaze and promptly smacked him upside the head. Edmund yelped and jerked back, hand flying up to rub the abused spot. “Do not ever lie to me again.”

Still rubbing and working hard not to appear disgruntled, he nodded. “I swear.”

I shook my head and shoved up to my feet. “What happened to the girl?”

Edmund followed me. His shoulders moved up in a shrug. “She vanished as soon as Ivan and I got into it.”

“She probably saw it as the distraction she needed to get away from him,” I mused. “She was most likely one of the street girls they keep around.”

Edmund was shaking his head even before I finished my sentence. “No, she wasn’t. I can’t explain it, Darius, but she wasn’t like any girl I’d ever seen.”

So, my little brother was love-struck by some girl he met once in a night club that ended in murder. I wasn’t going to argue with him.

“Do me a favor,” I said instead.

“Anything,” he said immediately.

I bit back the grin threatening to darken my face. “Keep this to yourself. No one else needs to know any of this. It won’t change anything.”

Edmund hesitated. “But Mom and Dad—”



“What?” I challenged. “What will they do? Ivan is still dead. The damage was done. The rest is merely semantics. Keep it to yourself.”

He seemed to struggle with the decision, but he agreed reluctantly.

“Good.” I pulled him in for a hug and was relieved when he returned it with a hard squeeze. “There is one other thing you could do to make me feel better.” I pulled back to grin into his puzzled expression. “You can name your first born after me.”

Edmund groaned and shoved me back. “I am not naming my kid Darius. It’s a dumb name.”

I gasped, hand flying to my chest. “How dare you. You’re dumb.”

For the first time since I got home, Edmund laughed and punched my shoulder. “Your face is dumb.”

Hooking my arm around his neck, I yanked him in a choke hold that had him sputtering and flailing.

“Not the hair. Not the hair!” he exclaimed, trying to shove me off.

“Dumb face, huh?” I dug my knuckles into his scalp and rubbed, sending him cursing and punching my sides.

I let him go just as he heaved, and the momentum nearly landed him on his ass.

“You fucker!” he cried, struggling to push down his tussled hair.

Snickering, I strolled to the door. “Love you, too.”

Not waiting for a response, I stepped back into the chaos. I found my parents standing by the open terrace doors. Mom spotted me first and beamed.

“Hello sweetheart,” she said when I joined them. “How are you enjoying yourself so far?”

I met my father’s raised eyebrow from over her head and gave a slight nod. “It’s fine.”

Feeling like something useful had been accomplished that night, I turned my attention to the party, searching the blur of faces for the only one that mattered, but there were too many and they were everywhere. If Kami was somewhere in that mess, I wasn't going to find her without doing multiple laps through all that tangled mess.

"She's not here yet," Mom said softly.

I glanced down at her, and she gave me a teasing smirk. "Who?"

She arched a brow as if to say, *really? That's the game you want to play?*

"Didn't she come with the other girls?" I said, deciding I was too tired for games.

"I think she was still doing something. The others came without her. You can always ask Lavena."

I followed her pointing finger to where my sister stood surrounded by a small army of admirers, wearing a dress that was ninety percent glittery threads. They shimmered and swayed dramatically around her when she moved. She was entirely in her element being fawned over and barely noticed when I pushed past a blond kid fondling her hand.

"Hey, watch it, pal," the little twig barked until I turned the full focus of my attention on him. He cowered slightly, dropping my sister's hand.

"Did you say something?" I challenged.

I had a solid two feet on the guy and a full fifty pounds. I could flatten him without putting any energy into it.

"Darius," Lavena warned, giving me the, *don't you dare*, eyes.

I continued to watch the guy until he muttered something about drinks and disappeared into the crowd.

"That was not nice." But she was grinning widely when I turned to her. "He was just about to tell me about his ties to the royal family and how he was going to give me a tour of the castle."

I raised an eyebrow. “That little weasel? What’s he doing here then?”

Her smirk widened. “Well, apparently his family was sent to Canada to run the foreign monarchy.”

I snorted. “The what?”

“Well, now, we’ll never know.” Lavena laughed and hooked her arm through mine. She led me away from her other admirers. “What brings you to me, dear brother?”

I disliked the way she was watching me, like a demon waiting to snatch up my soul. “Kami.”

She cocked her head to one side, all the while leading me away from the crowd in the direction of the terrace now absent of our parents. “What about her?”

I gritted my teeth, willing my patience to hold steady a little longer. “When is she coming?”

“Well, of course she’s coming. I’m sure she’ll be here at any moment. She was just waiting for her date to pick her up.”

It was said with the brisk casualness of someone mentioning rain later that evening, but the broad, toothy smile that followed indicated my sister knew exactly what she was doing. Well, it worked. All my good mood vanished with that single sentence.

“What date?” I heard the steely warning slice through the distance between us but couldn’t give a shit if she picked up on it.

“The one she’s bringing,” Lavena countered as if she couldn’t be sure if I was stupid or hard of hearing. “I think you’ll really like him.”

“You’d be fucking wrong,” I retorted without thinking. “Who is it?”

Lavena sighed heavily and pursed her lips. “You know what? I can’t seem to recall his name. Why? Is something the matter?”

She was fucking with me.

Any other time, I may have indulged her and played her little game, but I had no more patience to spare. I had no more fucks to give and I sure as shit wouldn't hesitate to go straight back to jail that very night covered in another man's blood.

“Don't tell me. He'll be here soon enough.”

My arm was caught before I could turn away. Razor sharp talons burrowed through fabric to cut into skin, an anchor, and a warning not to fight. Lavena's grin was gone, replaced by bared teeth and cold eyes.

“You're not going near her until we've had a few words, brother,” she said calmly. “Join me in my office.”

I allowed her to pull me out into the cooling night, away from the music and all the people I wished would just go home already, but that was a problem for later as Lavena rounded on me.

“You know what I find interesting?” she began. “The fact that you think I won't put you in the ground for hurting Kami. You may be my brother and I would take a bullet for you, but I will not let you anywhere near her until you set a few things straight for us.”

I didn't need to look to feel Kas and Sasha's presence burning holes between my shoulder blades. I didn't need to see that they blocked my only exit. The message was clear — I wasn't leaving until they said so.

“Make it quick. I have a dead man to meet.”

Lavena's eyebrow lifted, but she kept whatever thought she was having to herself. “Are you marrying Abilene Beaumont?”

“What? No, of course not.”

“Why does Kami think you are?” she shot back almost immediately.

“There was a misunderstanding.”

“Did you lie to her because you were done fucking her?”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” I snarled, my fury snapping momentarily out of control.

She didn’t bat an eye at my outrage. “Answer the question.”

“No!” I growled.

“When you see her tonight, what’s your plan?”

I hesitated on that one. I hadn’t thought it through. All week, all I’d wanted was to see her, be with her. Since waking up that morning, all I thought about was that evening when I would see her again and tell her ... everything. I hadn’t gone beyond that. I hadn’t even prioritized the things I wanted to tell her, only that there was so much change we had to discuss.

“Talk to her,” I decided.

“About what?”

I frowned. “None of your business.”

“Was it the deal you made with Abilene?”

I controlled the muscles of my face, kept my voice even when I replied, “What are you talking about?”

Lavena rolled her eyes. “Enough bullshit, okay? I don’t know how stupid you think I am, but let’s face it, I’m smart enough to figure out what was happening. It took me a minute when Kami begged us to just let you marry a ninety-year-old woman, that it was what she wanted. Bull. Shit! Kami has been in love with your dumb ass for too long to just shrug her shoulders and walk away, giving her blessings to another woman like it’s nothing. So, I wondered what the deal was with that. Super weird. It didn’t take rocket science. Everyone knows the power and influence Abilene holds over the majority of the city. Now, why would you need those things unless something big was happening, something so horrible that Kami would sacrifice her happiness to make sure you were safe.” Lavena paused for only a split second before blurting, “Volkov. He’s after you, isn’t he? That’s why you needed Abilene.”

It was difficult recognizing the jumble of emotions winding up inside my chest. There was annoyance that my sister was such a pain in the ass. There was surprise that she'd figured all of that out. There was amusement, though I wasn't sure why, but above all that, at the very crown of it all was pride.

"I'm right, aren't I?" she pressed, moving a step closer, her expression soft with a hint of concern. "Uriah wants revenge."

I studied my baby sister's face and laughed inwardly thinking how hard Father worked to keep things from her and my mom, how clever he thought we both were only for both of the women to figure it out on their own. I really wasn't surprised.

"Yes," I said quietly.

Lavena drew in a breath. "We bomb their house tomorrow."

"No!" I took hold of her shoulders. "No, we're not doing anything. Lavena, look at me. It's been settled. Abilene has agreed to back us. Coming after me or anyone I care about would be the last thing Volkov does. Okay? Nod."

She nodded slowly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, but I need you to swear, swear to me that you will not do anything to make this bigger than it already is."

Lavena's face crumpled into one of outrage. "I'm not an idiot, Darius. I know when to step down."

"Do you?" We heard Kas's mutter under her breath.

Next to her, Sasha snorted but stayed quiet.

"Both of you shut it," Lavena grumbled.

"I didn't set out to hurt Kami." I released my sister's arms and took a step back. "I was trying to protect her."

"We know. That's the only reason I haven't kicked you in the balls," Lavena said without missing a beat. "Because, you see, you're not just getting Kami in this relationship. You're

getting us and, unlike her, we don't have any problems messing up that pretty face of yours."

My eyes narrowed even as I felt a swell of pride. Kami being left alone and unprotected had been my biggest worry. Now, my sympathies were with whoever was stupid enough to touch her with these three around.

"I would expect nothing less," I told them.

Lavena beamed. "Good. Now," she looped her arm through mine and maneuvered us back towards the party, "I think you should let Kami have her fun tonight and enjoy the party with her date. You guys can talk tomorrow—"

I stopped and yanked my arm free. "The only person she will be enjoying the party with will be me. Her ride can go home on his own two legs, or I will help him get there on a stretcher."

"That's not nice," Sasha gasped.

"Oh, I've already been as nice as I will get on this matter." I faced my sister. "Where is she?"

Lavena blew out a breath and waved absently. "Well, you'd see her if you turned around."

I spun before she finished talking, gaze scanning the room.

She stood in the doorway, a vision in the shimmering, silver dress I'd sent her. It clung to her the way no dress ever should, a second skin that made every curve prominent. It dipped and glided, outlining her silhouette, draped casually over her firm breasts and emphasized the contours of her legs strapped in matching sandals. Her dark hair was down in shiny waves along her back and pinned up on one side. Her makeup was sultry and designed to make a man think of steamy nights interlocked with her across satin sheets. If I hadn't already been head-over-heels in love with the woman, that dress would have done me in.

"Fuck," I breathed, brain already imagining all the ways I wanted to peel it off her.

But it all came crashing down when she turned her head and smiled at the tall, blond Adonis that stepped up next to her and offered her his arm.

“Who the fuck is that?” The growl came from deep in my chest, a guttural snarl I shredded through clenched teeth.

“Oh, that’s Lance,” Lavena supplied sweetly. “The handyman from the shop. Gorgeous, isn’t he?”

Not when I was done with him, I thought, jealousy a white-hot noise in my ears, singing through my blood. I’d never murdered anyone, but I was more than willing to make this guy my first.

As if sensing my bloodlust from across the vast expanse of space, Kami’s head turned, and our eyes met. She took in my face before her gaze dropped to the fists balled at my sides. She said something to the dead man next to her and gestured in the direction of the refreshment table. He nodded like an obedient puppet before leaving her side.

Kami turned back to me once he was out of sight, but I was already moving towards her, head full of hot steam and desperation. I didn’t know whether I was going to shake her once I got my hands on her or toss her over my shoulder and take her back to my room, but something was about to happen.

“It’s not what you think,” she said the moment I was close enough.

“You have no idea what I’m thinking,” I bit out.

“Me and Lance—”

“There is no you and Lance,” I cut in sharply. “There never will be. The only person you belong to is me.”

I didn’t miss the flare of outrage in her eyes. “You can’t—”

“But I fucking can, kitten.” I hooked my arm around her waist and yanked her into my chest, destroying whatever protest she was about to make. The fury vanished into surprise before darkening into something I recognized all too well — desire. “You’re mine, do you understand? Your body, your heart, your future ... mine. I want all of you. Everything you



have. Everything you are willing to give me. And I will kill that fucker if he ever touches you again.”

Her lips parted, soft and welcoming. “Darius...”

I lowered my head, letting my mouth hover inches from hers, thrilled with her sharp inhale. “Stop talking. You have some nerve coming to my party with another man wearing my fucking dress.” I felt the tremor rock through her, and I tightened my hold. “Did you think I would take that lightly? Did you think I would just roll over while some prick puts his hands on you?” I slid my palm up the naked stretch of skin where the thin, silver straps crossed her back to cup the back of her neck, adding just enough pressure to mean business. “You’re mine, Kami, do you understand?” I smothered my grin against the curve of her jaw when she obediently nodded. “Good. Now, tell him to leave before I toss him over the balcony. Then, you and I are going to find a quiet place to talk.”

“I can’t,” her breathy gasp burned against the side of my neck.

I drew back to peer into her flushed face. “If you don’t, I will and I will not let him leave with all his pieces.”

“No!” She closed her small hands into the lapel of my blazer, holding me in place when I started past her. “Wait. Please.” Breathing heavily, she peered up at me, eyes pleading. “Lance and I—”

The man in question appeared before she could finish, two wine glasses in hand. The fucker was smiling, oblivious to how close he was to getting all those pretty teeth rearranged.

“Hey,” he said, passing Kami a crystal flute. “I can’t believe how amazing this place is.” His bright, blue eyes moved past Kami to rest on me. He extended a hand. “Hi, I’m Lance.”

Kami started to pull out of my possessive hold, but I tightened it, keeping her firmly against my side. I started to tell Lance he’d overstayed his welcome and that his services were

no longer required when someone rested a hand on my shoulder.

“Darius. Kami.” My father slid into place next to me with my mom on his other side. “I hope we’re not interrupting.”

I was about to tell him they were, but Mom spoke up, “Kami, that is a beautiful dress.”

Kami smoothed a small, trembling hand down the front, momentarily distracting me with the way the material shimmered under the lights, the way it parted just enough to gift me with a view of the firm mounds straining against the front. For a moment, I almost forgot why I was even pissed. Then Lance moved, lowering his extended arm and I went right back to wanting to punch him in the face.

“Thanks,” Kami said, smiling at my mom. “It was a gift from...”

“Me,” I stated evenly when she faltered.

I felt her eyes on my face, her confusion as she tried to figure out what was happening. I met her gaze with a set one of my own, daring her to ask.

She didn’t.

I knew she wouldn’t, not with so many eyes on us. Ultimately, she turned back to Lance and my mother as they admired the dress.

“Your mother wants me to tell you that she will be furious if you get blood on the carpet. She also wants me to remind you that if you get arrested for murdering a man at your welcome home party, she’ll kick your ass,” Father said, leaning into my side to murmur into my ear.

Any other time, I would have laughed, but the target of my rage took that moment to glance past me and break into a truly beautiful smile. He raised the arm not holding his drink and waved enthusiastically. I was debating the odds of this guy knowing anyone at the party when a darker man joined our group. His deep, rich eyes glistened as they took Lance in before turning to the rest of us, his smile big and dazzling.

“Guys, this is my fiancé Michael. Michael, you remember Kami?”

Michael nodded, smile widening. “Thank you again for dinner the other night. We had a great time.”

Kami smiled at him. “I’m glad we could meet. Lance speaks so highly of you.”

Michael flushed dark under his warm complexion. He shot his fiancé an affectionate grin.

“And this is Marcella.” Lance motioned to my mom but winced a little sheepishly at the rest of us. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know the rest of your names.”

Kami introduced everyone, saving me for last, I noted.

“Kami speaks very highly of each of you,” Lance said. “Thank you so much for letting us join the party.”

“It’s our pleasure.” Lavena slinked into our little circle with Kas and Sasha, a flute of champagne in hand and a sly smirk on her face. “Kami was very excited to have you both here.”

“And I still am. In fact,” Kami turned to my mom. “I was hoping we could help introduce Lance to a few of the guests here.”

Mom raised an eyebrow but didn’t ask questions. “Of course. I know just the people.”

Lance’s big eyes grew even wider as they shot from his partner’s beaming face to my mom’s. “Thank you!”

I caught Lavena’s smirk and realized how badly I’d been played by the little shit. She raised her glass in a mock salute, and I made a mental note to thank her with a whole bag of frogs in her bed the first chance I got.

“You know what this party needs?” Dad said, cutting into my revenge plot. “Dancing. Darius, why don’t you and Kami start us off?”

I didn’t argue. Any opportunity to get Kami in my arms and away from the others was one I was willing to take. I took

the untouched flute of champagne from her fingers and passed it a little too aggressively into Lavena's. She merely smirked and took a sip.

Vowing to deal with her later, I led Kami to the dance area.

"Fiancé, huh?" I murmured once I had her tucked snugly against me, our bodies moving in time with the gently swaying music.

Kami peered up at me with a sheepish grin. "I tried to tell you."

I pulled her closer. "I guess I'll have to let Lance live."

Her smile was breathtaking. "I would appreciate that. He's honestly such a lovely person."

I traced the soft lines of her face, the full curve of her mouth, the elegant shape of her eyes. I reached for the strand of satin coiled over her shoulder and twisted it loosely around my finger, all the while, I fell deeper in whatever spell she was casting.

"Were you really jealous?" she teased.

I shook my head, gaze never leaving hers. "No." My thumb glided along her jaw to her chin. I tipped her face higher. "I was homicidal ... and terrified I'd fucked up so badly that I might have lost you."

Her eyes softened. "Darius..."

"I meant it," I went on quietly. "Every word I said. I'm not letting you go. Not ever again." I brushed the curve of her cheek with the pad of my thumb, her hair still curled in my fingers. "I already lost four years with you and that's enough."

"What about Volkov and Abilene?"

I brushed the bare skin of her back with my fingers. The satin path along the raised bumps of her spine was warm and inviting to the touch.

"We'll talk about everything tomorrow. I just need to hold you tonight. I've missed you so much."

Her smile was small but managed to fill every crevice of my soul with warmth.

“Answer one thing for me?”

I tightened my hold, folding her into me. “Anything.”

“Does this mean I get to finally keep you?”

The corner of my lip quirked. “Do you honestly think I can let you go? This one week without you was hell. I can’t go through that again.”

“I missed you, too,” she whispered. “I know I said I was okay with you marrying someone else, but I’m not.” She bit her bottom lip. “I almost didn’t come tonight. I didn’t think I could face you.”

“What changed your mind?”

She grinned a little. “The dress. I wanted you to see me in it and regret your choices.”

The laugh burst out of me in a deep rumble I hadn’t felt in years. It rolled out in waves barely muffled by the music. Kami chuckled along, cheeks pink.

“Oh, that definitely would have done it,” I told her.

I kissed her.

I didn’t care who was watching or what they thought.

I didn’t care about anything but the woman in my arms and the future sprawling wide ahead of us. I was finally where I needed to be.

## CHAPTER 15

### *Kamari*



**D**arius didn't let go of me once.

All evening, his hand was at my lower back, around my waist, tucked in my hair the few times he'd managed to sneak us into a corner. The man was making it impossible to think of anything else when all I wanted was to be alone with him, to be in silence so I could ask him everything piling up inside my head. But there was always some who wanted to see him, someone who had a business question. I listened, but kept my contribution to a minimum, if I spoke at all.

Still, I enjoyed myself. I danced with Darius and the girls. I chatted with a few familiar and new faces. I even got to meet Abilene Beaumont when she approached us through the crowd in a simple, black dress and pearls. I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting, but the woman who stood before us could have been my great grandmother.

She greeted us both and Darius introduced us.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I said. "Darius has told me so much about you."

It was a lie. I knew next to nothing about her, but it seemed to please her when she accepted my handshake in her soft yet surprisingly firm grip.

"Abilene makes the best spaghetti sauce I have ever tasted," Darius stated.

"I would love to try it," I said.

“Good. You both can come to visit me this Wednesday. You can bring that paperwork with you, Darius, and I will have the contract ready.”

I had no idea what they were talking about, but Darius seemed aware and agreed. She murmured something into his ear before patting his arm and slipping away.

“What did she say?” I asked, curious about the grin left behind on his face.

“Protect the queen.” He chuckled at my puzzled expression. “It’s a long story. I’ll explain later.”

I gave his arm a light squeeze and turned to scan the sea of faces. There were so many bodies bobbing and moving through the space, amusing me how I’d thought the room would be too big when we’d been setting up the decorations.

“How much longer do we have to stay here?” Darius murmured into my ear, making me laugh.

“Lance drove me, but I think he and Michael will be here a while longer to mingle and enjoy the evening. I, on the other hand, am ready to go when you are,” I told him. “But I think your mom wants you to make a speech and say goodbye to people then we can go.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Is that all?”

“Make it quick,” I rested my palms over the warmth of his chest and peered up into his face. “I want you inside me the second we get home.”

I felt his sharp inhale under my touch, but it was the immediate darkening of his eyes that assured me we would be out of there within the hour.

“Fuck, kitten, you have—”

“Darius.” Like some ethereal goddess emerging from a mystical mist, Liya Cavell slinked through the crowd to stand before us, a vision in a shimmering gold gown. Her smoky brown eyes glided over Darius as if he were a tall drink of water and she’d been ostracized in the desert her entire life. The eyeshadow pressed into the back of her eyelids

shimmered with the lazy once over. Her hungry gaze never even landed on me as they worked their way back up to settle on his face. I may as well have been empty space. “Thank goodness you’re home. I was worried sick.”

Darius inclined his head, a polite gesture he’d given everyone who’d said the exact same thing to him the entire night. “Thank you for coming.”

The viper bared her teeth in a sultry smile that prickled the skin all down my spine. She fluttered her lashes and I saw the appeal. Liya was beyond stunning. She was the kind of beauty men went to war for, and she had the lineage to go with it. I didn’t know very much about the Cavells or their social standing, but they ran a pretty successful drug trade. Her and Darius’s paths crossed a few times, and they started dating. Much of that time was blocked from my memory. I’d intentionally avoided knowing anything about their relationship. But I didn’t hate her because she was beautiful or from Darius’s world. I hated her — wholly and completely — because of her cheating on him with half the city.

“You look good,” she was saying when I focused on the conversation again. “Practically haven’t changed at all since we saw each other last.”

Darius offered her his generic smile. “Thank you. You remember Kami, don’t you?”

Her big, doe eyes found mine at last and widened. “Oh, my lord, little Kamari, I didn’t even recognize you in big girl clothes.”

I nearly laughed. “It’s nice to see you in clothes, Liya.”

I hadn’t meant to voice my inner thoughts. I always told myself if I ever crossed paths with Liya, I would be indifferent and mature. That went out the window the moment she opened her mouth, it seemed.

I wasn’t jealous. I was fuming. This woman had had Darius. She’d had him. They were talking about marriage and kids. She was the one who decided he wasn’t enough. She was



the one who betrayed what they had. Now, she had the nerve to stand before him like there would ever be a second chance.

Her chuckle was condescending at best, but I was given no more thought as she pivoted back to Darius. She slithered an inch closer, an inch too close, invading his space and testing my barely restrained control.

Darius took a discreet step back. I felt the tug of his arm drawing us away from the sweet scent of honey and some exotic jungle plant.

Liya must have noticed as well because she flicked a glance at where my arm was threaded through his but couldn't seem to get her eyes to go the rest of the way back to my face. Her attention immediately returned to him.

“I was hoping we could talk ... privately. We left so many things unsaid that last time and I just want us to catch up.”

The small, bitter part of me wanted to tell her off, to act as small and insecure as she was but I didn't see the point. Darius was mine. He was going home with me. What they had almost ten years ago, was a lifetime ago and I'd won. Getting in a cat fight now would be as productive as trying to go back in time and beating her senseless with a bat. She'd had her chance. She fucked up. Besides, this wasn't my fight. Not yet.

“I appreciate the request, but I have guests I need to attend to, but thank you for coming.”

Darius made to move us away from the goddess in gold only to have a small, red tipped hand settle lightly on his chest, possibly to block him. I wasn't sure. I didn't care.

The leash around my control snapped.

It hit a level that would have frightened me if I could think past the roar blasting between my ears.

My hand shot out and slapped hers, the resounding crack unmistakable.

She was seeing me now. Her dark eyes wide and startled shot to me.

“Let’s keep our hands to ourselves,” I said with as much poise as I could muster.

Liya’s lips cut into a razor blade smile. “Goodness, Kami, I never realized how insecure you were. A shame, really, given how pretty you are. You really should give yourself more credit.”

“We don’t touch people who don’t want to be touched,” I replied smoothly. “Consent. It’s a thing. Look it up.”

“You know, the last time I remember seeing you, you were Lavena’s little shadow. I’m surprised she’s not here to protect you.”

I didn’t let the barb hit home when I raised my chin and replied coolly, “Last time I saw you, you had your legs around another man’s head, and I don’t need protecting from you.”

Her plump lips puckered into a mocking pout. “Jealousy is so unattractive, sweetheart. You should really grow up.”

It was my turn to smirk, to cut my lip on the daggers of my smile. “This isn’t jealousy. It’s being protective of the person I love. You had your chance. You hurt him. I’m not letting you do that again. Maybe no one’s cared enough about you to show you the difference, but this is what it looks like. Besides, if he’s dumb enough to go back to you, he deserves you.”

Liya’s curled mouth dipped, a tiny downward tilt no one would have noticed but I was close enough to her gorgeous face that I could have counted each eyelash.

“Liya.” Soft, cool fingers curled into my upper arm. “Kami.” I recognized Marcella’s voice, but I knew better than to take my eyes off a snake. “I hope we’re enjoying the evening.”

“It’s beautiful, Marcella.” Liya never broke eye contact either and that was fine by me. “Thank you so much for inviting me.”

I felt rather than saw Marcella press into my side, using her weight to wedge between us, forcing us apart. “Of course. I had hoped your parents would be attending, but you are always welcome.”

“They asked me to attend in their place. They knew how excited I’ve been to welcome Darius home.”

I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes or vomit, or both.

“Yes, I’m sure you celebrated your way through every dick in the city.” Lavena joined our tiny cluster, drink in hand. “I’m surprised your legs aren’t stuck in a permanent V. It would be more convenient.”

“Lavena!” Marcella hissed.

For the first time, Liya’s attention wavered away from me to fix on my best friend.

“I’m engaged, actually.” She raised a hand to flash us with the enormous rock on her finger. “We’re getting married next summer. I just came to see Darius as an old friend. I didn’t realize he had bought himself a little guard bitch.”

Lavena was in her face before I even realized she meant me. The two women were practically bumping noses.

“It’s time to go, Lace.” Lavena hooked an arm around the other woman’s elbow.

Liya struggled to pull free, but Lavena’s grip was like iron. “Get your hands off me, Lavena.”

“Oh, you of all people should know what it feels like when I put my hands on you, Lace. This is me asking you nicely before I get really mean.”

Lips pulled back over straight in a sneer, Liya barked a laugh. “I see you’re still protecting your little pet.” Her dark eyes spun to me, cruel and bitter. “You’re like the family dog.”

Whatever else she was about to say was silenced by the figure that slipped past me and pulled Lavena off before Liya could lose a chunk of her hair. Darius stood over a suddenly stunned and silent Liya, face a mask of dangerous calm.

“It’s time to leave, Liya,” he told her with the quietness of the sea before a storm. “Go now quietly or I will have you dragged out of here forcibly for everyone to see. Then, I will go home and pull every contract my family has with yours. I will do much, much worse if you ever speak to Kami that way

again. I think it would be best if you didn't even look at her going forward. Now, congratulations on your engagement. I hope for both our sakes, this is the last time we ever speak as well."

Honey-gold skin flushed beneath the makeup, turning a dark, patchy hue of humiliation as she staggered back a step. Despite my anger and slight vindication, I couldn't stop the pang of sadness I felt for her in that split second. Sure, she brought it on herself, but part of me wished it had gone a different way.

Without a word, Liya turned on her heels and started in the direction of the doors only to have Lavena call after her one last time.

"Just so you know, I was never protecting Kami from you. I was always protecting you from her."

A horrible lie.

Liya could have wiped the floors with me, and I knew that. I wasn't a fighter, a fact Lavena was aware of. But I appreciated the confidence.

Only after Liya had vanished from view and everyone had taken a calming breath did I realize Marcella was holding my arm still and Kas and Sasha were right behind me, looking as if prepared to grab me if I actually decided to hit Liya. I would have laughed hysterically at the scene, but Darius took that moment to turn to me, his expression set.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded, because I was. Despite my initial urge to break Liya's face, I knew deep down that it didn't matter what she said and the more I let it, the more I would be stooping to her level.

I faced Marcella. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have caused a scene at your party."

The other woman laughed. "Oh sweetheart, I was ready to cause a scene. You handled that far better than I would have."

I apologized again anyway, slightly embarrassed by the whole incident, which Lavena found exceedingly hilarious.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you square up on another person before,” she remarked, elbowing me lightly. “I was almost tempted to let you have a swing before stepping in.”

“I would have paid top dollar to see you flatten Liya on her ass,” Kas agreed.

I shook my head, touched, and concerned by their confidence in my abilities to flatten anyone. “That’s not how it would have gone down, but thank you,” I said, chuckling.

“Oh! Guys, the girl with those tiny shrimps is back,” Sasha hissed, dark eyes following a waitress making her rounds, a silver tray of tiny crackers in hand.

I didn’t understand what was happening, but watched my friends abandon me and hurry to ambush the poor woman with the snacks.

“Good lord,” Marcella sighed, watching the trio. “People are going to think we starve those three if they continue eating all the pastries.” With a shake of her head, she hurried over to save the caged woman.

“Not going to lie, that was pretty hot,” Darius said with a little grin that made me laugh. “And just for the record, I would have put all my money on you in a fight.”

“Then you would have lost all your money,” I told him. “But thank you.”

He brushed back a coil of hair off my cheek, letting his fingers linger and glide along the line of my jaw to my chin. “You’re it for me. You know that, right?”

A warmth bloomed in my chest as I caught the hand and held it. “I do. I was never angry that she was here or that she wanted to see you. I was insulted that she thought she had any right to after what she did. Besides, it was five years ago. Why are you the tree she keeps barking up?”

The analogy seemed to amuse Darius to no end when he burst out laughing. His free arm snaked around my middle,

and I was drowning in the warmth of his embrace.

“I’ve never been compared to a tree before,” he said, sobering.

I offered him a lopsided smile. “Are you okay?”

His answer was a slow, teasing kiss I felt coarse through me like warm honey. “I haven’t been this okay in years.”

“Good, then take me home and prove it.”

It didn’t take a lot to convince him to leave, but it did take longer than either of us liked to thank everyone, say goodbye to his family and get his car brought around. The brightly lit manor glowed against the dwindling twilight. Its sheer seclusion rewarded us with a canopy of endless stars stretching far over the treetops in the distance. The whole place was a sight to be held in the warm light of day, but in the night, it was something out of a fairytale.

I peeked at the gorgeous man at my side, taking in his shaded profile half hidden in shadows and thought of Rumi again.

*Both light and shadow are the dance of love.*

I wondered if Darius ever thought of that afternoon he’d read that poem to me all those years ago. It probably hadn’t meant the same thing to him as it had me, but I held on to the words, wrapping them up against my chest with all the other memories of him I kept tucked away there.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” He turned those unfathomable eyes down to mine, the blue pools hooded in thought and darkness.

I shook my head. “Not sure. Nothing, I think. Why?”

My hand was captured in his. The fingers were raised to his lips and the warmth that rolled down my arm sent a shiver through the rest of me.

“I owe you a coffee date,” he reminded me quietly as he pulled back.

He released my hand to shrug out of his blazer. The soft material still warm from his body and laced with his musky scent was draped around my bare shoulders.

“I would love a coffee date,” I murmured, tugging the lapel closer around me.

Darius leaned in and whispered a kiss to my lips that made me giggle for an entirely different reason.

“What?” he asked.

“I was just thinking how I hadn’t thought this would be possible for so long, but here we are.”

“Finally,” he added quietly. “And I swear to you, I will do everything in my power to make you happy.”

I touched the black bow at his throat. I tugged the edges and unraveled the satin ribbon to hang on either side of his throat.

“Same,” I told him.

His car was brought up to the bottom of the steps and he led me down. By the time he opened the door for me, and I slid into the passenger side, I was drained. My feet hurt and all I wanted to do was get out of that dress and into something cozy, or nothing at all.

I tugged the folds of the blazer closer around my shoulders and let my head drop back against the headrest as Darius maneuvered us out of the driveway and back towards the city.

“Your place or mine?” he asked, placing the weight of his palm on my thigh.

I settled my hand over his, keeping him in place. “I don’t care. I just want to sleep in your arms.”

“Tired?”

I raised my shoulder in a shrug. “A bit. It’s been a crazy week getting everything ready for tonight.”

“Thank you,” he said, taking his eyes off the road for only a second to meet mine, “for helping my mom put all of that

together. It couldn't have been easy, but it was beautiful, and I enjoyed myself tonight.”

Touched by his sweetness, I squeezed his hand and peered at him through the dark cabin. “I'm just glad you're home finally.”

The drive was a comfortably silent one. The country road was a landscape of darkness, but something about the blare of the heater, the crunch of gravel, and the knowledge that I was going home with the man I loved with all my heart made the moment spectacular. I was never one for aimless driving, but I felt a kind of peace just sitting next to him, knowing we were heading forward in our lives, that we were finally together.

Pulling up to the Alexander was the best part of that whole day, in my opinion. Going home with Darius, getting into bed with him and being held could never be beaten. It took all my effort not to shove open my door and jump out before the car had a chance to stop.

“My bed?” he asked, pulling into his spot in the parking garage.

I nodded. “Sounds great.”

He gave me a grin before throwing open his door and rolling out of his seat. I watched him jog around the hood to my side and yank open my door.

I was practically vibrating by the time he offered me his hand. The anticipation had livewires crackling through my system. I was aware of every stretch of skin on my body, every brush of my dress as I moved. It had been so long since I'd had his hands on me, so long since he'd built me up and destroyed me that I knew it wouldn't take long to hit my peak. Bob tried. I'd used him nearly every night that week, but it was always too fast, too basic. The anticipation of having Darius work his magic almost had me skipping to the elevator.

“What's that grin for?” he asked as we waited for the metal doors to open.

I shrugged, letting the front of his blazer slip open just enough to give him a view of my cleavage. “Have I told you



how much I love my new dress?”

Eyes fastened to my chest, he shook his head. “I can’t recall.”

“I definitely plan on thanking you for it ... thoroughly.”

Dark eyes lifted to my face. “How thoroughly?”

I closed the foot of space between us. “You might want to cancel all your plans tomorrow.”

His arm slid around my middle, and I was pulled in the rest of the way. “I’ll cancel the whole week if it means spending it with you.”

The lazy drawl skated across my skin, tightening my nipples against the satin fabric. Darius noticed. He dragged his blazer off of me, exposing me to the chill of the garage. My shiver seemed to amuse him as he opened his mouth to speak.

But his words never reached his lips when something yanked him from my arms. I had just enough sense to realize something was wrong when a blade of steel arched through the dimness and sank into Darius’s side.

## CHAPTER 16

### *Kamari*



**M**y scream rattled through me. It clawed across the stone and steel chamber in a piercing shriek. It drowned Darius's cry of surprise. It concealed the squelch of the blade plunging through fabric and skin again and again in rapid, violent successions. The figure snarled something I couldn't register as he shoved Darius back, away from him and ran.

A weird fog seemed to pull over me, muffling everything as if I were in a dream being chased by a monster. My brain couldn't register the scene even as I was diving to the ground, following Darius as he crumpled lifeless. Hands that were mine but felt alien grabbed at the crimson blossoms soaking across his white top. It pooled in a puddle beneath him, soaking hot and sticky through my dress to burn my knees.

In the background, I heard the attacker running in the distance, running with such determination his sneakers pounded as wild and desperate as my heart cracking into my ribs. Somewhere in the detached part of my brain, I recognized that I hadn't stopped screaming. That I couldn't stop even as my hands bunched the abandoned blazer into his wounds to staunch the blood flow.

I don't know when the screaming stopped — if it did at all.

I don't know where the EMTs came from, or who called them, only that hand encased in blue gloves were replacing mine. Lights were flashed into his eyes and vitals were taken. Someone asked me questions I tried to answer but my tongue had lost all ability to speak. It tripped and stuttered over the

most basic phrase, catching on every hiccup and sob. I must have been useless because they left me alone, focusing on Darius's still, pale body losing his life force in the middle of the parking garage.

"Is he dead?" I heard myself screaming again, hysterical to the point where even I knew I needed to calm down, but the ability wasn't there.

A woman with kind eyes took my shoulders gently and forced me to look away from the stretcher they were tucking under Darius.

"He's not dead," she assured me gently. "But we need to get him to the hospital. Are you hurt as well?"

I shook my head, craning my neck to see past her to where they were loading him into the ambulance.

"I'm going," I told anyone who was listening. "I'm going with him."

No one stopped me.

Someone, possibly the woman, bundled an itchy blanket around me and helped me up into the metal seat next to Darius.

He was so white, almost matching the paper under him. An oxygen mask was strapped across his nose and mouth. The fog inside gave me some hope when I grabbed his hand, only vaguely aware of mine smeared in his blood.

I was covered.

My dress was ruined, not that it mattered. I would have given up everything, burned it all to the ground in exchange for his life.

"Darius?" Even to my own ears, his name was a choked whine, a plea that went unanswered.

The ride to the hospital was a blur of screaming sirens and rapid chatter from the EMTs as they worked over Darius's body trying to stop the bleeding. I stuffed myself the best I could into the corner keeping out of their way. Darius's limp,

cold fingers stayed locked with mine until I had no choice but to let go.

They wouldn't let me go into the surgery room when we arrived at the hospital. They left me a crying, bloody mess in the middle of the hallway, watching helplessly as Darius was taken out of sight.

"Oh honey," a stout, middle aged nurse bustled out from behind the counter, identification badge swinging around her neck. She took my arm. "Are you hurt? Do you need a doctor?"

I shook my head, looking down at the red covering me. "It's not mine."

Leshandra heaved a sigh of relief. "Thank heavens. Let's get you seated in the waiting room, and I'll see if I can't get someone to just come and have a look at you, okay?"

I didn't protest.

I didn't have the energy.

"I need to make a call," I rasped. "I have to call..." everyone. I had to let Marcella and Alexander and Lavena and ... so many people who had to be there. "I don't have my phone."

I'd stupidly left it at home, not wanting to carry it around at the party. Why would I do that? Why would I think that was a good idea? Of course, I would need my phone.

"Well, okay," Leshandra patted my hands lightly when I started to cry again. "You can use the phone at the counter, okay?"

She set the phone and a box of tissues down at the counter for me. I thanked her as I reached for the receiver and froze.

Who did I call?

Lavena? Marcella? Both?

I called Marcella. She answered on the second ring. Her soft voice came out muffled with the rush of wind in her end.

“It’s me,” I said, voice wavering. I gripped the receiver harder.

“Kami? Alex, roll up the windows. I can’t hear. Kami? Is that you? Where are you calling from?”

*Don’t cry. Don’t cry.*

But that seemed to be my default. I couldn’t stop.

“You need to come,” I sobbed, breaking down. “Darius ... we’re in the hospital...”

“What? Sweetheart, slow down. Take a deep breath for me, okay? What’s going on? Where’s Darius?”

I did as she said and sucked in a breath but couldn’t stop the tears. I stuffed tissues under my eyes, smearing makeup across the soft white.

“Let me, honey.” Leshandra scooted over and took the phone from me. In two minutes flat, she had explained everything in a quick, professional tone before passing it back to me. “She wants to talk to you.”

“Yeah?” I whispered into the phone.

“We’re on our way, okay? Just sit tight and talk to no one.”

I didn’t understand the last part but all that mattered was that Marcella and Alexander were on their way. They would know what to do. They would fix everything.

Leshandra guided me over to an alcove tucked just around the corner from the reception desk. A row of wooden chairs was lined along the three walls with a low table in the center cluttered high with magazines. I was told to sit and wait.

But sitting was the last thing I was capable of. Every nerve in my body was wired. Every sound in the corridor had me rushing to the opening to peer out. I couldn’t stop shaking. The blanket from the EMT was doing nothing to Edmund off the chill coming from deep within my own core.

I was still there, pacing and praying when Marcella charged into view, still in her sleek, black *Ralph Lauren* she’d been wearing at the party. Alexander was right behind her, but

I was running into her open arms before he even rounded the corner.

“I don’t know what happened.” I cried into her shoulder.

She shushed me gently, calming palms gliding over my hair and down my back. “It’s going to be okay,” she said. “Come on. Sit. Tell me what happened.”

I let myself get led to a nearby chair and nudged into it. Marcella took my side while Alexander stood a few feet away, face drawn.

I started telling them everything that happened after we left the party. I told them about waiting for the elevator and the hooded man who came up behind Darius.

“He had a hood?” Marcella pressed gently.

I nodded. “Hood, dark glasses and a mask.” I closed my eyes and tried to bring forth the image I knew was seared into my brain, but all that came up was the spray of blood arcing across the gray stone, the hot scent of copper and grease, and the weight of Darius’s body crumpling like paper to the ground. “I don’t know,” I gasped, eyes snapping open, unable to rewatch that horror on a loop. “I don’t know. He ... he was tall, but not as tall as Darius. He...” I tried to remember without closing my eyes again, “was wearing a black coat, but like a windbreaker.”

“Did he say anything?”

I started to shake my head but stopped. “I think he said something to Darius, but I didn’t hear it.”

Marcella put her arm around my shoulders and pulled me close, our heads touching. Neither of us said another word, nor were we there for long when Lavena, Edmund and the girls hurried into the waiting room still in their dresses. Edmund was the only one who had changed at some point into dark trousers and a pale top. The girls were slightly ruffled, makeup faded and smudged, but their eyes were wide and alert as they took us each in.

“Holy fuck, Kami!”

Lavena crossed the room, but I was already out of my chair, blanket cast aside and running towards her. She caught me in a suffocating embrace that was reinforced by two more arms from the side and back.

“Are you okay?” Kas whispered into my ear.

I shook my head, unable to breathe without breaking. The hot well of tears was already burning my eyes and I could feel the tremors coursing up through me.

“I’m going to find them,” Sasha murmured into the strands at the back of my head. “I promise.”

Lavena pulled back first to wipe my eyes, her own red and shiny but firm. “We’re going to find this fucker.”

Sasha nodded vehemently. “I already called my dad on the way here. He’s pulling up chatter.”

Sasha had explained chatter to me before and from what I understood was it was an online forum for people in her business looking for or posting about jobs. Regular people didn’t have access to it unless they were really looking for it or someone directed them to it. It wasn’t easy to find or cheap. The people who could afford the monthly fees were people who could afford to hire an assassin.

“If this was an actual hit, we’ll know who soon enough,” she finished.

I nodded, so relieved I wasn’t alone anymore. Having my friends there was a calming wave settling the turbulence wreaking havoc through me.

“Okay, first thing first,” Lavena moved past me to where Marcella was holding out my abandoned blanket. “Let’s bundle you up. Last thing we want is for someone with heart problems to see you in that dress.” She was teasing but one look at Marcella’s chalky complexion and I realized she hadn’t seen the extent of blood covering me.

I murmured an apology as Lavena twisted the heavy material around my shoulders and guided me back down to sit.

“Next, Kas, run to Kami’s place, grab some fresh clothes for her. I’m going to find us all some coffee. Sasha—”

“I’m going to the Office,” Sasha said before she could be given a task. “I’m going to help my dad find this guy.”

Lavena nodded, her hands going to her hips. “Good idea.” She paused, shifting slightly. “Thank you.”

Sasha moved in and pulled Lavena into a tight hug. She said something before pulling away to peer into the blonde’s face. The two gave a simultaneous nod before Sasha went to hug Marcella and Alexander.

“I’ll be back,” she promised the group.

After a kiss planted to the top of my head, Sasha stalked out of the alcove.

“Anything specific you want me to bring back?” Kas asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t care. Wait,” I said when she started to leave. “Can you bring my phone? It’s on my dresser.”

After a nod, Kas left too.

Then, it was just me and the Medlock family in the harsh silence of the hospital. Alexander took the seat on his wife’s other side and rescued the fingers she was twisting together. Marcella rested her head on his shoulder, and they sat that way in a hold pattern no parent should ever have to experience. Across from us, alone in the row of chairs, Edmund sat still and desolate in his thoughts. His focus was fixed on an issue of last winter’s must-haves on *Vogue*, but I doubted he was actually looking at anything. I studied each of their faces, faces I knew better than my own, faces I loved with all my heart and felt the first stab of guilt.

This was my fault.

I asked Darius to leave.

I was the reason we were in that parking garage. If we had waited for everyone else, there would have been too many people for the stabber to get him.



Lavena sat next to me and placed her hand on my thigh. “Take a walk with me?”

I blinked at her. “What?”

She jerked her head towards the corridor. “Let’s find a vendor or something.”

“But what if—?”

“They just got him in there. It’ll be a while.”

The pointed way she said that had me glancing back at Alexander and Marcella. Both had their heads close together, murmuring quietly. I realized they needed privacy. They needed time to talk and plan. It was their son in that room. They were probably a wreck.

“Sure,” I said, getting to my feet.

“Hey, dumb ass, let’s go,” she tossed at Edmund on her way out.

The youngest Medlock didn’t argue. He didn’t ask why. He pushed to his feet and ambled after us.

I slipped my arm through his and pillowed my head on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered to him.

He shook his head. “This isn’t your fault.”

He was wrong, but I was too much of a coward to say otherwise.

We found a vending machine on an entirely different floor. Edmund had to pay; neither I nor Lavena had money on us. He didn’t complain as he pulled out his wallet.

It was evident Marcella had been crying when we returned. Her mascara was smudged around her eyes and her foundation was streaked, but she smiled when we returned and motioned me to sit next to her with my paper cup of coffee.

“The police were here,” she whispered. “They wanted your statement.”

I nodded, that making sense. “Are they still here?”

Marcella shrugged, brown eyes moving to the opening. “Probably, but,” her attention returned to me, “you can’t tell them what happened.”

I blinked. “What? Why?”

She leaned in closer and lowered her voice. “They won’t fix this the way we will. Getting them involved was why Darius went to prison. They make a mess. We will deal with this our way once and for all.”

I probably should have thought about it a bit longer than a second, but she was right. That was how it needed to be. “What’s the story?”

There was a ghost of a smile on her face when she replied, “It was a robbery. He wanted Darius’s wallet. Darius refused. The guy had a knife. It happened too fast. You didn’t see anything, except that he was wearing black. If they ask if you can think of anyone who would want to hurt Darius, no. You can’t think of anyone, okay?”

I nodded.

I probably should have felt horrible for undermining the investigation in case they could actually catch the guy, but the person with the knife was only a person with a knife. He was doing a job. He was told who to go after, where to be and when. He wasn’t innocent in this and would need to pay for what he’s done, but the real culprit was the motherfucker who sent him. He was the one I wanted to see fry, to bleed out while his loved ones watched.

It should have concerned me just how quickly my pain and terror flipped to rage and bloodlust. It should have scared me how easily the slow and brutal death of another person soothed me, but it didn’t. All I knew was that if Darius didn’t make it, if I lost him, I would hunt down every person responsible and gut them alive.

The two uniformed police officers who found me ten minutes later did their best with the little information I could give them. They scribbled it all down and I watched them try to build a picture from a scene that didn’t happen.

“We’re going to do everything we can to catch whoever did this,” the younger of the two assured us.

I appreciated his enthusiasm, but he wouldn’t. He wasn’t looking in the right place.

Kas arrived shortly after the pair left, hauling a duffle bag. I took it gratefully and wandered my way to the nearest bathroom. Lavena and Kas followed silently.

She’d swapped her own dress for jeans and a comfy sweater and brought a pair of sweaters and puffy tops for me and Lavena as well as shoes and a whole pack of wipes. The two helped me use half of it scrubbing Darius’s blood off my hand, arms, chest, and legs. No one spoke for several minutes until the job was done.

“Thanks,” I said.

The two gave me tired smiles, but neither spoke.

We changed quickly and returned to the waiting room to find a family with three small children taking up an entire wall. The youngest wailed, clutching his ears. We took our spots without looking at them. Lavena rested her head on my shoulder, and I leaned mine over top of her head and we sat that way.

It was ten in the morning when a doctor finally emerged with news.

“It was a rough night,” he said with a little chuckle, “but we got him patched up. There were four entry wounds, one on his side and three in his abdomen. Someone up there was looking out for him because somehow, all the vital organs were missed. He’s finally out of recovery and in his room. We’re going to keep him a few more nights just to make sure he’s okay to go home, but from what I can see, he should be back on his feet in no time.”

“When can we see him?” I blurted before he finished speaking.

“I can take you now, but it’s family only.”

“We’re all family,” Lavena said, sliding an arm through mine and Kas’s.

The doctor looked on the verge of arguing, but one look from Alexander and he seemed to change his mind.

He motioned us to follow him out into the corridor. We were taken up the elevator to the next floor and the long, pale hallway lined with doors.

The doctor continued to go over rules and visitation hours. It was all I could do to keep from sprinting past him and just finding Darius myself; the man was taking his sweet time getting us there.

Something broke in me seeing Darius unconscious and hooked up to a million machines. His usually warm tone glowed with a sick tinge of clammy white that made me think of dough. His dark hair hung lank and damp against his brow. But he was alive. The beeping of his heart machine assured me of it. It played the sweetest song I could ever ask for.

“My sweet baby,” Marcella whispered, voice as thick as my throat felt.

She rushed to his side and immediately touched the side of his face where the oxygen tank didn’t cover. She smoothed back his hair and touched his forehead as if checking for a fever.

Eyes damp, she glanced at the doctor. “He’s okay?”

The doctor nodded, kind enough not to point out he’d said as much earlier. “If all goes well, he should make a full recovery.”

Marcella nodded, turning back to her eldest. Her hands fluttered down to his chest, just a brush before she pulled back and straightened. “He looks good,” she observed. “You can see his color coming back.”

Alexander, who hadn’t said much since their arrival, touched his wife’s back. His blue eyes stayed trained on his son, but there was nothing to indicate his thoughts.

The doctor made a few more comments no one listened to before excusing himself and leaving us to gather closer around the bed.

I took his hand.

I don't know why I thought it would be as cold as it had been in the ambulance, but feeling the warmth in his skin unlocked the air that had been trapped in my chest. It calmed the storm in my gut, and I sank into the nearest chair, never once releasing him.

“Word of this will get out,” Alexander said quietly. “The people responsible will know they failed and will try again.”

My fingers tightened around Darius's. “Should we move him? I don't think—”

Alexander shook his head. “No, he needs to be here if he's going to make a full recovery. I will have Morpheus send a few of his best men to stand watch. No one will be allowed in here without my authorization.”

“We can each take shifts staying with him, too,” Lavena suggested. “That way one of us will be here when he wakes up.”

I didn't tell them that I had no intention of leaving. They could stay and have as many guards as they wanted, but I was going to stay in that seat until Darius opened his eyes.

## CHAPTER 17

# *Kamari*



He didn't wake up that first night.

The machines continued to comfort me through the shrinking dusk. Their every little spike assured me Darius was still there, still fighting to stay alive. I never realized how much I would love the relentless beeping until I was watching every jump with anticipation.

On the opposite side of the bed, Marcella tapped away at her phone. I knew she was keeping the family updated just from the occasional, *oh, how sweet of cousin Mauve*, she'd murmur under her breath.

I texted my dad to let him know what had happened just so he wouldn't find out about it from the news.

*"I'm on my way,"* he'd written back almost immediately.

*"No, don't do that. They won't let anyone not family into the room. I'll keep you posted once there's any change,"* I promised.

*"Does Marcella and Alex need anything? Do you?"*

I felt myself smile at his kindness. *"I'm okay, Dad. Thank you."*

He insisted I let him know if he was needed. He would keep his phone on until Darius woke up, even if Mom didn't like the idea.

"Dad says to let him know if you need anything," I told Marcella.

The other woman glanced up from her phone and smiled softly. “That’s so kind. Please tell him thank you.” She set her phone down in her lap. “How’s your mom?”

“The same.” I chuckled dryly. “A little worse, but mostly the same.”

“That must be so hard on your parents.”

“I’m sure it is, but he insists that they’re fine.”

She hummed softly. “Having met your father, that doesn’t surprise me. He’s always been a very sweet man who loves your mother very much.”

I agreed but let the topic drop. Discussing my mother and her many phobias was never a simple topic for me. While Marcella had never judged, talking about my parents’ business to anyone made me uneasy.

Instead, I smoothed the blankets around Darius and settled more comfortably in the rickety chair next to his bed.

“I don’t know if I’ve told you, but I’m so glad he picked you.” She chuckled when I glanced back at her. “I don’t know if that’s something I’m supposed to say, but if you’re going to be my daughter in law, I feel I should tell you that there is no one I want my son to be with more and I’m so happy it’s you.”

Flooded by the tangled knot of guilt and happiness, I lowered my gaze to the hand resting under mine, the long fingers too still. I couldn’t seem to let go. He’d become an extension of my arm, an anchor keeping me from drifting. I hadn’t used the bathroom since the day before when changing my blood-soaked dress. I hadn’t eaten or drunk anything since the party. Holding his hand was the only thing I was capable of doing. All other essential, human duties seemed pointless.

“I think we might be cursed,” I told her quietly, but with a weak chuckle that was supposed to make light of the comment. It didn’t.

“Why do you say that?”

How did I explain to anyone the back-to-back series is misfortunes every time we almost had a chance? I was

beginning to believe I was actively going against God himself trying to be with this man, which sounds insane, but valid.

So, I tried. I gave Marcella exact timeframes of every time Darius, and I were almost there just for some force of nature to get in the way. I even told her about Volkov because at that point, with everything that happened, there was no way she wasn't going to figure it out.

To my surprise, Marcella laughed. "Sweetheart, that's not a curse. That's the realities of being with a Medlock. It's like a rite of passage. I can't explain it exactly in words a normal person would understand but let me put it to you this way." She straightened slightly in her seat and leaned forward. "When Darius's grandfather was arranged to marry his grandmother, she was kidnapped and held for ransom for two weeks by a rival family. She wound up getting shot at the wedding in the middle of the church by her own sister, then he was hit by a car trying to get her to the hospital."

"Oh my God," I mumbled, horrified.

Marcella put up a hand. "There's more. Every Medlock woman has had to endure a series of tests, as Darius's great grandma would say, to make sure they're worthy."

I scoffed. "Great. A series of random pop quizzes I wasn't prepared for."

"But you're doing great," she assured me. "I wish I could say it eventually stops, but..." she gestured to Darius. "Being in this life isn't for everyone. It takes a strong, stubborn woman to endure the highs and lows."

"I keep hoping this is all a really bad nightmare, but I'm too scared to close my eyes so I know I'm awake."

All humor vanished from her pretty face, and she sighed. "I didn't sleep for a month after Alex was shot. I'd doze off and jerk awake reaching for him."

"What did you do?" I heard the smallness in my voice, the weakness.

Marcella shrugged. "Nothing. There's medication, if you want to try that. I found it only made the nightmare worse. I



felt trapped in my dreams, watching him get shot over and over again, and not being able to wake up.” She shook her head slightly. “I went to a therapist. I don’t think it helped. Plus, with people like that, people like doctors and priests who take an oath to only keep your secrets until it’s something unethical, it’s hard to be honest, you know? It defeats the purpose, and having friends, even friends who understand can be a risk. No amount of loyalty will keep some people from stabbing you in the back. You, Lavena and the girls got very lucky with your friendship.” She sighed, giving a little flip of her shoulder. “In the end, you’ll find the thing that gets you through.”

“What’s yours?” I asked.

“My thing?” I nodded. “Boxing.” She laughed at my startled expression. “I don’t do rounds with other people, but I like punching things until my arms hurt and I’m sore and tired. It helps my ... rage, I guess.”

I liked that idea. I liked the thought of hitting something until I couldn’t feel my arms. That was what I wanted to do to the people responsible. I wanted them to hurt, to bleed and beg before they died.

“I want them to suffer,” I heard myself say out loud.

Marcella didn’t ask who, nor did she seem surprised. “They will. I can promise you that.”

I shook my head, watching the slow rise and fall of Darius’s chest, but I didn’t explain. I couldn’t. I didn’t know how to put into words the raw, violent rage building up inside me. I didn’t know how to tell her I could picture exactly what I would do to the people if they were in front of me. I didn’t think she’d ever look at me the same way if she knew how slow I would make their deaths, how brutal.

I sighed instead and changed the topic. “You didn’t seem surprised when I mentioned Volkov.”

Marcella grinned. “You will learn that despite there being so many of us and some of us are better at keeping our secrets, there is very little you can hide, especially from us women. We

will figure it out one way or another.” She suddenly broke off and checked her watch. “Shoot! I had a tea date with a friend today. I have to call her.” She rose and pulled her purse strap over her shoulder. “I’ll be right back.”

I watched her rush out on her velvet, black pumps. The two men Alexander had hired to stay at the door stepped aside to let her pass and immediately returned to their positions blocking the entire door.

I wasn’t surprised one of them was Enzo. He and Darius weren’t best friends, but they were friendly. Darius being the brother of his sister’s best friend and the woman he regularly hooked up with may have played some part, but Enzo was one of the best at what he did, and Alexander would expect nothing less.

The other man, slightly shorter, but still built like a linebacker, I didn’t recognize. Enzo had introduced him as Lloyd Burkhart when they’d arrived. He’d been the one who had come into the room with a tiny, hand-held device and set to work scanning every inch, including Darius and us.

I was and wasn’t surprised that the room wasn’t bugged. As far as whoever did this was concerned, the job was done and Darius wouldn’t need a bugged room, but I wasn’t going to say no to extra precautions.

I traced the back of Darius’s hand, the veins, the long lengths of his fingers, his rough palm, missing the feel of them on me. I scooted closer to the bed and laid my head on the mattress next to his hip.

The scene was the same.

Me and Darius in the parking garage.

Darius getting yanked away, getting stabbed.

I jerked upright. My fingers tightening around his, my heart pumping louder than the machine next to me.

“You okay?” Lavena watched me from Marcella’s seat. The other woman was nowhere in sight.

“Where’s your mom?” I croaked, rubbing my free hand over the stiff knot at the back of my neck.

Lavena shut off her phone and dropped it into her lap. “Was forced to go home, like I’m going to do to you.”

My fingers reflexively tightened around Darius’s hand. “I’m not leaving until he wakes up.”

Unmoved, Lavena leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “You stink. You are covered in dried blood. Your face alone right now will scare him to death. You’re going home. You’re going to shower, eat, poop, and take a nap. It doesn’t have to be in that order, but I will forcibly remove you if you test me.”

“I can’t leave!” I snapped, anger and fear working up to tighten around my throat.

Lavena never so much as blinked. “Go or I will make you.”

Battling hot tears, I glowered at my best friend. “What if he wakes up?”

“I will call you.” She waved her phone as if in indication.

“But—”

“Kam, there is nothing you can do right now. He’s resting and healing. You will make yourself sick. Go home.” She softened her tone to a degree. “I promise I will call you the second there is any change.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat and studied the man I loved, trying to see him past the blur of tears threatening to spill. “I can’t sleep,” I told her quietly. “Every time I close my eyes ... if I’m here, at least I know it was just a nightmare.”

Lavena watched me for a long moment as if trying to decide something. “Go home,” she said again. “I mean it.”

She wasn’t kidding.

Within seconds of my protest, she’d called Enzo into the room. Her blue eyes bore mercilessly into mine as she ordered

him to get me into a cab.

“If I see you back here in less than three hours, I will ban you.”

I stared, horrified and hurt beyond measure. “Lavena...”

She put her hand up. “I love you. You can be mad at me, but you’re not in the right head space. It’s my job to look after you when you can’t look after yourself. Now, go home. You haven’t eaten or slept in two days. It’s only three hours.”

Enzo made as if to help me out of my chair. I jerked away, unable to take my eyes off my friend.

Deep down — deep, deep, deep down — I knew she was looking out for me. I knew I would have done the same but, in that moment, the betrayal felt too real, too solid. I couldn’t believe she would go so far but she didn’t back down. She watched in stony silence as Enzo escorted me out. He stayed strong and silent all the way to the lobby and still said nothing when he got me into the cab. My address was rattled off and the man was paid ... generously to make sure I went inside the apartment.

I was livid the entire drive.

Despite it not being the driver’s fault, I muttered my thanks as I exited the cab at the Alexander. Lewis was already waiting for me with a kind smile.

“Ah, Ms. Reid, welcome back. Can I help you to the elevator?”

Nine years of living at the Alexander and Lewis had never once asked to walk me to the elevator.

My eyes narrowed. “Did Lavena call you?”

The older man’s face took on a polite blankness that answered the question without actually answering. “Not that I recall, ma’am .”

I couldn’t be angry with him. He was doing his job.

“I’m fine, Lewis. Thank you.”

The man inclined his head and held the door for me to pass though.

I made it to the elevator without running into anyone and let it take me to my apartment.

It would be a lie to pretend the urge to stop at Darius's floor wasn't there. My finger hovered over the button before moving to the proper floor.

I was in the middle of my foyer, toeing off my sneakers when my phone sprung to life in my pocket. The possibility that Darius was awake had me fumbling for it. My heart jumped into my throat at Lavena's face inches from her screen.

I had never accepted anything so fast in my life.

"Lavena? What? Is he—?"

"*No.*" Her head bobbed as she moved around the room. The camera swayed and dipped. I watched her position it next to Darius's bedside table, angled toward the bed and his face. Hers blocked the screen a moment. "*There. Now, get into bed.*"

The bundle of anger wedged in my chest loosened as I realized what she'd done. For all her tough love, Lavena truly was one of the sweetest people.

I held on to my phone as if it were the most precious thing I owned and padded in the direction of the bathroom to shower, change, then slip into bed for a couple of hours.



Darkness cloaked my room when I opened my eyes. The absence of noise, of Darius's heart machine had me bolting upright, panic a thick past climbing up my throat until I recognized my surroundings.

Home.

I was in my apartment, surrounded by my things. The alarm on the nightstand told me it was nine.

I had slept for almost six hours.

My phone, propped against my lamp, was dead. The battery drained. I didn't bother plugging it in. The traitor was snatched up. The cord was yanked from the wall, and I was sprinting for the door. My shoes were snatched up, laces tangling with my phone cables as I bolted out of the apartment in my socks. I got my shoes on in the elevator as it took its damn, sweet time descending.

The cabbie was kind enough to let me plug my phone in, not that it helped. It was completely dead. By the time I finally had a little juice, I was already at the hospital.

Two new guards were at the door. They stopped me with firm expressions and a raised hand the size of a catch's mitt.

"Wrong door," one said, going so far as to fold his arms over his black t-shirt.

"No," I panted, trying not to double over wheezing. "No, I'm Kami. I'm on the list."

The bald one on the left checked his phone, scrolling with a chunky finger until he located what he was looking for. He exchanged glances with the other one and the pair stepped aside mutely.

I hurried inside and stopped. Everyone was there, seated casually around the bed, except Sasha.

"I'm so sorry," I breathed, shutting the door behind me. "I don't even remember lying down or passing out." I sucked in a breath and moved to the small table tucked along one wall and bent to plug my phone in. "And my phone died."

“Kami, it’s fine,” Marcella said softly. “I only just got here myself.”

Still struggling to catch my breath, I swept my hair back and turned back to the room. “Any change?”

Heads rocked slowly from side to side. I sighed as I padded to the only empty seat — my empty seat from earlier — and dropped into it. My hand reflexively settled over Darius’s.

Still warm.

Lavena rested her chin on my shoulder and blinked up at me with big, blue eyes. “Mad at me still?”

I wanted to tell her I was, but I had to admit the nap, shower, and bite of whatever was in my fridge had helped. I felt less jittery and more focused.

“Maybe a little,” I lied, holding my grin behind a scowl.

She scoffed. “Liar.”

Rather than respond, I knocked my head lightly into hers.

“Morpheus just texted me,” Alexander announced, peering down at his phone. “He wants to meet.”

Marcella was already on her feet, brushing down her slacks and knitted tank. “I’ll have Juan bring the car.”

“I’d like to come with you,” I blurted before I could stop myself. “Please.”

Alexander and Marcella exchanged glances, but I was already pushing to my feet; it may have sounded like a request, but I was going even if I had to follow them in a cab.

No one stopped me when I followed them, leaving Lavena, Edmund, and Kas alone to watch over Darius.

“Hey.” Lavena held out her phone to me. “Call Kas’s phone if you need to reach us.”

Grateful, I took the slim device and hurried after the Medlocks.

Neither one asked me why I was tagging along. They seemed unbothered by my presence. Alexander held the passenger side door open for me when we arrived in the parking lot while he and his wife got into the back.

Marcella must have texted Juan the address because he never asked, and no one told him as we pulled away from the hospital. I noted, with some confusion, that we were heading away from the city, away from the bright lights and prying eyes. The air grew crisper without the shield of buildings. The dark held more weight. It made me think of the drive back with Darius, the peace I'd felt with his hand on my leg and his warm scent in the cabin.

I glanced at Lavena's phone, half hoping for a message, but all the alerts were from other people asking if Darius was okay, if there was any news, if Lavena wanted to go for drinks. The last one was from Enzo.

I didn't look at the rest.

We passed a steel arch at the opening of what appeared to be a scrapyard. The dead remains of vehicles stood in rusted layers, a mountain of metal left forgotten and us maneuvering the winding path to the center.

A harsh, yellow ring of light illuminated a squat structure crafted from sheets of metal and the two figures waiting for us.

Sasha offered me a tiny, perplexed wave, but neither she nor her father asked why I was there.

"It didn't take as long as we had expected," Morpheus stated the moment we had joined the pair under the light. He held out a pale folder that Alexander accepted. "They were smart. They hired an amateur. Malcolm Jarmon, twenty-five, some street thug turned assassin got his hands on the listing, thought he'd made it big given the pocket change being offered for someone like Darius. He must not have done his homework, or he would have realized what a bad decision taking the hit was. He was texted Darius's information and photo, but here's the thing." He waited until Alexander had flipped the folder open. Several sheets of paper were flipped until Morpheus placed a finger on a spot. "Someone at the



party told him when Darius left and roughly how long it would take to get back to the Alexander. I haven't learned the identity of the informant here, but I do know who placed the hit in the first place."

"Volkov," Alexandra murmured before Morpheus could continue.

The other man nodded, his dark eyes shadowed beneath his heavy brows. "He waited for the party, knowing it would be the best way to calculate Darius's whereabouts for Malcolm."

Something about the photo of Uriah Volkov had me reaching for the page in Alexander's hand. I tilted it to get a better glimpse of that familiar face under the filmy light.

He had the same square face.

The same brown eyes and heavy forehead. In the photo, his hair was thick, wavy, and dark, but when I'd seen him, it was shot through with gray and slicked back.

"I know him," I murmured.

"You do?" Sasha peered down at the piece of paper. "How?"

I passed the photo back to Alexander. "He came to the shop a few days ago and bought a dress for his wife."

"He was in the store?" Sasha gasped.

I nodded. "He seemed really nice, asked for my name. Said he would send his wife in to look at a few pieces. Offered to set me up with one of his three sons. I thought he was weird, but sweet."

"He was feeling you out," Morpheus mumbled. "Was he alone?" At my nod, he hummed and scratched his chin. "The fact that you were with Darius when he was attacked, and you were left untouched makes me think you were never a target. Uriah must have taken a liking to you."

"Maybe he really did want to set you up with one of his sons," Sasha added, lips pulling down in a grimace.

“Honestly, that’s a real possibility,” Morpheus replied with a little shrug of his wide shoulders.

“Where is Malcom now?” Alexander interrupted, passing the folder back to Morpheus.

The other man accepted it and handed it off to Sasha. “He’s currently in holding. We found him holed up in a motel just on the outskirts of the city. He was waiting for his money. Someone was supposed to meet him there.”

“Most likely to kill him,” Sasha added. “No witnesses.”

“Is there a chance he could be lying?” Alexander pressed.

The slow rock of Morpheus’s head indicated that was an impossibility. “Definitely not. We were very thorough in our questioning.”

Interrogation.

“He named Volkov?” Marcella asked.

Morpheus shook his head again. “No, he gave us his phone and we found the forum, the messages, the files. He’d been wired the first half of the money and that was easily traced back to Oscar Corp, one of Volkov’s shell companies.”

Alexander exhaled heavily, head bobbing as if Morpheus was merely stating everything he’d already known. “Do you have a plan in motion?”

“Waiting on your orders,” Morpheus replied smoothly. “I have men ready to dispatch on your go ahead.”

There was a brief moment where Alexander exchanged silent glances with his wife, a second long conversation that seemed to solidify their decision.

“Do it.” Marcella slid her arm through her husband’s as if assuring everyone this was a mutual judgment. “Uriah Volkov can’t be allowed to live after this.”

Morpheus inclined his head to her before turning to his daughter. “Grab the contract.”

Sasha hesitated. Her dark eyes — so much like her father’s — shot from him to me, then Alexander and Marcella before

returning to the bigger man next to her. “I want to do it.”

It was unclear who was more stunned by the declaration.

“This is a big job,” Morpheus reminded her. “It can’t be taken lightly.”

“Darius is my best friend’s brother ... and ... boyfriend?” she shot me an apologetic, yet uncertain grimace before continuing, “I am not taking this lightly. I want this to be my hit.” She pivoted to face the other two. “I can do this.”

“Of course, you can, sweetheart,” Marcella said immediately. “I believe it completely.”

Alexander nodded. “If Morpheus believe you are up for the task, then yes, we would very much like Sasha to handle this.”

Morpheus remained silent for a moment longer, studying his daughter. “Enzo will go with you as backup.”

I was sure I wasn’t the only one who could see the visible tremors rippling through her, but she kept a firm eye contact with her father and nodded. “Fine.”

Morpheus motioned to the shack. “Get the contract.”

Sasha spun on her heels and hurried out of sight.

“She can do this,” Marcella vouched as if Morpheus needed reassurance. “It’s the perfect case for her. She has incentive and a purpose.”

Morpheus hummed quietly as if agreeing and disagreeing at the same time, but he didn’t voice either out loud.

“Morpheus,” I heard my voice in the silence that followed, startling even me at the unexpected intrusion. Morpheus pinned those unfathomable eyes down on me. “All of them.”

All three pairs of eyes snapped to me as if I suddenly declared myself a unicorn.

“Kami?” Marcella murmured, her concern reflecting in her eyes. “Sweetie, what—?”

I ignored her, attention fixed on the tall, dark man. “His wife. His sons. I want Uriah to watch them suffer horribly. He needs to watch everyone he loves die in front of him slowly and violently, and him being powerless to do anything but watch.” I took a breath, willing my voice to remain calm when I was anything but inside.

If Morpheus thought I’d lost my mind, his features never showed it, but I could feel him assessing me, trying to decide if I had any say in the matter, which, realistically, I probably didn’t.

The Medlocks were less careful with their expressions. Alexander seemed surprised, Marcella contemplative.

“What do you think, darling?” Alexander turned to his wife.

Marcella glanced from me to him. “If that’s what Kami wants. She has a right to make the request.”

“I agree.” he stated and turned to Morpheus. “And she does have a point. Leaving them to live would only continue the cycle. There is a lesson to be learned here and I believe Kami is correct that an example must be made.”

It was an effort to not throw my arms around the pair, but there would be time for that later.

“I do have one ... two more requests,” I didn’t wait before plowing on, “It can’t be Sasha. She ... I don’t want that on her hands. She can take care of Uriah, but the others, someone else has to do it.”

Marcella immediately nodded her head. “Agreed. I do not want Sasha to be anywhere near all that.”

A hint of a grin toyed across Morpheus’s face. “That is part of her job.”

Marcella shook her head. “Absolutely not. That can be her job somewhere else.”

Morpheus sighed but relented. “If that is what you like. What is the other ... request?” I ignored the touch of amusement in the word *request*.

“No raping anyone, especially Mrs. Volkov.”

All signs of amusement vanished. “We do not do that. My team are not monsters. We still uphold a code of honor.”

“It’s an understandable request to make,” Marcella assured me. “But we have worked with Morpheus for years and we would not if there was ever a hint of anything so vial.”

I nodded. “Of course. I apologize for my misunderstanding.”

Morpheus gave a low, grumbling grunt that could have passed for acceptance. Thankfully I was saved from saying anything more as Sasha returned with a stack of papers. Her father took them and the pen from her.

“There has been a change of plans.”

## CHAPTER 18

### *Darius*



I followed the relentless beeping through the fog.

I followed the gnawing, burning pain lighting my skin on fire.

I followed the lights and smells until my eyelids were opening and I was staring at a ceiling lined with foam and fluorescent. My body clung to the searing, white hot lances of unbearable agony even as I fought to move, to detach from whatever was pinning me down.

“Darius?”

Figures rose through the murk and blocked the glare. Familiar faces blurred in and out of focus.

“He’s awake!”

The rest of the exclamation was muffled under an ocean of nothing as I dipped under again.

When I resurfaced a second time, the figures were still there, but not the same ones. A light flashed in and out of view. Someone kept calling my name, but it sounded so far away.

“Darius, can you hear me?” the main figure kept asking, flashing that damn light into my eyes.

I tried to swat him away, tried to move my arms, but they stayed stubbornly down at my sides. It didn’t matter. The white mist enveloped me once more.

The third time back, I knew immediately where I was. The room was a sharp focus of divine white light so pure, I momentarily believed I'd died. The bed faced an entire wall of windows overlooking a sky thick with overcast. The late afternoon spilled into an already painfully sterile box containing an enormous bed, a million chairs and a dozen people in varying degrees of awareness.

I studied the crowd through sleep heavy lids, painting their faces to memory. It seemed nearly every person I held dear was clustered around me, but it was the dark head at my right hip that I actively sought out. It was the small hand curled possessively into mine even as she slept. I couldn't make out her features from that angle, but I recognized all that lush cloud of hair spilling over slender shoulders.

"Hey." From my left, Mom rose quietly from her seat and crept forward. Her hand settled lightly on my shoulder as she leaned in. "Hey baby, how are you feeling?" The words were a whisper, and I realized the rest of the room was asleep still.

"What happened?" I rasped.

Her brows creased with concern. "You don't remember?"

I did, or at least, a part of me did. It had been a loop in my dreams, a never-ending cycle of ripping pain every time the blade had sunk into my gut. It definitely explained the raw, burning itch across my torso.

"Was Kami hurt?"

Mom shook her head. "She's fine. Worried about you. We all were."

My gaze drifted down to the woman at my side. "What happened?" I asked again, returning my attention to my mom. "Was it a robbery?"

She shook her head. "Don't worry about that right now. Just rest. We'll talk about everything later."

I really didn't want any more rest, but I could feel my body settling to drop back into that weird, foggy place I kept going to.

“Tell Kami...”

I couldn't be sure if I actually finished my thought or what she was even supposed to tell Kami, but the words lingered in the space as I slid into nothing once more.

Dusk pressed into the glass and filled the room, except for the solitary lamp lit at the foot of the bed when I pried my eyelids apart. Most of the chairs lined the far wall, empty. Only one was occupied. The one I wanted to see most.

Kami sat in the same spot, face turned in the direction of the windows. A book lay forgotten on her lap, the spine cracked around the thumb being used as a bookmark. I studied her while she stayed lost in her thoughts. I traced the soft lines of her features warmed by the single source of light. The golden glow created a halo around her head, teasing out the streaks of auburn in the dark strands twisted into a loose braid over one shoulder.

It struck me in that moment with a clarity I probably shouldn't have possessed given how much drugs I was probably on, but I couldn't believe she was mine. Somehow and for some inexplicable reason, she had chosen me. She, who could have literally had anyone, wanted me. I couldn't believe it. I would have laughed if it didn't hurt.

“Hey kitten.”

Her head snapped around with a ferocity that sent tendrils of hair whipping around her face. Her dark eyes widened, and she leaped out of her chair.

“Hi!” she breathed, rushing to the side of my bed, her book abandoned on her vacated seat. “Hey, how are you feeling?”

I tried to inhale, realized it was a terrible idea and blew it out gingerly. “Like someone hooked my guts up on a hot poker.”

Her features creased into one of sorrow as she took the hand closest to her between both of hers. “I am so sorry,” she breathed. “This is all my fault.”

I may have raised an eyebrow, though I couldn't be sure. “You didn't do this.”



Without letting my hand go, she perched her hip on the edge of my cot and sat. “I was the one who made us leave the party. If we had stayed—”

“Then it would have happened another day,” I pointed out. “Possibly worse.”

She nibbled on her bottom lip. “I have never been so scared.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, wishing I could erase the uncertainty and grief from her mind. “I wish you hadn’t been there.”

Her fingers tightened around mine. “Then you would have died in that parking garage. I would have lost you forever.” Our joined hands were brought to her chest and cradled against the soft pattering of her heart. “I never want to let you out of my sights again.”

I tried to chuckle, but the sound came out as a weak wheeze. “Promise?”

Her response was to press my hand closer to her chest. “I mean it, Darius.”

“Good, because I’ve spent enough time without you.”

She sighed, but I knew it was to cover the thickening of tears in her voice. “You can’t ever die on me,” she croaked. “I can’t ... I can’t live without you. I don’t want to.”

“Then you know what that means, don’t you?”

Again, it may have been the drugs because I would never have said words that sounded so much like a proposal out loud without proper planning. My statement was meant as a joke for her to stick by my side every day until she was tired of me. But the way she stopped moving simply to stare at me had my nerves prickling.

This was not the face of a woman excited by the prospect of marriage.

“What?” I asked.

Her hold that had been firm and possessive up until that point loosened. My fingers stayed twinned with hers but it was

as if she was expecting me to pull away once I found out.

“I did something,” she whispered. Her bottom lip curled up between her teeth. “I don’t know how you’re going to feel about it.”

I wondered just how long I’d been out. Maybe it had been years and all hope was gone and she’d moved on, but because Kami had always been the sweetest person, she came to visit me, never really expecting me to wake up.

Even as I was thinking it, I knew that wasn’t it.

“What?” I asked again.

She sucked in a breath. I felt the thump of her heart where my hand was nestled between her breasts. “I want you to know that I don’t regret it and I would most likely do it again given the chance.”

Both intrigued and concerned, I waited, not expecting the news to be anything wildly crazy. This was Kami, after all, and she was incapable of horrible things.

“You have my undivided attention,” I teased, hoping she’d just tell me already.

The smooth column of her throat bobbed. “I ... I went—”

The door opened at that moment and Lavena strolled in holding three cups of coffee and several bags of chips. Her blue eyes hopped from Kami perched on the bed to me and widened.

“You’re awake!” She scrambled deeper into the room and dumped her items on the wheeling table at the foot of the bed. Then she was at my other side, looking me over. “Jesus Christ, you assholes. What the fuck?”

I grunted. “Love you, too.”

Her small hands speared into her hips, a stance I knew well; she was trying to keep from crying.

“Did anyone call the doctor? Is he coming? Did he see you? Where is he?” She didn’t wait for a response before she was matching back to the open doorway and the two figures I

could just make out blocking the hallway. “Where’s the doctor?” she yelled over their shoulders.

“Jesus, Lavena!” Kami hissed. “There are sick people here. You can’t be yelling in the halls at ten o’clock at night.” Kami reached for the button next to my bed and clicked it once.

“He should have already been here,” Lavena snapped.

“There are other people—”

Lavena whirled to face us, eyes bright with unshed tears. “There is no one more important than my brother. The doctor needs to come see him now.”

“Knock it off, snotface,” I rasped, desperately needing to move but not wanting the pain I knew would follow. “Come over here.” Lavena glowered from across the room, not budging. “Don’t make me get you,” I warned, only partially meaning it.

Reluctant, Lavena shuffled back to the bed and stopped when her kneecaps hit the mattress. I patted the spot next to my other hip.

With a sniffle and a deliberate avoidance of her face, she sat. I took her tightly bunched fist with my free hand and squeezed.

“I can’t believe you got yourself stabbed,” she muttered, hand waving dramatically but I didn’t miss her wiping her cheek. “How dumb are you? And don’t call me a snotface, asshole.”

I tugged on her hand. “I’m fine,” I assured her quietly. “It was barely a scratch.”

Her chin whipped in my direction, lashes damp around her enormous eyes. “You got stabbed four times!”

I grimaced. “That’s it?”

It definitely felt like it was more. It felt like my entire innards were turned to Swiss cheese. I could scarcely breath from the diaphragm without wanting to curl into a tight ball.

“That’s is?” Lavena practically shrieked. “Are you fucking stupid? That’s a lot. Like four times too many.”

“Do you remember when you made those dumplings and we all had to live in the bathroom for two days? It feels a little like that.” The teasing comment had the exact effect I’d been aiming for.

Lavena huffed, pulling back. “We all swore we would never speak of that.”

It was true, but she wasn’t crying anymore. Her eyes weren’t full of tears and sadness. I took the win.

“Where is everyone?”

She rubbed a hand under her nose. “Mom and Dad went home. Edmund is here somewhere. He got a call he had to take. Kas is home. Her dad has a deposition in the morning and she’s helping. Sasha is doing Sasha things.”

I lifted a brow. “What’s Sasha things?”

Lavena shrugged. “Taking care of stuff.”

The level of secrecy had my gaze flicking to the woman in my right. Kami was looking down at our joined hands, oddly transfixed by my thumb.

“Who was it?” I glanced at my sister. “Volkov?”

Lavena raised her chin in defiance. “You don’t need to worry about that right now. You’re supposed to be resting.”

I ignored her and faced Kami. “What happened?”

Her soft eyes lifted hesitantly through dark lashes. “Yes,” she murmured.

My sister hissed through her teeth. “We agreed!”

Kami sighed, shoulders slumping. “I know, but he has a right to know.” Lavena merely shook her head, and Kami continued. “He hired someone to do the job.”

I wasn’t surprised.

It didn’t surprise me that it was Volkov behind it. I hadn’t surprised me before learning the truth from Edmund and it

didn't surprise me after. Volkov was reacting exactly how anyone in his position would. Ivan may have been scum but he'd been Uriah's son. Doing nothing would have been weak, an opening for others to come after him and his business. He was setting an example.

"At least it's over now," I said more to myself. I closed my eyes and sank into the stuff mattress and flimsy pillow. "We just have to move on and leave it alone." It didn't take the heavy silence from the pair to clue me in. It was the topic that had started this conversation. My eyes snapped open and shot to my sister who was casting guilty sidelong glances towards Kami. "What is Sasha doing, Lavena?"

"It was me," Kami blurted in a rush.

I started to ask what the hell she was talking about when the door opened and frazzled nurse bustled in. She cast annoyed glances at the men at the door, but straightened her expression with she saw me awake.

"Oh good, you're up." She hurried over. "How are you feeling?"

In minutes, she had my blood pressure and temperature checked. She drew back my cover and rolled up my hospital gown.

"Hey, whoa!" I yelped without thinking.

She shot me two raised eyebrows and an amused smirk. "I need to check your bandages."

I knew that, but I hadn't been expecting the invasion, especially with Lavena standing several feet away, not paying attention but still there.

She caught me staring at her and rolled her eyes. She turned away.

The nurse went about her job examining my stitches and wraps. I was asked a series of questions that were jotted them down in the clipboard at the foot of the bed. I responded with only half a mind as I watched my sister and Kami huddle off to one side, heads bent together conspiratorially. I didn't need

to be a fly on the wall to know I wasn't going to like whatever had the two looking so panicked.

Because my room wasn't crowded enough, Edmund took that moment to waltz in. His pale eye jumped from person to person and stopped on me

His eyes widened. "You're up!"

The nurse ignored him as she pulled the blankets up around me. "I'll get the doctor." She turned to the others in the room. "The rest of you, visiting hours are over. Only one person can stay."

With that, she marched out.

"Spill."

I stared at each of the three's faces. Only two actually seemed to know what I was talking about. Edmund glanced from me to the two off to the side.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Maybe Mom and Dad are the people to talk to," Lavena decided getting nods of agreement from Kami.

"No, you. Now."

My sister shot the woman beside her a single glance before stepping closer. She opened her mouth, but Kami grabbed her arm.

"It was me. All of it. I take full responsibility for whatever happens." She lowered her hand and moved to the foot of the bed. "It had to happen. You might disagree, but I don't regret it." She sucked in air that lifted her breasts against the soft material of her T-shirt. My body's immediate reaction gave me hope that I hadn't lost more than a few pints of blood. "It would never have stopped. When Uriah finds out that you lived, he'll try again. He had to be stopped."

I processed the information she was giving me with the bravery of someone explaining why there was a body in the trunk of her car.

“Did you put a hit on Volkov?” I murmured, disbelieving and marveling at the prospect.

“No!” she said firmly, then winced and added, “not exactly. Your parents decided that might be the best thing, and I agreed.”

I let that simmer, understanding the rationale behind the decision. “Okay, well, I get that.”

But then, Kami looked back at Lavena and Lavena shrugged.

Fuck me.

There was more.

Breathing hard, Kami darted around the side of my bed to stand next to me, fingers twisting aggressively at her midsection. “Don’t get mad, okay?”

“Fuck, Kami...”

She put a hand up. “Let me explain. He tried to have you killed. He hired someone to take you out of my life. He made me watch as you bled in my arms. If he had succeeded, I would have lost you again, but forever this time. You did the time. Maybe that’s not good enough for him, but I don’t give a fuck. I don’t care that his son was a shitty person who was probably going to get killed by someone eventually. I don’t care if he thinks he’s some tough guy who sends shady little assholes to lurk in parking garages. He came after the man I love. He thought I would just let that slide and consider us even. An eye for an eye. But we are not even. Not even close. I don’t want Uriah to just die. That’s too easy. I want him to watch as everyone he loves dies. I want him drenched in their blood. I want him to feel every second of the pain and fear I felt that night, and I am not sorry. I won’t regret it or take it back.”

I stared at the woman standing over me, an ethereal beauty with eyes full of murder and vengeance and the sweetest words of love on her lips. The sheer rage stiffening the delicate lines of her spine was as precise as a whalebone corset strapped across her chest. This was not a woman who knew

mercy or surrender. This was a woman who was prepared to burn the city to the ground ... for me.

“What did you do?”

There was no hesitation in her response.

No remorse.

She met my gaze with cold, unflinching certainty. “What had to be done.”

Fuck, I loved her.

If my innards weren't being kept inside my body by a handful of threads, I would have had her on the bed with me, legs twisted around my hips as I showed her just how fucking hot she made me.

“Come here, kitten.” She regained her spot at my side, her hip bumping mine as she leaned over me, bracing her weight with the knuckles she bolted into the pillow on either side of my head. “You two can wait outside,” I told my siblings without taking my eyes off the face hovering inches over mine.

I vaguely recalled hearing the door shut. Then silence.

“Angry?” she asked.

I grazed her hip with the tips of my fingers. “Put your hand under the blanket and see for yourself.”

Kami laughed. “You know I would never be able to stop there.”

I heard the groan leave my chest. “Fuck, don't tease me. I'm an injured man.”

The rest of her laughter was muffled by the lips she brushed over mine. It dissolved into a low, throaty sigh as she sank into the kiss.

“I love you, too,” I murmured against her soft lips and felt them bow into a sweet smile.

“Heard that, did you?” She raised her head just high enough to look into my eyes. “I thought I was pretty sly



sneaking that in.”

It was my turn to chuckle. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to tell you.”

Her nose bumped mine. “Well, now’s your chance to make it up to me.”

I pulled her closer. “For the rest of my life if you’ll let me.”

Her quiet hum vibrated between our grazing lips. “Done.”

## CHAPTER 19

# *Kamari*



I watched Delia arrange the pillows around Darius, plumping them properly to help him sit up. He was doing his best not to grimace, but I could see the strain around his mouth every time the bed jostled.

“Do you need anything else, sir?” she asked, straightening.

Darius shook his head. “I’m fine. Thank you.”

The day nurse Marcella had hired inclined her head and left us alone in Darius’s childhood bedroom.

He’d been home from the hospital for an hour, and I could tell the relocation was taking its toll on him. What little color he normally had seemed washed out, leaving his eyes a brilliant blue against the ashen complexion. Strands of hair clung to his temples and there had been a distinct tremor in his arms when he’d hoisted himself onto the mattress.

It hurt to see him so frail. Part of me didn’t believe the doctor who said he was healing nicely and released him after only four days. It felt too soon, but he’d been so insistent, and Darius had been so persistent. I was completely outvoted.

“Will you stop looking at me as though I’m on my deathbed,” he teased. “Come here.”

I moved away from the open doorway and went to take a seat on the mattress. “I’m not allowed alone in a boy’s room.”

Darius grinned. “It’s fine as long as the door is open. Get closer. Why are you so far?”

I wasn't, but I scooted the rest of the way until I was practically in his lap.

“Better?”

“No, but it'll have to do.” He lightly brushed back a strand of hair. “Will you read to me?”

I recalled the last time he'd asked me to read to him and my entire body flushed. My cheeks warmed, making it nearly impossible to maintain eye contact. Darius grinned as if he knew exactly what he'd done.

“What would you like me to read?” I asked rather than give him the satisfaction of flustering me further.

“Don't care. Whatever you like.”

I started to open my mouth to list off a few off the top of my head when a cluster of raised voices filled the corridor. The familiar crack of Lavena's heels on hardwood had our attention turning to the doorway just as all three girls strolled through with Lavena heading the pack.

“Hey,” I said, adjusting my position to see them better. “What's going on?”

I hadn't seen Sasha since that night in the scrapyard. I hadn't texted or called her, not sure what the protocol was when you enlist your friend to help you murder a man. I figured she needed space to put the plan into motion and would return when she was done.

I studied her face, searched for signs of trauma or resentment. It may have been her idea to take Uriah as her first mark, but I had made the call to do the rest and I had no idea if she had to watch while it was being carried out.

Maybe I needed to apologize.

It terrified me that I may have wrecked our friendship to feed my bloodlust.

“Look who has come to visit from her travels,” Kas announced, hooking her arm through Sasha's.

I rose off the bed and hurried to her. “You okay?”

Up close, there were dark bags beneath her eyes, but aside from slightly tired, she seemed okay.

“It’s been ... crazy,” she murmured, sounding as exhausted as she looked. “There’s a whole thing after someone passes their first contract and ... anyway, I’m fine.”

I wanted to press, to demand she tell me everything she’s feeling, but I let it drop. She would share when she was ready.

“We do come bearing news,” Lavena announced, sliding her phone out of her back pocket. She swiped it open and passed it straight to me without glancing at the screen.

I read the bold headline aloud. “Carlton, the prestigious academy for the gifted was burned to the—”

Lavena snatched the phone back, chuckling weakly. “Wrong article. Sorry. This one.”

She flipped to a different print, but I was staring at her, jaw hanging, eyes wide. “What did you do?” I hissed under my breath.

Thick, dark lashes fluttered with all the innocence of a true crazy person. “What are you talking about? That was nothing. Not important. Read!”

I stowed the information away for later as I carried the phone back with me to the bed and sat on the edge.

*“After a series of mysterious and deadly fires running rampant through our city streets—”* I side eyed Lavena who returned it with a toothy smirk, *“—this one leaves devastation as a family of five perish under the blaze.”* I raised my head and glanced at Sasha. She said nothing so I kept reading. *“Officials have declared the incident an unfortunate accident, blaming the blaze on an unattended candle that may have tipped over. All five members of the Volkov family were found in their rooms, trapped by the flames.”* I stopped to stare up at my friends. “Is this for real? This is the dumbest news article I have ever read. Who wrote this? A fourth grader? A candle tipped over and not a single person was able to leave their room?”

Lavena shrugged. “Maybe they were heavy sleepers. The point is,” she snatched her phone from my hands, “it’s over. Revenge avenged, or whatever.” The phone was stuffed back into her pocket. “Now, we celebrate. Slumber party in Darius’s room.”

“Why my room?” Darius muttered from the center of his massive bed.

“Because this is where Kami is so unless you’re fine with her slumbering it up in my apartment, shut your mouth.” she flipped a coil of blonde over one shoulder and spun on the heel of her boot. “Who wants to go snack shopping?”

Kas was out the door a foot ahead of Lavena, listing all the treats they needed to pick up.

Sasha began to follow, but I hurriedly caught her arm and pulled her back.

“Talk?” I asked and continued when she cocked her head to the side quizzically. “Are you okay? You never texted or anything. I wasn’t sure...”

Her small hands rested on my arms, stopping my tirade with a soft smile. “I’m okay. Promise. It was intense, honestly. Enzo and his team handled ... you know and brought Uriah to me once everything was done. He was a mess.” Her smile faded, replaced by a tension I recognized. “He begged me to end it.”

The guilt and remorse hit me in the abdomen. I felt the sucker punch and nearly doubled over with the pain. But not because the bastard who tried to kill Darius was dead or that he’d suffered. My shame hung on the fact that I put my friend through that.

“I’m so sorry, Sasha,” I whispered, reaching for her this time. “I never should have asked you to do that.”

My friend blinked. “What do you mean? You didn’t ask me to do anything. I volunteered. I wanted to do it.”

She had, yet I felt I was to blame for the sadness in her eyes. “But the rest...”

Thin lines cut across the bridge of her nose. “I didn’t see anything. Enzo kept me at the opposite end of the house. He walkied me when it was my turn. It honestly wasn’t as hard as it should have been, you know? I think that’s the thing that’s bothering me. It should have been harder. I should have felt ... more. Does that make sense?” I nodded because it did in a way. “My whole family was like over the moon. My dad is so proud, and so am I, weirdly enough. I’d been so worried about taking a hit, terrified I’d mess it up, and I didn’t.”

I put my arms around her and pulled her in. “I’m proud of you, too,” I whispered into her ear. “Thank you.”

She gave me a hard squeeze and drew back. Her smile returned, brilliant and beautiful as always. “Want me to grab you anything from the store?”

I shook my head. “I’ll steal a little of whatever you guys get.”

I watched her leave with a little wave. Then it was just me and Darius once more.

“An accidental fire,” he mumbled, shaking his head slightly. “I wonder who they paid to write that story. They should be fired.”

I made a face at his pun. “It definitely left much to be desired. They weren’t even trying to cover it up.”

He patted the spot next to him. “Come. Join me. We have a little longer before my room is transformed into a movie theater.”

I crawled back into my spot but sat facing him, one arm braced over both of his legs, puncturing the mattress next to his thigh. “Are you going to be okay with this? Me and the girls,” I explained when he tilted his head. “They’re part of the deal. I’m not going to see them less just because we’re together now. They are a huge part of my life and stuff like this, impromptu slumber parties and three am breakfasts are pretty common occurrences.”

I appreciated that he actually considered it. He toyed with a coil of hair draped over my shoulder and deliberated.

“I want to add to your life, kitten, not take from it. I know how much the girls mean to you and I would never ask you to take time away from them to be with me, but there has to be a balance. That’s all I’m asking.”

I leaned in and skimmed my lips over his. “I can do balance.”

His thumb grazed my chin. “What else can you do?”

My smile bloomed between us. “Nothing I can show you in the state you’re in.”

His groan tickled my bottom lip. “My fingers still work and my tongue.”

I felt the hot flush of arousal build up at the pit of my stomach. “How—?”

His response was the slow slide of his free hand up and under my top. The palm cupped my breast through the thin fabric of my satin camisole and squeezed, sending electric pulses straight to my core.

“Close the door, kitten. Then come here and sit on my face.”

I was scrambling off the bed before he even finished. I didn’t even care when his low, throaty chuckle followed me across the room. I had my hand on the door, prepared to swing it shut when a figure stepped into view, scaring twenty years off my life.

Alexander grinned down at me staring up at him bug eyed, clutching my chest. “Sorry,” he said, not entirely sounding all that sorry. “I was just bringing this to Darius. Let him know to text me when he’s looked it over so I can email a copy to Abilene.”

A thin, manila envelope was passed to me.

I thanked him, then stood there awkwardly as he stared back at me just standing there, holding the door. Eventually, he inclined his head and disappeared the way he’d come.

Trying not to think he knew what we were up to, I closed the door, locked it for good measure and hurried back to the

bed.

“Mail,” I told him, passing him the envelope. “I think it’s for Abilene. Text your dad when you’ve read it.”

He accepted it. “Strip,” he told me as he pried the top open and pulled out the single sheet of paper from inside.

I had my top, socks, and jeans off by the time he looked up. My nipples were sharp points against the lacy front of my camisole, begging shamelessly to be touched.

The envelope was handed back to me with the paper still poking half out of the top.

“Put this on the nightstand, then bring my pussy over here,” he instructed. “I want her to ride my tongue like a good girl.”

The letter was dropped on the nightstand, and I got just enough of a peek to spot a series of bold, black letters across the top.

A name.

Not any I recognized.

Whoever Kairos Kova was meant nothing to me as I took my place.



*The End*

## *Author Notes*

Twisted Obsession is a longer, darker, and rewritten version of 3 Days. There are more scenes, extended chapters, new characters, and extra spiciness. The bones of the story remain the same-ish, but there is more meat to enjoy (some pun intended).

Why was it rewritten and extended? Because when I was writing 3 Days, it was a challenge to myself to write a short story. If you've picked up any of my other pieces, they're quite hefty. On a dare to myself (and partially my PA and editor), I wanted something sweet, dark, steamy, and short, but in my heart, I knew Darius and Kami deserved better. They deserved their full story and I wanted to give them that. Unfortunately, the characters (as always) ran away from me and now we have this.

Now, if you've already downloaded 3 Days back when it was free on my newsletter, thank you for downloading it again. I hope you enjoy it all over again. If you're new to the story, hello and welcome!

Please don't forget to leave a review everywhere if you're willing. It helps get Darius and Kami into more hands to enjoy.

Thank you in advance and happy reading!

Airicka

## *About Airicka Phoenix*

Airicka Phoenix is a multi-genre author of dark & dangerous romance starring strong female leads and sexy alpha heroes. She started her journey after never finding the type of books she wanted to read. Her love of tortured souls and forbidden romance carried her into writing her own hard-earned happiness. Currently, she lives on the outskirts of Toronto with her babies and can be found hard at work on her next project.

For more about Airicka, visit her at [AirickaPhoenix.com](http://AirickaPhoenix.com)