

MONSTERS & MUSES
BOOK FOUR

ARROWS
AND
APOLOGIES

SAV R. MILLER

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AND
APOLOGIES

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Arrows and Apologies is a dark, contemporary romance inspired by the Apollo and Daphne myth.

It is NOT fantasy or a retelling.

Arrows and Apologies is the fourth interconnected standalone in the Monsters & Muses series, and contains mature themes and situations that are not suitable for all audiences.

Reader discretion is advised.

For a detailed list of potential triggers, [CLICK HERE](#)

For those we couldn't save.

I am not a foe. Do not fly me as a lamb flies the wolf, or a dove the hawk. It is for love I pursue you.

— THOMAS BULLFINCH, AGE OF FABLE: VOLS. I & II:
STORIES OF GODS AND HEROES

PLAYLIST

“MakeDamnSure” - Taking Back Sunday
“Far Too Young to Die” - Panic! At The Disco
“Bad Drugs” - King Cavalier, ChrisLee
“Sex on Fire” - Kings of Leon
“OBSESSIVE” - Chase Atlantic
“FUNERAL GREY” - Waterparks
“Black Butterflies and Déjà Vu” - The Maine
“Antichrist” - The 1975
“Sweater Weather” - The Neighborhood
“Colors” - Halsey

To listen on Spotify, [CLICK HERE](#)

PROLOGUE



“It won’t happen again.”

How many times do you have to utter a sentence before it becomes reality?

Lucian’s been spouting the same four words for as long as I can remember, yet today, they don’t ring truer.

Pain slices across my bottom lip as my top row of teeth sink into the pillowy flesh. Leaning against the doorjamb of my shitty studio apartment, I block my brother’s entry and hate myself for doing so.

Laurel, the little black mutt at his side, whines in protest, huffing at me with his nose, and I’m tempted to give in immediately.

Snow flurries drift around us, and Lucian reaches out with a bony hand,

scratching behind the dog's ear as he gazes into the parking lot four stories below. He teeters, clearly incapable of maintaining his balance, and for a split second, a part of me hopes he falls this time.

That he puts me out of my misery once and for all.

Guilt stabs at my heart, and I bite my lip harder, making it bleed.

With a sigh, Lucian glances over his shoulder at me. He attempts that trademark goofy smile that used to make strangers fall in love with him on sight, but it's plagued with the weight of his demons.

The corners of his mouth don't quite turn up like they once did, betraying his exhaustion. Betraying the truth.

"Can't you just help me out this *once*?" The golden irises we inherited from our mother swivel to my face, scouring the surface for a bread crumb of acquiescence. "I swear I won't ask again, Cor."

Of course, I've heard that before.

Two weeks ago, to be exact.

My gaze falls to the paper hospital bracelet he still wears on his right wrist. "What happened tonight, Luce?"

"Nothing. Just a little routine checkup."

"At the ER?"

"A misunderstanding." He laughs, but it chimes hollow through the night air. "They tried to throw me in the psych ward for some suicide-watch bullshit. Can you believe that?"

I don't answer.

What would I even say?

Yes, Luce, I can believe it.

I wish they'd managed to keep you.

"How'd you get out of it?"

I'm sure I already know, though. My brother does few things as well as talking himself out of trouble.

Spinning around, Lucian shoves a hand through his dark locks. The long

ends flop over bruised fingers, and I don't miss the way they tremble.

“Well, it was... it was an accident.”

Something pinches tight in my chest. It's making it difficult for me to breathe, even as my brain recognizes that nothing is physically wrong.

With *me*.

The color hasn't yet fully returned to my brother's lips. They're tinged blue, like violets sprouting in a field of roses.

His eyes lift to mine, and he gives an awkward smile. Dropping his hand back to his side, he hooks a thumb into the pocket of his Korn hoodie.

“It's not as bad as it sounds, Cor, I swear. I... I was just having a bad night, and I fucked up. It was a stupid mistake.”

Silence settles between us like the snow thickening on the ground, and he glances past me into my apartment again. The place I *just* got. My muscles tighten, locking up as if bracing for an intrusion.

Don't ask. Please, don't ask.

He does, though. Like he can't help it.

“You believe me, right?”

This is the part where I give an emphatic yes, no questions asked. It's the role I've tucked myself into since we were kids—my big brother's sole protector. Despite our six-year age difference, it was clear to me early on that Lucian was the kind of impressionable, softhearted person others would constantly try to take advantage of.

And take advantage, they did.

For years, I watched every person he came into contact with latch on to the goodness inside him and drain him of it, taking it for themselves when they inevitably moved on.

They left the hollow, dried-out husk, and no one ever bothered to teach him how to get that goodness back.

Our mom spent all her time working, so it's just been the two of us. I've spent a lifetime trying to repair the damage. Provided shade as he dug his

grave, convincing myself I was helping. That he'd eventually look up and realize why he went so long without a sunburn.

But I suppose it's true what they say—*You can't save those who don't see a problem.*

Unease lines the outside of Lucian's eyes, and my resolve unravels like a thin ball of yarn.

Naturally, when my brother asks *again* if I believe him, I say yes.

Even though it feels like the sutures holding my soul together dissolve one by one, I nod, stepping back to let him inside.

Even though I *know* I shouldn't.

Because I refuse to be another person who disappoints him.

Or maybe it's because, deep down, part of me still hopes I can love him to recovery. That if I don't give up on him, he won't give up on life.

On himself.

I'm wrong, of course.

So unbelievably fucking wrong.

Some people just don't *want* to be saved.



MANY THINGS CAN BE SAID for the color blue.

It evokes sadness. Reflects the inner miseries we try to keep tucked deep inside, where no one can ever bear witness.

Some claim it elicits a calmness, returning the human psyche to its state in the natural world. Like water and sky, blue flows effortlessly between one medium to the next, making it the connector of all colors.

At least, according to the umpteenth Aplana Island Art Historical Society meeting I attended yesterday. Two days ago, the color blue was just that. Now, I can't stop staring at the lass across the pub, flitting from table to table, royal-blue hair shimmering as it spills in waves down her backside.

With an irritated grunt, I toss back the tumbler of club soda in front of

me.

My penance, I suppose, for building a political campaign on the premise of restoring the arts in our community. While mayor of this shitty little island town, I'm stuck pretending to give a rat's bloody arse about the endless interpretations.

Slamming the glass back down, I slide it away and glance at the phone resting by my elbow. My younger brother, Jonas, hasn't contacted me in over twenty-four hours, which wouldn't be abnormal, except for the bollocking he gave me the other day.

The swelling in my nose still hasn't completely gone down.

Though we generally operate on a *when necessary* speaking schedule, this silence feels pointed. Like perhaps I should've told him I knew his absentee mum's whereabouts before she showed up and demanded residency in his beach house.

Someone clears their throat, and I glance up to see the bartender staring. She places one hand on her hip, and I can't help wondering how long she's been standing there, trying to get my attention.

My gaze falls to her lips, focusing on them as they curve around syllables.

"Can I get you anything else?" she asks, leaning her forearms on the bar top. Her name badge is marked out with a strip of black tape and fastened upside down on her plaid top, and her dark, oval-shaped eyes search mine. "An *actual* drink maybe?"

God, don't I wish.

"I'm waiting for someone. I'd rather not be pissed when he gets here."

She makes a face, then purses her lips. "A date?"

"No." Pausing, I push my tongue into the bottom of my cheek, considering the nature of my anticipated company.

At one time, potential lovers.

Didn't ever quite get that far before our respective darknesses took over and drove us apart, though. Neither of us was interested in sharing much

about our personal lives, making a real relationship quite difficult.

“He’s... an old friend,” I say finally, ignoring the slight pinch in my chest.

For the life of me, I can’t fathom why I’m even telling her this. Perhaps I’m simply irritated by Hollis’s absence, and the bartender is an easy way to quell the annoyance before I seek an alternative outlet.

Blue sweeps across my peripheral vision, and my throat tightens.

Not to mention, it’s not *entirely* true. I’ve no misconceptions about whether Hollis will show tonight.

Blue hair sweeps past my peripheral vision.

I’m not really here for *him*.

“A friend you wanted to be more?”

My thumb finds the silver band of the Rolex on my wrist. “A friend when I needed one.”

A friend until he no longer was one.

“Hmm.” Her head cocks to the side, and she reaches up to adjust her blonde ponytail.

Then she disappears beneath the counter, and I feel the vibrations as she fiddles around below.

I glance across the pub again, wondering why I stopped in without waiting for a reply from Hollis in the first place. A normal person might give up when they’ve sent five undelivered text messages, but tonight, I decided I wasn’t going to take the hint.

If you ask my mum, I’ve never been normal anyway.

My eyes find the blue-haired girl again, and this time, I’m unable to look away. She’s dressed like the other servers in dark jeans and a pullover sweatshirt with the pub’s faded logo on the front, but she doesn’t appear to be doing any actual serving.

In fact, it looks as if she’s only swooping in after someone’s bussed a table or delivered food. I’d guess hostess perhaps, if the frown on her face

didn't seem permanently etched, like that of a marble statue. Employing such an ice queen would likely be bad for business.

Springing to her feet, the bartender blocks my view. She shoves a tall glass with dark amber liquid, ice, and a lemon wedge in my direction.

"There." She smiles. "I cannot, in good conscience, leave you with the same drink you've had since you came in."

My hands remain on either side of my tumbler. "I'm not sure it's ethical to practice peer pressure. I could have your license revoked."

"Gunnars are nonalcoholic." The girl makes a face, turning away from me. "My dad used to have one every night with supper. Said it reminded him of Hong Kong when he was young. Figured it might help nurse your nostalgia."

She spins around and takes the empty tumbler with her, disappearing into the kitchen through a swinging door. I lean forward, sniffing the drink before pushing it away and letting my eyes drift up to the shelves behind the bar.

Some of my favorites line the top one. Liquors I haven't tasted in years because my mum wasn't a fan of who they turned me into.

That's always been her problem, though. Blaming outside forces for the beast that lives within me, as if his claws weren't written into my namesake.

A buzzing sensation ripples across the counter, vibrating against my palms, and I snatch my cell phone up without checking the screen. Pressing it against my good ear, I clear my throat and swivel away from the bar.

"Mayor Wolfe."

"Formal and to the point. I like it." Disappointment fizzles in my chest as the baritone voice of Marshall Kade, my personal PI, trickles through the speaker.

The general din of the pub falls away as my ear hyperfocuses on the phone call. "Were you expecting something else?"

"Nah, although I hear your constituents refer to you as Your Honor." He chuckles, the sound light and airy compared to the dark, damp atmosphere

around me.

“My constituents respect me.”

A lie, in reality, but he doesn't need to know that.

“Wonder if they'd respect you still if they knew what you were doing in Boston.”

His comment irritates me because he's why I'm here in the first place. Tying up loose ends and being stood up in a dirty pub.

“I don't pay you to wonder.”

“That's... true. You just pay me to take care of the things you're afraid your brother will fuck up.”

The muscle in my temples throbs, and I press my knuckles into it, trying to alleviate the onslaught of pain. In truth, I keep the more high-profile hits for Jonas because untraceable kills are his specialty. Plus, it keeps him away from other aspects of the business.

“Is there a reason you're bothering me? I thought you were supposed to be on vacation.”

“You know we can't just check out for the weekend. There's always something—or in this case, *someone*—that needs our attention.”

My teeth grind together. “What is it now?”

“Three dead police officers in Delos County in the last twenty-four hours. Same MO each time—bound and gagged with a single bullet to the back of the skull.”

Movement at the opposite end of the bar catches my eye, and I turn my head as the blue-haired girl dumps a plastic tray into a bucket. With nimble, small fingers, she reaches for the hem of her hoodie and tugs it over her head to reveal a sheer white tank top.

Against my better judgment, my gaze dips to the plunging neckline and the cleavage she sports, then scans the rest of her body in slow motion. Now that she's showing more skin, I see the delicate contours of her body and the tattoos she's covered in, though I can't quite make out the designs from this

vantage point.

Christ, my mum would hate her. Not to mention the Elders who made me mayor in the first place.

The sudden urge to push her against a wall and ruin both of our lives hits me like a brick, and if I weren't already seated, the force would certainly double me over.

She turns toward the counter and pulls a glass jar from beside the register. Fishing a massive wad of cash from her back pocket, she sifts through a couple of bills, stuffs them inside the jar, and repockets the rest.

None of that would be particularly impressive, I suppose, if not for the fact that she looks positively *nervous*. Her tiny hands tremble as she works quickly, constantly glancing around to make sure no one's paying her any attention.

Luckily, I'm seated in the shadows, like a wolf locking in on its next victim.

Unfortunately for her, the little nymph has piqued my interest.

"Wolfe?" Marshall says, trying to reel me back into the conversation. "You listening to what I'm saying?"

"I'm the fucking mayor. Not a detective," I reply. "And it's not as if the Delos County Police are favored. They were almost declared a criminal enterprise last year."

"Yes, but these were Organized Crime and Gang officers. Specifically, a task force dedicated to weeding out the municipal influence of organized crime. *Someone* gave them a tip about a certain recently-elected mayor."

My spine stiffens. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I think you already know the answer to that."

Of course I do.

It's not as if I didn't anticipate this reality. No wonder Hollis didn't show.

"What do you want me to do, boss?" Marshall asks, and I despise how the moniker rolls off his tongue so easily. Despise the way it heats my insides the

way it used to, before I stepped into the spotlight of public office.

The throbbing sensation in my temples intensifies, and I'm tempted to haul myself behind the counter and down the first Cognac bottle my hands find.

For a moment, I forget the reason I came to Boston in the first place, as if the memory of bloodshed could ever truly be forgotten.

I forget the city officials I bribed just hours ago, shaking their hands with the DNA of their state representative still beneath my fingernails.

Reaching up, I tug on the corded leather necklace beneath my collar, toying with the Wolfe family crest looped through it. The W-shaped charm slides easily back and forth as I cast my gaze around the pub again, contemplating my next move.

I find the blue-haired girl once more, although this time, she's not at the counter, and she's not flirting with customers.

She's swiping the tips from back tables that have yet to be bussed.

So that's what she's been doing.

A greedy, small smirk tugs at one corner of my lips when her gaze finally meets mine.

Bloody hell, how I wish I could see those irises up close.

I'll bet they're *ripe* with fear.

On the phone, Marshall clears his throat, and I watch as the girl's eyes narrow into slits. She pockets more cash before slipping into the washrooms in the back.

Clearly not bothered by the fact that she's been caught.

"Haul in any beat cops you can," I tell Marshall, my mind working overtime as it tries to keep up with each new turn of events. "Find out what they know, then tail and question civilians in Delos, if you can. I want a full-scale counter investigation, and I want it off the record."

"Obviously."

With that, he hangs up, and I blow out a long breath. Scrolling through

my contacts, I'm tempted to text Jonas and let him know what's going on. It'd be nice to have the loyalty of someone just because of our relationship rather than because I pay them.

And though I do pay Jonas for hits, he's never once asked questions because his loyalty lies with our last name.

But if I tell him, I'll endanger him far more than he is in general because the Delos officers weren't investigating large-scale corruption.

They were investigating *me*.



“OKAY, I’m closing up soon, so you’d better get in there and finish whatever it is you’ve been doing.”

Laurel nuzzles me with his snout as he finishes off the pickle I brought him, and I look over my shoulder at my ex-girlfriend, Nari. She’s standing in the doorway, twirling the end of her ponytail and glancing down the alleyway like she’s afraid the boogeyman might jump out and grab her.

Little does she know, the boogeyman hides in plain sight.

He’s probably in her bar right now, biding his time as he looks for souls to steal.

A tiny shiver skates along my spine as I think about the dark gaze I spotted across the room earlier. How I froze for a second, wondering if the

shadowy figure would rat, and booked it before he could.

The fact that Nari's here now and not chewing me out says he kept quiet, though I don't know why. And I don't intend to be here long enough to find out.

"I'm done," I tell her, twisting back around to scratch Laurel's chin.

He huffs, pushing his head against my knee, asking for more.

"You got what you came for?"

Smirking, I hold up the bag of scrap food I swiped from The Oracle's kitchen. "Yep."

She stares at me silently for a beat. Her pink lips twitch as if she's refraining from passing judgment, and I can almost feel it coming. The lecture about danger and how much better life would be if I just went home.

And it likely *would* be better. I could put my public administration degree to use and get a job. However, it'd mean living with my mother again since I'm beyond out of cash and favors. She's made it clear she'd be happy to have me home, and I'd be lying if I said a part of me isn't tempted.

It's just that I've been away for so long at this point, after making a big stink about the way everyone gave up on my brother, that my pride refuses to let me return.

Nari doesn't say anything, and a pocket of gratitude opens up in my black heart, if only for a moment. Her silence is the reason I knew I could come here, even if we hadn't ended our romantic relationship on the best terms.

Even if she doesn't necessarily support everything I do or agree with my conclusion that my MIA brother is alive and not on some otherworldly plane like everyone else seems to believe.

The wad of cash in my back pocket feels distinctly heavy as we look at each other.

"Okay," she says finally, lifting a shoulder. "I trust you know what you're doing."

That sentence is Nari code for *I'm not mad; I'm disappointed*, and I

wonder if she knows more than she lets on.

I'd feel bad, except I need the cash. I've scrimped and saved every dollar possible over the last year to afford this excursion, risking jail time by squatting and pawning things that didn't belong to me. As if I don't have a list of priors the local police would love to add to.

There's no time to dwell, though, because in the next second, Nari's spinning on her heels and heading back inside. Pushing to my feet, I adjust the silver hoop piercing my right nostril and give Laurel another stroke behind his ear, then make my way to the end of the alley.

Glancing behind me as I come out to a fork between a couple of shitty buildings, I make sure no one's tailing me. My hand glides up against the concrete, finding a metal handle in the dark.

Wrapping my fingers around it, I yank, and the door pops open. Just barely, but enough that I'm almost able to force my body through and into the room I've been squatting in for the last few months. It's attached to the back of a grocery store, unused since they got a new place to store their frozen goods.

As soon as I move to go inside, a hand appears out of nowhere, slamming the door shut and nearly taking my foot with it.

"Hey," I snap, a sudden shock of adrenaline shooting through my veins. "What the fuck? You almost shut that on me."

A velvety, deep English accent rumbles above my head, "Good thing you seem to have impeccable reflexes then, little thief."

"Excuse me?" Squinting, I try to make out more than just a sharp jaw and dark hair in the dim streetlight.

He's tall, at least a foot taller than me, with long legs and broad shoulders. Under normal circumstances, I'd probably be interested in seeing how easily he could throw me over his shoulder or if we could fuck standing up, but right now, I'm more worried about the thief comment.

"Were you under the impression that your antics inside went unnoticed?"

His tongue clicks, and he leans a shoulder against the door, ignoring Laurel's sudden low growl as he stiffens at my side. "Or perhaps you were hoping to get caught. Perhaps you enjoy the rush."

What the fuck is happening?

Frowning, I take a step and twist myself away from the man. His tan suit jacket is buttoned and his face partially hidden, as if he does this kind of thing often and knows exactly how to protect himself.

If he intended to mug or kill me, he would've done so immediately. For some reason, the continued beat of my heart and the money in my pocket does little to quell my nerves.

I don't know how I know exactly, but something about this stranger is off. Something that tells me his danger isn't like what I normally deal with on the streets, but that I should be equally as terrified.

Maybe even more so.

"You're making an awful lot of assumptions for someone who doesn't even know my name."

"So you're not a thief?"

"No," I grit out, annoyed at how his accent clings to the words, like smoke tangling with the syllables, making my skin break out in goose bumps.

"The tips you grabbed from the ladies' tables. You gave the cash to them?"

"Yep."

"Fancy yourself a money service of some sort?"

"A *what?*" My face scrunches up. "How *old* are you?"

"Was that too difficult of a question for you to comprehend?"

His attitude makes my blood boil, and even though I know I should probably focus on getting the hell out of here, I can't drag myself away from the argument.

"No, it's just that you sound like you've stepped out of an early twentieth-century catalog for finishing school."

“Finishing school,” the stranger repeats, taking a step toward me and away from the door.

Laurel growls again, the throaty sound echoing up the alley. My nerves draw taut, fear that we’re creating a scene making its way into my bones.

I swallow as my heart kicks at my ribs.

“How old are you?” He undoes the button on his suit jacket, revealing a crisp white dress shirt, open just enough to showcase a soft smattering of chest hair and a leather necklace.

The two seem at odds with his otherwise neat, stately appearance, but they’re not what I focus on as he moves into a beam of light from an upstairs window.

His hands are *huge*, the corded veins stretched tight beneath his skin, making my stomach flip. Something lodges in my throat as his fingers flex, unnerving me.

A shrill bark rips through the air, and I jump, immediately reaching for Laurel’s short black fur. He pushes his body weight into my calf, barking again, and it jolts me from the fantasy.

“I should go,” I say, but it comes out hushed and breathless. “I have somewhere I need to be.”

His head turns slightly, and I know he’s glancing at the door he kept me from going in. “Perhaps you should return the bills first.”

Pursing my lips, I shuffle backward. “No, I don’t think so.”

He follows, slow and deliberate, like he’s planning on catching me the second I split.

There’s no doubt in my mind that he could, except I might buy a few extra seconds if Laurel goes for his feet. I don’t really want to use my brother’s dog as a weapon, but it wouldn’t be the first time I had to.

“Ah, so I was correct.” The man’s voice dips an octave, and I feel it in my chest. “You *do* enjoy the rush.”

My eyes narrow. “You know what they say about assuming.”

Before he has a chance to say anything else, I duck out of the light, whirling around so quick that I'm afraid I might sprain something. My ankles strain as I right myself, tossing the bag of scrap food over my shoulder and morphing into a sprint toward the darker, smaller street.

I hear Laurel bark, the sound feral for a minute before it dies off completely. My heart thuds heavy against my ribs, and I look back just as I reach the end of the two buildings I'm wedged between, seeing his silhouette digging into the paper bag.

Distracted, leaving me open to an attack.

When the stranger slams me up against the concrete wall, I only have enough clarity to shift my face to the left to avoid harming the piercing in my right nostril. He fits his entire physique against my backside, so tight and close that it almost feels like he's trying to sew us together.

The unforgiving concrete scratches against my cheek as I struggle.

"If you wanted to feel me up, all you had to do was ask."

His chuckle vibrates through me. "I'm certain you'd be willing, but this way is far more exciting."

"You're a fucking psycho."

I buck against his hold, and he adjusts his grip, fitting one arm beneath my elbows as he wrenches them behind me. His free hand snakes up to my throat, and my pulse skitters as he strokes it with the wide pad of his thumb.

"Better a psycho than a dirty little thief."

As he shifts, his hips press into my back, and I bite down on my lip in an attempt to ignore the hard feel of him.

I don't even know what his face looks like, but here we are, practically dry-humping in an alley.

At least he's not interested in the door anymore.

"What's your deal?" I ask. "It's not like I stole from you."

"But you did," he says, moving his thumb on my skin in a circular motion. "My attention, my thoughts. The entire time I sat inside, watching,

trying to figure you out.”

“Sounds like a personal problem.”

“I’d very much like to make it *our* problem.” His lips find my ear, hot against the shell. “Where is it you need to go, *m’eudail*? Let me take you.”

“Oh, sure. After you attacked me in an alleyway, I’d be stupid *not* to go with you.”

The arm hooked through both of mine removes itself, and I feel pressure in my back pocket as his fingers slip in.

“Hey—”

His hand leaves my throat, coming up and fitting firmly over my mouth. I shriek in protest, but the sound comes out more as a moan than anything else, and for a moment, neither of us moves.

My eyes are as wide as the moon, and his breath scatters across the side of my face in broken beats.

There’s something chaotic and primal about the entire situation. An undercurrent of debauchery, different from what I’ve grown accustomed to in my normal life, even if the mechanics of what’s happening are more than a little fucked.

It’d be nice if I could get a good look at the man’s face. But as my body heats, my thighs clenching together with a basal want, it seems unnecessary to determine whether it likes whatever game this is.

Maybe this can be my last hurrah before I leave town. An official send-off to the life I’m leaving behind and all the bad shit that dies with it.

He traps my arms again. “I suppose I could always head back inside and tell your friend what you did. Don’t think she’ll be very keen on the idea of you ripping off her employees, though.”

“My ex,” I clarify, though I’m not sure why it feels necessary. Maybe I think it’ll garner sympathy. Warm embarrassment scalds my throat, and I struggle against him more. “Do that, and I’ll kill you.”

“Threatening a government official is a felony, so I’d be careful wielding

that, whether you're capable of it or not."

Finally managing to wriggle an arm free, I lean into the wall and go limp, breaking the hold he has on me. As soon as it goes lax, I maneuver myself around so his dick is flush with my stomach.

At this angle, I can sort of make out the light color of his irises, though it's hard to see the exact hue. They're clear, almost crystalline, as he stares down at me.

One of his hands thrusts into my hair, tangling with the roots.

"I'm capable," I tell him, the scent of clean laundry and musky cologne hitting me at once. "But maybe I'd rather strike a deal instead." As I speak, I brush some of the hair off my shoulder, dragging the tips of my fingers over my collarbone, exposed through the tank top I have on.

"You're hardly in a position to be negotiating," he says, voice thick.

"Should I get on my knees then?"

His free hand finds the button of my jeans, pushing it through the loop. Hooking a thumb in the waist, he gives a small shake of his head. "I'd much rather be on mine."

Arousal spirals in my nerve endings, making me dizzy as this massive beast kneels before me. Slivers of his face appear as he moves, taking my pants with him.

My palms smack against the concrete when the denim reaches mid-thigh, and I let out a small squeak as cool air brushes my skin.

The muscles in my stomach tighten to a point of pain as he studies the most intimate part of my body.

A complete fucking *stranger*.

Not that it would be the first time I've let a stranger see me naked, but still. I've always preferred a little commitment.

Wrapping the wad of cash around the lacy band of my thong, the man leans in, slides my panties to the side, and sniffs.

"*Fuck.*"

That single syllable makes my pussy clench, and I bite back a moan.

He traces the branches of the tree inked on my inner thigh with the tip of his tongue. Inches up and up until I can feel his breath on my lips. My own leave my chest in harsh bursts, tension coiling like springs inside me.

“How do you like it?” he whispers.

I don’t answer because in truth, I’m not really sure. I’ve enjoyed sex for years, but this part never did much for me. A necessary evil that even the girls I’ve been with couldn’t make me enjoy.

After so many failed attempts, you start to accept that maybe you’re just defective.

Undeterred, my kneeling stranger moves in. The first lick snatches the soul from my body; it’s a single languid stroke, wet and dirty, and he doesn’t give me time to recover before diving in completely.

“If you won’t tell me,” he mutters, parting me with a thumb, “I’ll be forced to figure it out on my own.”

Sealing his mouth to my flesh, he alternates between sucking and teasing my clit with his teeth. My legs buckle, and he reaches up, pushing his forearm into my stomach and forcing me into the wall as he devours me.

When he pulls back, the loss is *tangible*.

“All night,” he groans, tearing at my pants until they pool at my ankles.

Shuffling quickly, he yanks them over my black stilettos, tossing them to the side as he fits his shoulders between my thighs. A large hand palms one of my ass cheeks, and then he’s shifting, hoisting me so he’s angled better.

“Huh?” I choke out.

He laps lazily, nipping my sensitive flesh. “All night, I’ve imagined how you’d taste, little thief.”

Another lick and the flat of his thumb follows. “Imagined what this view would look like. How it’d feel to worship a deviant.”

I shudder. “And?”

Teeth nick my clit again, causing me to cry out.

“Fucking divine.” As he finishes his sentence, his tongue spears inside me.

Lewd, disgusting sounds fill the alley as he eats, and it takes me a second to realize he’s not the only one making them.

My fingers twist in his hair, the strands soft and long enough for me to pull, just as one of his joins the ministrations of his tongue. “Oh *shit*.”

“There it is,” he grunts, speaking directly into my pussy. “Give it to me, *m’eudail*. I want to see how bewitching you are when you come.”

Pressure builds in my abdomen, heat wisping along my limbs. A second digit is added to the foray, curling and massaging as he tastes me inside and out.

Taste is too tame a word for what this man is doing, though. He *consumes*, ravishing me like this is the only meal he’s ever desired and the last one he’ll ever get.

Maybe it’s the taboo of it all—the public setting, the animosity, the fact that we don’t know a single thing about each other, except that our bodies are interested—that catapults my release over the edge.

Kaleidoscopes of color flash across my vision, and my head lolls back as the sensation morphs. It spirals, growing into a cyclone of white-hot desire, shooting up my spine so quickly that I almost black out from the pleasure.

The climax is violent, ripping through me like an insatiable storm. I clamp down on his fingers as he moves his mouth back up to my clit, moaning into my skin as I soak him.

Tiny jolts of electricity tingle through me as the man pulls back to bite down on the inside of my thigh. My fingers are numb as they release his hair, and he disentangles himself slowly.

Deliberately.

Slumped against the wall, I watch as he drags the back of his hand across his mouth. He fits the valley between his thumb and forefinger against his lips, sucking hard to clean me off him, and my core clenches all over again.

I should probably leave now. Really, I mean to, but my entire body feels like jelly, and my legs refuse to cooperate as cool air drifts between them. Warmth from the man's undivided attention scratches at all the places he hasn't touched on my body yet, and I suddenly realize I want him to.

At this moment, I want it more than I've ever wanted anything else.

Clearing my throat, I tuck a strand of my blue hair behind my ear. "Is public nudity a felony?"

"Pardon?"

Reaching up, I swallow down a ball of nerves and glance around the alley, then slip the straps of my tank top off my shoulders.

"Might as well add to my charges, sir."

"Your Honor," he says, taking a step toward me. His palm comes to my left breast, cupping it almost reverently.

I snort. "Are you serious? Isn't that for judges or something?"

He doesn't respond, and a sliver of unease wedges itself in my soul.

My eyebrows rise, and I recall his comment earlier. "Are you really a government employee?"

Still no response.

Frustrated, I grab his hand and claw at it. "Hello? Earth to... *stranger*."

His grip tightens, and I suck in a sharp breath at the feel of his rough palm against my puckered nipple. Another step brings him against me, and the pulse between my legs flutters wildly.

"Want to know what else I imagined?" he asks, using his free hand to work at the fly of his dress slacks.

My tongue darts out, wetting my lips, and he chuckles darkly.

"Of course you do. My little thief puts up a good front, but she's starved for a good, hard fuck, isn't she?"

"I'm not *your* anything." I let go of him with the intention of moving out of reach, but my body seems to have other ideas as it goes to assist him.

"That's right," he says. "Nothing but a dirty toy, and unfortunately for

you, I'm in the mood to play."

His cock bobs free as he unbuckles his belt, long and thick with that slight upward curve, and he gives it a tug.

"I'd love to watch you choke on it, but I'm afraid there isn't time."

Something catches in the light, and I tense up. "Wait, wait."

I'm breathless as he pinches the tip of a condom, moving to fit it over his dick. I didn't even see him get it out.

My eyes bulge at the silver barbell sticking vertically through the mushroom-shaped head. "What is *that*?"

I can almost hear his frown, and he pokes at the hoop in my nose. "Surely, you're familiar with piercings?"

"Well, yeah." I blink, staring. "But I've never actually seen one there. Jesus, that looks painful."

"It was. But I've had it a long time, and I can assure you, I rarely even remember it being there."

My nose wrinkles. "Why'd you do it?"

"Ask me again when I've bottomed out inside you."

In one swift move, he rolls the condom down his shaft and yanks my hips, trapping me between him and the wall as he lifts me. A large fist grips the base, and my arms tremble as I reach out to brace myself on his shoulders.

Shifting, I feel the tip slip inside as he moves my thong again, and the slight stinging sensation as I stretch around him almost forces a recoil from me. I press on, wanting—no, *needing*—this release.

From *him*.

His thick crown spreads me open, impaling me so slowly that I think it might never reach an end. The man holds me up by my thighs with his hands beneath my knees, so I'm completely on display to him.

Luckily, our proximity doesn't allow much light, so he can't get the satisfaction.

As his hips meet mine, a sharp heat cascades outward from my pussy. He strokes against me, reaching where few have before, and I startle, my nails digging into the smooth fabric of his suit jacket. My stomach caves, euphoria rushing from my core through my veins, and stars suddenly dot the night sky.

“See?” Dragging his cock back out, he hits the spot again, and I can’t stop a moan from escaping. “That’s why.”

“I so don’t care,” I say, although it’s the biggest lie I’ve ever told. I care, but mostly just about the fact that the piercing is capable of making me shake. “Shut up and fuck me.”

Shifting to brace a hand against the wall by my head, he leans in and presses his lips to my ear. “That what you want?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“You should really consider your requests before verbalizing them.” He pushes back in, quick and sudden, stealing the breath from my lungs. “There are monsters out here, you know.”

Yes, I know all about the boogeyman.

“Men who wouldn’t think twice about taking advantage of sweet, innocent little lassies.”

God, his accent is distracting. Thick and luxurious, like a fine English tea.

“Is that what you’re doing?” I exhale, sliding my hands up around his neck as his pace increases.

A dark chuckle rumbles against the side of my head, making my insides twist.

“You’re not innocent,” he says, fucking me harder and harder until I can feel a bruise spreading over my tailbone as it connects with the wall behind me.

Indignation catches in my chest. “I could be.”

“Innocent lassies don’t come all over the face of a man they don’t know. They don’t strip bare in an alley and spread their delicious thighs, and they certainly don’t ask the monster to fuck them.”

Biting my lip, I feel myself pulsing around him. My pussy is aflame, pleasure scorching through my blood as his thrusts turn almost punishing. Brutal strokes of his cock and that goddamn piercing make my vision blur.

“It would’ve been easy to forget the rubber,” the man groans, grunting the words into my neck like they’re painful to utter. “You were so ready, sopping wet and blushing furiously after you came, that I could’ve slid inside you bare, and you wouldn’t have even noticed.”

He’s probably not wrong, which is a problem all in itself.

If this were a regular occurrence, I’d be in trouble.

The hand on the wall leaves, coming down to wrap around my throat. Not in a way that robs me of any air, but almost as if he’s just trying to keep me steady.

Or, I muse as his breaths grow erratic, maybe he’s trying to ground himself.

I bring my hand up, locking our fingers and tightening his grip. Pressure remains on the sides of my neck as he lets me set the force, and the way my breathing scatters makes my stomach drop.

“That was my favorite fantasy of the night,” he hisses. “Thinking of what it’d feel like to take you raw.”

“Oh God,” I cry out, my body tensing as my pussy contracts. His words shouldn’t turn me on, but the idea of the *risk* is so insanely alluring that I can’t help myself.

“You’d love that, wouldn’t you, little thief? Skin to skin, my cock fucking away at your tight, hot little hole?”

Sweat beads along my brow, and I claw at his neck, my hips moving in tandem with his as I search for more friction, more warmth—just *more*.

“And what would you have done if I came inside you? If I pumped your sweet cunt full of my cum? So full that she’d leak for a week, and you’d have to walk around with the reminder of how deliriously good I felt every damn day.”

“I—I’m...” I trail off, my words not forming properly.

“You don’t even know my name.”

The sound of our wet flesh slapping and his words are my undoing; my spine tingles as another orgasm crawls up, making its way through my limbs.

“All you’d have to remember me by is the best goddamn fuck of your life, and if you were lucky, maybe I’d knock you up. Give you a reason to track me down, just so we could do this all over again.”

The feminist in me is revolted by the notion, but a primal beast holds the reins of my sanity right now. All I can do is nod fervently, secure in the knowledge that we’re protected here, and let my release take hold.

“That’s it,” the stranger says, fucking and coaxing me through it. “Come now. Squeeze my cock with that sweet cunt. I need to feel it, need you to—” He breaks off on a groan, shunting himself so deep inside me that I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget.

We finish at the same time, and he gives a couple of long, slow thrusts, working us through the climax.

“Just like that,” he murmurs, setting my nerves on fire. “*God*, you feel good. So goddamn good.”

“Jesus Christ.” I pant, trying to catch my breath and comprehend what just happened, all at the same time, but coming up short.

The man clears his throat, brushing sweat-slicked hair from my forehead. “That was...” He trails off, shaking his head. “Thank you.”

Wrinkles crease between my eyebrows, and I push at his chest. He withdraws slowly, both of us wincing at the immediate loss. Within seconds, he’s corrected his pants, and he stands tall over me as I move to step into my jeans, pulling my top up.

Cash is scattered over the pavement, apparently having slipped through the band of my thong at some point.

I chuckle to myself, bending to collect the money. Laurel scampers over, his metal dog tags clanking together, and I realize this is the first time since

Lucian gave him to me that we've been apart for more than a few minutes.

Guilt pricks at my skin, but I try to shake it off so it doesn't ruin my afterglow.

The sudden silence is unnerving, so I attempt to fill it. "I've never had anyone thank me for sex before. Maybe next time, you can just take me to dinner or something before you start talking about knocking me up."

He doesn't say anything, and a cool breeze washes over me, unimpeded.

My stomach drops, and when I look up, the stranger's gone.



THERE IS a reason I don't often do my own dirty work.

My brother, Jonas, believes I don't have the stomach for it. As if one could be born into the Wolfe clan and not be predisposed to a certain degree of tolerance when it came to the seesaw of morality.

Like I didn't spend the vast majority of my childhood learning to hunt, shoot, and track with our father too. Anytime my mum dragged me back to Aplanana Island, where Duncan Wolfe had made his home, that was what we spent our hours together doing.

Only he trained me in the shadows. While Jonas slept unbeknownst and tired from his rigorous lessons, our father sent me to the warehouse basement, where he conducted all of his *unofficial* business.

He always insisted it was necessary. Both the subject matter and the secrecy because during the day, they groomed me for *greatness*.

Jonas was to be the brute. The one who did the heavy lifting after our father no longer could.

They wanted me as the head—brains, brawn, and face alike. I needed to look proper but have a lethal edge.

Thus, it's not that my stomach is too weak to handle executions and political unsavoriness. I just don't have the luxury of embracing them publicly.

However, the morning after I return to Aplana, my brother still isn't returning my calls, so I have no choice but to head downtown for some early morning interrogating by myself.

Adjusting the heavy duffel bag on my shoulder, I let out a long breath. "Let's make this quick, all right? I have a budget meeting before lunch, and I'm hoping it runs over, so I don't have to meet with my mum while she's in town."

The scrawny blond carter who let me into the sanitation compound rushes ahead, pulling the metal door open to the decrepit building. Inside looks like your run-of-the-mill warehouse with concrete walls and forklifts beeping so loud that it's almost impossible to hear yourself think.

I strain to hear my escort when he speaks, head turned so I can't see his lips.

"You don't like your mom, Your Honor?" Waving to a small group of workers in blue jumpsuits, huddled around a compactor, the man leads me beyond the loading dock and through another doorway.

My chest warms as a memory flashes across my vision with his use of the honorific—luscious blue hair; soft, tattooed skin; and an insatiable cunt.

Last night was probably one of the dumbest I've had in a long time. My body had acted before my brain, short-circuiting when the little nymph left the building. I'd grown terribly accustomed to watching her rob the pub's

employees and followed her before I could think better of it.

If I'd been thinking at all, I'd have left her alone. Definitely wouldn't have risked exposure, especially given the business I'd been conducting there in the first place.

Certainly wouldn't have sucked the life from between her thighs and then fucked her while whispering how badly I'd have loved to spill inside her with nothing separating us.

Not one of my finest moments, yet I've been hard-pressed to think of anything else since.

I'd love to blame my actions on being stood up, but I can't quite convince myself.

Her scent, like chlorine and citrus, is positively embedded in my soul. So much so that I've been tempted several times to call Marshall and have him track her down for me.

Maybe even do it myself. See if she gets off on more than one kind of rush.

Shoving the thoughts of her aside before all the blood shoots to my dick, I smooth a hand down the front of my dress shirt, slipping it beneath one brown suspender strap as I follow the carter down a narrow hall.

"My mum's great," I answer after a beat. "*Too* great even."

Impossible to live up to.

I don't normally engage much with the common folk of the island, simply because the majority of them aren't particularly fond of me. But those who work in sectors backed by my late father's criminal syndicate tend to be a bit more friendly.

Or perhaps they're just scared, as my reputation often precedes me.

When it doesn't, my brother's does. Hard to forget the failed assassination attempt on one of Aplana's richest, most esteemed citizens—even if the bloke deserved it.

Luckily, that's the only crime they could pin on him. And since Jonas's

release from prison, I've had his records expunged anyway.

Didn't want crime overshadowing my political career, even if it was the nasty undertone.

Coming to a stop where the building forks, the carter presses his pinkie to a scanner on the wall, then reaches forward and pushes another metal door open.

"Yeah," he says, gesturing with his index finger for me to follow him down the steep concrete stairs.

Annoyance creeps over my skin each time he takes off while speaking, but I tamp my reaction. It's not like he knows better.

"I get it," he continues. "My parents wanted me to follow in their footsteps and join the Peace Corps. Thanksgiving has never been more awkward."

As we reach the bottom step, a putrid odor floods the air. I grit my teeth against it, unwilling to show an ounce of vulnerability here, even as it feels as though it could singe my nose hairs right off.

"So why waste management?"

He stops in front of a Plexiglas door, sliding it to the side with a shrug. The large recycling room is cleared out of its normal machinery to make room for dozens of garbage pallets. They're stacked in rows, almost touching the ceiling, and manipulated so the middle of the floor is open.

A metal cart on wheels sits beside the control room, dead center on the floor, and a man stands to one side of the box, pressed up on his toes with his palms against the wall.

He's been stripped naked, and the skin on his ass and stomach are decorated with deep red stripes. Welts that indicate my men are ahead of schedule, which, since my election as mayor, rarely seems to happen.

A black X is drawn on the center of the man's forehead. A target.

Sliding the duffel bag off my shoulder slowly, I let it drop to the ground, then bend and unzip. Rifling through the tools inside, I pause when I see

something I haven't used in a while—a red-and-white axe with a wooden handle.

Normally, I prefer my Glock or a bow, as they're much quicker and less messy, but right now, I feel like expelling some of the adrenaline left from my late-night rendezvous. And while I revel in the chase and capture of my victims, having them ready in advance works just as well.

I grin, my eyes calculating the distance between myself and our rat, aware that the spectacle is for my benefit. Wolfe men love a good show, and I do enjoy when they let me use certain skills that are otherwise dormant in my public life.

The carter's mouth lifts as he steps aside, nodding at the scene before us as he answers my previous question. "Waste management pays better."



UNFORTUNATELY, neither meeting extends beyond lunch. A few hours after leaving the compound, I've approved Aplana's annual budget and tucked myself away in my office on the top floor of City Hall, hoping the lock might deter my mum.

A pipe dream really.

What Lorna Malcolm wants, she gets. With the exception of my father.

I see her coming through the one-way glass door, which opens just as I slip a new black silk tie around my neck. My mum struts in, wearing plum trousers and a white Burberry blouse, a handbag glued to her side.

An admin from IT gives an apologetic look as he shuts us in together. I make a note to fire him later.

Tossing her dark red hair over one shoulder, she takes the brown bucket seat across from me, clasping her handbag tight to her chest. She glances over my shoulder at the wall behind me, lifting a brow at the fresh coat of dark

blue paint. It's the only speck of color in my otherwise neutral office, but she doesn't question it.

For that, I'm glad. I'm not sure how to explain the urge I felt to hire someone to come paint it this morning.

"Avoiding me, darling?" Her mouth barely moves when she speaks—some kind of coping mechanism from a strict childhood in which she wasn't granted freedom of speech—impeding my ability to read the words as they come.

Some people, though, never say anything new or different, so making sentences becomes less about the accuracy and more about context. The subtle shift of a gaze or the slight twitch in a finger, masking agitation or hurt.

I finish the Windsor knot, tightening it at my chin. "Apparently not very well."

"That's because your heart knows better than to hide from the only family you have." She gives me a patronizing look, smoothing away some smudged mascara at the corner of one brown eye.

"You're not my only family."

Instinctively, my hand reaches for my cell in the interior pocket of my camel-colored suit jacket. *No new messages still.*

Christ. Jonas Wolfe can hold a fucking grudge.

"Ah, yes. Can't forget that degenerate brother of yours." My mum's gaze hardens. "How is he, by the way? Still engaged to that bobblehead realty heiress?"

Sighing, I uncap the bottle of painkillers sitting beside my desktop computer, taking three and ignoring her comment. Partly because my mum's issues with Jonas and Primrose Realty have nothing to do with *me* and everything to do with the fact that my late father left us for them.

Also because, if she thinks Jonas is a degenerate, I don't want to know what that makes me.

“What can I do for you, Mum?” I take a sip of the honey tea in front of me, letting its warmth clear my sinuses.

“We had plans for tea.”

“My docket is quite full.”

Her expression flattens. “I know. I looked at my copy before I took the ferry over.”

“Your copy?” My brows quirk up. “Where did you get access to my schedule?”

She scoffs. “Well, since *you* refused to give me it, I made one myself while you were at the hunting range last week.”

Dull, quiet pain flares in my temples, and I rub at one with an index finger. “Mum, there’s a reason I didn’t give you one. The schedule changes often. Meetings get moved around or canceled. A political career is chaos.”

“I tried to warn you,” she mutters, toying with the ruby signet ring on her thumb. The Malcolm family crest—two opposing dolphins on either side with a python wrapping around the bow and arrows in the middle.

Her childhood was shrouded by Scottish royal politics; even now, she goes out of her way to be undetected and excommunicated, so we aren’t bothered by the rules and regulations of that society.

My decision to follow in the footsteps of my grandparents, both official foreign diplomats, took a toll on her for a long time. Eventually, she acquiesced because at least I didn’t follow the path of my father.

The blood I can still feel on my fingers begs to differ.

“In any case, my afternoon is booked. If you’d like to reschedule tea, we can try to set something up. I’ll have to do it myself, though, since I’ve yet to hire a new assistant.”

The crow’s feet adorning her eyes crease deeper. “You *just* got back to town. How can you possibly have no time for me?”

Something twists tight in my heart, flaying the organ open, and for a split second, I’m no longer thirty-six years old and the most powerful man on the

island.

I'm six, and ten, and fifteen. Watching my mother drink herself to sleep in a different apartment every night, mourning the life that was stolen from her.

I'm seven, completely powerless when the latest in a long string of boyfriends plies her with cocaine.

Nine, when the same man joins her this time and beats the living shit out of her.

Up until then, I didn't know how many liters of blood the body held. They teach you in school, sure, but there's no substitute for experience, and there's *nothing* like watching it pour from the back of your mother's head.

Nothing like having your face rubbed in it when her boyfriend decides ragging on her is no longer sufficient.

I'm eleven, secretly learning to pick up on social cues and lip-reading because the hearing loss in my right ear is becoming noticeable. One too many fists to the side of my skull starts to catch up.

Then at sixteen, I switch to a traditional bow and arrow when hunting with my father because the sound of the shotgun obscured my other senses too much, and I want to be able to focus on hearing while I perfect my shot.

The damage wasn't extensive, but I notice the loss nonetheless. My mum has never forgiven herself for it, nor have I forgiven myself for not being stronger for her.

Even now, the guilt is unbearable. Gritting my teeth, I open my online calendar and mark through my two o'clock with my PI. Marshall can wait, I suppose, though I leave the interviews scheduled for after. The need for an assistant grows more dire with each passing day, and even though I only fired my last one a week ago, things have already begun falling through the cracks.

"We'll do tea, all right? Let's go now," I tell my mum, getting to my feet and adjusting the strap on my suspenders before shrugging into my jacket.

Besides, perhaps some sightseeing and networking will finally help me

forget all about last night and the blue-haired pixie I wish were still wrapped tight around my cock.



“MA’AM, I’m sorry, but you can’t bring that on here.”

Frowning, I look down at my ferry ticket. The tag in my shirt tickles the back of my neck, and I resist the urge to reach around and yank it out. “I don’t see anywhere on here that says I can’t.”

The brunette ferry attendant crosses her arms over her chest. “*I’m* telling you, mutts aren’t allowed.”

Laurel whines at my feet, and I straighten my spine, willing myself to feel more massive than I actually am. Hard to throw your weight around when there isn’t much, but I’ve made it work in far more dangerous situations than this.

“He’s not a mutt.”

Okay, technically, he is, and I'm sure the pit bull facial features aren't helping my case. But she said *mutts* like it was a dirty word, not like it's the best thing ever.

"Is this like the TSA's *you can't bring unfrozen gel packs for breastmilk* shtick? 'Cause, I've gotta tell you, I'm not sure you want the backlash they're facing."

Rolling her eyes, the brunette picks up a corded phone inside her booth. "Security," she drones, and panic seizes my chest.

I slap my palms against the glass separating us. "Wait, no! Please don't call security. I *have* to be on this boat when it leaves. I... what if I..."

Feeling around in my back pocket, I finger the cash from last night. A wave of delightful discomfort washes through me, but I stuff it down, unwilling to give that stranger any more of my energy.

If you can't be bothered to say goodbye, then I have no reason to mourn.

Still, I don't particularly want to give up my only funds either. And I'm not sure the attendant would take well to a bribe anyway. Sometimes, I have to remind myself that not everyone can be bought.

"Look," I say finally, scratching at the tag on my neck. "This is... *was*... my brother's dog. It was his last wish for him to see Aplana Island, and I'd really like to grant him it. Respect the dead and all, you know?"

Fire burns the back of my throat, and I glance down, stroking the top of Laurel's shiny head. God, if Lucian were here right now, I'd kill him myself.

The brunette stares at me for several beats, and I can feel the line behind me getting antsy. Finally, she lets out a long sigh before sliding two boarding passes through the slot in the window.

"Keep your *service* dog on his leash at all times. He acts up, even a little, and you're both gone. Got it?"

Relief floods my heart, and I scramble for the passes. "Got it. Thank you!"

She nods, waving me off, and then we head to the loading dock.

Fifteen minutes later, we're aboard the *S.S. Daphne*, trying to find my cousin Violet in the crowd. Laurel spots her first, barking twice and tugging on his leash, drawing attention.

I hold my hand at my waist, silently telling him to heel. Training was not my brother's forte, though, so the commands are still relatively new to Laurel; he acknowledges the request and then darts away, ignoring it.

Shuffling behind him, I avoid eye contact with the ferry workers and other patrons. Boston Harbor grows distant on the horizon as we sail farther out, the sun painting the sky with brushstrokes of pinks and oranges.

Salty water sprays up the closer to the edge of the boat we get, scattering across my face and giving me goose bumps.

Turning on her heels, Violet gives us a smile as Laurel jumps up, paws landing on her thighs. He gets mud on her pale skin, exposed in the distressed cutoffs she has on, but she doesn't seem to care.

"Oh my goodness, hi there, baby! You've gotten so big since the last time I saw you."

"Amazing what a well-balanced diet will do for you," I mutter, dropping my backpack at my feet and leaning against the boat rail.

Violet glances at me, wide brown eyes slowly cataloging my appearance. "You don't say."

I shrug, glad that I opted for the oversize Korn hoodie and mom jeans so she can't judge me in full. I know I've lost some weight since leaving home, but not having unfettered access to food will do that to you. "Times are tough."

"They wouldn't be if you went home."

"There's no home to go back to," I say, glaring down at the worn combat boots on my feet. Black, like almost everything else passed along to me, although these at least I managed to score myself. Even if they are so big that I have a sock balled up in the toe portion to keep them from falling off.

Violet sighs, pushing an onyx-colored French braid off her shoulder.

Laurel's tail wags chaotically as she bends, scooping him into her arms. She giggles as he licks her face, then tucks his head under her chin.

"Is that what you're wearing to your interview?"

I hook the frayed cuffs of my hoodie over my fingers. "I don't really have anything else."

Violet purses her lips. "You can borrow something of mine."

"Oh. You're staying then?"

"Just long enough to get you settled," she clarifies, clearing her throat.

Violet's been on and off the island for years now, returning only to stalk the long-lost brother she has there, even though she won't actually speak to him.

"Does your dad know where you are?" I ask, knowing already that he doesn't. I might not be connected to the family anymore, but I'm certain my mother would've found a way to tell me about my uncle's bastard son somehow.

"No." Violet sighs, putting Laurel back on the ground. "I'd like to keep it that way. No point in hurting anyone, right?"

My mind flickers to the man she shares blood with; the product of an affair her father had early on in his marriage. Apparently, he found out his heritage over a decade ago and began reaching out to Violet, hoping to reconnect.

Violet declined the meeting, but she's not exactly keeping her distance.

Like most of the women in our family, Violet's loyal but also terribly stubborn. And I suspect she wants to get to know her brother, even if she claims otherwise.

Why else would she keep coming back?

She's the reason I know about the job opening at Aplana's City Hall in the first place, and after telling me about the shady mayor and how he might know something about Lucian's location, I applied. I'd been planning to come all along, but it's nice to have a cover.

We dock a while later, weaving our way through the Aplana Island Marina. From the research I did at the library back home, the island itself isn't a part of the conglomerate of recreation off the Boston coast.

It's like this tiny little kingdom with its own economy and judicial system, both of which lean far more corrupt than the internet says. Almost as if someone scrubbed the island's dirty records.

The information still exists though. You can't get rid of that level of crime entirely. You just have to know where to look.

Luckily, some staff members at the special archives section at Cambridge are easily swayed.

Bright green trees line the streets as we come to a stop in the marina parking lot. On one side of the island, there are endless rolling hills and occasional houses peppered between, which disappear the farther back you go.

On the other are the makings of a tiny city with cobblestone streets and rustic décor I can spot even miles away. Flowers and bubbly patrons, likely an odd mix between the residents and tourists since Aplana does function still as a place for the rich and bored to vacation.

I'll never understand how Lucian ended up here, given that we've never been rich or bored. Even when we were well into adulthood, our mother would've rather died than let us have a moment's peace, so the idea that my brother came *here* of all places will never sit right with me.

"So what's the plan?" Violet asks, hailing a cab with one hand.

A couple pass us up in favor of those without dogs until someone finally approaches.

I shrug as the yellow vehicle skids to a halt at the curb. "Find the man who led my brother to drugs and beat some answers out of him."

"Oh my God, your dog is so cute!" The cab driver, a large woman with platinum-blond hair, squeals as she throws open her door, climbing out of the car. "Can I pet him?"

Nodding, I watch with a little smile as she drops to her knees, immediately letting him climb in her lap for kisses.

Violet watches me, chewing on her bottom lip.

Exhaling, I adjust my backpack strap and raise my brows. “What?”

“Well, you know... what if you *don't* find anything?” She hesitates, toying with the end of one long braid. “What if Luce really *is* dead?”

Working my jaw side to side, I stare down as the cabbie plays with Laurel. He nips at her, and I remember how timid and depressed he was after my brother went missing. How much effort it took on my part to get him to be a spritely pup again.

I think about the family that wants me home and how I've really dug my grave, refusing to return. I've no doubt my mother would accept me back if I chose to go, but things would never be the same.

Lucian's missing person folder weighs heavy in my backpack; it's not official, of course, because the police back home don't give a shit about missing junkies. Luce had been piecing the folder together for who knows how long, before one day, a month after he was gone, it was tucked between a grad school acceptance letter and a course catalog for me.

And its presence changed *everything*.

Gritting my teeth, I walk around the cab driver and pull open the back passenger door, throwing my bag inside. “He's not dead,” I tell Violet, conviction heavy in my heart.

“You don't know—”

“I know my brother, okay? I know what it would feel like if he were gone from this planet. Our souls are connected, Vi. It's not...” My eyes sting, and I swallow over the fiery knot in my throat. “I just know, all right?”

He wouldn't leave me without saying goodbye.

Shifting on her feet, Violet nods softly. “Let's get you ready for that interview.”



TWO HOURS LATER, I'm standing in front of the vanity in Violet's hotel room. My body is wrapped in a knee-length black bodycon dress with long sleeves, my hair twisted into an intricate updo and pinned to the back of my head.

Laurel lounges on the bed, his belly full from treats the cab driver gave him.

Violet pokes the hoop in my nose, frowning. "Can you take this out?"

I slide the metal through the hole, resisting. "I'd rather not."

"Are you going to be playing with it in the middle of your interview?"

My hand falls. I glance at myself in the mirror, wishing I didn't look so much like my mother so I wouldn't see her disappointment in my reflection.

Violet waits, palm outstretched.

Groaning, I slide the ring out and give it to her. "I thought you said this mayor is progressive."

"He is," she says, nodding, "but he's very particular about his image, and we want him to like you."

Scoffing, I glance over the quick study sheet she gave me on Alistair Wolfe. Thirty-six years old, bisexual, an avid hunter and self-proclaimed art connoisseur, working on reviving the economy on the island and driving it away from its reliance on real estate investments.

In a few words, my polar opposite. I despise hunting, art is boring, and the economy is very low on my totem pole of priorities. Other than bisexuality, it doesn't seem we have much in common.

"Yeah," Violet agrees when I tell her all of this. "Which is why we should go over some talking points, if you want this job. To... soften you."

I snort. "Because I'm a bitch?"

She smiles. "An acquired taste, not for the faint of heart." Leaning back to judge her handiwork, she wipes some of the dark red lipstick from one

corner of my mouth. “Lucky for you, Mayor Wolfe doesn’t scare easy.”

“There are monsters out here, you know.”

The words from the stranger in the alleyway last night play on a loop in my mind, and nerves cinch the muscles in my stomach tight. I wonder what kind of monster the mayor of this shitty little criminal empire is.

A little while later, Violet and Laurel drop me at City Hall, and I try to remind myself why I’m here in the first place. That no one will know outright who I am or what my goal is.

They don’t know about the phantoms shackled to me. All they’ll know is what I tell them, so it’s important I keep up the façade.

Normally, I’d be vastly underqualified to be the executive assistant for a mayor, but Violet beefed up my résumé, and supposedly, this particular man is desperate.

“Rumor has it, he humiliated his last assistant so badly that they left the *country*,” another candidate whispers to the person sitting beside me as we wait outside his office.

The girl ignores the gossip, grinning as I look at her, and extends her arm for a handshake. I stare at her fingers, my eyes roving over her golden-brown skin and the copper bracelets on both arms. Her hair springs outward in tight curls, and she uses her outstretched hand to push some behind her ear.

“I’m Selene,” she says, giving me a once-over with an amused look.

Hesitating, I weigh the consequences of engaging. I’m not a fan of people, but it might be nice to start off on a friendly foot with the locals. “Cora.”

“I haven’t seen you around before. Are you—?”

She cuts off when the mayor’s office door opens, and a tall, thin woman in a maroon pantsuit steps out.

“Ms. Astor,” she calls, reading off a clipboard. “You may wait for Mayor Wolfe in here, please.”

Selene gives a wide smile, revealing a small space between her front

teeth. She holds her thumbs up as I stand. “Good luck!”

My palms grow clammy as I walk into the office. The first thing I notice is how utterly untouched it seems with its oversize brown leather armchairs and the massive oak desk, catty-corner in front of the single window. Cream-colored wallpaper lines the room on three sides, though the one across from me matches the color of my hair, and bookshelves are bracketing me in. I go to sit in one of the chairs, my heart pounding so loud that I can taste it on the back of my throat.

Ten minutes pass, and still, no mayor.

I swing my leg off from where it was perched on my knee, switching so the opposite is propped up.

Five more minutes pass.

My legs switch again.

Wringing my hands together, I push to my feet, irritation worming its way into my brain the longer I wait. If this is some sort of psychological test, I can already tell I’m not going to pass.

Patience is *not* one of my virtues.

Walking along the walls, I read the spines of the books on the shelves. They’re boring—histories of Aplana and its people with some literature between. Sketches of blueprints for different buildings throughout the city sit in frames on some of the levels, and I try to mentally catalog each one in case I need to know the basic layout later.

Finally, I get to the end of the shelves, and the last picture frame gives me pause.

There’s one photo that looks like it was taken at night, the focus a bit grainy; someone is crouched next to a dead deer, gripping the end of an arrow that juts out from its neck. I can’t see his face that well, but I don’t need to.

Disgusting.

Squinting, I lean in and move to the next photograph, disbelief blurring my vision for a split second.

“What the...?” Picking the frame up, I frown at something familiar I can’t quite place.

A man stands at the grand opening of some metropolitan-style building, a giant pair of scissors in his large hands as he prepares to cut the ceremonial ribbon. There’s no smile on his face, only a stare as icy as the blue of his eyes, and his jet-black hair is combed perfectly back over his ears.

Even through the grain of the photograph, I can see how he towers over the crowd and the immaculate, sharp curve of his jaw. He has on a pair of beige dress pants with a sage button-down shirt tucked in, the sleeves rolled up to reveal thick, muscular forearms, while a pair of suspenders attach to his pants at the trim waist.

The man *exudes* power.

Danger.

And I can’t help wondering how the fuck I know him.

Maybe someone Lucian mentioned or showed me over the years? Someone he knew?

Or maybe—

“Well, well.” A deep English accent comes from just over my shoulder, and a bolt of fear races up my spine, causing me to jump and drop the picture frame.

It shatters, and I feel a piece slice against the top of my foot, but I don’t dare move.

Not until he speaks again.

“What are the odds, little thief?”



WHAT ARE THE ODDS INDEED?

I don't consider myself a particularly fortunate man, yet it seems as though fate has decided to take my side for once. How utterly ironic that it intervenes now.

For the first time, I'm glad my mum showed up and made me alter my plans. Imagine what I might have missed otherwise.

Wide, bright gold eyes blink up at me as the blue-haired nymph from last night freezes mid-spin. Glass from my now-shattered photograph crunches beneath her heels, loud and grating in the silence.

The shimmery locks I had my fingers tangled in less than twenty-four hours ago are now pulled back, chin-length strands framing her soft face. She

bumps into the bookcase behind her, and I let my gaze drop, taking in what I couldn't in the dark.

Her lithe form is wrapped in a skintight black dress, the long sleeves hiding tattoos that I know adorn her smooth body.

Leaning back, she swallows, and I watch the delicate curve of her neck as it works through the motion. My trousers tighten, and I clench my jaw.

A light smattering of freckles dusts across her cheeks and forehead, and I notice the hole in her nostril and cock a brow.

“Interesting.” I inch closer, leaning down. “Unfortunately, I didn't get the memo.”

She ignores the suggestion that I haven't removed my piercing. “This can't be happening.”

I smirk. “And yet it *is*. I must ask again, what are the odds, *m'eudail*?”

Something unreadable flashes in her eyes, and I see tiny orange flecks around her pupils. They spark like little fires, and I find myself tempted to get burned.

“How the fuck should I know what the odds are? I didn't take statistics.”

“Did you take English? Ever heard of something called hyperbole?” Obviously, the odds are a farce. An oversimplification of a coincidence.

“Oh, you mean, like telling a total stranger how badly you want to impregnate them?”

My smirk widens, threatening a full-blown smile. Moving another step in her direction, I pause when our hips are just centimeters apart.

Leaning forward, I prop my forearm on the bookshelf. “That was no exaggeration.”

Her throat bobs, plush red lips parting for a breath. Our eyes remain locked, warring silently, though I can't be sure what battle is being fought.

Christ, I want to kiss her. Ruin her makeup, just because I know it'd piss her off.

My brain recognizes that the visceral reaction her presence causes is

likely something I should be concerned with, but my cock has no qualms. It lengthens behind the zipper of my trousers, and I bite the side of my tongue, dispelling the urge to pull her to me and bury myself inside her again.

“Sexual harassment in the workplace,” the girl mutters, shaking herself from our reverie.

I almost don't catch the words, but my eyes are glued to every slight movement of her mouth, learning the way it curves and gives when she speaks.

“They gave us a pamphlet on that when we came in, you know. I'm beginning to think this is a real problem for you.”

“I've never fucked anyone in my office.” I pause, my eyes flickering to her lips and then back up. “Well, who's worked for me, that is.”

The innuendo is there, bright and dirty, and she casts a look past my shoulder at the desk behind us. A knock on the door makes us jump, and she presses into me more firmly, attempting to escape. I shift, trapping her against the books, the outline of my erection hot where it touches her stomach.

She sucks in a small gasp; I don't hear it, but I feel the sudden expulsion of air as she releases it into my collarbone.

“Your Honor,” the deputy mayor's secretary, Kayla, calls. She's been helping out since I fired my other assistant, and she doesn't like me. “When can we expect to send in the next candidate?”

Candidate?

I look down at the little nymph, then over my shoulder at the stack of interviewee files sitting on my desk. Of course, that's why she's here. Kayla likely put the opening up on one of those job sites, and since Cora was in the Massachusetts coastal area, it makes sense the result would populate.

Those odds are pretty great.

Sliding my tongue over the front of my teeth, I say to the door, “Don't bother. I've made my decision.”

The girl's eyes widen, so they look like saucers. "You can't—"

"I'm assuming you're new here," I tell her, bending my neck so my lips graze her ear, "so I won't fault you for what you can't possibly understand. But I think you'll learn quickly, little thief, that there isn't anything on this island I *can't* do. If I want you as my assistant, then you'll be my assistant. If I want you to lie back on my desk and spread your thighs so I can reacquaint myself with the sweet, sodden paradise between them, you'll do that too."

Her nostrils flare.

My chest tightens, excitement pumping through my veins.

Sweeping my thumb over her mouth, I smear her lipstick, reveling in the way it makes her look like a blood-starved monster.

"The piercing," I rasp, my throat drying up the longer I look at her. "I want it there when you return."

Rage twists her features up, and she shoves at my chest. "I'm not a toy, *Your Honor*. I'm not going to come back if all you're looking for is someone to get on their knees and suck you off whenever you're stressed."

"We can negotiate the terms of your positions." On her knees is hardly the only place I want her. Especially if she keeps calling me *Your Honor* in that bratty tone.

"You don't even know my name."

"I didn't know it last night either, but you still came hard on my face. And my cock." Shrugging, I move back as she pushes me again.

Drawing in several deep, calculated breaths, the girl looks torn between fleeing and staying. Turning her hand over so her palm faces the ceiling, she rubs at a spot on the inside of her wrist, clenching and unclenching her jaw.

"You need an assistant," she says finally, letting her arms fall to her sides.

Fuck me, she's beautiful, even with the permanent scowl etched into her dark brows.

"Not an escort. You're a busy man, and since it's summer and tourist season and your entire campaign is based around reviving the arts, you're

about to get even busier. Not to mention, you're out of town pretty frequently, right?"

Straightening my spine, I tug at my suspenders. "What's your point?"

A smile almost cracks her face. She walks around the desk, trailing an index finger along the polished surface. "Just seems a bit odd for a small-town mayor. Either these are business trips, which leads to the question of what *kind* of business, or you're taking a lot of vacations. Which, again, leads to a question... how are you funding the trips?"

The silence in the room becomes unbearably loud, an endless stream of white noise pounding between my ears. It's not exactly a *secret* how much of the Aplana Island government is corrupt; it's just one of many things the citizens turn their heads away from, content to live their lives as long as no one disrupts them.

Something tells me this girl has chaos on the brain. I should send her packing, get her the hell away from the place where she could actually do some damage, if given the chance.

But letting her go now seems dangerous.

Plus... .. I simply don't want to.

My eyes narrow. "I see you enjoy toeing the felony line."

Lifting a shoulder, the girl shrugs. "I like the rush."

Yes, dirty girl, you certainly do.

"What's your name?"

"It's in my file."

Spinning around, she stalks toward the door, swaying her hips. Swallowing at the visual, I almost don't even notice when she pauses, looking back at me as she grips the doorknob.

"So I'll see you tomorrow, boss?" There's a question in her tone even if she feigns nonchalance. Forcing dominance into the situation, as though she were the one in control here.

Spitting a few thinly veiled threats hardly makes you one, but I suppose

there's time to show her that.

Walking over to where she stands, I palm the top of the door, yanking it open. Leaning in, I press my body to hers, lowering my head and voice as I speak into her hair. "Tomorrow," I agree, hoping I know what the fuck I'm doing. "Don't even think about running, *m'eudail*, because I'll hunt you down. You won't enjoy the rush then."

She jerks away, golden eyes in little slits. My free hand finds her lower back, and I resist the desire to smooth down over the soft material of her dress.

Instead, I shove her from the room and slam the door shut.



WHEN WE WERE YOUNG, our mother would tell Lucian and me scary stories about the boogeyman.

About how he lured in the innocent, promised them things like candy and puppies, and would eventually take off with their souls. Leaving them destitute.

Mostly, they were just fictionalized versions of the horror show that was her relationship with our father, an Olympic gold medalist from Puerto Rico.

Lucian, at least, had some fond memories with the man before he retired from swimming and went into national politics. Supposedly, for a time, Luis Alvarez was quite the doting parent.

By the time I was born, he'd decided domesticity was too bland for him.

I've never even met him.

In seventh grade though, we were asked to pen a letter to our local state representative, calling them to act on a cause we cared about. For some reason, I thought writing my father, begging him to save an animal shelter down the road from my house, was a good idea.

Everyone saw him on television parading around with his pretty wife and their kids, making promises I'm certain he never intended to keep. But he was favored, seemed capable, and I had hoped our biological connection might push him to do *something*.

Not long after I sent the letter, I got one of those template responses, thanking me for my words, along with a vague promise to look into the shelter issue.

My mother received a cease and desist in return; since he'd signed over parental rights before my birth, his team thought the letter was her way of reaching out to him for money.

A week later, the shelter was gone, razed to the ground, and the animals inside were euthanized or sent to foster homes.

I cried for a month, guilt growing leaden in the pit of my stomach.

The stories about the boogeyman were true, it appeared, only I learned then that most monsters weren't the hideous creatures they'd been painted as.

So often, they were just humans who let their flaws dictate their beings.

I've not trusted a single politician since.

Violet lends me a leather messenger bag to take to work, and I stuff Lucian's missing person folder inside along with a Ziploc baggie containing my ID, some cash, and a key card. I used the tips from The Oracle to book my own room at the island's Hotel Ledo, which sounds a lot fancier than the hole it actually is.

When I get to City Hall for my first day, to say I'm on edge would be an understatement. I spent my entire night researching Alistair Wolfe, wondering why he's one of very few not mentioned in my brother's folder.

But I suppose that's why I took this job in the first place. To find out the truth about this strange little town and what it did to Lucian.

Maybe the closer to the belly of the beast I get, the more I'll uncover.

If he doesn't eat me alive first.

"Hey, you made it!"

Jumping at the sudden voice, I quickly stuff Laurel inside the flap of my raincoat and spin around. Selene, one of the other interviewees from yesterday, holds open the glass door to the building, waving at me.

She's wearing a deep purple sweater, her black hair pulled back with a gray headband. "Everyone took bets on whether you'd show up or not."

Stepping inside, I glance around the area. According to the online blueprints, each floor in City Hall has its own lobby, though they get progressively more intimate as you advance in levels. The main section looks pretty standard with its shiny tiled floor and the leather benches surrounding a bouquet of patriotic flags in the middle of the room.

Reflexively, I reach up and prod at my nose, shaking my head when I only feel smooth skin and no metal.

"Do you... did Alistair hire two assistants?"

"Alistair?" Her eyes widen, and she snorts. "You mean, Mayor Wolfe? God, no, I could never. He's too..."

"Tempestuous? Domineering?" I pause, adjusting my hold on Laurel. "Morally repugnant?"

"Uh... sure?" Grabbing my shoulder, she guides me in the direction of the elevator. "I was gonna say hot, but I guess your stuff works too."

She pushes the call button on the wall, and I turn to look at her.

"So if you don't work for the mayor..."

"Human resources administration. That's why I was up there yesterday; Mayor Wolfe likes to have an HR rep fielding candidates, so he doesn't have to deal with the bad eggs."

The elevator dings, settling loudly as it reaches our floor. Selene shuffles

me inside, cocking her head as she studies me.

Warmth scalds my cheeks as I consider my outfit. Laurel licks me through a hole in my T-shirt, and I smother a grin. My clothes probably won't soften the mayor toward me, but I don't really want them to anyway.

"Good luck," Selene says finally, and as the doors glide shut, I can't help feeling like the sentence is part goodwill and part bad omen.

When I get to the top floor, I set Laurel on the ground, pulling his orange leash from my pocket and attaching it to his black collar. He spreads his front legs and hikes his butt into the air, and I laugh.

"Not now, bud. You have to be good, and we'll play later."

Tugging him along, I open the door to the floor's lobby and look around. It's practically a fucking ghost town up here, which is just as well since I'm sure Laurel's presence would be frowned upon.

It's frustrating too though. What the hell am I supposed to be doing?

There's a single desk at the far end of the lobby, directly across from Alistair's office door. Walking over to it, I shuffle Laurel underneath, giving him a plushy to play with. He hunkers down in the corner, content to destroy the toy llama.

Draping my coat over the desk chair, I turn toward the closed office door. Sweat slides down my spine as I take a step in its direction, but when I go to open it, it's locked.

Jiggling the knob a bit, I frown, noticing the lights are off inside. The instructions I got yesterday said to be prompt at eight, and it's a few minutes before, so where the fuck is the mayor?

Shouldn't *he* be here if I'm supposed to be his assistant?

Tapping my fingers on my thigh, I give up on my hope that the door will magically crack for me and head away from the office. A narrow hall sits on the other side of the desk, and I head down it slowly, noting the names plastered beside each door.

Conference Room A. The offices of councilmen Dewan and Stanton—

both last names I recognize from my research. A break room and finally a restroom.

Pushing inside, I stop in front of the sinks, gripping a porcelain bowl with my hands. Glaring at myself in the mirror, I silently curse Lucian for not being stronger and making me have to come here.

Whatever happened to him, I don't know if I'll be able to forgive how he disrupted my entire life. Even before he disappeared.

Splashing some cold water on my face, I squeeze my eyes shut and drop my head, pushing away thoughts of my brother and the gorgeous mayor. "Get it together, Cora. So what if he was a good fuck?" Okay, a *great* fuck. The orgasms with Alistair made any before seem like I had faked them. "Doesn't mean you have to be intimidated or fall for his bullshit."

"Just means you should fuck him again. See if the *good sex* was just a fluke." That *stupid* accent echoes in the room.

Alistair stands in the doorway, and I don't miss the way his head clears the frame by only a few inches.

A tendril of black hair sweeps forward, brushing against his eyebrow as he joins me at the sinks. He keeps those frosty eyes on his reflection, but for some reason, I can feel his attention gliding over me, wrapping me in a warm cocoon.

He sticks one hand beneath the soap dispenser, then twists both under the faucet. Veins dance beneath his skin as he washes, and I lose myself briefly in the memory of his fingers wrapped around my throat and thrusting into me.

Heat spreads like a vapor wave, starting in my stomach and circulating outward.

Alistair smirks, and I see the movement from the corner of my eye.

Snapping out of the haze, I cross my arms over my chest and glare. "Hitting on your assistant on her first day? Really?"

"Oh, am *I* the good fuck?" Pulling his hands back, he gives them a little

shake before turning and swiping a brown paper towel from the rack on the wall. “Well, what were you expecting, *Ms. Astor*? I’ve made my attraction to you quite clear, have I not?”

Hearing him say my last name sends a tingle through me.

It shouldn’t, though.

I’m not here to flirt—and definitely not with the likes of Alistair Wolfe.

“Glad to see you bothered learning my name.”

He shifts, pushing his tongue into the bottom of his cheek as his icy-blue gaze travels the length of my body. Liquid heat bleeds from his irises, caressing my skin.

A knot the size of a golf ball lodges in my throat as he moves toward me. He reaches up, tugging on the dark-blue tie at his collar. The tendons in his neck pulsate, and I get caught on them like a fly trapped in a web, unable to look away as he swallows.

Once, then again, as if measuring the state of my want.

Pinching my hip, I steel myself against it.

“I learned *a lot* about you. Took your file home. Spent my night familiarizing myself with the enigma that is Cordelia Astor.”

Now, he utters my name like a dirty word, somehow a cross between salacious and scornful. Images of him *acquainting* himself with me flood my mind, making the muscles in my thighs pull taut.

One long finger slides beneath the strap of one of his suspenders, which are attached to a pair of brown cigar pants. He pulls at the material, and it snaps against his broad chest. The loud sound makes me jump, and he grins.

“Did you go home and think about me?”

Yes. A shallow cavern opens up in my chest, stealing the air from my lungs.

“Do you think it’s appropriate for a boss to be making passes at his employee?”

“Maybe. If their sexual relationship predates the terms of her

employment.”

My eyebrows draw in. “It was one time, Wolfe. I’d hardly call that a relationship.”

Rolling my eyes, I step past him and exit the restroom, aware that it’ll take him all of three steps to catch up. Rounding the corner, I speed-walk to the desk, my eyes immediately seeking out Laurel to make sure he’s okay. His tail wags, mouth falling open with a smile when he sees me.

Sitting in the chair, I scoot forward and slip my hand beneath the desk, scratching the top of Laurel’s head. Comfort pours into my bloodstream, if only for a moment.

Thick forearms bear down on the wood partition separating me from the rest of the lobby. I wonder if he’s aware of the effect that rolled sleeves have on people.

“Did you bring a dog to a government building, Ms. Astor?”

My shoulders tense, and I feel Laurel shrink back. “I…” Heart kicking in my chest, I scrub my palms on my jeans. “I don’t like leaving him by himself. He has separation anxiety.”

And frankly, so do I.

Alistair’s gaze doesn’t soften. “And you deliberately dressed outside the code of conduct?”

“Not deliberately,” I say, tipping my chin up.

Violet left this morning, and I didn’t ask for more work-appropriate clothing. This is all I have, but I’m not telling him that.

“Your nose.”

I wince, and my hand flies up to cover the piercing, only it takes me a second to recall I don’t have it in. It takes another second to realize he isn’t talking about my ripped jeans or the oversize sweatshirt I have on.

He wanted me to wear the ring.

Neither of us says anything for several beats. The longer we stare at each other, the more my confidence in coming to this island wavers.

Finally, Alistair extends his arm, dropping a fat green folder onto my desk. “I’m hosting an art gala in a few weeks for the historical society. See to it the event goes off without a hitch, hmm?”

After I flip open the folder, my body deflates visibly. I scan each page, unease creeping down my sternum. “None of this has been done yet. You still need vendors, collectors, and auction items. This is in a few weeks?”

“Correct.” He walks to his office, turning his back to me. “Better get to it.”

I stare at the back of his neck, noticing for the first time the tiny sliver of red splashed through the bottom of his hairline. *What is that?*

It kind of looks like... blood.

But he closes himself inside the office before I have a chance to figure it out.



WHEN THE LIGHTS FLICKER ON, a distinctly feminine squeal fills the air.

Even though I'm certain she's been expecting me, Mileena Zakarian still has the audacity to look shocked. She drops the brown bag of produce in her arms, pulling a small dagger from the back of her loose-fitting jeans.

Blowing out a plume of smoke, I balance the Cuban between my forefinger and thumb, silent as she gathers herself. She could attempt to attack me, but the Glock 18 in my other hand keeps her at bay.

She'd be dead before she could take another step, and she knows it.

One of the many things my father taught me was marksmanship. We spent countless hours shooting targets until my fingers bled, and sometimes, we kept on even then because it was the only thing we really had in common.

My father became a criminal because he was bored. He had no real goals within the organizations he worked for, just wanted something to do and discovered he was good at illegal activities.

I, on the other hand, have always had an end in mind.

Power.

And I've always been willing to use any force necessary.

The Glock is light as I turn my hand, aiming the barrel at Mileena's forehead.

I've never once missed.

"Do it," she taunts, muttering something in her native Armenian and pocketing the dagger. "I'm sure my son will help you clean up the mess."

"Well, it is his house."

The beach house is the only structure for miles on this stretch of coast, just the way Jonas likes it, though it wasn't always his primary residence. He owns another home farther out, where he takes care of "business" for me, but a few months ago, he started dating Lenny Primrose and refused to bring her there.

I'm still not sure why he needed to live with the girl in the first place, given their entire relationship was fake from the start, but I suppose it'd have been harder for him to keep an eye on her otherwise.

Because even fake relationships with Wolfe men bring danger.

"It's *my* house." Mileena bends, scooping cucumbers and tomatoes into her arms. "My name's on the deed, isn't it?"

"A technicality. But you abandon something long enough, and the laws of nature reclaim it." I watch, sucking on the end of my cigar as she pushes the dark hair from her face, walking to the kitchen island and dumping the vegetables in the sink.

She proceeds to wash them, as if I weren't even here. Seconds later, she pulls out a paring knife and begins slicing, continuing to ignore me.

Agitation prickles along my skin like needles, and I put out the cigar on

an unused canvas. Paintings fill the floor of the living room, propped against the slightly dated furniture and the blue-gray walls.

Proof that the Primrose girl, apparently an artist, has absolutely taken over my brother's life.

Perhaps that's why he still isn't speaking to me.

"Why are you here?" I ask Mileena, pushing to my feet.

"Why are *you*?"

"I wasn't specifically instructed to stay away."

"No," she says, scoffing. "But maybe you should've been. Maybe without your influence, my son could've done something great with his life."

"My influence?" Scrubbing a hand over my jaw, I mull that over. "I'm certain my presence in his life didn't help, but imagine how much worse he'd have been if I hadn't been around. Jonas is smart, but he's impulsive. Holds grudges and acts on them without thinking."

The faint bruising along my nasal cavity flares—a dull reminder of my brother's rage.

I move closer, the Glock resting against my thigh. Mileena's dark gaze flickers to it, and she clenches her jaw, the muscle jumping.

"Wonder who he got that from." Leaning against the marble counter, I cock a brow. "The father who raised him to be resourceful and strong or the scared little bitch who ran at the first hint of trouble?"

Her knuckles whiten as her grip tightens on the knife. Bile teases the back of my throat at giving my late father any sort of praise, but when it comes to Jonas, I can't deny he was better to him than me.

Duncan tried harder with his second son, and I can at least appreciate that even if I curse the bastard otherwise.

Walking around the island, I stop just behind Mileena's petite frame. She brings the knife through the end of the cucumber. Slowly.

The second her wrist jerks, I spring forward, wrapping my forearm around her throat. I yank her head back into me, pressing the barrel of the gun

to her temple.

Her chuckle vibrates against my skin. “I thought you’d given this life up when you ran for mayor.”

“No, you didn’t,” I say, shoving her forward.

She drops to her elbows, the knife clattering into the sink.

“You were just holding on to the bloody hope. I told you not to fuck with me, and I *told* you not to bother Jonas.”

“I deserve to see my son—”

“You deserve *nothing*.”

After abandoning Jonas as a child, how can she possibly think she has a right to interfere with his life now? What penance has she experienced for her neglect? For choosing anything other than him?

Sweat drips down her forehead. “Please,” she whimpers. “I’m not trying to do anything, really. I just... I want the chance to get to know him.”

“That’s all?” As if she asks for so little.

“Yes, I swear.” Her throat bobs. “I... I don’t work for them anymore.”

Them. The Barbieris and their associates—a criminal organization here on the East Coast, known for their violence and their involvement in politics. Not to mention the drugs.

Nine years ago, Mileena came to me with a list of names. She’d come out of nowhere, although I always suspected she stuck around to keep an eye on her son.

Forging my father’s handwriting, she’d compiled a list of names she thought to be complicit in her ex’s death, and since he had been well-known for his crimes and the organizations he worked for, it wasn’t difficult to believe.

She told me the Barbieris were interested in Jonas because we were sons of an associate and that the only way to keep my brother from being recruited would be to eliminate the threat posed by the men who had killed my father.

Except it wasn’t the *only* way.

A deal could be brokered if you had something Ermes Barbieri wanted more than a simple, very skilled assassin.

So I traded my life for Jonas's. Sought a political career through means of force and coercion, rather than gaining power through merit like I'd always planned.

And gave him the list nine years later.

I leave the beach house before Jonas and his fiancée have a chance to come home and see me intimidating Mileena. Not that I particularly think my brother would care, but I'm not interested in rehashing that conversation.

One blow to the nose is enough for me.

My mind travels back to the blue-haired nymph, who now works twenty feet away from me during the day. I spent the entirety of her first shift locked in my office, beating off to the memory of how sweet her cunt had tasted.

She despises me—that much is certain—even if her tight little body doesn't. I'm positive I could coax submission from her, maybe have her spread out like a feast in one of the conference rooms before the week is over, but something's stopping me.

As much as I want to fuck her again, there's something deliciously alluring about the chase. Each time she bares her teeth, I make a mental note to punish her for it later.

Someday soon, when I'm buried inside her again, I'll take the opportunity to remind her of her hatred. And when she comes, soaking me, it'll be the utter humiliation on her face that finishes me off.

When I return to the mayoral mansion later, I dial Marshall's contact and sit back in the den with a tumbler of scotch.

He answers, out of breath, on the fourth ring. "Kade."

"It normally doesn't take more than one ring for you to answer," I say. "What are you up to?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" A grunt comes over the line, and then there's a noise that sounds an awful lot like the rustling of sheets, but he

doesn't say more.

The sound fades out, and I frown, pulling back the phone to make sure our call wasn't disconnected. When I put it back to my ear, Marshall's mid-sentence.

"... don't call in the middle of the night—most of the time." He clears his throat, his voice coming out clearer. "But I'm here now. What do you need?"

I'm tempted to ask him to repeat the first part of his sentence but decide against it. "Any progress on the cop murders?"

"Nothing new to report. Lips are sealed very tightly in Boston and Delos. I'm working on it, though."

"Good. Nothing's changed on my end anyway. I'm sure if someone's coming for me, I'll hear about it first from Hermes and his men."

"Let me know if you do, and I'll push things into overdrive."

Nodding to myself, I swipe my thumb over the rim of the untouched tumbler. "And the special project I asked you to look into?"

Marshall sighs. "I feel weird about this one, Wolfe. She's my sister's age, younger even."

Blue hair and blood-red lips flash across my vision. "I don't care. I want to know everything about her."

That way, I can keep her.



“PEOPLE in this town are very reluctant to work with you.”

Alistair glances at me, raising an eyebrow up above the black square-framed readers he has on.

Even though we’re separated by walls, since my first day, he’s kept his office door open and his desk against the far end, giving him the perfect view of me. I tried moving my workspace away from his line of sight, but this morning, I came in and found the desk bolted to the tiled floor.

Because what else would the mayor of a corrupt town be, if not completely unhinged?

“You’ll likely find me an acquired taste,” he says, going back to reading through a real estate proposal.

A snort puffs through my nose as I recall how Violet called me that a few days ago.

“Don’t worry, though.” His eyes lift, boring into mine with a stare so heavy that I feel it in my throat. “I’ve no doubt you’ll come to enjoy my *taste* in no time.”

“The taste of your blood maybe,” I mutter, turning my attention back to my computer screen.

“That can be arranged.”

My head whips up, indignation lacing my brows together. He’s no longer looking at me, having turned completely around to grab a book from one of his shelves, and I bite back the urge to retort, knowing that’s what the fucker wants.

The less consideration I give him, the better.

I *desperately* need this job, if only because the pay will allow me to remain on the island indefinitely. Money might be the root of all evil, but it sure makes life easier when you’ve got it.

If I don’t have to stress about finding a place to stay or what I’m going to eat, I can focus more on my brother’s whereabouts.

And not at all on the fact that Alistair Wolfe is trying to scratch his way beneath the surface of my skin.

Clicking out of the spreadsheet tab with a list of confirmed vendors for the gala, I sort through the tabs until I reach my private browser. Aplana Island court documents fill the screen along with detailed arrest records and buried news articles about the Mafia’s presence in the city.

From drug and arms trafficking to bankrolling the police and buying political favors, it seems as if crime has its fingers in every pie where this place is concerned.

My brother’s name brings up nothing at all.

A pinging sound comes from my computer, and a message from an unknown user pops up in the bottom right corner.

R u watching *corn emoji*?

Glancing up at Alistair, I notice he's still turned away from his desk, so the message can't be from him.

Another message comes through.

Ur on a private browser. Not allowed here.

Slowly, my fingers type back, pieces of a puzzle slotting together in my mind.

Selene?

Yes! Mayor W has spyware installed on ur computer. If ur watching *corn emoji* he'll know.

I scoff. Of course he's watching my every move. I should pull up a dirty site just to spite him, although I have a feeling he'd just come watch it with me.

The thought of us watching porn together makes my stomach cramp, and I exhale, logging off the computer entirely.

Laurel stirs from his nap as I push away from the desk. Running my hands through my hair, I scratch at my scalp, wondering what the fuck I'm doing here. Days have passed since I docked in Aplana, and I've not made any progress toward finding Lucian.

Shame scalds a path from my gut to my esophagus, making it difficult for me to breathe. Forcing a swallow, I lean down and grab Laurel's leash, looping it around my hand, and stand.

My shoulders tense when Alistair spins around, pressing his cell phone to his ear, and we make eye contact that scatters my pulse as he also stands.

I ignore it, which turns out to be the right move because he comes over, gaze locked with mine, and slams his office door shut.

Severing whatever tentative connection was there in the first place.



THE NEXT DAY, after securing several positive RSVPs from collectors and dealers throughout New England for Alistair's gala, I hide out in the break room on the second floor. It's a small area across from the restrooms, consisting of a fridge, two vending machines, and a basket on one of the metal tables that I think must be glued down.

It's the community basket, or so Selene explained to me—basically any food or drink left behind by the deputy mayor, his staff, HR, or the numerous council members and assistants who filter through the halls. Evidently, the entire top floor belongs to Aplana's mayor, and the remaining levels of City Hall house *everyone* else.

I've taken to eating down here because the mayor won't follow. Whether that's because he doesn't want to interact with people or because he knows deep down that he can't really risk being seen with the tattooed, blue-haired new girl, I can't be sure.

Not that it matters either way, so long as he keeps his distance.

A tall man with chestnut-colored hair and deep brown eyes enters the break room as I nibble on a pretzel, sifting through my brother's file in the corner. I don't look up as he pushes a few coins into the vending machine behind me.

I've seen him a few times here and there, coming and going from Alistair's office and refusing to check in with me first.

Light whirring fills the air as the machine dispenses the can, and that irritating clicking sound of the tab opening the aluminum grates against my ear. Then he *slurps*, and it's followed by a prolonged breath of contentment.

My fingers curl into the manila folder in my lap, bending the material. Reaching for the remote on the table, I crank up the volume on the wall-mounted television.

Regret floods my chest immediately because the news channel is showing an interview with Alistair promoting his upcoming event.

“In the wake of rising unemployment and the decline of Aplana's tourist

industry,” the daytime news anchor says, watching the mayor with a mix of scrutiny and awe, “how do you hope to explain the necessity of the art gala you’re throwing?”

“It’s my hope that this gala is just the first of many in a long line of measures aimed at reviving the arts.” He gives the camera a crooked grin, blue eyes glittering under the fluorescent studio lighting. “In my opinion and according to the scores of research my team’s conducted, people who appreciate art are rich in more than just money. There’s culture and passion, and I’m certain both of those things will work to help rebuild our tourist industry as well.”

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes, I have to at least admit the man’s got a way with words. He can spin a shit situation, which I suppose comes in handy when you’re a criminal and politician.

I’m still not entirely sure what the extent of his involvement is in Aplana’s crimes, but I can’t imagine his scope is insignificant.

I doubt there’s anything about the man that doesn’t have a visceral impact on everyone and everything around him.

The brunette from earlier remains behind my chair, silent. I shift in my seat, annoyance agitating in my gut the longer he stands there, not doing anything. Almost like he’s trying to flush me out of the room.

My head snaps around, a glare furrowing my brows.

His dark eyes are on me, watching with an unreadable expression.

Flexing my fingers, I raise an eyebrow. “Can I help you?”

“I don’t know,” he answers, the slightest hint of a Southern accent peeking through. “Can you?”

Blowing out a breath, I roll my eyes and slap the folder onto the table, gathering my things, even as my stomach growls. The oatmeal bar I grabbed from the hotel’s continental breakfast sits uneaten beside a bottled water, and I reach for it as I get up.

The man’s hand clamps down on my shoulder, shoving me back into the

seat roughly. My ass smarts as it connects abruptly with the wood, and I hug my folder tight to my chest.

“I didn’t say you could leave.”

“I don’t think I asked for permission.”

“Are you aware that blackmailing a government official is punishable by up to fifteen years in federal prison?” the man asks, yanking out another chair to straddle it backward. He leans his forearms on the back, brushing a piece of lint from the sleeve of his black jacket.

Anxiety spikes in my brain. Narrowing my eyes, I take in the disheveled state of his five-o’clock shadow, the hair that’s a bit too long as it droops over his ears, the indent in the unmistakable shape of a badge on the chest of his gray Henley.

Of course he’s a cop. As much of one as you can get in a town like this anyway.

Any sense of cooperation I might have leaned toward a minute ago dissipates. My nose scrunches up. “I... don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Would Alistair have told him about our conversation the day he hired me?

“Harboring a federal fugitive holds an even graver sentence.”

“Har—*what?* Now, I really don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Just throwing things out, seeing which one sticks to you.” He purses his lips. “What’s your goal here, Cordelia?”

The sound of my full name from this complete stranger makes me recoil. “I’m just working—”

“Why here?” he demands, smacking his palm on the table. “Why now? Graduated top of your class at Suffolk, but no one in your immediate family’s seen or heard from you for a year. No stable or legitimate history of employment in that time, and you had one real reference when you applied

for this job—a distant *relative*.”

Worrying my bottom lip between my teeth, I lean back into my chair, nerves constricting my throat.

Sneering, the man whips out his hand, and he clutches at the folder. Yanking back, I lift my leg, wishing I had more than the worn combat boots on my feet to fend him off with.

His chair scoots toward me as he pulls, and I cock my foot, driving it between his thighs. Fury fills his brown irises, a giant puff of air decompressing from his body as he releases the folder.

Scurrying to my feet, I scoop up my things and bolt toward the door.

A hand pushes against the top, keeping it closed, and then I feel a presence at my back.

“I’m onto you, Astor. Whatever plan you’ve concocted to ruin the mayor’s life, it stops now.”

“Jeez, I hope you’re not the only cop on his payroll,” I grit out. “You’re not very good at your job if you think *I’m* a threat.”

Chuckling darkly, the man steps away, wrenching the door open. “I’m not a cop, sweetheart. And you’re not fooling anyone.”

My heart skips a beat when I see Alistair standing on the other side, a harsh frown creasing the corners of his mouth. His eyes flicker from me to the man behind me, and by the heat searing my cheeks, I’m sure what this looks like.

I don’t even have the energy to correct it. Instead, I shove past my boss and go back to work upstairs.



HOTEL LEDO IS this little hovel of a dozen or so rooms on a dilapidated strip of the island. Minutes from downtown, the establishment also intersects with the marina, so not only is the place decrepit and looks like it hasn't been updated since the '70s, but it also smells like fish.

Still, I'm used to both by now; I grew up with the beach as my backyard and swam competitively throughout school. Until I got old enough to realize my subconscious was reaching for something I'd never be willing to admit, so now, I only swim in enclosed spaces and only when no one else can see me.

That way, if nostalgia tries to sneak its way into my soul, at least I'm the only one who bears witness.

The community pool behind the hotel has a few lights out, but there's enough that I can at least see the bottom. Technically, the area's closed off until morning, but I've never cared much for rules enforced by signs.

Digging the keys I swiped from the front desk's night manager, I slip inside, checking over my shoulder to make sure I'm alone. Laurel sits in the window of our room, watching me silently. I give him a thumbs-up, dropping my towel onto a nearby lounge chair.

The swimsuit I have on is one of the few articles of clothing I got from a thrift store in town—an orange string two-piece that I'd be embarrassed about during the day because of how tight I've had to tie it.

Every tattoo I've gotten over the years is plainly visible in the suit—a floral sleeve running from my left wrist up to my shoulder, reaching out; more flowers on my sternum, wrapped around three dainty skulls with roses for eyes; a floral pinup Grim Reaper winding up my thigh to my ass; and a nautical, nature-themed half-sleeve on my other bicep.

The tree on the inside of my thigh was the first one I got; it was on a whim one day when Lucian got his first and only. He knew a guy who accepted favors as payment, which was the only reason he could afford the ink.

Haven't gotten a new one since before Lucian went missing.

Running my hands down my sides, I try not to focus on the ridges of my ribs, far too noticeable beneath my skin. Swallowing over the lump in my throat, I remind myself of everything my body's gotten me through, and then I dive into the water.

My lungs blaze as I swim laps from one end of the pool and back, fire surging through my chest and propelling me onward. Everything from the outside world drifts away as my muscles expend themselves, and I lose track of time as my limbs cut through the water's surface.

It could be hours before I finally stop, collapsing on the concrete ledge. It could also be minutes, seconds of strenuous labor that duped me into

believing anything was possible.

A crunching sound outside the privacy fence echoes through the night air. I whirl around toward it, tension threading into my bones. Sinking back into the water, I lower myself so just my forehead sticks out, holding my breath as I wait for someone to leap from the shadows.

Be careful, my brother wrote in his folder. There are more people watching than you'll ever know. Never let them see you with your guard down.

At the time, I thought it was just a note he'd written to himself; after all, Lucian was prone to extreme bouts of paranoia, especially when coming down from a high. He'd always talk about owing people money and that he thought bears were out to get him.

Now, I'm not so sure.

I don't think I've really been in town long enough to have drawn suspicion already, but if the people involved in Luce's disappearance are as advanced as he claimed, maybe they knew I was coming.

Maybe I've walked into some sort of trap.

When nothing jumps out at me, I haul my ass out of the pool and book it back to my room. Laurel bounds off the windowsill, lunging at me the second I'm inside, and I catch my balance as I bolt the door shut.

Scooping him into my arms, I bury my head in his neck and smother him with kisses, soaking up his happiness and wishing I could somehow make it my own.

Turning on the television so the room isn't so quiet, I peel off my bathing suit and get a quick shower, scrubbing and shaving, then pad back into the room. Sliding my silver hoop back into my nose, I scoot under the scratchy covers with my hair wrapped in a towel, groaning when Laurel barks at the darkened corner of the room.

"Laurel, buddy. Come on." I pat the free space on the bed, my voice pitching exponentially. "*Come on, sweet baby. Come cuddle!*"

He ignores me, snarling at the corner. Ever the guard dog, he's been acting this way every night since we got to the island, apparently struggling with the latest life transition. Except, there's nothing in the room but the mini fridge and the red polyester armchair by the window.

An uneasy feeling crawls up my spine, but I chalk it up to nerves from the noise outside.

Rolling my eyes, I reach over and yank open the nightstand drawer, pulling out the little blue vibrator hidden inside. I swiped it and a rubber dildo from an adult store and stuffed them in my luggage; there are certain luxuries I can go without, like sheets with a decent thread count and red meat, but a proper orgasm isn't one of them.

And your hand is only *so* good for so long.

Switching the toy on, I slowly lower it between my thighs, gliding the bulbous head over my clit. It pulses, and my toes curl against the vibrations. Catching my bottom lip with my teeth, I stifle a moan as I press down and to the side, moisture and sweat cooling my heated skin.

My mind wanders as euphoria takes hold, and suddenly, it's not me holding the toy there; Alistair hovers over me with a wicked smile, his blue eyes piercing as they watch me undulate. He shifts, spreading the sensation, then moves lower, collecting my arousal.

Slowly—so fucking slowly—he pushes the tip of the toy inside me. My mouth parts on a gasp, and he bends down, swooping in to capture the escaped breath.

“God, the things I want to do to you,” the figment mutters, speaking against my lips. “I'm tempted to just swallow you whole.”

A tiny pinprick of discomfort flares as the vibrator slides in deeper, my body stretching to accommodate the intrusion. I imagine him releasing my mouth, dipping his head so he can take a nipple between his teeth, his thumb coming to continue the assault on my clit as the vibrator massages me from the inside.

“What would the world think if they knew you were getting off to the thought of your boss right now?” he rumbles, and I moan as his tongue traces the outline of the floral pattern inked in the valley between my breasts. “If they knew how depraved your fantasies were, how badly you wanted him to take this toy out and remind you what it felt like to be fucked *right*?”

The taste of copper floods my mouth as the vibrator hits a spot, stimulating the area until my vision blurs at the edges. Stars dance in my eyes, so I squeeze them shut, my hips bucking in the air as release teases the edge of my sanity.

“Fuck, I want to come inside you. But you like a beast, make you regret ever accepting me the first time.”

My legs tremble, my orgasm imminent. “No,” I rasp, barely able to get the word out.

“Deny me all you wish, but you want it too. You want my cum stuffing you full, dripping out of your tight cunt. It’s making you hot right now, just imagining it.”

I grit my teeth. Try to shake my head. But nothing else happens, my body too far gone, absorbed in its pleasure.

“That’s it, *m’eudail*. You’re almost there,” Alistair’s mirage says, and I fucking hate that his coaching twists my insides into delicious knots. It feels dirtiest of all. “Let go, little thief. Think of how fucking good it’ll feel, coming just for me. Your filthy secret.”

And I do.

My pussy spasms, sucking at the vibrator, and fuck *me*, I come so hard that my teeth chatter.

Even as my body feels like it’s splitting in two, trying to fight it, release pounds through me, dragging an unearthly cry from deep in my throat. It rips up, searing my vocal cords, taking my soul with it.

I collapse with a labored breath, flopping back into the pillows. The vibrator slips from me with a wet squelch, and my cheeks heat at the sound.

Throwing an arm over my face, I sigh as the rest of the world begins filtering back in. Laurel's still growling at the dark, so I prop myself up on a shaky elbow and pat the bed again.

Like I'm not even here, Laurel keeps on. Anxiety sprouts like weeds in my chest because the rooms here are definitely not pet-friendly even if they *look* like they should be.

"How about a walk?"

Throwing back the covers, I pull on Lucian's Korn hoodie and a pair of baggy sweats, shoving my feet into my boots. Laurel snaps to attention the second he hears the door unlock, and he bolts in my direction, looping his head through his collar as I hold it out for him.

Peeking my head out to make sure the coast is clear, I click my tongue and we slip from the room.

I've no idea where we're headed when we leave the hotel grounds. For a while, we just make our way toward downtown, passing beneath the pine trees lining the sidewalks and various mom-and-pop shops, most of which aren't open this late.

Mostly, I just absorb the scenery, wondering if the false sense of serenity is what drew my brother to the island. Since he'd been doing professional stunts his entire adult life, he did always talk about settling on an island somewhere when he retired.

Aplana Island seems different than other coastal paradises, though. There's a wickedness living in the wind, a sinister disturbance sprinkled through the air like pollen. Whether it's the underbelly of crime or something else entirely, I can't be sure.

Whatever the case, as I listen to the waves crash against the shore in the distance, I find myself turning off the main road and heading south. Beyond downtown, you can see the rolling hills where residential mansions sit, dispersed evenly among the vast landscape.

Homes of the mega-wealthy.

They get smaller the farther back you go but remain visible nonetheless as if reminding the citizens of this town that their overlords are always watching.

First in the trail of massive homes is the mayor's mansion, depicted as such with a wooden sign staked in the yard out front. We approach slowly, neither of us entirely sure we should step foot in the house's vicinity.

Laurel and I pause at the wall of shrubbery surrounding the house, staring at the front door. The lawn is impeccably manicured, rife with beautiful foliage and gray stone walkways, surrounding a tall fountain out front with a cherub sitting at the top, carved in white marble.

The actual mansion, I learn, looks far more modern than the rest of the grounds. It's all very square and dark with massive windows on every wall, which almost makes the house completely transparent.

Light spills from behind curtains on the second floor, and my feet inch forward. Curiosity wins out over the trepidation stirring in my lungs, scarcely allowing me normal breaths.

I shouldn't.

God, I *really* shouldn't.

But I do anyway because, deep down, I want to see.

What does the mayor do when he's at home by himself?

Does he really think of me?

Shaking off that thought, I creep along the hedges, careful to keep an eye out for cameras and potential motion sensors. There's one on the porch, angled slightly away from where I'm at across from the fountain, and I grip Laurel's leash tight, keeping him out of the line of sight.

Gritting my teeth, I dart through the sliver of light cast on the ground by a small stained glass window farther down the side of the brown home. Laurel sniffs, sneezing at something he finds on the ground, and I swallow over the hard knot in my throat.

My heart pounds against my rib cage as I press myself into the vinyl

siding, my fingers hooking into the flower box hanging beneath a bay window. Leaning up on my tiptoes, I squint, trying to see in.

There's nothing in the immediate foreground of the room, which appears to be a full galley kitchen with dark cherry cabinets and rustic-looking appliances.

Releasing a ragged breath, I take stock of the area, noting how clean and minimal everything looks. I doubt Alistair uses the place himself, so my guess is, he also has people clean up after him.

Typical.

Backing away from that window, I scoot along the edge of the house, a scream catching in my throat as a large black SUV enters through an electric gate at the other end of the property.

Pulling Laurel into my arms, I fit us as close to the side of the house as possible. Beads of sweat percolate at my hairline, my mouth drying up so quickly that I almost choke.

Two men in dark suits exit the SUV, speaking a foreign language in hushed tones. I think it's Italian, but I'm not close enough to tell exactly, and then they're walking to the back of the house, disappearing past the corner.

Moments later, a door slams shut.

Ignoring the tremor rolling through me, I skirt along the house, listening for movement inside. When I get to the last window, muffled voices bleed through the pane.

Setting Laurel on the ground, I motion for him to sit and stay with my fingers, then grab the side of the house, straining to try to see in.

My nose doesn't even clear the windowsill, but my eyes sit just above it. Enough to see a single frame in front of me, but none of the surroundings.

Scanning the room quickly, I see just one of the suited men now. His massive form is crouched in front of a wooden chair, blocking everything beyond.

Out of habit, my hand creeps up to my face, and I toy with my nose ring,

gliding it in and out of my nostril while my breathing spikes.

Alistair stands across the room, leaning against a wall, dragging a tan hand through his inky locks. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, and when they do, the mayor shifts. Morphs into the monster I've always suspected him to be.

His arm lifts, cradling a handgun. The suit by the chair moves, stepping back to reveal a man, bound and gagged, his mop of curly brown hair hanging over his face, clad in torn black clothes with blood smeared across his visible patches of skin. My initial thought is that he's unconscious.

At the last second, though, he raises his head.

Swollen black eyes meet mine, and I suck in a breath; it disappears down my throat, expanding like an explosion in my chest.

Seconds pass, maybe minutes—I can't be sure.

My stomach cramps, lurching violently.

Alistair doesn't move from his spot. Doesn't even seem disturbed as he aims the gun, like the act is as natural as breathing.

Flexing his finger, he pulls the trigger, blowing a hole straight through the stranger's head.

The action causes me to flinch, and my hand jerks, tugging the silver hoop from its hole. My knuckles hit the side of the house, and the jewelry falls to the ground.

I open my mouth to vomit, bile racing up my esophagus, but all that comes out is a scream.



AS I WIPE the blood from the mouth of the Glock, my head whips around when a sharp cry pierces the air.

Barbieri's soldier frowns, walking over to the window across the room. Pistol drawn, he peeks through the askew curtain, peering outside.

"What the fuck was that?" Marshall asks as he returns to the room, unbuttoning his dark gray sports coat. He pauses just inside the doorway, scrubbing a hand over his jaw as he notices the dead man. "A little trigger-happy, I see. Thought I asked you to wait for me to get back."

My eyes stay on the Barbieri man. "You did, and then I remembered I don't work for you."

The Italian shakes his head, presumably meaning he doesn't see anything,

and a short breath leaves me. It's not relief, though. Instead, dark suspicion takes hold, and I find myself staring out the glass, waiting for an apparition to appear.

Normally, I'd never conduct nonpartisan business in the mansion. But when Marshall called me earlier, saying they'd grabbed a guy who claimed he had intelligence to pin Hollis's location, it felt necessary to bring him in.

Perhaps I should've waited like I had been asked, but it's not as if the bloke was giving us any information anyway. He'd been beaten too bloody before we even picked him up, and what little coherent thought he managed was used to spit in our direction.

So I had no other option but to eliminate the threat he posed.

Marshall pulls a plastic trash bag from the back entryway, dropping the cleaning supplies in front of the corpse. Running his fingers through his mop of light-brown hair, he watches as Barbieri's man gets to his knees, snapping on a pair of latex gloves.

Brown eyes look at me. "What do you want me to do now, boss?"

Something catches my attention outside—a sliver of movement, barely discernible in the moonlight. I gravitate toward it, not listening as he continues speaking.

My gaze narrows, zeroing in on the shrubs at the far end of my property.

It could be nothing.

An animal perhaps.

Or it could be a liability.

"Go upstairs and pull the security footage from my office," I tell Marshall, not bothering to turn and make sure he heard me.

As I leave the room, I feel his footsteps retreat, the vibrations in the floor growing softer before they disappear altogether.

Slipping out the back door, I glide along the side of the house with my back to the wall, my free hand outstretched as I scour the area. Keeping as silent as possible, I hold my breath, doing my best to keep my senses clear of

distractions.

When I get to the sitting room window, I feel along the glass pane for signs of life. A few beads of condensation wet the surface, and there's a definite perfumed scent clinging to the air.

Bending down, I draw my trousers up a bit, draping my forearms over my knees. Pulling a miniature flashlight from my pocket, I switch it on, scanning the ground as my hand presses into the dirt.

It's warm, confirming my suspicions.

Someone was definitely here.

I remain like that for several beats, trying to place the smell. It's familiar, something clean and powerful I can't quite put my finger on.

Rolling my shoulders, I exhale a deep breath, steadying my hand on the wall as I go to stand upright again.

The flashlight roves over the ground, and a little piece of silver glistens in my eyesight.

Cocking my head to one side, I reach down, picking the metal up between two fingers. My eyes lift, scanning the property again, my heart thundering inside my chest.

Unease trickles down my spine like droplets of sweat, pooling at the base as my skin heats.

I'm tempted to draw the stranger out with words, but as I turn the silver ring in my hand, realization dawns.

Closing my fingers around the hoop, I push to my feet, inhaling once again.

That scent singes my nostrils, a small fire lighting my insides as something catastrophic builds in my bones.

Chlorine and citrus.

Well, well.

I warned the little nymph about the chase.

Looks like someone wants to play after all.



PANIC SETS in during the middle of the night, delayed by several hours.

Not that I've been able to sleep anyway.

Mucus collects in the back of my throat as I hunker down in the corner of my hotel room, staring at the door. It's bolted shut, and I shoved the wooden desk chair beneath the knob, but fear still seizes my spine. My arms tremble violently, and I wrap them tighter around Laurel, trying to soak up his warmth.

He nuzzles his head into my neck, resting his chin on my shoulder with a sigh when I don't react.

The mayor of this town just executed someone.

The fucking *mayor*.

I know politicians are corrupt, but murderers?

Vomit and shame burn in my chest. I let him touch me.

Fuck me.

A few hours ago, I got off to the idea.

What if he has something to do with Lucian's disappearance? What if I've been fantasizing about the man responsible for my brother's demise?

Pushing Laurel off my lap, I press the back of my hand to my mouth, lurching forward with a gag. Reaching for the plastic trash can beside the bed, I grasp it with shaky fingers, pulling it to me.

My mouth springs open, saliva pooling beside my tongue, and then a phone ringing draws me back.

Startled, I drop the can. It clatters loudly to the floor, drowning out the high-pitched tone of the hotel's landline. Airflow to my lungs becomes difficult as my eyes fall on the base's blinking red light.

No one besides Violet even knows where I'm staying, but since I can't afford a cell phone, her preferred method of checking in is to just show up.

The ringing continues, echoing in my eardrums. Laurel jumps up on the bed, circling a few times before settling down with his eyes on me, chin on his paws.

I scoot to the nightstand, trying desperately to regulate my breathing the way I do when swimming. Deep, even breaths keep you afloat.

Panic, and you sink.

Gripping the phone, I bring up the handset, let it connect, then slam it back down to hang up.

Seconds later, it starts again.

Tears spring to my eyes, and I repeat the action, banging the handset on the base over and over.

Past the curtains, a shadow appears, but then it's gone almost as quickly. The room goes silent, a branch scraping against the side of the hotel the only sound for several minutes.

Letting out a breath, I drop my head to the corner of the nightstand. Regret pulses, an evil little being throbbing inside the chambers of my heart, and I'm pissed off at my brother all over again.

"I hope you are dead," I say to absolutely no one because as *always*, I'm alone in my fear. My grief. It's a burden only I'm allowed to carry. "'Cause if not, when I find you, I'm gonna fucking wring your neck, Luce. Fuck you for making me do this. I would've never..."

Choking on a sob, I shake my head. *I would've never done this to you.*

A bloodcurdling siren splits the air, bright flashing lights flooding my vision.

The fucking fire alarm.

Gritting my teeth, I wait because there's no way this is some sort of coincidence.

When the red button on the landline lights up again, I growl to myself, snatching the handset and bringing it to my ear.

"Go away."

Silence fills the receiver. Like he's taunting me.

It has to be Alistair, right?

Who else would be out there?

Rage simmers beneath the surface of my skin, replacing the fear like water turning to vapor. Shoving the nightstand out of the way, I rip the cord from the wall and throw the phone at the window. It crashes to the floor, and the bottom half of the plastic base cracks.

Laurel whines, the sound barely audible with the fire alarm still blaring. I walk over and drag him into my arms, covering his half-floppy ears, and then pull the thin comforter over us and wait for the noise to stop.



I DON'T OPERATE under the illusion that my little nymph will show up at City Hall the day after she ran from my property.

She's smart. That much is clear since she somehow managed to avoid detection on my security system. The cameras had been angled away from the side of the house and stuck on a loop, supposedly because of a power outage during the wee hours of the morning, but I'm not so certain.

In fact, it wouldn't surprise me to learn that Cora isn't here on a whim at all and is actually working with someone.

To do what, I've no idea, but my suspicions are raised, and I'm on guard the next morning when I get to the office. Her desk is empty, so I sit and boot up her computer, curious to see if she's been using company time to be

deviant.

A small smirk tugs at the corner of my lips at the search history. It's a hodgepodge collection of Aplana's darkest underbelly, seedlings to the . Evidence that people are willing to overlook because for the most part, the citizens are taken care of.

It's amazing what folks turn their heads from when their needs are being met. You can practically do anything as long as it doesn't disrupt their cushy lifestyle.

Logging off her browser, I arrange her things so they're in the exact place she left them on the off chance she meanders in at some point.



A QUARTER TO NOON, I'm seconds away from confirming the appointment of Aplana's newest city attorney, Gerard Payne, in the lobby when Cora makes an appearance.

She stumbles out of the elevator, that yappy mutt on her heels, and a collective silence falls around the room. Cameras turn in her direction, press immediately poised to formally meet my assistant; even Gerard Payne shuts his massive cakehole long enough to twist around and gawk.

For the first time since I hired her, Cora's not dressed in baggy black clothing; she has on a red tennis skirt and a white tank top, though those blasted combat boots remain on her feet. Completely inappropriate for the workplace on its own, but that's not all.

She's soaked all the bloody way through.

Her hair hangs in wet strands, dripping down the sides of her face, her slender neck, and her *tits* onto the tiled floor.

Fuck me, her tits. Under any other circumstances, I'd welcome the magnificent handfuls, maybe even in front of a crowd, but certainly not this

one.

The sight of her pert, rounded breasts steals the air directly from me. Our one night together simply didn't do her glorious figure justice.

Dark rosy nipples pucker against the material of her shirt, and I can feel everyone in the room eye-fucking her. I'm doing it too, surely, but I'm allowed.

Finders keepers and all that jazz.

Jealousy burns bright in my gut, soiling every other emotion with its green tint.

Cora shifts, crossing her arms over her chest. As if that'll ever erase the memory of her from the backs of our eyelids. Her ankle moves behind her other leg, dragging up and down her calf as if she's nervous.

Someone clears their throat.

Gerard elbows me, cocking a gray brow. "Now, I see why you hired the girl with no experience. Not the kind you were looking for, eh, Wolfe?"

His beady eyes gobble her up, and I can tell that if it were just the three of us, he'd be trying to get her on her knees in the restroom.

Every fiber of my being screams to march over and take her in my arms. Shield her from their scrutiny and claim her in front of them so they'd know not to fucking look or breathe in her direction. The worst of Aplana Island stands in this room, moonlighting as people who give a shit about the town, and they don't deserve to be in her presence.

I don't either really, but being unworthy's never stopped me before.

If anything, it just makes me want her more. Even if she is a filthy little thief, sneaking around and doing God knows what.

Even if she has the potential to destroy me.

At least I know the ruin will feel *good*.

"If you'd like to remain attorney for Aplana, keep your comments about *my* assistant to yourself. Better yet, don't think them at all. She doesn't exist where you're concerned, mate."

“What, didn’t your mother teach you to share your toys?”

Cora’s gaze lifts, flickering to mine like a magnet caught in an electric current.

My hand clamps down on Gerard’s shoulder, sliding up toward his neck. Pinching, I give him a fake smile; pink blooms on his skin where my fingers rest, and he winces, trying to escape my grasp.

I bring him into my side, squeezing harder. “No, but my father taught me how to remove a man’s tongue from a bullet wound in the back of his neck, if you’re interested.”

Nathan Bergamont, a councilman from the mainland, chuckles. “You both know assistants are off-limits anyway. Imagine the uproar if Aplana learned you were taking advantage of someone in a position beneath you; they’d start to wonder if you’d been taking advantage of them, and all hell would break loose.”

My stomach burns, irritation simmering in my blood. A stupid, unspoken rule.

I don’t need to fuck my assistant to take advantage of my constituents. My election was a farce in the first place.

Not interested in hearing more, I release the lawyer and quickly cross the room to where Cora stands, apparently shell-shocked. A petite woman from the legal department stands close, seemingly trying to shield her and also get her attention, but the girl’s eyes won’t leave mine.

“Nice of you to join us, Ms. Astor.”

“Sir—Your Honor,” the other woman interjects, correcting herself with a cough. “I have a change of clothes downstairs that would probably fit—”

“No need. I have something she can wear.”

The woman frowns, confusion darkening her eyes, but I don’t stick around to hear more. Gripping Cora’s bicep, I try not to focus too much on her warmth as I pull her toward my office.

Shutting us inside, I lock the door and recline behind my desk, using my

fingers to coax the sudden ache from behind my temples.

Her face morphs, an angry expression creasing her brows. The fire lighting her golden gaze makes my dick kick behind the zipper of my trousers, and I lick my lips, tracing the outline of her body freely now that we don't have an immediate audience.

“If I'd known you were such an exhibitionist, I would've made our first time together far more memorable.”

Cocking a hip, she tilts her head to the side, a malicious grin spreading across her lips. “Aw, but then you wouldn't have a dirty little tryst to think about anytime you fucked your fist when you were alone. After all, the best-kept secrets are the ones discovered at night, right?”

My eyebrows quirk, and I'm intrigued by the animosity when I expected fear. Then again, perhaps I've underestimated the brat.

I stare at her for several beats of silence, just watching her drip all over my floor. Her dog licks at his paws, somehow less soaked than she is, and I wonder if she used herself as a shield to keep him out of the downpour.

“It's true; I do often think of you when I come late at night. I've found it entirely impossible to forget how your tight cunt enveloped my cock so fucking well, like it had been made expressly for my enjoyment. Are you finally admitting you think of me too?”

Snapping her mouth shut, she shakes her head. “No.”

“A shame. The memory of us together works *very* well when you're in a pinch.”

Her hands ball into fists. “Whatever. Doesn't matter because I'm resigning, effective immediately.”

I blink. “You just started.”

“Yeah, well, things end.” She shrugs, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “You get used to it.”

Silence thickens in the room between us, tense with a thousand unspoken words. An accusation hangs on the tip of my tongue, but I fear if I push her

for more right this second, she really will walk out that door.

Cora Astor's a hellcat, untamed and untethered, and I have no doubt she'd claw and bite to get her way.

Perhaps that's one of the things that draws me to her; there's a fire that lives in her, fueled by determination and spite, that can't be doused with water or sand.

It's the kind of fire you smother. The kind others have tried.

Me? I have no desire to put it out.

I want to watch her burn.

"Come. Sit." Pushing back away from the desk, I dip my chin. "Let's talk."

"I'm not a fucking dog."

"No, you're a brat who enjoys pissing me off." Leveling her with a stern look, I spread my palms along my thighs, rubbing at the brown trousers I have on. "Come here, Cora, or I'll walk outside and have you arrested for trespassing at my home."

Nostrils flaring, she sucks her bottom lip between her teeth. She clenches her hands into little balls at her sides, then blows out a long, ragged breath. Dropping the dog's leash, she crosses her arms over her chest and stops three feet from my chair.

"Here."

She just blinks at me, and I have to suppress a smirk because the girl doesn't know who she's toying with right now.

"I can wait, but if your arse isn't up on this desk in the next thirty seconds, I'm liable to bend you over it and make you *really* angry."

Huffing, she motions for her dog to sit, then comes over and stops, giving me a look.

"Move," she snaps, and fuck if I don't want to throw her over my knees and turn her skin a bright shade of pink.

I don't say anything. A muscle thumps in her jaw. She shoves her way

through, her knees grazing mine and leaving wet spots, then turns around, as if sensing I want her to face me and defying my wish.

Humming low in my throat, I stop her, reaching forward to plant my hands on the desk at her sides, trapping her in place.

A strangled sound comes from her throat as I roll my chair forward, keeping us just inches apart.

“How many employees have you done this with?”

“What, had them dripping all over me, aching for my touch?” I grin, inhaling her familiar scent. So sweet and clean and so completely opposite of the woman sitting before me.

The crowd outside remains, laughter and chatter filling the air, nearly splitting my focus. I concentrate on the feel of her in my arms, keeping my ear turned so I don’t miss any of her words.

For a moment, I just look at her, familiarizing myself with the colorful ink etched into her arms. Flowers, dainty and colorful, cover one arm while the other seems to take a more nautical theme with waves and seashells.

Cora scoffs. “I’m not aching for anything.”

Sitting back, I let my hands drift slowly inward. My right thumb brushes the outside of her thigh, and she shifts, trying to put distance between us. All it does is press her ass against my chest, which makes her freeze.

My hand continues its ascent, the next stroke more deliberate.

“So if I slid my hand up, I wouldn’t find you soaked? Just for me?”

“I don’t know if you noticed, but I *am* soaked. From the rain, *Your Honor.*”

My cock stirs to life at her brazen tone, and I slide my fingers up. Tracing the hem of her skirt, I watch her shoulders for key indicators, absorbing each intake of breath.

Her skin is smooth, like butter. I want to spread her on my tongue.

“Arousal and water have entirely different textures.”

“Yeah, I know how the human body works. Like I said, I’m not wet for

you. Whatever attraction I had the night we met disappeared the second you softened inside me, so this whole complex you've got going on about being some sort of gift to humankind? Cut it out."

"Hmm." My fingers move upward, gliding around the front of her. I run my index finger along the tree on her inner thigh, stroking the branches and subsequent leaves with the lightest touch.

She spasms, making my breaths scatter.

I stand. "Shall we test that theory?"

She turns her head, defiance lining her irises. They burn bright and golden, alight with renewed determination. "Absolutely."

Grabbing hold of my wrist, she locks eyes with me, spreading her legs apart as she guides my hand between them.

No panties.

Clenching my jaw tight, I try to hold on to the last vestiges of my control as she offers her bare cunt on a silver platter, but the second the pads of my fingers feel her wet heat, I'm a fucking goner.

"Not for me, hmm?"

Shuddering, she shakes her head, dropping her hold on me. "Maybe I fucked someone else on my way in. *Maybe* you're playing with his spunk, and you just think I'm turned on."

Something angry pinches in my chest as the image of someone who isn't me filling her up flashes across my mind.

"Maybe I should taste you and see," I say, withdrawing my hand.

Brushing the hair from her shoulder, I draw a little *W* on the curve of her neck with her juices, then lean down and run the pad of my tongue over the site. The familiar tang of her arousal assaults me, and I groan the word *fuck* into her skin, sucking hard and making her cry out.

"You could fuck a dozen men. Women too," I add, licking over the red spot my lips caused because I recall her comment about her ex-girlfriend at the pub. "But this cunt? She craves *me*."

“Prove it,” Cora rasps, grinding into the heel of my hand.

My free one comes up to grip her chin, and my eyes rove over her red mouth, hungry and eager. I glance at the glass door; someone tries to peek in, but the view from the outside is only reflective.

Still, my cock throbs at the thought of being watched, of doing this when we’re absolutely not supposed to, for a multitude of reasons.

“If they knew what we were doing right now, I’d be impeached. Possibly stoned on the courthouse lawn.”

Ermes and his men would have me killed if Aplana didn’t get to me first.

Returning beneath her skirt, I tease her clit with short flicks, reveling in the way her breathing grows shallow, chest caving in.

“Maybe you should be.”

Slowly, my finger slides back home, her cunt sucking me in. “Perhaps. But what a way to go, right? Making you come all over my hand. You’ve no idea how badly I wish it were my face again.”

“I’m not—”

Hooking my fingers, I massage her deep, seeking that spot that makes her clamp down around me like a vise. “Name a single person who’s fucked you better than me. Just one.”

“I don’t remember names.”

“You don’t remember names because there are none. Only I fuck you like this, right?”

She doesn’t agree, but she also doesn’t deny it, and a bead of pre-cum leaks from the tip of my dick at the tiny acquiescence.

“Souls are often ruined by so many untruths, you know.”

“Don’t worry about my soul,” she manages. “It was ruined long before you.”

My eyebrows draw in. *What does that mean?*

“Fine.” Leaning in, I pretend I don’t notice the sadness in her voice. My thumb presses down hard, and I can feel her pulse between her legs. “What

were you doing at my home last night?”

She doesn't reply. Won't meet my gaze either. She just stares straight ahead, completely immobile.

Maybe I should be angrier about the fact that she was there at all.

Or maybe I should be worried.

But she wouldn't have come here if she were planning my downfall.

Wouldn't let me touch her at all if she were scared.

Which only begs the question... what *is* she doing here?

Fitting myself into her backside, I shift forward, letting the hard length of me press against her ass. Her clothes soak through mine, cool against my warm skin. I let go of her chin, flattening my palm against her chest so I can feel her heartbeat in multiple places.

It speeds up as I bend forward. She catches herself on the desk, holding us up as my weight transfers to her.

Still, she remains silent. Deceptively pliant, though I'm certain if I moved my hand at all right now, she'd try to bite it off.

Maybe I'd let her. See if the scrape of her teeth feels as good as I imagine.

Dipping my middle finger into her, I try to absorb the gasp as it reverberates down her spine. Her cunt grips me so fucking tight, and the sopping heat of her is loud, lewd as I withdraw before plunging back in to the knuckle.

“If you're not going to cooperate, I have no choice but to adjust your job duties.”

Still, she says nothing.

“You'll head tomorrow afternoon's press meeting, promoting the gala.”

Head whipping to the side, she glares. Curling my finger, I stroke her inner walls slowly, cataloging the exact moment her eyes glaze over. I can see her struggle to ignore me, but she finally speaks, mouth parting.

“Excuse me? What part of *I'm quitting*—”

Adding a second finger and doubling the speed of my thrusts, I cut her off. “I’m afraid I must reject your resignation. There’s far too much at stake, and you don’t even know the half of it. You’ll continue to work for me, where I can keep an eye on you. Make sure you don’t get any ideas.”

My fingers work quickly, and she spasms violently, hand flying to cover her mouth as she tries to suppress any sound. Like that would somehow deter me from wanting to do this again and again.

Now that I know she’ll let me, I plan to make this a regular occurrence. Fuck the rules and the fact that I’m essentially blackmailing her to remain my assistant.

Fuck the fact that she’s keeping secrets.

I’ll figure out what they are. In the meantime, I want to keep her just like this. Flushed and creaming around my fingers. Eventually, I’ll fill her again. Push my cock inside her, drain myself dry so she leaks like a broken faucet.

I’m not sure why the idea of knocking her up appeals to me so much, but I cannot deny that the urge is there. Pure and animalistic, as though desperate for a way to trap her here.

“Plus, I like you being *beneath* me.”

Swallowing, she pulls at her skirt. Her dog lifts his head from where he’s been asleep near the door, then rests it on the floor again.

“You can’t... I can’t be on camera.”

That gives me pause. “Are you a fugitive, Ms. Astor?”

A deep blush paints her cheeks. “There are just... I’m not comfortable with that.”

Trepidation lines my stomach, bubbling along the surface like acidic water. I can tell there’s more to what she’s saying than she’s willing to admit, but I don’t really want to push her.

Yet.

So instead, I hold her chin with the hand that, seconds ago, was inside her. “That’s kind of the point.”

When we finally part, she turns around, leaning against the desk. Her eyes are wide and glazed over, but that fire remains.

Adjusting her skirt, she sneers at me. “You’re so unbelievably inappropriate. What if people heard us out there? If you want me to be your assistant so bad, why would you risk my job like that?”

“The job you were just so willing to quit ten minutes ago? I don’t see how my endangering your position makes any difference.”

Folding her arms over her chest, she bars me from seeing her tits. “Willful ignorance isn’t a good look, Wolfe.”

Grinning, I reach up, tugging the corded leather necklace hidden beneath the collar of my dress shirt. I slide the *W* charm to the side, pinching her little hoop between two fingers, and raise a brow at her.

Her eyes widen, and her hand goes to her nose, feeling for the piercing she already knows isn’t there.

“No, it isn’t.”



“SO WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?” Violet shoves a handful of popcorn into her mouth, leaning back on the sofa bed in my hotel room. “You wore an outfit to distract him, and it worked, right?”

Wringing my hair in the bathroom sink, I ignore the goose bumps sprouting along my arms at the thought of Alistair earlier today. The barely contained jealousy raging in his arctic eyes and the feel of his fingers on my skin, in my pussy, dragging pleasure from me like it was his favorite pastime.

As badly as I hate to admit it, his hands on me could easily become my favorite pastime too.

Which is wrong for a multitude of reasons—least of all, the fact that I watched him kill someone last night.

I'd be lying if I said it was the first time I had seen someone be killed. For some reason, it was just the first to affect me so viscerally. Maybe because I knew the executioner, or perhaps because other murders seemed to have reasons behind them. Food, space issues, self-defense.

People excuse a lot when their livelihood is threatened. Safety becomes justifiable through any means necessary when it's a luxury you scrape and scrounge for in the first place.

But Alistair isn't in danger—at least, none that I can see—so his crime feels unwarranted.

I should've booked the first ferry off the island today and run home after what happened, but doing so would mean not finding Lucian. So instead, I went back to work as normal and then let my murderous boss finger me in his office.

Clearly, he knows it was me there last night since he was wearing my nose ring in his necklace. Yet he didn't explicitly call me out on it. Didn't mention the hotel at all, or try to hurt me or shake answers out of me.

Well, okay, *technically*, he tried. But I don't think he pushed as hard as he could've.

That's the unnerving part.

The *why* behind his lack of force.

My body's primed, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Violet throws her arm over the back of the couch, watching me through the open bathroom door. Tugging at the hem of my oversize black T-shirt, I come back into the main room, brushing my hair. It'd dried enough at work, but my clothes were stiff and uncomfortable, so Alistair sent me home to work on the press conference for tomorrow.

I was in the pool ever since until Violet showed up and demanded to know how my time in Aplaná was going.

"I don't know what the problem is," I tell her, glancing at the mirror by the bed. She doesn't know the extent of what went down at the mayor's

house or about the creepy shit here afterward. “Just that there is one, you know?”

“Um, no. I don’t know. That makes no sense to me.”

My shoulders slump, and I give her a look. “Seriously? Okay, so why can’t you get to know your brother?”

She twirls a lock of onyx hair around her finger, petting Laurel as he sleeps on her lap. Her *I Heart Plants* sweatshirt hangs off one shoulder, revealing sun-kissed skin. “Because everyone says he’s a criminal. They’re all scared of him, scared to talk about him. How fucked would it be if I brought that to my world?”

I wait because that’s not the real reason. Violet’s sitting in the room with me right now, and it’s never bothered her that I have a rap sheet. Petty crimes, granted, but still.

“Let’s not talk about him, though,” she says, waving her hand. “That’s a story for another day.”

Sighing, I turn and place the brush on the nightstand, staring at myself in the mirror again.

I get why she doesn’t want to discuss it.

If the situation were reversed, I’m sure I wouldn’t want to, either. Especially with everything else going on.

On top of trying to figure out where my brother is, now I’m a bit concerned that Alistair was somehow involved. My brother loved his drugs, and this town is a hotbed for crime with the main criminal export being Lucian’s vice of choice.

All I know is, I can’t trust anyone here. Doing so has the potential to let my brother down, and I vowed long ago that I wouldn’t be the one to do that.

Not when life had done such a good job on its own.

Plus, there’s a lot to lose when you open yourself up to new people. New relationships to fuck up, new fractures threatening to tear your heart apart with no way to know which break will finally make the organ shatter.

Better to keep it locked up tight, away from anyone who might hurt it.



MY PALMS FEEL clammy as I rehearse lines from the index card Alistair handed me yesterday. I haven't spoken in such a public setting in... well, ever. Even at swim meets when I was younger, the most I did in front of a crowd was slice through chemically treated water and then accept a medal afterward.

"We look forward to..." The end of my sentence trails off, eclipsed by a staggered breath. "Seeing the community come together for the gala and anticipate that it will mark Aplana Island's great revival."

I roll my eyes, scratching Laurel's chin with my foot. Maybe they should try not being overrun with criminal organizations.

"Do you have a problem with my speech, Ms. Astor?"

Alistair seems to appear out of thin air, eyes on me while he fastens a red tie around his neck. His black suit jacket hides the suspenders underneath, and I must admit, it's a little unsettling to see him so buttoned up.

There's something else, though. He seems on edge and guarded in a way I haven't seen before. Even with all the people around yesterday, he looked perfectly at ease until he saw me standing in the middle of the room, flashing my tits to every important person in town.

The veins in his hands flex, mesmerizing me as they work at the silk fabric. He approaches my desk, lifting a brow as he catches me staring, and I cover my mouth with my hand, faking a cough.

"Yes. The fact that it's *your* speech."

"Pardon?"

"Well, you wrote it—"

Reaching over the desk, he yanks my hand from my lips. "I can't fucking

hear you.”

Blinking, I frown, letting my hand slowly fall to my lap. The words were pretty loud and audible to me, but maybe that’s only because I could hear them in my head.

“Sorry,” I say, sneaking a glance at his ears to see if maybe I missed hearing aids or something. “I was just saying, your citizens aren’t gonna buy the whole speech coming from me.”

He leans his forearms on the desk. The agitation from before seems to melt off his shoulders. “And why not?”

“I’m not from here. In fact, I’ve only been in town a short time, and I’ve mingled with approximately three people.”

Selene, the hotel night manager, and Alistair.

Technically, Violet and Alistair’s cop friend too, but I’m choosing not to count them since Violet isn’t a resident, and my interaction with the cop wasn’t consensual.

“A single young woman who clearly enjoys casual sex and works a simple nine-to-five, on an island with unfettered access to beaches and tourist spots, and you’ve met... three people.”

He gives me a disbelieving look, and I shrug.

“I didn’t come here for vacation.”

His eyes glitter. “Then why *are* you here?”

Because it’s the last place my brother was seen alive.

Because Lucian asked me to come.

Because I’m desperate.

Clearing my throat, I hold up the index card. “The why doesn’t matter to these people. They’re just gonna hear a bunch of disingenuous nonsense from a girl with tattoos and blue hair.”

“And a nose piercing.” Alistair reaches into his pants pocket, pulling out a rose-gold hoop, the double rings connected by a tiny garnet jewel. “Can’t forget that.”

He slides it over the desk, and I reach out, narrowing my gaze as I inspect it.

“What’d you do to it?”

“Nothing. I just thought you might want a new one before that hole closes up.”

Why does the word hole in an innocent sentence sound so fucking dirty when coming from his mouth?

“It takes a little longer for that to happen,” I mutter, turning the ring in my hand. Glancing up, I find the silver one on his necklace. “Why can’t I have that one back?”

Hooking his thumb underneath it, he shakes his head. “Oh, no. This is mine.”

Whatever. Annoyed, I pull the ring apart and slide it into my nostril, using my thumb and index finger to adjust it. “There. Happy?”

The corners of his mouth tug up. “Ecstatic.” Rapping his knuckles on the wood, he turns away and heads for his office but pauses mid-step. “You know, I’m not from here either.”

I feign shock, clutching my chest. “You’re kidding. I thought the ferry had taken me to the UK.”

“Afraid not. My mum is from Scotland and my dad England. I was born in London, as was my brother.”

“You have a brother?” Violet must have left that information out.

A soft expression flashes across his face. “I do. Three years younger than me, he’s much more British than I am and a thousand times smarter, and... purer.” He sighs, dragging a hand over his jaw. “Owns a great little pub on the island.”

“Is he into hunting and art like you?”

“Hmm,” he hums, as if considering this. “Not in the same ways, but I suppose he does have a certain... *respect* for painters and game.”

Whatever that means.

“I’ve never seen him brought up in any interviews or articles about you.”

“Doing your research, little thief?”

My shoulder lifts. “Good to know who your opponents are, right?”

A beat of silence passes as he stares at me, like he’s trying to see through to my soul. The intensity of his gaze makes my face heat, warmth pooling at the base of my spine and spreading lower.

“Opponents, *m’eudail*? Last I checked, we were on the same team here.” He shakes his head when I don’t respond, drawing a hand through his soft black hair. “In any case, I don’t like to mix my personal and professional lives if I can help it.”

I snort.

He ignores me. “Jonas is the best thing about my life,” he says softly, pulling at his tie as he averts his eyes. They return in a second, suddenly devoid of any emotion. “Keeping him out of this place keeps him safe.”

With that, Alistair continues on to his office, letting the door click shut behind him. I stare at the mirrored glass, watching myself in it and wondering how it’s possible to see so much of me in someone who’s ultimately still a stranger.

Reaching down, I scoop Laurel into my arms, breathing in the maple-syrup scent that somehow naturally clings to his coat. I stare at the door until someone comes to the top floor for a meeting with Mayor Wolfe, and even then, I’m still thinking about his words from earlier.

Safe from what?



SMOKE BILLOWS UP in the room, drifting toward the open window of my home office. Slouched down in one of the white suede armchairs before the ornately carved wooden fireplace, I suck on the butt of my Cuban and stare at the flames.

A letter sits, discarded in my lap, and I'm tempted to throw it into the flames. Let the words scribbled on the page turn to ash, but that feels too kind.

Even ash is useful sometimes.

The door opens, and I recognize Marshall before he comes into view; he smells like cloves and cinnamon, and the scent always precedes him.

Taking the chair across from me, he spreads his massive thighs wide, the

crotch of his dark jeans stretching as he reaches for one of my cigars on the mahogany end table between us. Silently, he lights up, taking a long drag as he settles in his seat, leaning his head on the plush backing.

“How long have we been mates?” I ask after a prolonged silence, still stuck on staring at the flames.

Marshall chuckles. “Is that what we are?” Innuendo drips from his tone, thick and heavy like honey.

I feel his dark-brown eyes on me, but I can’t bring myself to look.

I don’t particularly enjoy traipsing down memory lane, yet the letter in my presence almost forces my hand.

“How long have we been *just* mates?”

Memories prick the back of my mind—him on all fours, kneeling between my legs. Me on my stomach and his damp, sticky flesh clinging to mine, riding me the way I rarely let anyone else.

It takes trust, being vulnerable like that. And after a childhood in which vulnerability became my reality, grappling with that aspect of my sexuality was difficult.

From the moment we met, fresh out of college and working for the comptroller’s office over a decade ago, Marshall has always been one of the few people I *can* trust. In this world, where control and power and money dominate everything, you don’t take confidantes lightly.

Which is perhaps the main reason we’ve remained friends, even after our relationship ended.

“A long time,” he replies, somewhat wistful. “Why? Your emo assistant not cutting it?”

“Don’t bring her into this.”

Sighing, he takes a drag, then flicks some invisible lint from his knee. “Then what, Wolfe? You didn’t call me here to fuck you, and I definitely didn’t come here to get fucked, so why are you dredging up the goddamn past?”

“Hollis,” I choke out, my throat constricting as I run my finger along the edge of the letter.

Marshall leans over, snatching the sheet of paper from me. He scans the front, frowning, then flips to the pages stapled to the back. For several minutes, he just flips through them, and aside from the crackling of the fire, his obvious confusion is the only sound in the room.

“What the fuck is this?” he snaps, voice low. “Are... are you embezzling funds from the fucking Barbieris?”

“I’m not.” Snuffing my cigar out, I grab the folder from the bottom compartment of the end table and shove it in his direction. “Offshore accounts, wire deposits. Recognize the name?”

He catches it against his chest, propping it open. “Hollis Alvarez? Are you shitting me right now?” Blowing out a cloud of smoke, he sits up straighter, glaring at the documents. “A quarter *billion* dollars? Holy shit. Why is your ex-boyfriend stealing from the Mafia?”

Agitation burns low in my gut, so I don’t bother correcting him on two counts.

One, the Barbieri family isn’t like the American or Sicilian Mafia, per se. They’re affiliated, but the Barbieris are old money and power, and their influence on the national economy rivals other organizations.

My father was just *barely* associated with them; they were an organization that relies almost entirely on blood ties, and it happened that the Wolfe clan could be traced back to some of the older founding members of the enterprise, so when Duncan Wolfe came to the Americas, they used him as a mediator for their business interests.

It was why Jonas and I were raised the way we were; my father wasn’t quite closely related enough to become an official member, but the tether was strong enough that he wanted us raised as honorary sons in the event they did recruit.

Two, Hollis isn’t my ex.

Not in an official capacity anyway.

Though not for lack of trying. Ours just wasn't a relationship we could make work between my rising political career and the fact that he lived out of town and refused to let me into his personal life.

Eventually, the darkness that had always had a grip on my soul bled over and filled his as well. Last I knew, he was running drugs for low-ranking cartel members. My trip to Boston was the first time I tried contacting him in ages, curious to figure out what he was up to.

I wouldn't have guessed *this*.

"So what?" Marshall asks, still skimming through the bank documents. "What's his goal here?"

Grabbing another cigar, I press the tip against my lips, sparking the end with a match the way my father always did with his Cubans. Lighting up, I stare at the embers as they glow orange, puffing slowly so it catches.

"Well," I say, bringing my ankle up over my knee, "I'd say he's trying to pin the funds on me."



HALF of me doesn't expect my brother to show up at the gala. I invited him and his fiancée weeks ago, but then the entire fiasco with Mileena happened, and I still haven't spoken to the bloke.

Shortly after the more affluent citizens of Aplana arrive, though, I spot Jonas in a black suit, far removed from the leather jacket and jeans he prefers. His dark brown hair is combed neatly, the curls slicked down with some sort of pomade, and his bluish-violet eyes scan the front of the white brick building as if he expects me to jump out at any moment and force a conversation.

That's the thing about us, though. Jonas loves his grudges, and patience is

practically wired into my soul. He could be angry with me for the rest of our lives, and I'd never be able to give up the hope that he'd one day forgive me.

I spent a lot of my life resenting him because he was raised full-time by the man who had ditched my mum and me. Too much time was wasted on squabbling and bitterness when I should've been protecting him.

When we reconnected as adults, around the time he was arrested and sent to jail, I vowed not to let him down again.

Even with the stuff with his mum, I like to believe I'm doing what's best for him.

Sometimes, even the best intentions blow up in your face.

Jonas turns, and I notice the girl wrapped in his arms; he glances down at her as he presses her against his side, tucking a strand of the golden-brown hair that's escaped her updo behind her ear. It's clear my brother's a fan of the sleeveless navy gown his fiancée has on by the way he continuously runs his fingers along the material, making her giggle.

My chest pinches when he hooks a hand beneath her chin, tilting her head back. The purest, smallest of smiles graces her pretty face, and suddenly, I feel like a voyeur, violating such a private moment.

He's happy.

Outside of killing people, his pub, and his duty to family, I've not known Jonas to be genuinely *happy*. He's always carried around the burdens of his grudges, unaware of how black they turn your soul because he hides it so well beneath layers of sarcasm and wit.

I should be glad for him.

Especially given that the entire relationship was *my* doing in the first place. A way to distract him with the proper, angelic Primrose daughter and repair our public image at the same time.

For some reason, I didn't expect it would take such a turn.

My gaze flickers to the large canvas hanging on one wall of the viewing room—a ballerina dancing on a half-frozen pond, surrounded by beautiful

swans. The watercolor is an original Lenny Primrose put up at Jonas's request, and for a moment, I'm tempted to take it down.

Hide it in a storage closet out of spite.

An itch numbs my fingertips, and I shove my hands deep into the pockets of my trousers to keep from reaching out.

Gathering a deep breath, I turn and look out at the crowd, trying to find something else to focus my sudden irritation on. The corners of my mouth lift when I spot it across the room, scribbling something on a clipboard, clad in a hot-pink minidress.



ON THE LIST of things I give zero shits about, the state of Aplana Island's sewage system has to be in the top five.

Yet this random man insists on continuing his conversation about piping and underground mapping issues as if I alone were capable of convincing the mayor to do something about it.

My eyes find Alistair across the gallery floor, and a tiny shiver skates over my skin. He looks like a Greek god in his fitted tan suit, black hair perfectly coiffed, jaw sharp as it clenches. A pretty brunette in a navy gown stands next to him, staring up at the painting on the wall, though he seems distracted.

She speaks, but I don't think he's listening. Seconds later, he looks at me,

and I can't help the goose bumps that sprout on my arms.

His gaze feels like a cool caress, rinsing over me like excess mist from a waterfall.

I look away just as quickly, unwilling to let it excite me.

The last thing I need in life is a complication, and Mayor Wolfe is a problem waiting to happen.

Or a problem in progress really.

I'm just trying not to make it worse.

"... the history of sanitation in this town is so rich and unique, you know?" the man at my side asks, sloshing his champagne. I take a step back to avoid the spillage, and he comes with me, oblivious. "If you want, I'd be happy to explain it further. Maybe somewhere more private? I know the gallery is kinda full, but there's a cafeteria just outside, down the hall."

Gag me.

Hugging my clipboard to my chest, I give him a thin smile. "Thanks, but I think I'd better stay here. It'd be rude to take off when I organized the event."

"Oh." The man's face falls slightly, and he sips his drink, glancing around. "Well, hey, you did a pretty good job. Wouldn't know it, just by looking at ya."

I stare at him.

After a second, he snaps his fingers right in front of my face. I jerk backward, narrowly avoiding getting smacked.

"I know! We could do it afterward. Or sometime next week even. There's this amazing sushi place on the boardwalk, and—"

"Unfortunately, Ms. Astor's evenings are no longer available."

Curling my fingers around the edges of the board, I swing my gaze up to meet Alistair's. He sidles up to my side, holding a champagne flute in one hand and grazing my outer thigh with the other.

My spine tingles, and I bite the inside of my cheek to stifle the warmth threatening to build.

“Since when?” I reply, tilting my chin up in defiance.

Alistair’s brows quirk up. “Since I said so.” He glances at the other man, who reaches up to tug at his bow tie, seemingly uncomfortable now with our addition. “Ms. Astor is a phenomenal assistant, which is obvious from this party she threw together in a few weeks. I’ll be monopolizing her time for the foreseeable future.”

A small blush creeps up my throat at the praise, but I stuff it down. The man’s second language seems to be innuendo.

“She seems quite talented,” the other man agrees, suddenly standing upright and granting personal space. He smirks over his glass. “That kind of skill shouldn’t go to waste in one office, though.”

At my side, Alistair inches closer.

“Believe me, Masterson, her *skills* are not wasted on me.” He pauses. “And I’m not interested in sharing.”

The guy laughs, scratching at the back of his neck. “Pretty possessive for a boss to be over his assistant.”

Chuckling darkly, Alistair shakes his head. “You’re right, mate. She’s more than just an assistant, so if I hear you proposition her for sex again, I’ll have you fired and chased out of this fucking town. If she goes home with and rides anyone’s cock tonight—or any other night—it’ll be mine.”

The sewage man blinks several times, like he can’t believe what he heard. Maybe he’s so drunk that he thinks he imagined it.

“Mayor Wolfe’s just joking,” I offer, driving my elbow into the soft spot below his rib cage.

“No, I’m not,” Alistair insists, leveling the other man with a weighted look.

After an awkward silence, the sewage guy takes off, muttering something about Aplana being run by an evil dictator. I shake away from Alistair, resisting the urge to smack him with my clipboard, but only because it would draw unwanted attention.

Gesturing toward me with the flute, he gives a small smirk. “Beverage?”

“There’s not enough alcohol in the world to get me to go home and *ride your cock.*”

As he stares down at me, Alistair’s smirk remains in place. He slowly brings the glass to his lips, taking a long sip, and I hate that my eyes instinctively fall to his neck. His throat bobs as he swallows, the veins in his neck straining as he tips his head back just slightly.

Dragging the flute away, he catches a wayward droplet with his tongue, flicking the corner of his mouth.

I feel the movement between my thighs, and they clench involuntarily.

“Wasn’t alcohol,” he says finally, pushing past me and out of the gallery.

I stand there after he’s gone, confused about what just happened.

Seconds tick by and several people come along to appraise more of the artwork hanging on the walls or sitting on displays. My feet finally kick in and take me begrudgingly in the direction Alistair just left.

I find him down the hall and through a propped open door, leaning against the wall in some sort of recreational room. Soft music trickles in from mounted speakers, and a few people from the gala are inside, either mingling by one of the catering tables or spinning slowly around the makeshift dance floor in the middle of the room.

Marching over to him, I shove the clipboard at his chest, but of course, he doesn’t make a move to grab it, so the papers and board clatter to the ground, the crash echoing throughout the space.

“What the fuck is your problem?” I hiss, bending down to retrieve my stuff.

He has the audacity to look confused. “I don’t have one.”

“Oh, really? Is dick just part of your personality then? I’m having a real hard time figuring out how you became mayor in the first place.”

As he hums low in his throat, Alistair’s face softens. He glances past me, watching as the few people in the room exit quietly, and then holds out a

hand, palm up.

“Do you dance, Ms. Astor?”

Snorting, I cross my arms. “Do I look like someone who dances?”

“You *look* like a woman who sacrificed her soul to the devil. I learned long ago not to judge based on appearances.”

Rude. “Yeah, well, what’s it say about you if I look like that and you still want to fuck me?”

“Perhaps *I’m* the devil.”

Alistair’s lips twitch, and he reaches out, tugging one of my hands free and wrapping it around his bicep. The clipboard falls again, but he steps over it this time, pulling me along with him.

Sweat percolates along my brows as we stop in the center of the dance floor. I don’t think I’ve ever felt quite as small as I do right now.

Maybe that’s why I have such a difficult time with him; in a world where you’re already considered less than, the added reminder of your insignificance isn’t really welcome.

His left palm finds the curve of my hip, latching on as his other hand takes mine, cocking my elbow. The song overhead changes, morphing into something slow and sensual, and he yanks me closer, pressing our fronts together.

Liquid heat spreads through my belly, a warm kindling that I don’t want to acknowledge.

“Alistair,” I say softly, staring at his collar, “we shouldn’t be doing this.”

“No one else is here.” He spins us in circles, the weight of his hand leaden everywhere it touches.

Every fiber of my being is telling me to reject him. To run as far away as possible and hide from the nightmare that is Alistair Wolfe.

But my feet don’t cooperate, opting instead to mimic his movements as he shuffles rhythmically.

We turn in silence for several steps, my gaze glued to the royal-blue tie

beneath his suit jacket. It matches the color of my hair, and I wonder if he did that on purpose.

“I’m glad to see you’re still wearing the ring,” he says after a moment.

“Don’t get too excited,” I mutter, lifting my head. “It’s not an engagement ring. I just don’t want the hole closing up.”

Humming, he pulls me tighter to his body, and shame creeps into the recesses of my brain because I don’t exactly hate the way we fit together. Like two broken pieces of marble, sculpted and buffed and then melded into one.

“So if not dancing, then what?”

I pull my head back. “Huh?”

“You said you don’t look like someone who dances. I disagree that there’s a *look* for that, but that’s an argument for another time, I suppose.” He purses his lips, his thumb rubbing circles on my side. “What do you enjoy then, little thief?”

Nothing.

That’s my official party line anyway. The easiest way to turn people off to polite conversation or from getting to know me better. And it’s not untrue—the things I enjoyed prior to Lucian’s disappearance don’t feel the same now.

I don’t really want Alistair to know more about me, but for some reason, an answer comes out anyway.

“Swimming.” I swallow over the knot in my throat, the coarse material of his suit suddenly rough and foreign beneath my fingers. “Did it throughout school, and I still love it.”

He seems to mull it over, sliding his hand to my lower back. “Now, that doesn’t surprise me.”

“Are you about to make a disparaging comment about my body?”

“Disparaging? Never.” Offense lines his irises, and for the first time, I note the bright green ring around his pupils, just barely noticeable as the blue

darkens.

Pressing his palm into me, he swings out, bending me backward in a dip that steals my breath away. Adrenaline spikes in my veins, and I let out a little laugh of disbelief, gripping the lapels of his jacket as he suspends me.

“Your body’s done nothing but haunt my dreams since we met,” he whispers, leaning so he’s dangerously close to my lips.

Reflexively, I fold my mouth together, barring access.

“If I make disparaging remarks about it, they’ll only be about how filthy you look, split wide open on my cock, and *only* because doing so makes you come harder.”

“Jesus.” I don’t mean to say the word, but it comes out as a gasp, my clit throbbing painfully in response.

He opens his mouth to say something else, but then a door opens, and the cop who’s always visiting him at City Hall stands there, a terse expression on his face.

“*Busy*,” Alistair snaps, turning me so I’m hidden by his form. He clutches me tight, and the reminder of the trouble we could get into if someone saw our position is a splash of cold water to the face.

Being here serves me no purpose if I fuck up and get shunned by the town before I’ve found anything out.

“Wolfe,” the cop says in a clipped tone, “it’s your brother.”



THE RIDE back to Hotel Ledo with the cop—Marshall, I think Alistair said his name was—is plagued by a tense, uncomfortable silence.

I want to soak in it since part of the reason for the tension seems to stem from our mutual dislike of one another, but I can't really seem to focus. My finger toys with my nose ring, twisting as I try to think of something other than Alistair.

He ushered me out of the gala before I could even mingle with any of the dealers or artists, and I'm kind of annoyed, given all the freaking time I spent organizing the damn thing.

As I left with Marshall, my designated babysitter, I caught a glimpse of Alistair and his brother in the parking lot—both dapper, imposing figures, the

latter with dark brown hair, a neat beard, and the kind of frown you earn from a lifetime of bitterness.

I've seen Jonas mentioned and photographed on occasion, but the tabloids and mug shots don't really do him justice. Any other night, I'd have been hard-pressed to leave, but whatever was going on between the two seemed tense and upsetting, so I left with minimal complaints.

The words *kidnapped* and *fiancée* were muttered as we passed them, and I can't stop thinking about what the hell kind of world I've gotten myself into. Or rather, that Lucian's involved me in.

But even if I wanted to leave, I'm in far too deep at this point, and I don't want to know what it's like on Alistair's bad side.

He's my in with the city and its criminal network, and I doubt anyone else would keep me on if something happened to the mayor.

It's not like he hired me based on merit.

Granted, the gala seems to have been a success, but since I've never thrown one before, I don't really have anything to compare it to.

"Ms. Astor is a phenomenal assistant."

Did he mean that, or was he just toying with me? Asserting his dominance over the situation because he felt possessive and didn't want my attention on anyone but him?

And why the fuck do I even care?

"When do you plan on telling Wolfe?"

The cop breaks the silence with his question, and I glance at him from the corner of my eye.

"What are you talking about?"

He slides his hands along the top of the steering wheel. "The car isn't bugged or anything. You can admit it."

"Admit *what*?" I snap, sitting up in my seat.

"That you're not who you say you are." He tosses me a flippant look. "Wolfe thinks you're some down-on-her-luck chick who needed a job and a

quick fuck, but you're more interested in other things, aren't you?"

My mouth parts, confusion tying my tongue in knots. Releasing my fingers, I press them into my bare thighs, narrowing my eyes at the mammoth beside me. "You know, this isn't the first time you've accused me of something but provided no concrete information. Maybe I should tell Alistair that you suck at your job and just spend your time trying to intimidate me."

Neon lights bleed into the horizon, and the front gates of the hotel come into view. My hand inches toward the car door, grasping at the handle so I can jump out as soon as we stop.

"Who says intimidating you isn't my job, *little thief*?"

Unlike when Alistair says them, malice drips from those last two words, and a pit forms in the middle of my stomach, making me nauseous. Dread crawls up my neck like a thousand tiny spiders, and I grip the handle tight, my senses shifting into overdrive.

The transmission in the car kicks, resetting as the digital speedometer accelerates quickly. My stomach lurches to my throat, but I try to ignore it.

"Well, you're shit at it."

Brown eyes find mine, and the bright Hotel Ledo sign whizzes past in my peripheral vision. Anxiety trickles down my spine in the form of sweat, cool against my skin.

"What did you think was gonna happen?" he asks, keeping his head turned toward me. "You'd seduce Alistair and what? Get him to solve all your problems? Expunge your rap sheet and fund your little homeless adventures?"

Right now, I'm regretting getting rid of the cell phone my mother bought for me years ago. Being off the grid hardly seems important in retrospect.

"I didn't seek him out," I say, not exactly sure where the animosity is coming from. Whatever its source, I don't want to exacerbate it.

"Sure, you just *happened* to be in his line of sight when he went to Boston a few weeks ago, as if you knew he wouldn't be able to resist. Just

happened to come to the island where he lives and is mayor.”

“Resist what?” I let out an incredulous laugh. “Your understanding of the narrative is off, dude. Our meeting was pure coincidence, and my coming here had nothing to do with him.”

The speedometer reaches the triple digits, falling slightly as he lets off the gas a bit. I glance out the windshield, watching the road come flying into view while the car eats the pavement. We’re way past the hotel now, heading toward the rolling hills, and I take stock of the things I have with me.

Nothing really. My shoes—heels borrowed from Violet—and a faux-leather clutch with my plastic baggie wallet and a few tampons inside.

The heels are the only thing I could potentially fashion into a weapon, but even then, I’m not sure how much damage they’d really do. In the past, they worked in a pinch when I needed to fend off someone quickly, but never when my life was threatened.

As the numbers on the dash creep past the speed limit, I fear this is a kind of danger the past year on the streets didn’t prepare me for.

Bile bubbles in my stomach, churning violently as Marshall steers directly past the entrance of the marina, weaving around curves at illegal speeds. I grip the door handle in one hand and my seat belt in the other, partially frozen.

“He doesn’t trust you,” Marshall spits.

“And I don’t trust you.” Lifting my shoulder, I pull at the hem of my pink dress, regretting the length. If we crash and die, I just know I’ll be flashing the coroner.

“Good girl,” he practically purrs, and I have to press the back of my hand to my mouth to keep from vomiting. “Maybe you’re not as stupid as you look.” Cocking his head to the side, he steals another glance at me, then reaches over and grasps my bare thigh with his hand. “Then again, you did get into the car with me.”

I claw at his meaty fingers, trying to pry them off. “Ow, you’re hurting

me.”

“Not as much as you could hurt Wolfe. I know you say you’re not doing anything, but I looked you up, Cordelia Anne Astor. I know your birthday, your Social Security number, your family members. I know you’re a dirty little anarchist with a bleeding heart, who ran away from home because the police refused to help find your brother, and I know you’re here now because you think you’ll find him.”

His grip on my leg tightens, but my hands fall away as I stare at him. The car continues speeding, but everything inside seems to slow down for a moment as if suspended in time and space.

“Do...” I swallow, my throat suddenly arid. “Do you know where Lucian is?”

The muscle in his cheek thumps, but he doesn’t respond immediately. Rage boils hot in my chest, and I scratch at his skin again, trying to elicit an answer.

“I know a fuck of a lot more than you do,” he says. “More than he’s told you—that’s for sure.”

“More than he’s told you.” Does that mean my brother’s alive and gave me false information? That he lured me into some sort of trap?

Sweeping my tongue over my teeth, I wait for more. Unsurprisingly, he doesn’t offer it free of charge, and I don’t have the attention span to sit around and wait forever. Especially with my focus being split between this revelation and the fact that he just keeps driving *faster*.

The Mustang’s horsepower has to cap soon, right?

“Keep pretending you aren’t afraid of me,” he says, squeezing the wheel until his knuckles blanch. “I promise, by the time this is all over, you will be. And if I don’t kill you, *he* will.”

A wicked chill coasts over my skin like a frozen blade being dragged across it.

I consider the probability that this is all a farce. Some charade concocted

to intimidate me. And under other circumstances, I'd probably give up and go home.

But that would be giving up on Lucian, and I just... *can't*. At this point, I've been on this path for too long to stop, and there's still a tiny flicker of hope deep in my chest that believes he's alive.

I want to bring him home more than I've ever wanted anything in my life. Can't go back there unless I do.

When Marshall remains silent, my frustration peaks, and I throw my arms across the console, grabbing at the steering wheel beneath his hands.

"Jesus Christ!" he shouts, jerking back in the opposite direction.

The sudden swerving throws me into him, and I slam my hip into the console, narrowly missing his shoulder with my teeth.

"Let go, you dumb bitch!"

Making a fist with one hand, I rear my arm back and drive it into the side of his head. It doesn't knock him aside the way I was hoping, but he at least lets go enough for me to gain control of the wheel. He tries to block the next blow, but I use the force of my adrenaline to punch again, ignoring the way my knuckles feel like they bust on impact.

Bone crunches against bone with only the soft padding of flesh between, and I yank at the wheel until it meets resistance. Stars split my vision as the vehicle gets caught in a complete spin, and for a moment, I'm back at the gala, warm in Alistair's arms.

In another breath, Lucian's there, grinning at me like he lost me, and I've finally made my way back.

"I knew you'd find me, kiddo."

He scoops me into a big bear hug, just like he did when we were young and I was afraid of the boogeyman. Fear was the only thing I'd let him comfort me through, and the episodes were so infrequent that he always kept holding on for a bit too long.

"Where the hell have you been?"

He still smells like tropical gum and cigarettes, and I bury my face in his neck, just now realizing how long it's been since I smelled him.

So long that I began to forget his scent entirely.

Giving me a sheepish look, he tucks my head beneath his chin. "Just had to go away for a while, you know? I... things got bad for me, and I couldn't manage them."

"So you left me?"

"No, silly girl." His knuckles rub against my scalp, and I squeal, trying to wriggle away. "I would never."

"You're not around, though."

"Just 'cause you can't see me doesn't mean I'm not there." He strokes the back of my head. "And remember what I told you, right? Don't trust anyone. Every person you meet is living a life you have no clue about. They're watching you, and they will destroy you."

I frown, wondering if he somehow knows I fucked the mayor. "That sounds an awful lot like a death speech, Luce."

When he doesn't say anything, I glance up.

A scream lodges in my throat; hollow, rotted eye sockets stare down at me, and the decayed skin around his nose and mouth peels away, revealing withered bone beneath. His mouth opens wide, and then it's as if his jaw unhinges, and a black hole forms, sucking me inside.

THE SOUND of glass shattering reverberates through the night, yanking me from the illusion. My neck snaps forward, my forehead colliding with the dashboard as the Mustang comes to a stop.

The car creaks as I shift, sitting back in my seat slowly. Something drips down my temple, sluicing through my brow and into my eye. I pinch it shut in an attempt to stave off the stinging, but all it does is trap it inside.

My chest throbs as I give my head a little shake, gathering my bearings.

A dull noise blares out incessantly, and I look across the console, realizing that Marshall's knocked out, his head lying on the horn.

There's a deep, bloody gash by one of his eyelids and a dark purple bruise forming just beside it.

Aches erupt in every muscle of my body; they stiffen as I unbuckle and try to move, protesting my retreat. But I need to get out of here, at least before that asshole comes to.

Slowly, I pull my leg into the seat, ignoring the blinding pain that shoots through my calf. Kicking out of my heels, I hook my fingers into them and try to shove open my door.

It doesn't budge.

Squinting, I peer out through the windshield, trying to see what we ended up hitting. Branches cover the broken glass, so my first thought is a tree, and I'm somewhere between gratitude that the car didn't wrap around its trunk and a little bit of resentment that I'm still stuck on this planet, *still* looking for my brother.

My head throbs as I try the door again.

Nothing.

Punching the overhead light, I inspect what's keeping the door closed; it's bowed in completely, the plastic interior spearing the seat beneath me.

A few inches higher, and my thigh would've been impaled.

Rubbing my temples, I suck in a deep breath. The action smarts, but I push through it, considering what to do next. Leaning across the car, I reach for the driver's door handle, pulling on it.

Like the one on my side, it's glued shut, and now, panic is starting to seize my lungs. They compress, then fill up slowly, but it's almost like there's an endless leak that I can't plug, so it just keeps escaping. I can't keep up with the volume of oxygen I'm losing, and as I scramble into Marshall's lap, shoving myself through the broken window, I start to feel a bit dizzy.

Glass pricks my skin as I crawl out, and I hear the telltale tearing of

fabric, then the unmistakable feel of the breeze on my bare stomach.

Swearing under my breath, I move slow, steadying myself as the world begins spinning and spinning. My palms kiss the ground, and I'm just pulling my feet out when two hands close around my ankles, yanking me back in.

Letting out a scream, I claw at the dirt, gaining purchase as my feet thrash behind me. I feel one heel connect with what feels like Marshall's big chin. Then a loud cracking sound fills the air, and the car groans.

"What the—" Marshall says, and a second later, my feet are free, and he's struggling with his seat belt.

I land on the dirt with a thud, realizing as I look around the pitch dark that I have no idea how I'm going to make it back to civilization.

The groaning grows louder, piercing the night air, and as soon as my feet clear the window, it seems to crescendo to a peak.

Turning my head, I watch as the Mustang pitches forward, angling at a nosedive. Marshall's big brown eyes as he tries to climb out the window after me are the last thing I see as the car careens over the edge of a cliff.



JONAS POURS two fingers of whiskey in matching crystal tumblers, then hands one to me. Shaking four ibuprofen from a plastic bottle into his palm, he tips back his head, drops the pills into his mouth, and then downs his drink in one gulp.

Meanwhile, I can't bring myself to even sip the alcohol. Instead, I swirl it around my mouth and then spit it back into the glass. If he notices, he doesn't say anything—which is one thing I've always been able to count on with my little brother.

Like our father, Jonas has always been a man of few words, and as someone whose career revolves around wielding them as weapons, I've long admired the ability to say so much with so little.

The night before was a bit eventful, what with his fiancée being attacked by her father and ex-boyfriend. He was hesitant to leave her so soon after, but at the end of the day, blood trumps whatever rage and pettiness we've grown accustomed to.

Wolves protect their packs, and as such, Wolfe men are loyal to a fault.

Since I aided a bit in the retrieval of the woman he loves, he was willing to meet with me. Granted, he only agreed if I came to this abandoned warehouse turned target range, but after weeks of silence, I'll take what I can get.

"How's Lenny?" I venture, watching as he pours another drink.

Probably not a good idea to be drinking with so many guns and sharp objects around, but I suppose that's his prerogative.

His eyes lift, the violet hues he inherited from our father bright against the lighting. "Are you asking because you care or because you think you should?"

Fair enough. I've not exactly made my disdain for his relationship a secret, but only because it was only ever supposed to be a publicity stunt. He wasn't supposed to go and fall for the socialite.

"I'm asking because I want to."

Bringing the tumbler to his lips, he scrutinizes me from over the glass, leaning against his bow.

Swallowing, he sets his drink back on the table. "She's fine. A bit shaken up, but nothing she won't recover from. Her father and ex, on the other hand..." Trailing off, he gives me a pointed look, and I know better than to ask for details. He wouldn't give them anyway because he thinks my hands are free from the invisible bloodstains that mark his.

So much of our relationship is based on half-truths and lies of omission. It's no wonder things have been strained.

"How's Mileena?"

My brows rise. I haven't heard from her since the night I broke into the

beach house. “Isn’t she living with you?”

“Living in my house and living with me are two separate things. She’s out before I wake in the mornings, and she doesn’t come back until after we’ve gone to sleep.”

We. The constant reminder that my brother is part of a unit that no longer involves me causes a sharp pain to swell in my chest, like I’ve impaled myself on one of my arrows. I rub at the spot, the scar from where I was stabbed as a kid thick and obvious, even through the material of my button-down.

An awkward silence passes between us, and I shift my weight, pausing to see if he’ll be the first to break it. Neither of us is unaccustomed to waiting things out.

“Why’d you do it?” he asks finally, toying with the corded leather bracelet on his wrist. With the Wolfe family insignia charm dangling, it matches the necklace I wear—the only things our father left us, aside from a boatload of problems. “Why’d you work for my mum, or with her, or...”

“If I said it was for your own good, would you believe me?”

“No.” A tic forms in his jaw, thumping beneath his trimmed beard. “Anything where that righteous bitch is concerned cannot possibly be for my own good.”

“You don’t know that. You’re just driven by your anger.”

“Anger made me who I am.”

“And shortens your life expectancy.”

His lips twitch. “Well, big brother, I’m sorry we can’t all be as unaffected as you.”

Sighing, I put down my tumbler and grasp the handle of my gold-painted bow. Holding the instrument steady, I line a bodkin up with the string, hooking it in the arrow nock as I cock my arms to aim.

We’ve been coming here for years, using the old place as target practice to keep our marksman skills sharp, although it’s been a while since we were

here together.

The arrow releases with a soft *swish*, and before I can blink, the head lodges in the bull's-eye of the target across the warehouse.

I turn to my brother, reaching for the next bolt. “Look, the last few weeks have been hell. Stop fucking ignoring me and get back to work. I need you for shit, and I’ve found it rather difficult for my two worlds to function cohesively when you’re not around.”

It’s as close to an apology as he’ll get from me.

Placing his hand on his chest, he gives a mock gasp. “You’re such a sweet-talker, Alistair.”

“Politician, remember?” Bringing my arms up, I focus on the mark—since I prefer trad bows, mine lacks a mechanical sight, so I use the tip of the arrow to gauge the distance between myself and the target and then release again. “I’ll text you a name in an hour, when I get back to the office. Think you can have it taken care of by the afternoon?”

Jonas scoffs. “Don’t bloody insult me.”



I’M late to City Hall on Monday after a weekend spent searching for Hollis Alvarez in every location he was pinged at over the last two years. Jonas accompanied me to the outskirts of Boston, and we raided every back alley and shifty warehouse in Delos County, destroying everything in our quest.

Still, the only thing we found was a runner for one of the cartels, who claimed the last time she heard from Hollis was over a year ago.

In the end, she only said that to cover her own tracks. She was apparently skimming product off the top of Barbieri shipments and hoped we’d give her an alibi. She didn’t even know Hollis.

Jonas buried her alive on the beach—deep enough that she would be dead

before the tide washed the sand away, but not so deep that people would believe the death to be foul play.

After his stint in jail over a decade ago for his failed assassination attempt, Jonas worked hard at perfecting his craft. That's the reason I hired him in the first place; as much as I want to keep him safe and as easily as I can get rid of a body, no one does it quite like my brother.

I wouldn't have been able to sweep the election without him eliminating the opposition. Aplana Island never even batted an eye when its officials went missing.

The top floor of City Hall is completely silent when I step off the elevator, which I'd normally welcome, except it's also *empty*. Glancing at the Rolex on my wrist and then the computer at the receptionist's desk, I confirm that it's a quarter to noon, yet my assistant is nowhere to be seen.

I check the restroom, conference and break rooms. Even my office, on the off chance she went inside there, though I know she goes out of her way to avoid spaces I inhabit.

In the weeks she's been here, I've not known her to take lunch early. Her résumé might have been obviously cooked, but her work ethic is impeccable, and she does what she's supposed to.

Fuck. My cock stiffens as I think about her obedience.

I don't have it. Not yet anyway. She defies me every way she can, which only intrigues me further. There aren't many people in my life willing to go against me, and her fire burns *so well*.

With the job, at least she's willing. And since I'm still holding trespassing charges over her head, I can't imagine she'd start slacking now.

Heading to the second floor, I scan the break room, poking my head into offices and ignoring the whispers. An image of her and Marshall whips across my vision—the memory of them tangled up here, doing God knows what.

Marshall would never betray me like that, but there's no doubt in my

mind that my little thief would use him to get back at me.

Frustration pulls at my brows, and I make my way down to the main level of the building, ignoring the ache in my gut that flares every time I'm around HR. My entire existence is a massive violation to them.

A dark-haired girl peeks out of an office, peering at me through neon-purple glasses. She lifts a hand, lips curving into a crescent shape as she hisses, "Psst!"

Walking over, I try to catalog her in my mind, absorbing her dark brown skin and bright, bubbly eyes. She yanks me into the room, shutting the door behind her.

"Mr. Mayor," she begins, and already, we're off to a bad start, "I hope you don't mind me accosting you like this." She speaks clearly, keeping her face in my line of sight as she rounds the glass desk in the middle of the room. Folding her hands on the surface, she gestures for me to sit.

I glance at the pink bean bag chairs across from her and shake my head. "If you're asking me to consent to being pulled into your office because you're afraid of getting into trouble, I'll have to politely decline..." Gritting my teeth, I trail off, unable to recall her name despite her familiarity.

"Selene," she offers, crossing her arms over her chest. "Not like we've worked together for the last eight months or anything."

"Well, if you're here to rally for better wages, I'm afraid I'm a bit busy. Submit a proposal to my assistant by the afternoon, and maybe I can look it over—"

"Your assistant isn't here."

That piques my interest. "Oh? And how do you know this?"

"I'm not, like, stalking her or anything," she says quickly, like I'm going to report her for doing so.

Like I'd have any room to talk.

"It's just... she comes in every day the same exact way, and today, she didn't show up at all. I even called the hotel she listed in her onboarding

forms, and the front desk says her key card hasn't been used since Saturday morning, before the gala."

My thoughts flatten, and a heavy pit drops dead center in the middle of my chest. "What?"

"And then we got worried 'cause some people said they saw her leaving with this guy, Marshall Kade."

Narrowing my gaze at her, I cock a brow. "Do you think he hurt her?"

"Huh?" Selene blinks, shaking her head. "No, I just... the police found his car at the bottom of an embankment, off the northwest coast—"

My throat constricts, terror seizing my limbs. What the *fuck*?

Staring blankly at the girl's head, I stand there limply, trying to process what she's saying even though the sound isn't computing in my brain. It's garbled, like I've been submerged in icy water and nothing's able to break through the surface.

Hands shaking, I drag them over my face, trying to scrub the unease away. It sticks like glue, unwilling to release me from its clutches.

"Selene," I snap, forcing myself to focus but needing her to stop babbling. I watch her mouth clench shut, her round eyes staring up at me. "Where are the passengers?"

"Well, they said Marshall was airlifted to Boston, and Cora..." She trails off, and I think I might be sick. "Cora wasn't recovered."



YOU WOULD THINK that if you took enough right turns, you'd eventually return to a part of the island you recognized.

But for some reason, I keep getting more and more entrenched in the unknown.

My feet are cut and swollen, possibly even infected, given the numbness that settled in when the sun rose today.

That's another thing—with no cell phone or sense of direction, I have no idea what time it is. Only that the sun has risen twice since the accident, and I'm missing work.

God. Work. I don't even want to know how irate Alistair probably is right now. I'd like to believe he's concerned for my well-being, but more than

likely, he's just pissed, thinking his little toy took off.

That's all I am to him anyway. The reminder takes some of the sting out of the partial conversation I had with Marshall Saturday night and keeps me from trying to make sense of the entire ordeal.

If I don't find my way back to town, Alistair won't be able to kill me anyway.

I'll die alone out here.

Groaning as I pass what I swear has to be the same tree for the millionth time, I let out a little whimper and bend over, clutching my knees. My stomach growls, and I think about how I was sitting on the couch three nights ago with Laurel, sneaking him bits of chicken from a gas station sandwich while my biggest concern in the world was figuring out what the fuck had happened to my brother.

I wonder if Laurel misses me or if he's happy to be chilling with Violet instead. She can afford to spoil him in ways I can't, so I'm certain he's enjoying the toys and treats.

Sadness billows like an overpumped balloon in my chest, and I squat down, pinching the bottom of my dress together to keep from flashing... well, nature mostly.

A heavily wooded area surrounds me, and apparently, the sound of waves slapping against the shore isn't loud enough for me to find the beach. If I could, scooting along the edge of the island until I hit some sort of civilization would likely be a lot easier.

Exhaustion grips my muscles, and I prop my back against the tree, sliding down it for a quick rest. The tear in my dress was small, but I've pulled and prodded at the thread so much that it's started to grow, exposing the underside of my left boob as well as the top of my ribs.

Covering the spot with my palm, I lean my head into the trunk, working my tongue inside my dry mouth to try to produce a little saliva.

A dog howls in the distance, and tears prick my eyes.

At least, I hope it's a dog.

Do coyotes even live here? And if they do, aren't they nocturnal anyway?

My heart grows heavy in my chest, and I close my eyes against the blurriness of my vision.

Maybe Laurel sensed something was wrong and dragged Violet out to find me.

Sitting up suddenly, I glance around, eyes wide. "Fuck me," I mutter, dragging a hand through my dirty hair. *They think I'm dead, don't they?*

The Mustang went over the cliff, and I didn't stick around in case Marshall somehow escaped and came after me. But my not sticking around means I wasn't able to tell anyone my side of the story, and what else would you think if you found an accident and one person was missing?

They'd think I was ejected and probably tossed into the sea.

No one's coming to look for me.

No one's going to save me.

Maybe it's stupid I thought they would in the first place.

I'm a nobody to the people of this town, and considering the scope of violence and death that bleeds through the streets here, what's another casualty?

"Cor?"

Head whipping up, I curl my hands into fists, prepared to fight the intruding voice with whatever I have left in me.

Familiar gold eyes meet mine, and I suck in a sudden gust of air, surprise colliding with confusion like a cyclone in my stomach.

Lucian stands in front of me, his forehead creasing as he looks me over. "What the hell happened to you?"

Shock clings to my system, or maybe that's dried blood. It's hard to tell.

Frowning, I lift one finger in accusation. "Me? What happened to *you*? How are you even here right now?"

He doesn't answer, crouching down so we're eye level. I wish he'd reach

out, let me feel his warmth from the blood rushing through his veins. Prove that he's real after all this time.

But he doesn't. Draping his hands over his knees, he just keeps staring at me, an emotion I can't quite place threading his brows together.

"You don't look so good," he comments after a moment, and I try to laugh, but my mouth is too dry.

"I don't..." It burns when I attempt to swallow, like I've consumed gravel and it's stuck in my throat. "I don't *feel* good."

"You have to get up and get help."

"You're here," I point out.

His lips turn down. "No, Cor, I mean it. You *have* to get up. You can't die here."

The howling in the distance grows louder, and my body sinks, as if being reclaimed by the earth. I shake my head at my brother, comfortable for the first time since I got in the car with Marshall after the gala.

"No, no," I say, but my voice sounds fuzzy, even to me. Distant, like it's being whispered through the clouds. "I'm gonna stay right here. Maybe become this tree, so I can just live off the land. Literally."

It'd be so easy to just stay here forever. Let my body melt back into nature.

"*Leave!*" Lucian shouts, and the sudden eruption of anger jolts me back to reality. That one word is distorted, muffled, like he's saying something else at the same time.

When I open my eyes, I blink once. Then twice, a catastrophic disappointment opening a cavern in my heart and bleeding it dry.

Lucian's gone.

Almost like he wasn't here at all.

And there are two cops before me, weapons trained on my forehead, while a third holds a snarling canine off to the side.

"Cordelia Astor?" the slight woman officer asks, her tone too harsh for

my ears.

I wince, nodding mechanically, but I can't bring myself to look away from the spot my brother was just in.

“You're under arrest for the destruction of a privately owned vehicle and the attempted murder of Detective Marshall Kade.”

Their words don't register at all, so my body doesn't make a move to cooperate when they tell me to get up. I hear them say something to one another, and then I'm being lifted, and my arms are forcefully wrenched behind my back, my face shoved into the ground.

Wincing as I taste dirt and copper, I keep my gaze on the spot where Lucian was. Even when the cops' efforts reopen a cut on my temple and the blood trickles into my eye, I don't stop looking.

They haul me up, and I resist as much as my body will let me, unsure if what I'm seeing is really there or not.

A paper hospital bracelet.



“I DON’T KNOW how many times I have to tell you this, but I *don’t know where Cora is.*” The woman before me blows hair from her face, adjusting her grip on the dog in her arms.

Cora’s dog. I recognize his short, shiny black coat and orange collar.

Leaning against the doorjamb to room fourteen of Hotel Ledo, I glance over her head, looking around for signs of my deviant little nymph. They’re everywhere—a plastic bin with the inside bag pulled up and twisted to keep it from toppling over, just like she does at work. The Aquaphor I’ve seen her use sits on the nightstand, and the red tennis skirt from the day she came to the office soaking wet is on the sofa bed.

Nothing really screams recent activity though, and my concern continues

growing, its branches reaching out and barring my attention from anything else.

“Okay.” I relent after a moment, committing the contents and layout of the room to memory. My gaze catches on a broken landline in the corner, and I glance at the girl. “What happened to the phone?”

Tossing a quick look over her shoulder, she shakes her head. “Probably the product of some emotional outburst. My cousin’s a bit of a drama queen... runs in the family.” She smiles cheekily, giggling at the dog, as if he could understand her.

My agitation spikes, and I pull out my wallet, sliding a business card from the back slot. “If you hear from her, could you let me know?”

She takes the card, and her smile disappears as she reads. “You don’t think she’s in trouble, do you?”

One thing I’m quickly coming to learn about the woman who’s occupied my thoughts and dreams for the last few weeks is that if she isn’t *in* trouble, she’s likely going to be.

But I don’t particularly want to dwell on the potential in this case. Marshall’s awake and stable at Mass General, but I’ve been too busy here, trying to find Cora, to go visit him.

There’s no way she just *vanished*. Kade’s Mustang was totaled, but the interior damage was fairly minimal, given the speed at which they’d collided with the tree, according to my brother, who I sent to speak with law enforcement on my behalf.

The passenger seat belt wasn’t attached, but the emergency lock the belt had been deployed, indicating that it was in use when the vehicle crashed.

So most likely, she wouldn’t have been thrown.

Then where the hell is she?

She knows better than to run now, right?

Then again, if the shock and trauma forced her into a different, unstable state of mind, perhaps she wouldn’t have recognized the need to stay put.

My stomach twists, tension knotting inside as I turn away from the hotel door. The girl puts the dog down behind the door, then steps out and pulls it shut behind her. Crossing her arms over her cactus-print sweater, she cocks her head to the side.

“One time, when we were really little, Cora’s mom took us camping at Ashmere Lake for her brother’s birthday. Even though it was clear none of us wanted to go, except Lucian.” She rolls her eyes but smiles slightly at the memory.

I didn’t even know Cora had a brother.

“Anyway, their mom made this *big* deal about what to do if we got lost. I mean, mostly, she went over the campsite and land nearby, so we wouldn’t, but the woman was always looking out for probability, right? There were the obvious things, like stay put, try to build a fire, or draw attention to yourself before dawn, keep calm. But Lucian and Cora grew up pretty much ignoring everything everyone told them to do. Especially her, like she genuinely seemed to want to learn things the hard way.”

Goddamn stubbornness.

“A few hours into the trip, unsurprisingly, Lucian wanted to take off. Explore. He’d brought this bow and arrow with him that he’d gotten from their dad when he was younger, and he wanted to practice shooting targets, so he took off. Cora went with him, unwilling to let him get himself lost. At least if she went with him, they would have an extra chance of finding their way back ... I think that was her reasoning anyway. Cora was younger than him, but she was *always* more responsible and always looked out for his safety.”

Behind the door, the dog barks, and the woman presses her lips together. Her gaze slips past me, boring into the horizon, like she’s trapped in the memory.

“That’s her thing, you know? Cora’s *a lot*, but her protective streak is unmatched, truly. She doesn’t love easy, but when you’ve got it, there’s

nothing she won't do for you. Nothing she wouldn't do for her brother." Pausing, she exhales, and her eyes return to mine. "Want to know how they found their way back?"

I'm not really sure why it matters, but I lift a shoulder anyway. "I'm still standing here, aren't I?"

"She followed the water. Eventually, the lakeshore looped back around to the parking lot, and they were able to locate a ranger, who brought them back to us."

I blink, waiting for a point.

The girl doesn't elaborate further.

What the hell kind of story is that?

"Right. Well, if you see her..." Faking a cough, I give the woman a nod, stepping off the sidewalk as I head for my Lexus.

She still stands by the door, watching as I slide behind the wheel. Like she's waiting for something more.

Starting the SUV, I blow out an irritated breath, tugging on the leather around my neck. My finger brushes Cora's nose ring, and I pause, considering the story her cousin just told.

"Followed the water."

I lift my head as realization dawns.

The coast.

Throwing the vehicle into reverse, I speed out of the parking lot, my fingers humming with the weight of possibility. Granted, the entire island is surrounded by hundreds of miles of coast, but still. If I start at the accident site, I know I'll find her.

She doesn't know the landscape of Aplaná, so there's no way she'd be able to navigate it well. I'd be surprised if she'd gotten far at all.

My phone lights up as I drive past the marina, and I answer it immediately after checking the contact name.

"Kade," I bark, anger surging through my chest. "What the hell? I ask

you to get her home safely, and you almost kill her?”

His reply is weak, but full of snark. “I didn’t do shit, man. Crazy bitch grabbed the wheel and wouldn’t let go.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. She freaked out about something... kept mentioning her brother and something about wanting to hurt you.”

What?

Shaking my head, I slow down, pulling off to the shoulder on the road. Coherent thought seems to scatter from my brain, and an eerie sensation sweeps up my spine, extending past my extremities.

I don’t have a clue what’s going on, and I can’t say I fancy the feeling.

“Yeah, man, I don’t know. Maybe she’d been drinking or something?”

Thinking back to the night of the gala, I run through our interactions. I watched her every fucking move, a wolf zeroing in on its prey and keeping it safe from other predators.

Sure in my conviction that she’d be mine at the end of the night—even if *only* for the night.

She didn’t take any of the drinks offered by catering staff or otherwise, and even when I tried to give her champagne to alleviate the nerves I could tell she was experiencing, she declined.

“There’s not enough alcohol in the world to get me to go home and ride your cock.”

It was cute she thought I needed alcohol’s assistance, and I was looking forward to proving her wrong before Marshall rudely interrupted with my brother’s issues.

Come to think of it, even when we met at the pub, I didn’t see her take any drinks from the bar. Didn’t smell or taste alcohol on her tongue.

“...arresting the little slut right now,” Marshall says.

Though I didn’t catch the first half of his sentence, still, I heard enough. “Arresting her? For what?”

“Uh...” He makes a sound in the back of his throat. “Trying to kill me.”

“They’re charging her for that? Jesus fucking—” Ripping the phone from my ear, I slam my foot on the accelerator and merge back onto the highway. I’m three seconds from hanging up when I think better of it, bringing the receiver up again. “And for the record, Kade, call her a bitch or a slut again, and I swear, you’ll leave that hospital in a goddamn body bag.”

Ending the call before he can reply, I toss the phone onto the passenger seat and grip the wheel, trying to calm the rising tide of anger boiling inside me. It’s hot and volatile, building to a point of eruption.

Cop cars are parked outside the marina, and my anger morphs into blind rage when I see two officers practically dragging a broken and battered Cora behind them. Cutting to the right, I block off the first car in the lineup, throw it in park, and fly out of the vehicle.

No one has time to even draw their weapons before I descend upon them, and I pull the Glock from the waistband of my trousers, holding my hands out to the side in mock confusion.

“What have we got here, boys?” I ask, recognizing one of the cops as a plant of mine. My brows draw in, and my jaw clenches so tight that I can almost feel a crown loosen in a molar.

“Just a little crime roundup.” The female, who isn’t knowingly on my payroll, preens, like she’s expecting praise from the mayor.

I glance at the state of my little nymph, vomit teasing the back of my throat at the gash dripping blood on her forehead, her blackened and bloodied feet, the tear in her pretty pink dress. Strands of that bright blue hair are matted to her head, though it’s impossible to tell by what, and the makeup she had on at the gala is smeared, almost nonexistent.

Moments ago, she was limping behind the officers, but now, she’s propped up against the side of a cruiser, eyes falling closed and her hands bound behind her back.

My chest tightens, a fire burning inside the cavity, taking up all my

oxygen.

“Someone had better explain why the fuck my assistant is in cuffs in the next thirty seconds, or every single one of you will get a bullet between the eyes.”

The officers glance at one another, a third one taking a step away from the group.

I turn with him, training my Glock on his scrawny knees. “Aw, a volunteer? Speak up, wanker, or you’re first.”

“Your Honor, you can’t talk to us like that,” the woman officer starts, narrowing her blue eyes at me. She looks to her colleagues, then down at Cora, like she’s the dirt beneath her shoes. “Besides, we ran this girl’s name at the station. She’s got a list of crimes on top of the one we’re hauling her in for. You should really be thanking us.”

The other guy’s shoulders slump, and he shakes his head, giving her a look.

I almost laugh. “If you think that’s bad, you should see my rap sheet.”

Pursing her lips, the woman looks away from me. Eyes only though, as if she’s afraid to turn her back on me.

Like I’d need her to.

“We should get going, you guys. Cap’s expecting us, and—”

The solid gold bullet narrowly misses her teeth as she goes to speak, gliding right between them. I’m not sure if it pops out the other side or not, and I don’t really give a fuck.

Normally, I don’t use the gold casts unless I’m trying to send a message. Those bullets are custom and expensive, and those in our underground network recognize the Wolfe insignia engraved on them. Since they’re denser than normal rounds, they don’t fragment, and tracing their source is far easier, which isn’t exactly a good look for the mayor, but at the moment, I’m too enraged to give a shit.

Go big or go home, right?

Off to the side, the third officer lets out a groan, covering his mouth. His skin flushes, and he stumbles back. I roll my eyes, heading for where Cora appears to be passed out on the ground. Bending down, I run my hand over her ear, brushing wet hair back from her face.

Her right cheek is a deep purple, swollen and tight, and I'm careful to avoid it as I slide my arms beneath her.

She hangs limp as I lift her up, cradling her to my chest.

"We were just doing our jobs..."

My head snaps toward the man I recognize, though I can't place his name. "Yeah? Well, now, you have a new job. Take care of these two, and come find me when you're done. Don't make me come after you."

Walking over to the Lexus, I pause, turning to face him. The other officer bursts into tears, and I choke back a sound of disgust.

"Anyone finds out about this, you die."



A WET FLICKING sensation on my neck wakes me up, and for one horrified moment, I'm on the streets back home again.

Couch-surfing, hiding out behind dumpsters, bathing in public restroom sinks—praying to any god or universal being that my devotion to being a good sister will one day be rewarded.

I don't even necessarily need monetary compensation for the trauma that leaving home caused. All I really want is another day to keep looking for Lucian.

Peeling back my eyelids, I wince as the one on the left struggles, a sharp pain slicing across my brow bone. Clamping it shut again, I blink and open the other, immediately staring into a warm brown gaze.

Laurel yelps when he notices I'm awake, and I see his tail wag ferociously as his butt lifts in the air. He licks my chin, breathing hard, and tears sting the corners of my eyes as relief crashes over me.

Turning my head to look around the room, I realize too late that I'm not in the hotel.

To my left is a wall made completely of glass with a gorgeous view of the ocean out past the little balcony. The room is bright, complete with cream furniture and champagne-colored walls. A boho-style rug peeks out from under the bed, and there's a rocking chair across from the wicker dresser.

Plush, dark blue bedding surrounds me, soft against my broken skin, and even though I have no clue where the fuck I am, I let myself sink into it for a moment.

It almost reminds me of home, if I can even still call it that. That was the last time I slept on a decent mattress anyway.

Shifting, I try to sit up, but my body doesn't cooperate. An ache spreads quickly through my abdomen as I move, and I wince, gripping my side.

It feels like I got hit by a bus. Maybe even backed over a couple of times.

My hand itches, and when I reach to scratch it, I notice a piece of tape. Picking at the corner, I work at peeling it back, not sure what's attached beneath, but also needing it gone.

Whatever it is, I can *feel* it penetrating my skin. Paranoia floods my chest, and I peel harder, swearing when the tape splits into smaller pieces.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a deep voice warns. "And you weren't hit by a bus... it's more like you hit a *tree*, going forty over the speed limit."

Did I say that out loud?

Jerking my head toward it, I suck in a sharp breath as the muscles in my neck protest the sudden movement.

What I'm expecting is Alistair since my ears immediately picked up on his cadence. He's there, standing at my bedside in a pair of gray slacks with his suspenders drawn up over the shoulders of his plum-colored shirt.

Reading glasses sit perched on the edge of his nose, and he clutches a newspaper to his chest, making me wonder if he's been here long.

Any comfort I felt at his presence initially evaporates though when I remember what happened at his house. The man he shot and killed, all with a blank expression on his face, like murder was something he dealt with on a regular basis.

Then there's the pair flanking his sides. The three of them are all different variations of beauty, and suddenly, I'm wondering if I died and heaven is full of disturbingly good-looking men.

One man is an inch or so shorter than him with curly brown hair and eyes that look almost purple in the lighting. I blink several times, trying to determine if my brain is playing tricks on me, but the hue doesn't change.

His hands are stuffed in the pockets of his leather jacket, and he wears a familiar expression of irritability.

Jonas Wolfe.

Alistair's brother.

On the other side is a man taller than Alistair by about an inch, though it's possible his jet-black hair, combed and styled on top of his head, adds to his height. He watches me with soulless, dark eyes, narrowed as if in speculation.

Under his scrutiny, I feel like a patient.

My gaze falls to the tape on my hand and the detached tube under it.

Maybe I am a patient.

Parting my lips, I try to speak, but nothing comes out because of how parched my mouth is. A straw pokes at my chin, and I glance down to see Alistair holding a Styrofoam cup out for me.

Frowning, I pull back. Laurel settles in against my thigh, resting his head on my knee, growling low in his throat as Alistair tries again with the drink.

"It's water," he deadpans.

"Poison?" I try to push it as an accusation, but the word comes out lilted, like I've asked a question instead.

He shakes his head. “Why in the world would I poison you, little thief? Toys are no fun when they’re broken.”

Tears well in my eyes, and I blink through the burn. Someone sighs, and then the extra-tall man takes a step forward, reaching for the stethoscope dangling around his neck that I didn’t notice before.

“Mayor Wolfe, I’m going to ask you not to upset the patient.”

He doesn’t call him Your Honor, which I find peculiar. I squint as the man puts on the medical gear, pressing the opposite end to the top of my chest, over the blankets.

“Upsetting her is what I do best,” Alistair grumbles.

I watch the apparent doctor’s hands, prepared to throw a fit if they do anything untoward. A pomegranate tattoo peeks out from his shirtsleeve as he works.

He listens intently for several beats, and my hands grow clammy. I run my fingers through Laurel’s fur, keeping him calm as I steady myself internally.

Pulling back, the doctor takes the cup and gestures at me with it. “You should drink. You were dehydrated when Alistair brought you in, and you’re very lucky that there were no broken bones or lacerations needing more than a few stitches.”

Yeah, I feel lucky.

“What the fuck are you guys doing?”

This comes from a fourth voice, distinctly feminine. A woman with long hair the color of chocolate comes in, her hazel eyes hard as she drops a pile of folded blankets at the end of the bed.

My muscles relax a little with her presence.

“Scaring the newbie, obviously, love,” Jonas jokes, elbowing the girl in the side as she puts her hands on her hips.

“Hilarious. Get out.”

The two men move toward the door, but not before the doctor pauses,

pressing a kiss to the side of the woman's head. She huffs at him but softens slightly anyway, and then it's just the three of us.

She raises an eyebrow at Alistair as he settles into the wooden rocking chair across from the bed. Shaking his paper open, he leans back, propping his ankle on one knee.

“Is it really appropriate for you to be in here?”

He levels her with a look. “I'm not leaving.”

Rolling her eyes, the girl heaves a sigh and turns back to me. She sits on the edge of the bed, petting Laurel's head for a moment before she begins unrolling the blankets she brought, revealing first aid supplies and a package of saltine crackers.

Without warning, she yanks back my comforter. I jolt, eyes widening at the realization that I'm clothed in someone's oversize T-shirt and a pair of white tube socks. The woman exposes my bare legs, then runs a warm cloth up the front, dipping between them and then holding them up to get underneath.

I cast a nervous glance toward Alistair, aware that he's seen me in similar states of undress—even more so on the night we met—but somehow, I'm more aware of it now. Maybe because the other times, I had a semblance of control over the circumstances, and right now, I feel as powerless as ever.

Taking a sip from the cup the doctor gave me, I move my tongue around in my mouth, wincing at the acrid taste. “You know,” I say after a moment while the girl cleans me, “I usually try to learn a girl's name before she gets between my legs.”

Alistair's scoff is loud and pointed.

“Elena,” she offers, grinning wide. “And just so you know, now, he's imagining us together.”

Heat fills my cheeks because now, *I'm* imagining it.

Her hands are a stark contrast to Alistair's, soft and gentle, where his are usually callous and... well, not gentle. Every time he touches me, there's this

sense of urgency, like he's afraid it might be the last time he gets to.

Frankly, the last time should've been the first time, but mistakes are often made when good dick is involved.

And fingers.

And tongues.

“Stop flirting with my assistant, please.”

Rolling her eyes, Elena brings another cloth up to my face, smoothing it over my forehead and down the sides. My fists grip the sheets tight as she passes over my brow bone, and she gives me an apologetic smile.

When she speaks again, it's over her shoulder. “Why should I listen to you when you didn't listen to me about not bothering her?”

“Because she's *mine*,” he snaps, fingers tightening on the paper.

My stomach somersaults, and I press a palm over it to make it stop.

“And because you're fucking married.”

She waves that off, like it's only a minor detail. “Semantics.”

Clearing my throat, I let my gaze volley between the two of them for a moment. “Can anyone tell me what happened?” I ask finally, the words flaying my throat open as they wrench out of it. “Or where I am? What... the last thing I remember is...”

My voice fades, the end of the sentence getting lost as my eyes find Alistair's. The unspoken reality of what I witnessed at his house drifts between us like an electric current, daring one of us to reach out and grab it.

“We can talk about that later,” Elena tells me, reaching to untangle my feet from the blankets. “First, you need to shower and eat something because you've not had anything but IV fluids in over twenty-four hour.”

“But—”

Alistair cuts me off. “I'll help her.”

A nervous laugh bubbles past my lips. “I don't think so.”

“What, *m'eudail*? Scared you won't be able to keep your hands off me?”

That cocky smirk plays at one side of his mouth, and I wish he were

closer, so I could smack it off.

“Mmm, yes, but only because I’m not sure if I’ll be able to refrain from choking you.”

His eyes sparkle, bright blue against the cerulean sky behind him. “Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

Elena smothers a look of surprise in a cough, and she pushes to her feet. “Okay, well... I’m gonna go find Kallum. You two try not to kill each other, and *you*,” she says, pointing at me, “let me know if you need anything. Food, clothes, a woman’s touch...”

She winks with that last part, and Alistair shoves the newspaper to the ground, yanking off his glasses.

Laughing, she darts to the door, disappearing through it before I can beg her to stay.

To not leave me in the room with a murderer.

As Alistair comes closer, Laurel growls, baring his teeth.

“Call off your mutt, all right?”

I stroke the pup’s head, smoothing my thumb under his cheek. “Don’t call him that.”

He stops a foot away from the bed. Hooks his thumbs in his pants pockets.

Closing my eyes, I wrap my forearms around Laurel and pull him to my chest. Tears prick behind my lids, and I press my nose into the dog’s fur, dread and regret swimming through my bloodstream.

A hard knot forms in my throat as I accept my fate as the reason Alistair wanted us alone.

My breath hitches as the floor creaks, his presence looming closer. “Do it fast.”

Silence.

Then, “What?”

Drawing in a shaky breath, I nod my head. “Kill me quickly, please. You

can make it hurt. I don't care. Just don't drag it out."

"Jesus, what..." Seconds later, the bed dips with his weight, and I flinch when I feel his fingers grip my chin. "What happened to you in that car?"

"Car?" My eyes spring open, searching his. "What car?"

"Marshall's Mustang? The two of you were in it when it crashed into a tree, and then it pitched over a bloody cliff." He waits, as if trying to gauge recognition in me, then blinks hard. "You... do you not remember?"

I think back to the last memory I have, but the only thing that comes up is the night at my hotel, after I ran from his house. The torment he caused me by fucking around outside, calling the room phone, and setting off the fire alarm.

Past that, there's nothing. I know that time has inched forward, but instead of visual manifestations of what occurred during it, my memory is a solid black glob of nothingness.

Blowing out a long breath, Alistair just stares at me for several minutes. It almost feels like hours even, and my body grows weary in the meantime.

As if sensing this, he sits back, pushing the rest of the covers off me. "Let's... get you cleaned up."

He helps me into a sitting position, but I shrug out of his hold, ignoring the searing pain that racks my body as I do so. "I can do it myself."

Blatantly ignoring my proclamation, he gently pushes Laurel off my chest, then he not so gently shoves his arms under my neck and knees, scooping me up into the air and carrying me to the shower.



“MEMORY LOSS IS FAIRLY common with head injuries.”

Cora’s back muscles ripple as she balls up a washcloth, squeezing it over her shoulder. I watch in the mirror as the droplets rain down over her skin, gliding like a smooth caress over her bruises.

This is the first I’ve gotten to explore her from this angle, and I find it interesting that she has no ink on her backside other than the floral Grim Reaper piece on the outside of her thigh, which stretches up and onto one arse cheek.

“I’ve checked you out of your room at Hotel Ledo. We’ll arrange to fetch your things when you’ve recovered more.”

Her shoulders tense. “Where am I supposed to stay?”

“You’ll recuperate here, where I can keep an eye on you.”

Leaning against the porcelain tub, she casts a quick glance around the master bath; the separate shower has a rainfall feature, but she was too weak to stand and refused when I offered to join and hold her up. Behind me is the double vanity with white-and-azurite granite countertops and bucket sinks.

A house of luxury that I’ve barely utilized since its construction. In fact, Cora’s the first to even use the bathtub at all.

“And... where is *here* exactly?” She looks at me over her shoulder. “Are we at the mayor’s house?”

“No. The South House is an old family home on the southernmost point of the island.”

I’ve had enough issues, ensuring the officer I shot point-blank the other day was taken care of and retracting information from premature press releases on the entire situation. Bringing her to government property simply wasn’t an option.

“You’ll be safe here,” I add, pausing to see if the implicit warning jars her memory at all.

“Safe from what?”

There’s an edge of unease to her voice, as if she thinks the thing posing the greatest threat to her is me.

But that, she could never be safe from.

“Just *safe*.”

“Okay...” Dropping the cloth into the tub, she turns slowly, wrapping her arms around her knees.

The swelling in her cheek has gone down significantly since I found her yesterday, though the bruising hasn’t quite lessened around her eye.

My throat burns as my eyes move over her face, its delicate shape marred by trauma. I know I should be drilling her about what happened with Marshall, but she insists she can’t remember anything past the night she bore witness to my cruelty.

“So.” She rests her chin on her knees, avoiding eye contact. “What, uh... what exactly happened the other night?”

“Police are still re-creating the scene of the accident. We should know specifics soon.”

“You said I was with Marshall? Your cop friend, right?”

Bristling at the sound of his name on her tongue, I nod. “He’s a private investigator, but yes. He’s an old friend.”

“More than?”

Pushing off the sinks, I take a step toward her. “Are you asking about my dating history?”

“I’m asking if you were or are romantically involved with Marshall.”

“Romantically? No, can’t say that’s ever been the case. Kade doesn’t do relationships, and I...” Rolling up my sleeves and cuffing them mid-forearm, I trail off, walking over and reaching into the tub. With both hands, I wring the rag out, probably harsher than necessary.

“You what?”

My chin lifts. “You’re awfully curious about my dating preferences for someone who says she wants nothing to do with me half the time.”

“I want nothing to do with you a hundred percent of the time,” Cora says, though she’s glued to my every movement. She lays her cheek on her arm, sighing. “Your dick notwithstanding.”

“Ah, yes. The old *no strings attached* caveat. At least you’re honest about that, I suppose.” Motioning for her to sit up, I lean my thigh on the lip of the tub and reach for her. “A lot of people would kill to be in your position, you know.”

Kill is likely the wrong word to use; as if reliving the events at the mansion, she stiffens slightly, toes curling underneath the water.

She watches, a blank expression on her face, and when I gently palm the back of her head with my free hand, she flinches.

I stop breathing.

“Sorry,” she says softly, then frowns. “Actually, no, I’m not.”

“You’re not.”

Her bottom lip trembles, and she catches the plump pink flesh between her teeth. “I haven’t done anything to be sorry for. *You*, on the other hand...”

Bringing the cloth up to her chin, I wipe slowly, careful not to put too much pressure. “What would you like me to apologize for?”

“Take your pick,” she rasps, eyes widening as I move the cloth down her neck, cleaning away invisible debris. Between her and Elena, there really isn’t much of anything left to scrub away.

I just want to touch her.

“Okay.” My thumb brushes her pulse, and I revel in the way it jumps beneath my touch. “I apologize.”

“For?”

“Take your pick.”

Scoffing, she tries to pull away, but I slide my hand back up, keeping her chin in place.

“I love how we just constantly talk in circles.”

Spreading my hand so my fingers stretch out along her jaw, I brush the tip of my thumb over her mouth. Slowly imprinting the feel of her damp skin against the ridges of my fingerprint.

Her throat bobs, pulse fluttering at its base as those golden eyes darken.

“There aren’t enough sorries to make up for my regrets when it comes to you,” I say around my tongue, which feels enlarged and sticks incessantly to the roof of my mouth. “In another life, I would’ve gone about all of this so differently.”

One corner of her mouth tugs down, and I smooth the crease away.

“I’d have courted you properly. Been a complete gentleman and taken you out for dinner, maybe dancing. I’d have learned your name, your birthday, the fact that you have a *brother*.” She goes to open her mouth, but I press my thumb over it, stopping her. “Shh, little thief. It’s okay. You have

your secrets, and I have mine.”

Something sinister weaves through my insides, blanketing my heart like the sun.

I’ll ask about him later.

“I’m sorry I didn’t haul you out of the gala myself. I’d have much rather taken you in the back seat of my Lexus with that little pink dress pushed up over your hips, so I could fuck you bare against the leather.” My dick kicks behind my zipper, and I shift on the edge of the tub, seeking relief. “You’d whisper about how depraved and wrong it was, but your juicy cunt wouldn’t have been able to stop herself from squeezing the cum right out of me.”

Cora’s breasts rise and fall rapidly with each of my words. Like a magnet, I can sense her being drawn in, but our opposite ends still insist on repelling.

Still, I find myself leaning in, holding her steady as my lips brush hers. The touch is featherlight, barely even there, but I feel the electricity of it in my soul like a lightning strike.

“We shouldn’t,” she manages, the sound so soft that I almost miss it.

Inhaling deeply, I realize she somehow smells like chlorine and oranges, like the scent is ingrained into her being. I want it in mine too. Want it to be the first thing I notice when I wake in the morning and my last conscious observation before sleep.

Twisting my fingers lightly in her hair, I move a little closer. “There’s no future tense about it, *m’eudail*. We already *are*.”



HE DOESN'T KISS ME, for which I'm grateful.

I've never much liked kissing. It's weirdly intimate, and I prefer to get down to brass tacks when it comes to sex.

Fucking someone you disagree and can't be with is one thing.

Kissing them is crossing a line.

Still, I can't deny he leaves me wanting, the ghosting of his mouth against mine sparking a fire deep in my belly that I'm in no shape to put out. But then he pulls away, eyes gleaming, as if he's aware of the physical effect he has on me, and hauls me out of the bathtub.

My cheeks burn as he dresses me in a large white T-shirt and another pair of tube socks, and then he shuffles me back to the bed.

Even though he's seen me naked and had his head between my thighs, allowing him to dress me feels entirely more vulnerable than the sex-related undress. It's a kindness I wouldn't think him capable of, especially since the familiar, fresh detergent smell sticks to the cotton fabric, making me think this is *his* shirt.

A blush crawls up my chest and throat, and as he yanks the shirt over my head, I'm positive he can tell. For now though, he doesn't mention it or make any innuendos, and I'm stuck in limbo between gratitude and disappointment.

Laurel jumps up, panting with excitement as I crawl back under the covers. "So your family's house?"

He looks out the window, nodding. "My grandfather bought it when he first came to the States from Scotland. Passed it on to his only child—my mother—though she never got much use out of it before she signed it over to me."

"How come?"

"She's a travel photographer for different nature magazines, so her work's taken her around the world. The two of us were practically nomads until I was eighteen and went off to college."

Kicking my feet out on the mattress, I consider this bit of information. "Why aren't we staying at the mayor's mansion? Wouldn't that make more sense and be less suspicious for your assistant to be seen there?"

"You won't be seen here." Walking over to the dresser, he grabs his suit jacket from the top and shrugs into it.

"That sounds ominous."

As he buttons the coat, he looks at me, blue eyes completely devoid of the heat they possessed just moments ago. Something cold and bitter settles in my chest, and I sit back against the metal headboard, unease creeping in along with the broken tail end of a memory.

Marshall's angry face assaults my brain, a mirage appearing suddenly, making my neck break out in hives.

“If I don’t kill you, he will.”

Clutching the bedsheets with shaky fingers, I pull them up under my breasts, clearing my throat. Fear scratches at my spine, desperate to sink its claws in my soul, but I shake it off because in the next breath, I see Lucian’s smiling face.

Determination wins out over my discomfort, and I decide that I don’t care if Alistair brought me here to finish Marshall’s job. I don’t even care about the *why*, although presumably, it’s because having a loose end who is also a potential loose cannon is just bad sense.

All I know is, I’m not going to give him the chance.

Not before I find out what happened to my brother.

Seeming to sense a shift, Alistair moves closer, narrowing his eyes at me.

“What just happened?” he asks, jabbing his index finger in my direction.

“Nothing.” I lean back, forcing my eyes to close. “I’m just tired.”

He doesn’t respond, and I don’t look at him to see if he believes the half-lie. I just need him out, so I can figure out what I’m going to do next.

“All right.” He relents after what feels like an eternity, and then I hear the unmistakable sound of Oxfords thumping across the floor and the soft creak of hinges as a door opens. “I’ll be back after a while to see how you’re feeling. Try not to tax your brain too much, and for the love of everything bloody holy, don’t do anything stupid.”

The door clicks shut behind him, and my eyes open as I reach for Laurel, making no promises.



I DISCOVER PRETTY QUICKLY that Alistair greatly undersold the magnitude of his family’s house.

A few days pass before the soreness begins working its way from my

body, and I spend the majority of that time sleeping and being bothered by the dark-haired doctor from before.

He doesn't speak, only comes in to check my vitals and ruin my eyesight with his medical flashlight, then leaves a paper cup of Tylenol on the bedside table and exits.

Part of me wonders if he's actually here to finish the job and off me, but then I remember that Alistair takes care of things himself.

I suppose there's no denying he's willing to get his hands dirty.

My thighs clench together as I push open the bedroom door, the memory of just how dirty his hands can get playing on a loop in my mind. If that doctor isn't here to kill me, I'm convinced he's at least playing offense for the mayor and that the Tylenol is really some drug that makes me recall everything I'm trying to repress.

If I wasn't so exhausted physically, I know I'd be sleep-deprived from constantly reliving the crash. A secret I've been keeping to myself, just in case.

Laurel sniffs at the floors, which turns to a white and dark blue stone when we step into the hallway. Glancing left and right, I take in the high-vaulted ceilings with their crown moldings and the gold-foiled wallpaper that seems to stretch on for miles before tapering off at a wide, curved staircase with a wrought iron banister.

Keeping one hand on the wall, I make my way toward the stairs, glancing down over the balcony at the level below; the home seems to open up even more with the stairs leading to a bright, airy foyer and a stained glass door.

A massive crystal chandelier hangs from the middle of the ceiling, each glass fragment casting a glittering array of light against the door. On the floor directly beneath is a beautiful blue grand piano with a clear glass lid and sheets of music scattered across the top of it.

Tugging on the hem of my borrowed T-shirt, I start down the stairs, gripping the railing tight since my body's still reacquainting itself with

movement. I have no idea where Alistair is, but when I get to the bottom of the stairs, he's the farthest thing from my mind anyway.

A woman with shoulder-length, dark red hair stands under one of the arched doorways, holding a metal tea tray in her hands. She blinks at me, then slowly lets her gaze drop, and suddenly, I'm very aware of how little clothing Alistair's given me.

"Oh my." Pressing her mauve-painted lips together, the woman skirts past me, walking into the sunken front room to place her tray on a glass coffee table. Wiping her palms on her light-wash jeans, she comes back, approaching me with a guarded look, like I'm a wild animal.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know anyone was here," she rushes out, reaching toward me but seeming to think better of it at the last second. She touches her fingertips to her lips, searching my face with dark eyes. "Are you okay, darling? You aren't..."

Pausing, her mouth hardens into a thin line, and then she drops her arms to her sides. Silence ensues, and Laurel barks after a minute, begging to be introduced.

I reach down, patting his head, and he leans into me. "He's friendly," I assure her, just in case she doesn't like dogs.

In my experience, people who don't like dogs aren't to be trusted.

So I wait to see what she does; when she cracks a tiny smile, offering him her hand to sniff, I exhale in relief.

Straightening back up, the woman looks at me again. "My son didn't do that to you, did he?"

"Your son?" I blink, realization smacking into me like a freight train. "You're Alistair's mom?"

"The one and only." She extends her hand to me, and I take the tips of her fingers, wincing when she gives me a weird look before withdrawing. "Lorna."

"Cora," I reply, reveling at her smooth, youthful features.

She hardly looks old enough to be *my* mom, much less his.

Reaching out, she pinches a strand of my hair. “Well, that explains the piano and floor. And the wall in his office.”

“The what?” I glance down at the ground, the crystalline polish glittering under my feet.

“My son isn’t a very... colorful person. Well, he wasn’t, but recently he seems quite enamored with the hues of blue.” Pressing her lips together, she drops my hair and claps. My stomach flips, confusion keeping her words at bay. “Anyway, I’ll leave you to it. Like I said, I didn’t know anyone was here. Alistair doesn’t bring people here, usually, and I only stop in to check on housekeeping.”

“He doesn’t bring people here?”

Shaking her head, she walks over to one of the black leather sofas in the front room, grabbing a purse off the cushion and slinging it over her shoulder. “I’ve said too much. Goodbye, dear. Do me a favor and keep this visit between us, hmm? He’ll be angry if he knows I disturbed his guest.”

And with that, she throws open the door, leaving me alone. It slams shut behind her, the sound rattling off the windows on the upper level of the foyer, and I just stand there for a second, wondering what the hell just happened.

Laurel and I blink at each other, and then I shrug. “I don’t know, bud. This island is fucking weird.”

He snorts, presumably in agreement.

We head down the hall together, passing a chef’s kitchen and another sitting room, which widens, morphing into an octagonal-shaped library with built-in shelves and probably thousands of dusty books.

The far wall boasts an array of different hunting rifles and bows, strung up on display like trophies. But there aren’t any of the traditional animal carcasses hanging, which intrigues me.

Perhaps Alistair’s trophies aren’t the kind you can hang up in your home.

Laurel and I stop inside of it, and I tilt my head toward the domed ceiling.

There's a mural painted on the plaster; the Greek gods convening on their mountain, looking down at the mortals they rule. Marble sculptures of each Olympian are mounted above each bookcase, making the library look as though it belongs in a museum.

I'm suddenly too scared to touch anything.

Rolling my eyes at the pretentiousness of it all, I can't help wondering why I'm surprised in the first place. The man based his entire political persona around the arts, so some snobbishness is bound to be built into his character, right?

Frankly, I'd probably have been more shocked if there wasn't a single mythological reference to be found on the premises.

Leaving the room, I go down the hall and through the sliding glass door in the back. It lets out onto a gray stone patio with a firepit with ornately trimmed hedges lining the yard and walkways that seem to lead to country club-esque amenities, like a tennis court and some sort of driving range.

A mechanical digger sits beyond the hedge line, working at the dirt in one section of the yard. Laurel barks at the machine as it beeps, clawing away at the earth. Some men in bright neon vests stand around, chatting as they look over a blueprint on the side of a white pickup truck.

One notices me and breaks off from his group, walking over. "Shit, we didn't disturb you, did we? Mr. Wolfe told us to be out by noon, but we wanted to get this part done, so we could pour concrete first thing in the morning."

I glance out past him at the massive hole in the yard. "What are you building?"

"A pool." Removing his ball cap, he scratches at his receding hairline, shrugging. "I've never known the mayor to step foot in the water, but I guess there's a first time for everything, eh?"

Dread fills my stomach as I stand there, watching them work for a few more minutes. What kind of psychopath doesn't swim or at least lounge in a

pool? *Ever?*

The same kind, I guess, who might build a permanent pool for a girl who can only be temporary in his life.



“WORD ON THE STREET IS,” Ermes Barbieri declares, his words loud and clear as they bounce around the chambers, “you’ve got yourself a new assistant.”

Running a hand along my jaw, I sit back on the wooden bench, casting a quick glance around the room to see if anyone’s paying us attention. Unsurprisingly, the blokes don’t have anything better to do, so a dozen pairs of eyes remain fixed on us, practically pissing themselves as they wait for an answer.

“I was in the market since you had me get rid of the last one.”

Ermes hums, walking to the front of the auditorium to take a seat at the bench reserved for the Elders. Everyone else sits in the wooden benches in the underground addition to Lycia, an Italian restaurant on the coast of the

island.

“Was this one sanctioned before you hired them?”

“She was personally vetted by me and my PI.” My jaw clenches as I work through the lie. Not that I’m a stranger to half-truths where the Elders are concerned, but still. Breathe wrong, and all hell breaks loose.

He shares a look with one of the Lombardis, folding his hands on the desk before him. “The PI who claims your new assistant tried to kill him?”

“The accident is still under investigation, but I have a feeling there’s been a gross misunderstanding here.”

“Yes,” another Elder chimes in, leaning back in his chair. “Murder often is confused for other things after all.”

His sarcasm makes my blood boil, and I toy with the cord around my throat, reminding myself that slaughtering the backbone of the Barbieri family likely wouldn’t be a good look.

It’d be easy to do, given how much they underestimate my skill.

I’ve always liked it better that way though. If people think you’re just a pawn, they’ll have no way to prepare for the day you flip the game board.

Pushing to my feet, I fix the button on my suit jacket. “Was there a reason you called this meeting today, gentlemen, or do you just enjoy wasting my time?”

Someone mutters something in Italian, and Ermes pulls out a folder, sliding it across the desk.

I blink down at him. “Am I supposed to be able to see that from here?”

Rolling his eyes, he makes a hand gesture above his head, and then a projector flickers on, casting a bright light against the backdrop of the room. The air escapes my lungs in a single breath as a photograph comes into view—me in my office at City Hall, hunched over Cora’s small frame, my hand disappearing up her soaked skirt. Her blue hair falls forward, shielding her face from the camera at this angle, but there’s no denying what’s going on.

My eyes pinch shut, irritation worming through my gut.

“Since when are you watching my office?”

Salvatore “The Thumb” Parisi stands up from his seat, walking toward the center of the room, as if gearing up for a big speech. “Since we were told you’ve been under investigation by Delos County police officers and we had to make sure you weren’t flippin’ sides. Imagine our surprise when we got this little treat instead.”

My teeth grind together. “I’ve got Delos under control.”

“Ah, yes. That infamous Wolfe control.” Salvatore pauses, cocking his head to one side, pulling at the collar of his black T-shirt. “Worked out so well for your father, didn’t it?”

Irritation gives way to flat anger, and I’m mere seconds away from drawing my Glock and fucking up my entire life.

“The point is...” Ermes continues, and the photograph switches to something else.

Bank statements.

Fucking Hollis.

“We received these transcripts a while ago, but we were willing to allow you to plead your case, as our working relationship greatly predates the transactions recorded here. However, your increased disobedience where elective office is concerned is... troubling, to say the least.”

“With all due respect,” I say, adding a silent *which is none*, “your practices are a bit outdated. I’m not sure you know exactly how things work in politics right now, but power has to be built. Manipulated. Money can buy a lot of things, but loyalties are easily swayed with monetary value because there’s always someone out there who can outbid it. Aplana Island is no different.”

“That’s understandable.” He steepled his fingers together, sitting forward. “And why we’ve been willing to be patient with you. These things take time, and we get that. However, we’re here to make sure you’re looking out for the business’s best interests and keeping distractions to a minimum.”

Another photo displays on the wall—Cora and me at the gala, standing dangerously close as I glare down at the city employee.

Shit.

“The assistant is a nonissue,” I insist, the lie bitter on my tongue because never in my life has there been a *bigger* issue.

I can scarcely think of anything but her—that long, luxurious hair and how it feels like silk between my fingers. Her scent, soft and goddamn intoxicating, which seems to follow me everywhere I go. The curves of her magnificent body and the fact that every day since the weekend, she’s been asleep in *my* bed, as if she belongs there.

I’m certain there’s nowhere she’d rather be less, and the disdain just makes me crave her more. Like some sort of masochist who enjoys getting burned.

“You two seem awfully cozy...” Salvatore grins, crossing his arms over his chest.

“She won’t be a problem.”

Ermes sighs, running a hand over his face. His palm drops to the table, and he shakes his head, like he doesn’t want to believe me, but essentially doesn’t have a choice. Even with this footage, it’s not like they can accuse me of leaking information or slacking on actual job duties.

The only thing they could pin on me now is the embezzled funds, although they seem less concerned about those than they do with Cora.

I glance at the crowd, fire licking at my spine when I realize they’re all still looking at the picture of her.

“All right,” Ermes says after a moment, muttering Italian to the Lombardi at his side. “For your sake, Alistair, I hope that’s true.”



LATER, I stop by the South House as the hospital transport arrives, hauling Marshall from the back of their vehicle. He's in a wheelchair to keep pressure off his busted kneecap, and he gives me a grin when he spots me, gesturing to the Edwardian-era architecture.

"Fancy digs for little ol' me," he jokes, clapping his hand over my arm. The wound on his forehead still has a few stitches in it, and the shape of his nose is all wrong, but other than that, he looks pretty well-recovered.

I think about the woman inside my house and the bruising that's just now beginning to fade to yellow on her face. Part of me wants to end him myself just for allowing her to get hurt, but the other part is torn with relief that he's fine and the need to know what bloody happened that night.

"Don't get used to it. You're just here to heal, and then I'm sending you out on your arse again." I motion for the blonde nurse to push him inside, walking along as they head through the front door.

"Well, I'll try not to get used to it, but damn, Wolfe. The mayor's mansion is subdued compared to this place." Marshall glances around, an odd expression of awe scattered across his face.

His glee is a bit unnerving, given the terse and grumpy personality I've grown accustomed to over the years, but perhaps it's a simple side effect of his painkillers.

"Your room will be on the first floor's south wing, just down the hall from the library." Gesturing toward it, I nod at the nurse, indicating she should take him there.

She unlatches the brakes on his chair, then begins pushing him in that direction.

"Aw, putting me away already?" Marshall calls.

A thick and unsettling sensation pricks along my skin, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. It feels like I'm being watched, and though I want to count that out as paranoia from my meeting with the Elders, when I lift my gaze to the balcony upstairs, my suspicions are confirmed.

Golden eyes lock with mine, though it's impossible to gauge the emotions swirling inside. She stands there for a beat, fingers curled over the banister, and I take a step toward the stairs.

Her fingers slip away, falling to her sides as she inches back.

My feet shift, moving forward again.

As if repelled by my movement, she slides farther away.

A smirk tugs at the corners of my mouth, wicked excitement coursing through my veins. The last few days of watching her sleep were fine but missing that *edge*.

That fire.

The flames of her resistance were dormant while she adjusted to a new reality, but now, they're back in full force, it seems, and my dick hardens at the mere thought.

"Yo!" Marshall says, his voice echoing down the hall. "You gonna join, Wolfe? Annabelle here says she's giving me a bath."

I shake my head, not removing my gaze from the spot Cora stands in, even as she disappears from it completely.

"She's all yours, mate," I reply absently, already starting up the stairs before he can say or plead more.

When I get to the top, Cora's gone, but the air where she stood moments ago is still warm. Shifting, I glance down, noting the slight footprints on the granite floor, visible only under certain angles of the lighting. I follow them slowly, careful not to let my shoes scuff, alerting my prey.

The steps end in front of *my* bedroom, and liquid heat splinters through my chest. I'm certain she took the wrong door, and imagining the terror seizing her body now only heightens my excitement.

Slowly, I turn the doorknob, pushing into the dark room. The breeze from my intrusion washes me in her scent, and I close the door with a quiet click, leaving the lights off.

She's silent and completely still, wherever she is.

The furniture in the room obscures my vision a bit, but I don't mind. Each time I trail my fingers over linens and wood, my anticipation crescendos, the idea of catching her twisting my stomach into violent knots.

Pausing at the foot of the king-size bed, I take a breath and glance around, looking for oblong objects that don't belong. Chlorine and citrus invade my nostrils, and I glide around the mattress, my heart lurching into my throat.

It's never felt quite like this. I've chased, cornered, and captured many times, but the exhilaration clawing its way into my soul was always mostly absent. Hunting is just something I *do*. Something to pass the time.

Now, though, it feels necessary. Like I might wither away if I don't search for her.

My fingers tremble as I turn toward the bed, the sliver of soft, pale flesh barely visible against the white sheets.

But, *fuck*, I'd notice that hair anywhere. Wish it were in my bed far more often.

Extending my arms, I yank the duvet down and slam my palms on either side of her head, trapping her beneath me as she opens her mouth to scream.



COVERING her mouth with one of my hands, I use the other to shirk away the comforter, baring her body to me even though I can't quite see it. Her silhouette is a wet fucking dream, blurred curves and pristine edges, and I shove my knee between her thighs to get closer.

Somehow, closer doesn't quite feel enough though. Pushing her—*my*—T-shirt up over her hips, I skim my fingers along the lace of her panties, relishing the little shiver that racks through her body.

My knee presses into her hard; I can feel her pulse through my trousers, and she squeaks under my hand.

“Frightened, *m'eudail*?” Bending, I run my nose along the expanse of her throat, soaking her in the way I've been dying to for weeks. “Is that why you

ran?”

She tries to shake her head, her chest rising and falling in quick successions.

Chuckling, I slide my thumb beneath the elastic, feeling her abdomen concave, before sweeping up under her shirt, brushing the underside of her tit. My fingers curl around the curve, squeezing, and she squirms beneath me.

“Or do you just like the rush?” I breathe, plucking her nipple with a sharp tug. “Maybe you like running because you know I’ll follow.”

A low grunt comes from her throat as I shift, moving down her body. Releasing her mouth, I hook my fingers in her panties and begin pulling them down, but she bucks up, nearly kneeing me in the jaw.

Narrowing my eyes, I pin her hips to the bed, twisting the fabric so it pulls taut against her skin.

“You brought him here?” she asks, her voice almost inaudible.

“For the time being, yes. I’m still trying to figure out what happened after the gala, but please, Cora, if you’ve remembered something suddenly, don’t hesitate to inform me.” I wait, and she crosses her arms over her chest but remains silent. “He’s here to recover, same as you.”

“Same as me? Why don’t you go suck his dick then?”

“Why, so you can sit up here, imagining it? Maybe slip your hand between your legs and get off to the thought?”

I can almost hear her eyes roll.

“Is that what you do? Think about me with other men and women? If so, there are plenty of stories I can tell—”

Snarling, I scoot back on the bed, yanking her down by the panties so her arse hangs off the mattress. Then I shrug out of my suit jacket and toss it to the floor, rolling up my sleeves a bit.

“You want to know what I look like when I think of you?” Chuckling darkly, I unbuckle my belt, climbing on top of her again. Squeezing my legs together, I trap her hands at her sides, then pull my cock out, jerking slowly

and running my thumb over the silver barbell piercing the tip.

I wish I could see her eyes hooding as she watches, undoubtedly glued to the image before her. A sliver of light spills in from a slit in the curtains, providing a modicum of clarity as I loom over her.

“What I think about?”

Raising my palm, I spit into it, then resume stroking myself. She squirms, trying to break her hands free, but I just squeeze tighter.

“I think about your hot little cunt sucking me dry the night we met. How I watched you steal from your friend’s establishment and you didn’t seem to give a fuck that it was hurting anyone else. All you wanted was the money, and at that moment, I wanted *you*.”

She stays quiet, and I fist harder, closing my eyes as the lewd memories rock my vision.

“I think of how hot you look when you threatened to kill me and how devastating you were when you blackmailed me. Only it’s not really blackmail if I ended up getting what I wanted anyway, is it?”

Pressing my tongue against my cheek, I let out a ragged moan, feeling her breaths brush against my abs, as if she’s sitting up to try to watch. Euphoria barrels up and through me, lighting my nerves on fire, making me tremble.

“Most of all, I think of your tasty snatch and the fact that you stripped down right in that alley way and let me *feast*. Was that not enough for you, little thief? My tongue buried inside you while you drenched my face?”

“Yes,” comes her whisper, broken and needy and completely breathless. “Yes, it was enough, but I want more. Give me *more*, Alistair.” Her voice dips an octave, cool air brushing over my sweaty skin as she coaxes me.

Jesus fucking Christ.

Release hits me like a meteor, sticky warmth spilling over my fist, and I can’t stifle the moan that comes out with it. Peeling back my eyelids, I exhale slowly, opening my hand and rubbing it into the skin around her belly button.

Dropping my palm beside her head, I lean my weight onto one arm,

holding myself up above her. My free hand comes down, smacking against her lace-covered cunt, and she yelps in surprise, arching into the movement.

“Why can’t you just admit you’re jealous?”

“Because I’m *not*.”

Another slap, this one stronger than the previous, numbing my fingertips. Her resounding cry is like a symphony, and I want to feel it between my teeth.

“I am. The thought of you with anyone else makes me want to track down all your previous lovers, string them up like Christmas lights on the balcony outside, and fuck you underneath their corpses.”

“Oh my God.” She drags in a shaky breath, and for a moment, I worry I’ve chased too far. But her resistance doesn’t come, and I sink into her warmth a little more. “I’m not... jealous of Marshall. I just don’t like him.”

“I’ll admit, I’m not his biggest fan at the moment either.”

“Then why...” She trails off, huffing. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. I don’t care. Let me up.”

My hands spread over her hips, digging into the pliant flesh. “No.”

“Alistair.”

Fuck. My name in her mouth feels like a goddamn miracle, and it makes my cock throb painfully.

“I caught you,” I say, switching to my knees just off the bed, pulling her with me. “Don’t I deserve my reward?”

“Didn’t you already get it?” She drags her fingers through my cum on her belly, smoothing it over her irritated flesh, then pushes at mine, trying to dislodge them. “You—we can’t.”

Leaning in, I press my lips to the inside of her calf, moving them higher.

“We *shouldn’t*,” I correct, ghosting over the fleshy bottom half of her inner thigh. “But that’s what makes it fun.”

My tongue flicks out, lapping at the tree inked on her as I continue my ascent, and she winces hard when my teeth graze lace.

She mumbles something, but I don't sit up fast enough to catch it, so I ignore her, tugging the fabric away from her skin. Tangling her fingers in my hair, a scream peals out of her, and she yanks my head back forcefully.

Pain sprouts along my scalp, and I blink, ripping her panties free with a single pull. I sit back, pushing my knee into her core again, and free her of the tattered pieces. She clenches her thighs, attempting to bar me entry, but all it does is fit her cunt more snugly against me.

Her pulse thumps erratically, and I reach down, pushing my thumb against her clit.

"If you want it rough, little thief, all you have to do is ask." Shifting my weight, I grind more firmly into her, leaning in and wrapping my fingers around her throat so I can feel each intake of breath vibrating through her.

Encircling my wrist with her hand, she cants her hips upward, increasing the pressure of my knee. The subtle shift is barely enough for me to notice, except for the changing angle of her pulse, beating harshly like it's trying to break free.

"I don't want it rough," she says, gliding her hand up, tracing one of the veins in my forearm with a fingertip. Her unprovoked touch sends an array of goose bumps across my skin, making my dick bulge obscenely through my trousers. "I want it hot. Desperate, frenzied, and unrestrained."

Continuing her exploration, she swoops up over my chest, still just the whisper of a touch. Down my pecs, she snaps the strap of my suspenders, and I flinch, my entire body tight and taut as I wait.

Patently. Good things come to those with self-control.

She moves along my sternum, pausing at my belt buckle before palming the length of my dick. "You want your reward? I want it worth my while, *Your Honor.*"

Covering her hand with mine, I squeeze until my vision blurs, then release her and pull away, tucking myself back in. Dropping onto the floor, I hook my hands behind her legs, sliding her toward me so my lips are

perfectly lined up with her lower lips.

She tenses again. “I didn’t think you’d use your mouth.”

“Well, I’d use my cock, but I think I’d rather die than not taste you again right this bloody second.”

A nervous laugh comes from her. “Funny you should mention blood...”

My eyebrows arch, surprise rolling through me for a split second. Inhaling again though, I get a small whiff of the soft scent of iron.

Sliding my hands underneath her, I spread her arse with my palms, bringing her sodden folds right in front of my nose. Gently, I tug on the string of her tampon, pulling it out and throwing it into a trash bin by the bed.

Flattening my tongue against her asshole, I swoop up with a wet, languid stroke, swirling around her clit. “It would take more than a little blood to keep me from feasting on you tonight. In fact, I’m not sure I could be stopped at all. I’ve been patient, but that ends now.”

“Oh *fuck*,” she cries out, thrashing as I seal my mouth to her sopping flesh, sucking and licking, quickly losing myself in paradise.

The undulation of her hips sends a wave of wickedness through me, because even though moments ago she talked a big game, it’s clear how desperate and needy she is. She seems incapable of forming coherent thoughts now, and the soft whimpers rattling from her chest rake down my spine, coating me in want.

“Filthy brat, always running that fucking mouth. I should punish you and leave now before you’ve finished.” I press a kiss to her silken flesh, then dive back in for more. “But I don’t want to deny myself the little sounds you make when your cunt floods my face, so I won’t.”

For a moment, the two of us work in tandem; she gasps for air, and I pull back to blow gently, doing my best to give it to her.

Not the air she needs, not oxygen, but the kind she *craves*.

A metallic tang combines with her arousal, coating my tongue with a perfect mixture of flavors I don’t think God himself could conjure up.

And I realize at this moment why I could never connect with religion in my life—because it wasn't *this*.

Cora Astor and her goddamn cunt.

“You want to come, little thief? Earn it then. Fuck my face like the desperate slut you are. I want your cum running down my chin and staining the bedsheets.”

“Oh God, oh God, oh God,” she chants, grasping at the headboard, at my hair, at anything she can hold on to while her body convulses and she obeys for once, chasing the high of my mouth.

“God doesn't get on his knees to worship,” I mutter against her, taking her clit between my teeth. “You're in bed with the devil, *m'eudail*, and I don't think he intends on letting you go.”

A strangled sounds tears from her throat as I slip two fingers inside her, the half-growl so loud that it almost seems painful. My ears crackle as it grates through the air, and her hips lift, grinding into my face as she comes.

Violently. Poetically.

I'm convinced I've witnessed an angel falling from the heavens as she crashes, moaning and clamping down around me.

As the orgasm wanes, she sags into the mattress. I withdraw my fingers and smooth my hands up her thighs, rubbing circles on her hips as she struggles to regulate her breathing.

After several silent minutes, she disentangles herself from me, pushing up the bed. I join her, turning onto my side, and brush a few strands of hair from her face.

“You're so beautiful,” I murmur even though I still can't fully see her. I can imagine the pink flush of her cheeks and the sweat on her scalp, the smile playing at her lips, even as she represses it.

“Shut up.” She laughs, pushing me away as she rolls over.

I smooth my hand over the curve of her hip, trying to memorize the topography of her body in this stolen moment. No part of me wishes to get up

because I'm afraid that doing so will break the little spell cast in this room and we'll go back to the unrequited dynamic of the real world.

And while I'm happy with whatever scraps she's willing to give me, I'm not quite ready to face everything else at the moment.

Eventually, I get off the bed and pad into the bathroom in her room across the hall.

"Alistair?" I hear, and when I come back with minty breath, I leave the door open and the light in the hall on. She's sitting up with the duvet clutched to her chest, my T-shirt discarded completely.

Her hair sticks out at odd angles, and as I hand her a glass of water and Tylenol, I comb it down with my fingers.

She takes the glass and pills, popping them into her mouth before sipping the water. "Aren't... well, is that all?"

My brows shoot into my hairline, and I slide my belt out from my trousers, tossing it onto the floor along with my shoes. "Greedy little thief, aren't we?"

Putting her glass on the nightstand, she shrugs, and I hold out a fresh tampon and warm washcloth. She doesn't shy away as she cleans herself and inserts the applicator, then grabs the folded boxer briefs on my nightstand, putting them on.

"You're the one who talked all that shit about making me a cream puff."

As I reach to unbutton my shirt, I choke on my saliva. "A *cream puff*? Jesus, Cora."

"What?"

"Nothing." I chuckle, discarding my shirt and pulling back the covers to slide in beside her. "I just don't think I'm going to be able to have brunch with my mum tomorrow, is all. She loves cream-filled pastries."

"Well, at least we know where you get it from."

Narrowing my eyes, I reach up and yank her down, fitting her against my side. She struggles at first, but when it becomes clear I'm not releasing her,

she exhales, resting her head on my shoulder.

“If Marshall bothers you that much, I’ll find another place for him to stay.”

I feel her look up at me. “Why would you do that? He’s your friend.”

Pressing my lips together, I don’t reply because what am I supposed to tell her? That I’m completely enamored by her existence and there probably aren’t any lengths I wouldn’t go to, to make sure she’s comfortable?

Right, I’m sure that wouldn’t terrify her.

So I don’t say anything at all, keeping the truth close to my heart, where she can’t see it. Can’t expose me and use it against me.

We lie like that for a long time until, finally, she breaks the silence with a whisper.

“You’re building a pool.”

I nod, threading my fingers through her hair.

“Why?”

Closing my eyes, I consider not answering this question either.

Swimming has never appealed to me. The water leaves you vulnerable, which is why I’ve always simply avoided it.

My lips are dry when they open again. “Because you said you like to swim.”



SUNSHINE BLEEDS into the backs of my eyelids, and I wince, burying my head beneath the pillows.

“Rise and grind, Cordelia!”

Groaning at the sound of Elena’s voice, I pull the covers up to my chin. “No. Go away.”

“You know, I wasn’t much of a morning person either until I had kids.” She pauses, and it sounds like she’s rifling through dresser drawers. “My girls don’t let me sleep in ever though. And I love them, but they have a dad, right? They could wake him up at six in the morning instead, but no, it’s always *Mama this* and *Mama that*. Even though Kallum was the one who wanted them in the first place.”

Exasperated, I push up, darting a glare in her direction. “Oh my fucking God. Please stop talking.”

A brunette with sun-kissed skin and a baby-pink corset crouches beside Elena, snickering into one hand and petting Laurel with the other.

Rolling her eyes, Elena throws my combat boots on the bed along with a pair of black leggings and my Korn hoodie. “The faster you get up, the less time I have to ramble.”

Shoving back the covers, I kick out of my underwear, glancing at the new girl as I bend over. She averts her green eyes, and I smirk. “Hell of an introduction. I’m Cora.”

“Oh, I know.” The girl smiles but doesn’t look back yet.

“Lenny’s dating Alistair’s brother,” Elena says, and I turn around, shaking my head as I shimmy into the leggings.

How am I supposed to keep all these names straight?

Then again, it’s not like I’m staying here forever, so why do I need to?

Laurel hops into bed, taking my spot, and I sigh. “Why are you dragging me out, by the way? I was in a car accident recently, you know. I should be resting.”

“Yes, yes, we’ve all had a rough couple of weeks. That’s the way of the island, I’m afraid.”

“Mayor Wolfe asked us to take you shopping,” Lenny offers, finally swinging her gaze back to me as I turn around.

I snort. “Yeah, okay. Maybe later, we can buy a yacht and spend the weekend on the water.”

“Actually, my brother owns a boat if you’re interested in sailing?” Lenny says.

Reaching for the hoodie on the bed, I scan the two girls from head to toe, cataloging Elena’s dark sundress and the massive diamond on her left ring finger, then Lenny and her pink designer clutch with matching sandals.

Comparatively, I’m the black sheep. As a rule of thumb, I’ve never had

many girlfriends—or, well, friends in general. People have always seemed to be more trouble than they're worth, and I stopped getting off on disappointment a long time ago.

These two seem nice enough, but I'm still not sure I should go. It's clear they're the kind of people who garner attention wherever they are, and I don't particularly want anyone knowing I'm here.

I'm surprised Violet's been able to keep it a secret as is.

Plus, I'd be lying if I said being in the presence of money didn't make me uncomfortable, simply because I've never had it. We were lower middle class at best, growing up, and my mother skimped and saved every chance she got, complaining about evil corporations keeping poor people poor.

Even when Lucian went off and started making decent money from his stunt gigs, indulging in the stuff he sent never felt right.

Going on a shopping spree feels like a violation of my principles... but then again, so does letting a politician tongue-fuck me in his bedroom and then falling asleep beside him.

It's been three days since that happened.

Eat the rich, my ass. More like let them eat you.

Maybe I need to reevaluate my principles in general.

"Fine." I relent after a moment, opening the hoodie and shoving my arms through. "But I don't have any money, so—"

Elena laughs, twirling the end of her ponytail around her index finger as she holds up a black credit card. "Wolfe men are very much into spoiling."

Well, if you can't beat them, join them.

The two of them leave the room ahead of me, and I squeeze into Lucian's hoodie, breathing deep as I pull it down over my stomach. A hollowness settles in my chest as I breathe in fresh cotton instead of something familiar.

Instead of my brother.

Staring at myself in the dresser mirror, a thick wave of sadness settles onto my shoulders, like concrete blocks being tied around my neck.

Tears prick my eyes, and I pull the sleeves over my fists, pressing them to my mouth, realizing that the only thing I had that still smelled like him is gone.



“I JUST FIND it a bit suspect that, all of a sudden, neither of you remembers what happened in the car the night of the accident.”

A tuft of dark hair sweeps into Marshall’s brow as he pulls himself into a sit-up, and he drapes his arms over his knees. A little over two weeks have passed since I brought him to the South House, and he’s started up physical therapy while he waits for an official work release from his doctor.

Which means I’m seeing more of him than ever since the home gym here is my preferred place to exercise.

Far more peaceful than the gaudy public spaces on the island, typically filled by college students on vacation, just looking to film content for their social media presence.

At least, it used to be more peaceful. Having Marshall around, the house feels more crowded than ever.

“To be fair, my memory of that night was pretty scattered to begin with,” he says, knocking his fist against the side of his head.

Setting the dumbbell on the ground, I cock my head to the side, studying him. He just grins, cocky as ever, but I swear I can sense a change in him. I’m just not sure exactly what it is or what caused it.

“It wasn’t scattered enough to accuse Cora of trying to kill you,” I point out, watching him like a hawk. For what, I don’t quite know, but I can’t look away.

“Oh, is it Cora now?” He scoffs, dropping my gaze with a shake of his head. “Fucking ridiculous, man. You stick up for her, a practical stranger you met barely *two months* ago, over someone you’ve known since college?”

“She was dehydrated and passed out, and they were *arresting* her.”

“So what? The police force is full of shitty officers—we already knew that. Clearly, you took care of it because God forbid anyone hurt one of your precious toys.”

Sighing, he smacks his knee, reaching for his chair off to the side. He hauls himself up into it, settling in and spinning away from me.

I walk over, pushing a hand through my hair as I try to reconcile whatever the hell’s happened to my formerly very stoic PI. “What’s going on, Kade? Why are you... what’s your problem?”

“*She* is my fucking problem. Ever since she came into your life, she’s been the only thing you give a shit about, and it’s just disgusting. You have bigger and more important things to be worrying over, like an active investigation into your corruption and an ex trying to frame you for a massive crime, yet for you, it’s all blue skies and gumdrops.”

My hand whips out, gripping the collar of his sweatshirt, twisting it tight against his throat. His face darkens, blood rushing to his cheeks as he begins losing oxygen. “I told you to watch what you say about her.”

“See? When have you ever cared how I talked about someone?” he chokes out, nodding his chin at my shirt. “Emphasis on the *blue* skies, by the way.”

Glancing down at the navy fabric, I release him with a shove, and he almost topples over in his chair. “Are you jealous or something?”

“No,” he says flatly. “I’m just looking out for you, Wolfe. That’s what you’ve always paid me to do.”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I stare down at him as he massages his knee, apprehension kicking around my gut. Something isn’t right, and the fact that I can’t pinpoint the issue is entirely unsettling to me.

After a moment though, I shake it off, choosing for now to ignore the feeling until there’s something concrete to base it in. No sense in creating problems unless I’m capable of also coming up with the solution anyway.

“All right.” Clapping my hand on his shoulder, I jerk my chin toward the door. “Well, we’ve got several hours’ worth of security tapes, satellite locations, and bank information to sift through, if you’re up for it.”

“Hell yeah.” He grins, wrapping an Ace bandage around himself, then cracking his knuckles. “Finally, something to occupy me in this hellhole.”

As he wheels himself out of the gym, I stand there, staring at the spot he just left, wondering why he wrapped his good knee.



WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I did all my best thinking in the pool at school.

I'd swipe an elevator key from the administration office and head to the top floor after hours and just swim laps until my brain functioned properly.

I discovered that a breaststroke could help me work through tough math problems and that the butterfly was good for when I needed a boost of serotonin on days I couldn't protect Lucian from himself.

The water was my sanctuary, and I suppose, in a way, I have my father to thank for instilling the love within me.

Not that I ever *would* thank him, but still. If I'd taken after my mother, I'd probably like placing my problems on other people's shoulders and expecting them to help solve them.

If I'd followed in Lucian's footsteps... well, we know how that would have gone.

When the pool at Alistair's house was first finished, I promised myself I wouldn't use it, no matter how badly my bones ached for the fluidity of the water. Every day, I'd wake up and look out my window at the backyard, and the blue quartz finish would practically call out my name.

The first day, I just put my feet in it. That wouldn't be accepting anything, and it'd satisfy my desire to touch chlorinated water.

The next day, I waded in on the shallow end up to my thighs. After all, my shopping spree with Elena and Lenny had ended with me getting three new suits, and what was the point of buying them if I didn't use them?

Day three, I dived right in. Headfirst, like a reeled-in trout returning to the sea.

I'm flipping through the pages of Luce's missing person folder between laps when Alistair arrives at the house one day. Laurel barks, bounding over to greet him; he hesitates at first, not entirely used to the man just yet, but when Alistair crouches and holds his hand out, Laurel pushes his snout into it, scooting closer to his legs.

Stroking behind his ears, Alistair smirks at me. "One down, one to go."

I roll my eyes, shutting the folder and pushing off the wall. He keeps his icy eyes on me, stuffing his hands into his pants pockets as he stands, walking closer. He's got his reading glasses on, and paired with the black slacks and matching leather suspenders, the sheer beauty of the man makes my stomach cramp.

Flipping onto my back, I sever the connection, willing myself to get it together.

"I'm beginning to think you might be part fish," he rasps, and I remember too late that I'm in a string bikini with cherries printed on it, which is bound to give him the wrong idea.

Or the right one, depending on my mood.

Several days have passed since he even made a move on me, and though I know I shouldn't be entertaining it, I kind of miss the attention.

There's something wildly intoxicating about bringing a powerful, dangerous man to his knees. It makes you *want*, even when you know he's bad for you.

Maybe especially then.

Desserts tend to be more delicious when you're not supposed to have them.

Swirling my hands in the water to keep myself afloat, I reply, "Violet and I used to pretend to be mermaids when we were younger."

He's met my cousin just twice—once, she said, when he came to Hotel Ledo looking for me and again when we went to move my stuff from the room. I don't think she's been in Aplana much since then, though I'm having a hard time understanding why.

Part of me feels abandoned in my time of need, but I have more important things to fret over anyway. It's not like I expected her to stick around forever, but still.

"Somehow, I can't imagine you watching Disney, even as a child."

Kicking my feet down beneath the surface of the water, I float upright, cocking my eyebrows. He's already removed most of his clothing, leaving a pair of black boxers around his waist and his necklace, before using the stairs to enter the pool.

Laurel whines when he's in up to his knees, but he doesn't dare come any closer.

I swim backward, submerging myself farther into the deep end. "I thought you didn't swim."

"Why would you think that?"

"The guy who installed the pool said—"

Surprise flashes across his face, and he smirks. "Have you been asking about me, little thief?"

“No. He offered the information free of charge. And here I was, hoping this would be my alone time.”

“Well, you had the pool to yourself all day. Now, I’m here, and I want to join you.”

As he lifts his arms above his head, the muscles in them bulge and dance beneath his tan skin, rippling like waves before he bends, disappearing beneath the pool’s surface. I watch his silhouette cut through the water, though his strokes aren’t as languid and lithe as I was expecting.

Almost like he isn’t used to the motions.

With each stroke of his arms and kick of his legs, I inch backward, putting distance between us. My ass bumps concrete, and as he emerges in front of me, causing a spray of water to crash against my skin, I realize I’m trapped.

“Running already?” he murmurs, bracing his palms on either side of me on the edge of the pool.

His breathing is labored, and I have to believe it’s because he’s out of practice more than anything else.

My old nose ring on his necklace catches my eye, and I reach up, touching the metal with my finger. “You *don’t* swim.”

“No, I don’t,” he agrees, wrapping his hand around mine, clutching it to the base of his throat. Air catches in my lungs as his hips brush mine, then move forward, pinning me in place, his erection hot, where it presses into my stomach. “I don’t like how vulnerable it leaves you.”

Staring at him, silent, I try not to read too much into the fact that he’s in the water now. With me.

“Which one of you was Ariel when you were younger?”

I shake my head. “We weren’t *Disney* mermaids. I wasn’t anyway.”

“No? What kind were you?”

Drawing my bottom lip between my teeth, I let my gaze dip to his mouth. Arousal heats up my clammy skin, spreading like molasses through my

limbs, and I slowly look back up, meeting his hypnotic gaze.

“The kind that bite.”

His fingers skim up my side, teasing the string of my top before continuing on and hooking beneath my jaw. Tilting my head back, he moves so our bodies mold together, the skin-on-skin contact blazing a fiery path of desire straight to my clit.

Something else stirs too, deep and dark in the pit of my soul, like a murder of crows taking flight all at once.

“Lucky for you, I enjoy a bit of pain,” he replies, and then he’s leaning in, squeezing my chin so I can’t possibly escape.

When his mouth presses gently to mine though, claiming me in a kiss that seems to reach down and manually rip the air from my lungs, I realize how badly I don’t really want to.

And that might be the most dangerous thing about this island after all.



“HOLLIS ALVAREZ WAS last seen on a cruise ship headed for the Caribbean approximately ten and a half months ago.” Jonas sits back in his seat, reviewing the case file in his hand. “No known relatives, no birth certificate, no passport or general paper trail to go by outside of a few pay stubs from Eros Entertainment Industries.”

Taking a puff of a cigar, I nod. “Correct.”

My brother tosses the file onto the coffee table between us, reaching for his glass of whiskey. “How in the bloody hell did you become mixed up with a nutter like this? I thought you were supposed to be the cautious Wolfe.”

“Life was significantly less complicated when I met Hollis.” I rub at a sore spot in my chest—the same one that flares up whenever I reminisce

about our time together. “This was before I was really involved in politics, and before...”

Pausing, I fold my lips together, cutting off the rest of the sentence. Jonas isn’t exactly aware of the full extent of my involvement with the Barbieris, and I’m not sure now is the time to introduce him to reality. Not when it’s clear someone has it out for me, and informing him could put him directly in harm’s way.

“What was the nature of your relationship?” Jonas asks, taking a sip of his drink. “Were you just fucking, friends, MWBs?”

“MWBs?”

He nods, setting his glass down. “Mates with benefits. All the fun of the relationship without any of that serious, boring bullshit.”

I suck on the end of my Cuban. “What a beautiful sentiment, coming from a man in love.”

“Hey, I love Lenny.” His face softens, and he strokes his beard with the heel of one hand. “Speaking of, are we gonna talk about the elephant in the room?”

One of my brows lifts in question.

“There’s a girl living at the South House. A girl who, a few weeks ago, was just your assistant and now is going on shopping trips and lunch dates with my fiancée.”

“I’m aware of her presence, yes.”

The leather of his jacket creaks as he shifts, leveling me with a look. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

Everything I’m not supposed to.

Like kissing her in the pool even though the soft curve of her lips is all I’ve been able to think about for weeks now.

I’ve tasted between her thighs, but the art of the *kiss* is so much more than that. It’s an experience, where you study your partner and find the little things that make them tick.

It's learning the exact cadence of her breath, hitching low in her throat as I leaned in, and how she seemed to succumb to the inevitability of it all.

How her eyelids fluttered as I came close and the soft brush of her dark lashes against her cheek, the bruising from the accident gone completely now.

How, once I started kissing her, I never wanted to stop.

"We're not talking about Cora. We're talking about Hollis."

"Yes, but one of these paths seems to be a major dead end, brother." Sighing, he sits forward in his chair, glancing over at the fireplace.

Normally, I wouldn't invite him to the mayor's mansion at all, but with the Barbieris breathing down my neck, I've grown a bit desperate.

"We've looked everywhere for this Hollis character, and we're turning up absolutely nothing. The bloke was either bloody good at covering his tracks, or..."

"Or what?"

Rubbing the back of his neck, he gives me a sheepish look. "Or it's not coming from him at all."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning... perhaps someone's framing *him*."



PRESS CONFERENCES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN the bane of my existence, but for some reason, I find them more unbearable than ever before.

Maybe it's the empty seat directly in front of the podium, which Cora should be filling. Since the accident though, I haven't cleared her to return to work, much to her disdain. She's done administrative stuff from the South House, but even that's been limited because of her concussion and then the added threat of being watched.

I'm not unaccustomed to being watched by Ermes and his men; when you deal heavily in arms and drug trafficking, you watch everyone beneath you because anyone has the potential to turn informant.

Even the most loyal of men, like my father.

So I understand on that end where they're coming from. I just don't like them involving Cora, as though she has anything to do with my allegiance.

"Mayor Wolfe," a dark-haired man in the second row starts, holding his recording device under his chin, "now that the gala's over, what do you have planned next for the island's art revitalization project?"

My fingers grip the edge of the metal podium. "I'm unable to comment on direct plans before they've been finalized, but I can assure you, great things are coming."

"Would you consider the gala a success?"

"Have you noticed an uptick in foot traffic downtown?" I nod, plastering a smile on my face. "Pair that with the revenue and charitable donations made, and I'm inclined to say yes."

"Sarah, from *The Aplana Times*." Someone in the back raises their hand. "Can you release a statement regarding the attempted murder allegations against your former assistant?"

A hush sweeps over the press room, blanketing the crowd like snow. Selene from HR, who's been filling in for Cora, cringes, pulling the binder away from her chest and flipping through, like the answer might magically appear inside.

Anger boils in my blood, and I grip the podium until my knuckles blanch. "No comment."

The journalist presses a pen to her mouth, as if considering this. "What about the rumors that you two were romantically involved?"

That almost draws a laugh from me. "If you think there's merit to that, I encourage you to speak with Ms. Astor yourself."

She blinks. "Well, I would, but her presence has been sorely lacking at

City Hall lately. In fact, she's only been spotted a couple of times in public with Elena Anderson and Lenny Primrose, the latter of which we know to be engaged to your brother, Jonas."

My heart skips, apprehension lining my gut like a venomous acid.

"Is there a point you're trying to make, Sarah?"

I can tell my direct use of her name makes her uncomfortable, and it warms my insides a bit where her probing leaves me chilled. Off to the side, someone on my team mutters something about the questions getting too personal, and while, normally, I'd agree, I'm interested to see where she's going with this.

Waving off my admins, I fold my hands on the podium and stare down at the journalist.

Waiting.

For an accusation or the resurgence of conversation around my brother's openly criminal life. Or maybe the insinuation that Cora's appearance makes her incapable of an administrative position even though she's the best one I've had in a long time.

Something seems to be on the tip of her tongue, but after a moment, she just shakes her head, perhaps thinking better of it.

Which is just as well.

Heads roll when you ask too many questions.

As she settles back into her seat, formally withdrawing her interrogatory request, I exhale and sweep my gaze over the room. My team filters onto the makeshift stage, fielding concerns about upcoming city council meetings and noise ordinances, but something toward a door in the back catches my eye.

A swatch of dark hair and familiar gold eyes flash in the shadows near the exit corridor, and nervous energy palpates heavy in my chest. Excusing myself, I rush off the stage and scramble toward the back, keeping my chin up to see over the bobbing heads of those mingling about.

Just as I reach the doorway, the mirage slips through the glass door, and I

dart in that direction, whipping it open. The parking lot is filled with folks setting up for a farmers' market exhibit with a variety of vendor stations blocking key parts of the immediate area.

Rounding the stairs, I glance from left to right, a knot forming in my throat.

I'm not stupid or hallucinating.

I know it was him.

My *gut* knows.

Yet, somehow, even though I was mere steps behind him, Hollis Alvarez is gone.



I'VE MANAGED to evade Marshall's presence since he's been staying at the house, but he corners me in the pool one day, braking his wheelchair on top of my brother's file folder as I'm reading it.

Unease dances at the edges of my consciousness, and a flash of him threatening to kill me splashes across my vision. The sickening crunch of metal colliding with a tree trunk and angry shouts flood my memory, overwhelming in their intensity as I look up at him.

His eyes were the last thing I saw before the car went over that cliff.

And even though there's no way he could've planned something like that, it feels calculated. As if the universe knew how he'd come to haunt my dreams.

Marshall leers at me, and I move backward in the water, covering my chest in the black bikini with my arms.

“Can I help you?”

“You can leave,” he says, lifting one shoulder. His nose was reset from where the bridge dislocated during the accident, leaving the cartilage slightly crooked and adding to his maniacal appearance. He hasn’t cut his hair or shaved since he’s been staying here, and the Hawaiian shirts he’s taken to wearing are not doing him any favors.

I narrow my eyes at him. “I was here first.”

“No,” he corrects, “*I* was. I’m just not a loser anarchist who managed to hypnotize Alistair with some loose pussy.”

Biting back a laugh, I rest my palms on the surface of the water. “If my pussy is loose, it’s only because your *friend’s* big dick is buried in it every night.” Splashing, I smirk, fluttering my eyelashes at him. “Besides, I’d rather be a slut than a jealous, bitter hag.”

“His dick *is* big, isn’t it? And that piercing? Phew,” Marshall says, almost dreamily. I can’t figure this guy out. “He tell you how many times he enjoyed fucking me with it?”

“Nope. He’s usually too busy coming inside me to talk about irrelevant lovers.” All lies, considering we haven’t actually had sex since the night we met, but still, this asshole doesn’t need to know that. “I’ll give him your regards though. Make sure he knows how much you miss him.”

I pause, my smirk growing into a full-fledged smile. “I have to say, I don’t think he’ll care though. Alistair’s moved on, buddy. Maybe you should too.”

A harsh frown curves the corners of his mouth. “Cut the shit, little girl. Do you think this is some kind of game?”

“Well, not a fun one.”

He bares his teeth. “Quit acting like you’re an innocent and stay the fuck away from Alistair.”

“Or what?” I swim to the edge of the pool, propping my forearms on the ledge. My heart thumps wildly against my ribs, adrenaline pumping the blood through my veins, and I shield my eyes from the sun with one hand. “You keep making these threats, saying you know stuff about me and that I should stay away from Alistair, but you’ve not provided any evidence to substantiate your claims.”

His glare hardens, and he grips the armrests on his chair, silently fuming.

“I think you’re a lot of talk, Marshall Kade. I don’t think you know *shit*. And you know what else? I don’t make empty threats.”

Pinching my thumb and forefinger together, I place the tips inside my mouth and blow. Seconds later, Laurel comes running from the house with a piece of gold jewelry in his mouth.

Aside from basic commands, the whistle call and response are the only things I’ve been able to teach this dog, and at this moment, I’ve never been more grateful.

Laurel sits on the ground, using his full thirty-six pounds and pit structure to look as intimidating as possible. The knuckle dusters gleam in the sun, the edges carved into arrowheads with extremely sharp points.

Along with the detailed files in Lucian’s folder, these were wrapped in a Ziploc baggie and stapled to the back. I’ve yet to use them, except to intimidate, though right now, I’d like to put them on and beat the smug look off Marshall’s face.

“Those are cute,” he says, almost rolling his eyes.

“Keep underestimating me, Marshall. I’ll finish what I started in your Mustang.”

“What are you two hens clucking about?”

Marshall keeps his eyes locked on mine as Alistair enters the backyard, a pair of blue aviators resting on his nose. Rage bubbles just beneath the surface of his skin, visible in the crimson shade of his face, but Alistair doesn’t seem to notice.

I know he's mulling over my sentence, and I see the moment his gaze darkens and his jaw works, realization settling in that my memory isn't as broken as it initially was.

My brows quirk, and I turn toward Alistair, giving him a wide smile. "Just comparing notes."

"Notes? I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"All good things, I promise."

Crouching down, he slides his glasses up into his black hair, draping one forearm over his knee. The other reaches out, toying with the string of my top, eyes pooling with liquid heat.

I don't miss the way Marshall clenches his fists at Alistair's disregard.

My stomach gurgles with excitement.

"Good things from you?" Alistair says, chuckling. "I don't believe it."

Sliding his hand up, he palms my chin, rubbing his thumb over my mouth like he's trying to smear invisible lipstick. The friction from his fingerprint causes patches of goose bumps to crop up over my skin, and I'm not at all surprised when he notices, blue eyes sparkling with amusement.

"The water's cold."

Alistair nods, sitting back on his heels. His stare bores through to my soul, setting it on fire as he strokes his sharp jaw. "Frigid, I'm sure."

Pushing off his knees with the heels of his hands, he stands upright and turns around to Marshall. "Could I see you for a moment?" He asks the question, but there's an edge to his voice that I've not heard before. It doesn't leave any room for discussion, and even the detective seems to realize that.

Marshall nods, and the two of them head inside. Laurel bounds over as they go, dropping the gold dusters on the ground and presenting his neck for me to pet.

I do, tugging lightly on his collar as I watch the two men disappear inside the house without sparing me another look.

"What do you think, buddy?" I ask Laurel, kicking my feet in the water

behind me. “Do we trust them?”

He whines, and I sigh, spreading my hand on the concrete, resigning myself to my fate—complete distrust in the entire planet.

A chill skates down my spine, and I press my fingers into the cool ground.

The *concrete*.

Chin whipping upward, I stare at the sliding glass door leading into the house, realizing Lucian’s folder went with them.



I KNEW Marshall wouldn't like me asking him to leave.

But the press conference alerted me to the fact that there's still an ongoing investigation into what happened the night of the accident, which means he hasn't dropped his charges.

If the bloke's not willing to let it go, I have no choice but to relocate him until the police give me more insight.

Clutching a beige paper folder to his chest, Marshall lets out an incredulous laugh. "Are you fucking with me, Wolfe?"

"Unfortunately, no."

He grinds his teeth, smacking a fist against the dresser. His belongings are everywhere; clothes are strewn about the room—over the sofa, beneath

the window, and on the floor. Toiletries are discarded haphazardly, cellophane wrappers littering the walkway, and there are Polaroids *everywhere*.

If I didn't know the man to be impeccable about his living space, I wouldn't feel concern rising in my throat. But something about the state of my guest room feels incredibly deliberate, like an attempt to remain on the premises indefinitely.

“Such bullshit, man. I've done nothing short of everything you've asked for the last *decade*.”

I watch his lips move, almost too fast for me to catch the words as they spit from him. “You act as if I'm choosing sides, and I'm not. I have interests to protect. I can't...”

Rubbing his temples with his knuckles, he taps the folder to his chest, shaking his head as I trail off. For a moment, he just sits in the chair like that, eyes glazing over, and then he puts the folder on the dresser, wheeling himself backward.

“You're making a mistake, picking her over me.”

“I'm simply—”

Holding one hand up, he reaches back for the doorknob, twisting it. “Say what you want, Wolfe, but the divide is there. She got exactly what she wanted.”

I run a hand through my hair, tugging roughly at the ends, and start after him. “What are you on about? If you have something to say, stop being so goddamn vague and spit it out.”

“Stop being a fucking idiot, and maybe you wouldn't need me to spell things out for you.” Shoving the door open with his elbow, he pushes out into the hall, scoffing loudly when he gets there.

Cora stands just outside in a red beach towel, toying with her nose ring.

“See?” Marshall snaps, disgust marring his features. “Eavesdropping. Believe me when I say, that's probably not the only thing she's been listening

in on when it comes to you. And I'm sure there's a *reason*."

Cora doesn't respond, but her dog snarls at him, chomping at the air as he moves past. For a split second, he stops, glaring down at the little black beast.

Drool pools from his jowls as his snarl morphs into a ferocious bark, incessant as he pushes himself directly in front of Cora. Protecting her, as if Marshall is some sort of threat.

I stare at my oldest friend, wondering what the dog sees and why the hell I can't see it.

Ignoring the dog, Marshall keeps on, heading for the back door.

I blow out a breath, something hollow flaring up in my chest, making it ache. "I didn't mean you had to leave right this second."

Pausing, he looks over his shoulder. "But I have to leave, right?"

My eyes flicker to Cora, who just looks back at me.

As a Wolfe, I'm supposed to pride myself on my loyalties. It's the sole compass of morality that I've based my life's work on since I've never really given much thought about the well-being of others.

People die and are betrayed all the time, but they aren't supposed to be *my* people.

I'm not supposed to be the one doing the betraying.

Still, as much as I hate to admit it, Cora's not done anything to warrant having to leave. At least, in my eyes.

There's no evidence of the threats Marshall claims she made, and the police have yet to give me anything solid as far as what happened after the gala. As far as I can tell, it was an accident, and she ended up getting hurt.

All he had to do was get her home safe.

Perhaps my shift in loyalty has to do more with my obsession with her cunt than anything else, but regardless, I can't punish her.

Not for something I don't have any proof of.

Plus, she's *seen* things. And even if she hadn't, there's something in her that calls out to me. Something soft and pure, despite the rough outer shell

she projects.

It makes me want to keep her. Steal some of the goodness for myself.

Sighing heavily, Marshall gives a curt nod. “Well, when the whore fucks you over, don’t come crying to me.”

He wheels out of the house, slamming the glass door with far more force than necessary. The dog darts over, peering outside with his white-tipped tail sticking straight out, on high alert.

“I know he’s small, but I feel weirdly good about how protective that mutt is over you.”

Cora’s eyes soften as she looks over at him, and then she crosses her arms, leaning against the wall. “He belonged to my brother.”

“Oh?”

She nods, pressing her lips together. “We always wanted a pet when we were young, but our mom refused to adopt one when she knew she couldn’t afford its vet bills. Which, looking back, I guess was kind of noble, but when you’re a kid, you don’t really understand your parents’ reasoning behind things, right? You just know you aren’t getting what you want.”

Jesus, if that isn’t the truth. All the time I spent angry and bitter over the fact that my mum fled England when my father left us for Jonas’s mum, not understanding how it broke her heart to watch him be happy with someone else.

I didn’t get why she poured herself into men who didn’t appreciate her, who would in turn hurt the both of us, because those were the ones who made her feel something after the man she loved destroyed her.

All I knew was that my father wasn’t around.

“Anyway, as soon as Lucian got his first legitimate, steady paycheck as an adult, he went to the county shelter and adopted this little guy. He was the only one in the kennel not barking and freaking out, and he said they just bonded immediately.” Tears well up in Cora’s eyes, the first nonaggressive emotion that I feel I’ve ever seen from her.

I shift, suddenly unsure of what to do with myself.

Clearing her throat, she bends down as the pup hops back over, smooching his face with both hands. “Lucian had been staying with me and our mom before he disappeared, and since Laurel doesn’t like my mom, I kept him with me when I left home to find him.”

My brows knit together. “Find who?”

She glances over her shoulder, smoothing fingers down her inked shoulder. “My brother.”

“He’s missing?”

Swallowing, she nods, chewing on her bottom lip. “Yeah, for a year now.”

Is that why she doesn’t ever talk about him? Because it hurts to acknowledge something lost, especially when it was once something you’d thought you’d be able to keep forever?

I don’t say anything more, watching as she turns away to continue petting the dog. Her shoulders slump forward, just the slightest bit, but I recognize the weight of defeat.

“And I know about the *odds*, all right?” she says, her voice muffled but still clear enough for me to understand. “I know what everyone else says, and what the police think, and what even my mom believes. I *know*. I’m not stupid or delusional, thinking he’s alive just because I’m in denial.”

Oh Christ. She thinks he’s alive?

“He *is*,” she insists, and I have to wonder if I said it out loud. Lifting her chin, her liquid-gold eyes stare up at me, wide and vulnerable in a way I’m not used to from her.

It’s unnerving—the unspoken plea for me not to shatter an illusion.

Discomfort wedges its way through my ribs, settling dark and heavy on the floor of my stomach.

So unnerving that I can’t possibly find it within me to deny her even though I know the odds are not in her favor here.

One hand flattens over her heart. “I’d feel it here if he wasn’t. You know? With some people, your connections are so deep that you can feel when they’re in trouble. I used to be able to tell when Luce was admitted to the hospital for an overdose because I’d get this weird sensation in my chest. A few hours later, he’d show up at my doorstep, begging me to let him take the couch or to give him more money.”

The dog puts his chin on her knee, and she laughs softly.

“In retrospect, maybe I should’ve been paying more attention to the fact that he refused to acknowledge his issues, but... you can’t always protect everyone, you know? Sometimes... sometimes, they don’t want it.”

Her voice breaks, and the base of my throat burns.

“Anyway.” Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, she brushes off her knees and gets to her feet, readjusting the beach towel beneath her armpit. “I think you asked me once what brought me to the island. I’m sure you thought fate or something even greater, but the truth is, this was my brother’s last-known location. He’s proving to be a lot harder to find than I anticipated, but... big brothers are supposed to make life difficult, right?”

The last part ends with a half-hearted chuckle, though it lacks any real emotion. It’s the kind of sentence you repeat to yourself over and over in the hopes that, one day, your soul will start to believe it.

Sometimes, in order for your soul to get on board, it needs outside encouragement.

So as Cora announces she’s going upstairs to take a bath, I move to the kitchen and make a pot of tea, resolving silently to myself to help locate her brother once all this has blown over.

One way or another, I want her to have that closure.

That way, perhaps, I can keep her.

When she heads down the hall, I stay in place, leaning my shoulder against the wall to feel the vibrations of her footsteps up the stairs. The dog follows her, and I wait for the rattling of the windows, indicating the closing

of her bedroom door.

I start toward the library, fully prepared to get started on a brand-new search, but stop outside the guest room on this floor.

Marshall's room.

Perhaps I should feel bad about kicking him out, but looking into the unoccupied space, all I can identify is relief.



I KNOW I shouldn't be here, but frankly, the search for my brother is starting to drag a bit.

I've been on the island for weeks now, and the only thing I've done is sustain a concussion.

There are no new leads, no potential locations.

Nothing.

Nada, zip, zilch.

Luce is probably rolling over in his metaphorical grave—or at least regretting wasting precious resources on me.

The room has been pretty much untouched since Marshall left a few days ago, though I can't understand why Alistair hasn't had his things removed.

Maybe he's using it as some sort of peace offering, giving Marshall more dignity than I personally feel he deserves.

Stepping over dirty clothes, I scan the room in the dark, squinting hard to try to avoid the furniture. Something squishy gives way beneath the sole of my boot, and I press my lips together, not wanting to imagine what it is I've encountered.

Seriously, for him only having been in the room a couple of weeks, this place is a fucking dump.

I almost want to clean it myself, out of fear the stench will waft up the stairs and cling to my stuff.

My nerves are shot as I move about, hands sliding across every smooth surface, searching for my brother's folder. The air struggles past my lungs, my chest compressing with each empty inch of space, and I force myself onto my hands and knees, scouring the dirty floor.

Down the hall, a door creaks open. I freeze in place, my fingers stuffed beneath the nightstand, and hold my breath.

I'm not sure what the man of the house would do if he found me snooping. Although it's not so much snooping as it is retrieving stolen property, but then he'd make me explain what's in the folder, and I'm not really interested in involving Alistair into that part of my life.

Sexually, fine. If he wants to make me come, that's his prerogative.

I'm not going to complain.

But letting him know my secrets? Hard pass.

I've already told him too much. The sad, jaded pieces of my heart are constantly on edge, waiting for him to use them against me.

The soft click of a door shutting relaxes me slightly, and I continue crawling along the floor, feeling for papers. My knees ache, a little leftover phantom pain from the accident, but I ignore them, determined to find what I came in here for.

My fingers brush against something stiff and with a hard edge, and I

breathe out a sigh of relief, pulling it from beneath the bed. The manila folder feels heavy in my hands, and I sit back on my heels, leaning down to use some of the light from under the door.

Immediately, I know something is off; the weight is a red flag, and even more so, the folder has a little metallic latch that I have to pry open instead of the rubber band Lucian attached to his. Spreading the contents out, I push the first piece closer to the sliver of light, drawing in a sharp breath when I realize what it is.

A snapshot of me, pretending to wait tables at The Oracle back home. There are a dozen of them, Polaroids for instant printouts and the lack of a digital trail, each from a different angle of the restaurant.

I knew I was being watched that night, but *this* closely?

My assumption was that it was Alistair across the bar, which he confirmed when he came out to the alley.

I didn't think there was more than one pair of eyes on me.

With ice in my bones, I push the pictures aside, finding a handful of others from my time on the island, before the gala. Receipts from gas stations, pet stores, even my ferry ticket to get to the island—they're all included here along with things like my birth certificate, a list of people I've interacted with over the last year and what they look like, where they live, what their favorite color is.

I keep looking, even as my stomach somersaults, nausea boiling in my gut. The torn pages from a legal pad outline my daily schedule for the weeks before the accident, blocking out my actions in fifteen-minute increments.

6:30 a.m. Subject stirs after restless sleep, kicks blankets off, and takes a piss.

6:45 a.m. Subject scarfs down a plain bagel from hotel breakfast bar while watching morning news.

7:15 a.m. Subject showers, takes dog for a short walk, returns to hotel, and dresses for work day.

There's even one from the day it poured, soaking my clothes, when Alistair sent me home early.

5:15 p.m. Subject reenters hotel room, clothing wet and askew. Cheeks flushed, nipples taut against tank top. Subject climbs into bed and masturbates with a battery-powered toy, chanting inaudibly as she makes herself climax.

Oh my God.

He watched me *masturbate*.

Pressing the back of my hand to my mouth, I force a swallow, trying to dislodge the bile rising, burning in my throat.

Pushing the papers back together, I shove them into the folder again, my heart pounding so hard in my chest that I can taste it. The sound drowns out everything else, reverberating off the inside of my skull as I move, scrambling back toward the bed to put the folder where I found it.

Light spills suddenly across the floor, sweeping over me like a downpour.

I freeze, ass in the air, as the sound of shoes on the granite floor stops abruptly, and fear catches at the base of my spine, making it impossible to draw a single breath.

Pinching my eyes shut, I try to regulate my pulse, so I can listen for a sign from the intruder.

The room is deadly silent, and my chest feels light and heavy at the same time, like a rock caught in a current.

Behind me, the figure looms closer, and for a moment, I'm back at the hotel, being terrorized by an angry Alistair. One who I just watched shoot and kill a man and who knows I saw.

Now, I've been caught where I shouldn't be twice. And since it's happening in real time, I'm not exactly sure what to expect.

My limbs just seize up, rigid and unyielding.

Footsteps fall in soft thumps, but I can't tell who they belong to.

It could be Alistair, or it could be any one of the housekeepers he has.

It could be someone else entirely.

Like Marshall, returning to get his belongings.

Holding my breath, I wait.

Pressure, sharp and stinging, bears down on the back of my neck, but it's not skin that touches me. Fabric brushes the hairs at my nape, sending a shudder through me, and then I see a gloved hand reaching down, wrenching the folder from my grasp.

I open my mouth to protest, but then another gloved hand whips out, slapping over me. Their breath is hot in my ear, and I feel teeth nip lightly at the lobe, making me jolt in surprise.

A moment later, something thick and abrasive cracks against the back of my skull, and my vision goes dark.



BLOOD STAINS PORCELAIN skin as I drag the scalpel, making a four-centimeter-long incision on the back of the carter's ankle.

Clamping with two pairs of surgical pliers, I grip the opposite sides of the incision site and pull, wrenching it open until I see the Achilles tendon. Hooking retractors onto the site, I lean back, staring at my work and wondering how Jonas gets any sort of enjoyment from this.

My father dabbled occasionally in emergency first aid when he turned to a life of crime. Many organizations have in-house physicians they call for injuries they can't bring to hospitals, but my father had to learn to sew himself up when the situation necessitated it.

Then he taught his sons the trade, though our uses tend to err more on the

creative side.

Less medical and more... *wicked*.

I hired my brother to do these jobs for me for a reason—not because remorse or guilt are alive and well in my heart, but because I just find it so positively boring. A necessary means to an end that's occupying my time when I could be spending it doing *anything* else.

Like a certain spirited little nymph.

I'm fantasizing about driving watching her swim, reveling in how much she loves the sport, when the carter screams, agony tearing the lining of his throat.

Scooting around, I take the fifth of Jameson from the mantel and soak the rag in the neck of the bottle. Pulling it out, I grip his chin and push my fingers into his cheeks, forcing his jaw open and shoving the cloth between his lips.

“Drink up, mate. Hurts a bit less if you do.”

Squirming, he attempts to dislodge the cloth, but I push it back too far for his tongue to extract it. Then I move toward his heels, taking a gold Spartan blade from the floor and pointing it at his tendon.

“I'm not big on messes, so let's make this quick, shall we?”

Sliding the tip beneath the tissue, I tug upward just the slightest bit. The carter squeals, and I just stare at him, waiting for him to stop.

“Are you done?”

His cries echo off the ceiling, and I'm grateful for the quiet seclusion of the mayor's mansion; given its proximity to downtown, one wouldn't think privacy for a public figure would be possible.

But Aplaná keeps its distance either because they don't like me or because they fear me. Frankly, I don't really care what the reasoning is, so long as they stay away.

The screams subside as sweat pours down the sides of his face, and I chuckle to myself.

“Imagine the uproar if the island knew what really went on behind these

walls,” I tell the carter, trying to keep him awake, though I can tell he’s fighting sleep. “They said my biggest scandal would be fucking my bratty assistant, but they have no idea what I’m truly capable of.”

Pausing, I pat the man’s clammy cheek, waking him up before he can drift off completely.

“Am I boring you?”

He tries to shake his head, mumbling something into the cloth.

“It wouldn’t surprise me if I was, you know. Half the island doesn’t appreciate a good speech, which I learned very early on when I began campaigning for office here. The polls said I was too long-winded and all the poetry I waxed just confused them. But I minored in classical literature in college, so I was just putting it to use. Plus, if they’re too distracted, trying to dissect what I’m saying, it’s much easier for me to fuck them over.”

He manages to push the rag out from between his teeth, and I watch it fall to the floor. “Let me *go!* Please!”

My tongue clicks. “It’s rude to interrupt someone while they’re telling you a story.”

“I can’t help you. I already said I haven’t heard from Hollis in years, and even then, he never trusted me enough to tell me what he was doing.”

Reaching down, I grab the rag and ball it in my fist. “Well, he had to tell someone. The man wasn’t getting his fix from fairies in the forest, and he’s not evolved enough to be scheming on his own.”

The betrayal from him scheming against me at all burrows itself deep into my soul, like a plague infesting a beautiful harvest, but I’ve been stuffing it down, where I can ignore it. No sense in wallowing when I can’t even locate the bloke in the first place.

“None of the guys at the compound even liked Hollis, so anytime he came to town and worked on-site, they steered clear. They wouldn’t be his confidantes.”

“Correct.” The blade tilts up a bit more, pressure from the tendon pushing

back so I feel it in the handle. “But *you* were his friend. His supplier. You got him involved with the drug trade here because if he could pedal for the Barbieris or whomever, he could get his stash free. You *enabled* him, Joseph, and in turn put me in the direct path of his wrath.”

“I didn’t! I wanted him to get clean with me, but he—”

Rolling my eyes, I take the opportunity to stuff the cloth back into his mouth, cutting off whatever excuse he has next. It doesn’t really matter what he says anyway; as soon as I brought him back to the mayor’s house, I knew he wasn’t leaving alive.

As if I could let him, knowing Ermes and his men are watching my every move. Any leniency I might show otherwise is not possible until I find Hollis and the funds he stole.

A single flick of my wrist nicks the tendon, and Joseph’s wailing begins again as he writhes on the table, trying to get away.

Checking my Rolex, I ensure I haven’t missed my city zoning meeting and slide the blade back into place between muscle and skin, angling it just so. The clear degeneration of the site and tissue of the tendon tell me Joseph’s still using, which means he’s lying about getting clean.

Or at least staying that way.

And where there’s smoke, there’s fire.

Not giving him another chance to insult me with mistruths, I jerk my hand, slicing through the worn tissue. He thrashes violently, dislodging one of the retractors and making a bloody mess all over the hardwood floor.

Moving around to stand in front of him, I exhale, giving a solemn shake of my head. His blue eyes are wide and pleading, and I pinch his nose shut, watching as he begins struggling anew.

Removing my fingers, I bend so we’re at eye-level. “Part of me wants to punish you for getting my office so dirty. I’ll have to hire professional cleaners for this, and I do hate paying them to stay silent.”

Reaching around the waist of my trousers, I slip the Glock from the back

and bring it up, smoothing the cool metal along Joseph's jaw. The caress is light, like a lover's, and I almost laugh at the irony.

Slipping a cartridge of the solid gold bullets from my suit jacket pocket into the pistol, I press it directly into the center of his forehead and draw my finger lightly over the trigger.

"I guess that's not much compared to the mess I'm about to make."

When I return to the South House a while later, I take a quick shower to wash any remnants of Joseph away, hoping the cleaning job I did was sufficient before the maid service arrives in the morning.

Most of my evenings as of late have been spent on the second floor of the house, peering out the window as Cora swims in her tiny suits. I think I could watch her body glide through the water for hours, mesmerized by the ease she cuts through its surface, as if the two were one.

Other than the afternoon of our kiss, I haven't joined her again, but I'm tempted to use the time to work out a few kinks in my neck.

And a few on *her*.

That scrappy dog of hers lies in the upstairs hall, sniffing at my door. I brush my fingers over his head as I pass, scratching behind his ear and making his tail wag.

I get why she likes him. His tail wags, and a begrudging smile threatens my mouth.

He barks as I open my bedroom door, and I push my foot out to bar his entry.

Slipping just inside, I pull the door shut behind me and immediately stop dead in my tracks, coming face-to-face with the barrel of a gun.



MY FINGERS SHAKE, confusion like a lead weight dropping to the pit of my stomach.

When I come to, I'm tucked neatly in Alistair's bed, my hair fanned out on the white satin pillowcase.

As I shoot into a sitting position, my gaze darts around the room. The back of my head smarts, like someone took a brick to it, and I slide my fingers through my hair, massaging the spot.

A scab breaks loose, and the coagulated blood catches in the strands, making me wince as pain lances the area.

With no idea how long I was out or *why* I was attacked, I push back the covers and swing my legs over the side of the bed.

If Marshall was still around, my initial assumption would be that he found me. But the fact that I'm waking up in Alistair's bed paints a picture of my captor's face, and while I'd like to believe he wouldn't hurt me, the ache in my skull says different.

A man capable of murder is just that.

I'm a fool for thinking this might be different.

Downstairs, the front door opens and closes, echoing up the steps, and my entire body tenses. Anxiety pricks at my spine like a needle, and I squeeze my knees, trying to calm the rapid beat of my heart.

Staying completely still, I sweep my gaze around the room again, looking for *something*.

Anything that might put the situation into perspective or at least give me a chance to escape. Shadows pass beneath the door, and I edge my way to the white cushioned bench in front of the footboard, my eyes locked on the doorknob.

It doesn't twist like I expected. Animation shoots through me, and I spring to my feet and scramble to sift through his dresser and nightstand drawers for a key to the window.

The second story isn't that far up, and I think I'd rather take my chances.

Instead of a key though, I find a black-and-gold pistol wrapped in a handkerchief in the back of his walk-in closet with an ornate *W* engraved on the side.

Gritting my teeth, I pick the gun up, turning it over in my hands. I'm no stranger to weapons, but I've never possessed one with explicit intent to harm before.

In other instances, the expectation was that if I had to use it, it'd be used in self-defense.

Now, it's offense, and I'm not above using any means available.

Heart in my throat, I grip the gun and quickly exit the closet, trying to gauge how much time I have before he comes in. If I go beneath the bed and

don't clear the frame, he'll find me in a vulnerable position, and the probability of my escape lessens.

I go for the window, jiggling the locks with every ounce of strength I can muster. Each passing second that it doesn't budge makes my unease spike, and after a full minute, I give up.

Footsteps in the hall pause just outside the door, the shadow waxing and waning as they linger.

Bile teases my esophagus like sludge, solidifying in place as my feet seem to root into the floor.

Like a deer in headlights, I don't move from my position.

My chest heaves, growing heavier as I stare at the door.

Waiting.

The doorknob turns slowly, and I jolt forward, planting myself in front of the threshold.

Lifting my arms as soon as glacial eyes appear right in front of me, I aim directly between them. I'm not convinced I'd be able to make the shot, even this close up, but it feels like the right place to try for.

A hint of surprise flashes across his face, but in the next second, it's gone, replaced with a mask of indifference.

The sharp angles of his jaw shift, and he pushes his tongue into the bottom of his cheek, hand still on the knob. Laurel darts past him, coming around to sniff my ankles, and then sits just behind me.

"Well, this is interesting."

Gnawing on the inside of my bottom lip, I shrug, animosity coursing through me and outweighing my anxiety. My thumb brushes the safety as my silence soaks the tension between us, coating the room in discomfort so thick that it's suddenly difficult to breathe.

Alistair shifts, dropping his arms to his sides. "I'm hurt, little thief. Is this any way to treat someone who's been housing and feeding you the last few weeks?"

One of my shoulders lifts. “I told you I’d kill you.”

“Ah.” His stare darkens, the translucent hues of his irises becoming opaque, barring my request to view his soul. “That you did. The memory of you crying out for God a few minutes later must’ve pushed that from my mind.”

“Or maybe you just underestimated me.”

“Perhaps I did.” Reaching up, he strokes his chin, eyes glazing over as he thinks. “Does this mean you *did* try to kill Marshall then?”

Panic flares in my chest, and I give a soft shake of my head. “I don’t—”

“Yes, yes, you don’t remember. I know what you’ve told me.” He glances at the gun, then slowly slides his gaze back to me. “Though it’s not so inconceivable that you’d lie to me, is it? Certainly wouldn’t be the first time.”

Panic morphs into a cyclone of fear, tearing my insides to shreds. I think about the folder in the guest bedroom, how someone was watching my *every* move, and wonder what exactly Alistair knows.

“What I don’t understand is *why*.” He takes a step closer, and I scoot back one on a reflex.

When he smirks, I curse silently.

Alistair Wolfe is a hunter, both for sport and in spirit, and he’s made it clear I’m his favorite target. Backing up instead of standing my ground says I’m playing his game.

Invites him to pursue and inevitably catch me when all I want at this moment is to escape.

“Why what?” I ask, forcing the wobble from my voice.

“Why do you insist on lying?”

That gets a snort out of me. “Maybe you don’t deserve the truth.”

Emotion flickers in his eyes, storm clouds flashing for the briefest of moments before it dries up again, leaving me drenched from the sudden downpour. He inches closer again, and somehow, the muzzle of the gun is already grazing his chest through his sky-blue button-down.

“What do I deserve then, *m’eudail*? What am I worthy of, according to Her Highness?”

My face pulls, twisting in disgust. “Please, you’re the one who needs the honorific. Does the fake respect get your dick hard? That why you’re so adamant about the title?”

The corner of his mouth twitches, and he shoves his hands in his pants pockets, moving forward again so the gun is flush with him. I suck in a little surprised breath, a spasm in my index finger teasing the trigger.

“Are you sure you want to know what makes my dick hard?”

Lifting his arm, he brings his hand to my throat, pressing his thumb into the hollow at its base. I grit my teeth, and he chuckles, giving a light squeeze to my esophagus before gliding up the expanse.

He lands directly on my pulse. It kicks up, an electric current speeding through my veins.

“*This*,” he whispers, his minty breath washing over me, “fear, anticipation. The exhilaration of not knowing what’s about to happen yet *dying* to find out.”

I push the gun harder against him. “Hmm, I think I know what happens next.”

“Do it then.” Lifting his other hand, he curls his fingers around mine; I flinch, trying to pull away, but he hangs tight, his shirt creasing from the force.

“*If I don’t kill you, he will.*”

Marshall’s omen stabs me in the back of the head, and I stare up at Alistair, trying to reconcile the murderer with the man who nursed me back to health after the accident.

The evil mayor versus the man obsessed.

At the end of the day though, we’re still capable of killing the things that bring us joy.

His finger moves with mine as it pulls against the trigger, and I feel the

hollow popping sound in my gut. Our eyes meet, locking in some sort of silent battle, and then a small grin breaks out across his face.

My heart drops to my stomach, disintegrating on contact.

Fuck.

“When I was younger, my father taught me to never keep a loaded gun in the bedroom,” he says, tightening his grip on me.

Pain shoots through my fingertips, and I wince, jerking backward.

“Said that’s the first thing lovers go for when relationships go awry, and I used to think he was seeing the wrong women, if they all eventually wound up trying to murder him.”

Alistair spins us around, shoving me against the open doorframe. His hips jut into mine, and the heat of his erection sears through my silk pajama pants, making my thighs clench.

He traps me with his body, releasing the gun to shove a hand under my tank top, groping at my breast. I bite back a moan, and he nips the underside of my jaw in response. Laurel barks, and I hear his jowls snapping, but Alistair ignores him.

“I get it now,” he whispers, breath hot in my ear. “There’s something alluring about a violent woman. Men, not so much because violence is our legacy. But being at the mercy of a woman craving blood? There’s nothing quite like it.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be some big-shot hunter? Why would you enjoy *that*?” I grind out, my cheek squished into the wood frame.

“A *great* shot,” he corrects, as if that makes a difference.

Kneading my tit, he rolls his thumb over my nipple, and I let out a little gasp as it puckers, my defiance waning.

“Not everyone’s worth the effort though, and many leave my appetite unsatisfied.”

His breath hitches in my ear, and heat pools between my thighs. God, this shouldn’t be hot, all things considered, but the man knows what he’s doing.

In a world where so few do, it's hard not to take this seriously.

"Besides," he rasps, his free hand splaying out over my belly, pushing in, "I hunt only what I desperately wish to eat."

My mouth struggles to close, saliva collecting on my tongue as I feel the whole length of him. "How's your appetite now?"

"Deprived."

Warmth crawls up the back of my neck, and I free my hands, muttering a quick, "Good," before taking the butt of the gun and cracking it against his temple.

He hisses, releasing me just enough that I slip free, and then I run.

Laurel's right on my heels as we rush down the hall, skidding to a stop at the top of the stairs. My heart pounds, and I cast a quick look over my shoulder as I grip the banister.

Adrenaline racks my body, tremors shocking my system, and after a split second, when he doesn't appear in the doorway, I scoop Laurel into my arms and bolt.

I'm not going to wait around and make it easy on him.

Throwing open the back door, I put Laurel down again, so he can run easier. I haven't ventured out past the immediate grounds until now, so I'm not at all sure where I'm headed as we dash from the patio.

Passing the pool area, I keep a close watch on Laurel to make sure he isn't getting distracted by random stimuli; especially once we pass the hedge fencing and are thrust into thick forest in which the shadows seem to cling to the air directly in front of me.

My throat constricts, and a pit grows in my stomach, the deeper in we get, as though it wasn't my conscious decision to run.

The air gets cooler with each tree we pass, and sweat trickles down the back of my neck between goose bumps.

Leaves crunch somewhere in the distance, and a shadow glides across the trunk in front of me; I jump to the side, plastering myself to another tree, out

of the line of light spilling from the back of the house.

Breathing heavy, I pause, noting my breaths are the only ones filling the air now. Laurel is no longer at my feet, and I lean out, searching the grounds for him.

About a hundred feet away, a figure crouches low on the ground, his silhouette just barely visible, and I see a tiny shadow at his side, then hear the excited chomping sounds as he feeds Laurel something.

Traitor.

When the figure pushes to his feet, I take a second to study him; his shadow is shorter than I'd have expected, perhaps distorted by how the forest blocks direct light, and he moves different than a hunter would.

His motions aren't slow and calculated; they feel random, like a person trapped in a body they've forgotten how to use.

My eyes narrow as he begins walking toward me, and unease slinks down my spine like sweat, notching along each vertebra.

I stand there for a moment, trying to pinpoint what exactly it is keeping me in place.

As he gets closer, that feeling solidifies, pushing me backward. Stumbling over a massive root, I catch myself before face-planting and take off again, sans my dog.

He's better off, not getting lost anyway.

The moon gets lower in the sky, the longer I run, and my feet ache, begging me to give in. At this point though, I can't—on principle, this is one of those games that you have to play to completion, one way or the other.

Alistair doesn't strike me as the kind to forgive attempted murder very easily, and a bolting on top of that isn't really helping my case.

Well, he did say he likes the chase.

The fear.

So really, I'm just playing right into his hand—again.

Maybe I should be more upset about that, considering how sure I was an

hour ago that he'd attacked me and put me in his bedroom.

But... I kind of like the chase too.

It's kind of nice being on this side of things for once.

Being wanted is *nice*, even if the man doing the longing isn't.

My nerves burn bright, more alive than I've felt since leaving home, and it pushes me to keep on. Grinding my teeth together, I ignore the howling in the distance, telling myself it's just Laurel upset that I left him behind, and keep my head straight.

I grunt when my foot slips, the other catching at the last second, stopping me from going over the sudden edge. Rocks slide from beneath my bare feet, and I freeze, listening for the soft thud accompanying their landing.

It never comes, and I drop to my knees and slowly lean over the uneven land; the cliff is abrupt and probably several hundred feet up with the angry Atlantic Ocean thrashing against the rock below.

Salty seawater splashes my face as it rages below, each wave reaching slightly higher than the last.

"Holy—"

A hand clamps down over my mouth, cutting off the end of my sentence, and jerks me back away from the edge.

"Trying to get yourself killed, little thief?" Alistair whispers roughly in my ear, and my body trembles. "Even death won't save you from me."

There's very little finesse as he flips me around, pinning me to the ground and tearing at my tank top. He fits himself between my thighs, forcing one to curl around his waist, and presses himself hard into my core.

I arch against the movement, seeing stars as the friction on my clit sends sparks through my insides.

The sound of fabric ripping fills the air, reality drowning out even the sea beyond us. Squirring as much as his position allows, I kick my legs, still trying to free myself as he exposes me, emitting a low growl; it echoes in my chest, heating me in a way I've never been warmed before.

“I quite like you like this. Dirt on your skin, cut up from branches and thorns. Do you realize you’re bleeding?”

He holds my hand up, and I see a bead of blood drip from my thumb, which I didn’t even notice I’d nicked at some point during my sprint. My heart thrashes around in my chest, kicking into high gear when he dips his head, closing his lips around the tip and sucking it deep into his mouth.

Oh.

Oh, wow.

Do I have a blood kink, or is there something so depraved and primal about seeing this man lap at that particular fluid? As if his obsession runs so deep, he wants to familiarize himself with every part of me.

A slight, sharp jolt of pain radiates up my wrist, almost imperceptible, except for the fact that I’m trapped and unable to focus on *anything*, other than the feel of him on me.

Groaning into his palm, I kick harder, trying to shove him off me so I can maintain at least a tiny shred of dignity even though it feels like we’re past that point now.

“This is my favorite part of the chase,” he says, releasing me with a wet pop, then dropping his attention back to pulling my shirt open. I’m not wearing a bra, so once he’s pushed the cotton material aside, I’m completely bare. “Inspecting my catch. Cleaning it, so I can eat.”

Cool air stings my nipples, drawing them into hard peaks, and Alistair makes a strangled noise.

One I feel in my pussy.

The hand over my mouth moves, sliding down to collar my neck, and he shifts, bending his body to hover over my breast.

His moist breath cascades over my damp skin, and my abdomen twitches with anticipation.

“How...” I swallow, losing my train of thought when the tip of his tongue lashes out, striking me. “*Fuck.*”

“How what?” he mutters, tasting again, more firmly this time.

I grit my teeth, my nails clawing at the loose dirt beneath me. “I-I don’t remember.”

He smirks, closing his teeth around my nipple, tugging harshly. I suck in a gulp as my fingers push into his hair, gripping tight. Each nip at my skin results in an equal yank at the strands, and he moans against me, the sound so desperate and restrained that I almost come on the spot.

My thighs clench, squeezing his waist, and my hips lift as they search for purpose. Grunting, Alistair grinds back into me, his dick rubbing my clit and making me cry out.

Adjusting so his knees are on the outside of my legs, he hooks his fingers in my pajamas and starts rolling them down.

“Are these new?”

I nod, my eyes glued to his hands. “I bought them when Elena and Lenny took me shopping.”

“That almost makes me want to leave them on.”

“Why?”

“I’d love to fuck you in things I’ve paid for. If I had my way, you’d be in expensive fabrics every night, just so I could rip a hole in them and stain them with my cum afterward.”

“Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of buying the clothes? That feels kind of wasteful.”

He scoffs, dragging the silk over my knees and then off my feet. “The *point* would be treating you.”

My stomach flips. “What if I don’t want to be treated?”

I’ve barely executed the sentence before a sudden, salacious stinging sensation spreads through me. Alistair’s palm collides with the top of my pussy, and a startled sound escapes my throat.

His lips purse, and I jerk upright when warmth dribbles onto my throbbing, inflamed skin.

“You do,” he says, gripping my hip and smearing his spit over my raw flesh, dipping lower and mixing it with my wetness. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t be wearing these now. You would’ve put up more of a fight when I moved you to the South House, and you wouldn’t have taken the nose ring from me all those weeks ago.”

Swallowing, I twist the jewelry, biting the inside of my lip and watching as he slides his fingers between my lower lips, circling my clit.

“Everyone wants things, Cora. There’s nothing wrong with admitting it.”

He bears down on top of me again, lining our bodies up. The air whooshes from my lungs, and my breasts scrape his shirt, causing me to gasp.

One of his hands trails up my stomach, then farther up, between my breasts, and a shiver skates in its wake. Tension coils in my belly, tight, like a compressed spring waiting to be released.

“I want things,” I breathe, moving my hips so he can feel exactly *what*.

He plants his hands on the dirt beside my head, pushing himself up so he looms over me. The hunter with his prey, ready to devour her whole.

“Tell me one.”

My face falls, and he chuckles.

“Tell me something real, *m’eudail*. Something new. What do you want?”

As I consider the request, he sits back a little, unbuttoning his shirt and shrugging out of it. Next, his pants—he unbuckles them, shoves them off his hips, and kicks free. I don’t notice how great the loss of his weight really is until it’s back, warming me from head to toe.

Palming the outside of my thigh, he hikes it up, pulling it so my knee folds over his hip. I feel his cock bump against my slit, and we both gasp, freezing.

Emotion clogs my throat as I scour my brain for something. Anything to get him to fuck me and stop asking for secrets.

“I used to want to run an animal shelter. There was one down the block

from me when I was a kid, and it... burned to the ground one day, and I always wanted to build a new one in the same spot. As an... apology, sort of.”

His brow quirks. “Apology? Did you set the place on fire?”

I don’t reply, the memory of being a catalyst bleeding into my brain. You don’t have to light the match to be responsible for the carnage.

After a moment, he shifts, and the ridges of his length press against my clit, drawing me from my despair. “Okay, now, tell me why you ran.”

“You wanted me to.”

“Yes, but you’re not usually in the business of granting my wishes.”

Pinching my eyes shut, I shrug one shoulder. “I was scared.”

“Of?”

“You.”

“No, you weren’t. You’re not scared of anyone, least of all me, and that’s precisely what drew me to you in the first place.” His thumb finds my clit, drawing lazy circles, making me squirm. “Tell me the truth.”

The tip of him glides between my lips, collecting my arousal, the silver barbell in his crown cool on my heated flesh. I huff out a breath, seeking more, the lewd sounds spurring me on. It teases my entrance, pushing in the smallest bit, and I reach up, gripping his biceps.

My nails dig into his skin, piercing his hard muscles as they flex. Dragging them down, I revel in the groan that rips from him and the way he tenses beneath my touch.

“Did you catch me to have a heart-to-heart or because you wanted something? Because, I have to say, we’ve done a whole lot of talking, and something tells me the others probably don’t get the same treatment—”

My words are abruptly drowned out by the deep, primal moan that thunders through me as he sinks inside me, inch by rigid inch.

Drawing his hips back, he leaves just the tip in and pauses. “There *are* no others, little thief. You’re the only one.”

I only have a second to bask in the warmth of his words before he shuts me up.

Pistoning his hips forward suddenly, he bottoms out, stretching and filling me. That fucking piercing prods at me, making my vision blur at the edges, and a strained sob escapes as he picks up the pace.

His grip on my hips turns punishing, each collision of our bodies eliciting feral sounds that rumble between us.

“*Fuck*, it’s just as good as the first time. You’re so hot and tight, and your cunt sucks me right in, like the greedy little bitch she is.”

I watch his face in the moonlight, his blue eyes roving over my body, as if he’s trying to memorize the way it looks beneath him.

Reaching down under my ass, he props his wrist beneath me, tilting my hips so he can angle himself even deeper. Then seemingly unsatisfied with that, he withdraws and pushes my legs together, holding them to his shoulder as he sinks back in, shoving so deep and quick that a bite of pain seizes my limbs, but it turns to pleasure immediately, drizzling like hot wax over my limbs.

“You coming?” he grunts, and my pussy tightens, gripping his cock like a vise. “*Fuck*, do it. Come for me. Soak my cock like a good slut. ’Cause that’s what you are for me, right? My pretty, perfect little whore. Let me fuck you in public twice now, and your sweet cunt comes so good for me when I do.”

Saliva catches in my throat as my orgasm crests, heat flashing through my stomach and making my back arch. The juxtaposition of the sentiments shouldn’t work so well together, but like some sort of Pavlovian response, I come for him almost immediately, as if trying to prove that, yes, I am his perfect slut.

I’ve never been a big fan of the dirty talk, but maybe that’s because no one else knew how to do it.

Didn’t know what I needed.

Release crashes over me like a tsunami wave, knocking me flat. Alistair

continues thrusting, biting hard on the outside of my legs as he squeezes them, fucking me through it.

“I’m gonna fill you up,” he rasps, biting until I’m sure he draws blood, but then he’s pounding into me with such force that I’m pushed up toward the cliff.

The dirt grates against my bare skin, scraping my elbows and mixing with sweat, and it just heightens the aftershocks, catapulting me into another climax.

“Alistair,” I cry out, reaching to play with my clit as I clamp down around him again. My hair falls loose, the top of my head no longer supported as he keeps shifting us.

“You want it? Want my cum?”

“We’re gonna fall—”

Sparks burst behind my eyes as he drops my legs, pushing our hips flush together and rolling. He keeps his arm banded around my waist to keep me in place, and I come almost violently this time as he lands on his back, impaling me as deep as possible with me straddling his hips.

Now, it’s his head hanging off the cliff, and the water rages below, waiting to claim a victim.

“Ride me,” he says, clutching my hips so tight that I know he’ll leave bruises. “I want to feel it when I drip out of you. Fuck any consequences.”

“But—”

Thrusting up, he bounces me, and I choke on a gasp, my hands flying to his chest. His palm comes down on my ass, the burn from his handprint springing me into action.

I go slow at first, very aware of how close to the edge we are—so close that I can taste the salt water on his skin when he swoops up, sealing our mouths together. His hands dig into my back, trying to guide my movements, and I reach around, prying them off and pinning them at his sides.

“Don’t touch until I say so.” My hips roll slowly, relishing in the

delicious ache that heats my entire body. I feel his thumb brush my calf and freeze, pulling myself up so he's barely in anymore.

Alistair groans, fisting the dirt. "Okay, okay, fuck. I won't touch."

My knees strain as I stay in place, narrowing my eyes at him. My pussy clenches around him, and he lets out the smallest whimper, something soft and broken that makes me feel unbelievably powerful.

"Please," he adds, and it makes my heart stutter in my chest because I know damn well this man has never begged for anything in his life.

Yet here he is.

"I like that word, coming from you," I admit, and we inhale simultaneously as I sink back down his thick cock, letting a little moan escape as he stretches me again.

"What, *please*?" He laughs, but the sound is almost pained. "I'll say it every bloody day if it means I get you on top of me like this."

I hum, my clit rubbing against him with each undulation of my hips. He's barely hanging on to sanity, eyes pinched shut and the tendons in his throat taut, bulging against his skin. I bend down, tugging on his necklace and then scoring my teeth over a vein, and he spasms, his cock twitching inside me.

"Goddamnit, Cora, I'm gonna fucking come."

He's having to hold his neck up, and I should stop and pull him away from the edge, but there's something so undeniably beautiful about the lack of concern on his part. Like he's an addict, completely strung out on the feel of me sliding up and down his dick, and the fact that death could be imminent doesn't even faze him.

Or maybe Alistair is as fearless as he believes me to be. Maybe he'd welcome death, if it meant this was the way he went out.

"Not yet," I tell him, increasing the pace of my thrusts, my tits bouncing. "Touch me first."

Swearing under his breath, he doesn't waste any time, his palm immediately latching on to my breast. He massages and kneads, his other

hand abandoning the dirt to paw at my hip, driving me faster and faster.

“*M’eudail*,” he moans, sliding his hand from my breast and grabbing the back of my neck, yanking me down for a kiss as he takes over, railing me from below. “Please. I need... I’m...”

Moaning into his mouth, I nod, my thighs clenching as my third climax rolls over me.

“Are you—”

Shaking my head, I’m only half-paying attention to what he’s saying. What I’m agreeing to. He claws at my sides, flexing his legs, as if trying to buck me off, but I lean forward and shove him down with both hands, riding harder.

“I’m not stopping until I’m leaking all over you, and then I want to clean it up with my tongue.”

My words do it, and he scores his teeth along my neck, biting through the groan that racks his body. His hand slips off the ground, and we shift abruptly, hanging obscenely close to the edge of the cliff.

One wrong move, and this could be the last memory either of us has.

That knowledge coils excitement in my chest, and it spirals out, settling in my belly. I feel him swell inside me, and that sends me into the stratosphere, waves of pleasure coursing through me as my inner walls seize.

Our cries of passion echo through the forest, scattering a few birds; they caw as they take flight, and for some reason, it feels almost like an omen.

And even as I come back down to earth, feeling returning to my legs, knowing that what I just did was the epitome of stupidity, I realize just how little I care.

Because for the first time ever, my needs were at the forefront of my brain, and I didn’t think about Lucian or anyone else even once.



MY BODY IS COMPLETELY TRASHED by the time we get dressed again.

Fuck, the reality that I'm not eighteen anymore has never been so apparent as it is when I'm with the twenty-three-year-old at my side. We shagged once more after the initial session, and I emptied into her a second time while she lay prone on her stomach, arse high in the air.

I don't know what I'll do if that consequence rears its head, but tonight, I'm too entrenched in everything Cora Astor that I can't bring myself to think about it much.

Frankly, if she did get pregnant, I'd be ecstatic. The idea of her body blossoming with my child has appealed to me since the first time I laid eyes on her, and if anything, my desire to see it has only grown since.

Perhaps it's because I'm getting older, or perhaps because Jonas is settling down and I feel that intrinsic need to compete with him.

More than likely, though, it's just my body's primal desire to keep Cora attached.

To claim her, permanently.

That's a problem.

One I don't feel like addressing yet.

Kneeling on the ground, I hold my arms out behind my back, facing away from her.

"Uh..." She peeks over my shoulder, her blue hair almost silver in the moonlight. "What are you doing?"

"Offering you a ride."

"Thanks, but I don't think I can go again. Plus, I don't know how it'd work from behind unless... do you want me to peg you?" A pause, and then she grins. "I could be into that."

"Jesus."

My hands reach out, wrapping around her thighs and pulling her into me. I push to stand, and she squeals, sliding her arms around my neck and resting her legs at my waist.

We start back toward the house, and she shifts, rubbing herself against me.

The third time, her cunt is practically burning a hole through my shirt.

"Cora, if you don't stop, we're not making it back to the house before dawn."

And then I might really get you pregnant.

"Sorry," she mutters, pressing her lips to my ear. "It's just... I can feel you running down my leg."

Gritting my teeth, I increase the pressure of my fingers on her thighs and will my cock to stay soft. Once we've showered and I've convinced her to stay in my bed tonight, maybe I'll take her again.

It wasn't my plan to take her at all when she ran, but I suppose that's all the proof I need to know I'm entirely too enraptured by her existence. If anyone else had attempted to kill me—in my home and with one of my guns, no less—I'd have removed their heart before they could leave the bedroom.

But there was unwarranted fear and anger in her eyes when she accosted me, and I wanted it gone. If she wants to be angry or wants to fear me, she'll do so with a reason.

One I can remedy.

"I've never let anyone do that before," she says matter-of-factly, and there's a perverse sense of pride that swells in my chest at the realization.

I try to play it off, shrugging. "Good to know."

She flicks my ear. "Have you ever..?"

"Never."

Her cheek leans against the back of my head. "Good to know."

The lights from the house slowly come into view, and we make our way through the hedges, passing the tennis courts and the pool, and I set her on her feet when we've reached the patio.

She tugs at the scraps of her tank top, tied around her tits, and my eyes flock to their movement as she adjusts. Throwing me a glare, she rolls her eyes and shoves me away, turning to head back inside.

Stopping just past the threshold, she cups her hands around her mouth. "Laurel! Come on, buddy. Let's go to bed!"

My brows pull in. "He's not inside."

Her arms fall. "What? I thought you took him in."

I'm silent for a beat, trying to make sense of the claim in my head. "At what point would I have had time to do that between chasing and fucking you?"

"But... I saw you with him."

Our heads turn at the same time, both of us looking out at the forest beyond the property. Silence descends around us, thick like the dead of night,

and an owl coos in the distance.

Alarm raises my hackles, causing the hairs at the nape of my neck to stand on end. Something isn't right, and I'm concerned with the fact that I didn't notice it before.

Perhaps I was too distracted by the scent of chlorine and citrus to pay attention to another distinct scent.

Malevolence.

Cora wriggles her way past me, gripping her biceps as she heads back toward the forest. My hand lashes out, catching her around the waist.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Her chin tilts up. "I'm not leaving my dog out there by himself."

"You don't even have shoes on." Pulling her around me, I push her back inside, then drag a hand through my hair. "I'll go look for him, all right?"

"He doesn't know you that well." She worries her bottom lip, eyes darting behind me. "You might drive him farther away."

Pointing at myself, I raise an eyebrow. "I've never lost a target. I'll find him."

I don't.

Find Laurel, that is.

When I return to the house hours later, the sun is coming up, and Cora sits by the pool in an oversize hoodie and baggy sweatpants. Her golden eyes are bloodshot and red-rimmed, and I know without asking that she's been rooted in the same spot since I first set out.

Despair clings to her like a leech, sucking her soul dry, though she stares like she's in shock. Detached and aloof, the persona I've practiced for years, but for some reason, it looks all wrong on her.

I take the spot at the end of the lounge and reach out, massaging the bottom of her roughed-up foot.

She withdraws, pulling her knees to her chest. "I knew I should've gone."

Sighing, I drive the heels of my hands into my eyes. "You don't know the

land, Cora, and it was dark. You'd have gotten lost and possibly hurt." Lifting my gaze, I meet hers, trying to force even an ounce of emotion into her irises. "I'm not going to be responsible for anything that harms you."

Looking out at the pool, she lets out a humorless laugh but doesn't say anything more.

My hand covers her knee, stroking her smooth skin. "If we don't find him, we can always get another dog."

That gets her attention, except I can tell immediately it's the wrong kind. I'm not even sure why I said it other than the fact that her sadness is making my brain short-circuit.

Flames dance in her eyes now—a welcome change at least from the emotionless void before. Jerking from my grasp, she narrows her eyes and balls her hands into fists, and I know she wishes she had that gun again.

"Laurel isn't replaceable." She drops her feet onto the ground, standing up. "Although I guess it shouldn't really surprise me, coming from you. Tell me, *Your Honor*, if I get lost, are you gonna find a new toy to play with? How long would I have to be missing before you found someone else to satisfy your depravity?"

She turns to stomp away, but I jump up, grabbing her elbow. "I didn't mean it like that. And no one could satisfy me the way you do."

"I don't care."

"Yes, you do."

She thrashes as I wrap my arms around her, pinning hers to her chest as I bring her to me.

"Look, I'll go search for him again. Now that it's daylight, it might be easier. Maybe he'll even be able to trace his way back."

A snuffle rattles in her chest, but she clears her throat, still tense in my hold. "I'll put some food out for him. Maybe he'll follow the scent."

My arms fall away from her, and she walks toward the house. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I jingle my keys, gnawing on the inside of my lip as

I run through a dozen different scenarios in my head.

The door closes with Cora inside, and I exhale, pulling the cuff link from my pocket; the *W* is worn and faded, the rose-and-thorn design inside barely even visible anymore.

It's one of mine, but not a recent pair. In fact, I haven't seen the silver piece in years.

Not since I gave it to Hollis.



LUCIAN DESERVES A BETTER SISTER.

One capable of finding him or one who at least didn't lose his most-prized possession because she was too busy, getting fucked in the woods.

Kicking my feet against the water, I float along on my back, eyes closed as I pray silently to the universe to bring my dog home.

Home. I cringe at the term because that means I've already begun thinking of this place as such, which means I'm far more attached than I want to be.

God, talk about defeating the purpose of coming to the island.

I still don't know what I saw in the woods since Alistair denies ever interacting with Laurel before he found me. Part of me wants to believe he's

lying, but then I'm not sure what he'd actually gain from it.

"We can always get another dog," he said, as if Laurel hasn't been my sole reason for continuing life on this planet since Lucian disappeared. As if his big brown eyes and sweet, wet nose waking me up every morning and seeing me off to sleep at night are so easily replicated by another warm body.

As if there's a "we" in this scenario at all.

I'll admit, at times, I'm tempted to entertain the thought, but we're so unbelievably different that I'm just not sure it would ever work.

Clearly, since our attitudes toward animals are on such opposite sides of the spectrum. It doesn't matter how his presence makes me feel less alone or how, sometimes, it seems like he's the only person who's ever met the real me and not wanted me to change.

If anything, he seems to genuinely like me.

Or at least, he likes a certain part of me.

But I've been wrong before, and no matter how my body or soul craves him, I can't rationalize it.

Blowing out a breath, I open my eyes and squint at the sunny sky. It feels inappropriate for the star of our galaxy to be out shining, as if the earth isn't plagued with complete and utter disaster on a regular basis.

Then again, I suppose the sun can't shy away for every shitty situation. Otherwise, it'd never come back out.

Eventually, I climb out of the pool and take a quick shower, my hands trembling when I walk past Marshall's door and consider going in again. I'm not sure what happened to the folders or why he was stalking me, but I am curious.

Slowly, my hand reaches out, and I push the door.

It falls open slowly, knocking into the wall, and I blink at the brightness of the room. That definitely wasn't the case the last time I was in here.

The white-and-blue granite floor is plainly visible now, having apparently been cleaned of any debris and clothing left behind. Furniture has been

dusted, papers have been swiped, garbage thrown away.

Almost as if no one occupied the room in the first place.

But there's such a thing as *too* clean; this is the kind of clean I'd leave when I was squatting somewhere that I absolutely didn't want to be discovered in, like the top-level unit of an apartment complex while the owner was on vacation.

Although, in my defense, that guy shouldn't have left his keys in the fake rock outside his house.

Rookie mistake, if you don't want people breaking in.

Same with the open door here. If Alistair didn't want me snooping, he shouldn't leave rooms unlocked.

Gliding my finger along the surface of the white dresser, I bring it to my line of sight, noting the severe lack of dust. Not even a speck, which seems incredibly peculiar, given that it's been several days since Alistair's cleaning service stopped by.

Dust particles settle fairly quickly, reformulating on surfaces sometimes within twenty minutes. But this room is spotless.

Narrowing my eyes, I glance quickly around the room, searching for any signs of life. A wayward scuff mark, a wrinkled bedsheet, a slightly askew curtain. The immaculate placement of everything is unnerving, and a wave of discomfort pulses through me, making me back up.

Fumbling for the knob, I swallow over the hardened lump in my throat. My eyes remain on the space before me as I back up through the door, certain that something inside the room will jump out at me at any given moment.

Instead, I back into someone and peel out a sharp scream. Gloved fingers grab my biceps, forcing me forward and onto the bed. I kick, trying to free myself as someone settles down over me, clamping their palm around my mouth and nose.

The scent of leather assaults my nostrils, and I manage to open my mouth just enough to grip the fabric in my teeth, biting as hard as possible.

My assailant grunts, gripping a fistful of my hair and shoving my face into the mattress. Throwing my elbow back, I jab at their side, swinging my calves up and kicking at them with my heels.

“Stop *hitting* me!”

Air expels immediately from my lungs, and I freeze mid-thrash, my entire body going stiff. That voice...

“*Lucian?*”

The person climbs off me, and as I lift my head I see black jeans, a black T-shirt, and shaggy brown hair that looks like it hasn't been cut in a decade.

Which, I suppose, is a very good possibility.

He smiles sheepishly, slinking back against the metal headboard. Holding up his hands, he says, “Surprise!”

It takes a moment for the scenario to settle in. Another moment for me to realize I'm not dreaming—because I've been fooled many times before. Pushing onto my side, I pinch my wrist, blinking rapidly when my skin bleaches, and a bite of pain radiates from the action.

Slowly, I lift my eyes to him, tears blurring his image before I launch myself across the bed, wrapping my arms around his head.

A sob escapes me when he clings back, burying his face into my neck. The smell of cigarettes wafts from his clothing, but it's absent of the hint of alcohol and sweat that used to accompany him, like a cologne of his own making.

Happiness explodes like a piñata inside my chest, and my heart fills to the brim, threatening to push through my rib cage. I choke on my tears, mucus getting caught in my throat, and take a second to soak it all in.

Just in case it all disappears again when I pull back.

“Cor,” Lucian rasps, tapping my shoulder. “You're choking me.”

I squeeze tighter, then relinquish my grip the slightest bit. “That's the *least* of what you deserve, Luce.” Sitting back on my heels, I playfully punch at his chest, though there's more force behind the hit than I intended. “Where

the fuck have you been?”

He opens his mouth to respond, but I jolt forward, cutting him off with my palm.

“Wait. How are...” My brows furrow, my brain trying to make sense of everything and failing miserably. “Why...” Trailing off because the circuitry in my brain crosses and shorts, I blink, letting my arm fall away.

He cringes, his gold eyes crinkling at the edges. “I guess I have some explaining to do.”

Scoffing, I scramble off the bed and put my hands on my hips, still just staring at him. Like he’s an apparition, doomed to vanish without written notice.

Does he have another missing person folder? What do I do if I lose him a second time?

How do you survive the loss of your favorite person twice?

With a sigh, I cast a look around the immaculate room again, and a thought occurs to me. “How are you even here right now? Like, not here, but *here*, at Alistair Wolfe’s private home?” I pause as apprehension notches down the discs in my neck.

Running his fingers through his hair, Lucian blows out a long breath. “Okay, so I have *a lot* of explaining to do.”

I stand there, waiting. We stare at each other for several silent beats, and for a second, I’m thrust back in time to when we were kids playing the quiet game. A notorious sore loser, Lucian would always make funny faces to get me to fold first, but neither of us is laughing now.

My eyes move in slow motion over his face, noting smooth, full cheeks and the pink color of his lips—so unlike the gaunt, barely alive version I saw last—that I have to consider again whether this is a dream or not.

“But not here, okay?” he continues before I can voice my concerns about the validity of our situation. “This place... it gives me the creeps.”

Pulling a face, I cross my arms over my chest. “What, have you been

living in the attic all this time or something?”

When he doesn't reply, my eyebrows shoot up, and my head cocks to one side. Springing from the bed, Lucian slips his hand through my arm and tugs me by the elbow to the door.

“Not here.”

We pass the threshold, and he yanks the door shut behind us. Confusion muddies every other thought going on in my brain, and I can't even concentrate on how he's shaking a little at my side.

“Are you in trouble, Luce?” I ask as he drags me out the back, in the opposite direction of the pool and forest, guiding me around the side of the house. “Why'd you leave that folder, incriminating half the island? Do you realize everyone back home thinks you're dead?”

“I could ask you the same thing, Cor.” He pauses at the corner of the house, pushing me back against the wall and peering out. “Why the hell are you shackled up with the mayor?”

“He won't let me leave,” I grumble, irritated at the subject change and remembering what Alistair said about me not putting up a fight when he brought me here.

“Did he kidnap you?”

“It's... no, you know what? It doesn't matter what I'm doing. I've been looking for *you* for a year, Luce. Do you understand what I gave up to try to find you? The people I've cut off, just because no one but me believed you were still alive?”

Wet, hot tears sting my eyes, and I reach up with one wrist, dabbing them away.

“Yeah, you've seemed real torn up about it while living with the literal enemy.”

His flippant attitude feels like a slap to the face, and I ball my hands into fists, the tears drying immediately. “You don't get to pass judgment. You have no idea—”

“Shut up,” he snaps, whirling on me and clamping his palm over my mouth again.

We collide with the wall, and he smooshes us so we’re pressed like pancakes against the stone, keeping his head turned toward the front of the property.

The sound of wheels crunching on blacktop fills the air, and what I assume to be the electric gate to the house whirs open, allowing a tinted Town Car entry.

Alistair’s car.

Not the Lexus he owns, but the official vehicle funded by the people he uses to cart him around between events. It pulls into the circular driveway, and a few moments later, a door slams shut, indicating whoever is inside has gotten out.

I try to kick my leg out and signal to Alistair, if he’s the one who’s just arrived, so he at least knows I’m not *gone*, just currently indisposed.

If he chases when he thinks I’ve run, I’m not sure I want to know what he’d do if he thinks I’ve been taken.

Goose bumps tease the surface of my skin, and I push the thought of him burning the island down to find me out of my mind.

“Stop it,” Lucian growls, kicking my leg back. “He can’t see me.”

My eyebrows draw in.

“I’m in trouble, Cor.” His voice is barely above a whisper as he looks to me, then back out front. Seeming to decide the coast is clear, he takes a step back, releasing me, and then smooths his hands over the front of his shirt. “I’m in *deep* shit, and I need your help.”



Knocking on Cora's bedroom door, I drag a hand through my hair, trying to siphon the patient Wolfe gene.

The longer she ignores me though, the more difficult that gets.

Every fiber of my being screams at me to bust the door down. Eliminate the partition separating us and then remove every door in the house so I'm not kept from her again.

That would terrify the girl, I'm certain, but the relief it would give me would almost be worth it.

I knock again, jiggling the knob for good measure.

Blood stains the cuff of my dress shirt, peeking out at me from the sleeve of my jacket, and I consider changing for a moment.

Just as quickly, the thought passes. No sense in putting on airs now when she's already fully aware of my propensity for darkness.

"*M'eudail.*" Pressing my ear against the door, I stand completely still, listening for even the slightest hint of her inside. "Please open the bloody door."

I'm not sure how I've resorted to such a state of pathetic want, but here I am.

Desperate, just the way she likes it.

The paper in my hands crinkles as the side of my fist collides with the door—*Form to Incorporate and Declare Nonprofit 501(c)(3) Status*.

Aplana doesn't have an animal shelter, so I thought she could start one.

It's not her dog, but it's *something*, right?

Silence radiates up and down the hall, almost answering the unspoken question. I let the bag fall to the floor, trying not to focus on how the house feels far emptier than ever before.

My phone buzzes in my suit jacket pocket, and I take it out, clearing the message from my mum about tea tomorrow. Meeting with her is not very high on my list of priorities on a normal day, but that's especially true right now.

More minutes pass, and still, Cora continues ignoring me. Running my tongue over the inside of my cheek, I suck in a deep breath, telling myself to give her space.

Reminding myself that I've never had a pet, so I'm not able to judge the pain of losing one.

When that doesn't work, I take a step back, lift my foot, and kick the door in.

Wood splinters from where my shoe connects, and the sound echoes in the room.

The *empty* room.

Excitement pricks at my skin, pulling up goose bumps like weeds.

“Hiding again, are we?” I say to the walls, the furniture—whatever will listen and soak in the threat. Perhaps wherever she is, she’ll sense the malevolence in my presence. “Looking for a repeat of the forest, little thief?”

I’m met with an unnerving lack of response; even the sound of her breathing doesn’t register. Heat from her perfect body doesn’t exist in here, as if she’s not been in the room for quite some time.

Walking to the bed, I run my hand over the dark blue silk sheets, noting their cool temperature as well. The pillows are perfectly fluffed, and there’s no swimsuit hanging in the en suite, where she usually puts them to dry.

As I continue perusing the area for clues, a disturbance swirls in my gut, putting me on edge.

Something isn’t right.

In the weeks she’s been a partially unwilling member of my household, I’ve not known the girl to deviate much from her daily routine. In fact, her faithfulness is the one constant I’ve come to count on, considering the chaotic nature of my life otherwise.

I’ve taken to watching her on the security cameras while out and about, enjoying the sight of her in the pool, taking up space I previously thought I wanted clear.

Yet it’s as if she’s not even been here today at all.

Pursing my lips, I leave her room and head downstairs, stopping in the library to check the safe in the wall. A couple of weeks ago, I noticed her eyeing it while I went over blueprints for a potential mall on the northwest coast of the island.

As an experiment, I left the combination unlocked. Just to see if my suspicions about her were true. The next day, a handful of twenties were gone, though she’d left thousands of dollars and a solid gold bar behind.

Proving that, while still a thief, she isn’t stealing to be gluttonous. She’s only taking what she needs, and so I began leaving the safe open and counting the stash each night, so the next day, I’d know if she’d taken any.

Not because I wanted to catch her in the act necessarily, but because it felt good that she was using me for help even if she thought she was hurting me.

She could hurt me all she wants.

I would still want to take care of her.

That realization is more painful than the one I come to as I notice the safe is untouched today. Cursing under my breath, I leave the library and head to the locked closet off the kitchen, putting in the key code.

The door slides open, and I'm met by an extensive monitoring system. Scrolling through the frames on the screen directly before me, I check the doors that lead outside, scanning for an idea of where she's gone.

Unease fogs my brain, so it takes me far longer than it should to notice the time stamp in the corner.

As I scroll, the number doesn't change. It resets over and over, and my jaw clenches as I watch it glitch out.

Someone's tampered with my footage.

After a quick call to the security company, they do some sort of hard reset and retrieve logs from the last twenty-four hours. Pouring myself a spot of tea, I settle on the sofa in the great room, waiting for the files to come through on my tablet.

Sipping the honeyed liquid, I cue up the videos, fast-forwarding through hours of nothingness before I stumble upon two figures dashing past the front door.

Cora and a dark-haired man in a black T-shirt.

My chest tightens, nausea curdling like spoiled milk in the pit of my stomach.

They're holding hands and fleeing the property.

He keeps his face suspiciously out of view of the camera, and she doesn't even look back. Not *once*.

Wrapping my fingers around the porcelain cup, I study her backside,

familiar with her posture and body language at this point that I can ascertain she had no qualms about leaving.

So she wasn't going against her will. She freely abandoned the grounds with someone else. Didn't say goodbye or even have the decency to leave a note.

She just... *left*.

Rage floods my chest cavity, cutting off my oxygen supply and scattering coherent thought. Possessiveness flares up, burning a hole through my head, the longer I sit, staring at the frozen screen.

The teacup in my hand explodes, porcelain splintering into a million little pieces, before I even realize how tightly I'm gripping it. A few pieces nick my skin, and blood beads along my fingers, dripping onto the floor.

A floor I had installed because the azurite reminded me of her.

Fuck. How could I be such a goddamn pillock?

Teenage boys have more sense than me, for fuck's sake.

Perhaps Marshall wasn't completely off the mark. What if she's fucking other people, and here I am, rearranging my entire life to fit her inside of it?

Groaning, I lean back against the sofa and run my hands through my hair. Blood cakes in some of the strands, sticking to my forehead, and the tablet in my lap stares up at me. The back of Cora's head taunts, poking fun at the simpleton she's turned me into, and the man at her side, clutching her hand with an urgency I don't appreciate, only adds insult to injury.

Half an hour passes like that; I'm frozen in place, in time, wondering what I've gotten myself into with this girl. How she's upended my life so catastrophically in such a short amount of time and she doesn't even seem to mind.

Fed up, I push to my feet and head toward the powder room across from the stairs, cleaning my hands and splashing water on my face. I stare at myself in the mirror for a long time, trying to recognize the man staring back.

But that isn't possible when the man staring back isn't a man at all.

He's a beast. Hungry, depraved, and agitated, waiting for his prey to mistakenly wander back into his life.

Resolute, I leave the bathroom and trudge back up the steps, pausing outside her bedroom door. If I do this, there's no return from it. I won't be able to rectify myself to Cora, and I doubt she'll be open to hearing my justifications anyway.

Still, I slip inside the door and pull it shut behind me, enshrouding myself in complete darkness.

Unsuspecting prey is always the most fun anyway.



LUCIAN DRAGS me to some warehouse in the middle of downtown, but by the time we get there, the sun has set, and it looks like a place I won't be leaving alive.

Our leaving the South House is still a complete blur to me; after waiting to make sure Alistair got inside, my brother yanked me along behind him, oblivious to the soreness in my muscles from the thorough fucking I got recently.

Then again, why would he know? I'm taking the secret of how I fell for the politician to my grave.

Frowning to myself, I look out the window, shaking my head to clear the confusion from it.

The secret of how I *fucked* the politician.

Not fell for.

Jesus, Cora, get a grip.

Besides, there are far more pressing matters to attend to right now. I can sulk over my decisions later.

“How are you driving a car right now?” I ask, running my hand over the dash of the Toyota he had parked miles down the street. “Last time I saw you, your vehicle had been repo’d, and your license was one point shy of being revoked.”

Lucian’s leaning against the steering wheel, peering out the windshield. “It’s amazing what a couple of criminal connections can do for you.”

The blood in my veins turns cold, like rain freezing mid-fall. “Is that... where you’ve been all this time? With *criminals*?”

He spares me a single glance. “A little judgy, coming from Mrs. Mayor Wolfe.”

I make a face. “Stop *calling* me that. I told you, I was only staying there while I healed from a car accident.” Pausing, I wait for him to inquire about the wreck or maybe admit to being there when I was stranded because I swear it was real.

But he doesn’t. We just continue sitting in silence, watching the decrepit building before us like two police officers on a stakeout.

“I’m fine, by the way,” I mutter, crossing my arms and wishing I hadn’t gone with him in the first place. I’ll bet Alistair could scare answers out of him since my brother seems keen on keeping truths from me.

God, I’m pathetic. Since when do I need Alistair’s help for anything, least of all something concerning my brother? As if I haven’t spent my entire life learning Lucian’s signs of distress so I could be the exact person he’d lean on and wouldn’t have to seek assistance from anyone else.

Internally, I cringe.

Not exactly a winning endorsement of myself, but whatever.

It is what it is.

People are users; that's just how humanity is wired.

No one's exempt from the rule. Some just choose to be more self-aware of the fact that they play into the cycle.

Across the street, two bald men exit the warehouse, and Lucian slinks down, so only his hairline is visible above the steering wheel. He presses his nose into the leather, sucking in a gulp of air, and I shift in my seat, anxiety scalding the back of my neck.

Pulling my knees into the seat with me, I look at my brother, still awaiting an explanation. He breathes slowly, in and out, pinching his eyes closed, as if trying to actively regulate the timing.

My hand goes for the door, but his whips out, stopping me from wrenching the handle open. "You can't get out."

"Why not? What the hell is going on?"

"I can't..." Sighing, he pulls my arm back to my lap, twisting his fingers around mine. "A lot has happened in the last year. Well, the last few years, and most of it isn't explainable in an hour. There are dozens of moving parts and aspects of my life you can't even begin to understand, Cor."

Glaring, I lift a shoulder. "Try me."

How dare he think there's anything he's going through that I can't handle!

Withdrawing, he drops his head into his hands and lets out a long breath. Again, I find myself staring, studying every little detail about him.

Just in case. Something tells me that mantra might take the place of "it won't happen again," where my brother is concerned.

"A few years ago, I relapsed on a job site."

He looks over at me, but I don't say anything, because... yeah. Duh. Lucian wasn't known for his sobriety back home, which is part of the reason it was so easy to write him off as a lost cause.

Most people find it easier to bury addicts than help them.

“We tried to keep it under wraps, but obviously, that’s nearly impossible to do when you need to be fully, cognitively functioning for stunts. It wasn’t even a conscious thing, you know?” He lets out a bitter laugh. “I was doing so well, and then we went to this party at this bar, met up with these strangers, and... I don’t know. I didn’t want to be the odd man out, I guess.”

Again, he glances at me, as if seeking some sort of validation. Still, I remain silent.

“Anyway,” he continues, “I got fired from the movie, which is a shame because it was supposed to be this big festival hit the next summer. Do you know if it ever released? I kind of lost track of pop culture stuff when...” Trailing off when he takes in my expression, he shifts in his seat, sitting up and checking the warehouse front again.

The bald men from before are gone, having apparently disappeared at some point, which makes him relax slightly.

“Right. So I got fired. Needed cash bad, for obvious reasons, and I didn’t want to go home. You don’t know this, but the last time I left, Mom told me not to come back unless I finished a full project. This movie was my fourth attempt at an actual movie, when I’d been doing smaller productions mostly, and I fucked up *again*. There was no way I could come home and face her.”

Rolling my eyes, I silently curse my mother for making him feel that way. “You know she didn’t mean that, Luce. Mom’s always talking shit. She wouldn’t have wanted you to stay gone.”

He nods, as if he’s already accepted this. A light blush creeps up his neck, and he tugs at the hem of his T-shirt. “Well, it wasn’t just Mom I didn’t want to disappoint.”

I stare, waiting for more.

His eyebrows rise, and I blink, trying to process his silence.

“What, me?” An incredulous sound makes its way past my lips. “You stayed away because you didn’t want to *disappoint* me?”

“At first, yeah. That was part of it.” Smiling sadly, Luce rubs his palms

against the wheel.

“That’s kind of fucked, Luce.” My heart burns behind my ribs, flames eating away at the muscle until it feels like there’s nothing left. Tears scrape at the back of my throat, but I will them away, pressing my fingernails into my knees as a distraction.

Closing his eyes, he exhales. “It wasn’t—”

“I waited for you to come home every day. Made myself look like a lunatic for believing you were still alive and left home because I couldn’t deal with how no one wanted to look for you. And all this time, you were just gone because you were scared?”

“No one asked you to mold your life around my disappearance,” he snaps.

His sharp tone catches me off guard, and I sit back against the door, watching him.

None of the tells he used to have are present, which is both a relief and also a punch in the gut—because it means the animosity he’s showing now is just *him*, not influenced by outside sources.

Considering how close we used to be, the change feels entirely out of character. I’m not sure what to do with it.

My chest draws tight, indignation sitting heavy in my gut. “*You* did. What else was the ‘in case I go missing’ folder for?”

His head turns slowly, eyes narrowing. “The *what?*”

Scoffing, I shake my head, any patience and excitement I had from seeing him now wearing very thin. “Hilarious, Luce. Really.”

Gripping the door handle again, I go to push it open, but his arm whips across the console at the same time gunshots ring through the air.

My limbs seize up as they pop against the vehicle. Lucian shoves me down into the floor, adjusting the wheel and crawling beneath it.

“Shit, shit, shit,” he mutters, locking the doors.

Heart in my throat, I flatten my palms against the seat, trying to see

what's going on through the windows. "Where the hell did you take me?"

"I was checking up on someone."

"Who? A gang member?"

He cringes.

My hands curl into fists. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I needed money—"

Hissing for him to be quiet as a light roves over the seats of the car, I hunker down even more. Regret fills my veins as I go over every life decision that's led me to this point, and I can't believe how unbelievably stupid I've been.

With trembling fingers, I toy with the ring in my nose, wishing for the first time that I was back at Alistair's, still wondering about my brother's well-being. A shadow passes outside the window, and bile rises, scoring my esophagus as my nerves peak.

"How did you know I was at Alistair's?" My voice is soft, barely audible, but I want to know. If it's the last thing I do, I want Lucian's truths.

After everything, I think I deserve that.

He's squished awkwardly on his side, but he manages to lift his head a little, giving me an apologetic look. I ignore it, unwilling to forgive him even a little.

Not when he hasn't even said sorry.

"Because *I* was at Alistair's."

A laugh tickles my throat, and despite everything, I let it out. I'm not sure what else to do.

Another shadow passes around the back of the car, and we both hold our breath. My heart hammers against my ribs, thudding so loud that it's hard to even think, and then Lucian pushes up out of his spot, moves the wheel, and turns the car on.

"What are you doing?" I snap, reaching for his arm as he shifts into drive, then peels out of the area.

More gunshots fire in the distance. My stomach twists into a million little knots, and I curl into myself on the floor, trying to keep the vomit at bay.

“I’m taking you back,” he says, not sparing me a glance. “I fucked with the cameras at his house, but if he realizes that, he’s gonna be pissed.”

“So? I can handle him. Tell me what the hell is going on, Luce. Why were you at his house? Do you…” Dread swirls like a chaotic cyclone inside my chest, and I scramble out from the floor, settling into my seat again. “Do you know him or something?”

“Or something,” he mutters, and I frown because what the fuck does that mean?

“You’re scaring me,” I say, watching the speedometer, unable to tear my eyes away as the numbers creep forward.

Ignoring me, Lucian keeps his face forward, weaving through traffic. “Where’s Laurel?”

“Huh?”

“My dog.” His eyes dart to me, then back to the windshield. “I didn’t see him at the house.”

“My dog, you mean?”

Whipping his head in my direction, he narrows his gaze.

Sudden flashes of memories assault my brain, splitting my focus in half. In seconds, I’m back in the Mustang with Marshall, arguing about Alistair and my supposed sinister intentions toward him.

Déjà vu slaps me across the face, and my fingers claw at the door, trying to get it open. My throat tightens until I can no longer gulp in a single breath, and I feel light-headed, panic filling my lungs like lake water.

“Are you okay?” I hear my brother ask, but his voice sounds light-years away, floating up above my head.

The door pops open, and the ground whips past, colors blurring and warping before my eyes.

“Cora,” Lucian calls, a tinge of fear bleeding through the word, but I’m

not fully paying attention.

I just need to get out.

Tucking my arms, I spin around, bracing my feet and pushing with as much force as I can muster; I'm expecting some sort of explosive impact as I land, not sure if I've judged the angle correctly or cleared the car, but as I land on grass and roll with the thud, I pull my legs up and squeeze my eyes shut.

The car squeals, brake lights bleeding through the backs of my eyelids, and I let out a long, laborious breath.

A sharp pain slices through my ribs, and I reach up, pressing my palm over the site. Something cold seeps through my shirt, but my muscles ache too badly to assess properly.

"Jesus fucking Christ." Lucian's hushed, frantic whisper comes. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

"There's this thing called post-traumatic stress disorder," I cough out, rolling onto my side and clutching my chest. "You should look into it."

"I wasn't going to hurt you, Cor." He has the gall to sound offended.

"Whatever," I say, beyond over this entire encounter. "Can you just... I don't know... call a cab or something?"

He's quiet for a long, long time. So long that I have to open my eyes to check and see if he's even still here.

Hands on his hips, he stares down at me, an unreadable expression on his face. A beat passes, and he bends down, scooping me into his arms.

I tense up as he starts toward the car again, and he sighs, dumping me into the back seat without a word. Gritting my teeth against the pain, I sit up and reach for the door as he climbs up front, but he activates the child safety lock, trapping me inside.

"Just... I'll take you back, okay? I'm..." He doesn't finish the sentence, opting instead to start the engine and begin driving again.

I stare up at the stained ceiling, the scent of cigarettes clawing at my

nostrils, wondering if I'll ever get an apology from him.



MY SWEET LITTLE nymph doesn't notice me when she enters her room.

Perverse, wicked pleasure erupts in my bones at the realization that she thinks she's escaped my wrath.

Light spills in from the hall behind her, framing the curves of her silhouette. Even in just a pullover sweatshirt and leggings, she's so fucking beautiful that it makes my chest ache.

Wanton need pulses through my veins, and I clutch my knees with a violence mimicking the turmoil in my heart. As badly as I want her, I crave her apology more.

If I have to pull it from her tongue, then so be it.

I watch, my entire body rigid and primed, as she closes the door and

walks over to the side of the bed, letting her hair loose. She shakes it free, raking her fingers through the strands.

Taunting me.

Tempting me.

Shoving her arms into her sweatshirt, she pushes it up, tugging it over her head. Everything she does is plagued by slow motion, drawn-out movements that torment me, even in the half-dark.

Moonlight spills across her back, highlighting muscles cut from years of swimming, and I'm mesmerized by the rippling expanse as she bends and reaches for her leggings.

My cock stiffens as she shimmies them down her hips, kicking out of the fabric so she's standing there in just a black thong.

I move slowly, careful to avoid scuffing my shoes on the floor, and loom over her from behind. From this vantage point, she's so small and fragile-looking, though I know her to be anything but.

She sucks in a sharp breath, and I feel the intake in my lungs.

Slowly, I lift my hand, brushing blue locks from her shoulder, avoiding direct contact with her skin. The air shifts between us, toxins and lust conjoining and making it difficult to think logically.

A hiss comes from her lips, and I lean down, centimeters from the shell of her ear.

"You left," I murmur, inhaling her like a drowning man gasping for oxygen. The scent of chlorine and citrus are there, soft as ever and almost muddled by the stench of cigarettes and aftershave. Maybe even something else, metallic and angry.

Or perhaps that's just the taste left in my mouth as I bite down on the tip of my tongue, trying to stave off the beast that wishes to make her pay for leaving. The one that wants to push her into the mattress and reclaim whatever she let someone else have.

"And I came back." Her voice is strong, certain, but a shiver skates across

her skin.

“A grave mistake, I’m sure you’ll learn.”

The eye roll is almost audible, even to me. “Aw, did I make you mad? What’s the big bad Wolfe gonna do? Eat me?”

Arousal rushes down my spine. “Eat you, ruin you. The specifics don’t really matter much, so long as you’re of no use to anyone else.”

One of my hands glides up her arm, over her shoulder and neck, finally tangling in her hair. Wrenching her back against me, I flatten my free palm over her stomach, sliding down slowly until I dip beneath the elastic of her thong. Her stomach flexes under my touch, caving in, as if trying to put more distance between us.

“Who were you with?” I ask softly, my callous fingertips rough on the smooth expanse of her skin.

She doesn’t immediately answer, and I fist her hair tighter, relishing in the way she leans up on her tiptoes, chasing the movement.

“I don’t fancy repeating myself.”

“Then don’t.” Her neck pulls, trying to dislodge my grip. “Get used to not knowing everything about me, Your Honor.”

“Cute, but I’ll know everything there is to know about you one day, little thief. Mark my fucking words: you will never be rid of me because I’ll know you inside and out.”

Shifting her leg, she drives the heel of her foot into the top of my shoe; it barely makes a dent in the loafers, pressure hitting my toes, but not doing much else, and I stifle a laugh at the attempt. It’s lacking the usual conviction, and I reach down as she goes to redo it, catching her beneath the knee and pulling it inward.

She loses her balance, and I use the change in equilibrium to push her forward, so she’s kneeling on the mattress. I go with her, my front plastered to her back, so I feel when she sucks air in through her teeth, catching herself on her hands.

Knocking them out from beneath her, I let my weight fall on her until her chest meets the bed, and then I sit back, keeping one palm on the middle of her back while the other pulls at her thong.

The silk material snaps with little effort, and I click my tongue in disapproval. “Hope these weren’t a gift from your mysterious lover because he has terrible taste.”

“Actually, *psycho*, you paid for them.”

“Right. Well, remind me to buy you something more appropriate. I like being able to rip clothing off you, but at least make it a challenge.”

Tossing the shredded fabric over my shoulder, I shrug out of my suit jacket, rolling the sleeves of my button-down up while straddling her. Once my wrists are bare, I smooth a hand over one arse cheek, reveling in how soft the packaging of my little nymph is compared to the sour, tough interior.

A woman made for sin—the body of an angel and the heart of a bloody devil.

I can’t imagine anyone more perfect.

And I’ll be damned if someone else touches what I’ve decided belongs to me.

“Tell me who you were with.” I thumb the dimples in her lower back.

She tries to squirm away. “It’s none of your business. We aren’t anything to each other, so this whole possessive thing is really ridic—” A harsh, guttural sound comes from her throat as my thumb slips down her cheeks, pushing between them.

Her head turns into the blankets to muffle the sound, and I press my free hand against my cock, gnawing on my bottom lip. As I slide in and out in slow, devastating strokes, we sit there in silence for a moment, the lewd sounds of her arousal filling the air.

I’m certain she’s covered head to toe in a furious blush, and part of me wants to turn on the light to see, but I can’t bring myself to leave her.

“Goddamn,” I curse, feeling her walls tighten around me. “So *fucking*

wet, but then, for who? Is this for me, or did your little date not live up to the expectations?”

Rolling her head to the side, she makes an incredulous sound. “You’re seriously off the mark, Alistair.”

Humming, I shrug, adding a second finger. I creep dangerously close to blowing in my trousers as her cunt swallows me, and I have to unbuckle my belt and reach in, choking my shaft to keep from coming.

“You were gone for quite some time,” I say, leaning off the bed to reach into the nightstand, pulling out the toy and the lube she keeps hidden there. As if I’d never think to look in the top drawer for her dirty little secrets. “Did he wine and dine you? Spend the evening talking a big game, but when the time came, he couldn’t exactly deliver?”

“This is disgusting—”

She chokes as another finger slips in, and I pull her hips up, propping her arse in the air as I scissor her opening, stretching and massaging until she’s wide enough for multiple objects.

A mewl escapes her throat as I lean in, swiping the tip of my tongue over the aperture in the valley between her cheeks; she almost falls forward, but I catch her around the waist, and she rocks back as I lick up her seam around my fingers, then plunge past the tight ring of muscle.

“Oh *fuck*,” she cries, a slight pained sound tingeing her words.

I pause, pulling back slightly.

Her breaths come in short, sporadic bursts, and she shakes her head. “Why are you stopping?”

“Are you—”

“What’s the matter, Alistair? Scared that the only reason I’m wet is ’cause I’ve been thinking about my *other lover* since I got here, and you have nothing to do with it at all?”

My palm cracks against her cheek, then the back of her thigh, making my nerve endings go numb with the force. She whimpers, moving her hips as she

tries to fuck back on my fingers.

“Don’t you wanna know how good he was?” she taunts, pushing me deeper. “Or, hell, maybe there was more than one because I’m just a slut who runs off with the first people I see, right? Maybe I took it in both ends while I was gone because I’ll just spread my legs for anyone. Apparently, that’s who I am to you, right?”

Ripping my fingers from her, I roll her onto her back and land a series of harsh slaps to the top of her cunt, desperate to make her stop talking. Grabbing the silicone cock at my side, I bring it up, rubbing the lifelike tip over her clit, parting her lips.

She moans, reaching down and covering my fingers with her own, guiding my movements. I watch, completely transfixed by the sight and the sounds, and then I sit back, pushing her knees so they rest on the mattress and sliding the tip toward her entrance.

“Show me then,” I tell her, but Christ, my throat is tight, voice hoarse.

I sound as disturbed and desperate as I feel, and my heart beats wildly inside of my chest. I need to keep her doing things, so I don’t chase down the bloke she ran off with.

Every fiber of my being wants to hunt him down and skin him alive even if I’m certain she is just toying with me. Cora Astor knows how to get under my fucking skin, and here I am, letting her because for some reason, I want her there.

I want her existing beneath my surface, like some sort of parasite, taking up residency in my veins. I wish to break open my rib cage and stuff her inside, so I can keep her safe from the rest of the world.

Keep her *mine*.

We stare at each other, and I’m not sure why I want to entertain the fantasy she’s painting.

Perhaps the urgency—the *hurt*—in her tone spurs me on, telling me something happened, and she isn’t ready to speak about it yet.

Or perhaps it's my own penance, for wanting what I shouldn't.

For desperately trying to keep her here when I know she yearns to be free.

"Show me how he fucked you," I repeat, swallowing around the knot in my throat.

It burns, the image of another's hands on her skin, and as she blinks at me, I think for a moment that she won't do it.

She hesitates. "There really wasn't—"

"Show. Me."

Like the little brat she is, she wraps her hand around the base of the thick dildo, lubing it up before positioning and pushing it in at an angle. Her head falls back as the cock slides in partway, her wrist gliding in smooth, languid motions.

"Was he big?" I ask from behind my teeth. "Bigger than that?"

She shakes her head, and I blow out a breath, her resolve already crumbling. "Not as big as you."

"Yeah?" My chest swells, and I place my other knee on the bed, gripping her knees with both hands to keep her from trying to hide. "How sad for your sweet little cunt. She must've been so unsatisfied."

"She was," Cora gasps, gyrating her hips up against the toy.

My index finger joins the dildo, and I bite back a groan. "Did you think of me? When he had to call in a buddy and you could feel their dicks rubbing against each other from your two tight holes, did you think of how much better it would be if it were me?"

"Yes, yes, God." Her eyes pinch closed as she rides the toy and my finger, and I clutch the base around her hand, driving it in deeper, faster, *harder*. "It's always been you, Alistair. I always think of you."

Arousal clings to her thighs, her lips, and I lean in to capture her clit with my teeth, flicking my tongue against the bundle of nerves as she continues fucking.

When her back bows, I feel her spasm around me, and I switch from teeth

to sucking as she comes violently, a war cry tearing from her mouth like it's been dormant for decades. Her legs quiver, knees bouncing as she rides out the high of her orgasm, and I'm kneeling on the mattress before she's even recovered, letting my shadows fall around her.

"You'll spread your legs for me and *me* only," I growl, pushing my trousers down so my cock bobs free. "You want two at a time? I'll give you exactly that, and you'll never seek pleasure from another fucking soul, or I swear I'll hunt them down and burn them alive."

I give myself a stroke and run my thumb over the silver barbell at my tip, salivating over her silhouette in the bed, and then I grip the backs of her knees, holding her wide open. Her skin glistens, and she still holds the toy deep inside of her; I shift forward, catching the base of the dildo with the inside of my thigh and fist my cock beneath the head, pushing in against the silicone.

It slips back out immediately, and she whimpers, clawing at my neck. Her fingernails scald as they scrape down my throat and over my shoulders, and I grunt, notching myself inside just enough to retaliate. The piercing collides with the rubber, then disappears entirely along with it.

"Oh my *God*," she chokes out, digging her fingers into me.

Pain trickles across my chest, swirling furiously with the pleasure coming from the friction of her cunt and the rubber cock.

"Tight," I rasp, the veins in my forehead bulging as I struggle not to come too quickly. I slide in another inch and almost chew my tongue off at the euphoria washing over me. "So goddamn tight, *m'eudail*. I'm not going to make it."

"Please," she whines, reaching underneath us to cup my balls, massaging them as I squeeze in more.

"That feel good?"

"So so good."

Holding the dildo in place, I start fucking her against it, thrusting with a

precision that causes beads of sweat to percolate along my forehead.

My balls tingle, white-hot electricity shooting through my limbs as her cunt works hard to swallow two cocks at once. God, she looks beautiful, stuffed full like this, stretched to the brim and fucking loving every second, every bite of pain as it morphs cohesively with her pleasure.

“Jesus Christ, look at that; look how you’re taking the whole thing, even with this toy shoved up alongside it. You’re such a pretty, perfect little slut for me, aren’t you?”

“I can take more,” she says, and in turn, I cant my hips harder, pulling back more and slamming in so the air whooshes from her lungs with each collision of our hips. “God, Alistair, yes. You’re fucking me so *good*. It feels amazing... I-I’m—”

She cuts off, and I breathe out a laugh, her praise reaching some itch I didn’t even realize I had. The vocalization that I’m making her feel good though has my balls drawing up as release pounds through me.

“You *will* take more,” I promise, shifting so I’m leaning over her. The dildo slips out, and she screams at the loss, reaching down to push it back in. “I’m dumping all my cum in you, and I want your cunt sucking it all in, okay? I don’t want you wasting a single goddamn drop. You won’t be of use to anyone else with my baby in your belly.”

Toxic? Yes.

Never claimed to be anything but.

Walls fluttering, she nods chaotically, though I’m not even convinced she’s really paying attention to what I’m saying.

“Tell me you need it,” I command darkly, chasing the high of her desire. “Say you need me and my cum.”

Her voice is strained. “I do,” she sobs, thighs quaking. “Fill my pussy, *Your Honor*.”

She only ever says that in jest, yet, for some reason right now, it’s what sends me over the edge; my orgasm rocks through me with such force that all

I can do is push my hips flush against her and let it drain me.

“Take it, *m'eudail*. Take it all. Gonna fill you up, breed you, and keep you here, tucked into my side forever. You're mine.”

Squeezing my balls like she's trying to milk me dry, she peals out an ear-piercing moan, and jet after jet of sticky, hot semen funnels inside her.

“Fuck.” I cough, withdrawing slowly. The dildo slips out with me, and I collapse onto my side, taking a second to collect my bearings.

Opening my eyes a few seconds later, I notice she's still lying in the same position, knees splayed, on her back. Frowning, I slide my hands around her waist, dragging her into me, and gently turn her chin to press an open-mouthed kiss to her lips.

She tenses when I do, and my entire body goes stiff as I taste her, noting the metallic scent from earlier is present along with the salt of her tears.

Leaning up, I reach for the lamp on the nightstand, flipping it on to assess what's happened, and I'm in no way prepared for what I see when I do.



ALISTAIR'S EYES are wide and blank.

Staring but unfocused.

They're glued to me, but I've never felt more transparent.

I feel his cum on the inside of my thighs, leaking down the crack of my ass and pooling on the bed. Normally, I think he'd be hard-pressed to concentrate on anything else, but right now, he doesn't seem to notice.

My fingers twist in the satin sheets, and I move to pull them around me, extremely self-conscious all of a sudden. A pang ripples up my side, like a dozen little knives slicing through muscle, and Alistair gets to his knees, pinning my hands to my legs.

The blanket falls, shaken free by his silent fuming.

“What the hell happened to you?” he asks, raking his gaze over me.

His blue eyes chill me to the bone, and I suck my bottom lip into my mouth to keep the shivering at bay.

Pain shoots across the tender, swollen flesh, and I release it, tasting blood.

Dropping my eyes, I see gravel burn starting at my knees and spreading up the Grim Reaper on the outside of my thigh. My ribs ache, a dark purple splotch marring the skin that he can't seem to look away from.

“Did I...” Alistair frowns, a tendril of inky hair sweeping into his eye. “Did I do that to you?”

I almost laugh, but the expression on his face makes it die on my tongue. My pussy is still sore from the double penetration, but compared to the agony searing the rest of my body and the orgasms, it's the manageable kind of sore.

“You weren't *that* rough.”

“Then what happened? Who did this?” His stare darkens. “Who the fuck were you with?”

“All due respect, I think one thing you'll come to learn about me fairly quickly is that I'm my own worst enemy.”

His pants are still around his knees, so the longer he sits there, watching me, the more comical he looks. Or maybe the pain is making me light-headed.

Releasing my hands, he gently slides his arms beneath me, then carries me into the en suite. For the second time since I've known him, Alistair Wolfe draws me a bath, using his elbow to test the temperature, and ignores my protests by placing me in the water.

This time though, he slides his suspenders off his shoulders slowly, holding my gaze. Even though we just got done fucking, my pussy throbs with anticipation, clutching at nothing as she aches to be filled.

Next is his dress shirt, which he takes care to unbutton as leisurely as possible, one notch at a time. Then his pants, half-undone still, slipping down

his hips and collecting on the floor.

It's obscene how good this thirty-six-year-old man looks naked.

My stomach convulses as he lifts one leg, placing it in the tub behind me. I lean forward, too exhausted to fight the intimacy of this, even as he settles in, yanking me back against him.

For a moment, we just sit like that, and then I feel his hands skating over my skin, assessing me for damage.

"I'm fine," I mutter, not interested in bringing up my brother when I'm not even sure I'll see him again.

The drive home was awkward, and he left without explaining a thing or promising to return.

That cut deeper than his initial disappearance, I think, because before he went missing, I'd gotten so used to him constantly showing up and needing help. It was a routine I'd found comfort in, and one day, it had been ripped out from where I was standing.

Now, despite finding him, I'm starting to realize I might never get that back. The security of being needed by the one person on the planet who swore they'd never leave you.

Alistair's forearm crosses my throat, and his thumb sweeps over my cheekbone. It's the lightest, purest touch, and I don't even notice I'm crying until I feel it.

"I hurt you," he says—and goddamn it, why?

Why does this vile man have to be so fucking soft?

There's a tentative tether stretched between us, and I'm not really sure how it got there.

Drawing my knees up, I shake my head, resting my hands against his thighs. "Never."

"If I'd known you were injured, I wouldn't have taken you so hard."

"I wanted it."

He's silent for a moment, and then he tightens his grip, cupping my chin

as he speaks through clenched teeth. “And what about what I want?”

“What?”

“I said I don’t wish to be the person who hurts you, yet you forced my hand.”

Frowning, I wriggle out of his hold and turn around in the water to face him. He won’t even meet my eyes, and I wish so badly that I could deep-dive into his body and understand what his deal is right now because someone lacking a normal moral compass shouldn’t have such issues with what we just did.

I’m barely even hurt beyond some bruising and scraping, but he acts as if my entire body was shattered.

“You didn’t hurt me.”

Getting up on my knees, I straddle his thighs, sinking down so our pelvises align. He reaches up, running a finger over my nose ring, and I tug at his necklace, smothering a smirk when I see he’s still wearing my old one.

“I’m a big girl, Alistair. I know when my body can’t handle something, and if what just happened had been too much, I would’ve stopped it. But I needed it, okay? I had the most supremely awful day, and you helped me forget about it for a little while.”

He narrows his eyes, like he’s tempted to ask what happened, but I shake my head and press my palm to his lips. Glancing down, I notice a quarter-sized chevron-shaped scar on his chest, close to his heart, and I run my fingers over the roughened surface.

“What happened?”

Alistair scoffs, and I realize I don’t have any right to ask, but still. He answers after a beat, flattening my hand over his pec. “One of my mum’s old boyfriends liked beating on little boys. Normally, he just used his fists. Damaged my hearing a bit that way. But one day, he took a knife and snuck up on me while I was practicing my back float.”

Oh. Well, that explains his attention to sound, and his aversion to

swimming.

My soul aches for him, despite everything.

“You don’t treat me with little kid gloves,” I say after a prolonged silence, the honesty burning a hole in my throat. “And that’s what I l—” Abruptly, I cut myself off, and his brows twitch, his gaze wide and stuck to mine. I swallow, working my jaw as my heart rages. “I... like that about you. People tend not to take me seriously, but you always have.”

His hand comes to my wrist, freeing his mouth and locking our fingers together over his shoulder. The other hand strokes over my ass, and I’m not sure who moves first or if it’s just the water bringing us together naturally, but suddenly, his cock is at my entrance, the silver barbell tapping against my clit, and I lift slightly, thumbing him inside.

As I sink down, he closes his eyes and blows out a long breath. “I like that you don’t need kid gloves,” he says after a moment, cupping my hips. “I like that you’re not afraid.”

I am, though. Of him, especially.

Terrified of the way I feel whole with him.

Spreading my fingers over his chin, I stroke the underside of his sharp jaw, trying to commit the angle to memory. Tilting his head back, I lean in and capture his lips in a soft, all-consuming kiss. It quickly spirals, a cyclone of emotion exploding between us, teeth and tongue and moans, and then I’m fucking him, or he’s fucking me—I can’t really tell anymore.

Water sloshes against the sides of the tub as our collective pleasure floats into the air above us, fogging the bathroom up like little clouds.

He comes inside me again, shaking and clutching and sinking his teeth into my shoulder. Marking me, claiming me like he doesn’t ever want to let me go.

And despite his assertion that I lack any sort of fear, apprehension still seizes my lungs because for the first time ever, I’m not totally opposed to the idea.



“WE BELIEVE we’ve squashed the investigation looking into the ethics surrounding your election,” Ermes says, although I want to laugh because the Barbieri blokes didn’t do shit.

Jonas did. Once you track down the original source of the information, it’s easy to nip speculation in the bud.

I’m not sure why I didn’t hire my brother to do it in the first place since, clearly, Marshall is terrible at his job.

I never did get the information on Cora I asked for weeks ago, and at this point, I’m too far gone for anything to make a difference.

“Right,” I tell Ermes, sipping from my teacup.

The interior of the little Italian eatery Lycia is entirely brick, and the

windows are made up of reinforced, frosted glass, allowing light but no sight in. Just the way the mob likes it.

“So you’ll stop hounding me about shit then?”

He cuts into his chicken parmigiana, giving me a calculated look. “That depends. You gonna start fulfilling your promises, *stronzo*? We have a lot of work to do if you still want a seat in the Senate, and the art position might have worked on the citizens here, but I’m not sure we’ll be able to stretch it for Massachusetts as a whole.”

“Then we’ll pick improving health care or education or something. Who cares what the talking point is? There’s not much I can actually do in two years anyway.”

Ernes frowns, wiping his thumbs on the napkin tucked into his shirt collar. “I remember when you had more faith in the system.”

“I’ve never had faith in the system,” I counter, finishing off my tea. “I had manufactured belief in the people backing me. You’re the only ones who ever seem to get anything done. Hard to beat those who put their money where their mouths are.”

“If not for us, Aplana Island certainly wouldn’t be thriving.” He folds his hands over his lap, leaning back in his seat. “Then again, we wouldn’t be on the cusp of expansion without you.”

The sentence, innocent enough, somehow has an underlying threat. I cock my head to the side, meeting his dark gaze. “Why do I feel like you’re not simply complimenting me?”

He smirks. “Because you’re intuitive, Wolfe. That’s why I’ve always liked you. Certainly more than your father was, and I can’t speak for your brother, but—”

“You won’t speak of my brother, period.” My voice is sharp as it interrupts.

He raises a brow, and I curb the irritation boiling beneath my skin. “That was the deal, Barbieri. You ignore Jonas’s existence, and that includes casual

conversation.”

Humming, he nods. “Protective too. I can see why you ended up being such a skilled shot; men who acknowledge their potential losses in life will do whatever necessary to keep their assets safe.”

I just stare at him.

“No one’s located this Hollis character yet, is all I’m saying. So unfortunately, we have to go on what evidence is provided to us, and that all says *you* have the money. Now, whether that’s true or not remains to be seen, but as far as us renegeing on surveillance? I’m afraid we can’t promise that.”

Throat tight, I reach up and hook my thumb in the cord around my neck, fingering the pendant and the nose ring.

“What about your... *assets*, son?” There’s malice in his gaze as he holds mine, dripping from him like blood from an open wound. “Are they safe?”



MARSHALL TAKES one look at the computer screen and shoves back from his desk, shaking his head.

“No.”

Rolling back on my heels, I check the Rolex on my wrist, avoiding eye contact with him. “I don’t believe I asked a question.”

“You want me to watch the girl who tried to *kill* me a couple of weeks ago?” He blinks, scrubbing a hand over his five-o’clock shadow.

“Forensics said the accident was a result of overcorrection, which puts the blame entirely on the driver.”

“Because she grabbed the fucking wheel!” Crimson creeps over his skin, and he pushes up from his chair awkwardly.

With a brace still on his knee, he stalks to the water cooler in the corner, pouring himself a cup. I’m not sure how long he’s been back in his

downtown office—a little one-room building off the boardwalk—but judging by the clothes hanging on a metal rack and the cot rolled up in one corner, I'd venture a guess that he's been here since I kicked him out.

“I can't keep having this argument with you.” Running a hand through my hair, I glance at Cora's picture on the computer monitor.

“Then stop trying to make me the white knight for the girl you're in love with,” he snaps, and the air tightens around us, like a rope being knotted and tugged.

Silence pulses in the space, thick as snow and just as freezing.

“I don't love her.” A pang pricks at my sternum, but I ignore it, passing it off as heartburn.

Marshall's laugh is hollow. Detached. He glares down at his Styrofoam cup, jaw tense. “You look at her the way I used to look at you, Wolfe.” When he lifts his chin, his eyes are glassy.

Flames rain down my throat, and I clench my hands into fists, just for something to do. Swallowing feels like consuming a million little rocks, but I force it anyway, giving him a curt nod.

What does he want me to say?

I never felt that way about him.

Besides, *used to* implies those feelings are in the past, and it's not like his assessment of me is totally off base.

It's just not something I've allowed myself to think before now.

I'm not used to being affected by anyone so viscerally, but I suppose that's what love *is*—soul-deep and catastrophic. The kind of thing that has the power to effectively ruin you, but that you trust isn't going to.

Tearing my gaze from the blue hair on the screen, I meet Marshall's. “Then you should understand why I want to protect her.”

Later, I show up at Jonas's beach house to discuss his findings on Hollis, and I'm met by his mum instead, sitting on the porch swing out back with a small black dog in her arms.

There's no way...

“Where did you get that?”

Mileena whips her head up, startled. “Jesus, Alistair. You shouldn’t sneak up on an old woman.”

“You’re forty-nine. Answer the question.”

As I approach the porch, I realize she’s got the animal wrapped tight in a towel, and dried blood stains her hands and the terry-cloth fabric.

“I... found him,” she says, though her hesitance makes me wary. “Something happened though. He’s got this awful cut, and he’s lost a lot of blood, and his eyes won’t open.”

My stomach flips, and I take the steps, crossing the porch to her. Bending down, I see his orange collar, and something pinches in my chest.

“I thought maybe Jonas could fix him.” Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, she shrugs, and the red rimming her eyes tells me she’s been crying.

“He’s probably infected.” Lifting my hand, I hold two fingers in front of his nose, waiting. A lone, stuttered breath skates across my skin, and a tiny ray of hope sprouts inside me.

Unwrapping his tiny form slightly, I inspect the wound; it’s a clean cut, four inches long, and though it’s not currently bleeding, the fur matted around it and the swelling tell me it’s not particularly fresh. Pus beads inside one of the flaps, and I lean in when a flash of silver catches my attention.

Wincing, I push against the wound, knowing that the dog must be out of it when he doesn’t protest at all. The piece of silver pops out, covered in blood, and I turn it over in my hand, my veins turning to ice.

A cuff link with the Wolfe insignia engraved on the side.



“THIS IS why you shouldn’t love anything.”

Leaning my head on the concrete, I flatten my body against the side of the pool, sadness weaving itself into my bones. The emotional roller coaster I’ve been on over the last few days has taken its toll, and I can feel myself sinking internally, struggling to stay afloat.

I’ve never been any good at that part. Staying afloat. Swimming itself is different; you’re working toward something, keeping your mind and body active as you reach your goal.

Floating is stagnant. Trying to survive against the odds usually ends with disappointment, and one day, you just start letting the waves take over.

Maybe that’s why I never tried to swim professionally.

Alistair glances at me from behind his laptop, reading glasses sliding down his nose a fraction. “Good Lord, you’re gloomy. I tell you I’ve found your dog, and your reaction is immediate devastation?”

“He’s *barely* alive,” I whine, aware that I sound like an ungrateful brat yet unable to stop myself.

That’s the thing about disappointments; no matter how long you spend trying to make yourself immune to them, they don’t stop hurting. Eventually, all you’re left with is a heart full of bitterness.

“The vet expects him to make a full recovery.”

I huff, annoyed by his calm logic. “Could you just indulge me, *please*?”

“In your plight against love? No. I’m afraid I have a very vested interest in that specific emotion.”

My eyebrows draw in, and I look up at him with suspicion clouding my sight. He says it all so matter-of-factly that it’s easy to convince myself he isn’t talking about *us*.

Still, the unwitting suggestion fills me with unease, and I push off the side of the pool, needing to be farther away from him.

“You could at least take me to see Laurel,” I say after a moment, floating on my back. “How do I know you’re not lying about finding him anyway?”

“I’m not the liar in this relationship, little thief.”

Relationship. My chest grows heavy, and I push my feet into the water, looking over at him and the massive house beyond.

Is he really trying to keep me here?

The fact that he’s been adamant about finishing inside me every night for the past week should be the first clue, but for some reason, the reality of it all is only now settling in. Almost like I’ve been living in some sort of dream state, dicking around like there will never be any consequences.

God, I’m not even on birth control.

Redirecting the conversation, I purse my lips and swim to the other side of the pool. “When can I go back to work?”

At this point, I don't really need the job since Lucian's made himself known and Alistair's been leaving money for me in his library safe, although I'm not sure he knows I'm aware of the intention behind it.

"You won't be returning."

I frown. "Excuse me?"

"Don't pretend you're actually interested in continuing to be my assistant."

"Well, someone has to do it."

"Someone already is."

My mouth drops open, and I fold my arms across my chest, indignant. "Well, that's just great. What am I supposed to do now, sit around and twiddle my fucking thumbs?"

Glancing up, he pins me with a smirk. "Why don't you stick around and find out?"

"If you're looking for someone to just service your dick all the time, you'd be better off finding an escort. I have more important things to do."

"Oh?" Pushing his laptop to the side, he swings his legs over the chaise, a slight breeze ruffling his hair as he leans with his forearms draped over his knees. "What things? What exactly is waiting for you back in Boston? The streets? A severe lack of financial security or even personal safety?"

"Hey, I was managing just fine."

"And I'm telling you, you don't have to *manage*. You can have and do anything you want, Cora. I'm not interested in changing anything about you." He pauses, and the conviction in his tone tugs at my heart, almost pulling me toward him. "You just have to stay *here*."

The back door to the house slides open, and a few moments later, Elena and Lenny come into view, each holding one of the former's kids. They pause, glancing between us, as Alistair and I remain locked in a silent battle of wills until he turns his head, breaking the spell.

My stomach knots, tension coiling tight as I consider his offer. A plea

almost, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't tempting.

He's tempting.

But I still don't know what's going on with Lucian, and it feels wrong to build hope for either of us when I can't be certain I have a reason to stick around. The whole point of me coming to Aplaná was to find my brother, and I did that.

Unfortunately, this attachment formed anyway, and now, leaving might be a million times harder than I thought.

Getting to his feet, Alistair nods his chin at the girls and then heads back toward the house. I swim to the edge, watching his long, lithe form disappear around the hedge, and then look up. Elena's hair is twisted into a long braid, and Lenny's hangs loose, a few strands being fisted by the dark-haired infant in her arms.

"Did we interrupt?" Elena asks, putting her older daughter on the ground. She bends down, uncapping a tube of sunscreen, and smears it over the squirming child's cheeks.

They've been coming over on occasion to lounge around the pool, although I highly suspect Alistair gave them a standing invite just to keep me occupied.

Not that I mind the company, which is surprising.

"Just in time actually." I reach for baby Noelle's feet, squeezing her toes, and try to imagine myself with one of them.

But the image doesn't really work itself out because I've not spent much time thinking about my future. After college, I sort of resigned myself to being Lucian's caregiver forever, and then when he left, finding him became my purpose in life.

Can I even see myself with Alistair long-term?

He's a murderer.

Worse than that, a politician.

I watch Lenny and Elena as they discard their cover-ups, and Elena

climbs down the steps on the shallow end with her daughter. The letters scarred into the top of her thigh are just slightly pink, little puckered slivers of mangled skin that aren't even noticeable really, except that I've spent all of our encounters studying the two of them, trying to figure out what it is that keeps them with their men.

The letters are Elena's husband's initials, and it didn't take much for me to find out all the rumors about him. Granted, she's a known Mafia princess from Boston, but *still*. Just the mention of her husband's name strikes fear into people around here.

Lenny hangs her feet over the edge of the pool, fixing the baby so she's facing outward and propped on her knees. My eyes find the scar tissue around her collarbone—a *W* melted into her tan skin.

I recognize the *W* as the one from Alistair's necklace. The Wolfe family crest or whatever.

His brother *branded* her, and she wears it proudly. Like it's some kind of honor rather than a means of ownership.

God, I'm a judgmental bitch.

What do I know anyway? She seems happy enough, so maybe the symbol was put there with her consent. Maybe she loves him so much that she can't imagine *not* having the reminder of him on her flesh at all times.

Maybe not all people are so starved for genuine love and affection, and they're more capable of acknowledging the real deal.

Neither of these girls seems to be sitting around, waiting for the other shoe to drop even though they're involved with very dangerous men.

They're *happy*.

Loved.

Even my mother had a hard time looking at me after my father left, and no matter how she took care of me, the resentment was always present. That's why I pushed so hard to become Lucian's protector because if he needed me, he couldn't leave.

And then he stopped needing me, and now... I don't know.
How do you heal a broken heart when you've just noticed its fractures?



ARMS FOLDED tight against my chest, I stalk into the home gym, realizing a moment too late that it's empty. Alistair stands just outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, a golden bow and arrow poised in his arms.

He aims for a target across the side yard, and I'm dazed for a split second by the absolute grace in his posture, the ease with which he bends his elbow, pulling back and releasing the arrow.

A flutter ripples through me, and I walk closer, trying to get a better vantage point.

The arrow lands dead center, and I watch him set the equipment down, then reach into the waistband of his athletic pants and pull out a pistol. Adjusting his stance, he raises his arms, staying very still.

His biceps tense as he stares down the target, and with a minuscule twitch of his finger, the gun fires, a bullet whipping through the air and, again, hitting the center of the board.

I'm distracted by him running the back of his thick, corded wrist across his forehead, so I don't notice when he spots me. A smirk tugs at one corner of his mouth, and he reaches for the glass door, cocking an eyebrow.

"Want to join?"

Clearing my throat and hoping the heat in my cheeks isn't visible, I step outside, eyeing the gun in his hand.

"Shouldn't you be doing this in a field somewhere?"

He chuckles, pulling me so I'm standing in front of him. "I do my best hunting at home." His voice is a smooth caress against my ear, and I shiver as he slips his arms around me, lifting mine in front of us.

“Sure you want to teach me to shoot?” I quip as he removes the pistol from my line of sight, shoving it into the waist of his pants. “I’ve only threatened to kill you three times.”

“Twice,” he corrects.

I shake my head, my skin erupting in goose bumps as he pulls a four-fingered leather glove over my hand, then drags his fingers up my arms. “That was the third time.”

“Ah, well.” He lifts the bow instead, guiding my hands to the proper places. “I’ll take any excuse to have you in my arms. Shoot away, *m’eudail*.”

With his assistance, I manage to fit the arrow into the notched point in the bow, and he draws my rear elbow back, stretching the string.

“You always call me that,” I say softly. “What does it mean?”

He doesn’t respond for a few beats. “I grew up away from family because of my mum’s work, but she always made a point to stop in Edinburgh every summer so we could see her parents. My granddad called my grandmother *m’eudail*, and I’ve yet to meet another man more in love with a bird than he was with her.” He pauses, dropping his hands to my hips. “It sort of just rolled off my tongue the night we met.”

My heart beats erratically inside my chest, and I suck in a deep breath, squinting at the target across the yard. I don’t want to think about the connotation he leaves there, so I focus instead on the weight of the bow, noting that he didn’t actually translate the word.

“It could mean heinous bitch, and you’d never know.”

“It doesn’t. Now, line the center with the tip of the arrow,” Alistair coaches, his breath hot against my scalp. “And then release.”

I do, and the arrow whips out, landing a few feet away. “Well, we can’t all be world-class archers, I guess. Also, you’re a bad teacher.”

Walking around me, he goes to retrieve the arrow, and I slip past, heading for the target to see how accurate his aim is. As I get closer, I see a piece of paper pinned to the center circle, a bullet hole through the top, and I reach up,

yanking the arrow free.

The air expels from my lungs in a single exhale, and I freeze in place as familiar gold eyes stare back at me from the printed page.

Lucian?



BENJAMIN PRATT, the deputy mayor, raps his gavel against the podium, silencing the crowd.

“Everyone in favor of tabling discussion of the city buying out the marina for municipal use until Lionel Rafferty returns from his family home in Florida, say I.”

A dozen city official hands go up in the air, and I slip mine along with them, biting back a smirk. Rafferty won’t be coming back anytime soon unless they happen to find his bones at the bottom of the Atlantic.

The old bloke was getting a bit too liberal with his curiosity, asking around town for information on last year’s election, so I sent Jonas to his doorstep. Pity he was a rat because the more he uncovered, the more I

realized how poor of a job Marshall had been at covering my tracks.

Voting over, the officials at the table get to their feet and filter from the room, leaving just Benjamin and me at opposite ends of the table. Since taking office, I go out of my way to avoid the deputy mayor; he's no less corrupt than I am, but there's a self-service to his brand.

And when the only person you're loyal to is yourself, you're bought out far too easily.

"There's also the matter of Mayor Wolfe's fraternizing with his direct subordinate."

My eyebrows rise, and I steal a look at Pratt, sitting back in my seat. "I'm certain I don't know what you mean."

He rolls his eyes, smoothing a hand over his blond pompadour. "There were witnesses at the art gala, Mayor. You threatened a city worker and then accosted your assistant in public during a charitable event."

"Would you rather I felt her up in the parking lot?"

"I'd *rather* you not do it at all." His frown is rigid, and he tugs at his suit cuffs, clearly nervous. "It sets a very dangerous precedent, and frankly, the city has the means to sue you for violating their trust."

"Their trust?" Rubbing the underside of my jaw, I lean back in my chair, not dropping his harsh stare. "Aplana might take issue with it at first, but everyone enjoys a good love story. I'm certain once they learn the nature of my relationship with Ms. Astor, they'll be less inclined to riot."

When he opens his mouth to say more, I hold my hand up, silencing him.

"However, I'm not sure the same can be said for the kickbacks you take or the criminal sentences you get reduced so fines can be increased. I might be frivolous with my assistant, but I'm certain Aplana at large would attest that I have more of an aptitude for..." Pausing, I unbutton my suit jacket and brush one lapel to the side, brandishing the Glock holstered to my hip. "Justice." My coat falls closed again. "Who do you think they'd feel safer under?"

Benjamin scoffs. “Only because they don’t know about you.”

“I’d be careful wielding *any* knowledge about me so publicly, Pratt.” I point up at the corner of the ceiling, where a security camera hangs. “Prying eyes and all.”

Our meeting officially adjourns, and I leave the courthouse after receiving a text from my brother. He meets me out front, a blue leash in hand. Laurel sits at his feet, a large plastic cone wrapped around his neck, and I’ve never been so happy to see a dog in my entire life.

“I’m not an errand boy,” Jonas announces when I’m in earshot, his mouth barely moving. “Next time you send me to the vet, it’d better be to pick up equipment and not some bloody fucking mutt.”

Swiping on my phone, I send his payment through, holding the screen up for him to see. “Six figures to deliver an injured dog? Come on, brother. That’s not even a crime. You can’t beat that.”

He rolls his violet eyes, handing me the leash. Under the cone, I see he’s snapped the new blue collar I ordered into place; the material shines against Laurel’s black coat, and I cannot wait for the look on Cora’s face when I bring him back.

“That might not be a risk,” Jonas says, reaching into the pocket of his leather jacket and pulling out a folded piece of paper. “But you keep having me look into shady characters, and I know, one day, someone’s going to get tipped off about it.”

“You’re supposed to be stealthy.” Reaching out, I take the paper, unfolding it.

“Don’t worry about my skill; worry about the people fucking you over, Alistair.”

As I unfold the paper, Laurel shifts closer to me, sniffing at my heels, and I subconsciously reach out, stroking behind his ears.

“First off,” he says, holding one finger up, “that money you said was being embezzled? There’s no paper trail. No offshore account where it’s

being held. In *fact*, I managed to gain access to the original bank in Utah, where the money is being kept, and it looks like it hasn't ever been touched. The amount supposedly stolen has been sitting there for weeks."

My face contorts. "How is that possible? Even the Barbieris said it was gone."

Jonas rolls his eyes, and I'm certain he's annoyed with the fact that I've been keeping the full identity of my employers a secret.

I finally broke down though after my conversation with Ermes. I don't need them breathing down my neck, thinking I'm some sort of thief, which would potentially endanger the people in my life even more.

Initially offended that I was trying to protect him while still hiring him to take care of hits for me, Jonas acquiesced quickly and launched his own investigation.

Clearly, I should have confided in him sooner.

"Ernes Barbieri and his henchmen aren't looking closely enough. They hear a rumor, and they act on it; that's the problem with that family. They don't do their due diligence, especially in the higher ranks, because they expect their soldiers to take care of things. But soldiers and associates can be corrupted."

"So what? Who's..." I trail off, recalling who first told me about the embezzlement.

Laurel whines at my side, and my entire body goes rigid, unease leaking into my psyche.

Jonas folds his lips together, rubbing the back of his neck. "Remember how I said I thought someone was framing this Hollis character?"

I nod, only half-listening and having to watch his lips closely so I don't miss anything.

"Well, while looking for him, I thought about what you said with that Cora girl, how she seemed to appear out of nowhere. And it got me thinking... nothing is a coincidence, right?"

“Some things are,” I mutter, straightening my spine. Already, I don’t like where this is headed.

“No, that’s the point. Everything in this life has a logical explanation to it, even seemingly innocent girls with blue hair.”

“I do hate when you speak in riddles.” Flattening the sheet against my chest, I pull it back and study the picture on the front side. Confusion knits my brows, and I lift my chin, meeting his gaze. “Why are you showing me a picture of Hollis?”

His forehead creases, and he takes a step forward, looking down at the page. Moving backward, he gives me a funny look, and a rotted pit sinks in my stomach, festering when it settles at the bottom.

“That’s not Hollis,” Jonas says even though I can *clearly* see the shaggy brown hair, the gold eyes, and the smattering of freckles dusting his slightly crooked nose.

“I think I would remember him.”

Snatching the picture from my hands, he flips it over, showing a missing person’s report.

“That’s Lucian Astor. He’s been missing for a year, and I just found his body at the quarry.”



“SO ARE YOU COMING HOME THEN?”

Chewing on my thumbnail, I glance out the window of Alistair’s bedroom, my phone pressed tight to my ear. I finally broke down and bought a burner when I got fed up with not being able to contact Violet, especially since I needed to tell *someone* my brother’s alive.

Stretching my feet out in the king-size bed, I luxuriate in the cool white sheets, pulling them to my chest. Waiting naked in this bed probably isn’t the best way to say I’m unsure of how I’m feeling; if anything, it probably paints the exact opposite picture, but oh well.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?

Those who let fear rule their lives rarely live happy ones.

“I don’t know yet,” I tell my cousin, my toes curling when I see a pair of headlights light up the front lawn.

“Your mom would love to see you.”

“And I would’ve loved if she’d had a little faith in me a year ago.” *Or ever.* Rather than labeling me as her problematic, dramatic, free-spirited child, she could’ve believed me when I said Lucian was still alive. “Now, she’ll have to deal with only seeing me at Christmas.”

“Gonna bring Mayor Wolfe home to meet the family?”

“Only if I feel like running him off.”

Violet giggles. “I’m proud of you, you know?”

My face scrunches up even though her words flood my chest with warmth. “Okay, well, don’t make it weird.”

“I’m just saying. I feel like you’ve changed a lot for the better over the last couple of months, and... I don’t know. I’m glad you’re letting yourself be kinda happy for once.”

I open my mouth to ask what she means or to deny that I’ve ever not been happy, but I stop myself. Because despite everything, there is a sort of flicker of something alight inside me for the first time.

Part of me wants to acknowledge that it’s only begun since meeting Alistair, but on the flip side, it’s not like people can cure you of your insecurities. Someone can do everything right every step of the way, but unless you’re doing the inner work *too*, those old issues are going to crop up.

And when they do, they can ruin you.

But I meant it when I said I appreciated Alistair’s commitment to treating me like an adult. An equal. For all his possessiveness and toxicity, the constant with him this whole time has been his desire to keep me the same.

I’ve never had anyone just accept me, warts and all. Most people find your flaws and think they need to fix them, but he sees mine and likes me anyway.

Maybe that’s what you need for happiness to take root—not for someone

to offer it on some silver platter, but for them to provide the soil and space for it to grow.

Sadness bleeds through the cracks in my heart because I think that's what Lucian was always missing. The unconditional love that makes you feel invincible; even though I tried to give it to him, there were strings attached to me too.

He had to love me back, which immediately negates the unconditional aspect.

So he turned to something he didn't think was capable of hurting him and wound up broken anyway.

The front door slams, echoing up the stairs, and excitement zings through my limbs.

"Okay, Vi, I've gotta go. Tell your parents I say hi." I pause, considering. "Actually, don't. They'll tell my mom, and then she'll know you know where I am."

"Honestly, Cor, do you think she doesn't know?"

"I think if she did, she'd have met me the second I got off the ferry."

Clicking off the call, I throw the comforter back and slip from the bed, pulling a white dress shirt from Alistair's walk-in closet and putting it on. I leave the buttons undone and slide a pair of suspenders from the built-in rack on one wall, gripping the leather in one hand.

Going out into the hall, I pad toward the balcony, glancing over into the foyer below as I swing the straps at my side. "Oh, Mr. Mayor, your assistant's got a job for you to do..."

The words die on my tongue when I'm met by brown hair instead of black and dark eyes instead of arctic blues. Slumping against the railing, I make a face at Marshall.

He holds his hands up, feigning innocence. "Sorry, *little thief*, but you're not really my type."

Clutching the shirt closed, I take a step back. "What are you doing here?"

Getting kicked out once wasn't enough?"

Gripping the banister at the bottom of the stairs, he puts one foot on the first step. "What can I say? I like a little pain." Tilting his head, he takes me in, noting the suspenders. "Ah, I'll bet you do too. No wonder Wolfe is so into you."

"Maybe he just likes me because I'm not a jealous bitch who tried to kill his assistant."

His brown eyes glitter in the chandelier light. "Too bad he doesn't know what happened that night. God, can you imagine the *fear* he'd have if he knew?" Moving up the stairs, he chuckles. "Doubt he'd have asked me to come and keep you safe—that's for sure."

"Safe?" He takes another step, and I glide back one. "From what?"

"Oh, who knows? You stay in this life, and there's no telling what kinds of things might come up. Alistair is, after all, a dangerous criminal, working for one of the most lethal organizations in the world."

Swallowing, I press my palm to my thigh to subdue its shaking. I already knew that, obviously, but the verbal confirmation fills my stomach with dread.

But even though that might be true, what I've learned in the last year or so—especially the last couple of months—is that gray is my favorite color.

If I had a real problem with this life, I would've run when Alistair shot that man at the mayor's mansion.

"I'm sure your brother can tell you all about it."

My head whips up. "What?"

He's about halfway up the staircase, and he pauses, rolling his eyes. "Still playing innocent? All right then. Annoying, but I've gotten used to that from you by now."

My fingers curl over the railing, and then I scoot backward, edging away from the balcony as he rounds the top of the stairs.

"How do you know my brother?" I ask even though my entire body is

screaming at me to run. My fight-or-flight reflexes are tingling, trepidation washing through my bloodstream.

“I know everything about you, Cordelia. Your fucktoy told me to look into you because he thought it was *such* a coincidence you showed up after he met you in Boston.” He pauses at the top of the stairs, leaning against the banister. “It wasn’t though, was it? You’d been planning to show up for a while.”

“Because my brother had been missing. This was the last place anyone had seen him, and I had...” I trail off, the memory of him taking the missing person folder suddenly resurfacing, like a ship thought lost at sea. That’s what I was doing in his room the night Alistair attacked me.

But then Alistair never even acknowledged the attack or my snooping.

And Lucian...

He never asked about the folder.

Acted as if he didn’t even know what I was talking about.

Marshall’s eyebrows arch. “Had what? Clues? A *feeling*?” His laugh is bitter, and he reaches up to grab the back of his neck. “God, you’re just as pathetic as him. Used to follow Alistair around like a lost little puppy in desperate need of guidance. Which, looking back now, I guess he kind of was.”

My frown deepens. “Are you high? What the fuck are you talking about? My brother didn’t know Alistair.”

“Okay, well, explain why we all spent our summers together when Lucian would come to the island. Who do you think got him all those jobs on different production sites? He wasn’t talented enough to pull that off on his own, but *Alistair* has connections. No one tells him no... of course, I don’t have to tell *you* about the man’s power.”

Blinking, I try to piece together the puzzle he’s thrown at me, but I don’t have the corners or the edges, and I’m not sure what the picture is supposed to look like.

Lucian knows Alistair? They were friends?

My heart drops.

Even more?

Is that why he was at the house when he tackled me in the bedroom the other day? Because he's just been around, waiting for his old friend? His... lover?

Maybe Alistair knew this entire time, and that's why he pursued me in the first place. As some kind of sick fucking joke. Toying with my affections just to mess with Lucian—or worse, to get back at him for something.

Nausea curdles in my stomach, and I swallow the bile that rises, scalding a path up my sternum. *How could Lucian have this entire life and never tell me about it?*

Pinning me with a dark look, Marshall purses his lips, then peals out another laugh. “Oh, Jesus. You don't even know? Guess you and Lucy boy weren't as close as he made you out to be.”

That makes my blood boil, and I take a step in his direction, fisting my hands at my sides. The leather cuts into my palm, but I ignore the slight sting, glaring at Marshall.

“You don't get to talk about Lucian like that.”

His grin is lazy. “What're you gonna do, little thief? Try to kill me again?” He moves forward, his feet sliding against the granite floor. “Should've finished me off in the Mustang. I won't give you another chance.”

“I don't need you to give me anything,” I say, backing up now. “Come near me, and I'll rip your fucking throat out.”

“Feisty. I'll bet you're a firecracker in bed. I can't usually get it up for girls, but, hey, knowing you've got Alistair's jizz floating around inside of you might do it for me. Why don't we head into one of these rooms, give Mr. Mayor a nice little show to come home to?”

Disgust bubbles in my stomach, and I just stare at him, continuing to put

space between us. My ass collides with the balcony, and I reach behind me, steadying myself against it.

“Something’s really wrong with you,” I tell him, darting my gaze to the left and right, assessing my means of escape.

“Yeah, but we already knew that. Too bad your boyfriend and your brother aren’t as intuitive as you; otherwise, they wouldn’t have trusted me in the first place.”

When he gets a few feet away, he stops, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“It was entirely too easy to lure Alistair to Boston months ago. I just made up a bullshit investigation and told him it required his help. The man’s hero complex is buried deep beneath layers of ice and violence, but I knew he wouldn’t be able to resist. All I wanted was for your paths to cross, so when you showed up here later, the rest of my plan would be easier to ground in reality, but then he had to go and fuck it all up by sleeping with you.”

My chest tightens, apprehension raining down my spine, acid churning in my stomach. I clutch the suspenders harder, my knuckles bleaching, and lean into the banister.

“What plan?”

He narrows his gaze, as if confused by my question. But he doesn’t answer.

“What’s your goal here then? Kill me and ride off into the sunset with Alistair?” I cock my head to one side, smirking. “You really think he won’t care if I’m dead?”

“Oh, no, I’m counting on him caring. A lot in fact because I think your death will send him off the rails.” Blowing out a breath, Marshall places his hand on the railing, right beside me. “There are people willing to pay large sums of money for Alistair’s head or loyalty, and it will be much easier to get if he’s not of sound mind.”

The heat from his body scalds my hip, but not in a good way.

It’s like freezer burn, a cold, stinging sensation that I feel in my soul.

“See, Alistair’s biggest problem has always been how calm and collected he forces himself to be. He does it to protect his loved ones, however few they might be, but there have been a couple of instances in which he’s been goaded into revealing the rabid beast that lives beneath the suits and PR smiles. Did he tell you about the officer he executed, just for attempting to bring you in after the accident?”

I shake my head, furrowing my brows. I remember him finding me, but beyond that, the images are fuzzy, blocked out by the pounding in my head and blood obscuring my vision.

He killed someone for me?

Why doesn’t that freak me out the way it should?

“Yeah, well, I guess he didn’t take very kindly to the charges they were laying on you even though they were warranted. You *did* grab the wheel after all.” Marshall scoffs, working his jaw. “Really, it shouldn’t have had to go that far, because he should’ve gotten rid of you the night you were spying at the mansion. Anyone else would’ve killed you on the spot, or at least followed you home to intimidate you into silence. Imagine my surprise when Alistair just wanted to wait you out. I had to go to your hotel myself that night and rough you up a bit.”

That was him? No wonder Alistair never said anything about it. Suddenly, the creepy folder in Marshall’s room makes sense.

“But whatever. I should’ve known better. If I hadn’t been stuck in the fucking hospital after the gala because of you, I wouldn’t have given anyone the opportunity to find you.”

Reaching out, he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. I force myself to stay still, willing away the shudder that threatens.

“Don’t worry though. I don’t make the same mistakes twice.”

His fingers graze my chin, and my nostrils flare. “I get wanting to hurt Alistair because, *clearly*, he did a number on you, but didn’t you say Lucian was your friend? Don’t you think murdering his sister might put a damper on

your relationship?”

“Lucian and I aren’t friends,” Marshall says, and, fuck, the present tense word choice has unease buzzing along my brain. “We’re more... reluctant partners, working together toward the same common goal—destroying Alistair.”

My eyes burn, betrayal hot on the back of my tongue. “He wouldn’t want you to hurt me.”

“Why, because you still think he just wanted you to come find him? News flash, bitch, I’m the one who sent you that missing person folder.”

Denial flares in my stomach, unable to make sense of his words. “You’re lying. Lucian is here, and he wanted me to come. There’s no way he’d be okay with what you’re doing now.”

A door down the hall opens, and my breathing stalls out. Shaggy brown hair and gangly limbs step out, moving into the light.

“Whose idea do you think it was?”



LAUREL BARKS incessantly the entire drive back to South House.

We stop briefly at Marshall's office, but the place is empty. Not entirely surprising since, technically, he's supposed to be Cora's unofficial bodyguard, but it is a bit worrisome.

If he's been concocting schemes behind the scenes, I don't know where they end or what their scope is. Something tells me that Hollis's manufactured involvement and the discovery of his body in the quarry aren't mere coincidence though.

When I turn onto our road, Laurel continues barking, wagging his tail as he stares out the window. I'm not even sure how he has the energy to keep it up, given that he was only just released from the vet this afternoon, but

perhaps his excitement drowns out any discomfort.

He knows we're going back to see his owner, but I'm not certain of what to do once we arrive. I'm still struggling to wrap my brain around what has apparently been my reality for a while now—Cora is Hollis's younger sister.

A sister he never once mentioned in all the years we knew each other and certainly didn't warn me about.

Perhaps if he had, I wouldn't have gone after her.

My heart stutters inside my chest, calling my bluff.

And Hollis isn't really Hollis at all, but Lucian Astor? The poster child for drug abuse and unfortunate circumstances that everyone in their hometown and family wrote off as a lost cause.

Now, he's dead.

An ache flares behind my temples, and I reach up with one hand, trying to scrub it away.

Christ. What a bloody fucking mess my life's become.

"How am I supposed to tell Cora about her brother?" I ask absently, or maybe I'm asking the dog for advice.

His big brown eyes blink up at me, and he tilts his head, huffing.

Stepping over the console, he pushes his head against my hand, and the corner of my mouth lifts with my fingers as I thread them through his fur.

"Going to assume you're telling me not to worry."

Laurel licks my palm, and I try to will myself to relax. Whatever the reasoning is behind all of this, I'll discover it with her by my side or not at all.

An explanation doesn't matter without her.

Slowing my Lexus to a halt as I approach the house, I grip the steering wheel until my knuckles ache. There's a vehicle I don't recognize parked out front, turned off and stalled beneath a tree off to one side.

I frown, pulling my phone from my pocket and checking the security cameras.

They don't load, and when I try to send a text to my brother, it doesn't send. An error message comes up about disrupted service, and my skin suddenly feels too tight for my body, forcibly squeezing the air from my lungs.

Laurel's bark interrupts my train of thought; he jumps up, balancing his front paws on the dash, nose pointing toward shadows in a second-story window.

My window.

Gritting my teeth, I throw the Lexus into park and shove open the door. Laurel follows, hopping down, and I go to unsnap his cone, unclipping his leash from his collar and hoping he knows how to heel.

Deep down, I'm aware I should be stealthy about this ambush. Something about all of this doesn't feel right, an air of malice hanging about like an omen. Yet I'm having a difficult time not just bursting through the front door and putting a bullet through the skull of anyone who isn't the woman I love.

Fuck me. The woman I love.

I guess Marshall was right.

Jonas's warning about him sticks to the back of my mind, and I'd be lying if I said there isn't the tiniest concern that I'm about to be fucked when I walk inside. The threat of her being in danger though by far outweighs that risk.

"Come on, bud," I whisper, starting around the side of the house, motioning for Laurel to follow. I've no clue how to speak to a dog, but I've heard Cora do it enough times at this point that mimicking her vernacular seems like the best option.

He hobbles along after me, sticking to my ankles, and I reach into my suit and pull the Glock from my belt. We reach the gym's side entrance, and I peer through the glass, trying to see beneath the door to the interior hall.

A tiny glow comes from underneath. Presumably, wherever Marshall and Cora are, they're not directly inside, so I lean in and grip the glass on both sides, lifting the sliding door from its track; it slips out of the lock—a feature

I'd have had fixed long ago if I spent more time at this house, but I'm quite grateful for it at the moment.

Slipping through the doorway, I usher Laurel in and quietly shush him. Anxiety spikes, constricting my throat, but I don't know what else to do. If I leave the dog outside, he runs the risk of getting lost or abducted again.

I'd rather he blow my cover early than have to tell Cora he's gone a second time.

Pressing my ear to the interior door, I pinch my eyes shut and listen; voices murmur on the other side, but it's almost impossible to determine their trajectory.

Because of the lack of furniture and the granite, sound travels through the South House very fast, so it's possible they're on the second story, like the shadows suggested, and I just can't tell.

Laurel paws at the threshold under the door, scratching as he sniffs around, and I use my foot to shuffle him back a bit. My heart thrashes against my ribs, so hard that I think it might shatter them, and I flatten a palm over my chest, trying to calm myself.

Any hunter worth his salt knows how to force their heartbeat to quiet. It's an imperative skill, so your pulse doesn't distract from your target or make your prey privy to your presence.

The stakes for me just usually aren't so high.

Hunting animals and unsuspecting criminals is one thing. That's what my father taught me to do, and it's what I've spent my life mastering.

But when the hunt is double-sided, things get a bit complicated. Not necessarily more difficult, but I can't very well approach the situation the same as if it were just me here.

I brought Cora into my life. Forced her to stay within the confines I created, under the guise of keeping her safe, yet I'm the one putting her in the direct line of danger—*again*.

Swallowing over the knot in my throat, I reach for the doorknob, twisting

it a fraction to test the springs. They're fairly quiet, so I continue turning the black metal, leaning to the side to squint down the hall.

Nothing exists in my immediate vision, so I peel the door back more, pausing frequently to ensure I remain undetected. My palm breaks into a sweat as I step out, and I adjust my grip on the Glock, keeping it close to my thigh as I slide along the wall toward the stairs.

The baseboard creaks as I creep forward, and I glance down, noting that Laurel has disappeared. Cursing silently, I freeze in place, my spine stiff as I wait to find out if he's gone around and found Marshall before me.

No barking or growling comes, and no one shouts at an intruder, so I have to assume he's run somewhere else and left me behind.

Man's best friend, my arse.

When I get to the end of the hall, I glance out at the living room, trying to make out figures or shadows in the darkened area. All I see is meticulously placed furniture, staged in the same place it's been since I had the floors in the house replaced.

Flattening myself against the wall, I clench my jaw as voices float through the foyer; the edge lacing Cora's sends a wave of unease through me, and it takes every ounce of my willpower not to make myself immediately known.

"...not sure what killing me accomplishes."

My heart lurches into my throat.

"Indirect destruction is often just as delicious as doing the dirty work yourself," another voice says, the treachery from Marshall's presence neither surprising nor less painful than if it'd been someone else.

Pain sprouts in my stomach, cementing itself in my marrow.

"If he's too torn up about you being gone, he's susceptible to making poor decisions, and pinning him for treason against his employers becomes a thousand times easier."

Despite the fear present, Cora still manages to be snarky. "You must not

think very highly of Alistair if that's what you believe would happen. At what point have you ever known him to lose control like that?"

Why is she having a full conversation with the bloke?

I inch closer to the stairs, desperate to see what she's doing so I can get some idea of how to approach. If I move any farther out, I'll blow my cover though, and who fucking knows what will happen after that?

"He's never lost anyone close to him. There's no telling how he'll react, in truth, but based on how... passionately he feels about you, I'm fairly certain my estimation is correct. For fuck's sake, he's threatened to de-ball me on more than one occasion just for shit-talking you."

A laugh echoes off the walls, chilling me to the bone. "Imagine what he'd do if he knew about the car accident. Or the day I found you in my bedroom."

My muscles tense, apprehension coiling in my abdomen. What the fuck is he talking about?

"I'll bet you two had no idea I was just down the hall when he found you after you woke up. Didn't know I'd put you in his bed, did you?" His chuckle sends a splash of crimson across my vision. "Then I sat in the closet in your room, waiting for chaos. Gunshots, screaming, something. One of you was bound to attack the other, but it never came. Instead, you ran outside, and like a love-sick loser, he *followed* you."

The memory of taking Cora in the forest, on the edge of that cliff, is a warm spot in my brain, but it's quickly becoming tainted by the images Marshall's inserting.

If he was here, does that mean—

Cora's steely voice comes next. "You took my dog, didn't you?"

Someone claps—him presumably. "Took you long enough to figure that one out. I'm surprised Alistair never said anything about the little clues I left in him." *The cuff links.* He must've gotten them from Hollis at some point in the past. "How is Laurel, by the way? Obnoxious little guy. Had to drive the knife real far into his stomach to get him to stop biting."

A scream cracks through the air, and my body feels tight, wound like a spring and ready to break free. Something thuds against the banister, and I stand there for a minute, listening to their struggle; flesh cracks against bone, and then a gurgling sound floods my senses, and I don't think before I make myself known.

Holding the Glock up as I back out, I keep it trained on the balcony, aiming the second a figure comes into focus.

“Oh, look at that.”

Marshall's is the first face I see, and I dart my gaze down instantly, finding Cora's smooshed into his chest. His palm covers the bottom half of her face, and there are bright pink claw marks tracking down the front of his forearm and his cheek.

His other arm is wrapped around her front, a sharp blade poised horizontally across her throat. She squirms as he shifts forward, forcing her to bend slightly over the railing, and I see the knife press into her skin.

Our eyes meet, and for a split second, I'm back in the bar, seeing her for the first time ever. Completely captivated by her elegance, something soft yet entirely terrifying that I've not seen in another soul before.

I'm following her out into the alley, desperate to get as close as she'll allow. To see if her hair is as velvety as it looks and if those eyes might actually steal my soul away if I let them.

For the first time in my life, I've locked in on my prey, and I want to chase her. Not to harm her or string her up as a trophy, but to *keep*.

Forever.

Like a wild, caged animal, she looks back, trying to gauge if I'm here for her or to continue the cycle of pain.

As if I could ever hurt her.

“I really thought you'd take a little longer to get here,” Marshall says with a small shake of his head. “But of *course* this is the first place you'd go. Fuck the fact that they found Hollis's body in the quarry. You're *in love* now, so

why should that matter?”

“How did you know where we found him?”

He tilts his head back, groaning. Now would be the perfect shot, except that when he moves, he drags Cora with him, blocking himself somehow. As if he’s crouched down behind her or she’s standing on some sort of platform.

“For a smart man, you really haven’t been paying attention, Wolfe. What, did you think the body just magically showed up after all this time?”

Something pinches in my chest, suctioning the blood out as he confirms my suspicions. “Ah. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised since, apparently, you orchestrated the entire witch hunt and falsified the embezzlement claims in the first place.”

“Oh, no, I didn’t falsify anything. Someone did steal a bunch of money from the Barbieris. He just hasn’t moved it yet.” Cracking a grin, he adjusts his grip on the knife, and I see a bead of deep red drip run down Cora’s throat. “Can you guess who?”

My patience is waning, and I’m growing tired of not having my little nymph in my possession. “Cut the shit, Kade. You want something from me? Come and take it. Don’t use innocent bystanders in your ploy to ruin me.”

“You’re a few years too late, Alistair. I no longer want you. I just want you to suffer like I have, sitting here and watching you live your life as if no one else matters. Unfortunately, your precious thief’s as wrapped up in this as any of us. Frankly, you weren’t supposed to go and fuck her and then fall in love with her, but, hey, I’ll consider this killing two birds with one stone.”

“So what? You just planned all of this? Do you really think your dick is big enough for you to be playing God?”

His brows draw in, eyes narrowing into slits. “My plan was to bring her to the island and pin the theft on her. Would be easy since she’s got a rap sheet full of larceny anyway, and her relation was an easy motive. She was *supposed* to tell you about her brother, that way you’d be suspicious of her, and then when the embezzlement charges came up, the puzzle would just slot

into place. You'd kill her, or Barbieri would kill you both, and then Hermes could recruit me instead. But you didn't even notice the similarities between her and Hollis. Or, well, Lucian."

My lungs fill with the betrayal, drinking it in like I've been tossed to sea with no way to stay above the water. I've always wondered how sick of a fuck Marshall is, and I guess this is confirmation that he's no better than the rest of us.

Cora whimpers, struggling against him, and he pushes her farther over the banister; the knife slices a little deeper, and she howls, as if in great pain.

It's nearly impossible to think or breathe as that sound rattles my bones.

Jaw clenched, I aim the Glock at his forehead. "Why, Kade? I want to understand."

"No, you don't." He laughs, but it's off. Broken and empty. "You want to keep me talking long enough, so you keep a good shot."

A dangerous smile graces his features, and he reaches down, shoving his hand beneath the button-down she has on, pawing at her tit. She screams low in her throat, and my sight blurs as rage splits my focus.

"Get your fucking hands off her," I snap, anger seeping into my soul, testing my restraint. "Or I'll—"

"You'll what, Alistair? Shoot us both? Try for a better angle? You can probably get me before I slice her open," he says, eyes hollow, gliding his palm from her breast down over her stomach, toying with the lace of her panties. His gaze slides past me, landing on a figure I've been too occupied to see until now. "But can you get *him* before he gets you?"



I DON'T THINK I've ever been more confused in my entire fucking life.

They're talking about finding my brother's body in some quarry, but he's literally *standing right there*. Down the balcony, he steps closer to the stairs, a pistol clasped between his bony hands.

Pointed right at Alistair, who, for his part, looks as if he's seeing a ghost.
I can relate.

For the first time since we met, the mayor looks genuinely perplexed, and I'd find it humorous, if not for the knife at my throat and the wandering hands attached to the man behind me.

Marshall's fingers tease my pubic bone, and the only thing keeping me from completely losing my shit right now is that I've imagined his murder a

thousand different ways in my head.

A bullet to the skull—fairly clean, obvious. Easy, if I can get him to stop using me as a shield.

Bludgeoned to death, if the bullet doesn't do its work. It might be fun to rip his arms clean off and then beat him with them until he's lifeless.

I'm not sure how high up one has to be for a fall to break a vital bone in the body, but I'm inclined to believe the balcony would suffice—at least long enough for Alistair to step in and finish the job.

Suddenly, I'm glad he's a violent, closeted murderer.

"If he's here," Alistair says, blinking at my brother, "who's in the quarry?"

"Oh, who knows? Some unfortunate soul I happened upon. Planted him there for good ol' Jonas to find."

Marshall's fingers dip between my legs, and an agitated cry vibrates in my throat even though I try to stifle it. Alistair's head whips toward me, fury lining his icy eyes, and I know he's searching for a clear shot.

But Marshall keeps me perfectly in line with him, his face just barely past mine, and now, my brother's joined. Apparently, his time away made him into a supervillain.

A tic forms in Alistair's jaw, and his voice hardens. "If you think this is some sort of joke, Kade, know now that I'm not fucking around. I will personally remove the hide from your body and lay you out like a rug in my bedroom if you don't remove your hands from her this bloody instant."

"Big words from a man with much more to lose here than anyone else." Marshall laughs, glancing at my brother, who hesitates as he locks eyes with me.

Lucian frowns, swallowing. "What the fuck? Don't touch her like that."

"Switching sides already?" Marshall sighs, and I wince as the knife cuts a little more.

Blood and sweat dribble down my neck, mixing between my breasts, and

now, I feel a little bad that I'm wearing one of Alistair's shirts.

"Why don't you explain to our lovely couple why that's a terrible idea?"

Pushing his tongue into the bottom of his cheek, Alistair swings his gaze back to my brother. "What the fuck is going on, Hollis?" He pauses, glancing at the ground for a moment, swearing under his breath.

When he lifts his chin again, I can almost feel the anguish of betrayal radiating from him.

Or maybe that's my own. It's hard to tell at this point.

"Hollis was a stage name," Lucian says, shrugging. "A way to keep my professional life separate from Lucian Astor and his shitty existence. I didn't want the old me tainting the life I was pursuing on the island, so when we met at that music festival and you asked what my name was, Hollis is what came out. I just wanted to be someone else when I was here."

My stomach churns, sadness billowing like a balloon. We all knew he struggled with addiction, but the identity crisis is new.

"But some baggage gets shipped to you regardless. I relapsed often, sometimes struggled to hold a job, much less any money in my bank account. I'd have to leave sets and get odd jobs around town instead, just for some quick cash. My time on the island started being less about having fun and more about trying to find my next fix, and it was just like I was back home again."

Alistair's throat bobs. "We were..." He trails off, exhaling. "I would have helped you. You should have said something."

That surprises me, and again I have to wonder how well they know each other.

"Oh, he did." I feel Marshall's grin as his hand retreats from my pussy, pinching my thigh. "To me. I helped him, all right. When you control someone's needs, it's real easy to get them to do what you want." He pauses, pushing me so the top half of my body is suspended in the air, and Alistair takes a step closer, one hand leaving his gun, as if to reach for me.

The pain contorting his handsome face sends a sharp, miserable pang through my chest, and I can almost forget about the knife Marshall's digging into me or the fact that I'm possibly looking Death herself in the eyes right now.

For a split second, I'm back in the forest, and there's no one but us. My fear is controlled, calculated, and riding the cusp of oblivion.

And even though I'm absolutely terrified out of my mind, my heart is heavy with a bright, glowing warmth.

I feel loved, and it's now that I realize nothing's ever remotely touched me the way a single look from this man does.

How sad that I might not get to spend the rest of my life enjoying it.

"Stop it," Lucian gripes, glaring at Marshall. "We aren't actually supposed to hurt her now."

"What, you think this entire situation's been a walk in the park? You spent the last year hurting her, Lucy boy; the very least you can do is put her out of her misery."

My brother turns, and Marshall stiffens. Enough that I manage to go a little limp in his hold even though it causes the knife to slip, lengthening the cut.

"Careful there. Remember who you owe your life to. If I hadn't found you a few years back at the sanitation compound, you wouldn't even be here right now. You're nothing without me and barely anything *with* me. How are you gonna live with yourself after all the shit you've put the only two people who ever cared about you through?"

"But you said..."

"What'd he do, Lucian?" Alistair asks, looking back over. He scoots closer though, the shift of his foot imperceptible if you aren't paying close enough attention. "Promise you a big payout? All the drugs to fill your heart's content if you kill me?"

Marshall scoffs, and a blush crawls up my brother's cheeks.

“I owe him a lot of money,” Lucian admits. “If I help him take you down, that all goes away.”

My insides crumble at the misery in my brother’s tone. He doesn’t seem to even want to be here, his face twisted in agony, yet it’s clear just how much of a prisoner he is to his demons. So much so that he was willing to hurt me to satisfy them.

“What do you think happens if I die or go under? No one investigates?” Alistair’s voice is hard, thick with emotion, and he’s close enough that I could jump into his arms, if I could just get free. “Marshall pulled you into a one-sided lovers’ quarrel and didn’t tell you about the repercussions. He played you. Used you.”

Tears sting my eyes when Alistair looks up at me.

“Your sister? What did she do, besides love you?”

“She’s just collateral damage,” Lucian says, and a little piece of my heart breaks off, dissolving into thin air. “I didn’t want her to get hurt. I brought her here just so I could see her again, because I won’t get another chance when this is over. You two were just supposed to cross paths at The Oracle, you weren’t supposed to...”

He pauses, glancing at me. Anguish lights his eyes, making them glassy.

A tear streams down my cheek, and I watch, numb, as it slides off my chin, landing on the floor below.

My hand wiggles free of Marshall’s grip, and I flex my fingers around the leather suspenders.

Alistair closes his eyes, opening them again slowly. “And me?”

No one says anything for a moment, and then Marshall groans. “Okay, enough of the fucking sobfest. Lucian, kill Alistair, and maybe we can sell your sister at the docks, or—”

The barking of a dog cuts him off, and we all glance aside as Laurel bounds into the room, yapping furiously.

I take that second to escape.

Sliding my body to the side as his hold loosens just slightly, I free one of my legs and hook it behind his ankles. Shock registers on his face, delaying his reaction and knocking the knife away, and I use the momentum from the surprise to sidestep and shove him forward.

My hands lurch out as he loses his balance, and I catch him around the throat with the suspenders, pulling tight. He stretches his arms, gurgling, and simultaneously tries to pull at the leather and brace himself in case he falls.

From below, Alistair's face lights up with a cautious tension. Still, he breaks out into a smile—one I haven't seen before.

“Christ,” he mutters, breathing heavy. “I’m going to fucking marry you, Cordelia Astor.”

I roll my eyes, even as my heartbeat races. “Not the time, Your Honor.”

Marshall manages to slip a finger beneath the leather, and then he's pulling, trying to tug me along with him.

I'm not sure how much longer I can hold him up, and I feel myself slipping, losing my tenuous grasp on the floor.

The air in the room shifts, and I glance up to find Alistair's focus has left me. It's on my brother, his pistol aimed directly at his forehead.

Locking eyes with Lucian, I feel our connection buzz to life in the pit of my soul more prominently since he went missing. It flares like the forgotten embers of a fire, igniting and promising something anew.

I know he's fucked up. Badly. And I know it shouldn't matter. I don't have to forgive him or spare him—no one would blame me if I didn't.

But I spent my life trying to protect my brother from himself, and I didn't.

I failed him.

Maybe if I'd tried harder, or not written him off, or... I don't know. Maybe there's nothing I could've done to change the outcome right here, right now.

Still though, now that we're here and I feel that connection that's tethered

us together since we were kids, I don't want it to go away.

Even if something can't be exactly the way it was, that doesn't mean it's not worth fixing.

I've forgiven worse.

"Alistair," I cry, hating the way my voice breaks. Hating that even though Lucian let someone hurt me—even though *he* hurt me—I can't be the one to do it back.

It pains me more than it does him. Always has.

The banister creaks, and there's a loud bang as it tears from the wall, toppling over; Marshall's beet-red face is the last thing I see as we catapult over the balcony, and then the oxygen escapes my throat as my lungs compress, my back colliding with the hard floor.

Tendrils of agony radiate up my spine and down my arms, and I blink up at the ceiling, taking a second to catch my breath. Something crunches above me, and from my peripheral vision, I see Marshall crawling, and then he's looming over me, the knife back in hand.

He raises his arm, ready to plunge it into my chest, but then a gunshot rings through the air, and I startle from the ferocity, rolling onto my side.

Alistair kneels in front of me, kicking the knife and his friend away, scooping me into his lap. His hands are everywhere, brushing the hair from my face, pulling his shirt closed so my body's covered, assessing the wound on my neck. I hiss as he touches the skin around it, and it pulses, smarting.

"Nice save," I say, closing my eyes for a moment, trying to soak in his embrace.

"Wasn't me," he says, threading his fingers through my hair.

Surprise weaves through me, and I blow out a long, comprehensive breath.

He helps me sit up, and we turn our heads, looking over at Lucian. He crouches down at the bottom steps as Laurel scampers toward him, launching into his arms. The dog's tail is almost impossible to spot as it wags, and he

licks my brother's cheeks, his chin, anywhere he can reach.

Lucian closes his arms around him, burying his head in his fur, careful not to brush the bandage on his side.

His shoulders shake, and I look away, turning my face into Alistair's chest. Unwilling to be a voyeur on such a private moment.

A few moments pass, during which I steal a glance from the corner of my eye to make sure Marshall hasn't recovered; the hole in his head is pretty final though, and there isn't a hint of remorse for his fate anywhere to be found in the room.

Putting Laurel back on the floor, Lucian wipes his nose with the back of his hand and slowly spins around, coaching the dog to cross the room. He gallops over, climbing halfway onto my lap, and bathes my face with his tongue.

I giggle, relief and happiness interlocking in my heart—the organ somehow impossibly full in spite of everything that just happened.

But when I look back up, those two emotions turn to dread, thick like black sludge as it rapidly fills my chest.

Lucian's staring down at the gun, his eyes glazed over. For a moment, I think maybe he's realizing he just shot and killed someone. Or maybe all the regret and anguish are hitting him at once, like a dense fog you can't possibly see through.

Instead of pulling over to wait it out or driving on through, I know he's locking up. Panicking.

Misery lines his sallow features. Days ago, I thought he looked better, but the physical toll this life has taken on him becomes incredibly apparent as we sit here in silence.

Disentangling myself from Alistair's embrace, I push to my feet, scooting forward.

He looks up at me with the saddest, most broken of smiles, and I feel the loss in my heart long before his body follows suit.

“Luce,” I say, emotion scalding the back of my throat, making it hard to breathe. “Don’t.”

His hands shake. “I always hated it when other people were right. Remember? You got Mom’s lack of patience, and I got her know-it-all attitude. God, I’ll never know how she survived the two of us growing up.”

“She survived because she loved us.” I take another step, bile rising. “She still does. Imagine how excited she’ll be when you come home.”

The look on his face shatters my heart, like he’s reaching into my chest cavity and just squeezing until it bursts.

“I hurt you,” he says, curling his fingers around the handle of the gun. “All I’ve ever done is hurt you, Cor. This... there’s this thing inside me that keeps me from being happy or wanting to see other people happy. It’s angry and bitter, and every day, it just keeps festering.” His voice hitches.

“I’m rotting from the inside out.” Shaking his head, he glances past me, and I’m tempted to turn with him and see what he sees, but I’m too scared to move or look away. Scared that if I do, he’ll send me home an only child.

Sure in my convictions that he will either way.

“I thought drugs would help. Thought maybe they’d cure me, but for some reason, they never seemed to do the trick. I tried to be myself. Tried to be someone else. But you can’t erase who you are inside, and I’m... never going to be able to stop hurting you, Cor. One way or another. Look at what I’ve done to your life. Look what I let happen today. I should’ve just stayed missing. Shouldn’t have let Marshall push me around, or convince me Alistair was better off not in power.”

“It’s not all bad,” I choke out, tugging at the cuff of my shirt. “You brought me to Alistair.”

Lucian’s eyes move behind me again. He swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “You love him.”

Tears blur my vision, and my chest rejects verbalizing the sentiment, but I do it anyway. Even though speaking now burns a hole in my lungs,

solidifying what I've known for a long time.

“More than anything.”

Hurt flashes across my brother's face, trying to burrow inside me. He nods, staring down at his hands again.

The gun.

“I did too, you know.” When he looks up again, I know their eyes are locked, and my chest feels heavy. “Probably not in the same way, but... he was too good for me, even before I went and fucked everything up. God, I've made such a mess of things.”

My pulse is thick in my throat as I lean forward, ready to pounce. “It gets better, Luce. I promise, it does.”

“I don't want it to get better,” he says, tears streaming down his face. “I'm tired. I can't keep waiting. I just... I want it to stop.”

“We can get you help. Someone can fix you—I know it.” A sob escapes me, loud as it bounces off the walls. The ache in my chest morphs into a gaping hole, bleeding and growing until it's so large and unmanageable that I'm sure it'll swallow me whole. “Please, don't...”

Choking on my sadness, I shake my head, trying to dispel it. Trying to get the misery out from where it wants to make a home in my body.

“Please, don't leave me.”

He meets my gaze, and we stand like that for a moment, catapulted back in time once more.

It's Christmas, and he's showing off the hand-me-down dirt bike our aunt and uncle got for him and poking fun at me for chasing him around with a helmet.

I'm nine, and he crawls in the bed with me after listening to me cry for three hours straight because our mom couldn't afford to leave work so she missed my state swim meet.

We're adults, and he's crashing on the couch in my dorm room because I think he'll see the light in the morning. Maybe he'll care about living again if

I can just get him through the night.

Then minutes ago, he's saving me. Shooting an old friend, abandoning his scheme in an attempt to keep me safe.

Regret surges through me because earlier, I didn't think I'd experienced the unconditional love I'd been looking for.

But just because someone doesn't love the same way as you doesn't mean they love you any less.

Another plea sits on the tip of my tongue, but it doesn't come.

Lucian's lip wobbles. "I'm glad Laurel has you. Alistair too. Take care of them, okay?"

I can't even see him anymore; his figure gets obscured through the tears, and I reach up, rubbing my throat. "Stay and do it yourself."

Silence.

Then "I'm so... unbelievably sorry, Cor."

The last shot of the night is muffled by Alistair's immediate embrace; he wraps his arms around my head, pulling my face into his chest, and the cry that rips from my throat sears my flesh on its exit, drowning out the reverb of the gun.

My soul grows cold almost instantly, loss gouging a hole I know will never be filled. I cling to Alistair, squeezing my eyes shut, resigning myself to what just happened.

I used to wish Lucian would put himself out of his misery. I never expected to have to witness it.

Nothing prepares you for that.

Well, Cor, you finally got your apology.

Was it worth it?

I'm not sure when he does it, but at some point, Alistair removes us from the house, and then we're outside. He plunges his fingers into my hair, yanking me back to kiss my forehead, then my mouth.

"Fuck," he mutters, and it's the broken, saddled kind of curse, weighed

down with the realities of life. “Are you okay?”

A little breathless laugh tumbles past my lips. “Your timing is terrible tonight.”

He sighs, smoothing his thumbs beneath my eyes. “I know. I’m sorry. Probably also not a good time to tell you I love you, but, hey, why bloody wait?”

“You love me?” I repeat, a tiny sliver of something sprouting in my chest.

“Infinitely, and with every fiber of my being, Cora Astor. I’ve loved you since the second you walked into my life, and I’ll love you every second after, until I have no more to love you with.”

I wince, then shake my head, twisting my fingers in his lapels. I’m still in shock, but I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life. “I love you too.”

And even though it’s probably too soon to tell and Lucian’s body isn’t even cold yet, something stirs in my soul. Sadness, sure, but something else twists with the despair, padding my loss. I know Alistair can’t fix me, and maybe I shouldn’t look for a solution in someone else, but I’m glad he’s here to ease my pain regardless.

He looks at me, and I feel whole. Loved in a way unlike ever before.

Wherever he ends up, I hope there’s room in the afterlife for my brother to find what he was looking for.

Alistair leans down, sweeping my lips into a tender, passionate kiss, and my heart explodes despite the sadness wrapped around it.

I know I have.

EPILOGUE



Cora arches her back, pushing more of her full tit into my mouth.

Her moan vibrates against my palm, and I groan against her flesh, relishing in the palpitations.

Even though it's approximately the millionth time I've tasted her, somehow, I'm still as starved as I was when staring at her from across the pub three years ago.

She rides slow, grinding her hips with as much force as she can muster. Almost like she's trying to punish me for something.

One of my hands skates up her spine, tangling in her royal-blue locks, while the other grasps at the dirt beneath us. Sea water sprays our bare skin as it laps against the cliff, and she leans down, licking the droplets off my cheek.

Our forest-dwelling trysts are far less easy to come by now that we live just up the coast from Jonas and Lenny. The recently married couple enjoys frequently popping over despite the first drop-in resulting in a very clear view of my ass as I rutted into Cora in the middle of the kitchen.

But I'd rather them be able to visit than the alternative, I suppose.

Besides, the added complication makes the moments we can slip away that much more exciting.

I might have caught the little nymph years ago, but I've never stopped chasing her.

Rocking harder, Cora digs her nails into my chest, and I grunt, my climax approaching at a rapid pace. Releasing her breast from my lips, I reach around and grip her arse with both hands, guiding, needing more of her.

If it were possible, I'd crack myself wide open and stuff her inside. Let her live in my veins since she's pretty much the only thing running through them these days anyway.

"Ah fuck, *m'eudail*. I can't hold it."

A wicked smile graces her face, the sapphire stud in her nose ring glittering in the sunlight. "Mmm, say please."

My grip turns punishing, and she spasms around my cock.

"Please," I whisper, my voice hoarse, electric pleasure shooting up my spine. "I want to come in you."

"You want me dripping?"

"God, always."

"Do it then. Give me what I want." Her head falls back as her orgasm crests, washing over her with such violence that I'm convinced she's trying to sever my cock from my body.

She clamps down, and then I'm coming, pushing my hips up as cum spurts from my tip, flooding her cunt like I've not been drained in decades. I fall back against the earth, my head close to the edge of the cliff, and she collapses on top of me, tucking her face into my neck.

Rolling to the side, she wraps her limbs around my body, and we stay motionless like that for several minutes. I spread my hand over her stomach, tracing the curved line work of the wolf she had tattooed there, not long after her brother's death.

"Marry me," I say softly, half-hoping she doesn't hear, but also hoping this will be the time she says yes.

Her golden eyes curve up at the corners as she tilts her chin. Like every other time I've asked, she doesn't give an answer, and I'm left with a diamond-sized hole in my chest.

Moments later, her phone pings, shattering the cocoon we've erected out here. We get dressed and walk to the car, heading to City Hall in complete silence.

She doesn't usually say much on this day anyway. The real miracle is that I was able to drag her away from the animal shelter at all; since opening the place up a year and a half ago, she spends the vast majority of her free time there, trying to mend the wound her brother's death left.

We talked a lot about it in the days after, mostly just to see where she was mentally. I told her about my relationship with Hollis, and she told me about Lucian; even though they were the same person, they might as well have been completely different to us.

I know she misses him.

I certainly don't.

My mum meets us at City Hall, Laurel's leash wrapped tight around her fist; they've really taken to one another, and I know my mum is happy to have someone to spoil—until she gets grandchildren.

Cora jogs ahead of me to greet them, accepting the dog's kisses upon arrival. She scoops him into her arms, cradling him against her chest, and my insides heat at how natural it all comes to her already.

Yeah, Mum, we're working on it.

Walking over to them, I give Laurel a stroke on top of his head before

Cora puts him down, then lean down to kiss my mum's cheeks.

"You ready?" my mum asks, tucking her hair behind her ears.

Shrugging, I stuff my hands in my pockets and look up at the stage, where the mayor-elect holds a giant pair of golden scissors. "As I'll ever be."

Tugging Cora to me, I press my palm to her jaw, claiming her lips. Our tongues twist together, wet and hot, and I feel my cock stirring already.

"Marry me," I say again, wondering if muttering the words into her mouth will make her think they were hers.

"Go," she rasps, pulling back, her hands playing with my suspenders. She snaps them against my chest, wiggling her eyebrows. "Get up there before they let the next mayor lead the service."

Huffing, I adjust my suit jacket, buttoning the middle, and then weave my way through the crowd, taking the stage. Bracing myself behind the podium, I clear my throat and tap the microphone, garnering the attention of everyone in the yard.

"First, I'd like to thank you, the citizens of Aplana, for allowing me to lead you the last four years. I think we've seen serious prosperity and growth and have fostered a community capable of weathering even the worst of storms. I regret that I'm leaving the office, but rest assured, I'll be around. You can't get rid of a Wolfe that easily."

The crowd titters, tickled by the rhetoric, even if they don't realize how true it is. My decision to not run for reelection was not met lightly, although the Barbieris eventually relented, so long as I agreed to at least remain a public official in town.

Someone has to keep the secrets of the underground after all.

"Secondly, I'd like to thank Mayor-Elect Benjamin Pratt for allowing me to do this today." I motion for an assistant to rip the tarp away from the middle of the courtyard, revealing a sapling, freshly planted in the dirt.

I find Cora in the crowd and lock my eyes with her. "In Ancient Greece, laurel trees represented many things, but first and foremost, they revolved

around honor and success. Emperors wore laurel wreaths on their heads to attract wealth and victory, and so we've planted this one here in the hopes that Aplaná continues to thrive."

Tears spring to Cora's eyes, and she tucks Laurel's head beneath her chin.

"But the tree also acknowledges new chapters in life. Hard good-byes." I swallow, gripping the podium. "Moving forward. So with the Lucian Astor Memorial Tree, I want us to look ahead, prepare for the future, and accept what it throws at us with open, waiting arms."

They erupt in a riot of cheers, and I blow out a breath, stepping aside to cut the blue ribbon. Selene takes my place, going into her own closing remarks, and Cora meets me at the bottom of the stage stairs, throwing her arms around my neck before I've reached the bottom.

"You don't play fair," she says, and I grip her hips, pulling her tight against me.

"Is that a yes?"

She glances at the tree behind me, nodding her head and biting her bottom lip. I pluck it with my thumb, and she lets out a dramatic sigh.

"It's an absolutely."

THANK YOU FOR READING!

I hope you enjoyed Alistair and Cora's love story as much as I loved writing it. Please consider leaving a review!

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Sav R. Miller is an international bestselling author of dark and contemporary romance.

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