



SILVER SPOON
UNDERWORLD

God Loves Ugly



Aurora's **KNIGHT**

NICHOLE ROSE

AURORA'S KNIGHT

A CURRY GIRL MAFIA ROMANCE

NICHOLE ROSE

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ABOUT THE BOOK



Sleeping Beauty just met Silver Spoon Falls' most dangerous criminal. And he's not letting her go.

Constantine

I had one simple mission: Get in, take care of business, and get out.

But even the best-laid plans go awry.

Mine do the moment I set eyes on Aurora Branson.

She's been missing, presumed dead, for months.

Imagine my surprise when I find her being held hostage by a cartel.

Now I have a new mission:

Explain the trail of bodies I just left in my wake...

And then make this sleeping angel mine forever.

Aurora

I learned one lesson early in life: Trust no one.

This isn't the first time I've woken up with a stranger looming over r

But unlike last time, this dangerous man swears he means me no ha

For some reason, I believe him.

But I never expected to fall for him.

He's more deadly than the men who kidnapped me, yet I've never fe

But is it all an illusion, or is this dark prince truly my white knight?

igerous

I learned one lesson early in life: Trust no one.

This isn't the first time I've woken up with a stranger looming over my bed.

But unlike last time, this dangerous man swears he means me no harm.

For some reason, I believe him.

But I never expected to fall for him.

He's more deadly than the men who kidnapped me, yet I've never felt safer.

But is it all an illusion, or is this dark prince truly my white knight?

PROLOGUE

Aurora



Two Months Ago

"Grab the fucking girl and let's go before the cops get here."

Are they talking about me? I fight to open my eyes, but they're so blurry. Why aren't they cooperating? I try to roll onto my side, but my limbs won't cooperate either. My body fights against me, leaving me helpless.

"She's a fucking gold mine."

I hold my breath, praying they aren't talking about me. It's a useless prayer—one said more because I have nothing except faith left to rely on than because of any hope it'll be answered. Whoever they are, I think they're looking for me specifically for me. But my dad didn't raise a willing victim.

He may have raised a terrified one, though. I've never been so afraid of my own life. Every muscle in my body aches with the desire to burst out of this

flee for my life...except I can't.

I can't even move.

"At least the bitch left the door unlocked like she said she would."

No. Oh no.

Someone let them in here? They betrayed my dad?

I warned you not to trust anyone, my long-dead nanny's voice whistles the back of my mind. You were cursed. The cards told me evil would find you, but you never listen, girl.

She was wrong about that. I listened all too well. Thanks to her absolute conviction that I was cursed, I learned long ago to trust no one. The fact that my dad is the mayor in a town full of billionaires probably didn't help. The only daughter of the mayor comes with a lot of strings.

"I thought you said she was sleeping."

"She is sleeping. I put a sedative in her drink."

My heart sinks when I hear the familiar dulcet voice. *Millie Audlerson*, my dad's senior advisor. She's been his closest friend for as long as I can remember. She's practically family at this point.

heavy. *Why, Millie? Why?*

os don't "Doesn't look like she's sleeping to me. There's no one in her room or bed."

I'm not in my bed?

is prayer *The bathroom.*

han out I never made it out of the bathroom. Did I lock the door?

7 came I don't remember. I try to drag myself out of the floor to find out, but my legs still refuse to cooperate.

d in my "Check the bathroom."

bed and Loud steps thump across the floor and then the doorknob rattles.

"Now what?" the second man who spoke asks, sounding surly.

"Kick the goddamn door in." The first man who spoke—the ringleader—doesn't have much patience. "We need to get the fuck out of here before we realize we were even here."

Even though I know it's coming, my heart still skips a beat when the door splinters inwards beneath the force of their kick. It's hard enough to rattle everything I own, but it's *damn* hard to be *knocked* *down* *and* *be* *fall* *vanity*.

Please, let the door hold. Please, let the door hold. Please...

Absolutely Another well-aimed kick buckles the door and cracks the frame.

It's that Tears leak from the corners of my eyes.

1. Being *Fight, Aurora, dammit. Fight!*

I expend every ounce of strength I have to haul myself to my knees. My hand lands on a wire hanger. I grasp it, pulling it close to my body. It's a useless weapon, but it's the only one I have.

My eye. A hulking giant in a pinstripe suit pushes the door out of the frame just as I can stumble to my feet. He isn't what I expected. He seems...normal. Except for the black eyes, anyway. Those are cold and soulless.

"Evening, Sleeping Beauty." He grins at me and my stomach twists. "Goddamn he's not normal. He's a monster dressed in sheep's clothing. His gaze is on the hanger in my hands. "You want to put that down and come with me."

"No." The word comes out strong and sure, though I've never been so terrified. I sway on my feet, dangerously close to collapsing on the floor again.

but my "I'll make you a deal. You put it down and come with me nice and quiet, and I won't kill your father. You put up a fight, and you'll never see your father again." He holds my gaze, unblinking. "We won't hurt you."

"What do you want from me?" I ask warily, not so sure I believe th

not hurting me part, I mean. I absolutely believe he'll kill my dad if I p
ader—fight.

ore they "We just want you to come with us for a few days."

"Why?"

he door He shrugs one massive shoulder, making it clear I'm not getting an a

g on the "Remember our deal, Victor," Millie states from behind him, he

ringing out clear and firm. "You aren't to harm her. This is a ransom or

Malice flows through Victor's dark eyes.

I whirl on Millie in outrage. "You betrayed my dad for *money*?"

Victor lunges forward, grabbing me around the waist. Within secon

hanger is gone, and I have no hope of escape.

es. My A needle jabs deep into my arm, delivering more sleeping poison

y. It's ainto my system.

I scream in fury as the world goes dark. I'm a prisoner, betrayed

just as Dad's advisor, caught by my own emotions. Cursed...exactly like

cept hisalways said I was.

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at. The

not hurting me part, I mean. I absolutely believe he'll kill my dad if I put up a fight.

"We just want you to come with us for a few days."

"Why?"

He shrugs one massive shoulder, making it clear I'm not getting an answer.

"Remember our deal, Victor," Millie states from behind him, her voice ringing out clear and firm. "You aren't to harm her. This is a ransom only."

Malice flows through Victor's dark eyes.

I whirl on Millie in outrage. "You betrayed my dad for *money*?"

Victor lunges forward, grabbing me around the waist. Within seconds, the hanger is gone, and I have no hope of escape.

A needle jabs deep into my arm, delivering more sleeping poison directly into my system.

I scream in fury as the world goes dark. I'm a prisoner, betrayed by my dad's advisor, caught by my own emotions. Cursed...exactly like Merry always said I was.

CHAPTER ONE

Constantine



"What are you doing?"

"T.C.O.B." I clutch the phone between my ear and shoulder, can peer through the binoculars at the dilapidated house down the street and talk to Dimitri Arakas at the same time.

"What the fuck does that even mean?" my best—and oldest—friend demands.

"It means I'm taking care of business."

"You couldn't just say that, you jackass?" The smile in his voice gives away.

"Fuck off. I'm busy."

"Right. You're *taking care of business*. Again. For someone with a goddamn social life and no hope of ever getting laid, you have an awful

business to take care of." He snorts. "Annd I just solved the mystery didn't I?" He raises his voice, shouting into the room, "Alexa, buy s lotion and tissues."

"You asshole." I chuckle, shaking my head. Since marrying Snow months ago, Dimitri is on top of the world. It's good to see him so hap he's turned into an even bigger pain in my ass than usual. He's always chipper. It's sickening, really. "I'm not jacking off. I'm out scout Dante."

"You're looking for the cartel again?"

"Something like that."

The Arakas family is known in Texas for their not-strictly-legal b endeavors. Frankly, Dimitri and his uncle, Dante, are the closest the s to the mafia. Until recently, we were sitting pretty in Houston, b changed. Dimitri's baby sister flew the coop to Silver Spoon Falls cartel moved in on the area. I guess they thought it was ripe for the p since it's flush with billionaires.

ler so I Dimitri doesn't fuck around when it comes to his sister, so we pack eet and shit and set up shop here to keep an eye on things. The cartel didn't app our presence and decided to play dirty. They attacked Dante and h –friend Dimitri's wife, Snow, got caught up with them too.

They've been otherwise occupied since. Kidnapping and killi mayor's daughter in a botched ransom will keep anyone busy, I guess. ves him doesn't know I found them two days ago. Dante gave me explicit instr not to tell him. After everything they've put his family through, if he ; hands on them, it'll be a bloodbath we can't explain our way out of th vith no so I'm handling the situation myself.

il lot of I always murder better alone, anyway.

myself, Dimitri talks too fucking much.

stock in "Well, hurry it up. Snow wants you over here for dinner tomorrow. He thinks you spend too much time alone."

er a few "I like being alone," I grunt. It's the truth...more or less. I grew up in the streets. I'm sure I had parents, but I never met them. I was dumped in foster care when I was a kid and never adopted out. I ran away from my group home at fourteen. Until Dimitri found me trying to boost his car a few years ago, I haunted every back alley in Houston, lying, cheating, and stealing to survive.

I've done a lot of things in this life that I'll pay for when I'm buried in business hell. Most of Dimitri's men call me the Grim Reaper because of the tattoo I have on my chest, but the truth is...the name fits in more ways than one. I've sent more than my fair share to hell ahead of me. Some, I sent because they deserved it, and some, I sent because I like to think most deserved it. Others though?

lucking Well, I have no illusions about the kind of man I am.

If heaven is real, the angels will bar the doors to keep me out. Damn, but the bliss and eternal salvation aren't for men like me. It is what it is.

I appreciate I'm not complaining. I may not be bound for heaven or ever have a girl and kids, but life isn't all bad. I've got money in the bank, beer in the fridge, a bed to sleep in, and people who consider me family. Not bad for a motherfucker who came from the streets.

Dimitri "Yeah, well, I'm not telling my wife that, so suck it up, buttercup, and get your sorry ass over here for dinner tomorrow. If she's not happy, she gets his happy," Dimitri says.

is time, "I'll be there." There are four people in this world I never refuse.

Snow, Belle, and Ariel, Bruno's new wife. They're soft in a way the rest of the world isn't. It's soothing to know such light exists. Perhaps the li

four of them shine will counteract the dark deeds I do. I don't fucking
w. She All I know is, if they want something, they're getting it.

"See you tomorrow." Dimitri pauses. "And just so you know, if you
running stop *taking care of business* by yourself soon, you're going to regret it.
aped in allowed to be two things at once."

my last I quirk a brow. "We are not talking about my dick, Dimitri."

car ten "We're talking about you, you jackass. You're allowed to find a little
ig, and of happiness in this fucked up world. That's all I'm saying."

"Noted."

ning in "Stubborn ass." He hangs up on me.

demon I snort and toss the phone toward the console, shaking my head. Fine.
ne. I've as fucking stubborn as I am. Until he found Snow, he felt the same ex-
se I had I do.

I scan the rundown house at the end of the block again for any sign
movement. It's been well over two hours since the last light wink
omestic Either everyone is asleep or they're all sitting in the fucking dark. My
well go find out one way or another.

a wife I do another quick scan of the neighborhood to check for any wit-
ridge, a Like the target property, the rest of the neighborhood is rundown.
l for a Spoon Falls may be rolling in it, but the same can't be said for Copper

The small town a short drive from Silver Spoon Falls is in its death throes
and get strong enough wind will send most of the homes here falling into ruin.

I'm not Thanks to the Silver Spoon MC, most of the residents have relocated
town. Guess they had an issue with an MC in town and decided to drive
Devin, out of the area by convincing every business owner who was willing
rest of relocate to Silver Spoon Falls. The MC checks in on the few old-time
ight the

know. stayed behind, makes sure they have what they need, and that their place is habitable. But the rest of the town is dead.

You don't If there's anyone left on this street, I haven't found them. But I You're check anyway. The last thing I need is to leave a witness. Sheriff Armstrong is an honest, honorable man. We'd rather not have him bring down our necks when we've already been pissing him off for months. He's the slicest to these pricks.

I double-check my weapons and then slip from my SUV. It takes a few minutes to hike around to the back of the property in the dark. By the time I get there, my boots are filthy, and I'm tempted to set the whole goddamn section of woods on fire. At this point, I think I'd be doing the greatest favor Texas a favor. Trash and tangled weeds have grown up everywhere as a result of the fights to reclaim the mostly abandoned town.

Signs of I emerge from the woods about ten yards from the back door. A guard is propped up on a stool, scrolling through his phone with a light cigarette tucked behind his ear.

"Who the fuck are y—?"

Witnesses. I don't give him time to finish his question before I aim and fire. The silver silencer, he makes a louder sound than the shot does. He also makes a mess of the back wall on his way down, landing on top of his shoes. Somehow, the cigarette stays put, though.

I step over him to the door, testing the knob. Unlocked.

Dead out of Huh. Guess they thought the jackass on the stool was protection for them. Looks like they were mistaken.

Looking to I slip inside the kitchen and pause to give my eyes time to adjust. With the moonlight to help, it's darker inside than out, but it doesn't take

aces are before I adapt. I do my best work in the dark anyway. Don't most sinners?

double- I'm silent as I go room by room, clearing the house. Carmona has Dillon men asleep in one bedroom downstairs. I may be a cold-blooded killer, but I have a few morals. I've never killed a sleeping man and don't intend to. I kick the fuckers awake first. Before they even have time to comprehend what's going on, they're dead.

fifteen I find the two men I'm looking for upstairs. One, Tao Cruz, is still asleep in his bed. I give him the same courtesy I gave their enforcers. Hell, I even damn him grab his gun.

state of As soon as he has it in his hands, I pull the trigger.

is nature He lands in a heap on the floor with a thud.

I back out of the room just as his boss appears in the doorway across the cartel hall.

an unlit *Victor Carmona.*

If he's surprised to see me coming out of his underboss's room, he doesn't show it. He doesn't look nervous or afraid, either. Then again, I didn't expect he would. There's evil...and then there's *evil*. Anyone who makes a name and murders women or sells them to the highest bidder is the latter. If he deserves to die, it's this motherfucker.

I aim my gun at his head.

"Guess the mayor isn't squeaky clean after all, is he?" He seems amused by the thought.

"I'm not here for the mayor."

Without "Arakas," he guesses.

ke long I don't respond.

"Ah, well. There's a surprise waiting for Arakas in the last bedroom."

of us left. Tell him it's a little parting gift. A final fuck you, if you will." He
reaching behind him as if he's going for a weapon.

is three I don't even hesitate to pull the trigger.

er, but I Victor Carmona falls like a ton of bricks, taking his filthy empire with
to start Only then do I wonder what the fuck he meant about leaving I
ime to parting gift. Whatever he meant, it didn't sound good, that's for damn s

I put the worry aside for the moment to finish clearing the rest
sleep in house. By the time I reach the last room on the left, I haven't found
even let else. The padlock on the bedroom door in question confirms my su
that whatever he's got inside is bound to cause a whole helluva lot of tr

I circle back to Carmona's room, turning on lights as I go, and th
through his shit for the key. I find it along with about a pound of coca
ross the 50gs. I leave the coke and the drug money alone, and head back to the
the hall with the key.

Why the fuck do I feel like a man headed for the goddamn gallows?
doesn't I shake the feeling off, shoving the key into the padlock. It comes
t really in my hands. I shove it into my pocket and gently push the door open.
kidnaps "Jesus H. Christ."

anyone I step into the room, staring in shock at the curvy blonde asleep in t
her hair spilling across her pillows, moonlight spilling across her perfe
Aurora Branson, the mayor's daughter. Her photo has been pl
used at everywhere since she disappeared two months ago.

The sheriff and the Texas Rangers tore the county apart looking
The sheriff hasn't quit even though half the state assumes she's dead.
time, they've had her. They've kept her locked up like a prisoner.

Rage courses through me, powerful and vast. If Carmona were stil
on the I'd kill him slowly. Whatever she endured, he would. A thousandfold.

smirks, I stumble toward her a step, unable to take my eyes off her. She's so
the bed, so still. And so fucking beautiful. Her honey hair gleams
moonlight. So does her creamy skin. Her full lips pucker in her sleep
th him. mouths something. Her quiet whimper cracks my heart in half.

Dante a Somehow, I end up standing beside the bed, staring down at h
ure. shouldn't be here. She shouldn't know pain or fear. When she's mi
of thenever will again.

anyone *Jesus.*

spicion I rub the palm of my hand over my heart, trying to think.

ouble. Why can't I think?

en rifle *Because you're staring at an angel, you idiot.*

ine and If ever one walked the earth, I think it might be this sleeping beauty.

end of Pale blue eyes spring open, staring right at me. No. They stare *in*
stripping me right down to the basest of desires. Protect. Claim. *Fuck.*

"Sleeping Beauty," I manage to whisper. It sounds like a prayer on r
undone The first I've said since I was a little boy.

"Don't call me that."

"Aurora." I crouch beside the bed, trying not to overwhelm l
he bed, desperate to be close to her. I can't leave her side. I won't. Not until she
ct face. Not until she's mine.

lastered

for her.

All this

ll alive,

I stumble toward her a step, unable to take my eyes off her. She's so tiny in the bed, so still. And so fucking beautiful. Her honey hair gleams in the moonlight. So does her creamy skin. Her full lips pucker in her sleep as she mouths something. Her quiet whimper cracks my heart in half.

Somehow, I end up standing beside the bed, staring down at her. She shouldn't be here. She shouldn't know pain or fear. When she's mine, she never will again.

Jesus.

I rub the palm of my hand over my heart, trying to think.

Why can't I think?

Because you're staring at an angel, you idiot.

If ever one walked the earth, I think it might be this sleeping beauty.

Pale blue eyes spring open, staring right at me. No. They stare *into* me, stripping me right down to the basest of desires. Protect. Claim. *Fuck.*

"Sleeping Beauty," I manage to whisper. It sounds like a prayer on my lips. The first I've said since I was a little boy.

"Don't call me that."

"Aurora." I crouch beside the bed, trying not to overwhelm her but desperate to be close to her. I can't leave her side. I won't. Not until she's safe.

Not until she's mine.

CHAPTER TWO

Aurora



I lick my lips, staring in silence at the dark stranger. He's not one of the men that I've seen around here before. Is he new? Why is he in my cell in the middle of the night? My stomach churns with anxiety, but I hold my tongue back, refusing to consider the possibilities.

I've been a prisoner for long enough that I've started to lose track of the days, but Victor hasn't let anyone hurt me yet. I'm holding onto every kernel of hope I have that the status quo remains unchanged.

I don't think this man works for Victor, though. Does Victor work for me? I never considered the possibility that Victor Carmona had a boss. No one here answers to him, but perhaps this man is the one with the real power. He certainly fits the bill.

Victor Carmona is big and powerful, a wolf in sheep's clothing. That is whatever eats the wolf. There's no blending in for him. His gorgeous bronze skin, and broad frame make him hard to miss, but that's not what keeps my attention. It's the hint of danger radiating from him that does it. It pulses in the air around him, kissing his aura like a neon sign screaming *danger dwells here*.

His dark hair—slightly too long and curling at the ends—and scruffy beard give him a wild appearance. Not as if he's unkempt, but as if he's uncontrolled. Intelligence blazes in his hazel eyes. So does something I've come to understand acutely since I woke up in this room. The will to survive.

He has it. He's used it. And I think it may haunt him.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Sleeping Beauty." He grimaces, his face pulling down into a deep frown. His brows furrow at the same time, as if he's distressed. "I'm sorry. Aurora."

I blink up at him. In all my time here, he's the first person who has ever apologized to me. Those words didn't even pass Victor's deceitful lips. He swore I was going home weeks ago only for that day never to come. "Who are you?"

"Constantine Attias."

The name fits him, but it means nothing to me. I've never heard it before. "This moment. If he's in charge around here, no one has ever mentioned his name."

"Do you work for Victor?"

Fury flows like molten rock through his eyes. "Carmona is dead, Aurora. I sit upright, the thin blanket falling from around me. "He's dead?" I ask. "It's a mortal sin to rejoice in the death of another, I'll gladly skip to hell. "So he killed him?"

"No, not someone. Me."

his man I meet his gaze again, shocked and completely unsurprised at the
his eyes, time. Of course this man is capable of killing. I don't think Victor Carr
at what the first he's sent to the afterlife. But I hesitate, nonetheless, precar
; that. It picking my way through a situation as unfamiliar and potentially dan
eaming as every single moment of the last endless months.

"Why?"

my jaw Constantine doesn't answer for so long that I'm convinced he isn't g
tamed. answer at all, and then he shrugs. "He hurt several people who matter t
ome to "Oh." I lick my lips again, thinking. "Are they okay?"

An amused smile turns Constantine from wicked prince to devious
handsome. "Shouldn't I be the one asking you that, starlight?"

full lips "He didn't hurt me," I whisper, wrapping my arms around myse
most as physically, anyway. He locked me in a room for months and threaten
everyone I love. I haven't spoken to anyone except him or Tao in w
who has don't know if anyone is looking for me or if they think I'm dead.

ps after I don't say any of that part out loud, but I think Constantine unders
. anyway. His smile slips, anger bleeding into his expression again.

"We need to go, princess," he says, his rumbling voice soft.

"Go?"

: before I've never wanted to *go* more in my life. Anywhere that isn't this
ed him. dusty, dirty room. But...am I walking from one prison into another?

Never, a little voice whispers. *Go with him. He'll protect you with hi*
rorra." "We can't stay here, starlight. There are bodies all over this hous
If it's a can't protect you and shoot my way out of here if any more o
ome one motherfuckers show up." He pushes himself to his feet, rising like
graceful cat, and extends a hand in my direction. "Let's go home."

Home. God, I want to go home so badly.

e same "My dad," I blurt, my gaze flying to his. "I want to see my dad."
mona is He grimaces. "Last I heard, he was in D.C., starlight. Ryker Mont
ariously sent your dad to meet someone he knows at the CIA."

ngerous "I..." I press my fingers to my forehead. "I want to go home."

"I'm going to take you to the sheriff."

"No." I rapidly shake my head, fear pinging through me. Dillon Arr
going to has always been nice to me...but there's a reason I'm here instead o
o me." home. Someone betrayed my father. Was it Millie, his oldest friend? C
just dream that?

tatingly I don't know. Some days, I think I remember the night they brou
here. Other days, I'm convinced the little flashes I see are sim
elf. Not remnants of one of the nightmares that plague me. They're disjoint
d to killhazy. A hanger. A broken door. Millie Audley. A needle jabbing i
weeks. I arm.

If she is the reason I'm here, I don't think she's the only one involv
tands it dad agreed to pay the ransom. They even had a drop, but when Victo
got there to get the money, it was gone. Someone took it. He questio
relentlessly about the people in my dad's life, those he'd turn to for he
this.

musty, As far as I'm concerned, Sheriff Armstrong is at the top of that list. I
trusts him implicitly. I don't think Dillon would steal the ransom
's *life*. instead of delivering it...but people I'd normally turn to for help are
e and I people I can trust right now.

f these I can't even trust my own mind.

a big, It's ironic, really. This man may be dangerous—he just admitted to
everyone in the house—but he may be the only one I'm safe with
moment. I stare at his hand for a brief moment, not entirely convin

simply because he's not my dad's friend, either. It's him. He's...di
gomerySpecial.

He's yours, the same little voice that's convinced he'd risk his life to
me whispers.

"You don't want to go to the sheriff?"

nstrong I shake my head again. "Not until I see my dad. It might not be safe.

of back Constantine cocks his head to the side, silently demanding an explan

Or did I "I think...I think someone betrayed my dad," I whisper, glancing c

the floor. "I think someone was with them the night I was kidn

ght meSomeone let them into the house." I swallow hard, trembling. "S-sc

ply thestole the ransom money my dad paid to get me back."

ted and "Jesus H. Christ. You're sure?"

nto my "About the ransom money. The rest isn't so clear." I shake my

frustrated. "They drugged me a lot in the beginning. I don't know wh

ed. Myand what I dreamed."

or's guy "You think the sheriff was involved?"

ned me I hear the incredulity in his voice.

elp with "No, I..." I shrug helplessly, lifting my gaze to his again. "I don'

who it was. It could have been anyone, but if you were in my shoes,

My dadyou take that chance?"

money His grim expression tells me he wouldn't.

the last "Let's go then, starlight. We'll figure it out once we get you out of h

I take a breath and place my hand in his.

killing

at the

ced it's

fferent.

protect



"

ation.

lown at

rapped. My legs shake as Constantine leads me out of the bedroom and i

omeone hallway. My hands tremble too. I'm a ball of anxiety, terrified Victor v

out at any moment and snatch freedom from my hands before I even ta

Right up until I see his body sprawled across the hallway floor, a

y head, Red splatters all over the wall, and the pool of liquid around him c

at's real Constantine's story. Victor Carmona is dead.

"Close your eyes, starlight. Don't look."

Except...I think I want to see. At least until we draw closer, and I
red isn't the only thing splattered all over the walls. I press my fa

t know Constantine's shoulder, hiding my eyes like the coward I am then.

, would "Had I known he had you locked up here, I would have made him
more," Constantine says, his voice dark, deadly. And so close to my ea

his breath against the side of my neck.

are." I shiver, gooseflesh rising on my arms. I'm not afraid, though. F

sinks deep, warming places deep inside of me. Desire sparks like a
igniting deep in my abdomen. Is it wrong that I like the way his
brushes my earlobe? Or the way he fits against me?

I don't know. Maybe I'm so starved for human touch and affection t
man seems like a good source for both. But I press my body close

anyway, wanting—*needing*—to be as close to him as possible.

"I've got you."

I keep my eyes closed as he leads me down the hall toward freedom. I don't want to see the rest of the carnage he left in his wake. It's enough to know the man who reached into my neatly ordered world and plucked me out of it is dead. The others don't matter.

"Careful, starlight." Constantine grabs me, hauling me into him as the door disappears beneath my feet between one breath and the next. "We've got to go down the staircase to navigate."

"Starlight." I peel my eyes open to look up at him. "Why do you keep calling me that?"

"*And a softness came from the starlight and filled me full to the brim.*" Constantine murmurs faintly, reaching out to touch my face with gentle fingers.

My lips part, a soft sigh escaping. I sway toward him, transfixed by the awed look in his eyes, as if he's found the key to heaven. As if it's *me*.

A hitman who knows Yeats and speaks it as if he's speaking to my soul. Who is this man?

Mine.

"Come on. We need to go." He runs his knuckles down my cheek and pulls back to help me down the stairs. We don't talk again until we're at the front door. The series of padlocks on it have a growl rumbling in his chest.

"He let me out of my room to shower sometimes," I explain. "I kept my eyes closed to run away."

"Fucking prick."

He abandons the front door and leads me into the kitchen. "Close your eyes again. There's another one out back. Guess they thought he'd be able to catch you if you got out."

"Stupid short legs," I mumble under my breath. At least, I think under my breath, but Constantine chuckles, so I guess he hears me. Freedom. I He pulls the door open. I don't close my eyes. I inhale the sight of the rough tusk like a starving man. The wind blows cool against my face. For me outbillows in, the first I've had in months. It feels like...freedom.

Tears sting my eyes.

the floor I take a tentative step outside, holding my breath. When no one has stopped me, I take another step.

"You're free, starlight," Constantine whispers.

you keep I've held it together with duct tape and sheer force of will since Victor Tao kidnapped me, but hearing those words sends my defenses toppling. I heave a sigh, relief and exhaustion and a thousand different emotions crashing over me like a tidal wave.

by the I plummet toward the ground, sobbing. I don't land, though. Before I can hit the ground, Constantine is there, sweeping me up into his arms.

how? "Shh, baby," he breathes against my ear, pressing my face into his shoulder as he sets out across the yard with me in his arms. "No one will ever hurt you again. I'll kill anyone who tries."

and then

he at the

rest.

not trying

our eyes

ough to

"Stupid short legs," I mumble under my breath. At least, I think I say it under my breath, but Constantine chuckles, so I guess he hears me.

He pulls the door open. I don't close my eyes. I inhale the sight of the night sky like a starving man. The wind blows cool against my face. Fresh air billows in, the first I've had in months. It feels like...freedom.

Tears sting my eyes.

I take a tentative step outside, holding my breath. When no one tries to stop me, I take another step.

"You're free, starlight," Constantine whispers.

I've held it together with duct tape and sheer force of will since Victor and Tao kidnapped me, but hearing those words sends my defenses toppling. My knees buckle, relief and exhaustion and a thousand different emotions hitting me like a tidal wave.

I plummet toward the ground, sobbing. I don't land, though. Before I can, Constantine is there, sweeping me up into his arms.

"Shh, baby," he breathes against my ear, pressing my face into his shoulder as he sets out across the yard with me in his arms. "No one will ever hurt you again. I'll kill anyone who tries."

CHAPTER THREE

Constantine



Aurora's tears eviscerate me. They burn like acid, setting my bones boiling. By the time I get her to the SUV, I'm ready to crawl in myself just to pay Victor Carmona back for every single one she shouldn't die easy this time.

I'll spend days taking him apart piece by piece, just to hear him sob. Just to hear him beg for mercy. And then I'll put him back together again all over again. Until I'm satisfied he's suffered enough.

Spoiler alert: it'll be a long fucking time before that day comes.

I have to pry Aurora's delicate little hands away from my shirt before I can tuck her into the passenger side of the SUV. She doesn't want to let me go, which breaks my fucking heart that I have to make her, but I want her as far away from here as possible, post haste.

I brush tears from her round cheeks before securing the seatbelt her. And then I press my lips to her forehead, unable to help myself. I touch her, need to soothe her. The compulsion to comfort overpowering. I feel her pain as if it's my own.

Shit, maybe it is.

With one look, I became hers to command. Already, I love her. A I'd kill for her. I don't even drink the water in this town, but who b protect an angel than a demon?

I drive her straight to the Arakas compound—the series of mansions Dante built around the large estate he owns on property just of Silver Spoon Falls. The place is fortified and under constant guard. gets in or out without approval, especially now that Belle and thei Snow, and Ariel live on the property.

She's sleeping by the time I pull through the gates, though she isn't peacefully. She mumbles in her sleep, too faintly for me to hear. It's n lood to to guess where her mind is, though. Someone she trusted betray nto hell forcing her to spend two months in a waking nightmare. Of course s red. He sleeping peacefully. It'll be a long time before she does that again.

I bypass the main house and take her straight to mine, pulling up in : scream.the doors. She doesn't make a sound when I carry her inside. For nd startsecond, I consider putting her in the guest room, but I don't.

I put her in my room. If I'm not here, I want her to wake up with m surrounding her so she knows where she is. Truth be told, I want he re I can used to my scent all over her. I want her used to *me*. Maybe that make: ie go. It asshole, but my cock hasn't gone down since I set eyes on her.

ar from After everything she's been through, she needs time and distance be get there. I'll give her as much as she needs. I won't rush her into anyt

aroundtake more than she's willing to give. But I'm working on borrowed time, I need her tied to me before her father gets back from D.C.

her is There's not a chance in hell that he'll let his baby girl date a mother like me. She may be twenty-one, but he's the mayor. I've got enough brains on my hands to paint this entire town red. Not to mention, everyone in Spoon Falls already knows I'm an Arakas associate.

etter to "No, please," Aurora whimpers in her sleep.

"Easy, starlight." I run my hand down the side of her face, crooking my finger smaller beside the bed. "You're safe now. I won't let anything happen to you again, not outside." "Constantine," she sighs.

No one My fucking heart swells.

r baby, I watch her for a long moment, awed at how soft she is. At how innocent she is. Even after everything, she's so goddamn sweet, so pure. I'll never let anything happen to her, resting her.

not hard The thought settles like lead in my stomach, weighing me down. I curl up beside her, my feet, settling the blankets around her, and then stride from the room. I know he isn't going to have to go back to my car to get my cell before I can call Dante and Dimitri.

"Is it done?" Dante asks as soon as he answers, sounding wide awake. "Yeah, but there's a complication." That's an understatement. I left a trail of a splitfull of dead bodies in Copper Creek, and I've got the mayor's daughter in my bed. There's no explaining my way out of this one.

y scent "What kind of complication?" Dante growls.

r to get "Meet me at my house." I don't even try to explain by phone. I'll just tell them to do it again when I call Dimitri...and then again when they get here. I'll just better bring Bruno too."

fore we "Fucking hell. I'll be there in five."

hing or I hang up and dial Dimitri.

re here. "It's four in the fucking morning, Constantine," he growls. "If you're dead, dying, or in jail, I may kill you."

mfucker "Unless we pull off a miracle, I may be going to prison. Quit bitching and get over here."

1 Silver "Fuck my life. What happened?"

"I'll explain when you get here."

"Where the fuck are you? I thought you were looking for the CouchingKings."

gain." "Yeah, I lied. I was watching their place when you called. Just get here and I'll explain. I'm at my house."

"Fuck," he growls. "Fine, but I may let you go to prison for lying to me." "Might not have a choice," I admit.

deserve Dimitri falls silent. "Jesus Christ, Constantine. I'll be there in two."

I disconnect, and then shove the phone into my pocket. The wind whips around me as I lean back against the side of the SUV with my eyes closed. If this were any other day, I'd be burning my clothes and scrubbing out the SUV to destroy any evidence I may have tracked home with me. But this is not the day. I've sailed.

a house What was it Carmona said? He left a parting gift, a final fuck you to the missing Dante. He fucking knew exactly what finding her meant for us. Either kill her or return her home. The first isn't even an option. We don't kill women for any reason, let alone innocent victims. And the latter means explaining to every law enforcement agency in the state why I left a trail of bodies behind.

ist have every law enforcement agency in the state why I left a trail of bodies behind.

2. "You Headlights sweep across the driveway, blinding even with my eyes closed.

I want until Dante kills the engine to open them. Dimitri jogs over from the SUV. I place in nothing but a pair of sweats as Dante and Bruno climb from the SUV.

u aren't I push away from the SUV to meet the three of them.

"What the fuck happened?" Dante demands.

ing and "The Kings won't be an issue anymore," I say. "And the mayor's daughter is asleep in my bed."

Dante rocks back on his heels, genuine shock crossing his face.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Dimitri growls.

armona "The mayor's daughter is in your bed?" Bruno says as if making heard me correctly. "Clearly I missed the first act of this play."

get over "He found the Kings two days ago. I sent him in to handle it." Dante a hand through his silver hair. "Didn't know they had the fucking daughter." me." daughter."

Dimitri scowls at him.

"Don't look at me like that, nephew. You've got a pregnant wife to l whipsabout now."

osed. If "I'll be extra worried from fucking prison," Dimitri growls. "We can ie SUVthe fucking scene if we're turning her over. As soon as Dillon goes at shipgoing to start counting murder charges."

"There's another issue."

you for "Jesus Christ." Bruno throws his hands up. "I'm too fucking old kill hershit."

nen for "You're not that goddamn old," Dante says. "Suck it up."

ning to "She's not going to the cops until she sees her dad." I cross my ar ehind. plant my feet, prepared to fight this one out if need be. These three hav closed.my family for a decade, but she's my priority now. "She's convinced s rom hisset up her abduction, and someone stole the ransom money before C Dante'scould get to it. She isn't sure who, but she doesn't trust anyone in her circle."

Dante reads between the lines. "Meaning Dillon."

"Him or anyone else," I agree with a nod.

daughter Everyone is silent for a moment, processing this news. And then sighs heavily.

"So what's the play? We just keep her here until her dad gets back to then hope for the best?" He scowls, shaking his head. "That's not g sure hework. The longer we wait to tell anyone she's here and alert them bodies, the bigger the risk."

scrubs "Can the scene be staged?" Bruno asks.

mayor's "Unlikely. Most of them were in bed."

"Then we lie." The three of us look at Dante, who shrugs. "This is and she was kidnapped out of her bed and held hostage for two mo worry you can convince her to say she saw you driving by and shouted for doubt anyone will give a flying fuck if they died in bed or not. You t scrubman against a houseful of assholes holding a young girl hostage. You in, he's fucking hero as far as most people around here are concerned."

"That's never going to work," Dimitri mutters.

"Do you have a better plan?" When Dimitri doesn't say anything for this turns back to me. "Do you think you can convince her to help us?"

I hesitate. Can I convince her? Probably. Is it the right thing to do? so sure. She's been through enough already. Involving her with this t ms and my own ass doesn't sit well with me. If it were just me at risk here, I w ve been even consider it. I did the crime. I'll do the time. But it's not just someone Dante, Dimitri, and Bruno too. If I go down, I'll be dragging them do armoname. They've got wives. Dante has a baby. Snow is pregnant. Ariel p father's won't be far behind.

"Yeah," I sigh. "I can convince her."

Dimitri

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CHAPTER FOUR

Aurora



I come awake with a start, though I'm not sure why. I think maybe I'm dreaming again. I don't remember the details, only the feeling of hopelessness. That's the dangerous part of being a victim, the insidious feeling of hopelessness. It creeps up on you. Before you know it, you're in despair, unsure how to climb back out again.

Except I'm not there anymore. This isn't the musty, dirty room with the wallpaper I've spent the last two months in. This room is massive and modern, with dark, masculine furniture. The bed isn't lumpy and uncomfortable, nor is the blanket thin and scratchy.

"You're in my bed, starlight."

I startle at the sound of Constantine's voice floating from the shadowed far side of the room. I turn my head to find him leaning against the

near the door, watching me with those gorgeous eyes of his. He exhausted.

"Hi," I whisper, my heart pounding. "I'm at your house?"

"Yes. In my bed."

Is it my imagination or do his eyes seem to glow when he says it?

He pushes away from the wall, striding toward me. For someone so moves silently, like a natural predator. He squats beside the bed, h running over me. "You didn't sleep long, Aurora. It's still early."

"Did you sleep at all?"

"No."

"Oh. Why not?"

His lips quirk up into that smile again. The one that makes my hear little faster. Can he hear it? Does he have any idea how freaking beau is when he smiles? "I promised to ensure you were safe."

Something soft and warm shoots through me, relaxing knots e I was muscles. I make an instant decision and flip the covers back, silently i g of...him into the bed with me.

ness of "I'm fine, starlight."

a pit of "No, you aren't. I can tell how tired you are," I disagree.

"Are you always so stubborn?"

peeling "Are you?"

ve and "Always."

y and "Me too."

He rewards me with another of those smiles. They come easy to hi he smiles often.

ows on "It's your bed, Constantine. If you stay on your side, we can share he wall little while." If I were decent, I'd offer to go sleep in a guest room a

he lookshim back his room, but I'm quickly coming to learn that maybe I'm decent when it comes to him. I want him close, not because he makes safe but because he makes me feel like a livewire shooting off sparks.

"You don't have to share the bed with me, Aurora. I'm fine."

"I like having you close," I blurt. My teeth sink into my bottom lip, big, hechurning through me. "You make me feel."

is gaze "Feel what, starlight?"

"A lot," I whisper, swallowing hard. "You make me feel...a lot."

His eyes glow again, heat simmering in them as he stares at complete silence. He doesn't say anything else, but he pulls his shirt c his head.

t race a My eyes fall to his torso. Tattoos litter his bronze skin. A demc tiful hehorns and malevolent eyes blazes from the center of his chest. Three are inked in scroll right about the tattoo.

in my "*God loves ugly*," I read aloud. "What does that mean?"

inviting "It means that, once upon a time, I believed I could be saved."

"You don't anymore?"

He shrugs, striding around the opposite side of the bed.

I sit with this in silence for a moment, processing. I try not to stare but it's hard not to do so. He may think his soul is ugly, but the rest certainly doesn't match.

"Once upon a time, I thought I'd die in that room," I finally say. " out of hell, I'm thinking the man who carried me out can find his w m, as ifheaven."

His lips quirk into a smile as he paces toward the bed before slidin it for athe far side. "I'll stay on my side, starlight."

nd give I wish he wouldn't. I start to tell him that, but don't. What would he

not sodid? Just a few short hours ago, I was locked in a bedroom, guarded by a feelmonster. Surely it isn't normal to ache to be held by a stranger now. And I do ache to feel this man's arms around me. To fall asleep to something other than the sounds of abrasive, raucous laughter floating up from the floor. To feel a sense of safety and anxiety for once.

We lay in silence for an eternity before Constantine curses. A second later, the bed dips as he shifts abruptly. Before I can ask what's wrong, he's dragging me across the bed into his arms.

me in "I won't hurt you," he promises. "Just don't like how small and alone I feel off overlook over there by yourself."

"Okay." I worry my bottom lip between my teeth before the truth finally tumbles out. "I wanted to ask, but...it's probably not normal, is it? The words stranger to hold me after everything, I mean."

"I'm not a stranger, starlight." He shifts us until he's able to tip my head back to look at him. We're so close, his lips are inches from mine, his eyes boring into me. "I'm the man who'd kill to protect you."

"You would, wouldn't you?"

"Without hesitation."

at him, "How many people have you killed?"

of him "I stopped counting a long time ago."

"Oh."

If I got "Does that frighten you?"

ay into "Maybe it would have two months ago." I shrug, not sure that's true. If he were anyone else, it'd probably terrify me. But he isn't just a monster. If I am cursed like Merry always said, I think maybe he's the think that can break it. Isn't that how it works in fairytales? My life may not be one of them, but if ever a storybook hero existed, I think it's him. He's a warrior.

ed by a "But not any longer?" he asks.

nd yet I "I've seen evil now," I whisper into the inky dawn. "I've lived in fear
g otherknow what it looks like and how it beats in your chest. You are
r belowConstantine. You're something else."

"What am I, Aurora?"

id later, "Inevitable." I don't know why I say it, but I think maybe it's the only
ig, he'sthat fits him. He's inevitable. For those who cross the people he cares
he's the inevitable, foregone conclusion. You don't tempt fate, not if yo
me you to survive.

"Jesus," he rumbles, shifting closer. His lips settle against mine in
comeskiss. He intends it to be short and sweet, a simple gesture of gratitude,
to ask about I'm quickly coming to learn that I'm starving for any little piece
man he's willing to give. If he gives an inch, I'll take a mile.

read up That's exactly what I do.

boring I press my tongue to his bottom lip, eager to taste him and the fo
fruit dangling in front of me. A pained groan rips from deep within h
before he hauls me on top of him. My legs slide against the expensive
encasing his powerful thighs as I straddle him, our mouths working t
as if we're both starved for the taste of one another.

"Starlight." His fingers sink into my hips, pulling me deeper into hi
hand slips into my hair, cradling my head as he deepens the kiss. His
strokes against mine, drugging me. "You taste like trouble, baby girl."
strictly I shiver at the rough rasp of his voice. At the thick bulge nestled b
anyone.my thighs. At the way he holds me as if I might shatter if he presses to
neant toA thousand different sensations swarm me, each one new and more e
f those,than the last.

"Constantine," I moan, caught in a maelstrom of ecstasy.

He groans like a dying man, reluctantly breaking the kiss. "We have
r of it. Before I lose the will to stop at all, starlight."

It's that, My heart plummets. I don't want to stop. I want to glut myself on hi
I'm so full of his heat that it burns away the last two months enti
freedom has a taste, it's his lips.

ly word But I groan and slowly pull back. At least I try. He kisses me again
s about, this time. Slower. He sinks into me as if he's submerging himself
ou want water. I drown with him, sinking to the depths, only to reem
something else. Something new.

1 a soft *His.* God help us both, but I think I belong to this man.

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He groans like a dying man, reluctantly breaking the kiss. "We have to stop before I lose the will to stop at all, starlight."

My heart plummets. I don't want to stop. I want to glut myself on him until I'm so full of his heat that it burns away the last two months entirely. If freedom has a taste, it's his lips.

But I groan and slowly pull back. At least I try. He kisses me again, softer this time. Slower. He sinks into me as if he's submerging himself in holy water. I drown with him, sinking to the depths, only to reemerge as something else. Something new.

His. God help us both, but I think I belong to this man.

CHAPTER FIVE

Constantine



"Starlight, this is Belle and Dante Arakas," I murmur gently, introducing Aurora to Dante and his curvy wife. She woke us up fifteen minutes ago, well past noon. Since Belle is a doctor, Dante sent her to check over for me. "She's a doctor."

"It's nice to meet you, sweetheart," Dante says, leaning back against the wall beside the front door. He maintains a healthy distance, giving her a few feet of room to breathe.

"Arakas." Aurora eyes him speculatively. "You're the man everyone always whispers about."

Dante cracks a smile. "Probably."

"Is what they say true?"

Dante looks at me, arching a brow.

I shrug one shoulder. She's curious about everything and asks questions fearlessly. I'm not sure if it's shock or if she's always been that way, though I have a feeling she's always been that way. The thirst for knowledge and desire to explore the world and know everything lurks deep in her gaze.

"Depends on what they say," Dante finally says. "If they say I'm anything like the man who kidnapped you, the answer is no, little one. What they say isn't true. I'm just a man. Some of us just sin more than most."

That answer seems to satisfy her. She nods once before glancing at Belle.

"Hi, Aurora. It's good to see you again." Belle smiles at her, a reassuring smile. She's the light to Dante's dark, saving lives where I lose them. I never could figure how that would work, but it does. The love they share is apparent.

"You two know each other?" I ask, glancing between Belle and Aurora.

Belle nods. "Aurora attended the hospital gala with her father right before he moved here. I didn't know anyone, and she was avoiding the billionaire. I'm introducing you two. We talked about her fear of needles."

Aurora "You're afraid of needles?"

Aurora Her brows wrinkle in disgust. "No. I'm not afraid of them. They make me nervous."

I "Ah," I say, fighting a smile.

Belle "How are you feeling?" Belle asks her.

Aurora "I'm okay." Aurora glances from her to me, her brows crinkled. "I don't need to be checked out, Constantine. I'm not injured."

"Humor me, starlight."

Her brows wrinkle in annoyance, but she reluctantly agrees.

Belle glides across the living room floor toward her, her bag in hand. I watch them for a long moment, relieved she's here. Relieved Aurora

questions. Grateful Dante agreed to send her when I asked. Aurora is so good enough I brave, I'm not sure she'd tell me even if she they had hurt her. She'd be alone.

I know grown men with less spine than this little goddess possesses. They don't even think about what she went through the last two months, but she hasn't cracked yet. She's still soldiering on, refusing to break.

Watching her, I feel whole in a way I never have. Peaceful in a way Belle is brand new, as if I'm staring at my life's purpose. It's not to kill and mangle, destroy. It's to protect and cherish. It's her. She's my reason.

If there's forgiveness for a motherfucker like me, I think she's my reason. This world is an ugly place, with nasty people. Maybe He knew what

He was doing when He brought me into it, after all. He knew the brightest light would need his darkest knight. Yin and yang.

I'll be hard so she stays soft. I'll stain my hands so hers remain clean, so the people who hurt her—every last one of the motherfuckers—will pay.

"I'll be back in a few minutes, starlight," I murmur. "I need to make

She glances up at me, her lips slightly parted. Those pale blue eyes make me right to my soul again, sending me free-willing deeper into love with her. I spin like a top set loose on the floor, following the natural slope that leads right to her.

She tips her face up to me, and I can't resist claiming her lips.

I really Belle gasps quietly.

"Motherfucker," Dante mutters.

I ignore them both. Let them watch. Let them wonder. She's mine. I give a flying fuck how it complicates things or who has a problem with my hand. I follow her to the ends of the earth.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," I murmur against her lips.

oddamn "Okay," she breathes against mine.

carry it I pry myself away before I embarrass her in front of our company.

Dante follows me down the hall. "Branson is going to kill you."

. I can't "Won't be the first to try," I remind him. Hell, I doubt Chris Branson hasn't be the last, either. I've been shot, stabbed, and left for dead more than

I'm still haunting the alleys of this great state.

y that's "She's been through hell."

him and "I'm aware. I carried her out of there." I push open the door to my

allowing Dante to enter ahead of me. "Give us a little credit, D.

7 proof.helluva lot stronger than she looks, and I'm not fucking stupid. I'm not that the advantage of her. You know me better than that."

iew his Dante lifts his hands in a placating gesture. "I wasn't accusing. reminding."

an. But I grunt by way of response, dragging my phone from my pocket.

ty. "You're calling Branson?"

a call." "Yeah." I scrub a hand through my hair, turning to face him. "And t yes see calling Dillon."

h her. I My announcement catches him by surprise. His eyes widen. "Yo at lead him?"

"Enough to turn her over to him?" I shake my head. "I trust no one for that. She's staying here until her father gets here. But I trust him enough to know he didn't steal that ransom money."

"It's a risk," Dante warns me. "If anyone finds out she's here, then I don't come for her to keep her quiet."

h it. I'll I smile, a cold, lethal smile. "I fucking hope they do."

Dante shakes his head. "You and Dimitri are two fucking peas in a p

"We learned from the best."

He snorts, circling around my desk to the mini bar to pour himself of whiskey. He holds up a second glass, silently asking if I want to wave him off, dialing Chris Branson's number.

son will "This is Chris Branson."

n once. "Mayor Branson, this is Constantine Attias. I work for Dante Aral calling about your daughter. Don't say anything until you're alone."

His sharp intake of breath sounds like static on the line. "You have l office, "We didn't kidnap her, if that's what you're suggesting. That's not l She's ado things. Are you alone?"

t taking "Yes, goddammit. I'm alone. I want to speak to my daughter."

"I've got a doctor checking her out right now, but she's safe and unlf SimplyI'll have her call you as soon as she's finished, but you need to get bac I dealt with the men who took her, but you've got a situation to handle.

"What situation?"

"The people who arranged her kidnapping." I pause. "I'm guessing hen I'mthe same ones who stole the ransom money."

"What are you talking about? Her kidnappers got the ransom money ou trust "They didn't," I say softly. "Someone stole it out from underneatl It's the whole fucking reason she wasn't released."

enough Chris Branson goes stonily silent for a long moment. "Who?" he ough togrows.

"Don't know yet, but I'm working on finding out. I'd highly recomm ey maytrusting anyone until we know. According to your daughter, some them into your house the night she was kidnapped. She believes one people may have even been there when they took her."

od." "Believes?"

"They drugged her."

a glass "Jesus Christ."

e, but I "How soon can you get here?"

"I'll be on the next flight out, but it may be tomorrow."

I glance at Dante. "Can you pull some strings and get him a plane ticket. I'm here?"

"I'll call Jude," Dante says. "We'll get him back here."

her." "We're working on it. Just hang tight."

now we "Did they hurt her?" he asks, his voice cracking.

I know what he's saying, what he can't bring himself to say, anyway

"No," I say softly. "They didn't touch her. Seems whoever arranged for her to be taken may have cared enough about her to spare her from that fatality here. He exhales a shaking breath. "I want to talk to her."

"Belle Arakas is looking her over. As soon as she's finished, I'll make sure she calls you."

they're "Call Dillon Armstrong."

"There may be an issue with that," I admit.

:" "What issue?"

h them. "The house full of bodies I left behind."

Chris grunts, the sound full of satisfaction. "It won't be an issue. My daughter. I'll tell you whatever fucking story you want, and I'll make sure it sticks. Those motherfuckers kidnapped my daughter."

end not "Noted." A little tension falls from my shoulders. Maybe I won't be in prison, after all.

of your

ie back



"Say that again," Dillon Armstrong growls.

for her "I found Aurora Branson," I repeat. "You can come see for yourself
e." don't believe me. But until her dad gets here, you aren't leaving with her.

ke sure "What the fuck? You found her? Just like that?"

"No, not just like that." I pinch the bridge of my nose. Dealing with
enforcement is exhausting, even when they are decent. They ask too
goddamn questions. "There was quite a lot more than that involved.
rather not go into the details over the fucking phone."

"Jesus Christ. I knew having the mafia in this town was going to be
in my ass, he mutters. "I'm too old for this shit."

fake up "Aren't you in your forties."
s. The "Exactly. That's too goddamn old for this shit. Where is she?"
e going "Arakas compound."
"Do I even have to ask if that's where you conveniently found her?"
"Do I need to stab you when you get here?"

Dante barks laughter from the far side of my desk. "We didn't kidnap
girl, Armstrong. That's not our M.O., and you know it."

"Yeah, I know." Dillon sighs heavily. "I'm guessing the Carmonas
are involved in this?"

"Something like that."

"Are any of them still alive?"

I don't answer...which is answer enough.

"The four of you will be the sole reason I retire before forty-five, you're wondering. Being in charge in this town with you in it is v much goddamn work. Jesus Christ, Constantine. You didn't leave any (alive?"

"I saved a kidnapping victim from a cartel. Shit happened in the pro mitter. It's a version of the truth. Shit did happen while I was saving f if you fell in love with her. But the dying came before. He doesn't need to kn er." though. I'm working with what I've got here. Sue me. "It tends to when it's eleven against one."

with law "You know what? I don't even want to hear anything else. I'll b o many soon."

But I'd "She isn't leaving with you."

"You said that already."

e a pain "I mean it, Dillon. Someone in your circle is the reason she was tak be a cold day in hell before I let her leave here without me to gu back."

Dillon falls silent for a moment and then curses abruptly. "You when the rest of this town falls in love, it's an amusing shit show : When the Arakas family does it, there are always bodies to clean up. that?"

nap the "That's just the way the cookie crumbles, motherfucker."

"One day, I'm going to arrest you, Attias."

i Kings "One day, I may let you, but that day isn't today."

Dillon sighs and hangs up on me.

I slide my phone back into my pocket before turning to Dante.

"Well, that went well," he says.

I snort, shaking my head. Sheriff Dillon Armstrong is an interesting
in case He was right about one thing, though. When we fall in love, there do
way to be bodies on the ground.
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"Well, that went well," he says.

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CHAPTER SIX

Aurora



CHAPTER SIX

Aurora



Aurora

"I talked to your dad, starlight."

I glance over my shoulder, startled as Constantine's voice behind me.

"Shit." He grimaces, striding across the back patio toward me. "I mean to startle you."

"It's okay." I turn from the pond at the back of his property to face him. "You called my dad?"

He jerks his chin in a nod. "He's in DC, but he'll be on the first flight out here. He wants you to call him." Constantine stops in front of me, his head down to frown at me. "What did Belle say?"

"She said I'm fine, exactly like I told you." It's mostly true. Physically fine. But she thinks I should probably talk to a therapist or someone who deals with things like this. She's probably not wrong about that, but I don't want to talk to anyone yet. At least not to a stranger.

Constantine hooks his finger beneath my chin, tipping my head back until my eyes meet his. "What did she really say, Aurora?"

I scowl at him. "She thinks I should talk to someone. A shrink."

"Ah. You don't want to talk to anyone?"

"Not yet." I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. "It's still too close."

He nods again like this makes perfect sense to him. "Give it a few days, starlight. You're allowed to take all the time you need to sit with whatever happened. You're allowed to fall apart or break down or scream or cry or deal however you need to deal. There is no right or wrong way here."

"How do you deal?" I bite my lip. "I mean, I think you went through things too. They weigh on you, don't they?"

"Sometimes. But my shit was a long time ago and it wasn't the same sounds "What was your...stuff?"

"Foster care." His gaze shifts from mine before sliding back. "Never I didn'tmy parents. They dumped me when I was born and never looked bounced around foster homes for a while, but that didn't work out. I ce him.one...well, there are evil men in this world, starlight. They prey on and kids just because they can."

ht back "Oh, Constantine." Tears well in my eyes, horror for him flowing t tippingme. "He hurt you?"

"Beat the hell out of me on the daily. His wife too. She was too terrible, I'msay anything, so when I told my social worker what was happening ne who denied everything, said I made it up. They sent me back there." H I don'tnarrow. "I ran away the next morning."

"I'm so sorry."

ck until "It was a long time ago."

"That doesn't mean it doesn't still hurt you."

"He was the first person I killed," he admits. "Don't even know why back, but I saw the bruises on the little girl playing in the yard and k se." hadn't changed. I waited until he left to go to the bar that night and f w days,him. He didn't remember me, but I remembered him. He didn't hurt h whatelse after that."

rage or "How old were you?"

"Seventeen."

I push myself into his arms, hugging him tight. He was just a kid, for the people supposed to protect him, watching the same thing hap

h someanother child. How can I blame him for what he did? I'm angry for I never should have had to make that decision. And yet he did.

:" "I'm so sorry," I whisper, leaning up on my toes to press my lips to h

"I'm not a hero, starlight. He deserved it. A lot of others didn't. The ver metjust business." He meets my gaze, his open and honest. He doesn't lie back. Ior try to make himself look better. He just gives me the truth as he the last "I'm not a good man. I haven't been one in a long fucking time."

women "That doesn't make you evil, Constantine. It doesn't mak irredeemable. It makes you human," I whisper, placing my palm aga throughscruffy jaw. "I saw evil. I lived with it for two months, wondering w strike. Sooner or later, I was leaving that room in a body bag or a ified toman's property. We both know it."

ng, she He flinches but doesn't deny it. Eventually, Victor would have killed is eyessold me. We both know it's true. He wasn't going to let me go, not the money he wanted for me, not unless I died first. Those were my o ways out of that room.

Constantine may not be a hero in his eyes, but he's the reason I'm mine. Maybe that doesn't tip the scales far enough for him, but if even I wentthe men he's killed are like Victor or the one who hurt him, then ma new hecosmic scales that weigh and measure the worth of our souls were n allowedoff-balance as he thinks.

anyone He's not a bad man. He's one who does what he must. It's a sub distinct nuance that makes all the difference in the world.

"I'd like to talk to my dad," I whisper, dropping back down to the

"Can I do that?"

ailed by "Yeah, starlight. I promised you'd call him as soon as you were do open toBelle. He's waiting to hear from you." He fishes in his pocket for his

him. He before holding it out for me.

I reach for it, but he doesn't release it. When I look at him, his brows are furrowed, deep grooves between them.

"I called the sheriff, Aurora."

My eyes widen and I rear back in shock.

"Easy, starlight. Easy," he murmurs. "I know you're leery of anyone right now, but your dad trusts him and so do I. He wasn't involved in what happened to you. Dillon isn't that kind of man."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know the kind of men capable of things like that, and I know Dillon. He isn't one of them, Aurora. You can trust him."

I hesitate for a long moment and then nod, putting my fate in his hands for the second time in less than twenty-four hours. I hope he's right.

"I need a favor when he gets here, starlight."

"What?"

"It's going to require you to lie." He grimaces apologetically. "I would ask, but there's no way to hide the fact that the men I killed in that house weren't killed in self-defense. Dillon is bound by the law. He can't let me go without a good reason."

"You need me to give him a reason," I guess.

He nods. "I need you to tell him that you were banging on the window for help when I was driving by. I fucking hate even asking, starlight, but if they don't believe you, they'll try to take Dante and Dimitri with me. I can't allow that to happen. They have families."

"If it were just you, you'd let them send you to prison just to keep me from lying, wouldn't you?" I gape at him, stunned. "Why, Constantine?"

"You shouldn't be in the middle of any of this, Aurora."

"I'm in the middle because they put me in the middle," I cry. "You don't know how I feel." He touches my cheek. "I've never had anything worth protecting but you." "Starlight."

I swallow hard at the look in his eyes. "You do now?" I whisper.

"Only the brightest star in the sky."

trusting "Constantine."

involved in He grins at me, brushing his thumb along my bottom lip. "Call your name." "Starlight. I'll go wait for Dillon to give you some privacy."

I stare at him until he walks back inside, my heart in my throat. Or maybe it's just the way he looks at me. I've met it's in his hands. I'm not sure, but I'm falling in love with him. Is that possible?

hands for Yes, my heart whispers.

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"I'm in the middle because they put me in the middle," I cry. "*You* didn't."

He touches my cheek. "I've never had anything worth protecting before, starlight."

I swallow hard at the look in his eyes. "You do now?" I whisper.

"Only the brightest star in the sky."

"Constantine."

He grins at me, brushing his thumb along my bottom lip. "Call your dad, starlight. I'll go wait for Dillon to give you some privacy."

I stare at him until he walks back inside, my heart in my throat. Or maybe it's in his hands. I'm not sure, but I'm falling in love with him. Is that even possible?

Yes, my heart whispers.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Constantine



"The fact that Dante actually let me into the compound this time me nervous," Dillon growls, eyeing me sideways as soon as I open the front door for him. "I think I preferred being barred from passing beyond goddamn gates."

"Yeah, well, the situation changed." I hold the door open for him, and let him enter the house.

For someone who claims he's nervous, he strolls in like he's been there a thousand times. To his credit, he doesn't snoop. He glances around with interest and then stops a few feet into the living room, not trying to go deeper into the room.

"Armstrong," Dante says from the far side of the room where he's talking with Dimitri.

"Arakas. Dimitri." Dillon inclines his head in a nod at the two cops before turning back to me. "Where is she?"

"Out back. Give her a minute. She's talking to her dad."

"Good. It'll give you time to explain what the fuck is going on," he glances at me.

"I was out driving and saw her banging on the window," I lie smoothly.

"Figured since you were looking for her, I'd go in and get her."

"Uh-huh," he says, not believing my story for a minute. "And you think to call me first?"

"I was in Copper Creek. Didn't seem like the wait twenty minutes for cops to show up type of situation."

He glowers at me, one hand on his utility belt. "You ever heard that you're so full of shit your eyes are brown?"

"Hazel."

"I've got kids, Attias. I've changed enough diapers to know what color the other end looks a whole helluva lot like your eyes," he mutters.

Dante and Dimitri both chuckle.

"Ask her if you don't believe me."

"I'll do that." He glances from me to Dante and Dimitri. "And the fact that

he just so happened to be driving by the place where the Carmona family was following the same cartel who targeted both of your wives—was holding her hostage is just a great, big co-inky-dink, I suppose?"

"Not at all," Dante says. "We've been looking for the motherfucker for a while. I won't deny that. But for the sake of whatever fucking paperwork you need to go anydo, let's just go with the rest of it and save all of us a lot of time."

"Jesus Christ." Dillon laughs abruptly. "The day the three of you and Bruno leave town, I'm throwing a fucking party."

"You know you'll miss us," Dimitri says. "We've single-handedly run the

of them your cartel problem."

Dillon narrows his eyes on Dimitri. "I'm still writing fucking reports the last time you *resolved* part of my cartel problem."

growls. "They were a big problem." Dimitri shrugs.

toothily. Dillon rubs a hand across his jaw, trying to hide a smile. "Just tell me you know about how they got their hands on Aurora."

u didn't "Someone let them into the house."

Dillon and I both turn as Aurora steps into the room from the kitchen for the phone clutched in her hands. I take one look at the tears drying on her face and take off toward her.

is saying "My dad wants to talk to you," she whispers, her bottom lip quivering when I reach her side.

I ignore the phone for the moment, more worried about her than anything else. I tilt her face up to me, carefully drying her cheeks. "Are you a starlight?"

"Yeah." She nods, giving me a tremulous smile. "Hearing his voice is just emotional, that's all."

act that "Shit. I should have stayed with you." I thought she might want things—but I didn't consider that she might need emotional support. Clearly, I'm a stage asshole. I need to learn to take better care of her. I'm not doing a great job of it, far.

ckers. I "It's okay. I'm okay."

have to I pull her into my arms, pressing my lips to her forehead. "You're the strongest person I know, little warrior."

ou and She burrows into me with a soft sigh.

I take the phone from her, putting it to my ear. "You wanted to see if I resolved me?"

"You're in love with my daughter," Chris Branson growls. "I hear
ts fromfucking word you just said to her."

"Then you know she's perfectly safe with me."

"Goddammit."

re what "We can discuss it later. The sheriff is here."

"Jason Montoya is sending his jet for me. I'll be there by 1am. Don't
out of your fucking sight until then."

ien, my "Don't plan on it."

cheeks "Take care of her."

"Like my life depends on it," I vow, pretty sure it actually does dep
iveringit. Not because Chris Branson will kill me but because losing her migh
been mine for less than a day, and I already don't know how to live
nythingher.

u okay, I disconnect and slip the phone back into my pocket before tipp
head down to her. "You're safe with me, starlight. I won't let anything
ice wasto you."

"I know." She pulls back to look up at me, her pale blue eyes rim
rprivacy,red and still so fucking beautiful.

I'm an Dillon clears his throat behind us.

t job so I sigh heavily and reluctantly release Aurora before turning to face h

"Hi, Dillon," she says quietly, sticking close to my side.

"Hey, sweetheart," he says, his voice gentle. "I'm so fucking sorry I
u're theable to bring you home a long time ago. I hope you know we haven't
trying."

Aurora nods, swallowing hard. "Constantine told me."

peak to "Are you all right?"

She nods again.

d every "Can you tell me what happened to you?"

"I woke up locked in a bedroom in Victor Carmona's house. He s
escaped, he'd kill my dad and everyone else who matters to m
mumbles. "Um, he kept me pretty drugged for the first few days.
really remember much, but he kept saying I'd go home as soon as
t let her paid the fee."

"The ransom?" Dillon confirms.

"Yes. Except someone else picked up the money and they don't kno
They assumed you had people watching the area and were waiting
end on opening to go in. By the time they got there, the money was gone."

it. She's "They wanted it thrown in the recycling," Dillon says. "We had unit
without plant, but the truck went off course two miles outside of the gates.

time we got someone over there, the money and the driver were bot
ing my We assumed we fucked up. It wasn't exactly a traditional ransom ex
happen Your dad was adamant about us playing by their rules for your protecti

"It wasn't them," Aurora says. "Victor questioned me for hours ab
med in my dad would have trusted with the details of the exchange."

"Who is on that list?"

"You, Millie Audley, Jude Despora, Cormac Carmichael, Finn
im. Judge Hyde, my uncle Brady, but we haven't heard from him in a lon

We think he may have been killed by one of the MCs he double-cr
I wasn't She shrugs helplessly.

stopped "Not exactly an untrustworthy bunch," Dante muses.

Aurora grimaces.

"What's that look?" Dillon asks.

"Millie," she whispers, pressing her palm to her head. "I think...
maybe she was there the night they kidnapped me?" Her lips purse, h

narrowing as she tries to focus. "I keep dreaming about her and I don't know why, but in my dreams, I'm in my bathroom, and the door is broken. I see her hanging there. She's there, and I'm angry at her." She glances at Dillon, perched on the edge of the sofa. "I don't know. Maybe it's just a dream."

Dillon's grim expression says otherwise. He reaches into his pocket, pulls out his phone before pulling something up on the screen and walks across the living room toward us. He stops a few paces away, hesitating for a moment, then reluctantly turns the phone around so we can see the screen.

It's a crime scene photo of what I'm guessing is Aurora's bathroom. The door is splintered and broken into pieces, the frame shattered. A solitary lightbulb hangs from the ceiling, casting a dim glow over the scene. A woman's body lies on a bathmat knocked askew in front of the door.

"I don't think it's just a dream, sweetheart. You were abducted from your bathroom," Dillon says quietly.

"Millie Audley," I say, memorizing the name of the woman who bore the scars. "Aurora. If I find her, I'll kill her."

I share a look with Dimitri, who nods in complete understanding of the look on my face. I don't have to say anything. He knows. Not so long ago, he was in the same place, prepared to make the same decision for the woman he loved. Snow's own stepmother tried to murder her.

"I've never killed a woman or even raised my hand to one, not even if she deserved it. Neither has he. But things aren't so black and white as you think. The women you love are the ones nearly destroyed by vicious bitches who play deadly games with other people's lives. It took everything Dimitri had to kill Snow's mom. I'm fully prepared to make the same sacrifice to protect Aurora. Even if it means tipping the scales past the point of return."

Dimitri knows it. I think Dillon does too.

He takes one look at my face and fires a curse up at the ceiling. "I n

't know alive, Constantine. If she's working with someone else, I can't find
I have ashe isn't around to talk."

plexed. "Then find her," I snap, pulling Aurora into my arms. "Because G
her if I do."

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alive, Constantine. If she's working with someone else, I can't find them if she isn't around to talk."

"Then find her," I snap, pulling Aurora into my arms. "Because God help her if I do."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Aurora



"Talk to me, starlight," Constantine whispers, brushing hair back from my face. "What are you thinking?"

"That my nanny, Merry, was right," I mumble. "She used to be convinced that I had a curse on me. She was big into tarot and divination. Even when she read my cards, they warned of a great evil hanging over me. Pain, sorrow and loss were in my future every single time."

"Bullshit," he growls, flipping me onto my back on the bed.

I blink up at him, startled at how quickly he moves. At how emphatic his words sound.

"You aren't cursed. You were betrayed. If the cards warned of a great evil hanging over you, it's because that bitch was in your life, hanging over you."

like a gathering storm. She won't be for much longer," he vows, venomous voice. "One way or another, she's exiting your life immediately."

I shiver, certain he means it. If Dillon doesn't find her, he'll kill me. I don't know how I feel about that. He's too good to have death weighing on his conscience and on his soul. I can't let him kill me. If I allow it, I become the thing that destroys him.

That's not what I want. I want to be the thing that protects him as he protects me. The one who loves him as ferociously as I think he loves me. That is what's happening here, isn't it?

I'm not a job to him, but something else. Something more.

"I think I love you," I blurt.

"You think?" He quirks a brow.

"I've never...I don't..." I stop and then start again. "I feel you control me from the inside out, as if that's exactly how it's supposed to be. When you kissed me and brought me to life. But I'm so afraid it's just an illusion from that it doesn't mean what I think it means."

"What do you think it means, starlight?"

"That you're mine," I whisper. "That I'm yours. That we're inevitable."

"We are inevitable, Aurora." He dips his head, brushing his lips against mine. "In this life and every other, we're inevitable. You feel me control you because you belong to me, the same way I belong to you."

"It's too fast."

"You know all of my sins, starlight. I've confessed them all." He presses his nose against mine. "Do you still think you love me?"

"I...yes."

"Then it's not too fast."

"We set our own speed. We decide our own course." His lips touch

n in his shell of my ear. "I fell for you in an instant and it was enough to
lifetime. We have the rest of our lives to learn the little things."

her to "Constantine," I groan, reaching for him. "Please."

ave her "Please what?"

her. If I "Show me."

He groans, settling over me on the bed and loses himself in me a
fiercely request set him free. His mouth is everywhere, kissing all those hidden
he loves I didn't know existed.

I gasp his name, dizzy from the sensations swirling through r
undresses me slowly, his hands reverent as he slips my clothing from r
rough pads of his fingers glide against my skin, sending me reeling
world I've never known.

suming I push my hands into his shirt, trying to pull it from his body. He y
It's like off over his head and flings it away, allowing me to touch him too. I tr
ision or fingers over his bronze skin and the hard muscles just beneath, marv
his strength. He's so powerful, so damn beautiful.

He leans back, his hazel eyes blazing hot as they trail down my body
e." "Sweetest little star in the galaxy," he says, and then leans forward,
across my nipple into his mouth.

suming My back bows from the bed, sensations sparking everywhere. Bright
light courses through me, setting me ablaze. He doesn't stop his
assault. He moves from breast to the other, sending sensation ripping t
brushes me over and over.

I'm trembling by the time he slides down my body, pressing little ki
over my belly. His lips touch every flaw and imperfection, worshipping
one. I can't even breathe through the fire of what having his bare hands
uch the skin does to me.

o last a My body sizzles and steams.

He groans before rising to his feet. I watch through slit lids as he undresses. Where my body is covered in stretch marks, his is covered in scars, some so old they're only faintly visible. And still, he's perfect.

"I wish you could see how perfect you are right now," he says. "As if my glowing, starlight."

I swallow hard, pressing my legs together when his erection springs free. Everything inside me trembles with the desire to feel him inside me. That doesn't seem wrong. With reverence in his eyes and my name on his lips. That doesn't feel fast at all.

He slides my legs apart and kneels between them on the bed, running his mouth up the inside of my thigh. His breath blows hot across my center.

I twist my fingers in the sheets, my heart racing.

He meets my gaze again, his hazel eyes burning with desire, and I smile. He doesn't. This man doesn't need redemption, and he doesn't require it.

If angels are real, he's one of them. They are warriors, after all. He's so captivating, entirely too perfect.

"Do you want me to stop, starlight?" he asks.

I shake my head. If he stops now, I may cry.

He nods once, his expression fierce, and lowers his head.

His tongue swipes through my folds.

"Oh!" I cry out in shock, my fingers clutched in the sheets as pleasure surges through me.

He groans and tightens his grip on me, pulling my hips up to meet his mouth. I cease to breathe as he gorges himself on me. Cease to exist outside of this moment. I'm nothing but a ball of sensation, shooting across the horizon.

My head spins, wave after wave of pleasure wracking me as he eats r
finisheshe knows exactly what I need and where I need it.

ered in He gives it to me.

Within minutes, an orgasm tears through me, flinging me into foreve
"You're Constantine groans my name, his eyes locked on my face as he wa
take me.

free. I shake beneath him, sobbing my way through it, before I fall li
ie. Andgasping for breath.

his lips, He crawls up my body, wiping the back of his hand across his

"You taste like heaven, starlight. If you aren't careful, I might get ad
ing hisHe hitches my leg over his hip, his erection pressing against my center
r.

"I don't have condoms, Aurora. I've never..."

"Never?" I gape up at him, stunned. He's a virgin too? How is th
ee whatpossible? I answer my own question. He wouldn't allow himself close
saving.to anyone, that's how. He's punished himself for so long for being wh
. He is"Me either."

"I'll be gentle with you," he promises, searing me with sincerity. "
hurt you. Not ever."

"I know," I mouth, trusting him implicitly.

His hips surge forward.

I cry out as he slips inside, fighting for every inch. I writhe benea
ire rollstangled in awe, caught in ecstasy. So in love with this man, I can't bre
there's pain, it's fleeting, no more than a pinch.

reet his His head kicks back when he's all the way inside, a loud, satisfie
tside ofripping through the room. "Fuck, starlight. Fuck, yes."

eavens. It's the most erotic sound I've ever heard.

He pauses, dipping his head until his mouth meets mine again. His

ne as if gentle and so sweet, all I can do is cling to him and gasp. He tastes like us.

"Are you okay, warrior?" he whispers against my lips.

er. "Yes. More."

tches it "You want more?"

"Yes."

mp and "Whatever you want, starlight. I'm yours to command."

He slides out slowly before pushing his way back into me. He kisses my mouth the same time, slow and sweet. My inner muscles clutch at him, terrified. "keep him inside me, desperate to keep him inside me where I think he belongs."

He kisses me as he makes love to me, thrusting deep before he pulls out to start all over. And then he goes faster. Harder. Within minutes he's moving so quickly, so deeply, that he loses track of my mouth. I sob. Wordless sobs of ecstasy pour from my throat.

He's everywhere, kissing and biting every inch of me that he can reach. Every little nip, every soft kiss, sends me higher and higher. He works me with his hands, mouth, and body, destroying any chance I have of surviving without him.

My fingers dig into his back as he sends me spiraling toward another orgasm. Everything inside shrinks. I can't even focus on one sensation before he's back inside. He thrusts into that shrinking ball of everything I am. My hips lift to meet him again and again.

I groan "Starlight," he groans against my breast. "I've never loved anyone the way I love you."

His words send me hurtling over the edge. I cry out, exploding around him. His kiss is pleasure tears through me savagely, leaving me sobbing in bliss as he

like me, curl and my back arches.

Constantine shouts my name, his hips slamming into mine a final time. He cries out, his erection jerking inside of me as he comes, too. My body clenches around him, my orgasm prolonged by his. It seems to go on forever. He moans above me, his fingers digging into my hips and his hair pressed tightly to mine, sheltering me through the storm.

We collapse at the same time. He lands against me, his head resting on my chest between my breasts. His heart thunders like a thousand hooves against my stomach. Neither of us speaks. There are no words to describe this moment. He may as well be dead. Until he finds them. He lifts his head, his hazel eyes meeting mine. The light shining there takes my breath away.

He falls back. "We were made for this, starlight," he whispers. "Me and you." He smiles, his eyes shining.

my reach.

his lips me

surviving

my orgasm.

another

meet his,

ing the

and him.

my toes

curl and my back arches.

Constantine shouts my name, his hips slamming into mine a final time. He cries out, his erection jerking inside of me as he comes, too. My muscles clench around him, my orgasm prolonged by his. It seems to go on forever. He moans above me, his fingers digging into my hips and his hard body pressed tightly to mine, sheltering me through the storm.

We collapse at the same time. He lands against me, his head nestled between my breasts. His heart thunders like a thousand hooves against my stomach. Neither of us speaks. There are no words to describe this moment.

Until he finds them. He lifts his head, his hazel eyes meeting mine. The joy shining there takes my breath away.

"We were made for this, starlight," he whispers. "Me and you."

CHAPTER NINE

Constantine



"Dad!" Aurora flies down the front steps toward her father, com skipping the bottom one in her haste to get to him. She hits his tiny missile, knocking him back a step.

"Aurora," he growls, closing his arms around her and dragging against his broad chest.

She clings to him, sobbing the same way she did when I carried her that fucking house of horrors last night. I plant my feet and shove my hands into my pockets, fighting like hell to keep myself where I am and live through this moment. They deserve it. After everything they've been through, they need time together.

Chris lifts his gaze to look at me over his daughter's head, the porch light illuminating the unshed tears hanging bright in his pale blue eyes.

Aurora look so much alike that it's unnerving.

"Thank you," he mouths.

I jerk my chin in a nod as Dimitri strides up the steps toward me.

"Dillon just called," he murmurs, his voice pitched low. "They talked to Millie about two hours ago."

"Has she talked?"

He jerks his head toward the house, indicating for me to follow him.

I step inside after him, curious as hell about what he doesn't want Clara or Aurora to overhear. Whatever it is, I've known him long enough to know it's not good if he wants to discuss it in private.

"She talked," he says as soon as I'm over the threshold. "I don't know if you want to handle this, but she claims that Chris's brother, Brady, is the one she's been working with."

I whip my head in his direction. "You're fucking kidding me. Her brother? Her uncle?"

He nods, his expression grim. My blood doesn't boil at his confirmation like it turns frosty with ice-cold rage.

"Dillon was surprised to hear he was alive. Apparently, everyone thought he was dead. I guess he caused a lot of problems for Jude's MC a while ago and then disappeared. They assumed he was killed by the rival MC or double-crossed."

"Clearly fucking not." I run a hand over my head, wishing the MC had dealt with the fucker when he disappeared. Because he's a serious go through problem. He hurt Aurora.

If Millie isn't just trying to save her own ass and Brady really is in the light, I'm going to kill him. Doesn't matter if he's Aurora's uncle or not. Aurora and that's *precisely* why he's going to die by my hand. He's her blood, one

people in this world who should have been protecting her. Inst
callously risked her life. He left her to die with those motherfucker
could make a few quick bucks off his brother.

arrested No one deserves to live less than he does. Anything could have ha
to her! He's fucking lucky it didn't. Carmona and his cartel have
sordid history of selling women. Of hurting them.

"Millie claims she doesn't know where he is," Dimitri says. "But I
ris and already looking. Figured you would want to handle it before Dillon n
now it's to find him."

"Yep." I shake my head. "Jesus. Her own fucking uncle, man."
ow how "It's always fucked when it's family, isn't it?"

the one He would know. Snow's stepmother tried to murder her more tha
It's a special kind of twisted when your own family betrays you for sor
lis own as simple as money.

"Fuck. This is going to break her heart." It's bad enough that someon
ation. It known her whole life helped execute her abduction, but this? She's so
strong. But how much more is she supposed to take before she brea
thought may have a warrior's spirit, but she has a gentle heart.

le back "What can I do?" Dimitri clasps a hand on my shoulder, his express
MC he of empathy and understanding. "Whatever you need, you've got it."

"Help me find the motherfucker," I growl.

MC had
oddamn

olved,
ctually,
e of the

ead, he
s so he

ppened
a long,

Dante is
manages



Fifteen minutes later, I pull the mayor into my office to discuss th
with him. Dimitri keeps Aurora company. Keeping the truth from her
feel right, but frankly, I'd rather cut out my own goddamn heart tha
n once.

nothing "My daughter is in love with you," Chris says as soon as the doo
closed behind us. "What the fuck am I supposed to do about that, Attia
ne she's I glance him over, assessing. He's an older, harder version of his da
fucking with the same damn eyes and golden hair. It's not hard to see why the
ks? She in this town overwhelmingly support him. He's the exact kind of m
want in charge--honest, hardworking, patient, with a spine of steel.

ion full "Frankly, I don't care what you do about it as long as you don't br
heart or make her choose," I answer with a shrug. "Hate me beca
chose me if it makes you sleep better at night. But don't disappoint he
been through enough."

"We both know having you in the family is going to be a problem."

"And we both know her happiness means more to you than be
elected," I retort, not denying it. Chances are, having me in the fam
fuck up any future political plans he has. He knows it as well as I do

related to the mayor isn't exactly ideal for me, either. But I'll be c
before that stops me from putting my ring on Aurora's finger. "Yo
bigger problems than me right now anyway."

"Millie," he growls.

Guess he talked to Dillon.

"And your brother."

Confusion furrows his brows. "My brother is dead."

"Not yet," I mutter. "Your advisor told Dillon that your brother t
ransom money. He's alive."

doesn't "Jesus Christ." Chris stares at me in genuine shock. "Brady is alive?"

n break "For the time being."

I don't have to spell it out for him. He reads between the lines ju
r clicks Implacable, lethal satisfaction fills his expression, turning him fr
s?" exhausted father to a cold executioner.

ughter, "I bailed him out for years. Burned a lot of bridges trying to clear
people messes before I finally told him that he needed to sort his shit out hi

ian you He shakes his head, weary. "When he disappeared, the guilt ate me a
have given just about anything to have him back home. But putt

eak her daughter in danger?" He lifts his gaze to mine, rage burning in the de
use she his eyes. "I won't forgive that. Let the miserable son of a bitch r

r. She's growls. "It's less than he deserves for what he put her through."

"Fair enough." I pause. "No disrespect to you, but until the situ
handled, Aurora should stay here."

ing re- Chris narrows his eyes at me.

ily will "They kidnapped her from your house," I remind him, matter-

. Being "Look around. It'll take a goddamn army to get to her here. And, if b
miracle someone does get through our defenses, the motherfuckers w

damned to kill me and every single man on this property before he even breathes the same air as her. Can you say the same about your staff?"

"Point taken," he growls, and then shakes his head. "She would fall only motherfucker in this town who doesn't give a flying fuck that mayor."

"Oh, I care," I mutter dryly. "Having you in the family is bound to be a fucking problem for me."

He cracks a smile, the first of the night. "At least we agree on that one, Attias."

"

is fine.

from an

to up his

himself."

live. I'd

ing my

depths of "My dad likes you." Aurora curls up against my chest, yawning.

"Not," he I run my hand down her back, holding her close. "You think so?"

"I've been on four dates in my life. He threatened all of them." She looks up at me through red-rimmed, sleepy eyes. "He didn't threaten you."

Oh, he threatened me, but I don't tell her that. He said he'd rip my balls through my throat if I even thought about treating her with anything less than respect. He may be a politician, but I don't doubt he'd do it. His daughter means the world to him. I don't fault him for that. She's become my gravitational center faster than I thought possible. She deserves a



hes thewilling to go to war to protect her and a man willing to die to defe
Now, she has both.

for the "Oh my gosh." She blinks up at me with owl-like eyes that see
I'm themuch. "He did threaten you, didn't he?"

"He's your father."

to be a "You didn't break up with me."

"What the fuck?" I flip her over onto her back, glaring down at he
t much,think I'd leave because your dad threatened me?"

"My dates did." She scrunches up her nose. "One actually said
going to the bathroom and snuck out during dinner. He texted me fr
car to tell me that he just couldn't date the mayor's kid, but no off
anything." She rolls her eyes. "High school was so much fun for me."

My irritation quickly fades, a smile curving my lips upward. "You
been on a date since high school, starlight?"

"No." A blush stains her cheeks. "I didn't see the point." She peek
from beneath her lashes. "No one really interested me, and the only or
asked after high school always seemed more interested in my dad than
I think I preferred when they were scared to date me."

"Fucking morons." I bend my head, brushing my lips against hers.
want a goddamn thing from your father, starlight. Except you."

e peeks "You already have me," she whispers.

"Yeah?"

alls out "Yeah."

ess than I kiss her long and deep, marveling all over again that she's here rig
aughterin this bed with me. Anyone else would have cracked under the stress,
me myAurora. She really is the brightest little star in the sky. God knows
t father

and she deserves her. But she's mine anyway. I kiss her until she's mewling at me and then pull back to look down at her.

Her pale eyes are bright, her lips swollen from my kisses. Her hair flows across my arm and the pillow in soft waves.

"Ravishing," I growl.

She smiles up at me, touching the tip of her finger to my cheek. "You're pretty ravishing yourself, Mr. Attias."

"Fuck." I take her mouth again, plundering it as if I haven't had a woman's touch in weeks. When I finally let her up this time, we're both breathing hard and my balls ache.

"What was that for?"

"You make me feel like maybe I'm exactly who I'm supposed to be. Maybe that man isn't so fucking bad, starlight. That's what that was for."

"That man isn't bad, Constantine. He's kind of my hero. You're more honest and kind and gentle and fiercer than I am. You protect the people who need protecting, and you love your family so much. I love that," she says. "You're an amazing man."

"Fuck." I press my forehead to hers, guilt pricking at me. But I bite my tongue, holding back the truth, battling it back. Until Brady is dead, she doesn't need the weight of his sin hanging over her head. I don't want her living with his impending death hanging like a sword over her head. She doesn't need to carry that weight. It's too goddamn heavy.

Right now,

but not

I don't

deserve her. But she's mine anyway. I kiss her until she's mewling beneath me and then pull back to look down at her.

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"You make me feel like maybe I'm exactly who I'm supposed to be, and maybe that man isn't so fucking bad, starlight. That's what that was for."

"That man isn't bad, Constantine. He's kind of my hero. You're more than your past, you know. You're honest and kind and gentle and fierce, and beautiful. You protect the people who need protecting, and you love your family so much. I love that," she says. "You're an amazing man."

"Fuck." I press my forehead to hers, guilt pricking at me. But I bite back the truth, battling it back. Until Brady is dead, she doesn't need that anvil hanging over her head. I don't want her living with his impending death hanging like a sword over her head. She doesn't need to carry that weight. It's too goddamn heavy.

CHAPTER TEN

Aurora



The next three days pass in a blur. It's odd. Time crawled while I was locked in that bedroom, but now, it seems to race. And yet it bleeds together.

The only parts that are vivid are the moments I spend with Cons. When he's by my side, the restless anxiety in my mind quiets, and I feel I can breathe again.

But the times when he's gone? I hate those times. There are a lot of them over the next few days. I'm not entirely sure what's going on, nor am I *want* to know, but I can read a room. Enough to know that something is definitely off.

Every time he leaves, I hold my breath, praying he makes it back. Wishing I knew where he was and what he was doing. Feeling like a

for sticking my head in the sand and trying to pretend it all away instead of simply asking for the truth.

I *am* a coward. I should have asked. I *should* ask. And yet I don't.

When he's with me, all I think about, all I *see* is him. I don't want to know if more awful things are coming my way.

Dante and Dimitri stop by frequently. The three of them disappear from Constantine's office, leaving me with Belle and Snow. My dad disappears every day. He and Constantine disappear into his office, too.

He's stressed more than usual. The last two months have been hard on him...harder than I could let myself consider while I was locked away. He's always been an amazing dad, but when he hugs me now, he always hugs like it might be the last time.

When he shows up on day four, he's tense and frustrated. I follow Constantine immediately head to Constantine's office.

I don't know why I follow them instead of just demanding an explanation, but I linger outside the door like I used to do when I was a little girl, all still eavesdropping on my dad's business conversations. I didn't understand what he, Millie, and his advisors and members of the town council were talking about behind closed doors, but I listened anyway.

Just like I do now.

"Dillon suspects that you're looking for Brady," my dad tells Constantine. "He was at my office this morning, asking questions. If you're going to handle this, I suggest you do it soon."

What is Brady?

Uncle Brady?

What is Brady? Confusion clouds my mind even as my stomach churns with anxiety. A crack opens in my chest, yawning wide. Uncle Brady is alive.

instead of Constantine is looking for him?

No. Oh, no.

"That's easier said than done when your fucking brother won't stay in his room," Constantine growls. "He's a paranoid son of a bitch."

"He stole half a million dollars from underneath the Carmona Kir...
ear into guessing he's real fucking paranoid right now," my dad says drily.
...ops by doing everything we can to keep the truth from leaking so he doesn't
... again, but we're building a house of cards. He'll be even more paranoid
... and finds out that Aurora is home and Millie is in jail."

...y. He's "Yeah, well, knowing you're going to die will do that to you."

...ugs me I stumble away from the door with my hand clamped over my mouth.
... least that's my intention. Instead, I stumble right into the door, knocking
... He and open.

My dad is pacing in the center of the room. Constantine's leaning
... against the corner of his desk, his arms crossed over his broad chest. He whips
... the girlhead in my direction, takes one look at my face, and leaps to his feet.

... half of "Aurora." He takes a step in my direction.

... I talked I back away from him with a frantic shake of my head, stumbling into
... wall. My mind races, but my thoughts are a chaotic jumble. I don't know
... what to say. I don't know what I think. Or how I feel.

... tantine. Uncle Brady is alive. He's the reason I spent two months locked in
... oing to bed with Victor Carmona threatening to murder my dad every day.
... the reason my dad aged five years while I was gone. He's the reason
... wouldn't let me go.

And the man I love—the one who rescued me—and my dad are plotting
... iety. A kill him for it. Because of me, my dad will spend the rest of his life
... ? And

that he helped kill his own brother. Constantine will spend the rest of his life with another death on his conscience.

"Starlight," Constantine says. "It's okay. You're okay."
Except...I'm not. None of this is okay.
He takes another step toward me, holding out his hand.
"We've got to look at it. Look at him."
And run.
And if he

truth. At
checking it
against
rips his



I don't stop until I'm outside, and my side twinges. I fall to my knee into the grass, gasping for breath. Choking on my tears. On guilt. On two months of fear. It all crashes down on me at once and I can't breathe through it.

God, why can't I breathe?

I wrap my arms around myself, sobbing uncontrollably.

"Aurora!"

The fear in Constantine's voice only makes me cry harder.

The sound of running steps reaches me, and then he's at my side. I fall to the grass beside me. He's not breathing hard. Naturally.

"Baby," he whispers, reaching for me.

"W-w-why m-me?" I sob. "W-why, Constantine?"

his life "Starlight. Baby." He plucks me up from the ground, pulling me c
lap. His strong arms surround me, wrapping me up in him. And th
makes me cry harder. He's so good to me. So damn good to me.

"D-d-don't do it. You c-can't do it."

He rocks me in his arms while I cry harder than I ever have before
guilt, and anger pouring from me in a flood. He doesn't make r
promises.

Part of me—the tiniest part I've never even met until now—is glad.

And that makes me cry harder.

Maybe I'm not so innocent after all.



s in the
nths of

"I didn't want you to find out that way."

"Were you g-going to t-tell me at all?" I ask, resting my head
shoulder when the tears finally run out. We haven't moved at all. W
near the pond on the property. My dad came out a little while ago to cl
He fallsme and then went back inside.

"Eventually." Constantine sighs, running his fingers through m

"After it was said and done. You shouldn't have to carry it, Aurora."

"Neither should either of you. You're going to k-kill him because of

into his "No." He crooks a finger beneath my chin, gently but firmly turn
at only face up to his. "I'm going to kill him because he's dangerous. You ar
first person he's hurt. You're simply the one who matters to me. But h
a lot of people, a lot of good people, Aurora."

grief, "He's my uncle." My bottom lip quivers.

ne any "He doesn't deserve the title."

"It isn't fair."

"To who? To him?" Constantine snorts. "He helped arrange your ab
and then stole the ransom money, leaving you with a cartel that's sold
of women into slavery. That's what isn't fair, starlight. Death woul
been preferable to what else they might have done to you, Aurora. E
the other option? No one survives that for long without wishing for
Rage brews like a storm in his eyes. "He doesn't deserve your empa
had none for you when he abandoned you to that fate."

"It isn't fair to you. It isn't fair to my dad."

"You think doing this to protect you is a sacrifice on my part?" He
his head, his expression softening. "When will you learn, starlight?
nothing in this world worth having without you. I've been stumbling t
the dark for thirty-four years. I didn't know light until I met you."

"Constantine." Tears well in my eyes, spilling over.

on his "There's nothing I won't do for you. No law or oath I won't bre
e're outfucking kingdom I won't destroy to keep you safe. That's not a sacri
neck on my part, Aurora. Protecting you is the best part of my life. It's the *on*
in this life I've gotten right." He brushes the tears from my cheeks v
y hair, pads of his thumbs. "Your dad agrees. You're the joy in his life. That'
protecting, no matter the cost."

me." I sit in silence for a long moment, sitting with his truth, trying to fi

ing my place in my crowded mind. I feel the same way about him. If our roles aren't reversed—if it were his uncle, wouldn't I do the same?

He's hurt. The answer is immediate and emphatic.

Yes. A thousand times, yes.

I'd sell my own soul to protect him if that's what it took. So how can I fault him for doing the same? How can I fault my dad? This is their choice to make, and I think I have to let them make it. Even if it means letting a good man die for his crimes.

dozens. If I have to carry that...well, Merry's cards always warned that my father would have held darkness. I think maybe this man is the darkness she saw in my father. Because and it's his pain I'll carry. If that's a curse, so be it. For him and for me. "I'll clutch that mantle tight and wear it with pride. That's my sacrifice. My choice."

shakes

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place in my crowded mind. I feel the same way about him. If our roles were reversed—if it were his uncle, wouldn't I do the same?

The answer is immediate and emphatic.

Yes. A thousand times, yes.

I'd sell my own soul to protect him if that's what it took. So how can I fault him for doing the same? How can I fault my dad? This is their choice to make, and I think I have to let them make it. Even if it means letting Brady die for his crimes.

If I have to carry that...well, Merry's cards always warned that my future held darkness. I think maybe this man is the darkness she saw in my future. And it's his pain I'll carry. If that's a curse, so be it. For him and for my dad, I'll clutch that mantle tight and wear it with pride. That's my sacrifice. That's my choice.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Constantine



"Aurora," I breathe, linking our hands together above her head as I push into her in slow, steady pulses. She's hot silk around me, driving me out of my mind. "I love you."

"Constantine." She turns her face up to mine, silently demanding a kiss. I give it to her willingly, unable to deny her anything. She owns me, body and soul. Especially in this bed when she's wrapped around me, letting me know she's here.

Christ. I spend half of every day in hell looking for her uncle...and every night in heaven, lost in her. It's been two days since she found out about him, and we still haven't found him.

Sooner or later, we will. I'll end his life for endangering hers. And the future can begin. She'll never know pain again. Never know sorrow.

what she'll know. Every fucking day until I leave this earth.

I nip her bottom lip, loving this position. I'm curled around her with legs draped over my hip. I have complete access to her gorgeous body; I can touch her anywhere, see every part of her.

I run my hand down her abdomen, groaning when her muscles tense beneath my palm.

She gasps, arching and mewling when I run my finger in circles around her clit.

"You want to come, starlight? I feel how close you are."

"Yes. Yes, Constantine."

How can I say no to that?

I shift positions slightly, allowing me to fuck her harder, deeper.

She cries out in bliss, her head thrown back.

God, she's a vision.

I watch her in rapt fascination as I stroke her clit and fuck her, driving me higher and higher. She takes me with her, marching me right to the edge before her sweet cry of release sends me plummeting over the side.

I growl her name, thrusting deep as she comes around me. My lips kiss her neck, tingles, cum shooting up my shaft as my balls empty into her. She moans loudly and goes wild, saying my name over and over.

Perfect. So damn perfect.

"Marry me."

Her eyes fly open, still caught in the throes of passion.

"Marry me, starlight."

"Constantine...?"

"I mean it," I murmur, brushing my thumb across her bottom lip.

This is mine. It doesn't have to be today or tomorrow, but the way I feel about you

going to change next week or next year or ten years down the road. I'm
with her Aurora. I'll always be yours. Marry me."

y. I can "Yes."

"Jesus." I lean forward, pressing my mouth to hers in a hard kiss.
quiver into her again, already hard. Always desperate.

My phone rings.

and her Aurora groans.

"Hold that thought," I growl, grabbing it off the bedside table. I do
out of her. Fuck that. I fully intend to finish what I started. "What?"

"We found him," Dimitri says without preamble.

"Fuck. You're sure?"

"Positive. Marco and I are going in to subdue him before he bolts or
send you the coordinates. Get over here."

"I'm on my way."

ring her Aurora freezes, her gaze flashing to mine.

ie edge I carefully avoid looking at her as I disconnect and set the phone

kiss her gently and then reluctantly pull out of her, not willing to disc
y spine uncle or any of this bullshit while I'm still inside her.

ans her "They found him," she guesses.

"Yeah."

She doesn't say anything for the longest time and then she sighs and
to her knees before crawling into my lap. I wrap my arms around her, h
her close. "Promise me that you're coming home safely."

"I'll always come home safely." Once upon a time, I might have
risks, but not anymore. I have her to think about now. I will be ma
"Marry home to her, no matter what the job is or what I need to do.

ou isn't "Okay," she says simply, her voice small.

1 yours, "I love you, starlight."

"I love you too."

I brush my mouth across hers, and then reluctantly slide her off my
I thrust can get dressed.

on't pull



1 us. I'll

Brady is holed up in an old, abandoned cabin an hour outside of Spoon Falls. It's in the middle of fucking nowhere, about as far off the side as you can get in Texas. By the time I pull up outside, Dante's already the fucker Brady's tied to a chair, dripping blood all over the floor. He looks enough like Aurora to make it obvious they're related, but it's clear he's on something. Even tied to the chair, he can't move.

Cold fury swirls through me as I look him over. I want to rip him from limb, make him regret every single second she spent locked in that fucking room, living in fear. But when I go home to her when this is over, I want to go home with a clear conscience, too.

"Has he said anything?"

Dimitri snorts. "He hasn't stopped fucking talking since we dragged that sorry ass out of bed. He denied having anything to do with the abduction."

"You believe him?"

Dimitri strolls toward the cabinet over the stove and hooks a finger under the knob, pulling it open. Stacks of cash sit inside, most still neatly bound with bands to hold them together.

"What do you think?" he asks drily.

"I told you already; I won it playing poker," Brady wheezes. His chest is broken.

"That's funny," Dante says. "Because your brother noted the serial number of every bill he turned over to the people who took his daughter. Guess what? You've got a whole hell of a lot of them here."

A moment of panic flashes in Brady's eyes.

It's enough to confirm that he's about as innocent as Dahmer.

"She's your niece, you piece of shit," I growl, planting my fist in his chest.

Silver He yowls as the chair topples over backward with him still in it.

grid as No one makes a move to help get him back up.

re. I kick him in the ribcage and then step on his hand, satisfied when I hear the bones crack beneath my boot.

's lived He screeches in pain before Dimitri and Marco haul the chair away. It won't stay again.

"She spent days listening to them debate whether they should sell her a limb to recoup what you stole out from under them or if they should just kill her. I think that should be done with it." I grip him by the throat, getting right in his face. "You know, I spend the rest of her life remembering that fear, you sorry son of a bitch."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" he wheezes, his face turning red.

A clatter sounds from behind me as I hit him again. Everyone else in the room turns, but I'm focused on the motherfucker tied to the chair in front of me. "You're on."

me as stark terror overtakes his expression as he realizes I'm not going around him breathe.

bound "Constantine, let him go!"

I whip my head around as Dillon's voice sounds behind me.

He holds his hands up to show he's unarmed. "Let him go," he says. "You know if you handle it this way, I won't have a choice but to investigate."

It'll lead me right to your fucking doorstep. You'll end up in a jail cell. I'll win."

fight. "He'll still be dead."

"And your girl will be alone," he says quietly. "She'll spend the rest of her life loving you through plexiglass. Is that what you want for her?"

"How the fuck did you find him?"

face. "Followed you." Dillon shrugs. "Work smarter, not harder. I knew I'd find him sooner or later."

"He doesn't deserve to walk out of here."

I hear "So break his fucking kneecaps, and I'll drag his sorry ass out."

He props his shoulder up against the door. "Frankly, I don't give a shit what you do to him so long as you leave him breathing." He nods.

"Which he won't be in about thirty seconds. Don't make me arrest her for murder tonight and break that girl's heart."

her and "He's right."

"She'll I glare at Dante, who shrugs. "You know he is. Until he showed up." "He could have buried him where no one would find him, but that ship sailed."

"If you kill him now, he'll arrest you. It'll be a whole goddamn ordeal. From now on, I think death is too easy for him. Let him rot in prison for the rest of his life."

front of Dimitri chuckles. "Doubt it'll be too long unless they put him in solitary." "He fucked with the cartels. They have all kinds of friends in prison. I

g to let dead or wish he was dead before his cell door even closes behind him.

I hesitate, my hand still around Brady's throat as he begins consciousness. Everything in me screams for blood. It's what that motherfucker deserves. But I slowly pry my fingers from around his neck again, allowing him to suck in a breath.

Investigate. He deserves death. But Aurora deserves peace more.

Well, and

t of her



or you'd

Dillon She's still awake when I make it home. She meets me at the door, wrapped in a blanket. Her eyes are wide and haunted. It's obvious she's done a lot of things but stress and worry since I left the house.

I walk right up to her and pull the blanket loose before scooping her up into my arms. We don't speak as I carry her through the house to the bedroom and lay her in the bed.

We don't speak as I undress.

Neither of us says anything until I crawl into bed beside her and drape her into my arms.

"Is he...?"

"Alive."

He'll be

" The tension leaves her body all at once. She sinks into me, melting a
to lose weight of the world just left her delicate shoulders. That right there
that I needed to know I made the right decision tonight. He didn't deserve me
throat, he got it anyway.

For her.

Always, for her.

"Thank you," she whispers.

I brush my lips across her crown, breathing her in. "He should be
thanking you, starlight. He's alive because of you."

"Because of me?"

"You've lost enough because of that motherfucker. Killing him would
mean letting him take something else from you. You deserve peace."

"So do you."

I smile in the dark, rolling her beneath me. "Haven't you heard, starlight,
I seek her mouth with mine. "You are my peace."

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The tension leaves her body all at once. She sinks into me, melting as if the weight of the world just left her delicate shoulders. That right there is all I need to know I made the right decision tonight. He didn't deserve mercy, but he got it anyway.

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"So do you."

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EPILOGUE

Aurora



Five Years Later

"Fuck, starlight," Constantine growls, his fist wrapped around my hair as he thrusts into my mouth. His gorgeous eyes are at half-mast, on my face as he watches his cock disappear between my lips. "You're to kill me, aren't you?"

I shake my head around him, running my tongue all over his shaft then I hollow my cheeks, sucking hard just the way he likes.

He curses, falling from my lips.

Before I can even protest, I'm in his arms with my back against the wall as he thrusts into me. His mouth comes down on mine, swallowing my cry of ecstasy. I claw at his shoulders, sobbing his name as he pours himself into me.

"Perfect," he groans as my body quickens around him and I fall on edge, unable to hold off the orgasm. With him, I never can. He won't He takes me to heaven over and over, filling my life with more pleasure I know what to do with.

This is my sacrifice. This is my future.

I've never been happier. Neither has he. Our world isn't perfect happened to me five years ago changed a lot of things. I trust less now did then. My uncle and my father's oldest friend betrayed our family betrayed *me*. I may never entirely get over that.

But they've paid for their crimes. They were both sentenced to prison their role in my kidnapping. Because of my uncle's history, he probably ever step foot outside of a prison again. The world inside hasn't exact kind to him. He's been beat up, stabbed, and targeted by cartels more once on the inside.

I don't feel sorry for him. He made his bed. He can wallow in it alone he *is* alone. But I'm not. I spent two months locked in hell...and five years and my heaven with the man who carried me out of there.

locked Constantine is my world now. He's the dark matter the makes up my e trying universe, my knight. He's by my side through everything, and I'm by is who he who is, and I love him fiercely. Exactly as he is.

ft. And He's learned to love himself too. I think the day he decided to let live, he finally realized that he never needed redeeming. He may things, but that will never make him evil. It will never make *him* to showerfaced the darkest part of his soul, and he didn't let it win.

ing my "I love you." He drops his forehead against mine, his breath v ids into across my face as he releases inside me. "Fuck, I love you, starlight."

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"Why are we here?" I whisper an hour later, clinging to his hand like a lifeline as he pulls up in front of the house where our story began five years ago. My stomach churns, anxiety clawing up my throat. I haven't been here. I haven't even stepped foot in Copper Creek in the last five years. "It's okay, starlight." He hooks his arm around my waist, hauling me against him. His hand splays across my pregnant belly, cradling our baby. And I still can't believe we're going to be parents again. Her big brothers are years in my dad. "I promise this will be worth it."

I tip my head back against his shoulder to peer up at him. "Look at it, baby." I swallow hard and reluctantly shift my gaze toward the old house. He feels...different seeing it now. Five years ago, it seemed bigger than Bradyominous. Now, it's just a sad relic in a dying, decaying neighborhood. The windows and doors are gone. The siding is covered in slime. It does feel like the same prison that used to haunt my nightmares.

And it *did* haunt them. The nightmares started about two weeks ago. Constantine rescued me. I'd wake up in tears, thinking I was back there. He was right beside me for every single one, holding me through them, reminding me that I would never be back here again.

They lasted for months before they finally stopped. It took a lot of time and distance. It took a lot of healing.

I frown when I notice that we aren't alone. The Silver Spoon Fire department has set up shop on the opposite side of the street. They're watching us, even though they discreetly pretend they aren't.

"What's going on, Constantine?"

"They're demolishing it, starlight."

I gape up at him, shocked.

"Everything has been stripped out of it. If you want to do it, you can take it's a year's worth of work. You're the match that sets it ablaze. If anyone has that right, it's you."

"They're burning it?"

"To the fucking ground," he confirms.

I gape at him and then at the house. It'll be gone, burned away as if it never stood there at all. As if all the awful memories were just a bad dream. As if the men who died inside were just a figment of my imagination. I'll never worry again about someone else being locked up inside. Or about Carmona's evil escaping.

"I want to do it," I blurt, my heart racing.

Constantine tips my chin up, his eyes shining with pride. "You're the bravest fucking person I know, starlight." He touches his mouth to mine in a hard kiss and then waves over someone from the fire department.

I listen with half an ear as the firefighter—Chief Banger—explains what I need to do. Constantine helps me don a hard hat and flame-retardant pants. He and the Chief walk with me in silence across the grass to the pit that surrounds the house to keep the fire contained.

"Whenever you're ready," Chief Banger says.

"I'm ready." I expect him to hand me a match, but he hands me so

therapy of Molotov cocktail contraption instead.

When I look at him, he just winks at me. "Figured you'd like this
all fire. It'll be our little secret."

They're I heft it in my hand, testing the weight of it. I eye the gaping door a
a breath before nodding at the Chief. He helps light the end of the
sticking out of the bottle. It ignites with a soft whoosh of sound.

I close my eyes...and let go.

The bottle shatters somewhere inside the house, spreading whatever
an light it contained. Constantine pulls me away from the door as the rest of
department moves in, quickly taking over.

Within minutes, smoke billows from the house as it goes up in flames.

Constantine and I watch in silence from across the street, his arms wrapped
it never tightly around me. We don't move until it's fully engulfed. Then
and then do I take a full breath.

have to "Thank you." I turn to him, tears of gratitude welling in my eyes.

Victor given me a lot of gifts over the years, more than I can name. But this
second time he's given me freedom, only this time, it feels complete. As
not just stepping out of the prison they kept me in, but out of the past, I

still the He cups my cheeks in his palms, turning my face up to his. "Never
ine in name for loving you, starlight. Knowing you and our kids are happy
everything I need in this world. It's what I live and breathe for."

what I Tears spill down my cheeks, wiped away as soon as they touch his
gloves. "I love you, Constantine Attias. Until the day I die."

they dug "That's not long enough, starlight," he breathes, tipping his head to
press his lips to mine. "I want eternity."

"Then it's yours. I'm yours, in this life and every other."

me sort He smiles against my lips. "Yeah, you are."

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



Thanks so much for reading Aurora's Knight! If you enjoyed Connor and Aurora's story, please consider leaving a review!

Next up in the Silver Spoon Universe is Grizz's Passion from Nichole, followed by the Silver Spoon Falcons series.

Like your men a little dark and delicious? Get ready to fall for Gabriel, the last Valentino brother standing in the Ruined Trilogy! Wicked will release in late May!

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Thanks so much for reading Aurora's Knight! If you enjoyed Constantine and Aurora's story, please consider leaving a review!

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SILVER SPOON FALLS UNIVERSE



We're taking over the world! Just kidding. We're building out Welcome to the Silver Spoon Falls Universe, where forever means that. Our hunky heroes will find their curvy soulmates and a little along the way!

We hope you'll join us this year and next as we introduce you guys more of the men and women who call Silver Spoon Falls home in the Spoon Falls series and the Silver Spoon Underworld series.

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Don't worry! We will continue writing our own books too! And the connect in new and exciting ways to our own worlds, creating one giant universe for you to explore!

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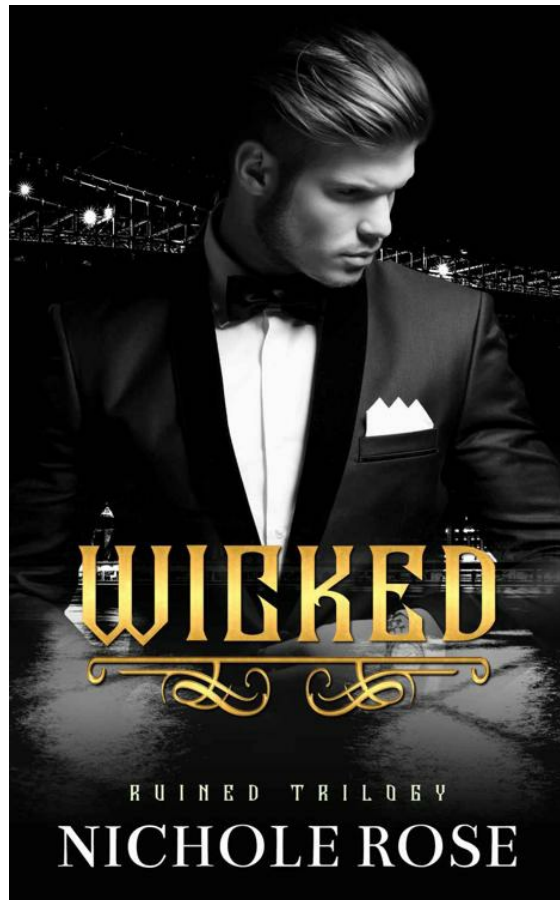
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**The Silver Spoon Falls Falcons and Silver Spoon After Dark are also
coming in 2023!**

WICKED



To win her love, this crime boss will need more than money and po

Gabriel

They say those with the power make the rules.

They lied.

Genesis Santiago refuses to bend to my will.

I know because I've tried.

She wants nothing to do with me.

That isn't going to work for me.

She's the only thing in this world I need.

One way or another, I'll make her mine.

Even if I have to break her to claim her.

Genesis

I know what people say about Gabriel Valentino.

He's not just a billionaire. He's a criminal.

When he catches me trying to steal from him, I expect a quick death

Instead, the bossy, arrogant man hires me.

But I won't bow to any man...

Not even the one who owns my soul.

Not even to save my own life.

Warning

When this wicked mob boss finds his curvy girl, he'll do whatever to make her his. If you enjoy over-the-top billionaires, willful heroin steamy romance with a touch of darkness, you'll love Gabriel and C As always, Nichole Rose books come complete with a guaranteed H cheating. Each book in the Ruined Trilogy features a different V brother and can be read as a standalone novel.

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Razor's Flame

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Zane's Rebel

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Ryker's Reward

Zane's Rebel

Oral Arguments

Grizz's Passion (coming soon)

ABOUT NICHOLE ROSE



Nichole Rose writes filthy, feel-good romance for curvy readers. Her books feature headstrong, sassy women and the alpha males who captivate them. From grumpy detectives to country boys with attitude to insta-love over-the-top declarations, nothing is off-limits.

Nichole is sure to have a steamy, sweet story just right for everyone. She fully believes the world is ugly enough without trying to fit falling into a one-size-fits-all box.

When not writing, Nichole enjoys fine wine, cute shoes, and even the supernatural. She is happily married to the love of her life and is a mama to the world's most ridiculous fur-babies. She and her husband live in the Pacific Northwest.

You can learn more about Nichole and her boo
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