

THE *CAPO* AND THE *BALLERINA*

*v*ICIOUS
IMPULSES

SIENNE VEGA

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THE CAPO & BALLERINA BOOK 1

SIENNE VEGA

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Content Warning



HI!

FIRST OF ALL, THANK YOU FOR CHECKING OUT MY NEW MAFIA series, the Capo and the Ballerina! This is an arranged/forced marriage mafia romance between a beast of a capo named Caelian and the ballerina of his dreams, Nevaeh.

For those of you familiar with my work, this book may not be my 'darkest' story, but there are still some elements that may be upsetting. Below are more specifics of some of the content:

- Gore and violence
- Dubious consent sexual situations (between MCs)
- Nonconsensual sexual situations (between MCs)
- Depictions of human trafficking

Furthermore, book 2 in this series will be significantly darker in tone, so please be aware once you've made the decision to read this series. This book **is not** suitable for readers under the age of 18.

Lastly, **please note that this book will end in a cliffhanger, picking up directly in book 2, Brutal Impulses.**

Now that that's out of the way, I hope you enjoy! ☐

Sienna

Prologue - Caelian



THE PAIN REMAINS.

Constant and unending.

'Til soon, everything *becomes* pain.

It torments my body day and night. Hot summers and the coldest winters.

A profound kind of pain that knows no relief and offers no escape.

Only in my dreams.

The sharp, unbearable pain subsides. No longer does it feel like a thousand razors stab my chest. My desperate gasps for air turn into a dozing silence.

The world is in color again.

For the first time in my tortuous life, it's like the heavens have opened up. I'm a monster being welcomed through the golden gates.

Soft clouds and twinkling music. I'm able to breathe, able to feel alive.

Even if it's only in my dreams.

It's when *she* appears—the clouds part ways and she twirls into view, her arms in a perfect arc above her head. Her body

floats and her feet glide with grace. Her every move mesmerizes me.

A sign from the heavens themselves. An angel appearing to me.

Dark skin and darker hair. The sweetest eyes and lips that are destined for mine.

I reach out with hope beating in my cursed heart only to wake to clutching air.

It was just a dream. Dreams aren't real. But the pain is.

The razors stab away with utmost cruelty 'til I'm bracing against the bed and tearing at my skin. Blood drips from my lips and dries under my fingernails. I heave for breath as if learning to work my lungs for the first time.

The days are numbered, but that grim reality serves as motivation. If it's all coming to an end, then I decide the terms. I choose what will be my final moments.

Because anything is better than a life like this.

ONE

Nevae



PAIN SHOOTS UP THE ARCH OF MY RIGHT FOOT.

Immediate, almost debilitating pain that any doctor would probably be concerned about. That should probably concern *me*.

But I can't stop now. All eyes are on me.

I wince through it and push myself to keep going. I swing my left leg to the side in sync with my arm as I spin in fast circles and maintain my momentum.

The dance studio zips by as if I'm not the one moving. The room orbits around me at a dizzying blur.

Round and round and round again.

Panic clenches inside my chest. So does a sense of breathlessness in my lungs. The pain's gone nowhere—it intensifies 'til I'm gritting my teeth with each push off my right heel.

Soon it's not just the room looking like a dizzy blur because I'm executing fouettés. It's a rush of dizziness crashing over me as the pain becomes too much and I can't hold on another second.

My foot gives out and I drop to the floor with a harsh thud. The other dancers in the studio gasp. Then comes their

scandalized mutters of gossip.

I'm shaking as I blink through the haze of pain, but I have an idea of what they're saying. Cruel words I've heard before and am used to as the outcast among a sea of White faces.

Told you she wasn't good enough.

She doesn't deserve that lead role.

We all know why she was chosen.

I'd love nothing more than to tell them to shut up, but in the moment, I'm much more concerned about my ankle. If the damage is serious enough, it could cost me my lead in the show, and then I can kiss being *Principessa Danzante* goodbye.

Damp with sweat and half dizzy, I scramble to sit up and undo the ties of my pointe shoe. I don't notice that Ignazio, the director of the show, who also happens to be the manager of our dance company, has strode over to scold me.

It's not until I hear my name and he's already standing over me that I realize he is.

"What have I told you a thousand times before, Nevaeh?" His pallid, hook-nosed face twists into a scowl. He notches his hands at his slender waist and makes me feel like a peasant to his lord with the way he towers over me. "If this is too much for you, I can choose someone that will be able to keep up. Not all dancers are befitting of *Principessa*. It is the title role."

I gulp down air and give a profuse shake of my head. "I can handle it. I can be *Principessa Danzante*. I've told you, I'm good."

I rush to stand up, determined to prove myself. My injury has other ideas—another bolt of pain spikes through my right

ankle and sends me sinking to the ground as quickly as I tried getting up.

Ignazio rolls his eyes and mutters curses words under his breath. “Pitiful, Nevaeh. You said you could handle this.”

“I can... it’s...” I wheeze, trying to push myself up on shaking arms. “It’s just a small sprain, Ignazio. I... I just need a moment...”

“There’s no more time for just a moment. YOU!” He rounds on Darren, my dance partner. “What are you doing, standing around like an oaf? Pick her up—help her home! She needs to rest that ankle if there’s any hope for next week.”

“Oh, no... don’t send me home early. I can do stretches.”

“If you’re to remain my *Principessa*, you’ll go back to your dorm and rest that fucking ankle.”

There’s no arguing with Ignazio when his thick Italian voice takes on a growly inflection and his dark green eyes flash in warning.

I shut out any other protests.

Darren, being the well-meaning if not brainless jock type he is, does as he’s told, no questions asked. He slips a toned arm around my back and hoists me up so that I’m propped against his athletic frame. None of my weight is on my right ankle. Most of it’s on him.

Used to being held in his arms, I’m more concerned with Ignazio’s instructions. “Does this mean you don’t want me at dinner Friday?”

Ignazio’s face darkens even more. “You better be there on Friday. As presentable as ever, Nevaeh. You have been reserved. You know I do not disappoint our fans.”

I wish you did.

Darren helps me hobble the rest of the way out of the dance studio. The gossip doesn't let up—the other dancers in the show watch me go with raised eyebrows, folded arms, and muttered conversation.

I don't expect anything else; I've never gotten along with most of these girls.

What little friendliness existed between us vanished the second I was chosen as *Principessa* in Ignazio's show.

A long string of assumptions have unraveled about just why...

"You okay?" Darren asks as we sway in our seats on the subway.

I haven't said a word since we left the dance studio. My mood's soured, and my thoughts vary between frustration that I could show such weakness in the middle of rehearsal and dread that I'm still expected to show up on Friday.

I cast Darren a wry smile. "Yeah... it could always be worse I guess."

"You've still got your part," he says. "He's given 'em away for less."

Darren's attempts to cheer me up fail. We fall into another moment of silence as I turn my attention to the rest of the beat-up subway car.

The other passengers look as weathered and exhausted as I'm sure I do, with their shabby winter coats and bags under their eyes.

No one in Dresden is *really* comfortable. Ninety-nine percent of the population lives hand to mouth.

The other one percent remains an illusion to most of us—unseen and unreachable, behind gates that divide their part of the city and ours.

I would've never fallen into the trap that I have with the Dresden Dance Company had I any other choice; I certainly wouldn't have signed my life away like I did when I was only just a child.

Friday wouldn't be a *mandatory* engagement.

But it can always be worse. I've realized that after years locked into my contract with Ignazio and the company.

My body shudders at the thought. Some of the other dancers are better actors than I am. As it turns out, I'm only good at performing on stage. In real life, during face-to-face situations with our "fans," I'm Ignazio's worst nightmare.

Darren walks me up the five flights of stairs to my dormitory. The building itself belongs to the Dresden Dance Company and serves as the mandatory housing for its dancers. Another means for us to be under the company's thumb at all times.

I glance up at the security camera for every flight that we climb, and then again once we reach the fifth-floor landing. The blinking red light seemingly follows us all the way to my door.

I thank Darren for the help before limping inside my dorm and tossing my keys into the empty bowl by the door.

It's been years since any real repairs have been made. The heat doesn't work when it should during winter months and it's not uncommon for water to leak through the ceiling. Any complaints made to Ignazio and the company have gone ignored.

The five-hundred square foot space isn't much... but it's mine.

I flop face down onto my bed and let out a groan thinking more about today.

If I were stronger, I would've fought through the pain and kept practicing.

I *used* to be better. Faster. More fluid.

I used to dance circles around every person in that studio.

That was before my ankle injury during *Lupi Nella Notte*. Before Dad fell into trouble and nothing was the same.

I sigh as my eyes close, and I shut out the noise. I focus on my dreams and leave the worrisome thoughts behind.

Before all the bad...



It seems the next time I'm leaving my bed, it's Friday evening, and I'm flitting from my closet to the bathroom to get dressed. I've done as Ignazio instructed and spent the last two and a half days resting in bed, streaming TV shows and movies, and eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches (all I have in my kitchenette). My ankle's nowhere near its usual strength, but it's better—I'm able to walk like a semi-normal person.

The special cocktail dress Ignazio had delivered slips over my head, and I take my first glance at myself wearing it in the mirror.

It hugs my body. Tight but not obscene. Short enough to ride my thighs but not short enough to be shocking. The deep wine shade pairs well with my brown skin. I leave my silky,

straightened dark hair out like our fans prefer, and then apply a touch of makeup.

Dressing up has never been my thing—definitely not for these kinds of events—but looking in the mirror, I’m aware Ignazio will be pleased.

He lets me know the moment he sees me. His normally scowling face eases up, and he cuts through the mingling crowd to reach me.

“Perfect, you’re here,” he says amid the loud din of conversation. His hand touches the small of my back as he guides me toward a silver-haired man in a suit and shirt that’s halfway unbuttoned. “Mr. Andressi has been waiting to meet the *Principessa Danzante* of the show herself. He’s very impressed with you.”

I turn what’s an involuntary cringe into a fake smile as Ignazio brings me up to the silver-haired man known as Mr. Andressi. He sports a Rolex and a goatee that’s as silver as his hair up top. His eyes flash with delight at the sight of me.

“Nevaeh Graham. You are even more stunning in person than on stage,” he says, taking my hand for a kiss hello to the back of it.

I blink at him, thrown by the forward greeting. “Err, thank you. I appreciate you supporting our company.”

His top lip curls. “Of course. I have always been a big supporter of the arts.”

I look over to find Ignazio gone. He’s already wandered off to introduce another dancer to one of our fans—there’s a whole sea of wealthy men in various expensive suits waiting.

The next hour becomes torture. Mr. Andressi pulls out my chair at our table and then proceeds to talk about only himself

in excruciating detail. That's when he's not making a snide remark that I've eaten too much for his liking.

A sigh leaves me as I remain polite and agreeable, though my teeth clench. The remaining food I push around my plate with my fork, watching the clock with wishes for the night to be over.

"Excuse me," I say, scooting back my chair. "I need to use the ladies' room."

Mr. Andressi opens his mouth as if to protest. I'm scurrying off before he can.

I'm quick and nimble by nature, which comes in handy during situations like these. As the crowded dining room mingles, I'm able to slip in and out unnoticed. My ankle and the heels I'm wearing slow me down, but I'm still fast enough to escape the dining room without anyone stopping me.

For half a second, I consider making a break for it. I could probably make it off the entire property unseen.

...but then what? What happens when Ignazio finds out?

Another shudder vibrates through me. I do as I said I would—I head for the women's restroom.

Within a few footsteps, I realize I'm not alone after all. I cross the sparkling atrium with the distinct feeling eyes are on me. An unsettling presence looms close by. Slowing down as I glance around, it suddenly feels like I'm being hunted.

Even with the distant sounds of conversation in the dining room, I feel like I've been left alone to be preyed upon. By what, by *who*, I have no clue.

It's not until I'm footsteps away from the door to the women's restroom that a cold hand snatches me by the wrist.

I'm jerked sideways, reeled into the arms of a man with silver hair and a wicked glint in his eyes.

"Mr. Andressi," I choke out. "Please let me go."

"I understand what you're doing. I have heard all about you and how you play hard to get," he grates out in a tone that's like sandpaper to the ears. "You pretend to be so innocent, yet I've caught on to your games."

I shake my head, my expression wide-eyed and horrified. "What? That's not what I'm—"

"You're so beautiful. So... *untouched*. Unlike most of the others. What will it take for me to have you?"

"Nothing! Get away from me!"

A panicked cry wavers out of me as he shoves me back and easily restrains my arms on either side. I've been flattened into the wall to the point I can't move. The corners of his mouth tip wider, showing off teeth stained yellow from time, and that make my stomach churn.

"I'll have you now," he mumbles, bowing his head. His lips crawl over the length of my throat. "No one else has to know."

He's kissing his way up toward my jaw and mouth when the assault stops. He's wrenched off me and thrown to the ground. I'm unable to move from the sheer shock at what's happening in front of me.

Another man has appeared. One much larger, bulging with muscles under an all-black suit. Yet he moves with the speed of someone a third his size. He snatches Mr. Andressi up off the ground by the collar of his dinner jacket and smashes a huge fist into his face.

It's one of many to come.

I shrink against the wall as the mysterious mountain-sized man beats Mr. Andressi to a pulp. He pounds his fists and cracks his elbow. He slams his head through the wall a few feet away from me. Streaks of blood mar the once pristine atrium by the time he's through.

Mr. Andressi drops to the floor unconscious. Almost lifeless.

Horror has paralyzed me from head to toe and made it impossible to do anything but gape at the aftermath.

The man rounds on me, heaving ragged breaths, with his fists bloodied *and* tattooed.

Suddenly, I'm feeling as if Mr. Andressi's weren't the only set of eyes I felt on me. This man has been watching me too.

A man I've never seen in my life. A man that's the stuff of nightmares... and dark fantasies.

Deep-set eyes that are wolfish and predatory in nature and hair that's been shaved into a buzzcut fade. Skin that's been naturally tanned from hours in the sun, and tattoos that come up to his neck and cover what little of his large hands I can see. He's the kind of man you take notice of the instant he walks into a room: tall, striking, and with a muscled body even his suit can't hide.

His mere presence renders me speechless and makes nerves flutter in my stomach. I blink and then cautiously peel myself off the wall.

He takes a step to block my exit. He's peering down at me like he knows me—like he knows everything there is to know about me—and as if he hasn't just beaten a man half to death right in front of me.

A cold shiver crawls up my spine.

“Hello, ballerina,” he says in a husky voice that bears a hint of an Italian accent. “I’ve been dreaming of you.”

TWO

Caedian



“OUR SURVIVAL IS ON THE LINE.”

Pa pushes away his dinner plate and reclines in his chair at the head of the table. His hands settle on his spare tire of a stomach, the large gold ring on his pinky finger glinting. The heavy dinner has left his eyelids droopier than usual. He peers lazily around the table like he’ll be out any second; like there’s a chance he’ll be midsentence and then he’ll face plant into the table, streaking the perfect white cloth with the shoe polish in his hair.

It wouldn’t be the first time. The men in attendance—the *top* men in the family—are more than used to it.

Everybody in the Ziccardi family is used to the circus. They’re part of the act. The more incompetent Pa is, the greater the possibility it’ll work to their advantage.

It’s just a matter of when. Who will take the mantle and how.

I remain the only one uninterested in any of the politics. I might as well be an outsider altogether.

The butler on staff rushes forward to present Pa his after-dinner drink and cigar. Pa puffs on the cigar, taking his time to finish his train of thought.

“Where was I?” Smoke blows past his lips and curls in the air as he speaks. “Oh, yeah. Our survival. It’s on the line.”

Several guys nod their heads along. Some with hunger on their faces. Others with cool composure. Many of us are blood-related, but that hasn’t stopped them circling him like vultures.

Coreno leans closer, his face breaking into a grin as crooked as his nose. “Uncle, there’s nothing to worry about. If you would like the situation handled, I can take care of it. I have always negotiated the best deals.”

Pa considers his offer, then nods. “That is true, nephew. Claudio taught you well.”

“He learned from you,” Coreno says. The flattery oozing from his voice is enough to nauseate anybody.

“You have made bad business decisions for Zinc Co,” points out my younger half brother, Cristian. He’s shorter, fatter, blonder, and worst of all, more spoiled than anybody at the table. A product of an affair, he’s convinced himself he’s a rightful heir regardless. He shoots Pa a petulant look like he’s expecting an apology. “If it should be anybody, it should be me. Your son.”

“Cristian,” Pa says, his cigar smoldering between his fingers. “You don’t wake up before noon. If women with big bazookas aren’t there, you’re never interested. In fact, I’m surprised you made it here tonight.”

A round of laughter peals out of the guys seated at the table. Other capos like Joey D’Amato and Vic Sandino don’t miss the chance to laugh at Cristian’s expense. My younger brother responds by sulking and turning red.

“It should be someone impartial,” offers up Carmelo, who may be the only family member I can stand for more than five minutes. He gives an even-keeled shrug, resembling every bit of the stereotypical *capo* that makes women want to fuck him. “I would be fine attending, uncle. If you can’t make up your mind.”

Pa waves off his offer like all the rest. He turns in my direction, a swirl of cigar smoke surrounding him. “Caelian,” he wheezes. “You’re going to be my representation at the meet up.”

The others around the table erupt in objections. Coreno leans even closer than he already is, launching into a detailed explanation why it’s a bad business move to send me. Cristian wastes no time whining about how he’s always done everything Pa has asked, even though he’s a lazy slob. Nobody’s happy about Pa’s decision.

Not even me.

I sit with a deadpan expression and wait out their bitching. I wouldn’t be here tonight if the dinner hadn’t been mandatory. And yet these fuckers believe I have any real interest in attending some meeting on the family’s behalf.

“There’s nothing I can do that hasn’t been negotiated,” I say once the complaints die down. “It’s a waste of time. Choose someone else.”

“See!” Cristian explodes. “He doesn’t even want the job, Pa—you act like he’s your only son!”

“Hey, fat fuck, he has two nephews!” Coreno glares.

Before the outrage can spiral out of control again, Pa holds up a hand to silence the room. “Everybody needs to shut the fuck up. I’ve made my decision. It’ll be Caelian. He’s the least

invested... which means he's not emotional like you *goombahs*."

Nobody utters a word, though their glances at each other say enough.

For once, I don't blame them. Pa's logic makes little sense.

He puffs on his cigar and then says, "It'll be different with you, Caelian. I have confidence you can talk them down. You can save Zinc Co from Nero's grubby paws. The Vorones like straight-shooter types. Get in, get out, get it done."

I leave the dinner irritated I've once again found myself in this position—representing Pa to plead for the life of a fucking sinking ship.

Everybody else heads to the strip club for the night.

Pa's knocked out before they even drive off.

I head into the city too, but for different reasons. Dresden after dark is an ominous landscape of tall buildings shrouded in shadows and streets that never have enough lamp posts to ever truly feel secure. One of the country's biggest cities, it's also one of the most dangerous.

People out after dark are either looking to cause trouble or asking for it.

I'm neither. As I drive down the urban enclave in a car worth more than most people's homes, I'm my own category. I *am* the trouble.

Nobody dares fuck with me. Anybody that does would be making the stupidest, gravest decision of their lives.

I drive to the heart of the city, where the Dresden Performing Arts Theater resides, and I park just outside. I

don't go in—tonight's show has already started and is crowded to maximum capacity.

Instead, with a painful stitch in my chest, I sit and ponder one question and one question only.

Is this where I will find my angel?

The beautiful ballerina from my dreams that has saved me many nights over. She appears at the height of my torture and takes away the pain one graceful spin at a time.

For so long, I've struggled to remember her. My mind's a fog from the medications and treatments. I've questioned whether I've even dreamed her at all. If she isn't some other woman I've come across on the street who I've manifested into this angelic figure.

But for every sharp stab at my heart comes a beat of certainty.

My angel... has saved me. She *will* save me.

She's the key to my life... or the key to my demise. Regardless, I feel compelled. I feel drawn to this woman from my dreams for a reason unknown to me.

Finding her is the only worthy endeavor I want to spend my time on. Serving as Pa's avatar at his business meetings is not.

I don't give a fuck if our family survives. I don't give a fuck about anything.

About anyone... except for my angel.

My ballerina.



Ignazio Presutti is an Italian playwright that immigrated to the United States with pennies in his left pocket and a wrinkled script in his right. He rose to prominence when he was discovered bussing tables at Vecoli, an Italian fine-dining restaurant frequented and owned by *La Cosa Nostra*.

Nero Vorone himself vouched for him. He put him on to bigger and better things.

Ignazio went from wiping tables and wrestling with trash bins to creating ballets like *Lupi Nella Notte* that were hailed as masterpieces.

He morphed into the biggest name in the city's dance circles. Soon, he outright took over the Dresden Dance Company—*or* was strategically placed in charge as a figurehead.

Some say anyway.

It's a dirty little secret what's really going on behind the scenes. Once the curtain draws on the stage, the mesmerizing dancers in Ignazio's employ are put up for another type of performance.

Some more than others.

Only those who can afford to spend know about the dinners and special events. They're certainly not cheap. The caliber of women are considered... worth it.

Night begins to fade by the time Ignazio emerges from the rear exit of the dark, vacant theater. He believes he's alone as he strolls across the promenade, fiddling with his phone. His busy fingers tap away and he stares at the screen, too distracted to realize a man is closing in.

It's not until I'm within arm's reach that he finally senses my presence and looks over his shoulder. Eyes going wide, his

phone flies out of his hand and he leaps away in a fluid maneuver befitting the ballet.

“Take whatever you want. Just... spare me.” He quakes like a fucking coward, not even bothering to put on a tough act.

I stalk closer ’til I’m forcing him another few steps back. “You’re the man I’ve been looking for.”

“If this is about a debt—”

“This is about a girl,” I interrupt, reaching out a hand. He flinches out of instinct despite the fact that I’m only fucking with him. My large, tattooed hand tugs on the lapel of his blazer jacket as if fixing its crookedness. It’s amusing how cowardly some men are in the face of a bigger, stronger man.

“A girl,” he gusts out. “What girl? I have plenty of girls.”

My lip curls. “This isn’t just any girl. This one is more special than all the others. If you have her, then it seems we have much to talk about.”



My ballerina stands frozen in place, blinking up at me in the flesh. My presence seems to unnerve her. We are a few feet apart, and yet I can see—*feel*—the quake of her body.

She’s just as I imagined. Just as I dreamed.

For a lengthy moment, I’m almost as thrown by her as she is by me. To think, I almost made good on Pa’s request to attend the Vorone meeting tonight. If I hadn’t listened to my instinct, the pained, twitchy heart that beats inside my chest, I would’ve missed her.

Possibly for good.

Up close, her beauty is otherworldly. Face softer and rounder than even I dreamed. Lips full and begging to be kissed with passion. Dark hair that flows past her shoulders, and deep brown skin that can only be described as the most exquisite shade of mahogany. How can someone so beautiful exist in a world so hideous?

She's petite... in the way that all ballerinas are. But hidden underneath the dress she wears is the unmistakable hint of feminine curves. An ache starts up inside me, my long fingers twitching, as I'm tempted to rip away the fabric and find out firsthand.

Soon. Very soon.

"You have the wrong girl," she murmurs finally, gathering nerve. She steps left. "Please. I don't want any trouble."

I step right. She goes right. I go left.

We play this game, do this dance, several times before she quits altogether. Taking a step back, she peers up at me with brown eyes the color of cinnamon and lashes that flutter so gently.

So polite. So classically trained.

"I said please," she repeats in a low voice. "I just want to go."

Her voice—I've never heard her speak.

This, more than anything, is a marker that she's real. That she exists, for she's never spoken to me in my dreams.

She's afraid. Of me but also of the violence that just unfolded before her. The man I've viciously beaten and left

bloodied at our feet on the floor. She's not used to such carnage. Such brutality.

"I don't have the wrong girl," I answer. "You are the one."

"Please... just... I want to go!"

She scurries around me so quickly, it's impressive. I could reach out and snatch her if I wanted. If I really cared to, I'd swipe my arm and scoop her right up off her feet.

But I let her go. She escapes me this time. What will be the *only* time.

I shove my hands in my pockets and watch my ballerina flee across the vacant marble atrium. What she doesn't realize now but will soon come to find out is, there's nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide.

She's the angel of my dreams, and I *will* make her mine.

THREE

Nevaeh



THE MORNING AFTER THE DINNER EVENT, I'M WOKEN UP BY A fist pounding on my door. I roll over and pull the covers over my head. Whoever it is needs to go away. I'm in the middle of some great sleep and have no desire to wake anytime soon.

Saturdays are for sleeping in—especially Saturdays I'm not due in for early rehearsal.

The person knocking demonstrates he's not giving up. He adds his voice to the cacophony of pounding fists outside my door.

“Nevaeh!” snarls Ignazio. “Open this door right now! I know you're in there!”

My teeth grit and my eyes squeeze shut even tighter.

Of course he does. Why wouldn't he when my every waking moment is surveilled and controlled by him and the company?

It's long been a worry of mine that there might even be hidden cameras *in* my dorm room—a paranoid concern that I've never been able to prove, even after turning over every inch of the five hundred square foot space.

But if Ignazio's pounding on my door like this, it must be an emergency. Has this afternoon's rehearsal been

rescheduled? Does he need me to come in earlier?

He'd strictly told me that I'm to stay off my ankle as much as possible...

"I'm using the key!" he threatens from the other side of the door.

"I'm coming. Sheesh."

My tone sounds petulant and snotty, but can you blame me? Not only have I been woken up, I'm being accosted through my door. A simple phone call or text would've sufficed.

I slide off my bed, certain I must look a mess—my silk scarf's slipped off and my hair feels more like a lion's mane. Sleep lines decorate one side of my arms and legs and probably my face. I yawn and stretch, then pad over to the door to answer.

Ignazio's seething on the spot. He's an overheated kettle boiling on the stove the way he rattles and shakes. Teeth and fists clenched, he snarls at me. "When I tell you to do something, you do it, Nevaeh! I have been standing out here for three minutes."

He storms inside so abruptly I'm stumbling to get out of his warpath.

"You could've texted," I mumble.

He spins around with nostrils flaring and a vein pulsing in his temple. I take a precautionary step back and fall silent.

"Now is not the time to mouth off," he says testily. He gestures at my belongings filling out the small dorm room. "We have a situation to discuss. Sit."

I do as he says and plop down in the chair next to my desk. Tension coils through my body and leaves me feeling uneasy.

Am I about to be stripped of the lead role? Will Ignazio punish me for my poor performance at the dinner last night? Has a suitor finally made an offer?

I shudder at the thought.

My whole life has been controlled. I've been confined to the limitations of a twenty-thousand word contract that spells out my existence.

Agency isn't something I've ever had. I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I ever gained that level of freedom. Mom always says the grass is greener on the other side. After a lifetime spent under the control of someone—or some kind of entity like the dance company—I've convinced myself this is true.

A woman like me could never survive in Dresden on my own. The city's too toxic. There's no shortage of corrupt officials and violent criminals with the power to rule everything.

Definitely squash a nobody like me like you'd squash an ant on the sidewalk.

When Ignazio is satisfied with my compliance, he heaves a deep sigh and then scrubs his hand on his goateed chin. "Nevaeh, it's not at all what I wanted. But it's not at all something I can turn down."

"Please," I blurt out. "Please don't take the lead role from me. I can be your *Principessa*. I've been healing. I walked fine in heels last night."

He holds up his hand to silence me. "It's not about being *Principessa*, Nevaeh. Though I've already given the role to

Jalene. As your understudy, she is more than prepared to step in so short notice.”

My heart sinks and tears well up in my eyes.

Every doubt, every taunting word I’ve had to overhear for months echoes in my ears.

Told you she wasn’t good enough.

She doesn’t deserve that lead role.

We all know why she was chosen.

Of course I wasn’t good enough. I never deserved to be chosen. How could I fool myself into ever believing that I did?

“But the show isn’t why I stopped by,” he goes on. “An offer has been made for you. A very, very generous offer. The most generous offer we’ve ever had.”

My heart skips inside my chest. “A-an offer? For me? *Already?!*”

“I’ve had many since you debuted. Just none that were a good enough fit. Honestly, this one seems—it may not be comfortable for you—but the amount proposed... it’s an amount that can’t be turned down. Even if I wanted to. You understand.”

I swallow against the block forming in my throat, parsing through the racing thoughts in my mind. “Who is it? Mr. Andressi?”

“He made an offer,” Ignazio admits. “He was very taken with you.”

The flashback from last night of him cornering me outside the restroom invades my mind. The same disgust that had

filled me as his lips pressed into my throat returns. “A final offer? A real one?”

“Nevaeh, they are *all* real offers. It simply depends on the conditions. But the offer I’m speaking of isn’t Mr. Andressi’s.”

The second shock to my heart within seconds—it does another quick skip, my pulse speeding up. I rack my brain for who else it could be from last night. There were no shortage of leering businessmen foaming at the mouth to bid on the dancers. Though I had spent much of the evening with Mr. Andressi, several had pulled me aside for a quick meet-and-greet.

“He’s quite familiar with you,” Ignazio says, wandering over to my window. He pulls out a pack of cigarettes and lights one up. Never mind asking if it’s okay in my private space. “He described you perfectly. Likely saw you on stage and decided you were the one without ever meeting you. His *angel*, he said.”

And that’s when the shock and disgust morph into an even deeper horror.

My eyes widen and I stare at Ignazio as if I’ve heard the worst news in my life. Maybe I have as I think about last night and the beast of a man that had beaten Mr. Andressi bloody. He’d beaten him unconscious like that level of vicious violence was nothing. Then he’d rounded on me like a predator about to devour his next slab of prey—he’d trapped me with his wolfish eyes. His clenched jaw and hard features. The way he’d loomed over me was intimidating and overwhelming all at once.

“No,” I whisper.

“His name’s Caelian Ziccardi. He will be taking you this evening. He bought you out early, Nevaeh.”

“Of... of my contract? But I thought that’s impossible? I still have time—”

“The amount he paid was enough,” Ignazio interrupts, blowing smoke. “I’m sorry. There’s nothing I can do.”

“It’s in my contract that I’m still with the company at least for the next year!”

“Not anymore it isn’t. Your contract is voided.”

My mouth drops open to argue some more, but I’m so thrown by the news that I can’t even articulate myself. It’s becoming difficult to think. Difficult to breathe.

“This isn’t legal,” I sputter finally after several shaky breaths. “This isn’t fair, Ignazio. The company must abide by the contract and—”

“Fair is relative, Nevaeh. Now pack your things. I’ll return in a few minutes. Don’t try to escape. He’ll be waiting for you.”

Ignazio wants to hear nothing else I have to say. When I try again to reason with him, he repeats himself and then walks out, leaving the chemical stench of cigarette smoke behind him.

I’m so shocked I can’t even provide a real reaction beyond staring around the room.

My whole life’s about to change.

Some say Dresden’s flesh trade is inhumane. Mostly people from other cities where the industry’s still frowned upon. But city officials argue that since it’s become legal, it’s

being properly regulated and monitored—something that works in the favor of those participating.

My parents would agree. It's what they hammered into my head from a young age.

I'm *lucky* to be protected by the company, and by extension, the Vorones. Others have fared much worse in our deteriorating city. At least they've ensured my contract was a good one.

I believed them, but now...

I don't know what to think. My contract's been bought out and I'm being handed over to another man regardless of what I want or what was written in those twenty thousand words.

He's a predator that seems neither kind nor comforting but instead, cruel and violent. The Vorones have never been angels, but they're the devil we're familiar with. We've been able to survive under their thumb.

Caelian Ziccardi.

He must belong to the Ziccardi family. Which means he's a gangster. His family isn't as all-encompassing as the Vorones, but clearly he has enough pull if he's able to buy me out of my contract completely. Are the Vorones aware? Do they normally let dancers be sold to rival families?

So many questions spin around in my head.

I grope around for my phone and manage to place a call to Mom. She answers in her usual honey-sweet tone. My speechlessness fades, allowing me to launch into a fast, panicked explanation of what's happened.

Her reaction isn't what I hoped for.

“Oh, sweetie,” Mom sighs. “That’s terrible. You haven’t even had the introductory dinner yet? Your suitor is supposed to take you to dinner. It’s a way for the two of you to get to know each other.”

“He said it’s happening today! There isn’t going to be any dinner.”

“Ask for the sit down. Sometimes if it’s not a good fit, they’ll change their mind. You remember our old neighbor and his daughter? She was selected, and then the man had second thoughts.”

“But I don’t want a dinner! I don’t want anything to do with him!”

“Are you sure he’s a bad man? The Ziccardi family has fallen from grace... but he’s clearly wealthy.”

I close my eyes and breathe through my nose. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“Sweetie, you know that’s not an option. You know it’s how we’ve survived. We’ve *all* suffered and done our part. Your father is depending on you. Don’t you ever forget that. His survival rests on you.”

We hang up with my feelings of dread and disbelief stronger than ever.

Mom isn’t any help; she’s locked into the same system I’m trapped in. The difference being she sees it as a necessary evil.

More breaths sputter from my lungs as I stare around my dorm and feel the walls closing in.

Life has always felt like a box to be contained in, but it was bearable. Dancing and belonging to the company gave me

peace and sanity. Both are being taken away at the same time I'm being given up.

I always knew there would come a day an offer was made and I was sold. But I always hoped it'd be under favorable conditions. A businessman who would at least be decent and kind.

It seems that was wishing for too much.

My hands come up and wipe away the tears rolling down my cheeks. There's no other way around it. There's no other option I have left but to do something I've never done in my life.

It's time to rebel.



Ignazio shows up outside my door at three p.m. on the dot. He bangs his fist and demands I open up.

I've packed my modest-sized suitcase and a bookbag I've filled with my most prized possessions—important items like my laptop and personal documents and more sentimental things like the ballerina snow globe Dad gifted me years ago.

I sigh and resign myself to my fate.

A pleased smile lights up Ignazio's face when I open the door and step aside.

“Good girl,” he praises, scanning the room. My suitcase and bookbag are perched on my bed. “I knew you'd come around. Lots of the other dancers complain that I show favoritism to you. But what they don't understand is that you are a good girl. You always listen.”

My insides clench. I shadow his footsteps. “You’ve made your decision. You always know what’s best.”

“That’s right. I’m sorry to see you go, but you understand, it’s what has to happen. The money you have made the company is record-breaking, Nevaeh. We will remember you fondly.”

My obedient mask slips, if only for a second. I rush to put it back on in time for Ignazio’s next glance in my direction.

“Well, if you don’t have any other questions, it’s time. I’ll carry your suitcase.”

He shuffles over to grab hold of it. I exhale a shaky breath, my stomach a violent mess of nerves, as I prepare myself to do what I must.

He’s turning around when I swing at him with the frying pan I’ve intentionally kept within reach. My hit lands upside his head and knocks him to the ground. I spring forward to steal my suitcase and bookbag back, and then dart for the door.

“Nevaeh, don’t dare try to run away!” he yells from the ground.

“Too late!”

My legs stretch as far as I can make them given my limited height. My strides are smaller than the average person but agile enough that I make quick work of the fifth floor hall. I hurdle down the first two flights of stairs throwing paranoid looks behind me, fearing that Ignazio has somehow managed to catch up.

He’s nowhere in sight.

I leap down the next few sets of stairs. My muscles ache carrying my suitcase and bookbag down so many flights.

My ankle worst of all.

No wonder the dormitory building doesn't have an elevator—it'd make escape so much easier.

Once I'm able to make it outside, I'll flag down a taxicab and ride it to the train station. My destination beyond that is unknown. Something I'll worry about when I get there.

On the ground floor, a beat of hope fills me up. I race down the hall clutching my things, thinking I'm about to push the double doors to freedom.

No less than ten feet away, Caelian Ziccardi steps into my direct path from a side door. He blocks any way forward and forces me to come to a toppling halt.

My eyes go round with horror, and I lose the grip on my suitcase.

“Hello, *mia bella ballerina*. I've come to collect you.”

I open my mouth to scream at the top of my lungs. He jams a needle into the base of my throat and turns my world from color to an all-consuming black.

My body goes limp and hits the floor.

FOUR

Nevach



THE BED SERVES AS AN ANCHOR THAT MY BODY UNWITTINGLY clings to. My arms clutch the pillow, and I lay dreaming somewhere between consciousness and deep sleep. Vaguely aware I'm in a bed but disoriented as to how. It takes me another few seconds to work through that I'll have to wake up for good if I want to know.

My vision's blurry from what must be hours of sleep. The same can be said for my voice. As I scoot up in bed and clear my throat, it feels dry and hoarse.

There's just one problem. The bed I'm lying in isn't my own. The horror of this discovery unloads on me all at once.

As my memory clears, so does the last sight I'd seen before everything went black—the predatory wolfish gaze of Caelian Ziccardi fixed on my face. The hauntingly dark gray eyes that had peered deeply into mine.

Into my soul. Disturbing my spirit.

The last thing I saw before he must've drugged me.

I survey the bedroom I'm in. The room might as well be frozen in time—walls papered by an indigo damask pattern that looks luxurious but dated. Clunky furniture made of

decades-old wood fills the room. My palm presses down on the bedspread I'm on top of and a small cloud of dust rises.

I slide off the bed, my bare feet touching cold wooden floors.

Where are my shoes?! Where are my clothes?!

I forget about taking inventory of the room's furnishings and begin frantically searching for my things.

My book bag, my cell phone, my suitcase are nowhere to be found. The outfit I'd been wearing is gone too. Instead, I've been changed into some kind of silky, lace-trimmed nightgown that stops at my thighs. The same shade of pale pink as my pair of pointe shoes.

A shudder runs through me at the eerie coincidence.

Forget my things. I need to find an exit!

I run toward the door with a sense of hopelessness that expects for it to be locked. To my surprise, I'm wrong.

The door creaks open and I find myself in an empty hallway that's just as dated as the bedroom. It stretches out of view on both the left and right sides of me. More of the dark blue damask pattern papers the walls, along with the occasional oil painting decorating the space.

Dim ceiling lights only add to the moody air.

Where am I?

I choose to go right, rushing down the hall on bare feet. A staircase emerges that leads to the ground floor. In the deafening silence, every step taken feels thunderous. I do my best to be quiet and light-footed, using my dancer background to my advantage. If there's one thing I can do, it's be agile.

No one even seems to be home. Fine by me. It'll be easier to escape.

Caelian probably didn't expect me to wake up so soon.

I reach the door and wrench it open. It's as far as I make it.

A strong hand clamps down on my shoulder and forces me around so fast, I lose my balance and tip over. Arms bulging with muscles catch me before I ever touch the ground. I'm set back on my feet as I blink and question what just happened.

Glancing up, I find myself in the last place I want to be—back under Caelian Ziccardi's unnerving dark gaze. My breath stalls in my chest, the deep dread I felt during my escape attempt returning in spades.

"Let me go," I mutter, so quietly it's almost a whisper.

His lip curls much in the same way it had last night at the dinner. "*No.*"

"This... this isn't legal. There are laws. I signed a contract."

"Your contract is no more. You're mine now."

Every second spent in his company unnerves me, disturbing my very being. Something about this man unsettles me and I can't shake it off. There's a violent, borderline feral energy about him that makes him seem more beast than man, like his black button up shirt and pants are nothing more than a costume for the real animal underneath.

He can barely contain himself. I can sense it from him, emanating in thick, overpowering waves.

Violent urges and dark thoughts.

And I'm his. He *owns* me.

“Please,” I choke out. My eyes ache as I blink up at him, tears soon on the way. “I don’t want to be here.”

The vaguest hint of amusement flickers in his gaze. He reaches out to brush tattooed knuckles against my cheek, earning an involuntary flinch from me. “I’m sorry to hear that, *mia bella ballerina*. This is your home now.”

“No. It can’t be.” I shake my head despite the dread sinking deeper and deeper inside me.

“Yes, *bella*,” he growls, leaning closer so that I catch a whiff of his masculine scent. Something warm and earthy. “You’re mine. The angel I’ve been dreaming of, and tonight... you’ll be my *wife*.”

Caedian



“C, YOU REALLY THINK IT’S A GOOD IDEA?” MS. POITIER asks, handing me a warm towel. “The girl’s only ever known life with her dance company.”

I scowl, snatching the towel from her hands and wrapping it around my waist. A frosted glass partition separates us. I’m fresh out of the shower, still dripping wet. Ms. Poitier stands on the other side as she always does, waiting to supply me with whatever I need. Stepping out from behind the partition, droplets of water clinging to the muscles of my bare chest, I give her a scolding glance.

She knows better than to question me on this. She’s well aware of the lengths I’ve gone to. The endless hours I’ve spent obsessed with this endeavor of mine.

My dreams are nothing new. They’ve been a recurring theme in my life for some time now.

The only salvation when the most debilitating kind of pain racks through my body.

Most people would beg for death. They’d seek a doctor unscrupulous enough to end it for them—or they’d simply end it themselves.

But I’ve survived.

My angel has seen me through the darkness, and she doesn't even know she has.

I stride into the wide expanse of my bedroom and head straight into the closet. Ms. Poitier serves as my shadow, going where I go. She holds out her arms as I discard the towel and shrug on a crisp black dress shirt.

“You've devoted a lot of time to tracking the girl down. All I'm saying is there are other ways to go about this.”

My fingers work their way up the buttons 'til I'm on the second to last one. “She was always going to be sold.”

“But under different circumstances—normally, these kinds of transactions are done so more... *humanely*.”

“Is there such a thing as humane when buying and sell human beings?”

Ms. Poitier's sparse silver brows knit together, contrasting her copper skin tone. “C, you know what I mean. Most women in her predicament... they're aware of the stipulations in their contract. They simply expect things not to be so forceful.”

“Forceful?” I rumble like a beast.

“What else would you call it?” says the sixty-something-year-old woman I've known my entire life. Once upon a time, as a boy, she seemed so much larger and more intimidating. Now, she cranes her neck for a look up at me, her hands on her wide waist. “You drugged her and brought her to an unknown location where you plan to marry her. You've said all of two sentences to the girl. Both of which were creepy might I add.”

I bare my teeth at her, though it does nothing to intimidate her—Ms. Poitier has been dealing with violent mobsters her entire life. Even the devil himself would have trouble scaring her.

“What’s your plan if she doesn’t want to be married to you?”

“There is no alternative. That will be her fate.” I walk out of the closet dressed in my uniform for the night—an all-black suit that’s tailored to fit my large, muscled form. Every piece of clothing I own is personally tailored; when you’re my height and stature, it’s a requirement.

I buckle my gold watch onto my wrist and check my reflection.

Ms. Poitier can criticize my plans as much as she wants, but she can’t deny that I haven’t made an effort. I’ve put in work to make this situation as smooth as it possibly can be. If I were truly as cruel as she’s making me sound, Nevaeh would be chained up in a fucking cell.

Any further discussion on the matter is put on hold by the ring of my cell phone. Pa is video calling me. Ms. Poitier sighs as I turn my back to her and answer.

A second into the call, it’s evident Pa’s drunk. His skin’s tinged a rosy shade and he slurs his speech. But he’s not alone—Coreno and Cristian are seated in the background of his office, nursing their own drinks.

“You fucking *leccaculo!*” Pa yells.

“You’re in high spirits.”

“Don’t you mouth off to me! Don’t I give you everything? My only son, I treat you like fucking gold,” he slurs over the phone.

“What about me?” Cristian asks. “There you go again, Pa. Treating me like chopped liver.”

“Shut the fuck up!” Pa pauses long enough for an infuriated glare in Cristian’s direction and then turns his ire back on me. “I’ve been good to you, Caelian. Better than most men are to their sons. And yet you can’t do one lil’ thing for me. A damn disgrace!”

I straighten my cuff links, my tone bored. “Is this about the Vorone meeting?”

“What else do you think it’s about, you fucking donkey-faced motherfucker!?”

“Are you done? I don’t have time for this. I have other important matters.”

I can almost see the heat steaming out of his ears as he explodes into a fit of curse words. I set the phone down so I won’t be forced to watch his tantrum unfold.

It won’t be the first time and it certainly won’t be the last.

Pa has been losing his grip on Zinc Co., the Ziccardi pharmaceutical company for years now. It started with his ill-fated, short-sighted partnership with Nero Vorone, where he struck a distribution deal in hopes the bottom line would ultimately enrich him and the Ziccardi name.

From there it snowballed into Nero encroaching more and more on what was supposed to be Pa’s territory. In more recent times, it’s morphed into Nero demanding more ownership of the company to square some of Pa’s other debts with the Vorones.

He’s spent years making a mess and expects me to find a magical means of bailing him out. Unsurprising in every sense of the word.

“You realize what’s on the line, stronzo fucker? What part of our survival don’t you understand?” Pa asks.

“If it was so important, then why couldn’t you go?”

“I’M THE FUCKING BOSS! I CALL THE SHOTS!”

“Then call me when you’re sober.”

I hang up on him, sliding my phone into my pants pocket.

Pa is a walking contradiction—he puts on a front as if he cares about the future of the Ziccardi family, and then turns around and chooses self-preservation at every opportunity. It’s a wonder he ever managed to claw his way up the hierarchy in the first place.

I won’t be fixing his mess this time. I’m taking a page from his book—my wishes come above everything else. My final stage won’t be spent worrying about the family; it’s going to be spent how I deem fit, which is what tonight’s all about.

I check the mirror one last time before I leave the bedroom. The same room I’ll soon be sharing with my angel.

Nevaeh sits in tears when I find her. Only she looks beautiful when she cries.

She’s seated at a vanity table in a simple robe as Ms. Poitier readies her for the ceremony. Her dark hair’s been styled in waves that spill down her shoulders. Ms. Poitier dabs some powder onto her cheekbones as I come to stand in the doorway.

“Don’t fuss,” she says. “If you cry off this make up, we’re starting over.”

Nevaeh sniffles, then closes her eyes as though it’ll prevent the tears.

My head tilts to the side. Watching her has quickly become an enjoyable pastime. The girl is a stunning beauty, even more

captivating than in my dreams. Thoughts of all the ways I'll make her mine fill my head. She has no clue what she's in for.

If she did, she'd know her tears are more than justified.

I leave the two to finish getting ready. The rest of my staff have spent the evening piecing together last minute arrangements. The ceremony is more of a formality than anything, but I've instructed them to make some effort.

It's in the more barren half of my house, the east wing where most rooms are decorated with cobwebs and sheets over the furniture.

For this occasion, all eye sores have been cleared out. Some flowers have been put up for display. A plush rug rolled out for Nevaeh to walk down.

Umberto approaches with a bottle of brandy to inform me my cousin Carmelo's on the phone.

"He sent this as a gift. He's sorry he couldn't make it."

I oblige by taking the phone. I wouldn't if it were anybody else (I had my fill of family bullshit earlier with Pa). But Carmelo and I have always gotten along. He's the only family member I allow to visit my estate, who has the code to surpass the gate. It's no wonder he's the one who bothered to send a wedding gift.

"Congratulations, cousin," he says on the phone. "I heard you have finally chosen a bride."

"You've heard correctly."

"You purchased her from the dance company?"

"I did."

“Which one is she? They have some very beautiful choices.”

“You wouldn’t know this one.”

“It’s possible,” he says. “I have been a fan of the company for years.”

“They are all the same.”

He makes a humming noise as if denoting agreement. “Did you get the brandy? It isn’t much, but it’s my customary gift at a time like this.”

We hang up after I thank him for the fine bottle of liquor, passing both the phone and bottle off to Umberto again.

It’s once I’m off the phone that my impatience grows and I check my watch.

The ceremony begins with Ms. Poitier—her walking in tells me Nevaeh’s ready.

She takes her seat at the piano, arranging her sheet of music and pressing her fingers to the keys. The first note of Pachelbel’s Canon in D plays, filling out the huge vacant space with the gentle melody.

I’m at the manmade altar beside the minister I’ve coerced into presiding over today’s ceremony. He clutches his Bible with nails biting into the leatherbound book and tension pulling at his mouth. His best efforts can’t hide the fact that he’s resentful that he has to do this. The alternative was having his dirty secret revealed to his congregation. As it turns out, a god-fearing man like him has a huge gambling problem, and even huger debts to pay off.

It doesn’t matter how he feels. So long as he does what he’s supposed to, I couldn’t give less of a fuck.

Another moment passes as the music twinkles on, and I stare down the aisle.

Nevaeh appears seconds before my patience wears thin. It would be beneficial for no one if I had to go drag her out. Least of all for Nevaeh.

She stands at the far end of the aisle in an ivory gown that's draped delicately against her dark skin. Simple yet divine like the angel she is.

Her hair's loose waves cascade about her shoulders. So often her chocolate brown hair's slicked down into severe buns, even in my dreams, that it feels rebellious seeing her like this.

Soon we'll be exploring all the different ways she's untamed—and the ways in which I will tame her.

We'll be bound for life. We'll be avowed 'til death.

The music plays on as Nevaeh takes slow steps down the aisle. There's a softness about her expression despite the worried knit of her brows and sadness dimming her eyes.

Our marriage may be daunting for her, but in time, she'll adjust.

And should she never do so, then her life will be that much more miserable and brutal.

She finally reaches the altar, turning to face me.

“Shall we begin?” the minister asks, opening his leatherbound Bible to a hand-written note bookmarked inside. “We're here today to celebrate the union of Caelian and Nevaeh Ziccardi. Marriage is perhaps the greatest and most challenging adventure of any human relationship. No ceremony can create your marriage—only you can do that

through kindness and patience. Dedication and understanding. Talking and listening. Supporting and helping and believing in each other.”

Nevaeh snuffles and tears her gaze away from mine. As if she can’t possibly bear to look at me as these flowery words are recited.

I grit my teeth. Can she not pretend even for a few minutes?

“Tenderness and laughter,” the minister goes on. “Learning to forgive and appreciate your differences. But most importantly love and cherish—”

“Skip this part,” I snarl moodily. “None of that is important. Get to the declaration.”

“Errr... right. Will you, Caelian, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“Yes, yes. What else would I say?”

The minister rolls his lips together but ultimately bites his tongue, knowing any outburst would severely cost him. He turns to Nevaeh. “And will you, Nevaeh, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?”

Nevaeh can’t even bring herself to answer. She merely snuffles again and peers at the ground.

Hot irritation burns me from the inside out, deepening my scowl. “She does! Get to the declaration!”

“But the vows—”

“There are no fucking vows!” I bark at him, and he flinches.

“Ri-right. Errr, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You... you may kiss the bride.”

I don't wait for Nevaeh to react—I provide the outcome for her. My arm hooks around her waist and I wrench her toward me for a hard, aggressive kiss on the lips.

Our *first* kiss.

Both as husband and wife but also in life itself.

It's a recreation of my dreams. Her sweet, soft lips are immediately addictive. My arm tightens, holding her closer and snuggler against me. The deepest primal urge stirs and almost makes me throw her over my shoulder to haul her off. I'd have her writhing naked on my bed with my cock buried in her tight cunt within seconds if I listened.

I fight the urge and pull back... for now.

Wrapping her hand inside mine, I say, “Come. Tonight's only just begun.”

Nevæh



“EAT YOUR FOOD,” CAELIAN GRUNTS FROM HIS END OF THE long dinner table.

My gaze drops to my untouched plate.

His staff’s put together a feast for our celebratory wedding dinner—a succulent rack of lamb on a bed of roasted, fresh-off-the-vine peppers. There’s the many dishes of appetizers and soups they’ve prepared, like buttered mushroom puffs and some sort of Italian wedding soup that has bits of meatball, lots of veggies, and white wine making up its flavor palate.

So much food it makes me question who Caelian thought was attending tonight. It makes no sense having enough food to feed a whole neighborhood just for two people.

When I still don’t touch a single item on my plate, his scowl deepens, and his large hands tighten on his knife and fork.

“Is there a problem?” he asks with barely restrained patience that tells me he’s not patient at all.

I could play along and be the obedient little wife he’s hoping for—I could simply obey and clean my plate like he’d prefer. Instead, my heart beats faster in rebellion. I meet his

cold, dark gaze from across the table, my chin high and shoulders thrust back.

“I’m not hungry,” I reply.

His nostrils flare. His hands become clenched fists resting on the table. “You *are* hungry,” he insists. “You haven’t eaten a bite in over a day. From the moment I brought you here. Eat what you’ve been served.”

I push my plate away and then fold my arms. “I said I’m not hungry.”

“And I said eat your fucking food!” he bellows.

It’s louder than a lion’s roar in the jungle. The abrasive sound reverberates through the room, feeling as if it were screamed in my face despite the fact that he’s ten feet away. The delicate glass and silverware almost seem to vibrate precariously in place, threatening to tip over and shatter on the floor.

My tough act feels ironclad until it’s faced with his brute anger. Then I’m jumping in my seat and flinching like I’ve been physically struck.

An even louder silence follows.

I don’t dare look at him again. My heart’s racing faster than ever and tension’s corded through me, turning my usual loose and flexible dancer’s body unbearably stiff. The only thing I can think to do is sit still in my chair and stare at an indiscriminate point across the room.

Is this what the rest of my life’s going to be like? Married to some violent brute who shouts me down when I don’t do exactly as he says?

Caelian seems to realize how he's come across. He releases a breath that's ragged, and then makes another attempt at being civilized.

"It would be polite if you ate your food," he says in a careful, slow tone.

I give no reaction, sitting still as ever.

"Fine, then you'll fucking starve!" he growls in disgruntlement. He shoves his plate away from himself like his appetite, too, has been lost. "Umberto, get your ass in here with the wine!"

A split second later, a toothpick of a man in a butler's uniform scurries into the room carrying a bottled wine and two glasses. He promptly sets the wine glasses down and fills each with a quarter of blood-red wine. One for me. One for Caelian.

"You *will* drink this," Caelian says. "If you won't on your own, I will come over there and pour it down your throat for you. This is tradition—we begin our marriage with a toast of wine to cement the vow we've made to each other."

"I've made no vow—"

"You don't need to make a vow. *I* made a vow for you. I'm your husband and you will listen to me!"

The tension living inside me only intensifies. It feels so unbearable it's all I can do to sit where I am and refrain from erupting in a frustrated scream. I take hold of the wine glass as he does the same on his end of the table. The warm, tart wine touches my tongue and slides down my throat. If only it were poison.

He drinks his in a single toss. He sets down the delicate glass with no care at all—almost enough for a brute like him to *shatter* the glass—but he seems pleased at the moment. At

least as pleased as a violent monster like him can be as he gazes at me from his end of the table. Approval flashes in his dark gray eyes.

I've obeyed, which is what he wants.

"Ms. Poitier," he calls, "take her up. Get her ready and bring her to my room."

Disgust floods my stomach and makes me nauseous. I can't hold back this time. "Please don't—"

"Now," he snaps.

The older woman bustles into the room so quickly, I'd guess she's been hovering just outside this entire time. She darts straight for me and eases me out of the chair by my arm. I'm pulled out of the dining room where Caelian's still seated, being served another alcoholic refreshment by Umberto, the butler.

Ms. Poitier returns me to the room they've been holding me in. The door swings shut behind us and she goes to work without any explanation.

My wedding gown is stripped off of me. So are the tight undergarments she'd squeezed me into earlier. I'm like a doll being changed from one outfit to another.

"You're a very pretty girl, dear," she says, gathering my hair over one shoulder. "He's very taken with you and your beauty and grace. He's been dreaming of you."

"So I've been told..."

"You know what's expected of you," she says, kneeling to tug off my sheer hosiery. "Young women like you are aware of what happens in these situations. I've never known C to put his hands on women, but he's a violent mafia *capo*—nothing is

above them at the end of the day. If you push him far enough, don't think you'll be exempt from physical punishment. Defiance will get you nowhere but a red and sore behind."

On some level, I can recognize she's giving advice to help me. All as she dresses me up in whatever intimate fashion Caelian expects me to be delivered to him in. But her tone's warm and motherly enough that I begin finding solace in it. Even if it's just a little.

Ms. Poitier seems wise, like she has many stories to tell. Vaguely, with her light brown skin and coiled hair touched by various shades of gray, she reminds me of an aunt figure. An older woman that could be from my family if it was big enough.

She rises up to her feet and slips a satin piece of lingerie over my head. More ivory against my dark skin. "He's paid for an experience. Behave yourself and do as he says, and it'll be over quick. He's mixed alcohol with his pills again, which never goes well. He'll be out in minutes. I've told him but he never listens. Just... let him have it."

Nerves quake in my stomach.

My mouth opens to speak, though I squash the urge.

Ms. Poitier's unaware. Caelian must be too.

Many women locked into contracts and the lifestyle that I've led do often get sold to various customers. Often by the time one chooses to marry them, they're no beginner in the bedroom.

But my story's different.

Part of the contract I was placed into involved none of these encounters. It explicitly stated in my contract I'd go untouched... until my husband bought me.

Since he bought me out of it, Caelian likely didn't read the fine print. Neither has Ms. Poitier. They don't know that I'm far out of my depth. I have no experience. I've never...

"You really are a pretty angel," Ms. Poitier sighs as though a proud mother. She fusses with my hair, making sure it's framing my face and touching my shoulders in just the right way. "All done. Has the wine hit you yet?"

My brows knit. "The wine from earlier?"

"Here, have a swig of some liquor. It'll help relax you." Ms. Poitier sneaks a small flask from the pocket of her house dress and pushes it into my hands.

At first I'm about to turn her offer down, but as thoughts about Caelian's brute size and strength enter my mind, I figure it might be needed. I swallow two gulps and then cough at the instant burn down my throat.

"I like the hard stuff," Ms. Poitier says, taking her flask back. She fixes one last stray piece of hair before she clutches my hand and leads me out of the room. "No more time to waste. He's waiting for you."

SEVEN

Nevæh



MY HAND BALLS UP INTO A FIST AND HOVERS OVER CAELIAN'S door. I glance over to my left. Ms. Poitier lingers down the hall watching me, giving encouraging nods of her head. She motions for me to go on.

I suck in some air and then quickly release a shaky breath and tap my knuckles against the door. It can barely be considered a knock. More the kind of innocuous noise you hear in the background and think nothing of. He probably didn't even hear it.

My heart beats with hope at that thought until the door whips open and I find myself standing opposite him.

Caelian Ziccardi, a man so huge and bulging with muscles that he almost feels unreal. He towers over me by more than a foot, like an insurmountable mountain I've been sent to climb. A flicker of dark glee shines in his eyes at the sight of me outside his door.

"*Mia bella ballerina,*" he says, his accent thicker and huskier than usual. He's been drinking. Noticeably, to the point the woody, sweet scent of whiskey is on him. He steps aside. "I've been waiting for you for a long time."

I catch the double meaning—the reference to his supposed dreams of me and the literal moment that he's spent waiting

for me to turn up at his room.

With a final glance down the hall at Ms. Poitier, I step into the room feeling like I'm entering the den of a beast.

His door slams shut, and I recoil at the jarring noise.

He strolls past me, giving no indication he notices nor cares. It could be the alcohol, or he simply might not give a damn. Either are believable.

“Would you like another drink?” he asks from the polished minibar set up in his room.

It prompts my first real look around—my eyes scan the large, open-spaced bedroom, taking notice of many of its details.

The furniture and decor match the rest of the house's vibe. Dark, archaic, and heavy. Large furniture made of the sturdiest wood, which looks antique. His bed alone feels like it was made not for a human but for a giant monster. Is that where he'll take me?

I shudder at the thought, my belly clenching.

“Nevaeh,” he says sternly. Ice chinks the glass he's holding as he fills it up. “Do you want a drink?”

“N-no thank you,” I stutter out, neglecting to mention the two swigs of liquor I just had. On a mostly empty stomach at that.

He finishes making the rest of his drink, his broad back a canvas of muscles and tattoos. Sampling the drink, the ice bobbing along in the pale brown liquid, he reaches for a few of the pills on the counter of the minibar.

I frown observing him. He takes the pills and tosses back his alcohol. Are these the pills Ms. Poitier had been

complaining about? Some kind of drug he's addicted to?

As if my situation couldn't get any worse...

He glances at me from over his shoulder. "You haven't moved from the spot by the door. Are you afraid of me, *bella ballerina*?"

I shake my head, though it's after a pause of uncertainty. "I... I don't know where you want me. This is your room."

"Ours," he interrupts. "*Our* room. You'll be sleeping with me here most nights. Except for when I'm gone or unavailable... then you will be returned to the other room I have for you."

I bite my tongue, tempted to point out how he speaks of me like a toy to be put away at his whim. Instead, I focus on steadying my breath and my skyrocketing heartbeat. You'd think I've been dancing the way it thrums so fast inside my ribcage.

Nerves and unease. Dread and concern. Sadness over my past life that's now gone.

In minutes he'll be changing me in a way I've never experienced before. I'll be forced to take him and endure his touch and invasion of my body. Just another way I'll be controlled and placed in a cage, much like I've been my entire life.

Only now it'll be without the light my dancing has always brought me.

From the time I was a small girl, I dreaded what was in my contract. Aware I'd be bought and married to a man of means, I wasn't one of the girls looking forward to the arrangement. It seemed like an extension of the control the dance company—

and the Vorones—had already exerted over me and every other aspect of my life.

Love was never in my future; not the kind that was told in the fictional stories on the screen and in books.

The kind of love I was destined for was a contractual marriage where a wealthy man bought me as his wife, like he'd buy any other possession. The idea of love has only ever meant more control.

Little did I know, the reality would be so much worse. I'd be bought out of my contract and then given to another crime lord that seems even more vicious and violent...

Caelian finishes his drink and sets down the empty glass. He pins me with his first full-on look since answering the door. The primordial hunger returns. His gray, wolfish gaze eats me up even with the distance between us. He's already devouring me without even having to touch me.

“You are very beautiful,” he says, approaching me. I'm his captive, unable to run or hide or do anything but stand still as he eclipses me. He lifts his large hand to caress my cheek, spending a moment studying my face. “It won't be as bad as you're thinking. Your life here with me. I don't seek to hurt you, angel. I only seek to make you mine... and you are already. But tonight will put it in stone. Take off your dress.”

I glance down at the slinky white slip dress Ms. Poitier put me in, then up at him. The shock spreads across my face, my eyelashes fluttering in quick blinks and my lips parting. It takes a hard swallow to keep me from protesting his request.

He arches an impatient brow.

There's no turning back. No escaping what's about to happen.

I can do so willingly, with some pride and dignity, or I can let the barbarian he so clearly is take over. He'd be more than willing to rip it off me himself.

My fingers are stiff as they reach for the hem of my little lingerie dress and tug to pull it up over my head.

I let the expensive fabric spill into a small satin mound at my feet. I'm naked before him except for the matching pair of panties Ms. Poitier put me in.

Caelian openly leers. His wolfish gaze tracks over every inch of my naked body.

My arms yearn to come up and cover myself. I've never been naked in front of a man before. Even my physicians have always been female.

A lifetime of insecurity rolls through me. Ballerinas aren't sexy. We're not seductive like many women with ample curves. We're dancers, meant to be light enough to toss around and grace the stage to tell stories with our bodies. No more, no less.

Though I've had many of Dresden's Dance Company's fans call me beautiful and express interest, I've never felt the sexual desire that seems to consume others.

My body's small and petite. My breasts not even a true handful. I have hips and a backside that's fuller than your average ballerina—something that's always frustrated Ignazio and caused him to subtly insult me and insinuate I need a diet—but I'm not a curvy woman.

I'm *not* sexy and never will be.

An eternity feels like it passes between the time I shed the lingerie and Caelian traps me under his appraisal. Even my

battered dancer's feet and beaten up toes are studied. Another flaw of mine I'm well aware of.

But, the next time his eyes meet mine, there's a fiery spark in them.

He likes what he sees.

Caelian *grunts*. "As exquisite as I knew you'd be. Take off your panties and then get on the bed."

My breaths quake from my lungs as I do what he says. The pair of panties I'm wearing join the lingerie on the floor and I pad over toward the giant bed in the nude. I crawl on, feeling more awkward than I've ever felt in my life.

What do women do in this moment? Am I supposed to start seducing him? Do I wait for him to touch me first? Will a man of his size injure me? Should I say something about my inexperience? *Would he even care?*

I must look a frightened mess on the bed.

He's disrobing when he calls me out on it. His button-up shirt falls away and his heavy hands work on the buckle of his belt. His attention's on me as he sheds these layers, as if he expects eye contact at all times.

My heart feels like it'll beat out of my chest at any moment.

"You're nervous," he predicts. "Understandable, *bella*. Make no mistake. I *am* a huge man. Taking me won't be easy. But you can handle it... or you will learn to."

I shudder at the ominous sound of the words and lose any nerve I have to tell him. He wouldn't care anyway—he'd claim I'll have to simply bear it.

Caelian's boxer briefs are the final layer separating him from me. Once they're removed, my eyes widen at the intimidating sight that greets me.

I've seen male anatomy before in movies and in school during health and science classes.

But seeing Caelian's appendage in person—his huge, thick, *veiny* penis as it stands upright on its own, hard and erect, sucks any air left in my lungs.

He'll split me in two. There's no way...

My legs clamp together, and I scoot backward on the bed to put more distance between us.

He chuckles and starts toward the bed. His member swings as he walks, heavy and powerful like the rest of him. Along the way he grabs a bottle of some kind of clear liquid.

"Don't worry, *bella*," he says, his Italian accent audible in every syllable spoken. "I will make myself fit."

"Caelian," I warble out. "Please..."

"Please, what? We're man and wife. This is part of what being my wife entails. Lay back, *bella*. It will be easier if you relax."

I do as he says, settling against the mountain of pillows, squeezing my eyes shut.

Caelian's large, muscled body feels heavy even without any of his weight on me. From the second he climbs over me, balancing himself on one hand, I feel as if I'm being crushed under him. His presence, his mere energy is that overbearing.

My heart pounds away in anxious anticipation.

In the next second, I'm proven right in thinking that his touch is rough and uncaring.

He pries apart my legs. Something cool and slippery trickles over my sex, and then come his fingers, prodding at me.

I grit my teeth and wince at the intrusion. Instant discomfort seizes me. If this is what his fingers feel like...

"So tight," he mutters, then he leans in for a kiss. He steals my lips with his, kissing me hungrily and sloppily. His tongue jams itself into my mouth and his taste of whiskey becomes mine too. I squirm under him, so upset and appalled by the moment that tears wet my lashes.

And still his fingers poke away at me. A dull ache builds from the inside of my sex. I try to squeeze my thighs together to keep him out, but he only pins one down with his knee.

"You're feisty," he says with a chuckle, his warm breath tickling my skin. "I like a little fight. You should be happy I've used so much lube. Maybe next time I'll make you take me without."

"Caelian," I grunt, pushing at him.

"Nevaeh," he whispers, then he kisses me all over again. His fingers leave me, his hands groping my breasts and the rest of my body.

I curl a fist and then punch at his chest and shoulders.

It makes no difference.

He bites my lip and squeezes my breast. More rough touches. More touches laced with callousness and disregard.

A soft cry whimpers out of me at the realization this will be what I'm forced to endure for the rest of my life. A

thoughtless, vicious, violent brute that doesn't give a damn about what makes me feel good or what I want.

The only thing that matters is what he does. What pleasures him.

His hard, hot, thick organ presses up against my entrance, warning me of what's to come.

"This is about to be heaven," he says with a cruel smirk. He holds my gaze as he does it, slicking himself in more of the clear liquid he's coated me with, and then thrusts into me whole.

A silent scream leaves me, my body consumed by a pain I've never known.

My mouth drops open and my back arches. Tears flood free. I'm crying as the sharp pain lances through me and leaves me paralyzed, pinned against the mattress.

Split in two. Literally...

The dull thought is all I can think of as I lay still and he enjoys himself.

Caelian doesn't seem to notice my distress. He rumbles out a long groan and then draws back his hips only to slam into me again. The pace is quickly set—Caelian and his machine-like hips drive into me with brute force, breaking me open and tearing me apart.

The pain makes me dizzy. Spots appear before my watery eyes as if letting me know of the damage being done. I claw at his arms and shoulders and any other piece of him to hold on, to fight through the sheer agony.

It doesn't slow him down.

Caelian buries his face into the crook of my neck and groans as he pounds away. “You feel even better than my dreams, *bella*. How can you be so fucking hot and tight?”

More tears spill out of me as I silently beg for it to be over. If there’s a god that exists, surely he has to take mercy on me and let this moment end.

Please... please... I can't take much more...

Every moment becomes torture. My body tenses up out of pain while his seems to do so out of pleasure. He gives no thought to my stiff reactions, to the tears slipping down my cheeks. His throaty moans drown out any cries of discomfort. His thrusts grow harder, come faster, and the ache his member leavings behind lasts longer. It feels as though I’m being torn apart.

At last, with a finishing punch of his hips, he buries himself so deep inside me, it feels humanly impossible, and he comes. Warm fluid seeps between us. Possibly his seed and evidence of my brokenness.

I’m afraid to glance down and check.

I breathe for what feels like the first time in hours. The pain remains, throbbing from my battered sex and other parts of me that were brutalized by his touch.

Caelian bows his head and releases a breath too—his much more rough-sounding.

My initial thought is that he’s seen the bloody mess between us; he’s realized what he’s done. That thought is extinguished in seconds as he hurries to roll off me and rises up from the bed. His tattooed hand clutches at his chest and he lurches toward the door.

“Ms. Poitier!” he shouts, flinging it open. “Call the physician. Now!”

I’m lost as to what’s happening.

Footsteps pound down the hall and another male voice calls something out about a treatment. I’m so shocked, still fresh with pain, that I don’t move. I stay where I am as if waiting to be collected.

After a minute goes by, Ms. Poitier wanders into the bedroom. She must’ve realized I’d be confused.

“Nevaeh, there you are,” she says. “I’ve come to take you back to your...”

Her voice goes out, her eyes lowering to the bedsheets. A pang of horror hits me when I follow her lead and spot the blood and semen not only coating my thighs and sex but the bedsheets themselves.

The older woman eyes the messy evidence with a startled silence, then she comes over wearing a sympathetic frown.

“I’ll get you cleaned up, angel dear,” she says softly. “A warm bath should help. He won’t be back tonight, so you’ll have time to rest.”

“But where did he—”

“He’ll be in treatments for the rest of the night,” she interrupts, curling an arm around my shoulders. She helps me off the bed and my achy legs protest as we walk toward the door. “You should be glad. He won’t be able to touch you again for some time. It’s over for now.”

What should comfort me only disturbs me more. A thousand questions pop into my head as I realize I’m more in the dark than even I realized.

EIGHT

Nevae



YOU LEARN TO CHERISH THINGS MORE WHEN YOU HAVE FEW OF them. It's a lesson I've learned in the past, and it's a lesson I learn again trapped in Caelian's secluded mansion. Most of what I owned, I left behind at my dorm. The suitcase I packed could only fit so much.

A few changes of clothes and my most prized possessions.

In the days following my marriage to Caelian, I learn I'm expected to think of the things provided for me as *my* things.

The fabulous new wardrobe and jewelry. The expensive perfumes and moisturizing creams. The furnishings, however archaic, in the bedroom I'm being kept in.

Ms. Poitier makes it clear in a not-so-subtle way, I'm supposed to forget my past life. That includes my past possessions.

But I find myself sneaking private moments with them. In the early morning before the sun's even finished rising and the rest of the house is quiet, I get up and pad over to the armoire in the corner. A sanity check of sorts to make sure my things are still there.

My hands glide over the glass dome of my snow globe and a sigh of relief puffs out of me. Dad gifted me this snow globe

to express his love for me, and I'll treasure it 'til I'm old and gray. Call me paranoid, but I wouldn't be surprised if one day I check my suitcase or the armoire where I've stashed many of my things only to find them gone.

Caelian—and by extension the small staff he employs—seem determined to scrub my past existence from record.

Talk about dancing or my family isn't allowed. The subject's always changed, and I'm reminded that Caelian doesn't wish for me to discuss these topics.

Where he even is, I'm not sure.

The last time I saw him was in his bed after he finished almost splitting me in two. He's been a ghost ever since.

Days go by, and I'm left alone, only kept company by staff members like Ms. Poitier and Umberto, the butler. I'm not allowed to leave the premises, and I'm not allowed any communication with the outside world. All use of electronic devices is heavily monitored to the point I'm not even provided a *remote* when I watch TV.

When I ask where Caelian has gone and when he'll be back, I'm told that information isn't mine to know.

“He's my husband,” I say, blinking in puzzlement. “Shouldn't I get to know where he is and when to expect him?”

Ms. Poitier reaches out to stroke my dark hair and brush it off my shoulders. “Dear, it's not for you to know. He'll be back soon. That's as much as I'm allowed to say.”

The constant close watch is frustrating, but part of me is grateful for the break from any more time in Caelian's bedroom.

All the Epsom salt baths in the world can't take away the memory of what happened on our wedding night. The soreness between my thighs subsides and I'm able to walk without an ache again. The bruises from his crushing grip begin to fade...

Visceral aspects of the moment do not, like the smell of his warm breath and the feel of his weight on me.

My vagina clenches at the memory of what it was like to have the thick, veiny monster he calls a penis inside me. If I barely survived the first time, what will it be like when he returns?

I wander the barren halls of Caelian's mansion as though they'll provide me an answer.

For such a large and sprawling property, he only has less than a dozen in his employ. More than enough to keep me in line, but so few that the place feels abandoned. A moody, dark air persists no matter what room of the house I find myself in.

When I attempt to go visit Caelian—more so out of curiosity over his whereabouts—I'm met with a prompt rejection by one of the security guards.

"Mr. Ziccardi is unavailable right now," the guard says, his voice monotone and his expression lifeless. He prods me away from Caelian's bedroom door with a rough hand.

I stumble at the harsh push. "No need to put your hands on me! I'm his wife. I'm just wanting to—"

"Mr. Ziccardi is unavailable right now," he recites again. "Any attempt to access his private chambers will be met with force."

I reluctantly turn away and give up. For the afternoon anyway.

When being held captive indoors, it's easy to lose track of the days. As I return to my room and glance out the window at gold dusk coloring the sky, I make sure to take a mental inventory of the time. Tonight will mark three days since I've seen him.

I shouldn't care. The man's a brute who stole my virginity and tore me up. He kidnapped me and forced me into a marriage I couldn't want less.

Yet, as I curl up in the armchair by the window, my thoughts are on him, wondering if this will be what our marriage is like. Him gone most days and nights. Me held against my will at his home 'til he decides on a whim he's ready to *play* with me again.

The least he could do is allow for me to dance. If I could simply spend my days at the dance company, practicing for the show, fulfilling my lead role as *Principessa*... then maybe things wouldn't be so bad.

There's a gentle knock on the door.

Ms. Poitier eases it open and pokes her head inside. "Honey, I have a surprise for you."

My legs drop from the seat of the armchair and I stand up. "Caelian's summoning me?"

"No," she simpers, stepping into the room. "This is a *pleasant* surprise. As in, one you'd enjoy. I have your mother on the phone."

A frown takes over my face. "My mom? How did you—"

"Mr. C says you can speak to her. Only five minutes. Make the most of them."

The moment turns surreal as Ms. Poitier passes me the phone and then stands back to wait the conversation out.

It takes me another second to grasp what's happening. I wasn't aware Caelian had the means to contact my mother nor that he would care to. My phone and laptop were both confiscated once I was brought here. Is that how he got a hold of her number, or was it through other means?

Ignazio and the dance company? The Vorones?

I bring the phone up to my ear with distrust laced in my voice. "Mom?"

"Nevaeh baby," comes her achingly familiar voice. "I've been so worried about you. How is your new arrangement?"

"Fine," I answer carefully. My eyes flick across the room to where Ms. Poitier stands. A constant reminder I'm not alone and can't speak freely. "How did you get a hold of me?"

"Never mind that. I'm just glad to know you're in one piece."

My brows furrow. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You know what I mean. I heard about your escape attempt. It was reckless of you—what have I told you about fleeing from your contract?"

"I was bought out of it."

"But until ownership was transferred, you were still beholden to it," she scolds. "It's only due to kindness on your husband's part that you're unharmed for what you've done. Tell me about what you've brought with you."

My posture goes rigid, though I try to act natural. Ms. Poitier wears a soft, almost motherly expression as she hovers near the door and eavesdrops on the conversation. The contrast

is so strange it becomes unnerving—listening to my real mother, who’s almost impersonal, while staring at a woman I’ve only known for a few days that fits the maternal role perfectly. Yet neither woman truly feels like an ally.

Both women carry an undercurrent of ulterior motives.

Ms. Poitier works for Caelian first and foremost. Mom has always been obedient, and even a proponent of the system we’ve found ourselves living in. The flesh trade she and Dad signed my life away to in the name of our family’s self-preservation...

I clear my throat and choose my words carefully on both fronts. “I have everything that’s important with me.”

“Oh, good,” Mom says. The relief’s imbued in her tone. “For a second, I thought you’d forgotten what was key.”

“I never would...”

“Your father would be upset. It meant the world to him. It’s very important you have it with you.”

“You sound more concerned with my things than me.”

Mom clicks her tongue in a sound of offense. “Of course not! My baby girl comes above all. You’re unharmed and that matters most.”

Ms. Poitier taps her wristwatch to let me know time’s winding down. Surprisingly, I’m grateful for the cue. I’ve had enough chatting with Mom to last me for a few days.

“Time’s up. I’m not sure when we’ll talk again.”

“I was told weekly. Remember we love you. Take care of yourself and what’s ours.”

The coded language only frustrates me further. We hang up with me doing my best to keep from rolling my eyes.

I'd assumed talking to Mom might lift my spirits. Instead, all it's done is put me in an even worse mood. I'm sick and tired of being everyone's pawn.

Ms. Poitier comes over to collect the phone. "I'm sure she was happy to hear from you."

"Where's Caelian?" I ask.

"Mr. C is unavailable at this time."

"When will he be available?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, dear. Any attempt to—"

"I've been told," I interrupt. "That answer's not good enough. He's my husband, and if I'm going to be trapped here, I want to see him."

"Nevaeh!"

I ignore Ms. Poitier's calls as I race for the door and fling it open. The hallway still feels like an overwhelming maze even after almost a week spent in this house. It takes me a second before I'm able to orient myself and dart in the direction that'll lead me to Caelian's room.

In the days that I've been here, my ankle has mostly healed, allowing for me to move like I usually do—with speed and fluidity.

Ms. Poitier can't keep up. She scurries behind me with pleas for me to stop.

I dash down the hall, focused on my final destination. The door at the end that belongs to Caelian. Instinct tells me he's

home; he's inside his room, and has been hiding away for whatever reason.

Out of nowhere, an unstoppable force rams into me and sends me sailing through the air. My body jerks and my feet leave the ground. A grotesque crunching noise echoes in my ears at the brutal collision. It's not until I land in a tumble several feet away that it's clear why.

Throbbing pain attacks my wrist and pulls a wounded cry out of me. I roll over, cradling the bent joint in my opposite hand and staring up at the ceiling, blinking back tears.

The guard that speared into me steps over and peers down with no mercy to be found in his hard gaze. Ms. Poitier joins his side, her lips in a deep frown.

All I want to do is crawl somewhere and hide. This isn't my home, and it never will be. I'm not safe here if I'll be punished so easily, so severely, for simply trying to see the man they made me marry.

My husband.

"Nevaeh, dear. I'll help you up," Ms. Poitier says.

I shake her off, crawling one-handed on my knees to get away. As far as I'm concerned, I want nothing to do with any of them...

"What is this? What has happened?"

I freeze at the sound. Ms. Poitier and the guard look up. The three of us are equally startled by the voice we know so well.

Caelian's bedroom door is open and he stands in the doorway, his face clenched in fury.

Caedrian



“IT’S A DANGEROUS GAME YOU’RE PLAYING,” MY PHYSICIAN, Dr. Tulio, warns. He uncaps a fresh syringe, the long point of the needle glinting in the light. He inserts the needle into the vial of the treatment my body sorely needs and fills it up to the proper line. Flicking any bubbles out of the syringe, he pinches my skin and injects me. “How many times have I told you no alcoholic beverages? *Most* of all when you’ve taken your medication.”

I barely register the pinch of his fingers or the needle. My scowl speaks before I do. “Nothing’s going to stop me from living my life.”

“Even if it means more suffering? The treatments can only do so much, Mr. Ziccardi.”

“It’s my wedding night. Am I not supposed to enjoy myself?”

“Enjoy yourself all you like. But do so without the alcohol and without mixing it with your medication. That’s if you want your best chance at fighting this.” He gives me a disapproving shake of his head and then removes the needle from my arm. He moves on to the next one—another vial with another long, sharp needle.

We're both already accustomed to the routine. This is only the beginning.

The pain will soon be taking over. Within the hour, I won't be able to do anything but lay still and hope for an unconscious sleep so deep, I'll wake once the worst of it's over.

See you in my dreams, angel.



I'm in between life and death when it hits me. It becomes all I know. The torture seizes me and makes every inhale of breath feel like a thousand hot blades cutting my heart. The pain invades every corner and crevice of my huge, muscled, often-perceived-unstoppable body. It exists inside me like a second entity to myself, taking over 'til there's nothing else.

I squeeze shut my eyes and beg for the drugs to take effect and numb me through the pain... or put me to sleep. Whichever comes first this time.

A silhouette appears in my mind's eye.

Svelte and petite but with limbs that stretch far and wide as she dances. She's so quick, spinning and leaping like the movements are second nature to her.

I watch in wonderment until I'm no longer consumed by the pain.

I'm only consumed by her.

The more she dances, the closer she moves. She becomes more than a silhouette in the haze of my dream. She springs and twirls and slides over toward me.

Her enchanting brown eyes find mine. So beautiful and dark, shining from the invitation in them.

Come with me, she says. Fall with me.

An angel of life or an angel of death, in the ravages of my pain, it doesn't matter.

I trust my beautiful ballerina angel and take the leap deeper into the boundless abyss...



A wet cloth of some kind passes over my brow. I open my eyes to the fuzzy and distorted sight of Ms. Poitier bent over me. She notices I'm awake and shakes her head.

"You scared the hell out of me, C," she lectures. "How many times have I told you not to do that?"

I grin, my voice weak and hoarse. "But it's so much fun."

"One of these days it's not going to end like this. You know that, right? You're pushing your luck."

"How long was I out?"

"A day and a half. Dr. Tulio says you need to rest up—"

"Nevaeh?"

Ms. Poitier dabs the damp cloth at the rest of my face. "She's cared for. Poor girl's going out of her mind with boredom. Why can't she at least dance, C? There's space for it in one of the spare rooms."

"I said no."

She sighs. "What do you expect me to do with her?"

“I have already given you instruction. You are to watch over her.” I attempt to push myself up only to be met with aching protest from my body. I settle against the pillow, glaring around as if seeking an invisible man to blame. “When will the physician return?”

“He’s in his office. He’ll be up any minute. I told him you were coming to.”

I grunt, turning my head toward the window. Morning birds tweet songs outside on the ledge. Light melodies that would probably make most people smile. It merely makes my glare harden. If I could, I’d roar at them to shut the fuck up.

My bad mood is insurmountable.

This isn’t how I envisioned the first few days of my marriage to go—this isn’t how I wanted to be spending the time that was supposed to be *mine*.

“Your father called. Should I let him know you’re awake?”

“I don’t want to hear from him.”

“It was important. About the Vorones. *And* Nevaeh.”

That gets my attention. My head snaps to the other side, turning away from the window to where Ms. Poitier stands at my bedside. “What about Nevaeh?”

“Your father is angry because he found out you bought Nevaeh from the Vorones.”

“I didn’t buy her from the Vorones. I bought her from the city dance company.”

“*Owned* by the Vorones.”

A ragged sigh battles its way out of my sore lungs. “It’s no concern of his.”

“You should call him. It sounds like the Vorones didn’t realize...”

...that I was buying her. Fuck.

Pain fires off inside me as I force myself up this time, gritting my teeth. “I’ll handle it.”



The Vorones exert dominance over Dresden in a manner the Ziccardis never have. Nero Vorone, the highly regarded and respected Don of the family, has cloaked the city with his influence at every turn. The elected officials he bribes. The thirty-thousand-strong law enforcement under his thumb. The courts he packs and media companies he intimidates into staunch silence. His reach knows no bounds across the huge metropolis.

He owns a fucking ballet dance company. Is there a question he hasn’t monopolized it all?

The Ziccardi’s have always been the David to the Vorone’s Goliath.

We’ve operated well in that position. Second string. The smaller syndicate whose reach doesn’t compare, but still rakes in enough money to thrive and survive. Mainly through the drug trafficking agreement we reached with Nero over Zinc Co.

Nero could’ve crushed us a long time ago if he wanted. He’s kept us around as cover. If the Feds ever wish to crack down on a crime family in Dresden, we’d be the sacrificial lamb he’d offer when he cut a bribery deal.

Zinc Co would be tied only to us in any official capacity. We'd be the ones taking the fall.

At least, that's my theory on the matter.

In more recent times, relations between him and Pa have soured. The Vorones started to move in on Zinc Co, demanding a bigger cut, and Pa wasn't having it. He's wanted me to step in on his behalf. Something I've avoided doing.

It seems, where the Vorones would've likely overlooked my purchase from their dance company doubling as the flesh trade in the past, they've decided to strike up an issue with it now.

I depart my secluded estate located in the mountains miles outside of Dresden. The aftereffects of my treatment still weigh on me, making me less strong and alert than I usually am. No matter, I'll manage. I always do.

When you have a condition as debilitating as mine, you learn you must.

I'm granted a meeting with Nero at his restaurant, Vecoli. I show up alone while he waits at a table of seven. Three of his guys on either side of him. His amber eyes light up and his mustached lip curls as he greets me.

That's the other thing about Nero. He's all about appearances. I don't think I've ever known another mafia guy to be so superficial and concerned with his looks.

Probably because if you stripped away the expensive goods he drapes himself with, you'd be left with a tall, gangly motherfucker who's got the face of a donkey. Bubbled eyes, brows too manicured for a man, and a protruding nose that takes up too much space.

He's not, and never has been, easy on the eyes. Which makes him all the more obsessed with superficial shit.

"I'm so glad you could join me, Caelian," Nero says. He tugs on the steel cufflink of his flashy designer suit. "Please have a seat. It will be a pleasure to break bread."

I do as asked and take the seat across from him. "I'm only here for one reason."

"Ah, yes. I figured. Carmine would like for you to discuss business on his behalf. There has been a lot of back and forth about Zinc Co and how we'll be conducting things going forward."

"That is what my father is concerned about, yes."

"He's upset regarding some stipulations I have proposed. He feels they will hinder his business."

Two waiters appear to fill up our glasses and place large plates of Italian food in front of us. I ignore the eggplant parmigiana that's been served to me and meet Nero's amused gaze.

"Yes, he's upset," I admit. "But that is his matter to address. I have a matter of my own."

Nero arches a neatly waxed brow. "And what would that be?"

"I have recently purchased a girl from your company."

"Which one?" he asks to laughter from his men.

"A ballerina."

"Ah, yes. That's right. I heard about that."

Nero accepts the drink the server hands him and surveys me as he sips from it. He's taking his time on purpose. His

men flank him on either side, a wall of enforcers ready to do his bidding. They're supposed to be intimidating, though they fail to realize I'm beyond such tricks.

I stand on my own. I need no men to back me up.

There's freedom in having nothing to lose.

"Well," Nero says slowly, "you see, Caelian, there's a problem. The ballerina you purchased was in an ironclad contract."

"I bought her out of the contract. Speak with Ignazio about it."

"Ignazio has no authority on the matter. It wasn't a contract to be bought out of. I'm sure you're aware."

I scowl at him, careless as to how disrespectful it may seem. "Then why don't you tell me what the real price is? Isn't that what this is about? I bought the ballerina, but you're unsatisfied. I'm guessing that's because of my father."

Light gleams in his amber eyes. "You're very smart. No wonder Carmine wants you to negotiate on his behalf. The ballerina is one of our most prized possessions at the dance company. You paid handsomely for her, that's true... but still not enough considering everything."

"Then what's the *real* price?" I grit out impatiently.

"You'll be willing to pay it? I don't know that you can. Your family isn't prospering as it once did. Isn't that why Carmine is so upset by my new stipulations?" His lip curls in a wider, cockier smirk.

I'd love to punch it off his face. I settle for clenching my hands into fists on the table. "You want me to get him to agree."

“That’s right. If you’re to *keep* the ballerina. He needs to agree to the new terms and conditions of our Zinc Co partnership. It’d be the less... messy outcome.”

I leave Vecoli with hot, liquified metal coursing through my blood. A fury that burns and feels dangerous as it inhabits my veins.

But is it any surprise? I should’ve seen this coming. Nero would use my purchase of Nevaeh as a means to damage the family.

The Ziccardi name means shit to me. Insects I crush on the ground mean more. However, Nero’s request forces me to involve myself in a feud I had no intention of getting thrown into.

The location of my estate is so hidden and secluded, it’s an almost two hour drive from the city. My condition’s flaring up by the time I park my car and ride the elevator from the underground garage.

Ms. Poitier attempts to guilt trip me about Nevaeh again, telling me how she’s been miserable these past few days. I stride faster, slipping ahead of her by several paces.

“Let her speak to her mother. Five minutes only.”

I slam shut the door to my bedroom before Ms. Poitier even has a chance at sneaking inside.

In the solitude of the huge room, I’m able to take off my mask for the first time in hours. Exhaustion weighs in, and I lumber over to my medication drawer to take my next dose of pills. Dr. Tulio would be quick to come if I called him, but I choose to forego his treatment for now.

Instead, I sleep. I use the afternoon to rest up and recuperate from a trip into the city I probably wasn’t well

enough to make so soon after another episode.

A great crash in the hallway wakes me. Followed by the softest little cry of pain I've ever heard.

Nevaeh.

I'm at the door, wrenching it open, stepping outside to the scene unfolding.

Enrico, one of my soldiers, stands over a small, crumpled body on the ground. Ms. Poitier hurries over with horror scribbled on her aged face.

My gaze drops to the crumpled body. Nevaeh's cradling her wrist, tears shining on her cheeks.

“What is this? What has happened?”

Comprehension dawns. The hot, liquified metal in my blood heats up to untold levels. I charge forward like a bull gone rogue and spear into Enrico at my full strength. He groans, cracking into the wall and making a dent with his head.

“What the fuck is this?!” I howl. “What have you done to her?”

He opens his mouth to answer only to be pummeled by my fist. Blood spurts and teeth shatter. My fist collides with his face again. Many, many more times 'til he's dropping unconscious to the floor, and I'm roaring at Ms. Poitier to alert the other guards and take him away.

“I'll finish him later,” I snarl as more of my men show up. I round on Nevaeh, who's scooted off and curled up into a ball against the opposite wall.

Terror's frozen on her face, she's still clutching her bent wrist. She's gaping at me like she expects to receive my wrath

next. Doesn't she understand why I'm so fucking angry?

That I'm protecting her, not seeking to hurt her?

"Come here, *bella!*" I roar in my blinding fury.

Her eyes widen and she shakes her head before she scrambles to her feet and then takes off down the hall.

Far away from me, the brute she believes will bring her harm.

TEN

Caedian



“NEVAEH,” I SAY FROM OUTSIDE HER LOCKED DOOR. “I’M coming inside.”

It’s my house. I have every key to every door. The lock on hers is more of an illusion for her reassurance than anything. A false sense of security and privacy that doesn’t really exist. That’s without even addressing the matter of the surveillance cameras I have set up in her room.

Or the fact that a man of my size can easily break such doors down.

But it’s better if she opens it on her own. If I let her know beforehand that I’m coming inside. I’m hardly the type to bother thinking about these trivialities; the only reason it’s any different is because of the injury she’s sustained.

Fucking Enrico could’ve snapped her in half if he’d hit her any harder. What the hell was he thinking?

The girl’s barely five feet tall, and judging by the commotion, he must’ve slammed into her like a linebacker during a football game.

“Nevaeh,” I say when silence answers me. I rap my knuckles harder against the door. “If you won’t answer, I’m coming in.”

Why does this girl have to be so damn stubborn? Why must she make me so angry, then act so afraid?

My blood's hot, my features twisted into a scowl, as I wrap my hand around the brass knob and jam the key into the lock. The door scrapes open to the immediate surprise of Nevaeh. She's on her bed with her legs crisscrossed. Her face goes slack from the shock I could enter so easily.

I let the door drift shut behind me. The air thickens with unspoken tension between us. Darkens with the energy I naturally carry at any given time. My rough and callous presence effortlessly dominates the space.

She feels it too. Her body stiffens, though she makes no attempt at escape. Likely because she recognizes there isn't one.

We're trapped in this room together.

I stalk toward the bed. "Let me see."

She's nursing her wrist, resting it in her lap. At my order, her brows bend together, and she merely blinks at me.

"I said, let me see," I say more coldly, grabbing her by the arm perhaps rougher than I should.

Restraint is difficult when I'm used to behaving as viciously as my natural instincts call for. She doesn't put up a fight, letting me seize hold of her by the arm and assess the damage done to her wrist.

It's not broken. Though it is a nasty sprain. The swelling's already started. When I touch the area with my fingers, even attempting to be gentle, she winces.

More rage courses through me. More violent urges.

“What happened?” I ask, clenching my teeth. “Tell me what he did.”

“Caelian... just go. I want to be alone.”

“What did he do to you?”

Nevaeh furiously shakes her head side to side, suddenly looking fit to burst. Tears well in her eyes and she rolls her lips together as if stifling whatever threatens to get loose. Her wrist lays flush against my palm, so fucking dainty and delicate compared to the size of my hand, that more rage burns through me.

I do what feels right—my thumb rubs the inside of her swollen wrist as if hoping to soothe.

And, I suppose, that *is* what I’m hoping to do.

Soothe her. Comfort her. Make her feel better in some way. Though I don’t know how, and though this is far from my area of expertise.

“Tell me,” I say in a quiet rumble. “Tell me what he did to *mia bella ballerina*.”

“I was just trying to... I was just coming by to see where you were.” The rest of what she says is drowned out by the frustrated cry that bubbles out of her.

My arms enclose around her in an embrace that’s primal and protective. My hand comes up to cup the back of her head as I hold her close, and she spills tears on my shoulder.

So, Enrico was trying to keep her from coming to see me. She must’ve been curious as to my whereabouts after I disappeared for a few days.

Ms. Poitier had warned me she was growing more restless.

“Listen to me, *bella*,” I say, pulling away enough to peer into her watery eyes. “If someone ever puts their hands on you—my guards or anyone else—you come find me. I want to know about it. The only one who gets to touch you is me. Is that understood?”

She sniffles, making my pained heart twitch in my chest. “But how will I reach you? You disappeared and no one would tell me anything. They said you were unavailable.”

That is the messaging I had given. The instructions I’d left for them to relay to anyone who would be looking for me. Perhaps I should’ve caveated that with Nevaeh in mind. Though she’ll do as I say and what I want when I want, it could be a problem if I disappear like I had. If Enrico had no problem hurting her this time, who could say it wouldn’t happen again?

My mind is made up.

“If you need me, you call this number,” I say. I snatch the notepad and pencil on her bedside table and jot down my most private means of contact. “*Only* if it is an emergency, Nevaeh. Only if you truly need me and can’t find me.”

She takes the torn piece of paper into her uninjured hand with a nod.

I move to stroke her cheek out of affection. More affection than she probably realizes I have for her.

She flinches in reaction. Tension pulls at her full mouth, though she says nothing. She still doesn’t like me or want me touching her—in fact, she probably can’t stand that she’s forced to interact with me. While she was searching for me, it was for the reasons Ms. Poitier stated. Boredom and frustration.

I withhold vocalizing my irritation even if it lives on my face.

“Very well,” I say, standing up from the side of her bed. “I’ll send the physician up. He’ll take a look at your wrist. Ms. Poitier will also be up to help get you ready. We’ll have dinner at six.”



Dinner is eaten in silence. Nevaeh sits on one end of the long table. I’m on the far end of the other side. Umberto serves dish after dish. As much of a feast as the kitchen staff normally prepares on any given night. Antipasti and gnocchi soup. Cheeses and fruit. Stuffed artichokes and marinated zucchini. Braised veal and Sicilian-style swordfish. The table is covered with an array of Italian options for every taste and appetite.

Yet Nevaeh barely touches a crumb. She resembles a doll not only in how beautiful she looks—Ms. Poitier’s dressed her in a cream-colored cashmere sweater that contrasts wonderfully with her darker complexion—but she’s as poised and immobile as one as well.

I forego a knife and fork and tear into my shank of veal with my teeth. My chewing’s aggressive and uncivilized, though I couldn’t give less of a fuck.

Irritation’s once again prickling up my spine due to Nevaeh’s defiance.

What she’s protesting this time, I’ve got no fucking clue. The girl seems determined to starve herself if it means proving a point.

“Eat your food,” I say, gesturing to the platters and dishes sprawled out between us.

She picks up her spoon, scoops up a bite of the risotto on her plate, and then hardly swallows any down.

I bare my teeth at her. “Must everything be so fucking difficult with you?”

“When can I dance again?”

So that’s what this is about...

“You’ll dance when—and *if*—I say you can.”

“I have a leading part in Ignazio Prescutti’s ballet—”

“I don’t give a shit,” I interrupt crudely. “Eat your fucking food first.”

Her dark brown eyes narrow at me. Her good hand tightens around her fork, and she funnels a few more bites of risotto to her mouth.

But my mood’s already too sour to give a damn. She doesn’t get credit for being coerced into complying. She can whine and protest and throw temper tantrums all she likes.

I’m in control, and I’ll deprive her of whatever I want.

Including her dancing.

Dinner ends on a tense note, with Ms. Poitier collecting her and me going off to the floor underground.

Though my estate’s only manned with fewer than twelve regular staff members at any given time, occasionally, I’ll call in the rest of my crew.

Tonight’s one of those moments. They await me in the underground compound I’ve built to conduct any necessary

operations. I stride into the room to everyone lined up, except for the asshole on his knees.

Enrico's face is busted and bruised from my earlier beatdown. His lopsided nose leaks and his right eye is swollen beyond repair. Both signs he likely needs emergency treatment. He won't be receiving any tonight.

I stop in front of him, my bulging arms folded against my wide chest. "You've been a loyal *soldato* and part of my crew for years. Tell me what happened."

He coughs up blood that sprays onto my shoes. "Caelian," he rasps. "I was... I was following orders."

"What orders would that be?"

"No visitors. You were..." More blood is hacked up. More flecks on my shoes. "You were unavailable."

"That's right, I did tell you I'd have no visitors. I said no exceptions."

His eyes light up and he nods along eagerly to every word. He's relieved I seem to understand where he was coming from. His hope couldn't be more misguided.

"Let me get this straight," I say slowly. "Because you were instructed to deny any visitors that came to see me, you thought it was appropriate to... what?"

He gulps down air. "I was using necessary force."

"Necessary force against a woman involves crushing her to the ground? A woman of Nevaeh's size no less. Really?"

"C, you've always said to guard your private room against intruders—"

“You would categorize Nevaeh, the woman I *married*, as an intruder?”

“You said—”

“Shut the fuck up about what I said and tell me what you think!”

He seems to realize he can't win. Any answer he provides is the wrong answer. He trails off with a blubbing whimper and then bows his head in a plea for forgiveness.

I'm in no mood to be merciful. Not that I ever am.

A second passes where I admire how bloodied and pitiful he looks on his knees. I point at his twin brother, another guy on my crew named Matteo.

“What do you think about this?” I ask. “Do you think I should go easy on your brother for what he's done?”

Matteo takes a look at his groveling brother, then gives a shrug. “We all know the rules. We know what happens when we break them.”

“No, Matty!” Enrico blurts out. Another one of my guys kick him in the face to shut him up.

Most people would be disturbed their boss is considering the punishment of their brother. Their twin brother no less. Matteo Bandini is cut from a different cloth. Born and raised to be part of this ruthless lifestyle since he was a boy, much like myself. He sees it as work. Even if it's Enrico.

I grin. “Hold him down.”

Two of my men obey my request at once. They pin Enrico to the floor using their hands and knees.

He erupts in screams and struggles against their hold.

I accept the clear glass container handed to me by another one of my men. Crouching beside a twisting and turning Enrico, I peer down at him.

“I’m sure you knew you’d be punished. Let’s see if you can survive this. We’ll be taking bets.”

Enrico attempts to clamp his mouth shut. The same soldier who handed me the container kneels on the opposite side and pries his jaw open by force. I pour the clear liquid clean down his gullet ’til it’s empty, and I’m easing back to admire the damage.

The effects are immediate. Enrico’s eyes bulge in his sockets. His face pales to a sickly color. The muscles in his throat work so hard his Adam’s apple bounces up and down. The hacking sound he produces grows louder as he chokes on his tongue and fights against the liquid seeping down his throat.

But it’s too late.

We watch as the sulfuric acid wreaks havoc and burns through his upper gastric tract. It incinerates him before our very eyes in a gruesome sucking noise that emits from deep down his esophagus.

Enrico flops like a fish on dry land, his struggles weaker and weaker against the men holding him down. Soon, he goes still altogether. The life vanishes from his eyes and foam froths from his mouth, mixing with the dried crust of blood already on his lips.

I stand up and dust my hands off. “That was more entertaining than I thought it would be. It’s a shame he didn’t last longer. Take him away and carve him up like I instructed.

Use the rest of him to feed the strays in the city. They could use a meal.”

Several of my men snicker and then do as I say.

Once they’re all gone, I notice someone I hadn’t before—Ms. Poitier hovers near the doorway with a scolding expression lined on her face.

I blow out an aggrieved breath. “What now?”

“I see you’ve found new and interesting ways to hurt people. Acid down his throat?”

“I could’ve skinned him alive, but I wanted to get creative this time.”

“You hurt the man that hurt her, and she *still* won’t want you.”

Any amusement dies from my face. My usual scowl replaces it. “It doesn’t matter if she wants me.”

“Yes, it does. You want her to want you. Have you forgotten I know you better than anyone?”

“She’s my wife whether or not she chooses to be.”

“But it ruins the dream. Your perfect vision of her.”

I turn my back and stride toward the collection of weapons stowed in this room. “I’m missing your point.”

“The girl’s been kidnapped, married off, injured by one of your men—she’s miserable. If you keep this up, there’s no telling how this’ll end.”

“Then what’s the solution, P? Give me your almighty wisdom.” Sarcasm seeps from every word, though deep down, my curiosity has been piqued.

Ms. Poitier's right. I *do* prefer that Nevaeh wants me in return.

"Give her a reason to be happy here," she answers. "Beyond just what you want, C. It might come as a surprise to you, but there is more to life than you and your desires."

I roll my eyes out of stubbornness. "And how would I go about doing that?"

"You figure that part out. I believe you can if you *try*."

With a sage smile on her lips, Ms. Poitier wanders out of the room. I watch her go, hating that she's planted this seed in my head. How the fuck am I supposed to know how to make Nevaeh happy?

ELEVEN

Nevae



MY PLAN'S SIMPLE. WAIT UNTIL THE COAST IS CLEAR AND then run for it.

Caelian's huge estate tends to be quiet and vacant even during the hours of the day most people are awake. Through the night and into the early morning, the home might as well be inhabited by ghosts.

I wake before dawn and take care making my bed. The only belongings I'm bringing with me are in the suitcase I had stored in the armoire. Everything Caelian has provided remains untouched and in place, left behind in the bedroom.

It's a risk I'm taking, trying to escape. But what other choice do I have?

Remain in a forced marriage where I'm held captive at an estate, physically assaulted by my husband's guards? Neglected and mistreated as I go insane from boredom?

I haven't danced in days. I haven't done anything but sit around and miss my old life.

Caelian's return has changed nothing. He hasn't explained what he wants with me, nor has he shown he's more than a violent brute. The rare moment he tones down his crude

behavior isn't enough. It simply proves it's an act. The brute is who he really is.

The door creaks when opened, making me cringe. I slip through the narrow crack and then scurry down the hall. Halfway toward the staircase, I consider abandoning my luggage altogether. Thirty pounds might not sound like a lot, but when one of your wrists is swollen, it slows you down.

I make it down the stairs in a stealthy enough manner that I don't make a sound.

My plan beyond Caelian's front door gets sketchy. Since I've never left the grounds, and I wasn't awake when I was brought here, I'm not sure what to expect. He could have armed guards wandering the perimeter of the estate or attack dogs or drones.

Anything's possible with Caelian.

There's the matter of the location itself. Just where is this estate located?

After looking out the windows from various parts of the house, it's clearly secluded. Surrounded by tree lines and distant mountaintops. Will I even be able to survive on my own?

It's almost winter. The nights average in the low thirties. Chances are I might freeze to death or lose my way in the woods if I don't find help by sundown.

Yet, despite these real dangers, I'm willing to take the risk.

...because anything's better than living a life like this.

Once on the ground floor, I make a break for the front door. Determination pulses through me and spurs me faster. It feels so close, so within reach...

I pass many doors on the way. Doors that hide the different rooms in Caelian's mansion, but it's the one door at the end that I'm sprinting desperately toward.

The one open door to my left makes me stop in my tracks. My hope's pulverized into dust as my gaze swings over to this open door.

Caelian sits in a cushiony leather armchair in the den, calmly sipping on a drink. He raises a brow at me. "Going somewhere, *bella?*"

I'm speechless. My face warms all over. A feeling of foolishness trickles over me and leaves me wanting to run off and hide somewhere. How ridiculous must I look? Did I really think I'd get away?

"Caelian..." I sputter.

He rises from the armchair and starts toward me. "Where were you going, Nevaeh?"

I shake my head and take a step back to turn away. "Nowhere. I was just..."

"Just, what? Trying to leave me?"

Oh, no. He's angry. He'll explode any second.

"I'm sorry," I murmur halfheartedly. More so an apology for getting caught than anything.

"Are you aware of where you are?"

I shake my head again.

"What if I had armed guards ordered to shoot on sight?" he asks, and my belly churns at where this is going. "Do you know that it's dozens of miles from here to civilization? With

this November chill we've been having, do you believe you would've survived?"

"Caelian—"

"Answer me, *bella*," he says firmly. "Do you think you would've made it more than a few hours in the freezing cold woods?"

I close my eyes and release a deflating sigh. "No."

He tilts his head to the side in consideration. "But given all that, it was still worth the risk for you?"

Hesitantly, I nod.

He makes a throaty noise I can't place, then takes another sip from his glass. "I thought so. Then it's true. She was right."

"Who was right about what?"

"Put your luggage down. I have a surprise for you."

Caelian sets off down the hall without a further word. It dawns on me a couple seconds later that he expects me to follow.

I take the bait and trail behind him. He leads me into a wing of the house I'm unfamiliar with. The archaic décor continues, more heavy furniture far past its prime, and more dim lighting and damask wallpaper. Cobwebs hang in every corner as though the spiders that take up residence in them occupy the space more than Caelian and his staff does.

Caelian makes a final turn down a hall and then reaches into his pocket to pull out a ring of keys. He lets the door swing open once it's unlocked.

I'm at a loss for what's happening. I hover several feet from the open door and faintly consider making another break

for it—not that I’d ever get far. We’ve already established that.

“Nevaeh,” he says. “Look inside.”

“I’m not understanding.”

The room’s filled with old furniture covered in dirty white sheets. I cough at some of the dust particles floating through the air.

Caelian smirks. “This will be yours. A space for you to do what you love once it’s renovated.”

“Renovation? You mean it’s going to... you’re changing it into a place for me to...”

“It’ll be a small dance studio, yes. The project should be complete in the next few days. The company I have coming in has been told to finish as soon as they can.”

I take a step back and run a hand over my hair as if checking I’m awake. “You’re serious? This will really be a dance studio I can use?”

“Whenever you like.”

A moment passes where I’m too stunned to think up any kind of reaction. I settle for gaping at Caelian from where I stand, then glancing over to the room caked with dust. It’s a small space located in what seems to be a deserted wing of the house, but none of that matters. It’s my own dance studio!

A sudden current of happiness bursts out of me. Unable to contain myself, I release a delighted squeal and jump into his arms for a thank you hug.

Because of the jarring height difference, I’ve had to leap up to hug him, and he’s caught me to hold me off the ground. I squeeze myself to his thick neck, murmuring how grateful I am that he’s letting me have a dance studio.

Seconds pass before I realize I might be doing too much.

I pull back enough for a look into his eyes.

It's the first time I'm doing so directly. So up close and intently.

They're gray, but not just any shade of gray, a deep, smoky gray that clouds with different emotions at any given moment. Darker when he's furious, and predatory when he's got an appetite for violence. Wolfish in shape and intensity. Intimidating and mystifying all at once.

I lick my lips and blink as if to break the spell I've found myself in.

Yet I'm only drawn deeper into him. I forget to intake a breath, my arms loosening from around his neck and hands slipping down to his hard, ironlike chest.

He's as locked into my gaze as I am to his. He refuses to break it, holding me up several feet off the ground as if it's no bother at all. His arms are securely locked under my backside and won't be letting go anytime soon.

My brows knit and my heart flips and I do what feels natural in the moment. I lean in and press my lips to his.

It starts off as a simple kiss. A quick exploration that I've taken on a whim and brush of the lips that's supposed to be short-lived.

But I should've known better.

Caelian grunts and digs his fingers into my hair and kisses me harder. Heat crackles around us as if a spark has been lit by a match.

I melt into him without even understanding what's happening. My fingers curl against his chest and grip at the

nape of his neck as he devours my mouth. His tongue slides over my lips and pushes its way inside where he flicks his to mine.

The next throaty sound that fills the air belongs to me. I moan as his tongue massages mine and makes my brown skin break out in a hot flush. I've never been kissed with so much passion, and I don't know how to handle it. I'm breathless and clinging to him. My heartbeat's an echoing drum in my ears.

He brings me up against the wall without ever breaking our kiss, his hand sliding up my hip and then down, gripping my thighs.

Caelian kisses me like he's expressing something his words never can.

My brain's too foggy to figure out what.

His lips leave mine and travel to my throat. I pant his name and tilt my head to the side, shuddering at the warm feel of his lips on a sensitive spot I didn't even realize I had.

My reactions seem to drive him crazier. He grunts and squeezes my thighs, licking and sucking my throat. His dominant, powerful hands leaving imprints in my skin.

An urge I've never known blossoms inside me. It's as passionate as Caelian's kisses, as hot as his touch, burning me up in a way I didn't know was possible.

I'm a goner, pinned against the wall, so flushed I've forgotten my name.

...until he grinds into me and I feel the huge erection poking at my stomach.

The hot feelings vanish. My panting and flushed skin too.

Flashbacks of our wedding night strike me like an unexpected bolt of lightning. I squirm and shove at his chest.

“Nevaeh—”

“Put me down!”

It takes a second for him to listen. As the panic swells in my voice, he seems to realize it’s better if he does. His hands release me by my thighs, and I stumble upon landing.

We catch our breath in uncertain silence.

“Thank you,” I mutter, patting down my hair. “I’m sure the dance studio will be great. I... I appreciate it.”

His features harden, his agitation clear. “You’re upset again. What is it now?”

“Excuse me,” I say before he can cut in. I duck out from under him and make my escape.

Maybe not to the world outside... but to the bedroom I’m staying in.

TWELVE

Nevae



WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN CAELIAN AND I LEAVES ME BEYOND confused. The moment I'm inside my room, I'm slamming the door shut and touching my lips. They tingle as if refusing to let me forget.

I just kissed Caelian.

I don't know what came over me. One second, I had been prepared to make my escape into the uncharted wilderness surrounding his property, then the next second, I was being led away for a sneak peek of what will soon be my dance studio.

The happiness, the unexpected and thoughtful surprise had me reacting off adrenaline. I threw myself at him, whisked off my feet as he easily caught me, and I *kissed* him. He kissed me—thoroughly and passionately, immediately in return like he'd been waiting for the chance.

A shaky breath leaves me as I back up toward the bed and then plop down.

That kiss was so intense, I'm not sure what to think or how to feel. Living the life I have, trapped in a strict contract and hyper focused on my ballet career, I've never had time for interaction with the opposite sex.

Things like first dates and first kisses were never for me. My first time in bed was just the other night with Caelian, and the pain had almost been too much to bear. The mere memory of that pain had me running away from him and his burning kiss.

There's a soft knock on the door that I already know is Ms. Poitier before she even pokes her head in.

"Figured I'd check on you, honey. See how you're settling in."

Unconvinced by her excuse, my brows raise. "Ms. P, you know, don't you?"

"And what would that be?"

"Just now... with Caelian."

A slyness develops about her expression. She gently closes the door so we're alone. "You mean things might be taking an unexpected turn between you and Mr. C?"

"I mean if there's one thing I've learned since I've come here, it's that you know everything that goes on in this house."

"I might be aware of a few things. You've never looked so dazed."

"Caelian showed me the dance studio he's renovating for me."

"How did you thank him?" Ms. Poitier flaunts a knowing smirk as she awaits my answer.

My face warms like it had earlier when Caelian took me to the east wing of the house. I study my hands in my lap, feeling more immature and inexperienced than I'd like. It's borderline humiliating.

“Ms. P, I’ve never... my contract... my dance career...”

“You didn’t have much time or opportunity for men,” she translates. At my nod, she comes over and slides an arm around my shoulders. “I don’t believe we understood the extent. Many dancers from your company *are* experienced.”

“My contract was different. It was... special,” I explain, choosing my words carefully. “My father—he was once a valued asset to the Vorones. They gave him special privileges even though our family was beholden to them. He was able to guarantee certain things written into my contract.”

“I see. I suspected after that scene on your wedding night. So does that mean you never told Mr. C?”

“I didn’t think it would matter. He said it was happening regardless.”

“That,” she sighs, “would be a true statement. But C probably would’ve liked to know—well, *sober* C. He was quite out of it that night.”

“I don’t know how to... what I’m supposed to do. What’s expected of me as his...” I pause at the gravity of the word. “His wife?”

A soft laugh trickles out of Ms. Poitier. “Nevaeh honey, I’m about to give it to you straight, with all the things about your situation taken into account. You’ve got his attention. You’ve got him *captivated* by you. Now, all you’ve got to do is finish the job.”

I frown, puzzled. “Finish the job?”

“A woman can talk a man into fighting a whole army by himself if she really wants to. It’s all in how she does it. The tools in her arsenal that she uses.”

“You mean seduce him?”

Ms. Poitier winks at me, then gets up from where she sits beside me. “I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. That’s all I’m saying. I’ll leave you be.”

Ms. Poitier knows what she’s doing as she walks out. The conversation may have ended, but the many thoughts she’s left me with are just beginning...



In the second surprise of the day, I’m allowed outside. Umberto comes to collect me as I sit staring forlornly out the window at the grounds below.

“Mr. C says you can spend some time in the courtyard if you’d like.”

My first inhale of fresh air awakens my spirit. I tip my face up to the pale afternoon sunlight and enjoy what little warmth I can. November brings more chill than anything, but just feeling the natural light on my skin helps.

Kneeling to touch real grass and hearing it’s crunch as I stroll the courtyard does wonders.

My mental state and my mood improve instantly. I wander over to a thick pear tree and touch its rough fissures.

For a moment, I close my eyes and collect myself, grateful I’ve been allowed this small freedom. Then I scan the open space, the bladed grass, and the cool air. Umberto waits on the other side, serving as my chaperone.

He might as well be invisible as I give in to my heart’s desire. My feet move on their own. My legs stretch and leap as

my arms wave with perfected grace. I've slipped into one of the routines from Ignazio's ballet without even thinking.

I spin, twirl, and step like I'm performing on stage. Except there are no rules to my movements like there have been so many other times in the past—I freestyle as my body flows to the imaginary music playing in my head.

Slow applause starts up. At first the clapping only belongs to Umberto, but after a second glance, Caelian's appeared at his side.

Startled and breathless, I slow my movements 'til I've stopped altogether. "Caelian—"

"You dance so elegantly," he says, pocketing his hands. "Perhaps it's why I've been selfish and kept you from it—I wanted to be the one to watch you."

"You can anytime. I'd be happy to dance for you."

An element of mystery swims in Caelian's dark gray eyes. It's a look that carries many different meanings. As if so many things are on his mind.

The hot feelings I'd had earlier when we kissed kindle to life. I feel the flames lick at me from the inside, reflecting on the outside by warming my skin.

What is this man doing to me?!

"It's time for dinner," he says after our pause. "Go upstairs and get changed. I'll see you in the dining room."

For the first time since I've come to stay at Caelian's estate, my heart flutters out of excitement for our meal together. I rush upstairs to shower and change into another outfit Ms. Poitier's handpicked for me.

An empire waist dress that's a powdered pink shade. My hair accompanies the gentle look in half up, half down loose waves.

In less than twenty minutes, I'm entering the formal dining room to find Caelian already waiting. He scoots my chair in and bows his head next to mine.

"Hope you'll eat a bite tonight, *bella*."

Force of habit has me vowing to eat as little as possible... until I remember Ms. Poitier's advice.

I watch Caelian take his seat at the other end of the table and decide I'll test out her theory. I'll be pleasant and behave like Caelian would prefer.

Another feast is served to us that caters to any appetite. All kinds of different meats and pastas and soups.

I fill my plate more than I ever have before.

He casts me a curious look. "I'm surprised to see you behaving yourself."

"I worked up an appetite today."

The words leave me in a coy tone that doesn't even sound like myself. Coyness has never been my forte. But the silky sound of my voice and small smile I give him reveals I'm subconsciously channeling Ms. Poitier's advice.

I'm attempting to catch a fly with honey.

As we dine, I rack my brain for topics to discuss.

"Did you have a busy day?" I ask.

Caelian cuts into his large slab of ribeye steak and surveys me with open suspicion. "Now you're making conversation. I'm almost wondering if this is a ruse."

“No ruse. Just... just earlier today... I really appreciate you letting me have a dance studio.”

He grunts midchew, looking the part of some kind of barbarian king in his throne with his feast, even despite the expensive black button-up shirt he’s wearing. “You disobeyed me this morning, Nevaeh. I hope it’s the last time.”

I bite my tongue and stifle the urge to bicker. “Yes. I promise it won’t happen again.”

“Good. Your place is here with me.”

“But will I...” I breathe slowly, trying to remain sweet like advised. “Will I ever be able to go other places? *Outside* of your estate?”

“No.”

“Caelian—”

“What did I just say?” he snaps, his cold gray eyes narrowing.

“You... you said no.”

“Eat your food.”

He slices into more of his giant steak, the sharp and precise movements of his knife denoting metaphorical violence. It feels symbolic in a way, like he’s doing more than cutting into his meat. He’s cutting into my heart, slashing through it every time I have a beat of hope.

Just when I’m wondering if things won’t be so bad.

We eat the rest of our meal in uncomfortable silence.

“You’ll be sleeping in my room tonight, *bella*,” he says once Umberto’s clearing the table.

I can't even argue. It feels like once again I've been strapped into a rollercoaster that teases so many possible highs only to bring me crashing down into lows. Ms. Poitier's advice doesn't work when I'm married to a brute—he's impossible to charm because he's so stuck on his narrow view of how things must be.

How can I pretend I'm content with no freedom?

I've been caged my whole life, yet nothing compares to this.

Being a toy for a man obsessed with me because of some dream he had.

An hour and a half later, I'm in his bed. He's pounding away, his heavy body rippling with muscle as he grunts and gropes me. I close my eyes and draw blood from my tongue, counting the minutes 'til he's done.

'Til he rolls over and slips off to sleep on his side of the bed.

And I tear up in a silent cry on mine.

THIRTEEN

Caedian



“WAKE UP, *BELLA*. I HAVE SOMETHING TO SHOW YOU.”

Nevaeh is sleeping beauty in the flesh. She lays curled among the satin sheets with a relaxed expression on her angelic face. Long lashes kiss her cheeks. Her mouth is plush and full even when at rest. Her dark skin luminescent in the morning light. Everything else about her features, from the soft curve of her cheeks to her round nose, are so delicate and sweet-looking, it makes my heart clench.

Not from its usual pain but from a deep yearning I’ve never experienced before. This beautiful angel curled up in my bed—the angel I’ve dreamt of during so many trials of pain and torture—is finally mine.

Last night we shared in more passion, though she still resists me. She refuses my touch even as I can’t help myself from having her. I had been overcome with intense desire and had consumed her the second the bedroom door closed. Perhaps too strong and aggressive... but it’s in my nature.

Soon she’ll adapt...

I stroke her cheek with my rough knuckles. “Angel,” I whisper. “Wake up. Do you want to see what I have to show you?”

Her eyes flutter to a slow open. She blinks at me in drowsy confusion. “Caelian...”

“Come with me.”

I lead Nevaeh from my bed to the hall. One of my strides equals two or three of hers. She scurries alongside me, trying to keep up as I grip her hand and walk her toward the staircase. Though she doesn’t ask where we’re going, I can sense she’s curious.

We arrive at the steel door on the east wing of the house where hardly anyone goes—except when me and my men need to access the compound a floor below. The east wing remains more barren and unused than other parts of my estate for that reason.

“Come, *bella*.” I clutch her hand as we start the spiraling descent down the staircase.

We’re plunged into darkness the farther down we go. Nevaeh’s body tenses up in caution. I pull her along faster so she won’t have a chance at trying to turn back.

“Where are we?”

“This is my compound,” I answer. “It is a *de facto* headquarters for my crew. It is for official business only.”

“Then why are you—”

“Shhh. You’ll see. Just this once. I have something for you.”

Any further protests are quelled.

We walk down the long hall that’s sparsely lit and made of cinderblock until we reach the room I’ve brought her down here for.

I'm not a man who experiences happiness or excitement in the manner most people do. My life has been rife with pain and suffering for as long as I can remember. My outlook and behavior has reflected that.

But, in a rare occurrence, a jolt of excitement hits me. At times it's been difficult communicating with Nevaeh. She never seems to understand where I'm coming from, and I lack the patience to figure out why she's so damn resistant all the time.

Last night is a perfect example. Our dinner had started promising, with Nevaeh showing up and eating her meal like I asked. Things quickly went left once we actually started a conversation. She insists on questioning me as if she has any authority in our marriage.

My fuse is short. My mood easily ruined.

We never recovered. Not even as we went to bed as husband and wife. Nevaeh wouldn't kiss me like she had earlier in the morning; it was almost like two completely different women. One had glowed with passion while the other lay frigidly immobile as I had my way with her.

It shouldn't matter to me if Nevaeh plays along. I'm going to do what I want regardless. She's mine whether or not she wants to be.

...yet it irks me that she resists. That I can't seem to get her on the same fucking page.

This might be my chance. Where the dance studio reveal ultimately fell flat, *this* might be the way I'll show Nevaeh how I feel.

"Close your eyes."

She resists for a distrustful second before following orders. I twist the knob of the door I've brought her to and then guide her inside the room.

Some would say it's barbaric. It's gruesome and sickening that I've cultivated the collection I have. They would be right—however, sick and gruesome things are what a man like me prefers. The blood of my enemies and their heads on a pike.

“Okay, *bella*,” I say, gripping her shoulders from behind. “Open your eyes.”

Nevaeh does as I say, then erupts in an immediate scream. Her whole body convulses as if about to leap away, but I'm standing solidly behind her like an immovable wall. Nimble and quick, she escapes anyway, ducking from under my grip and zipping past me.

“Nevaeh!”

“Get me out of here!” she shrieks. “HELP! SOMEONE HELP ME!”

“What the fuck are you screaming for—”

“You're insane! You're *actually* crazy!”

I take several steps toward her. “I've never pretended I was sane.”

“Stay away from me!”

“You are overreacting.”

“OVERREACTING?!” she screams at the top of her lungs. She backs up the closer I come, shaking her head, looking feverish and sick. “You have a room of *severed* heads! And I'm overreacting?!? HELP! PLEASE!”

I release a deep growl and stalk over to seize her. She only screams more, fighting my hold, punching and kicking at me. Her hits are comically soft despite her hardest effort. They couldn't hurt me even in my weakest state, let alone in this moment. My grip on her clenches tighter as I wait out her temper tantrum.

She loses her breath fighting me. Gasping for air, throwing fists at me, she's beyond desperate.

"Nevaeh," I say in a scolding tone. "Are you going to calm down so I can explain?"

"There's no explaining! I'm... I'm going to be sick. The smell."

I let go of her at the last second. She spins around and keels over to throw up the contents of her stomach.

An exasperated sigh leaves me. I roll my eyes and step over to check on her.

"Nevaeh, you got too excited and made yourself ill. Will you tone it down and shut the fuck up now?"

Though she can't speak, she shakes her head and spits up more sick. She's lucky I'm more than familiar with such ailments suffering from the condition I do—and that I have staff to clean up such messes. My giant hand attempts to be gentle, patting her spine.

"Did you not recognize the head I was showing you?"

"Was I supposed to?" she croaks, wiping her mouth. She's trembling and clammy.

I suppose the putrid stench of the room is difficult to handle for those unused to such gore.

“It’s Enrico. The guard who hurt you.” I walk over to grab the severed head off the shelf where it’s displayed. Returning to her side to show her, I’m finally wondering if perhaps I’ve misjudged the situation. This isn’t the romantic gesture I assumed it would be to win her heart.

Nevaeh takes one look at his gray skin and gouged eyes and then clamps a hand over her mouth.

“Please get it away from me!”

“I killed him for you,” I say plainly, like I expect a thank you.

“Why are you doing this to me?” she croaks, tears in her eyes. “Why are you punishing me like this?”

“Punishing you? Nevaeh—”

A sharp knock on the door interrupts us. I already know who it is. With a vexed sigh, I tell Ms. Poitier to come in.

“I heard screaming,” she says, stepping into my trophy room. Her reaction to the gruesome scene is the opposite of Nevaeh’s—you’d think she’s walked into a gentle nursery the way she stands there unfazed. A woman like her has borne witness to decades of mafia indiscretions. “Is everything okay in here?”

“Please,” Nevaeh says, hurrying toward her. “I want to get away from this room.”

Ms. Poitier strokes her hair in a motherly fashion. “Of course, honey. It might not be your type of atmosphere. Why don’t you head back to the west wing of the house, and I’ll fix you some ginger tea to settle your stomach?”

Nevaeh couldn’t escape the trophy room fast enough. She disappears from the room without even a glance in my

direction.

The instant I'm alone with Ms. Poitier, I roll my eyes and return Enrico's severed head to his rightful spot on my display shelf.

Ms. Poitier only has to fold her arms, purse her lips, and give me that look of reprimand for me to understand where this is going. "Are you *trying* to traumatize the girl? What in the world would possess you to bring her down here? And to your trophy room!"

"It was to show her that the man who hurt her is dead. I murdered him for her."

Ms. Poitier blinks at me. "What did you expect that girl to do with that information? Thank you for beheading him?"

Yes...

"I expected some gratitude," I answer in defense. "She should understand by now that I am trying to make her happy."

"C, will you take your head out of your violent, bloodthirsty ass for one damn second?" Ms. Poitier snaps, smacking a hand to her forehead. "Most women do not find severed heads romantic. Most women don't want to be shown their husband's trophy room full of them."

"But it was for her—"

"It doesn't matter! The girl is basically a puppy, she's so damn innocent. And you're over here showing her gouged out eye sockets? Do you realize how sheltered she's been her whole life? She's been locked into a contract that might as well have been a prison sentence it was so strict. She was the only Black ballerina in her company, which means she's probably felt alone and alienated her entire life. Her father was

murdered by Nero and her mother lives under his thumb. In fact, have you bothered to learn about her at all? *Beyond* her beauty and graceful dancing and your dreams of her?”

No...

“Those things are unimportant.”

“Not if you expect Nevaeh to ever change how she feels. She’s a real person. Not a fantasy from your dream. You have to find a way to bond with her.”

“It’s never mattered with other women before.”

“That’s because you were having sex with women bought and owned by your family. They couldn’t tell you even if they didn’t enjoy themselves, because you could make them disappear. You’ve bought and paid for Nevaeh just the same—that’s true—but you’ve decided to *marry* her. That changes everything. If you want the girl to ever have even a little affection for and attraction to you, ‘because I say so’ ain’t gonna cut it every damn time. She’s your wife. Treat her like your wife.”

“How would I do that?”

“Talk to her. About things. Get to know her. Let her express herself. Stop with the fucking bad moods. Spend some time together—*not* showing her severed heads. Doing something she would like too. *Romance her.*”

I scowl out of bad habit. “Romance is stupid.”

“You say you care about her, don’t you?”

“Yes!” I rumble defensively. “What kind of question is that? I killed Enrico for her!”

“C, violence is not a love language.”

“A love... *what?*”

“Did you know the girl was a virgin? On your wedding night. You hurt her.”

Suspicion floods me. I don't bother hiding it in the glare I give Ms. Poitier. Nevaeh, nor Ignazio, had ever mentioned anything about her innocence being intact. She had been a part of the Vorone's flesh trade for years. How had she possibly managed to escape being used in that way? Had Ignazio paraded her around at their dinner events for show only?

“She has never said anything about that.”

“Because she feels she can't talk to you,” Ms. Poitier says. “Any time she speaks her mind, you growl at her and a fight happens. The girl feels damn near traumatized by you, C. If you want to change that, you're going to have to be passionate. Be romantic.”

“There's that word again,” I grumble.

“Pleasure her.”

“Ms. P, enough.” I cast her my sternest glare yet.

“It's not just about you and what gets that dick of yours wet.”

“I don't know where to begin,” I confess in a moody tone. And it's the truth—everything Ms. Poitier speaks about is complicated and beyond my scope.

“Now would be the time for me to tell you the other reason I came down here. A team of doctors from Zinc Co reached out this morning about the treatment for you that's been discussed. It's being made available if you would like to give it a try, but the only caveat is that it's in Zurich. You'd have to make the trip to their specialized treatment facility.”

“That’s thousands of miles away.”

“It would take days beginning to end. But you know what that means, don’t you?” Ms. Poitier smirks at me, folding her arms. “It’s the perfect excuse for you to take your wife on a honeymoon.”

“No.”

“C, you can’t keep her locked up in this house forever—”

“I said no.”

“Then you’ll get more of the same. You’ll only drive her further and further away.”

I clench shut my eyes and breathe so hard, my nostrils flare. It’s true that I’m stubborn to a fault. I’m stuck in my ways, and I have a narrow view of women and relationships. My patience wears thin easily, and I prefer doing things for my benefit than for the benefit of others. Everything Ms. Poitier describes is the opposite of me.

It almost calls into question if I’ve made a mistake marrying Nevaeh. If perhaps I’ve gotten lost in a dream thinking it’d become real life.

I could carry on the way I have—prioritizing my wants and desires and disregarding Nevaeh.

But it seems Ms. Poitier is right when she says it’ll only push her away. It’ll damage any chance at ever getting along.

I husk out another rough breath, then concede with a nod. “Fine, maybe a trip... maybe she can come with me.”

“And?”

“And,” I continue reluctantly, “I’ll spend some time with her. Try to... maybe talk to her.”

“Repeat after me: no more severed heads.”

“Ms. P, you’re pushing it.”

My growl makes the older woman laugh. She knows to push my buttons right up to the point of explosion before backing down.

“I’ll let the doctors know you’re coming. Should I tell Nevaeh to pack for the trip?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Go ahead. Since you seem to think this is so necessary.”

A bright beam breaks out across Ms. Poitier’s face. She turns to go, then stops for one last word. “Oh, and C? If you ever need tips—you know, on how to *pleasure* a woman—I’d be more than happy to give a few. I’ve been around the block a time or two.”

FOURTEEN

Nevaeh



I'M WARY WHEN MS. POITIER TELLS ME I'LL BE accompanying Caelian on a week-long trip to Zurich. Not only have I never been out of the country, I've never been out of the state. An issue I raise several times only to be told not to worry about it.

“But I don't even have a passport.”

Ms. Poitier waves a dismissive hand. “Nevaeh honey, don't you worry about it. It's all been taken care of.”

By ‘taken care of’, I discover she means such trivialities like passports and other official documentation don't matter when you're ridiculously rich and a violent mafia *capo*.

Caelian guides me onboard the private jet we'll be flying on and tells me to stop asking so many questions. I'm a bundle of nerves climbing the ladder of stairs.

An alcoholic beverage and some Xanax later, I'm waking as we're soaring among the clouds. I've been moved from the seating in the cabin to a private bedroom... *on the plane*.

I blink hazily at the bed I'm lying in and then at the porthole windows through which large clusters of clouds float by.

Caelian speaks and makes me jump. “There she is. *Mia bella ballerina...* or shall I say *la mia bella addormentata?*”

He’s seated at a desk on the other side of the room.

A desk.

This private jet has a full size bedroom with a *desk*.

Shock fading, I take a guess at his words. “My beauty? My sleeping beauty!”

“Yes, *bella*. You looked very beautiful resting like you were.”

My cheeks flush, though I’m grateful my melanin protects me from truly showing the rosy hot evidence. “You know, Caelian, there’s more to me than just my looks. Is that the only reason you want me?”

“You are an elegant dancer. Even in my dreams.”

“But...” I bite my tongue and hold off on the words about to come out.

What’s the point...

Caelian rises from the desk and ambles over to the bed. “What is it? You aren’t happy.”

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s something. I can always tell by how you pout. Did you know that? That you pout?”

He’s sat beside me on the bed, reaching out for a tender stroke of my cheek. My belly flutters like it’s been invaded by butterflies, a reaction I’m not used to. I blink at him in confusion, wondering how he’s drawn them out of me.

Flushed cheeks and butterflies. The other day I’d moaned and panted. I’d *throbbed*.

It's a contradiction when you consider he's made me freeze up with fear and anxiety.

"You still don't feel comfortable around me," he says, studying me. "Perhaps that's my fault. I haven't spent time with you like I should have. That's changing on this trip, Nevi."

"Nevi..." I scrunch my nose.

"Yes, Nevi. I like it. Nevaeh takes so long to say. This is easier. My pet name for you."

There's affection laced in his thick-Italian-accented voice. Affection in his normally dark gray eyes.

It sets my heart racing. I don't know how to process any of this. I've trained for more than half my life in dance, becoming one of the company's most talented ballerinas, yet I'm lost on how to navigate situations like this.

No one's ever prepared me for it...

I swallow. "Then... I get to give you a pet name too."

"Like what? Boogeyman? Devil? The monster of your nightmares?"

He releases a thick, teasing laugh without realizing the truth of his jest.

Caelian *is* the monster of my nightmares—he's ripped me from the only life I've ever known and forced me into a marriage I didn't want.

So, then, why am I tempted to smile? Why am I thinking of nicknames I can give him?

I've never been so confused, so conflicted, in my life...

We land in Zurich within the next half hour. My first few minutes in a new country are a whirlwind of armed guards, limo rides, and being shuttled from place to place. We leave the international airport after landing on a private runway and head to the Bareiss Boutique Hotel, where we'll be staying.

The word boutique makes me think it'll be a quaint hotel. I gasp when we pull up to the carpeted entrance and a bellboy waiting outside for us. The huge building before us resembles an elegant manor with a gorgeous clock tower at the very top. It's located right next-door to Zurich's largest river canal.

We're swept inside in another flurry of movement. I'd get lost in the crowd of armed guards and hotel staff swarming around us if not for Caelian. His titan-sized hand engulfs mine and pulls me along closely at his side.

It makes me feel... safe. Protected. Even with a dozen-odd people forming a wall around us and sensory overload hitting me, I know that Caelian has hold of me and he's not going to let go. He's made it a point to keep me close in the chaos.

We make it up to our hotel room, which isn't a hotel room so much as it's a penthouse apartment. I stare in wonder at the gold-trimmed furnishings and twinkling diamond chandelier. Caelian comes up from behind, sliding his muscly, veined, tattooed arms around my hips.

“Do you like it?”

“I... I've never seen anything like it,” I answer. “I've been to a hundred dinners at establishments like Vecoli, but this... this is something else.”

His grip tightens on my hips, prompting a funny ripple in my stomach. “This is for you. I wanted you to enjoy yourself.”

“I didn’t need... thank you.” I turn around to face him, doing what feels natural. My hands land on his chest and I peer up into his eyes. “I appreciate you letting me come with you on this trip. It’s great to finally get to go somewhere and not be stuck in your house. But why are we here?”

“Don’t worry about that, Nevi. You are here to enjoy yourself. Ms. Poitier will be by to help you dress for our dinner.”

He takes one of my hands and kisses me on the palm. Sensually. Tenderly. In a way he never has before.

I realize a second too late it’s a kiss goodbye.

I’m left standing in the middle of the lavish penthouse-like hotel room. Though this might be the place we’ll be staying for the foreseeable future, I feel like a child in a fine china shop. Scared to touch anything and unsure what to do and where to go.

Thankfully, Ms. Poitier shows up a minute later.

“How do you like the accommodations, dear?”

“They’re... unbelievable.”

She smiles, guiding me toward the next room. “Just wait ’til you see the closet.”



Caelian’s eyes flash with approval when I walk into the Bareiss’s formal dining room. All other reservations for the night have been canceled in order to accommodate us. Gentle classic music plays in the background and dozens of candles flicker, giving the cavernous space an intimate feel.

Ms. Poitier dressed me more provocatively tonight—a midnight blue dress drapes my body with a deep neckline, spaghetti straps, and an asymmetrical high slit that creates a sexier silhouette than I realized I was capable of.

My thick hair's been twined back and pinned up with only a few loose tendrils framing my face. The sparkling gold jewelry around my neck and wrist and dangling from my ears matches the luxury vibe of not only the hotel but tonight's vibe itself.

Caelian rises from his chair and evokes another flutter of nerves out of me. He stands at his place at the table in his usual all-black ensemble of a button-up shirt and slacks. Both fit him impeccably well, tailored to his muscles and large size. The short strands of his faded buzzcut hair makes my fingers inch to run over it.

His wolfish gaze on me, flicking up and down, I feel like I'm being devoured.

I move to take my seat at the opposite end of him. He takes a brisk step forward to intercept me.

“That's too far. I want you up close. Over here.”

He draws me into the seat to the right of him. So close, when we both sit down, it feels like our knees could touch. A result of his lengthy limbs encroaching on my space.

But I don't say anything.

I don't mind.

We're served our widest selection of food yet. It spans a range of different cuisines from Italy to France. Many of the other dishes are native to Switzerland.

I sample some of the roasted basil soup and hum from its tastiness.

Caelian smiles. “So she *does* know how to eat and enjoy a meal.”

“She does when she feels comfortable doing so.”

“I’ll take it. As Ms. Poitier says, baby steps are still steps forward.”

“You follow her advice often. It’s... endearing.”

“She is a pain in my ass,” he says so candidly, I laugh. He swallows a bite of the braised pork he’s eating and gives a shrug. “But she knows she is. She’s an important confidante. I trust few people. She is one of them.”

“You’ve known her a long time?”

“All my life.”

My brows jump slightly. “Oh, that explains a lot.”

“Such as?”

“It’s just...” I pause to choose my words carefully. “You two have a mother/son vibe.”

“She raised me more than my mother did. So that would be accurate.”

“Where is your mother?”

“I don’t know, Nevi. Nor do I care.”

“Oh.”

He sips from his wine glass and then nudges his knee against mine. “But don’t feel bad for asking. It’s natural to be curious.”

“My curiosity so far has gotten me into trouble.”

“I have been... impatient. I have been very... agitated with you at times,” he answers, the outline of his jaw even more distinct from the tension it’s holding. “I have realized that perhaps a different approach is best. It takes time to adjust. This has been a big adjustment for you.”

I stare at him for a moment. “Caelian Ziccardi, is that you? Or have you been replaced by an AI bot?”

He lets out a wolfish laugh that in turn makes me laugh. It’s a deep and gritty sound to my ears, but there’s also an earnest quality about it that warms my heart and tickles my belly. It’s the kind of sound that makes you feel good when you hear it.

Caelian’s genuine, unfiltered laughter. The barbarian mafia *capo* with a sense of humor.

He’s thinking the same thing I am. His gaze glints looking at me. “So *mia bella ballerina* is wittier than I knew of. What other secrets is she keeping from me?”

“Maybe you should get to know me and find out.”

I almost cringe a split second after my answer. Automatic reflex after our time together. It seems any time I’ve taken a chance and expressed myself, I’ve been reprimanded. He’s snapped at me or raised his voice, and though he says he’s going in a new direction, I can’t control my immediate reactions to him.

The immediate worry he’ll grow furious and yell over me.

Silence follows my mouthy comment. Caelian studies me a moment longer, then gives a slow nod of his head.

“Your skepticism has been earned. I haven’t made an effort to learn about you. But I will now. Tell me about your life.”

“Caelian, you don’t have to ask. I don’t want you feeling obligated to.”

“But I want to know. So tell me.”

“What else is there to say but my life’s revolved around dancing? I belonged to the dance company. Isn’t that how I wound up here? You bought me from Ignazio?”

“Is that how it’s been? You have belonged to the company your whole life?”

A sad smile touches my lips. “Not always. When I was really little, I lived with my family.”

“And what happened?”

“My father... he worked for the Vorones. He was Nero Vorone’s personal accountant. You know how it goes—it’s difficult for people to escape the bottom rung of society and not fall prey to everything that entails. The crime, violence, all the poverty. My father was desperate to protect us from it. So, he made a deal in exchange for his services. For a while, we lived a nice, peaceful life.”

“It sounds like that eventually came to an end,” Caelian says, reaching for his glass.

I nod, again with a sadness I can’t shut out. “It wasn’t enough for Nero. He wanted more. No one escapes his iron fist. He wanted to take me, put me directly in the flesh trade. I was seven.”

Caelian’s nostrils flare. His grip on his wine glass tightens almost to the point of shattering it.

But he says nothing, fuming in silence as he waits for me to go on.

“That was my father’s worst nightmare. It’s no secret what happens to people that go straight into the trade. He pleaded with him to make an exception for me.”

“I am guessing I know what that is.”

“I was to train with the Dresden Dance Company from childhood ’til adulthood, and then, when I was twenty-one, I would be available for purchase. But only by a suitor willing to make it final.”

“Marry you.”

“It was a better deal than most girls get. Even the other ballerinas are expected to, um, entertain the dance company’s clientele. The only difference from the rest of the flesh trade being that the clientele is rich and prestigious. I was separate from that. Still up for sale.... but only by a suitor who could truly afford me and what came with it.”

He unclenches his hand from around the wine glass. “Which is where I came in.”

“Yes... except you violated my contract.”

“I had to have you,” he admits simply, unapologetically. “What was it like, training at the dance company since you were such a young girl?”

“Difficult.... especially at first. I missed my mom and dad. The rest of my family. But then I fell in love with dancing. The rest was history.”

He grunts, then polishes off the last of his wine. “The training would be very intense, I imagine.”

“Nervous breakdowns weren’t uncommon. Ignazio and the rest of the dance instructors expect the very best.”

“But you rose among them. You came out on top. Ignazio chose you to be the lead for his latest show.”

I bite the bottom of my lip to keep from showing my shy smile. “Some say he chose me out of favoritism. Ignazio always tries to appease Nero and the Vorones. I was the one dancer in the company that was allowed a special contract.”

“Your father is dead,” he says bluntly. At the startled look on my face, he elaborates. “What I mean is, Nero has no incentive to continue your special treatment, Nevi. Ignazio would not treat you better than others to please Nero. There is no reason for it. You were made lead because of your talent and grace.”

“Thanks,” I answer. “I love performing for the company, but I’ve never felt like I belonged... if that makes sense.”

The gray storm that is Caelian’s gaze only grows stormier. “It makes perfect sense.”

“I was the only Black ballerina. It’s always made me stand out.”

“Enough to be in my dreams.”

“You’re serious when you say that? You’ve really dreamt of me?”

“Yes, *bella ballerina*. In my dreams, you danced for me. You...” he trails off.

My brows draw close. “I what?”

“You made the pain go away.”

We sit with our gazes locked onto one another as his confession sinks in.

I'm not sure how to react. Though I've suspected Caelian suffers from some type of ailment, I haven't a clue what it could be. My mind travels back to our wedding night and how he'd seized up in pain and rushed out of the room. He'd been gone for days afterward.

I frown at him, leaning closer in my seat. "What's causing your pain, Caelian?"

His large, rough hands scoop mine up. He peers at every feature of mine like he's mesmerized by my sheer beauty. Being on the receiving end of such intent study only makes me ripple with more nerves.

My skin runs hot and the deep-rooted longing I hadn't even known I have feels like it's being unearthed—the same kind of longing from the morning Caelian showed me my future dance studio.

"What can I do to make it better?" I ask him. "How can I make the pain go away?"

He invades my space. We go from several inches apart to only a few. He leans toward me in his chair 'til he's sliding a hand up the side of my neck and holding my face. "Be yourself, Nevi. Show me who you are."

"Most people don't care to know about me. Everyone's always... sought to control me. I've been treated as an object my whole life," I confess, my mood dimming. "My parents. Ignazio and the dance company. All the other dancers."

"Me," he supplies.

After a pause of uncertainty, I nod.

His large hands take hold of mine. "Listen, Nevi. I won't pretend I'm some noble, charming man. I'm not—I'm a man who has crushed the windpipes of men with my bare hands

and had no remorse. I have a trophy room of severed heads. I'm a selfish asshole that doesn't even care if my family, my own fucking blood, lives or dies. I do what I want, when I want, for myself only. You *are* mine. You *belong* to me."

My heart stutters in my chest, my brows drawing close. "You don't need to tell me all the different ways you own me, Caelian—"

"You miss my point," he says, squeezing my hands. "You do belong to me. You are mine. But I've realized that maybe... I've been unreasonable. You're more than a dream or fantasy. You're a woman. My wife. And I want you to express yourself. I don't want you feeling trapped. I want you to want to be here with me. I want you to be content being my wife. Knowing I'm your husband."

A slow smile begins forming on my lips. "You want my approval?"

Mild exasperation flickers across the rugged features on his face. "Nevaeh, is that all you got out of what I just said?"

I let out a soft laugh that's teasing. Squeezing his hands in return—without even a quarter of the strength of him—I meet his gaze with mine bright. "I like that you want me to want you. It makes me feel like my thoughts and opinions matter."

"Something you've never felt before..."

I nod in answer. He thumbs my cheek and contemplates what we've said.

"I can understand you," he says finally. "In a way, we have that in common. A lack of control in our lives. You've been controlled by your contract and all the people exerting themselves over you. I've been controlled by my sickness. It's inescapable and dictates every facet of my existence."

“That’s what was paining you on our wedding night? Why you disappeared for so many days?”

“Yes, Nevi. I can’t control it. When there’s an episode, it happens regardless of what I want. When I was a child, it caused me to be bedridden. I missed out on many things other kids got to experience. It’s only when I grew older, stronger, bigger that I was able to bear it like I do now.”

“You had a lonely childhood?”

“I’ve never had a friend. Not a real friend. Everybody’s either scared shitless of me or been driven away by my condition. It used to upset me as a boy. But now I don’t give a fuck. I’ll do as I want. Fuck everybody else.”

“I need your attitude to rub off on me.”

His lips slant into a grin. “There’s some ways that can be achieved. I can think of a few.”

I open my mouth to speak, but his kiss stops me before I can.

His mouth collides with mine in a fervent kiss that turns my world upside down. It’s the heat of his mouth on mine and how he claims ownership as soon as my lips touch his. It’s the immediate quiver up my spine as I relent and give in.

Caelian’s kiss has driven me crazy before—that morning outside the dance studio. I had been startled then and I’m startled now by the force of fit.

The intense masculine desire that radiates from him. It’s enough to swallow me whole. At such a level I wonder if I even comprehend how much he wants me.

“Caelian,” I breathe. “I can’t...”

“You can, *bella*. Tell me if you want me.” His fingers slip into the strands of my pinned up hair, and next thing I know, he’s released the clips holding it up. My thick, silkily straightened hair falls down in waves about my shoulders as he otherwise busies himself with kiss after kiss along my throat. He grunts in approval at my hair being set free and takes the liberty of twining his fingers in deep.

I can only gasp at the feel of his hot mouth on my throat. My chest thrusts into him, my back arching in my seat. He grips a fistful of my hair and tugs hard enough to force my head to tilt upward. It gives him even more access to my neck and shoulders.

Something he takes full advantage of.

He kisses his way up and down my throat, across my shoulders. His fingers toy with the strap of my dress, sliding it past the tip of my shoulders and pressing more kisses wherever he can.

Deep longing takes over me. It’s heating me up, making me come alive in a way I never have before. In the way that made me frightened and anxious the time Caelian had pinned me against the wall.

He returns to my mouth for more heavy kisses. His tongue lashes against mine. I almost draw back in alarm and inexperience, but he holds me close. He leads the kiss ’til it feels like the most natural, instinctual thing in the world.

I’m no longer worrying about my lack of experience or if I’m pleasing him. It feels so good, I’m too busy losing myself in his kiss. His lips on mine. Mine touching his.

His hand roams to the small of my back and he pulls me further into him, deepening our kiss, forcing me to surrender

to his dominant mouth.

And I do—a shiver runs through me as I grip Caelian’s ironclad muscles and play off of him. What at first feels uncertain and foreign, quickly spirals into a hot desire that has me climbing into his lap. That has me slick and throbbing.

Caelian must sense this, because he pauses long enough between our kisses to tell me how he’ll have me again tonight.

Before any anxiety can bottle up inside me, he meets my eyes and says, “But it’ll be different, *bella*. It won’t hurt. I’ll make it feel so good for you.”

“Caelian,” I murmur, blinking dizzily, my mouth kiss swollen. “I don’t understand.”

“I know the secret you kept from me the night we married. What I took from you that night and why you’ve been running scared.”

I go to look away, but he grips my chin and forces my gaze. “Tell me, Nevi. You haven’t been pleased from the other times I’ve had you, have you?”

Hesitantly, almost guiltily, I shake my head to the side. Not that I even understand what it would mean or feel like to be pleased...

My impression of sex has always been transactional. One person taking, another person receiving. Even Mom and Dad’s marriage had been like this, Mom admittedly seeking cover with a man who was able to provide it.

Caelian’s dark eyes flash with knowing, his large hand rubbing his jaw. He rises from the chair still holding onto me like I weigh nothing and then sets me down on the dinner table. “I thought so. Tonight, that changes. Spread your fucking legs, Nevi. Show me that beautiful pussy of yours.”

My skin flushes as if it's on fire. I almost glance around to check if anyone else has heard the absurdity of his words, but then I realize we're alone.

I'm trapped with the beast that is my husband.

“Caelian—”

“This dress has to go,” he grunts. He claws at the skirt, hiking it further and further up my thighs.

At first, I try to block his attempts. As his hands shove my dress up, I desperately, with burning cheeks, try to push it back down.

It feels indecent. Immodest. *Wrong*.

A ravenous hunger darkens in Caelian's gaze. His wide, square jaw pulls tighter with tension. His huge hands grab mine and force them still. Then he forces me to tug up the length of my own dress. I can do nothing but obey as his grip overpowers mine and finishes bunching my dress up about my waist.

My panties are on display. My hips and thighs. My *sex*.

I brace my hands on the tabletop and draw my legs closed.

Caelian won't have it. He pries them apart—as wide as they'll go—and then he husks out a breath that's gravely and rough to my ears, but also the sound that matches the look in his eyes.

That ravenous hunger that's darkened the gray color to a violent shade, like a storm's fast on the way.

I gnaw my teeth on my lips and mumble, “Caelian, please... my... my legs. Let me close them.”

“Why would I do that, *bella*?” he growls. “Why would I let you hide the pretty little pussy I want to see? The pretty little pussy I want to *taste*?”

My eyes round. I shake my head. “I don’t know what you’re—”

RIP!

With his long, clenching fingers, he snatches away the delicate fabric of my panties. A soft cotton pair that Ms. Poitier had put on me.

I’m bare and exposed. My sex is on display for his viewing pleasure.

And I can’t even snap my legs shut! If I should try, he’d block me and split them apart again.

Caelian stares. He stares and he *grunts*.

My pulse quickens watching him react to me. The most intimate part of me.

It’s a foreign experience—the times we’ve been together so far have happened so fast, with Caelian jamming himself inside me, there wasn’t much time for admiring any views.

Yet, as he sets sight on me, an unexpected heat warms my skin. I’m not sure how I know, but deep inside, I’m certain he’s turned on. He’s aroused by what he sees.

Maybe it’s the way the thick lump that’s his Adam’s apple bounces in his even thicker throat. It could be the way his grip on my knees tightens to the point of near pain, as if he’s barely holding on to his composure. It could even be the subtle lick of his lips that happens in a blink-and-miss-it moment.

Whatever it is, it makes me hot all over. It makes me feel strangely secure. It makes me feel... *womanly*.

“Bella,” he groans. “You have the prettiest fucking pussy I’ve ever seen. I’ve dreamt it in my dreams... but it didn’t click. You really *are* heaven. Fuck, I’ve got to do it.”

I don’t understand ’til he’s hooking my thighs with his arms and tugging me close to the edge of the dinner table.

“Caelian!” I gasp.

“I’ve never done it, *bella*,” he mutters, wedging his head between my thighs. He kisses the inside of the left one, then the right. Gentle, soft kisses that send a shiver racking through me. “But you... you’re so fucking irresistible. How fucking stupid have I been? Why haven’t I taken the time? Why haven’t I paused to see what was in front of me?”

I have no clue what he’s talking about. He seems to almost be talking to himself.

But the more he goes on, the more I baffled I become.

“I’ll please you, Nevi,” he promises. He nuzzles the inside of my thigh, his rough beard scratching the soft skin, and then places a kiss on the lips of my sex. “I’ll fucking learn what makes you writhe with pleasure. It’s what you deserve.”

My brows knit. “Caelian, what are you—oh! *Ohhhhhh*.”

His tongue has darted past his lips and taken a warm, appreciative lick of my slit.

The gesture’s so unexpected, so new to me that the only thing I can think to do is squeal and tense up.

Not because it doesn’t feel good. But because it *does* feel good. And because it’s that surprising.

Caelian’s only getting started. His tongue returns to my slit, and he licks his way up and down the length of it, varying the pressure he applies and the motion he uses. Soon he’s more

than licking—he's nibbling, sucking, groaning as his mouth teases my sex in every way imaginable.

My hands grip the table to hold myself upright. I'm caught between the shudders of arousal passing through me and the shock that's taken root.

Never in a million years did I imagine Caelian would be on his knees before me, his face buried between my thighs, his mouth on my... my *pussy*.

The word rings through my head and makes me shudder all over again.

I've been so sheltered, so protected that I'm embarrassingly inexperienced. Even dirty words make me flush hot and feel silly.

But what other way could it be described?

Caelian sucks at my pussy lips and my clit and his tongue swirls inside me. My body goes slack with pleasure as any insecure thoughts fade away. Soon I'm gasping out, I'm digging my fingers into his hair and undulating my hips out of instinct, moving in tune with him.

His response is a beastly growl. It's a precursor to his madness. His mouth gapes wide and he feasts on every inch of me he can taste.

I've never noticed how long his tongue is until this moment—how he easily commands it to wreak havoc on me and send shockwaves tingling up my spine.

When I'm still not close enough for his liking and he craves more, he grips my ass and lifts me partially up off the table. My hips slide forward, my legs falling open wider than even I knew they could. His nose grazes my pussy. His beard

scratches the insides of my thighs. I close my eyes and marvel at how good he's making me feel.

The delicious stroke of his tongue. The thick fingers he adds. The patterns he draws on my clit.

He pulls the quivering nub between his lips and suckles like I'm nectar he's draining from a piece of fruit.

It's my undoing—I cry out and let go, my legs going limp over his broad, muscled shoulders. I'm swept up in an intense spiral of pleasure, spinning around and around 'til I'm writhing on the dinner table.

For seconds on end, I'm lost in its wave. Nothing else matters except for the tingling pulse that's taken over my body.

It fades slowly, leaving me slick and speechless. I'm panting as I come down and blink as if drugged.

Caelian grins. His lips, his nose, his beard are all glossed with evidence of me.

In this moment, I've never found him sexier. My pussy throbs as if awakening all over again. As if begging for *more*.

He seems to read my mind. Grabbing my hand and helping me up off the table, he says, "Come, *bella*. Our bed's calling us."

Nevae



BY THE TIME WE MAKE IT UP TO OUR HOTEL SUITE I'M A fidgeting, nervous wreck. My belly roils and an uncomfortable lump has lodged itself in my slender throat. I can't stop picking at my nail beds or fussing with the straps of my dress out of an anxious urge to do something, anything, with my hands.

Caelian's every move exudes confidence. He commands deference. He overtakes the air to the point that his presence becomes the only thing that exists.

His hand comes to the small of my back and he guides us into our bedroom. It's with the unspoken knowledge of what's about to transpire between us. Another night spent in the bed where he'll take me. He'll have his way with me, and I'll be left in tears.

In the dining room he said it would be different this time. He pried apart my legs and brought me a level of pleasure I didn't know was possible. As we make our way up to our suite, I can feel the slickness between my thighs. Evidence he's been there. His tongue and his fingers made me fall apart and my body wrack for seconds on end.

Yet, a part of me is still skeptical as he ushers me into our bedroom. Memories of the other times flood me and make me

stiff as a board.

He's always been so rough. So uncaring as he ruts away and I'm left to bear it.

Caelian seems to read my mind. Probably because my anxiety lives on my face and in my stilted movements. He weaves his thick fingers in my hair and draws my head back for a look up at him. His eyes are the same violent gray shade as every other time. Pools of torrential desire that warn of the storm that's to come.

Peering down at me for what comes to be several charged seconds, he plants a kiss on my mouth. He speaks against my lips. "You have no idea, *mia bella ballerina*. No idea how I'm about to consume you. I'm going to have you lying in a puddle of fucking cum by the time I'm through with you."

My belly flutters in response. My lashes do too, fluttering in confused, borderline concerned blinks.

But there's no time for questions. No time for me to voice my concern.

Caelian's lifting me up off my feet with the ease of one bulging arm. Not for the first time making me feel like I weigh nothing. He's so strapping and well-built that I'm like a toy in how he handles me.

From within the deep reservoir of my anxiety comes something else—a quick-rising sense of thrill that shoots through me. There's something inexplicably arousing about how he's plucked me off the ground and carries me over to our bed where I'm flung onto.

Maybe it's the ease in which he does. Maybe the ravenous aggression that's become its own presence in the room, different than the other times because it's not just about him.

As I land on the bed and push myself up, I'm on the receiving end of a stare that can only be called hungry.

Hungry for me.

For more than just his pleasure but mine too. The breath in my lungs has stalled. I watch as Caelian stalks toward the bed and then reaches for my thighs.

"I want this dress gone," he says simply.

The fabric is split in half off my body, much like my panties earlier. I'm left fully bare for his viewing pleasure. Something he fully takes advantage of.

His gaze scorches a slow trail down my naked body. It's like he's pausing long enough to admire every feature, every unique quirk of mine. From the small swell of my breasts and dark, pebbled nipples to the way my flat belly quakes in anticipation, and how a soft V forms at my closed thighs.

He husks out a breath at the sight. His hand flies to the crotch of his pants as if it's a mindless urge. He can't help himself as he feasts his eyes on what's waiting for him.

"Fuck," he growls. "How have I not paused to appreciate this before? Look at you. So fucking sexy my dick's aching, *bella*. Do you know how bad I want you right now?"

I can't find my voice to answer him. I'm thrown by the sheer magnitude of his desire that's heating my skin and making my heart thunder in my chest. He shucks off his button-up shirt and shoves down his pants. The impossibly long, veiny, borderline monstrous penis that's brought me dread every other time makes its appearance.

He's so... *large*. Big. Just shockingly huge in every way.

I should feel intimidated—and a small part of me still does—but there's another part of me that's throbbing away. Born from the same shudder of thrill from seconds ago and the thrill I'd felt the morning he'd kissed me outside the dance studio.

This must be what desire feels like.

Caelian overtakes me on the bed. His body is a work of genetic perfection. Shoulders wide and rock hard like they're made of steel. A broad chest that's carved by muscles and inked with tattoos. A waist and hips that are trim and defined by sharp V lines pointing straight at his eye-catching appendage. Thighs that are as bulging as his arms and dominate with every powerful stride of his.

Being overtaken by Caelian is like being consumed by an inescapable hurricane. He holds me down and tells me all the ways he's about to devour me.

"I want to make every part of you mine," he groans, burying his face into my neck. I squirm under him and try to wiggle my way to freedom, but it's no use.

I'm his for the taking... and for once, I'm excited. My sex is still slick. It's throbbing for more.

"The scent of you, *bella*," he says, kissing my throat, then traveling down its column 'til he reaches the smooth outline of my chest and shoulders. "Fuck, the feel of this soft skin. You aren't an angel. You're a fucking goddess."

My teeth bite down on my bottom lip as he proceeds to show me the truth of his words. He kisses my breasts. Suckles them. Nibbles 'til my nipples twinge with light pain but also pleasure that radiates across my breasts. He continues, pinning me down, devouring me all over.

I'm made to lay under the heavy, muscled weight of him 'til he's licked me from my mouth to the slit between my thighs. I pulse against his mouth, and he darts his tongue inside of me, groaning at how wet he finds me.

"You're so fucking wet," he says. "Is this from earlier? Is this all for me?"

"Caelian!" I gasp out in utter shock as his lips suckle at my lips.

My *other* lips.

I don't think. I move, grinding against his face as he sucks and licks me up some more. The same intense pleasure I'd experienced in the dining room returns two-fold. Maybe because I'm more sensitive. I'm on edge as he resumes what we started earlier.

Blood surges to my sex. My... my *pussy*.

The word still feels so dirty, so naughty as it rings through my head the same way pleasure rings through me.

I've never been the woman that's sexual. That knows what she's doing or has the faintest clue about how to arouse men.

Yet I have a man that's the size of a beast with his head dutifully buried between my thighs. He's feeding on me like I'm the nourishment he needs to live, groaning and lapping at me. I rock my hips along with him and decide to let go.

Give into pleasure.

Maybe these moments between Caelian and I can be enjoyable after all.

He proves so in the next moment—his busy, lengthy tongue finishes me off a second time. With long strokes that

inflict the right amount of warm pressure, I'm arching halfway off the bed. The cry I let out doesn't even sound like me.

It's a breathless whimper that only makes Caelian grin.

"Is *mia bella ballerina* feeling good?" he asks, pressing kisses onto my lips.

At the sweet, tart flavor of his kiss it occurs to me I'm tasting myself. The naughtiness of it intensifies my orgasm. My pussy throbs and a pool of my juices slick my thighs and coat myself. I can feel it without even reaching down to make sure.

All things that turn Caelian on. He's deepened our kiss. He's holding me down with his muscled weight and positioning his thick appendage at my entrance. He slicks himself with me and tells me how good my juices feel on him.

"So fucking wet. So fucking good," he growls. His penis rubs against the length of my pussy in what becomes an unbearable tease.

I whimper and gyrate against him in a beg for more. For the real him sliding into me. He manages a throaty laugh before he captures my lips once more.

"Do I feel just as good to you as you feel to me? Tell me, *bella*."

There's something filthy about the nickname that had previously gone undiscovered. In the moment, as he smacks his penis against my glistening slit, seconds away from penetrating me, the nickname makes me shiver.

"Yes," I choke out, seeking his mouth. "You feel... oh, Caelian. You're so big."

“You’re going to take me, *bella*. Every inch stretching you out. But it’ll feel good too. I promise.”

His reassuring words as he grants me the kiss I’m seeking makes me feel more secure than I’ve ever felt in bed with him. A level of trust I’ve never had in him before as he guides himself into me and I moan at his girth. He’s no less affected—he takes on an intoxicated look as he slides inside, inch by inch, and revels in what it feels like.

My eyes close as I take in the moment myself. The thickness of him invading my body and how my walls spasm accommodating his girth. The fullness can’t be put into words except to say it’s spine tingling and breath stealing.

More.

The single word spins around inside my head as Caelian slips inside. My hips jut against him as I adjust and find a spark of pleasure among the slight discomfort.

Caelian brushes hair away from my face and grips my head with his large palm, forcing my mouth to his. The touches possess a firmness but aren’t like before—there’s an attentiveness that tells me he’s tuned into every reaction of mine.

He kisses me deep and then tunnels into me. Slow and steady. Thick and overwhelming.

For every moan I give, he licks and sucks at my lips. He rolls his hips and finds a path deeper into me, eliciting fully body tremors. I search for the spark of pleasure through the cloud of aches and discomfort.

Once I’ve caught this spark, there’s no stopping it—soon it ignites into a wildfire that’s consuming me in its hot, tingling flames. The discomfort that’s plagued me every other time

we've been together fades with his every stroke. Each pump of his hips as he slips deeper into me.

"You feel like heaven, angel," he groans into my throat, his kisses hot on my skin. "You are such a good girl, taking me so deep."

"Oh..." I hum. "I can't take... no more... Cael... I'm so full."

"Yes, *bella*. You can. You can fucking take it." He tugs hard on my hair, prickling my scalp, forcing my eyes open and onto him. "Look at me. Stay with me. Fucking feel every inch of my cock as it stretches that little tight pussy."

I shudder at his words, my body buzzing from the pleasure rushing me. The strength of him between my thighs, pistoning away, filling me up, making me arch with pleasure becomes a surreal experience.

Caelian's invasion consumes me. Every part of me 'til I feel him in my bones.

His hips rock against me, his penis slipping deeper than it ever has before. He strokes fingers in my hair and peers at every flicker on my face as though fascinated. The intensity of the moment sends me careening into my third orgasm of the night.

The strongest yet. It sweeps through me as a frisson of euphoria. I'm hot and dewy, barely able to catch my breath as I come down.

But Caelian's not done with me—far from it as he flips me over and spears into me from behind. I grunt at the force of the intrusion. My hands ball up and grip the sheets as my body leads me. I throw myself back at him to match his thrusts, causing him to rumble at me and pound harder.

The moment feels surreal. Transformative in that it's some kind of life-altering experience. As I pant, moan, tremble against Caelian's deep thrusts I know I won't ever be the same again. We've broken through a barrier that has separated us.

We've achieved an intimacy that was out of reach before.

It plays out in carnal fashion. Caelian's aggression grows, and so does my breathless eagerness to match him. We explore, turning and rolling over as we maneuver into new positions. My flexibility as a dancer comes in handy as I'm easily contorted any way Caelian wants me.

All the different erotic shapes he can twist and bend me into. It's like his mind is blown as he pins my legs on either side of my head and drives his hips into my pussy.

I'm folded up like a butterfly as he pounds away, so wracked by pleasure that I can only moan in response. My pussy tingles and throbs, sensitive and soaked after several orgasms.

You'd think we're part of a Cirque du Soleil act the way we contort ourselves. The positions he twists me into that have us grunting and panting.

When it's finally over and we're collapsing onto the bed achy and spent, I'm speechless.

I never knew sex... could be this good.

Caelian lays at my side breathing raggedly like a beast. He's dripping sweat, his defined muscles gleaming. He's as dazed as I am.

Though I'm certain Caelian's been with many women, I suspect it's always been very formulaic. Women he's purchased that he's used to pleasure himself for a few minutes before dismissing them for good. The kind of sex we had on

our wedding night. Nothing comparing to what we've just experienced together.

He rolls onto his side, propping himself up on his elbow, and grins at me.

The light in his eyes, the ease of his expression, makes me smile. It's so adorable, though I don't dare tell him—a man like Caelian would crush skulls if anyone ever told him he was *cute*.

“You are fucking sexy,” he tells me.

I laugh as if he's told a joke. His words basically are. I've never been sexy.

The ease on his face vanishes for a severe scolding. “Don't act like I'm joking. I'm not. I fucking mean it. You are so fucking sexy, Nevaeh. You look so innocent... so harmless. Yet here you are, making me lose my mind. Do you know how many women I've been with? The way you work that body. The way you squeeze my cock. The look in your eye as you took me.”

He groans. I glance down to spot his penis giving a twitch of agreement.

My cheeks warm as self-doubt lingers. “You're serious? You really think so?”

“Yes. Fucking sexy as hell. Can't you see how gorgeous and sexy you are?” He drops many little kisses on my throat, allowing his large, warm palm to slide over my stomach and breasts.

His hands on my naked skin feels so good. Addictively so. I almost release a small moan of my own.

“Ballerinas aren’t sexy. I’ve never thought of myself that way. I don’t have the kind of body that’s normally... you know... I don’t have any curves.”

“We must be staring at two separate bodies. You’ve got an ass I love to grip,” he says, slipping an arm around to palm my backside. His gaze drops to my chest. “And these fucking breasts. These nipples.”

I’ve never felt so wanted and desired. The foreign feeling makes me come alive. Awakens some deep-buried feminine sensuality that has me drinking in his words and acting on them. I press my soft, petite body into his and chase his mouth with my own. My hand wraps around his girthy shaft and begins stroking him in the way my instincts guide me to.

“Then show me how I am, Cael,” I whisper against his lips. “Make me take you. I want all of you.”

A thunderous growl rumbles from his chest as he pins me under him once more. “Be careful what you ask for. The night’s still early, *bella*. I can have this whole hotel hearing your screams.”

My body shudders at the threat. It shouldn’t excite me. Yet it does.

Caelian’s right. The night’s still young and just getting started...



I wake to a cracked groan of pain. It takes a second before the blariness from sleep wears off and I’m able to place myself. I’m lying nestled in bed among thousand-thread-count sheets and the luxurious duvet that’s heavy but warm.

The room's tinted dark blue, telling me it's in between the hours of midnight and sunrise. I've been asleep for hours.

The cracked groan sounds again, and it occurs to my slow-working brain where it's coming from.

Peeking over my shoulder, I find Caelian at my side, breathing erratically. From what little I can see in the dark room, his face isn't peaceful and serene like it should be during sleep. Instead, his features are pulled tight. His teeth are gritted and he's clutching a hand to his chest.

I blink several more times to make sure I'm seeing what I think I'm seeing.

Then, it crashes down on me at once, jolting me fully awake.

He's in pain.

Deep, unspeakable pain.

"Caelian," I gasp, sitting up on my knees at his side. "Caelian, wake up. What do you need? What's wrong?"

He groans trying to answer, then grips a fistful of my satin nighty to pull me closer. "Nevi," he chokes out. "Nevi... in the refrigerator... my medication."

"Stay put. I'll grab it!"

I leap off the bed in a move similar to a saut de chat. I land gracefully on my feet before taking off from our bedroom into the rest of the penthouse suite. My quickness comes in handy, taking me from one end to the other of the massive suite within a few short seconds.

I grab the black briefcase-like nylon bag from inside the fridge and then speed my way back to Caelian. The moment I'm returning to the room, I'm throwing myself onto the bed.

“I have it. What should I do?”

“The vial,” he pants through the pain. “The syringe.”

Understanding his shorthand speech, I scurry to zip open the bag and grab the items. My hands shake as I fill the syringe with the clear liquid from the vial. I’ve never used a syringe myself before; I’ve never had to stick anyone with a needle before.

“My chest,” he begs.

“What if I do it wrong and hurt you?”

“Nevi, my chest!”

He grabs my wrist and yanks it toward his broad, muscled chest, right against his sternum. I release a terrified whimper as I do as he says—I pierce him with the thick needle and inject the clear liquid into him.

His groans volumize with even more pain. His panting grows sharper and harsher to my ears. He closes his eyes and clutches at his chest as if another rush of pain’s hitting him.

I watch on with my heart pounding and panic leaving me jittery.

“You need emergency medical treatment. I’ll... I’ll call 911... or whatever the equivalent is here...”

“No. Stay,” he growls. His hand snaps shut on my wrist again and he pulls me back toward him. “*La mia bellissima ballerina. Lo rendi migliore. Sei un angelo.*”

I don’t understand a word of what he’s saying to me. For all I know it could be gibberish spoken in the throes of pain. But it sounds affectionate just the same.

He holds me in place as slowly, his breathing calms. The grimace leaves his face. He stops clutching at his chest and he lays still as though the storm has passed through him and left him calm.

I do what I can. I reach over and stroke his damp hair. I let him know I'm right here if he needs anything.

He peers up at me, his eyes darker than charcoal, but it's a look that sends a shiver coursing down my spine. He isn't saying a word as he comes down from his painful episode, but his eyes speak for him. Gratitude. Affection. Something else that stirs up confusion inside me.

"Caelian," I say softly. "Are you okay?"

His hand comes up to grab my face and bring me down to him. Our lips touch in a slow, tender kiss I sink into. I can easily lose myself in until Caelian ends the kiss first. He pulls away enough for another long look up at me, his thumbs stroking my cheeks.

"You saved me, Nevi," he says. "Just like you have saved me in my dreams."

An uneasy ripple rocks me. "Caelian, I... I can't be held responsible for what happens in your dreams."

"It was you speaking to me from afar."

I have no idea what he's talking about, but I drop the matter. Caelian is obsessed with these dreams he insists he's had of me. There's no talking him out of them. Though he hasn't outright said it, these dreams are the sole reason he's sought me out and married me.

I settle down beside him in bed, still drowsy, still unsure what's happening between us. Last night was full of passion and affection. I had lost myself in him. I had surrendered to

desire in a way I never imagined I would... least of all with Caelian.

My body still thrums with the aftereffects of what he did to me. The pleasure he brought me and the sense of fulfillment I didn't even realize I had been craving all this time.

If last night could be what the rest of my life with Caelian would be like, maybe I won't be so unhappy after all. Maybe there's a chance life with him could be tolerable.

Enjoyable.

"Does that happen often?" I ask, folding an arm under my pillow. I roll onto my side to face him despite the fact that he's lying on his back gazing up at the dark ceiling. "What happened just now... is it normal for you to wake up in pain like that?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"That's a conversation for another time."

I frown. "So you really are sick? As in... very seriously sick?"

"Nevi," he scolds. "What did I just say?"

"You aren't used to being challenged, are you? Caelian, I'm not a doll for you to play with. Some figment from your dreams. I'm a real woman... with thoughts and feelings. I... I should be allowed to express them."

He falls into disgruntled silence, glaring up at the ceiling as if what I've said couldn't be a worse idea.

I sigh and shift to roll back over, facing the wall like I have every other time we've slept in the same bed. He reaches out a

hand to stop me.

“Yes,” he answers stiffly. “I really am very sick. If that’s what you want to call it. I have a rare heart condition that’s plagued me since I was a young boy. It is excruciatingly painful and there is no cure. The only solution is temporary. The treatments I receive, which are what keep me alive. It’s a miracle I’ve lived as long as I have. But eventually... eventually, I will succumb to it.”

I’m not sure why the revelation hits me as hard as it does. I barely know this man—and yet as he tells me about his medical situation, a sudden cold gust blows through my lungs and leaves me breathless. I’m left staring at him in the blue-tinted dark, both shocked and horrified by the revelation.

Even when he told me he was sick earlier during dinner, I hadn’t grasped the extent. I hadn’t truly understood what he was saying.

Flashbacks of our wedding night play in my head. How he’d seized up in pain, then went missing for days. I hadn’t understood what was going on. No one would give me any answers.

I blink and try to stave off the sad, small cry bubbling up inside me.

Caelian slides his thick forearm past my stomach and around my hips ’til he’s dragging my body toward his. “Nevi, don’t think you can hide from me. Don’t cry for me either. It’s a reality of my life I’ve long ago accepted. Everyone’s time is limited. Mine more so than others.”

I sniffle. “Is that when you’ve been dreaming of me? Your treatments?”

“You have gotten me through the pain. I don’t know where these dreams have come from. Why you appeared to me the way you have. But I knew I needed to find you. Make you mine while I could.”

He drops a kiss on the tip of my nose that would be sweet if I still weren’t plagued with an inexplicable sadness.

“Go back to sleep, Nevi. We’ll spend the day together—and I promise you can speak your mind all you like.”

I slowly smile at him, then nod, scooching even closer. The weight of his large, muscled body at my side and the heat it radiates are unrivaled. *Comforting* in a way.

My eyes slip close and before I know it, I’m out.

Hours must pass.

I stir to the light tapping sound of a knock on the door. “Nevaeh dear, I’m coming in.”

I sit up and squint against the bright morning light flooding the room.

Ms. Poitier enters clutching a garment bag she lays flush on the foot of the bed. “Good, you’re awake. Time to get you ready.”

The space in the bed beside me is empty. I rub my eyes. “Where’s Caelian?”

“He had some important business to handle. Get up, dear. We have to get you showered and changed.”

“When will he be back?”

“Soon.”

“Is it about his medical condition?”

Ms. Poitier quirks a silver brow. “So he’s told you? It’s business just like I said. A lot is happening between his family and the Vorones. Grab your things and meet me in the bathroom. I’ll get the shower started. You like it very hot. It might need an extra minute to warm up.”

I wait until Ms. Poitier wanders off toward the ensuite bathroom before I pad over to my luggage in the closet. I haven’t bothered unpacking.

Between last night’s passion and this morning’s confusion, there hasn’t been much time.

I unzip my suitcase and slip my hand through the opening. Relief fills me as I run my palm over the glass dome of my snow globe. It’s remained intact even throughout our travel.

“Nevaeh dear!” Ms. Poitier calls from the bathroom.

I snatch the first pair of panties in my luggage and hurry toward the open doorway, grateful I’ve managed to keep my promise even now. “Coming!”

SIXTEEN

Caedlan



“YOU COULD DIE, MR. ZICCARDI,” SAYS DOCTOR GERBER. “This treatment is experimental and has not passed clinical trials.”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve been told I would die. It won’t be the last, doctor.”

“You have had a turbulent journey with your sickness. I can certainly understand why you would believe the benefits outweigh the risks. We have a team of specialists who will be able to monitor your progress through the treatment.”

“I’m still lost as to why it had to be here in Zurich. I would have preferred in my home.”

“Your home does not have the accommodations necessary for this kind of treatment. Your family reached out about your condition and expressed concern your health is deteriorating. It is imperative we solidify a plan forward.”

“My family reached out did they?” I say slowly.

Doctor Gerber’s flat, liver-spotted face fills out with more concern. “Yes, they wanted us to extend the invite for this treatment since you had been resistant in the past.”

“That’s very interesting. That tells me I might need more time to reconsider.”

“Well, ideally, we’d like to start the procedure tomorrow,” he says. “If it is truly a road you wish to go down, then I will need your signature on these consent forms.”

I walk out of the Gerber Medical Treatment Center already preoccupied with my next engagement. Matteo’s called me three times in the last half hour. I snarl at him the second I return his call and he answers his phone.

“C, didn’t mean to call on ya honeymoon, but it’s important,” Matteo explains. “The Vorones. They’ve shown up at your estate.”

I stop mid-walk toward the car waiting for me. “What do you mean they’re at my estate?”

“Nero sent some guys. They wanted to search the premises. Said you’re keeping their important possession from them.”

Nevaeh?!

“What important possession of theirs?”

“They refused to say, C. They said you better call Nero ‘cuz you failed your half of the bargain.”

“My half of the bargain!?” I bark in sheer anger.

“What do you want us to do if they return? They left this time but seems like they’ll be back.”

“Don’t back down. If they attempt to force their way onto the property, you shoot to kill. He’s not going to intimidate me like he does the rest of the city. That’s my fucking domain,” I growl as another one of my men meets me at the backdoor to the limousine. I slide inside and clench my phone tighter to my ear. “I’ll handle the rest from here.”

“Shoot to kill?” Matteo repeats. “C, don’t threaten me with a good time—”

“Hold it down.”

I hang up on him swearing under my breath. I’ve only been out of the country for a couple days and everything’s already going to hell.

It’s true that I did agree after my meeting with Nero to talk Pa into accepting the new stipulations on Zinc Co. A matter I haven’t had any success in considering Pa’s not only a stubborn jackass, he’s a drunken one.

It can’t be later than breakfast time in the States and he’s already a sloppy mess.

“’Ello!?” he slurs loudly into his end of the phone.

“Your incompetence has caused me trouble with Nero and the Vorones. You fix this!”

“Who’s this? Carmelo? That you?”

“You know who the fuck this is! You’ve refused to comply with Nero’s demands!”

Pa chuckles on his end. Even his laughter is sloppy and garbled. It turns into a hacked cough as if he’s so drunk, he’ll choke on his own spit. I can practically see him sitting slumped in his fake throne, surrounded by his yes men and the models he’ll fuck tonight, barely able to hold up his phone. Sweat on his forehead, the shoe polish in his hair leaking down the sides of his face.

“Me, refuse? How can I refuse when *I’m* the don? I’m the boss. Something... something you *cazzos* don’t understand.”

I scowl out the window of the limo. We’ve begun to drive down Zurich’s clean, neat streets. “This isn’t the time for you

to throw a temper tantrum about your ego.”

“It’s the per... perfect time,” he hiccups. “None of you respect me, so... so I’ll make you. You and Nero. You and everybody.”

“I’m not taking the fall for your bullshit. You fix this or I’ll find a way to turn it back on you.”

He snorts out a laugh. “What’s the matter? You don’t wanna give up that... that little ballerina of yours? ’Cuz that’s what he wants. It ain’t... you think it’s just about the business changes? HA!”

“Alright, uncle. Time to get off the phone,” comes Coreno’s voice. Sounds of a struggle follow before he takes over the call completely. “Hey cousin. It’s me, Coreno.”

My nostrils flare in irritation. “Yes, I fucking figured that out.”

“Your father’s a little... uh, belligerent right now. He doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

“He knows exactly what the fuck he’s doing! You should know not to involve yourself in matters between the two of us.”

“He’s my uncle. I have every right. I gotta go, cousin. He needs looking after.”

I roar as he hangs up on me. My grip crushes my phone. I drop it to the ground and slam my shoe down onto the screen. A spiderweb of cracks spread across the glass and the phone releases a broken dial tone sound.

The phone means nothing. A new one can and will be bought within minutes.

It’s the rage, the fucking *audacity*, that has me fuming.

My chauffeur asks me what I'd like for him to do.

“Keep driving. Back to the hotel. Like was planned.”

Calculations busy my mind. The many different scenarios that are possible and how they'll play out. If it's true that Nero is sending his men to my estate, then the situation is more serious than I anticipated. He's pissed and he's not bluffing.

In reality, the Vorones can crush me and my family. Pa knows it. His soldiers know it. I know it, though I'd never go down without a fight.

I have nothing left to lose—I'm on the brink of death anyway. Should he want to escalate this growing feud between our syndicate and his, I'd make the most of the conflict. I'd go down in a fiery, violent, gruesome blaze of gore and glory.

Nero understands this, which is why he's attempting intimidation first.

He wants Nevaeh back? For what? What does *mia bella ballerina* have to do with a mafia feud?

Nothing. It's simply to spite me. And in turn, to spite the Ziccardi name. Nevaeh was a special case in Nero's eyes due to her father's usefulness, and so now that I've bought her, he believes he can use her as a bargaining chip. Some means to exert control over me, which would ultimately be control over Pa and the family.

The matter occupies my mind the entire drive to the Bareiss. I get out the car and stride through the lobby ready to bark more orders to my men about the potential violent conflict we've found ourselves.

But it comes crashing to a halt the moment I'm confronted with the sweet face of an angel.

Nevaeh waits for me, dressed in knee-high boots and a peacoat. A beanie sits on top of her head, her eyes bright and a smile on her lips when she sees me.

She looks... *excited*. For the first time, she's happy to see me. She's been waiting on me in the lobby.

The carriage ride.

I'd promised we'd spend the day together. Nevaeh has been looking forward to it.

My rage melts away. I forget about the heightening tensions between me and Pa. Between me and Nero and his army of a family.

All I can focus on is Nevi and making her happy in this moment.

A brute like me—who would've ever imagined?

"Nevi," I say. "How long have you been down here in the lobby?"

"A few minutes. Ms. P brought me down and I've been waiting with security. Is that okay?"

"Yes, it's okay." I extend my hand for her to take.

In the past, she's denied my touch. She's recoiled whenever I've stroked her cheek or attempted to hold her in my arms.

It may be slowly, but things are beginning to change between us. Nevaeh only hesitates a second before she takes my hand and lets me lead her toward the revolving doors of the Bareiss.



It takes us almost an hour to reach the vineyard where I've arranged our horse-drawn carriage ride. Our tour guide flags us down from where he's waiting by the carriage. He explains we'll be riding through the Swiss countryside, exploring the many green hills and fields used to grow grapes and make wine.

I hoist Nevaeh up into the carriage. She shrieks as her feet leave the ground and I plop her down on the cushioned seat. I climb in after her, the addition of my large and muscular mass causing the carriage to rock under my weight.

Nevaeh's like a child in a candy store, the way she's glancing around in every direction. Her large brown eyes shine with wonder, drinking in the scenic views of the wide-open sky and miles of green hills.

I become more interested in watching her watch the surroundings.

Given her strict background and lifestyle in the dance company, she's never had the chance to sightsee or explore. Our trip is the first time in her life she's ever really been anywhere. Admittedly, the significance of this was lost on me until this moment.

It makes me want to show her more. Take her other places. Be the one who opens up her horizons.

My angel has been so sheltered, she has no clue what the real world is like.

Our fingers intertwine in her lap. We share the slightest smile as the carriage pitches forward, the horse leading us clomping down the path. Our tour guide drones on about the historic background we're passing by, dropping fun facts about

the vineyards and sharing other interesting info people would probably love.

But Nevaeh and I are too preoccupied with each other to notice.

“You seemed upset,” she says. “When you first came back to the hotel. Did your business go okay?”

“I wasn’t handling business—not intentionally. I was at an appointment for a procedure I’ll be beginning tomorrow.”

Her brows pinch closer. “What kind of procedure?”

“Something that may cure me of my condition. But that’s not why I was behaving like I was when I got back to the hotel. I don’t get upset, by the way.”

“Cael, everyone gets upset sometimes,” she says, a lightness in her tone. Some form of amusement on her part. “It’s okay that you were upset.”

“I wasn’t upset,” I snap in a deep rumble. “I don’t get upset. I was fucking pissed.”

My response should be intimidating to her—and it used to be up until recently. But in the face of my rumble, she merely smirks and traces her fingertips along my tattooed knuckles. I can feel the amused energy coming off her, like she’s still thinking in her head that I’m *upset*.

It should make me scowl. Bark at her for taunting me and disrespecting me.

A few days ago, it would have. Instead, I trap her hand within my own again and growl at her for being naughty. “You must want me to punish you, *bella*. I should put you over my knee right here in front of the tour guide and spank that little fat ass of yours. Would you still be smirking then?”

Said smirk drops off her face. Her eyes go wide, and she stares at me, stunned.

I rumble out a laugh. “As I was saying, I wasn’t upset, *bella*. I was fucking pissed.”

“But why?”

“I received some bad news.”

“Regarding your family? Is it the Vorones?”

“Don’t worry about it, *bella*. This is supposed to be an outing for you to enjoy. You aren’t involved in anything going on with my business dealings.” I grip her chin and drop a kiss on her lips, though it does nothing to chase away her curious frown. “How are you liking your first time out of the country?”

Her eyes soften on me. “It’s been amazing. Everything’s so open here. So... clean.”

I grunt, amused. “As opposed to the dirtiness of Dresden?”

She nods. “It’s home, but everything’s so worn down and gray. I’ve never seen so many open fields before.”

We sit and stare for a while at the miles of vivid green surrounding us. Vineyards full of ripe grapes to make delicious wine I’d love to sample after our carriage ride. The horses clomp along the path we’ve taken and the tour guide continues his speech from up ahead, gripping the reins to steer us.

The air is so fresh even my fucked up lungs and twitchy heart are breathing clear.

It couldn’t be a more perfect outing.

“Do you do much traveling?” Nevaeh asks. “You live in such a remote location. It seems you prefer to be alone.”

“That’s true, Nevi. I prefer solitude. It’s easier for me.”

“Why do you say that?”

I think on it a second. “Most people... they don’t understand a man like me. I have certain proclivities and urges. I behave certain ways. My condition takes its toll on me other times. It’s easier to remain far away from others.”

“You said you understood me when I told you I’ve never fit in.”

“That’s true. You can say I never have either. If you compare me to the others in my family, the other *capos* under my father, you’d see I’m different.”

“Because you’re withdrawn?”

“Yes. But also, I don’t fuck around like they do. They’re all about the glitz and perks our lifestyle brings them. The flashy cars and fuckable women. Make no mistake, I sate my appetite when it arises, but otherwise... I care for none of that.”

“Will I be satiating your appetite from now on?” she asks.

I glance over at her in mild surprise. The concern’s returned. So has her frown. I understand what she’s asking—she wants to know if she’ll be my only woman. Many men in my lifestyle, even the married ones, fuck whoever they want, whenever they want.

Her tone, her frown, the extinguished playful vibe, all tell me she doesn’t like the idea of other women.

Mia bella ballerina wants to be my only.

I clench her hand tighter within mine and lean over to drop a kiss on the tip of her nose. “*Bella*, you’re more than enough.

I haven't spent years dreaming of you, searching for you, to disregard that now. You're the woman I sought for a reason."

This seems to calm her fears.

We go back to enjoying the sights and sounds of our carriage tour across the vineyards.

"This vineyard up ahead is one of our most famous," the tour guide recites over the *clomp-clomp-clomp* of the horses. "It was established in the year of 1939, which as I'm sure you're aware, was the start of the second war. But, fortunately for Switzerland, we remained neutral through—"

There's a subdued bang that interrupts him. It's the firing of a long-range weapon that sends a bullet straight through his skull. The rest are immediately to follow. Our carriage ride goes from peaceful to bullet-ridden within a second.

The tour guide slumps forward. His grip on the reins loosens. The carriage immediately loses control with no one to guide the horses. They whinny and speed up in a wild panic at the bullets whizzing through the air.

Nevaeh screams at my side. I grit my teeth, one hand shoving her down and the other fast at work withdrawing my pistol.

Somebody's trying to take us out.

SEVENTEEN

Caelian



“STAY DOWN, NEVAEH!” I YELL ABOVE THE CHAOS.

I twist around, frantically scanning the green hills around us. Nothing off meets the eye. We’re surrounded by the same rolling hills and fields of leafy vines. The occasional cottages stacked along the slopes. Who could possibly be shooting at us?

I duck as more bullets hail toward us.

The carriage lurches precariously from side to side. The horses only gain speed. They gallop faster down the dirt pathway. With no one to guide them, they go off trail, dragging us along with them in a direction too close to the edge of the hill we’re on.

“Cael!” Nevaeh screams from the floor of the carriage. “We have to course correct, or we’ll go flying off the hill!”

“Stay down! I’ll handle it!”

I’ve located our sharpshooter. He’s not as far away as I thought. As we barrel off course, he emerges into view, perched on the rooftop of a cottage.

I lift myself back up onto the seat of the carriage, shutting one eye and taking aim.

It’s a game of chicken. His rifle on me, my pistol on him.

He's crouched onto his elbows, trying to calculate the next pull of his trigger. The constant bobbing and weaving the carriage is doing has thrown him off, making it harder for him to land any of his shots.

But that doesn't change the fact that in a direct face off, he'd win.

Which is why I need to catch him off guard. I aim for the chimney off to the right of him.

He gets the shot in first. More bullets stream unseen through the air, only recognizable by the muffled crack of gunfire. It happens in such an instant, I'm not fast enough to duck out of the way.

The carriage gives a great jerk to the left, almost tipping over. The horses whinny in more panic at the sudden abrasive movement but carry on racing down the dirt trail they've chosen.

I'm lost as to what the fuck just happened. My gaze dips for a quick check on Nevaeh down below. If that jerk threw me off, it had to have terrorized her.

Nobody's on the floor of the carriage. Nevaeh's gone.

My twitchy heart bangs away at that shocking discovery. Before I can begin questioning if she's fallen out of the carriage and tumbled to the ground, I realize where she's gone.

Nevaeh's crawled up front and seized hold of the reins. She was the one who yanked on the reins so hard, the carriage gave such a jarring lurch.

My sweet angel sits up front, steering the horses, her dark hair whipping in the wind. She realized the sharpshooter was about to shoot me and prevented him from doing so.

I'd spend more time thrown by this twist of events if we weren't in the danger we're in. I refocus my attention on the cottage that's now slipping behind us and squeeze the trigger of my pistol.

This time, not to throw him off by hitting the chimney. This time I aim to kill.

My bullet hits its mark, clipping him in the side of the neck. He loses what balance he has on the rooftop and plummets two stories below.

While I'm unsure if he's dead, for the moment, it's good enough. The threat has been eliminated.

I climb into the front seat of the carriage and steal the reins out of Nevaeh's hands.

The horses let their panic die out and begin slowing down. We come to a halt that's anything but smooth.

I turn to Nevaeh and explode. "What the fuck were you thinking?!"

Her mouth drops open. "I was trying to help you!"

"I told you to stay down!"

"Someone needed to steer the carriage or we would've went off the side of the hill."

"And if you got shot? If the sniper aimed for you and you got hit by one of his bullets?"

"Then... then I would've dealt with the risk I took," she stammers out, losing half her nerve.

"It was a stupid risk! You listen to me! When I tell you to do something, you fucking do it!" I roar over her. My voice deepens 'til it's more beast than man. "If I tell you to get down

on the ground, then that's what you'll do, Nevaeh! Under no circumstances are you to ever defy me again!"

A dozen different emotions bloom on her sweet pretty face. From disbelief to puzzlement to flat out anger and frustration. She growls back at me though she doesn't refute anything I've said. She crawls into the backseat of the carriage with her arms folded and her glare set on the countryside.

She's mad at me. I don't give a fuck.

"Throw tantrums all you want," I snarl at her, tugging on the reins to put us into motion once more. "You'll do as I say, or I'll make you do as I say. You choose."



We return to the Bareiss Hotel still in a sour mood. Tensions are higher than ever as we ride the elevator and Nevaeh marches in front of me. Her short legs and limited stride means she has to put three times as much effort into staying ahead of me. Her stubborn streak pushes her to do so.

Inside our hotel room, she stomps straight into the bedroom and slams the door. I growl at the loud reverberation it sets off and then storm over to shove the door open.

"Don't you go slamming doors in my home!" I bark.

"It's not your home, it's a hotel!" she shouts back. She stomps a foot in frustration, her hair a tousled, disheveled mess about her shoulders. Dirt streaks her once perfect peacoat and she has a scratch on her cheek from all the commotion maneuvering in the carriage during the shootout.

Truthfully, she looks beautiful even like this. It's a distracting thought as I'm supposed to be just as pissed off as

she is. I'm supposed to be seething and raging like the vicious *capo* I am.

I give it my best shot.

“This is my home away from home—so while we're here, you'll play by my rules!”

“How can I forget? It's always your rules. Always what you say. Always what you want. I'm so sick of having to do what you tell me to do! Never mind that I was just trying to help you!” she explodes, her petite body shaking with anger. She couldn't intimidate a puppy if she tried. “Let me go, Caelian! Let me go back to the dance company where I belong!”

“You belong with me!”

“That's only what you tell yourself,” she yells. “That's the lie you repeat to convince yourself I'd ever want to be here with you!”

My temper shatters, my hand flying out, gripping her throat as I pin her to the wall. Teeth bared with fury pulsing, I barely restrain myself glaring into her eyes. “You've gotten too comfortable mouthing off, *bella*. You think I won't put you in your place? Try me and find out.”

Though my hand collared around her delicate throat is more of a restraint method than a means to hurt her, she struggles to free herself. Her own temper is rising the more I refuse to let go.

“I can't stand you!” she growls, then she knees me in the crotch.

Caught by surprise, I release her and groan. She darts to freedom like the nimble little creature she is. But I don't let her make it far—as she attempts to scurry across the room, I'm

scooping her up with one arm and flinging her down on the bed. She's light enough that it takes no exertion at all. She kicks her legs out at me as I approach, even as I cover her body with my own and force a hand between her thighs.

“You want to fight, *bella*?” I grin, rubbing at her pussy. “We can fight in all sorts of ways. I don't mind being a little rough if it means teaching you a lesson.”

I go to kiss her on the lips only for Nevaeh to smack me across the face. If anyone else had the audacity to strike me in such a way, they would be seeing stars; they would be swallowing their shattered teeth.

But, like with all things, Nevaeh is different. Her indignant smack against my cheek stings. Her normally sweet brown eyes glare up at me. Her breaths come out in fast puffs. Instead of feeling more furious, the tension shatters.

I release a throaty laugh and watch confusion flicker across her beautiful face.

“You're frustrating, *bella*. You have no idea how I want to fucking punish you.”

“I'm... I'm not scared of you.” She puts on a brave face that further cracks through my temper and makes me laugh more.

“Fuck, I can't stay pissed at you.” I grip her up and wrench her mouth toward mine in another attempt at a kiss. This one she doesn't fight, giving in the instant my lips touch hers.

There's no slowing down. We're kissing and tasting each other, stripping off our clothes, and expressing ourselves with our bodies. Any feelings. All feelings.

The fight we've just had has us rough and passionate until Nevaeh's stretched out in splits and bouncing on my dick. My

naughty little ballerina takes me whole and scratches me up as if in her own form of punishment. Marks I gladly take fucking her deep and hard, pinning her into the mattress and making her scream out.

We don't stop 'til we're spent in every conceivable way. We come together and then go limp, husking out heavy breaths, our bodies buzzing.

I drag Nevaeh's mouth back to mine. "*La mia ballerina cattiva*. What am I going to do with you, Nevi?"

"You could stop scolding me for trying to help you."

"But I don't want you being reckless."

Her hand glides across my broad chest, taking her time to think up her answer. "I won't be... unless I have to. It was life or death, Cael."

"You're too brave. It's fucking sexy... but frustrating too."

"I'm going to choose to take that as a compliment."

I brush my lips to her damp brow. "There you go. My ballerina proving she's not so sweet and innocent after all."

EIGHTEEN

Nevae



OUR TIME IN ZURICH COMES TO A BITTERSWEET END. PART OF me wishes we could stay longer, or even better, travel to other destinations, but another part of me looks forward to returning to Caelian's estate. Pulling up the long drive that winds through the woodland terrain, it feels like I'm coming *home*.

I smile and glance over at him. His hand's already on my thigh. It's wide enough that he's able to grip it whole. He gives an affectionate squeeze when our eyes meet and my heart ticks slightly faster in my chest.

There's a change happening inside of me—a fondness creeping up on me that I've never expected to have.

Where Caelian used to make me clench up in anxiety and flinch in fear, I'm looking forward to his touch. His warm strength that constantly surrounds me and makes me feel safe and comfortable.

Over the course of the coming days, we settle into a routine. More of a routine than we've ever developed—I spend nights with Caelian, waking up in his bed every morning to the muscled weight of him at my side. We enjoy a slow breakfast, either in the breakfast room on colder, wetter days, or out on the terrace when there's a spate of morning sunlight.

Caelian goes off to handle his business while I busy myself with hobbies. I read books, do puzzles, go for walks around the estate, chat with the staff like Ms. Poitier and Umberto. Most wonderfully of all, I *dance*.

The dance studio Caelian's had built for me is finished by the time we return from Zurich.

It's a modest studio, barely larger than most living rooms, but it's more than enough for me to flit around to my heart's content.

I make a point of spending half of the afternoon dancing, *practicing* as if I were still in Ignazio's show.

In my head, I'm still *Principessa*. I'm the star of Ignazio's ballet.

Tutto è Bellissimo twinkles in the background as I set off at a quick waltz. My feet brush off the polished wood flooring, my arms extended as I slip into a turn.

I sweep across the dance studio like this, keeping up with the gentle twinkling notes. My form is perfect, my body fluid. Ignazio would be watching on with nods of approval. Many of the other dancers in the show would be sharing looks of vexation like they usually did whenever I took the floor.

I lose myself in the routine. Soon I'm spinning in fast back-to-back *coupe* turns. I'm so lost to the whimsical music that I don't even notice Caelian's watching me in the doorway.

The glint in his eyes tells me I've mesmerized him. He's under the spell of my dancing. A rare smile slants over his mouth, his rugged face without its usual scowl.

And then he surprises me by taking a step toward me. He opens his arms, showing me the open palms of his powerful hands.

He's communicating, telling me I can if I want to. If I'd like to take the chance.

Coming out of my last spin, I make a seamless adjustment to the routine. I sweep across the studio and launch into a saut de chat. I leap through the air like a cat, straight into his waiting arms.

Caelian catches me with ease, proving he's to be trusted. He's caught me from my great finale of a leap.

It's only the beginning of Caelian catching me. Just the start of him participating in my routines.

More often than not, toward the end of my practice, he arrives in the studio, ready to be used in whatever way I need him. He lifts me, spins me, sends me flying through the air as if I've sprouted wings. He becomes my impromptu dance partner for all intents and purposes.

Something I suspect he more than enjoys.

Our evenings revolve around almost gluttonous dinners where feasts are prepared or delivered and we eat whatever our bellies will allow. The long table fails to keep us at a distance like it once did—I sit in the seat closest on his right, and even that's not close enough, prompting Caelian to drag my chair toward him.

The late evenings into nights are slow and relaxing. Caelian opts to read by the fireplace in the den. Sometimes I read too. Other times, I fuss with my latest pair of pointe shoes or do floor stretches (something he more than enjoys watching). I ask him questions he entertains. Questions he often turns back on me.

“If you could speak to anyone dead or alive, who would you pick?” I ask one evening.

He gives a dry blink and then turns the page to the historical book he's reading. "There's no one meaningful enough I'd care to talk to."

"Oh, c'mon," I say, rolling my eyes. I'm curled up on the floor in front of the roaring fire. Another new pair of pointe shoes rests in my lap, along with the scissors, pins, and ribbons I'm using to prep them. "There has to be someone in the whole world you'd want to speak to. Past or present."

"Nope. No one."

I roll my eyes again and set my attention to piercing my left shoe with a safety pin.

Caelian pauses long enough from his book to ask, "You answer your own question. Who would you choose, *bella*?"

"Easy," I say immediately. "My father."

"You miss him very much. I can tell because your throat goes hoarse when you speak of him."

I swallow against the hoarse throat he's called me out on. "He was taken away from me very suddenly."

"How did he die?"

"I... I'm not sure." I blink against the sudden onslaught of tears. "It happened just a few years ago. I was away from home."

"Dancing for the company."

"He was still working for the Vorones. There was some kind of business transaction that went wrong. My father never made it out."

"His body?"

“Never found. Sorry.” I pop up off the floor and attempt my escape.

Caelian’s faster. He moves at a shocking level of speed considering his titan size. He cuts me off and brings me back against the wall when I fight him on it.

“Don’t run from me. You don’t need to hide your tears. Your sadness. I want to fucking see it all. Isn’t that what you wanted? You wanted me to see the real you.”

“Cael,” I sniffle, shaking my head.

“Yes, Nevi,” he growls, gripping my chin. He bows his head and hovers his mouth over mine as if about to plant a passionate kiss on my lips.

I sputter out a shaky breath and peer blearily into his eyes. My own are watery, suddenly overcome by my grief for Dad, but also something else—the intense feelings that he’s bringing out of me.

These feelings I wasn’t supposed to have for him.

I’m Caelian Ziccardi’s wife. He’s a violent brute of a mafia *capo*, and yet instead of disgust and loathing, I’ve developed affection for him.

Real affection.

“Kiss me, Cael,” I beg in a whisper.

“Cael,” he repeats, then the corner of his lips quirk. “You’ve started calling me this. Is that my pet name, *mia bella ballerina*?”

My expression almost takes on a pout. “Yes. You have about fifty pet names for me. It’s only fair.”

He releases a wolfish laugh that's earnestly given. Always such a rough sound to the ears, but I know better than to find it cruel or believe it's bad. It's the purest reaction from Caelian in moments like this. His laughter. His attentiveness and affection.

He grants me my wish. He claims my mouth while holding me up against the wall. His hands touch every part of me 'til I'm panting and my nipples are painfully hard. Then he's throwing me over his broad shoulder and tossing me down on the first piece of furniture available—which happens to be the armchair he was seated in mere minutes ago.

I'm naked from the waist down before I can comprehend what's happening, hanging off the armchair as he ploughs straight into me.

He fucks me hard to the sounds of our skin slapping together and the crackle of the flames.

I squeeze my eyes shut, moaning and trembling, caught up in a whirlwind of intense pleasure.

And when he's done, I'm carried upstairs, where he takes me again in our bed.

We fall asleep twisted among the sheets, a pulse of pleasure humming through my body. The last thought on my mind would've surprised me only weeks ago.

I'm Caelian Ziccardi's wife... and I'm at peace with my new life.

NINETEEN

Caedian



“C, WE’VE GOTTA DO SOMETHING SOONER THAN LATER,” Matteo says. He’s dropped by my office in the underground compound of my estate. He’s a spitting image of his deceased twin brother, conjuring up residual violent urges out of me.

Most people would be disturbed their boss murdered their brother. Their twin brother no less. Matteo Bandini is cut from a different cloth. Born and raised to be part of this ruthless lifestyle since the time he was a boy, much like myself.

I drag my attention away from the reports that have been left on my desk. “Are you going to tell me what you’re whining about, Matteo? Don’t let me think you’re mourning your trash bag of a brother. You can always join him.”

“Never, C. Enrico got what Enrico deserved. This is about what’s going on with Nero. Don’t you think we need to plan our next move after the sharpshooter and the guys at your estate?”

I grunt in answer, offering no further thoughts.

It’s true that I haven’t properly addressed the brewing situation between Nero and myself. Tensions continue to rise between our families. He’s given no indication his demands have changed, meaning he still expects Pa to agree to his new business terms. He still expects Nevaeh to be returned.

Over the past week I've been distracted. Nevaeh and I have found a way to not just coexist, but slowly thrive together. Every night's been full of mind-blowing passion while our days have been no less pleasing.

We started off on such disastrous footing that it's been astounding the progress we've made in such a short time.

Our marriage is coming up on a month, and I'm tempted to seek Ms. Poitier's input regarding what I should do. If the occasion would warrant some type of celebration. If that would be what she and other women consider *romantic*.

"I'll handle the situation," I say vaguely, after fighting through my wandering thoughts. "You do what you've been instructed to do. Keep order around the estate and be my mouthpiece with the rest of the crew."

"Yes, C."

Matteo steps out of the way and reveals we're not alone. Ms. Poitier, being the eyes and ears of the house, has wandered into the room while we were talking. As Matteo walks out, she steps up toward my desk with a know-it-all sort of expression on her mature face.

"Spit it out, P. What are you here to bitch me out about now?"

She lets out a short laugh. "You know me as well as I know you. You've got the right idea—I was coming down here to chew you out something good. It's the only way you ever listen."

"Such a motherly tone. I must be in extra big trouble."

"This is no laughing matter, C. Matteo's right. What are you planning on doing about this Nero problem?"

“What am I planning on doing about this Nero problem,” I repeat slowly, dragging out each syllable, leaning back in my chair. “I plan on making him regret the day he ever attempted to assassinate me in a horse-drawn carriage with my wife.”

“We’ve got to be careful with this one. Nero is more powerful than your family. You don’t want to hear that, but—”

“I don’t care,” I interrupt. “Disrespect won’t be tolerated, P. He’s purposely inserted me into his drama with my father.”

“He wants Nevaeh. But you don’t want to return her.”

“I bought her. Fair and square.”

Ms. Poitier quirks a silvery brow, her expression sassy. “You speak of her like she’s a pair of shoes you picked up at a department store.”

“I lost the receipt. No returns allowed.”

“You and that smart ass mouth. It should’ve gotten you knocked upside the head when you were little.”

“My mother would’ve needed to be around for that to happen.”

She sighs. “All I’m saying, C, is you need to tread lightly. Nevaeh’s precious, but this is *all* our lives at stake.”

“First you tell me to romance her, then you tell me to give her up. Make up your mind.”

“Not give her up. Move smarter. But what do I know? I’ve only lived thirty plus years in this lifestyle.” She places her hands on her rounded waistline and strikes an authoritative pose only she could pull off in my presence.

I smirk. “I’ll give it some consideration.”

Ms. Poitier winks at me as she turns to walk out. “You know, Nevaeh’s making you a lot less hardheaded. Maybe the girl’s worth keeping for that alone.”



The popular expression revenge is a dish best served cold applies to many life circumstances where a wronged person seeks to make someone suffer for what they’ve done. What’s missing from the expression is that revenge is a dish that’s also best served when you least expect it—out of the blue when you’ve been lulled into a false sense of security.

Nero Vorone has an ego the size of the city of Dresden. He believes himself to be invincible, waltzing around the city like he owns the place. With so many industries in his back pocket, it’s no wonder he’s under the illusion he’s unstoppable.

But there’s one industry Nero doesn’t own, even if he believes he does—*the streets*.

The other side of the criminal world. Those underground and not a part of an organized crime family with proper rules and traditions.

The guys on the street are the antithesis to somebody like Nero. They’re hungry and willing to go whichever way the wind blows if the offer’s beneficial enough for them. Many do Nero’s bidding, dealing drugs in the roughest neighborhoods for a cut of the profits, but there’s no real loyalty among them.

Their loyalty lies with the biggest paycheck.

I’m lurking half a block down when the cold dish of revenge is served to Nero. The group of men he has with him escort him from the ritzy hotel he’s been staying at, to the back

of his town car waiting for him. He's got what he'd call a dime piece on his arm, a woman in a short dress with her tits practically hiked up to her chin. She clutches at his arm as he says something and then she laughs.

That's not his wife.

In another minute, she'll regret being his mistress.

I check my watch and rustle the newspaper that's in my hands. You'd think I'd stick out like a sore thumb given my brutish size. Friday evening on one of Dresden's most populated streets provides enough cover that a man sitting out in front of a coffee shop with an untouched latte and newspaper isn't catching anybody's attention.

Nero's helping the dime into the backseat when the dinged up Cadillac I've been waiting for drifts by. A masked man pokes his head out the window and sprays bullets at Nero and his men. The drive by causes pandemonium on the very public city street.

Pedestrians scream and flee for their lives. Nero cowers on the ground, covering his curly-haired head. His men draw their weapons and aim to return fire at the Cadillac, but it's too late—the Cadillac without a license plate is already rounding the corner.

The stink of gunfire pollutes the air and almost brings a grin out of me.

I fold my newspaper up as several of his men crowd around the casualties. One of his soldiers and the dime piece were both struck. Nero's enraged screams almost drown out the whirring sirens from the emergency responders on the way.

“HOW COULD YOU FUCKERS LET THEM DRIVE OFF!?” he barks amid the chaos.

It's my cue to exit. I rise up from my seat outside the coffee shop and start down the opposite end of the street.

Some would say the stunt I've pulled is crazy. Others would tell me it's a death wish.

Both claims would be accurate—I'm a man knocking on death's door, doing what I want, when I want, and that includes making a fool out of Nero Vorone.



Nevaeh doesn't know she's helping me celebrate the revenge I sought. She smiles prettily at me as I pull her into my lap that evening and press kisses into her throat. Her arms slip over my shoulders, and she draws back to give me a quizzical look.

“You're in a good mood.”

“You say that like it's a rare thing.”

She laughs. “That's because it is. Cael, you're the grumpiest man I've ever met.”

“I love when you call me Cael.” I bury my face in the crook of her neck again and treat her to even more kisses. Her skin is so delicate and soft, so sweet-smelling that it makes me hard as hell. My hand grips her hip and I chase her mouth with mine 'til she's giving in and kissing me on the lips.

I've never imagined affection could feel this good.

The times I've had with women in the past don't compare. It's as if I've been experiencing human touch and feeling on mute before, versus now where the volume is dialed all the way up.

Nevaeh is easy to become obsessed with. Something I learned when I began dreaming of her, but it's on an infinitely higher level in the flesh.

The girl has got me in good moods. She's got me smiling and hugging up on her.

Some men would say I'm pussy-whipped.

But... fuck... I can't stop even if she's a distraction. Even if a whole fucking mafia war's about to start over the possession of her.

I'm a man on his deathbed and having Nevaeh is my dying wish.

"Cael, we should go somewhere," she says once I'm through kissing on her. She's still planted in my lap, toying with one of the buttons on my shirt. "It's been a month since I've been here."

So women do find it romantic...

"Where would you want to go, Nevi?"

She thinks a moment. "The theater?"

"Nevi," I scold. "You're not returning to your dance company."

"Not to return myself. Just to see a performance. I'd like to watch a show."

The innocent hope in her voice does me in. My hand glides up the subtle curve of her hip and I give a nod. "Maybe. I'll think about it."

The answer's good enough for her. She initiates our next kiss, brushing her lips to mine.

Temptation rises up inside me to turn it into more. My aggressive tendencies push for me to take her, claim her, make her mine yet again.

I'm half a second from listening.

An acute stab of pain strikes first. I tense up, a grunt rumbling out of me. Any other ability to speak is lost. I'm only able to clench my fists and pant for air. The pain is that immediate and blinding.

Realization dawns in Nevaeh's eyes and she screams for help. "MS. P! UMBERTO! SOMEONE!"

My vision's narrowing through a black tunnel. More grunt noises leave me as the pain becomes too much and consciousness is an effort I can't keep up with. My heart's swelling inside my chest 'til I'm certain it'll burst. I'll die.

"HELP!" Nevaeh screams.

I groan and slip away, off to my dreams.

Maybe for good.

TWENTY

Nevaeh



CAELIAN LOSES CONSCIOUSNESS AND HE DOESN'T WAKE UP. I'm banished from his bedroom as a team of doctors turn up and shut me out.

Ms. Poitier puts a comforting arm around my shoulders and tells me it'll be okay. I'm far from convinced.

"Let's get you some tea downstairs. It's better than pacing the hall outside his room."

I shrug off her touch. "Who were those doctors? Where did they come from?"

"Nevaeh dear, those are doctors that Caelian's been working with."

"I've never seen them before. Where's Dr. Tulio, his primary physician?"

"You have to calm down," Ms. Poitier says. "Being hysterical's not going to do anything good for anybody. Most of all yourself."

As the long-time caretaker of the house leads me away, my body stiffens. My sense of right and wrong rings like an alarm bell. The moment feels off.

Caelian's not in trusted hands.

My suspicions are all but confirmed once we're downstairs and Dr. Tulio emerges from the office he has in Caelian's house.

I duck out of Ms. Poitier's hold and scramble toward him. "Why are you down here? Why aren't you upstairs? Caelian couldn't breathe—he was in intense pain—and you're down here like nothing bad's happening!"

"Nevaeh..." Ms. Poitier ticks her tongue.

"Well? Get up there!" I yell, ignoring her.

Dr. Tulio straightens his black-framed lenses and peers at me with a frustrating level of calm. "I would be up there if I were permitted. The doctors he's with now will be performing the specialized treatment. They've come down from Zurich to do so."

I frown. "But Caelian changed his mind. He decided he no longer wanted that treatment!"

"I'm afraid he's signed the release—"

"He didn't want it!" I scream, my frustration bursting out of me. It propels me forward. I sprint down the ground floor hall to more warning calls from Ms. Poitier. Bounding up the stairs two, three steps at a time, I round the corner and shoot straight for Caelian's bedroom door.

The knob refuses to budge when turned.

Locked.

"OPEN THE DOOR!" I yell, banging fists.

It cracks open a couple inches, one of the stone-faced doctors wedging their face into the gap. "No incessant noises when we are hard at work."

“Caelian changed his mind about the treatment you’re performing!”

“We have a signed consent form stating he wanted the procedure performed.”

I hop up and down, sliding left to right to sneak a peek into the room, or even better, skirt my way inside. If not for my extensive dance training, I wouldn’t be able to jump high enough with so much ease.

The doctor obstructing my entry might be over six feet easily, but I leap up and steal a look at the bed on the other side of the room.

Caelian’s lying amid a team of doctors. His eyes closed. His skin tinged *blue*.

He’s not breathing. Whatever they’ve done to him, they’ve made him worse.

Any shred of composure I was clinging to is thrown by the wayside. I lose my cool in every sense of the word.

“Someone needs to give me answers about what’s going on! What are you doing to him?”

“Nevaeh dear, what do you think you’re doing?” Ms. Poitier releases pants of air as she finally catches up from down the hall.

“You need to tell me what’s happening to Caelian. From the moment I got here, you’ve kept me in the dark. I won’t be patronized anymore!”

“Now is not the time, honey.”

“Honey yourself!” I snarl nastily, sounding harsher than I usually would. The situation calls for it. My pulse beats with

desperation as I spin around and take the doctor by surprise. I sling my body at him to break through his block on the door.

I'm not a big person and I don't have much weight to throw around, but the force and suddenness with which I slam into him is enough to catch him off guard. He stumbles several steps back, allowing me to slip into the room.

My heart begins aching at the daunting sight before me. A row of doctors stands on either side of Caelian's bed in the middle of consulting each other as they poke, prod, practically experiment on him.

As if he's a lab rat for their study.

My eyes widen in horror, and I scream at them, flocking over to shield him.

"Don't touch him!" I shout. "Nobody touches him 'til I know what you're doing. You've done something to him. You've made him worse."

"We're going to need you to step aside. You're interrupting his treatment."

"What treatment? You've turned him blue!"

"Move, girl."

One of the doctors to the right of me shoves me hard to the ground. Nobody blinks an eye or gives any reaction. They carry on working like I'm invisible or a piece of the decor. A growl revs up from my chest, my temper washing over me in a hot wave.

I have to do something. Anything.

They must be stopped.

Caelian's hooked up to a machine that seems to pump some kind of substance into his veins. It looks different than the vials he'd had me retrieve for him that night when he'd woken up in bed riddled with pain.

It's the substance that's harming him. It's only doing more damage.

They're so busy poring over Caelian that nobody seems to be monitoring the machine that's plugged into the wall. Boldness streaks through me as I crawl over and yank the cord out.

The machine beeps, the red light on the front flashing. The substance stops mid tube and doesn't pump any further liquid into Caelian.

The doctors round on me, ready to unleash their ire.

"Enough insanity!" Ms. Poitier booms before they can. Everyone in the room turns toward the doorway where she stands, hands notched on her round waist. "Doctors, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave! The woman you just shoved down to the ground is Nevaeh Ziccardi, Caelian's *wife*. She believes Caelian has withdrawn his consent. As his wife, she is the authority on his affairs when he is incapacitated. Leave or I'll have his security make you leave."

The team of doctors share looks with one another. Their silence becomes their consensus as, initially one by one and then in groups of twos or threes, they file out of the room.

Ms. Poitier and Doctor Tulio step aside to allow them exit. Once they're gone, I turn to the physician with begging eyes and ask him if he can treat Caelian.

He gives a resolute nod and then strides toward the bed to take over.

My anger melts away. Relief overwhelms me.

It's only when I blink that my tears wet my cheeks and I realize I've started silently crying.

Ms. Poitier reinstates her arm around my shoulders. "It'll be okay, Nevaeh. He'll patch him up. He always does. I didn't know those hacks would do what they did, or I wouldn't have let them in."

"You mentioned they're from Zurich?"

"The treatment facility Caelian visits. I believe they work with Doctor Gerber, the specialist he saw in Zurich. They work closely with Zinc Co., the company Mr. C's family owns."

Eventually as the hours pass, I allow Ms. Poitier to escort me downstairs and soothe me with some hot tea.

I sit at the island of Caelian's gourmet kitchen and hiccup, trying to calm my nerves.

I'm on edge, unable to quiet the roil in my stomach or the pitter-patter of my heart.

What if he doesn't wake up? What if there's been too much damage and he can't recover?

Ms. Poitier strokes my hair the way a mother would. "You're all worked up. Mr. C wouldn't like it."

"He was so... blue. That can't be good."

"He's come back from worse before. He'll... he'll survive."

But Ms. Poitier doesn't sound so sure. There's an undercurrent of uncertainty that belies her words. She frowns, snagging the barstool next to mine. "I'm surprised you're so

invested. Just a couple weeks ago you couldn't stand the sight of Mr. C."

...so much has changed. I... I care about him...

I peer into the steamy contents of my mug. If I were to try to speak, I'd probably break out in more tears.

"Mr. C has long anticipated the moment he won't be able to recover," she goes on sadly. "It's not a matter of if, but when. You play such a role in that, Nevaeh dear—him spending his last phase of his life with you. The ballerina from his dreams."

"I need to speak with my mother," I choke out.

Ms. Poitier's brows furrow. "Dear, you know the rules—"

"Please. She's the only one that can make me feel better."

The excuse works.

Ms. Poitier caves with a guilt-riddled sigh and grants me a five-minute phone call.

"I'll be making more tea. Don't do anything you'll regret," she warns.

I wait 'til she's wandered off to the pantry before pressing the call button.

Mom answers with a drawn-out yawn on the third ring. I launch into what's weighing on my heart.

"I can't do this," I whisper, speaking fast. "I don't want to anymore."

"Baby, we've been over this. You *have* to."

Shaking my head frantically side to side, I pick at the nail beds of other fingers. "Mom, I'm telling you... I... I can't do this."

“You sound emotional. How many times have I ever told you that’s the worst thing you can become in this arrangement? You know what’s on the line. You’ve trained all your life. There’s no escaping it.”

“It’s too much.”

“Nevaeh!” she snaps. “I’m sick and tired of the theatrics. I’m not going to tell you again. What’s done is done. I don’t know what else you expect me to say. Nero’s not fooling around. Do you want that blood on your hands?”

We hang up on that guilt-ridden note.

Ms. Poitier notices the distressed expression etched onto my face the moment she returns from the pantry. She forgets about the teabags and kettle she’s fussing with and comes over to check on me.

“You look more upset than when you placed your call. I knew it wasn’t a good idea to break Mr. C’s once-a-week rule.”

A broken sigh works its way out of my lungs.

If only you knew...

TWENTY-ONE

Caedian



THE DOORS FLING OPEN AND IN SPIN A DOZEN SMALL WOMEN. They flit across the floor with fast-moving feet and their delicate tutus. In just a few short movements they've captured the attention of everyone in the room.

The music's chaotic. Violent strokes of a violin and heavy fingers slamming down on a piano. The more dissonant it becomes, the harder the frolicking women dance.

They leap from one end to another and whip in dizzying circles. If not for their grace even in the face of chaos, you'd think their dance was unplanned and spontaneous.

I sit among the roomful of nameless men, shrouded in shadows that hide our faces. No one cares to pay mind to the person seated next to them; no one gives a damn about anything but the performance happening before our eyes.

I tear my gaze away from the women's chaotic routine and turn my head to the left. My body jerks in my seat.

The man seated next to me has no face. Where his eyes and mouth and nose should be is only a blank canvas of skin as if his features have been erased.

They've been blurred out—everyone's has.

As I turn my head to the right, I discover more of the same. More faceless men in the seats filling up the audience.

Who the fuck are these men and why am I among them?

My hands come up over my face to feel my lips and the slope of my nose. I've hardly made sense of what's happening when a new resonating chord is struck in the music. It sweeps over the audience like a tidal wave on the shore, washing everything away.

The dancers part down the middle to make way for another one of their own—a woman that's more angel than she is a dancer as she appears in a burst of golden light. Dark skin, dark eyes, dark hair that exudes beauty and mystery as she flows across the stage in a costume distinct from all the others.

I blink, immediately enthralled and unable to look away.

The others in the audience cease to exist. Not only are their faces a blur, they fade altogether.

The dancers fade too... until she's the only one left spinning in perfect circles on the very tip of her toes.

Mia bella ballerina. Mio angelo perfetto. La mia salvezza.

But it's as she's twirling faster and faster that I catch the worry in her eyes. The sadness encapsulating her as she meets my gaze even as she spins.

She's trying to tell me something; she's trying to—

I heave a great breath into my lungs, my eyes popping open. It's the type of breath you take when you've been submerged underwater and life has dwindled away, second by second.

Blinking many times, I place the surroundings around me. I'm in my bedroom, lying on sheets dampened by my sweat. I

scrub my hand over my face with the familiar cloak of drowsiness clinging to me.

I've been asleep for hours. Possibly days.

I must've suffered another episode. Perhaps worse than my other recent ones.

Nevaeh descends on me at once. She's been curled up on the windowsill with a book and spies I'm awake.

Her chocolatey hair's been arranged in a loose ponytail with shorter strands framing her face. A large fuzzy sweater swallows her up and dangles off one shoulder. She carefully wraps her arms around me in a relieved embrace, but not before I catch sight of the glassy look of her eyes.

She's been crying.

"Nevi," I say, my throat painfully dry. "I'm awake now. Why are you crying?"

"Caelian, there were doctors here and they were trying to do that procedure on you. You got so blue. I screamed at them, but they wouldn't listen. One of them knocked me down and they were going to keep doing it—"

"What doctors?" I interrupt. Thinking straight is difficult after such a deep sleep. I slide my hand along the side of her neck and force her to focus her attention onto me.

"They were the doctors that work with Gerber. The guy from Zurich."

My temper pierces through the fog that is my mind. I drop my hand from Nevaeh and push away the bedsheets covering me.

"Caelian, Dr. Trolio said not to overexert yourself—" she calls out.

But in this moment, I'm a man on a mission. I can't be stopped no matter how fragile a state my health is in.

Something fucked up is going on. Somebody somewhere's fucking with me. I may not know how or why, but they've poked the wrong beast. I'm awake now.



“Well, if it ain't my son,” Pa says answering the door to his office. He's got a drink in hand and some of the shoe polish stained along his hairline. He goes to step aside, but instead winds up knocked backwards.

My fist sails straight into his jaw without warning. My version of a hello.

Right away, his guards standing in the hall rush toward me. I'm ready for the confrontation, rounding on them with both of my large fists clenched.

“This is between my father and I,” I spit. “Interfere, and you'll be sorry.”

Stepping the rest of the way into his office, I slam the door shut in their faces.

Pa's crumpled onto the floor. His drink's spilled around him. The chunks of ice begin melting into the carpet. He clutches his swelling jaw and curses me out.

“You fucking stronzo. You put your hands on me again, and it's death by firing squad.”

“As opposed to what? Death by medical malpractice? You think I'm not onto what the fuck kind of games you're playing? You're desperate enough to try and off me? Your own son?”

He pushes himself off the floor and back onto his wobbly legs. “It sounds so uncivilized when you say it like that.”

“What’s your end game with this, Pa? You eliminate me and then what?”

“You’re causing nothing but trouble for me. For relations with the Vorones. I chose you above the others and what did you do? You spat in my face!”

“This is about the fact that I wouldn’t be your mouthpiece?”

He hobbles over to the minibar to make himself a fresh drink. More shoe polish has slid down the side of his face, leaving a faded black stain on his skin that he seems unaware of. “You know what this is about. This is about the ballerina. You need to give the girl up.”

My fists are tight enough that my nails bite into the palms of my hands. “Tell me what you did with the doctors. You are the one who introduced me to Gerber—don’t fucking tell me you’ve been sabotaging me!”

Pa waves a hand, bringing his drink to his lips. “Don’t be so dramatic, Caelian. This was a one-time deal. You refused the treatment in Zurich. Everybody has a price.”

“I’m guessing the sharpshooter that came after us was you too? I should’ve known. The attempt was so sloppy.”

“I should’ve gone with the more expensive assassin. He guaranteed results.”

“What could be so important that you’d be willing to go through so much trouble for a ballerina?” I growl. My patience dangles by a thin string that’ll snap in half any second.

“She is property of Nero’s. What have you been missing? We piss him off, then everybody’s screwed. He’s gonna kill us all if we don’t obey. Then he’ll take her anyway.” His thick, lumpy throat works overtime as he slops down more liquor. “Beats me what’s so special about her. I’ve never seen the importance of those little dancers some like so much—need more ass in a woman I’m gonna fuck.”

I lose it. I launch myself at him in a violent tidal wave of rumbling grunts and flying fists. He winds up on the floor again with a mouthful of blood.

I’m being pried off him by a third party. Somebody almost as big and strong as I am.

“Caelian, you drunk or something?” Carmelo asks, holding onto me tight. The other two have arrived with him, Coreno and Cristian standing off to the side.

I could throw Carmelo off me, though I refrain for the moment. Seeing Pa’s blood decorating my knuckles is enough to sate my violent urges.

“What’s the matter with you?” Carmelo asks. “Both of you? Father and son coming to blows? Is that how we do?”

“That’s how our family does. Where have you been, cousin?” Coreno asks Carmelo. “Stop acting like you’re above the rest of us.”

“Caelian’s mad ’cuz I might’ve tried to give him a procedure. He thinks to kill him. I was trying to help him along like the loving and devoted father I am.”

I wrench myself from Carmelo’s grip and take a warning step forward. “And I’ve repaid you in kind. Keep it up and you’ll be spitting up more blood.”

“If this is how we’re going to fight the Vorones, we’ve got a problem,” Carmelo sighs. He’s hardly any better for the criticism he gives—his hair gelled, his muscles squeezed into a crew neck shirt that’s too tight, his repeated checks of his phones to message whatever bimbo he’s fucking—he’s just as bad.

“This is why I should’ve been chosen,” Coreno says. “I would’ve already handled it.”

Cristian scowls at him, his chubby-cheeked face extra petulant. “His *son* should handle it. That son being me.”

“Alright, alright,” Pa says, gripping the back of the sofa in his office to pull himself to his feet. “I might’ve reacted impulsively, Caelian. But don’t act so surprised. I’ve tried to kill my brother, your uncle, at least a dozen times.”

Carmelo nods. “It’s true. I remember the cut brakes in my pop’s car when I was twelve.”

Pa coughs out a bloody laugh. “That was one of my favorites.”

“You are both fucking insane pieces of shit,” I spit. “Leave me out of your games.”

“You’re involved whether you like it or not, stronzo. The real problem is, how’re we gonna handle Nero? If you ain’t giving up the ballerina—” Pa spies the venomous glare on my face and clears his throat. “We’ll need to find another way. We may need to reach out to our allies abroad.”

“The Sorvinos,” Carmelo says. “But wouldn’t that open up a whole other can of worms?”

“Probably. That’s a thought for a different day.” Pa lumbers over to his minibar as if he can’t help himself; he just has to pour another drink.

“Stay away from me. Stay away from Nevaeh,” I growl before I storm out of the office.

Pa and Carmelo can discuss their stupid plan to engage the Sorvinos among themselves. I have no interest in participating. Pa can't be trusted, and neither can Carmelo. The Sorvinos from all the way in Sicily are no better.

But one thing is for sure: if what Pa says is true and there's no avoiding this confrontation, I'll fucking crush Nero and his men if they dare try anything else.

TWENTY-TWO

Caedian



“YOU’LL BE HAPPY TO KNOW I’VE THOUGHT ABOUT IT.”

Curiosity unfolds on Nevaeh’s face. She tips her head back for a look up at me as I walk over to where she’s seated in the den and kiss her brow. She’s taken up crocheting thanks to Ms. Poitier, who’s been giving her lessons every few days.

As snowflakes flutter outside the window nearby, Nevaeh bathes in the warmth from the fireplace and crochets what resembles a scarf.

“Thought about what?”

“What is it you were wanting to do?”

A little smile brightens her face. “It’s snowing out tonight.”

“So what? We’ll be inside.” I flash the two tickets at her. “Grab your coat. And possibly the scarf you’re knitting.”

“*Crocheting*,” she giggles.

Within five minutes we’re being escorted to the car we’ll be taking by my men. Nevaeh hasn’t stopped beaming since she found out I’m taking her to see a show. We ride through the woody terrain surrounding my remote estate with little light except for the car’s high beams.

It takes us just under two hours to reach the Dresden Performing Arts Theater. I clutch Nevaeh's hand tight as we pull into the valet driveway for premier guests.

“Are you sure you'll behave yourself?”

“Do you really think I wouldn't?” she quips.

I drag my fingers along her soft features. From her jawline to the curve of her bottom lip. “That's exactly what I think—and I hope you don't, so I have an excuse to punish you.”

Desire darkens in her eyes like the naughty angel she is. She leans into my touch and pokes her tongue out to tease the pad of my thumb. My groin gives a hard and threatening tug. If she keeps on like this, we'll never make it inside the theater. We'll be too busy in the back seat of this car.

Something I have no problem with, but sense Nevaeh would ultimately regret. She's been wanting to spend a night at the theater since we married.

Tonight's show is *Mystere*, a more recent musical that's been penned and choreographed by one of Ignazio's counterparts.

“Horatio,” Nevaeh says with a look of contempt. She clings to my muscly arm as we walk through the private entrance reserved for us.

“You say his name like it's a dirty word.”

“His head's larger than Ignazio's, if you can believe it.”

“I've dealt with Ignazio. That seems like it would be impossible.”

“He wanted me for one of his shows. Thankfully, Ignazio refused to give me up.”

“Do you miss it? Performing with the company,” I say. We’ve settled into our seats in one of the prestigious gold-trimmed balconies.

“Yes,” she answers. “But it’s because I love dancing. Not because I loved the life I was living. The people like Ignazio and the other dancers. The contract I always knew I was trapped in.”

“You and the other dancers really didn’t get along?”

Nevaeh watches the stage as an announcement’s made about the show beginning in five minutes. The gleam in her eyes reads as bittersweet. The former likely from thoughts about her fellow ballerinas.

“I didn’t belong with them. They always made it clear I wasn’t a part of the clique.”

“Because of... your skin color?”

She nods. “And they felt I was a teacher’s pet. I was Ignazio’s favorite.”

Anger expands inside my chest at the thought Nevaeh’s been mistreated for a physical characteristic of hers that couldn’t be more beautiful—her complexion that’s smooth and dark like the finest mahogany.

It makes me want to track down these other dancers and dole out retribution. Punish them for their fucked up behavior at Nevaeh’s expense.

I would if I didn’t suspect it would make her upset. She’s not one for violence.

“They were insecure you stood out,” I say once the red tint from my temper wears off. “They were mad because you stole the show.”

She smirks at me. “How would you know? Is that your way of admitting you’ve seen me perform?”

“I have a feeling.”

My mind flashes back to my recent dream. The oddity of the dream has been something on my mind for days. Though I’ve had many before in my comatose state, none carried the same tone that one had.

The roomful of other men. The flittering ballerinas. The deep worry in Nevaeh’s eyes even as she danced.

But it’s true that she stood out in the dream. My sole focus.

The theater darkens and the show begins with a vibrant trill of music. Nevaeh leans into me as we sit in the solitude of our balcony and soak up the entertainment. I’m no man that attends the theater or knows much about ballets beyond what little I’ve seen in my dreams watching Nevaeh dance.

It’s not how I’d usually choose to pass my time, but I can’t deny the raw talent on stage. Both male and female dancers act out a story using the artful movements of their bodies. I’m drawn into the storyline without realizing it.

Nevaeh smiles up at me in the shadows, then rests her head on my chest. I wrap my arms around her and hold her in place.

What I’ve told those around me is true—I won’t be giving her up and I’ll be enjoying every moment I have left should an episode hit me that’s fatal. I’ll have to make plans to ensure Nevaeh is properly looked after once I’m gone.

We watch the rest of the show like this. The third act is coming to a close with a final dance number that Nevaeh whispers to me is one of the most technically difficult routines in any modern ballet.

Thunderous applause breaks out among the crowd. The performers take their bows and wave at the audience as bouquets of flowers are tossed at their feet. The applause is so ear-splitting and overwhelming that at first no one catches on to an even more jarring sound.

The blast of heavy gunfire.

The second they do, the theater erupts into pure mayhem.

What was once roaring applause turns into desperate screams.

Hundreds of audience members scatter like ants while others attempt to take cover. The performers on stage scurry behind the long velvet curtains draped along the sides. So much movement that it's impossible to keep track of it all.

Me and my men are reacting with zero hesitation.

We're securing the archway to our balcony, ensuring nobody gains entry. I'm aiming my pistol over the railing to pinpoint the gunmen and take them out.

What the fuck's going on? This can't be a coincidence—is this another assassination attempt by Pa?

But, as I pull the trigger and nab one of the men far below, I know it's something else we're dealing with. These aren't amateur-type men that Pa would hire and send after me like in Zurich.

This is a team of men descending on the theater in an organized attack.

The lights cut out and more screams fill the air.

Including a scream from a few feet away.

“Nevaeh!”

Bullets crackle around me on the balcony as shadowy figures flit about. I can't fucking see what's happening or who's who.

Somebody barrels toward me in an attempt to knock me off my feet. I dodge him at the last possible second and send a tight fist crashing into his skull. We struggle for a while until I'm able to wrestle him against the balcony railing and shoot him point blank in the head.

Another gunshot rings out only feet away.

I turn around, ready to clobber anybody else with my fists and leave them bleeding out by my gun.

The perplexing sight before me is of two figures grappling. One significantly smaller than their opponent. The size difference proves not to matter as the smaller one spins into a summersault kick that knocks the larger figure down.

I piece together what's going on and rush forward.

Squeezing the trigger at the figure collapsed on the ground, I grab Nevaeh's arm and pull her away with me.

Anybody who tries to interfere receives a bullet.

In the commotion, we're able to escape the balcony and find our way into the lobby where some of the theater lights have come back on.

Several of my men that have survived form a wall around us the rest of our way. Matteo races ahead to open the rear door for us. I practically throw Nevaeh onto the seat and then slam the door shut once I've crammed myself in too.

It happens so fast. We're speeding off, the violent scene falling behind us.

My heart's pounding harder than it should in my chest. It takes me another moment to urge myself to slow down. For my heart to listen before it ventures into stabbing pain territory.

“Nevi, do I need to scold you?” I ask, squeezing her hand within my own for her attention. “Were you fighting one of the gunmen?”

“He came at me. I had no choice.”

My scolding ends there.

I pull her close and kiss the top of her head, relieved we've escaped in one piece.

Truthfully, it could've ended a lot worse. My mind is made up on what's happened. The shootout was orchestrated by Nero and his men—or someone he had hired to do so much like I had done to him on a public street.

This bad blood between us is escalating. Any day now, it'll become an outright war.

I'll have to make sure me and my crew are ready.

Walking through the front doors of my mansion, I table the situation for the morning. I'm more concerned with letting off some steam. Nevaeh at my side provides the perfect opportunity. I wrench her into a kiss that lasts us the entire journey upstairs. At first, it's as I bow my head and press my lips to hers in the hall. Then it transitions to me plucking her off her feet and carrying her up the stairs with our mouths joining again.

It finishes with me depositing her in our bed before ripping off my clothes. Nevaeh props herself up on her elbows and does the same to her own outfit. My impatient hands take over

once I'm on the bed with her. I yank her tights off and drag her panties from her hips.

Nevaeh arches into me. Her delicate hand clutches at the nape of my neck. Her mouth seeks to return to mine.

Our passion burns from there.

Our limbs lock and our bodies grind together. My hand secure around her throat, I work my hips against her, my dick buried deep. A soft cry leaves her every time my pelvis bone rubs against her clit in the right way. I silence these little noises with a flex of my hand on her throat and a hot kiss on the mouth.

We come as one. The euphoria rushes us, and we're left dazed from how good it feels.

The chaos from the night couldn't be further from my mind in a moment like this. I lay down among the many pillows on my huge bed and keep Nevaeh folded into my side.

"We make a good team, *mia bella ballerina*," I muse aloud.

She trails her hand down my broad chest. She stops where she can feel my twitchy heartbeat. A serene expression has come to her face. "We do. I'm really glad you're okay, Cael. That you've recovered."

My latest episode still seems to linger on her mind. She's brought it up several times even as days have gone by.

I snuggle her closer and say, "I couldn't go out without having you a few more times. Or taking you to the ballet like you wanted. Though the shootout wasn't part of the plan."

"I had a great time anyway."

“Good. I’ll always have the memory of you doing a somersault kick.”

She lets out a light laugh. “I guess my dance training has come in handy.”

We drift off over a period of time. Nevaeh first, before I follow. I get up only to use the restroom and take the nighttime dose of my medication. I’m out within minutes.

Hours of dreamless sleep pass.

I’m pulled from my deep slumber in a heavy-lidded blink in the dark. There’s a bright blue light coming from the crack in the bathroom door. I recognize what kind of light it is as I sit up and notice the empty spot next to me in the bed.

Then I notice my phone’s no longer charging on my nightstand.

I pad over toward the crack in the door, peering through for a look inside.

Nevaeh’s huddled over the closed lid of the toilet, her face illuminated by the white-blue light of my phone. Her fingers tap away at what must be a text message.

My eyes narrow watching her. The twitchiness of my heartbeat reflects the suspicion that’s poisoning me.

What is my ballerina up to?

TWENTY-THREE

Nevae



OVER THE NEXT FEW DAYS, WE'RE SNOWED IN. THE WOODS surrounding Caelian's estate resemble a winter wonderland. Inches of snow cover the once green terrain, crowning treetops and forming mountains on what was once a flat surface.

If not for the roaring fires in every room and the added heat blasting from the vents, I'd be shivering cold.

Memories of winters spent cramped in my dorm room come back to me. The heat rarely worked and any time the dancers complained, Ignazio told us to shut up and be grateful our situations weren't worse. By worse he likely meant outright sold in the flesh trade like what happened to most people involved.

Still, while conditions weren't the best, I had grown used to life with the dance company.

It was the evil I knew. The kind I had experienced most of my life.

My new situation with Caelian still confuses me. I've developed real affection for him while hating the circumstance that has brought us together. In such a short time, we've already been through so much. How can I move on from that like it was nothing?

“Come away from that window, Nevaeh dear. I’m about to decorate.”

Ms. Poitier’s invitation pulls me from my daydreaming. I aim a meek smile at her and then follow her out of the bedroom.

This morning’s chillier than usual. Even for the snowstorm we’ve found ourselves in.

“Mr. C will be busy with other affairs today,” Ms. Poitier says as we walk the long hall. “I thought we could spend time decorating like you asked the other day. It’ll be the first time we’ve bothered for Christmas.”

“What do you normally do?”

Ms. Poitier scoffs with a raise of her brows. “Nothing, Nevaeh. We do nothing. You think Mr. C’s really the type to decorate his home? Does he seem festive to you?”

“But he’s decorating now.”

“He’s approved it. Yes.”

“For me?”

“What do you think?” She tugs open the door to one of the hallway closets and reveals the boxes upon boxes of decor stacked inside. “We’re going to have our work cut out for us. I’ll tell you that.”

I step forward and pick up a glittering silver streamer. “We’ll get it done. Do you think we can leave the tree for last? I’d like if he’d decorate it with me.”

“You are a cute little thing. So hopeful. We’ll see how *that* goes.”

We spend the rest of the morning hanging wreaths and mistletoe. Streamers and Christmas lights go up throughout the large manor. Poinsettia plants are put out on display, along with candles that'll make the place not just look like Christmas but smell like it too.

I place my hands on my hips, admiring the end results in the den. The room glitters in a way that would put anyone in a festive mood.

Maybe even Caelian.

The naked fir tree stands tall at the far side of the room, awaiting our decorative touch. Ms. Poitier called on Umberto and another staff member to help us set it up.

“Well, let's hope Caelian'll decorate it with you,” she says, nudging my side. “Lord knows that man could use a little Christmas cheer.”



Dinner is the first time I see Caelian all day. He strides into the room with his broad, bulked-up shoulders looking as if they're carrying the weight of the world. He takes his seat to the right of me with barely a glance or acknowledgment of my presence.

His expression is no better—his jaw holds tension, and any warmth has been extinguished from his dark gray eyes.

I frown even as I try to remain unaffected. “The kitchen staff prepared one of your favorites: osso buco. I've never tried it before, but it smells delicious.”

Caelian gives a grunt, but otherwise makes no attempt to engage me.

He's heaped large portions of food onto his plate and begins working his way through it in moody silence.

I struggle controlling my next exhale of breath—I'm so tempted to draw it out and make it known his bad mood irritates me.

It's only after I remind myself we'll wind up in a fight that I don't. He's probably had a stressful day dealing with his family's operation and the ongoing feud with the Vorones. We were attacked a second time in weeks by the rival family. Could relations be worsening even more than they already have been?

I clear my throat as I spool linguine around my fork. "What do you think of the Christmas decorations? Ms. P and I spent all day on them."

Caelian nods, his mouth full of food, the muscles in his jaw and throat bouncing as he chews. I wait another moment to see if he'll offer any real words once he swallows. Wishful thinking that doesn't come true; he merely goes for more polenta and veal.

"I was hoping we could do the tree together..."

He reaches for his wine glass and washes down what he's eaten with a long drink. If possible, his expression has grown moodier, less engaged. His behavior couldn't be more standoffish and dismissive. He still hasn't looked me in the eye.

My stomach roils. I search for what could be the cause. Things had been so good between us last night. We'd gone out to the theater, and though we'd been attacked, it had been a good time. We enjoyed ourselves and came home to act out the passion that had been building for hours.

Could Caelian be feeling unwell?

“If you don’t want to decorate, we don’t have to...”

“We’ll do it,” he snaps, even his tone cold. Finally, he pierces me with a look. Hard and almost reproachful. “If that’s what you want to do this evening, we’ll decorate the tree.”

The roiling sensation in my stomach goes nowhere. It only intensifies, making me lose what little appetite I’ve had.

I can’t help feeling like I’m missing something. Something Caelian refuses to tell me.

Once the table’s cleared and dinner is over, we move into the den where the huge fir tree awaits to be decorated.

Umberto delivers a step ladder for me to reach some of the higher up spots on the tree. I thank him and turn to Caelian with a miniature nutcracker in hand.

“Do you want to hang the first ornament?”

His thick fingers scoop the tiny figurine from my hand, his gaze trained on my face.

An icy shiver rocks my spine.

“Caelian, is there something wrong?”

“You tell me. You wanted to decorate. That is what we’re doing. Is it not?”

“Yes,” I answer. “But—”

“But what, Nevaeh? Are you still not satisfied? Is it still not enough for you?”

I’m dumbfounded for a second. Bitterness poisons his husky, accented voice as he snarls at me and hangs the nutcracker without care.

All at once, it's no longer a matter of detached coldness. His anger emerges like a monster rearing itself from underneath a child's bed. I take a step back and attempt to sort out how to deal with him when he's like this.

This is more than a simple bad mood.

"You're upset with me," I say slowly. "But I don't understand why. All I wanted to do was decorate with you."

"Don't frame yourself as the victim, Nevaeh! You are no fucking victim!"

"I wasn't trying to be! I was pointing out that I hoped we'd be able to get along—"

"That's not possible," he snarls. "I've tried with you. I've fucking given you everything you've wanted. Yet it's still not enough for you. You're still unhappy!"

My mouth drops open, thrown by the accusation. "Everything? You mean the basic decency to treat me as a human being versus some doll out of your dream?!"

"There you go again! Never satisfied!"

"You've barely even let me dance. You don't let me outside unless it's with you. I can't even speak to my mother. I doubt you'd even let me visit—"

"You can forget about speaking to her again, let alone ever visiting her!" he roars over me. "You know what? You can even forget about that dance studio—it's off limits! I've been too fucking nice to you. I see it now. That's the problem. You're spoiled! No more!"

I fall silent. I'm shaking inside and out. My hands tremble at my side and my heart booms in my chest.

Caelian ends his rant by crushing the nutcracker in his large fist. He turns to me and dumps the small, splintered fragments at my feet.

“That’s what I consider decorating,” he snarls in my face, storming past me. He makes it to the doorway before adding, “I expect you in my bed within the hour!”

I gnaw on my bottom lip to stifle the cry that begs for escape. Frustration bubbles up inside me, bound to force its way out anyway.

I’ve fooled myself thinking our marriage could ever work; we could ever learn to love, trust, and care for each other. How many times does he have to show me he’s a thoughtless, vicious brute before I believe him? Before I understand there’s no real civil union between us?

I’m trapped, like I’ve always been. Except so much worse when my husband’s the beast from every storybook...

TWENTY-FOUR

Caedian



“WHAT IS IT NOW, C? WHAT THE HELL’S THE PROBLEM?” Ms. Poitier asks barging into my command center.

Several of my men glance around at each other. Her abrupt appearance throws them off. During our strategy talks, the room is usually off limits. Even for Ms. Poitier, the caretaker of the estate.

I heave a ragged breath out of my lungs and gesture to the men around the planning table. “Take five. Not a second more. Have your asses back here ready to continue.”

My crew files out of the door like obedient schoolboys dismissed by their teacher.

Ms. Poitier’s got her arms folded, her silver hair curled around her face in tight ringlets. She watches them go with an unapologetic bend to her mouth. The energy she exudes tells me she believes she’s about to issue another one of her infamous lectures.

By now she should know I couldn’t give less of a fuck.

“That’s the last time,” I warn. “You’ve gotten too comfortable stomping around my home, acting like you’re in charge. Make no mistake, if I need to remind you that you work for me, I will, P. Your opinion holds some use at times,

but don't let your role as caretaker go to your head. You're in no position of authority."

She glowers, the lines around her mouth more distinct. "You just can't help yourself, can you? Reminding everybody they're beneath you, C. You're in charge."

"Because I am. Do you have a problem with that?"

"If I did, you'd tell me to shut up."

"So you do know your place."

She huffs out a quick, sardonic laugh. "I can assure you I'll make sure not to interrupt your future strategy talks. I'm guessing they were about retaliation against the Vorones?"

"What else could it be? After everything that's happened, it's in my hands to settle the score. He won't get away with what he's done," I explain, walking around the table littered with maps. The current one on top features a layout of one of Nero's largest drug compounds. "My father will be attending one of his dinners in a few days to discuss where we are on our business dealings, but I can no longer trust him. It's clear my father has his own motives."

Ms. Poitier steps up to the table for a gander at the maps. "Is this what's got you so damn grumpy lately?"

"If you're asking about Nevaeh, you're wasting your time."

"You yelled at the girl again last night. She was in tears when I found her this morning."

"She should consider herself lucky that's all I did."

Ms. Poitier purses her lips. "The more things change, the more they stay the same."

“What’s going on between Nevaeh and I has nothing to do with Nero and the Vorones. It has everything to do with Nevaeh.”

“Backtalk? Attitude? Asking too many questions? What did the girl do to offend your sensibilities this time?” I pin her with a harsh glare that makes even a woman like her wilt. “I’m extra sassy today, C. But if this is as serious as it seems to be, then I’ll drop it.”

I collect the map on the table, rolling it up, mulling over if I want to tell her. “Nevaeh has been deceiving me.”

“In what way?”

“Somehow, she’s figured out the code to my phone. She’s been using it to text her mother.”

Ms. Poitier’s brows jump high on her forehead. “She’s been what? Nevaeh? Are you—?”

“I’m sure,” I interrupt. “She’s been deleting the texts from the sent folder. However, I had one of my tech savvy men retrieve them. It’s been going on for days now. From around the time we went to Zurich.”

Ms. Poitier seems too shocked to talk. Her hand’s come up on her chest as if she’s about to clutch a pearl necklace she doesn’t own.

I turn my back on her and return the rolled up map to a shelf on the wall.

She’s as shocked as I was when I discovered what Nevaeh was up to. Her sweet brown eyes and angelic face had me fooled—the girl couldn’t be more fucking sneaky.

I’ve been concerned with making her happy. Trying to be more open-minded to giving her freedom. Treating her as

more than just the beautiful ballerina from my dreams.

I took her on dates and on a honeymoon. I had a whole fucking dance studio renovated for her and even learned to please her in bed. Things I've never come close to considering doing for anyone else.

Instead of being grateful for what I've done, she's chosen to go behind my back and beg her mother for an escape from the life I've given her.

Her messages had hurt worse than my medical condition.

Please. I can't do it anymore. I need an out.

I don't want to do this.

I can't keep pretending.

Message after message that was like a stab to the heart.

All this time, I was fooling myself into believing *mia bella ballerina* was being honest with me.

The truth is, she can't stand me.

But the joke's on her—she'll still be mine. As I told her on our wedding night, she gets no say in the matter. She'll adapt and be obedient and live a quality life, or she can be trouble and be punished at every turn.

It makes no difference to me so long as I get what I want in the end.

Ms. Poitier requests to see the text messages. She swears when I show them to her and she reads for herself the things Nevaeh has been texting.

“This doesn’t look good.”

“She didn’t think I’d ever find out,” I say, pocketing my phone. “I’m a heavy sleeper. Particularly with my medications.”

“And she’d know that being at your side every night when you wake up.”

I nod. “But it doesn’t matter. It’s her mistake. Her privileges are gone. She’s stuck with me so long as I’m alive.”



Pa is surprised when I volunteer to attend his dinner with Nero. He’s bringing along a few of his trusted *capos* like Carmelo and Joey D’Amato. He assumed after our last explosive fight that I wouldn’t be interested—that, or he preferred to leave me out altogether given the fact that we’ve never trusted each other.

Nero hosts us at Vecoli. The fine-dining Italian restaurant is closed for the evening as our families agree to yet another civilized sit-down.

That doesn’t mean the air isn’t tense. That Pa doesn’t bring a slew of guys with him. That I don’t have Matteo with me as my righthand.

The strumming notes of Italian folk musicians like Fred Buscaglione and Renato Carosone play in the background.

Nero’s idea of controlling the atmosphere. It’s his say what music we listen to. The kind of food we’ll be eating and the

seats we'll be taking.

“So glad the Ziccardi patriarch could join me,” he says with his arms opened in welcome. He's standing at his place at the table in another suit that was probably featured in some recent designer advertisement. His sharp lapels and high-rise trousers give him away. So does the like-new stiffness of his suit jacket. He shakes Pa's hand before everybody sits down. “It is my hope that maybe we'll finally be able to come to a consensus. After all, it's most important that everybody wins. Wouldn't you agree, Carmine?”

Pa's skin ruddies. He stammers out an answer, doing his best to keep his speech clear.

But I know better.

I'm tempted to rub my brow like a sudden migraine's come on too strong. He's been drinking again.

Everybody can tell, though nobody cares enough or has the balls to call him out on it.

Nero's condescending smirk grows. “I'm glad we're on the same page, Carmine. You see, this conflict can come to a very simple, quick end. We can make sure there's something in it for everybody.”

“Nero,” Pa slurs. “You understand... the cuts on our operation. We've gotta... hic... we've gotta survive.”

Servers surround the table from all angles. They set down plates of antipasto to start off and fill our glasses to the brim with wine. Pa's the first to snatch his up for a taste.

I catch Carmelo's eye. He's gaping at me like a cat's got his fucking tongue. His mind is likely full of thoughts of the afterparty. The strippers he'll fuck and the tables he'll blow money on at the casinos.

Joey D'Amato is no different. None of the other capos are. Nobody's going to say a thing. They're going to sit tight and watch the car crash of Pa negotiating with Nero while belligerently drunk.

I grit my teeth and hate the fact that I give a damn.

"You need a decent cut," Nero says with a nod. "I would say that's a fair ask. Wouldn't you fellas?"

Everybody around the table murmurs their agreement except me.

I've moved on from checking for reactions to glaring at Nero. He senses the daggers I'm sending his way, because he purposefully skips me when he consults the table.

"I would say even with the cut, it's a decent profit. What do you think, Carmine?"

Pa slops down another mouthful of wine. "Nero, be reasonable. Cutting our profits on the... distribute... distribution..."

My sigh is audible as he struggles to piece together a basic thought.

"Then you want to... to take away Zinc Co."

Nero sits relaxed in his chair, his expression thoughtful. He's nursing his drink while Pa's already gearing up for his second.

"Tell you what," he says after a moment goes by. Everybody else has started focusing more on the appetizers as they're delivered to us. "Because I like you, Carmine, I'm going to let you remain as partner of Zinc Co. You'll share running that operation with my underboss, Leonardo. You can't say that's not a good deal, because it is."

“I guess that’s... alright...” Pa blinks with difficulty, his eyes bloodshot.

I pinch the bridge of my nose listening to this so-called negotiation. Pa’s too fucking pathetic and drunk to realize he’s being played. He’s not only lost out on a large chunk of profits on drug distribution, control of the company itself is being taken away.

Our family will not only lose out on millions of dollars, we’ll lose what little power we have in the city and crime world.

“Good, we’re on the same page. That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Nero asks.

“Nope. But when’s more coming?” Pa holds up his wine glass and glances around for the nearest server.

Nero laughs. “Somebody get this man a drink! Or heads will roll.”

Several of Nero’s men laugh along with him. It’s a chorus of cocky laughter that competes with the accordion sounds coming from the music.

Carmelo finally gets his head out of his ass and leans over to Pa. “You sure about this deal, uncle? We’re not keeping anything that we wanted to keep.”

“You challenging me, *goombah*?” he slurs.

“You can’t have that,” Nero says from his end of the table. His hazel eyes shine in the restaurant lighting as finally he directs his gaze onto me. “There’s just one more matter to discuss. The ballerina.”

“She’s mine. That matter is closed.”

“I’m afraid not. If you’re unwilling to give her up, then we have no deal. Which means we’re still in conflict. Which means that’s very bad news for some of you,” Nero says coolly.

“I hope you include yourself in that assessment. Because I can assure you, you will regret coming for what’s mine.”

“But she’s not yours. She never has been. She is owned by my family.”

“I paid for her. That contract is null and void.”

“I’m afraid not,” Nero says. “The sale was never approved. You’ll return her or there will be much trouble for your family.”

“Caelian,” Pa hiccups. “Give up the girl.”

I’m sitting with my fists on the table, veins throbbing in my neck. “I said she’s not being returned. She’s fucking mine. The matter is closed.”

The heads of everybody else at the table swivel from left to right as they watch the verbal confrontation go down.

Nero loses the humor in his gaze. His stare becomes icy, his smirk gone. “You seem to not understand the situation, Caelian. The girl was never up for sale. You may think you’ve purchased her, but what you’ve really done is steal her. She was not Ignazio’s to give away. Are you saying you are unwilling to give back what you’ve stolen from me?”

“We’ll... hic... we’ll buy you a new ballerina,” Pa slurs. “One with a... bigger... hic... ass.”

“You want her returned so you can have her?” I growl across the table. My chair crashes to the ground as I rise to my feet and stand at my full dominant height. “That is what’s

going on—you didn't want anyone else to marry her. You claimed her for yourself.”

Nero releases a cold laugh. “Hardly. The girl serves another use. Or has she never told you of her and her family's dealings with me? Has she never told you of our bond?”

Uncertainty flickers in and out of my clenched expression. “Whatever bullshit you're talking about, I'm not interested.”

“But I think you would be. I know Nevaeh and her family well. They've eaten at my table. They've been in my home. I've been front row at her performances. She's danced for me many times. You might even say... she's like a daughter to me.” His smirk returns as he gains the upper hand of the moment. “She and her family have helped me with this undertaking of making Zinc Co. mine. They've been some of my biggest assets. She was specially trained for reconnaissance and holds the key we need for the finishing touches of our take over. Perfect that she's been in your home all along. Hasn't she ever told you? The little innocent ballerina of your dreams isn't so innocent after all.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Nevae



THE FRONT DOOR SLAMS SO HARD, I CAN HEAR IT FROM THE second floor. I get up from where I'm seated watching a movie and creep over to peek into the hall. Heavy footsteps pound the floors followed by distant calls from Ms. Poitier.

What is going on?!

I have my answer in the next moment.

Caelian emerges onto the second floor landing with his features twisted in fury. He's never resembled a wolf more—his cold gray eyes tense and focused. His teeth bared and jaw chiseled into a sharp line of tension.

He's heading straight for me.

My stomach hardens with ice-cold dread.

Time seems to slow down.

I can't move. I'm frozen as Caelian closes in on me. Six feet, five inches of towering muscle barrels toward me, and the only thing I can do is watch it happen.

Once we're within arm's reach of each other, I choke out his name. "Caelian, what—?"

"No questions," he growls. His thick fingers snap shut on my wrist and jerk me into the bedroom.

The door slams behind us. He releases his hold on me too suddenly. I stumble a couple steps off balance, so lost as to what's going on, I'm questioning my recollection of events.

What have I missed? Why has Caelian been in such a horrible mood? Why has he graduated from sulking in silence to what's unmistakable rage?

"Let's get one thing straight, Nevaeh," he says, his Italian accent thicker than ever. He advances toward me while I scramble to put more space between us. "You don't speak unless I speak to you. I'm the one that asks the questions—and when I do, you'll fucking answer. You'll tell me the truth."

"Caelian—"

"What did I just say?" he yells, cutting me off. He jabs a finger into his rock-hard chest. "I'm in control! You'll do as I say!"

I bite back any rebuttal forming. My ice-cold dread has gone nowhere.

The wolfish gleam in his eyes leaves no question of how infuriated he is. It's an energy that poisons the entire room to the point it's inescapable. So visceral, I'm left feeling like I'm being crushed by the weight of it.

"What have you been keeping from me?" he asks.

"I haven't kept—"

"Wrong answer!" he barks. I flinch. He steps closer, blocking any exit. "Don't fucking lie to me, Nevaeh. This is your chance to be honest. Tell me what the fuck you've been keeping from me."

The icy dread intensifies until I'm numb altogether. I blink up at him, my heart pounding faster. "Caelian, I've told you

about myself. You knew most of what I've told you. Isn't that why you sought me out?"

He flashes his gritted teeth like a wolf about to feast. "So you're going lie to my fucking face."

"Caelian—CAELIAN!"

My scream rings in the air as I'm ripped off my feet. Caelian's bulging arms clench shut around my body and my head snaps back and forth from the sudden aggressive moment. I'm jerked, then flipped upside down, then turned over and pinned down onto my stomach.

Over Caelian's knee.

I realize what's about to happen a second too late.

"Caelian, let me—OW!"

His palm slams into my backside so hard it knocks every ounce of air from my lungs. My whole body jerks forward with vicious force. His hand at rest on my spine keeps me from rocketing toward the floor.

"Want more, *mia bella ballerina?*" he asks crudely, an edge of humor in his voice. "Because every fucking lie you tell me is another fucking spank earned... and worse."

"But—"

SMACK!

His palm crashes down on my backside a second time with no less force. I cry out at the stinging pain and then thrash against him in hopes I'll free myself. Caelian only presses me further down on his thick, muscled thigh.

"I told you, no talking. Keep pretending this is a fucking game. I will make you suffer more than you ever have before,"

he warns. No warmth is to be found in his voice. Any affection he's had for me is gone. A cry bubbles out of me as he goes on. "Tell me what you've been keeping from me."

I swallow against the emotion rising up. The temptation for more whimpers and tears that have begun wetting my eyes.

If I keep my cool, if I remain calm, then I'll get through whatever this is.

Clearly, someone's told Caelian something that's made him distrust me. I have an inkling what, though I'm not sure how I can give him what he wants without making my situation worse.

"I have told you what you've wanted to know," I say ambiguously. "But if there's something else you'd like to know. Just ask—STOP!"

Caelian's heavy palm rains down on me. He doesn't stop at one this time. His hand slams into me six more times, each smack harder than the one before it. By the time he's done, heaving a ragged breath from his broad chest, I'm shaking.

His assault has left me speechless and scatterbrained. He's spanked me so hard, using his full power, that I'll undoubtedly be sore for days.

He shows zero remorse.

He holds me in place with one hand. With the other, he flips the bottom half of my nightgown up over my backside and tears off my panties. The crass sound of the cotton ripping makes me flinch as I realize where this is going.

I'm not sure how much I'll be able to withstand before breaking.

Caelian stuffs my ripped panties into my mouth. “That’s enough from you. I don’t want to hear another fucking word from those juicy lips of yours. It’s nothing but fucking lies. Your chance to redeem yourself has passed. Now, I will do whatever the fuck I want.”

I’m tempted to spit out my panties and plead with him—ask him yet again why he’s doing this. If I do, he’ll only punish me.

He wants answers. Answers I can’t give him. Answers I’m not even sure of myself.

Caelian pushes two of his fingers into my pussy. I’m hardly wet enough. The intrusion is uncomfortable as he begins pumping them in and out.

I bite down on the wad of panties stuffed into my mouth.

“This pussy isn’t ready for my fingers. How will it fare with my cock?” he taunts. “You’re about to be in for a long night, *bella*. And if you think I’ll show you mercy, then get that out of your pretty little head now.”

My eyes squeeze shut as he goes knuckle deep. No time is offered to adjust before he’s withdrawing them and pushing back in just as roughly.

“I’ll tell you what I’ve learned about you,” he says, pumping away at my aching sex. “Your family works for the Vorones.”

“I’ve told you that!” I scream around the wad of panties.

He ignores me, his fingers picking up speed.

In, out, in, out, over and over again ’til my skin’s heating up and a strange sensation hits my belly.

“You were no innocent ballerina. You were specifically trained in espionage. That fucking sob story you gave me about never belonging and feeling controlled was bullshit,” he growls, growing angrier. The more furious he becomes, the more furious he pumps into me. He forces a third finger and I scream out and jerk my whole body against him “Stay fucking still—or I can penetrate this little pussy with other things. Things that might have you *begging* for my fingers.”

Tears roll freely down my cheeks, though I give up protests. I lay limply over his lap as he plays with my pussy.

“You were here to sabotage me and my family,” he says. “The second they found out I bought you, you were tasked with spying on me.”

No, no, no!

“Caelian,” I shriek, my words muffled.

“I feel foolish for trusting you. For ever thinking you’d adjust to the life I was trying to give you. That you were even deserving of it. You deserve nothing. Things are about to change, Nevaeh... for the worse. I’m about to show you how good you had it before you went and fucked up.”

I’m weeping by the time he’s returned his hand to my backside. He smooths his rough palm along the round shape almost in a tender way. The false sense of safety is nothing more than a prelude to the next strike of his palm.

It comes in the following second. Raw and brutal against my supple, sore flesh.

The torment does something to me the longer it goes on. Each smack intensifies the sting of the one before it; each dose of pain makes my heart pound harder.

It sends a current of adrenaline coursing through my veins.

Soon, I'm breathless. I'm counting the seconds 'til the next wallop and then soaking up the sting that comes with it.

My body quakes. My teeth bite into the rolled up fabric jammed in my mouth. I'm aching and hot. Sore and indignant... but also dazed and wet.

His fingers return to my pussy. I can practically feel his grin. "Does *mia bella ballerina* get turned on when I spank her? You like it when it hurts?"

I growl in answer, more than a little delirious. I couldn't form a full sentence even if I weren't gagged.

But even despite the confusing reaction he's forcing out of me, I'm distantly aware of one thing—I have to find a way out of this situation.

Caelian's not going to be merciful anytime soon. I can't give him the type of answers he's seeking. Which means I need an escape.

"Who would've known my ballerina's not so innocent?" he asks, rubbing my pussy. "Who would've known she's a bad, filthy little troublemaker that wants me to punish her?"

Think. Think. THINK!

I urge my body to cease its reactions to him. His probing fingers. The rough palm of his hand. The taunting words and insinuations of what's to come.

"It's only the beginning, *bella*," he says. "I'm going to make you wish you never—*ARGH!*"

I seize the moment in the only way I can. I wait until his hand shifts from where it's positioned on my back to aid his other hand in massaging my behind. The second it has, I'm rolling off him, thudding onto the ground. He's a towering

force rising up onto his feet and scooping a large hand down to snatch me.

But I'm ready for him—I anticipate the move and slide to the left. As he swipes at me a second time, I thrust my foot at his groin as hard as I can.

He roars like a beast, veins throbbing in his thick neck.

I'm already on the go. I'm leaping up onto my feet and darting for the door. In a few quick steps, I'm making it to the door and wrenching it open.

The wood floor is cold and slippery against my bare feet, but it spurs me to go faster. I hurtle down the hall in my nightgown and dark tangle of hair.

Caelian's not down for long. My foot's pushing off the bottom stair when his are pounding down the top half of the staircase.

Times like these remind me of how much of a maze his estate is. I zip down halls and round corners, huffing out frantic breaths, as I race toward the front door.

Twenty feet... fifteen feet... ten feet...

My hand stretches out and I leap the last few feet like this is a performance for Ignazio's show.

The night's a cold and frosty landscape with no light to be found. The sky's a color darker than graphite and the ground's caked in fresh snowfall.

I don't hesitate or give it any thought. My bare feet sink into the mounds of snow. The iciness shocks its way up my limbs and draws another gasping breath out of me. I push on, one foot after the other, 'til I'm turning numb. I'm crossing the

length of the courtyard, and the surrounding woodland comes into view.

I have no idea where the hell I'm even going, or what my real plan is. I just know I have to get away from Caelian and his wrath.

My hope for escape is dashed.

As I make my way through the snow, Caelian bulldozes across the snow-laden landscape. The air I'm sucking into my lungs vanishes and a dark cloak envelops me. His presence *consumes* me before he even touches me.

His arms wrap around me from behind in an attempt to lift me off the ground. I twist and squirm and slam my fists into his chest. The struggle becomes so messy we're knocked off our feet. We crash into the ground with his arms still locked around me.

“GET OFF ME!” I scream into the night. Frosted air puffs out in front of me and floats into the sky. I slam another fist into Caelian's chest, then jam my knee into his abdomen.

It's like kneeling steel. His muscles taut and impenetrable.

He refuses to budge no matter how hard I fight. He traps me under him and grabs hold of my left wrist to pin it above my head. The right shortly follows 'til it's just my body jerking against him. A cruel grin spreads across his face as he holds me down.

His normally olive complexion has paled in the cold night. The tip of his nose and hollow of his cheeks have tinged red. The same red as the bloodspots in one of his nostrils—probably a consequence of one of my desperate flying fists.

“Look at you, so fucking foolish,” he says. “Did you really think you'd get away? And if you did, where the fuck did you

think you were going? Listen carefully, *bella*, you'll hear the wolves in the woods howling at the moon."

"Let. Me. Up!"

"I've had enough of your insolence. You clearly haven't learned your lesson."

His large hand takes hold of both of my wrists. He keeps them pinned together above my head with as much ease as he had holding one in each hand. His knee prods my legs apart and his fingers return to my sex.

"Caelian, I said let me go!" I scream.

"And I said you're going to learn your lesson. Apparently, that has to be the hard way."

"Caelian..." I gasp. My eyes widen. "CAELIAN..."

He scoops up some snow and then pushes it inside me. My back arches and my thighs attempt to clamp shut to block him out, but it's no use—he keeps them spread wide apart and plugs two fingers into me, pushing the icy flakes of snow in deep.

The only way to describe it would be to say it's instant sensory overload. It's like being frozen from the inside out as the ice sets off a tingling numbness in my pussy. I go from acutely aware of my walls clenching to feeling the kind of intense cold that spreads throughout the rest of my body.

It's brutal and unforgiving. It's wrong and unnatural.

Yet through the icy pain emerges a small pulse of pleasure. His fingers pump in and out of me. He rubs my clit and watches my face. His grin grows more devilish at the reactions he's forcing out of me. The grunts of mine that slowly sound less angry, gradually more aroused.

“You’re wet, *bella*,” he laughs. “And not just from the melting ice. You like when I punish you. You like being mine.”

I grit my teeth. “I’m not yours. You’ll never have me.”

“But I already do. This pussy is fucking mine. This body is mine. That mouth of yours is mine. You’re mine,” he growls, reaching for the button and zipper of his pants. My thighs instinctively draw closer together only to be kneed apart by his more powerful legs. He spreads me wide and spears into me whole.

It draws the last of the air from my lungs. I gasp and arch up into him at the feeling of being so instantly full.

Caelian plants a hand in the snow to hold himself up and uses the other to grip my thigh and curl it around his hip. My hands latch onto his forearms without care as to how my nails slice into his skin. He doesn’t care either—he’s too busy groaning at how deep he’s gone.

“The fucking ice and the warmth from your pussy,” he grunts, hanging his head. “It feels too good to be true, *bella*. Your punishment’s my reward.”

Caelian rolls his hips and immediately sets a deep stroke. I quiver out a moan as a heat and cold I’ve never known overwhelm me. I’m lying barefoot in a bed of snow, my nightgown hiked up to my waist, with Caelian’s cock buried inside me.

The ice he’s pushed into my pussy has melted, but it’s left a cool trail of wetness in its wake. It’s paralyzed me enough that I can still feel the tingling numbness. Only now the heat of arousal slowly chases it away with every harsh pump of Caelian’s hips.

He swoops in and captures my bottom lip. It's both playful and dominant, demonstrating how I belong to him and he's claiming me.

There's no choice in the matter.

I shudder and return his kiss 'til my lips part and our tongues rub together. His hips roll in tune with the rhythm of our heavy kisses. His dick slides in impossibly deep, making me moan into his mouth.

“That's right, *mia bella ballerina*,” he growls, his strokes picking up in speed. He nips at the hollow of my neck like an animal. “Be my naughty ballerina. My filthy little ballerina that I'll fuck whenever I want.”

My eyes lift up to the midnight sky as pleasure sparks through me. The stars glittering across the blackish blue sky echo the pleasure I'm feeling—thousands of tiny sparks lighting me up 'til I'm right on the edge.

Caelian's not far behind. He ravishes my mouth. His violent fingers grope my breast and then curl along the base of my throat. The thick, velvety length of him sinks deep as he ruts away, fucking me into the snow.

I splay my hand against his broad, muscular shoulder and ride the rhythm of his strokes with him. I've surrendered and given up any fight as my hips move with his. My eyes meet his as his swollen hard cock fills me up.

Caelian might not be the husband I thought I'd have. He might not be a man I can trust. We may never truly be each other's person. But I can't deny the draw between us. The fraught chemistry that charges the air in moments like this as he takes me and claims me.

And I give in... because that's the only thing you can do when a man like Caelian Ziccardi marks you as his.

I shut out any other thought of what'll come after and focus on the pleasure.

It rises up until it's unbearable and then explodes from the inside out. The veracity at which my orgasm blows through me is stronger than any storm. My body's spinning in a tingling wave of pleasure as I come. I melt into the snow, lost to the moment.

Caelian follows me. One hand claws at the snow while the other crushes my thigh in bruising fashion. His muscles and veins strain against his skin as he works his hips and drills deep into me before he comes with a deafening roar.

I'm enthralled by the sight—Caelian letting go, tapping into the most primal side of himself, as he spills into me. His warm release feels like a special reward after the snow that had numbed me. He pulls out, his cock still pulsating, and I sit up to suck him clean.

His fingers fist in my hair, his breathing chaotic and out of sync. When I've swiped my tongue up and down the length of him and delighted in his tangy taste, he wrenches me up and plants a kiss on my mouth.

We stay huddled for a second longer like this, snow floating around us.

We've lost all concept of where we are and how freezing cold it is. Finally, he's rising to his feet and pulling me up along with him. His arm slides around my waist so that I'm pinned to his side as we set off toward the house.

"You've been punished, *bella*," he says. "Do I have to give you more... or are you finally going to tell me the truth?"

My body pings with the aftereffects of my orgasm. My mind's no less affected. It's clouded and slow to work. Two terrible things to be when someone's requesting the truth out of you.

I sigh, aware I can't deny him any longer. "Alright, Caelian. I'll tell you. Everything."

Nevæh



CAELIAN SITS ME DOWN WEARING A SOLEMN EXPRESSION ON his face. No words are needed for me to pick up on what he's expecting. We've come inside, taken hot showers, and warmed up in a fresh change of clothes.

Now that that's out of the way, he expects the truth I've promised him.

I let go of the air I've been holding in my lungs. "You have to swear you won't get angry."

He lifts his square chin, regarding me with a judicious stare. The shade of gray in his eyes is almost as dark as the night's sky.

"Caelian," I moan softly. "Please swear you won't get mad."

"Tell me, Nevi. Tell me the truth, and I will do my best."

Probably about as good as it's going to get all things considered. I rest my hands in my lap. My fingers have curled into two balls of anxiety. It's the only way I can keep from picking at my nail beds or nibbling on the nails themselves. Both bad habits of mine when I'm stressed and unsure what to do.

Ignazio used to swat at my hands whenever I'd do it during practice. He claimed ballerinas were supposed to have delicate hands. Our feet and toes might be battered and bruised, but our hands were visible—they were to remain in ideal condition.

But I never listened.

It was difficult to when my entire life depended on the whim of one man and his satisfaction with my family. If my father had been useful enough, or if we'd earned the right to breathe another day.

“Caelian, my father's still alive,” I say in what sounds like a small voice even to my ears. What I'm about to say are words I've never spoken aloud. “I've been instructed to claim he's dead, because it would prevent anyone questioning his whereabouts. What I told you about his use to Nero and the Vorones is true—my father's been a valuable asset to him for a long time. My whole life.”

He grunts, giving no other discernible reaction.

“But what I said about me being protected is also true. I wasn't sold into the flesh market because of my father's use to Nero,” I rush to add. “I was allowed to train at the Dresden Dance Company because my father was one of his most vital employees.”

“But...” he supplies.

“But,” I say, sighing. “I was also trained in other ways. All of the dancers are. We're to be Nero's eyes and ears. His covert means of spying on the rich and powerful businessmen in the city. They take us to dinners and purchase us for the night, thinking the service being provided is for their pleasure.”

He strokes the scruff on his chiseled jaw. “When really it’s about what information you can get from them.”

I nod. “No one suspects the dancers. We’re docile and obedient. We’re trained to be that way.”

“Trained in other ways as well.”

My fingers uncurl in my lap as my gaze lowers to them. Nail-bitten and chewed, they’re the fingers of a woman that’s lived much of her life under duress. I return to my bad habit, picking at my frayed cuticle, feeling the satisfying sting of the skin I rip away. The tiny gash I leave behind.

Caelian watches me as if he understands what I’m doing. He makes no effort to stop me like he has in the past. He allows me to indulge in my habit as I think through my thoughts.

“We were trained in the basic tenets of espionage,” I answer. “Combat, weapons training, surveillance and counter surveillance.”

“Suddenly, it makes so much sense how you were able to take out the gunman at the theater. That kick of yours...”

“I’m not skilled. I’m not a physical threat, Caelian.”

His slate-gray eyes narrow. “Nevi, your diminutive and unassuming size and nature are a threat enough.”

“I’ve never been a good spy. I’m not cut out for it.”

“Yet you’ve managed to fool me for weeks.”

“It wasn’t by choice. You have to believe me.” I stand up from where I’m tucked into the armchair by the window. I move toward it for a look at the white powder floating in the dark. “I was told if I went against my instruction, I would be

risking my father's life. I was told he would be killed, Caelian. My mother insisted I continue no matter what."

He stands up from his position on the edge of the huge king-sized bed and comes up behind me. His Herculean presence engulfs me in masculine heat without touch. It's visceral enough I can feel the energy he exudes.

"I didn't want to keep it from you," I say, my throat sore. My voice strangled. "But I didn't know if I could trust you. The longer I was with you, the harder it became to lie. The more I pleaded with my mother to find me an out so I wouldn't have to lie to you any longer."

His titan-sized hands come up to grip the ball of my shoulders. Tight and firm but strangely soothing. "You thought I would use you against Nero?"

"I have sensitive information," I confess. "Information Nero didn't want you to have."

"Which is why he tried so desperately to get you back."

I labor another breath, its sound gritty to my ears. "I hated feeling like I was betraying you, Cael. After how hard you tried to make me happy, I realized I didn't want to deceive you anymore. But my mother insisted if I wanted to keep my father alive..."

He squeezes my shoulders, then bows his head and nuzzles his face against mine. "I understand, *bella*. You were carrying out what you were told to do. You had no allegiance to me. I forced you to be here."

My stomach rolls with unease despite his words. "Did Nero demand you give me back?"

"Yes," he answers. "But I won't be doing so. You're mine, regardless of what consequence that comes with."

I do my best to mask my relief. I meet his gaze in the reflection of the glass window and allow for a subtle quirk of my lips. A small but poignant gesture.

His grip tightens on my shoulders. “What is the information you have, Nevi? What do you know that Nero is so concerned about?”

I think fast, weighing options, choosing my reaction carefully. “I’m not exactly sure. I have a key. It unlocks some kind of code that’s important to Nero in gaining control of your family’s pharmaceutical company. My father gave it to me. I hid it in the city.”

Caelian’s broad, muscled frame eases half a step back from me. His hands go nowhere, smoothing down the length of my arms and then gliding upward again. “I figured it would be something like that. His desperation to have you returned was too much. It wasn’t out of affection or even lust. The more I’ve thought about it, the more I’ve suspected he wants you for another reason. Where in the city is this key?”

“In my old dorm. I never grabbed it before I was brought here.”

“And you don’t know what it unlocks beyond that it’s a code?”

“My parents have never told me. They’ve wanted to protect me.”

Caelian grunts, but says nothing else.

“W-what now?” I stutter out. My brows knit watching him in the window glass.

“You mean will I be returning you?” he asks, and I nod. “No. How many times do I have to make it clear, *mia bella ballerina*, that you are mine and mine alone?”

I breathe his name as he eases me around and takes my lips in a gentle, consolatory kiss. His lips are warm and welcoming and enough to make me forget any other thought on my mind. I follow his lead, reveling in the lash of his tongue and suckle of his lips. His fingers sweep across my cheeks and then scoop behind my ears. He holds my face and kisses me like a man keen on taking advantage of the moment.

I'm more than happy to let him.

By the time we break apart, I'm feeling like Caelian's kisses have put me under his spell. He guides me to the huge bed, and we begin pulling back the covers and dimming the lights. We slide into place against each other with his bulging arms wrapping snugly around me and his lips pressed into the side of my neck.

"Buonanotte bellissima ballerina," he whispers.

He's asleep within minutes.

I should be too.

Instead, I'm wide awake. I'm left staring into the naked dark of our bedroom, wondering about the choices I've made. If I've done the right thing by handling Caelian's questioning the way I have. If I've put him in more danger or betrayed Mom and Dad.

My gaze lands on the closet opening. Though it's too dark to make out what's inside, I stare at the dark mouth with the suffocating dread that the truth is only a few feet away. Everything Caelian and the Ziccardis and Nero and the Vorones have ever wanted.

In my possession and my possession alone.

Caedian



THERE ARE SOME PEOPLE WHO PREFER TO KEEP BAD BLOOD A secret. If they have animosity toward someone or a rivalry going, they'd rather pretend otherwise. They operate off passive aggression and furtive schemes that they hope will bring down their enemy.

I'm the opposite. Once it's clear that I am on my own with Nero and the Vorones seeking what I have, and my family against my militant stance, it's a relief. There's no ambiguity to the situation, which allows me to move even more freely than I already was.

Any gray area is gone.

They are *all* my enemies.

I act accordingly—my men keep tabs on Nero and the Vorones. We need to be abreast of any potential incursions he may be planning, so that we'll be prepared.

Nero makes for a different kind of adversary than my clumsy family members. He won't hire any D grade assassins to carry out the job, nor will he put his most incompetent men on it either. A megalomaniac obsessed with power like him would want to crush his opponent.

It's how he's maintained complete domination over Dresden. It's how he and his father managed to cull the Ziccardi family for years now.

I've made it clear I won't be cooperating with his demands. Therefore, I'm his target in need of destruction.

"Nothing as far as I can tell, C," Matteo reports. He gives a shrug before shoving his hands in his pockets. "It seems like they're moving like they usually do."

"And you've had guys on the street keeping their ears open?"

He nods. "Nothing. Not a word about any kind of move being made against you."

"Interesting. I'm not so sure I buy there's nothing in the works." I stroke my jaw, staring absently around the room of my command center. "He must be keeping it under wraps."

"Our turncoat—you know the guy we've got at Vecoli—swears he's heard nothing, and you know Nero eats there four, five times a week. It's possible he's lulling you into a false sense of security. If I was Nero, and I was gonna try something, I'd wait a while. For you to forget about it."

I grunt out a laugh. "I'll never forget about it. He's made it clear where he stands. If I won't give up Nevaeh, then he'll make an attempt to take her by force."

"If I may, C," Matteo says, frowning and scratching his head. "Ever consider just... cutting a deal with him? He seems to want the ballerina real bad. You could probably nickel and dime him for a big payout."

One look of mine is all it takes.

He's barely finished his stupid train of thought before he's cringing and backing down. Redness creeps up his neck and reaches his ears. He holds up both hands to show he means no offense.

"Or not," he quickly says. "Just a suggestion. I know you... uh, you like the girl."

"You seem to be as clueless as my family, Matteo. I won't give Nevaeh up, because she's mine. I bought her out of that fucking contract, and I've married her. She's the woman I've wanted. Why would I give her up?"

"Right. Right, C. That's real true. How about I go reach out to our inside guy at Vecoli and tell him to do some more digging? He might be able to find something else out from one of Nero's security at the restaurant."

"That sounds like something productive for you to take on."

Matteo gets the hint and flees the room in a few rushed steps.

Nobody has to understand why I'm so committed to keeping Nevaeh.

Nevaeh herself doesn't seem to understand why. But it's for no one else to agree with or comprehend.

Simply put, Nevaeh's mine, and she'll remain mine 'til the last beat of my pained heart. My right hand comes up my chest to feel its weak twitches. I've been making an effort to follow Tulio's directions. All medications have been taken, and I've refrained from things like alcoholic beverages and cigars.

Partly due to Nevaeh's influence—her large, sad brown eyes when she witnesses me puffing on a cigar or cutting up a bloody slab of red meat have been enough to guilt me.

Only she holds that power. A privilege she doesn't realize she has.

I leave the command center behind and emerge on the ground floor to find *mia bella ballerina* twirling away in her dance studio.

As I so often do whenever I come across her mid practice, I stand to the side and play spectator. Right away it's apparent that she's not dancing to a particular routine. She's uninhibited and free, prancing across the room in fast footwork. Tendrils of hair begin falling loose from her normally tight bun, but she pays them no mind and keeps dancing.

I watch in amazement as a euphoric expression blossoms on my ballerina's face. It's similar to the one she makes when she comes. The sheer and pure adrenaline rush of pleasure.

She soars through the air in an impressive far-reaching leap and then lands with the grace of a swan. She flows into more quick footwork, her bright pink ballet shoes a blur. A series of rapid spins follows, where I question how she possibly controls herself to such a perfected degree.

No wonder Ignazio chose her as the star of his show. She's incredible.

She comes out of her last spin breathless and dewy from so much movement. Her eyes widen at the sight of me, and she gives a startled little, "*Oh.*"

The sound's almost enough to make me hard on the spot.

"C'mere, Nevi," I say, opening my arms to embrace her.

She walks straight into them. I hoist her up off her feet with my usual ease—she's so light and easy to toss around—and plant a deep kiss on her mouth.

I draw it out, licking her lips and teasing her tongue. She tastes sweeter than fucking sugar. More addictive than it. It only makes me greedier in how I devour her. My arms have locked underneath her ass, allowing her to sit up perched against my chest.

But I'm not the only one that's losing control. Nevaeh doesn't hold back in returning my affection. She's like a wild feline rubbing her tongue to mine and moaning in my arms. Her body subtly rocks against me, her legs banding around my torso, and her fingers scratching my beard. My ballerina's turned on.

I bet her little pussy's already gone slick.

A growl thunders from my chest. I turn us around so that I can position her against the wall.

“C! You might want to come address this!”

Ms. Poitier's call echoes from down the hall, piercing the aroused fog that has begun to spread through my brain.

Nevaeh and I break apart with our breath heavier than usual and the pupils dilated in our eyes. My hold on her loosens and I set her down on her feet.

“Stay put.”

I follow the sound of Ms. Poitier's voice. In a manor this size, it's no easy feat. She's calling from the west wing where the front entrance is located. I'm coming down the hall when I piece together what's going on.

She's in the den waiting for me among the elaborate Christmas decorations she and Nevaeh put up, but she isn't alone—Carmelo's seated in one of the wide-backed, tufted armchairs. He's already helped himself to a drink, left leg crossed so that the ankle rests on his right knee.

I stop short a few steps into the room. “Who invited you in?”

“You did. Remember? A while back. You gave me your gate code weeks ago. In case of emergency.”

“This isn’t that kind of situation. In which case, I’m still wondering what you’re doing here.”

I make a mental note to change the gate code. While Carmelo has always been the best of the worst in my family, we’re no longer as close as we once were even weeks ago. His inaction and behavior at the recent sit-down dinner made it clear he’s siding with Pa, Coreno and Cristian. At least ideologically. He, too, believes I should give Nevaeh up.

“I came to enjoy some of this celebratory brandy I gave you weeks ago, remember? The joyous occasion of your wedding,” he says, sipping from his drink. “And, also, to pass some news about relations between our family and the Vorones.”

“And, apparently, to raid my liquor cabinet.”

He cracks an easy smile. “You’re not supposed to be drinking. This brandy shouldn’t go to waste.”

“What news do you have?” I move deeper into the room and grab the decanter of brandy he’s just poured from. I’m conservative in the amount I pour. Just enough for a few swallows. After sampling its woody taste, I take up the armchair across from his.

It’s instances like this where we’re opposite each other that our differences stand out—I’m the size of a tank, covered in tattoos with a harsh ruggedness that’s borderline uncivilized. Carmelo’s closer to Nero in the way that he presents himself.

A tailor-made suit that highlights his toned arms but hides his chicken legs. Only he's much less stylized than Nero.

Carmelo always has used his averageness to his advantage.

"It's about Nero's intentions," Carmelo says. His expression's somber, his groomed eyebrows straight slashes on his forehead. "I'm sure you've figured out he's not giving up his quest to get the ballerina back."

"I'm sure you've figured out I don't give a shit."

The corner of his lip spasms into the ghost of a smile. "Cristian and Coreno have a real problem with that."

"Still don't give a shit."

"Pa seems to have resigned himself to our fate. Whatever that may be," he goes on, then labors a sigh. "Nero's already put a plan into motion. Have you been upping your security measures?"

"You don't need to worry about me and my measures, cousin. Be assured that I'll handle any attempts made against me and what's mine."

"Fair enough. I always appreciate your delivery. Straight and to the point. It's a lot less passive aggressive than the other two."

"Some would say your neutrality is just as frustrating."

The ghostly smile returns for a brief second before he disguises it by drinking from his glass. "I'd say that's probably true. But we don't all like to be rash and hotheaded. Some of us think things through and consider our options. I've done just that, and I've made up my mind."

I glare at him, swallowing another mouthful. "And what would that be?"

“An offer has been made,” he answers plainly, setting down his drink. He reaches into the inside pocket of his suit jacket. “Stick with the losing team or join the winning team. Guess which one I’ve chosen? Nero wants the ballerina, and I’ve promised him I’ll deliver her.”

From inside his suit jacket, he pulls some kind of remote. I rise up from the armchair with my fists curled and my temper ramping up. My heart’s exploded into many fast, painful beats. I’ll knock his teeth out before he can ever push a button.

“Careful, cousin,” he warns. “We’ve got the place rigged. You make one wrong move, you’re going to be blown to smithereens. This can be violent and nasty, or it can be painless and easy. Which will it be?”

“You fucking piece of shit!” I bark at him. I take a large step toward him, about to swing.

He holds up the remote with his finger hovering over the button. “Hand over the ballerina. I’ll leave and so will Nero’s men—yes, they’re positioned all around your estate. Those woods make for a good remote home. But they also make for the perfect hideout for intruders. Cousin, don’t make this any harder than it has to be. Give her up.”

“FUCK OFF! You want a fucking fight, I’m about to rip that smirk off your face. We’ll all die if that’s what it’ll come down to!”

“You can’t be this stupid—”

“I’m death, asshole! I’ve got nothing to fucking lose! Press that button. Blow up the place. I’ll still beat your ass. I’ll bash your fucking skull in.”

My threats unnerve an even-keeled, prissy son of a bitch like Carmelo. He swallows hard, his Adam’s apple shaky,

though he keeps his finger on the button.

Apparently, it's dawning on him that if he does push this button, he'll be starting an immediate war he'll be in the thick of.

"Caelian," comes a quiet voice from the doorway. "Don't fight them. I'll go."

I'm breathing raggedly as I turn to look at Nevaeh. She's frowning, the sadness in her eyes perplexing.

"Nevaeh—"

"It's the only way this ends," she says. "If I'm given back to Nero. He'll destroy you, Caelian. You're one *capo* with a small crew. He's the don of the family that controls the entire city. It's... it's no match."

Though she speaks the truth, I don't give a fuck. I'm prepared to go down fighting 'til my dying breath.

"The lady's spoken," Carmelo says, standing up. He makes sure to keep the remote within view as if warning he still possesses the ability to destroy the estate. "She's coming with me, cousin. I'll call off Nero's men that are surrounding the place and the explosives will be dismantled. Nobody's got to get hurt... well, except maybe her. Not really sure what he wants to do with her."

"Nevaeh," I growl like a beast. "Come here."

She shakes her head. Tears shine in her eyes. "Caelian, I have to go. It's what's best for everyone. For you."

"Nev... NEVAEH!"

The pain stabs straight through me and renders me immobile. My hand clutches at my chest as I husk out

desperate breaths and grit my teeth, urging myself to move through the pain. I can't fucking let it slow me down.

Not right now. Not as Carmelo grips Nevaeh by the arm and begins striding down the hall.

“Bye, cousin!” Carmelo calls. “You shouldn't have drunk that brandy. I told you it was bad for you. It was bottled that way.”

“N-N-Nevi...” I croak, unable to complete a word much less a sentence.

I stumble sideways, then collapse onto the ground in a heavy thud. A numbing tingle ripples through my body as it jerks against the hardwood floor. The pain radiating from my chest is beyond comprehension. Something as simple as keeping my eyes open becomes a herculean effort. Still, I fucking fight. I grit my teeth and I howl like a fucking beast.

“Mr. C, what's—oh my god!” Ms. Poitier screams.

The sight of her scurrying toward me as I lay paralyzed on the ground is the last thing I see before I can't hold on any longer and let go.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Nevae



“YOU’RE A REAL VALUABLE BARGAINING CHIP,” CARMELO Ziccardi tells me in the limo. He’s shoved me inside and slammed the door.

The second his driver hits the gas, we’re speeding down the winding graveled terrain that leads up to Caelian’s remote home located in the mountains outside Dresden.

Carmelo pockets the remote he’s been clutching and lets out a relieved breath. “Glad I didn’t need to blow anybody up. Believe it or not, I didn’t want to kill my cousin.”

“You could’ve fooled me,” I mumble.

“Hey, hey, hey. You ever meet the rest of the *goombahs* in my family? Cristian resembles porky the pig, and Coreno’s busy knocking old women over if it means he gets a step ahead. Caelian’s always been my favorite. I might’ve hurt him by getting him to drink that brandy, but it was necessary.” Carmelo presses one of the buttons on the sleek wooden dashboard in the back of the limo. A panel slides to the right to reveal a built-in minibar. He reaches in to grab a bottle of sparkling water and raises his brows at me. “Thirsty, ballerina?”

“I have a name.”

“Yes, you do. Ballerina.”

“What was wrong with the brandy?”

“Between me and you, it had a certain kind of poison in it. Caelian’s very susceptible considering his heart condition. All part of the experiment. He’s got no clue.”

“What experiment are you talking about?”

“You know. You used to perform for Nero and my uncle during the business dinners. Isn’t that why Caelian started dreaming about you? He might not remember it ‘cuz half the time he was drugged out of his mind... but the rest of us do. Caelian’s whole sickness has been used as a means for Zinc Co. to develop more medications. More treatments. His father sold him out. Why do you think we were trying so hard to get him to do that treatment in Zurich?”

“And when he left without doing it, you had the doctors come—”

Carmelo shrugs. “It’s business. Just like this move of mine is.”

I bite the inside of my cheek and force my gaze out the backseat window of the limo. I might’ve chosen to come with Carmelo, but it had nothing to do with him and everything to do with my hope I was resolving the situation as peacefully as possible.

What other option did I have? Caelian would have fought tooth and nail against his cousin and the men Nero had armed him with. He would’ve put himself in more danger.

He’s in no physical health to fight a war against Nero and the others.

For as dominant and powerful as he is, he's no match against his true might.

In a way, Nero's already won.

He has Dad. If he's sending crews of men to capture me and rigging Caelian's estate with explosives, then his patience is running out. He'll murder Dad sooner than later if he doesn't get what he wants.

It goes against everything Mom and Dad have advised. But I made a snap decision in the spur of the moment that I can only hope works out.

Caelian's alive and rid of the conflict at his doorstep. Maybe I'll be able to persuade Nero into finally releasing my family from his tyranny, and in turn leaving Caelian be.

I sigh, my heart aching. Half an hour ago I had been flitting around the dance studio, losing myself in the music as I freestyled. Caelian had appeared and I'd felt a beat of passion darting into his arms. I had no idea it would be for the last time...

My eyes close and I lean my head into the cool window glass.

Carmelo takes notice, sipping from his bottle of sparkling water. "Cheer up, ballerina. I hear Nero gets sick of his women pretty fast. Your end's probably gonna come on quick. Hopefully, it'll be painless."

"Stop talking to me."

"Did you get mouthy like that with my cousin? Don't let my civilized appearance fool you—I will bitch slap that little pout off your face if I have to. I'd rather deliver Nero's possession unmarked, but respect is respect. He'll have to understand."

I ball up a fist in my lap. My mouth stays clamped shut despite my mounting temper. It leaves me flushed and full of pent up tension. I've never been an angry person but being forced to sit beside the man that's taken me away from Caelian brings it out of me.

He won't shut up as he boasts about his good fortune.

He tells me all about how Nero had approached him after their recent sit-down dinner and made a proposition.

"It came as a surprise," he rambles on. "But Nero's an observant man. He picked up on the dynamics in my family and he could tell I was his best option. I'm levelheaded and reasonable, unlike Caelian and Coreno. I'm not a lazy fuck like Cristian, and I'm no drunk like my Uncle Carmine. He gave me an out, so I took it. I'm looking at it as a job promotion."

I shoot him a loathing glare. "Do you really think Nero's going to reward you? You've proven how easily swayed you are by betraying your family."

"Some things are worth the risk."

I'm forced to endure the rest of the limo ride listening to more of Carmelo's bragging. At some point, I disappear into my thoughts and filter out anything he has to say.

The drive from Caelian's estate deep into the city takes us almost two hours. It seems the next time I'm sitting up straight and pulling myself from my headspace, we're braking outside the Dresden Performing Arts theater.

A building I know all too well.

My stomach lurches. I turn to Carmelo. "Why are we here?"

He shrugs. “Beats me. Nero requested you be delivered here. So that’s where I’m bringing you.”

As if the situation couldn’t feel more degrading, I’m passed off from the hands of Carmelo into the hands of Ignazio.

In the weeks since I’ve last seen him, he hasn’t changed. He’s as willowy and foreboding as ever, regarding me with dark, unkind eyes and a tight mouth. His skeletal fingers enclose around my wrist, and he informs Carmelo he’ll be letting Nero know I’ve arrived.

Some of the men Carmelo’s with—all of whom are dressed in all black with gelled hair and tough guy mean scowls—stay behind. The others leave with him. The former I’m assuming being Nero’s men.

They shadow me and Ignazio every step we take.

I struggle against his hold as he steers me into the back entrance of the theater. His fingernails pinch into my skin in punishment.

“Hold still, Nevaeh. You’ve no idea the amount of trouble you’ve caused.”

“*You sold me,*” I spit out, unable to disguise my anger.

He jerks me along so that I stumble. “That’s beside the point. You’ve been a pain in my ass for a while.”

I’m so lost as to what’s going on.

Ignazio’s never been a walk in the park, but there’s something off about his behavior. He scolds me loudly with obvious glances around as though he’s checking to make sure we’re within earshot of Nero’s men. He won’t let go of me and

seems eager to show off how easily he can bully and push me around.

I'm more than used to his harsh words. His criticisms ranged from deep-dive critiques of my dance technique to cruel comments about my body shape and weight.

He shoves me into the dressing room that's commonly used by the understudy, and then eases the door shut, promising the men I'll be out in a few minutes.

"I'll get her changed and she'll be ready to go!" he calls.

The second we're alone, I can't hold back any longer. I slap him across the face. It's a bold move that's unlike me, but I've been bullied and pushed around enough for one day. Any further punishment I'll suffer is worth it.

The sound bounces off the walls of the cramped room. His cheek reddens from the hit. He takes a step into me and forces me back one.

"Don't ever put your hands on me!" I say. "I'm not going to let you touch—"

"Listen here, you stupid girl," he snarls through clenched teeth. His eyes flash with the same kind of warning they used to during practice whenever one of the dancers messed up. "Lower your voice. Don't you see what I'm doing? That I'm trying to help you out?"

"Wha... what?"

"Nero's men are watching. They're here waiting on his arrival."

"Nero's coming to the theater—?"

"That's right. To collect you. But first, he wants you to dance for him. Like old times."

My brain feels crowded with confusing, contradictory thoughts. I blink several times. “He couldn’t have wanted me just for that.”

“It’s not just for that. You know why he’s demanded your return. Do you have it?”

“Have... what?”

“The code,” Ignazio says, then he moves even closer. I’m trapped between him and the vanity table behind me. “Your mother said you have it.”

“You’ve been in touch with my mother?”

“We’re going to pull off the impossible, you stupid girl. You do as I say, we’ll get out of here in one piece. We’ll be able to find your mother and gain the upper hand. Got it?”

No. This couldn’t be more confusing.

“My mother’s never mentioned she’s told you about it.”

“That’s because I’m undercover. Who else do you think was responsible for protecting you for so many years? I could’ve sold you off many different times. There was no shortage of fans interested in spending a night with you. Do you think any other handler would’ve protected you like I have?”

My brows knit in confusion. “I guess not...”

“Get dressed. Now. Quickly. We don’t have much time.”

“I haven’t even warmed up—”

“There’s no time. Hurry.”

I sigh and do as Ignazio says.

The lone costume dangling from the rack in the corner happens to be in my size. A coincidence that’s no coincidence

at all but clearly meant for me. I slip into the leotard and sparkling tulle skirt and then rush to do what I can with my hair.

It's the fastest, least polished preparation I've ever had before a performance on the stage.

Ignazio barely waits for the last bobby-pin in my hair. He's back to being a loud bully, clutching me by the arm and dragging me from the dressing room.

The men let him know Nero's arrived and is seated in the audience. He expects the performance to start in five minutes.

"But what am I even performing?" I pant, scurrying to keep up on our walk backstage.

"Your solo from *Lupi Nella Notte*. I have the music on deck. It'll impress him. You should want to stay alive."

Ignazio gives me another hard nudge toward the stairs to the stage. My legs feel stiff and uncooperative as I stagger my way up the steps.

The bright stage lights flash on and almost blind me. An arm comes up to shield my eyes. Nerves flutter inside my belly in warning I'm beyond unprepared. I'm in no condition to perform, let alone a complex routine like my solo from *Lupi Nella Notte*.

My mind's fuzzy. My heart aches. Caelian feels like a ghost alongside me, making me wish he were really here.

His protection and the safety I found in him.

"There she is!" Nero yells from his seat in the fifth row. The huge theater is empty except for him and a handful of his men. He breaks out into applause with a delighted grin stretched onto his face. Though it's been a while since I've last

seen him, he's as ostentatious as ever in a black and gold embroidered dinner jacket. His loose curls shine even at a distance from all the product he's used.

I drop my arm to my side and give him no reaction. I won't let him know he gets to me. I won't make whatever this is more enjoyable for him.

"Well?" he demands loudly in the empty theater. "What do you have to say for yourself, Nevaeh? Do you realize the amount of trouble we've gone through to get you here? You've been a very, very bad ballerina. Your family's been very, very bad too. Explain."

My lips part to speak, then I stop and glance to my left off stage. Ignazio's watching with the kind of baffled expression that tells me he's unsure how I should play this. The nerves already running rampant inside me intensify.

"I... I don't know," I answer uncertainly.

Nero quirks a groomed brow. "You don't know?"

I shake my head. "No."

"You mean you've been ducking me for weeks—your whole family's been—and I'm supposed to believe you don't know? Sweetheart, you better fucking know," he says, pulling out a handgun as though it's a toy to tinker with. He cocks back the hammer and aims it at me on stage. "Let me tell you how this is going to work. You've got some vital information. You're going to entertain me with your little dance like you used to, then you're going to provide me with what your family's taken from Zinc Co. Then... then I'll decide if I want to be nice or if I want to be nasty. Believe me when I say, you want me to be very nice to you. *Capeesh?*"

A numbness settles over me. I nod, feeling any hope drain from my body.

Nero grins wider. “Good, sweetheart. Now, go on. Dance.”

TWENTY-NINE

Caedian



“NEVAEH,” I GRIT OUT. “NEVAEH!”

“C, you’ve got to stay still,” Ms. Poitier lectures from somewhere beyond my blurred vision. “You’ve got to let Tulio do his job.”

My arms swipe at whoever it is hovering over me. Clobbering smacks that could easily knock a normal person off their feet. In the blinding fever of my pain, I don’t have a single fuck to give if I do. I keep swinging my arms and finally connect with solid skin.

A punch to the throat.

Dr. Tulio chokes at the force of it. He stumbles several steps back and grips his throat with terror widening his eyes.

“C, what the hell!?” Ms. Poitier gasps. She appears as a distorted shape in my limited vision. “Dr. Tulio was administering your treatment. You’re acting like a barbarian.”

“Nevi!” I croak in my weak, husky voice. “NEVI!”

There’s not much I can think or say in moments like this, where my heart feels like it’s being ripped apart. It’s all I can do to simply stay alive. Being drugged into numbness and slumber have been how I’ve managed so long.

But this moment’s different.

Even as the pain eats me up, the only thing I can think of is Nevaeh.

She's gone. My angel is gone.

Ms. Poitier frowns as if reading my thoughts. “C, we’ll get her back. It’s more important right now that you let Tulio treat you.”

Distantly, between the debilitating bursts of pain, I recognize she’s right. My giant, muscular husk of a body falls still. Dr. Tulio cautiously approaches the exam table I’m lying on inside his office.

“No sleep,” I grunt. “I don’t want to fucking sleep through this. Just treat me, then numb me. I’ve got to get Nevi.”

“But, Mr. Ziccardi, the treatment will work better—”

“DO IT!” I roar, and he jumps like a frightened mouse.

There are no more protests. Dr. Tulio seems to realize that I’m too thick-skulled for him to get through to, so he falls silent and works away. Needles pierce my skin. Pain radiates through me. Breaths become a luxury.

I grit my teeth and bear it.

An eternity seemingly passes by before Dr. Tulio has administered the treatment beginning to end and is stepping back. He rolls off his latex gloves and turns to admire the EKG machine beside the exam table.

“You’re steadying out,” he says. His tone holds a note of somberness and disapproval. “But please keep in mind any exertion may—”

“I’ve got to go,” I interrupt, swinging my legs over the side of the table. I wrench away the electrode pads and wires that

have been connected to me and barrel out of the room with more force than a canon.

It's how I crash down the halls too. I'm on a rampage as I bark at my men to assemble and get ready to launch our mission. We're about to track down Carmelo and his men and massacre every last one of them. No mercy. No survivors. Only barbaric bloodshed and the sweetest revenge.

Ms. Poitier reaches me one last time at the door to plead with me. Worry glosses her eyes in the form of tears as she tells me I'm not strong enough.

"Get out of the way," I growl, strapped down with weapons and ammunition.

"C, don't you realize how insane you're being? This won't end well!"

"I don't give a fuck!" I snarl in her face. Ferocity deepens my voice beyond its usual rough and low sound.

Ms. Poitier doesn't dare challenge me again.

With an incline of my head, I motion to my men that it's time to go.



We comb the city for Carmelo. Any location where he could've taken *mia bella ballerina*. Starting with his home, we tear the place to shreds and shoot up any of his men that attempt to interfere. His business operation meets the same fate. Then we turn our ire to Nero and the Vorones and begin picking off whatever locations Nevaeh could've been transported to.

Matteo is the one with a spark of genius. It's as we've massacred the men at Vecoli that he turns to me with his head tilted and a befuddled look on his face. "What if they've taken her to the theater? That's where she was signed with the dance company, right? Wouldn't that be where Nero wanted her to return?"

Though I have no way of knowing if his theory is correct, it makes enough sense that I round up my crew and tell them it's where we're headed next.

We pull up to the Dresden Performing Arts Theater in a matter of minutes. From the moment that we do, I'm aware it's the correct place—a long line of Vorone vehicles are parked in the curved valet section.

Several of his men take notice and migrate toward the stone steps of the theater. I'm holding nothing back in this moment. The fun and games are over. All chances for negotiations and civilized discussion have passed.

I hold up my semiautomatic rifle and open fire on the men. They're sprayed with so many bullets their bodies convulse while they're still on their feet. The bullets running through various parts of them won't allow anything less. Only after me and my men have shot them a dozen-odd times each do they flop to the floor in crimson pools.

We rush past them without a second glance back. Entering through the front doors of the theater, we're like any SWAT team invading a territory in search of our perpetrator. The difference being this perpetrator happens to be even more powerful than we are.

Nero has to have heard the commotion outside the theater. It wouldn't surprise me if this has been set up as some sort of elaborate trap.

I keep my eyes peeled, my weapon pointed, moving carefully through the theater lobby. Around me, my men fan out and check the different sections of the building.

Pain twinges through me. Remnants from my earlier episode. I push on from sheer willpower alone. If I die tonight, I'll die knowing I went out in a blood-soaked massacre, taking back what's mine.

Mia bella ballerina.

The main men who have stayed with me and not gone off to clear other parts of the building congregate outside the double doors. Matteo is at the front, waiting for my go ahead. I stride forward wearing a mask I've donned many times—cold, bone-chilling fury that won't go away 'til my lust for blood and violence has been sated.

I give my nod of approval. “We're going in.”

Matteo and another guy fling open the double doors and we spill into the theater with our weapons drawn. I enter last, coming down the center of my group of men.

Our hunch was correct. The rest of the theater might be empty, but this room couldn't be more opposite. Nero's men stand in a dutiful line on the far side of the theater. Nero himself is on stage. Nevaeh is an arm's length away.

He grins at the sight of us, cocks his hammer, and points his gun at Nevaeh's head. “Not so fast, Caelian. Take another step, and this gets real messy, real fast.”

THIRTY

Nevach



AT NERO'S COMMAND TO DANCE, THE SOUNDTRACK TO Ignazio's last award-winning ballet, *Lupi Nella Notte*, begins playing. Familiar music I haven't danced to since my serious ankle injury last year.

I trust my instincts and let go. Muscle memory takes control. My body flows in tune with each note of the music, within seconds performing like I'm alone on the stage. Nero's watchful gaze no longer exists.

No one else does except for the beautiful piece of art I execute with my body.

Rising en pointe on my left leg, my right stretches in and then out. My arms arc in front of me. I'm a bird about to take flight as the music swells. Then I'm launching into a series of coupé turns. One after another I spin and spin.

I spin until I'm a blur to the naked eye. The music transitions into softer, more whimsical notes, taking me with them. I travel with the sound, slipping into fast footwork across the stage.

Ignazio, Nero, even Caelian have often compared my movements to walking on clouds.

Now is no different as I circle the stage like I'm a musical note. I frolic and leap, my arms sweeping, and I forget the rest of the world exists. Worry, heartbreak, pain... none of it can hurt me in the moment I've given into my body's love of dance.

The solo ends before I'm ready for it to. My pointe shoes slide across the shiny wood flooring and my arms rise above my head in perfect arc position. The last note plates and I take in my first deep breath in minutes.

The trance I've slipped in vanishes and reality returns. I'm on the stage at the theater having just performed a solo for Nero.

His lone applause echoes throughout the cavernous theater. I go still in the center of the stage, uncertain what he expects from me next. His eyes gleam as he thumps his hands together over and over again. The corner of his lip lifts into a grin.

But it's not a grin that means anything good for me. It's cruel and mocking, showing how much pleasure it brings him to have my fate in his hands.

Gradually, his applause dies out. He lets the silence press down on the atmosphere in the theater as if reveling in the discomfort it causes. I shift my balance from my right foot to my left, fighting off the urge to fidget or do anything else that would reveal my nerves.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can feel Ignazio watching from the side of the stage. He's gripping the curtain for support, likely as on edge as I am. If he's truly on my side—helping my family survive Nero and the Vorones—then his life is on the line too.

I swallow with difficulty. "Is that all?"

“All?” Nero cracks out a laugh, shaking his head from side to side. “Why would you think that’s all? We’re just getting started. I’ve given the situation a lot of thought. It’s become amusing when I think about how you’ve been right under my nose this whole time. Some little ballerina with the secret we’ve all been looking for.”

“I have no secrets—”

“No need to lie,” he interrupts with another cruel laugh. “That’s the surefire way to piss me off and end things a lot sooner for you. I know all about what you’ve been up to. It’s how your treacherous father has remained alive as long as he has—I couldn’t kill him if I didn’t have the key.”

“There is no key. I don’t have it.”

The grin drops off Nero’s face. “Didn’t I just tell you I don’t appreciate being lied to? Your father himself told me you had it. So no use lying, dollface. If you cooperate, I just might keep you alive for a while. I’ve had plenty of ballerinas from the company, but there’s something special about you.”

I ease a step back despite the fact that I’m on stage and he’s yards away in the audience. It still feels too close. His presence is suffocating.

“I’m married.”

Nero barks out his loudest laugh yet. It goes on for several seconds ’til tears mist his eyes and he’s glancing around at the men he’s brought with him. A few of them chuckle along or split their lips in cruel grins.

Agitation bites at me and I snap at them. “I am! I’m married to Caelian Ziccardi, and if you’re not going to let me go, then just do it. Kill me—because I’ll *never* go with you.”

“It sounds like you need to be taught a lesson. Sounds like Caelian wasn’t so rough with you after all.”

Nero takes several steps forward on a direct path toward me and the stage. My breath catches in my lungs, icy-cold fear infusing my veins.

“Nero! We’ve got a situation!”

The doors to the theater fly open and a handful of other soldiers file in. Nero forgets about me, turning around to face his men for what panicked news they’re about to deliver.

“He’s here!” one of them pants. “He and his crew just pulled up and they sprayed our guys on security.”

“They’re moving in.”

Nero’s brows pinch together in vexation. “Who the fuck is he, you dumbfuck? Why are you speaking to me like we’re pals, and I’m supposed to be following what nonsense is coming out of your mouth?”

“Caelian Ziccardi... he’s ambushing us!”

“Then what the hell are you in here telling me about it for? Secure the fucking building!”

I’m caught between reactions watching chaos erupt around me. Nero’s men rush to take aim at the door. Others slip out of side exits to attempt locking up the rest of the building. Even Ignazio has vanished from where he stood near the stage curtains.

Taking a page from his book, I sidle toward the side of the stage. If I could just make it backstage, I’ll be able to sneak away before anyone notices I’m missing. I’ll find a way to reunite with Caelian once the coast is clear...

“No you don’t!” Nero snarls, snatching me by the arm. He yanks me backward and makes me stumble on clumsy feet. “You’re my insurance should anything go awry, dollface. Your hubby’s not the stablest guy. But if you’re my shield, then there’s no chance he’ll try anything.”

I twist and squirm in his clutches for only a few seconds, then I give up such a useless effort. If I’m to escape Nero, it’ll have to be in a cleverer, more underhanded manner. It’ll have to be a moment where I take him by surprise.

Caelian and his men burst through the door as expected.

A mafia standoff ensues. The soldiers of the Vorone family with their guns trained on the soldiers of the Ziccardi’s. Though both families have many more men than the ones present today, the situation still feels volatile and out of control. Tension cinches the theater, even more tangible than the solid objects in the room.

Nero welcomes Caelian and the others with a cocky grin—*and* a cock of the hammer of his gun as he points it at my head. “Not so fast, Caelian. Take another step, and this gets real messy, real fast.”

Caelian’s glare is darker than I’ve ever seen it. Forget the stormy grays usually coloring his eyes. In this moment, they’re a frightening black abyss that feels unending in its hunger for brutality. His muscles are taut and clenched, veins protruding, his breath heaving. He’s barely holding himself back from launching into a full blown rampage.

“Let my wife go,” he says. A few short words that are a precursor to what he’s really capable of.

“We’ve been over this. She was never yours to begin with,” Nero says. “You never bought her out of her contract.

Because I'm her owner—I own all the dancers at the company, and if I don't want to put 'em up, guess what? They're not for sale!”

Caelian takes a single step forward. “Nevaeh is her own woman. She will go where she wants to go. Regardless of your fucking contracts. Something tells me she would rather leave with me than stay here with you.”

“It doesn't matter what she wants. This is business! She's worth more than everybody in this building! Your family thinks these business negotiations are a game. It's no wonder you've done so abysmally. Zinc Co would be nothing if it wasn't for me.”

“Enough talking. Let my wife go or we will be slaughtering every last one of you.”

Nero's grip on me tightens. The barrel of the gun pressed harder into my temple. “Careful what you're about to start, Caelian. We may have the same number of men now, but my family's five times as big and powerful as the Ziccardi operation. I can annihilate your family without even breaking a sweat.”

“You think I give a shit which family is bigger?”

“You should give a shit which family holds all the power. And mine does, Caelian. Your ballerina was the last thing I needed to gain control. All that negotiation about Zinc Co. ends today. I don't need your asses anymore now that I have the key to it all. The new medicine we've had in development. I'll become the richest man on the planet. And you... you'll be left a deathly ill fool that was nothing but a puppet for your father.”

Through the haze of Caelian's vicious fog, I'm able to catch his attention. He senses my gaze on him and shifts his ever so slightly to meet mine. Nero's too busy blathering away to notice. I speak with my eyes, praying Caelian will understand what I'm trying to communicate.

The fact that he allows Nero to prattle on uninterrupted tells me he does.

With a deep inhale, I resign myself to the deadly chance I'm about to take. Thoughts of what could go wrong are shut out. The nerves churning inside me about how I could be making a grave mistake. I dissociate these thoughts and feelings when I take the biggest risk of my lifetime.

As Nero boasts about the power of his crime family, I twist in his grip and grab the barrel of his gun, catching him by surprise and pointing it skyward at the ceiling. My knee jerks up to slam into his gut. The gun goes off above our heads with a resounding bang.

It's all the invitation Caelian needs. A split second is all it takes for the theater to fill with the dizzying hail of bullets.

Nero's men take cover behind the many rows of seats. Caelian's men rush to do the same. All while both sides fire back at each other the second something's within their line of sight. Men drop like flies once they're struck.

I'd have a front row seat to the carnage if I weren't locked into a scuffle with Nero. For being a mafia don that bullies and intimidates for a living, he's not much in physical combat. Even with my basic training, I'm able to hold my own... at least for the first few seconds we're struggling for the gun.

Strength is on his side as he muscles control over the gun's handle. I'm not to be defeated so easily—I fight like I was

taught, focusing on evening the playing field, using any maneuver to my advantage. As he wrestles my grip away from the gun, I'm sweeping my leg out to send him crashing onto the floor. He grabs me by the ankles and yanks me off my feet in immediate payback.

I slam into the stage floor, the wind knocked out of me at the brutal impact. Coughing and aching, I try to push myself back up, but it's no use.

Nero's hand shuts around the back of my bun to jerk my head back. The open palm of his hand collides with my cheek. A burst of pain smarts across my face. It might not be the hardest hit in the history of physical confrontations, but it's enough to have me crying out and seeing stars.

"You stupid little bitch, look what you've done. You think this is going to turn out in your favor? You're coming with me, and now it's going to be so much worse for you and your pathetic family!"

"DON'T EVER TOUCH HER!" roars Caelian from out of nowhere. He leaps across the stage and spears into Nero with crushing force.

Nero's grip on me vanishes as his long, gangly body sails backward. He lands on the ground, already half unconscious. Caelian couldn't care less as he follows up with a fist to his jaw. Blood splatters onto his tattooed knuckles as he goes back for seconds, thirds, and fourths.

The grotesque crack of Nero's teeth shattering makes me cringe. So does the limp way his head dangles as Caelian lifts him off the ground and cages his jaw between his large hands. An even louder, sharper crack whips through the air.

He's broken Nero's jaw.

With his bare hands.

Caelian lets go of him. His body thumps to the floor. It hasn't even been a full minute yet bruises bloom across his skin and his blood drips down his front.

It's the goriest sight I've ever seen. I'm shirking away when Caelian rounds on me. Then relief fills me as our gazes meet and I move to push myself up off the floor. My ankle protests with a dull twinge of pain. My fall from fighting Nero was so rough it's injured my fragile right ankle again.

Caelian's scooping me up at once. I'm tucked into his arms and propped against his chest. He keeps his other arm free to aim his weapon at others posing a threat.

Nero's men dash toward the stage to avenge their boss who's passed out and broken on the floor. At the sight of me and Caelian, they open fire.

"C'mon, *bella*, we have to go!" Caelian shouts. He shields me with his broad shoulders as he turns to dive behind the curtains. He pants, running for cover, occasionally returning fire himself.

"Caelian," I say, bobbing as we sprint backstage. "What about Nero? His men?"

"We'll finish this rivalry another day. All that matters is I'm getting my ballerina back. Time to go."

His men seem to realize it's time end the gunfight, because they begin making their exits too.

I close my eyes and cling to Caelian, overwhelmed by the deep relief of being in his arms again. Relief that we're both still alive and relief that we're still going to be together.

THIRTY-ONE

Caedian



SNOW FLOATING OUTSIDE THE BEDROOM WINDOW IS THE FIRST thing I see on Christmas morning. The flakes sail through the air until they reach their eventual destination on the ground. In the hours between nightfall and the pale sunrise, we've had two more inches.

I scrub a hand over my rough, untrimmed beard and glance to the small bundle at my side—Nevaeh's curled up under the covers still deep in her dreams. She looks as angelic as she had in mine, but instead of twirling about for me like so many dreams before, she'd been at my side as we moved hand in hand. We'd been slow dancing as if it were our wedding.

We never danced at our wedding. Nevaeh never even smiled that night. Instead, she'd cried. A realization that leaves me with a pang of guilt.

I'm stuck in my head as she stirs next to me. A sleepy smile naturally spreads on her face the instant our eyes connect and she realizes I'm already up. My arm slips under her to pull her against me, my thoughts shifting to how good it is that she's in my bed. That we've managed to come out on the other side of these chaotic past few weeks. We're stronger for it.

Times that have been difficult but perhaps necessary.

I press a kiss to her lips. “So good of you to join me.”

She stretches her torso and legs against me and yawns, “How long have you been awake?”

“Not long. But long enough to notice you sleeping.”

“Is this about how I snore again?”

“Yes and no.”

She laughs and pushes a hand to my defined shoulder. “Caelian! For the last time, I don’t snore.”

“I beg to differ, *bella*. Next time I’ll record you.”

The sheepish curve to her lips and flutter of her lashes tells me she’s amused even if she won’t ever admit it. She springs up in bed, the scarf she wears at night to protect her silky tresses slipping off. She flounces from the bed in a move almost worthy of an acrobat and scurries toward the minibar.

I’ll never adjust to how agile and fluidly she moves. Always with absolute ease and grace.

She returns a second later with a fresh syringe and vial of my medication.

It’s no surprise. As our days together have turned into weeks, Nevaeh’s made it her mission to hold me accountable. She ensures I’m following Doctor Tulio’s instructions as far as my treatments and medications go.

If she can help it, first thing in the morning she’s making sure I’m taking my latest dose. She slides back onto the bed on her knees and sets up a makeshift station along our sheets. My pills and the vial and syringe. I watch her work as she fills the syringe with the clear liquid and then with steady hands places the long needle to the injection point at my chest.

Our gazes hold for a second, communicating my trust in her before she does it. I breathe through the feeling of the treatment working its way into me. The valves of my heart lurch harder in order to accept the dosage.

Nevaeh keeps me sane through the discomfort. She straddles me and clutches my face in her hands to force my attention. A gesture that might seem small and inconsequential to some, but in the moment, as my heart twinges in pain, means more than anyone can possibly understand.

She leans in close enough for our brows to touch. Close enough that I can almost feel the softness of her lips against mine.

My fingers grip her hips to keep her where she is, my breathing ragged. “Nevi, you give my heart strength. This dying heart that was useless to me my whole life... you give it a purpose to keep beating.”

Her fingers trace along my jawline. Her lips graze mine, a salty taste to them. She’s started tearing up. “Cael,” she murmurs. “I...”

“What, Nevi? Tell me.”

I intertwine her fingers with mine and indulge in a soft kiss. The wonderful feeling guides me through the discomfort ’til I’m more keyed into her warm taste than I am the twitch in my chest.

“I love you,” she murmurs, almost shyly.

A slow smile comes to my rugged face. I thumb her bottom lip and kiss her again. Suddenly, the treatment’s working—my heart’s beating as it should and any residual pain’s gone. Her words have sped the process along.

Which may or may not be true in reality, but it's how I fucking feel.

Hearing those words from Nevaeh is a warm ray of light on a freezing winter day like today.

“Nevi, I love you too. You must realize this already. You see how fucking crazy you make me.”

Her giggle is light to my ears. “I'm happy you dreamed about me.”

“They led me to you.”

I roll us over 'til Nevaeh slips under me and I'm looking down at her startled brown eyes. Her cherubic features and plump, parted lips are too much to bear. I can't resist for long, swooping in for more kisses.

I make my way from her mouth and jaw down to her neck. My hand shoves itself between her thighs and rub at her clit through her panties. She moans against my tongue and gyrates her hips as if to beg for more. The friction I create rubbing the crotch of her panties is quickly making her come undone.

“Oh god,” she puffs out. She rocks into my hand.

I push her panties to the side and slide two of my thick fingers inside her.

Nevaeh gasps at how deep I thrust them. At how I curl them and find the special button of pleasure that feels so good she can't even move.

I greedily suck at her throat, then return to her lips. “You are soaked, *mia bella ballerina*. So fucking wet my fingers are glistening. Suck yourself clean from me.”

Nevaeh tastes herself when I present my fingers slick with her juices. Her large, deceptively innocent brown eyes hold

my gaze the entire time and make my already hard dick twitch against the confines of my sweatpants.

I growl, kissing her on the lips, sucking her taste from her tongue.

Then I decide I must have some for myself. I prove how easily movable Nevaeh is by twisting onto my back and hoisting her up by the waist. Caught off guard and turned the fuck on, she squeals as I plant her where I want her—right over my face. Her thighs on either side of my head. Her pretty little pussy right at my mouth.

“Ride me, *mia bella ballerina*. Ride my fucking face with that juicy pussy of yours.”

Nevaeh warbles out a shocked breath before she obeys. She runs fingers through her wild mane of hair and grips the sturdy wooden headboard in preparation. Her hips immediately slip into a fluid motion, rocking back and forth across my face.

My mouth waters. Her pussy is so fucking close. Within the swipe of my tongue.

I take full advantage. As she rocks gently, her small round ass brushing against my upper chest, I lap at her glistening pussy. The flat side of my tongue runs the length of her slit, then pushes into her for a greedy taste.

Her warmth floods me. Her walls pulsate around my tongue. I let myself tease the fuck out of her, drawing a range of reactions. Shallow breaths and quaking thighs. Unfiltered moans of my name as she rocks her hips and my nose bumps against her swollen clit.

I suck at her folds and squeeze her ass in the palm of my large hands. Her taut ass muscles flex in my grip, encouraging

me to squeeze even harder. Lap and nibble and tongue her hot, wet pussy even more.

All of it overwhelms Nevaeh. But she never stops riding. Exactly the opposite—she rocks even faster against my face, clearly far gone.

So very fucking close.

I bring my ballerina to her orgasm with my eager tongue flicking against her clit. It's her final undoing. She comes with a sharp gasp and full body shudder. The pleasure rolls through her so intensely, she's as good as jelly in my hands.

I kiss the inside of her quivering thigh and then flip her under me. Her head's barely touched the bed by the time I'm spearing into her. My cock pushes into her pulsing warmth, so fucking soft and inviting, I grunt at how good she feels.

Nevaeh moves with me. Her face relaxed with orgasmic bliss and her body pliant, she falls into the rhythm of my slow but deep strokes. I fist my fingers in her hair and yank her head up for a hungry kiss.

So I can ravage her the way my primal urges call for.

Mia bella ballerina who is mine. Mine for so long as my pained heart twitches.

Just thinking of the intensity of my feelings for her stokes a madness out of me. My hips thrust faster and the many nerve endings in my cock tingle. I ache for this woman as I stroke into her and she envelops me in her tight warmth.

When the moment comes that I can no longer bear it, I let go with a rough groan. Her pussy shares in my pleasure and spasms around me, milking every ounce of my release. For several seconds to come, my hips jerk on their own 'til I'm spent. I've spilled every last drop.

The high remains with me. My mood's immediately relaxed and content.

I wrap Nevaeh up in my arms and indulge in even more kisses, as if I haven't just tasted her lips.

"I'm awake now," she murmurs.

I laugh, my hand sliding along the curves of her body. "Good. That's how I'll wake you up every morning."

"I'm going to hold you to that, Cael."

"Today's Christmas."

She hums. "It is."

"Tell me what you want, Nevi. I'll refrain from being the Grinch."

A pretty smile lights up her face. "You will?"

"Yes. Only for you. And only today."

"We should have breakfast. Maybe in the sunroom so we can watch the snow outside," she says on a beat of excitement. It tells me she's already thought about this, which I find more endearing. "And maybe we can go for a walk in the snow... if you're up for it. And... and maybe we can listen to some Christmas music and open presents."

I lock my fingers around a stray hunk of her hair and peer into her eyes. "You've gotten me presents?"

She gnaws on her lip, then nods. "But it's a surprise. You can't know 'til you unwrap it."

Shit!

How could I forget to get her something? It must reflect on my face, because she laughs.

“It’s okay if you didn’t get me anything—Christmas isn’t your thing.”

“I got you something,” I fib. My thoughts run rampant with ideas for a last-minute gift. I’ll have to figure something out.

“Sure you have, Cael. We might be going on six weeks, but I already know your tells.”

Nevaeh is right to be skeptical as she gives me a peck on the lips and then crawls out of bed for a shower.

The idea comes to me at the click of the bathroom door shutting. The perfect gift to give Nevaeh at a time like this. It’ll sure make her happy.

I grin and reach for my phone to set my plan into motion.

Nevæh



CAELIAN KEEPS TO HIS WORD. WE SPEND THE MORNING indulging in a large breakfast in the sunroom off the west wing where we watch the snow fall through the glass ceiling and wall. After we've eaten to our heart's content, we bundle up and go for a long walk along the trail that leads into the woods.

Other times I've been hesitant and even fearful of the woodland surrounding Caelian's remote estate. His presence makes me feel safe as we wander the trees and snow. He scoops up my gloved hand in his and holds me close to his side.

The frigid air frosts out in front of us. I shiver and press myself closer into Caelian in hopes of absorbing some of his body heat. He radiates so much of it that he begins to feel like a lifeline the farther out we make it.

"A deer," I gasp.

It emerges from beyond the clearing up ahead, looking svelte on twiggy legs. Caelian's arm comes around my shoulders, and we stop some distance back to observe the skittish creature.

"It's a good thing it's not a wolf," Caelian says.

I tip my head up for a concerned look at him. He can't hold in his husky laughter.

"Kidding, Nevi. There are no wolves in these woods... during daylight hours. Most of the time."

"Caelian, if you keep this up, you're going to make me pass out. I don't do well with wild animals."

"And yet you've fallen for me." He catches me by surprise by nipping at my jaw.

We move on from our trek through the woods and return to the main courtyard outside his home. I crouch low to scoop up a handful of snow and then catch Caelian by surprise from behind. My snowball hits him in the back of his shoulder and garners a stern glare.

Smirking, I play innocent and attempt to stroll away.

Caelian's not having it. He intercepts me with ease. His strong arms sweep me off my feet and he spins me around 'til we're collapsing in the snow and I'm breathless from the laughter his ticklish fingers have forced out of me.

"Great, I have snow all over me," I pant, shoving at his shoulders. It's no use yet I do it anyway.

He merely grins down at me and then pulls me up to my feet as though he's decided I've had enough of his torture.

"You know, I never had a happy childhood. I was a very sick child and always stuck in bed during holidays," he explains. He wraps his arms around me from behind and steers me ahead. "But my few happy moments were when I was allowed out on a snowy day like this. My brother and cousins used to race each other in their snow boots. Cristian would always throw himself down on the ground and cry if he didn't win."

“And you?”

“I would race too. I’d try to keep up... but I was usually too slow.”

“Your sickness...”

“Yes,” he answers. He bows his head and nuzzles his face to mine. “I enjoyed myself anyway. The crisp air and the icy feel of the snow. I used to like to make snow angels.”

A serene smile comes to my lips. “Me too. When I was a girl, we didn’t get to play much in the snow either. Deep in the city, there wasn’t much room outside. Our instructors would sometimes let us, if training went really well.”

“Dance training... or the other kind of training?”

“Both.”

“*Mia bella ballerina* is a spy,” he teases. “It still astounds me.”

“I’m not a spy. I’m... I’m a pawn,” I say. “That’s all me and my family have ever been to a guy like Nero.”

“Don’t worry. He’ll never harm you again. We’ve won this last battle. We’ll win the war too. We got him to retreat. A first for someone like Nero. He failed at everything he wanted. Taking you back and gaining control of the key you have. Whatever medicine he claimed would make him rich. He thought he’d have control over Zinc Co. by now.”

“What about your family?”

“A lot of shit needs to be sorted out. I want my revenge on them for what they’ve done to em. I’ll make sure they suffer. All of them. Including Nero.”

I try to find comfort in Caelian's words, though it's next to impossible. How can I when I'm left pondering about Mom and Dad and their safety?

Worries I don't raise to Caelian. He still doesn't understand the complexity of our situation. He doesn't need that kind of trouble in his life.

Especially when I know getting him more involved will put his life at risk.

He kisses me on the cheek, then unwraps his heavy arms from around me. "Nevi, I've been thinking about our future. I don't know how much time I have left."

"If you follow Tulio's advice—"

"There's no cure for my condition," he interrupts matter-of-factly. "We've been over this. It's not a matter of if, but when."

My sadness drips off me. I tilt my head downward and sink into the heaviness that weighs on my heart. Caelian senses it right away and takes hold of my hand, his thumb stroking my knuckles.

"That's not to darken the mood. If anything, I was trying to be uplifting."

"Your version of uplifting needs some work."

"Nevi, I want you to bear my child. It'll be the way I'll live on."

I stop altogether for a stunned moment of silence. It's thrown me for a loop. Caelian's never expressed any interest in having a family or building any kind of legacy. He's seemed indifferent about his family and what would come after he's gone.

“Caelian...” I trail off.

“I want to it all with you, Nevi. I married you for a reason. Now comes children.” In the winter light, the shade of his gray eyes have never looked purer. They’re softer and paler, almost a new shade altogether. Enough to make me melt and throw my arms around him in a loving embrace.

“I want to do it all with you too.”

“More excuses to keep you trapped in my bed,” he growls. “But first... there’s something else. A Christmas surprise.”

He leads me by the hand across the snow-dusted courtyard. Though I don’t ask where we’re going or what’s the surprise, I’m racking my brain for what it could be. Earlier I’d doubted if Caelian got me a Christmas present; he’s simply not the holiday type.

It seems I’ve underestimated him...

When he brings me around the corner and a woman with shoulder-length butterfly locs and familiar eyes comes into view, I scream.

“Mom!”

I sprint the rest of the way to her. She welcomes me with the kind of motherly hug only she can give.

It’s been so long since I’ve seen her, my memory barely registers the last time we were able to embrace like this. She strokes my hair and then pulls back for a once over of me.

“My beautiful girl,” she says. “You look just the same as ever.”

“But how? Caelian?”

I glance over my shoulder at him. His expression would be considered ambiguous to most people who don't know him. But I do—I see the trust in his gaze and the subtle quirk of his lips. He's letting me have this. My mom for Christmas, when a few weeks ago he wouldn't even allow for a phone call. He knew how much it would mean...

"I'll leave you two ladies alone." He winks at me on his stroll toward the house.

I'm speechless for a moment longer, swimming in the deep feelings I've developed for Caelian. Aware how big of a sign this is for us. How much it demonstrates he'll give me the freedom I've craved and love me in a way that isn't all-consuming control.

Mom brings me back to the present with another stroke of my hair. "He doesn't seem too bad."

I smile. "He's wonderful."

"I was so worried from your phone calls."

"We had growing pains. But... we've come out on the other side."

"Good. Listen, sweetheart." Mom glances around to check that we're alone and no one is in the vicinity to eavesdrop. "Where have you kept it?"

My stomach roils. "Mom—"

"Ignazio said you still have it. Nero never got his hands on it."

"It's Christmas, Mom. I don't want to talk about this right now."

"This is exactly the time to talk about this. We don't know how much longer we have. What's the matter with you? You

know what's at stake," she scolds. "We can't get too comfortable, and this is the perfect opportunity."

I frown. "For... what?"

"For our escape. Ignazio's going to help us. It's a blessing in disguise that this estate is so remote. These woods will make it easy to disappear. We'll do it tonight."

"I'm not coming," I say, taking a step back.

Mom takes one toward me and grabs my hands in hers. "Sweetheart, we're a family. The survival of all of us depends on it. Your *father's* survival. If we mess this up, we'll suffer at Nero's hand. Is that what you want?"

"Of course not—"

"Then you'll do what we have to do. It's your out. All you've said over your phone calls is that you wanted one," she says. "Let's head back inside, or he'll get suspicious."

"But we can tell him the truth. He'll help us."

She scoffs as she turns to walk off. "Do you know how naive you sound? Do you know why what you have is so important, and what that would mean for him? He would never forgive you."

I'm left behind in the middle of the snow, unable to form a real rebuttal. Mostly because I'm unsure if what Mom says is true. If Caelian would hold my secrecy against me. He's reacted to my perceived deceit before, and it wasn't pretty at all...

What would he do if he found out? Can I really risk the survival of my family?

With a deep, troubled sigh, I trail in Mom's footsteps, lost as to what to do.

THIRTY-THREE

Nevae



“So, TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF, NIECY,” CAELIAN SAYS OVER Christmas dinner.

The kitchen staff have outdone themselves this time. The table’s loaded with a vast selection of holiday foods. No dish stands out more than the herb roasted turkey and maple glazed ham serving as the center piece of the table. My plate’s so full, I’m not even sure where to begin, and I spend several seconds eying everything. I almost miss Mom’s answer.

“What more is there to say about me other than I’m the mother to a beautiful ballerina?” Mom says with a bright smile. “Levar and I have always been so proud she’s been able to share her gift the way she has.”

“Nevi is the best dancer I’ve ever seen.”

My cheeks warm at Caelian’s flattery. “There are many dancers who are better than I am.”

“She’s modest too,” he says.

Mom laughs, her dark eyes shining. She raises her glass. “I must say I’m truly pleased with how your union is turning out. I won’t pretend I wasn’t worried for my sweetie. But it seems you two have really fallen for each other.”

I avoid Caelian's gaze for a second. He's taken to raising his glass too, his undivided attention shifting onto me. The intensity of his affection permeates the space between us. An overwhelming reality on its own, let alone when I'm keeping secrets.

Mom's watching me too. The shine no less bright in her eyes.

They're waiting for me to raise my glass. I do after a slight pause, forcing a smile onto my face.

"To this holiday with loved ones," Mom says.

Our glasses chink against one another before we take our sips.

Each of us rides a different wave as we do. Mom's triumphant and eager. Caelian's satisfied and calm. I'm a bundle of ever-increasing nerves as the night wears on.

We eventually move into the den, where Christmas music trills in the background and the massive tree glitters. We do a small exchange of gifts. Since I had no clue she would be visiting for the holiday, I have nothing to offer Mom, but Caelian's thought ahead.

"This is truly gorgeous," she gasps, sliding the top off the jewelry box. She holds up a pair of emerald earrings that sparkle in the light. "You two shouldn't have."

I tip my head up at Caelian and murmur, "I can't believe you put my name on the gift tag."

"Husband and wife. What's a gift from me is a gift from you."

"That's conveniently in my favor this time, so I won't complain." I let out a soft laugh.

Mom gifts me with new ballet shoes. Caelian informs me that on top of my surprise visitor, he'll be renovating more of the east wing.

“You need more space for your dancing,” he says, wrapping his arms around me from behind. “This house is your home, Nevi. Which means it needs to reflect that.”

Mom gives Caelian a male cologne that she says made her think of him—the scent's heavy on earthy and woody notes. Caelian's reaction is polite, making it difficult to tell if he truly likes the scent or not.

I hold out a jewelry box of my own for him to take.

“I hope you like it...”

He spends a second taken aback. He's not only startled by the gesture, but endearingly touched by it.

“Nevi,” he says. “You got me a ring.”

“If I have to wear one...”

“Then I have to wear one too,” he finishes. A broad grin crosses his face.

We indulge in a tender kiss despite the fluttering nerves in my stomach. Mom waits until we're separated to tell us how good we look together, but I'm not fooled—she's really thinking about what's to come in a few hours.

The night snowballs from there. Caelian and I share in a slow dance to soft music. He grips my small hand in his massive one and we sway around the room at a lazy, unhurried pace.

“This will be our wedding dance,” he says. “The dance I should've given you on our first night together.”

“It’s okay. This is just as special. Thank you for doing any of this, Cael. Christmas—any holiday—isn’t your thing, but you’ve let me put up all the lights and mistletoe I’ve wanted.”

“What can I say? You bring out a softer side in me.”

“Some would say they didn’t know it was possible for a man like you.”

“A beast,” he growls, and my smile widens. “What would you say?”

“I wasn’t sure either. But I always hoped it was.”

Once we turn in for the night, Caelian spends his time taking his medication and treatment. I wind down like I usually do, with a hot shower and some self-care. The warning look Mom had given me replays in my head as I splash my face with cleanser and secure my hair with pins.

When I’m certain he’s not looking, I sneak into the closet and check my luggage to ensure my things are still there—my *real* things zipped up in the luggage I brought so many weeks ago. Personal possessions like my personal documents and the snow globe Dad gifted me...

Caelian pats the space on the bed next to him when I emerge from the bathroom. I crawl on and settle beside him.

“Today was good. We should do this each year.”

My heart aches. I give a nod. “Yeah... that sounds wonderful...”

“What is it? You’re upset about something. I can always tell. You get this sad frown on your face like a kitten.”

I’d be amused if I weren’t weighed down by the conflicted feelings swirling inside of me. It seems I’m destined to be put

in difficult situations where I'm forced to make impossible choices that have no win.

The burden feels unbearable on my shoulders. I close my eyes and curse Mom for doing this to me again—making the safety and survival of our family hinge on my actions. It's a responsibility no daughter should ever have. Yet it's how my parents have maneuvered throughout their time dealing with Nero and the Vorones.

But, for as much as I've fallen for Caelian, can I subject him to our mess? Mom is right when she says they'll come for him harder than ever.

They'll punish Dad. They'll likely kill him...

I curl into Caelian and bury my face in his chest. His arms come up to secure me in place, holding me snug against him as tears wet my eyes and a silent cry leaks out of me. He recognizes what's happening, his large hand sweeping across my spine.

"It's alright, Nevi," he hushes. "Tell me what it is. I won't get angry... or violent."

There's a hint of humor in his husky voice.

I can't get the words out straightaway. I cry and sniffle and squeeze into him like I'm trying to fuse his body with mine. The warmth he radiates and the hard contours of his muscles have become soothing comforts over our brief time together.

"Cael," I mutter, "my mom wants me to go away with her tonight. She wants me to leave with my belongings so that I can help free my father from Nero."

His hand stills on my back. His chest muscles flex. "The code that you have?"

“Yes...”

“And she didn’t want you to tell me?”

“She said it was best if...” I can’t even finish my words.

His inhale is rough and belabored. “You’re not going anywhere, Nevi.”

“I don’t...” I lift my head up to peer into his eyes, mine like glass. “I don’t want to. I want to be with you.”

“Then that’s where you’ll remain. Your mother will have to figure out another way.”

“But my dad...”

His large hands take hold of my face. “Then we’ll figure out how to free him from Nero. I will help you.”

“I don’t think it would be fair to involve you any more than you already are.”

“You’re my wife. It’s what I’m here for. There’s a lot for us to sort through between your family being beholden to Nero and mine as well. I don’t have the same loyalty to my life as you do to yours. But we will find a way to help them.”

“I love you, Cael.”

“*Mia bella ballerina*, I more than love you. I dream of you.”

We kiss and cuddle ’til our eyelids refuse to stay open. Caelian’s medications kick in and my fatigue traps me. I slip off to sleep, spooned in his arms.

Hours of warm comfort pass us by.

My eyes blink to a groggy open in the pitch-black dark of our bedroom. I don’t know what time it is, but it must be far into the night for it to be so silent and still. Sometime during

our hours of rest, I've untangled myself from Caelian and drifted a few inches away. I roll over to return to my spot tucked into his side, then stop when I realize I'm not the only thing awake in the room.

We're not alone.

A figure lurks in the dark. I blink several more times to parse out its shape.

"Mom?" I croak.

No one answers. But that doesn't stop the figure from creeping closer. From emerging from the dark shadows and reaching out a hand for me...

THIRTY-FOUR

Caedrian



“C, WAKE UP,” MS. POITIER SAYS, GIVING ME AS HARD A shake as she can given my size.

I have been a heavy sleeper since I was a child. With all the many medications I take on a regular basis, the moment I lay my head down on my pillow, I’m usually out for the foreseeable hours to come.

I grunt, fighting my way out of a groggy fog. The light creeping into the room reveals its morning time. The draft in the room tells me it’ll be another chilly winter day and we need to turn the heat up. My hand scrubs over my face as if to clear up my fuzzy vision.

The space next to me in the bed is empty. Has Nevaeh gotten up early and gone downstairs for breakfast?

Her mother is here. Perhaps they decided they wanted some bonding time alone over coffee.

“What time is it, Ms. P?”

“It’s minutes before seven. C, there’s something...” she shudders out a deep breath. “There’s something that happened last night.”

“Such as?”

Her shoulders slump, her expression flat and crestfallen.

It's a look a wise woman who has been around the block a time or two like Ms. Poitier rarely wears. She seems lost for how to proceed, taking her time to choose what she says with great caution. I've never been a patient man, and that hasn't changed in this moment.

"Ms. P," I snarl. "Spit it out. What is it? Where is Nevi? Is she downstairs with her mother?"

Her lips stretch into a frown, and she shakes her head. "C, she's... she's gone."

"What do you mean she's gone? Gone where? Downstairs to the breakfast room? Outside in the courtyard? Her dance studio?"

I have no idea why I'm listing off these places around the estate as if there's not a deepening sense of dread burrowing inside me. A vague understanding of where this is headed and what Ms. Poitier's frown says before words ever could.

"She's gone as in... she's not here anymore. Her and her mother. She left this note for you."

I snatch it from her and crumple it inside one of my fists. "She can't be gone. She has to be here."

"She's not, C. They've disappeared."

"Disappeared?!"

My loud roar makes a solid woman like Ms. Poitier flinch. She eases half a step back. Possibly to prepare herself for any other outbursts to come.

"There's no way she could disappear. She's on my property!" I shove aside the covers and charge through the room on a wave of instant fury. "Where's security? Have them

search the premises! Review the surveillance cameras! Check every room, every... every place she could be!”

“C, we have. What do you think we’ve been doing all morning? One of the sensors was activated, and that alerted the security team that something was amiss.”

“And you’re only just waking me now!” I boom in her face as she scurries to keep up with me.

I wrench the bedroom door open with enough power to almost rip it off its hinges and then barrel down the hall, heaving like a beast embarking on a rampage.

In this moment, that’s what I am.

I make it downstairs where several of my men swarm me. Matteo is first to launch into an explanation.

I hold up a hand to shut him up. “I don’t want to hear any fucking excuses! You imbeciles have failed to keep the premises secure—and worse than that, you’ve failed to keep my ballerina on the premises! What fucking good are you?”

“Caelian, we don’t know how she did it! How they did it! We think they used an exit through the east wing. They knew which spots to avoid so the cameras wouldn’t capture them.”

My glare darkens.

So my ballerina has been sneakier and more observant than I thought. As we’ve spent more time together and our relationship bloomed, I have trusted her more. I have given her privileges she never otherwise had. Even after discovering the espionage manner in which Nero deployed the ballerinas in his dance company, I foolishly believed Nevaeh wouldn’t betray me.

Not mia bella ballerina.

She had sworn to me she was mine. She had confessed she loved me. She had given me a fucking ring and vowed she wanted to be with me and only me.

How could she disappear into the night only hours later?

“Search the woods,” I growl.

“We’re combing through them now. It’s miles before civilization. Doesn’t even make sense how they’d be able to get so far.”

“It was planned. That’s the only way they could’ve managed. It was part of their scheme all along. That is why she begged to see her mother for so long. She was going to try to escape.”

Matteo blows out a breath as we descend the spiraling staircase into my underground compound. “I’ll tell you what—she had me fooled. Really thought she’d fallen for you in recent weeks.”

His words remind me of the fact that I’m holding the note Ms. Poitier said Nevaeh left for me. I unclench my fist and open up the wrinkled sheet of paper. Nevaeh’s penmanship is as graceful as her dancing:

Cael,

*I didn't want to have to do this.
But I knew I couldn't involve you in
my mess. It's for the best that I
handle what's happening with my
family on my own. I'm sorry it had*

*to be this way. Just know our time
together wasn't a dream this time.*

*This time, it was real. I love
you.*

Nevi

Her letter only ignites an even hotter flame of anger that scorches me. I crumple it back up in my fist and release a roar that surely echoes for miles. If Nevaeh and her mother are still wandering somewhere in the surrounding woods, they must hear it.

Buried further down from the rage and fury is the heartbreak. The twitchy heart that has been the bane of my existence from the time I was a boy snaps into smaller, more pathetic fragments. Fresh pain rolls through me that I'm unsure if caused by my condition or by the realization Nevaeh has walked out on me.

She's left me and everything we've begun building together.

If anyone ever had the power to hurt me, she does. Deep, deep irreparable pain that could destroy a man. It will destroy me if she doesn't return.

But that won't happen. Because I'll destroy her first if she won't be with me.

I grit my teeth, my balled up fist absorbing the words written on the paper clenched inside. "Do whatever it takes to

find her. Bring her back here. She will be punished. She will regret ever trying to run from me.”

TO BE CONTINUED...

Author’s Note: Thank you so much for reading part 1 of Caelian and Nevaeh’s story! Their journey will continue in book 2, Brutal Impulses coming out in 2024. Let me tell you, Caelian WILL make it his life’s mission to bring back his ballerina... whether or not she wants to return. In the meantime, please drop me a quick review on Amazon and Goodreads! It means so much! ☐

Also by Sienna Vega

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Book 2 - Brutal Impulses - Coming in 2024

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About the Author



Sienne has a thing for dark and brooding alphas and the women who love them. She enjoys writing stories where lines are blurred, and the romance is dark and delicious. In her spare time, she unwinds with a nice glass of wine and Netflix binge.