

QUEENS LOOK GOOD IN BLACK

SIN OF
SILENCE

Vengeful
TIES

BEST SELLER

EMMALEIGH LOADER

VENGEFUL TIES

RAVENSDALE MAFIA

BOOK ONE

EMMALEIGH LOADER

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PROLOGUE



Alessia

“Shattered - Trading Yesterday” – The Age of Information

“I warned you about playing with the trash, Alessia,” my father growled as my heart hammered inside my too-small chest. The events of the last half hour were still too much for me to digest. I couldn’t understand how we’d been playing so carefree and without burden only to end up here, with a blade to my best friend’s throat.

Tremendous horror washed through me as I stared into those safe ocean blues.

He pleaded with me not to fight for him, not to let my father see an ounce of weakness, but I couldn’t help it.

I couldn’t help the vulnerability that bled through my desperate tone, while I pleaded with my father not to take away the only good thing in my life. “Daddy, please. Daddy, don’t. We’re just friends. He’s my friend, Daddy. Just a friend!”

I had known him for almost two years. We were five when we met and he’d been my light ever since. The only one who knew me without actually *knowing* me. My family was well known in Ravensdale. In all of Devilwood County for that matter. Friendships were either forced or faked.

But not with him.

The dirty boy from all those years ago.

I had run into the woods that bordered our property late one evening. Needing an escape, a moment to not be the disappointing heir to the bloodied throne and just be a child. I'd spent all day in lessons. Learning something my mother called proper etiquette. It was so tiresome, even now I remembered how desperately I wanted to be anywhere other than there. Despite being the only child, I knew I was never to inherit all that my father had. My father never kept it quiet how much my mother disappointed him. That no matter how much he 'rutted' her brutally, in order for her to give him a son, it never worked.

I wasn't sure what rutting meant, but I knew brutality.

It hadn't happened yet, the wanted son, and I was unsure if it ever would. So this sad world, would be all that I'd know.

This emptiness inside of me that left me feeling so disconnected and alone. My parents loved me, at least I always thought they had until this very moment.

Luigi and my mother were both stuck with me and I, them.

It became too much to always be prim and proper.

To never dirty my dress when all I wanted to do was tear it to shreds. I preferred trousers. It made it so much easier to move around.

My mother would've had a hernia if she'd seen my white gown sullied that night. But I didn't care, I just needed to be free. Anywhere other than in that too-stuffy room, with those all-too-scary men. My father was holding a meeting and it seemed that one of the men had brought their young son who had the same idea of getting out of there in mind.

I had only seen him or his family in or around my home that one time. I never knew who the family was or why they were there, but that didn't matter because we had each other.

He was my only true friend, and when I was with him, we could do anything that we pleased. I'd often flee the compound of my father's kingdom with one of my father's

men. He was like an uncle to me and the only person who allowed me some sense of independence. Every time I begged and pleaded, he had no choice but to give in and take me into town. We'd play for hours and then Ronnie would get me all cleaned up and back to looking like the perfect princess before he returned me back to my parents as if I hadn't left peace only to return to hell.

My family was dangerous, that I'd known since the moment I'd been born, but until this very second, I'd never seen my father's hatred and indifferent frown of disgust aimed at me.

I might not have been his true heir—a female born to lead was unfathomable—but I'd *thought* he loved me. I really did.

“He is so much more than that, Alessia. The fact you don't know it, speaks volumes. Blacks don't have friends. That, my dear, is the cost of power.”

I felt cold.

Icy bone-brittle fingers wrapped around my heart in a brutal vice and I forgot how to breathe. My chest constricted and I thought I'd faint right there and then. I couldn't let that happen though, I needed to see this side of my father. I needed to see all of him and remember it so I'd never let my guard down around this monster again. It was so very clear to me now, how much I'd truly been blind.

“It's okay, Lessie. Don't look. Close your eyes. It's okay.” He had been the only grace I'd found in this sick world of darkness. He didn't have any ties to the mafia, to this family. If he had, I'd have seen him more than that one time. Seen his family.

But I hadn't.

He was just my friend, who loved me for who I was. Now, I'd be the reason he perished. Why his parents would lose a son.

I couldn't refer to him by his name, couldn't voice the agony inside of my soul.

I couldn't make any of this a reality because if I did, I would be admitting defeat. My father would see that tendril of weakness in me and tug it free until my entire being unraveled and I was destroyed.

I gritted my teeth and turned my head, preparing myself. I intended to watch. To burn this insidious moment into my memory for all of time because Father had been sure to teach me one thing: The greatest pain bears the sweetest revenge.

I never had the chance to turn back on my own though. His goon, Elliot, gripped me by the chin and forced my face back toward theirs.

My father was prideful and victorious.

My friend was ashen, yet he refused to cower, to show weakness.

My heart wretched all the more for his bravery.

He didn't want to cry. To show me the fear I saw so starkly in his turbulent ocean blues. He wanted to show me that he'd be okay.

That this was all going to be okay.

But it wouldn't.

Nothing would ever be okay again.

"Don't touch her! Don't you touch her!" my friend screamed, the sound so weak in comparison to Elliot's deep throaty chuckle from behind me. It rattled my chest and the struggling in my gut worsened.

"Watch, Alessia. Watch while I teach you the greatest lesson of all." He paused and turned those dark eyes onto me. I would have shivered at the menace there under normal circumstances. But this wasn't normal and I no longer feared anything. "Love? It's nothing but a burden."

Everything faded from black to white. Emotions too much like a storm to see the clear skies ahead. I hadn't known that at that moment, I'd never see a sunny day again.

There was no comprehension of how horrific this would be.

How this *one* moment, would set me on a path of destruction.

Then my father slit the little boy's throat and my best friend fell to the ground in a broken slump. Blood pooled on the cold ground around him and, as the seconds passed, crawled to the tips of my frozen toes. We had been playing in the woods, barefoot and joyous.

Now, my entire world burned while my toes turned bloody.

I shook, the image of a seven-years-young, delicate throat, torn open, gushing with his very life essence. That just wasn't enough to keep his young heart beating and it plagued my mind. My lips trembled, and the air that left my lungs was choppy and broken as I fought to control my rage. That red-eyed demon I found way too often calling my name.

He wouldn't witness me falling apart, I refused to allow it.

One thing was for certain though.

The second my best friend, the love of my life's heart stopped beating, so did mine.

I tore free from my father's idiotic follower and stepped forward. Squaring my shoulders, that stilled with their tormented quivers, I stared at my father. Right into his cold, soulless eyes I'd seen so many grown men avoid out of fear and seethed, "I loathe you, and the only thing you can take for certain as a lesson learned today is my vow to end you." I was surprised at the venom that bled into my once innocent-sounding tone. I knew too much hostility at seven years of age. No child should grow this frozen, this soon. My father smirked, the edge of it as condescending as the pity in his gaze. His eyes were brown, but not vibrant and coveted. Dull and murky instead. *Lifeless*. "Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but mark my words, Alessia Black, the daughter you never wanted, will end your reign, Luigi Michael Black. I will destroy all that you love. After all, what is love, other than a burden, Father? And be assured, I no longer love you."

In The Beginning

Killian

-Fourteen Years Old-

My hand shook as I pointed the barrel of the gun at the store clerk's head. Convenience stores were always an easy hit. Owners never potted around the place, only mangers at best, who'd actually have the sense to value their life. No matter how many times I held one up, though, it never got easier. Fear consumed his irises, giving his gaze a darkened hue that made it hard to ignore. Thin lips trembled as he held his hands out before him in a calming gesture as if that alone would stop me from doing what I was about to do. A tendril of fear tugged at my chest as my palms became slick against the handle of my weapon.

I shoved it down and forced it to become nothing more than white noise because fear wouldn't do either of us any good.

It was an idiotic emotion and I would be nobody's *idiot* again.

His visceral terror was a waste of time, the calming hope that he could offer me a shaky smile and that all of this would just go away in a puff of smoke was futile. The only option we had right now was to get this over and fucking done with. I had a check-in and I couldn't be late.

Not after I'd worked this damn hard.

"Money. In the bag, now," I ordered, in a tone that came out much calmer than I felt, while waving the gun toward the register.

Being an associate of a crime family was no easy feat. It was as ball-busting as it was fucking grueling. Especially for a fourteen-year-old kid from the streets. It wasn't like finding a lost soul to recruit as a run-around, stupid enough to do all the dirty work, was a position that would be hard to fill. Which

meant that I needed to be different and not expendable. Ensure they saw something in me that set me apart from the rest because there was no way I'd be a grunt forever.

\$2,560.

That was what I needed to hand into Tony—a soldier for Ravensdale's very own crime lord, Luigi Black. That total was our weekly target, and between myself and the people he had recruited, brought in a hefty wage. I'd always brought in a little bit extra and this week would top all of the others.

"I don't have all fucking night, man. In the bag. Now!"

Burt, as it read on his name tag, hurried to empty the crisp dollar bills into the bag I handed him and as soon as it was full and the register was empty, I hauled ass out of there and did a few circuits around the block and made sure I wasn't followed.

It was my fourth hit of the night and I'd collected around \$6,900 in total.

An hour later, I pulled up to our usual meeting spot down by the quarry. Shadows danced in a pearl essence across the slick ground, still damp from the rain that not long ago fell. There was a slope that lead down to the crystalline waters as they lapped against the shore. Some quarries were fucking magnificent. The waters so clear, they would often resemble paradise.

That's why I loved it here.

Because nobody would expect something so beautiful to be so fucking deadly.

Just like *her*.

Quarries were filled with toxins, so if you ever came a cross one, avoid popping in for a swim like it's the damn fucking plague.

Tony wasn't the only one standing there waiting for me, like he normally would. He puffed of his cigar and I could smell the plethora of smoke as I approached.

Another man stood at his side, dressed in a suit that seemed to cost more than the money burning a hole in my pocket and was blacker than the night. It made his darkly tanned skin glow in comparison under the moonlight. As I shuffled toward them, Tony looked up at me and smirked. There was nothing kind or familiar in it. It left me cold and angry, seeing the way his eyes drilled into mine with a challenge I wanted to answer. But I knew who the man idling beside him was and if I fucked this up, I inevitably fucked up the rest of my life.

“This the kid, Tone?” Luigi Black asked him with an indifferent look on his face. He offered me one fleeting glance as he shook out his arm, rubbed the corner of his eye and flickered his gaze across the waters.

That one second he spared me a look though, was like he stared at me as if he saw right through me. As if there was nothing but a hollow shell of a boy that stood before him and wasn't worth the examination.

“Sure is, boss. The one that always brings us that little extra every week.”

“You think he's ready?” He sounded like he was bored, like this was just another Sunday night and to him, it probably was.

“Whatcha think, kid? You ready?” Tony huffed a broken chuckle and took a long toke on his cigar before he blew the smoke in my face.

I gritted my teeth and swallowed to keep myself from biting back at the revolting smell of his breath that carried on the wind. “For what?” There was a little too much attitude in my voice and I quickly adjusted myself, standing up a little straighter.

“To give yourself to the family,” Luigi filled in the blanks and Tony was soon forgotten. I focused solely on him. The made man who took over Ravensdale with effortless ease. If I wanted the life I sought, he'd be the one to give it to me. “You do this, kid. You follow through with what I'm about to ask, tonight will be the first night of the rest of your life.”

A car door opened behind me, but I remained staring down the boss, as Tony had called him. Something told me that if I showed him any fear, I'd be the one sleeping with the fishes and not the poor sack of shit one of his men just dragged from the trunk of his fancy little car.

I didn't move as the unknown soldier dumped tonight's victim on the sodden ground. Nor did I even blink when he sobbed like a broken man in the face of death. I still had my gun on me from the hold-ups I did earlier, so when Luigi offered me one of his, I looked away from him and withdrew my own.

I didn't trust that if need be, they wouldn't use my prints against me.

The man laid at my feet clawed at the cold stone beneath him. Blood welled under his cuticles and painted crimson stripes at my feet. He looked like he was tweaking. Coming down of some kind of high that looked more like a horror show than it did any kind of bliss junkies swear they get from the shit they put into their bodies.

Another rule of this life.

You had to stay clean.

Nobody did smart business when their jaws were swinging and their minds were playing tricks.

"Kill him," Luigi drawled and it came from him so easily. There was torment in his eyes, but it wasn't troubling. It was humor and clearly a test. He thought I'd choke. Tremble at the knees and tell him I couldn't do this. "This man—"

As he started to offer an explanation as I aimed my gun and pulled the trigger without so much as breaking a sweat.

He tried to hide it, but I could see the shock on his face. "Didn't you want to ask what he did to deserve death, first?" He hiked a brow and I turned back to face him, meeting his amused stare with a cold one of my own.

"I didn't need to."

He scoffed, huffing out a chuckle as he pulled on the sleeves of his suit jacket like it was his nervous tick. “Wise, kid. Very wise.”



Alessia

- Sixteen Years Old-

“King” - Niykee Heaton

T ranquil and lost in my thoughts, I stood in front of my opulent mirror inside my closet. It covered one wall, one massive wall that left me a little place to hide as it reflected back at me every imperfection. Not that anyone would see it beyond the armor that I’d learn to wear with expertise.

My flat palms smoothed over the crimson silk gown that adorned my slender body before they traveled up to caress my chest, where my necklace lay flush against my skin—shining with an array of beautiful diamonds that twinkled brighter than the stars. The perfect picture stood before me, yet I could see what so many others would miss. The darkness in my gaze. My eyes were already brown, dark, and large, like black pools, but what also dwelled there was my lack of... well, anything really, nothing but numb emotion stared back at me. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen joy sparkle in their depths. That part of me able to experience such a thing died a long time ago and all that was left was this perfect little vessel.

The perfect little princess.

Soulless.

“Miss Black, the guests have begun to arrive,” Serafina, our housemaid informed me as she poked her head around the corner into my closet. Gentle brown eyes, so light they almost

appeared amber, settled on mine. “Oh, wow, aren’t you just spectacular?” she breathed in genuine awe.

I gave her a soft smile that didn’t meet my eyes and turned to face her. “I’ll appease then?”

“More than ever, Miss Black. You’re... well, you’re perfection. Not many hold traits such as yourself.”

“What traits would those be?” I asked, not really interested, but wanting to delay stepping downstairs.

“Miss Black, you’re a regal grace. An utter beauty.” She paused for a moment as she stepped toward me. Head tilted back just a fraction and she studied me with narrowed eyes. “But these high cheekbones,” she caressed my makeup-covered cheek, “these devious eyes,” her soft touch feathered under my smokey eye, “and this wicked tongue.” Gently, she flicked her thumb across my bottom lip, plump and painted a deep burgundy, “are going to create wars. Many will try to use you, Miss Black. Be deceitful, tell lies and underestimate you greatly. But you’ll always win. Because you have more than just beauty.”

I swallowed thickly, lost in the truth that was thick in her gaze. “Which is?”

“Smarts. You have genius inside of you, girl, and that, above all else, is what wins the war.”

As I cleared my throat, I dropped my eyes to the ground to center myself again. Serafina has always been insightful. It wouldn’t surprise me if she’d sensed the turmoil which had tormented my soul for longer than I cared to remember. “I best get downstairs. It’s improper to keep our guests waiting.”

I’d already made them wait. Because she was right, I did have smarts and my smarts told me that today was the day everything would change for me. I needed to make these people understand just who and what I was and that first lesson would be that I wait on no man nor woman and I’d arrive at the party when I damn well pleased.

I walked out of my closet and made it to the door when Serafina called after me, “Oh, and Miss? Happy Birthday.”

- Alessia -

“Young And Beautiful” – Lana Del Rey

“Today, we celebrate my baby girl turning sixteen. I am honored to have the family here, witnessing this great moment. The moment my pride and joy, slowly becomes the young woman I’d always dreamed she’d be,” my father addressed the crowd that had gathered in our personal ballroom inside the manor. I stood beside him with my mother, who had her hands clasped around my shoulders with pride. Luigi looked back at me, a massive smile on his face as I stared on impassively. “I’m proud of you, baby girl. Happy Birthday.”

The crowd cheered and champagne glasses clanked together. The sound a low chime that rang out louder than their lowly muttered words. A boy who stood off to the side caught my attention. He looked to be my age, his shoulders were broad as were the tops of his arms. He looked like he was packing muscle under his black turtle neck. One hand nestled in the pocket of his slacks.

The other, tattooed and scarred, sat against his thigh. His large black watch perched over the fabric of his sweater. He stared at me intently. Dark blues eyes bore a hole into my flesh and I had to look away.

Once the toasts had been made, I made my way across the dance floor. It didn’t matter that I was alone, or that I danced as if I was dancing with a ghost, because it wasn’t far from the truth.

Lana Del Rey’s “Young And Beautiful” played and the soft melody drifted through the crowd like a narcotic. Couples swayed around me, dancing to the beautiful tune as I closed my eyes and moved like I was the only one here. I twirled and spun out wide, allowing the wind from my movements to gather under my arms before I brought them close to my body and caressed myself. It was as if I’d been transported to a place of the in-between. A place beyond time or space where I

could feel this beautiful song as viscerally as I felt my touch against my skin.

“You should be here, Rían ,” I whispered to the phantom that danced with me inside my mind.

He responded, so easily as if he was truly here, *“I’ll always be with you, Lessie.”* I could still hear his voice, but he remained faceless.

I knew that if I opened my eyes, it would become impossible to keep the pain from chipping away at my heart that beat too slowly inside my chest. I couldn’t withstand any more anguish, so if this was all I could have, this was all that I’d take.

When a lone tear fell from my eye and trailed down my cheek like a crystallized raindrop, I knew it was time.

Inhaling deeply, I drew on my strength and straightened my spine. Tonight, was the night I’d truly become a woman, and the first night I’d get the sweet cherry-like taste of revenge.

Opening my eyes slowly, I took in my surroundings. My gaze traveled across the dance floor and scanned every face here. When I saw him, I exhaled and glided across the floor until I passed him. I made eye contact, and his dark hungry eyes followed me as I made my exit. Walking down the hall, I pushed open the double glazed doors and stepped out onto the balcony that overlooked the woods. The stars shined so brightly tonight and I upturned my head, breathed in the fresh air and allowed the wind to kiss against me.

“You’re a woman now, darlin’. How do you feel?” his dark voice grumbled from behind me but I gave no inclination that I’d heard him.

Instead, I stayed basking in the kiss against my cheek that cooled my burning skin. *“Like the world is mine to take.”* I breathed slowly, before I gently turned to face him.

The past eight years hadn’t been kind to him. He was never a looker, more of the bulldog type, but those added crinkle lines now made him look more like a mastiff. *“You’re*

a woman. A beautiful one at that. You've always been feisty, Alessia. Always been one I'd die to taste."

"You would," I whispered back breathlessly. "If my father found out, he'd kill you."

"That's why this will be our little secret." He stepped closer, shoulders hunched as his head hung. Dark, beady eyes leered at me from beneath his lashes.

"Morals. They're lost to you, yes?"

He smirked and it was anything but kind, "I have no soul, darlin'. Morals weren't a part of the package."

"So you never felt it?" I asked, hardly a whisper this time as it was my turn to step forward. I placed my hands on his chest when he looked at me in confusion. I tilted forward, bringing my lips to his ear. "The horror as you watched my father slit a seven-year-old boy's throat?"

He drew back, staring down at me with a cloud of anger and disinterest on his ugly mug. "You still hung up on that?" he growled and now it was my turn to smile.

"Not at all, I was just curious how it felt."

"Empty. I felt nothing, love, because he was nothing but a runt. Those are easy to kill, they should stay away from the beasts."

I shuddered and my smile grew wider. "I couldn't agree more," I mused as I whispered into his ear. Stepping around him and caressing his chest until I feathered my touch across the backs of his shoulders. With my free hand, I withdrew my blade that had been sheathed to my thigh and pushed myself up against him, reaching up on my tippy toes to reach around his broad frame. "You should have stayed away from the beast." I slit his throat.

The rotten wet sound of death assaulted my ears as he turned in shock, hands wrapped around his throat to stem the bleeding. It didn't work, the crimson rivers bled through his soaked fingers and sprayed against me. My heart beat frantically inside my chest, it ached and I felt cold but not out of fear.

It was excitement.

Victory.

I lifted a trembling hand and shoved him in the shoulder, watching as he tumbled to his death, straight over the balcony.

“Alessia?” My father’s voice echoed down the hall and I turned, standing a little taller so he could see me in all my glory.

When he rounded the corner and made it to the still open doors, he gasped, “What in the devil? What happened?”

“I killed Elliot,” I breathed and he stopped short of touching me. For a moment, he just stared. Taking in my cherry-covered face and my red gown that was now darker, covered in the essence of one of his men. After he sought my eyes for some kind of answer, he nodded, breathing out deeply as he caressed the side of my dark head. “Is it done now? Will you put this nonsense behind us? Forget it happened at all? You cannot live in the past, Alex. It will kill you. I did what was necessary. For you, for this family. I won’t hear another word on it. You got your revenge. This is the end of it, alright?”

I nodded once and uttered, “Yes, Father.”

Tonight I became a woman old enough to make this night the beginning of the end.



Killian

-Sixteen Years Old-

Blood rushed through my veins as the adrenaline pulsed within my ears. I scowled at the side of the gothic-inspired cobblestone mansion. Rain down-poured, scoring into my flesh as my muscles rippled and flexed.

I was playing with fire and more likely than not, about to get myself killed.

But I needed to see them.

Needed to see who I left behind and to remind myself that everything I was doing was worth it. For as long as I could remember, nothing other than *her* had mattered. That didn't change when I found myself abandoned and afraid.

It only strengthened my resolve in doing what I needed to do and becoming who I needed to become.

My leather-booted foot caught on the trellis and I cursed, shaking my leg to set myself free before I reached over and latched onto the cold and weathered balcony. Pulling myself over to the right and hefting myself up and over, I dropped to my knees as the rain pelted against my back even harder.

My chest was frozen, not just from the rain but also from the fact I'd come here without proper clothing. I only wore a black wife beater with black lounge pants. I hadn't intended on coming here, but when I'd heard they had swung back through town, something overcame me and that restless beast inside of

me rooted against his cage until I'd snapped and ran out into the night.

I made quick work of picking the lock and stepping inside. My sodden clothing seeped into the beige carpet but I didn't care. Silently, I padded across the open space and stalked toward the bed. Breathing heavily, I hung my head and glared at the young lad sleeping on his side without knowing who loomed above him.

My brother.

Shawn.

He looked just like me.

Devilishly handsome and smug, even sleeping.

I hadn't seen him since he was five and something inside of me slithered with unease at how much my heart clenched for him. After I'd memorized his features, told myself this wouldn't be the last time I'd see him, I'd turned and made my way into the next room.

To my sister's room.

Ilya.

The entire mansion was cast in shadows and despite how hard I tried to erase my past, to forget certain things, this place was never one of the things I could push aside so easily.

My family had many homes and Ravensdale wasn't one of our permanent residents. I hadn't understood it at the time, being so young, but this was a home we used when my father was conducting business in the area.

Ilya had her mouth opened, a delicate snort huffed from her slender nose and I found myself smirking at how casual she looked. How peaceful and indelicate. There was something about her that told me if I'd captured this image on camera and showed it to her, she'd beat me with it. Sensing she favored her looks.

I'd already spent more time here than what I should have. Left behind evidence of my entry too. My brown and muddied

footprints imprinted into the ground, I made my way to the last room where my mother and father slept.

She was as beautiful as ever.

Her head of dark hair fanned out as she laid on her outstretched arm. Her long lashes fluttered as she dreamed and I found myself wondering what she thought about.

My father was on his front, hugging his pillow as he snored like the wheels of a train on the track.

Wiping the back of my hand across my mouth, I cleared my throat and clenched my jaw.

Destroying any emotion inside of me as it began to rise.

Somethings were just better left in the dark.

This wasn't my family.

After all, what kind of family didn't avenge the death of their son?

3



Alessia

Eighteen Years Old

I rolled over, the silken sheets wrapped around my naked thighs as I turned my head and eyed the boy lying beside me. He was weak and easily swayed. A year older than me and one of my father's foot soldiers with family back in Poland. Uncles and cousins trading in liquor. They were all about their alcohol and threatening companies into using their supply. Not as cut throat as the Russians in personality but they use more lethal concoctions in their spirits. Stuff that makes you forget your own name and half the time forfeit your own life.

He was born here though, doing petty crimes and desperate hold-ups just to prove his worth to the family. His mother had Italian blood, and that was the only reason my father used him for grunt work. He was too naive to understand only full bloods would make it up in the ranks. He'd never be a made man, no matter how much he tried.

If my father knew one of his recruits had touched me in such a way, he would have his hands removed.

My gaze dropped and I looked at his wrist, the one that hugged tight the pillow clung to his chest as he slept with unafflicted bliss.

I imagined myself taking it instead.

The sounds of his fictional screams echoed in my mind and it became almost impossible to remember the silence that once surrounded me. I saw the blood and felt it splatter

against my parted lips as I licked away the sweet cherry-like crimson.

He wailed, and I'd hit bone. My breath hitched and my pussy heated. It was a chimed clank against my steel blade that sounded like the sweetest melody.

An ache beat inside of my chest as my heart raced and I shivered with how vivid the imagery was.

Erik snorted a broken snore before he choked, the sound getting caught in the back of his throat. It was almost enough to stir him awake, but not quite.

I reached out and trailed my deft index finger down his back, between his shoulder blades, and smirked as his muscles rippled at the contact. Traveling down to his waist, I flicked off the thin sheet that covered his naked ass and then gently rolled him over. There was definitely something wrong with me.

Wrong with how much I craved to watch people bleed, but in my line of work, it was useful.

The kind of work that was set on vengeance.

When he was on his back, I took his flaccid cock in my palm and began to stroke it softly. My eager eyes took in the mediocre appendage as I teased it to its full height. It ebbed and throbbed, the thick veins grew as angry as the head I had awoken, when I crawled on top of him and seated myself. A small moan slipped out and I whispered it into his ear, allowing him to hear the sounds of the pleasure I was stealing from him.

Vicious hands wrapped around my waist as his fingers became bruising to my skin. It made me groan with gratitude, the bite of pain almost as fulfilling as the cock that was stretching me wide. I felt so full, so hungry and I needed more than what he was able to give me. Erik's eyes snapped open, holding mine hostage as I grinned down at him. Those deep moss-green complexities ignited with unbridled desire and thick, hefty lust. Using his grip to rock me back and forth, I

purred and wrapped my hand around his throat with a need that was like a chokehold on my self-control.

I wasn't gentle.

I never was.

I didn't have it in me to be delicate or to make love. Something unsettled and violent lived inside of me and though I should probably fight it, I never felt inclined to.

I never even saw the boys that I fucked as anything more than a living, breathing dildo.

There was only one pair of eyes I saw when I climbed the stairs of heaven and they weren't moss green.

They were oceanic.

A blue so vivid, you felt like you were in the Mediterranean, drowning in crystal waters. You never fought the current though, because to die by those eyes, was to die in a paradise so true, you'd give anything just to catch a glimpse.

These boys were nothing but vessels. Faceless vessels I used to my advantage.

I could detach, remove all emotion and see nothing other than the cock I was riding or the fingers I was fucking. I needed a release, I needed change and I needed *him*.

Only *he* was an impossibility to me.

I tightened my hold, brown eyes cold and disengaged and I knew that was what Erik saw when he gazed up at me. A weak smile on his lips as he tried to enjoy the infliction I had brought to this encounter. His lips tinged blue first, then that hue feathered out to his cheeks. Those dark green eyes grew wider and wider as my grip strengthened to the point my hands white-knuckled and my entire body shook, all the way up until my orgasm tore through me.

I cried out, throwing my head forward as the muscles in my face fell slack. My mouth opened, a silent scream caught in my throat as I clenched my eyes shut and wondered what he would look like now...

The boy that I loved and never got to watch grow.

My heart ached and the second that pain ebbed, I cut that thread before it had a chance to weave. Catching my breath, I sat back and sank into him further. He groaned and I let go of his throat, stroking it softly. Soothing the red marks that would later turn into wicked bruises. Watching him, somber and calm, I gauged the unfettered devotion this little mouse had to me.

I could do anything to him, and still, he'd smile and ask me for more.

Even things he hated.

I circled my hips once, and stared down at him unsmiling, utterly in power as I hopped off and immediately took his cock into my hand. Now that he could breathe again, he exploded in my hold, coating my skin white. He grunted, lifted with his shoulders as his core tensed and wave after wave of his release sprayed all over me.

When he was done, I offered him a sultry smirk, then delicately slipped my legs off the side of the bed and stood, walking toward my dresser and cleaning my hand with a tissue I had placed there in its holder.

I'd been messing with my father's operations ever since I grew breasts and could turn a boy's head. Before that, I'd relied on my child-slim frame to get into places I wasn't supposed to be.

Usually, I used violence to get my answers, in fact, that was the *only* way I got my answers.

Fucking wasn't for gain, I'd never use my cunt for easy favors like a common whore. It was simply pleasure. Because sometimes, my past would haunt me, and my desires became too hard to control.

"Damn, babe. That was some wake-up call," he mused, a dopey smirk taunting me and I gritted my teeth at the endearment.

I was nobody's babe.

I hummed softly and finished cleaning my hand as I left him unanswered.

Finally, I turned back to face him and said, “Now, Erik. Be a dear and tell me what you know about this supposed alliance my father is creating with the Polish?”



Alessia

-Twenty Years Old-

“Burn It to the Ground” - Nickelback

“A little closer,” I purred as I stared through the sight of my sniper rifle. “Just a little closer.” The damp ground seeped through the skintight, black body suit I was wearing.

A chill as cold as ice tickled against my nerves but I held myself steady, untroubled by the winter air as it gushed a torrent around me. It was a lucky thing, being olive skinned with hair as dark as the night because while I laid here, waiting for my target, I knew that I blended in seamlessly. That the shadows concealed me as if we were one. My breath was even, my hand even calmer while I watched the warehouse with a deadly trained eye.

My father had a shipment coming in, courtesy of the Scottish mafia.

Delivery of the deadliest weapons Devilwood County—or any county for that matter—could do without. These weapons were military grade, untraceable and downright disastrous. Unique in the way they had been altered. In the wrong hands, it wouldn’t be those born in sin that would burn.

It wouldn’t be the privileged that would be tormented. It would be the lost souls that got ripped from the streets and sold into horrors worse than their very own nightmares—because we often don’t truly know what they are until we live through something far worse—but not the soccer moms and

the Wall Street lawyers. The teenagers having fun at the mall or the grannies playing bingo.

It would be the low to middle class families that become terrorized by this new wave of heinous carnage. Schools would shut down, shopping centers too.

If these weapons ever made it into the hands of those who awaited them, nothing but hell would reign down on this earth.

We normally worked with the Russians and those bad boys could get their hands on anything. But the Scotts? They were trying to prove themselves and get in with the Kings Wolves. The current president had the foresight to tell them where to go. He knew better than to accept that kind of trouble here.

My father, however, loved only one thing.

Power.

I mean, who even heard of the Scottish mafia?

And if they did, who the fuck would tremble at the sound?

The stuff they'd gotten into far exceeded what even madmen would tamper with.

There was merit to these kinds of weapons, don't get me wrong.

But in the right hands.

The assholes waiting on this shipment won't be receiving them any time soon.

Not when I'm done anyway.

When the armored SUVs pulled to a stop inside the clearing of the Linkin Warehouse—the place that handles all weaponry shipments—I set my focus and adjusted my lens before I sought out the device that had been placed under the wheel arch.

I could just about see the brim of the rounded explosive and knew it was my bullseye.

First, I made sure I had a clear view of all three vehicles—each one had an explosive attached—so I could act quickly. When the time was right, I pulled the trigger in quick succession and smiled with ominous delight as they jolted, and buckled forward as if they'd been hit in the rear before detonating in a cloud of orange decay.

I felt the flashback, the heatwave caressing my cool skin and I relished in it.

The explosion was huge and even rocked the earth with its destruction. That was on account of half of the explosive shit they already had on top of the rigs that I had planted before the vehicles left their houses to head for the docks to collect the shipment. I knew where each driver lived. Where each car was stored and every dock and airport we had a hand in controlling. I made it my mission all those years ago to undermine Luigi at every turn. I'd be the phantom he never saw coming and the thrill of that had me teasing my constricted breasts against the dirt, gaining friction for my covered nipples as the veins of arousal heated my blood.

There was only one thing I wanted from this silent war, and it was my father's sanity.

He broke something in me that night, something no little girl should ever have stolen. He traumatized me and raped my lucidity with nothing but atrocious horrors.

For a moment, I just lay there, staring into the flames, and wondered what it would be like if they engulfed me. After such vivid thoughts, my panties grew wet from the delusion. It was the only way I could cope with the darkness. By living in it and making a friend there instead of fighting an enemy... fighting myself.

The pain my father unleashed that day did nothing but create a carnal and violent creature that wanted to destroy everything in its path. I saw beauty and wanted to rip it to shreds and paint it black.

It created a monster that thirsted for death and rot, more than it thirsted for water or unpolluted air.

I blinked away my haze. Once I was happy with my work, I packed away my sniper rifle, hefted the bag that contained it over my shoulder, then stalked back to the car that waited for me.

My 1969 Chevy Impala sat idle behind thick brush that sprouted from the ground with a vengeance and arched in a way nobody would have believed something had hid behind it.

She made the perfect chameleon, just like me.

When I got in, I started the engine, cranked the stereo, and put my foot on the gas, tearing out of there with a smirk of victory. One that rivaled Luigi's down in that basement when he slit my best friend's throat.

There were no games of mercy when it came to wicked men.

I didn't want to just kill my father, I wanted to destroy him for what he did to me.

I vowed once that I would tear down my father's empire and I would.

I would savage it, shred it apart, and burn it to ash, just so I could later swoop in and make it whole again.

With me as their leader.

Their Queen Of Ruin.



Alessia

—*Twenty-Two Years Old*—

“I Did Something Bad” - Taylor Swift

“Repeat that?” I asked incredulously from my seat in the dingy little office my father scarcely left nowadays. The nerve of this man never ceased to amaze me and yet, I still found myself sitting before him fighting to keep my jaw from hitting the ground at the absurdity of his request.

His demand.

Luigi Black stared at me from behind his opulent desk, with those dark pools that had stared at me one too many times over the years. I wanted to remove them from his damn skull, examine them just to see if the same visions haunted him as they had me.

The office was darkened, with no windows to offer even a slither of light. Years ago, this room was lined with windows that bordered the back woods to our property. As a child, it would be my favorite place to come. I’d sit in his chair for hours, overlooking his empire. Watching as his men did their rounds of the property.

On grounds so large, when I was really little, I would often see myself lost too. Nothing could touch me, even when I felt so little and so unseen, I felt like a queen towering above it all. He’d come and find me, stand at my back with a huge smile of pride on his face, and place his too-large hand upon my little dreamer’s shoulder. I’d smile back at him, finally feeling his

acceptance. He'd allowed me my moment of delusion before he popped my bubble with his twelve-inch blade and reminded me that all of this would never be mine.

Now, he worked from a box, too paranoid to even look through a simple pane of glass in fear somebody would shoot him through it. I couldn't blame him really, not with the parasite I had planted into his mind. The little seed grew and bloomed as each day passed and I relished in the knowledge I was the one to put it there.

Luigi Black was now half the man he used to be. Being the king sat heavily on his shoulders and the toll was more than beginning to show. He used to be so handsome, so full of life that even with the darkness behind those complexities of his, people couldn't help but be drawn to the danger that exuded from him and all that he promised.

That, and the dark, dark color of his eyes, were pretty much the only thing we had in common. We both carried an air of intimidation, and that was without even trying.

No, he'd seemed to have lost that air to him.

I took joy in the fact that I was the reason for his deeply troubled state even if he didn't know it yet. The past seven years had been fun watching him crumble. If I could mess up a deal, or make him look stupid, I'd take the opportunity in a heartbeat. I'd done everything in my power to screw with him, torment him like a predator does their prey. Being the mastermind behind his deteriorating state, was a power unlike anything I would have felt if I had just outright killed him.

My father ran an aged hand through his dark, shoulder-length curls and huffed, like that alone was a great chore. "You heard me, child. I can't take risks with your life. You may not be my heir, but you are my daughter. I have to keep you safe, no matter the cost."

"I'm your only child. *That* in itself makes me your heir." I gritted my jaw and set my shoulders as they rose. Not that he would have noticed. Nobody ever would, I was the master at self-control. I inhaled a deep breath and centered myself,

refusing to allow my anger to show. It had taken years of training to lock away all of my emotions.

In the face of the man, I was an absolute statue.

The devastated turmoil that festered under my lolling, calm composure, was a weapon and nobody saw it coming until it was too fucking late.

The ache that bit beneath my skin, was fuel for the fire that burned in my chest.

“Don’t start this again, *Alessia*. You know that no man would respect a woman in power.” The way he says my name in Italian used to warm my heart, but now, I felt nothing. “You taking over? It’s a fool’s notion. That isn’t the way of our world.”

What he meant to say was this wasn’t the way of our family.

I knew it was the way of many others.

Women held power and men downright respected them for it in this new age that was forever evolving. The men in this house though were stuck in the dark ages.

“You don’t gain respect, you take it. They would bow to me because I’d make them bow. You only refuse me the empire because you think I will undo all of the rotten shit you have bled into it over the years. You’re afraid. Afraid that I will take your ruins and build a kingdom with its remains. Don’t try to fool me, Father. I know exactly how you see me, exactly *who* and *what* you are. You’re a simple beast in human flesh. I may be the princess, but we both know to you, I’m nothing more than a whore up for rent.”

He sighed, and his Adam’s apple bobbed while he swallowed thickly, untamed anger crinkled the corners of his unchecked eyes. A single moment passed, and then the mask cracked and his fury burned, trained directly onto me. “Who the fuck have I sold you to, Alex? Tell me. To whom have I gifted your fucking cunt?” Venom spewed and if I was a lesser woman, I would have recoiled at this brazen temper. Instead, I just smirked knowing I had gotten a rise out of him. “Child, I

grow deeply fucking tired of your shit. This conversation is over. You will be protected and that, my dear, is my choice to make. You have no say in the matter. When will you stop seeing me as the monster? Have I not loved you how every father should love their child?"

No, he hadn't. But that didn't mean anything either, because, in his world, that was exactly how he loved me. Just like a father should. "I have assigned you two guards and that is the end of it. They are to never leave your side. Not talk, touch, or even address you but they are most *definitely* to give their life for you." He looked over into the corner and I followed his line of sight with an indifferent expression on my face.

Two men stood sentinel with god-awful, theatrical masks over their faces, concealing their identity. "The masks are for security. They need to remain unidentifiable if they're to truly protect you. No use in this vengeful pain in my ass that has been haunting me for years using them to get to you. Or me for that matter. No, this way, nobody will know and if they do happen to get killed, I'll just replace them. The world, our enemies, would be none the wiser."

I narrowed my eyes at that statement, anger boiling at how he explained away a human life with such ease. Especially when I knew who stood beyond those masks.

Luigi was possessive, obsessive even by nature, even more so when he had something to lose. So it didn't surprise me that he had resorted to such measures, it did however surprise me that he had the foresight to hide the identity of my security detail.

He'd become unhinged, as bad as every rival family that had threatened to take me right out from under him.

Threats against my life weren't new.

Many slept with crosses hanging above their beds at night, mine was upside down and allowed entry to the demons that wanted to drain my soul. That was one thing my father could never protect me from. One thing I knew he never *wanted* to protect me from. Fear built character, it built strength. I was

lucky I was born with it. Fear? It never touched the edges of my psyche.

I glared at both men in irritation. The masks covering their faces were white and triangled at the chin, which pointed into deep frowns and I found the irony in what may have been hidden behind them.

If anything, it should have been reversed.

We all hid our sorrows, but *nobody* attempted to hide the false smiles they wore as armor.

One stood taller than the other. His body was well-defined and I could tell that under that suit, he'd have the physique girls would go to war for.

The other was shorter.

But not by much and stockier, with wider shoulders. He was dressed in a suit as well, dark blue in contrast to the other man's brooding black. "You think they could save me?" I scoffed with a delicate whisper and a quirk of my brow, turning back around to face Luigi.

"They're my best. I'd trust you to nobody else. With all of this shit that has been going on over the last seven years, it's just getting worse, Alex. I just can't seem to stop the things I've been clinging to so tightly from falling through my hands." There's an edge to his tone. A weary lint of agony coils into something raw and rough as he speaks. "Someone is out to get me, Child. Don't you understand that? Feel the importance of it? They are out to get us all. After the deal tanked with the Polish, we're now indebted to the Russians for looking for a cheap outlet. Not only for our disloyalty in wanting to venture out into the Polish's homemade shit that knocks people out fucking cold on their asses, but for trying to contract two deals with two different families. They're breaking our balls over the shipments. Prices are through the roof and I'm struggling to make sure everyone keeps making a profit when they rise every quarter. That's been going on for years. The first domino to send us toward the gates of Hell," he huffed while I just sat there cold, staring at him like I'd rather be anywhere else in the world, and I would. "Don't even

get me started on the hits the Scotts put out on my men. I can't send anyone across the pond to broker a deal without them being sent back to me in pieces." The longer he seemed to talk, the more tension rippled through his tone and puffed from his nostrils like an angry bull. It's like a steady race but with his vocals, they started slow before speeding up with hysteria. "Now with the attempt to blow up one of the drug supply houses, I have to up our security. I'm going to have to head out to the location and do recon. I'll be gone a while and I need to know you're looked after." He didn't look at me, instead stared off into space when he added weakly, "*It's just getting worse.*" Like he was the only one in the room.

He wasn't though, and I took joy that it was *his* weakness that was showing now.

The same words he's echoed for years, no closer to any kind of answer.

I sat a little straighter and canted my head.

Fifteen years ago, my father would never have let his mask slip. Especially not with company standing right before him. He was the epitome of power and control, just to be near him was to quiver at the intensity of unwavering strength that could conquer cities. Yet, being undermined without ever knowing the devil he danced with had battered him down into this deranged version of himself, made him crack like a porcelain vase.

It started as a fracture and soon enough, the whole thing would shatter.

Now he just looked sad and pathetic.

Frenzied as the demon rioted in his head.

Telling him to trust nobody, not even himself.

"Fine, I'll take bitch one and bitch two." I sighed, standing from my seat like this conversation had bled me of any interest.

Clapping my hands together, I headed toward the door and sang, "Follow along, now, *good puppies.*"

When we walked out into the hall, I lead them around a few corners and once we were cleared and far enough away from any listening ears, I spun and punched Ronnie on the shoulder. He grunted and staggered back. “What the fuck, Alex.”

“You thought I wouldn’t recognize you? That this mask, or anything else in this world for that matter, would make it so that I didn’t know who you were?”

“I didn’t have time to warn you,” he grunted, shaking his head and removed the mask from his face, revealing his milk chocolate complexion, darkened by his blush that just made his entire skin look silken. Those deep gray eyes, so pale they looked like ice, bored into mine and my heart softened, even though my face stayed stern. “Don’t kill this kid either. Killian’s good people.” Ronnie nodded his head toward the guy who I’d avoided the most over the years. The one who watched me from afar, and apart from the night of my sixteenth birthday, never uttered a single word to me. He just stood there silently and unmoving. “Picked him myself.”

“Is that right,” I hummed, knowing full well Luigi would have passed the task on to someone else. “I don’t need a babysitter.” There was no heat in my words because I wasn’t going to fight this. I didn’t want to fight this.

“Just roll with it, kid. You have enough going on without worrying about two people more than willing to give their life up for yours. With the shit you get yourself into, you need us. You’ve always been a troublemaker.”

I narrowed my eyes as I stared into his with the slightest hint of mocked humor. Ronnie hardly left my side anyway since the man was basically my uncle, so having him here in an official capacity wouldn’t matter as much, but this other man?

I had no idea who he was, not really, and I didn’t trust easy.

In fact, there was one person in this entire world that I trusted and I was looking at him. My eyes never left Ronnie’s when I spoke. “You vouch for him?” I asked, finally turning to

stare into deep blue eyes that peered out at me with something hard and brutal in their bottomless depths. The shadows circled his gaze through the holes in the mask and they brought the color to life with vicious vibrancy.

Gave them power, and electricity.

Something inside of me bellowed, but it was shoved so deep down, the voice was only a tiny whimper in the dark that had become my rotten soul.

“I do,” Ronnie agreed, crossing those thick arms across his chest and turning, so we were both facing this secretly masked man with intimidation.

“Then you know what he has to do.”

6



Alessia

—Twenty-Five Years Old—

“You think you can do this? You. A woman?” Raymond asked me from behind his black desk. His chin rested in his hand as he stared at me without an ounce of belief.

“Trust me, Raymond. I’ll get you that land and when I do, I can trust on your alliance and your discretion?”

He scoffed, sniffing before he smirked at me with mockery, “Yes. Prove you can get things done, and you’ll have my backing.”

I sensually wound my hips as I lowered my knees, arms in the air as I caressed my soft skin with my other hand. Losing myself to the music, I lashed out again. The tasseled end of my whip flayed open the flesh on Waylen’s back.

My current victim.

Tied to my chair in my basement of horrors, he screamed and I breathed it in.

Warehouses were so overated and I liked being burrowed underground.

The darkest of evils often were. The ones deeply hidden.

The fun dwelled in the bowels of such a place. He roared his pain, and the rumble turned into a husky tune that melded to the base of Lil Wayne, Wiz Khalifa, Imagine Dragons, X Ambassadors, Logic & Ty Dolla \$ign’s “Sucker for Pain”

while I danced around his seat dressed in a satin khaki-colored gown. I'd just come from a charity event my father was hosting. It was easy enough to slip out undetected so I could conduct my business.

I flicked out my wrist again, slashing it across his chest, parting his flesh so beautifully for me. Caressing his jaw with the delicate touch of my index finger, I leaned closer and purred the words *I'm just a sucker for pain*. The orbs of his green eyes lightened by the second. The blood drained from him and pooled on the ground beneath our feet. My black heels were dotted with blood. You'd think they would darken, but they didn't.

Not even when they glossed over, stolen of any glistening speck of light that once lingered there, showing the smallest signs of life.

"H-how?" he stuttered, gasping for reprieve. I didn't give him one, striking him again and loving the way his back arched but couldn't move, bound to the chair. I must have been a sight before him, never allowing my regal demeanor to falter. "Why? Why are you doing this?"

The answer was simple.

Power.

Ravensdale was split down the middle.

The entire east side, half of the north, and the south belonged to us.

The mafia.

The *Blacks*.

All of the west, half of the south and north, belonged to the Kings Wolves and everyone knew that. Both parties respected it and both sides took value in their oaths.

My mission to undo my father took me to the seediest of places. Just like tonight, it brought me here.

"You pissed someone off, darlin'. Someone powerful and he tasked me with getting rid of the problem." My voice was sultry, purring with a deep husk. Drunk on the perfect

mutilation of his once unmarred flesh I added, “Newsflash, *you’re* the problem.”

“Who? Who would want me dead?” The words stammered out of him in a broken rush and as soon as he’d spoken them, realization dawned. Those light eyes widened and horror flickered through them. “Raymond?”

“You should have just sold him the land.”

Raymond was a powerful businessman, one who had just moved into town and had his eye on the prize. He had forged an alliance with my father. They’d run into a little problem with Waylen here when he refused to sell. They wanted the land that Raymond owned. A deadbeat little bar bordering the outskirts of Ravensdale. Wanting to build a casino, another property to launder their money through.

Waylen never wanted any part of it. Despite the place he owned being a dump, he wasn’t inclined to sell and no matter how much my father tried to put the fear of the Blacks into him, he wouldn’t budge. It proved a big problem for him and Raymond both.

It was Raymond’s business venture, one my father had granted him permission. For a cut, *naturally*. Like my father took in most business on our side of town. It would bring in extra money for the family as well as add to the mountain of other businesses that Raymond had founded. He wanted to set up shop in Ravensdale, and Waylen was making that difficult.

Couldn’t grow his own little empire though without the land he needed or the mafia king gifting him with consent.

It was far enough away from the law and pretty well isolated should any extra activities get started up there.

That’s where I came in.

Over the years, I’ve been seeking out those in alliance with my father and stealing them right out from under him. I had to pick my targets wisely, though. The ones my father failed, I’d have to save. When they needed a problem taken out, no ties connected to them, I’d be the one to do it and that was how I earned their favor.

Couldn't say I didn't enjoy the job.

Nobody other than the two men standing at my back saw this side of me. Outside of this basement, I was a regal princess. Here, I let the anger out. I thrived on the blood and enjoyed watching others live the pain I kept so deeply buried inside.

It was the only outlet I had, the only weakness I'd even let leave my core.

"I need you to sign these papers, Waylen. Make this easier on yourself. Just sign on the dotted line and then I'll end this."

He shook his head, the wispy, thin strands hardly moved and the bald patch in the middle of his skull shined slick with sweat under the dim light. Snot bubbled and popped within his right nostril and I sighed with contempt. "No. No, I won't be bullied. There's nothing you can do to me. Nothing that hasn't already been done."

A slight crinkle creased the corner of my eye as I fought a smirk. "Is that so?" I mused as I walked around him. Truth is, I'd been torturing him for hours. Cutting him on every smooth surface of his skin and making him bleed so fucking gorgeous for me.

I didn't have to though, I already had my ace tucked away safely up my sleeve.

I could have done this without any violence, but I needed to breathe again.

Every second I fought my control, it made living all that much harder. I was tired and sometimes, I just needed to let go.

Brutality was my slumber.

I never needed to pretend here.

I whipped the tasseled end of the whip across my khaki gown and licked my lips at the sight. Snapping my fingers, Ronnie stepped closer to my side and produced a phone that he held up to a confused-looking Waylen. "You're good, I'll give you that. She was hard to find at first, not having your name

and all that. Probably why my father couldn't find her. He would have, eventually. I'm just better and so much faster."

"W-who?" he choked out, and the little dip in his throat between his collarbones heaved up and down, like the chin of a croaking frog.

"Don't," I growled lowly. "I don't tolerate those that play dumb. I found your daughter, Waylen, the one you thought was safely tucked away at collage." Ronnie answered the call, the one that rang right on time. The screen lit up and a small, freckled girl appeared. Tears streamed down her face, and large rounded glasses perched on the tip of her nose as she sniffled. She was beautiful in a geek kind of way and looked nothing like her pathetic father. "I'll kill her, Waylen. I'll kill her and I'll make you watch if you don't do what I asked."

"How could you?!" he screamed at me in fear, while I stared at my black-colored nails and examined them, unaffected.

"I lost all that I loved once. I would have done anything to save him, but I couldn't. You can, Waylen. You can save her. If you don't, then you never fucking deserved her in the first place."

"Daddy," Cammie squealed, noticing the phone in front of her face. "Daddy, what's happening?" You couldn't fake the sound of desperation. Of true, soul-consuming fear. That sound echoed around the basement now, and I felt nothing for it.

At first, Waylen said nothing, just looked away and clenched his eyes shut tightly. "Aryon," was the only word I needed to utter before a fist flew across the screen in a blurb and struck Cammie across the face. She wailed and Waylen gasped, eyes flying open and drawn back to the screen.

"Don't, please! Don't!"

"Daddy, what's happening!" she screamed once again and sobbed down the line. The cracked static adding to the harrowing sound.

“Okay, okay! I’ll do it. I’ll sign!” There was a rush of adrenaline in his wavering voice, not that it would do him any good. “I’m sorry, honey. I’m so sorry. Daddy loves you okay, no matter what happens, remember Daddy loves you, alright?”

“I love you too.”

I nod my head and Ronnie cuts the call before anything else could be said. Taking the papers from my second guard, Killian, I shove them in front of his face and offer him a pen. Ronnie cuts the ties behind his back before both men go back to stand silently by the door.

Waylen scribbles his name across the white page, shakily in black ink and I smile down at him, patting him on his bloodied shoulder. “Good boy, Waylen. A very good boy.”

“How? How did you do all of this? You’re just a woman,” he asked, head hung heavy, utterly depleted and withdrawn without an ounce of energy in being able to lift it up to look at me.

“Because in reality, darling, this seductress is the true muscle,” I mused with a soft smirk on my lips, designed to torment the weak. “Kind of perfect, no? Let’s face it. None of you saw little Alessia coming. After all, who would expect the daughter to defy the father?”

*Alessia*

“**Y**ou should totally, like do it,” Adley mocked in a cheerleader voice as she went cross eyed. “Really, though. It would look really badass.” She beamed at me with her natural voice from the seat in Locks, my hair salon.

I flicked through one of the twenty magazines, not paying attention to any of the pages. Looking up, I met her eyes in the mirror. “I don’t need to look badass, Adley. I’m already a badass.” Then I dropped my eyes again, returning to my mundane task.

“You’re literally no fun, do you know that? How the fuck are we related?”

“Do you need a lesson in the birds and the bees?” I quipped and tried to hide the smirk that was forming across my face.

She huffed a laugh and snorted indelicately. “Considering I’m the one knocked up, and you aren’t, shouldn’t I be having that conversation with you?”

I recoiled, looking back at her in shock. “Definitely not. I don’t want any crotch goblins destroying this body, thank you very much.” It wasn’t a lie. I’d never seen myself as a mother and every time I allowed myself to venture into such a fantasy, the man who I would’ve wanted them with was dead. “It would make it much harder to kill things.”

“I kill just fine,” she hummed, waving her left hand dismissively while she cradled her growing stomach.

“That’s because you’re a psycho and can’t resist the urge.”

“Hey, I resent that. I could stop if I needed to.”

“Could you?”

“Fuck no.” She laughed at her own joke. “It’s a serious problem. But the sex that comes after is fucking insatiable.”

Scratching the back of my shoulder, I smiled at her and pursed my lips in thought. “Oh yeah?”

“Heck yeah, Wolf gets all riled when he sees me covered in blood.” Her eyes fell heavy, half masked and thick in psychotic lust. I shifted in my seat, not wanting to make eye contact with the horny pregnant lady. It’s like the woman’s in heat. “He does this thing right, with his favorite blade and my clit, and it”

“No,” I bark and she stopped, stared, and then started to chuckle. “I don’t want to know.”

“You’re such a prude.”

Whatever she needed to tell herself.

Kelly brushed out Adley’s hair and ruffled it with her fingers. The long locks fanned out blue and I envied her free spirit. I dismissed them and sat back, watching quietly. It took me years to find Adley after she was abducted by a serial killer couple who wanted her for their deranged son’s little pet. She was only five and the cousin I had when she was taken, sure as heck wasn’t the same sweet little girl that returned.

I guessed that was just the way for the women who shared Black blood.

To survive hell and come back as the Devil’s keeper.

I turned my head and gazed out the window, watching as people milled on by. Both guards stood out front, backs ramrod straight and I knew if I was standing in front of them, I’d see both their eyes flickering back and forth without rest, taking in the area, never missing a thing. I was drawn toward Killian’s broad and tensed shoulders. The way he conducted himself was unlike any man I’d ever known.

Even as a teenager, the boy who watched me from the shadows always had this way about him. I'd once thought my father was the epitome of power, but he paled in comparison to Killian.

He was a God amongst men and just to stare at him, was like watching a great sea part. Nothing stood in his way and people unknowingly shifted, just to give him more room to roam.

From my vantage point, he seemed to tower over the world. Those strong thighs were rigid under his black slacks, thick and taunt against the fabric.

I remembered back to the day I officially met him as my guard. When Ronnie had vouched for him and told me I could trust him with my life.

It was an impossible moment to forget.

Nobody had ever looked at me the way he had.

"Then you know what he has to do," I said, staring at the blue-eyed man standing before me. His rich, intoxicating scent wrapped around me and filled the air. I'd never smelled anything like it. So strong and undiluted, it felt like I was standing by a campfire, in the middle of the woods surrounded by nothing other than sandalwood and citrus. I inhaled deeply and bottled up the scent so I'd never risk needing to get this close to him just to smell something so heavenly again. As I stepped into him, I reached for the chin of his mask, intending to lift it from his head. With a quick hand, his snapped up and his fingers coiled around my wrist, stopping me from touching him. He pulled me into him, close enough that my warm breath gushed against him but not close enough that my chest touched his.

I didn't jump, never made any move that showed I was startled at all. Instead, I just raised a delicate brow and waited for him to let me go, intrigued by the brazen disrespect for the rules he apparently vowed to uphold.

"Killian. You know you aren't supposed to touch her," Ronnie growled in a low, scathing hiss. He stepped forward,

ready to rip Killian away from me. Lifting my other hand, I halted his movement while never taking my eyes off the troubled blues that bored into my gaze with a searing kind of energy that made my heart flutter in anticipation. “Now, boy. Let her go.”

“Do you want to be here?” I asked him and took comfort when he nodded once. “Do you take your vow seriously?” Another nod, another wave of his mouthwatering scent. I tilted my head and narrowed my eyes. “If you do this job, Killian. You’re loyal to nobody but me. Act on nobody’s orders but my own. Not even my father’s. You do as I ask. Any questions you may have, die on your tongue. It’s not your place to question me or my orders. Do you understand?” He nods again and I smirk at his stubbornness. “I’ll also ask you to prove yourself. Can you do that?” He nods one last time and I take a step back, breaking his hold on my wrist.

“Then follow me.”

Ronnie already knew what was about to happen. He must’ve thought that Killian would have agreed to my barbaric methods, or he never would have chosen him.

All those years ago, when the little girl inside of me was broken and the vicious, bloodthirsty bitch was born, I had turned so cold. I had pushed away everyone that I loved and that included Ronnie. I wanted him to hate me, to give up on trying to save me so I could slowly destroy myself without making him watch. He was a stubborn bastard though and refused to let me drown. He pulled me back from the edge and got me thinking straight again. He got me angry. He made me smart.

When he finally got me to talk and found out what happened, he wanted to kill Luigi.

He may have sworn to protect the man, but he would have burned down the estate to keep me safe. He’d always protected me, for as long as I could remember.

I still couldn’t trust he wouldn’t hurt me like my father had. He’d been my world once, and I, his princess. All until he ripped out my heart.

I needed Ronnie to prove himself. Back then, I wanted it to be something so fucked up he'd never do it.

I wanted to test how concrete his word was and prove to me there wasn't a limitation on his loyalty.

Crazy bastard did it though, with a smirk on his lips and now, if he wanted me to trust this Killian, he needed to take the same oath.

Once we'd made our way back to my cabin—the one that I had built for my twenty-second birthday—I kept walking until I approached the porch. Sitting down on the large swinging seat that arched above my head, and opened to show me the canopy of stars, I blew out a cold breath. Ronnie carried on forward. Toward the stump and the stack of wood, he had piled there ready to cut. Beside that was a fire pit, one built into the ground and he made quick work of getting one started.

Killian stood there, tall and silent, waiting for further instruction with his tattooed hands clasped before him.

When the fire was burning wildly, Ronnie ran a sweaty palm across his stubbled jaw and sighed. Turning to grab the iron poker from its hook, he shoved it into the flames and the end turned luminous with a savage orange that glowed like embers.

Neither of us said anything and neither did Killian.

I watched him though, seeking out any kind of hesitation.

I found none, but still, I couldn't help but stare at him.

The mask hid pretty much everything, everything except his dark roots and caramel-weaved strands of hair that sat ruffled on the top of his head. I wondered what he looked like underneath, and when Ronnie cleared his throat, I knew it wouldn't be long before I'd find out.

I stood from my seat and made my way slowly down the steps and over toward Ronnie, "Come here, Killian," I spoke softly and he retraced my footsteps until he was standing before me. "Get on your knees." He did so without question and I wondered if he had grown up since the one and only time I had been this close to him. He had hurt me once, which was

a hard feat for a man who hardly spoke. Would he—could he turn into a man I could truly trust? “Open your shirt and remove your mask.” He did what I asked of him, all but removing the damn covering on his face. “If I have to ask again, I will dismiss you and find another soldier to be on my security detail.”

He hesitated for a single second, then instead of lifting his mask off and over his head, he pulled it down, so it stayed around his neck and rested against his large chest covering his throat. I noticed the ink first, my eyes followed his rough and tattooed hands as they removed the thing concealing him from me. He was covered in tattoos, and if I wasn't so eager to get this over and done with, I may have been inclined to study them more. I didn't look up. Not just yet, I needed a moment to breathe first. Everything about this man was dominating, and while it was easy enough for me to dismiss it entirely, I still hated the thought of offering him, or anyone at all for that matter, this chance to stand at my side.

“I'm not a normal girl, Killian, and this isn't a normal job. I don't trust easily and I need to know that when you make this oath to me, you'll mean it. Will you wear my brand?”

I looked up at him, my gaze trailing over his hard and defined pecs, to his dark brown and blond dusted, stubbled jaw. His cheeks dipped, cheekbones high and shadowed around his growing beard. The bridge of his nose was slim and fitted perfectly to the portions of his face. Dark brows naturally furrowed and dipped in the center, covering blue eyes that made me want to gasp. Instead, I swallowed thickly and gritted my teeth, eyes moving up to the long strands of his hair that gathered on top of his head and fell to the side.

Dark roots with caramel streaks that looked all too appealing to run your fingers through.

The man was an Adonis, created to perfection and if I was any other woman, I'd probably want to fall weak at the knees.

But I wasn't any other woman, and this... was just any other man.

I wasn't the girl who had her head turned easily and I never would be.

I had too much to focus on and no room in my heart for any more pain and that was all love or affection ever brought.

Fucking pain.

I looked away from him, and summoned over Ronnie. "If you say yes, Killian. There's no going back."

I didn't expect him to speak, and I was right. He looked at me, those fierce eyes seeing everything I tried to keep hidden and with one single incline of his head, I accepted the poker iron from Ronnie and stepped forward. "It's okay to scream. It'll be the last one you'll ever let escape working for me. I'm not the boss that just accepts protection, Killian. I'm the type of boss that gives it too." Then I stabbed the poker into his flesh and he clenched his jaw, teeth grinding together. I was surprised they didn't combust into dust as he ground them back and forth. He didn't scream though, just let out a throaty groan that affected me way more than it should have. His flesh burned and sizzled like meat in a skillet and still, he remained silent and coiled so tightly, I found myself resting a gentle palm against his chest to steady him and offer a little comfort.

Once the imprint had been made, I removed the poker and handed it back to Ronnie, "You'll see my doctor. He'll treat the wound and make sure it doesn't get infected so that the scar heals correctly." As I stepped back, his gaze fell to his chest, and a wicked smirk spread across his lips at the massive A that had been burned there.

Then he finally spoke and my world tilted on its axis. "The mark of a queen."

"Yo, earth to Alex." Adley's voice broke through my memory and I turned back toward her. "You with me?"

"Of course I am," I sighed, not offering any explanation for my daydream. "You done?"

"Almost. Wanted to ask if you think I should cut it all off though. You know, be a daredevil, or keep it long?"

“Stitch doesn’t like change. If you go home pregnant and with a bob, you’ll give the poor man a heart attack.” She knew I was right and then the shadows rasped, “She’d be sexy no matter how she cut her hair.” I groaned out loud, rolling my temples between my index and thumb. “How long has he been there?”

“He’s always been there,” Adley frowned while I glared at her. “Are you losing your touch?” Now she smirked, and I wanted to poke her in the eye.

“What happened to a girl’s day?”

“We’re having one. Just with a hot biker on security.” She shrugged and I looked out the window before looking back at her in veiled annoyance.

“More like a stalker that would surgically attach himself to you if that was an option,” I grumbled under my breath. “I have security.”

“Yeah, well. At least mine could cut his way out of a wet paper bag with skill. No offense, but yours? Looks like they’d suffocate trying.”

I chuckled lightly at that. It was idiotic, but whatever delusions she needed to keep herself warm at night. “Of course they do.” I stood to my feet, brushing my long ponytail from the arch of my shoulder. “I’m going to get coffee. I’ll be back soon.”

“Okay,” she called, throwing her hand in the air while she eye fucked the shadows like she was about to get off just from Stitch’s dark eyes alone.

“Fucking serial killers.” The door shut behind me and I turned toward Ronnie. “I’m grabbing coffee. One of you stays here.” Then I walked off to the right, heading down the street on Main without any idea who had chosen to follow me.

I often directed everything at Ronnie because he never bought into this bullshit about never talking to me.

Killian, however, hadn’t uttered a word to me in the five years he’d worked for me.

Nothing other than “*The brand of a queen.*”

I could still hear it, and it still made me fucking quiver.

*Killian*

I followed Alessia down the street and toward the coffee shop. I was a foot away from her. Leaving her enough space that she didn't feel crowded but still close enough that I could take out any threat, should one arise. I'd kill for her in a heartbeat and within the last five years, had proven that plenty.

Not that she needed protection.

The woman was fiercer than a force of nature. I didn't fear anything in this world. I'd already seen the cut-throat nightmares of the underworld first hand. But making a woman like Alessia Black my enemy, sure as fuck scared the hell out of me.

I'd seen enough of her in the half a decade I'd been her guard to know that she was someone to watch with caution. She could handle herself just fine and this *Alessia* she showed the world, was nothing compared to the one she showed us behind closed doors.

She'd never break a sweat, never creased those delicate brows. Even an expert in behavioral mannerism wouldn't have a clue what the fuck she was thinking.

I reached for the door before she could and pulled it open for her. She frowned at me and then smirked. "Aw. Bitch number two decided to follow me today." Stepping inside, I followed close behind without offering any kind of response.

She'd adopted the name for me and Ron and had used it every day since the moment her father assigned us to her.

It didn't bother me because I knew I was nobody's bitch.

Everyone in the coffee shop glanced at us fleetingly. It wasn't every day you saw someone dressed in my unusual attire, accompanying a stunning woman like Alex.

Most knew who we were and to what family we belonged.

But there were always the tourists.

Those who passed through and saw the three of us walking around town like something out of a horror flick. I couldn't even count how many kids I'd scared over the years and how many had stopped to pull on my pant leg asking to take a photo like I was some kind of mascot. Why Luigi insisted on these coverings always fucking alluded me.

He wanted to save face with the world, but if his enemies did manage to take one of us out, they would know about it and that would be all that mattered at the end of the day.

"Coffee, black," Alex ordered from the tall slim kid behind the counter. His hungry eyes roamed all over her while she stared up at the board even though I knew she knew what she wanted to order. I shifted a little bit closer. My hand brushed hers and her entire body stilled at the contact but made no other indication she felt me at all. "Two iced coffees. One plain. One with four shots of caramel and six shots of hazelnut."

"Is that all, sweetheart?" The kid drawled and I fisted my hands into balls at my side.

I hated the way he addressed her, the way he leered at her like this wasn't a stunning mastermind that stood before him but just another piece of ass.

"That's all, and if you call me sweetheart again, I'll remove your tongue from your head." She spoke casually, so calmly that the atmosphere in the building remained tranquil.

The kid, *Stuart*, judging by his name tag, screwed up his face in disgust. “Whatever, bitch.” The scoffed huff filled with disdain, rushed out of him. Though he muttered it under his breath, I heard every single word.

I stood there silently while he completed the order and when he was done, he placed a tray filled with plastic cups on the counter. I leaned forward and gripped him by the shirt. Pulling him into me, he lifted onto his tippy toes as his chest painfully dug into the high-risen glass separating us, that I had him doubled over. Grabbing a stack of napkins from the side, I smacked him around the face with them before shoving him and watched as he stumbled back from the shock.

I didn’t need to really hurt him, the prospect of what I would do when I grabbed him was enough to make the kid need to change his pants. I picked up the order, turned, and headed toward the door to hold it open for Alex who smirked at me from beneath her lashes. “Touchy today, are we?” She mused as we began our walk back to the hair salon.

Anyone who addressed a woman like this should put respect to her name.

When we got back to Ronnie, she took a plain iced coffee from the holder in my hands and thrust it at his chest. “You know I’m supposed to be staying focused,” he complained but took it from her anyway.

It was either that or she’d make him wear it.

“Hard to do when you pass out from dehydration,” she deadpanned, then took the black coffee for herself then nodded her head toward the extra she ordered with all of the flavorings. Given that I’d never spoken to her, or voluntarily ordered a drink in front of her, it always baffled me that she knew how I took it and how I preferred iced to hot.

I inclined my head in thanks and she rolled her eyes at me.

A black town car drove past and slowed when it reached the point where we stood. Alex stepped forward and squared her shoulders, those cold eyes of hers drilled into the hostile gaze that glared back at her from the driver’s seat. Ronnie and

I stepped forward to place our bodies in front of hers, my hand on my gun. She didn't move, never even flinched. Just kept staring the man down through the gap in our shoulders until he blinked first and rolled his window back up, speeding away. She stayed still, watching him leave and never taking her gaze from his tail end until it turned the corner and she lost sight of him.

Only then did she blink.

“What’s happening?” Adley asked as the door opened, and she stepped out with a black apron wrapped around her and half her hair mussed.

“Not a thing,” Alex replied smoothly before she turned and stepped back inside the building.

Luckily this was the last stop of their girl’s day and as soon as Adley and Stitch left, I knew it wouldn’t be long before we returned home too. A few hours later, the freaky couple said their goodbyes and disappeared out the door. Alex let out a deep sigh and leaned back in her seat. “Thanks for that, Kel.”

“No worries,” the blonde-haired woman replied with an easy smile. “Daniels called. She wanted to know if you’d head over to the Wolves for dinner this Sunday.”

She was referring to Billie-Jo. The woman who married one of the Kings Wolves bikers Toothpick, and whose son Alessia helped save.

Kelly was more than just a hairdresser and this was no ordinary salon.

It was Alessia’s.

Not that anybody knew that.

She bought the place on the down low a few years back and hired Kelly who was a struggling, single mother that nobody wanted to take a chance on. Basically gave her the joint and in return, Kelly would pass on messages to Alex when needed. She used the back room to conduct business.

“She tried calling, but couldn’t get through.”

Alex pulled her phone out and stared at the screen. “I’ve got no messages.” Tucking it away again, she stood to her feet. “Fine, tell her I’ll be there.” Then she said her own goodbyes and entered the back room that doubled as her office. Making her way to her desk, she sunk down into the seat behind it, then clicked on the mouse.

“Kid, it’s time to head home. You’ve been out all day,” Ronnie told her in that fatherly way of his. Her eyes stayed glued to the screen as she started tapping away at the keyboard.

If he was anyone else, she’d have sliced through his vocal cords for daring to tell her anything. But he’d always been like an uncle to her and she highly respected the man.

I swear, if it wasn’t for him, she’d never look after herself. He forces her to take a step back and breathe every now and then. It isn’t easy work trying to usurp a kingdom she’d been told half her life she would never rule.

“I will. I just want to respond to a few emails first and make sure all our operations are still running smoothly.”

“You’d know about it if they weren’t,” He countered and still, she kept her head down and her fingers flying. She didn’t respond to him, and he just huffed and perched on the end of the desk beside her. He picked out his blade from inside his suit jacket and stabbed it into the table, twisting it into the woodwork out of boredom and still, she never even blinked.

“Killian, did you get the debt owed from Stevenson?” She looked up then, knowing she had to. I nodded, and her gaze flew straight back to the computer screen. “Dillons?” Again, she looked up at me and I nodded. “Is it in the safe?” I nodded once more and she blew out a slow breath. “That just leaves Murphy. I’ll need to collect that. It makes him a week late.”

“And you can.” Ronnie inserted his voice into her steamrolled thoughts. “Tomorrow. He’ll probably be home with his family now. It’s not like you can go in there and rough the guy up, is it?”

Leaning back in her seat, she turned to face him and steepled her fingers together, placing them under her chin. “Says who?”

“It’s not good business. *Or* smart and you’re anything but dumb, Alessia.”

“I know that, but should I decide that to be my course of action, you have no say in the matter. Remember yourself, Ronnie.”

He chuckled at that, standing to his feet. “How could I ever forget myself when you keep me so perfectly in line? Let’s go, killer. I’m getting too old for these late nights.”

Together, we piled into the car and I drove back toward the compound.

Once the doors closed, Ronnie ripped his mask off and blew out a hot breath. “Fuck me. This thing will kill me one day,” he groaned and I smirked lopsidedly behind my own, leaving it in place before putting on my indicator and taking a right turn.

“You chose to wear them,” Alex reminded him as she rested her forehead against the cool window and gazed out into the night. The stars twinkled and as I spared a moment to stare at her, I saw them glisten back in the depths of her dark brown eyes.

She was different tonight, more withdrawn and lost inside her own head.

“The reasoning behind them was smart, even if the orders came from an idiot,” he gruffed, and massaged his large shoulders back into the seat to get more comfortable.

Alex didn’t respond, just stayed quiet and stared out into the darkness.

Fifteen minutes later, I was pulling up to Ronnie’s home and he was unfolding his massive frame from the seat, now indented with the full weight of his body. “Night, kid. I’ll see you two in the morning.”

Ronnie had a family of his own, so was allowed to stay outside of the Black Manor. It was only a one minute, and thirty-second drive between the community that had been built for the made men in the family and the manor. The Blacks had acres upon acres of land, all gated off and wrapped in impenetrable fences. They'd basically made their own town, so he lived on the street with the other men who had families too.

Normally, I'd have my own place, but considering who I was protecting, Luigi refused the idea. Ronnie was enough, but he insisted that one of us live in-house with Alex. She detested the thought but knew if we openly defied that particular order, he'd ask too many questions about the balls she continued to hide. Then everything she'd been working toward would be exposed and he'd know everything.

Watching to make sure Ronnie got inside the house and the door shut with ease behind him, I made a U-Turn and headed in the other direction, toward Alex's cabin which was nowhere near the rest of the houses or the manor.

Just as I'm about to pull up, she looks over at me. "He's a week late, Killian. If I let this stand, they'll all think I'm weak. I want this sorted tonight." She'd been so quiet, I wouldn't have heard her if I hadn't become so hyper-aware of her every move over the last five years. Nodding, I put the car in reverse, backed out of the drive, and drove back toward the iron gates.

9



Alessia

We pulled up to Murphy's half an hour later. I wasn't worried about what would transpire next. I was many things but a fool wasn't one of them. I knew how to get in and out of places undetected and it would add the perfect element of surprise.

He probably thought he was safe here, within the walls of his perfect little home with his perfect little family.

But he was wrong.

He needed to know there wasn't anywhere I couldn't reach him. Anywhere in this big, big world he'd be safe.

Loan sharking was just another avenue of income for me, it got my name out there on the streets, which was exactly what I needed when the time was right.

Nobody would ever dare talk and put my name in places I didn't want it put.

That much I knew for sure. Because half of these assholes all had the same thing in common. When push came to shove, they were all cowards.

Their thought process was that borrowing from a woman would be the safer option. Knowing if they went with my father, not only would the interest be higher—which was intentional on my part—but so would the pain if they didn't meet their deadlines.

I was deadlier than my father because I had more to prove.

If any of them had been stupid enough to talk, it would only tighten the noose around their neck and what my currently unhinged father would do to a traitor, would be far more heinous than anything I'd do to them.

I'd made it so.

We sat in silence as the night grew darker, watching the house. It wasn't uncomfortable, but then again it never was around Killian and I hated that.

I hated that when he was next to me, breathing wasn't so hard. There was only one person who ever made me feel that way and it was a violation of Rían's memory to ever have that feeling again. I didn't mind that he never spoke to me, that even living with him, it felt like living in solitude, because that was what I wanted. What I craved above all else because that was all I deserved. To be alone for the rest of my life because letting anyone get too close to me meant an inevitable demise and I never wanted that for Killian or Ronnie.

When the bedroom lights on the top floor of the two-story house flickered off, I knew it was the kid's bedroom and then two hours later, when the second bedroom light flickered off, I knew it was Murphy's room. I opened the car door and slid from my seat, dressed in the same black outfit I had worn earlier today. I stuck to the shadows and crept toward the house, Killian hot on my heels. "Stay in the car," I whispered, but he ignored me. His giant form flattened the long blades of grass as he lumbered toward me, backing me up into the side of the imposing home we were about to break into.

Inside my mind, I pictured acting out how I really felt. I saw myself breathing heavily, my chest rising and falling at his close proximity. Yet on the outside, my face remained impassive and my breathing stayed even. He loomed above me, bent a little lower, and shook his head *no*.

The man was as infuriating as he was formidable.

A low growl was all he got from me before I shoved him back and continued on my way. When I got to the back door, I picked the lock, refusing to allow this giant asshole to steal all of my fun tonight. When I heard the soft click letting me know

it'd worked, I gently pushed the door open and listened for any kind of squeak it might give off. It was well-oiled and didn't make a peep. Stepping inside, I kicked off my black combat boots so I could drift along the kitchen tiles without leaving an imprint. Just as I was about to tell Killian to do the same, I noticed he already was.

Deciding to leave him to it, I moved softly on the balls of my feet and glided up the stairs like a phantom and right into Murphy's room. The fucker laid on his back, mouth hung open, nose to the ceiling snoring louder than thunder. How his wife slept next to him, I had no idea. When Killian filed in behind me, I nodded my head toward the missus and he seemed to just read my mind, stalking towards her and drawing his gun.

I pulled mine too and placed it right between Murphy's eyes, right on the bridge of his bony nose that had a little lump on it, probably from breaking it. The slight amount of pressure I pushed onto it, was enough to have him waking with a pained gasp. Brown eyes grew wild when he saw me. Bringing a finger to my lips, I hushed him and then flicked my gaze toward Killian. Following my line of sight, tears sprung to his eyes when he saw him pointing a gun at his gracefully sleeping wife.

Flicking my wrist, I indicated for him to get up from the bed and he followed my silent demand with ease. I turned my nose up in disgust and how weak he looked right now.

If a tear fell, I'd fucking blind him.

Leading him out of the room, I directed him out into his garage and when Killian shut the door behind us, I cracked Murphy across the back of the head with the butt of my gun. "Got something for me, Murph?" I asked casually as he staggered forward with a grunt. Flexing my neck, I popped my shoulder and rested back against his steel toolbox. One of those industrial ones that stacked on top of one another and lined the wall. I kicked one foot over the other as I watched him fall to his knees and allowed silence to fall.

“Don’t get up,” I told him, allowing him to turn so he was facing me, but not standing back to his feet. Resting the gun against my thigh, my other hand toyed with the end of something pointed on top of the worktop. I wanted him to look up at me from where he rested at my feet like a peasant. To see the power he decided to underestimate. “I don’t like it when payments are missed. So why did you think it was acceptable not to make one?”

For a moment, he just stared at me dazed. It was like he was warring with himself, trying to determine how afraid he should be of me. I noticed it the second he decided to try his hand at bravery. When he opened his mouth—no doubt to offer something smug and smart—I lunged forward with skilled grace. I shoved the barrel of my gun into his mouth, down his throat until he gagged, then stabbed him in the eye with whatever it was I was playing with from the side.

When it protruded from his head, I noticed it was a screwdriver.

“Shh, shh,” I hummed gently while I cradled the back of his head, shoving him deeper onto the end of sharp, sharp steel. “I’d think before you speak to me with anything less than respect, Murph. And I’d *definitely* think before you try to lie to me.”

He tried to scream, but it was muffled and instead, he gagged around the barrel. I pulled it out just in time for him to throw up that night’s dinner all over the ground. Huge chunks of it painted the padded tiles and I frowned. I’d cleared the space before any splashed back at me and took up my position leaning against the toolbox. “So let’s try this again, shall we?”

“Y-you crazy cunt!”

“Wouldn’t call that respect now, would you, Killian?”

My deadly guard just shook his head, not that Murphy could see it since I stabbed him through the eye on the side Killian stood.

“Didn’t think so.” I stepped forward again—around the puke—and closer to Murphy who scurried back like a rat in a

hot tin can.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry, please, I’m sorry!”

I didn’t want his apologies, but I so enjoyed his terror.

“My money, where it is?” I asked one last time, sounding bored.

“The ki- kitchen. It’s in the kitchen.” Sobbing, he pointed with his hands toward the door we had not long walked through. His hands were clasped together as if he was in the middle of prayer. I didn’t know if he was religious, but I knew no gods were coming to save him.

“Where?” I asked.

“In with Floppy’s ashes.”

“Floppy?”

“Our dog,” he cried and I narrowed my eyes in disgust.

“You keep your dead dog in the kitchen?”

“Mealtime was always his favorite.”

Shaking my head, I instructed Killian to go and check. When he returned seconds later with a hefty envelope, my suspicions were confirmed. “You had the money, so why not bring it to me?”

He couldn’t look at me, instead, he kept his overflowing gaze on the tips of my sock-covered toes. I cocked my gun and pointed it at his head.

“Okay, okay! I thought you were a push over, alright? I thought you were weak and wouldn’t do shit if I skipped out on paying you back. I never expected you to come here and get your hands dirty.”

“I think *bloody* is the word you’re looking for,” I tell him absently, the anger inside of me rising.

It wasn’t like I didn’t know why he, out of all of my clients, was the only one not to pay back what he owed. Everyone else had sense and value for their lives, this fucker

clearly didn't. I already knew what I would do next, but I wanted him to stew on it.

It would only benefit me if he lived. He'd be a breathing mutilation of what would happen if you crossed me, so that was a win. But still, a lost eye wasn't all this bastard would be getting tonight. I turned and ran my soft hands over the other tools that lined the wall. When they brushed against a rusty pair of sheers, I pulled them from their hook and walked back toward him. "I don't like thieves, Murphy." He fell backward, his hand slicked with blood as he tripped over his own essence that refused to give him the platform he needed to keep himself upright. "I especially don't like sexists."

His palm was flat against the mat, and his wrist was bent at the perfect angle for me to slice right through his flesh and bone. When he almost roared his pain and woke up the entire house, I kicked out, hitting him square in the jaw, knocking him out cold. He fell to his back, his hand inches away from his detached wrist. "And I sure as fuck don't like people thinking I'll let this shit stand."

*Killian*

She was glorious.

A force of mass destruction in the flesh.

She owned Murphy from the second she broke into his house, right up until the second she knocked his lights out. I'd never grow tired of watching her in her element, watching her reign with an iron fist, and proving all those who doubted her fucking wrong.

It took me years of petty crime and shitty orders to get by her side. Clawing my way up through the ranks, just to align myself with the woman I knew would rule it all one day. I'd been a grunt doing dirty work, all until I proved myself worthy of being where I stood today.

Now I got to witness what no other man ever would.

The blood queen soar.

There was nothing sexier than a woman who needed nothing other than her own company. She'd never needed nor wanted to prove herself to anyone before tonight. So I knew something was troubling her, which troubled me.

Actually, it pissed me the fuck off.

I hated not being able to read her the way I knew she read me. She saw everything about everyone and when it came to what others saw when looking at her—it was exactly what she wanted them to see.

She knew her worth and exactly what she was capable of. She was so detached, covered in blood, she just sat there beside me sullen and inside her own head as I drove us home. By the time I pulled up it had been a full thirty-two minutes she'd sat in the same position staring at her hands. I wondered if she was finding patterns in the blood.

I knew she didn't regret what she did because she's never regretted a thing in her life.

I wanted to ask her what was wrong, but speaking to her would only dismantle all of the hard work and energy I had put in over the years at keeping her at a distance. If I opened my mouth, if I risked conversation after conversation with her, I risked spilling all my dearest secrets.

Alessia Black was a woman men would wage wars for. A woman you could bare your soul to. Men would conquer mass cities just to give her the choice of a home. Raid the oceans, just to find her the finest gold and pillage still-beating hearts from the chests of her enemies, just to show her she'd always be safe.

If I ever allowed myself to cross that line, and build that connection with her, I knew it would be one I'd never return back from unscathed.

Alessia had demons and many of them.

I cut the engine and before I had the chance to pull the key, she was out of the car and stalking toward the cabin's front door. I blew out a cold breath and sat there for a moment, clenching the steering wheel and adjusting my hard cock that made these slacks impossibly tight. I'd always got hard after watching the warrior rise, only to coat her silken flesh in decorative black. Like a Viking in battle, painting her face with the art of her kills. Once the heat rushed through me and I knew she'd be in her room, I got out of the car and followed her inside, straight toward my room and into the bathroom where I slammed the door behind me.

Removing the boots from my feet, I stripped down from my suit and left it where it pooled on the ground. Reaching one hand into the shower, I turned it on and set the

temperature to cold before I lumbered over toward the vanity and knocked the mask from my head. It fell into the sink and I groaned, resting both hands on the counter I white-knuckled the basin before shaking my head and unsettling my wayward strands.

It'd been a long ass day, and I needed to get some rest.

Everything ached from being on my feet twenty-four-seven.

The woman never slowed down or took a fucking break and given the fact she was trying to undo an empire from the inside out, I couldn't say that I blamed her. She worked fucking hard to get to where she was, so I gave her all the credit she deserved.

Still though, I was fucking shattered.

I just needed to sleep off the tension.

Stepping into the shower, I allowed the cold spray to downpour onto my back before stepping forward and hanging my head. The heavy stream beat against my skull and as I tried to breathe through this raging hard-on I knew wouldn't die from, I decided to get it over with. Taking my thick length in my palm, I stroked myself slowly at first.

It was a gentle tease, it had to be when I was so aroused it fucking hurt.

When the pain lessened, filtering through how good it felt, I hissed lowly and stroked myself harder. Imagining Alessia on her knees, mouth wide open while I fucked her throat deep, with an intensity I'd hoped she'd never experienced before.

The thought was intoxicating.

Because I *knew* that woman would get on her knees for no man. I also knew how fucking sweet she tasted.

I rutted into her, thrusting my hips forward into my palm pretending it was her mouth. Her thick, wet lips sucked me in greedily. I had no idea why, but I'd imagined her to take all of the control, even if she was on her knees. In my head, she hollowed her cheeks and sucked me into the back of her

throat, leaving me tensed and ready to explode. I came hard, spraying the tiles with the seed that I fantasized was deep inside her cunt. When the imagery became too real, I shook my head and turned my face up toward the shower head, allowing it to assault me and rid me of my darkest dreams. I was breathing heavily and instead of feeling relieved, I felt even more riled up.

Stepping from the shower, I wrapped a towel around my waist and headed into my room and straight toward the dresser. Pulling out a pair of boxers, I stepped into them and headed back toward the bed, flopping down onto the mattress with a groan. My head started to ache, but luckily it helped my eyes fall heavy, and soon enough, I'd passed out half-naked on top of the sheets. I didn't even have the energy to crawl beneath them. I was startled awake a few hours later when a terrified scream tore through my skull and before my eyes had even snapped open I had one hand on the door and one on my gun. Ripping it open, I charged out into the hall when the sound came again, this time louder and right from inside Alex's room.

My heart felt like it was about to explode from my chest. Just punch through the cavities right there and fucking then. Splatter against the drywall.

I'd never heard Alessia scream.

Not once in the entire five years I'd worked for her. Or the many years before, that I spent stalking her from the shadows.

I'd seen her make plenty of people scream, mostly men who she put the fear of Satan into. But never once heard the sound come from her throat.

I had thought I'd experienced true terror at least once in my life, the night my heart stopped beating. But it didn't compared to how I felt in that very moment.

I kicked her door open and threw myself through it, gun held high and more than ready to put a bullet into the head of whoever had scared the shit out of Alessia.

She was a woman of many things, but fear was never one of them.

Only when I crossed the threshold, it was to find her room empty and her alone under the covers. I stood there like a moron for a moment, just blinking dumbly at her sleeping form wondering if I'd woken from some kind of nightmare of my own.

Because looking at her now, you'd never have known that dreadful sound had been pulled from her chest. Just when I thought I was starting to lose my mind, she screamed again and thrashed her head to the side like she was in agony.

The kind of pain that could kill a person dead.

I rushed toward her and fell to my knees to shake her awake, gun rested on my bent thighs. But she was in too deep. Bellowing her terror to the heavens, my pulse thundered beneath my skin.

“Wake up! Lessie, wake the fuck up!”

Her eyes flew open, pupils dilated and almost darker than an abyss as she gasped. Her back arched and her chest heaved like she was being strangled in her sleep and any bit of air she could get was needed. The silken camisole she was wearing in a pearl white clung to her tanned skin with perspiration. The covers gathered around her waist, low on her hips as the top of her thighs peeked from beneath the fabric.

By the Devil, she was fucking beautiful.

Even when she had terror in her harrowing, soul destroying eyes.



Alessia

“Daddy don’t!” I cried as tears streamed down my cheeks.

Everything happened all too quickly, which was strange considering the fact everything also happened in slow motion. The sound of rain pelted against glass despite us being in daddy’s dungeon of hell. There were no windows, yet the pitter-patter inside of my head was almost as loud as my screams.

Shadows were plentiful here, dancing in the little light this place offered. It was like my turmoil was alive and outside of my soul that housed its torment.

Pain riddled my body as my little limbs shook. I clawed and kicked, fighting my way toward Rían but each time I shucked off the hold of one of my father’s brutal soldiers, another one gripped me even harder. Bruising my delicate skin. Soon enough, there was an army between me and the boy that I loved. I cried for him, screamed for him, even.

All until my throat bled.

But this wasn’t right.

This wasn’t what happened.

It was only me, Daddy, Rían, and Elliot there that day.

That’s when I knew what this was.

‘It was what should have happened,’ my conscious whispered back to me in a monstrous shrill voice that sounded

like nails on a chalkboard. My own soul laughed at me, like all of this was Rían's vengeful spirit that haunted me from beyond the grave.

I should have done anything to get to him, to stop my father from slitting his throat.

I was so weak then.

Helpless.

Fucking pathetic. I was powerless, nothing but a frail, useless being that stood hopeless in the face of death when I should have kicked that bastard's ass. I should have allowed the Reaper to take me instead. Or this empire and everyone in it.

Anyone but Rían.

I never forgave myself for just standing there and watching, when I could have done something, anything, to stop him from getting hurt.

I knew it was a feeble regret. I was seven, and the chances of overpowering fully grown men were less than slim, but I couldn't logic away the ache in my heart.

“Lessie, wake up!” I gasped and my face felt wet as I startled myself awake, dry heaving for a painless breath, but each one I inhaled burned like ice. My chest ached and I reached up to swipe the tears from my face. My weakness glistened down my cheek.

My own body betrayed me and anger soon overtook the sorrow.

Killian was on his knees beside me. Large hands wrapped around my shoulders and I resented the fact his touch didn't feel foreign. It never did. “W-what are you doing in here?” I rasped, blinking away the sting in my eyes, refusing to allow any more of my anguish to show.

“You were having a nightmare,” he said, breathing heavily and his face fell, creasing with concern. His hair was mused and ruffled, disheveled on top of his head.

It was still damp from his shower.

My head snapped toward him at the rough sound of his voice. He sounded like some kind of dark God. Like he hadn't spoken before this very moment, and I knew despite the fact he didn't speak to me, he did in fact talk.

Especially to Ronnie.

Something squirmed low in my tummy and I clenched my thighs together. The same feeling I felt when I first stared into his ocean blues plagued me now I'd finally heard his voice again after all of these years. Something inside of me screamed and as soon as it made a sound, something even more vicious in me shut it up as quickly as it started.

I shook my head, clearing the fog, and sat up so my back rested against the headboard, knocking his hands from my shoulders. "So I've only got to be screaming to be granted your acknowledgment?" I chuckled, shrugging off the embarrassment but I couldn't hide the bitterness in my tone.

"I thought you were being murdered," he gritted out, and I couldn't help but look into his eyes which were thick with worry. I'd seen many looks on his face before, looks he thought he kept well veiled and he had, from everyone but me. I noticed. Because they were the same expressions I tried to hide myself.

"It'd take more than a nightmare to kill me off."

"What were you dreaming about?" he asked after a moment of silence, and I debated telling him, then because I hadn't told another living soul I let slip, "The boy I killed." Once that sentence whispered past my lips, the rest soon followed. "It's the anniversary of his death in two days. I was dreaming about the night I murdered him."

Something dark and unreadable consumed his baby blues and turned them into dark sapphires. It was magnificent how much they changed depending on his mood. His entire face shifted and he looked angry, furious even.

There was something about that expression on his face, aimed directly at me, that made me feel like I deserved it.

Like I needed it and before I knew what I was doing, I'd sat up and dropped both my legs off the side of the bed. Using the heels of my feet, I wrapped them around his waist and pulled him into me. He'd been glaring at the ground, so when he was yanked forward, a small gasp slipped passed his lips. Slowly at first, I just stared at him as incredulously as he stared back at me. His dark brows furrowed and I reached up a tender finger to smooth out the crease, my other hand coming up gently to cup the side of his face.

I felt pained and he looked it.

Yet I couldn't stop and it seemed like he couldn't pull away either. "Why did you walk out on me that night?" I asked, it was the question that had plagued me since the night it happened.

He didn't need me to explain, he knew what I meant. Regret swirled in his depths and something unwelcome tugged at my rotten heart. "Because you would have hated yourself. So I let you hate me instead."

"Will you hate me now?" I asked, infused with the need to hurt physically so these old wounds would cease to ebb their poison back into me.

I was so distracted tonight. Overcome with the images of the past, I needed to let it out. I needed to make somebody else hurt, only I'd been foolish. Ronnie was right. I'd risked his wife or even his children finding us. Witnessing how much my hatred controlled me and bled into the violence. Normally when this time of year rolled around, I'd have it handled. I'd have let it seep from me in my own way, a healthy way.

But this year was different. It marked so many different occasions.

As the years passed, it was hard imagining who he'd be. What he'd look like.

But now, those youthful years had been and gone. I was aching and mourning the life I imagined we would have had. It would be easy to think that all of this was idiotic. After all, we

were only seven. What did a child know about what they wanted?

What desires were awaking inside of them and what their future would have held?

Our connection went beyond that. It went beyond a childhood friend that was easily forgotten as if we had simply drifted apart.

It bled soul deep. During the two years that I had him, he became an escape for me. He'd become every breath of fresh air that kept me alive. He shared my dreams with me and made them possible so that I could dream of something pure and bright.

He was the embodiment of my freedom and my youth and when he was taken from me, so was everything good a young child should experience and hold dear.

We had married back then, as children that stood under the apple tree thinking the world would be laid at our feet to conquer. Ronnie officiated.

He'd thought it was the sweetest thing ever.

Now I was bereft of the real wedding and the children we spoke of having. We had promised each other we would do better than what our parents had. That we would love and cherish them and allow them to be free.

Happiness unlike I'd ever felt, other than when I was with him, was pillaged from my life, now I had the insatiable urge to hurt those who deserved to be hurt. It was one of the reasons I worked so closely with the Kings Wolves. They were good men, brilliant men that did the Devil's work in punishing the sinners and making this world a safer place. It was only the darkness that I was left with and I had no other choice other than to make it my home.

"You don't need to be hated, Alessia. You need to be loved," he croaked it so hoarsely, it broke through my tortuous thoughts. I felt the vibrations as they ebbed through me where I still cradled his face. I almost couldn't believe this strong, dark and unyielding man had just said something so sweet.

Something so wrong.

I resented the statement, because it wasn't true, it'd never be true. "Tonight, Killian. I need to be hated. I need you to keep looking at me the way you are right now. In anger. In disdain."



Killian

God, she was killing me.

If only she knew, she never killed that boy.

He was standing in front of her about to give her everything he had.

Even if I died that night, it would have been at her father's hand. Not hers. She was just as weak and as helpless as I was. She did exactly what I asked her to do, what I pleaded with my gaze, hoping she'd understand, she survived.

Rían Killian Kavanagh.

Heir to the Irish mafia.

I'd learned a lot as a dead man.

The first thing was who and what I truly was.

My family wasn't like Alessia's.

I knew the violence and I knew the strain. My father rode me almost as hard as Luigi rode Lessie. But I never had a clue about what the mafia was or the fact that I was a part of it too. I just thought my father was an asshole sometimes. An unwavering man with even greater strength and was so set in his ways that you either followed his orders, or he'd make it so you couldn't follow any orders ever again.

It wasn't until I woke up cold and bleeding by the quarry, fighting for my life that I really understood how fucked we

both were from the moment we were born into this dark world of corruption.

There was nothing we could do to escape this life.

Nothing other than die.

My life ended where it started.

As my pulse throbbed and I couldn't speak, I'd woken up with my throat slit. You'd think you'd know or at least could've guessed the magnitude of being traumatized. Even as a child, it came in the form of a scary nightmare that would leave scars long into adulthood. You may not have known the definition or had some profound understanding of it, but it's bled into our genetics, into our very DNA. Something brutal every human being could anticipate. But when I lived it, it devastated me more than the brain could ever comprehend.

Thinking I'd truly died and ended up in the bowels of a place I couldn't even begin to fathom. That night, a storm fell like it wanted to punish Ravensdale and I was caught in the middle of it. Left feeling like it was me destined to be punished. All until a passerby found me and took me home to his wife. In pretty bad shape, they nursed me back to health and taught me how to speak again. Every time I tried, it came out as nothing but broken static that croaked from my fractured vocal cords.

Luigi took everything from me that night.

He took my future and he believed he'd taken my life too.

When I found out who my parents were, Triona — pronounced tree-n— and Cormac Kavanagh, I couldn't understand why they never retaliated. Tore this town apart and destroyed everything in its wake to find out what happened to me. But they never so much as stirred the waters.

I had no idea why we'd been here all those years ago. Why or how I'd met Lessie. Only when I woke up, I had nothing but my anger and grief to keep me company.

I'd stayed with the family. Leo and Amelia Madden. I offered up no information about who I was or what had happened to me. They just assumed I was the victim of some serial killer passing through town or some pedophilic cunt my

new father was hell bent on murdering should that have turned out to be the case.

They became my parents and loved me more than I ever thought possible. Over the years, I'd learned to grow fast and hard. I had to, I needed to become something fierce if I was to ever get my revenge.

Into petty crime by the time I was nine, I'd caught the eye of some of Luigi's soldiers after I forged myself into the perfect candidate. I worked my way up through the ranks, determined to be the nightmare this bastard never saw coming.

Working within his very own empire.

I was going to destroy everything he'd built. Steal it right out from under him and make his precious little daughter mine. Imagine my surprise when I entered the fold just to find her as bloodthirsty and as cold as I had become.

She was fucking glorious and I'd never forget the moment on her sixteenth birthday, that it had been me who had made her a woman.

Me who stole the last shred of innocence she had.

She wanted my hate, but I had none to give. It was all reserved for her cunt of a father.

But I could use it.

Use it to give her everything she needed and more.

I'd planned on worming my way into the family, learning all I could about the people I knew nothing about and when the time was right, making it mine.

Forcing Alessia into marriage and taking over her families empire. Ruling with her at my side. All so we could then go and take everything my father owned too.

I wouldn't stop until I'd taken everything built to destroy us and tear us apart so that nothing could ever hurt either of us again.

Take two empires and make them one.

To own it all.

“Rian,” she breathed.

Her warm breath fanned across my parted lips. “Do it.”

That was the plan at least.

The one I’d spent years formulating.

But after that night when I was fourteen, I’d still had to prove myself to the big boss man himself. That took a little longer than I expected and the first time I was even allowed around Alessia, was at her sixteenth birthday party.

Then what I had planned, stopped mattering altogether.

The second I saw her again, after all of those years, it was impossible for the floodgates not to open and every emotion I felt for her to thunder through me like a hurricane.

It was foolish of me to think that she wouldn’t recognize me either.

That when those dark eyes met mine from across the dance floor, she wouldn’t see me for exactly who I was. Even if I had more than enough tattoos and muscle to look entirely different from the scrawny little kid she remembered.

I cracked and I did what I’d always promised her I’d do.

I claimed her.

“You aren’t supposed to call me that, Less. Remember what we agreed?”

*Alessia*

I stood on the balcony with a racing heart. Covered in blood and silently elated that I followed through with murdering Elliot.

My father was bigger fish, but Elliot... he did nothing but restrain me that night and ever since, I'd longed for the day I could slit his throat just as Luigi had slit Rían's.

Breathing heavily, my gaze to the ground, I wondered why I didn't feel disgusted by what I had done and that was when he approached.

The tattooed boy from the party.

I'd thought my mind was playing tricks on me.

When I had danced with my delusion, he'd made his way from my psyche.

That this was just another fantasy, another ache in my dwindling heart. Yet here he stood, staring at me with those same cold ocean blues that had hardened with the brutality of living a difficult life. He stalked toward me, like a stealthy predator and I found myself straightening. My back and throat extended as he stepped into me and placed his gentle hands on my bloodied hips.

"Why must the fates be so cruel, Rían?" I whispered lowly, my eyes entranced with his unyielding stare. "I dream of you still, after all of these years."

I heard his silent gasp, my gaze now drawn to the bob in his heavily inked throat as he swallowed quickly, “You danced alone, Lessie. Then you cried. Were you dancing with a dead man, baby?”

I nodded, my heart in a deeply rooted anguish when his husky tone purred against me. “Always.”

“I’m real, Lessie. I’m alive and I’ve come back for you.”

No matter how many years had passed or how hard and raw his tone had grown, I’d know that voice anywhere. It was my turn to gasp at his continued speech, wrapped around me like a soft, silken caress.

When it grew stronger instead of fading away, I questioned if maybe this wasn’t a dream.

“Who did you kill, Lessie?” he asked without judgement, without shame and I took pride in the smile that bloomed across my face.

“Elliott. The man who stopped me from saving you.”

“You killed for me, darlin’?”

I smirked at him, without reply. The answer was as vibrant as the cherry red that covered me. Rían tightened his hold on my skin, rough fingers bit into my flesh bruisingly and I quivered with the intensity.

The second my lips parted, his heated mouth covered mine in a soul searing kiss that energized the darkness that had held me in a vice all of these years. He took me away, and danced with me through the stars. I’d never felt anything like it, and when that bite of pain turned into a dangerous kind of pleasure, I threaded my fingers through his hair and pulled him in close. Holding onto him as if he’d slip through my fingers one last time.

Rían, spun me and bent me over the railing. My long dark hair billowed freely in the wind and when I risked a glance at the plummeting depths, my heart dropped to my pussy and throbbed like it was beating just to survive.

As if it was beating for him.

“God, I’ve missed you,” he rasped as he buried his face in the crook of my neck. Trailing his nose up the length of my throat inhaling my scent. “Hmm, Peppermint and Rose. I’ve dreamed of this scent, baby. I’ve dreamed of you.”

My entire body came alive, buzzing with electricity. Chilled with beaded little pebbles of anticipation.

“I’ve got to admit, the years haven’t changed my feelings for you, but they’ve definitely perverted them.” I moaned at his touch because he was right, we had once been innocent children who took comfort within each other’s company. I’d known butterflies and heart flutters when I had been around him. Now though, it was a carnal kind of lust brewed from a childhood of longing and need. I’d built him up so vividly in my mind’s eyes, that everything we had once felt had transcended time and space.

It transcended everything that was deemed normal.

I had this urge, this need for the hole inside of me—for whatever reason it’d opened in the first place—to finally close.

He was the key to that fractured lock and I’d use all he could give me to make me whole again.

The growl that echoed behind me made my stomach dip and my pussy clench. My breathing was thick with ease, welcoming whatever he wanted to do to me. “I thought you were dead.” My senses came back to me slowly. Anger, hotter than the sun had ever been on my skin during a hot summers day, ignited and heated my chest. “I watched you die.”

“Hmm, you did. I have been dead, Lessie. Dead, every single day I went without you. But I’m back now, and we’re going to make them fucking pay. Are you with me, baby? Or do I have to make you pay too?”

The sexual zest in this tone, had my hips gyrating against the breeze, but I knew better than to miss the bite of warning there.

Thrusting my ass into his groin, he grunted and clenched me tighter. Moving my hips up and down the shaft that had

thickened to hardened steel, a moan slipped free and I had to close my eyes to gather my senses. "I already planned to watch them burn."

Was my only answer.

My plans hadn't changed, only difference now was, I wouldn't be alone in the darkness.

*Rían*

We had a plan, and nothing would stop us from seeing it through to the end.

That was our story so far, and that was how we ended up here.

“Do you still think we can’t trust Ronnie?” she asked, her dark troubled eyes full of hope.

I sighed, hating that we had to keep who I was from him. But it was safer for him this way. “It isn’t about trust, darlin’. You know I trust that man with my life. With *your* life, but it’s safer if it’s just the two of us for now. If anyone was to find out, we’d all be killed. Ronnie included.” I pushed forward and laid her back on the bed, gun on the nightstand as I crawled on top of her. Instinctively her back arched with passion and she extended her throat to me. Trailing my nose up the side of her neck, the way I had the first time I held her again, I peppered her with the smallest little kisses that made her shudder. “Stop mourning me, Lessie. I’m right here. I’m alive and I’m yours.”

A sultry little mewl hummed past her lips as her ample breasts pushed hard into my bare chest. “He took everything from you, Rían. In two days, your parents will grieve that day you vanished. You’ll grieve the life you never got to have even if you don’t acknowledge it. Most importantly, you’ll resent me for it. For dragging you into this mess.”

I groaned and dropped my head to rest it against her forehead, needing to feel her against me.

Her skin on mine.

The burden was too much of a weight to bear. Every year, we had the same conversation, and every year, I told her to let go of the past and focus on our future. This woman was deadly, a silent predator that knew how to hold a grudge and take out her enemies without so much as chipping a blood-red nail. Yet when it comes to the anniversary of my *supposed* death, she played the part of grift perfectly.

Too perfectly.

It took her to such a dark place I hardly recognized the demons that drained the soul right out of her beautiful eyes. That night traumatized us all.

I had the comfort of knowing she was alive and safe at least. She'd spent nine years thinking that I was twelve feet under or swimming with the fishes.

I fucking detested the thought, all those years of heartache and suffering.

I blamed myself for all of it, just like she too, blamed herself.

I wished I could have reached out, sent her a letter, or done *something*.

But it was too much of a risk.

Everyone, including Luigi, had to believe that I was Killian Madden.

The son of a sweet baker and gritty tattoo artist.

I wrapped my hand around her throat and squeezed, her magnetic gaze widened and held mine captive until a wicked smile spread across her devilishly stunning face. "You want my hate, darlin'?" I asked her with a growl that vibrated from my chest.

"I want it all, baby," she purred in response, wrapping her long legs around my waist and pulling me in close. "I want

everything.”

Sat back on my heels, I unwrapped her viper-like hold, pressing her thighs into the mattress, spreading her teasingly. My flat palms firm on her tender flesh. She bucked and I smirked at how greedy she was for me.

Always so damn greedy.

I gave her fabric-covered pussy a quick slap and reveled in the harsh gasp she gave in return. I gave her another one, harder this time and she groaned smoothly, eyes clenched tight as her head burrowed back and forth into the pillow. Her silken pajama shorts were in the way of everything I wanted to see. Preventing everything I wanted to do to her. The sweet, fucking torture I *needed* to bestow on her perfectly tight cunt. Reaching for my gun, I pulled it from the bedside table and ran the barrel over her silk-covered peach. The contact was firm and it had her eyes snapping open.

When she saw what I tormented her with, she sighed in arousal and those dark eyes lit like a fire that blazed through the blackest nights. Her legs twitched, trying to open wider than they already were but couldn't. She was already as open as I could get her.

Lessie was flexible and the things she could do with her lithe little body would blow even a sexually deviant mind.

I stroked her back and forth, applying pressure when the barrel reached her entrance so she could feel the promise of penetration and then circling my wrist when I came back up and toyed with her clit. As I leaned over her, staring into her lust-riddled eyes, I reached my hand smoothly under her pillow and removed the knife I knew she kept there. Placing a soft, departing kiss on her seeking lips, I sat back again to watch as I rubbed her into a frenzy of desire and uncontrollable need.

“Don't toy with me, Rían,” she growled and I gave her a dark chuckle for her fiery temper. Alessia was special. Somebody who could submit to me as gloriously as she could, had me on my knees, crawling toward her in worship.

Some called it a switc.- I just called it Alessia fucking Black.

She took what she wanted, what she needed, and never apologized for it.

“That’s the thing, sweetness. Tonight. I think that’s exactly what I want to do.”

Frustrated, she tried to sit up and take control. My hand back around her throat made it difficult as I pinned her back to the bed, the huge gray pillow doming around her head from the heavy imprint into the feathers. She hissed and I swiped the gun against her harder, loving it when she began to rock her hips with the action. She sought more friction... attention, and it was exactly what I planned on giving her. “Tonight, baby. You’ll be my good girl. The second you cease to be such, I’ll punish you. Understood?”

“Fuck you,” she spat, a taunting smile on her daring face.

“Is that how you want to play this, sweetheart?” I quirked a dark brow, watching every hitch in her breathing with heated fascination in my groin.

“I told you, darlin’, I want your fury. I want your punishment.”

I groaned because it was impossible not to.

Nobody *ever*, got this side of her.

Every mask she wore, was mine to witness. Every secret, every strength, and vulnerability.

It was *all* mine.

I stepped from the bed and she pouted. It was comical with her defined cheekbones and resting bitch face. It was hard to imagine such a daring woman being so soft and delicate. She was a woman of pure magnificence and I craved it. Not wanting to waste any time, I quickly secured her to the bed with the restraints wrapped around the frame. Spread like a starfish, I watched her thighs tense and knew she was clenching her pussy and wanted more. The dip in her throat rose and fell with her choppy breathing and her nipples

hardened through the thin camisole. Back on the bed, I was back between her opened thighs, gaze intense on her core. I slid the steel blade up the inside of her leg and drew the thinnest line of crimson that painted her tanned skin exquisitely.

I followed the bleeding trail with my tongue and when she mewled in unbridled pleasure, I used the butt of the gun to slap her cunt one more time. The bed creaked as she pulled on her restraints, and as I hovered over her pussy, she tried to thrust her hips into my face. I smirked at her will, loving that no matter what, she would always chase the high.

The lioness taunted the king of the pride.

I cut the silken fabric of her shorts and marveled when they fell with ease to the bed, leaving her in nothing but royal blue, satin panties, perfectly stained with her wet patch of arousal. I could smell the sweetness of her cunt. It left my mouth watering.

I cut those next and when her honeyed core was exposed, her scent thickened and my eyes rolled back in my head. I needed a taste, just one quick taste. I ran my tongue through her slick folds and growled like a savage as her flavors burst to life inside of me. "Fuck." The word was hissed and I no longer sounded like a man.

A man possessed maybe.

"You taste so damn good, love," I whispered against her. The neatly trimmed little bush she owned like a queen, tickled against my nose and I pulled back to watch her gush a little for me. "Always so damn responsive."

Swiping my index finger through her wet lips, I couldn't help but do it a few times, mesmerized as I played with her faultless cunt and the wicked sounds she dispelled into the heated room. I gathered her on the tip of my finger and brought it to her lips. "Taste yourself. Taste how good this is, and *then* praise me for my restraint, sweetheart. Tell me I'm your fucking king." The growl was involuntary, but when she smiled at me with defiance in her gaze, I knew it was warranted.

This time, I gently cut the crease of her thigh and her panting grew heavier, and so did her sweet little mewls. I wrapped my mouth around her pussy and sucked hungrily, the flick of my tongue toying with her clit as I lapped up the small cherry line of blood. “Now, princess.”

She hated when I called her that.

She bucked, her sweet peach grinding against my face as she took what she wanted. I dropped the gun and the knife. My hands flew to her risen ass as I grip her rounded globes with vicious ferocity. I kneaded and squeezed, knowing my prints would bruise into her smooth flesh and I buried my face into her pussy and devoured her like I was a man starved. There was no preamble, no playing. I tongue fucked her until she was screaming my name and on the edge of the cliff that would have her squirting all over me.

“Yes,” she cried and the sound of passion stole her tone and made her weep for me. “Fuck yes. Yes, yes, yes!”

Just as she was about to come, quaking around my enclosed head, I pulled back and smacked her cunt again. Allowing the sensual sting to bat away her orgasm for now. “You wanted punishment, darlin’. How was that?” I asked, pulling back and smirking at her outraged roar. She trashed and writhed, trying to get free so she could get those wicked hands on me. “Say it, Lessie. Say it, and I’ll make the ache feel so damn good,” I purred, my voice was as smooth as a shot of whiskey that burned in all the right ways.

I lifted the gun and slipped the head inside of her tight cunt, while our eyes locked and she least expected it. It rippled and I could feel the pressure on the handle. She clamped around the intrusion and tried to suck it in deeper. “You want me? This dick? Submit to me, sweetness. Submit, and I will make you feel better than you ever thought possible.”

She moaned and her neck arched, a sweet blush burning her tanned flesh pink. She gritted her teeth, reluctantly uttering, “You’re the king, Rían. The fucking king and I’m yours. Your restraint? Your power? It makes me crave you in ways that are too wicked to explain.”

“Try, love. Tell me, what do you want this king to do?”

“Make it hurt. Make me feel. Fuck me, Rían. Fuck me because I need it.”

I covered her, pinning her down with the full extent of my weight, forcing the air to gush from her parted mouth. I covered her with my own, stealing her very breath and branding her with a kiss that would sear like water on a hot skillet. She whimpered and I could hear the desperation as I fucked her slowly with the head of the gun. My arm was between us, and as I tormented her with the gun in one hand, I stroked her clit with the bloodied blade in the other. It moved against her like fine satin, slipping back and forth so fucking easily.

We were electric.

And together, we shuddered.

“Please, Rían. I need it,” she pleaded so softly, I pulled back to kiss her cheek gently.

I whispered against her, just as quietly, “Anything for you.”

Then she came, and every single item used was covered in her wet heat. My hand was thick with her come, the head of my gun bathed in it and the steel blade getting the reminiscence of what is covering us both already. I could see the wet patch in the middle of the sheets as she continued to gush long after I pulled out and tossed both the gun and the knife to the side. I never wasted a second as I moved back, gripped her hips and flipped her in such quick succession, she cried out from the rush.

There was slack in the restraints, so while I flipped her to her knees, the binding forced her to cross her arms awkwardly and place her chin on her risen wrists. I smacked her ass, the plentiful globe bouncing with the assault. A second later, my boxers were gone and my cock was buried so far inside of her, I felt resistance. “So fucking perfect,” I spat in what sounded like anger, but in truth, it was just too much desire to know what to do with it.

Wrapping my hand around her throat, I lifted her up so her back was flush with my chest, her shoulders hunched as the cuffs pulled her in the opposite direction. She moaned and a little giggle of appreciation fluttered past her kiss-swollen lips. I punctuated my hips, rutting into her with wild abandon as she clamped around me and sucked me in as deep as I could go. She wanted it all and she fucking took it with a sultry mewl that had my balls aching. With my hold on her throat, I helped her bounce on my cock, and too soon after, my balls jumped into my core and I was pumping my load inside of her. I coated her walls white, pulse after pulse, I filled her with my seed, and the sigh I let out, was nothing but pure fucking relief.

“I fucking love you, Lessie. Hold on a little longer, love. Soon enough, we’ll make them all fucking pay.”



Alessia

“*Alex, wake up.*”

The muffled noise was making my head ache. I knew the tone and I knew who it belonged to. I had the perfect night, was fucked into bliss and the ecstasy chased away the nightmares. I just needed another moment of rest. My alarm was set for six a.m. every damn morning. Without fail, however, treachery and deceit never slept.

I'd need to be up for fifteen minutes before the day even started. So I could just lay there and let everything catch up. Allow the darkness to sweep through me so I could put my armor back in place and make sure it couldn't shift throughout the day. Then I'd hit the home gym, get everything pumping and my instincts high on alert before grabbing breakfast and going over all of my business ventures that needed my attention and digging up dirt on the next ally I was about to extort for my cause.

Our cause.

I hated the divide that was between myself and Rían. I wished that when I woke, it was his face I saw. I ached for it. My soul physically wept. Even though I had him, and he was finally mine like I'd always dreamed, in a way that I always dreamed, it was still unbearable torture. To only have half of him, was a torment I'd endure. Ronnie standing above my bed and kicking one of its legs in order to try and wake me was the exact reason he never could spend the entire night.

You never knew when shit was about to hit the fan and your overly muscled bodyguard would come calling unannounced.

“Alex, girl. Wake up, we got a problem.”

Laying on my front, my head buried into the pillow and my right arm across my chest, I silently chastised him. Exasperated and easily infuriated I reached out and latched onto Ronnie’s wrist so quickly, I hadn’t even moved from my position of slumber. Rolling, I brought him with me, and as he landed on his back, the wind knocked out of him and I, on top, kept rolling until I stood from the bed with ease and glided across the room for my robe. A suited and masked Killian had his arm extended, waiting for me.

“What a gentleman,” I purred, knowing full well he wore a smirk behind that frown. “Why are you waking me up at three a.m., Ronnie?”

“Did you have to be so rough?” he grunted, sitting up to glare at me.

“Did you have to wake me?” I countered, and he just huffed with annoyance.

“Yes, princess. I did.”

Turning, I leveled him with a thick frown through narrowed eyes. “Low blow.”

That made him laugh as he stumbled from the bed, closer to the center of the room. “That bloke we saw the other day? The one who was mean mugging you outside of Locks?”

I stopped by the door and turned to face him with a delicate lift of my brow. “What about him?”

“I did some digging. He’s a private investor. Looks like someone wants to know all that they can about little ol’ Alessia Black.”

My blood boiled at the thought as my gaze shifted between Ronnie and Kilian. We all knew what this meant. “One of our allies turned dirty.” It wasn’t a question.

It was a statement.

Someone wanted to find out information about me and use it to take me down, and manipulate me. Forge me into a docile little girl they would have by the tits. I bet they didn't account for the fact I had a slight pain kink. "Any ideas who it is?"

"Nope. But I do know that there are three men who have pledged themselves to you that have absolutely no intention of letting a woman control them. They just want to keep you quiet." Anger flared to life in Ronnie's dark gray eyes and a shiver trembled down my spine at the intensity. "You have to hit them where it hurts, girl. Show them you can't be messed with."

I huffed at that. "Don't I always?"

"You do. But this time, it needs to be something they'll never see coming. Something, no *sane* person would ever think of. You have to put the fear of Alessia into them, kiddo. Take them out of the game with crippling fucking fear."

I nodded and a sadistic smile spread across my face. "Think it's time to hold a dinner date, don't you?"

The End For Now

Now you know the makings of Alessia Black and the hidden identity of Killian Madden, find out how they capture it all next in

Vengeful Deceit, Mafia Ravensdale Book 2

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emmaleigh Loader is a stay-at-home mum of three - her two boys and her brother-in-law - and a wife, who lives in the UK.

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