



BIG BAD BILLIONAIRES BOX SET

ENEMIES TO LOVERS FAKE RELATIONSHIP ROMANCE

L. STEELE

BIG BAD BILLIONAIRES BOXSET

L. STEELE

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THE BILLIONAIRE'S FAKE WIFE

1

[CLAIM YOUR EXCLUSIVE EPILOGUE TO THE BIG BAD BILLIONAIRES HERE](#)

"You must forgive my lips... they find pleasure in the most unusual places."
— *A Good Year*. Director: Ridley Scott

Summer

"Slap, slap, kiss, kiss."

"Huh?" I stare up at the bartender.

"Aka, there's a thin line between love and hate." He shakes out the crimson liquid into my glass.

"Nah." I snort. "Why would she allow him to control her, and after he insulted her?"

"It's the chemistry between them." He lowers his head, "You have to admit that when the man is arrogant and the woman resists, it's a challenge to both of them, to see who blinks first, huh?"

"Why?" I wave my hand in the air, "Because they hate each other?"

"Because," he chuckles, "the girl in school whose braids I pulled and teased mercilessly, is the one who I—"

"Proposed to?" I huff.

His face lights up. "You get it now?"

Yeah. No. A headache begins to pound at my temples. This crash course in pop psychology is not why I came to my favorite bar in Islington, to meet my best friend, who is—I glance at the face of my phone—thirty minutes

late.

I inhale the drink, and his eyebrows rise.

"What?" I glower up at the bartender. "I can barely taste the alcohol. Besides, it's free drinks at happy hour for women, right?"

"Which ends in precisely" he holds up five fingers, "minutes."

"Oh! Yay!" I mock fist pump. "Time enough for one more, at least."

A hiccough swells my throat and I swallow it back, nod.

One has to do what one has to do... when everything else in the world is going to shit.

A hot sensation stabs behind my eyes; my chest tightens. Is this what people call growing up?

The bartender tips his mixing flask, strains out a fresh batch of the ruby red liquid onto the glass in front of me.

"Salut." I nod my thanks, then toss it back. It hits my stomach and tendrils of fire crawl up my spine, I cough.

My head spins. Warmth sears my chest, spreads to my extremities. I can't feel my fingers or toes. Good. Almost there. "Top me up."

"You sure?"

"Yes." I square my shoulders and reach for the drink.

"No. She's had enough."

"What the—?" I pivot on the bar stool.

Indigo eyes bore into me.

Fathomless. Black at the bottom, the intensity in their depths grips me. He swoops out his arm, grabs the glass and holds it up. Thick fingers dwarf the glass. Tapered at the edges. The nails short and buff. *All the better to grab you with.* I gulp.

"Like what you see?"

I flush, peer up into his face.

Hard cheekbones, hollows under them, and a tiny scar that slashes at his left eyebrow. *How did he get that?* Not that I care. My gaze slides to his mouth. Thin upper lip, a lower lip that is full and cushioned. Pouty with a hint of bad boy. *Oh!* My toes curl. My thighs clench.

The corner of his mouth kicks up. *Asshole.*

Bet he thinks life is one big smug-fest. I glower, reach for my glass, and he holds it up and out of my reach.

I scowl, "Gimme that."

He shakes his head.

"That's my drink."

"Not anymore." He shoves my glass at the bartender. "Water for her. Get me a whiskey, neat."

I splutter, then reach for my drink again. The barstool tips, in his direction. This is when I fall against him, and my breasts slam into his hard chest, sculpted planes with layers upon layers of muscle that ripple and writhe as he turns aside, flattens himself against the bar. The floor rises up to meet me.

What the actual hell?

I twist my torso at the last second and my butt connects with the surface. *Ow!*

The breath rushes out of me. My hair swirls around my face. I scramble for purchase, and my knee connects with his leg.

"Watch it." He steps around, stands in front of me.

"You stepped aside?" I splutter. "You let me fall?"

"Hmph."

I tilt my chin back, all the way back, look up the expanse of muscled thigh that stretches the silken material of his suit. *What is he wearing? Could any suit fit a man with such precision?* Hand crafted on Saville Row, no doubt. I glance at the bulge that tents the fabric between his legs. *Oh!* I blink.

Look away, look away. I hold out my arm. He'll help me up at least, won't he?

He glances at my palm, then turns away. *No, he didn't do that, no way.*

A glass of amber liquid appears in front of him. He lifts the tumbler to his sculpted mouth.

His throat moves, strong tendons flexing. He tilts his head back, and the column of his neck moves as he swallows. Dark hair covers his chin—it's a discordant chord in that clean-cut profile, I shiver. He would scrape that rough skin down my core. He'd mark my inner thigh, lick my core, thrust his tongue inside my melting channel and drink from my pussy. *Oh! God.* Goosebumps rise on my skin.

No one has the right to look this beautiful, this achingly gorgeous. Too magnificent for his own good. Anger coils in my chest.

"Arrogant wanker."

"I'll take that under advisement."

"You're a jerk, you know that?"

He presses his lips together. The grooves on either side of his mouth

deepen. Jesus, clearly the man has never laughed a single day in his life. Bet that stick up his arse is uncomfortable. I chuckle.

He runs his gaze down my features, my chest, down to my toes, then yawns.

The hell! I will not let him provoke me. Will not. "Like what you see?" I jut out my chin.

"Sorry, you're not my type." He slides a hand into the pocket of those perfectly cut pants, stretching it across that heavy bulge.

Heat curls low in my belly.

Not fair, that he could afford a wardrobe that clearly shouts his status and what amounts to the economy of a small third-world country. A hot feeling stabs in my chest.

He reeks of privilege, of taking his status in life for granted.

While I've had to fight every inch of the way. Hell, I am still battling to hold onto the last of my equilibrium.

"Last chance—" I wiggle my fingers, from where I am sprawled out on the floor at his feet, "—to redeem yourself..."

"You have me there." He places the glass on the counter, then bends and holds out his hand. The hint of discolored steel at his wrist catches my attention. Huh?

He wears a cheap-ass watch?

That's got to bring down the net worth of his presence by more than 1000% percent. Weird.

I reach up and he straightens.

I lurch back.

"Oops, I changed my mind." His lips curl.

A hot burning sensation claws at my stomach. I am not a violent person, honestly. But Smirky Pants here, he needs to be taught a lesson.

I swipe out my legs, kicking his out from under him.

2

Sinclair

My knees give way, and I hurtle toward the ground.

What the—? I twist around, thrust out my arms. My palms hit the floor. The impact jostles up my elbows. I firm my biceps and come to a halt planked above her.

A huffing sound fills my ear.

I turn to find my whippet, Max, panting with his mouth open. I scowl and he flattens his ears.

All of my businesses are dog-friendly. Before you draw conclusions about me being the caring sort or some such shit—it attracts footfall.

Max scrutinizes the girl, then glances at me. *Huh?* He hates women, but not her, apparently.

I straighten and my nose grazes hers.

My arms are on either side of her head. Her chest heaves. The fabric of her dress stretches across her gorgeous breasts. My fingers tingle; my palms ache to cup those tits, squeeze those hard nipples outlined against the—hold on, what is she wearing? A tunic shirt in a sparkly pink... and are those shoulder pads she has on?

I glance up, and a squeak escapes her lips.

Pink hair surrounds her face. *Pink? Who dyes their hair that color past the age of eighteen?*

I stare at her face. *How old is she?* Un-furrowed forehead, dark eyelashes that flutter against pale cheeks. Tiny nose, and that mouth—luscious,

tempting. A whiff of her scent, cherries and caramel, assails my senses. My mouth waters. *What the hell?*

She opens her eyes and our eyelashes brush. Her gaze widens. Green, like the leaves of the evergreens, flickers of gold sparkling in their depths. "What?" She glowers. "You're demonstrating the plank position?"

"Actually," I lower my weight onto her, the ridge of my hardness thrusting into the softness between her legs, "I was thinking of something else, altogether."

She gulps and her pupils dilate. *Ah, so she feels it, too?*

I drop my head toward her, closer, closer.

Color floods the creamy expanse of her neck. Her eyelids flutter down. She tilts her chin up.

I push up and off of her.

"That... Sweetheart, is an emphatic 'no thank you' to whatever you are offering."

Her eyelids spring open and pink stains her cheeks. Adorable. Such a range of emotions across those gorgeous features in a few seconds? What else is hidden under that exquisite exterior of hers?

She scrambles up, eyes blazing.

Ah! The little bird is trying to spread her wings? My dick twitches. My groin hardens, *Why does her anger turn me on so, huh?*

She steps forward, thrusts a finger in my chest.

My heart begins to thud.

She peers up from under those hooded eyelashes. "Wake up and taste the wasabi, asshole."

"What does that even mean?"

She makes a sound deep in her throat. My dick twitches. My pulse speeds up.

She pivots, grabs a half-full beer mug sitting on the bar counter.

I growl, "Oh, no, you don't."

She turns, swings it at me. The smell of hops envelops the space.

I stare down at the beer-splattered shirt, the lapels of my camel colored jacket deepening to a dull brown. Anger squeezes my guts.

I fist my fingers at my side, broaden my stance.

She snickers.

I tip my chin up. "You're going to regret that."

The smile fades from her face. "Umm." She places the now empty mug

on the bar.

I take a step forward and she skitters back. "It's only clothes." She gulps, "They'll wash."

I glare at her and she swallows, wiggles her fingers in the air, "I should have known that you wouldn't have a sense of humor."

I thrust out my jaw, "That's a ten-thousand-pound suit you destroyed."

She blanches, then straightens her shoulders, "Must have been some hot date you were trying to impress, huh?"

"Actually," I flick some of the offending liquid from my lapels, "it's you I was after."

"Me?" She frowns.

"We need to speak."

She glances toward the bartender who's on the other side of the bar. "I don't know you." She chews on her lower lip, biting off some of the hot pink. How would she look, with that pouty mouth fastened on my cock?

The blood rushes to my groin so quickly that my head spins. My pulse rate ratchets up. Focus, focus on the task you came here for.

"This will take only a few seconds." I take a step forward.

She moves aside.

I frown, "You want to hear this, I promise."

"Go to hell." She pivots and darts forward.

I let her go, a step, another, because... I can? Besides it's fun to create the illusion of freedom first; makes the hunt so much more entertaining, huh?

I swoop forward, loop an arm around her waist, and yank her toward me.

She yelps. "Release me."

Good thing the bar is not yet full. It's too early for the usual officegoers to stop by. And the staff...? Well they are well aware of who cuts their paychecks.

I spin her around and against the bar, then release her. "You will listen to me."

She swallows; she glances left to right.

Not letting you go yet, little Bird. I move into her space, crowd her.

She tips her chin up. "Whatever you're selling, I'm not interested."

I allow my lips to curl, "You don't fool me."

A flush steals up her throat, sears her cheeks. So tiny, so innocent. Such a good little liar. I narrow my gaze, "Every action has its consequences."

"Are you daft?" She blinks.

"This pretense of yours?" I thrust my face into hers, "It's not working."
She blinks, then color suffuses her cheeks, "You're certifiably mad—" "Getting tired of your insults."

"It's true, everything I said." She scrapes back the hair from her face. Her fingernails are painted... You guessed it, pink.

"And here's something else. You are a selfish, egotistical jackass."

I smirk. "You're beginning to repeat your insults and I haven't even kissed you yet."

"Don't you dare." She gulps.

I tilt my head, "Is that a challenge?"

"It's a..." she scans the crowded space, then turns to me. Her lips firm, "... a warning. You're delusional, you jackass." She inhales a deep breath, "Your ego is bigger than the size of a black hole." She snickers, "Bet it's to compensate for your lack of balls."

A-n-d, that's it. I've had enough of her mouth that threatens to never stop spewing words. How many insults can one tiny woman hurl my way? Answer: too many to count.

"You—"

I lower my chin, touch my lips to hers.

Heat, sweetness, the honey of her essence explodes on my palate. My dick twitches. I tilt my head, deepen the kiss, reaching for that something more... more... of whatever scent she's wearing on her skin, infused with that breath of hers that crowds my senses, rushes down my spine. My groin hardens; my cock lengthens. I thrust my tongue between those infuriating lips.

She makes a sound deep in her throat and my heart begins to pound.

So innocent, yet so crafty. Beautiful and feisty. The kind of complication I don't need in my life.

I prefer the straight and narrow. Gray and black, that's how I choose to define my world. She, with her flashes of color—pink hair and lips that threaten to drive me to the edge of distraction—is exactly what I hate.

Give me a female who has her priorities set in life. To pleasure me, get me off, then walk away before her emotions engage. Yeah. That's what I prefer.

Not this... this bundle of craziness who flings her arms around my shoulders, thrusts her breasts up and into my chest, tips up her chin, opens her mouth, and invites me to take and take.

Does she have no self-preservation? Does she think I am going to fall for her wide-eyed appeal? She has another thing coming.

I tear my mouth away and she protests.

She twines her leg with mine, pushes up her hips, so that melting softness between her thighs cradles my aching hardness.

I glare into her face and she holds my gaze.

Trains her green eyes on me. Her cheeks flush a bright red. Her lips fall open and a moan bleeds into the air. The blood rushes to my dick, which instantly thickens. *Fuck.*

Time to put distance between myself and the situation.

It's how I prefer to manage things. Stay in control, always. Cut out anything that threatens to impinge on my equilibrium. Shut it down or buy them off. Reduce it to a transaction. That I understand.

The power of money, to be able to buy and sell—numbers, logic. That's what's worked for me so far.

"How much?"

Her forehead furrows.

"Whatever it is, I can afford it."

Her jaw slackens. "You think... you—"

"A million?"

"What?"

"Pounds, dollars... You name the currency, and it will be in your account."

Her jaw slackens, "You're offering me money?"

"For your time, and for you to fall in line with my plan."

She reddens, "You think I am for sale?"

"Everyone is."

"Not me."

Here we go again. "Is that a challenge?"

Color fades from her face, "Get away from me."

"Are you shy, is that what this is?" I frown. "You can write your price down on a piece of paper if you prefer," I glance up, notice the bartender watching us. I jerk my chin toward the napkins. He grabs one, then offers it to her.

She glowers at him, "Did you buy him too?"

"What do you think?"

She glances around, "I think everyone here is ignoring us."

"It's what I'd expect."

"Why is that?"

I wave the tissue in front of her face, "Why do you think?"

"You own the place?"

"As I am going to own you."

She sets her jaw, "Let me leave and you won't regret this."

A chuckle bubbles up. I swallow it away. This is no laughing matter. I never smile during a transaction. Especially not when I am negotiating a new acquisition. And that's all she is. The final piece in the puzzle I am building.

"No one threatens me."

"You're right."

"Huh?"

"I'd rather act on my instinct."

Her lips twist, her gaze narrows. All of my senses scream a warning.

No, she wouldn't, no way—pain slices through my middle and sparks explode behind my eyes.

3

Summer

"You kneed me?"

He growls, actually growls. A shiver of heat ladders up my spine. My heart begins to thud.

Oh, hell I've done it now. Men and their delicate egos. Bet he won't take this lying down.

I shove at his shoulders and he lurches to the side. I spring up, glance down to where he glares up at me, hunched over. My nerve endings tingle.

Why do I have such visceral reaction to him? Pompous prick.

He straightens, then shoves himself up to standing.

What the—? How could he have recovered from that knee to his balls so fast? I blink. No one has that much endurance, not unless he's trained for it... *Nah!* I shove the thought aside.

He is a spoiled, pampered brat, no doubt. Typical. One of those who likes to flaunt what he has. Why do those with money think that is the solution to everything, huh? *Because it is?*

A hot sensation stabs at my chest. I've screwed it up. I've messed up my future and a chance for my sister to live a normal life.

The jackass in front of me swipes out his hand. I duck.

His features harden. He leans forward on the balls of his feet. Hell no, not going to let him catch me this time. I grab my bag from where it hangs on the hook below the bar counter, and head for the exit.

Shoving open the heavy glass door, I burst onto the sidewalk.

"You! Stop, right there." Something brushes my collar. I scream, lunge ahead. Adrenaline laces my veins. The blood slams so hard at my temples, I am sure I am going to faint.

Two cops approach me. *Oh, my God!* I wave at them. "Help!"

One of them catches sight of me; his forehead pinches.

The heat at my back turns up to a furnace. *Shit, he's close.* He's really, really, close. The hair on the nape of my neck rises. "Help me, please."

There's a low exclamation behind me.

My stomach flip flops. Damn the man, how did he get here so quickly?

The first cop reaches us, "Everything okay here?"

"This chap," I stab my thumb in Mr. Grouchy Pants' direction, "he's harassing me."

The second officer glances between us, then straightens, "Sinclair."

"Hello Josephine, Will." He nods at them.

What the—! He's on a first name basis with the cops? Does he have them on his payroll?

Of course he does. Asshole here would do everything to ensure circumstances are always within his control.

I dart forward.

"We're not done." His low growl follows me.

I sprint past the cops, up the street, veer right, then a left onto crowded Oxford Street. Safety in numbers. Okay, I got this! The breath rushes out of me.

When I reach the entrance to Tottenham Court Road tube station, I peek a glance behind me. There's no sign of him. Whew!

I swipe my card at the barriers, run down another flight of steps onto the platform as my train pulls into the station. I jump into the first open doors and collapse into a seat. Sweat beads my forehead; my hair is plastered to my cheek. I bend over, gasping. Close call. The woman opposite stares at me, wide-eyed. I meet her gaze and she promptly looks down at her Kindle.

Yep. One good thing about the tube in London, most people avoid eye contact. The anonymity that this city affords is precisely why I love it... and hate it. I slump against the barrier on my right.

It means no-one cares how I dress, or what I eat, or do for a living. It is why no one gives a shit about my sister lurching closer to her grave every day.

Nope, not gonna happen, not on my watch. I am going to find a way out

of this mess. I am. At the next station, I check my phone. There's a new email in my inbox.

From: Meredith Vincent
To: Summer West

Dear Ms. West,

Your appointment to pitch for the innovative marketing strategy for 7A Investments is confirmed.

Mr. Sterling, our CEO, will see you at 9am, tomorrow.

Address is below.

Pls confirm your acceptance of the meeting by reply.

Yours sincerely,

Meredith Vincent
Executive Assistant

Wow! Okay. Did I write to 7A investments asking to pitch for their account? I don't remember it. I frown, toss my head. Doesn't matter.

This is my chance. It is an opportunity to salvage my future and I am not going to turn it down. I type out my acceptance, hit reply, then drop my phone into my shoulder bag.

I am going to get this account, if it is the last thing I do.

The train pulls into Mill Hill East tube station, and I step off.

The phone dings again with a text message.

Isla: Soooo sorry, had a work emergency. You know how it is with us wedding planners...

Me: Now you tell me! You got me into so much trouble you *biatch!*

Isla: What... what? Did you meet someone at the bar?

Me: No, I didn't. Is that all you can think of and... hold on... you wouldn't do that to me, eh?

I huff.

Me: Would you?

Isla: What are you talking about?

Me: You stood me up on purpose?

Isla: Moi? What are you talking about?

Me: So help me Isla, if I find out you did this to me...

Isla: Is he that hot?

Me: No.

Isla: A dominant stranger with a take charge attitude that melts your panties and makes you want to lick him up?

Me: What is it with your hang up with obstinate mules... I mean males?

Isla: Ha, ha. *snort* Don't mock it until you've tried it.

Me: I have no idea what you're talking about.

Isla: Sometimes you need a hug you know...?

Me: Exactly.

Isla:.... on your backside... with a paddle.

Me: What the...

Isla: Administered by an obnoxious know-it-all who doesn't take no for an answer.

Me: Sweet baby goats, are you getting off on this text message, Isla? I swear if you are...

Isla: Sorry... sorry... *not*, you're waaay too uptight my girl. Give in, live a little.

Me: If by that you mean fantasizing about some alpha male making rough love...

Isla: Don't bring that four letter emotion into the mix.

Me: Yeah, not all of us want to be controlled.

Isla: Famous last words.

Me: Thanks for shoving your kink in my face.

Isla: Hey, how did you guess that I love doing that?

Me: TMI, bye.

Isla: Are you blushing, West? I bet you are. Seriously I'm sorry for standing you up. Last minute change, a bride called off her wedding and uh, it wasn't pretty.

Me: Wow, good luck handling the pieces of that.

Isla: I'm gonna need it for this one. PS, the bridegroom walked into the office and he's not happy.

Me: Can't your boss handle him?

Isla: She's not around. And gah! This man is completely unreasonable! But wow! Is he smokin' hot. *gulp* Wish me luck.

Me: Luck! Go get him GF.

Isla: Later xxx

Typical Isla, always taken in by a pretty face. *And I'm not?*

I suck my cheeks in, drop my phone into my tote bag.

Walking out of the tube station, I race home, then up the short flight of steps leading into the one-bed apartment I share with my sister.

For how much longer, though? If I can't keep up the rental payments on it...? I'll find a way, I will.

"Karma?" I cross the living room into the tiny bedroom.

"Summer?" My sister glances up from her embroidery machine.

Her dark hair flows around her face. Her skin seems paler than usual.

I sink down on the bed across from her, "You okay?."

Her amber eyes flare. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"No reason." I shuffle my feet.

"No breathlessness, no numb fingers or toes. The hole in my heart hasn't eaten me up completely." Her lips thin. "Yet."

"Why do you get so defensive about your condition?"

"Umm, let's see." She holds up a finger tipped with black nail-polish, "Because I'm trying to live and you keep thrusting my disease in my line of sight every time you bring it up?"

I draw in a sharp breath. "That's being uncharitable. Just because I worry about you and do my best to take care of you—"

"—doesn't make you my mother."

All the blood drains from my face. Bet I'm as pale as her, though on Karma, her dark goth get-up enhances her luminous beauty.

On me... bet I am as chalky as the paint on the wall behind her.

"Hell, sorry, Summer." She blows out a breath. "I'm more on edge than usual. Tomorrow's market day, so I need to get my clothes done in time. I need to be at Camden Market before 5 am so..." She raises her shoulders.

"Right, I'll leave you to it then."

I jump up, head for the door.

"Summer, stop."

I cross the floor to the small counter on the far side that doubles as our kitchen. Fill a glass with water from the tap and drink from it.

"I'm sorry for what I said earlier." Karma pauses at the doorway to the bedroom.

"You know how to get to me, don't you?" I firm my lips.

"My specialty, Sis. Chalk it up to my teenage hormones."

I snort, then turn and lean a hip against the counter, "You're almost as clever with words as you are with your clothing designs."

She holds up a hand, "Uh, oh, I sense a Summer sermon, coming on."

"Don't be ridiculous." I redden. "It's just, I don't understand why you'd give up a paid fashion scholarship at Central Saint Martins..."

"They were too mainstream." She sets her jaw.

"What's wrong with that?" I throw up my hands.

"Do you see what you're wearing?"

I glance down at myself, "You made it." I raise my shoulders. "It's offbeat but... it mirrors my personality."

"Exactly." She tosses her head, "My ideas are too... off-beat for their sensibilities."

"So?" I tilt my chin up, "You could have... adjusted..."

She stares, "Says the woman who is a walking talking encyclopedia of trivia that's largely useless."

"That..." I rub my forehead, "That's different."

"Right." She snorts. "How many other twenty-one year-old women can give trivia nerds a run for their money?"

I wrap my arms around my waist. "I'm not sure that's something to be proud of," I mumble.

"You made enough money winning pub quizzes and TV game shows."

"It was one show—"

"That earned you £100,000." She raps her knuckles against the door frame. "It's kept us going this far."

That's how we've survived since I left the homeless hostel at nineteen.

It was because of the money that I'd been able to take on responsibility for Karma and pull her out of the care system. I'd also used a portion of it to launch my marketing consultancy.

I'd expanded the scope to supply quizzes to pubs, bars, parties and to my growing list of online subscribers who love to receive a daily trivia quiz from me... For a fee.

My dream job.

I thrust out my chest. I had defined it, created it, pursued it. I bite the inside of my cheek. What had I been thinking? Following my intuition? Thought I could earn a living from my passion for movies?

Why did I have to turn down the job of marketing manager for the—ugh! —accounting firm? I hunch my shoulders.

It would have paid well, allowed for specialist medical consultations for my sister. I'd been bloody selfish, that's what.

I'd held onto some stupid notion that I could have whatever I wanted without compromising on my dreams. Except, I'd lost the client who contributed to 80% of my business.

I twirl a lock of my hair, bring it to my mouth and chew on it.

"Horrible habit." She frowns.

"It helps me think." I push off from the counter, begin to pace. "I have a big meeting tomorrow. If I get the account..."

"You will."

My phone dings. I stare at my bag.

"You going to see who it is?"

I shake my head.

"Want me to?"

I raise my shoulders, and let them drop, "How much worse could it get, huh?"

She reaches for my bag, pulls out my phone, reads the message.

"Who is it?"

She drops the phone into my bag.

"It's nothing."

"Karma!" I scowl, then flounce over to her and check the screen. There's a new text message.

SmellyGuy: You have one week to pay the rent or else...

Right! I drop the phone into the bag, then for good measure zip my bag shut.

"Vanilla or chocolate?" I cross the floor to the tiny refrigerator, pull open the door of the freezer.

"Is that a trick question?"

"Yeah. No."

"Do I have a choice?" She returns to the settee.

"Nope." I chuckle, pull out the carton of vanilla ice-cream. "I did the shopping so..."

Karma sinks into the sofa, "Your tastes are boringly predictable."

"Yeah, well, I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I

am." I grab the carton of ice cream, straighten.

She blinks. "Is that from *On the Waterfront*?"

I chuckle. "You've been paying attention to my trivia quiz emails, huh?"

"Bet you can't guess which movie *this* is from? She flips her hair over her shoulder. "Don't let anyone ever make you feel like you don't deserve what you want."

I pull out two plastic spoons, then join her.

"Too easy." I scoop up some ice cream, "*10 things I Hate About You*."

Her face breaks into a smile.

Strange word games the two of us have. Spouting dialogues and having the other person guess the film it originated from is one. Words don't cost, and they comfort. We can use them to weave a world in which we are safe, away from the nightmares that haunt our lives.

"My turn." I pass the carton to her. "Gotta celebrate the Now. Live in the moment."

She licks the ice-cream from her spoon, scoops up more. Her forehead scrunches.

"Give up?" I snatch the ice cream carton from her.

She frowns, "Okay, which is that from?"

I snicker. "None, that was all moi." I lick the remaining ice cream from my spoon.

She grabs at the carton, then peers into it. "Gah! Not fair, you finished it."

I chortle, "See, you shouldn't underestimate me." I hand the empty carton to her. "Now shoo, I need to work on the deck for tomorrow's meeting.

"Brilliant!" She brightens, "I have the right set of clothes for you."

4

"Y'know, I could eat a peach for hours."
— *Face/Off*. Director: John Woo

Sin

"Have a good day, Mr. Sterling."

Peter my chauffeur pulls my *Aston Martin* up to the curb in front of my offices. The heritage building on the South Bank is prime London property that I acquired after a bitter bidding war. It does the job, I suppose. I swing open the door and Max bounds ahead. He pauses in front of the homeless man next to the entrance.

His sign today reads: *The Devil returned to Hell by two.*

I approach the homeless guy, drop a wad of bills into the upturned cap in front of him. "Byron, again, huh?"

As always, his face doesn't change expression. The two of us are similar that way.

The degree of separation between the man in the palace and the one on the street is less than seven, son.

My father's words echo in my head. He hated the homeless. Perhaps it struck something primal in him. This dread of losing everything, finding himself out on his luck, had intensified after the incident. He'd lost his job soon after, hadn't been able to afford the money for my mother's cancer treatment, if it had not been for my friends. Yeah, I have a few... Six, to be precise. The kind who'd stab me if I turned my back on them.

Figuratively speaking... In business, I mean.

Best if you never trust anyone, not even your friends. There is no way you can be hurt then, right?

I walk toward the heavy glass door where Max waits for me. I push it and he bounds ahead of me. The receptionist glances up; her face flushes.

"Good morning, Mr. Sterling."

I frown. "How long you been here?"

She blinks.

"You deaf, girl?"

"N... no." Color fades from her cheeks, and her color matches the wall behind her.

"Answer the question."

She gulps. "A week."

"You're fired."

"But..."

"You're on probation so no need to go to HR; you can leave right now."

She splutters, "My fault, Sir?"

"Don't like your face."

That is true. Also, because I am getting a little tired of her loss of composure every time I walk by. Reminds me of what my position in this city is all about. Something I hate.

I walk up to the elevator, the doors swish open, and I step inside. Seems the elevator maintenance company can keep their contract... For now.

"Stop." A hand appears in between the doors, halting their progress. A woman steps in. "Sorry... I can't afford to be late, I—" She looks up.

Green eyes stare at me, pink hair tied up into a knot that is already coming undone. The pale creamy skin of her neck colors. It reminds me of someone. I snap my gaze to her face and her jaw drops open. "You?"

The door slides closed. "About time," I glare.

She frowns, "You're acting as if you were expecting me."

"I was." Wisps of candy-fluff colored hair cling to her flushed cheeks. My fingers tingle to whisper it off of her face. *The fuck—?* I slide my palm into the pocket of my pants.

"Are you stalking me?" She chews on her lower lip and my dick twitches.

I widen my stance, "And what if I was?"

"If... if this is your idea of a joke—" Her shoulders go rigid; she glances up and around the corners of the steel cage.

"No cameras."

Her gaze pops back to my face.

"It's a private elevator." I punch the stop button and she draws in a sharp breath.

The elevator jolts, then halts. "Oh, hell." She pivots, slaps her hand on the door.

"Too late." I lean a shoulder against the steel wall.

She swallows, "Why... why did you do that?"

I fold my arms, "Not for the reason you are thinking."

She sidles away. Her shoulder brushes the wall opposite me, and she jerks upright. "Wha... what reason would that be?"

I scan her features, down the arch of that neck—it's quite stunning, actually—down to the thrust of her breasts. Today, she's wearing a jacket that pulls in her shoulders. Clearly, it's a size too small for her. It's buttoned in the front. The material strains at her chest, showing off her curves.

Annoying little thing that she is, she's used to flaunting her assets to get her way, no doubt. I stare at her breasts, and she folds her arms around her waist.

"Not that either, as I clarified earlier."

Her cheeks flush. Hmm, interesting color. She's a natural redhead obviously, given how the color on her face highlights every single freckle on her beautiful skin. I stiffen. Why is my mind headed that way? I am used to controlling it, ensuring that my will is obedient to me. Every time I see her, though, my brain seems to drop to my groin. My dick twitches. I widen my stance and her gaze drops down to my crotch.

"You could have me fooled. From where I am, it seems you'd very much like 'that.' " She makes inverted commas with her fingers.

I stiffen. *Sod this*. I will not be insulted by the likes of her. "So that's your game, huh?"

"Now, what has that asshole mind of yours conjured up?"

"You don't want to know." I flex my fingers and she pales.

"Try me." Her chin wobbles.

"You wouldn't be able to stand it, Sweetheart."

"Stop calling me that."

"Oh?" I take a step forward and she blinks, scans the small enclosed space.

You're trapped, little Bird. Can't get away from the big bad bully now.

Her breath hitches; she retreats against the wall. "St... stop."

I take a step forward. "No one tells me what to do." I glare down at her.

"You think waaaay too much of yourself." She juts out her chin.

"You don't think enough about yourself, clearly." Which is why she turned up for the meeting today without checking for any ulterior motives. Anger ladders up my spine. I don't get it. *Why am I concerned about her well-being?* She's here, in my space, exactly where I want her to be.

She's here insinuating herself into my life. Doesn't she understand how bad this can turn out for her?

Doesn't she care that I could do things to her that she'd never recover from?

My groin hardens. One part of me, at least, relishes the hunt. Adrenaline laces my blood. This could turn out to be interesting. Imagine that? Something to work toward. Someone who challenges me, who doesn't grovel before me.

She dares go toe to toe with me? Interesting. I glare at her and she gulps. Fear radiates off of her.

"You uncomfortable, little girl?"

She shakes her head.

"Such a pretty little liar."

She jerks her chin. A bead of sweat runs down her temple.

I swipe out an arm and she flinches. I scoop up the drop of perspiration, then bring it to my lips and suck on my digit.

She makes a strangled sound deep in her throat. Watches me with unabashed curiosity... Or is that anticipation?

"I could take you right here and you couldn't stop me."

She freezes. Her pupils dilate. Her chest rises and falls; the jacket stretches further. The button squeezes out of the eyehole. *Bloody hell.* I reach for her and she opens her mouth; her features contort.

"Don't," she whispers.

She pauses. Eyes wide, mouth opened in an 'O.' Pink lips parted, lip gloss gleaming. My mouth waters. My balls pulse. Is she trying to taunt me? I reach for her lapels and every muscle in her body snaps to attention.

I drag her up to her tip toes, drop my chin, until my face is directly above hers. Her eyelids flutter shut, her thick eyelashes fringing those soulful eyes. Eyes that consume me with their vulnerability. That hint at the innocence beneath the surface. An awed hopefulness through which she surveys the

world. With bated breath. Waiting for her future to unfurl. An optimism that I want to tear apart with my bare hands.

Rip into her and teach her never to trust anyone.

Not so easy. My breath raises the hair on her forehead and her lips tremble. Her chin wobbles and she tips her head back, showing me the curve of that gorgeous neck. Too fucking vulnerable. I am going to have to teach her a lesson.

"Little Bird?"

"Summer." She swallows, "My name is Summer."

"Are you a virgin, Summer?"

5

Summer

"Seriously?" I snap my eyes open.

This man has the ability to reduce me to surprised silence and that's not complimentary, though it does take a lot to rob me of my ability to speak, honestly. It's more a testament to his sheer audacity. "You didn't ask me that."

"Why not?"

"Because... it's incredibly rude, for one."

"Is it?"

"Are you kidding me?"

"I never 'kid.' " He says the last word as if it's a bad smell.

"Figures." I can't stop the chuckle that spills from my lips. "If you could stop long enough to actually notice your surroundings, you'd see that we don't live in the dark ages anymore. Perhaps you'd see how everything is wrong about this picture."

"You actually believe there is free will in this world, hmm?"

His voice tugs at my nerve endings; goosebumps dot my skin.

It's being enclosed in this tiny space that's making me faint. I am not claustrophobic, but being stuck in an elevator with a larger-than-life male who has a completely warped sense of his own importance is... is enough to sap the will of any strong-willed woman... and I am... but one desperate to get to her meeting, and wrap up this account. "I am going to be late."

"It can wait."

Anger flares low in my belly, "There you go again, presuming to know what I can and can't do."

"Why should I pretend?"

"Because..." I fidget, "Because... it's polite?"

"Which I am not. We've established that already. So why don't you cooperate?"

"That'll be the day." I huff out a breath.

"The faster you answer my question, the sooner we can both be on our way."

"So, if I tell you if I am a... a..."

"Virgin." His lips curl.

Bastard's having so much fun at my expense. I can't wait to wipe that look of satisfaction from his face. Honestly, I really, truly, want to see him on his knees and groveling. For mercy. And I'd never show him an iota of it, I won't.

"Yeah." I square my shoulders, "That. If I tell you... which by the way, I am not going to because, newsflash, this isn't the dark ages anymore. Women are allowed to live as they want, date whom they desire, sleep with..."

His eyes glitter.

"—not you." I gulp, "I definitely don't want that with you."

He glares at me, "So you're thinking about it, huh?"

Nope.

"Admit it."

Never.

"Since you saw me, you've wanted to find out how it would be to have sex with me?" He drops his nose to the hollow of my throat and nuzzles me there.

I shiver.

"Give me what I want."

I will not.

"Say it." His voice drops to a hush.

A thrill of anticipation heats my blood. Would he be as demanding in bed? Position me as he wants, push me until I give him what he needs, allow him to possess me, dominate me... The elevator lurches. His body bumps mine. Chest to hip to thigh. All of my senses focus in on him. My nerve endings pop. "Yes."

"Yes, what?"

The elevator moves up, "Let me go, the doors will be opening soon."

"Not until you complete your sentence."

"But."

"You have less than thirty seconds."

"Wait..."

"Twenty-eight"

"Fuck."

"Told ya already, that's not on the table."

"Asshole."

"Fifteen seconds."

My heart rate ratchets up, heat flares between my thighs. *OMG, I can't be turned on.* Surely not. The thought of the elevator doors opening and my being discovered, has a sick kind of appeal. The hell is wrong with me? Apparently, I enjoy being the object of his single-minded attention, something I haven't been at the receiving end of with anyone else.

"Five..."

"No, of course not, you asshole."

"See, that wasn't so difficult, huh?"

The elevator doors slide open. He peels himself off of me, steps back.

I break away, step out of the doors, which begin to close. I angle my body toward him, "Aren't you coming?"

He yawns, leans a shoulder against the elevator walls, "This floor is for plebs."

I open and shut my mouth. Did he actually say that? The doors close.

I watch the floors scroll up on the elevator's panel. It stops at the floor marked 'A.' Does that mean only assholes are allowed there? I snicker, then turn and march toward the reception desk.

"I am here for-"

"The pitch?" The sleekly coiffured woman behind the reception desk looks me up and down. *What? Do you have to audition with your superiority complex to be hired here?*

"No, the fork."

She blinks.

I stab my tongue into my cheek, "It was a joke."

"Oh!" She purses her lips. Hell, she'd be the perfect companion for the man I left behind in the elevator. Speaking of, "Why are there two receptions in this building?"

"I am the administrator to the upper echelons."

Did she say echelons? Does anyone use that word in daily speech?

Her phone buzzes. She straightens and touches her earpiece, "Yes, Mr. Sterling." Her breath hitches. "Of course, Mr. Sterling, I'll send her up."

She glances at me.

"I heard."

I pivot, then stop. Holdonabloodysecond. I swivel around. "How many offices did you say are up there?"

"I didn't." She huffs.

"How many?" I frown. Alphahole had gone up; he'd hinted he is the boss. Is he the person I came to meet? No, it's not possible. My heart begins to race. "Tell me."

She frowns, scans her nails, "I can't give out private information—"

I grit my teeth, force my lips to curve in the semblance of a smile, "Please, this could change the outcome of the meeting I am about to go into. I really need to be better prepared for whatever is coming."

She frowns, then jerks her chin, "One, just one, Mr. Sterling's."

6

Summer

I walk out of the elevator. This time, the trip had been accomplished mercifully alone, thank you very much. I get off on the ‘Asshole’ floor then move forward to the conference room at the very end, as directed by the second receptionist.

She'd cautioned me that Mr. Sterling hates to be kept waiting.

What a surprise, huh?

I glance past the doors that open off the corridor. The entire floor is hushed. The faint scent of leather and cigar smoke clings to the walls. The place smells like the inside of an old boy's club.

Figures. Of course, alpha asshole is a chauvinist.

Probably went to boarding school with other rich toffs, all of whom are now top politicians and captains of industry. Bet he could call up anyone to get a favor done for his company. That's how he'd established his company so quickly. Okay, maybe that was uncharitable. By all accounts, 7A had been set up by him and his partners and they'd built it up from scratch.

Though Sterling is in charge of the marketing, which is why I am meeting him. Just my luck. My shoulders droop as I approach the massive double doors of the conference room. Ornate woodwork laces the frame. There's a knocker with a lion's head on it in place of the handle. I blink. My fingers twitch. Before I can stop myself, I've grabbed the knocker. *Slam it down, do it.* Not as if you're going to get the account so why keep the pretense up, eh?

For Karma, yeah. Okay. Do it for Karma. She deserves you giving this

your best shot. I push open the door and enter.

A rectangular glass table stretches the length of the room. There are at least ten chairs clustered around it. One wall is taken up by a white projection screen.

I walk around, until I am facing the table. I have a PowerPoint on my laptop. Which means I have to plug in my computer, or plug in my usb fob with the deck. Should have taken a print-out, but there hadn't been enough time. *Okay, don't panic. Deep breath. You can do this.*

I drop my tote bag onto the table, pull out my fob, and pivot to face the screen. I spot the console to the side, and walk up to it... *How the hell does it open?* I press down on the surface. Nothing. To the right... left... *What the —?* The hair on the nape of my neck rises.

"You won't need that."

A shiver runs down my back. I'd known it was him seconds before he had spoken.

"Of course, I will." I continue to flutter my fingers over the console, and it slides back. *Whew!*

I shove my fob into position, then straighten. His scent envelops me. Bergamot and fresh cut grass, saturated with testosterone. I gulp, walk toward the table.

He clicks his tongue. "You're going in the wrong direction."

I whip around, and he drums his fingers on his massive chest.

"I don't have much time."

I swallow. Of course. He is the client; this is his office. He knows where everything is.

"Fine." I round the table, drop into a chair.

"Didn't give you permission to sit."

I stiffen. "Controlling much?"

He drums his fingers on his chest, "I can't tolerate childish tantrums. Clearly, you don't have what it takes to manage our account." He pivots on his heels, heads for the door.

In that moment, I have never hated anyone more. Superior jackass with a God complex. If I didn't need his business desperately, I'd have told him that to his face, too.

"Wait."

He keeps going.

"Hold on, please."

He opens the door.

"Look, I'm sorry. I apologize. I shouldn't have said that."

"Too little, too late." He glares at me, "You should have thought of that before you directly contradicted me."

The blood fades from my cheeks. What am I doing here trying to negotiate with a man who has clearly lost touch with reality so much that he doesn't see anything except the tip of his own nose? His strong patrician nose that hooks above a square jaw and hints at the strength of his obstinacy. A strong will that could crush me if I let it.

If you give in now, you are going to regret it.

I need his business, and if I show my desperation, I can kiss any hope of gaining his account goodbye. No, it is time to change course. To hold my own, to fight him at his own game, with his own tactics. Say something, anything, to keep him here. I gulp, then toss my head, "Fine, leave then."

He frowns.

"But you'll never hear about how I was going to put myself at your disposal twenty-four-seven."

7

Sin

That was supposed to have been my proposition. *The hell did she come up with that?*

I glare at her.

She shuffles her feet.

Are you uncomfortable, little Bird?

My fingers tingle and I shove them into my pocket.

She tips up her chin, "Well?"

"Well, what?"

She twists her fingers in front of her, "Don't you want to hear about the rest of my proposal?"

Interesting. I am the one normally laying down the conditions. I am the one in charge, who likes to demand, and is never turned down. Not only has she stood up to me since we met; now, she actually wants to lead? I bare my teeth, "Clearly, you are delusional, or plain stupid."

"Clearly." She bites on her lower lip, "But you have to admit you are curious..."

Hmm.

"A teeny tiny bit?" She holds up her forefinger and thumb. Slender fingers tipped with pink nail polish. The woman loves that color.

Bet she also adores candies, flowers and teddy bears. The kind she'd love to receive on Valentine's Day, right after she'd belted out Karaoke on a drunken night out with her girlfriends. Then shagged the man she took home.

My gut tightens. Most females I associate with come well coiffured, long limbed, blonde hair, with designer outfits and high-heeled shoes that have never seen the inside of a tube station. This girl though—I take in her footwear. Chucks?

I blink. She is wearing chucks, with her slimline black skirt that comes to mid-thigh. Why hadn't I noticed the ridiculous combination of her outfit? Probably because I was too busy staring at her breasts... or is it at her ridiculous pink hair, which really has no place in my boardroom?

Max huffs, then shuffles toward her with his ambling doggy gait.

She doesn't notice him... Or if she does, she gives no indication. He circles her, sniffs her ankles, then drops down at her feet. His tongue lolls out of his mouth.

I frown. Max can be stubborn, and when he sets his mind on something... Well, nothing, not even me, can dissuade him. I look at my watch, "You have five minutes."

Her gaze widens.

I stalk forward, drop into the seat in the middle of the conference table. "Starting now."

"B...but." Her mouth opens and closes.

"Do you often do that?"

"Wh... what?" She stutters.

"Sound like you are drowning?"

Her cheeks flame. Her blush is quite spectacular, actually. It sears the expanse of her throat, right up to the tips of her ears. Do the other parts of her turn pink too? Would her pert backside show off every single fingerprint of mine? I drum my fingers on my table.

"Well, you were here to pitch an idea, right?"

She nods.

"So give it your best shot." I kick out my legs.

She leans forward toward the panel that controls the console with the fob and, I shake my head.

"What?" She frowns.

"I don't have time for a long drawn-out presentation."

"Bu... but I pulled together a deck."

"Give me a summary." She chews on her lower lip.

Don't look there, don't. I peruse the glistening flesh. Pink, slightly swollen. Her mouth falls open slightly, and fuck, if I don't want it fastened on

my cock right now. My groin hardens. I shove my legs further apart, "Ms. West."

"Mr. Sinclair?"

I tip my chin up, "You now have four minutes and fifty seconds left."

She releases her death grip on her laptop, folds her fingers together on the table, "The brief was on how to humanize the face of the 7A Company, using innovative marketing communications, the kind in which my company specializes."

"Cut to the crux of the strategy."

Her eyebrows lower. "My idea is to go behind the scenes, tail the founders, share behind-the-scenes pictures of each of the Seven, your interactions with each other, how you come up with strategies, the chemistry, the banter, the fights, use the key individuals at the helm to bring out why your company is not as bad as the recent PR that surrounds it."

"Oh, so you think we have a bad reputation in the market?"

"Yes." She holds my gaze.

Took guts to own up to that. It is refreshing, I'll give her that. I place my elbows on the table, lean forward. "Go on."

"You and your fellow stakeholders are seen as cut-throat, mercenary, not caring about your employees, or anyone else, ready to take what you want, earn money for your stockholders."

I frown. "What's wrong with that?"

"Profiting by itself is not enough. Not if you were thinking of going for an IPO, which you are."

How did she find out about that? That is information privy to the seven of us... and our teams.

"If you're wondering how I knew about that," she raises her chin, "there was a piece in CITY A.M. last evening."

"There was?"

"Clearly, your PR team sucks if they didn't bring it to your notice."

"Hmm." I pull out my phone, search for the piece and find it. "We would have announced it in a week... No biggie."

I'm going to destroy whoever leaked the piece.

"It didn't necessarily come from within your company."

"Oh?" Did she second-guess my thoughts, hmm?

"The change in your messaging during the last few months is a clear indicator that you are planning something big. Besides, the brief was aimed at

whitewashing your reputation, and companies do that when they are going to..."

"Raise capital?" I pocket my phone.

She nods.

Hmm. Okay, I'll grant her that.

"So you're not just another pretty face, huh?"

Her lips firm. She knits her fingers together in her lap, clearly trying to control herself from saying something she might regret.

Question is, why am I not able to control myself when it's about her?

I survey her features again. Taking in the bright look in her eyes, her enthusiasm writ in every angle of her body, the way her chest heaves, the tension that skitters off of her, for a second, I feel my age. Hell, I am only a decade older than her, if that, but the experience I have packed into that time has clearly made me into a cynic. Not that I'll admit to that. Ever.

"So, you think you can flounce in and tell us that our reputation sucks, that our confidential information has been leaked, and that you know better than us how we should be planning forward?"

She blinks, shuffles her feet. "Umm." The pulse flutters at her throat and I can't look away. It hints at her vulnerability, how tense she is... how nervous she's been throughout, really.

Guess not everyone has been fortunate to be blessed with a fighting spirit such as mine, huh?

"How desperate are you to win this account?"

She stiffens.

"It's clear that you're not the best agency in the market. I mean, your ideas are hardly original."

She curls her fingers at her sides. "It's as original as... as your beard."

"Is that a joke?" I lower my brows.

"What do you think?"

"I think..." I stroke my chin, "that you like how I wear it."

"I hate it."

"Good." I knock my knuckles on the table. "I'll keep it."

She shoots me a look that is so hate-filled, that I chuckle.

"It's not funny." She makes that sound—the one between anger and frustration, that I heard yesterday—deep in her throat.

My dick twitches.

How would she sound under me? When I am balls deep inside her

melting pussy, while squeezing her beautiful tits? My groin hardens. *Fuck. Get your head in the game.*

I thrust out my chest, "It is from where I am."

"Have you always been such an arrogant prick?"

"Watch it, now." I glare at her. "Your idle prattle has ceased to amuse me."

"You know what's really not amusing?" She moves forward to stand in front of the table, then slaps her hand on the table, "That I let myself be subjected to the toxicity of your presence. "

Our height difference is such that even with my being seated, she has to tilt her head back to peer into my face. She really is petite, and exquisite. Made to be broken, to be put on a shelf and taken care of, then taken down on occasion, to be admired.

It's a compulsion of mine. To collect objects that elicit extreme emotions, which I admit is something that doesn't happen often with me.

That's no explanation for what I do next.

I tap my fingertips together, "So how are you going to put up with shadowing me for a week?"

8

Summer

"A... week?" I squawk. I didn't hear that correctly. "You mean seven days?"

He raises his eyes skyward, "She can count."

Jerk. I swallow, press my knees together, "I won't do it."

"Why not?" He drums his fingers on the table. "Don't you need this gig?"

"I do."

"Then?"

"My uh—my," I twist my fingers together. How do I put this without giving away more about myself? *How...?* "My personal circumstances don't allow me to—"

"Ditch him."

"What?" I stare.

The ego of this guy. I mean, it's not possible he's managed to get through life with this attitude, is it? Does everyone he encounters bend to him? Do they?

He rotates his foot, clad in Italian leather shoes.

"Time you got rid of whichever lover boy you're seeing."

My eyes bug out, "You're joking."

"There you go again, presuming to know what I mean."

I throw up my hands, "You're speaking in riddles."

"Good, one way for you to put that ol' brain matter to good use."

Anger thrums at my temples. My pulse pounds. Adrenaline laces my blood. "I've never met anyone quite like... like... you." I raise my palm,

bring it down.

There's a blur of motion, and the next moment, he looms above me. His fingers lock on my wrist.

"Let me go."

"Your answer first, Pink."

"Don't call me that."

"I'll call you what I want, when I want to, and you'll answer to it."

"No."

"Yes."

Obnoxious ass. I stare at his face, searching for something... anything that would give me a clue to why he is acting so unreasonably. "Were you born this way or did you become such a repugnant beast along the way?"

"You don't get to ask the questions."

He tugs me forward and I squeak. My nose bumps his. That dark edgy scent of him envelops me. Moisture pools between my thighs. Hell. How could someone so horrible smell so delicious?

"Your boyfriend—"

"What about him?"

"Drop him."

Not that I have anyone currently. And if I did, would I do as he's commanded?

Yes.

Yes.

"No." I jerk my head.

He lets go of my wrist only to wrap his fingers around my nape. I flinch.

"You will do as I say."

My nerve endings crackle. That hushed tone of his voice... the angle of his head, the intensity with which he peruses my features, holds my gaze, ripping me to shreds, cutting straight to the core of me, that frightened little girl who's inside of me. Bet he knows how much of a loser I am inside. One who has never managed to get her own way. I'm not going to give in now. If I do, the alphahole will win and I'll never... never give him that satisfaction; not unless it is on my own terms.

"Oh yeah?" I tilt my head, "And if I don't?"

"Hmm." His eyes gleam, "You sure you want to know?"

The hair on my forearms stands on end. This is a trap. Every single action of his since he walked into this room has been carefully calculated to put me

on edge, to unbalance me, to ensure that I am so angry that I'll lose my composure. *Don't say the obvious, don't.* I toss my head. "Bite me, motherfucker."

He peels back his lips. His white teeth flash. Wow. The sheer enjoyment on his face? It changes his features, transforms him into what he might have been as a boy. Full of life, excitement, ready for the next challenge... which in this case, is me. I pull back. "No, don't —"

He lunges forward. The next moment I am splayed across the length of the table, my breasts crushed against the hard surface. "What the—?" I struggle and he leans his heavy arm on the small of my back. I jerk my hips, push up on my toes. A weight behind my knees pins me in place.

"Let me go, bastard."

"Nice of you to have spotted my true lineage, and on our first meeting."

I huff. *Don't say, it, don't.* "Technically, it's our second meeting."

"Don't correct me." He yanks up my skirt.

Cool air assails my skin. I freeze. No way, he isn't going to... "Unhand me."

He pauses, "Did you say 'unhand'?"

Is there a glimmer of laughter in his voice. I angle my head and he increases the pressure on my back, holding me immobile.

"You wouldn't dare..." My chin trembles.

"You should realize that I don't take kindly to dares." He cups my butt and my thighs squeeze together. I clench my fists at my sides. When I get out of here, I am going to file a sexual harassment lawsuit. I am going to sue the living daylights out of him.

"Won't work," he growls.

"What?"

"Whatever you are plotting."

I freeze.

"Everyone in this office will support me. It's your word against mine, and yours doesn't count for much."

My guts clench. The sheer audacity of this man! Does he really think he can get away with what he is doing? "The cameras."

"None in this room."

"From the entrance to the building?"

"I've ordered them wiped already."

"The bar yesterday..." I bite on my lower lip. Of course, he owns it and

everyone there, as well. "Fuck you."

Pain explodes across my backside.

I scream. "You spanked me, what the bloody hell—?"

"Language, Bird." He smacks my butt again.

I howl. No one has ever smacked me before.

I haven't let anyone get this close to me. Certainly, no one in the revolving door of foster homes had cared enough to admonish me. So, how had I put myself in this position with this intolerable asshole?

I strain against his hold and he leans more of his weight on my back. I kick out with my leg as he spanks me again, and again. Five, six... ten. "Stop." I wheeze.

"Learned your lesson yet?"

"Get off me, you brute." I yell, and he slaps my arse so hard that my entire body jerks up the table.

"Sinclair."

"What?" My breath stutters; the pain sinks into my blood, coils in that empty space between my thighs.

"My name, little Bird." He cups my butt, "My name's Sinclair."

Moisture pools in my core. Why the hell is my body reacting this way?

"Say it." His voice lowers to a hush.

I tremble, open my mouth, wanting to oblige him. *Do it. Give him what he wants.*

"No."

Whack.

"Now." He growls.

My skin stretches; my nerve-endings pop.

"Sinclair." I huff.

His large hand palms my butt. "See, we get along so well when you obey me."

Right. I swallow, firm my shoulders. "This is not about a boyfriend."

He stills, but his body is braced for action. Dense clouds of energy vibrate off of him.

I turn my head so my cheek is flat against the table. "My sister." I peer up at him. "She's unwell, I can't leave her."

"Not my problem."

Anger threads my veins, "She's not well you... nincompoop. I can't leave her."

"Too bad."

The blood pounds at my temples. Until now, I hadn't realized how protective I feel about her. Me? I can deal with shit. But Karma? No way am I going to let her suffer because of this. I twist my torso. His grip loosens. Enough for me to pull free. I scramble up on the table, raise my hand,

"Do it and you lose this account, and your home. You and your sister will be on the streets."

I pause, "You wouldn't."

He raises an eyebrow. Of course, the asshole would go all out to destroy me.

Then another thought strikes me, "You already knew?"

He leans back, straightens the cuff of his jacket. "You don't think I'd let you walk in here without running preliminary checks on you?"

"You had me investigated?" My gut churns. The thought of this man searching out the nooks and crannies of my life? My butt throbs. Every fingerprint of his seems to be etched into my arse.

I clamber off the table, glad to put the width of the barrier between us.

"Didn't take too long, by the way." He straightens, his tone already preoccupied. No doubt he's moved on to other things already. He's dismissed me in his mind. Me and my petty little life. I am inconsequential, not even a blip on the expanse of his beautiful life. I hate him... No, loathe him.

I am going to find a way to avenge this humiliation.

Ensure that he feels as helpless as I do in this moment. I smooth my skirt down my hips, then square my shoulders.

"Good-bye, little Bird." He pivots, struts to the door.

His large body cuts out the sight of the doors. That's how massive he is. Slim waist, jacket stretched across a firm butt. Powerful thighs that ripple with each step he takes away from me. More wetness pools between my thighs. It's not fair that the devil has such an irresistible body.

If he leaves, I can forget about my fledgling business, or paying next month's rent... And if Karma's condition were to flare up..? No, she is stable. That's what her last examination showed, but I have to be prepared for the worst. I can't afford to be selfish anymore.

"Wait."

He continues walking.

"I'll do it."

He reaches the door, "Tonight. 8 pm. I'll send my chauffeur to pick you

up"

"I can't drop everything..."

"Don't tempt me to change my mind."

Hate him. Hate him. Hate him. I press my lips together, hold up my middle finger, then for good measure stick out my tongue at his back. Childish, but what he's done to me, how he's coerced me into this situation, is nothing short of crazy; like, completely out of this world, unbelievable.

"Why are you doing this? This entire set up... It's too elaborate, smacks of desperation."

He pauses at the threshold.

"What is it you really want from me, Sinclair?"

He draws himself up to his full height, "I'll tell you when the time is right."

My heart begins to thud. OMG... that... didn't sound ominous. Not at all. The hell is he hiding from me? I bite down on my lower lip. Not yet. Now is not the time to throw more questions at him. I can play his game. If he can bide his time, so can I.

"Oh, and Bird? That spanking today, was nothing." He pushes open the door, holds it open for a beat, "Next time, your rudeness won't go unpunished."

9

Sin

The door shuts behind me. Something hits against the barrier; I ignore it.

She's angry. Good. I flex my fingers.

So far, things are going smoothly. In fact, it has been too easy. I frown.

I can't believe she allowed me to spank her. I'd expected her to run out of there screaming, maybe reach for her phone and dial for help... which, of course, I'd have stopped her from doing. It hadn't taken much coercion to bait her, actually.

I stab my finger on the elevator button. Max butts my leg. I glance down and he darts toward the stairs. Why not? My office is a floor above.

And after that run in with that little spit fire... My cock hardens. The shape of that gorgeous arse is burned into my palm. For someone I've spent most of my life hating... Too bad her physical attributes are so enticing.

I clench my fingers into fists. All a ruse to tempt me. Bet she'd dabbed on that infuriating perfume—jasmine and something more complex lurking below. Notes of pepper that had twisted my guts and had tested my patience.

I hadn't meant to lose control, honestly... but what's done is done. I square my shoulders. Next time I won't veer from my plan. I will not give in to my hate... It hadn't been hate. Far from it. There had been something in the air between us. Something that had annoyed me, had squeezed my chest and hardened my balls until I couldn't stop myself.

Not again. One slip up... one more than I have allowed myself in any other project. Nope. I have to look past that enticing face, to the darkness that

taints her. The darkness, so like mine. *The fuck?*

I shake my head, prowl toward the stairs, hold the door open for Max. He darts ahead and I follow him up the stairs to the floor above.

I shove the door open and he breaks out in a flurry of barks. No one in the foyer looks up. My staff is too well-trained to show any signs of recognition. I shove my office door open and he darts in, jumps onto the rug in the corner. When I'd brought him here the first time, he had headed for it and claimed it as his. I'd been mildly amused, enough to allow him to own it.

"Stay," I stab a finger at him. He pants, tongue lolling, then places his head on his paws.

I swerve right, walk into the adjoining room, as Damian throws his ball at a basket strung up in the corner. The ball bounces once, then rolls toward me. I pick it up, pitch it at him.

"Wassup?" His long blonde hair haloes his face.

"Isn't it time you got that cut, Goldilocks?"

He grins, "Jealous?"

I frown, "Why would I envy your lifestyle?"

"Oh? Let's see." He holds up his fingers, "The women throwing themselves at me, the ability to hold a crowd with my magnanimous presence, the chance to travel the world while following my passion...?" He cocks his head, "Not to mention the fact that I have more than enough to invest in our new venture, and fly down at the least pretext."

"It isn't a pretext, douche-canoe."

"Speak for yourself." Weston turns from the window, jerks his chin. "I need to return in half an hour to prep for a very important procedure."

Fucker's the quietest of us, the most serious, the most accomplished.

I lean forward on the balls of my feet, "Is that a surgery you're talking about or your latest sub?"

His lip curls. "What do you think?"

"Not going there. What you do with your personal time is your own thing. We all have a dark side, but you, Weston, you scare me."

Yeah, did I mention he's the meanest? Still waters run deep and all that.

"High praise, coming from the master sadist." He smirks.

"That's a back-handed compliment. I'll go with the positive meaning of it... For now."

I crack my neck. "I wouldn't have called this meeting if it wasn't important. I realize all of you can't wait to bugger off to whatever depraved

pursuits I pulled you away from."

A chorus of snickers greets that.

Like I said, assholes, each and every one of them.

I stalk to the bar, pour myself two fingers of the whiskey and toss it back.

"You gonna share?" Saint prowls over.

"Get your own."

"Why should I, when..." He snatches the glass from me, "...it's so much more satisfying to take what's yours?" He sets the empty glass on the bar counter with a thump.

A slow burn builds inside of me. Saint has always managed to rile me up the wrong way. Bastard enjoys it, probably because we've been competing with each other since the day we met. On the first day of kindergarten, when he'd been knocking a ball around the yard in front of our school, I'd taken the ball from him and run. He'd pursued me.

He hadn't stopped since. Neither had I. No wonder he'd ended up a lawyer, and me a banker. Neither of us had much going for us in the good will department.

"Sore loser, huh?"

"I am not the one holding an empty glass."

"Because I won the last bet?" He smirks.

"I won the three before that."

"You were on a lucky streak."

I drum my fingers on my chest, "You're hurting my feelings."

"Not since you decided to pursue Mary Jane Nokes in sixth grade."

"You barely noticed her." I crack my neck.

"I didn't... until—"

"She succumbed to my charms," I widen my stance. "which, you have to admit, was a bloody given."

He stabs his finger in my chest. "Don't provoke me, you *chutiya*."

"Settle down children." A new voice sounds. "Would have thought you'd have found a more mature way to fight out your differences by now, huh?"

I turn to the entrance of the room. A tall, broad shouldered man, stands inside the doorway. He has dark, closely-cropped hair, a scar down one cheek, and a tattoo peeking up his neck, enclosed in a priest's collar.

"Edward." I step toward him, Saint at my heels, "Didn't think you'd make it."

"And miss the chance to redeem the souls of the most debauched men on

this planet?" He clicks his tongue..

My grin widens, "Life treating you well, Father?" I grip his shoulder.

"Not as good as it's treating you sinners, apparently." He surveys the room, taking in the furniture. The conference table that had been converted to a pool table, the deep-set leather sofa, the fireplace, the wet bar, the floor to ceiling bookcase.

"You like?"

He angles his head. "Nice one, Sin. Almost as beautiful as the woman I ran into who was in such a hurry to get away that she took the stairs going down."

Edward hates elevators because... reasons.

I knit my eyebrows, "Tiny, curvy, pink hair and a face so cute you take an instant dislike to it?"

"Dislike is not quite the word I'd use, but if that's what you want us to believe." He raises his shoulders.

"Huh?" I tilt my chin up, "You're a priest, not a mind reader."

"You're a cut-throat entrepreneur, not someone who's the best judge of character."

"Present company proves your point accurately." I lower my brows.

Edward chuckles, pats my shoulder, "Good to see you too, Brother."

"Now that you pussies have the touchy-feely stuff out of the way, can we get down to business?"

A massive monster of a man prowls through the entrance.

His blonde beard catches the sunlight, the sparkle rivaled by the golden brown of his hair, and his tan that seems to clothe him in a perpetual amber glow.

I groan, "Don't recall inviting you here, Arpad."

"Which is why this is the place I need to be."

"Right, are we starting or what?" Weston asks from his perch by the window.

"Is this a reunion?" Damian drawls, then bounces his ball on the floor of the office.

"If all of our meetings are going to be such a waste of time, count me out." Saint swerves past me and heads for the door.

The fuck? Asshole needs special treatment, apparently. He's not getting any from me.

"You walk out of here, Saint, and I promise I'll cut you out of future

deals."

He takes another step.

"You're going to regret it."

He twists his head and shoots me a look, "I regret being here already."

"Get your arse in gear, you tosser."

Saint turns on Arpad, who merely stabs his thumb in the direction of the room. "Surely, you want to find out what he's up to? If you miss this, your curiosity is going to haunt you unless you commit industrial espionage and break down his plan of action."

"Hmm." Saint leans his hip against the door frame.

"Right." I pivot, then walk into the room, "Sit down everyone. Didn't call you here to mess with your time."

"Yeah, it'd better be worth it." Saint growls.

I glare at him.

He smirks. "Go on then."

"How long has it been since you had a decent night's sleep, huh?"

His features close. "What's it to you?"

I glance at the doc, "And you Weston, have you spent a single day not wondering about what happened to the disaster we left behind that day?"

Silence descends on the room. I toss my head. Figures. They are like me—larger than life, big egos, razor sharp minds, the best in their fields... Yet here we were, in search of that one thing that has eluded us since the incident that changed us all.

I fix my gaze on Edward, "How many times a day do you ask the Lord to forgive you for your sins?"

Edward's jaw firms. "Rhetorical questions, Sinner?"

"Takes one to recognize one, Father."

Color bleeds from Edward's face.

"Shit, I didn't mean that."

"Sure, you did." Edward sucks in his cheeks. "That why you called us here? To rehash the mistakes of our past?"

"What's your plan?" Saint stalks into the room, drops into the nearest armchair. "You are too smart, Sin, It's the one thing I hate about you... Possibly the one thing I admire about you too. You've managed to emerge relatively unscathed from the incident, put your life back together, the first of us to earn a million."

And a billion... many times since, but who's counting, huh? I widen my

stance, "What do you want in return?"

"50% of whatever profit you are proposing," Saint growls.

"Hold on a second." Weston strides forward, "I am a surgeon, that doesn't mean I'm going to settle for less than my proportionate share of the profits."

"And I am the most in demand Angel Investor in Silicon Valley." Arpad drums his chest.

"That's because Jace decided to turn his attentions to philanthropy," Damian smirks.

He's referring to our mutual acquaintance JK aka Jace. He is part of a select circle of people that Arpad and Damian have become close to in LA.

"Tosser got married and decided to retire." Damian bounces on the balls of his feet.

"More power to him." I snort.

Losers, all those who follow their hearts and get involved in that emo shit. The result: they lose their killer edge, become soft at their edges. Not something that I'll ever fall for. Especially since there is one goal on my horizon—to bring down the man responsible for my ruin.

Arpad tilts his head, "Jace and I were never in competition. Besides," he cracks his neck, "I hold the record for maximum ROI in a quarter amongst all of us. So," he flexes his fingers, "I stake the claim to the biggest share of the profits."

"Don't you want to hear what Sin's proposing?" Damian aims the ball in my direction.

I snatch it up, bounce it once, then balance my foot on it.

"I'll tell you, on one condition."

Saint scowls, "Baron?"

I widen my stance, "Fucking Baron."

Arpad's jaw hardens, "Bastard always manages to insert himself into our conversations without being present."

"He is annoying that way." Edward concedes.

Saint jerks his chin. "The seventh wheel, but clearly, whatever we are planning, he needs to buy into it too."

I tilt my chin up. "He's in."

"You spoke to him?"

"In a manner of speaking." I'd had to follow the security protocol he'd laid down, which involved old fashioned snail mail, and an unsigned typewritten note, to a PO Box. Apparently, physical mail leaves less of a trail

than communicating in a clandestine electronic method. "He's happy with whatever we decide."

"Fucking Baron." Arpad snaps his fingers, "Always knows how to use his time most efficiently, while the rest of us are working our asses off."

"Not you" Saint snickers. "You're too busy sailing around the world in that dinghy of yours."

"It's a sailboat." Arpad curls an eyebrow. "And PS, it's called generating passive income, baby." He spreads his hands, "What can I say? I have a knack for investing in exactly the right start ups... Speaking of which..." he stabs his finger at me, "...you going to tell us what it is?"

"FOK Media."

"FOK Media?" Edward blinks.

"What's that short for?" Arpad smirks, "Full of Kink?"

"Funny Ornerly Kangaroos, maybe?" Damian rolls his shoulders.

I shake my head.

"Oh, wait, let me guess." Saint snaps his fingers, "Fill or Kill?"

"An obvious guess," I make a mock gun with my fingers, point it at him. "But no, it's Full of Kindness."

Silence descends.

Saint snickers, "You're joking?"

"No." Not completely. I begin to pace, "After our last unmitigated PR disaster," I turn to Weston, "because of which we had to sell off our shares, divest our portfolio—"

"Hold on." Weston raises his palms, "I made you a profit. We dumped the shares before the stock market tanked."

"Maybe..."

Weston frowns.

"Your sins turned out to be damn profitable for us, this time." I lower my chin.

"As long as you don't repeat them." Edward tilts his head.

Weston raises his hands, "I never should have been caught on that sex tape... Besides, everyone who is anyone has one of those. And it hasn't affected business, has it?" Weston steepled his fingers, "On the contrary, it's brought in a flurry of new patients. Seems the sight of my arse inspires confidence, as much as my success rate in surgeries."

"Win-win situation..." I prop my fingers on my hips. "So we are ploughing in the profits, forming a charity that will invest in a cause—"

"—that gives us legit write offs." Saint drums his fingers on his chest.

"But what's the real business?" Arpad widens his stance.

I scan the room, "We invest in start-ups, in upcoming artists, in musical talent, medical scholarships, we cast our net wide."

"And the returns?" Saint widens his stance.

"Twenty-five percent of their income streams for the rest of their lives."

Weston hums, "It's steep."

"It's fair." I set my jaw.

"It does good." Edward's tone is considering. "I concede that much."

Not that it matters to me. My soul is going to rot in hell, but it's not a bad idea to have side benefits.

I'll also say whatever it is these assholes want to hear to get them to agree.

"If it weren't for the incident, the Seven of us wouldn't have kept in touch. This..." I jerk my chin, "shared venture would be a more positive reason to keep us together."

"All the more reason to walk away from it," Saint grimaces. "If I see any more of you guys, I'll end up resembling one of your ugly faces and that's not on my wish list, no offense."

"None taken." I bare my teeth.

"But." He pauses.

"But?"

He drums his fingers on his chest. "You have my interest, I'll give you that."

Fucking cunt.

Damian scratches his jaw, "And we do this meeting... What? Yearly?"

"Monthly." I firm my lips.

"Monthly?" Damian scowls. "You are aware of my schedule."

"You have a private jet, bitch."

He glowers.

"This way, we meet each month, in person, to evaluate the risks."

Saint smirks, "You'd think you want the strength of the group behind you or something."

I do, but not in the way he thinks.

Makes it easier to keep track of what they are up to. Sure, I have eyes on them, but there's only so much you can trust what the hired help gets you. Best to meet them face to face, read their expressions, study their body language. Deciphering the unsaid, yeah, that's my specialty.

"And the meetings will be in London." I thrust out my chin.

"No fucking way. Why London?" Arpad growls, " I hate this bloody city."

"I proposed this plan. I get to dictate where the meetings happen." I curl my lips, "And it will be on my home turf. Anyone who doesn't agree can sod off."

I scan the space. "No? It's settled then." I thrust my chin forward, "Besides, London is the center of the universe."

The moody, overcast weather the city wears for most of the year suits my temperament fine too.

"Bloody anglophile." Arpad grumbles.

"Filthy Frenchman." I snicker.

"Children, please." Edward walks up to me, grips my shoulder. "For the first time, you've had an idea that I am comfortable putting my weight behind. I'll put half of my investments behind it."

I frown, "In return for?"

"50% of profits."

My jaw drops, "What the—?"

"Kidding." Edward chuckles. "One seventh works for me. Though I won't say no to more, since my share of profits will be donated to the good of my flock."

"You're in a good mood, Father."

"I feel in fine form." His lips twitch.

"Who have you been taking lessons from?"

The smile switches off. He blinks, "No one."

"So, there is... someone?"

He shakes his finger under my nose, "Now, now. You can't trip me up. I take my vows seriously."

That much is true. The guilt in his eyes though, had I imagined it? Nah, not likely.

I survey the room, "Don't go getting your knickers in a twist people. I can assure you that, unlike Father here, I don't have an altruistic bone in my body. This way, we own these people until the day they die, not to mention ongoing revenue streams."

"Self-perpetuating assets? Works for me." Arpad stretches, yawns. "We done now?"

"Hold on." Saint prowls over, "How do we choose what to invest in?"

"Prospective applicants present their projects, and—"

"We get them to pitch to us." Arpad lowers his chin.

"That's good."

"You bet it is." He walks up to us. "It's a good idea, Sin, for once."

Right.

"The next meeting is in my offices." Saint growls.

Of course, he'd want the last word.

"Sure." I tilt my head.

His eyebrows knit. "If there isn't anything else..." he stalks to the door.

"I am not done yet."

"FOK Media is taking on an agency to help with the marketing."

"Oh?" Saint swings around. "Who heads the agency? Someone you're shagging?"

I glower at him.

"Interviewed her earlier. She'll manage our social media presence, and start seeding PR stories, get the ball rolling."

"Definitely shagging her." Damian scratches his chin.

"Did you think she'd have merits of her own?"

"Does she?" Weston's mouth quirks.

Not only.

"At least she's not an employee. That's something." Arpad drags his fingers through his hair.

"You have something to say to me, dipshit?"

He holds up his hands, "Hey, I am not the one with a hard on for her."

I frown. How dare he talk about her in that fashion?

He drums his fingers on his chest, "If she's not an employee, at least it doesn't open us up to further legal issues, when you pursue her."

"That is not going to happen." I grind my teeth so hard that pain slices up my jaw.

"So you're not interested in her?" Saint scratches his chin.

"No."

His eyes gleam. "I can pursue her?"

A growl rips from me. Anger twists my guts. Only when my hands knit in his collar, do I realize I've crossed the floor to him.

He smirks. "Someone's edgy."

I draw my fist back, "Shut the fuck up."

"Wanna try to hit me, Sin?" His tone is pleasant.

It wouldn't be the first time. Fucker knows how to get under my skin good. I smooth my palm down his collar.

"Nope, old chap." I pat his shoulder. "Actually, I do need your help."

"Hmm?" He frowns.

"Summer will be shadowing me for the next seven days to get in-depth information for the social media strategy."

"Oh, yeah?" He snickers. "Is that a euphemism for what you have in mind?"

I ignore it, "She also has a sister."

Saint straightens, "Oh?"

"Who's unwell, asswipe."

He tilts his head. "And you want me to what? Play nanny?"

Damian pipes up. "Technically that would make him a Manny."

"What?" I shoot him a sideways glance.

He shakes his head. "You should keep up with the trends. Not that this is something new or anything. Oh, wait." He snaps his fingers, "Not that you would be aware of that either, huh?"

"I leave those pursuits up to you, Pretty Boy." I turn to Saint, "Can you send your chauffeur to pick her up and move her to my Hampstead Heath apartment?"

His eyebrows knit, "You're taking care of her family? What next? Pay off her debts."

I narrow my gaze.

"And what will you be doing during this time?" Saint curves his hand, makes a pumping motion.

"None of your goddamn business."

I turn to the man on my right, "Doc?"

Weston straightens.

"The sister also has a heart condition, and considering that's your specialization, will you check her out, find out how bad it is?"

10

"I have a head for business and a body for sin."
— *Working Girl*. Director: Mike Nichols

Summer

I drag my suitcase toward the imposing door to what has to be the most beautiful three-story house I have ever seen.

The street is off Primrose Hill. Celebrities live here... And of course, the Jerkenstein.

His chauffeur had dropped me off in front of the beautiful wisteria-covered townhouse and I had almost been sorry to see Peter leave.

Not that we had spoken much. I'd been too taken in by the Aston Martin the alphahole had sent to pick me up.

It had smelled of Sinclair. I bring my sleeve up to my nose and sniff. Bergamot and pepper. Correction, *I* still smell of him.

My stomach flip flops. A hot sensation coils in my chest. I haven't seen the man and already my palms are damp. From hate. That's all it is, right? I raise my fist and knock on the door. It swings open. Huh?

I push open the barrier and walk through, into the large foyer. Ahead, a stairway winds its way up.

To my right is an elevator. Huh? Guess when you're rich you can't be bothered with climbing the stairs?

How much had it cost him to buy the place? Take a number and add at least another seven figures to it. My head whirls. Guess all the money in the

world can't buy politeness though, huh?

He is the richest, the snobbiest, the most infuriating man I've come across. And I am going to spend the next seven days with him. Hell.

I bypass the elevator and head for the stairs. He could have been here to welcome me, guide me around. Of course, not. Why had I expected that, huh?

At the foot of the stairs, I pause. I have no idea where I am going, and no way am I dragging my wheelie up the steps.

Hence, elevator...

Hell, does he have to be right even when he isn't physically present to rub it in? I pull my bag to the side, and deposit my tote on it. Then clomp past the foyer, taking a left, through the living room that opens out onto a massive garden.

I pause at the decking that leads out onto a green lawn, flanked by cherry blossom trees in full bloom in the spring sun. Rows of flower beds grace a garden path that leads down to a pond whose water glistens in the distance. I lean forward on the balls of my feet, wanting so much to walk out and explore... I take a step forward when a sound interrupts me. Huh? Was that a moan? I hesitate.

A rustle reaches me from somewhere behind. I pivot, move forward. Another soft sigh. No, I am not imagining things. My heart begins to race. He wouldn't dare. He wouldn't have called me here to humiliate me.

No, actually, that would be exactly his style. Embarrass me further. I stiffen. Why should I hesitate? I haven't done anything wrong, have I? I head past the bay windows on the opposite side of the room, into the adjoining kitchen. And pause. There on the side of the island, he stands, shirt unbuttoned, the lapels parted to show off that sculpted eight pack.

Whoever has an eight pack outside of models and film stars, eh? This alphahole, that's who.

His stomach is concave, and the pants at his waist are unzipped. My mouth goes dry. The blonde hair of a woman covers the most important part of his anatomy. Damn it. Not that I'd wanted to catch a glimpse of his dick. Of course, not.

His fingers dig into her hair, he tugs on it, and she makes a humming sound deep in her throat.

Bet her cheeks are hollowed as she takes him down her throat.

He drags her hair back, then presses her close. Her shoulders tremble and

a sucking sound reaches me. My cheeks redden. My thighs clench. The hair on my nape rises and I jerk my gaze up.

Indigo eyes burn into me. His features are hard, his jaw set. His gaze is hot, lust-filled, yet shuttered at the same time. As if he were watching me watching him. I take a step forward, not able to stop myself. If I were closer, would I see myself reflected in his eyes? Would I see how much he wants me? Would he sense how much the entire tableau is turning me on?

I gulp. My scalp tingles. My toes curl. Every part of me seems to be alight with a strange fire. I shouldn't find this erotic. I shouldn't.

A nerve throbs at his temple. He jerks his chin. When my foot slaps the ground, I realize I have taken a step forward. *The hell?* I blink. One side of his mouth curls.

His biceps flex and he pulls her head back, then forward again. And again. I was wrong. She isn't giving him a blow job. He is taking it from her. He is using her mouth for his pleasure. And yet it is as if he is completely dissociated from the entire proceedings. He set this up for my benefit. He wanted me to find him in this position, of course, he orchestrated this entire scene.

I stiffen, angle my body. I should leave, should get away from him.

His grin broadens. His chest rises and falls. He yanks her away with such force that she falls on her arse.

"Hey," she protests.

"Leave." He says it without taking his gaze off of me.

She glances up, "But, I'm not done."

"I am."

He lowers his hands to the front of his pants. The harsh rasp of the zipper being pulled up, grates on my nerves. All of my pores seem to pop at once. Damn him and his account.

Turning, I race to the door

"Summer, stop."

His hard voice crashes into me. I shudder. My steps seem to slow of their own accord. *The hell is he doing to me?* I'd been wrong to indulge him this far.

Been wrong to think that I'd survive a week with him... Hell, a few seconds in his presence and I am unravelling. Pinpricks of heat slice my skin and my thigh muscles spasm. I hate the man... No, I loathe him.

No way am I going to allow him to see how much he's gotten under my

skin. That I'd wished I had been the woman on her knees in front of him. That he'd been using me to pleasure him. This is sick.

I don't want him. I don't want be part of this charade. Reaching the front door, I wrench it open and race out.

11

Sin

It wasn't meant to be like this; it wasn't. Let her go; you don't care; you don't.

"Sin?"

Alana glances up at me, her features pinched.

"Get out of the way."

I walk past her and she grabs at the hem of my pants. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." *Everything.* "Leave, now."

"I thought you wanted me."

"Not anymore." As I say the words, I realize that it's true. Fuck that and fuck her and fuck the woman who distracted me enough for me to stop a blowjob half-way.

I stalk to the living room.

"Who was she?"

"None of your business." And she isn't. Not mine either. My Bird is an irritant to be dealt with. With her messy pink hair, the jeans and plaid shirt that she'd tucked in, teamed with a pair of chucks... pink, of course. Does the girl own any other color? If she'd intended to highlight how young she is, she succeeded. Every time I see her, her freshness takes me by surprise. No one was meant to look this chaste, this squeaky clean—enough to highlight the differences in our life paths and experiences, right there. I want to taint that wholesomeness, want to mark that pristine air that accompanies her. Mark her, defile her... *Fuck.* I curl my fingers at my sides. What I feel for her goes

beyond hate. I want to destroy her. Then build her up again, a finer, sophisticated version of what she was. *Fuck me*. When had I thought of this? Breaking her down was part of the plan. Anything else? Unacceptable.

I've come this far, haven't I? I've inched forward toward my goal.

I'd had her on my turf... Then I'd lost her.

I stalk toward the open door, buttoning my shirt up. "I want you gone when I return."

I prowl out the door, down the steps.

Peter straightens. "She went toward the hill." His eyebrows knit.

I ignore him.

Don't need my hired help telling me that I was wrong in what I did.

Max darts out of the house; his collar shines in the last rays of the setting sun.

I head toward Primrose hill, start up the slope, Max at my heels.

By the time I reach the top of the hill, the shadows have lengthened. I pass a group of people huddled on the grass, then a couple sprawled on the bench. His head is in her lap and she bends down to kiss him. *Romantics*. I snort under my breath.

Life is not about love and hearts and all that stupid shit that Hallmark dreams up in a bid to keep people buying its products. Suckers fall for that crap; good thing I am not one of them.

A squirrel darts past. Max barks and gives chase. That's his weakness. He sees one of those little critters and loses his shit. Like I seem to do with her.

I reach the top, turn to take in the view.

The vista of the London skyline stretches out before me. Lights twinkle, reflecting the setting sun. I survey the space. Where the hell could she be?

I stalk to the edge, past the signs that highlight the landmarks of the skyline. Can't see anyone. I angle my body to turn, when... There! A shock of pink catches my attention.

I head toward it.

Find her hunched into herself, seated on the ground, facing away from the crowd. Her shoulders are bent. She's drawn up her legs and her chin rests on her bent knees. I hesitate. She seems alone, lost in her thoughts... so fragile. Hurt radiates off of her... Nah, must be my imagination. Since when am I so sensitive to the feelings of others?

Besides, she doesn't mean anything to me. She is merely a pawn in the larger game I have going on.

Which means I need her to survive and get through what has taken place... and everything that is going to be hurled her way.

Why does it matter to me that she survives as unscathed as possible? That she come out stronger, able to take on the world.

Why do I want to go to her and draw her into my arms? Soothe her hurt until she smiles again? Why, when she means nothing?

I close in on her. A gust of wind blows toward me. The scent of her—cherries and caramel laced with cut grass—envelops me. My dick twitches. *What the bloody hell?* So, some part of me finds her interesting. Sure, given half a chance, I'd shag her. I'd do the same to half the willing females that come my way. Except I haven't.

I had had a woman on her knees, in front of me, face in my crotch, in the process of sucking me off and I had walked away. *In search of her?* Only because I need her to return. I can't lose her, not after having come this far. She plays an important role in my plan for revenge, except she isn't aware of it. Something I plan to rectify at the right time... just not yet. I pause next to her. She stiffens; her fingers tug at the grass, pulling away handfuls.

"Done sulking?"

She doesn't give any sign of having heard me.

"Didn't take you for the jealous kind."

Her shoulders draw back.

"Did you want to be in her place, taking my dick into your mouth, hmm?"

Her head comes up.

"If you ask me nicely, I might fuck your mouth."

She springs up to her feet. Her cheeks are pale, her eyes like glowing emerald orbs. *Whoa, stop right there. You don't find her beautiful, remember?* She closes the distance between us, and my groin tightens.

She stabs a finger in my direction, and I have this insane need to bend my head and suck on that digit; though that would be a poor imitation of what I've wanted to do to her pussy since the second I'd laid eyes on her. *Screw that.*

I bare my teeth, angle my head, "Go on then, spit it out, Sweetheart."

"You have a nerve."

I scratch my chin.

"You staged that entire thing for me."

"Oh?" I pretend to yawn, pat my mouth with four fingers.

"You knew I was on my way, and you set it up, including keeping the

door unlocked so I could walk in and find you."

"Why?"

She frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Why would I do that, Bird? Why would I go to such elaborate lengths to stage that entire little charade?"

"Because you are some kind of kinky flasher? You enjoy showing off your cock?"

"Wanna touch it?"

Her cheeks flush. "Ego much?"

"I might let you blow me off, if you ask nicely."

"OMG!" She throws her hands up, "you are... are..."

"Irresistible?"

"Obnoxious." She chokes.

"You mean, virile? Admit it, that you are attracted me."

"No." She sets her jaw, "No way am I feeding your already inflated sense of self-worth."

"If the shoe fits." I allow my lips to curl.

"You're such a cliché." She huffs.

I tilt my head, "Every stereotype has its roots in a spark of truth."

"Didn't take you for the philosophizing kind."

"Didn't take you for a sore loser."

"You're right." She juts out her chin. A tear winds down her cheek, trembles at the edge of her jaw. I lean forward, lick it up.

She flinches.

"Why did you do that?"

"Because..." *I wanted to taste you? Find out if your essence is as prickly as your demeanor? Because I have this insane desire to break you down and find out what makes you tick, little Bird.* "Because I can."

Her jaw hardens and she takes a step back. "You're the most arrogant, most dominating, most selfish man I've ever met."

"You noticed, huh?"

She makes a sound deep in her throat, "It will be my pleasure to take you down a notch before we are done."

"Is that any way to talk to the man who's gonna be paying your bills?" I rock back on my heels, "Don't forget I hold yours and your sister's future in my hands."

She pales, "Not fair." Her breath hitches. "If you keep throwing that at me

at every turn, then the deal is off."

12

Summer

"Oh?" All expression fades from his face. He schools his features into that emotionless mask I am coming to recognize and hate. "You sure about that?"

I nod.

"Okay."

Huh?

He pivots on his heels and stalks away.

Hold on a second. He's leaving? I chew on my lower lip. Why isn't he stopping me? I'd thought he'd laugh at me, perhaps force me to stay... Instead I watch that tight butt of his recede.

My mouth waters. My thighs clench. *Stop it.* Ogling his gorgeous frame is not going to get your job back. *Damn him.* Damn him for calling me on my bluff. He is aware of exactly how much I want this position... and how I'd do anything to have it back. *Will you grovel to him though?* No... No. Do I have a choice?

He takes the path leading down the grassy slope of the hill.

"Wait."

He speeds up.

Asshole. I break into a run. By the time I catch up, I am panting. My hair sticks to my cheeks. Oh, great. Add being shiny with sweat to my already bruised ego. Whatever. "Stop."

He keeps walking.

"Hold on, Sinclair." He pauses.

I draw abreast with him, then brush past him to plant myself in front of him. His big body blocks the sight of the rest of the space. I tilt my face back, all the way back. His face is in shadows. In the lengthening darkness of twilight, he seems formidable.

He folds his arms and his biceps stretch his shirt. I gulp. The heat of his body spools off of his chest, envelops me, reels me in closer, closer.

I squeeze my fingers together in front of my body, as if that will be enough of a barrier. He could haul me up and march away, and there wouldn't be a thing I could do about it. Moisture pools between my legs. Damn him, for the way my body responds to his every move. His presence, his scent, his every action has me attending to him. All of my senses zoom in on his face. I peer up, trying to discern the sharpness of his cheekbones, the hooked nose, the thin upper lip, that pouty lower lip that makes me want to reach up, draw his face down until it's parallel to mine, then sink my teeth into that sensuous, fleshy part of him. And that's not the only part that calls to me either. A chuckle ripples up my throat.

His glare deepens. His mouth firms. "Are you going to apologize or what?"

"What the—?" I dig my heels in my chucks into the muddy path. To be honest that's exactly what I'd been hoping to do, or at least I thought that's what I'd intended, when I'd set off after him. Now, with him watching me with that superior smirk—okay, I concede that look of disdain is hot on him; it makes him unapproachable, yet so sexy... my nerve endings jangle—and that is the last straw.

No way am I going to give him the satisfaction of winning this round. *It's not a game, oh stupid one, it's your life.* Yah. And it's my prerogative to screw it up, so long as I ensure that Karma is taken care of.

I jut out my chin, "No."

His mouth opens, closes. He blinks once. Ha, guess Mr. Smirky Pants is at a loss for words. Stroke. In my book, that counts as a win.

He closes the distance between us, until his big body brackets me in.

I gulp.

He lowers his chin, and our eyelashes almost kiss. "Say that again."

My body trembles. I fight the urge to step away. Anger scrolls off of him. Nervousness thrums my skin. "No." I tilt my head further back, "No way am I apologizing for that."

"I would have let you walk away, if you hadn't stopped me. You made a

mistake by coming after me."

My throat closes.

"What... what do you mean?"

"You had your chance, and lost it." A nerve throbs at his temple.

Oh, no, that... that's not good, is it?

I scuttle away from him and he doesn't stop me. That's not reassuring.

His eyes gleam; his nostrils flare.

Whatever that evil mind of his has conjured up, I am so not going to like it.

"Run, little Bird."

"Eh?"

"You have until I count to five."

The hairs on my nape rise. I angle my body away, ready to take off, anything to get away from this blackhole of a man, who attracts every part of me, even as his temperament repels every cell in my body. Every action has an equal and opposite reaction... Who said that? Einstein? Strike that. Not the time for stupid trivia, not.

"Explain." I clear my throat.

"If I catch you, you do as I command for the next seven days."

"And that's different from now, how?"

He raises an eyebrow, "Want me to spell it out for you?"

"You mean..." I blanch, "you mean the deal—"

"Extends from the meeting room to the bedroom."

"Go fuck yourself."

He smirks. "If I were egotistical, I'd say that you would enjoy that, but it's not your physical surrender that I want."

"Th... then?"

"It's your emotional submission, your mental breakdown."

"You're raving mad."

He raises his shoulder and then lets it fall. "My choice."

"And if I don't agree."

"I don't remember this being a negotiation."

"Jerk."

"You need a new vocabulary."

"And you..." I drag my fingers through my hair. "...you need a new attitude."

"I suppose you're the one who's going to change me?"

No, what's he talking about?

"Many have tried and failed, Sweetheart. I am not the bad boy you can tame. Not the hero of a romance novel come to save you."

"Th... then?"

"Take your worst nightmare and multiply it by 1000... Then add another few zeroes."

"Your wanker instincts are showing."

He bares his teeth, "Your... fight or flight senses need sharpening."

My heart begins to race. Adrenaline fills my blood.

"I meant every word I said." He thrusts out his chest.

The pulse thunders at my temples.

His nostrils flare. Bastard senses my fear. Sweat beads the inside of my palms and I hold up a finger. "Hang on."

His shoulders bunch, every part of him on edge, ready for the start of whatever insane race he has in mind. Darkness bleeds off of him. He's excited. Damn him. This entire thing is a joke for him... and I stupidly came along for the ride. I have to take control, have to. "So, let me get this right."

He angles his head.

"If I evade you now, I can leave?"

"I don't repeat myself."

Icicles crawl up my back.

"If... if you catch me?"

"Then you're mine to do with as I want."

"For the next seven days, right?"

He raises an eyebrow.

"And you'll pay off my debts and arrange for my sister to be treated by a specialist?"

He nods, "I'll deposit another million in your account, in good faith, so both of you are taken care of for the immediate future."

I swallow. Why is he doing this? Something is not right. What is he not telling me?

What choice do I have?

I had upped the stakes. He's made this deal impossible to resist... All the more reason to cut and run. I have to get away from him, before he ruins me completely.

"Deal." I hold out a hand.

He ignores it. He peels back his lips and his pearly white teeth shine in

the first rays of the moonlight.

My legs quiver; my thighs spasm. *Get away, get away from him now.* My body leans away from him, ready to bolt. Something primal inside of me insists that I stay, meet his gaze. Not look away as he bends in closer.

His breath sears my cheek.

"Run now. You have until I complete my countdown."

"Five."

I tense. *Go, go.* The hard edge of his glare bores into me. He can see my heart, my soul, my every desire lies unleashed in front of him.

"Four."

I take a trembling step back. *What am I trying to prove? Why am I not taking the small advantage he's offering me?* Because it's a trap, it's a—

"Two."

"You cheated." I gasp, "You missed a count."

He bares his teeth, "One."

I turn and bolt.

13

Sin

I watch her run down the slope

She picks up her pace, her butt cheeks stretching and pulling against the seat of her jeans. My dick twitches; my groin hardens. My entire body begs me to follow her.

The hell?

I hadn't meant to initiate this little game, but when she'd held her own and dared me, something inside of me had snapped—the hunter inside that loves to play, to race after his prey, toy with it, before he claims it. *Claim her? No.*

I never meant for this to go this far.

It was supposed to have been easy—crowd her into a corner until she is helpless and alone, then throw her a lifeline, and watch her entangle herself in the snare. Instead, the fine threads of the net tighten around me.

Sweat trickles down my spine.

Bloody long-sleeve shirts; I prefer to be casually dressed... but the front. It always comes down to the face I show the world.

The importance of keeping up this façade until I find those responsible for turning the lives of the Seven upside down.

I can't fail them; not now.

I break into a run, covering the ground in half the time it took her.

Heart pounding, pulse thudding at my temples, adrenaline laces my blood. The hunt, it always comes down to the hunt. The ability to track down

my victims and entrap them. It's why I had been chosen to lead this foray against our enemy. Coming from the rest of the Seven, I assure you it's a compliment that I don't take lightly either. Nor my responsibility to them. *Catch her, coerce her, make her bend willingly to your maneuvers.*

All of the pores on my skin seem to pop. I stalk her as she runs out of the park, up the street that leads to my home. Is she aware of the route she's taken? A pigeon to a homing device. Fly away, little birdie, lead me on the chase.

She rushes up the sidewalk, careening to the very edge where it meets the road, then over to the other side where the walls of the houses skirt the hillside. The hell is she doing? I frown, increase my pace. She continues her hap-hazard retreat. Her shoulders shudder; her speed slows. She must be tired, winded from the descent.

At least she's made it this far without falling arse over tit. The woman needs a keeper.

Max races up from behind to join me. He keeps abreast, his mouth open, tongue lolling.

I prefer to give him his freedom. He has full run of the house and the grounds.

In fact, I have faith in his capacity to look after himself. Unlike her. She needs a goddamn leash to be kept in check. I can't allow her to hurt herself. Not until she's played her role in this charade, of course.

That's all it is. My fingers twitch. How would it be to encircle the expanse of her neck, as I bend her over my desk and take her from behind? My dick lengthens, instantly excited by the thought. I growl low in my throat. This primal reaction I keep having to her is unacceptable. I must maintain my distance from her, or it will complicate things further.

I click my tongue and Max lunges forward. He circles her and her speed slows. She staggers to the gate leading up to my home. Max brushes past her, darting past the open gate, up the garden path. She follows him. Good girl. I'll go easier on her when I catch her. A surge of something fierce unrolls in my chest. Anticipation? Lust...? Admiration that she's lasted this far? Yeah okay. I am not a sore loser. I'll give her her due where it is due to her.

The fuck—? I can't string together a sentence with words, apparently. I slow to a walk, stalk up the garden path. Reach her where she's sitting on the steps. She stares ahead, her legs bent at the knees, her features pinched. I lower myself next to her.

We sit there in silence. The wind rustles the trees that skirt my property. Ahead on the front road, a cyclist races past.

"What were you doing earlier?" My voice emerges huskier than I intended. I clear my throat and she stiffens.

"What do you mean?"

"You careened back and forth as if—"

"As if there were people shooting at me." She brings a strand of that pink hair to her mouth and chews on it.

"There wasn't anyone aiming at you."

"Wasn't there?" She shoots me a sideways glance. "I could feel your gaze drilling holes into me."

I frown. "You are not making any sense at all."

She flings her arms up, "Says the man who is the epitome of all things sane, huh?"

I rub the back of my neck. *Well, damn*, "You have me there." I drop my arm to my side. "There's a method to my madness, while you are—"

"Spontaneous? Interesting?"

"A little confusing is what I'd go for."

She presses her lips together, "Hmm."

"I have to admit that it piques my curiosity though."

Her head whips around, "Oh, my God. You realize what you did?"

"What?"

"You gave me a compliment." She shoots out a hand and places a palm against my temple, "Are you feeling okay? Not dizzy or anything?"

Blood rushes to my face, the rest of it to my groin. If she looks down, she'll see exactly what her touch is doing to me. How engorged I am. How her nearness crawls under my skin and coils in my gut, urging me to lean in closer... closer.

"Admit it, that you needed an excuse to touch me."

Her lips purse, "You and your ego—"

"Are made for each other."

"Which is unlike what I can say about the two of us." She withdraws her hand.

"Oh, no, you don't." I shoot my arm out and catch her wrist.

"Let me go."

"You should have thought of that before you came back to my lair, little Bird."

"It's not as if I had a choice."

"You always have a choice."

"Easy for you to say that, from your position of power."

"Everything you see here? I fought for it. I created my future and now I am giving you a chance to do the same."

"Right." She tosses her head and her scent deepens. A pulse beats to life at my wrists, my temples, even at the backs of my eyelids.

"Why did you come back?"

"Not to be insulted by you, that's for sure."

"That's for me to decide."

She glances away, her breathing harsh in the still night.

I rub circles over her delicate wrist, "Tell me."

Her pulse rate ratchets up, mirroring mine. Bloody hell. It's the hottest thing I've ever experienced, and I haven't kissed her yet. Something hot coils in my chest. My mouth waters. "Say it."

Her chest rises and falls. Her features twist. Then she squares her shoulders, peers up into my face, "Your money. I need the money, of course."

14

"Well, maybe I don't need your money. Wait, wait, I said maybe!"
— *Friends*. Episode, directed by James Burrows

Summer

Something buzzes next to my ear, and I crack my eyes open. Where am I? The large windows let in sunlight. The sun beams light on the wooden floors. My fingers catch on the soft fabric of the futon. I take in my surroundings. Oh! I'm stretched out on a bed. And it's not a normal sized one. The massive bed seems to stretch from one side of the room to the other.

Of course, I'm in Sinclair Sterling's house, in his guest bedroom.

The buzzing sounds again. I spring up to sitting position, and reach for my phone that's plugged in on the side-table next to the bed.

"Hello?" I clear my throat.

"Ms. West?"

"Who is this?" I frown.

"It's Alia from 7A Investments, this is your wake-up call."

"Wake up call?" I blink.

"Yes. Ms. West. Mr. Sterling wanted me to call you to make sure you make it to the office on time for the meeting at nine."

"Meeting?" Was I supposed to meet him? Bet he set it up without giving me notice. Would be just like the alphahole to pull a stunt like this on me.

"Wha.... what time is it?"

"It's 8.15 am."

"8.15?" I scramble towards the edge of the bed.

"Good day Ms. West." The line goes dead.

I glance around the room trying to get my bearings. After that conversation with Sinclair when I'd told him that I had returned to him because I needed his money... He had shown me to my bedroom and I'd crawled into bed and fallen asleep. A-n-d, I hadn't charged my phone.

Which means.... he must have done it.

How the hell had he managed to access my password protected phone. Like that isn't stalkerish at all? I hunch my shoulders.

And he was here in my room while I was asleep? Did he watch me sleep? Goosebumps pop on my skin.

I should be creeped out by it... except... hmm... what had he thought of as he watched me? Had it aroused him? Had that beautiful bulge between the corded muscles of his thighs engorged further?

My thighs clench; my nipples pebble. *The hell is wrong with me? I hate the man, remember?* I don't find him attractive, I don't. Except I do. The meaner he is to me... the more I want to slap him and simultaneously snog him. Lick him all over his sculpted pecs too, while I am at it. *Jeez!*

And he's not impervious to me either. Not the way he'd eaten me up with his eyes last night, gah!

There's something between us, some strange unspoken chemistry, that hums and flows and seems to take up all of the air in the room when we are together.

It's the reason I should have run from him when I'd had the chance. But I hadn't. I couldn't.

I need what he is offering too much. It isn't only my life at stake, and he is aware of how desperate I am. It's why he lured me in, trapped me... The worst thing is, every step of the way he's pretended to give me a choice.

Choice, hah! The kind where you point a gun at a girl when she is poised at the edge of the cliff and say, choose now. Lean back and fall to your death, or come forward and I'll decide when that death will come for you. That's what he is going to be, my untimely fall from grace. And I am going along with it willingly. For now.

I survey the room and spot folded clothes on the chair next to the bed. There's a note on top of them.

Yep, he'd definitely been in the room while I'd been sleeping. The hairs on my forearms rise.

I scoot across the bed and snatch up the note.

Office. 9 am. Same conference room.

Wear this.

You're welcome!

That's it? The note isn't signed, typical.

He'd been angry last night. Oh, there had been no outward sign of his fury... except for the flared nostrils. Oh yeah, and the vein throbbing at his temple.

What had he expected, eh?

That I'd throw myself at his feet and tell him how much I wanted him to kiss me, make love—no fuck—me? For that's all it would be with this man. A complete, one-sided power struggle, which would end only one way. With my submission. He'd take me with no compromise, tear into me, and imprint himself in every one of my cells.

He'd possess me absolutely, mark me and change me forever; and there wouldn't be a damn thing I could do about it.

Just as I'd been unable to beat him at his own game. I may have started that little contest yesterday, had thought I could hold my own against him, but he had turned the tables again.

Like a good little soldier, I'd marched right back to his house, to my prison—a gilded cage where he can keep his bird captive.

My toes curl. My scalp tingles. His little bird. Why does the thought of bending to his will seem so tempting?

It has to be because I hate him, loathe the sight of him and everything he stands for. There's a thin line between love and hate, after all, and surely, I am mistaking the signs of whatever it is that stretches between us. I have to get through the next few days, survive them as best as I can, and then I can walk away. Assuming he'll let me go. Assuming there is something left of me that I can call my own.

I glance at the face of my phone, "8:20 am."

"Fuck, fuckity, fuck." I scoot out of bed so fast that I fall on my arse. "Damn."

I spring up and race for the shower. Only Sin-fucking-Sterling, douche-canoe of the first degree would pull a cheap shot like this.

Leaving me to make my way through rush hour traffic. How the hell am I

going to get there by 9 am? No way could a car make it through the traffic, not that I have the money for a taxi. Public transport is my best bet. Hell.

Five minutes later, I'm out. I pick up the clothes, put them on, then survey myself in the mirror.

A pencil skirt that clings to my thighs and comes to below my knees. It is a respectable length, actually, but the cut...? Wow.

It enhances my curves, makes my voluptuous body seem almost... Sexy? The blouse has long sleeves that cover me all the way to the wrists, but it is made of lace. I prop my arm on my hip and my flesh peeks through the pattern.

It's coquettish and erotic at the same time.

And the shoes... Okay, they are stilettos; but not very high, they're the right length needed to enhance the turn of my ankles. I look way too well put together. I seem different. Like someone who belongs here in this house, with him, under him. *Stop it.* I straighten my shoulders, grab my phone.

I've begun to recognize his little glances, the crease that appears between his eyebrows when he is pondering something, the tight curve of his arse, the tented stretch between his legs. Hell, if that was permanent resting position, then how would it look when he was aroused, huh? I gulp, smash my knees together. *Don't go there.* Not now. I hum to myself under my breath.

An old trick, to try and keep my mind occupied and out of the gutter... More precisely, out of Sinclair Sterling's pants, which is where it would happily dwell given half a choice. The screen on my phone shows 8:35 am.

Oh, hell. I pull off the stilettos, shove them in my bag and put on my chucks. No way am I running to the tube in those things. I grab my phone and bag, race down the steps, and out of the door.

I race up the quiet street, my skirt hampering my progress. Bet he planned all of this, to test my resolve. What had he said? He wants to break me down mentally and emotionally, huh? Well, we'll see Mr. Sterling.

Once I'm in the elevator, I change shoes. He doesn't need to know. The doors open on the floor of the 7A offices.

I walk down the corridor, to the conference room I'd been to the last time I'd been here.

I pull out my phone. I'm five minutes late.

At least he'd set the alarm for 8.15 am... which had given me enough time to make it here despite the rush hour jam on the tube.

Speaking of, why had he thrown me that little carrot?

The hairs on the back of my neck rise.

I shove open the double doors, step inside, come to a pause.

At the head of the table is Sinclair, "You're late." He glares at me.

"As you planned." I step inside; the door snicks shut behind me.

"Explain?"

"This entire sabotage operation of yours is not going to work."

"Oh?"

My knees wobble. I grip my tote bag, and lurch forward.

"Ms. West?"

I stutter. "Wh... what?"

"Lock the door, will you?"

15

Summer

His voice slinks down my back. Every hair on the nape of my neck rises.

I pivot, shove open the door and place one foot over the threshold.

"With you on the inside, Ms. West."

My mouth goes dry. I pause mid-step. I should get the hell away. Run out of here, take the steps, never look back—

"Don't think about it."

I angle my body forward.

"You leave now, and the deal's off. I'll ensure the doctor never sees your sister again, that she is back in your little hovel of an apartment. Oh, wait, that's not possible because your landlord has already rented it out so—"

I whip around. "How dare you bring my sister into this."

He raises his shoulders and lets them drop, "Because I—"

"—can?" I toss my head, "Tell me something new."

"This entire exchange is getting tedious." He pulls out his sleek phone—latest model, of course, privileged schmuck—presses a number, then holds it to his ear, "Ah, Saint, that girl I told you about yesterday... Would you cancel her next appointment with Doc because—"

"Stop." I fold my arms in front of me.

"Yeah, the deal is off." He says into the mouthpiece.

"Please, I'll do anything you want." Damn him, I am groveling now, but I can't let Karma end up on the streets, I can't.

"Definitely over, you can take her back and—"

I stalk up to him, grab the phone from his hand and raise it above my head.

He tilts his head, holds out his palm. I stare at the phone.

"You'll regret it." There's an edge to his tone that assures me he means the threat.

I stare at the screen. There's no evidence of a call in progress. *Bastard*. I snap my head up.

"You pretended to get on a call. Why would you do that?"

His features resolve into a mask.

"You know what your problem is?"

He pretends to yawn.

"You think you are the sole adult when you walk into a room, and that you are superior to everyone else."

"That's because, I am." He props a hand on his hip.

"Newsflash, asshole, your confidence is going to be your downfall."

"Oh?" He pulls back his lips and his eyes glitter. He doesn't seem angry. Far from it. He's excited. Intrigued even? He leans forward on the balls of his feet, "And of course, you are the one who's going to bring down the king?"

"You are the leader of this company because your team is too scared of you. They need you to pay their bills, so what do they care? They'll never question you, they'll dance to your tune—"

"But you won't?" He flicks off an imaginary piece of lint from his shoulder.

"No." I take a step forward until we are almost toe to toe.

The heat of his big body pounds into me, weighs me down. The dark edge of anger vibrates off of him, forming a tension-filled bubble that encloses us, not that I care.

I've come this far, haven't I?

May as well get it all off of my chest, huh?

"Those people out there?" I stab a thumb in the direction of the door, "They have no idea what darkness lurks under that polished demeanor. That at heart you are insecure about your wealth, your position. You think you could lose it all in a flash, so you hold onto it with your greedy hands."

His left eyelid twitches. He clenches his jaw so hard, I can literally hear him gnash his teeth together. Oh, good. I hope some of those pearly whites crack on the edges.

"Go on." His voice is so soft, so low; yet the threat in his tone, sinks into

my blood, rolls down my stomach to pool between my thighs. I gulp. Resist the urge to curl my fingers into fists, to blink and look away. *Pivot, run away, now, before everything goes beyond the point of no return.* Ha, likely story. I passed that point a while ago. No turning back now.

I square my shoulders, hold that burning indigo gaze.

"You'll use your power to get anything, to solidify your fake space in the world. Perhaps launder the profits from your business into some bullshit non-profit, so you can build up a fake reputation. Because that's what you are—a fake. Someone who has no idea what it is to do real good, to use your money to actually make a difference. You have no idea what it means to have no money, to live in fear of where your next meal is coming from, stressing about the roof over your head, about the health of your loved ones.

"When you are convinced that you are a failure because all of your dreams have gone up in smoke and every passing day brings you closer to your grave as you fight to hold onto the present and try to make a living of your wretched life because time is running out. It's running out right in front of you and all you see is yourself, in the mirror... a failure."

My chest heaves. Adrenaline laces my blood and I feel tears threatening to spill over. When had I gone from talking about his faults to laying bare my soul? Every single thing I said about him is true... and about me, too. This has become a strange war of sorts, in which there will be no winner. Correction. The person who'll lose everything is me.

He has his money, his position. And his reputation...? He can always rebuild it. While me? I set myself back by zillions of years. I am going to lose everything that matters to me, be left with nothing, not even tattered dreams to hold onto. I called him a fake, when really, the pretender in the room is me. My shoulders slump. A dark feeling of despondency courses through my veins. Every millimeter of my body suffuses with so much cringeworthy shame that I am sure he can spot exactly how much I already regret this outburst. Some fighter I am.

I pivot, drag myself toward the door.

"Oh, Bird?"

"What?" I don't turn. I don't want to see his face, take in the smug triumph that, no doubt, crowns the alphahole's features. Someone, kill me now. Oh, wait, never mind. I am doing a really good job of burying myself alive all by myself.

"My phone."

"Eh?" I glance sideways at the sleek device I clutch in my fingers. Damn it, could have at least done my nails, huh? Maybe not a salon manicure, but I could have allowed Karma to buff them up as she'd often offered to do. Stupid, stupid thought.

I turn once more, shuffle toward him.

Each step brings me closer to his heat; that edgy masculine scent of his deepens. The dominance of his presence creates an invisible circumference in the vicinity. If I step into his field of influence I am gone, caged, trapped forever in the layers of huskiness that would subsume me, draw me in and consume me until I forget about myself, about everything that was of significance to me... Like the world, which has brought me only disappointment so far.

I pause a few steps away from him and hold out the phone.

A beat. Another.

There's no movement from him. I peer up at him and gasp. Those eyes... The darkness of his irises seems to have gone impossibly deeper. His features are so hard that they could have been carved out of some yet to be invented alloy—like "Spider Steel."

What are you blabbing about? Now is not the time to show your preoccupation with useless pieces of trivia.

"Excuse me?" He glares at me.

"Uh... It's the strongest bio-material—stronger than steel and its biodegradable."

"So?"

"Your face could be carved from it, it's so..."

"Breathtaking?"

He says it with a straight face. He actually believes in his own invincibility.

"Ugly." I tilt my chin up, wave his phone in front of him, "Like your stupid phone, which, since you don't seem to want it, I am going to—"

He clicks his tongue. "Temper, Bird. And after that beautiful dialogue that you spewed, too?"

"Guess what, asshole?"

"I'm waiting." He holds out his hand, palm face up.

"Too late." I pitch the phone over his shoulder.

16

Sin

She pivots and runs for the exit.

It's sheer luck, pure instinct, that I flick up my arm and snatch the phone from out of the air.

"Why, you little hellion!"

I lunge forward and grab her around the waist with my free arm. She yells and strains against my hold. I haul her back against me, her back flattened to my stomach, the curve of that sweet arse pressed up against my groin. Of course, I am instantly hard. The column of steel between my legs tents my pants and stabs into the valley between her butt cheeks. She shudders, then her shoulders stiffen. Every part of her goes rigid.

"Let me go." She huffs.

"After that stunt?" I dip my head until my lips graze her ears. She winces. Her scent deepens in the air. Oh, yeah, the little tease is as turned on as I am. "Which, by the way, failed."

"Huh?"

I thrust the phone in front of her face.

"Damn it." Her body slumps, "Can't do one thing properly, huh?"

Her self-loathing is evident in her tone. Something hot stabs at my chest. Why should it bother me that all the confidence seems to have drained out of her? This is what I wanted right? Her at my mercy? And after that spectacular tantrum that she pulled, which had lodged somewhere deep inside of me. Nothing she'd said about me was accurate. Of course, not.

I am not insecure, not the one who is holding onto my position in the world as if it is all that matters. Which it does, of course. Not that I am admitting to that.

Everything I've done so far was to a plan. It is a means to an end. As is she. So why am I hesitating now that I have her where I want her? Powerless. Because I prefer her fighting me, challenging me, standing up to me... So much more entertaining than the rest of my employees, who scuttle away at the mere sight of me. Maybe I'm bored, and wanted someone other than the rest of the Seven to banter with me, huh? And I admit it, she is far easier on the eye than any of them, of course.

"You going to apologize, Bird?"

She strains against me again and I tighten my hold on her.

"You going to admit you were wrong in what you said earlier?"

Her spine stiffens, "No."

My left eyelid twitches. "What did you say?"

"I didn't do anything wrong... If anything, I was spot on in my opinion of you. It's the one thing I am good at, sizing up a person."

"Oh?" I grind my groin against her arse. My cock thickens. "And what do you say about the size of that?"

Her entire body jerks, "I could sue you for sexual harassment."

"Don't be crude."

"I'm being crude?" She makes a gurgling sound.

"And untruthful."

"Seriously, you need to get your head examined."

"I'd rather examine... you."

"Aargh." She pulls up her bent arm and I sidestep. Good thing I am so agile, huh? Her elbow grazes the side of my abs and she huffs.

"Stay still or you'll hurt yourself."

"Stop telling me what to do."

"I haven't begun."

She makes a hissing sound.

How cute. I bite the inside of my cheek. "You're beginning to sound like a scratchy vinyl."

"And you're seriously pissing me off." She snaps her head back and connects with my chest. The vibrations ricochet down to the inevitable destination... my groin. My shaft engorges further. *Fuck*.

I widen my stance. She links her fingers, snaps back her arms and buries

her elbows in my solar plexus.

Stars flash behind my eyes. My vision narrows.

"That's enough."

I push her against the conference table, and she squeaks.

I bend her over, so her cheek is flat on the surface. Her arse sticks out in the air, and slots in very nicely against my front, thank you very much. I drop the phone face up on the table, then flex my fingers. "If you continue this way, it's going to make things worse."

"Buzz off." She kicks out, catches me in the shin.

My thighs flex, my balls throb in reaction.

"I can't let that go unpunished." I step back, putting a smidgen of space between us, then spank her arse, once.

Her entire body jerks, "Jesus," she yells.

"You called, Babe?"

"OMG, that was beyond corny. Did you read the book on Ten Ways to Seduce a woman? Newsflash asshole, this is not one of them, by the way."

"It's a million ways actually. I wrote it."

There's silence for another beat, then a chuckle wheezes out of her. Something lifts from my shoulders. Guilt at how I am behaving with her? How being with her pushes me to indulge myself; actions I always regret later, me second-guessing my own actions? What the hell is happening here?

"We're too bloody combustible together," I whisper my knuckles over her delectable jawline, "and therein lies the problem."

"Oh, no... no, no, no." She shakes her head, "Don't try to put this down to some weird chemistry that riles us both up, and that I hate you because secretly, I am attracted to you, because I am not. I am not."

"Let's find out, shall we?"

I grab that pencil skirt and yank it up and over her butt.

17

Summer

The cool air hits my exposed arse.

What does he see? My backside covered in slinky red panties. The underwear that he bought for me. I gulp. Is this why he laid out that silk and lace concoction of lingerie for me? And I hadn't been able to resist it, huh? Had he been planning this scene all along? I push up, try to turn, and he clicks his tongue. The blood pounds at my temples. *How dare he treat me so?* I use my elbows for leverage and twist my torso, or at least try to; he leans the weight of his arm around my waist, effectively pinning me down. "Hey what are you—?" He kicks my legs apart and I stutter.

He eases his fingers under the waistband of my panties. I gulp.

The heat of his body sears the back of my thighs. "So you were saying...?"

Was I? What had I been saying? What—

"What happened to all that sass, huh?"

Why is he still talking? Why can't he deliver whatever humiliation he had in mind, huh?

"Should I spank you again?"

Yes.

Yes.

I shake my head.

"You liked it that much, little Bird?"

I actually am growing attached to that name, not that I'll ever tell you

that. If I did, I bet you'd insist on flinging it in my face all the time, and hey, didn't I shake my head earlier?

"That was a 'no,' Smirky Pants—"

He slaps my butt and I squeal.

Honestly, the slap wasn't all that hurtful. It's my ego that's taking a real kick to the rear right now... Rear... Haha, so not the time for word play.

He slaps my arse, harder this time; bastard probably read my mind. And his hand connects with my backside again. My entire body moves forward this time with the force of the hit. A moan bleeds from my lips. *The hell? I didn't enjoy that. I didn't.*

He brings his palm in contact with my arse again, and pain warms my blood. Moisture pools between my thighs.

"So, you were saying that you are not attracted to me?"

Crack. I yelp.

"You said I couldn't seduce you?"

"Hey that's not what I—"

Crack. My entire body jerks. My back tingles. My toes curl. I huff, squeeze my fingers together. I will not scream again. Will not.

"You said there's nothing between us—"

"You're twisting my words, jerkass."

He flips me around, "It's your knickers which are all twisted out of shape, Sweetheart."

He cups the space between my legs, and I stare up at him, my breath coming in pants. My back throbs, my scalp seems to be on fire.

He squeezes my fabric-covered pussy, and the dampness between my legs intensifies. Heat sears my cheeks.

"You're fucking soaked."

Thanks for stating the obvious.

He massages my core, and a groan trembles up my throat. He slips his fingers under the seam of my panties, and I pant. Goosebumps flare on my skin. Please. *Please do it.* Please slide your fingers into my underwear, thrust your massive fleshy fingers into my melting, aching pussy. *Hell, what does one have to do to get a finger fuck, huh?*

"Say it."

I frown.

"You know you want it."

"No."

He grinds the heel of his palm into my core, and the heaviness of his palm combined with the friction of the fabric against my clit... *Gah!* A trembling sensation sweeps up from the soles of my feet. *No, no, no.* I can't come. Not like this. I bite down on my lower lip and his nostrils flare. He lowers his head, until our eyelashes tangle.

"Ever climaxed in a boardroom before, Darlin'?"

I scowl at him and his mouth quirks.

"That's what I thought." He raises his hand and I blink. *What the—?* He brings down his palm on my already sensitized pussy.

A scream boils up.

My entire body tenses, my spine curves, the orgasm swoops up to envelop my thighs, my waist, it bursts up my spine and crashes behind my eyes. Sparks of red and black squeeze my vision. Moisture gushes out from between my thighs. My shoulders tremble, my breasts hurt, the hollowness in my womb intensifies.

I crack my eyelids to find him perusing my features. "You're beautiful when you orgasm, little Bird." Something burns deep in those eyes, "You're unique, you know that?"

Heat flushes my cheeks. "Did you just say what I think you did?"

All emotions fade from his face and his features shutter. *Oh, so it's like that, huh?* So, we are going to ignore that the alphahole showed me the first crack in his countenance?

He scrunches his forehead and a line appears between his beautifully arched eyebrows. "You enjoy trivia, Pink?"

Here we go again. I am beginning to get familiar with his manipulative nature. And PS, I like this nickname less. I jerk my chin.

"How many orgasms do you think a woman is capable of in the space of five minutes?"

Don't think that's a rhetorical question. Also, I have a feeling I am going to find that out. Btw, if he thinks I am going to answer that question, he has another trick coming.

"I hope you are keeping count, hmm?"

His lips curl at the corners; intent glitters in his eyes.

Wait. What? Don't, don't.

He slides his finger inside my panties and eases it into my melting pussy. "Oh!" I stutter. My hips tremble.

"Did that turn you on, little Bird?" He adds a second finger, a third. I

gasp. Pinpricks of pleasure radiate out from my core. He thrusts all three fingers deeper, then curves them. My breath catches; my thighs spasm. My eyes roll back in my head. OMG. What's he doing to me? A vibrating sensation buzzes up my spine and down again. My entire body seems to be humming with an out-of-body sensation. The vibrations intensify. I sense him lean toward me.

He's suspended above me for a second, enough for me to pick up the shift in the air. He pulls his fingers out of me, and I crack my eyes open to find him reaching for his phone which is buzzing in my line of sight. He picks up his phone, plonks it between his ear and his shoulder, "Hello?"

What the hell? Did he just answer his phone, and in the middle of getting me off? Anger explodes low in my belly. I tilt my chin, raise my shoulders off the table and he jams his fingers back inside of my thrumming core. Too much. Too full. I hit the table with a thump. His gaze locks with mine. Indigo eyes intensify to a color that is almost jet black. Dark, brooding, edgy like the rest of him. His features tighten with almost painful intensity; his jaw tics.

"Tell me." He speaks into the phone.

Is he actually holding a conversation while being knuckle deep in me?

I mean... honestly... this is... not happening. No way. Adrenaline laces my blood.

I rear up from the table, and he hooks his fingers inside of me again. Sensations shudder up my spine, my toes curl, and my fingers tingle. My scalp feels as if it's on fire. *Oh, no, no.*

I am not coming again for this jackass, not when he has no respect—like negative two hundred and fifty regard or feelings of any kind for me—and not when he's holding a conversation with someone else on the phone. The hair on my forearms prickles; my nipples pebble. No way, and I'm turned on? My sex clenches. *Jesus, I can't be turned on.* My bullshit barometer didn't spontaneously combust just now, did it?

He yanks out his fingers, leans in close enough for his breath to raise the hair on my forehead.

"Those projections are way off. No way am I paying 50% more for a brand that is clearly on the decline."

The voice on the phone squawks back something that I can't discern.

And he's mouthing off figures while jerking me off? Color flushes his cheeks; his nostrils flares. The bastard's enjoying himself immensely. It has to be the ultimate show of superiority, a fuck you to the world, that he can do

whatever the hell he wants and will never be punished. I clench my fingers into fists. I will be his downfall. I swear it upon all that I hold dear, I will have my revenge for this utter compliance that he's wrought from me today—he thrusts his fingers inside of me again and the trembling zooms up my thighs—right after this unholyest of all orgasms that threatens to overwhelm me. A moan spills from my lips.

The voice on the other side of the phone falls silent. Then, "Sinclair, are you with someone?"

"Of course not, there's no one in the room with me."

No one?

Hey, I am more than the sum of all the people you've ever met, asshole. I open my mouth to tell him.

His gaze narrows, his chest heaves, he drops his head and closes his mouth over mine.

18

Sin

The taste of her seeps into my mouth.

Honey and cherries laced with something so intangible, so delicate, my head spins. I tilt my lips and her entire body goes rigid. I lick her mouth. Ripples of sensation tremble up her chest and her breasts heave. I nibble on her lower lip and her mouth opens. I ease my tongue in, dance it over hers. The taste of her intensifies.

Not innocent, not at all.

Something husky, sensuous, layers so complex that it would take me months, years to decipher her, to solve the puzzle that is her. My groin throbs; my balls harden. I swirl my thumb around her clit and a whine trembles up her throat. I absorb it.

I swipe my tongue past her sharp little teeth and goosebumps flare on my skin. A low growl rumbles up my chest, I lean forward, so my chest brushes the full ripeness of her breasts.

"—so you see we have to see this deal through."

I deepen the kiss, and the trembling of her body intensifies. Her spine curves. Her breasts thrust upwards. I grind the heel of my palm into the swollen bud of her clit, and she explodes.

Her body jerks, her head falls back, mewls of pleasure bleed from her mouth into mine. I swallow it all. Swallow down every last drop of her pleasure. My chest hurts. My dick lengthens. No way am I going to come in my pants. Her body goes limp under me.

"Sin, you there?"

I tear my mouth from hers. "I am not budging. They can accept my offer or they can go to hell."

There's silence at the other end. Then, "got it."

I toss the phone aside, making sure to disconnect the call.

Her eyelids flutter and a husky moan spills from her lips. My balls harden and my legs tremble. And t-h-a-t's my cue. I should step back from her. Should pay every last penny I owe her and cut her loose. And put aside everything that I've fought for my entire life?

She opens her eyes, and those beautiful green irises stare up at me, pupils blown from the orgasm I wrenched from her. Her eyelids are hooded, yet deep inside, hurt flickers. I misused my position. Hell, I've broken every sodding rule in the book, from the first time I had encountered her. So what, huh?

What's another falsehood, in my every growing list of guilty pleasures? At the top of which is her.

I pull my fingers from inside of her and we both shudder. I raise my hand to her mouth and ease my fingers in between her lips. She curls her tongue and sucks on my digits.

I feel the suction all the way to the tip of my dick. My balls grow harder, if that were possible. *Got to get away from her. Now.*

I drag my fingers from her mouth, then bring them to mine and lick her combined juices. Her pupils dilate further, the scent of her arousal... and mine, intensifies. *Oh no*, not going to stay for the rest of this clusterfuck that my life is fast descending into. I draw back and her gaze widens. Her lips stutter. And I can't stop myself. I can't.

I drop my head and kiss her. So damn sweet. So irresistible. I nibble my way up her jawline to her temple. Press my lips to the soft skin there. "You okay?"

Silence. A beat. Another. Then she nods.

"Good."

I lean back, hold out a hand. She scowls up at me, glances from my face to my palm, then grips my fingers. I pull her up to a sitting position, then to her feet. She stumbles and I lean into her, then pull back, steady her with my grip on her shoulder. When she stays standing for another second, I release her. Then smooth her skirt down her hips. My fingertips brush her calves and she shudders. I step back, putting distance between us.

"You never did get to share your plans."

She stares at me, a dazed look in her eyes. "Plans?" she mutters.

"My office, ten minutes." I pivot, stride past the table, then pause. "You'll be safe there." Why did I have to give her that? It's unlike me to concede an inch, let alone give someone another chance. It has to be because she is crucial to the success of my plan, and I had almost screwed it all up. Almost. Well... I raise my shoulders and let them fall. Too bad. Time to move on. If there is one thing I am good at, it is learning from my mistakes, and this little bird here is the biggest of them all.

"You expect me to believe that?" Her voice is unwavering. Good. A flush of pride fills my chest. She is stronger than she realizes.

I glare at her over my shoulder, "Your belief, or lack of, is immaterial."

She draws herself up to her full height, which still means she has to tilt her head back to meet my gaze. Damn, if the little spitfire isn't fearless. Or naive. Or possibly, both.

"I have many faults, lying isn't one of them."

And isn't that the biggest whopper of them all?

She wraps her arms around her waist. "As if I have a choice..." she mutters.

"You don't."

"No need to rub it in." She tosses her head, "Where's your office?"

"One floor down, the office at the very end. You can't miss it."

"Does it have whips and chains and little baby goats waiting to be sacrificed to the devil?"

I can't stop my lips from curling, "Only if you want it." I turn, stride to the door, then stop, "Oh, and Bird?"

"What?"

"Don't be late."

19

Summer

I hold my wrists under the running water from the tap. Goosebumps pop on my forearms. *Get a hold of yourself; it's okay.*

It will be okay.

I came all over my new work client's fingers while he negotiated some kind of deal on the phone. My thighs clench. I stare at myself in the mirror. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

I seriously don't think that what he did to me is hot, right?

The complete control of his actions as he'd finger fucked me to not one, but two orgasms, right there on the conference table, was... hedonistic. It was a hundred ways screwed up. These things don't happen in real life. The audacity of the man. He seriously thought that he could get away with it, too. Has he tried this with anyone else previously? I shut off the tap, and my fingers clutch at the cold metal.

Of course, he must have.

Had he done it in that same conference room? The one where there are no cameras so there can be no incriminating evidence of his trysts. I tip up my chin. I am not going to be yet another in a long list of fuck buddies that he's gathered along the way. Someone he thinks his power and money can buy off. Isn't that what brought me here in the first place?

The fact that he holds all of the cards. He has the money I need so desperately. Hell, I could sell myself and not come up with the kind of cash he is offering, at least not as quickly as I need it. It is my life, my sister's life,

my fledgling company.

How far would I go to secure my future? Would I sell my body to the fucked-up machinations of one man? A power drunk, obnoxious jerkface. Too bad he has a countenance that could floor a woman at twenty paces. And that body? I gulp. He could have stepped off the pages of a fashion magazine. Not to mention a razor-sharp mind, with the ability to stay fully in the present and navigate his way through a complex deal, while the rest of him is focused elsewhere. The man had literally split his attention with cold calculation to ensure all of the tasks at hand were fulfilled to his satisfaction.

And mine.

Moisture laces my already damp panties. I shift my weight from foot to foot. Damn it, I didn't have a choice. I shove my underwear down my legs, and stuff it into my bag.

The door opens and an older woman walks in. She's dressed in a fitted skirt, obligatory jacket, and stilettos. She pauses at the wash basin next to mine, and pats her already sleek bob. Not a hair out of place. I stare at my own flushed appearance, the strands of pink hair stuck to my forehead. Grabbing a paper towel, I dab at the shiny skin. Her gaze meets mine in the mirror.

"You have beautiful skin."

I bite the inside of my cheek. "Thank you."

"You're new, huh?"

"No prizes for guessing?" My voice comes out sharper than I intended.

"Don't let him get to you."

"Who?"

"Sinclair." She flips out her compact and dabs at her nose, "His bark is worse than his bite."

"Oh?"

"It's the difficult upbringing he had."

I tilt my head, "Difficult?"

"The kind of horrific things he and the rest of the Seven faced as children would have forced many others to have committed suicide or turned to the wrong side of the tracks... which," she snaps her compact shut, "I admit they dabble in the gray area, but they have each other's backs. And true loyalty among men... Well, there's something that marks out the character of a man, huh?"

The Seven? Who are the Seven? Is that what 7A is all about? How do I

find out about them? I wad the tissue into a ball and drop it into the slit provided. "There's no honor among thieves. Doesn't mean their actions can be condoned."

"What if you weren't seeing the whole picture and your point of view was biasing you?"

I turn to her, "What are you not telling me?"

Her features soften. "That's for you to find out. You are a resourceful woman. Surely you can solve the rest of this puzzle on your own?"

She reaches out a hand and pats my shoulder. "Come dear, he hates to be kept waiting."

She turns and heads to the doorway.

"Wait."

She pauses, angles her body.

"Who are you?"

"I work with the Seven; I've been with them since the beginning."

"The beginning..."

"When they formed their first company."

Ah. I had searched for Mr. Alphahole's background, of course, but hadn't found much. He'd kept his tracks covered, until he'd come out of nowhere, or so it seemed, and bought the flailing Tenor Investments. He'd rebranded it as 7A Investments. He'd kept himself out of the limelight since. Bet he used his power/money to buy his privacy. And then there's FOK Media. The company I am working for, which just launched. That had been the latest news I had found, when I'd searched the internet last night before falling asleep. Hmm. I walk toward the woman, "That's all you are going to say?"

"For now." She dips into her pocket and pulls out a card, "Come find me when you get a chance."

I take the card. *Meredith Vincent.*

"You're the one who emailed me?"

She nods.

There is no designation, no phone number or email address. "And you're so high up in the company you don't need any introduction?"

She giggles, and the sound is so girlish, I can't stop my lips from quirking.

"Don't be silly." She searches my face, "My job is highly confidential. I work with the Seven, and I don't need to introduce myself to them, do I?"

Right. That doesn't quite make sense, but I'll take any support I can get in

this place.

"So, you'll help me?"

She pushes open the door, "I have a feeling we are going to help each other."

20

Sin

She is exactly fifteen seconds late. I pace the floor in front of my desk. Glance at the watch on my wrist.

Twenty seconds now.

How dare she keep me waiting? I drag my fingers through my hair. And she threw my entire morning off course. I'd missed the second meeting of the day, because I'd been sidetracked. At 9 am in the morning, which was arguably the time of day I was at my sharpest, I hadn't been able to function because I had taken one look at her and all thoughts had drained from my head... leaving me with a part of me that throbbed and ached, and was very alive.

My dick twitches again. My fingertips tingle. I bring my digits to my face and sniff. The scent of her arousal clouds my senses. My cock lengthens immediately. Damn it, why didn't I wash her off of my skin?

I'd wanted to hold onto some evidence of how I had made her writhe and throb under me, had her begging for more, if that call hadn't interrupted me—fucking Saint.

Remind me to take him on the next time we meet— Yeah, if he hadn't phoned with some negotiation detail or the other... We won, by the way, and will be expanding our presence in South East Asia. Another market, another day.

World domination is what I live for, right? We had been negotiating this acquisition for the last six months, and things had gone our way. Another

billion in the bank by the end of this financial quarter; we'll be richer. Have resources to go after the bastard who caused us so much grief. And I have the biggest pawn in this move right where I want. In my grasp. At my mercy. I roll my shoulders. So why am I not satisfied? I rub the faint sensations that stab at my chest.

There is nothing personal about what I am doing. She is a means to an end. It isn't her fault that she is the personification of my worst nightmares. I just need to use her to break my enemy. So why am I pacing back and forth, wearing a line in the wooden flooring? Everything in the space is muted—wooden paneling, plush leather sofas, floor to ceiling books.

This is one corner of my domain which I haven't hesitated to furnish to my taste, given the amount of time I spend in it. The armchair is made to order, and opposite it, a wide settee, big enough to double up as a bed on the occasions I've had to sleep here.

The dark leather would highlight her creamy skin beautifully; set off the freckles on her arms, lend a sheen to those glossy pink curls on her head... unlike her pussy where she is as bare as the day she was born.

My dick lengthens, stretching the crotch of my pants. Fuck the woman for worming her way into my thoughts. I pivot toward the door, walk toward it, just as there's a knock.

I pause, roll my shoulders. "Come in."

Silence stretches for a beat, another.

So, she is gathering herself too, huh? *Game on, little Bird*. I pivot toward the table... Nah, best to put a barrier between us. I round the expanse of the desk and drop into my chair.

She steps through, pauses inside the doorway.

I lower my eyes to the chair opposite, then back to her face.

Her lips tighten. Fire burns in those eyes. My dick instantly stretches my pants. *Damn, the spirit of this girl*. She is a fighter through and through. Good. She'll need every bit of that strength to hold up to what I have in store for her.

She stomps to the desk, plops her bag on the floor, then drops into the chair.

"Ms. West."

"Mr. Sterling." She pulls out a brick-like device from her bag and places it on the desk.

"What the fuck is that?"

She flips open the cover, presses down on a button. "It's a time machine." There's a grinding noise as the machine boots up. "What do you think?" She frowns down at the screen.

"It certainly seems to be something that's teleported forward from the eighteen-hundreds."

There's a whirring sound and she frowns.

"No, strike that." I rub my chin. "It's from way earlier."

"Ha, ha," she deadpans.

The laptop makes crackling noises; she rolls her shoulders, "Come on, come on," she mutters under her breath. There's a wheezing sound and she stiffens her spine. "Not now." She slaps down the cover, turns the brick over and proceeds to punch it.

"What are you doing?" A headache begins to pound at my temples.

This entire scenario isn't going as I'd planned. I am so close to getting my revenge... Not just mine, but a comeuppance for all the Seven, and this tiny thing is threatening to destroy every inch of my carefully orchestrated scenario.

I lean forward and grab her wrist; she freezes. Her shoulders go so rigid, I am sure she's having a seizure. "Relax." I place my fingers on the pulse that flutters against her skin.

She tugs at her hand and I release her. *What is this weird compulsion to touch her, huh?*

"You don't need that... that device for our discussion."

"But," she shuffles in her seat, "I had a presentation, all prepared for the social media plan."

"Bet you have all the highlights up here." I tap my temple, "Give me the key points."

"I don't do impromptu." She wrings her fingers together. "Mr. Sterling, I put a lot of thought into that deck."

"So you must be bloody familiar with the gist of it. Summarize it for me."

Her chin wobbles and a bead of sweat slides down her cheek, "I... my mind is a blank."

Stage fright? More likely, she's still riled up about what happened in the boardroom. I lean back in my very comfortable leather chair, place my elbows on the armrests.

"You are going to learn a few things in the time you are with me, Pink."

"You mean like how to misuse your power." She starts ticking items off

on her fingers, "How to use your money to buy the silence of your team, manipulate people's lives as if they were mere playthings..." She draws in a breath.

"Is that how you speak to the man who holds your future in his hands?"

She blinks, looks down. "I'm sorry... I am not always this impolite; it's just, you can be annoying."

"Oh?" I tilt my head.

"I am also not used to losing." She juts out her chin.

I peruse her features, "Neither am I."

I hold her gaze for a beat, then steeple my fingers together. "Better?"

Yeah, so that little diversion had been to take her mind off of the task at hand; one way to get past nervousness. A little trick I've learned along the way, and apparently, it worked for her.

Her forehead furrows. She peruses my features, then nods. "As we've already agreed, I'll be shadowing you—"

"Living in my house"

"—for six days more."

"Six days and three hours"

"Right." She opens her mouth as if to tell me off, then squeezes her lips together.

I frown. Is she going to behave herself? I hope not. It was more interesting when she was fighting me, hmm?

She sits up straight, "The original strategy had been to humanize the face of FOK Media, in order to generate positive PR in the hope that it would rub off on the faces of the people involved i.e., the same people who are the promoters of the 7A company."

"Agencies are always good at this, huh?"

"Huh?"

"Summarizing the brief I give them and throwing my words back at me."

She balls her fingers into fists.

I raise an eyebrow.

She stuffs her hands in her lap, then seems to compose herself.

"As I was saying, that was the purpose behind FOK Media, except I don't think your idea will work."

21

Summer

Shut up, shut up. What are you saying? Couldn't you have found a way to share your opinions in a diplomatic fashion? This is when he loses his shit, and fixes his cold glare on me, and probably buzzes for security to throw me out. My stomach churns. I swallow down the bile that taints my throat.

All expression leaches from his face, leaving behind a cold hard mask. It's as if every single emotion inside of him has been flash-frozen. His jaw tics. *Ugh, that's not good, right?*

A vein throbs at his temple. I gulp. Here it comes. I grab the arms of my chair, brace myself.

A chuckle vibrates up that massive chest.

I freeze. No, no, he's having a complete breakdown. Wow. Did I cause that?

His eyes gleam. "Go on."

"Eh?"

"You've certainly gotten my attention, little Bird, don't waste it."

I draw in a deep breath. "There's only so far that you can pull the wool over people's eyes." *Unlike those in your inner circle, the general populace cannot be bought.* "Why do you want them to believe that you want to right your wrongs?"

"I don't."

"Right. So why are you embarking on this entire plan? Why FOK Media?"

He taps his forefingers together.

My hold on the chair tightens, "I signed the non-disclosure agreement, so whatever you say stays within these walls."

His eyebrows knit. "Very well. As you're already alluding to it, I estimate that you have guessed that FOK Media is a cover. We need to buy goodwill with the public. We also need a legitimate business that is a tax write off."

"Ergo, a nonprofit."

"Besides, the money channeled through the entity will be used for doing good."

"Finding the best talent in the world, from different fields, sponsoring them, providing seed investment in return for a percentage of their lifelong profits."

He drums his fingers together, "Get to the point."

"I suggest that you a) change the name to reflect your intention; b) that instead of a percentage of profits, you give the chosen talent a portion of the share capital, along with the immediate funding. That way you bind them to your company, while helping them grow their own nest eggs for the future. Everyone wins. And c).."

He doesn't move a muscle. Well, except for the bulging vein at his temple, he may as well be carved out of rock.

"You Seven not be involved at all with the company."

"Oh?"

I nod.

"Who do you recommend should lead this initiative?"

My guts churn; my heart beats so hard I am sure it's going to jump out of my ribcage.

"You've come this far, Pink, don't stop now."

"Me."

"Eh?" He blinks. Yeah, the man actually seems surprised. I rendered the notorious gazzillionaire alphahole silent. Fist pump.

Adrenaline laces my blood. I tip my chin up, "Me. I suggest that I lead the initiative."

Color sears his cheeks. Okay, strike that. Maybe it is too early to celebrate. His biceps bulge; the tendons of his neck flex as he swallows. Guess he didn't like what I said, huh? I don't blame him. If I were in his shoes—though his pants are what I'd rather be in, actually— *Shut up, what are you thinking? Get the hell out, while he's too shocked to react.*

"Umm. I'll be going then." I slip out of my chair, grab my bag, slink toward the door.

"Ms. West."

I keep going.

"I didn't dismiss you yet."

The look on your face said it all, asshole. If you think I am going to wait for you to dole out any other punishment—my stomach flip flops—nervousness that's all it is. The faster I get out of here, the better. I reach the door and squeeze the handle.

"Okay."

I freeze. He didn't say that. No way. Nope. Nah. I open the door a crack.

"If you leave now—"

"Yes, I am aware." I raise a finger above my shoulder "You'll get my sister's appointment with the doctor cancelled. And you won't give me the account to FOK—which, by the way, the name sucks— I mean it's intriguing, but not exactly what you'd call a public relations success, considering all the connotations that go with it—"

A feminine groan fills the air.

I stiffen.

The sound of skin hitting flesh, a low moan bleeds into the space between us. All the hair on the nape of my neck rises. Bloody fish in boots, it couldn't be.

I spin around. His burning indigo gaze clashes with mine. I flinch. The force of his dominance seems to swell, until the air is thick with unspoken words... desires... lust. Anger coats my blood. At him. At myself. For hating him. And wanting him. Dense hatred for everything he stands for; the absolute power that he wields crashes home. "You didn't."

He doesn't move a muscle.

Another harsh gasp pulses from the phone on the table and the blood thuds at my temples. I race to the table. He doesn't react. I snatch up the phone. Don't look at the screen. *Don't.* My gaze drops to the expanse.

My face is front and center. Head thrown back; eyes closed. Color flushed cheeks, hair clings to my forehead. It's the visage of a woman in the throes of absolute ecstasy. Bile rises up my throat. The camera angle had caught me in all my pre-climactic glory; and him? There's only the hard muscle of his bicep from the arm he'd thrown around me—it could have been anyone. Of course, he'd ensured that his reputation wouldn't be touched by

this.

The on-screen me grips the muscle of his forearm, arches her neck, her mouth rounded in an O. It's filthy, dirty... and completely arousing. My stomach clenches. I can't tear my eyes off of the screen.

An arm fills my line of vision. He takes the phone from me, shuts off the video.

Silence descends on the space.

He stands not a few inches away from me. The heat from his body envelops me. I shiver. My palms and feet are so cold. "I thought you said there were no cameras—"

"I lied."

Of course. "Hangonabloodysecond," I force the words out through lips gone numb. "You answered your phone, so you couldn't have been recording on it..."

He curls an eyebrow. I stiffen. "So there was another camera in the room...?"

He circles the air with his finger.

"More than one camera?"

He tilts his head. My knees buckle, I dig my heels in for purchase.

Honor among thieves? Meredith has no idea she is working with the devil in disguise. As am I.

The world spins, my knees seem to buckle, and darkness closes in.

When I open my eyes, all I see is blue and turquoise and shades of cerulean. Eyes, his eyes. They aren't cold and empty. There is an ocean of hidden emotions, tucked away deep inside. So deep, so intense. Angry waves crashing on a stony shore. Pulling at me, tugging on me. My skin feels too tight. My hands and legs tremble.

"Don't you dare faint again."

Fury vibrates off of him, and all of my nerve endings seem to flare at once. The world comes into focus again. I swallow, and my throat hurts.

"Drink this." He holds a glass to my lips.

No way! If he thinks I am going to accept a drop of water from him, he's

—

He glares at me; I purse my lips.

"Don't be stubborn." He growls.

I turn my face to the side. My heart begins to race and my vision wavers again.

"Fine."

I hear him step back, then hear the thunk of a glass hitting a surface.

"I didn't poison the water. Honestly." He shakes his head as if he can't believe I'd suspect him of such a thing.

My tongue feels swollen in my mouth. A bead of sweat slides down my back. There's silence a beat, then another.

"Please, Summer."

Goosebumps flare on my skin. Maybe it's the fact that he spoke my name, or he used the 'P' word. I chuckle to myself. Why do I care about that, huh? But I'm too thirsty; an itchiness crawls down my throat. I turn on my back, then sit up and swing my legs over. The world tilts then straightens. I reach for the water. My fingers are shaking. How strange. I mean, nothing much has happened, except... My entire world has come completely undone. All the moorings gone, everything I thought I was, had worked toward, all my hopes and dreams and ambitions. My company, my sister... Karma. Focus on Karma. I need to get through this for her. I drain the glass, place it on the table. Then wipe the back of my palm across my lips.

"Why?" I raise my head, take in those features that I've come to hate. "Why do it?"

"Because I need revenge against your father."

22

Sin

"My father?" She pales further. The pink strands of her hair seem too bright against her gaunt features. She's too damn skinny.

"When was the last time you ate?"

She blinks, presses her knuckles to her eyes, "Answer me first, why do you want revenge against a dead man?"

"Because—" I take a step forward, stop. I'd meant to tell her all of this, of course, just hadn't thought it would come so early in the game. Too bad. She'd thrown me a bouncer and I'd flung the ball right back at her.

I hadn't meant for it to lay her so low that she'd faint.

Bloody fucking hell. When she'd collapsed... my heart had stuttered. Everything inside of me had come to a halt. Only when I caught her before she hit the floor, did I realize that I had raced to her.

Ha! The cold-hearted gazillionaire who's swallowed companies for breakfast, laid low by the sight of a woman fainting. If the business media had seen me then, eh? Thank fuck I'd caught her before she'd hurt herself. If she had, I'd never have been able to forgive myself. I shake my head. *The fuck am I thinking?*

I square my shoulders, thrust out my chin.

"Because?" She lowers her hands. Her gaze is a little wild, her pupils dilated from the shock.

"Because he destroyed my life and those of my friends, and because..." Why do I care that I'd wanted to break the next piece of news to her gently?

Why does it matter that it would hurt her? This is what I wanted, right? To sway her to our side, no matter what it takes.

To lure her father into my trap. I need to see the bastard pay, and this is the most foolproof way, so damn the collateral damage, right?

I set my jaw.

"Because he's alive."

She blinks. "No."

"Yes."

"No, you don't. My father was killed in a plane crash. They never found his body...he—" Her chin wobbles, "He didn't die, did he?"

I shake my head.

"So... where... where is he?"

"In the States."

"How did you track him down?" She frowns, "Or for that matter, me and my sister?"

I click my tongue. "Do you really have to ask me that question?"

"How many people did you have to pay? How long did you search before you found us?" She squeezes her elbows into her sides.

"Does it matter?"

She draws in a breath. "Guess not." She wraps her arms around her waist, and I notice the goosebumps on her forearms.

"He never reached out to me in all these years." Her shoulders slump, "He let me and my sister think he was gone. He left us alone."

Emotions spike her features. Her hands clench at her sides. My heart lurches. I shouldn't have sprung this on her without warning. Eh? What am I thinking?

I ball my fists.

I did exactly the right thing. The faster she realizes the real reason for this charade, the better it will work.

She shuffles her feet, "So all this... this drama of meeting me in the pub, then calling me in to pitch for your company's account... It was all a farce?"

"Not completely. 7A and FOK Media need marketing help, though you wouldn't have been my first choice to take it on."

"I'm bloody good at my job." She growls.

"You lost your biggest client."

"Through no fault of mine. Hell, the last out-of-the-box marketing campaign I delivered, had their brand retention increasing by 75% year on

year... If that isn't a good result, tell me what—" Her gaze narrows. "You?" she breathes.

Oh, this is getting interesting.

"You did it?"

"You have to be clearer than that." I tilt my head.

She stabs a finger in my direction, "You made sure that they dropped me."

"Maybe." I drum my fingers on my chest.

"You ensured I'd be so desperate that I'd jumped at the opportunity to pitch."

"I may have... ah, had a hand in them moving on, yes." I fold my fingers, glance at my fingernails. "But the events that followed?" I click my tongue. "It's entirely your fault."

"Mine?" Her eyebrows knit.

"If you had listened to me at the bar—"

"You were a complete jerkface." She juts out her chin. "What did you expect? That I'd throw myself at your feet and agree to do your bidding because you commanded me to?"

I tilt my head.

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" She makes that noise deep in her throat again, and fuck, if my dick doesn't twitch. I frown. Who is this woman who thinks she can hijack every single conversation we have?

"Time's running out." I pull down the cuff of my shirt sleeve. "Fall in line with my plan... or... Well, you don't have a choice, do you?"

Her lips tighten, "You are as callous as my parent who kept away all these years. One who clearly wants nothing to do with us... So why would he care what you do to me?"

"Oh, I think he'd care very much if he found his daughter was marrying one of the richest men this side of the planet."

She stares at me, then chuckles, then throws her head back and laughs. She leans into the settee, rocks from side to side. Tears run down her cheeks.

I stalk to the other side of the room, pour out a generous finger of whiskey, then stalk toward her. When I pause in front of her, she flinches, and my gut lurches.

Of course, she hates me as much as I had despised her—or rather the concept of her—all this time.

She had been merely a pawn in a much larger game and now... Now I

can't give up. I am too close. So things haven't proceeded exactly how they should have, thanks to her. She's resourceful, I'll give her that. Nevertheless, nothing will come in the way of this last mile. Not after a decade of planning and plotting every last move. So close, I am so close.

I place the glass on the table, move away. "Drink it."

"I don't need it."

"You look like you are about to pop it, and believe me, while I don't care one way or the other, I need you to be alive for the time it takes to see this through."

She shoots me a stare. Her green eyes burn into me, color flushes her cheeks, and her breasts heave. *Damn, she is magnificent.* My fingers tingle. My groin hardens. Oh, that fire, that fury inside of her. It had all been locked away, behind that scatterbrained façade. She is a little volcano, waiting to erupt, and guess who will be at the end, receiving all of that goodness? *Not me. Nope. N-a-h. Don't fall for her. Don't try to rescue her.* Just because she didn't turn out to be exactly what you'd thought she would be.

"Drink it... or not. Your call."

I saunter away, toward my desk. Behind me, I sense her move. By the time I reach the desk and prop a hip against it, she's drained the glass. She coughs, splutters, then stares at the glass, "I fucking hate you." She throws the glass against the wall. It bounces off, hits the ground, rolls to a standstill not half a foot away from her. She springs to her feet, picks it up, and pitches it at the wall again. It shatters, pieces raining down on the floor. She stays there, shoulders heaving.

"Did that help?"

"No." She pivots around, "You were joking, right, about what you said earlier?"

I allow myself a half-smile, "Do I seem as if I am joking?"

Her shoulders sag, "No." She raises a hand to her hair. "But marry you?" Her fingers tremble as she tugs on a strand. "It's preposterous."

"You woman. Me man." I shrug. "What's wrong with it?"

"Everything."

"Who cares? It will be an event your remaining parent will not want to miss."

"One who's been absent all of my life, who preferred not to tell us about his existence. Why would he care?"

I twirl a finger in the air. "Ring a bell, Sweetheart?"

"What? He wants to see the decor of this room?"

I motion with my palm.

"He wants to sit behind your desk?" She squeezes her eyebrows together.

"Go on."

"He wants a liaison with your company?"

"Not bad." I drum my fingers on my chest.

"He's in debt, I assume?" She grabs a strand of her pink hair and brings it to her mouth.

Interesting habit, if a little weird for my tastes. *The fuck do I care?* I need her for as long as it takes to bring the old man to my doorstep.

"After the massive losses that his business suffered, he had to sell off his assets. He moved to the US."

Her forehead crinkles, "If you are aware of his whereabouts, why don't you take revenge on him?"

"What's the fun in that?" I widen my stance. "I want him to pay for his sins in the city where he instigated his crimes, in front of those who once knew him."

"You want to destroy him completely?" She locks her fingers together in front of her.

"Guilty as charged."

Her lips firm, "Why would he return?"

"A chance to redeem himself in front of his peers in his home country, courtesy of the contacts I'd introduce him to." I spread my arms wide, "It would be a wedding gift to my bride-to-be, to ensure her father is taken care of."

She flinches. "So, you'll bring him here with the lure of money?"

"And a fresh start, not to mention the chance to be reunited with his daughters."

"What if he refuses to come?" She brings her arms down and tucks her elbows into her sides

"Oh, he'll come all right."

Her chest heaves, "Why is that?"

"Because I'll be personally inviting him, to attend his daughter's wedding which takes place in..." I glance at my watch.

"In?"

"Three days."

She throws up her hands, "What world are you living in where the

paperwork can be completed in such little time?"

I flick some imaginary lint off my lapel.

"No." Her chest heaves and she clenches her fists. "You... You..."

"It's amazing how money can buy you anything, anywhere... especially when you can call in favors to those in power." I bounce a little on my heels. This is fun.

"You... You can get the registrations and such done by then?" She blinks rapidly.

"With time to spare." I angle my head. "You don't have to do anything."

"I have to show up." She pinches her lips together, glances toward the exit.

I hold up the phone. "Don't even think about it."

She pales further.

I stiffen. "If you're going to faint again, make sure that you're sitting down."

Her shoulders draw back, spots of color burn her cheeks, sparks of gold flare in her eyes. *There you are, my little Bird.*

She juts out her chin. "Name the place and time and I'll be there."

"Not so fast." I lean forward, and the scent of her body intensifies.

My dick twitches and sweat slicks my palm. Fuck her for the response she always elicits from me. I scowl, "Move in with me for the next 30 days."

"What the—" She opens and shuts her mouth. "The original deal was for a week!"

"I changed my mind."

"I agreed to 7 days." She trembles.

"It's not enough time to see this plan through." Why am I bothering to argue with her? It's not as if she has a choice.

"Bu... but... 30 days?" She swallows. "That's too long."

I raise my shoulders, "Gotta convince the world it's real, huh?"

Fuck that.

I don't care how it seems on the outside. Truthfully, I hadn't thought about the time span as such, except... Okay, I *did* need time... Just enough to figure out what the hell I am going to do about this little—okay, big—problem I have, for when it comes to her, I am not myself.

Not in control... and that... I can't stand. I have to get to the bottom of what it is about this woman that constantly claws at me. An itch. An irritation. She is a rash that clings to me, refusing to fade from my skin, my

blood and I... must find a way to resolve it.

I allow my lips to smirk, "So?"

She squeezes her fingers together, "So?"

"That wasn't a request."

"Will you keep me here against my will."

I glance at the phone.

"Yeah, yeah." She drags her fingers through her hair, "So you have incriminating evidence on me... but... 30 days?"

I narrow my gaze.

"It's a much longer period of time than I had anticipated."

My heart begins to race. So, the Bird has claws after all, huh? My gut clenches. What had I thought? That she is different from the rest? That it isn't about the money? That she is actually attracted to me? I'd coerced her into this arrangement, after all, pushed her to the edge, hoping... Hoping what? That she'd emerge from it like some bloody phoenix? *Fuck*. I straighten my spine.

"How much?"

She blinks.

"Think of a figure."

"Right." She bites her lower lip, and I squeeze my fingers at my sides.

"Say it before I change my—"

"Five."

I lower my eyebrows.

"Five million." Her chin wobbles.

Not bad. She has the presence of mind to pull a larger figure than I expected.

"Two." I wipe all expression from my face.

She straightens, "Four."

My pulse thuds at my temples. And she negotiates too, huh? At least, she is a survivor. I have to give her that.

"Two point five." I keep my arms loose at my side.

She opens her mouth. I hold up a hand. "Final offer and we both know it's more money than you'll ever see in your lifetime."

"Asshole."

I yawn, raise my phone. "Fine, guess I'll upload this to—"

"I'll take it."

"And sex."

She pales; her breathing grows shallow. "Not part of the deal."

"Hmm." I touch my finger to her cheek.

She winces.

"I'll never force you." I draw back, "But by the time we are done with this arrangement, you'll be begging me to own you, possess you, to have me balls deep inside of you, as you come on my dick."

She shudders, then straightens her shoulders, "Never."

I slide the phone into my pants, "You will give in to me, little Bird, this I promise, and it will be of your own volition." I brush past her, toward the exit.

"One day..."

Her voice follows me.

"One day I'll make you regret what you're doing to me."

I bare my teeth, and the blood pounds in my ears, at my temples, my wrists. Fuck, if that's not the hottest thing I've ever heard from anyone.

I glare at her over my shoulder, "Oh, I'm counting on it."

23

"These damn things are as hot as a stiff cock!"
—*Julie & Julia*, Director: Nora Ephron

Summer

"Cruel." Stab. "Sadistic." Stab. "Twat." Stab, stab. "Alpha-fucking-hole." I bring the knitting needle down toward the cushion again, only for Karma to pull it away from me.

"That bad, huh?" She pats the pillow and places it behind her neck.

"Swine. Pig. Horseshit." I fume.

"Manure." She holds out her palm and I place the knitting needle in it.

I spring up and begin to pace, "Bastardo."

"Is that Italian?" She loops the wool around the needle, drags it out in that rhythmic fashion that makes my head boggle.

"Does it matter?" I walk toward the other end of the room, turn, head toward the other side.

"Guess not. He's certainly helping you expand your vocabulary."

"It was already quite extensive, thank you very much."

"You talkin' to me?" Her needles clack.

"*Taxi Driver*." I toss my head.

"Keep your friends close and your enemies closer." She tugs wool from the yarn.

"*Godfather*." I smirk. "Is that the best you can do?"

Her eyes gleam, "You know how to whistle, don't you, Steve? You just

put your lips together and blow.”

"What are you trying to tell me, huh?" I throw up my hands. "I always know when you are trying to manipulate me."

"Moi?" She coils wool between the needles. "As if I'd ever try to get you to do anything you didn't want."

"Yes, you. You're every bit as scheming as that nasty jerkface."

"Thought you liked his features." She frowns at the wool.

"What's that got to do with anything?" A headache begins to drum against my temples.

"You can't handle the truth."

There's silence, broken by the clack-clack of the needles.

I turn, flounce to the front of the settee where she's sprawled out.

"What are you trying to say?" I frown. "And that line is from *A Few Good Men*."

She doesn't answer. Her fingers flex, the wool is eaten up in the space between her needles to be spat out on the other side, woven into a perfect design. Unlike my life, which is as messy as a knotted, all-over-the-place, dirty, cast aside, bag of unwanted thread. This must be a new low for me, comparing myself to fabric... Not even—the raw material that goes into making cloth. Ugh.

"How do you enjoy knitting?"

"It's calming, helps me focus on something other than what's going on in my mind."

"Right."

"You should try it."

She glances at me over the needles.

I sidle away to the far side of the settee.

"No, thank you, I have better ways of getting rid of my frustrations."

"Oh yeah? How? By destroying cushions?"

"I barely touched it. The surface is all smooth... Look." I pull the pillow from behind her neck and fondle the fabric.

Silky cotton, soft, yet packed with textures. Like the skin on his chest, the sheath that envelops that turgid muscle between his legs. *Concentrate on the topic at hand. Ugh!* I bury my head in my palms. "What am I going to do, Karma?"

"Nothing."

"Huh?" I survey her through the gaps between my fingers. Yesterday

morning—after that stunt that he'd pulled on me, the asshole had stayed away from me for the rest of the day; or vice versa. I'd done my best to avoid him completely.

Which was easy, considering he'd been away from the office, or so Meredith had informed me.

She'd shown me to my cubicle, which is nowhere near his office—thank God. It is on the floor below his, with the rest of the marketing team.

Should I be thankful that he isn't showing me favoritism, or be upset that minutes after proposing to me he was casting me aside as if I was some... piece of disposable machinery? Or a stain on his carpet that he could walk over.

Hang on a second. I am not seriously considering his stupid proposal, right? I mean, this entire scheme is insane. I slide down to the floor, then tilt my chin up. "What do you mean, nothing?"

My sister knits another stitch, "Exactly that. It's not as if he gave you a choice, right?"

"Eh?"

"Whether you like it or not, he's going to put you through the scheme. He's not going to take 'no' for an answer."

My heart begins to thud. "So what? I play dead?"

"Oh, no." She weaves the yarn between her needles, taking her time. I follow her action, trying to focus, focus—*ah, hell*. "Gimme that." I tear the knitting out of her hands and fling it aside.

"Fifteen minutes." She chuckles.

"Huh?"

"That's how long you lasted this time, before yanking away my piece of art."

I snort, "It's a scarf... Or whatever..." I frown, "What were you making anyway?"

"It's a stole... for you."

"Oh!" Something hot coils in my chest. My sister can be a bitch, but she does love me. She has my best interests at heart, like I have for her... Right?

She snickers.

Blood thuds at my temples. "You idiot."

"You believed me, didn't you?" Her shoulders shake, chortling sounds issuing from her.

"Gah! Can't believe I fell for that." I spring up and onto the sofa, then dig

my fingers into her side.

She laughs harder.

I drag my fingers down her sides, tickling her, squeezing her. Her laughter rises in volume. "Stop." She gasps.

"Swear you'll never do that to me again."

She slaps the arm of the sofa; tears run down her cheeks. "Swear. You win. Peace."

"Too late," I crow, tickling her under her armpits. She snorts, gasps, pushes at me. I duck, lose my seat on the sofa, and pitch over, onto the carpet. I lay there gasping, glance up at the ceiling. The skylight is open and light pours in.

She follows me down, throws herself next to me. "You are horrible."

"Says the Wicked Witch." I smirk, referring to our childhood nicknames for each other.

"All the better to eat you with." She makes a growling voice.

"Bet, that's what Mr. Big Bad is saying about me, right now." The chuckle catches in my throat. It isn't funny, not at all. I'd run out of the office yesterday at six pm on the dot, the official closing time for 7A Investments. I hadn't spoken to anyone, just messaged Karma, and when she'd replied with the address she was at, I'd come here.

"Is he?" She tilts her head.

"Bad?" I trace the pink lighting up the edges of the clouds far above. "Yes."

"And the other." She turns onto her front. "Is he?"

My cheeks redden. "None of your business."

"Aww. You're blushing. So cute." She pats my cheek.

I shove it away. "Oh, get a life."

She coughs—on cue. Come on, don't be uncharitable okay? She's unwell. But her sharp thinking and general bitchiness makes up for what she lacks in the stamina department. Enough that sometimes I forget that she's technically unwell. Then, of course, she pulls up her condition, and hell. I curl my fingers at my sides.

She coughs again, and her entire body shakes. "Jeez, thanks girlfriend, so blame me for living vicariously."

"Hardly, vicarious." I sniff. "Nothing happened."

"Something did."

"You mean other than what I already told you—?"

"About him proposing that you marry him, then invite our father who we'd presumed to be dead to attend the wedding, and plot his downfall—?" She counts it off on her fingers.

"Exactly." I drag my fingers through the carpet again. "By the way, this place is nice."

"Don't change the topic." She surveys the sunny three-bedroom apartment. "It is, isn't it? The car that brought me here was as nice."

"Oh?"

"The chauffeur helped me pack what I needed too. He drove me here, then told me I have an appointment with a specialist for tomorrow."

I wave my hand in the air. "And you agreed to... to all of this?"

"He had an official letter, all signed by Sinclair Sterling of 7A Investments, which is where you were going for an interview. He told me part of the deal is that you get company quarters."

Something he had neglected to tell me.

"And you believed him?"

"What's not to believe?" She wrinkles her nose. "He seemed trustworthy, the signature on the note was legit. Besides, when I peeked out of the window and saw the Aston Martin..."

"You saw the car, and that was it, you forgot everything else."

"Not only, it was the 7A connection."

"Wait until I get my hands on them." I flex my fingers.

"You have actually, on precisely one of them, to be accurate."

"A-n-d, finally we tackle the issue at hand." I grab a strand of hair, chew on the tip, "What should I do?"

"Go along with it." She straightens, walks past me to retrieve her yarn.

"Easy for you to say. You don't want to lose this pad."

"No one says pad anymore." She surveys the remnants of her knitting.

"I do."

"It's a beautiful apartment in Regent's Park." She sniffs.

"Aren't you worried about what happens if all this goes pear-shaped?" I drag my fingers through my hair. "What if our father refuses to come, or hell—" I shoot up to sitting position. "What if he agrees?"

"He definitely will." She twists her fingers together in front of her.

I spring up to my feet, begin to pace again. "Which means I have to go through with this wedding—assuming I don't kill the alphahole first, that is. And then, what if... what if...?"

"He demands sex?"

I shoot her a glance, "Not funny."

"Has he asked you?"

Yes.

"No." I shake my head.

"You two discussed it?"

Boy, have we!

"Of course, not."

"Is he as highly sexed as the tabloids claim him to be?"

"What have you read about him?"

She curls a lip, "See, I knew you were interested in him."

"Of course, I am." I drag my fingers through my hair, "I am supposed to fake an entire relationship with him and then walk away unscathed."

My shoulders slump. Therein lies the problem. If I spend more time in his vicinity, I am going to throttle him... Or worse, throw myself at his feet and beg him to lick me all over... After I've kissed him, and sucked on that Adams apple of his, and dragged my tongue down his chest, to—no don't go there, not yet. Not ever.

"You're attracted to him, huh?"

"No."

"You wish this was real?"

I pause, glance at her. "What?"

"The marriage, the life of privilege, father returning to our lives, and attending your wedding, with you wearing my wedding dress that would be showcased for all the paparazzi, and me, of course, as your bridesmaid..."

"There you go, inserting yourself in the tableau. Not that I mind." I don't. Truly. But the rest of it? Yeah, she is right. I mean, no. I mean, yes, I'd wanted all of that, but not with a man I love to hate. And hate to lust after. And want to throttle to within an inch of his life... After he's given me enough orgasms to keep me high on endorphins, of course.

"Oh," I push my knuckles into my eyes, "What am I going to do, Karma?"

She pulls at the patchwork of her knitting, and the entire thing comes undone. She flings it aside, then crosses the floor to me, "You know what I'm going to say, right?"

I blow out a breath. "What?"

"Show me the money!"

And ain't that the goddamn truth?

When it comes down to it, that's all that really seems to matter.

It sure does make the world go round; it's what brings grown men to their knees, what buys you the best treatment from the foremost specialist in town, what ensures that you can pursue your dreams, your goals, your ambitions, ensure that you never go to bed hungry, or feel helpless... Okay, maybe not the last.

But nine out of ten times, it is the money that wins out.

And it is why I am going through with this crazy scheme, of marrying this billionaire-bully. I link my fingers together. Damn it, why are my palms sweating?

I pivot to face my sister. "Really? You're scraping the bottom of the barrel if you're referencing *Jerry McGuire*. It's... waaaay too iconic. A child would have guessed it."

"So?" She raises her shoulder and lets it drop.

"Guess what my response is going to be?"

She tilts her head, "Try me."

"Money's something you need in case you don't die tomorrow."

There's a lesson somewhere in those words, about my life, but damned if I can decipher it.

She purses her lips, "Wall Street? You stooped low enough to quote Wall Street?"

Desperate times and all that... What can I say, huh?

She grips my shoulder. "You'll be okay, Summer."

"Famous last words."

24

Sin

"You did what?" Saint looks up from pouring the hundred—or was it two-hundred-year-old?—whiskey from the bottle. Some of the amber liquid splashes onto his tie.

It's a red color today. For fuck's sake, you'd think the man was all dressed up for his wedding. Oh, wait, that's what we were discussing. Only it isn't his nuptials, it's mine.

"Yeah." I drag my fingers through my hair. The strands are long enough to brush my collar, the longest I've worn them. I need to cut it, but when she'd run her fingers through it, the sensations had been pleasant—okay, more than pleasant.

I'd loved that she'd dug her fingers in and held on as I'd brought her to orgasm... *Wait. What?* Now I am changing my look, and because it reminds me of how she came all over my fingers, as the sugary scent of her arousal teased my nostrils and I plunged my tongue between her lips and tasted of her, from her, drawn on that honeyed essence of hers—fuck. My dick is instantly erect. Clearly, it didn't get the memo this is all a pretense. I march to the phone on my desk, scoop it up.

"Meredith? Can you fix an appointment with my barber? Yeah, tonight after work is good." I pause. "No wait, have him come to my residence." One of the perks of being a gazillionaire? You can get the service to come to you, whenever you want. What? It's true.

"Your mind is wandering, asshole."

Saint places the bottle on the counter with a thump.

"Your aim is off the mark, you knobhead."

"Huh?"

I jerk my chin at his tie.

He glances down, shrugs. Then pulls off the tie, and drops it into the wastepaper basket.

"Why do you bother with those things?"

"It has its uses." He picks up the glass. "And that particular brand, withstands a lot of wear and tear."

"Spare me the details of your kinky tastes." Not that I am not aware of them. My PI keeps me informed about the proclivities of the others in our little 'happy family.' Which is how I am aware of the particular club that he likes to frequent. So do I, on occasion, except I ensure never to cross paths with him. Some things need to be kept hidden, capisce? "Your personal life is none of my concern."

"But you went and made yours of interest to all of us."

I glare at him. He's right though; dipshit states the obvious every fucking time.

"Marriage?" He brings the glass to his lips and drinks from it. "Really? What were you thinking?"

With my dick, obviously.

He takes another healthy swig, then gestures at me, "You are attracted to her, I get it. She's hot... in a certain fashion." He lowers his chin, "So shag her, you twat, get it out of your system, but, marriage?"

Anger curls in my guts.

"Don't talk about her that way."

"Oh?" His shoulders go solid. "Do I detect a trace of sentimentally in your rather boring facade?"

"Bugger off."

"Very original." He raises the glass at me, then knocks it back. "So, tell me then, what were you thinking?"

Yeah, I will, as soon as I sort things out in my head. I clench my fists at my side, then stalk to the window and stare at the square outside. A couple kissing in one corner of the space. A little girl runs after a dog, her mother calling out to her. That's the thing about London.

Every damn building faces a green space, a park, a patch of woods. Enough for families to thrive and prosper. Well boo-fucking-hoo. That was

never part of my plan. No family... or any of that emo shit for me. So then...
Why did I do it?

I had reacted on instinct when I had made that statement, had been thinking on my feet. Although, if I'm being honest—Ha! Why start now?—I'd known I might need to escalate things to ensure the bastard takes the bait. Plus, I kind of like the idea... *The fuck am I thinking?*

"Sleeping with her wouldn't have been enough." Not that I hadn't come close to that. And for the life of me, I don't know why I didn't just do it.

I could have taken advantage of her that day in the conference room, when she had been spread out, legs wide apart for me. My mouth waters. My groin hardens. A pulse flares to life in my balls.

Of course, my body is right on track to win the Olympic gold medal for being ever-ready to find a way to get aroused at the merest hint of thoughts of her.

"You saying what I think you are, old chap?" Saint drawls.

"Which is?"

"That you are attracted to her? Maybe you've developed a soft spot where the poor, defenseless, little bird is concerned."

I stiffen. *How does he know that I call her Bird?*

"Yeah, you're not the only one to have eyes on the ground, old chap."

My vision narrows; anger thuds at my temples. "You had me followed."

He clicks his tongue. "Tit for tat... Although the tit I prefer to be thinking about comes fixed to the female anatomy."

"This isn't about sex."

He raises his eyes skyward, "And that is exactly what I've been trying to get through your thick skull, you *chutiya*."

"What?"

"Fuck her—"

I glare at him.

"Sayin' it as I see it." He raises his hands. "Since when have you started pussyfooting around the four-letter word, by the way?"

"Not pussyfooting."

"Just pussywhipped."

"Ah, fuck you, dickhead."

"Real creative with your insults too." He shakes his head. "I fear you are crossing over to the dark side, my man. Better get your dick in hand and point it in the right direction."

I flex my jaw so hard, pain slices up my face. "Told you, don't talk shit about her, not when I am around, and especially when I am not in the room, you feel me?"

His jaw drops open. He scans the space, then walks to the table, grabs an antique letter opener, and slices it across his other palm.

Blood gushes out.

"The fuck you doing?"

"Relax, I don't have a death wish. Besides, if I wanted to off myself, there are other ways which would ensure I go down in a blaze of glory."

"You really should stop listening to classic rock."

"A much-overrated Bon Jovi song, by the way, but if the shoe fits." He pulls out a handkerchief, wraps it around his hand.

"The point of this entire exercise being—?"

"To prove to myself that I wasn't dreaming."

"Man, and I thought I was the cold-blooded of the lot?"

"You?" He tilts his head, "You, Sinner, have a conscience. Me, on the other hand, I never hesitate."

As I have witnessed first-hand. I drum my fingers on my chest, "You saved my life that day in the basement."

"My hand was just as steady, when I buried the bastard's pen in his neck. His blood sprayed across my face." He holds up his fist, now clenched around the ruined handkerchief.

"And I'll never forget that." It's why I tolerate his general fuckedupedness, not that I trust him or anything. I crack my neck, "Don't underestimate me or the rest of the Seven."

"I can assure you that I don't spend any time thinking of the rest of you. Speaking of, to complete the point of this tedious exercise, all I can say is, do whatever the fuck you must to get her out of your system. Don't get entangled with her."

Too late.

"You feel me, Sin?"

Fucker's right. Again. That's what I should have done. That's what I had been planning to do. That's where it had been headed. Me taking advantage of her, bending her to my will, forcing her to participate in my plan to bring her old man out of hiding, and making him pay for everything. No, we are not going to leave it up to the law. The thing about money? When you have enough of it, you can use it to mask all of your sins. Except me, of course. I

use my wealth to amplify my reach, to ensure I am never forgotten. To imprint my mark on the revenge that we have been planning all of these years. And then I had to go and mess it all up.

Okay, so maybe that's not entirely true. Maybe I'm not giving myself enough credit for my strategy, or my instincts, for that matter. "Don't get your knickers in a twist, *ol' chap*," I spread my arms, "This is all part of a plan."

"It is?"

I nod, "I needed to find a way to tie her to me in a way that would convince Adam it's serious."

He rubs his jaw. "Hmm."

"What?"

"Don't believe you."

"What-fucking-ever."

"You should never have embarked on this slippery slope. You could have just had her move in with you, pretend to be in a relationship."

"Like you know so much about relationships, huh?"

"Hey, I know how to avoid them, and have been far more successful at it than you, or the rest of the Seven, for that matter."

He's right, of course.

All of us—with the exception of Edward—have played the field, and well, you don't dip your dick in pussy without occasionally something sticking to it, if you get my drift. What? So, I am an uncouth bugger. I may wear £10,000 suits, get chauffeured around in an Aston Martin, and never fly commercial, doesn't mean I can't tell it like it is, huh?

"I wouldn't count preferring to pay for liaisons as experience."

He stares at me, then chuckles. His shoulders shake so hard that he has to hold onto the edge of the bar counter.

I frown. "What's so funny?"

"You, douchebag. You, who's gonna pay for the biggest fuckin' mistake of your life."

"You're getting on my nerves." I stalk toward the phone on the conference table, reach for it, and depress the speaker phone.

"Sin?" Meredith comes on the line.

"Call Security," I growl.

There's a pause, then, "Is this about Saint?"

"How did you guess?"

"Because whenever you two speak, one or the other threatens to call Security on the other. Don't waste my time, I have a lot to do."

The dial tone rings out.

"What the—?" I release the switch and the annoying buzz cuts out. "She hung up on me?"

"She saved your life, and that of the rest us. She anchored us lost boys by giving us a home away from home to hang out in. It's thanks to her that we are here and didn't end up as crackheads or criminals—present company excluded."

"Of course." A headache begins to squeeze my temples.

He straightens, "She's entitled to ignore you if she thinks that's the right thing to do."

"You had to bring that up, huh?"

"Someone needs to keep their feet on the ground, and stick to the plan." He ambles toward the exit, "Especially since you seem hellbent on screwing it up."

My stomach churns. I'd hoped talking to Saint would help me come up with a solution. *As if.*

The twat has a way of flagging my mistakes. He is the devil's fucking advocate. The only one of the Seven who can stand up to me. Which means, I hate his guts and yeah, also rely on his particular brand of meanness to call me out at my own game. Which he had successfully done. And that leaves me where? Holding my fucking balls in my hand.

"Stop."

He reaches the door, keeps going.

"Fuck you, Saint. What do you want me to do? Beg?"

"Words are overrated." He twists his shoulder, and throws me an amused glance, "We've always dealt in a different currency from the rest."

I stiffen, fold my fingers into a fist. Of course, it has to come down to a bargain with this wanker. He is way too similar to me. A fact I loathe. And which is also why we are the ones who can go toe to toe with each other. Hell, I'd call him a worthy opponent if I was feeling charitable. Which I'm not now, not when a sinking feeling pervades my stomach. I square my shoulders.

"Name your price."

25

Buttercup the Princess Bride: We'll never survive.
Westley: Nonsense. You only say that because no one ever has.

— *The Princess Bride*. Director: Rob Reiner

Summer

"I'll get it." My voice echoes in the wake of the doorbell.

I am alone, again, in the mansion on Primrose Hill.

It is the start of the weekend and I haven't seen him...or anyone else for that matter. He seems to subscribe to the philosophy that servants shouldn't be noticed, except for the results of their efforts.

He definitely has a staff... for food seems to appear magically in the refrigerator and the entire place is spotless, so someone does clean the space. Besides, I'd returned home last night to find my bed made up. It is disconcerting, like living in a hotel... which isn't quite one. I shiver, scrutinize the massive library. I've adopted the space as my own. The floor to ceiling bookshelves, framing the window that looks out on the garden, is my happy space. So why do I keep glancing toward the door, hoping to see him, huh?

Not that I missed him. Nope. N-a-h.

It is a relief not to be on tenterhooks, or peeking around corners before daring to go to my destination within the house. I'd come home from the office—on the tube—again, not complaining. If anything, I am envious of folks who go about their everyday life with scarce in the world to worry

about except which bar to go out to on Friday night. Which dress to wear to work in the morning. Which job to hop to next. Which date to shag and take home for the weekend... Oh, on the last... Okay, I've always really admired those who could do that.

Not that I hadn't tried, mind you, but apparently, I have a weird set of morals; imbued, no doubt, from the nuns in the convent school that Karma and I had last attended.

While I had held onto those beliefs—perhaps desperately, for they had grounded me—Karma had gone the other way.

Maybe that's because she had been such a sickly child.

When she should have been laughing and playing with the other kids, she had been confined to peering at us from behind the windows. So, when she'd finally come of age, and had joined me in the real world, she couldn't wait to explore her fledgling sexuality. On the days that her health permitted, of course.

I race down the steps and fling open the door.

Karma swaggers in.

She's wearing dark skinny jeans, torn at the knees. Boots that have massive platforms, a blouse that slipped down one shoulder and is held together by safety pins; another of which is pierced through her lip. Her lip? I blink.

"Didn't the Gwen Stefani look fade with the Nineties?"

"Shows how little you are in touch with current trends, Sis."

Huh? I frown and she chuckles. She tugs on my hair, "So easy to pull a fast one over you, huh?"

She saunters past.

"You could, at least, pretend to be a responsible adult."

"Hey, I knit... That's my two-pence contribution to *The World According to Garp*."

"What are you talking about?" I knot my hair around my fingers.

"It means, adulting is overrated. Besides, you do enough of that for the two of us."

Her boots leave muddy footprints on the polished floor. Should I say something? Why do I care? This isn't my home. I am borrowing it for the duration of... what? A fake marriage to a cold-hearted, obnoxious alphahole, who is trying his best to forget about my existence, apparently.

"Why are you here?"

She does a turn, blows out a low whistle "Damn, you hit the jackpot, woman."

"Or the end of my patience." I tighten my hold around the half-open door.

"Being able to recognize a good thing when it hits you in the face has never been your strong point."

"What do you mean?"

She pivots, waves her hands in the air. "All this, honey. All of this can be yours. Correction, is yours, already—"

"It's all pretense." I huff.

"Haven't you heard?" She leans forward on the balls of her feet. "You gotta fake it till you make it."

I grimace, "You mean like, *Legally Blonde*?"

"I was thinking more, *Pretty Woman*."

What the—! "So, I should prostitute myself?"

"You said it." She smirks.

"Honestly, Karma, you sure can be a bitch sometimes."

She drops her hands to her side, "OMG, that was a low, low hit even for you."

"And your stupidity in telling me that I need to accept my fate, and go along with whatever this weird-ass plan spun by a psychopath—"

"He's not a psychopath—" She scowls.

"Full of himself, vicious billionaire—"

"Gazillionaire, actually—"

"—has concocted, and actually be happy about it, is sheer and utter nonsense."

My chest heaves.

Her features tense. She moves toward me. "Hey, Summer, I'm sorry that I upset you."

I snort. "No, you're not."

"I really, truly am. You're right, I can be a bitch sometimes. I think it's some self-fulfilling prophecy. After all, with a name like Karma I didn't stand a chance, huh?"

"It's better than Summer."

"You're not the one having to pronounce your name to people, when you introduce yourself."

"Better than people instantly assuming I am some kind of a hippie."

"Of course, your get-up doesn't inspire that at all, huh?"

I glance down at my long skirt, teamed with a peasant blouse, and pink Chucks. "What's wrong with what I am wearing?"

"Nothing."

"Not my fault if people go by appearances." I snort.

"Woman, you are an optimist. The world is ruled by how you appear. Haven't you gotten that through your head yet?"

"What I reflect to the world is not what I am on the inside."

"It's true." She nods and her lips quirk.

"Don't go laughing at me. As you are aware, I am more rebellious than I seem."

She looks me up and down. "Let's agree to disagree on that, Sis. You're more of a quirky misfit."

Huh? Is that good or bad?

"You're someone who wants to soothe things over, make the world a better place, someone who yearns for male approval."

I glower, "You think I have daddy issues?"

"Don't we all?" She raises her shoulders, then lets them drop.

"That is the most honest thing you've ever said. I mean, given how we were abandoned by our own father, of course, we'd be looking for approval from the men in our lives, huh?"

"Difference is you fear loss of control. You'll do anything to tame your circumstances, while I..." She looks past my shoulder.

"You?" I jerk my chin.

"I leverage the cards I've been dealt, rather than upset the entire table, looking for that one Ace that'll probably never land in my lap."

"If you are implying that I'll never settle for anything other than the *one*, you're right." I tip my face up, and peer into her eyes.

Damn, I could do with some heels about now. Except this isn't a power play. It isn't. This is me and my sister having a conversation about priorities, huh? And it's time she understands where I stand on this.

"I won't stop searching for the person who is compatible with me in every way."

She shakes her head, blinks, and I frown. Did something go into her eyes? Doesn't matter. This once, I am going to have the last word.

"This marriage is as fake as Posh Spice."

The hair on the nape of my neck prickles; a frisson of electricity ladders up my spine. Too late, I realize what she'd been trying to tell me. *Don't turn.*

Don't. A blast of heat at my back makes me wince.
"Care to repeat yourself?"

26

Sin

Her shoulders stiffen and every part of her goes rigid. "You heard me." She pivots around.

I glare at her.

Her cheeks redden, but she holds my gaze. Impressive.

My little bird is trying to flex her fledgling wings, huh? Why should it matter to me that she's dismissing this relationship as a pretense? It is, isn't it? I was the one who'd initiated it, so why am I so angry that she's insisting that it is all a fake, huh? Because that's all this is ever going to be. Another lie in a long string of deceptions, which is what I excel at, after all.

I prowl over to her. Closer, closer. Her chest heaves; her breathing grows shallow. I pause when I am right in front of her. She tilts her head back, all the way back, to look at me.

"Actually, I don't think I did." I raise my hand and she flinches. She's afraid. Good. I drag my finger down the side of her cheek. "Say it again."

"You mean play it again, Sam?"

"Huh?"

"*Casablanca*." She gulps. "That scene where Ilsa—"

"Asks Sam to play 'As Time Goes By'?"

She nods

"You have it wrong."

"No, I don't." Her eyebrows knit.

I smooth the crease between her eyebrows, and she turns her head away.

"Listen," she huffs, "you may be the boss in the office but when it comes to movie trivia—"

"—I am always right." I curl my lips.

"You can't be perfect about everything." She huffs.

"Oh?"

This should be good. "What will you give me if I prove you wrong?"

She sets her jaw.

"Well?"

"What do you want?"

"You."

"Excuse me?" She whisper-screams.

"You heard me."

"You already have me right under your thumb, agreeing to every sneaky plan you've no doubt spent the last many years—"

"A decade, actually."

Color smears her cheeks. "—thinking about. You made me agree to this pretend marriage—"

"That's where you are wrong." I lean forward until my chest almost grazes her chest. Almost.

I don't need to glance down to find out that her nipples have puckered. (Expected.) Or that my pants are suddenly too tight at my crotch. (An unfortunate byproduct of our proximity, one that I'm going to alleviate as soon as I have called her out on her mistake.)

"That's twice in as many minutes, by the way."

Her gaze widens. "You are such an arrogant know-it-all. It's not possible to have a single straight conversation with you."

"Right?" I allow my grin to broaden.

A pulse beats to life at the hollow of her neck. I want to drop my head, nuzzle that space where her scent would be the most concentrated. *Fuck, why would you want to do that, huh?*

I start to raise my arm, then lower it; my fingers tingle. *How can I ache to touch her again?* Feel that silky smooth softness of her skin under my palm, cupping her, palming her arse, thrusting knuckle-deep inside the soft core between her legs—

"Hey." She claps her hands.

I tip my chin, up. "Don't raise your voice."

"I'll do whatever the fuck I want."

"Summer!" A new voice sounds within the space.

I glance past her, spot the woman Summer was talking to when I entered.
"Who're you?"

"Hi." She moves forward, "I'm Karma."

"Karma?"

She blows out a breath. "Excuse my parentage, and hers." She jerks her head toward Summer. "We are what happens when you cross a flower-chewing hippie with a loser ex-millionaire with a penchant for gambling."

No kidding! And isn't that the root of this entire fucking problem.

"Good to meet you by the way," she holds out her hand.

I glance at it, then at her face. "The jury is out on that."

She blinks, her features taking on a stunned countenance, then she chuckles, her shoulders shaking. She bursts out laughing, a full-throated giggle that's oddly infectious.

I find my lips twitching. "You must be the sister."

"You must be the alphahole." She grins.

I frown, "Alpha—?"

"Shut up, Karma." Summer pivots, and I pull her against my side. She struggles and her hip grazes my side.

I wind my arm around her tiny waist, dig my fingers into the curve of her butt. She shudders, then falls still.

"So, that's my nickname, huh?" I smirk.

Summer snorts, "Only you would take it as a compliment."

"I'll let that pass."

"Why do I find that so difficult to believe?"

"You're right to be suspicious."

She huffs, "Why don't you say what's on your mind?"

"Where's the fun in that?"

Karma Chameleon's gaze darts between us. "Guess you two get along quite well, eh?"

"What are you talking about?" Summer throws her arms in the air, "We hate each other."

"Right." Karma's eyes gleam. "My sister is rather good at believing her own lies."

"It's the first thing I noticed about her, though in this case, I hate to admit she is right."

Summer turns on me, "OMG, are you feeling feverish or something?"

"Eh?"

"You agreed with me. That's a first? Is it raining outside?"

"It always rains in London, haven't you noticed?"

She makes a noise deep in her throat.

I chuckle. "By the way," I tug on a strand of that pink hair, "completing what I started earlier—"

"Do you always have to have the last word?"

"Definitely getting to know me better." I tilt my head, "Be careful, you may end up liking me."

"Never." She wrinkles her nose.

"I'll hold you to that, and as I was saying earlier, I was right."

"About what?"

"What you quoted was a misquotation of the line "Play it, Sam"."

"No." She blinks.

"Look it up." I smirk.

She scans the room, pats the pockets of her skirt.

"You searching for this?" I produce her phone and she snatches it up, stares at the screen.

"You called me—?"

"What's the point of a phone if you never keep it with you?"

"Twenty times?"

"I expect you to be at my beck and call at all times. Have you forgotten?" I shoot up an eyebrow.

"It's the weekend."

"You work for me, twenty-four-seven."

"How can I forget!" She sets her jaw.

"Well?"

"What?"

"Are you going to look it up?"

"I'll save you the bother." Karma steps forward, "He's right."

"So, what else is new?" I can't keep the slightly victorious tone from my voice. Cheap shots.

For some reason, when I am around her my control seems to slip, and hell, if I am not going to take every single opportunity to come out on top. Literally.

Summer glances between us, then pulls up her phone. Her fingers tap on the screen, then she stiffens. Tucks her elbows into her side.

"Told ya."

"Yeah, yeah." She blows out a breath and the hair on her forehead flies up. "That's a first. I'll give you this one."

I lower my voice, "You'll give me every one of your firsts."

Her chin comes up, and she whips her head around to look at me. "Happy?"

I shake my head.

"What more do you want?"

"We made a deal at the start of this conversation, have you forgotten?"

"I am losing count, asshole."

I lower my head, nuzzle her cheek, then whisper, "Much prefer alphahole."

"I think I'm going to call you pain in the ass."

"At least wait until I've stuffed my cock into that hole too," I murmur.

Her breathing hitches.

I pull back, survey her features. Pupils dilated; creamy skin of her neck flushed with color. My dick instantly lengthens.

Her mouth opens, and that's when, cunt that I am, I move in. I close the distance between us, drop my head and close my mouth over hers.

She stiffens; every muscle in her body solidifies. I swipe my tongue between her lips and a small sigh escapes her. I nibble on her mouth, suck on her tongue, and her spine curves. I bring her firmly against my side. She literally seems to melt into me.

My cock hardens, my balls throb, an answering pulse flares at my temples. *Fuck.*

The sound of a throat being cleared reaches me. I lessen the intensity of the kiss, move back, and she follows me. I can't stop the rumble of pleasure that vibrates up my chest. She must have heard it too, for she stiffens. Then pulls away. I let her put some distance between us. Not too much, for I keep my arm about her waist.

"So." I turn to Karma. "Glad you could make it."

"Wouldn't miss helping my sister plan her wedding."

"Wait." Summer shuffles her feet, "You're the one who invited her?"

"He did," Karma confirms.

Summer shoots me a dirty glance, "Did you hack the password to my phone?"

"Didn't need to. I used your favorite number."

"How did you know...?" She purses her lips. "You had my laptop rigged so you could figure out my patterns?"

"You give me too much credit. Turns out, you are predictable."

She snarls low in her throat. Damn it, those little sounds she makes? I'll ensure it's an all-out cry when I have her spread out on my desk and—

"It's an invasion of privacy." She hisses.

"That's not the only thing I'm going to invade."

She reddens, and her chest heaves in the way that implies that she's seriously turned on. Bet her panties are soaking wet, not that I am complaining. I wish we were alone so I could shove my fingers between her legs and confirm my theory. My fingers twinge and I fold them into a fist at my side.

"Are you going to use every word I say against me?" Summer mutters
I arch an eyebrow.

She swipes her hair back, "Forget I asked."

"Mr. Sterling," Karma interrupts. "That sure is a generous offer, by the way."

"What is?" Summer frowns.

"He didn't tell you?" She blinks, "How many men would give carte blanche to their bride to organize the wedding their way."

"Only the cunning, conniving, obnoxious ones." Summer mumbles.

So fucking feisty. This woman, she hasn't a hope in hell of keeping up with me. Still, I have to give her full points for trying, which is more than what I'd acknowledge with any other opponent. She is turning out to be nothing like what I had expected. Surprises, I hate them. Challenges... Yeah, I can definitely credit her as a puzzle to be solved, a game to be played, safe in the knowledge that there will be one winner—me.

"That all you've got?" I allow my lips to curl.

"And you..." Summer glowers at Karma, "I can't believe you are ganging up on me with him."

There's a loud bang on the front door, which flies open. "Are we too late?"

Summer blinks. "Isla, Amelie?"

"I took the liberty of inviting your closest friends too."

Summer

"He gave you his credit card, right?" Karma hops up and down on her heels. My sister is excited. And she's also right.

I hold up the black piece of plastic he'd slipped into my palm. Yeah, hadn't expected that. Not sure what I am going to do about it either.

"I vote we put it to good use." Amelie snatches the card from my hand.

I reach for it and she holds it out of reach. "Oh, no, Ms. Goody-Two-Shoes, I am not going to allow you to spoil this fun."

I tuck my elbows into my sides, "Christ, Amelie, this is seriously not on. I am not going to spend time being indebted to him."

"You already are," Karma drawls from the comfortable leather armchair in the corner, a glass of wine held between her fingertips. She looks at home in the living room, which overlooks the beautiful garden behind the house. The doors are thrown open to allow the warm summer breeze to waft into the house. Large pink and yellow roses bloom to the side; a meadow of wildflowers stretches out on the other side. A path stretches out, leading to the pond in the center of the garden, and beyond that, tall trees overlook a waterfall that gushes down from the wall that brackets the property on three sides. Idyllic. Beautiful. And so wrong.

I don't deserve to be here, soaking in the rightness of the moment, when everything else about this picture is wrong. Wrong place. Wrong time. Wrong groom. What had I been thinking, agreeing with him? Oh! Wait, I didn't have a choice. If I had refused, I'd have been on the streets, scrambling

to save my life and that of my sister's. The very sister who, right now, pours out wine from the, no-doubt, obscenely expensive bottle, and raises it in my direction. "Salut."

I frown. "You're not supposed to be drinking. It neutralizes the impact of the medications you are taking."

"Not what the doctor said," she mutters.

"Oh, yeah?" I march up to her. "Why didn't you call me when you went to see him, huh?"

"Does it matter?" She chugs down the wine. "They're all the same—not able to diagnose what's wrong with me, only to start me on a different medication, then tell me to be careful about my diet, exercise... As if I were eighty instead of eighteen."

"It's a good thing drinking in this country is, at least, legal at your age."

"Which really takes the edge off this rebelliousness." She takes another mouthful of wine, then hiccoughs.

"You've had enough."

"And you haven't had any yet." She offers me her glass.

I stare at it, then purse my lips.

"Aww, come on, Sis, indulge me. It's a time for happiness. Time to celebrate."

"You sound strange."

"I know, right?" She stares into the glass, "Must be the alcohol, or the rather pleasant surroundings we find ourselves in. It's certainly not your temperament, which as usual, leaves much to be desired."

She raises the glass to her lips and I snatch it from her.

"Hey!" She protests.

I drain the glass. Then blink.

"Yummy, huh?" She smacks her lips.

"So that's how wine's supposed to taste?"

"It's certainly a step up from my last drink, which came out of a cardboard box." Amelie walks up to us, a freshly-opened bottle in hand, and tops me off. Then reaches for a new glass, fills it up and hands it to Karma.

"I think she's had enough," I mutter weakly.

Amelie grins. "Come on, we need the liquor to brainstorm."

"Besides the wine is sooo good," Karma giggles.

Isla rushes in from the garden, hair tousled, her cheeks flushed. "Guys, the flowers, OMG, there's a hot house with orchids. Those blooms must be

worth thousands."

"Try millions." Nothing I have encountered in this house gives me the confidence that their value is anywhere in the area of the numbers I have in my head. Best to add many zeros after any of our guesses.

"This man, he's beyond loaded." Isla flings out her arms so wide, she almost decks me.

I retreat to a safe distance.

"He's a gazillionaire, many times over." She walks over to the massive mirror that takes up almost one corner of the entire wall. "And this is one helluva space." Our reflections greet us, with the garden stretching out in the background.

It is overwhelming, dominating, yet brutally sensuous, with a tinge of sophistication—very much like the man who owns it.

"It's... ah... something." I swallow.

Karma laughs. "Damn, she's already mastered the art of understating stuff, huh?"

"Yep, have you noticed?" Amelie snickers. "The more money you have, the less you talk about it."

"Now, that's not fair." I turn on them. "I'm a little overwhelmed with the speed of everything that's happened, that's all."

"Hey." Amelie walks to me, "Didn't mean it the way that came out. And for the record, I think you're doing the right thing."

"What?" I scoff. "Mock marriage to an obnoxious Mr. Moneybags who's using me to further his empire?"

"Is that what he told you?" She narrows her gaze. "That it's a pretend wedding?"

I nod.

"I think he's lying."

Karma and Isla move in closer.

I wrap my arms around my waist. "What makes you say that?"

"Calling your sister and your best friends to come out and help you plan your wedding." Amelie waves her hand in the air. "Do those seem like the actions of a man who feels nothing for you?"

"Oh, he has feelings all right." I snicker.

"Aha!" Her eyes gleam. "You fucked him, huh?"

"No... uh..." I shift my weight from foot to foot. "Not quite."

"Either you slept with him or you didn't." Amelie tilts her head.

My neck heats. "It's kind of complicated."

"It always is." Isla nods.

"As if you'd know. Miss I'm-saving-myself-for-marriage." I quirk my lips.

Karma props her palm on her hip, "And you're not?"

"Nope." I jut out my chin. "I've been too busy earning a living, to consider wanting to sleep with anyone. Besides, I haven't meet anyone I wanted to have sex with, okay?"

"Summer, no." Amelie rounds on me. "Tell me that's not true."

I lean back, "Hold on, what's going on in that head of yours now?"

"Are you a virgin?" Amelie frowns.

"Now you sound like him."

"I knew it." She snaps her fingers.

"What are you talking about?"

"Bet, that's part of the attraction. You're probably the first halfway decent looking woman he's encountered—"

I cough into my hand, "Gee, thanks."

"—who's also never been with another man. Bet it brought out all of his possessive instincts and he decided he was going to claim you."

I snort, "Asshole whisperer, that's me." I swipe my hair over my shoulder, "He could have slept with me without wanting to marry me, you know. Besides," I jut out my chin, "I told him I wasn't a virgin."

Amelie stares, "Bet he subconsciously knew that you were lying."

"Like, we have some secret connection, so he can read my mind?" I scoff.

"Do you?" She lowers her chin.

I stare, "Of course not."

"But, you haven't fucked him yet?"

"Jeez what is this, the Spanish Inquisition?" I throw up my hands. "And no, I haven't. Besides, all of you are forgetting one thing. This entire thing is a pretense."

"I don't know, the oncoming wedding seems all too real." Isla squeezes my shoulder.

Tell me about it.

"Karma did mention that there's a deal involved."

"She did?" I growl.

"It's perfectly okay." Amelie pats my cheek. "You're finally wising up, leveraging your best assets to earn a living."

"Jeez, thanks, with friends like you who needs—"

"Enemas?" Karma smirks.

"Ugh." I make a gagging sound in my throat. "Hate it when you come up with gross jokes."

"Which this wedding isn't." Amelie frowns at Karma who makes a gesture as if she's zipping her lips.

I sober. "How am I going to plan a wedding in 2 days? I mean, I never thought I'd be walking down the aisle." The entire scenario is fake, but you know what I mean.

I wring my fingers together in front of me. Swallow down the tears that prick at my eyes. *Why does everything seem so overwhelming all of a sudden?* I sniffle.

"Hey." Amelie rubs my back, "We're here for you. I, for one, think you should do exactly what your heart dictates."

Which is what? Throw myself at him and beg him to fuck me? No, not that. Rewind. Throw myself at him and demand that he release me from this stupid charade? Better. Which he is not going to do. He is hellbent on taking revenge for whatever my father did to him, which he hasn't revealed yet. I mean, how bad could it be? Some corporate war gone wrong, no doubt. I'm sure that's all it was. He's probably blown it all out of proportion too.

"My skills as a wedding planner were clearly honed for this day, huh?" Isla brackets me in from the other side. "Besides, you have one thing going for you."

"I do?"

"Yep." She grins. "You have his credit card so..." She raises her shoulder.

Yeah. My shoulders slump further. Money really can buy anything, even the arrangements for an unplanned wedding, huh?

"Listen, Babe, we are all on your side, even if we are constantly taking the piss." Karma folds her arms behind her back.

"Hmm. You sure about that?"

"Completely." Her features resolve into an expression of determination. "I promise not to say anything bitchy—"

"Hallelujah."

"At least for the next half an hour."

I laugh, "Thank you for your kindness."

"Oh, and leave your wedding dress to me."

"I... I'm not so sure Karma." I twist my fingers together.

Her eyes gleam. "You do want to catch his attention?"

I bite on my lower lip.

"You want to ensure he never underestimates you again? You want to surprise him, huh?"

"Yes... but, can you create it in 2 days?"

"It's difficult, but not... impossible." She taps her finger to her cheek. "Not if I take the barebones of the dress I had been working on... and...." She brightens, snaps her fingers. "Oh, I think I know just the thing." She squeezes my shoulders. "Trust me."

Famous last words.

"You won't regret it." She winks.

Oh, hell. My stomach plummets.

"That's settled then." She grins. "Let's get this show on the road."

Amelie waves the black credit card, "Right, what should we order first?"

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"...there's only two syllables in this whole wide world worth hearing: pussy."
—*Scent of a Woman*. Director: Martin Brest

Sin

"Is it too warm in here?" I run my finger around the collar of my shirt. I opted for a straightforward long-sleeved shirt, tapered pants and a jacket. No tie for this occasion. My way of showing it doesn't mean anything. A pointless gesture. *Who am I trying to convince?* My stomach rolls and I tug at the sleeves of my shirt. My fingers tremble. *The fuck?*

"You nervous, ol' chap?" Saint asks.

"The fuck you dithering on about?" I pull out my handkerchief, rub at the bead of sweat that trickles down my temple.

"Should I turn up the air-conditioning?"

"Fucking hate that artificial atmosphere." Truth is, being stuck in any enclosed space makes my head spin. Unless I have something to distract me. I play with the clasp of my watch. Some of the nervous tension drains from my shoulders.

"Yeah." He sobers. All seven of us have that specific phobia in common. All of us have different ways of coping with it.

"Here." He snaps open a wooden box.

"If you were thinking of proposing, it's a little too late. Besides, I am not into you that way."

"Har, har." He smirks politely. "Knowing how much you abhor jewelry, I

figured I'd get you the next best thing."

He holds out the box. Rolled tobacco leaf columns nestle in the humid air.
"Aww, you remembered. I am so touched."

He chuckles.

I gently pull out one of the cigars. It is one of my bloody weaknesses, along with rare whiskeys. Turns out money grows on you, sensitizes your tastes so you began to appreciate the finer things in life.

He takes one for himself, then places the box on the table. Producing a cigar cutter, he snaps off the ends, then holds a lighter to my smoke, then his.

The pungent scent of crushed leather and toasted almonds, woven with something sweet—cherries?— almost as fine as the taste of her, fills my senses.

I tilt my head back, puff out a smoke circle. My muscles unwind a little.

"I hate to tell you, this was a good idea."

"Feel that?" He tilts his head.

"What?"

I raise the cigar to my mouth, take in a puff.

"That stillness inside, that calm before the storm, that sense of everything about to hit a shitstorm, your last few minutes as a single man, when the fragrance of a 100-year-old cigar loosens your tensed-up tissues?"

I cough, "Only 100 years? You disappoint me."

His eyes glint, "You're welcome."

I draw in another reverential puff, "I'm touched you remembered my weakness for these."

"At half a million dollars per smoke stick, well, you'd better be."

"Now who's counting their pennies, huh?" I grin.

He smirks, takes a puff of his own. "I see what you did there, by the way."

"Oh?"

"You're not fooling me any, Sin."

"Not trying, you pretend toff."

"If you wanted to marry her, you didn't need to pull this elaborate shenanigan. I mean, you could have told the rest of us that you were in love."

Love? I cough. "I barely know the woman."

The collar at my throat digs into my skin. I resist the urge to loosen another button.

"It's a pretense, 30 days and we are done."

He taps his fingers together, "Did you sign a contract with her?"

I freeze. I didn't. I was confident that the incriminating video would ensure that she'd do whatever I wanted. Besides, I was planning on letting her go as soon as I sign my deal with her father, which should be happening very, very soon.

"I don't need one."

He opens and closes his mouth, then chokes. His shoulders shake, he chortles, and tears fills his cheeks.

"Don't die on me yet." I thump his back, hard enough for him to stumble forward.

He staggers away, leans his hip against the window. "Is it a magic pussy? Is that what this is? Is she so damn succulent that your dick overpowers your brain now?"

"Told you already, don't—"

"Yeah, yeah." He straightens, "Don't talk about her that way. I know. And honestly, no disrespect to whatever there is between the two of you..."

"Which is nothing—"

He cups a hand behind his ear, "Are you listening to yourself? No contract, asshole. You've left yourself open to some crazy-arse shit here. Possible sexual harassment in the workplace. No pre-nup either. If she doesn't take you to the cleaners by the end of this..."

I set my jaw, "She won't."

Fact is, it honestly hadn't crossed my mind to draw up a contract with her. Why is that? Do I trust her that much? Am I so sure about my ability to control her? Did I really think that I would be able to manipulate her into doing exactly what I want? An interesting conundrum. One I haven't found myself in ever before. I survey the ash building up on the cigar.

He scans my features. "You have something on her?"

I tilt my head.

"Something incriminating enough that it'll make her bow to your every whim?"

I allow my mouth to curl with a smirk.

His muscles unwind. "Well then." He puffs out the fragrant smoke. "I want to believe you..."

So do I.

"—and for your sake, I hope you come out of this unscathed. Considering...."

I slip a hand into my pocket, "Do pray tell."

"Clearly, you are slipping."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"This may be a fake ceremony, but it is legally binding. It has to be for it to work. So clearly, that's what's making you nervous."

"Not." I raise my cigar to my mouth. My fingers are rock steady. "I know what I am doing, but do you? Considering the £150,000 you spent on this cigar—"

"Its £500,000..." His cheeks hollow as he takes a puff, "per smoke stick."

"Hmm." I narrow my gaze, watch him through the fragrant cloud. Bastard outdid himself on this one. He never did know when to stop.

"Consider it my gift." He raises his cigar in a mock toast. "After all, it's not every day that my worst enemy gets married."

I snarl.

"Sorry, I mean," he air quotes, " 'mock married.' " He speaks out of the corner of his mouth, "Without any kind of paperwork to cushion the fall."

Luckily for him, I ignore that last part. "It's not going to distract me from my ambitions, nor take away my instinct for business."

He chuckles, "I think thou doth protest too much."

I bare my lips, "We'll see, shall we?"

29

Summer

Alphahole: Ms. West, have you forgotten that you are getting married in precisely 3 hours?

Me: I am trying my best.

Alphahole: Stop being obstinate.

Me: Stop being so dominating.

Alphahole: I was born this way.

Me: You know what they say about people who try too hard to project themselves?

Silence

Me: It's that old saying about how those with small balls try to overcompensate in all other fields of life.

Alphahole: I can assure you my balls are bigger than normal size, as is my dick. As you must have guessed from the way you thrust your pelvis wantonly against my groin.

Me: Anyone ever told you that you're crude? And does anyone use the word 'wanton' anymore?

Alphahole: I do.

Bet the jerk has his lips curled in that smirk. My thighs clench. Damn it, can't I have a single normal interaction with this man without getting hot and bothered? I wipe my clammy palms on my shirt.

Alphahole: Are you there, Ms. West?

Me: Does it make a difference?

Alphahole: No.

Jerk.

Alphahole: As long as you turn up for the wedding, I don't care what you wear.

It'd serve him right if I turned up naked.

Alphahole: Don't do that.

Me: You have no idea what I was thinking.

Alphahole: Don't I? You're too predictable, Pink.

Bite me. I am going to spring a surprise on him, and he won't see it coming.

Alphahole: You won't have the courage to do that after our time together, either.

Me: Stop putting words in my mouth.

Alphahole: That was too easy.

Me: What? Being able to predict that your ego has no bounds? You think you can manipulate anyone and get away with it.

Alphahole: Can't I? I've gotten you to toe the line thus far, haven't I?

I toss the phone aside. Begin to pace. Think of the money in the bank. The million that was already deposited. Another million on the day of the wedding—today—then for every day after until we reach the thirty days, or my father agrees to join forces with him, whatever comes first. If he wasn't holding that video recording over me, I'd have walked out by now.

If he hadn't been holding it over me, I wouldn't have agreed to this in the first place, either. Damn, poverty sucks. Except, I am no longer poor. I just have to get through the next twenty-five days. That's all.

The phone vibrates again and I ignore it. And again. After the third buzz, I swoop down and pick it up.

Alphahole: That was uncalled for, I'm sorry.

Wait, what, he apologized?

Alphahole: Don't expect me to do so again.

Just as I was thinking he had no heart he had to go and break the illusion. That's not good. I don't want to see him as human, for he isn't. He's a freakin' heartless monster and I am best served thinking of him as one.

Alphahole: You there?

No.

Me: Yes.

Alphahole: The doc gave you a clean bill of health.

Right. He'd arranged for his personal doctor to check me out in the privacy of my bedroom yesterday. Of course, he could have warned me about it, but no, why would he? The doctor had shown up and I'd been livid.

I'd wanted to refuse... until common sense had won out.

When he'd recommended I use the contraceptive injection, I'd agreed. Best to be protected. The last thing I want is to become pregnant. I swallow.

Alphahole: I'm clean too.

Riiight... I chew on my lips. *What does that mean?*

Are we going to have sex on the first night of our marriage? My cheeks flush. God, I sound so archaic. Besides, no way do I want to have to sleep with him... Do I?

Silence. A beat. Another, then the dots jump on the screen.

Alphahole: I know what you're thinking.

Me: So you can read my mind now?

Alphahole: Very easily. Right now, you're stressing out that I plan to seduce you on our first night. You're wrong.

Eh?

Alphahole: I'm going to take what is already mine.

Me: I'm not yours.

Alphahole: We'll see.

Me: Fuck you.

Alphahole: I am counting on it. Oh... and Pink

What?

Alphahole: Don't embarrass me.

30

Summer

Embarrass him, huh? If he hadn't goaded me, I wouldn't have fallen in with Karma's plan.

I survey myself in the mirror.

What had I been thinking when I'd agreed to wear the dress that she had created? I'd gone along with the idea, because... yeah, I did want to shock him. Show him that he shouldn't underestimate me. I toss my head.

This entire pretend wedding is a car crash waiting to happen. It's inevitable that everything is going to go wrong. I am nudging it along.

It is his fault, for treating me like... like worse than dirt. Like I don't exist.

Hell, he treats that damn old school watch of his with more affection. At least he massages it, touches it, tinkers with it. He gives it attention.

Me? He dismisses as if I am an errant child, or a dimwit who has no idea what I am doing. Which I don't, I admit. Else why would I have landed in this situation? Faking a wedding that I very much want to be real.

I tighten my fingers around the bouquet of flowers.

There, I've acknowledged it to myself, huh? Although logic dictates that I abhor him, my body cannot deny the effect he has on me.

It isn't that he's good-looking. *Not only.*

It's that complete confidence that clings to his every move, the way he seems to walk into a space and own it, how everyone else in the vicinity acknowledges he is the most lethal of them, how he wears his arrogance with

absolute single-mindedness. A cockiness that the world owes him—a mindset that is so alien, so different from everything that I am used to—a sureness I wish I possessed.

Is that what this is? Am I envious of everything he represents? What I lost out on, thanks to the error of my parents? Except, that isn't me. I've always been proud of being my own person and making my way through this world on my own steam. I don't need anyone to rescue me. I don't.

So, what am I doing here? I glance down at my posy.

Wildflowers. White, pink, and violet blooms mixed with green. Thankfully, it isn't the expensive bouquet that Amelie had wanted me to order.

It isn't that I was averse to spending his money... More that every single option that Amelie had shown me in the catering, the decorations, the entire idea of how I'd wanted a wedding to be, well, it had all felt strange.

I'll be honest. I've never spent time imagining my dream wedding.

When you grow up trying to figure out how to survive and where your next meal is going to come from—especially after you had all of it one day and it had been taken from you the next—well, you learn not to think too far out in the future. You really do try and focus on the now and what you have. Maybe it also had to do with my mother's slight obsession with seizing the moment.

Perhaps she had an intuition for things to come, that her life would be brutally cut short one day when she'd contracted blood poisoning. I mean, for hell's sake, what were the odds, huh? The dye from the hand painted fabrics she'd loved wearing had bled into her skin and prolonged exposure to it had killed her. Hell. The mind boggles.

It had wrecked my father enough for him to throw himself into his work.

He'd neglected me and Karma, progressively, and one day had not returned home. Apparently, he hadn't been the above-board businessman he'd made himself out to be. He'd made a series of bad business decisions, then borrowed from the Mafia—*bad idea, Dad*—and when he hadn't been able to pay them back, he'd abandoned us to the system and left the country. The coward.

We'd been lucky to be able to escape with our lives. At least our foster homes hadn't been too bad—I'd heard some of the horror stories of the other kids. I'd thanked our stars that we'd ended up with people who, while they weren't too loving, hadn't been monsters either. And they hadn't separated

me and Karma. We'd stayed together until I'd turned sixteen and found myself at a homeless hostel. I had tried to protect her, but my sister's illness had made her far older than her years, too soon.

I raise the blooms to my nose and inhale. The scent of the open countryside envelops me. Whoever had plucked this had known exactly which blooms to fold into the mix.

There's a knock on the door.

"Come in." I face the mirror and survey myself.

Footsteps sound, then Karma's face appears next to mine. "Wow," she breathes.

"Is that good or bad?"

"Umm." She tilts her head. "You look..."

"Go on." I grip my bouquet until my knuckles whiten.

"Nice flowers. Your favorites?"

I glance down at the burst of colors. "Aren't they beautiful? Wonder who got them for me?"

"Maybe Amelie or Isla?" She leans forward, brushes a piece of lint from one of the panels of my dress.

"Maybe." I shift my weight between my feet. "And you haven't answered the question."

Her lips quirk, "Which one?"

"You know," I huff out a breath. "How do I look, Karma?"

She puts distance between us, looks me up and down. Her eyebrows knit. "You look..." She bites her cheek.

"That bad, huh?" I swallow.

"You look... Not as I expected." Her face breaks into a grin. "You're going to make such an impression."

Oh. The breath rushes out of me. "Not too much?"

"Yes, much." She brushes away a strand of hair from my temple. "Isn't that what you were going for? To shock him?"

"Kind of." My heart begins to hammer. "Maybe I should forget about—"

"No."

She grips my hand. "You are strong, gorgeous, one hell of a woman. No one can show you up. No one. You are the queen of all you survey, who can have anything you want. You were born to live an epic life, on your terms. You are going to fulfill your destiny and no alphahole can take that away from you, for you own your power. You are you."

I blink, "Wow."

Her eyebrows furrow, then she straightens herself, pulls away. I swoop down and grab her arm. "Did you mean everything you said?"

She hesitates, then glances away.

"Do you believe in me, Karma?"

She draws in a breath, then tilts her head up. "I do."

Something in my chest lightens. Tears prick the backs of my eyes, and I blink them away. "Thank you."

She nods, shuffles her feet, then peers up at me from under her eyelids, "I also believe in this dress that I created for you."

"Ha." I toss my head. "I can't believe you turned it around so quickly." I grip her shoulder. "Thank you, Sis."

Her chin wobbles.

For a second, I am sure she's going to hug me. I move forward, but she ducks, drops down, straightens the skirt of my dress.

"Your little speech earlier," I wrinkle my brow. "It wasn't from a movie, was it?"

"No."

"Then?"

"Something I read in a self-help book."

"You read self-help books?"

"Naah." She hesitates, "Happened to find it on the tube. I read a few pages, and the sentiment of it stuck with me."

"Hmm."

She rises to her feet, "I really do love the dress. It's audacious, outrageous. It's so not you, that it is you."

I straighten, survey myself, one last time. It made sense in a funny Karma-esque way. "You're right. This time."

She meets my gaze in the mirror. Her eyes are too bright.

"Do you have something in your eyes, Karma?"

"Of course not." She turns her head aside to wipe her cheek. "Come on, you want to be on time."

"On the contrary." I grin. "Let's not."

31

"Just because she likes the same bizzaro crap you do doesn't make her your soul mate."

-500 days of Summer. Director: Marc Webb

Sin

"She's late."

I crack my neck, shift my weight from foot to foot.

"Where the fuck is she?" I rub the back of my neck, "I hate being kept waiting."

"Better get used to it, old chap." Saint smirks from his position by the window.

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"Simmer down."

"Don't tell me what to do," I grumble, begin to pace.

It's not that I am uncomfortable... Okay, maybe a little. Not because I am the cynosure of all eyes. I thrive on the attention. But the fact that I am here, cooling my heels, in front of the people who know me for always being in charge, the one who calls the shots and ensures everything always runs to plan—that she is making me wait? Unacceptable.

This woman is taking advantage of the fact that I can't do much about it. Not yet, not right now in front of the group of people assembled in the back garden of my house.

Summer loves this space—I'd caught her walking among the flower beds,

her head raised to the sun to catch the sun rays—and no that's not why I chose it as the venue for the nuptials. It was practical. That was the only reason... right? I rub the back of my neck.

"Good thing it's not raining, huh?" Saint stares up at the clear blue skies.

"So that's what we've been reduced to talking about, the weather, huh?"

"I'm being considerate of your pride." He shoots me a sideways glance. "Better unlearn that attitude of yours. It's downhill all the way from here."

"Shut your trap, you fuck."

His grin widens, "This is only the beginning, her making you wait at the altar. When you're enjoying marital bliss, don't forget about the reason why you embarked on this trip."

"You have it all wrong."

"Do I?" He arches an eyebrow.

I drag my finger around the collar of my shirt.

A trickle of sweat runs between my shoulder blades. Could do with some cloud cover about now. But, of course, on the one day that I'd counted on the weather behaving per norm, everything has to turn out to be as surprise. I glance at the watch on my wrist. *She's fucking late.*

"Fifteen minutes." Edward's voice interrupts my thoughts.

I peer up at him. "Sixteen minutes now."

"She's the bride."

"It's a fucking pretend wedding." I lower my chin.

"Not from where I am." One side of his lip arches up. The Father is enjoying himself.

"Don't get too used to it." I growl.

"I don't know, from where I am, it's a wonderful sight, seeing you all uncomfortable, Sin."

"Won't last forever. And I demand a 25% share of the profits of FOK Media."

"No way." Edward shakes his head.

"*There* you are." Saint snickers. "Wondered how long it would take for the asshole part of you to show up."

"It was never gone. I had it temporarily shielded out of deference to the rest of you."

Edward frowns. "Here I thought your bride was finally beginning to round off your edges."

"Never." I crack my neck from side to side, trying to loosen the muscles

that have somehow knotted themselves up. Where the fuck is she, anyway?

I glance at my watch again. "Seventeen minutes." I breathe. "No one... No one has kept me waiting this long."

"There's always a first time." Saint rocks back on his heels.

"Wait until you stand in this position, dipshit."

He chuckles, "Never gonna happen."

"Never fucking say never." I grumble.

"Think you can refrain from swearing for another few minutes?" Edward stares past me, then stiffens.

An electric tingle runs down my back. *She's here.* Silence descends. A complete and utter stillness. My skin tightens. My throat closes. I should turn, I should. I stare straight ahead. There's no music—my choice. This wasn't supposed to be a fucking happy occasion. It is a formality. I needed enough gravitas to convince her old man, who is about five minutes away from the house, so Peter has informed me. I'd timed this down to the last detail. Good thing they'd been stuck in traffic and had taken a little longer than expected to arrive. That's how much to the last detail I had orchestrated this little circus; the only thing I hadn't expected was for my bride to screw it all up—back up a second. Not my bride—my business partner. No, hostage, in this little arrangement that will ensure I can finally put the ghosts of my past behind me and... Her scent envelops me. Cherries and caramel laced with that mysterious note of anticipation. A uniquely feminine scent that could belong to only one woman. Her.

Don't turn, don't.

I pivot, and every muscle in my body tenses. All of my senses hone in on her. My vision narrows; the blood drums at my temple. *She didn't. No way.*

A long line breaks through the slit on the skirt that runs to mid-thigh. The lace and chiffon clings to the curves of her waist, nipped in to show off that impossibly tiny circumference, that begs me to wrap my hands around her body and haul her close; before I place her across my lap and spank that luscious butt for what she's done. That dress... She doesn't wear it, she owns it. It is her.

The fact that it is a neon pink sets off the color of her hair that pours in glorious waves around her face. Bold. Daring. It personifies that streak of sassiness that she tries so hard to hide, and which slips through the cracks in her facade anyway, especially when I push her. She can't control it. No more than I can rein in the desire that rushes to the fore. My groin hardens. My

dick twitches. I take in the proud thrust of her breasts, ensconced in the delicate lace that runs up her chest, and over one shoulder.

I bet if she turns around, I'll see the plunging dip of the dress at the back. My fingers tingle. *How dare she exhibit herself so?*

Next to me, Saint draws in a sharp breath.

I don't need to turn to find out that he's turned on. All of my friends—no, strike that —none of them deserve to be called anything except my most hated acquaintances because they've seen her in that dress.

I want to tear the fabric off of her, bury my nose in the cloth and drag her essence into my lungs. Right before I spin her around, bend her at the waist and claimed her for myself. Imprint myself in every orifice of her body, until every pore on her skin oozes with my sperm. *Fuck.*

"Who is she?"

"What do you mean?" I growl. "She's my bride."

"Not her." Saint jerks his chin. "The other woman, in the golden-brown sheath who just walked in."

The hell is he talking about?

There is no other woman here except the siren wrapped in that delectable dress that I am going to ensure will be burned. Only so that she'll never tease me again with the hint of flesh that peeks from between that slit as she takes a step forward. Another.

Summer's gaze locks with mine, holds.

Her hips sway under the silky soft fabric. Her cheeks are pale, despite the blusher. Good. I narrow my gaze and her throat moves as she swallows. She is within a foot of me when I glare at her. Her pupils dilate. Her chin trembles. She pauses.

Don't give up now, little Bird. Come closer. Closer.

She inches toward me. Her scent deepens. The pulse at the base of her throat flutters with such speed that I am sure she is not only afraid but also aroused. As turned on as I am in this instant, my cock jumps forward, and I widen my stance to accommodate my arousal. Bet it's clear to the rest how aroused I am, but what-bloody-ever.

She takes the final step that brings her within a few inches of me. Nervousness vibrates off of her. She blinks and the chemistry between us seems to ratchet up. Takes another step, then pitches forward.

Summer

Fuck, fuckity, fuck.

The ground comes up to meet me. This is it; I am going to fall and ruin every bit of impact I've created so far. Gonna make a fool of myself after all that effort I went to, to appear sexy and alluring. So damn clumsy. *How could you do this, Summer?* I squeeze my eyes shut, wait for the inevitable collision with the floor. A hard band fastens around my waist and I am tugged against a very hard, broad expanse of what seems to be pure, unforgiving, muscle. *No, no, no.* I hold onto the bouquet of flowers. Then scent of bergamot and expensive leather fills my senses.

"You need to look where you are going." His warm breath sears my cheek.

The hair on my forearms stands on end.

"Open your eyes, Bird."

I shake my head.

"You can't postpone it forever. You may as well accept your fate."

Never. I'll fight this... this thing between us, no matter that the attraction thrums at the edges of my nerves. All of my brain cells seem to have turned into mush. My knees tremble. His hold on my waist tightens.

I peer up and my gaze collides with his.

Silver flecks flare deep in those indigo eyes.

"You need to be careful about what you decide to take on."

I tremble and he straightens me. I try to pull away. His grip on my chin

tightens. He peers into my eyes, the intensity almost a physical caress. My thighs clench. Damn him and this overwhelming physical response I always have to him. I straighten my spine, hold his attention. Will not look away. Will not. One side of his lips curls. He tilts his head. In acknowledgement? An acceptance of the battle lines that I have drawn?

Why am I intent on making this difficult for the two of us? Why can't I fall in line with whatever he has in his mind, toe the line, and then walk away unharmed? Because that is never going to happen. If I give in to him, he'll only want more. The only way to come out of this in one piece is to hold my own. To dig in my heels and show him that he can't take me for granted. If that means I have to resort to grandstanding, then so be it.

"I know exactly what I am taking on." I jut out my chin.

"Oh?"

I tilt my head back, not breaking our connection. "Question is, do you?"

His nostrils flare; the skin around his eyes tightens. A cloud of heat spools off of his body and slams into my chest. I gasp.

The weight of his dominance seems to intensify, pinning me in place. I can't move. Can't breathe. Can't turn away from the heavy weight of his presence which seems to coil around me, squeezing my hips, my thighs. I gulp. A bead of sweat slides down between my breasts and his gaze darts down, then swivels up to my face. His lips curl in that infernal smirk. All of my nerve-endings seem to flare at once. Damn the man.

"Typically, you'd kiss the bride after the wedding, but perhaps you want to do the honors now?"

A voice cuts through the tension between us. I stiffen.

He leans in closer, drops his head until our eyelashes tangle. I part my lips. *Do it. Please.* My breath catches.

Sinclair lets go of me so suddenly that I stumble, then right myself. *Jerk.*

I clutch the stems of my flowers with such force that my nails bite through the tender stems and into the palms of my hands. Why did I think this day would be any different from the other times we've spent together, eh?

He turns to face the minister. "I can wait."

A hot feeling stabs inside my chest. I didn't want him to kiss me anyway. So why is there a heaviness behind my eyes? I raise my head, stare forward.

The minister's lips move. I don't hear what he's saying. I stare past him at the wall at the far side of the property—the water rippling down the

surface, the birds that fly off a tree to the side, taking with them, the last of my composure. My lips tremble. Damn the man.

"Sinclair Amadeus Sterling, do you take Summer Cora West as your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do."

I hear the words as if from far away. Above me, the wind picks up. A gust blows past me and I stagger. *I can't do this. I can't.* The world swims around me. The minister's face fades in and out in front of my eyes. *I. Can't.*

A wide palm grips my fingers, coaxes me to loosen my grip. I watch as the bouquet slips from my fingers. He catches it midair, hands it to someone next to me.

Sinclair tugs at my arm and I turn to face him.

Indigo eyes fill my vision. Turquoise and cerulean and so many shades of cyan that they seem to reflect the skies overhead.

"Summer Cora West, do you take Sinclair Amadeus Sterling as your lawfully wedded husband to love, respect and to obey?"

I blink. *Obey?* Of course, he'd highlight that, huh?

His gaze intensifies. Those dark pupils seem to sweep away all barriers and tear right into my soul. He can see me naked. All of my fears and hopes and aspirations—he owns all of them. I've been his from the moment I set eyes on him. When he'd commanded me, the bartender, that I'd had enough. When he'd swept into my life with the force of a hurricane sweeping aside all protests. I never stood a chance. I'd added my yes to his every command. And yet I am here, standing in front of him, trying to make a last stand. A ball of emotion plugs my throat. I try to draw in a breath and my lungs burn. I shake my head. Open my mouth.

His glare deepens. Then he drops his head and closes his mouth over mine. He thrusts his tongue between my lips, draws on any remaining air I had left. He sucks from me, drinks from me, buries his teeth into my lower lip with such force that I taste blood. Pain sweeps down my spine. My thighs spasm. All thoughts drain from my mind. A silence replaces the screaming echoes in my head. He softens the kiss, swipes his tongue across my lower lip. Once, twice. A trembling springs to life, low in my womb. A moan bleeds from my mouth and he swallows it up. His entire body seems to shudder. Nah, must be my imagination. The next second he pulls away. Searches my features. He must have found what he was looking for, for he nods.

"Ask her again." He addresses the priest without taking his eyes off of me.

"Sin..." the priest's voice has an edge of something hard to it.

"Do it." He growls.

Silence for another beat, then the priest asks the question.

Sinclair doesn't break the connection between us. He rubs his thumb over my wrist, a gentle circle that leaves a trail of sparks in his wake. I gulp.

"Summer?" The priest's voice coaxes me.

Sweat beads my palms.

"I do."

My heartbeat ratchets up. My guts churn. A gust of wind blows my hair about my face and I shiver.

He pushes the strands of hair away from my temples. "You did well, Bird." His lips quirk.

Something warm coils in my chest. I can't tear my gaze from his features. Those high cheekbones, that hooked nose, and the pouty thrust of his lower lip.

"Do you have the rings, Sinclair?"

His features harden.

"Sin?"

His jaw tics. "No rings."

Oh! I blink. What had I expected? That he'd have rings for the both of us? I mean, I hadn't consciously thought of it, to be honest. I'd assumed, though, that he'd surprise me. And he had, just not in the way I'd expected.

His features harden and he scans my features again. If he wants a reaction, he'll be disappointed. It's better this way. No physical signs that there is anything between us... Nothing except that piece of footage which he holds over me, which ensures that I'll comply with his every demand. I firm my lips.

"... I now proclaim you man and wife. You may now kiss the bride."

He lowers his head, I turn my face, and his lips brush my cheek.

He whispers, "Enjoy your last few seconds of freedom, for soon you'll be caged."

I draw in a sharp breath, peer up to find his lips curved in a smirk. He tilts his head, and the fire in those eyes switches off. How does he do it? Blow hot one second and cold the next. Why can't I be that heartless, that single-minded in my quest? Because I am too human, too emotional. Too good for

him. I am no match for his iron will, the sheer strength of determination that resides in every pore of his body. And I am wedded to him... At least, for the next twenty-five days. Anger floods my chest and my guts heave. I raise my palm.

He shakes his head. "You'll regret it."

He's right.

The realization sinks into me, at the same time a trembling grips my body. The pulse thuds at my temples; adrenaline laces my blood. I need to get away from him before I have a complete breakdown. I pivot and rush down the path I had taken earlier, when a man steps in front of me.

Tall, broad shoulders, gray streaks his temples. His green eyes with specks of gray similar to mine brighten with recognition.

"Summer, look at you, my little girl, all grown up."

33

Sin

"Father?" Her spine tenses.

The older man walks toward her.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here to walk you down the aisle."

I'd made sure of that. One of the many wedding gifts I'd had in store for my new bride.

Her father extends his hand, and she flinches. He folds his arm around her and draws her in for an embrace.

She stands stiffly in the circle of his arms as he pats her back.

She cringes and I clench my fists. Of course, I hadn't expected the meeting between them to be effusive. After all, the man had abandoned his daughters and left them to their own fate. But hey, I'm not completely heartless. I had given her enough warning that he would be here... She hadn't known exactly when and I'd made sure it would be at her weakest. I'd wanted to see her fall apart in front of her father. Wanted to see how he'd react to seeing her after all this time. Well, I have my answer. The bastard is gloating at the chance to use her to further his own interests, while Summer is in complete shock.

If she'd been close to falling apart earlier, clearly, she's reached the end of her tether.

Adam's features twist. He glances past her and his gaze locks with mine. I tilt my head.

What will he do next? How will he orchestrate the rest of the meeting on

which depends the rest of his future? This is what I excel at, right? Putting the pawns together, watching their interaction, enjoying their discomfort, and waiting for something to give. It's how I've won my business successes. Constantly on the move, looking for my next victim, which in this case, happens to be him.

I should be happy, celebrating how I am so very close to getting revenge for everything I had lost. So, why is my heart heavy? Why is there a burning sensation in my gut?

Adam's lips twist in a half smile. He grips her arm; she pulls away.

He wraps his arm around her shoulders and every muscle in her body goes rigid. *Fuck this.* I cross the distance to them.

"Aren't you going to introduce us, Summer?"

She doesn't react.

I slide my arm around her waist, tug her close.

Adam steps back, a gleam in his dark eyes.

Bastard had been trying to get a response out of me. He'd been trying to gauge how far my feelings for his daughter actually go. Have I underestimated him? I frown. Did I make a mistake by calling him to be witness to this wedding?

Does Adam actually care about his daughter or is he trying to figure out how much I do, then use it against me?

It doesn't matter. I'll find a way to get what I want from him. I always do. Right now, I need to get my wife away from the cause of her discomfort.

Her body trembles and I tuck her into my side.

"Adam Rhodes." The older man thrusts out his hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

I glare at his palm, then tip my chin up, "Can't say the same."

Summer shifts her weight from foot to foot.

I rub the curve of her hip, and she draws in a breath. Some of the tension seems to drain out of her. Good.

"Well, at least you're straight talking. We have that in common."

"Do we?" I thrust out my chin.

He raises his hands, "You invited me, Sinclair. When do we talk about the business proposition?"

My gut clenches and I tighten my hold on Summer. "You came this far for your daughter's wedding, the least you could do is pretend to be happy on her behalf."

"Hmm." He taps his chin. "Oh, I think my daughter understands how happy I am on her behalf." He peers sideways. "Don't you, Summer?"

She drops her head and her features fold into a hardened mask. I've never seen Summer this... cold, this defeated. She's been sassy, full of life, angry and upset... but always, always she's worn her emotions on her sleeve. It's one of the things I've come to expect of her, that she can't hide from me. That is also her appeal. It gives me the security that she'll speak her mind, challenge me, always get a rise from me. It is a fucking turn on. It's also what I miss the most right now. I don't relish seeing her this defeated, this on the verge of being broken... Only I get to do that.

"My wife is tired."

Summer doesn't react to my using that term aloud. *Damn it, that isn't good. Why isn't she saying something?*

"I think she needs to get some rest."

"Of course," he angles his body, "but first I want her to meet someone."

"Victoria," he beckons to the woman behind him. "Come dear, meet your stepdaughter."

A woman steps forward. She's wearing an exquisite golden-brown dress that falls to below her knees. The cut clings to her curves and highlights her pale skin. Her dark hair is a lustrous cloud about her shoulders. She's at least two decades younger than Adam, about Summer's age. Broad forehead, sharp features, her ethereal beauty is enhanced by the haunted look in her eyes.

Behind me, I hear a sharp inhalation of breath. Saint draws abreast with me. I glance sideways and find him staring at Victoria.

Victoria frowns then inches away from Adam. Her movement also takes her closer to Saint, who stares between the two of them.

"Summer, it's lovely to meet you." Victoria stretches out a hand.

Summer swallows. "I didn't realize..."

"That you had a stepmother?"

"...that I had a father." She spits out the words, then straightens.

Adam's jaw firms. "I was hoping you two could get acquainted."

Saint shuffles his feet; his hands are clenched at his sides. Huh? It's as if the man is upset about something.

Victoria's lips twist, "I didn't mean for this to come as such a surprise. I wish there had been a way I could have warned you of our coming... but..."

Summer nods, "You don't need to apologize." Her gaze travels to her father, her eyes narrowing, "I understand how it could have been."

No doubt, the bastard planned this out, springing his new wife on his daughter. I clench my fists at my sides.

Victoria glances from Summer to me, "Perhaps, we can catch up once you are recovered from your wedding and the honeymoon—"

"There is no honeymoon." I interject.

Summer's body tenses again.

Damn it, I hadn't meant for it to come out quite that way... Okay, so I *had* planned to drop that little piece of knowledge at the most opportune time, which is clearly now, seeing the way Summer's breath caught in her chest. She tries to pull away and I grip her to me tighter.

"Not until we've sorted out the little business between us." I nod toward Adam. "Tomorrow."

Why am I postponing this meeting, one for which I've waited for so long?

I step around the couple. Summer follows my lead without protest. That's so not like her. Clearly, her father's presence has completely taken the spirit out of her. It's not exactly what I'd intended. And I don't like it, not one bit. I increase my pace, dragging her along.

I hear Saint strike up a conversation with Adam's wife, "So, Victoria, is it?"

"Mrs. Rhodes to you." Victoria cuts him off. "Are you the hired help?"

34

Summer

"Did she actually ask him that?"

I turn to Sinclair in time to see his lips twitch.

"I do believe the chemistry between Saint and your stepmother is interesting, to say the least."

"He's not the kind who'd seduce a married woman—"

Sinclair shakes his head. "Not that he has many ethics... But *that's* something he steers clear of. Which is one reason I find that scene intriguing."

"You could have warned me that he remarried." I tug my arm free from his and he lets me go. His warmth recedes and chills pepper my arm.

"So could you." He jerks his chin to my dress.

"It's not the same thing."

"Oh?" He tilts his head, "My wife parading herself in almost next to nothing—"

"This is a completely decent dress—"

"Not." He growls, taking the steps two at a time.

I increase my pace to keep up with him. "Aaannd... I'm only your pretend wife," I pant.

His jaw tics and a vein bulges at his temple.

"So, you can't really tell me what to do or wear, considering I don't even have your ring on my finger."

Reaching the landing leading to his room, he stops, turns to peruse my

features. "Is that why you're pouting?"

I force all emotions from my features. "This is my normal resting face."

"And it's a beautiful one, too."

"Did you pay me a compliment?"

He frowns.

"Yes. No." He drags his fingers through his hair. "Maybe."

I go to brush past him and he stops me. "I had your belongings moved."

"Huh?"

He jerks his chin toward the closed double doors. "My suite."

"Bu... but."

"We need to put up enough of a front for people to buy into the pretense."

"No one's gonna pry into your living quarters, are they?"

"They wouldn't dare." He widens his stance, "Consider it a precaution. As much as I trust my staff—I wouldn't have them employed if I didn't—still, I am not taking any chances until the deal is done."

"But—"

He blows out a breath. "Look, Summer, you look beat and I could do with a rest, before we have to join the guests for dinner."

I pale.

"I don't think I can survive having to put up this pretense again today."

"Tell me about it," he mutters. The lines around his mouth seem pronounced. His hair is mussed—from standing outside and because he'd run his hands through the thick strands. Not that I had been watching him closely or anything.

"Can we have this conversation inside my suite?" He runs a finger around his collar as if he finds it particularly constricting. He isn't wearing a tie. Come to think of it, I've never seen him in one, in the little time I've known him.

He shoves open the double doors.

I hesitate.

He raises his shoulders, "Suit yourself." He disappears inside.

I shift my weight from foot to foot, grab a strand of hair and begin to chew on it. Better stop that. Don't want him to realize how nervous I am feeling right now. I walk toward the suite. Then step inside. The doors shut behind me with a snick.

The living space is massive. Three times the size of the room I had occupied. Right. Lifestyles of the rich and famous, huh? I walk to the

massive window and peek outside.

A balcony wraps around the entire floor. On one side of the house the rolling slope of Primrose Hill extends down. I turn the other way and the skyline of London stretches in the distance. It's rare to get a panoramic view of the city, considering government regulations dictate that you can't build above a certain height. To see it here at will is a treat.

The sound of water running in a bath reaches me. I turn, walk toward the door that leads into the bedroom. The room sprawls out about the same size as the one I'd left behind. The pride of place is the massive king size bed that takes up almost one wall. It's draped in a royal blue, the sheets flowing down the sides.

Large pillows are thrown against the headboard, which is made of unembellished wood. At the foot of the bed is a bench, on which he's discarded his jacket.

The sound of running water grows louder. He stalks out of the bath, his shirt sleeves rolled up. I take in the veins that run up the sides of his powerful forearms. Does the man work out? He has to, considering the shape he is in. The light from the bath highlights the gap between his narrow waist and his forearms. His pants cling to his powerful thigh muscles, showing off the bulge between his legs. Is that his normal resting condition? The man's packing all right, as I discovered from my brush with that particular muscle of his anatomy.

"If you keep staring at me, I'll think you want me to exercise my husbandly duties."

My cheeks burn. I glance up at his face, to find his lips curled in that smirk that I am coming to associate with him. Why does he have to be so overpoweringly handsome, so completely sure of himself? It's part of his appeal and yet—it also makes me want to say something to show him I am not affected by him. *Liar.*

"Where do I sleep?"

He glances past me.

"But there's only one bed—"

"Which is wide enough for the two of us to sleep without touching each other all night.

I chew on my lower lip.

"Trust me." He looks me up and down, "I am acquainted with what you have under that dress, and while I'd love to shag you, I promise you I am not

that hard up."

"That's not what it looked like when you finger fucked me in the conference room."

"There was a reason for doing that."

The video.

He prowls past me, walks toward another door at the far end and shoves it open. He glances back, "I ran a bath for you."

The hell? I walk to the bathroom door and peek inside. It's a beautiful bright space, wide enough to run the length of the bedroom and the living room, a sunken tub takes up a large portion of one entire wall. Beyond that, huge windows open out to let the sunlight inside. To the other side are twin sinks. Piles of folded towels, soap bottles, other bottles of various sizes and colors grace one of the sinks.

I pivot around and he drawls, "You're welcome, by the way."

"You had to go and spoil it by saying that?"

He leans his hip against doorway to the walk-in closet. "Ah, but that's the point. You're still trying to find something nice about me, when really, every single move of mine is calculated to ensure that I get closer to my goal."

"Your revenge, your empire, that's all that matters."

He folds his arms across that broad chest, "Is there anything else?"

"Obviously, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, took lessons from you."

"Actually, it was Gordon fucking Gekko." He smirks.

"This entire thing is a freakin' joke for you, huh?"

"On the contrary." His smile switches off, "I've never been more serious about anything else in my life."

A nerve throbs at his temple. His gaze intensifies.

My breath hitches, my pulse pounds, and liquid heat curls between my legs. I don't realize I've taken a step forward, until he straightens.

He nods toward the bath, "Rest up, Bird, you're going to need it."

35

Sin

"Surprised you went through with the reception, bro." Damian, the self-designated bartender for the evening, hands me a tumbler of whiskey. I grip the glass, toss back its contents.

He raises an eyebrow, but tops me up.

"You okay?"

"Peachy." I suck down the 200-year-old whiskey like it's going out of fashion.

"How's the bridegroom?"

I glance up to find Jace walk in, flanked by Arpad and Weston.

I scowl, "What are you doing here?"

"Wouldn't have missed seeing you hitched for the world, bro. Besides, your friends made sure I knew the date and time."

"Sinclair." A woman shoves herself between Jace and Arpad. The men move apart, and she stalks through. "How could you?"

Bloody hell! "Sienna?" I hold out my glass, Damian shakes his head. "You're drinking this way too fast. You need to be sober."

"Bollocks." I grab the bottle from Damian and top myself up. I'm halfway through emptying the contents of the glass before Sienna reaches me.

"Really, Sin. You thought you could get away with keeping this a secret?"

"I prefer to keep things low-key."

"Huh?" She props a hand on her hip, "You expect me to believe that?"

"Umm." Damn it, I don't want to lie to her.

Sienna and Jace are the only two outside of the circle of the Seven that I'd count as friends. I survey the room. The fuck do I do with this bottle anyway? Damian takes it from me. I shoot him a grateful glance, as he shakes his head and walks off. "You tell him, Sienna. He hasn't introduced his bride to us yet."

Her gaze widens. "Why, Sinclair, how could you?"

"It's not like that." I glance past the comfortable chairs arranged on the decking. Everyone who means something to me—not necessarily in the friend space, but you know what I mean—is there. They look at me with varying expressions of curiosity. There's a hum of anticipation in the air. They're waiting for the bride to arrive. Well, technically so am I, though I don't want to admit it.

A laugh breaks out from a corner, and I turn to find Amelie, engaged in animated discussion with Isla and Karma.

Weston follows my gaze. "Who's that?"

Like I care.

"Why don't you go ahead and introduce yourself? You can find out for yourself that way."

"Maybe I'll do just that, but first..." He turns to the bar and pours out two flutes of champagne. "Can't believe you trusted this wanker to man the bar." He jerks his chin at Damian.

"Hello to you, too." Damian raises his whiskey tumbler and takes a sip. "I do think I am livening up the environment quite nicely."

"Surely you mean bringing down the collective IQ of the place by a hundred, old chap?" Weston chuckles.

Sienna looks between them. "You guys are so delightfully British."

Jace saunters up, pulls her close. "It's the only time I am thankful to my old man for insisting that I go to boarding school in the UK. That accent always does it." He palms her stomach.

"As long as our son or daughter speaks like you, I'm good." She peers up at him.

Damian straightens, "When are you due?"

"We are due in less than four weeks." Jace's chest seems to expand.

Well fuck, the man's done for. Hook, line and sinker.

"I am right chuffed for the both of you." Weston straightens. "However, I see something that needs my attention." He excuses himself and walks over to Amelie.

The three women fall silent as Amelie eyes him suspiciously.

Good for her. She has street smarts written all over her, unlike my wife who is clearly trusting. She has to be for having allowed herself to be ensnared by me. And why do I keep insisting on calling her mine? When she isn't. I haven't touched her, not since that day in my conference room, when I had almost come in my pants, as I had fingered her to orgasm. The taste of her lips, the feel of that soft wet core as she had climaxed on my fingers. The hair on the nape of my neck rises.

I pivot and see her.

She stands at the doorway, the simple pale pink-colored sheath covering her from the high collar to below her knees.

I'd chosen it for her from the wardrobe I'd had delivered for her. It is the most conservative of all the dresses I'd personally picked out for her. What I hadn't counted on was that the sheer simplicity of the cut brings out her curves. It enhances her luscious figure rather than hide it. And the color... The soft pink deepens the flush of her cheeks and compliments the highlights in her hair. My mouth waters. My groin tightens.

I want to lick up the creaminess of her skin, bury my nose in her scented hair, grab the upright perkiness of her breasts and squeeze until her nipples bead, her thighs clench, and the soft flesh between her legs melts with anticipation for me. My cock. My essence inside of her, filling her up and overflowing from her every orifice. *Fuck*. I squeeze my eyes shut, shake my head. When I crack my eyelids open, she's still there. She surveys the room and her gaze homes in on me.

She swallows and I swear I can hear the sound from across the space of the room. She tips her chin up. My dick instantly mirrors the move. This woman... I'd sense her in a packed stadium. Blindfold me and I'll home in on her in a crowded room.

Every pore in my being snaps to attention, every muscle in my body coils with tension. If you cut me open now, my flesh would hum with the need for her. To be inside of her. To pin her to the ground with my cock and thrust into her.

Shag her, mark her, claim her.

The bloody hell—?

One make-believe almost-ceremony and I want to show the world who she truly belongs to. Why is that? Why does it matter that every damn male gaze in the room is drawn to her? And yes, they are people whom I trust, as

much as I can trust anyone, and who'd never breach their loyalty for me—well, all except Saint. That twat, I don't trust. He throws me a smirk. Then crosses the floor toward her. *The fuck—?* What does he think he's doing?

Only when my feet eat up the ground in front of me, do I realize I am moving.

I stalk toward my newly-wedded wife—apparently being at the ceremony did not get the message home to my soon-to-be-murdered ex-friend and business partner—when a man steps in front of me.

36

Summer

What's wrong with him?

Sinclair pauses to speak to my father, his gaze never wavering from me. His nostrils flare; his eyebrows knit. Those indigo eyes blaze as if he's got murder on his mind. Why the hell is he so angry?

Was it something I did?

He fists his fingers at his sides; the skin stretches white at his knuckles. Huh? There's a fierceness to the set of his features that hasn't been there before.

"Jealousy suits him, don't you think?"

His friend steps in front, cutting off Sinclair from my line of sight. That is, if you could call this six-foot six-inch giant of a man—with the elegant gait and the £10,000 pound suits to rival—a friend.

He holds out his hand. "I'm Saint."

"No, you're mistaken." I tilt my head back, all the way back, to peer into his eyes. What is it with these guys? Did they put something in their water growing up, that all of them seem larger than life?

"Trust me when I say this. I've known Sin for a long time, and I've never seen him so riled up about a woman before."

"Maybe it has something to do with—" I hesitate. How much is this guy aware of Sinclair's agenda, huh?

"Revenge?" His lips quirk, "Your father?"

I nod.

"That's primary on all our minds right now. Why do you think all of us—well most of us—are here today?"

"Not for the wedding—" I mumble.

"—As much as to pin your father into a corner and make him, and the men he worked for, pay."

He holds out his arm and I take it. He leads me to the side.

I glance behind to see that the rest of the men have closed in on where Sinclair and Adam are speaking.

"What did my father do to make all of you so hellbent on revenge?" I chew on my lower lip.

Saint stiffens, "How much has Sinclair told you about what happened to us?"

"Nothing." I huff out a breath. Why would he? He doesn't have to. He doesn't owe me anything, except I am now his lawfully wedded wife. No, not even that. "He didn't have to, right? After all he—"

"—Coerced you into this wedding, huh?"

I shoot him a sideways glance, "You don't think I would have done this willingly, do you?"

"Well, he has a way with women."

"Not this one." I pull away from him and he holds on.

"It's in your interest to play along."

"Huh?"

"You want something out of this entire arrangement."

"I'm already getting—"

"Other than a monetary pay off."

"Are all of you as egotistical as him?"

"The jury is out on that. We each have our strengths." He looks up, and I follow his line of sight to the woman standing on her own, staring into the fireplace.

"And weaknesses, apparently," I mutter under my breath.

He shoots me a quick glance. "How well do you know Victoria?"

So, he doesn't want to refer to her as my stepmother, huh?

"First time I've met her."

"Ask her to meet me before she leaves for the States."

"Why?"

"I have a proposition for her."

"Why would she be interested?"

He rakes her figure from head to toe, "Trust me, women like her always are."

I stiffen. I owe nothing to Victoria, but she... is family... sort of. It isn't that I want to look out for her, or my dad... A little bit maybe. Besides, what is Saint's motivation here?

I frown. "We've only just met."

"So?" He pats my hand. "You help me, and I promise, I'll help you find a way to get even with Sterling there."

"I thought you were friends."

"Of the competitive kind.'

"Why do you want to meet her?"

"My intentions, I promise you, are..." He hesitates. "I want to get to know her better."

"You want to get in her pants."

He chuckles. "That too. I won't hurt her." He peruses my features. "Not unless she wants me to."

Does he have the same proclivities that Sinclair has hinted at? "Did whatever happened to all of you... result in the same warped tastes tainting each of you?"

He frowns, then drops my hand, "You'll have to ask Sterling that."

"I thought you were going to help me with him?"

"What do you want to know?"

"What's his weakness?"

His lip curls; he surveys me from toe to head.

"No, you're wrong."

"Yes."

"I don't understand.'

"You, Summer West, have singularly ruffled him. You've gotten under his skin to an extent you don't realize."

"What do you mean?"

"This marriage, it wasn't part of the plan."

"Oh."

"We tried to dissuade him."

"We?"

"The Seven." He makes a circular motion with his fingers.

Ah! I scan the faces of the men in the room.

"Jace isn't one of us," he adds. "The Seventh, Baron, is not here

currently." Saint slides his hand into his pocket, every inch the picture of a self-assured, domineering, upper-class twat. "Sinclair feels something for you. He's so far gone in his emotions that he doesn't realize how much he is vested in this sham."

My heart begins to thud. "What are you trying to say?" I can guess, but I want him to tell me. Want to hear it in his own words.

"You, my dear, are his weakness."

A hand descends on his shoulder. I glance past Saint to find Sinclair glaring at me. "Get away from her."

"Just a conversation, old chap."

"Anything you want to say to her, goes through me."

"Hold on a second." I huff, "I am still here."

Saint steps away, "Whatever you say." He turns to me, "Ask her, will you?"

Sinclair plants his body between us, "Here, asshole," he indicates his face, "you direct your questions here."

Saint's eyebrows fly up. "Possessive much?"

"Bugger off."

"You can take the man out of the gutter, but not the upbringing that clings to every part of your core, eh?"

Every muscle in Sinclair's body goes solid. His shoulders seem to bulge, stretching the already tight fit of his shirt. He withdraws his arm and I grab it. "Don't."

The tension radiates off of him, under his skin. The warmth of his body sinks into my fingertips, travels straight to its logical destination. My core.

I dig my fingertips into his forearm. He's so big that I have to use both of my hands to circle the circumference of his muscle. "Please."

He leans forward on the balls of his feet; his jaw tics. "I am going to kill you for touching her."

I stare. *What's gotten into him?*

Saint glowers, "Getting tired of your empty threats, Sterling."

Oh, for heaven's sake!

I shove my body between the two of them.

Sinclair glares at Saint.

I stand on my tiptoes and grab Sin's collar.

"What the—?" He glances down.

I tug him toward me, rise up on my tiptoes and kiss him.

His lips are softer than I remembered them to be. Which must be my imagination because there's nothing soft about this man. I nibble on his lower lip, and his entire body goes solid. He stays there, unmoving. I'm trying to distract him from getting into a fight? *Why?*

Why does it matter to me, that I don't want him to embarrass himself in front of his friends? They know him better than I do, for much longer than I have. They are probably used to him creating a scene. But instinct had taken over, and a surge of possessiveness, maybe. My heart stutters. For that second, I'd felt a kernel of ownership over him, concern about his reputation. Or a thrill at the fact that he'd been jealous because another man had touched me? Either way, I had been stupid to act on impulse. I disentangle my arms and step back.

"Sorry." I mumble. "That was not warranted."

I angle my body with the intent of leaving. The next second his arms loop around my waist. I squeak. He hauls me up and to him. His mouth crashes down on mine. I gasp aloud and the sound is lost, consumed by him.

His tongue thrusts between my open lips, tangles with mine.

The dark taste of him fills my palate. The heat of his body slams into me, surrounds me and ties me to him. His palm cups my cheek, cradling my head, tilts my face up, deepening the kiss further. He yanks me close, until my breasts are flattened against the unforgiving wall of his chest. My nipples bead and my sex clenches. Every pore in my body seems to open with anticipation, and still, he doesn't stop.

His teeth clash with mine, his tongue laps at mine, the scent of him fills my senses. His hard thighs cradle my hips and the turgid length of his cock jumps against my core. I swallow, try to pull away, but his large fingers wrap around my neck. I stutter. He holds me in place, every millimeter of my body pressed against his, branding me, owning me, a clear signal that I am his.

I won't be able to escape him. Will not be able to leave this relationship unhurt. He's possessed my soul since the second he'd laid eyes on me, had claimed my body from the moment he'd met me. I'd been so wrong to think that I could find my way out of this, because I can't. I am caught, going to burn up in the flames that are Sinclair Sterling, for he gives no quarter. Cares for no one. Looks out for no one, except himself... and perhaps, the Seven?

A trembling sweeps up my body. My hands shake and my knees knock together. The utter rightness of my thoughts sinks into my bones. My heart begins to thud. He is every bit the untamable alpha male that his reputation

pains him to be. Is that why I am so drawn to him, unable to pull away from him, as he ravages my mouth, brands me with his touch? Is that why I can't stop the moan that bleeds from my mouth? He bites down on my lower lip. I gasp. Goosebumps dot my skin. He tears his mouth from mine, and I sway.

"Look at me."

I crack open my eyelids, meet that indigo gaze. The silver flecks in them flare.

"You're mine, Bird."

I swallow. Can't look away. Can't refute the heated possessiveness in his eyes.

The sound of clapping reaches me. I wince. My shoulders shake. He wraps his arm around me, turns me around and tucks me into his side.

My hands and feet are so numb. A cold sensation slides down my back, and I shiver.

He tugs me closer, searing my side with the heat of his intention. My throat goes dry. He wants me, that much is clear. That doesn't change anything. Yet something has shifted in the last few seconds. The balance has tilted further in his favor, if that is possible. I want him, want to feel his touch on my skin. Yet everything inside of me wants to turn him away. My head spins.

The blonde man from behind the bar, steps around the barrier. Comes toward us with two glasses of Champagne. "A toast."

Sinclair takes the two glasses and hands me one.

The voices in the room quieten. A beat, another.

He releases me, only to step around to face me.

I stare at the strong cords of his throat. If I leaned in, I could press my nose to the space between them, inhale that dark edgy scent of his. I shiver.

"The moment I saw you, I knew you were the one, Summer."

A hush descends on the room. I swallow hard, and in the silence, hear the blood pound in my ears.

"Then you walked into that elevator and I was sure." He pauses, unbuttons his jacket. His white shirt clings to the hard planes of his chest, the buttons opened enough to reveal a few strands of black hair. Heat pools between my legs and I squeeze my thighs together.

"The third time I saw you, you were talking to yourself."

What? I tilt my chin up and—mistake, *dammit*—his gaze locks with mine.

My throat closes and my pulse begins to race. His eyes gleam with sincerity; a warmth that draws me in and insists that he's telling the truth. Is he? The skin around his eyes creases.

"That's when I fell in love with you."

I blink. This man... he's such a consummate liar. If anyone could reflect their heart in their eyes, then it would be him, in this instant.

"I knew then, I had to make you mine. To tie you to me irrevocably, so you could never leave me."

A sigh sounds from behind me. A drawn breath. Can no one here see through his pretense?

He moves closer and the chemistry between us ratchets up. His broad shoulders shut out the sight of everyone else. He could be talking only to me, revealing his true self. I watch entranced, a part of me applauding at the show he's putting on.

"For, you complete me."

He did not just say that.

The most overrated movie dialogue of all time; and he's using it at this precise moment.

If he'd wanted to cut right through my heart, he couldn't have done it better. Oh, he's smart, this man. He knows me too well. Knows how to throttle every last one of my silly desires.

Someone claps, and another, and a third joins in.

Without anyone in the room realizing what he's done.

"I am the luckiest man alive to be able to call you my wife."

I turn away, tears pricking my eyes. My throat closes. Pressure builds at my temples.

"Summer Sterling."

The complete confidence in his tone lashes me about my shoulders. I strain against the pull he exerts on me, force myself to take another step forward. And another.

"Can I call you by my name?"

I pause. My feet refuse to move. Damn this man. How can he throw me down one moment, then lift me up high above the clouds, make me reach for the sun the next?

Doesn't he realize how cruel it is when he does that?

It will leave me floundering in the gutter, mired in the throes of the passion that laces his words; the one that compels me to turn around and

swallow.
"Never."

37

Sin

She wasn't supposed to be this smart, this magnificent, this able to match me step for step.

After that rejoinder to my completely unplanned speech—yeah, that's how much she's managed to throw me off course—the entire room had gone silent. Anger had crawled down my spine, mixed with fierce pride.

Then the room had erupted in applause.

"Bravo." Arpad had come forward and kissed her on both cheeks. I hadn't stopped him, only because the tosser's heart is keen on someone else. Besides, it is a typical Gaelic affectation, one that I'd let him get away with, this once.

Her friends had surrounded her. Saint had held back. Good. Guess he'd gotten the message, finally. Don't hold your breath.

I'd stepped forward and the crowd had parted.

Had approached my new bride. "Touché, Darling." I'd raised my glass at her, and she'd shot me a look, one filled with so much anger that my dick had jumped to attention. *Fuck.*

She'd jutted out her chin, held my attention, refused to cave in as I'd glared at her; and that took a lot of courage. Not even the Seven—except Saint, maybe—would have taken up the gauntlet I'd thrown down. She had.

She'd known what I had been up to; that I'd used her love for movie trivia against her. I hadn't been kidding when I'd said that I was a master at it—an old love, that I had forgotten and which she'd rekindled in the past few

days. I was using it to undermine her. It could have very much been code language that I was speaking. I had intended the underlying meaning for her, had no idea if she'd pick up on it. Especially the last movie title I had pulled on her? It wasn't a mainstream Hollywood film but an Indie flick based on a novel. *The fuck?* Those forgotten loves from my childhood... of reading, running in the countryside. Those had been idyllic days before her father had changed my life forever.

It's why I had tracked her down, ensured that she'd have to agree to my plans. Only she'd overthrown them completely. She'd turned out to be something completely different. She may be younger than me in years, except she makes up for it by her sheer determination. That hunger for survival which had kept me going all through the time that the Seven and I had almost lost our lives—? I sense that naked intent in her too. She's my perfect foil. I couldn't have chosen a better life-partner if I had set out to intentionally find one. I stiffen. The accuracy of my words sinks into my blood, confirming what I already knew. I need to stop this crazy one-track road to my destruction. Need to focus on the end goal. The big finish I have been setting up for so long.

The end of her father, destroying him so he no longer has the will to survive. Which, means one thing—taking away his money, his freedom, his new wife, and any remaining connection to his daughters.

And getting permanently tangled up in *her* life, with her relationship to him always at the forefront of my mind, is unacceptable. It is time I fuck her out of my system.

I glance up from the window of my bedroom, twist my neck to find her by the entrance. I'd made our excuses and hustled her here.

Not that anyone would have missed us.

Each of the Seven knew what was expected of them. All of the players were assembled on the lawn below. They'd do their bit. It was time I put my own plan in action.

"Shut the door."

She trembles, and I tilt my head.

She firms her lips, turns and slams the doors inward. They close with a soft snick.

"Look at me."

She hesitates.

I wait a beat, another.

"Don't keep me waiting, Bird."

She pivots to face me. Her fingers curl into fists at her sides. Guess I pissed her off, huh?

I jerk my chin and she takes a step forward. Another, until she reaches the bed.

"Stop."

She pauses.

"Undress."

She stiffens.

This is when she protests, yells at me, or better still, turns and rushes out to appeal to our guests, who are partying below.

Instead, she reaches behind.

I hear the hiss of a zipper and fuck me but I'm instantly hard.

She raises her hand to the neckline, tugs the material down one shoulder, then the other. Her movements are precise; her fingers tremble. The dress whispers down to pool at her hips.

My mouth waters; my chest hurts. "Take it off completely."

She shimmies out of the outfit. It pools at her ankles and she kicks it aside. She stands, chest thrust out, the perfect globes of her breasts bared. I rake my gaze down her chest and her nipples harden. Down the concave of her stomach to the satin triangle of her panties.

I glance at the scrap of cloth, then at her face.

Her cheeks pale.

I raise my eyebrow and she sets her jaw. Then shoves her underwear down and kicks it off. I drop my gaze to the flesh between her thighs, the completely bare flesh with the tiny slit at its base that glistens pink in the late evening sunlight.

My cock thickens. A pulse drums at my wrists, at my temples, even in my fucking balls. *The fuck is she doing to me?* I need to be inside of her before I explode right here in in my pants.

Her fingers clench at her sides, "Happy?"

Not even close.

"Get on the bed, on your hands and knees."

Her chest heaves. Her beautiful green pupils dilate. From anger? From lust? I am going to find out. "Do it."

She draws in a breath, then clambers onto the bed. On her elbows and knees, her sweet butt thrust out in the air. My dick lengthens. My throat

closes. She has such a hold on me, and she doesn't realize it. I plan to keep it that way.

I stalk over to her, stand at the foot of the bed, "Open wider."

She wriggles her hips, then increases the 'V' between her thighs. The blush pink of her pussy glistens between her legs. The blood empties to my groin so fast that my head spins.

I lean forward, cup her arse. She whimpers.

Drag my thumb down the valley between her butt cheeks. She shudders. A moan bleeds from her lips. Her spine bends.

I pull back and let my palm connect with her arse. She hiccoughs.

"You defied me."

Crack. I slap her curved behind and her entire body jerks. She huffs.

"In front of everyone."

I spank her again, and she snarls.

"You like to challenge me, Bird?"

I slap her curved tush. She makes a noise somewhere between a growl and an assent.

"Tell me, you want to go toe to toe with me?"

She nods.

"Speak."

"Yes." The word comes out on a moan.

"Good, then you must pay the consequences for your actions. Let it not be said that I did not give you enough of a warning, sweet Summer."

I spank her beautiful, tight arse again. She howls. And again; she cries out. Six, seven, eight. I increase the intensity of my beating—faster, harder, more frequent. Her thighs quiver; her body sinks down into the mattress.

"Hold up your butt, or else I swear, little Bird, I won't stop until I've forced an orgasm out of you, without touching your cunt."

She growls something unintelligible. Lowers her head, until her cheek is smashed into the mattress. Glances over her shoulder. Her green eyes blaze at me; her lips tremble. Color flushes her cheeks. Every curve of her body is defiant, every angle of her spine rigid. Her fingers dig into the fabric of the bedspread. Good. "Are you turned on?"

She stares.

"Speak now, or so help me Bird, I'll—"

"No."

I spank her butt and she shudders.

And again.

"Are you going to fight me again?"

She winces.

"Say it."

"Yes." She juts out her chin and I can't stop my lips from curling.

"Good." *Then you won't mind if I punish you a little longer?*

Her lips part, "No, don't—"

Ten, eleven, twelve... I spank her heart-shaped behind again and again. With each slap, her entire body bows, trembles, her knuckles whiten, the scent of her arousal deepens, her feet, still in the satin custom-made stilettos, dig into the mattress.

Her chin quivers, her shoulders heave, a tear rolls down her cheek; she doesn't lower her eyes. Doesn't look away. Doesn't make a noise, until I raise my arm again.

"Stop." She wheezes.

"Why should I?"

"Because..." She swallows, "I'm sore."

I bring down my palm again on her butt and she moans.

"Because I want you to."

Wrong answer. I spank her again and her entire body shudders. Her chin wobbles; her shoulders pull back, "Because I am your wife?"

"That's right." I lower my arm, loosen the buckle of my belt, and her gaze drops to my crotch. "It's why I am going to fuck your cunt, so you'll never forget it."

I drag down the zipper of my pants and my dick swings free. She draws in a sharp breath.

"It's why I am going to imprint myself on every cell of your body." I lean forward until my dick is lined up with her pussy. "Until your every thought, every sentence, every last string of trivia in your mind will begin and end with me."

She shudders. "Fuck you, Sinclair Sterling."

"With pleasure."

I back up, then bring down my palm.

38

Summer

His palm connects with my pussy, and I explode.

Moisture pools between my legs. The trembling sweeps up my calves, my thighs, zings up my spine and shatters behind my eyes. My hands shake, my legs give way. I lurch forward and come to a stop.

Wha—?

His hands grip my waist, the width of his palms span me end to end. The warmth from the connection sinks into my blood, rolls toward its inevitable destination—my melting center.

"Sinclair—"

"Sin."

"Eh?"

"Call me Sin."

"Goddam you." I bite down on my lower lip, "Why don't you fuck me and be done with it?"

"Ask for it."

"No."

He palms my throbbing arse and sensations coil in my core. He drags the head of his cock between my melting lower lips and I moan. The thick length of him hints at how good it would be if I gave in to him. The emptiness inside of me claws, deepens. So hollow. So incomplete. I dig my fingers into the bedspread. No way am I giving him what he wants.

"So stubborn."

I sense him move. The heat of him envelops my back, sidles down the dip between my sensitized thighs. My throat closes.

"So responsive."

He nuzzles the skin at the point where my shoulder meets my neck, and my sex clenches. Goosebumps flare on my skin; my breath catches. He moves my hair aside, presses little kisses to the nape of my neck. I shiver. He sucks on the skin right there where I am the most sensitive and I moan.

He massages my hip, his blunt fingers long enough to graze the edge of my sensitive slit. The rough hair on his groin grazes my tingling backside and pinpricks of pain radiate out from his touch. A whine spills from my lips.

Is that me? Why do I sound so needy? Why is my body betraying everything that I am trying to communicate to him?

"So beautiful." He nibbles a path down the length of my spine and my heart begins to thud. Blood engorges my clit, my nipples pebble with such intensity that they hurt. I bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from asking him to take me, to put an end to this craziness, whatever it is that stretches, connects me to him. My mind to his. My heart to the essence of his being that is surely the darkest, blackest soul to ever exist. So why am I aching for him?

He drags his chin down the length of my spine and goosebumps flare on my skin.

"Ask me to fuck you."

I shake my head.

"Please."

I shudder. My heart clenches. Something inside of me snaps. Oh, hell, I am so going to regret this. I draw in a breath, "Fuck me, Sin."

His entire body seems to freeze. Tension radiates off of him. The heat from his body intensifies, until I am sure I am melting inside and out. Sweat beads my forehead, my nerve endings pop, crackle, waiting, waiting.

His breath teases the shell of my ear, "Thank you, Bird."

My throat closes.

I sense him draw back, his hands grip my hips, then he plows into me. I scream. Pain slices through me and I try to pull away.

"The bloody fuck—?"

His grip tightens.

"You lied to me?"

"Nothing you didn't do first. I was returning the favor."

His fingertips dig into my side, "You were using me?"

"As were you."

"You wanted me to feel guilty about taking your virginity?"

"Do you?" I glance at him and wince.

His face is all hard planes and shadows. His cheekbones stand out so sharply that I could cut my skin on them.

"No." He sets his jaws with a snap, and I can literally hear the sound of his molars grinding. "You want to know how it makes me feel, Bird?"

A vein throbs at his temple.

"Answer me."

"H... how?"

A bead of sweat slides down his temple; a muscle jumps at his jaw line. The white lines that crease his mouth reveal how close he is to losing control. The force of his dominance leaps off of him, and crashes down on my shoulders. It pins me down. I stare unable to move. Unable to glance away.

His hand slides down my belly and grazes my clit. Sensations of heat spiral from his touch. He leans his upper body closer, until the hard planes of his chest seem to envelop me from all sides.

I gulp; my toes curl. What's he going to do next?

He drops his head and licks my lips, "It makes me want to fuck the defiance out of you, so you'll never lie to me again."

My throat closes. A ball of emotion fills my chest. All of my brain cells seem to ignite together. How can he sound so harsh, so uncompromising, yet so filthy at the same time? And why the hell do I find it so arousing? My pussy spasms and he groans.

"You like the thought of that, eh?"

Yes.

Yes.

I shake my head.

"Still lying, hmm?" He tilts his hips, and his dick twitches. "Time you learned not to lie." He pinches my clit.

More wetness pools between my legs. A moan bleeds from my lips.

His shoulders bulge, his biceps seem to grow larger. "Those tiny sounds you make fucking turn me on, you know that?" His eyelids half close, until only a sliver of indigo shines from between them. I shiver. His features close, his gaze intensifies.

"I don't want to hurt you."

I swallow.

"Though I am beginning to think you like it when I do."

I bite the inside of my cheek, to stop myself from agreeing.

He pulls out of me and the pain recedes; he stays poised at the entrance to my lower lips. His fingers strum my clit. I shiver. He releases my hip to bring his other hand up to cup my breast. His palm is so big, it dwarfs my flesh. My nipples grow turgid. He tugs at the sensitive peaks, and I shudder. Throw my head back, arching my neck. He drags his chin down the delicate column. My scalp tingles, my toes curl.

"I am going to fuck you now."

I swallow. He strums the swollen lips of my pussy and a trembling starts from deep inside.

He releases his hold on my breasts, only to wrap his fingers around my throat. Panic bubbles up from somewhere deep inside and my skin stretches until it feels too tight. He presses his thumb to the pulse at the hollow of my neck.

"Shh." His warm breath lifts the hair at my temples. "Let me do this right for you, Bird."

I shiver.

"Focus on my touch, my heat, my voice; forget everything else. Follow my lead. Can you do that, hmm?"

I nod.

"Good girl." His warmth cocoons me, his thighs cradle mine, his fingers play with my pussy. He nudges my wet entrance with his dick, "Do you trust me?"

No.

No.

I nod.

His chest expands behind me and his muscles seem to go solid. "Hold onto me." His shaft nudges my wet entrance; his grip on my neck tightens.

He thrusts forward and his dick fills me. I gasp; my thighs clench.

Tendrils of heat coil deep inside, as the pressure at the base of my spine grows.

He stays there, and I draw in a breath. His cock pulses inside of me and a moan wells up.

"You okay?"

"Y... yes."

His muscles tense; his arms vibrate with the stress of holding up his body weight.

He pulls back, then pumps his hips forward. Pain slices through me, the pleasure welling up on its heels.

The vibrations slam against the fingers that stroke my throat and I can sense every single separate intonation.

"Shh, let me make this good for you."

His lips touch my nape. Pinpricks of heat radiate out from the contact. He draws my hair aside, nibbles on the skin at the juncture of where my neck meets my shoulder. I shiver. He licks his way down the curve of my arm, then bites down.

My sex clenches; moisture pools between my legs.

A groan rumbles up his chest. "You're killing me."

He buries his nose against my skin, "And you smell so fucking good."

A pressure begins to build between my legs...

"I can't hold back, Bird. I have to move."

I jerk my chin, bite down on my lower lip. "Please." The word spills from my lips.

"Thank fuck." He tilts his hips and thrusts, sliding into me again. Too much, too full. Pain thrums up my spine. I huff, curve my spine.

"Shh." He kisses the side of my neck, then fastens his teeth on my earlobe. He tugs and a melting sensation unfurls somewhere deep inside.

"Oh." I tilt my head, giving him access and he obliges.

He strokes his tongue over my earlobe, then eases it inside the hollow of my ear. I shiver; goosebumps flare on my skin.

What the hell?

How had I not known that it could be so erotic to have him nibble on my ear lobe, suck on it, as he grips my hips, propels forward and buries himself inside me?

"Sin. Please."

I squeeze my eyes, throw my head back. His grasp on my hip holds me in place. He cups my breast, pinches the nipple. *Jesus*. Flashes of heat go off behind my eyes. I am flying, floating... somewhere in that space between pleasure and pain.

He releases my breasts, and I groan.

He slides his hand down to cup my pussy, strum my lower lips, pinch my clit, and I cry out.

The pressure intensifies, grows, radiates out to my extremities. My feet dig into the mattress, my fingers clench, and every pore in my skin seems to open.

He slams into me again with enough force that my entire body bucks. His lips brush my ear. "Come."

And I shatter. The sensations sweep up my chest; my heart pounds against my ribcage with such force that I am sure it's going to jump out. He loosens the grip on my throat and the climax engulfs me. The blood drums against my temples. Sparks of red and white fill my vision. Then, that too, fades away. Darkness pulls me under.

Something cold slides between my legs, and my eyelids flutter. I glance down to find that I am on my back, legs spread wide. A dark hand wipes a pristine white towel down my throbbing center. I wince.

"Shh! Let me take care of you."

He dabs the cold towel on either side of my thighs. The coolness permeates my skin, and the burning eases, somewhat. "Better?"

I nod.

He straightens, walks into the adjoining bath. The door is open, and light pours out. I hear the sound of a cabinet being opened and closed. Then he walks out again. The bed dips as he places a knee between my legs. He squeezes out something from a tube. "What's that?"

He spreads it out onto my thighs. A cold sensation sinks into my blood and all remaining aches instantly recede. "Is that—?"

"Aloe."

"Do you do this often?"

"What?"

"Take care of virgins in your bed."

He straightens, caps the ointment, then walks past the bed to place it on the side table.

"I've never slept with one before."

"Oh."

"And I am only taking care of you, so you are ready for another round."

"Wait... what?"

He slides onto the bed, "Scoot over."

"You don't mean that?" My pussy clenches. Moisture seeps from my core.

I shift to the other side, making sure there's the width of the bed between us.

He folds his arm behind his neck, "Don't I?"

He closes his eyes, and I peer at his features. That hard countenance, the hooked nose that caps the surprisingly pouty lower lip, and I am familiar with how that tastes.

"I suggest you get some sleep."

"And round two?"

He opens one eye, "I'm beginning to think you can't get enough of me."

Jerk. I scramble back, then pull the covers up to my chin.

Close my eyes, try to sleep. Turn on my side. Wriggle my feet, then turn over on my back. Dammit, now I have an itch on my back. I shift my hips, arch my spine, try to reach the spot which is below my nape.

"What are you doing?" He grumbles.

"Trying to scratch an itch, you mind?"

"I can do that for you—"

"Not that kind." I huff.

"Hmm."

I roll my shoulder blades against the bed.

There's a long inhalation of breath. Then the mattress, dips. He shifts toward me. "Turn over."

"But."

He grabs my shoulder and moves me on my side.

"Where is it?"

"Center of my back."

He places his palm unerringly on the right spot and drags his fingers down the length of my back.

"Oh," I can't stop the moan that bleeds from my lips. He repeats the action, this time in reverse.

"Ah."

I stretch into his touch, and he obliges. He digs his fingers into the space between my shoulder blades, and all the way down to the cleft of my butt. And again. Soo good. A sound of pleasure escapes my lips.

"You remind me of a kitten I had."

"You used to have a kitten?"

His actions stop for a second, then he continues his strokes.

"It doesn't matter."

"Of course, it would only humanize the bad-tempered alphahole if you were to share something of his personal life, huh?"

"Exactly."

Getting this man to talk about himself is like... trying to find a seat on the tube during rush hour. "Soo... Amadeus huh?"

He caresses his big palm up my spine and I arch into his touch.

"Is there a story there?"

His touch stills, then he massages his fingertips over the knotted muscles of my shoulders. *Oh!*

"My mother."

I still.

"She loved classical music. She was listening to Mozart when she went into labor, hence..." He digs his fingers into the back of my head and scratches my scalp.

Goosebumps tingle down my skin. I shiver, "Where did you learn to do that?"

"Experience."

Of course. My stomach lurches; something hot stabs at my chest. I am not jealous. *Why am I jealous?*

"That's enough." I pull away and he doesn't comment.

I peer into the darkness, then clear my throat.

"What?" He sounds half-resigned, half-aroused. "I can hear you thinking, so say it aloud."

"That... What happened?"

"What...?"

"You know, 'that,' when I almost blacked out—"

"You mean your second orgasm in as many minutes?" I can't see his face, but damn, I can sense the smug satisfaction in his voice.

"You're welcome."

Jeez.

"How can you be both considerate and an alphahole?"

"You do realize that's technically not an official word in the English language, hmm? Not that I'm protesting its usage." He smirks. "And it comes naturally to me."

Why did I ask? I groan aloud.

Silence for another beat. *Don't ask him, don't.*

"Is it... ah, always like that?" I mean, I know it can't be, but I have to ask.

Not that I expect him to answer or anything.

The silence stretches. It's completely quiet. In the shitty apartment I'd shared with Karma, there was always some noise at night. The ambulance screaming, late night party-goers returning home, the staff from the pub downstairs cleaning up before heading home. Here, I can hear my thoughts. Which I am not sure I appreciate. Not when all of them seem to lead back to him.

"It's never been that way for me." His voice is low.

Oh! "You mean—"

"Go to sleep, Bird."

He turns on his side.

His breathing deepens. Apparently, that stupid switch on-switch off mechanism he has that allows him to flip the switch on his emotions can also help him fall asleep in an instant. The man really doesn't have a soul.

Taking the virginity of the woman you blackmailed into helping you get revenge by destroying her father? Check.

Ensuring you make her life completely and utterly miserable during the process by crawling under her skin, and occupying her every waking thought and invading her dreams? Double check.

I close my eyes, and my limbs grow heavy. My breathing deepens, then catches.

One second, I'm empty. The next, he is there. His heat sears my back, envelops me from behind. I lean into it, rub my butt against the hardness that throbs between my legs. He slips inside of me, filling the emptiness, stretching me from end to end. I shiver and a whine tumbles from my throat. I stretch my spine, seeking that delicious presence, the complete comfort, that absolute awareness of what it is to be so in sync with another. *Wait, what?* I crack my eyes open and peer into the dark. "Sin?"

"Shh, I didn't intend to wake you."

He drags my hair away from my nape, whispers a kiss to my shoulder. Moisture pools between my legs. I turn my face toward him, and he takes the hint. He nibbles his way up the column of my throat to my ear lobe and bites down. "Ah!" I shudder, raise my arm and wrap it back and around him.

He's so massive, that I barely reach halfway around his broad back.

He brings his hand up and cups my breast. The warmth of his fingers sinks into my blood and I thrust myself into his grasp.

He plays with my erect nipple and heat ignites between my legs.

He drags his hand down my stomach to cup my pussy. The gesture so possessive, so completely confident, that my head spins. Or maybe that's because his hardness lengthens inside of me, bumps against my inner walls. Pinpricks of sensations shimmer up my spine.

"You're so gorgeous, Summer." He presses little kisses down my jawline.

I twist my upper body, crane toward him, and he closes his lips over mine. His tongue sweeps inside my mouth, sucking on mine, drinking from me. His possession is absolute, his strength incomparable. He's taking from me, marking me, re-forming me into a shadow of himself, and I can't stop him. Another whine tumbles up my throat, and he swallows it. He propels his hips, and his cock leaps forward. The hard ridge of his pelvis chafes the soft bump of my arse, every part of him rigid, unforgiving. A complete contrast to me. I've never felt this helpless, this vulnerable. This open and giving. This... unable to get ahold of the emotions that twist my stomach, coil in my guts. What is he doing to me? I open my mouth to ask and he deepens the kiss. His tongue scrapes across my teeth, his fingers pinch my clit, and his cock seems to expand further, pervading my pussy. A groan rumbles up his chest and the vibrations sink into me. My blood thuds at my temples; my heartbeat ratchets up. Sin, Sinclair. Mr. Sterling—the alphahole who swept in and turned my entire life upside down.

He tears his mouth from mine, then pumps his hips. His cock leaps forward and I gasp.

"Look at me, Bird."

I crack my eyes open, meet his deep indigo gaze.

A trembling urgency builds from somewhere deep inside. He thrusts again and again. Grinds the heel of his hand into my clit. Sensations coil at the base of my spine.

He wraps his other hand around my throat, shoves his thumb into my mouth. I suck on his digit, and his pupils grow darker.

He holds my gaze, pumps his hips, impaling me further on his dick. A bead of sweat runs down my spine and I shiver. He bends his head, until our noses bump.

"Come for me, Bird, come all over my cock."

His whisper sears through the silence in my head and I explode. The climax grips me, and my entire body bucks. My back stretches, my stomach rolls, and cum gushes out from between my legs.

"So fucking beautiful, my little Bird."

A groan rumbles up his chest. His cock lengthens, throbs, then liquid heat bathes my insides. He raises his palm from my pussy to his mouth and sucks on his fingers, then drags the liquid of our joint essences down my breasts.

"Sleep now."

My eyes flutter shut. I float in that space between sleep and wakefulness. He draws me closer, and his dick twitches inside of me. *He can't be hard again, can he?*

"I am, Bird. It seems where you are concerned, I have an insatiable appetite. Apparently, I like to punish myself." He draws in a breath and his entire body seems to expand. "Another first." The tone of his voice dips further.

Did he say that? Nah, must be my imagination. He can't read my mind. Nope. This was a really good dream, all of it. I snuggle into the warmth, begin to drift off, then it comes to me. "Timotheé Chalamet."

"Huh?" His grip on my waist tightens.

"I loved him in *Call Me by Your Name*."

"Hmm."

A whisper brushes my hair. *Did he kiss me?*

"How did you know that was my favorite movie ever?"

He hesitates. "I didn't." He cups my pussy, "But I wanted to taste your cum as badly."

Wow. "That's... ah..." I swallow. "The most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me."

"Good." He tucks me firmly into his chest. "Go to sleep."

I drift off with his cock inside of me.

When I awake, his side of the bed is empty.

39

"...I believe in long, slow, deep, soft, wet kisses that last three days."

—*Bull Durham*. Director: Ron Shelton

Sin

"Whiskey at 9 am? Isn't that a tad hard core?"

I down the rest of the liquor and it burns a trail down my throat. "The fuck do you want now, Saint?"

He walks to the bar at the corner of the office and the coffee machine kicks into action.

"What's the point of having this £5000 machine if you never use it?"

I shrug. I had it brought in only because the rest of the Seven prefer coffee. Me? I am a tea drinker. Blame it on growing up in the East End. Tea so strong and with enough sugar that you can float a spoon on it. That's the first drink I'd ever had, and its taste is something I have never been able to shake off.

He walks up to the window, peers outside. "Anything interesting?"

I snarl.

"Bad night huh?" He snickers.

"What do you care?"

"You're the one who's spearheading this entire scheme. I'm checking that my investment is in safe hands, bro."

"You're not the one who has anything to lose."

"And you do?" He turns to me. "Anything you want to 'fess up to, Sinner?"

"Bugger off. I am not looking for a priest." *What I need is a bloody surgeon to look inside my brain and tell me, what the hell had I been thinking last night?* I had taken her without an inch of empathy, smacked her butt, torn into her pussy.

Then, I had pretended to drift off on my side of the bed, hoping she'd take the hint.

She'd mumbled to herself, then her breathing had deepened.

I had turned to face away from her, yet every morsel of my attention had been focused on her. The way her scent had intensified as she'd slept. The soft inhalations, the twitch of her limbs which indicated that she had fallen deeper into slumber.

I'd had my eyes closed, yet I hadn't needed to see her to imagine her features. The flushed cheeks, parted lips, the rise and fall of those sugar plum breasts, the quiver of her flat belly, the melting triangle of her pussy. My dick had lengthened, and I had palmed myself.

I could have turned and helped myself to her and she wouldn't have resisted. She is no match for my deviousness; fucking innocent that she is. Okay, not completely. She's packed a lot into her years so far. She is a survivor. I have no doubt she'll get through everything I have planned. Question is, will I? I hadn't anticipated wearing a raging hard on while lying next to her. Me fisting myself, trying to jerk off, without disturbing her.

I'd taken her virginity. And that had been unexpected.

She'd denied it when I had asked her, and although that question had been to rile her, I had taken her answer at face value.

I had had no reason to suspect that she was one.

I had been her first. *Fuck! Her first!* I had assumed... *What?* That she was experienced enough to stand up to my inclinations? That I could take what was mine. *Is she mine? The fuck am I doing thinking along those lines, huh?*

And why am I in my office at the crack of dawn, leaving her warm willing body in my bed? It had been too fucking right, that's the problem. Her skin, her scent, the taste of her is in my mouth.

After I'd taken her that second time, I hadn't been able to sleep. I'd waited until she'd drifted off, then crawled between her legs, like a starving schmuck, and eaten out her pussy.

Even asleep, her thighs had tightened around my ears, and that had

spurred me on. I'd cupped her arse, scooped her up and sunk my tongue inside of her.

I'd lapped at her cunt, sucked on her, pinched her clit, rubbed the engorged nub between her lower lips. I'd cupped her butt, brought her closer, sunk my thumb into that tight little back hole, and she'd come again. The sweetness of her cum had exploded on my palate as she'd moaned out her release.

Those little noises she makes when she is close to coming? Fuck. They are going to be my destruction. Her voice, husky with lust, is fast becoming the soundtrack of my life. One I can't do without.

I'd known then it was a bloody mistake. I am in too deep, trapped by the lure of that sexy little body... No, not only. It is her spirit I crave. Her thirst for life which I had once had but I've lost along the way. In her presence, every part of me stands to attention—my dick twitches—yeah, especially that particular appendage. *Fucking hell.*

She's imprinted herself in every part of me, and fuck, that's a scary thought. No one is allowed to get this close to me. No one.

I pull away from the window, walk to the bar and pour another, then toss it back. The liquor sparks a burn deep in my stomach. I can still feel my hands and legs though. Her taste still laces my tongue. Her scent lingers on my skin—I hadn't wanted to shower. Don't judge. Just another twat throwing himself off a literal cliff; all in the name of some stupid emo shit. *Jesus, have I lost my balls completely?*

I grab the bottle to pour another finger.

Footsteps approach. Saint snatches the bottle from me.

"Hey."

I reach for it and he clicks his tongue. "Get your head in the game."

I glare at him, and he holds my gaze. He's as tall as me, as broad, as able as me to lead any initiative for the Seven; he'd had as much at stake, but he'd withdrawn and given me enough rope... To hang myself, as it were.

"You knew."

He angles his head. "The fuck you talking about?"

I thrust out my chin. "You wanted me to fall for her?"

"Are you falling for her?"

"Stop answering one question with another."

He clicks his tongue. "You have it bad."

"Don't change the fucking topic." I grab his collar and yank him forward.

"Tell me, you didn't set me up to take the fall in this."

"I didn't."

He lowers his eyebrows. "You're imagining things, old chap."

Am I?

"Why?" I growl, "Tell me Saint, or so help me I am going to punch you in your pretty face."

"You couldn't." He smirks. "The last time we went a round, you know what happened."

Neither of us had won. It had been a fucking tie, again. He and I are too well matched. It's what makes us compete with each other for everything.

"What were you doing speaking to her yesterday?"

"What are you doing in the office the day after your wedding? Shouldn't you be busy taking your bride on a honeymoon?"

"A pretend honeymoon, and no, that was never on the cards, as you well know."

What the fuck is his problem anyway? How dare he talk about her?

"Let go of my collar, Sin." I glance down to find I am gripping his shirt. I let go, step back, and hold out my arm.

He thrusts the bottle at me. "Your funeral."

"Since when are you so concerned about my well-being?"

"Ah, let's see," He holds up a finger. "Since you decided to come up with a hare-brained scheme of doing good to salvage our reputation—which I could have told you for free was a bad idea. Then hired the one woman you should have kept your distance from, then married her. All in the name of revenge?"

I swig from the bottle. The liquor goes down smoothly, burning a trail in its wake. My toes feel numb... That's good.

"You don't fool me."

"Blah-fucking-blah." I mimic a mouth talking with the fingers of my left hand. "You done?"

His lips firm. "You need to get it through your head that not all of us are your enemies."

"Oh? And let you come in and rob me blind in front of my eyes?" I snicker. Then, toss back another swig of the alcohol. Yep, can barely feel my fingers. I lower the bottle to the bar counter with exaggerated care.

The conference call device in the room buzzes and I wince.

Saint struts to it and depresses the speaker. "Rich Prick's office."

Meredith's chuckle fills the space, "Hello, Saint."

"Hey, M."

"Is Sin there with you?"

"Barely."

She laughs.

"Loser." I can't feel my lips, or the tip of my nose either. Makes for a nice change. "Anyone ever tell you that you're an annoying motherfucker?"

"What's up, M?"

"Ask her why she didn't come to the wedding," I grumble.

"You're on speaker, Sin." Saint smirks.

"I knew that." I blink, stalk to the table. "You're not off the hook, M. You didn't turn up yesterday."

"I'll come when you decide to have a real wedding."

Huh? Don't know about the wedding, but the night sure felt like the first of a new life together. *Hold on, back up.* Emo central. "The woman's too smart." I peer up at Saint.

His face fades in and out in my line of sight.

"I may be old but I am not deaf... yet." Meredith's chuckle sounds from the phone. "I heard you, Sin."

"Oops." I curve my lips. "It was a compliment."

"I know." She laughs. "Called to remind you to eat your breakfast. It's on the desk in your office."

I glance through the adjoining doors, spot the tray laid out.

"Thanks, M."

"You're welcome, my boy."

The woman makes me feel like I am a kid again.

After the incident, I'd gotten into so many scraps on the street, it's a wonder I made it through that patch of my life alive. I probably wouldn't have if Meredith hadn't found me beaten up and rushed me to the hospital. She'd met the rest of the Seven... and had become a big part of our lives.

"Sin?" Meredith's soft voice breaks through my thoughts. "The books you ordered are here."

"Cool scene."

"I'm sending them up."

The line goes dead.

"Cool scene?" Saint frowns. "Books?"

"None of your business."

A knock sounds. I walk through to my main office and fling open the door. A girl—an intern? How many of them do we employ?—walks in.

She glances at me and her cheeks redden. She stands there, blinking. I point to the desk and she walks toward it. Drops the books on the wooden surface. She straightens and Saint enters the main office.

Her gulp is audible. Her chest heaves. Here we go again. My presence can be overwhelming on its own. Then add in Saint, and the entire area is a pheromone kill zone.

"You may leave now, Tanya."

"It's Alia."

"Bye, Stella."

She huffs out a breath, walks past me, stumbles, then rights herself and darts out the door.

Saint chuckles. "My effect on the opposite sex is not to be underestimated, huh?"

Wanker.

He prowls to the table, stares at the books. "*Movie Trivia Unleashed. Advanced Movie Quizzes. Dialogues from Movies You Always Wanted to Know—*"

"Thanks for spelling out the titles." I stalk over, gather up the books.

"You feeling okay, Sin?"

"Eh?" I shuffle my weight from foot to foot.

"Something you want to tell me?"

"About what?"

He stares at the pile of books in front of me.

That? "It's a new hobby."

He tracks me as I stride to my desk.

"You don't do hobbies, Sin."

"Things... have changed." I pick up a book, relax into my swivel chair.

"You don't say?"

I plant my feet on the table, begin to read the book. I glance past the cover to the corner, where Max normally keeps me company. He'd refused to leave the house, had spent the night moping outside the bedroom door.

Yeah, I'd locked him out last night. Apparently, I couldn't share my bride with my own mutt. *Fuck!* When I'd opened the bedroom door this morning he'd shot inside, then curled up on the floor by her side.

I'd left both woman and dog sleeping peacefully.

"What are you doing?" Saint's voice cuts through my thoughts.

"You're still here?" I mutter.

He ambles over as if he owns the office—which he doesn't—okay, maybe 1/7th of it, but this is my domain, and I am getting a little tired of one or the other of the Seven constantly dropping in.

It's almost as if they are checking in on me... More likely, their investment is what keeps them returning. I smirk.

He reaches for the book I'm holding and I hold it out of his reach. "What the—?" I glower.

"You're losing it, old chap." He rubs his chin.

"Piss off." I jerk my chin at the door.

"Fine." He holds up his hands. "But you should know that there is a lot of talk already."

"Oh?" I pick up another book flip it open.

"The tabloids got wind of the wedding.

"Took them what, 24 hours? They're losing their touch."

"No, you are."

"You're seriously pissing me off." I crack my neck.

"You're pissing on everything we've worked on."

"Don't be so dramatic." I turn another page.

He grabs the book and tosses it on the table. "Get your head out of your arse for one second."

I tilt my chair back, yawn. "You're getting on my arse."

"I'll do more than that if you don't come clean with me on what's happening."

"I have it in hand." *Right.* My heart begins to thud. I fold my palms in my lap. "But since you've obviously got a bee in your bonnet about this..." I jerk my chin. "Say your piece or forever hold your piss."

He widens his stance. "This sham of a wedding didn't convince anyone. Not me, and certainly not her father."

"It was meant to bring her old man out of hiding and into our net, which it has."

He drags his fingers through his hair, then begins to pace. "It's not enough. You're the fourth richest man in the country. Your net worth ranks below mine—"

"Hold on a second." I slam my feet on the floor, lean forward. "Last I checked, our net worth was exactly the same."

"That was..." He taps a finger to his chin, pretends to think. "Twenty-four hours ago, before you took your name off 'the most eligible bachelors in the country' list."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Only everything?" He chuckles. "You have your head so far inside your arse that you didn't realize this would have been the perfect occasion to drum up some PR, paint the picture. 'Most sought after playboy of the decade, settles down, finds his happily ever after.' Blah, fucking blah."

I press my lips together. "Your point being?"

"Not too late. You wanted a simple, romantic, wedding under wraps. You got it. Now throw the press a bone, do a quick briefing, introduce your lovely wife, and launch—"

"FOK."

"FOK, indeed." He widens his stance, props his palms on his hips. "It may work in your favor. The pretense of wanting to keep things private. When they can't have something, you know how crazy the press gets trying to sniff up a story."

I shuffle around in my seat, trying to find a comfortable position. "What's in it for you?"

"Launch FOK properly, get all attention on that and your nuptials. It'll ensure her father has no reason to doubt the relationship. Then when he's at ease, we lower the trap."

I chuckle.

Saint nods, "Strip him of all his assets, and then you divorce his daughter."

I can do that much. As long as I don't get any closer to her. I rub my clammy palms on my pants, "You any closer to breaking up his marriage?"

He rubs his chin, glances at the watch on his wrist. "3, 2—"

His phone buzzes. He flashes me a glance and picks it up. "Hello." He nods, then bares his teeth. "You bet. I'll meet you at Claridge's for tea, in an hour." He shoots me a thumbs up sign. "Looking forward."

He slides his phone into his pocket. "See? You can count on me, old sport."

"Stop shittin' me."

"You're welcome." He raises his hands. "I only had to intervene to salvage every last tactic in your very sorry plan... Which sucked from the beginning, by the way."

A headache begins to drum at my temples. "Get off my balls, man."

He half bows, "Avec pleasure." He pivots, heads to the door as it's flung open.

My wife barrels into the room, "Sinclair Amadeus Sterling, you have a bloody nerve."

40

Summer

"Hi Summer."

I glower past Saint at the obnoxious, douche-canoe, conceited waffle, rat's arse of a man, aka my husband, and all the breath promptly leaves me.

"You okay, there?" Saint frowns.

"Of course." I make a sound deep in my throat. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You were muttering to yourself."

"He has that effect." I growl.

Saint glances from me to Sinclair, who gives no sign that he's surprised by my appearance. Asshole hadn't waited for me this morning. He'd left, after laying out a dress for me to wear—he hadn't forgotten that, of course.

He'd ensured that one of the interns in the office had helpfully woken me up at a quarter to nine.

Giving me enough time to drag my sorry arse out of bed, and into the shower. I'd raced to the tube and managed to reach the office by half past nine. "You could have waited and offered me a lift to the office."

"Oh?" Sinclair folds his arms behind his neck, his legs up on the £5000 custom-made desk which, no doubt, he could replace in an instant. Like he could switch me out for another. Which he will do. The question is, when, and it is something I intend to find out.

I take a step inside the room, and Sinclair smirks.

My pussy instantly salivates. *Hell*. Something in that meanness of his glance, the way he rakes my body from top to bottom, undressing me...Just

as he had made me take off my clothes less than nine hours ago. It already seems far in the past, in the cold light of the gray London morning.

"And why, pray tell me, Bird, should I have delayed my very important meeting, while I waited for you to stop snoring?"

"That was you, asshole." I pull out my phone, "I have proof. I recorded it."

"What?" He frowns.

I wave the device at him, "Guess none of your girlfriends dared tell you about your condition, huh?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

Saint chuckles, "Damn, this should be interesting."

"Get the hell out of here." I snarl at the same time as Sinclair.

"If this is what marriage does to people—"

"Fake marriage."

Sinclair echoes my indignance.

"Right." He looks between us. "Bye, Summer." He lowers his voice, "I'd wish you luck, but I think that tosser needs it more than you."

He heads for the exit; the door snicks shut.

"Missed me, Darlin'?" Sinclair drawls.

His rough tone tugs on my sensitive nipples, then slithers down to the valley between my legs. I shiver.

Damn the man. He's unshaven, his hair mussed up as if he's been running his fingers through it, or like he rolled out of bed and came here, which he had, considering I had his dick buried balls deep inside of me less than 3 hours ago. My sex clenches. Hell. I fold my fingers at my sides.

Why the hell does his potency only seem to magnify every time I see him? Considering the number of times he fucked me last night... Were the last two times my imagination? Had he actually gone down on me? He'd made me come, then kissed me, making sure I'd tasted our joined-up fluids. I flick out my tongue and his nostrils flare. Even across the room, I swear I can see his biceps expand. His shoulders stretch the width of the custom-made shirt. No tie, of course.

The first two buttons of his shirt are undone, revealing the sculpted chest underneath. The planes of which I had drummed my fingers over, had tugged on those dark hairs that arrow down to the part of him that is currently hidden.

My fingers tingle. I'd felt him inside of me... Clearly, he is massive—my

pussy throbs—okay, bigger, much bigger than I had expected, but I hadn't had a chance to touch him, circle that thick muscle and find out for myself how big he really is.

What? I may have been brought up by nuns, but my education is far from lacking when it comes—*haha! No, don't go there*—to the opposite sex. Blame it on Karma. My sister has her faults, but some of her curiosity has rubbed off on me, enough to read her romance novels... None of which had prepared me for the sheer dominance of the man who stalks me as I saunter into the room.

Keep it casual, don't blow this. Don't show him how pissed you are at him. I walk up to the desk, keeping my arms at my sides. "We had a meeting this morning."

"I'm aware."

"We could have spoken at home before you left."

"You forget, I prefer to keep work things strictly in the—" he air quotes, "—official space."

Jerk. What does that say about us? "I thought this, whatever-it-is-between-us, was work. You don't seem to have a problem bringing this," I wave my finger, indicating the space between us, "home."

He ignores me. "Speaking of, you are officially—" He checks the cheap-ass watch on his wrist—*What's the story there, huh?* "—five minutes late."

"I don't fucking care."

"Language, Mrs. Sterling."

"Fuck you very much, Mr. Sterling."

He chuckles, "You're welcome." He swings his legs to the floor, leans forward, then pours tea into a cup. He reaches for the sugar, adds a spoonful, another. He reaches for the third and I huff.

"What?" He shoots me a glance from under those beautiful thick eyelashes.

"If you keep poisoning yourself with that stuff, you're gonna be diabetic before you know it."

"Oh?" He pauses, with the third spoonful of sugar poised above his tea. "You worried about me, hmm?"

"Hardly," I swat away an errant strand of hair, "I'd have said the same to... any stranger I'd meet in the street."

"Really?"

"You bet."

"So you wouldn't mind if I..." he lowers his spoon toward the cup and I dart forward, grip his hand with enough force that the sugar spills in an arc on the table.

"Oopsie." I lurch back. "Sorry, didn't mean to get so..."

"Possessive?" He smirks, then stirs his tea with the now empty spoon.

"Aggressive." I shuffle my feet.

"I am beginning to see the appeal of both versions, in fact—" He brings the cup of tea to his lips, sips. The beautiful tendons of his throat flex as he swallows. "I enjoy all of your emotions, revel in every single insult that you throw in my direction." He licks his lips, and hell, I am instantly wet.

I chafe my thighs together, shuffle my feet, then squeeze my bag in front of my chest, as if that will diminish the impact of his ridiculously sexy presence on me.

He returns his cup to the breakfast tray.

"Why don't you take a seat?" He pushes the platter aside.

"I'm fine here."

He frowns. "Even standing up, you are barely at eye-level with me—"

Thank you for pointing out my lack of height, you reprobate.

"So, if you think this gives you an edge—"

"God forbid," I look skywards, "anyone try to show up Mr. Big Bad himself."

"Cute."

"What?"

"Your nickname for me."

"Not a nickname, you perv."

"But you enjoy that part of me so much."

The blood rushes to my face. He peruses my features and his eyes gleam. "Why I do believe, my darling, that was a blush."

"So, sue me." I blow out a breath, then drop into the chair. A burn sears my bottom and I jump up. "Ow!"

"What's wrong?" His brow clears. "I see."

"You know nothing, Jon Snow."

"Even I know that's from *Game of Thrones*... That was too easy. You're slipping, Bird. Unless—" he frowns, then straightens, "Guess, your butt must really hurt, huh?"

"Thanks for figuring that out, genius."

I grip the edge of the desk, look to the right, the left, where there's a rug,

the kind used for pets, in the corner. Strange, had it been there the last time I came in here? Of course, I'd been distracted then.

He stalks to the door, locks it.

"What are you doing?"

"Making sure you're okay."

"Of course, I am. I came here, didn't I?"

"Hmm." He prowls closer. His big body blocks out the sight of the room, draws in all the oxygen in the space. I try to breathe and my lungs seize.

He pauses in front of me. "Turn around."

"What?"

"So I can check your behind."

"You did it already last night." My cheeks flame.

Damn it, why does his proximity reduce me to a spineless blushing female? I am better than this. I don't need him. I don't need a knight to ride in on his white horse and save me—which, by the way, he's not. Though he probably has many Arabians in his stables—

"Thirteen."

"What?"

"Arabians, and they are all white."

My jaw drops. "What the—did you read my mind? You can't read thoughts, can you?" I frown. "Is that how you win in business, you have a secret ESP-ish instinc—"

"Stop. Bird. Your expressions are way too easy to read." He laughs. His entire face lights up. His indigo eyes lighten until they are almost sky blue. Something hot stabs in my chest.

He's a 100% obnoxious-as-hell, pompous prick... but damn, he's a magnificent, utterly irresistible one, who somehow, somewhere, perhaps, has a flicker of humanness hidden deep inside. Of course, you have to look for it with a blow torch... But hey, I've never backed down from a challenge, huh?

He cups my cheek, "Go on, let me assess the damage I inflicted."

"It's nothing... really—"

"Let me be the judge of that, hmm?"

I twist my fingers in front of me, scan the space.

"No cameras."

"Yeah, that's what you said last time."

"You weren't my wife then."

I stiffen. Does he mean what I think he means? Can his

alphanoliciousness actually acknowledge that the ceremony yesterday meant something to him? I grab a strand of my hair and bring it to my mouth, chew on it. He reaches out and gently tugs on the strand until I release it.

"I promise I won't take advantage." He holds up his hand, "Besides, it's nothing I haven't seen."

Thanks for reminding me about exactly how you reduced me to a melting blob of jelly. I bite the inside of my cheek, glower at him.

He merely smiles. He seems almost harmless... Almost. Yeah, and I am the Queen of England. I snort, pivot to face the table.

He presses his big palm into the small of my back and I shiver.

He applies pressure. I follow his lead.

I bend over the polished surface of his antique executive desk.

41

Sin

I have her where I want her. Bent across my desk.

I've imagined this scene a hundred, no a thousand times, since the day I saw her at the bar. She'd reached across the bar for her drink. One glimpse of the creamy column of her neck and I'd been a goner.

Her dress had clung to her impossibly tiny waist, then swooped down to cup that gorgeous heart-shaped arse, and fuck me, but I'd known she was trouble. My fingers had tingled to touch her, caress her, palm the eggshell shape of her butt, and fondle her. I do just that. Cup that sensuous curve, the parabola of my desire, the shape that has haunted me, called to me, the one that has competed for attention with the circle of her breasts. I palm her butt and she trembles. A moan spills from her mouth. "Does that hurt, Bird?"

She shakes her head.

"You okay, if I drag up your skirt, Sweetheart?"

The fuck? Was that another endearment? They come so easily, like rain falling from the leaden London skies. Something inside of me burst open, at some point in the last twenty-four hours. Something shifted, and I cannot, for fuck's sake, put my finger on it. A corner was turned, a line crossed. I slipped into the gap between the platform and the tube train, crushed by thousands of metric tons of steel. *Ha!*

There is no going back, after this. *What does that mean?* I am going to find out.

"Summer?"

"Hmm."

"Can I check out your butt?"

She giggles. "Umm, a bit late to be asking that question, huh?"

"Never say never."

"Sean Connery, James Bond. Hated that film, actually," she murmurs.

I knew that.

I am beginning to echo her love for movie trivia. It is addictive. *She* is addictive. The water vapor to my clouds; the sunshine to my rainy weather. We are opposite, and yet we fit. *Fuck. Get your mind off the poetic license wagon.*

"And it's *Never Say Never Again.*" She turns her head, so her cheek is flat on the table, then peers up at me.

"I must be doing something wrong."

She frowns. "What do you mean?"

"You're still talking, still thinking." I curl my lips. "I am going to take that as a personal challenge."

"What?"

"I am going to distract you, Bird. Gonna take care of your poor hurt arse, then shred your asshole, and make you come so hard there will be no other thought in your head, no other word, no other name, except mine."

Her pupils dilate; her cheeks redden.

She opens her mouth to speak and I draw up her skirt.

"Sinclair—"

"Sin."

She chews on that damn lower lip of hers and the crease deepens, that beautiful dip which makes me want to rest my cock on it, as I thrust my heavy length inside of her mouth.

"Say my name."

She shakes her head.

Hmm.

I reach down, tear off her panties, and she squeaks. Her gaze widens. I bring the piece of silk to my face, bury my nose in it. A whine wheezes out of her.

"You enjoy that, hmm?"

She rubs her cheek against the wooden surface. "I shouldn't."

"But you do." I drop the scrap of fabric into the pocket of my pants, then bend and kiss the reddened surface of her behind.

Her hips wriggle. I slide my thigh between her legs, spread them apart, and she stiffens.

"Relax." I press tiny kisses up the curve of her spine, making sure to keep space between me and her reddened butt cheeks.

I swipe the heavy fall of her hair to one side, then kiss her nape.

"Why are you doing this?" She shivers.

"What?"

"Being so nice to me?"

"You don't like it?"

She blinks, "I am not sure."

"How about this." I nuzzle her cheek, then press another kiss to the corner of her lips.

"You've been drinking?"

"I tried, Bird."

"Tried?" The skin at the corners of her eyes creases.

I nod. "Tried to forget the memories we made last night. How you felt under me, your pussy clamping on my shaft, the slickness of your cunt as I moved inside of you, the trembling flesh of your breasts as I squeezed you, the firm indentation between your arse cheeks as I spanked you."

She swallows, the sound loud enough to echo in that tiny, infinitesimal, hair's breadth of space that separates us. "You sound like... like—"

"A man who's losing his mind?" I allow my lips to curl.

"A man who's falling for me."

My shoulders go solid.

"It's too late for that."

Her lips turn down. "Ah."

"I'm more than halfway in love with you." I peruse her beautiful features. "You are all that keeps me from sliding into some dark place."

"*Cold Mountain*." Her features light up.

"Directed by Anthony Minghella." I tilt my head.

"You've been reading up?" She reaches for one of the books scattered on the table.

"I've been trying to keep up."

"So, what's next?"

I snatch the book from her, put it aside.

"We fuck like minks." I smirk.

"I hate minks." She whispers.

"That's from *Basic Instinct*." I snicker, "And you got that wrong."

"You're going about this all wrong." She reaches up and strokes my lower lip.

My dick is instantly hard... Okay, harder.

I've been throbbing since the moment she flounced into my office spewing fire. I knew then, I can't let her go, not until I've satisfied a particular fantasy of mine.

"You're right."

"Wow!" She draws in an exaggerated breath. "That's twice in two seconds that you've ceded to me."

"Don't get used to it. The truth is—"

I stare into those ocean green eyes. I get distracted, and not just by her sexy-as-fuck mouth, or those wide eyelashes that stand to point when she cries, or that pert little nose, turned up at the end, which doesn't begin to do justice to her. It is the entire damn package. It is her, all of her.

She clears her throat, "Truth is?"

"—I haven't started." I straighten, reach for the food tray, pull it close.

"What are you doing?"

"Shh." I grab the tiny silver crucible and place it next to her face.

"No." She quivers.

"Are you saying *No*? Or are you, *saying No*?"

"I'm not *saying*, No."

She draws her hand back, and I reach for her wrist.

"Then?"

"I'm scared."

"So am I." I lower her palm to the tent between my legs, turning her arm enough for her fingers to cup my hardness. "See what you do to me? Whenever I am near you, all I see is you. Especially when I am not in the same space as you."

Her forehead furrows.

"What are you saying?"

That I want you, I need you. "I need to be inside of you. I want to write my intentions onto every part of you, saturate your cells with my essence, pour myself into the fabric of your being until all you can do is think of me, hear my voice in your dreams, scent me first thing in the morning, melt into me when you fall asleep."

"Oh."

"I am saying," I squeeze her palm, press her fingers against my cock. She has me by my fucking balls, literally and physically. "I am going to fuck you."

"I thought you were going to make the pain better."

"That too."

"How?"

I can't stop the smirk that tugs at my mouth, "I admit my methods are a little unorthodox, Bird, but I believe they'll prove to be effective."

"Tell me." She tips her chin down.

"With my ministrations I will distract you." I squeeze her hand, then release it. She keeps her fingers wrapped around my dick. Good.

I reach for the rest of the butter, scoop it up.

"With my mind I will ensnare you." She licks her lips.

"With my cock, I will—" I drag the butter down the valley between her arse cheeks.

She shudders.

"Sin."

"That too." I curl my finger into her back hole.

42

Summer

His finger prods at that forbidden part of me and every muscle in me curls with tension.

"Relax, Bird."

I squeeze down on the rigid length of his dick. My Sin. He is that, and so much more. Forbidden. Out of reach. Yet so much everything I need. Am I going to allow him to do this to me? *Yes.*

There, that is the answer. I'd gotten on the fast train to hell from the moment I'd heard that rough voice of his. No turning back now.

His dick seems to lengthen, thicken, in his pants. The scent of him is overwhelming. The air saturated with his dominance, his intentions, the heat of him that burns me, invites me to cross the line.

"Sin."

"Summer." He reaches for the remaining butter on the silver dish and scoops it all up.

I gulp, lower my gaze.

My distorted reflection on the polished wood surface gapes at me. Eyes wide, nostrils flared. My mouth quivers; my nipples harden. Damn him for making me want every single thing that is wrong. This is wrong. *We* are wrong. This goddamn venue is a mistake. A never-ending movie on a loop, repeated, again and again. I raise my gaze to his face.

He's watching me from under hooded eyes.

"Do you want me, Bird?"

I nod.

"How much?"

"Take me to bed, Sinner, or lose me forever."

"That's from *Top Gun*." His brows draw down. "Did I say that? Jesus, I can't believe I am playing this your way."

He glares at me. My nerve endings stretch.

My skin crawls, my toes curl, and I wriggle my hips. I can't... cannot contain this craving, this yearning, this sheer carnal hunger to have him buried inside of me.

"No more games, Summer. Tell me you want what I have in mind."

I swallow.

"Say it. Tell me 'no.' "

"Yes."

His cock leaps in my grasp. I squeeze it and a pulse beats to life at his jawline. *Wow*.

He dips his fingers into the crease between my butt cheeks, unerringly finding my back hole. He slides one finger in.

I gasp. Too full. Too much. It's tight, but not really. It's beyond my comfort level. Enough that I want... I need...

"More?"

I jerk my chin.

He eases the finger inside and I swallow. He curls the finger inside and a trembling grips me. "Sin."

"I'm here."

He inserts another finger and my body bucks.

"My God." Color sears his cheeks. "You're so..." the tendons of his throat flex. "Beautiful, my Bird." He licks his lips and goddamn him, I sense that swipe deep inside in the most intimate part of me.

"You're unique, exotic, one-of-a-kind, my Summer. Your every response is my salvation."

His words envelop me, sink into my blood, curl in my chest, satisfying something deep inside. Something I hadn't acknowledged in all these years. That I'd wanted more than the physical. I'd hoped to meet someone who'd match me word for word. Who'd teach me, push my boundaries, understand why the trivia is more than sentences. More than emotions. They are images of my unsaid desires, that I can hold in the palm of my hand, relish in real life, in front of my eyes, just as he worships me. Here. Now. In this very

moment, there is nothing else. Just me, him, and the pleasure he's going to wring from my body.

"Sin."

"Tell me."

"I want you inside me."

His indigo eyes blaze. "Anything you need." He slips a third finger inside and my pussy spasms. Liquid heat drips from my core. I drag my fingers up the length of his dick, constrained by my position. I strain toward him "I want —"

"I know."

He pulls out his fingers and I am empty. Hollow. A shell of my former self. Ready to embrace—

He pushes away the food tray, then drags my fingers down, and onto the table in front of my face.

His eyes never lose their steady calmness. He's a man close to reaching his goal. The one thing he's sought since he'd stated his intent. My complete and utter destruction. My submission. And I'm giving it to him, willingly. "Take it."

"You possess me." His voice chafes my already sensitized nerve endings.

He loosens the buckle of his belt, drags down his zipper, and his cock springs free. There's Sin... A whole lotta Sin there. And it's all for me... At least for this instant. And after... After? *Don't go there.*

"What's wrong?"

He pauses, dick in hand. His fingers grasp the base of his thick length. It's massive, veins run up its length, a drop of precum glints at the tip. Of course, I'd felt it inside me. But seeing him, naked, wanting, greedy for what I can give him... *Is that right?*

Is it only me that he wants to claim? The others? Why am I thinking of that? Do I have a claim on him? This entire marriage thing is getting to me. I was beginning to believe my own lies. Fake it till you make it has never sounded truer.

"Summer." His jaw flexes.

"I.."

"What do you need?"

"Thought you could read my mind."

He hesitates. "I don't want to get it wrong."

"You won't."

A vein throbs at his temple; his shaft pulses. So much emotion, so many secrets all coiled up under the surface. He's not in control. It's all a sham. A face he shows the world. A mask he wears, and I ripped it away from him. Sensations crawl inside my chest. I am getting to know this man too well. Too quickly. Everything is happening at breakneck speed and I am powerless to stop it.

He reaches down with his free hand and grips my nape. The strength of his intensity drips into my skin, and I swallow. I've never felt closer to anyone else, as much as I have in this instant.

He draws in a deep breath. "I can't give you that."

I bite the inside of my cheek.

"I've always been up front about what I wanted."

Have you?

"I should have stopped before things got so out of hand, and for that I take the blame."

Blame? What does he mean?

"I'll tell you this much. I've never wanted anyone as much as you. Never felt this... close to anyone else before. Never allowed anyone to see the parts of me you have."

But it's not enough. Can't you see that?

"I don't know if I can give you my heart. Hell, I doubt that exists after everything I have done so far, but my body, it's yours for the taking."

My throat closes.

This man, he could talk forever, and I could listen to him. Hell, I could orgasm, multiple times, one after the other to the timbre of his voice. *I want more.*

What? What do I need?

"How about a deal?"

"Oh?" He tilts his head.

"You've gotta admit, you're not exactly in any position for negotiating."

He smirks. "Clever girl."

"I'm learning from the master."

"Damn right." He squeezes his dick from base to tip and my gaze drops to his crotch. Droplets of cum drip from the tip of his cock, which has definitely engorged further in the last few seconds.

"Why, Mr. Sterling, I do believe, that you love it when I sass you."

"Never denied that." He growls. "Stop dicking around, Bird, what's your

game?"

"Not a game." I bite down on my lower lip and he inhales.

See? He's definitely not as much in control as he pretends. He's as much at a loss as I am. I draw up my shoulders, cross my fingers, "I get to take the lead in bed."

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Sin

"No." My voice sounds almost as hard as my dick. I wince. She could have asked for my money, my empire, my fucking heart, at that moment and I'd have given it... Okay, maybe not the last one. Dominance in bed is the one thing I will not compromise on.

She tilts her head, the expression on her face a mirror to the one I've pulled on her so often. The back of my neck heats. My cock leaps against my palm. How is it that I can possibly find her attempt to take control so... so arousing?

I glare at her, and she sets her jaw.

"You said you'd give me your body."

I jerk my chin.

"Then this..." she stares at my crotch, "all of this is mine."

This woman. *Fuck*. How can she surprise me so much? Blood rushes to my groin. My balls grow so hard that I am sure I'm going to jizz myself right there, right now.

"You'll let me take your ass."

She nods.

"Your pussy."

She hesitates, then tosses her head.

"Your mouth."

The pulse beats so fast at her throat that I am sure it's going to tear through her skin.

"At the same time?"

I tilt my head and she juts out her chin. "Okay."

"Anytime I want?"

She squeezes her eyes together, "Why do I get a feeling I am going to regret this?"

You have no idea, little Bird.

She cracks her eyelids open. "What else?"

Smart woman, she knows I am not done yet, hmm? A surge of pride fills my chest. She's come far, my wife, in a few days.

"I will allow you to lead..." Her breath catches.

"Once."

"You..." She swallows. "You'd do that?"

Yeah, what I said earlier? Clearly, I am bloody good at lying to myself, for when it comes to her... Turns out, I am unable to disappoint her. All for a reason, of course. It's the long game that matters. That's me. I bide my time. Never retreat. Keep my focus on the target. Revenge. What a hollow word. It's second nature now. It's what's driven me so far. I can't let down the Seven either. Giving up the thing that defines me? A price I hadn't thought I'd ever have to pay.

Doing it for her? Yeah, only her. Only for her.

"Don't celebrate yet." I splay my fingers on the back of her waist. She flattens her shoulders, her arse juts out. Perfectly heart-shaped. *My beautiful responsive, Bird.*

I line up my dick with the crease between her butt cheeks. She squirms. I apply enough pressure, so she turns her head toward me. I drop my head and brush my mouth over hers. She stiffens. I swipe my tongue between her lips and she whimpers. I tilt my head, deepen the kiss and she opens for me. I draw from her, suck on her tongue, bite down on the infuriating crease in her lower lip. She cries out and I swallow down the sound, at the same time that I slide my hips forward.

My cock nudges against her back hole and she murmurs deep in her throat.

I slip my fingers in between her legs and play with her pussy. She shudders, parts her legs, and I slide two fingers into her melting pussy. Her spine arches, she thrusts out her butt, and I slip in. I rub my heel on her clit, kiss her with even more intensity.

Her arm comes up and she holds onto my neck as she bows into me.

My sweet Bird. I slide my finger inside her pussy and her knees buckle. I tighten my grip on her nape. A trembling sweeps up her body. She digs her fingers into my skin. I tear my lips from hers and she swallows. Pupils blown, lips parted and swollen from my kisses. I drag my palm down her spine.

When I apply pressure, she bends.

Lowers her head to the desk, her cheek, once more, flush with the antique surface. A thing of beauty, a perfect composition. A merger that clicks into place effortlessly. She's all that. *She's mine.* I grip her hips and thrust forward; her entire body jerks. And again. My balls harden and pressure builds in my groin. I need more. Much more. I pull out of her, then flip her over. The front of her dress falls open.

She blinks, wide-eyed. Her lips part.

I don't hesitate. I bend with her, over her, touch my lips to hers and kiss her. Drag my hands up her hips to her breasts, cup them, and squeeze her nipples. She moans, the sound so sweet, so right.

I bring my hands down to her thighs, pull them wide apart. She swings her legs up and around my waist. *Fuck.* I grit my teeth; I need to slow down. Sweat beads my forehead. My heartbeat thunders in my ears. What's happening to me? This was meant to be some kind of hate fuck. A last try to overcome whatever hold she has on me. I'd sweetened her up with words—well, it was all truth, really— then tried to break her. *Instead, it's me who's broken.*

I squeeze the base of my dick, position myself at the entrance to her weeping pussy. Then tip my head up to stare into her eyes.

"I'm going to fuck you now."

She nods.

"You can say 'No.' "

"Yes."

"Last chance to walk away." *Am I warning her or myself?*

"Oh, for heaven's sake." She grabs my dick, lines me up with her slit, then slides forward.

She impales herself on my shaft. My cock slips all the way home. I can't stop the growl that rips out of me. Holding her gaze, I grip her hips, withdraw until I'm poised at the opening of her pussy. Pause a beat. Another. Then I thrust into her so hard that the entire desk shakes.

She links her arms around my neck and holds on.

"Good girl."

I proceed to fuck her with an intensity I've never felt before. A complete carnal possession that overrides any other intention I may have ever held.

Remember what I said about fucking thoughts of any other men from her mind? I lied. Again. *Turns out, I am the one who's never going to be able to think straight. Ever again.*

I thrust into her, again and again.

Fix my fingers on her nape, with my thumb pressed to the front of her neck, where I can sense every single vibration of her voice that emerges in small hoarse cries.

Sweat beads my shoulders. I don't stop. I withdraw then pound into her again and again.

Her lips part; a flush covers her breasts, her face. Her entire body trembles. She throws her head back, her gorgeous hair a halo tumbling down her shoulders. "Come," I growl. And she shatters. Beautifully.

Her eyes roll back in her head and she shudders.

I pull out of her, my balls draw up, and white streams of my cum splatter across her chest. I squeeze my dick from base to tip, empty every last drop of myself on her.

Reaching between us, I rub my seed into the skin exposed by the gaping front of her dress.

She slumps and I scoop her up in my arms. Walking around the desk, I sink into the chair. She curls into my chest and her breathing deepens.

I hold her close, tilt my chair back, turn it toward the window, and watch the raindrops drip down the windowpane.

"I didn't know how to love him. I only knew how to fuck,"
— *Lie With Me*, Director: Clement Virgo

Summer

I come awake to find that I am curled up in the center of the massive bed—his bed, in his house on Primrose Hill.

I sit up and the sheet slides down to pool at my waist. When I swing my legs over, I wince. My thighs ache; there is a soreness in my center. I straighten, glance down, and the breath leaves me. The skin on my thighs is chafed and abraded. I take a step forward and my arse hurts... Yeah, also that part of me where he had proceeded to butter me up, before driving into me from behind. A slow burn starts somewhere below. *No. I didn't enjoy it, I didn't. Who am I kidding?* He'd... surprised me again.

He'd brought to life one of the most notorious scenes from film history and ah! Liquid heat pools between my legs. It had been the singular most degrading experience of my life... and the most turned on I've ever been.

I squeeze my fingers at my sides.

Then he'd turned me around... and... kissed me. He'd made love to me.

"I'm more than halfway in love with you."

Did he mean it? Sinclair Sterling does not say anything lightly and definitely not the emotions associated with that particular sentiment. Perhaps my imagination is leading me down a path of wishful thinking?

What do I have to do to clear my head? Rid my body of the imprints of

his palm that I can feel on my butt, on the curve of my waist, the thickness of his fingers... inside me, bringing me to orgasm, the cold slick of the butter as he'd lubricated me before he'd taken me, with absolute confidence.

He'd known that I wouldn't refuse him. I'd wanted to. *No... I'd wanted him.* When I am in his vicinity, I can't think of anything else but him... *Liar.* Even when I am not in the same room, I see him in my mind and yeah, my pussy has a way of homing in on how it will be to have him buried balls deep inside of me.

Jesus, get a grip, here. Stop with the pornographic scenes playing on repeat. Not that I've seen porn... If you don't count *9 1/2 weeks*, which had explored BDSM long before *Fifty Shades of Grey*, or *9 Songs*. Wait... What is it with the 9 anyway? I shake my head. Or any of the myriad other arthouse flicks that I'd snuck in to watch, whenever they came to play at the Prince Charles Theatre—one of the few existing arthouse cinemas near Leicester Square.

My entire life is beginning to resemble a badly-produced indie flick, for that matter... For he hadn't stopped there. After I'd fallen asleep on his chest... Yeah, it's large, hard, and surprisingly comfortable, and despite all of the ways he's fucked me over—literally—seems something in me innately trusts Mr. Big Bad.

I'd woken up to find he was carrying me up to the roof top. He'd ordered a helicopter because... Well yeah, he could.

He'd said he wanted to get inside me again and didn't want to wait. Of course, not.

I swallow, lurch toward the bathroom.

He'd carried me inside the house to the kitchen. Fed me strawberries and cream. He'd insisted I eat it and drink every drop of the glass of orange juice he'd poured for me.

Then he'd shagged me.

Over the kitchen table, on the steps, against the wall of his bedroom, on the bed... He'd broken off to bring me some cheese and biscuits at dinner time. No alcohol because... he wanted all of my faculties about me.

I'd lost count somewhere after orgasm number thirteen, or was that twenty? I bite the inside of my cheek. I'd fallen asleep with him inside of me again. My pussy clenches. How can I miss him already?

I shove open the bathroom door and cross the floor to the sink on the left; the one with an array of feminine cosmetics, none of which I'd brought. The

brand is absolutely top of the range. Individually, they'd account for what I'd probably get paid in a week working at FOK. *Fuck.*

I drag my fingers through my hair. I'd never gotten a chance to mention the reason I'd barged in on him. Because I'd had an idea for the marketing strategy. Something I need to bring up to him right away.

I glance at the mirror and notice the note tucked into a corner of the glass frame. Reach for it, pull it out. The gold SS on the cream paper confirms who it was from.

"The cosmetics are for you—don't refuse them."

Asshole. His cursive is as dominating as his presence.

"Breakfast is waiting for you in the kitchen."

Huh? You don't say.

"Because I'm feeling charitable, you may work from home today. You're welcome."

What? Am I supposed to be grateful or something? I purse my lips. Bring the note to my nose and sniff. Bergamot and leather... and a whiff of something intangible I label as testosterone. I chafe my thighs together. Place the note aside. Brush my teeth, shower in record time. When I return to the bedroom, I spot the dress he's laid out for me.

I slip it on, survey myself in the mirror. It has a long flowing skirt and the blouse fits me so closely, I have to wonder. Did he have it tailored to my specifications? Does he know my measurements that well?

He knows my body more intimately than anyone else ever has. I fondle the soft material. The skirt is a dark red. How did he guess that it's the color that sets off my coloring best? My pink hair flows around my shoulders, the blonde highlights in it seem lustrous, and my skin is a pearly effervescence against the fabric.

Once again, he's unerringly figured out what is right for me. Does he always know what is best? Am I beginning to harbor some kind of secret crush on him, where I am beginning to acquiesce to his every single demand? No. I drag the brush through my hair, drop it on the table. I won't wear any make up. After all, I'm not dressing for anyone. Besides, I don't want to use any of the cosmetics he bought for me. The dress? Well, that is different. I have to wear something—though left to the alphahole, I bet he'd prefer me to go naked.

Don't second guess me, Bird.

I scrutinize the room. The mussed-up bed where we'd spent the night, the

table and chair at the far end, the comfortable-looking settee on one side of the fireplace. The furnishings are luxurious, but otherwise there is a sparseness to it that hints at... what?

Something more complex about the man than I've been giving him credit for?

Nothing to think about here. Nothing to unearth. He is a greedy, narcissistic, pompous prick, who thinks about one thing—himself. And how to amass more money. See? Puzzle resolved.

I slide on the ballet flats—made of the softest leather I've ever worn—then pivot and walk down the stairs. Walk into the kitchen and find a covered tray, with a note.

"Eat it all."

I stiffen. I should ignore the food, turn away, leave, right now, before this entire farce of a relationship backfires on me and I begin to harbor feelings for him. Too late. I feel something... already. Hate, yeah, that's all it is.

I uncover the tray to find a massive sandwich. A plate of fruit, crisps. There's another note stuck to the side of the plate.

"It's gluten free. You're welcome."

How did he know I am allergic to gluten? I've never mentioned it to him, and managed to ignore any food that could have traces of it so far.

Of course, he had to go and spoil it all with that know-it-all tone.

I crumple the note, fling it away,

The kettle clicks on. *What the—?* I hear the water boil. Did he set it on a timer? Some kind of sensing device that picks up when I'm in the room? I blow out a breath.

I walk to the kettle as it switches off. Make myself a cup of tea, and seat myself at the table. I've just finished the sandwich when the doorbell rings.

My heart begins to thud. Is he back? Did he decide he is going to work from home today? Better still, does he want to spend it with me? I am halfway across the floor, before I slow down. By the time I reach the front hallway, there's a banging on the door. I fling it open.

Familiar features peer down at me.

"You?"

"Hello, Summer."

I glare at the man who is my father.

The bastard who'd abandoned me and my sister when we'd needed him the most. He'd never looked back, until he'd sensed the first whiff of a

possible business gain, and then he'd come running. The asshole would sacrifice his family for money—oh, wait, he already had.

There's a light roll of thunder in the distance—as if it is asking for permission. That's British weather for you, just like our vocabulary. Apparently, we use the word 'sorry' more than any other country—up to 8 times a day. Yeah, sorry—not sorry. I frown, "I don't want you here."

"Can I come in?"

It begins to drizzle outside, some of the drops blowing in to bead on his shoulder.

"Do I have a choice?" I jut out my chin.

"That's my girl. Still got a spine, huh?"

"No thanks to you, and don't call me your girl."

"You're my daughter."

"Really?" I stare. "You lost the right to that when you decided to leave me and Karma to the vagaries of our fate."

"Don't exaggerate." He frowns. "Look at you now. It doesn't look like you suffered too much."

If you don't count the fact that we'd gone from having an abundance of every luxury to having two meals a day, and a school where we were the laughingstock because of how different we were. So, we weren't abused physically. Mentally and emotionally, though, it was another story. I wrap a strand of my hair around my fingers. "You could have taken us with you—or better still, you could have told us what was going on, found a way to face up to the mess you'd created."

"And what? Gone to jail?" He rocks back on his feet, "Where would that have left you?"

"Exactly where you left us anyway. Fighting to make something of ourselves. Trying to undo the hurt of our childhood years, and betrayal. And yeah, issues with trust, let's not forget that."

"Your husband has money; he can afford the best mental health professionals."

"Are you listening to yourself?"

He draws in a breath, "I didn't come here to fight."

"Too bad." I wrap my arms around my waist, "I've been waiting for the chance to tell you how much of a shitty parent you were... No, strike that. That I disown you, for how you abandoned us." I attempt to close the door. He grabs the handle, "Sunshine, please."

I freeze. Only my father called me that. I'd been his ray of sunshine once, or so he'd told me. Those mornings when he'd cook me breakfast, before anyone else was up. Our time together. Then he'd drive me to school. Karma had been a baby then, and dependent on our mother. He'd been proud of me once. And I had looked up to him.

"Five minutes. That's all I'm asking." Oh, he knows how to push the point when he has an advantage, huh?

I step back, walk inside, then head toward the living room that overlooks the garden. He follows me.

I stop at the massive French doors, and he pauses behind me.

"I can explain, Summer."

"Save it. I don't want to listen to your sorry excuses."

He draws in a breath. "Everything I did was so I could ensure that you and your sister had a future."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"I was mixed up with the wrong people. After your mother died, I wasn't thinking straight. I made many wrong business decisions. Ended up falling into debt."

I don't want to hear it. I don't.

He swallows, the sound audible in the silence, interrupted by the patter of the rain outside.

"I ended up owing a lot of money to the Mafia. I had to leave before they took everything I held dear to me."

"So you dumped us?"

"The only way was to start afresh, for all of us." He moves away. "I put you in the care system, then faked my own death. I moved to the US, changed my identity, wiped all traces of our past."

"You did it very effectively too." I stare straight ahead. "Guess you were good at something."

He winces. "Everything I did was to throw the Mafia off of your tracks. It was for your good."

"So parents say. They have no idea how much they screw us kids up. So we have to spend the rest of our lives unlearning everything we were subjected to in our growing up years."

The breath whooshes out of him. "I'm sorry, Summer. I did what I thought was best for all of us..."

"Yeah, I'm sorry too." I turn on him. "You've assuaged your conscience,

said your piece... Why don't you leave now, huh?"

"There is." He shuffles his weight from foot to foot. "One thing."

I knew it. "Money? You think because of this..." I wave my arms around, "that I have some claim to his wealth and his power? Then you are wrong."

"You're the wife of a rich and powerful man. It has to count for something."

"It means nothing."

"Not from where I am." He lowers his chin, "And it's not about the money."

"Don't lie." A headache begins to pound at my temples.

"I admit, it might have been one of the main reasons that I accepted Sinclair's offer, but when I saw you and your sister after all these years." His throat moves as he swallows, "I realized it wasn't about that at all."

I don't believe him. I don't. Something hot unfurls in my chest, "What then?"

"Are you happy?"

I blink.

"Excuse me?"

"Does he make you happy?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"You're my daughter"

"You lost all right to call me that."

He holds up a hand. "I get it. You're unhappy with the cards life dealt you, so far. It's normal. It's time you put it behind you as you start your new life."

"Is that why you're here? To give me advice?"

"When Sinclair asked me over, I agreed to come, on one condition. I had to be satisfied that he was the right man for you. Someone who could take care of you, protect you—"

"The way you never could."

His lips twist. "You grew up fine, with all your wits about you."

"No thanks to you."

"Tell me you are content, and I can seal the deal with him."

"Deal?"

"He didn't tell you?" Adam frowns.

"We haven't had the time to speak." Heat sears my cheeks. I hadn't meant it to come out that way.

My father doesn't seem to notice.

"It's understandable. Sinclair is a busy man. He bought me amnesty from the government, gave me a chance to return home to attend my daughter's wedding." Adam shuffles his feet. "Still, considering what he wants..."

My pulse begins to race. The hairs on the nape of my neck rise. I wipe my suddenly damp palms on the skirt. Something thrums at the edges of my conscious mind and I push it away. "What does he want?"

"What do you think?" A familiar voice cuts through the space.

I whip my head around to find my husband leaning against the door frame.

He trains his gaze on my father, "I want to ruin you, of course."

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Sin

My wife stiffens.

Ahead of her, the man who was responsible for destroying my childhood stares past her at me. He looks confused.

"The deal was you'd keep me and my family safe and share enough business interests for me to redeem myself on my home turf."

I tilt my head.

"You didn't invite me to attend the wedding because my daughter wanted me here?"

I make a twirling motion with my fingers. "Go on."

"You want something more from me?"

I bare my teeth.

He swallows, "Either way, you don't intend to stick to your word?"

I walk toward them. "Now what makes you say that, hmm?" I pause next to my wife.

Adam looks at her, then back at me, "She's innocent." Sweat beads his forehead.

"That's what I told the men who kidnapped me."

"Kidnapped?" Summer angles her body to face me. "What are you talking about?"

"Ask your father."

She steps away, putting distance between herself and the both of us. Anger slices my gut.

Of course, she is wary of me.

She has the right to be, given how I had taken her in my office yesterday, and then I couldn't keep my hands off her body. She is singlehandedly, the biggest distraction in my life right now, and I would do well to be done with her and this sham of a marriage.

I'd hoped for time with her, hadn't reckoned things would come to a head so soon. What-fucking-ever. I can work with the cards I've been dealt. So what if I told him I'd protect them? I don't owe him, or her, anything.

"Dad?"

Adam glances down at his daughter. "I haven't heard you call me that since—"

"Since you abandoned us."

He winces. "I've already explained to you, Summer—"

"Stop." She cuts the air with her hand. "I don't want to hear your excuses." She jerks her chin toward me without looking at me, "Tell me what he's referring to, will you?"

"I... I'm not sure." Adam looks between us.

"Bull-fucking-shit." I explode. Adam's shoulders hunch. My wife winces, but doesn't take her gaze off of his face.

"Tell her." I gesture toward the older man.

He blinks rapidly, then peruses my features. "Who... who are you... really?"

"Haven't you guessed yet?"

"It can't be," he whispers. His face blanches.

"Tell her what you did to me... you fucking piece of shit."

Adam takes a deep breath. "It's a long story."

I twist my lips, "Trust me, nothing as extended as the time I spent with the rest of the Seven locked up in a windowless cellar."

"You were locked up?" She whips her head around, and I feel every millimeter of that green gaze. Waves of confusion emanate from her. *Fuck that.* I don't need her sympathy; I don't need anyone feeling sorry for me. I want revenge. Anger coils my gut. A hot feeling stabs in my chest. I click the clasp on my watch. *Control it. You gotta rein in your temper. Stay focused.* I click the clasp again.

The cold metal soothes me; some of the noise in my head recedes. So close. I am so close to my goal, I can practically taste the ending. Revenge: his utter destruction, tracking down the men responsible, and putting this

whole ugly segment of my life behind me.

A pressure builds behind my rib cage.

"Tell her right now, or I swear I'll kill you with my bare hands. Right now."

Summer inhales sharply. *Go on Bird, go to his defense, tell me off.* Show me how the blood of my enemy runs through your veins.

Her gaze is fixed on her father, "Spit it out, whatever you did to him." She firms her lips.

Huh?

Adam makes a choking sound. He pulls out a handkerchief and mops his forehead. "Can you get me some water?"

"No." My wife's features are pale. The hollows beneath her cheeks are pronounced. She grabs a strand of that glorious pink hair and chews on it, a giveaway that she is stressed. I take a step forward, then stop myself. *What am I doing?*

Why do I want to go to her, pull her close and ask her to lean on me? Tell her that she doesn't have to worry about anything as long as I am around. I'll take care of her forever. *Fuck.* These motherfucking emo thoughts? Where are they coming from? Just because I fucked her— *You made love to her, asshole.* Last night had been as close to a declaration of intention as you can get.

You worshipped her body with your own. You kissed her, took her arse, wrecked her pussy as if it were yours. For she is yours. She is. Only it's too late. I've come too far, planned too much. I owe it to the Seven to see this through.

She? She is collateral damage. A drumming intensifies behind my eyes. I drag my fingers through my hair.

"No point delaying the inevitable." I glare at the man.

He makes a choking sound.

"Don't faint on me now." I lean forward on the balls of my feet. "You're not getting any sympathy from me."

"I don't need it." He draws himself upright. Then turns to my wife. "You remember what I told you about owing money to the mob?"

She nods.

"I was in their control. I had to do what they asked. They threatened to kill you and Karma. Or worse."

"The fuck?" A growl rips up my chest.

Both of them turn in my direction.

"They threatened her life?" I flex my fingers at my sides, Summer's gaze narrows, "What's your problem?"

I shoot her a glare; she juts out her chin. She takes a deep breath and opens her mouth. I shake my head. She purses her lips and I am sure she's going to speak or say something; instead, she wraps her arms around her waist and glowers back.

Later, Bird. You and me are going to have this out, and I promise, you won't be able to speak at all by the end.

Her cheeks redden. Perhaps she read the intention in my gaze, hmm?

I turn on Adam, sorry excuse of a human that he is. "And you call yourself a father? You left them in danger and ran away?"

"I faked my death, severed ties with them. I released them into the system because, let's face it, the government would have had more success in miring their trail in paperwork so that it would be difficult for anyone to find them."

"You did a brilliant job too. In fact, I'd almost forgotten about your existence." Summer's voice is harsh; there's an edge to it I've never heard before. She holds her body so tightly that her shoulders seem to vibrate.

"Too bad you couldn't do the same for yourself."

Adam loosens the tie about his neck, "What do you mean?"

"My husband tracked you down, didn't he? So you weren't as efficient in covering your tracks as you thought."

Adam turns to me, his eyes wide, "How did you find me, when the Mafia tried and failed for all these years?"

"Clearly, they aren't as resourceful as I am. Funny how almost dying can light a fire under you, and ensure that you never give up until you track down your quarry."

Summer angles her body toward me. "Wha... what do you mean? Who almost died?"

I slice my hand through the air, "Doesn't matter."

I glare at her. Now is when she explodes, and tells me off, pulls off a snarky comment at my expense. My pulse rate picks up; my blood thrums in my veins. *Come on, little Bird, give me a taste of that sass and fire hidden below the surface.* I scan her features, wait... wait. She peruses my features with a searching look in her eyes, then shakes her head.

"Cora." Adam's chin quivers.

Summer stiffens, "You lost the right to call me that."

"When you were born, your face was a perfect heart shape. I wanted to name you Cora. Your mother insisted on Summer. We compromised, as was often the case." His lips twitch. "And Cora became your middle name." His features soften. "You were so beautiful. The tiniest little child with the sweetest disposition ever."

He sways; rubs his chest.

"I'll never forget how you lit up my life, my child. The time we spent together is among the most precious memories of my life."

She firms her lips, raises her chin, "I am pleased to say I don't remember much of my growing years."

He winces, "I deserve it."

I take a step forward, "Tell her what you did to us."

"You mean there's more?" Summer tucks her elbows into her sides, her entire body stiff. Her chest rises and falls. She's imagining—I can't begin to fathom what it is she's thinking, but the reality is far worse.

"I..." Adam licks his lips, "Please, can you get me some water first?"

I turn to do that.

"No."

I pause, glance toward my wife.

"The complete story first." Summer sets her jaw, "Enough with your delay tactics."

A small smile turns up his lips, "You remind me of your mother."

"You don't get to do that." Her chin trembles. "Spit it out already." She spits out his name, "Adam."

He squeezes his eyes shut and when he reopens them, they glitter with unshed tears. "Fine." He weaves on his feet, puts out his hand, and grabs onto the nearest chair. "They coerced me... I had to obey them." He looks from me to her, "I kidnapped your husband."

She scowls, "What do you mean?"

"Your father aligned with the Mob in furthering their business interests." My voice emerges as if it belongs to someone else.

I glare at Adam, "Tell her how you kidnapped me on the way home from school when I was twelve."

His gaze flicks to his daughter, "It's not how it sounds."

"Oh?" The blood thunders at my temple. "Are you denying what you did."

He tips his chin up, drags his fingers through his hair. His fingers tremble.

"It's true that I delivered you to the Mafia."

I fold my fingers into fists, "As you did the rest of the Seven?"

He furrows his brow. "I wasn't responsible for any other children. The Mafia must have put others up to that." He raises his hands. "I swear. After taking you, I knew I couldn't do that again. That's when I faked my death."

Anger explodes behind my eyes; my vision tunnels.

"Why me?" I growl. "I was the sole scholarship kid in that school. My parents had no money, let alone the kind of old wealth that the rest of the Seven did."

"It was a mistake. Last-minute change of plans. The child they had set their eyes on didn't come to school that day. You walked out instead." He raises his shoulders. "I was desperate; you fit the bill."

"Wrong place, wrong time, huh?"

His lips twist. "You could say that."

There's a sharp inhalation from my wife.

"You were unlucky, Sinclair." He waves a hand at his surroundings, "But look what it did to you."

"The fuck you mean?" The blood drums at my temples with such intensity that the edges of my vision go dark.

"Clearly, it gave you the motivation you needed to lift yourself to the very top."

"Are you actually trying to take credit for my success? It drove my parents to an early grave, you dumb fuck. My entire life changed in an instant." A trembling stumbles up my spine. I grip my fingers at my sides. Take one step forward, then another.

"Sinclair." My wife's voice follows me

I reach him, grab his collar.

"Sin." She grips my collar, "Don't."

"Do it." Adam smiles, then his lips pull down. "I deserve all of it."

I pull back my hand in a fist; my wife screams.

Adam crumples to the ground.

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Summer

The rhythmic whoosh-thump of the respirator thuds against my chest, mirroring the whump-whump-whump of my heart. I stare at the man who was... is my father.

I hadn't seen him in fifteen years and when he'd shown up at my wedding I had ignored him. I had insulted him when he'd turned up on my doorstep— Okay, *my husband's* doorstep. I had refused my father water. He'd asked for it twice and I had ignored him.

I curl my fingers into fists.

I had been too intent on revenge; on cutting into him with my words; wanting him to feel as broken as I had been in the years after he'd left me. When I'd found out he hadn't actually died, I'd wished him dead so many times... And here he is, on death's door. His ribs visible through the hospital gown, his face so pale it blends in with the sheets. When had his dark hair gone so grey? I hadn't noticed it earlier.

In the blurry images I carried in my head, he'd been tall, larger than life, a wide smile, a full head of dark hair. He'd been some kind of hero... a vision I'd wanted to cling to in my weaker moments. Someone who would one day come back for me and tell me that he was sorry, that he still loved me.

And he had returned. And I hadn't wanted to acknowledge that he still existed. He is the cause of every bad memory from my childhood come to life, and he claimed that he'd done it all for my own good. Typical. Why do parents always think that their children need to be shielded? That they can't

bear what their parents are going through?

All he'd had to do was take us with him—love us, hate us, we'd have been together, and that's all that would have mattered.

But he hadn't.

And here we are in a hospital room. My father had crumpled and Sinclair had caught him before he could hit the floor. My husband had called for his helicopter, then phoned ahead for his private doctors to be on standby. For once I didn't begrudge him his wealth.

We'd arrived at the hospital, and Dad had been rushed in. A cardiac attack. They'd operated on him right away, put in a stent to widen his blocked arteries. Now all I have to do is wait. For what? What am I going to say when he comes around? What will I tell him? What is going to happen to him? To us?

Karma and Victoria were in to see him already, and now they are in the waiting room outside.

I'd put it off, until... until Karma had urged me to go in. She'd told me that if something were to happen to him, I'd regret it if I didn't at least see him. But Dad is in his fifties; nothing is going to happen to him, right?

People survive multiple bypasses and go on to live full lives. Surely, my father will be no different. He'll pull through. He has to. I press my knuckles into my eyes.

The door whispers open behind me, and a shiver runs down my back.

It's him. He's in the room.

Sinclair draws abreast; the scent of bergamot and leather cleaves through the cloud of antiseptic. I draw it into my lungs, hold it, savor it. How many times will I be able to do this?

"How are you?"

These are the first words he's spoken to me in the last many hours. He'd ensured I didn't have to deal with the paperwork, the formalities, talking to the doctors. He'd taken care of all of it, leaving me to grieve... What? How things could have been, had my father not abandoned us? How I could have handled things differently with him? Could I have told him everything I carried around in my mind? My father... Sin... Why are my emotions always such a tangled web?

"Bird."

"Summer." My voice is too loud in the room, "My name is Summer."

"You should take a break, go home—"

"No." I glance away, "And it's not *my* home."

"Call it mine then." He widens his stance. "Go, eat, take a bath."

"What if he dies while I am gone?"

"He won't."

"Oh?" I stop the chuckle that bubbles up. Hysteria? No way am I giving into that. Not in front of him. "You think you can stop death?"

"I know it."

I stiffen, "What do you mean?"

"I almost died as a child."

"What?" I swing around. He's staring at the opposite wall. A pulse flares to life at his jawline. "The Mafia kidnapped us and kept us captive."

"For how long?"

"Too long." He fiddles with the clasp of his watch. "It was close to a month." His jaw tenses.

I don't dare speak, don't want to break this line of thought. He's thinking of... something... caught in the throes of his nightmares. I am not the only one running from my past, eh?

"We were bound to our beds, kept drugged." He clicks open the clasp of his watch, then shuts it with a harder click. "I floated in and out of consciousness." The tendons of his throat flex. "In my lucid moments, I tried to communicate with the other boys in the room. There were—"

"Seven of you."

He nods. "That's how we met. From different homes, families, different realities; and our lives were changed irrevocably in that time."

"A powerful bond."

"One that unites you and haunts you for the rest of your life."

"What did they want?"

"They blackmailed our families for money. Until they realized mine didn't have any."

The clicking of his watch grows louder.

He pulls himself up to his full height, "After about 3 weeks in that hell hole, one of us managed to break free. He was caught and brought back. That day they decided to make an example of me. I was the expandable one, after all." His smile grows fierce. "They beat me so hard that I lost consciousness."

I gasp. "The scar over your eyebrow...?"

He nods.

"The other families paid up. The kidnapers took the money, revealed the

location where they were holding us. I was rescued with the other boys." He clicks the clasp of his watch. "When I arrived at the hospital I wasn't breathing. They resuscitated me." The clicking grows louder.

"They brought you back." The breath rushes out of me.

"I chose to live."

"Is that why... uh! You're so intense?"

One side of his mouth kicks up, "Now you're being diplomatic."

Yeah, but when a man decides to reveal something of his deepest self, you don't exactly kick him for it, eh?

He straightens, rubs the back of his neck, "I almost died... The rest of the Seven didn't escape unscathed either."

"What do you mean?"

"That is their story to tell."

He turns to me.

His shirt is unbuttoned, his hair mussed as if he's been running his hands through the thick strands. It gives him a veneer of vulnerability. An act. Surely, it's an act?

He'd wanted me to draw my father into the open. He'd wanted to destroy him.... Guess he got his wish, huh? So, what's left? "Why share all of this with me... now?"

He holds out his hand. "Take a break."

I stare at his hand. "Is everything a negotiation?"

"Yes." He draws in a breath. "It's the most important lesson I learned during the time I was locked up there. You had to think on your feet, hold back. As long as you had something that your opponent wanted, you had a chance."

"Am I your opponent?" I tip my head back, peruse his features for the first time since he'd come into the room. Dark shadows circle his eyes, and his stubble seems wilder somehow.

It enhances his potency.

Those dark, brooding, smoldering good looks just kicked up a notch. Combined with that hint of defenselessness that laces his features, it's intoxicating. An addiction. A low burn simmers in my belly. My body is too conditioned to react to him. I don't stand a chance.

I reach for his hand, his fingers brush mine and he pulls me up. I straighten and our knees bump.

He tucks an errant strand of hair behind my ears and I shiver.

His gaze deepens as he surveys my face. He sighs, "Bird, I'm..."

A cough sounds from the bed. I blink. Sinclair withdraws. I swivel, walk toward the bed, "Daddy?"

My father's eyes blink open. "Summer?"

"I'm here."

His fingers twitch. I grasp his palm. His hand is bigger than mine, yet his bones seem hollow.

"I'm sorry, for everything."

"You need to rest and recover."

"It's time for me to leave."

"Don't say that." My heart begins to race; a weakness hollows my knees. I grab the edge of the bed.

"You need to get better and..." My voice falters. I am not sure what to say. Come home with me? Do we have anything in common anymore? Our worlds are too different; so much time has passed. "We can... make a fresh start."

"You do that for me." He glances up at the man towering above us. "Take care of her."

Sinclair moves closer, until his warmth envelops me. "I will." His voice seems to be coming from far away.

"I can take care of myself."

"I know." My father's face lights up in a smile. "But life is a long walk; there are ups and downs, and the time goes faster when you have company."

My father's face waves in and out in front of my eyes. Only then do I realize that I am crying.

I swipe at the tears on my face. "Is that how it was between you and my mother?"

"I was never the same after she died." His chin trembles. "But it won't be long before I see her."

My blood pounds behind my eyes, "Don't talk like that," I sniffle. "You are going to be fine."

He gasps, glances up at Sinclair, "There's something you should know." He swallows; his chest heaves.

The beeping from the monitor next to him increases in pace. "Daddy, please don't talk. Please, you need to conserve your energy."

"I must." He draws in a breath, "I'm afraid he's tracked me down."

"Who?" Sinclair moves closer, "Tell me, Adam."

"Stop." I shove at Sin, "Back off, asshole, let him recover first."

"Mob. Underworld boss." My father coughs; all color leaches from his face. "He called me and threatened me. He's going to hurt my girls."

"Don't talk Dad. Please." I wring my fingers. He doesn't look well at all. "I'm going to get the doctor."

"No." My father wheezes. "Stay with me, Summer." He holds out his arm. I step forward, grasp his palm, twine my fingers with his.

He trains his gaze on Sinclair, "The same faction that was behind the kidnapping of you and your friends." His chest heaves.

The beeping in the room intensifies further.

My pulse begins to race. "Dad, don't exert yourself, please."

Sinclair comes closer. "Who is it? Tell me."

My father's eyelashes flutter, his lips move, but nothing emerges. *Shit. This is not good. Not good.* My throat closes. My stomach twists.

"Don't crowd him. Can't you see he needs to regain his health first." I yell, "Get away from him!"

Sinclair's feature harden. A nerve throbs at his temple. "Tell me who's responsible." He brushes past me and leans over Dad. "If I need to keep her safe, I need to know who I am after."

My father's mouth opens and closes. Sinclair places his ear next to his lips, "Say it."

His lips move. "Byron... Capo..."

The beeping monitor next to the bed flatlines.

"No." I scramble up, squeezing my father's fingers. "You can't do this." The door slams open and footsteps sound. A doctor, followed by two nurses, comes rushing in.

The doc checks out his heart with a stethoscope, nods to the nurse, who turns to me, "You need to wait outside."

"No." I hold onto my father's hand. It's warm. He can't have left me. I didn't get to tell him how much I care for him. That I forgive him. "Daddy."

"Ma'am, please." The nurse turns to the man by my side.

Sinclair pulls me close, "Bird."

I shake my head, tears pouring down my cheeks.

"Come with me." He tugs me back; my father's hand slips from my grasp. A second doctor, additional nurses flood the space. Cut the sight of the figure on the bed from my line of sight.

He urges me to turn; I follow him outside. He leads me down the

corridor, through a door, into a waiting room. Faces... familiar faces turn to us.

"How is he?" Saint asks, from where he's waiting not far from Victoria.

I glance away.

Karma rushes to me; I open my arms and hug my sister.

Victoria stands with her fingers clasped in front of her. She's wearing a dark blue, almost black in color, dress that falls to below her knees. Her make up is perfect, her lips a red slash. She stares at the door, her features blank. Did she love my father? Maybe I should comfort her?

I try to move toward her, but Karma tightens her hold on me.

Or maybe not.

The doors open behind me.

No, I will not turn. Will not.

There's a soft murmur of voices. Then footsteps approach me. The doctor clears his throat. "Mrs. Sterling."

"It's Ms. West" I turn, with Karma holding onto me.

His face says everything.

"No." I swallow.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Ah, Ms. West. His body rejected the stent. It's extremely rare but..."

His voice fades.

Victoria approaches us. I meet her blank gaze. She draws Karma away from me. My sister shoves at Victoria half-heartedly, then folds her arm round the other woman's slim shoulders.

I brush past the doctor, walking toward Sinclair who watches me approach.

His lips move... I don't register the words. I stare at the broad chest, in that crisp white shirt... The color pristine, the tendrils of black hair that pepper his tanned skin. Up to that strong chin, the square jaw.

"You okay?" He dips his face, peers into my eyes. Cerulean, blue and black. Everything I hate.

"You killed him." A coldness grips my chest. "He wasn't old enough to die; he could have lived to be ninety."

Sinclair's jaw tics. "I'm sorry for your loss, Summer."

"No, you're not. This is what you wanted. You wanted to ruin him and you made me help you. Well, guess what? You've ruined all of us." My knees wobble. I clench my fingers at my sides. I thought I had done my share

of grieving when my mother had died... the first time I thought my father had died... but this... Everything feels too sharp, too real. Is it because I am older now? Because I can separate each individual shred of emotion that pierces my gut? I press my fingers together in front of my chest.

"I didn't intend for this to happen." His jaw tics.

"Bullshit." My chest hurts and pressure builds behind my eyes. "You made him come; you subjected him to this farce. You threatened him, told him you were going to ruin him. You must have known this was a possible outcome."

The skin at the corners of his eyes creases. He firms his lips. "I didn't want him to die. I wanted Adam to be alive to witness his destruction."

"How big of you."

A vein pops to life at his temple.

"If it weren't for you," I stab a finger at him, "My father would be alive."

"And you'd still think he was dead."

I wince.

He drags his fingers through his hair, "Fuck, I'm sorry Summer."

I lean forward on the balls of my feet, "I hate you."

"You don't."

That hard certainty in his tone whips through the jumble of thoughts in my head. "You know nothing."

I throw myself at him.

Raise my fist until it connects with that beautiful jaw. Punch his neck, his chest, any part of him that I can reach.

"I loathe you. I never want to see you again. I want you to leave, I can't stand you. Go. Away." I raise my arm and he catches it.

"Do you mean it?"

I tilt my chin up. *Don't say it. Don't.* "Get away from me, you monster."

Sin

I'd turned and stalked toward the door of that hospital waiting room... and paused. I'd turned and caught a glimpse of Karma and Summer holding each other, Victoria, slightly to the side.

At least Summer would have company. My wife wouldn't be alone in her grief.

That had reassured me; enough that I'd walked away.

I had set her free, just as I'd intended to do all along. Arranged the funeral for her father; had told myself I wouldn't go. Then had contented myself with watching her from a distance.

Fuck, when had I started second-guessing my moves, huh?

Why is it that I can recall the shape of her black dress as it had hugged her curves, ending below her knees? Her pink hair had shone in the afternoon sun.

Yeah, unlike in the movies, in real life, the fucking sunshine bathes a funeral scene in golden light, even in rain-drenched London.

My wife had held onto her sister, flanked by her stepmother on the other side.

Saint had represented the Seven.

He'd stood at the other end of the crowd, his attention focused on Victoria. Again.

Summer had glanced up and spotted me.

Our gazes had connected. I'd held hers, willed her to come to me. She'd

stiffened, then deliberately turned away, and I'd forced myself to leave.

That was exactly seven days ago. I'd focused on 7A and FOK media, had buried myself in my work.

She'd told me to get away from her, and I had.

For the first time in my life, I had gone against my every instinct, which had screamed at me to gather her close, comfort her, take care of her. She hadn't wanted it. And I had listened to her wishes. *Fuck me. Fuck her. Fuck this thing between us that seems to grow bigger with every second.*

I raise the bottle of whiskey and chug it down. The liquid hits my stomach like a fireball. I stare out through the open window of my office.

"Planning on alcohol poisoning yourself, huh?" Saint walks up to stand next to me.

I don't reply, stare into the distance, where London spreads her skirts out, waiting for the next big bastard who will fuck her in the cunt. Oh, wait. That's me. I am the one who's turned every innocent thing that's come my way into sordidness; who's made my millions doing whatever it took, for as everyone knows, you can't reach the top without stepping on some bodies.

That's all she'd been. Collateral damage. *So why am I standing here brooding when my plan had worked spectacularly?* I had destroyed Adam, and in the process, my wife. I hadn't thought she'd take me down with her. Without trying. Without raising a finger. She'd bared herself to me and I had crushed her.

"It wasn't your fault."

"Oh?" I raise the bottle to my lips, take another healthy swig.

"He could dish it out, too bad his heart couldn't take it."

Whatever.

He holds out his hand and I hand the bottle to him.

"How long are you going to sulk?"

"Do I look like I am sulking?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely."

I thrust out my hand and he holds out the bottle. It's empty. Typical.

"Why did you come here, Saint?"

"No reason."

"You always have a reason."

"Making sure you're alive, old chap."

"I am. You can bugger off now."

"You're in a piss of a mood."

"Get off my balls, you knob."

"Have you spoken to her yet?"

I'd tried, once. She'd hung up on me. No one hangs up on me. No one. I'd almost walked out of there and to her house... And then what? What would I have done? Apologized? Told her I'd become a new man? This is what I am. And it is true that her father played a big role in that. Perhaps the old man had been right; I had forged my identity from that incident. I wouldn't be here if I hadn't forced myself forward. Aimed so high that no one could touch me. So I could have the perfect revenge until... It had gone all pear-shaped on me.

"I'm divorcing her."

Saint stiffens.

"I'll ensure that she's set up for life. Give her enough money so she won't have to work ever again."

"Is that what she wants?"

"It's what she gets." I place the bottle on the table nearby. "That should be enough compensation for what I put her through, right?"

"Well, then." He turns, walks to the bar. I hear the ice clink. He returns with two glasses of whiskey.

"A toast then." He raises his glass.

I toss the alcohol down my throat.

"You're such a *chutiya*."

"That's me." Always ready to bring out the worst in people.

"Maybe you should try to placate her?"

"Not my style."

"Not that you should change your approach or anything... not unless you want her."

"I don't—"

"If you love her—"

I scoff, "I don't."

Jace walks in. "The man doth protest too much."

"Thought you'd left the country." I glower.

"I returned last night. Sienna and I are buying the house up the street."

"What?" I frown, "Why?"

"Let it not be said that you didn't welcome me with open arms." He laughs. "It wasn't my call. She wants our child to grow up in the UK. Don't ask me why." He shakes his head. "Besides, she fell in love with Primrose

Hill when she attended your wedding." Jace's face lights up, as it always does when he speaks about Sienna. All of this emo shit, fuck, it's too early for that. "She figured this way she could get to know your wife better as well."

"You missed the memo." I grind my teeth so hard, pain flicks up my jaw. "I'm getting divorced."

He shakes his head, "Don't be such a..." He turns to Saint, "What was the very eloquent word you used?"

"Chutiya."

"Yep, that."

My left eyelid twitches, "And you're the master of relationships because?"

"I am the one who's married to a woman who lights up my days and my nights."

"What-fucking-ever. That flowery-ass bullshit may suit you, but it's not for me."

"Hmm." Jace approaches me. "Close your eyes."

"What?"

Saint snickers, "If I were you, I'd be careful. Whatever Jace is on, it's clearly infectious. I, for one, intend to savor my single status." He steps away, giving us both a wide berth.

Jace grimaces, "You going to be swayed by this sorry excuse of a douche, or you going to, for once in your sorry life, listen to your fucking heart?"

"Newsflash." Saint stretches out on the couch, "He doesn't have one."

Jace jerks his chin at me, "Didn't take you for a pussy."

Fuck this. I shut my eyes. "Now what?"

"What's the first image that flashes behind your eyes?"

Her.

"What's the first voice you hear?"

Hers.

"The first scent?"

Her arousal.

"Color?"

The pink strands of her hair.

"The first touch you recall?"

How her lips had parted under mine. How she'd moaned, opened up for me. Welcomed me into her body, her life, her soul.

My eyes flash open.

"You doubt what you feel for her?"

A hot burn stabs at my chest.

"What are you going to do about it?"

Saint punches a cushion behind his neck, "Shag her out of your system, that's what you should do. Get it all out, man."

I turn in his direction.

"Then," he rubs his hands together, "divorce her."

I prowl toward him.

"After," He links his hands behind his neck, "making her sign a watertight contract that she gives up all rights to your name, your firm, every goddam thing that she's come in contact with."

I squint down at him. "You're right."

"I am?"

"Good thing I am not you, eh?"

"It was Beauty killed the Beast."

—*King Kong*. Directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack

Summer

"He didn't." I crumple the paper and fling it aside.

Karma looks up from her laptop, "Let me guess." She pretends to think, "It's the alphahole, otherwise known as, your husband?"

"My soon to be ex." A situation I can't wait for. Something hot stabs at my chest; my heart begins to race. I can't wait to be rid of him, to put all of this sordid mess behind me.

"Hmm." She resumes working.

"What are you doing?" I growl.

At least my own sister could be sympathetic to my cause, huh? She's been curiously controlled in her reactions the last few days. Every time I try to talk to her about Mr. Sterling. Yeah, it's back to that. Best to think of him in formal terms. Newsflash: tell that to my subconscious which has a one-track mind where Sin is concerned—Yeah, see what I did there?

"Karma." I march up to her, slap the laptop's face down, a second after she yanks her hand out of the way.

"Oy, you were never this violent before."

"Shit happens." I scowl at her. "What are you hiding from me?"

"Moi?" She fluffs up her hair, "Nothing. Honest." She widens her gaze, looking not innocent at all. "After all there's no crying in baseball."

"That's from *A League of Their Own*." I shoot back. "And, you can't distract me."

She huffs out a breath. "I tried."

"What?"

"You are overanalyzing this."

"Me?" A slow simmer starts somewhere inside. "I'm overanalyzing?"

I spot the piece of crumpled paper, scoop it up, and walking back, I thrust it under her nose. "Read it."

She accepts it, reluctance written in every angle of her body. She opens it, peers up at me.

"Go on."

She sighs, opens it up, and begins to read.

"Aloud."

"Dear Ms. West,

This is to inform you that you are appointed Head of FOK quizzes a new division of FOK Media. Please report for work, 9 am tomorrow, and present your long-overdue ideas in response to the earlier marketing brief—I take it you have the details?

PS. You're welcome."

"Aargh! That man."

She continues reading.

"Yours sincerely,

Sinclair Sterling

MD, FOK Media

Chairman, 7A Investments"

"Yeah, yeah, I know all that." I grab the sheet from her, then thrust the other piece of paper at her.

She reads it and her eyebrows shoot up.

"Divorce proceedings?"

"Yeah." My shoulders slump.

"That's what you wanted, right?"

"Hmm? Yes."

"Then?"

"Don't you see the problem?" I scowl.

"That you'd be working with him?"

I glare at her, "You're taking the piss, right?"

"Why should it bother you?"

"Only that he'd be my ex, not to mention the history between us."

"He's giving you a chance to accomplish all of your dreams. You've always wanted your own quizzing company, and you'd be the CEO of it, so to speak."

"As a part of his company."

"So?"

"So, I want complete autonomy."

"Maybe that's what he's calling you to discuss?"

"Why is he doing this? It's favoritism, nepotism."

"It won't be if he's divorcing you."

"I'd be his ex."

"Gives more credibility to the fact that he's recognizing your potential."

"But I don't—" I bite my lips.

"You don't want to be separated from him?" She tilts her head.

"I didn't say that."

"You almost did." She continues, "You're making too much of all this."

"It's only my life."

"And he returned it to you."

"Huh?"

She waves her hand around. "Gave you back this shitty apartment, reinstated all your outstanding bills, transferred the £4.5M to your bank account."

Y-e-p.

You read that figure right. When I saw it, I almost fell over. Like, how many zeroes were there in that figure, huh? Well, ask me, I know. I counted and re-counted it quite a few times in my online bank balance.

"He hasn't backtracked on the money and he hasn't sneakily tried to pay off our debts." Karma steeples her fingers together. "He hasn't shown you favoritism... Hasn't bullied you into doing anything you don't want."

"Yeah, yeah." I huff. "What are you? The alphahole's personal PR flunkie?"

"No, that's your official role." She chortles.

I throw my hands up. "I walked into that one."

"No, seriously Summer. He's trying. He made sure I have access to Dr. Weston...if I choose to pursue the treatment with him."

"Which you are."

"It's something we need to discuss."

"What do you mean? He's the best heart specialist there is in the city."

"I..." She tips up her chin, "I'm not sure I want to see him."

"There." I stab a finger at her, "That's the problem. You're afraid of getting the right diagnosis, because then you'd have to do something about your condition. You'd have to stop pretending there's nothing wrong with you."

She jumps up to her feet, "So not true, and you should speak."

"What do you mean?"

"You're the one denying you have feelings for Mr. Gazillionaire."

"Not." I grind my teeth.

"You do. And now when he's doing everything as you wanted, you are livid."

She's right, though no way am I going to admit that.

"You were hoping for a chance to find fault with him, which you can't. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that you're missing him."

"You're deluded."

"Oh?"

"I can't be bought with good intentions."

"You should be telling him that."

I stiffen.

"Unless you are too chicken about keeping that appointment and telling him that to his face?"

Umm. I begin to pace. "I don't trust him."

"You mean you don't trust yourself?"

I swing around. "What?"

"You have to admit there are serious sparks between the two of you. Maybe that's why you don't want to keep the appointment?"

"I don't have to. I could sign the divorce papers, mail them to him. Then go tell him to stuff the job offer where the sun don't shine."

"You could." She relaxes into the sofa, places the computer on the side. "Or you could tell him to his face."

I grab a strand of my hair, bring it to my lips. "Imagine the look on his face, huh?"

She nods. "Bet he wouldn't be able to deal with the fact that someone could actually turn him down."

That's true.

She places her fingers together in front of her, "You'd have the last word. You'd enjoy that."

That would be cool. I raise my shoulders, and let them drop, "Well, nobody's perfect."

She snorts. "You're a long way from that, girlfriend."

"Gotcha." I clap my hands.

"Wait. What?" She sits up. "I'm confused."

"That last line of mine?" I chuckle, "It's from *Some Like It Hot*."

"Not fair, Summer." She scowls.

"I got a point on you." I pump my fists in the air, then fling out my arms and do a shimmy. "Woohoo." It's childish of me, but gosh does it feel good to let off some steam.

"I'm not as obsessed with movie trivia." She tosses her head, "So I keep missing things. Not that I'm competing or anything."

"Such a sore loser." I grin.

"Now it's you changing the topic." She waggles a finger at me.

"Yeah." I sober, straighten my shoulders, "What should I wear tomorrow?"

49

“I thought about what you would look like having an orgasm.”
— *Sex, Lies & Videotape*. Director: Stephen Soderbergh

Sin

I drag my finger around my collar of my shirt. Is it hot in this room or what?

I stalk to the desk in my office, grab the glass of water and chug it down. My stomach churns. I swallow down the bile that rises up, slap the glass back on the surface.

Why am I nervous? I don't need to be nervous. This is me at my A game. I am the CEO of this company, the fourth richest man in the country, a billionaire... Blah-bloody-blah.

I squeeze the bridge of my nose.

The last three days had been bugged to hell. I'd tried to bury myself in work, but every turn I took, every new investment I'd tried to consider was held up by the fact that FOK media isn't up and running yet. Yeah, I had delayed its launch. I snort.

Me. CEO, shark of an investor, a businessman at the top of his game, had been met with closed doors... of my own making. I'd sent her that letter with the divorce notice... The hardest fucking thing I've ever done. For once, I had parked my ego in a corner.

I know when I have to pretend to retreat so I can move in for the kill. Lure the prey into my lair, and then—I draw in a breath—I'll pounce. No... I'll seduce her into my web, ensure she understands what I need from her. I'll

lay the fucking world at her feet if she'll allow me. As if.

I smirk.

The adamant pink-haired goddess won't allow me to treat her as special. She wants to be my equal. Entreated me to give up the thing I cherish most—my control. I'd opened my blasted world to her, revealed my regrets, told her things I hadn't shared with anyone else; I'd ripped out the darkness for her... Given her an insight into what made me what I am. But had it been enough? I rock back on the balls of my feet. Hell, no.

She wanted more.

She wanted every last thing that I had hidden away and tried to forget.

She needs me to show, not tell. Bloody fucking hell. That... is the hardest thing ever. And I am trying. Goddamn her sweet mouth, and her beautiful cunt that I remember every second of my waking moments, her gorgeous lips and her sun-kissed limbs, her husky voice and her alluring scent that clings to my pores and drives me insane until I can't sleep for fear that I'll recollect every single glance, moment, touch, kiss, regret... *Fuck!* I rub my chest.

She crawled under my skin, sank into my soul, and I hate it. And love it. She made me unrecognizable to myself, and damn, if that isn't the biggest welcome surprise ever. Is that why I am rooted in front of my desk, mumbling to myself? Definitely turning into a pussywhipped loser. The last I checked, I have my balls, thank fuck.

A whine sounds at my feet. Max nudges his head against my thigh. I glance down and rub his sleek head. "You miss her too, huh?"

He huffs, arches his neck. I lean down and rub under his ears. "You've been a good boy, always exiting the room whenever she was around. I swear, sometimes I think you are human... No, better than them. You had a sixth sense when it came to giving me my privacy with her. That ends now."

He stiffens, muscles quivering in that alert way whippets have. Where they are relaxed and tensed at the same time. Kind of like how I feel now, huh.

"You're going to meet the woman... I... want. The one who is something special to me, Max. The one who's going to change the future... for both of us."

He slumps on his behind, whines again. "Exactly. I'll do everything but beg... No, maybe even that. Okay, maybe... if it comes to it... Fuck." I roll my shoulders, "I sound insane, huh? Talking to myself, like I am a kid again."

I'd had to do it in that room, blindfolded. It was what had kept me sane.

Hearing my voice in my head, hearing the others, communicating through claps and thumps. It had been the only way to communicate, since we'd been gagged. But I am not that boy anymore. I've come a long way. I've taken revenge. My shoulders slump. Only it hadn't been half as satisfying as I'd hoped.

My landline buzzes. Adrenaline laces my blood. I scoop up the receiver, "Send her in."

There's a pause. "You okay, Sinclair?" Meredith's voice is soothing.

"I won't be if you don't send her in, in the next second—"

"She's on her way."

I draw in a breath. *Stay calm, no need to panic now.* She's only a girl... standing in front of me, asking me to bare my emotions for her. No pressure. And now I sound like one of the movie trivia questions she loves to show round. It's fucking catching. She's catching. Onto me. My failures. My pretensions. "Sorry, M."

"You better not let her go this time."

"Yeah." I chuckle. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"I'm counting on it, boy, and when you get married this time around, for real, I—"

There's a knock on the door, "Gotta go, M."

I drop the receiver so fast that it crashes and bounces onto the desk. I grab it, balance it properly in its cradle. I can do this. I've stared down bigger negotiators, more lethal ones, none of whom had large green eyes, breasts that were an exact fit for my palms, and her lips, those lips. That crease at the bottom that is sure to drive me insane, if I let it. *You've got this, Sinner.*

I swivel around, lean against the desk. Drum my fingers on the surface. No, that won't do. I prop my hands on my hips.

The knock sounds again.

"The door's fucking open. What do you expect, a red-carpet invitation?"

50

Summer

The alphahole's voice crashes through the barrier. I freeze. My knuckles stretch white. He's the one who invited me. He could sound a little more welcoming. A little less intimidating. To hell with that. I am going to teach him that he can't mess with me. I've got this. I twist the door handle, and the double doors swing open. I step inside and pause.

"Well? You going to keep me waiting all day, woman?"

Anger thrums at my temples. I raise my head, and those indigo eyes lock with mine. All of the breath leaves me. The force of his dominance spears me with the precision of a heat-seeking missile, pinning me in place. The scent of him... bergamot and leather and woodsmoke. It fills the space, crawls into my cells, and I am instantly wet.

He frowns; his glare sweeps me from toe to head. He licks his lips and a whine bubbles up my throat.

He tilts his head and his jawline cuts through the air.

The rough chafe of those whiskers between my thighs, across my sensitive, swollen, throbbing pussy... I gulp. The image is sharp, larger than life, so real that I squeeze my thighs together.

"Close your mouth or you'll catch a fly, and it's not a sexy look, I promise you that."

I snap my teeth together. *What a wanker!* I'd forgotten he has this ability to turn me on and the next second dump freezing cold water on all of my heated desires. I walk forward and the door snicks shut behind me. The sound

shivers up my spine and my knees knock together. I pause, hold onto the straps of my bag. Dig my fingers into the leather.

"How dare you?" he growls.

"What?" I stiffen.

Not a second in his presence and he is issuing orders and declarations. It's as if no time has passed between us, no incidents... Nothing except the death of my father, and his subsequent actions trying to show... What? That he is trying to put things right between us? As if that would ever be possible. "What are you talking about?"

He struts forward. I take a step back, but he's already standing in front of me. He shoots out his hand, I cringe.

"Your hair." The muscles of his jaw flex. "You changed it."

"The color... Yeah."

"Why?"

"Why?" I shuffle my weight from foot to foot. "I needed a change, I guess." I jut out my chin. "It's what some of us do when everything else spirals out of control. Unlike alphaholes, who decide to go about destroying other people's lives."

The skin across his cheeks stretches; he pales. The look in his eyes is bleak, so stricken, that I blink. It clears. The cerulean and blue roars forth. Nah, I was mistaken. He couldn't have revealed himself so clearly there. No way.

"Going auburn suits you."

"It does?"

"Makes you ordinary enough that you can blend in with the rest."

Ouch. My shoulders stiffen. I thrust out my chin. "Nice to see you've been polishing up your manners."

"Nice to see that you've accepted my job offer."

"I haven't."

He blinks. His features pale yet more.

Gotcha.

He drops his hands to his sides. "So why are you here?"

I reach for my bag, pull out the papers. My fingers tremble so hard that they flutter to the ground. The hell? I stare at the rectangle of white on the ground between us.

So does he.

Neither of us says a word.

Then he clicks his tongue, "Max, get it."

I frown, watch him. He has his gaze trained on the paper. I wait a second, another. A bead of sweat rolls down his temple.

"Sinclair?"

His jaw tics.

"Sin?"

A vein throbs at his temple.

"What's wrong?"

"Max." He clears his throat, tracks his gaze across the floor toward me. "You like her, don't you, boy?"

I scan the room again, see nothing... except for the pet rug in the corner—which I'd spotted before—and next to it, a leash. My heart begins to thud.

"Sin, you're beginning to scare me."

"I knew you liked her from the moment you saw her at the pub. How she leaned across the counter as if she owned the place, sucked down that pink concoction—"

"It's called a Daiquiri—frozen, not stirred."

"What-bloody-ever."

I stiffen. For a second there, I was sure I'd sensed something different. "I signed it, so that's it. It's over between us." I pivot, walk toward the door.

"Stop."

I hasten my steps.

"Bird."

My heart stutters. No, I will not give in to his stupid nicknames. He doesn't mean anything when he calls me that. It is how he manipulates my emotions, which, apparently, I have a shit ton of when it comes to him.

I reach the door, grab the handle.

"Max, go to her."

My spine stiffens.

"Go on, good boy, that's it, brush up against her ankles, grab the hem of her skirt, rub her back—"

"Stop." I pivot to face him, "Who's Max?"

"My imaginary dog."

51

Sin

"Surprised?" I thrust out my chest. I've done it. I've told her the one thing I had confessed to no one else.

Not the Seven, not M. Definitely not my parents in the time that they'd taken me home and tried to understand what had happened to my mind.

She stares at me, a furrow between her eyebrows. "I... don't understand."

I widen my stance. "It's a coping mechanism."

"So Max... isn't... he's not—"

"Real."

"Oh."

"After I was rescued from the kidnappers, I spent a month at the hospital recuperating. When I was released, my parents struggled to cope with my changed behavior. Not that I had been the easiest child before," which was putting it mildly; I grimace, "but I became more withdrawn. I was pissed off with the world, with them, with myself for being in a situation where I'd had no control."

"It wasn't your fault." Her tone is soft.

Wasn't it? I drag my fingers through my hair.

"My parents were busy trying to make ends meet, as it were. They didn't know how to deal with me. My mother tried, I suppose," A pulse throbs at my temple. "She tried to get me to see a therapist, but—"

"You refused."

"Yeah," I glower. "I can be a stubborn twat."

"I hadn't noticed." Her lips curve.

Say something more. Say what a freak I am. Off my nutter... Yeah, that would be a more accurate description. Why the fuck would she want to stay with me after everything I've told her?

I bare my teeth, "You think I'm crazy, huh?"

"No." She shakes her head. "Not more than usual."

Turn around. *Fly away, little Bird.* The cage door is open. The world awaits you. Sail forth. Conquer. Find new friends... A lover. Another husband. My thighs spasm. My shoulder muscles bunch.

If she glances at anyone else, takes someone else in my place... I'd kill the asshole... Fuck that, I won't allow it. I can't.

I'd brought her here, thinking I'd coerce her to stay; bribe her with more money, a job that fulfills her dreams, a hint of what she's missing. I'd hoped she'd feel the loss of what could have been between us. I'd been sure that she'd take one look at me, and what? Throw herself at me, ask me to take her back? *Fuck.* I roll my shoulders.

That had been exactly my line of thinking. Then she'd walked in, and I'd known, it wouldn't work. All of my arrogance had been stunted and forced to take a back seat. I had done the unthinkable.

I'd ripped open the one thing that would unravel my entire persona, my existence, the face I show the world.

I'd exposed myself to her. I was bare. Nothing to hide. Almost. "You should leave now," I growl.

"Okay."

She turns, heads to the door.

The fuck? She's going? Sure, I'd told her to... But when had she ever obeyed me before? Without question.

This time. The one time I'd wanted her to disobey me, fight me, hold her own, she'd... flummoxed me again. She is perfect. She is mine. And I've lost her again. I squeeze my eyes shut. The blood thuds at my temples. My ribcage tightens. I draw in a breath. My lungs burn. Images from the past overwhelm my mind. Darkness envelops me.

Voices reach me in the damp musty space. Muffles, thuds, scrapes. I hear the moans of the boys in that enclosed room—six of them—I know them by their grunts, stifled by the rags in their mouths.

The door opens, footsteps sound. Someone is coming. Nearer, nearer. *No, please, not me. Not this time.* I'll do anything you want. Is there a God? I've

never prayed before. If I knew how to... I could. I can't. So all I can say is help me. Someone. Anyone.

I try to swallow, but my throat is too raw. Attempt to breathe, but my lungs spasm. My face hurts. My arms are numb. Can't feel my fingers. My toes. I am floating... floating... looking down on my hurt broken body. Myself. I am no more.

Click. More. I need more. *Click. Click.* My fingers fumble with the clasp of my watch. Cold. Metallic. *Click. Click. Click.* The sound pierces through the noise in my head.

Focus. Focus on it.

The shape of the *clasp*. Rectangle. The indentation in the center. Like her lips. The crease. Pink. Soft. Beautiful. *Click. Click. Click. Click.*

"Sinclair."

Her voice. Soft and husky. Her breath catches. She does that when she comes. In my arms. On my dick. On my fingers. All over my tongue. *Click. Click. Click. Click.*

"Sin." Her warm fingers encircle my wrist. Her scent fills my senses. Focus on that. On how she leans into me, her breasts thrust up and into my chest. The nipples erect. The pink areolae twitching, yearning for my mouth. My groin hardens. My dick lengthens.

"Sin." She grips my crotch through my pants.

Heat shoots up my spine, the darkness recedes, and I snap open my eyes.

I am back in my office, in the present, with the only person in my life who matters. *Her.*

"You don't want to do this." I glare at her.

"But I do." A smile curves those beautiful lips.

"You don't understand."

"Your watch." She glances down.

I pull my fingers away from the steel clasp.

She leans closer, "That's why you wear this worn out watch, huh?"

I set my jaw, "If you've figured it out this far, you don't need my help for the rest."

"You play with its clasp as a means of grounding yourself, connecting yourself with the present, right?"

I smirk. "Anyone tell you that you should have been a psychologist instead? I'd use your services. Hell, we'd make full use of your couch. I bet we'd wear it out in a week, tops." I angle my head, "What do you say?"

"I say that you shouldn't change the topic."

"Hmm." I thrust my pelvis forward and into her palm.

She swallows. "Sin. Please." Her tone turns beseeching. It doesn't stop her from gripping the bulge that tents my pants. Good. I widen my stance.

"Love it when you plead with me."

"Can I speak what's on my mind?"

"As long as you keep your hand on my dick, everything is fine."

She scowls. "It's not though."

"Oh?"

"You have an imaginary dog for a companion, Sin, and you have been holding onto a watch from your boyhood days, as a means of connecting you to your sanity. You need to face what happened to you. You need help."

"Not happening." I set my jaw.

"You overcame your past, Sin. Look at you today, an incredibly handsome, gorgeous, self-made gazillionaire with a heart of gold hidden behind that asshole exterior."

Heat flushes my neck. I've been complimented by many but this... from the woman who's mine... nothing tops this. I want to say something flippant—because a douche-canoe never changes his stripes, eh? I open my mouth, but there's something blocking my throat. A pressure builds at my temples.

I peer into her eyes, and all I see is myself. *The fuck?*

"What you've been through would have broken a lesser man." She rubs my dick through my pants. "Not you, Sinclair Sterling. You survived. You are here, standing in front of me, proud—"

"And hard."

She purses her lips, "And still an alphahole."

"Who's ready for you."

She withdraws her hand, but I am faster. I grab her fingers, press them into my aching hardness.

"Need you, Bird."

She swallows.

I tighten my grip, thrust myself into our joined hands. "See what you do to me?"

Her pupils dilate; her breathing grows shallow. She shuffles backward, putting more distance between us and my heart begins to thud. My throat closes; my guts churn, "Don't leave me, Bird."

"That's not fair." Her lips turn down. "You're playing the emo card."

What me? Nah! Uh!... okay, m-a-y-b-e. I'm not beyond using sneaky ways to get her attention, and if it means I can bind her to me? Well then, all bets are off.

I press down, use her hand to massage myself. "You mean this?" A groan rips up my chest. "See how I react to you?"

Her fingers curve and my balls tighten.

Sweat beads my forehead. "So fucking hot, Bird. Admit it, that no one else can make you come the way I do."

"You know it's true."

I smirk.

"It's not only that." She bites on her lower lip, and of course, I feel the tug all the way to tip of my cock. *Fuck!*

I lean in close enough for my breath to raise the hair on her forehead, "So, you don't want to feel me hard and throbbing and pulsing inside of you, hmm?"

She shivers.

"You don't want me?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then?" I glare at her. "Enlighten me here, help me out, Bird."

"It's your trusting me enough to reveal how—"

"Broken, I am?"

"I was going to say resilient, but if you want to put yourself down." She raises her shoulders. "Be my guest." Her fingers squeeze and blood rushes to my groin.

"Fuck." I groan.

She slides her hands down, cups my balls.

A snarl rumbles up my chest.

Her green eyes gleam, "You undervalue yourself."

I frown, then chuckle. "Good joke. Your sense of humor has improved."

"You think your sharing your nightmares and how you managed to not let them overwhelm you is—"

"—A sign of weakness."

"Let me finish." She squeezes my balls.

My cock thickens; blood rushes to my groin. I glare at her.

She glares back.

"Just because you've fooled the world into believing that you are an obnoxious asshole—"

"I'm being myself, Babe."

She twists my balls, and I growl. "The fuck, Summer?"

"Let me complete my train of thought."

I pull my hand out of my pocket, fix my fingers around her nape. "You dare tell me what to do?"

"No." She shakes her head. "I dare to show you what you really are."

"Oh?" I tilt my head, yank her close enough for our lips to almost touch. Almost. "And what's that?"

"A man who needs a soft touch."

"I don't know, from where I am, I am quite hard—"

She lets go of my balls only to grasp my cock once more. She massages it and all thoughts empty from my mind. This woman? Fuck! She knows exactly how to please me.

I shove myself forward, thrusting into her grasp, fucking her hand. I pull my fingers off her palm, grab the desk for support.

"That's fucking hot. But I'd much prefer to fuck your mouth—"

"Listen to me, this once, you prick."

"*Your* prick." I allow a smirk to curl my lips, "And you have my attention."

"What I have, is your manhood in the palm of my hand." She pumps me through my pants, a long hard swipe from base to tip. Goosebumps flare on my skin.

"Jesus, woman, spit it out already."

"It makes you human, okay? What you told me; it wouldn't have been easy for anyone to admit. And for a full-of-himself asshole such as you, well, it must have taken hours of prepping."

"Days... Weeks... Since I met you, actually."

She frowns.

I firm my lips, nod toward her.

"I mean, it means a lot to me... That you trusted me enough to share your secrets."

I lower my eyebrows. I sense a but coming there... *Nah! She wouldn't dare, would she?*

"But it's too little too late."

My mouth falls open. I know I am gaping, but fuck that. "Don't you dare do it, Bird."

"What?" She unzips my pants, and my dick swings free. She grabs my

swollen shaft at the base, swipes up to the tip, and I huff.

Tighten my hold on her nape.

"What were you saying?" She peers up at me from under her thick eyelashes, massages me again. The blood rushes to my groin; my cock jumps.

"Don't you dare leave—"

She squeezes me with enough pressure for my shaft to thicken. The pulse thuds at my temples, behind my eyeballs. My balls are so fucking hard that I am sure I am going to come right now.

My head spins; my knees tremble. And fuck, this isn't about the blow job. It's simply that the woman I love, is getting me off— *Hold on.*

Love. What? No. I did not think that.

I mean, I'd confessed to *almost* being in love... When had I crossed the line? Is that why I'd spilled all my secrets to her like she was my sounding board? Which she was... *She is... Mine.*

I am hers. Hers. I stare at her flushed features. Take in the dilated pupils, the color on her cheeks. Her parted lips. She, too, is aroused. Good.

I force my shoulders to unlock. Widen my stance. "Bird."

"Hmm?"

She drags her fingers to the base of my very excited cock.

"I love you."

Summer

His features contort. His hard chest shudders. His hard, veiny shaft jumps in my palm and hot bursts of cum sear my forearm, my chest; streak the blouse I'd teamed with my short skirt.

Sin in the throes of an orgasm? It's the hottest thing I've ever seen. A moan bleeds up my throat, I swallow it. Tilt my chin up.

"You're lying."

His features relax. His dick pulses in the aftermath of the orgasm. My fingers don't meet around the column of his hardness. Damn him. And he just came. The hell?

He smirks, "When you have a man's balls in your grasp, it's more potent than a dying declaration."

I frown. "You mean that a man will say anything to get his dick sucked?"

"Are you offering?" He scowls.

"No." I release him and his hold on my neck tightens.

"Then I will."

He flips me around, so I am the one leaning against the desk. He drops to his knees in front of me.

"What the—?"

"Let me." He peers up at me from under hooded eyelids.

"Sinclair, what are you doing?"

"Let me pleasure you, Darling."

I shake my head, grip the edge of the desk with my palms, mirroring his

stance from earlier.

"Please." His features soften.

"Wow."

"Didn't think I knew how to say that word, huh?" He smirks.

A chuckle bubbles up. "Only you could turn a simple request into a—"

"Demand?"

"An asinine string of words."

"Love it when you talk filthy to me."

I set my lips together. "That wasn't talking filthy you ass—" He leans in and touches his lips to the center of my body. Pleasure zings up my spine. I throw my head back, huff.

"Love it more when you moan."

"That was... a—"

"A yes?"

"Stop putting words in my mouth."

"Then say it aloud, Bird."

"I can't think when you touch me."

"Okay."

"What?" I blink. Sin being this... agreeable? Wow! All of my senses go on alert.

I glance down to find he's indeed holding his hands up.

"See? I can comply with your wishes."

Hmm. "So why don't I trust you?"

"Give me a chance, Bird."

I chew on my lower lip.

"If I don't make you come in the next five minutes—"

"Three."

"What?" He glares at me.

I shiver, shuffle my weight from foot to foot. That rough tone, that harsh edge to his intention... Wetness slicks my core, as he's going to find out in the next few seconds... "Two minutes."

"Summer." He growls.

I bite the inside of my lips, "You have one minute to make me come. If I were you—"

His hands swoop out, he drags my skirt up above my hips again.

"You didn't wear panties."

"Didn't want a panty line."

"Liar." He drops his head, licks my pussy from my back hole up to my clit.

I gasp. "Not. Lying."

"You came here with the intention of seducing me."

"Not."

He licks my swollen nub and a trembling starts up my toes. *No, no, no.* I can't let him win this. I arch back, away from him. He grips the backs of my thighs, "Spread for me, Baby Girl."

My legs part like the words of my favorite movie prose.

"So beautiful. So sweet. Your cunt is my home, Darling."

I swallow, thrust my pelvis forward, and he plunges his tongue inside my pussy.

"Sin."

"Shh." His hum rolls deep inside of me. A whine slips from me and his grip tightens. He dives into me, licking, sucking. I dig my fingers into his hair and tug. Raise one leg and hook it over his shoulder. He lowers his other and fits it under my other knee. I am riding his face, as he fucks me with his tongue. Thrusting, throbbing, stabbing at my center. I'm coming. "I'm coming." I arch my shoulders back, my spine curves, and the climax rips through me. Sparks of blue and white...Stormy, swirling, big fat tears roll down my cheeks.

He doesn't stop. He thrusts that wicked sinful tongue of his into me, hooks it across the most delicate part of me. Another orgasm throbs at my center and shoots out, vibrates out to my extremities. He rips his mouth from my lower lips. "Come for me, Bird."

And I do. Again. I shatter on his desk. Moisture drools out from between my thighs. He bends his head, laps up all of my cum. Wipes me clean.

I slump onto the table. He swoops up, rolling my legs up and around his waist, then scoops me up.

My head falls against his chest. Thud-thud-thud. His heart gallops under my ear. Or is it mine?

He walks around and sinks into his chair, holding me.

"Sinclair."

"Hmm?"

"I love you too."

A chuckle rumbles up his chest. "I know, Bird."

"You're still a jerk."

"Swoon, I'll catch you."

—*The English Patient*. Director: Anthony Minghella

Sin

"Have a good day, Sir." Peter pulls up to the curb in front of my office. I lean across and open the door of the Aston Martin, as he comes around.

"I got this." I wave him back.

His gaze widens, then he nods and retreats.

Max bounds out of the car, straining at the leash. He pauses in front of the homeless man next to the entrance.

His sign today reads, "*Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day...*"

I pause in front of him, "Bloody fuck. Can't you write something a little less depressing?"

He stares up at me.

I pull out my wallet, "There's a job waiting for you" I nod toward the building. "If you need one. Not that I'm one to mock your lifestyle, but so you know, if you change your mind."

He tilts his head.

Right. So all of a sudden I am some kind of a do-gooder? Trying to change the world? Not. It's Bird who's affecting me. Maybe I am so happy that I want to share my good fortune with the rest of the world? What-fucking-ever. I pull out a few bills, drop them into the hat in front of the man.

Max races toward the entrance, pulling me in his wake.

"It's from Darkness."

"Huh?" I turn, blink.

"A poem by Byron." Homeless Man stares at me. The fuck is up with that vacant gaze of his? Is he high on something?

A prickle of unease grips me. "Byron? You mean the poet or the Capo of the Mafia?"

He picks up the bills and pockets them. Then gathers up the hat, slams it on his head, without losing a single coin or bill. He strides away, board tucked under his arm.

The fuck? "Hey, hold on." I stalk forward and Max whines. I pause glance back.

Max wags his tail, pivots toward the office building. He whines, then tugs at his leash. "Jesus, hold on, you mutt."

I turn around to find Homeless Guy has disappeared.

What the fuck just happened there?

I rub the back of my neck, then prowl toward the entrance. Max keeps pace.

I shove open the door and he bounds ahead, dragging me along into the building that I own. Fuck my life.

He, flops on the ground in front of the receptionist's desk.

She smiles at the puppy.

I scowl. All of that sweetness that the bugger leaves in his wake is seriously cloying. But Bird had insisted.

It had been her gift to me on the first anniversary—the first month of her moving in with me. She'd made me promise I'd take the little fucker to work, and me... Well, I couldn't have refused her.

Max snaps up on all fours, and bounds toward me. He circles me once, then drops down on his hind legs, right in my path.

I blow out a breath, lean, tap his head. He rolls onto his back. Yeah, okay, it's a second more. I drop down on one knee, tickle his stomach.

His jaws open; his tongue lolls out. He wriggles his little body around, his eyes rolling back in his head.

A shocked gasp reaches me from the direction of the reception table. I glance up and she instantly reddens. She looks down, shuffles the papers in front of her.

I straighten, walk toward her.

She pales.

"Alia, right?"

She blinks, peers up at me. "You... you remember my name?"

Lucky guess.

I'd assured Bird I'd tone down the grumpiness. This is me keeping my word. Make a note. Yeah, and on that... I gave in to her and saw a shrink yesterday; I'll survive. Besides, she's promised me a whole lot more in return. I smirk.

"You bet, I do, Ste—I mean Alia." I brush away an imaginary speck from my collar. "I know all of my employees by name." Not. Though, I *had* asked for the employee list. Another step toward the softening of my profile to the world.

Apparently, internal PR is more important than external, and the fastest way to fix our reputation in the market is to begin on home ground, by turning our people into ambassadors who'll amplify that message blah-bloody-blah... a whole lotta soft arse corporate bullshit if you ask me, b-u-t—Summer had asked it of me, and I'd never turn down my wife.

Besides, I have a sneaky suspicion that it might build the market image of FOK, which will go a long way in driving up the capitalization of 7A. Which is what I need right now. The butterfly effect, huh?

Bird had pointed all of that out to me—when I had finally let her share her marketing ideas with me... i.e. when I had spared her mouth long enough for her to get a word in. I've been keeping her busy, all right.

She'd seconded Saint's idea of holding a quick press briefing where we'd play the role of happy couple—no strike that—where we'd be ourselves, and introduce FOK Media properly to the public. Get the positive coverage, blah-fucking-blah.

I'd hated the idea and told her so. But she'd insisted, and well, that was that.

Besides, my wife's bloody smart, and that's the goddam truth. Though sneaky woman that she is, I know when I'm being manipulated into getting to know my employees better. Still I want her to have this little victory; and no, I'm not softening. Not.

She'd hated the name FOK... wanted me to change it; but I wasn't giving it to that... yet.

I scowl and the receptionist swallows.

She backs away from the desk. Bloody hell. Who knew trying to tone

down my assholeness would take so much effort, huh? Eyes on the prize. If this makes Bird happy, it's worth it. I'll be nice to my employees if it's the last thing I do.

I peel back my lips, flash my teeth. So it's more a grimace than a smile, but it's the best I can do.

"Uh... Ah... Mr. Sterling, are you okay?"

I keep the smile fixed on my face. "Of course, Alia." I tilt my head, "You're doing a good job." I knock my knuckles on the receptionist's console. "Keep up the good work."

Her jaw drops.

Guess I convinced her, huh? I deserve an Oscar for my performance. I push away from the platform, stalk toward the elevators.

Then pause, "Oh, and Alia?"

I turn to face her.

She's staring after me, her mouth half open. "When Mrs. Sterling—"

She smiles, "You mean Summer?"

My heart jumps. Summer. My Bird. My sunshine. The woman I'd do anything for... because I am a pussywhipped motherfucker. That's me, all right, and her happiness is paramount. I want her happy. And naked. And content, after she's come in my arms. Everything else takes second place, including my wants.

I straighten my spine.

"Exactly. When *my wife* comes in, please ask her to come directly to my office?"

"Of course, Mr. Sinclair."

I pivot. Did she call me Mr. *Sinclair*? I pause, then raise my shoulders. What-bloody-ever. They can call me motherfucker for all I care. As long as they do what I command.

I stalk across to the elevators, pause in front of mine as the doors slide open. Max bounds in, and I follow. Stab the button for my offices, then drop down to one knee and scratch behind his ears.

"You think she'll enjoy the surprise, little bugger?"

"Why are you trying so hard to fit in when you were born to stand out?"
-*What a Girl Wants*. Director: Dennie Gordon

Summer

"Thanks Peter."

I open the door of the Aston Martin and cross the sidewalk to the 7A office building.

I am already two minutes late.

It had been a surprise when Karma had called me last night and asked me to come over.

What was more shocking? Sinclair had allowed me to leave. It was unlike him, to let me out of his sight. He liked me by his side, in bed and out of it. And every second in between. Possessive Jerkface—and I use that term affectionately, I promise.

He'd told me I must go if Karma needed me. He'd insisted that Peter drive me, and I had accepted. I didn't want to put myself in a situation where the Mafia could get to me either.

It would only compromise Sinclair's standing to do so. Besides I had found my way back to him, no way was I going to lose him again.

Still, a little bit of distance is also healthy, right? One night away from him, to have space to myself, to recuperate from the impact of his physical closeness that I am reeling from... Surely, my sore pussy and my thighs that have been getting one hell of a workout this last month would appreciate it...

You'd think? I hasten my steps.

I had the money to buy out the apartment we'd rented and gift it to my sister. It had taken a good chunk from the money that had hit my bank account. Yeah, London's a bloody expensive city.

I had almost not accepted the cash, but Karma had reminded me that I had earned it fair and square. It was part of my deal with Sinclair.

Besides, it means I have a base and Karma has a home—as Sinclair had not hesitated to remind me. This once, the alphahole had been right too. So, I had taken the money and used it. He'd also had a bodyguard assigned to Karma, for which I was grateful.

I had accepted a job with him... as the Director of Marketing for FOK Media and 7A Investments.

The quizzing division he'd mentioned earlier? That was off the table.

Instead, I was relaunching my marketing consultancy as a quizzing company, using the money that I had earned.

It would be separate from any of Sinclair's other business interests.

When I'd mentioned this to Sin, he'd been more than supportive. He'd suggested that I pitch it for a loan with FOK Media to fund international expansion, rather than dip into my personal funds. Hmm, it couldn't be because he wanted to watch out for me, huh? It did make business sense though, so I'd agreed.

I glance at the time on my phone.

Damn it, I'm five minutes late now. I'd wasted time at Karma's this morning, not wanting to say good-bye. I'd have taken the tube to save time, but Sin had insisted I wait until Peter arrived to pick me up. Sinclair Sterling, still an alphahole. But he was *my* alphahole. *Mine*.

My fingers tingle and my scalp tightens.

So close to seeing him again. His masculine scent, that hard voice, those beautiful lips that could tease me to orgasm, while his tongue stabbed in and out of me... in a simulation of how his cock would be buried inside of me... soon, very soon. Moisture teases my core. Damn. How, I've missed the man. Missed his dominance, the sense of security, his warmth, his closeness, his ability to look inside my soul, and read my fears. I am complete when he is in me. Corny much? I huff out a breath.

If this is love... Well, I don't want to know the alternative. It isn't all physical—okay, a lot of the attraction is, and my poor ravaged cunt appreciates that, honestly. It's more... It's the way he follows me with his

gaze, the way he watches me when he thinks I am not aware, how he holds the door open for me, loans me his jacket without asking if I am cold. How he'd agreed to my keeping a separate room in his house, no questions asked, even as his lips had firmed at the suggestion. Surprised? So was I.

I had wanted an expression of my independence, a place I could retreat to, where I could think, read, stare into the distance. He has his study and this retreat is mine. It is a room that opens up off of his bedroom, that he had insisted on, and I had agreed. No use prodding the monster more than needed, right?

He'd invited the rest of the Seven home—at my suggestion—and we'd played... One guess. Yeah, movie trivia night. OMG. It was hilarious, and addictive, and there had been sparks flying between my friends and some of the Seven. Karma had been absent that night...

All the more reason that I had made sure to go when she had called yesterday. We'd spent the night talking, gossiping, and she'd waved goodbye to me this morning with a strange look in her eyes. My footsteps slow.

Maybe I should have stayed with her, found out what was bothering her? I am sure that she'd called me to discuss something... but every time I had tried to bring it up, she'd changed the topic. And I... I had been too consumed by my new obsession, my passion, my love for the man who Sinclair Sterling is turning out to be.

Sin. As sinful in deed as in name. As sexy as hell when he spanks me, torments me to the edge, then makes love to me with a tenderness that soothes away the pain.

I reach the entrance to the offices of 7A, then barrel through. My chunky wedges slip, then catch, and I careen past the receptionist, who flashes me a smile, "He wants you to go up to his offices."

"Oh?"

"Can't get enough of you, huh?"

I laugh, "Me neither."

"I don't know what you're doing to him... I mean, other than... You know." She flushes. "Didn't mean it that way, Mrs. Sterling."

"Summer, I told you to call me Summer."

She beams. "Summer. He's different since you came into his life."

"You mean one notch less than horrendous?"

"Many notches less than horrible."

"Ha." I smirk, "Don't let his charm get to you."

Her forehead furrows. "You're not jealous that he spoke to me?"

I laugh. "If I got envious of every woman who glanced at my husband..."

I shake my head. "He has that impact, huh?"

She sighs, "You're one heck of a lady, Summer."

I grin, "Be sure to tell him that."

"You bet I will."

I wave my goodbye then, race for the bank of elevators and take his private elevator up. Glance up at the camera in the far corner. Yes, there is one; he had it installed, and only *he* has access to the feed. So, he can track me as I approach his office, he said. I know, slightly creepy, but... it means I can do this: I raise the hem of my slim pink skirt, it's conservative except for the slit that goes up to mid-thigh. Flash him the long line of my thigh. Then laugh. Heat simmers off the surface of the security cam...

Hope you got that, Alphahole. Two can play this game. Haven't you learned that by now? I blow him a kiss as the elevator slows to a stop. The doors slide open and I race out on the executive floor. I'd insisted on my office being three floors down, with the rest of the team.

He'd looked as if he was about to lose it... Then, he'd agreed. Huh? The man is trying, though he ends up calling me up for meetings five times a day. Once he'd met me halfway... in the stairwell, and we'd... Ah! Made out. It had been hot, I confess. We'd been late to our next meeting and he didn't care.

Yep, he's definitely trying. Wonder what he'll ask for in return though, hmm?

I pass the desk where Meredith normally sits. It's empty. Huh? Pick up speed, reach his office, prise open the door, and there's no one there. What the—? My heart picks up speed.

I place my tote on his desk, then cross the floor to the door that opens into the adjoining conference room. Swing it open and see him. His back is to me.

He grips the window frames with his arms outstretched on either side. His biceps bulge, stretching the perfectly cut sleeves of his tailor-made suit. My breath catches. He's as fucking hot as... Sin. If ever a name appropriately fit a man, it is his.

His dark jacket clings to every hard plane of his back. His waist is so damn narrow and that tight butt. I gulp. I know how it feels to palm that ass. Those powerful thighs with a smattering of hair that chafes across my sensitive skin. The thick calves, the wide stance.

"Bird."

I jerk my chin up. I hadn't made a sound. I swear the man has eyes at the back of his head.

"I know you're there."

I huff.

"Come on in, I've been waiting..."

I step in and the door closes with a snick behind me.

"Come close, you know I don't bite..." He laughs softly, turns around.
"Not always."

I gasp.

"You... you shaved."

He smirks. Without the hair that covered his chin, his lips are exposed in all their glory, and that square jaw—"You have a dimple in the center of your chin?"

He frowns.

"It's..."

"Don't say it."

"So sweet."

His cheeks redden. "You make me sound like a cupcake."

"I'd love to lick off your cream."

His gaze widens. "Come again?"

"I'll come as many times as you want, if you promise to keep that school-boy look."

He prowls forward, "Care to repeat that?"

"Ah!" I take a step back.

He ambles closer.

I move away, until my butt hits the door. I search for the handle behind me as his long strides eat up the distance between us.

"School boy, huh?" He leans forward on the balls of his feet.

The light haloes his perfect features. That indigo glare envelops me, the scent of testosterone saturates the air, and I swallow.

He raises his hand, tucks a strand of dark hair behind my ear.

I'd opted to keep my natural auburn locks, and he loves it. Loves me as I am. Maybe this is what it means to be into someone? *When you miss a person even when he's standing right in front of you, eating you up with his gaze, when you know he's as turned on as you are. And you can't wait for him to kiss you, own you, possess you, write his name on every cell of my body, script his language on my pussy, drag his tongue across the underside of my*

foot as he sucks on my toes before he bends me over and—

"Shall we shag now, or shag later, Baby?" He waggles his eyebrows.

"Austin Powers." I throw my hands up, "Of all the movies to quote from, you had to choose *that* one?"

He raises his shoulders, "I'm a guy, what did you expect?"

"Flowers, hearts, chocolate?" I count them off on my fingers. Okay, so you've got two out of three there. "Maybe a ring?" I let my lips curve up. "Nah, just kidding on that one." *Not.* I slap at his shoulder. "Whatever it is you have planned, Sinclair, it won't buy you into my good graces—not after that completely pathetic attempt at trying to be romantic."

He slides his hand into his pants pocket and his brows draw down.

"Seriously, if you think Austin freakin' Powers is your role model to be amorous then—"

He yanks his hand out, pats his breast pocket.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"It's something."

"Jesus, woman, give me a break, I am trying—"

"What?" I frown. "You're acting all mysterious and I hate it."

My pulse rate ratchets up.

"Give me a second—"

"What? Why?—"

He drops to his knees.

"No." I step back, hit the door again. I angle my shoulders, and his forehead smooths.

The breath rushes out of him.

"Summer Cora West, will you be mine?" He holds up his palm. The sunlight slants over his head and golden flames explode from the single perfect yellow sapphire set in the center of beaten gold.

I swallow, lift my gaze to his face, "Why?"

His eyebrows lower. "Why?"

I flatten my lips. "Why should I marry you... a second time?"

He glares up at me.

"You really want to do this now?"

"Now." I tip up my chin. "Convince me, Sinclair Sterling, what's in it for me?"

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Sin

This woman. Every time I expect her to act in a certain fashion, she throws me for a bouncer. I'd proposed to her and thought... What? That she'd fall into my arms, with declarations of love and forever? That she'd be floored, perhaps be so swayed that she'd collapse and I'd catch her? Then ease her into my arms and kiss her senseless? Then we'd... live happily ever after? She is going to make me work for it, huh?

My thigh muscles twinge. I ignore it. *Man up, bastard. Tell her what you really feel.* It's now or never.

"What? No words?" she peers down at me. "Apparently, I've finally rendered you speechless, eh?" She pushes a finger against her cheek. "Should I be congratulating myself on that?"

I glare up at her. One side of her lips curves.

"The alphahole who'll sit across a table and negotiate until he gets his own way on everything, struck dumb." She swipes her hair from her face, "And all because I asked you to navigate a delicate matter of the heart?"

My shoulders bunch; my pulse begins to race. Sweat slides down my spine.

She glances at the ring in my palm, then at my face. Her lips turn down. "Guess that's it, huh?"

She turns to leave.

"Flowers."

She pauses.

"I know you love the violets among the wildflowers because they remind you of my eyes."

She stiffens, reaches for the door handle.

"You're allergic to gluten, yet you sneak your favorite brand of cake from Gregg's because it's not available anywhere else, then you swallow down half a bottle of Benadryl to compensate for the allergic reaction."

She flinches.

"A habit you have to stop, by the way."

She pushes down on the handle and the door whispers open.

"You hate stuck up snobs who have way too much money they don't know what to do with, yet you forgave the worst of them, because you realized he was broken enough to have to overcompensate for his insecurities."

Her shoulders shake.

"You love waking up at dawn sometimes and walking on the grass barefoot, while you lift up your head and sniff the delicate breeze that wafts down from the East."

Her entire body tenses.

"You hate the color pink."

She swings around.

"Who told you?"

"It's why you colored your hair and bought clothes in that color, because it was a way of training yourself to realize that you don't get what you want, so you have to embrace your flaws, and look beyond the surface to what really matters."

"What matters?" Her throat moves as she swallows.

"You."

My phone buzzes.

I glance at the device placed face down on the table; so does she.

I walk toward it, pick it up, then glance at her.

Her breath catches.

Holding her gaze, I pitch it toward the wastebasket. The buzzing cuts out.

She blinks. "Don't you need to check who that was?"

"You come first."

Her gaze widens.

"It could have been a potential merger or acquisition deal worth millions."

"Screw that," I growl.

She grabs a strand of her hair and tugs, "Wow, you sure can be intense, huh?"

"Better get used to it Bird." I chuckle. "You are all that matters to me. Your smiles. Your laughs. Your sighs. Your little moans when you come, the soft mumbles when you talk in your sleep, the little crease..." I touch my lower lip, "That drives me crazy. The deep lines..." I rub the center of my forehead, "That form when you are arguing with yourself. The heated fires in your eyes when you are angry. Your scent which deepens when you are aroused." I lick my lips, "The way you chew on the strands of your hair—"

She releases the tendril, purses her lips.

"It's gross, but hell, I love every single quirk about you. Especially this sexy, professional look with the fuck me pumps."

She giggles. "These are 1-inch wedges."

"It kind of went with the entire speech."

I smirk and she firms her lips.

"Especially that."

"What?"

I jerk my chin up. "The way you challenge me. You never give an inch, always push my buttons, and when you grab my dick and squeeze it..."

She reddens.

"...Hell, you are the only woman who has had me by the balls and all I could think of was, she can take the fucking lead in bed if that is what she wants."

"Anytime?" Her gaze widens.

"Sometimes." I growl.

"Next time?" She bites on her lower lip, and my dick twitches.

"On one condition."

"Oh, no, no, no." She backs away, arms raised. "You're not making this into a deal."

"You started it, Babe, better deal with the repercussions now."

"So?" She draws in a breath.

"So." I draw my shoulders back. "Summer, you're my fucking other half, so get your arse here, so I can put this damn ring on your finger, then bend you over my desk and spank you until you are on the verge of climax; then bury myself balls deep inside of you and claim you again and again and again until you want to come, and then I won't let you, not until I've fucked every damn orifice in that sexy little body, so you have no more thoughts filling

that over-stimulated brain, and you've run out of anything to say, and then, if you are good, and perhaps if I feel like it... I might..." My groin hardens. "Let you come at the same time as me."

Her mouth opens and shuts.

I angle my head, "Is what I think I might have said."

"Huh?"

"When actually... No... In reality, what I want to say... I mean..." I draw in a breath. *Fuck, get a grip on your emotions man.*

"You... You okay, Sin?"

Nope.

I've never been better, never as good as now, when everything is so clear to me. I square my shoulders, "What I actually want to say is that I loved you when I hated you. I loved you when I didn't want anything to do with you. When I thought I wanted revenge for something that wasn't your fault, and now when I know I love you... I can't stop thinking about you... The truth is, I am crazy about you Summer. I can't live without you. Not for one second more. So, what do you say, Bird, will you be mine?"

Her eyes shine. Her chin wobbles.

Fuck. I went too far. That will teach me to try and restrain myself. All it did, was bottle up my goddam true emotions and then it all surged forward... into the worst, terrible, unintentional, proposal. I am done. So done.

I swallow. My heart hammers; my pulse pounds. Adrenaline laces my blood. If she turns me down... I'll... I'll... fucking let her go, that's what. Then I'll haunt her for the rest of her life, while I jerk off every night to the images of her gorgeous face.

Her lips tremble, her chin quivers, then tears stream down her face.

"Fuck, Summer. Don't cry."

"Cry?" she snuffles. "You think I'm upset?"

"Aren't you?"

"Nope." She swallows, "That... that was the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me. You didn't hold back. For the first time, you said what was on your mind without thinking, with real feeling. You were there, present, for every single second of that proposal." She wipes her face. "The first part wa-a-s a little convoluted, and very obscene, by the way."

"Why you little tease." I growl

"I forgive you for it."

I blink, "You do?"

"Yep." She nods. "I know how it is, sometimes your mind is racing forward and then the words pour out. It's called, obeying your instinct."

"Eh?"

"It's okay, Sin." She pats my cheek, "I'll take it, both your proposals, and also..." She holds out her fingers.

I chuckle, slide the ring onto her left ring finger.

She glances at it and fresh tears pour down her cheeks. My heart stutters; something hot stabs my gut. "Bloody hell, Bird, don't cry. I can't deal with your tears."

"Sorry." She sniffles. "It's just... It's so..."

"Gorgeous?"

"It's—"

"Stupendous?" I smirk. "You love it, I know."

"Sinclair Sterling, shut up and kiss me already."

"With pleasure." I spring up, wrap my fingers around her nape, tug her to me and lower my lips to hers.

She moans, that little throaty whine, and my cock thickens.

I kiss her deeply, nibble on her lower lip until her mouth opens, then thrust my tongue inside her honeyed mouth and draw on her essence. She twists her fingers on my lapel, pulls herself closer, until she's folded into me, her breasts crushed against my chest. The blood rushes to my groin. Fuck. I need her. Want her. Now. I slide my other arm around her waist, down to her

—

Paws patter on the wooden floor, the door pushes open the rest of the way and Max rushes, in barking wildly.

She lurches closer, and I steady her.

"What the—" I glance down to find Max, clawing at my wife's skirt. She drops down and scoops him up. He licks her cheek and she giggles.

I frown. So now I am jealous of a dog? I lean in close and whisper, "Be home before me and undressed, on the bed, legs wide apart, pussy showing, with your fingers in your—"

"Shh!" She presses her lips to mine. Soft, Sweet. My heart fucking melts. "I'll be there." She murmurs.

"Promise?"

"What do you think?"

I laugh.

Saint appears at the entrance to the conference room. "The fuck happened

to you?"

Summer

My husband plants his body in front of me, blocking me from Saint's line of sight.

"What the—?" I shove at Sin's immovable bulk.

He wraps his arm around my waist, holding me in place.

"Sinclair."

He twists his neck and shoots me a glare.

I glower back. "What are you doing?"

"I am possessive."

"You don't say?" I tip up my chin.

"I can't change this part of me."

"I don't want you to change that part of you." I dig my fingers into his biceps. His muscles flex and the power thrums through the material of his shirt and jacket. His gaze drops to the ring on my finger.

"I really do love the ring."

"I'm glad." His lips kick up at the sides, "I'm sorry I couldn't get you another bouquet of wildflowers."

I stiffen, peer up at him, "So it was *you* who gathered the flowers for me at our wedding?"

"Ah." He shuffles his feet.

I blink. Sinclair Sterling, with an uncomfortable look on his features. Wow.

"I didn't mean for it to come out that way." He squeezes the bridge of his

nose.

"Are you apologizing?" I widen my gaze, "Why do I find that hard to believe?"

"When it comes to you, Bird, I've learned never to underestimate your responses." The skin around his eyes creases, "Or mine toward you, for that matter."

"Oh."

"Oh!" He chuckles. "Love it when I drive you speechless, you know that."

"I love you... Full stop."

There's a gagging sound from the direction of the doorway.

"Shut up Saint." My husband says without turning around. "So, where were we, hmm?" He straightens, pulls me forward and into his side.

I melt into him, twine my arms about his lean waist, rub my cheek against that hard chest.

"Like I said." Saint retreats into the office and drops into an armchair. "You look different, Sinner."

"The fuck I care about your opinion?"

"It's not the fresh-faced look, which takes years off, by the way."

I glower at him.

"It's that disgustingly self-satisfied glow all you hitched-up couples in love have where you can't wait to shackle all of your friends into the same institution."

"Do you find me saying or doing anything to that effect?"

Saint raises his eyes skyward, "Thank fuck for that."

His phone pings, and he pulls it out of his pocket, glances at the screen.

"The fuck?"

Sin's shoulders bunch. "What is it?"

"Probably a crank message, except..."

"Except?"

"He or she knows their poetry."

Sin stiffens. He walks forward, his arm around my shoulders. I lengthen my steps, to keep pace with him. We halt by his desk, and he pulls me against his chest. "Let me see that."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, Sinclair, probably an irate woman I fucked."

"Read it out." Sin's voice is hard.

Saint's shoulders stiffen, then he glances at the screen.

*"I had a dream, which was not all a dream.
The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars.
Did wander darkling in the eternal space..."*

"Byron." Sinclair and Saint say in the same instant.

"Speaking of." Sinclair stiffens. He lets go of me long enough to grab his phone from the wastepaper basket. He straightens, pulls me back into the 'V' between his legs, then checks his phone.

He stiffens.

"What?"

He shows me his phone.

*"The crowd was famish'd by degrees; but two
Of an enormous city did survive,
And they were enemies..."*

I read out.

"The fuck?" Sin growls from somewhere above me.

Saint's shoulders bunch, "Byron again."

There's a buzzing sound from my bag.

"Sin." I nudge him, "I need to get my phone."

"Fine." He lets go of me so I can grab my bag and pull it toward me.

He pulls me close, keeps an arm around my waist as I fish out my phone.

There's a missed call from Karma and a voicemail. I listen to it, then frown.

"Everything okay, Babe?"

"Yes... No... I don't know. It's a message from Karma, saying she's going to Sicily. Her friend had an extra ticket so she's going with him."

"Him?" His hold stiffens on my hip.

"That's what she said. She shouldn't be traveling in her condition."

"She's stable, right?" He begins to draw circles over the curve of my waist.

I shiver.

"She's fine for now, but she needs to protect against over-exposure, excitement."

I dial her number and it goes to voicemail. "Shit! She isn't answering her phone." My heart begins to race. "She didn't mention anything yesterday or this morning, when I left her house."

Saint glances at Sin, then stands up and stretches, "A few days in the sun, with a man..." He curls his lip, all casual like. "Maybe that's what she needs?"

"Don't treat me like I don't know what's happening." I turn to glower at Saint then at my husband. "You guys are worried, admit it. First my father mentions Byron, the Mafia boss guy, then you two get messages quoting Lord Byron and now..." I frown at my phone. "Karma suddenly takes off for Sicily?" I shake my head. "Something's not right."

There's a knock on the door.

Max springs up from his rug, races to the door and scrapes at it.

Another knock, then Meredith pops her head through, "There's a woman here to see you."

"I'm not expecting anyone." Sin frowns. "Besides" he wraps a strand of my hair around his thick finger, he rests his chin on my head, "we were leaving."

"Not you, him." Meredith angles her head at Saint.

"Oh! And congratulations Mr. and Mrs. Sterling." She beams at me.

I flush. Wow. Mrs. Sterling. It sounds... sounds so right. My heart flutters. "Thanks, Meredith."

"Always a pleasure, my dear." Her entire face lights up.

"Thanks, M," Saint straightens, "send her in."

Meredith nods and retreats.

Sin growls, "Make yourself right at home."

Saint lifts a middle finger at him, then turns to the door. It swings open.

Victoria stands there. Not a hair out of place. Perfect make up. Except, her lipstick is smeared. She glances at me, "Hope I am not intruding." She twists her fingers together.

"You are already here." Saint looks her up from head to toe. "May as well come all the way in."

Her dress falls to below her knees, and there's a tear at the hem.

I stiffen, "Victoria, are you okay?"

Max sniffs at her ankles, whines. She bends, pets him. He licks her fingers, then runs to his rug, settles there with his chew toy.

"Victoria?"

She looks up at me, "Everything will be fine now." Her tone is composed. She turns to Saint. "I've been looking for you."

Saint smirks, "About time."

She takes a step forward, then stumbles.

"Hey." Saint closes the distance between them.

Her legs seem to wobble and she crumples, but he's already there. He

grips her shoulders, straightens her, "You okay?"

"Help me."

*TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT , TURN THE PAGE TO READ VICTORIA
AND SAINT'S STORY IN **THE BILLIONAIRE'S SECRET***

THE BILLIONAIRE'S SECRET

PROLOGUE

I have a heart that never beats, I have a home but I never sleep. I can take a man's house and build another's, I love to play games with my many brothers. I am a king among fools. Who am I?

Answer: The King of Hearts in a deck of cards

Victoria

"Will he, or won't he?"

I turn to the man playing the role of my husband. "Who are you talking about?" I ask.

"Saint," he replies.

"Who?"

"The man glowering at you from across the garden." Adam swipes a finger under his collar, "I wonder if he'll approach you before the night is over?"

I angle my body, but he shakes his head, "Don't look there."

Right. I swallow. "Is that good?"

"It's perfect," he reassures me. "Things are on plan."

This is what I want, don't I? This is why I am here. So why is my heart pounding? Why is my stomach tying itself in knots? A trickle of sweat runs down my spine.

"Act natural." He half smiles.

I swallow, tip up my chin. *I can do this.*

"Come, dear, meet your stepdaughter," he beckons.

I step forward, and my heels sink into the lawns attached to the beautiful town house located in prime real estate in the heart of London. I smooth my palm down the golden-brown dress that comes to below my knees. Good thing I'd packed this dress near the top of my luggage; that had made it much easier to change before leaving the airport. Finding the shoes had been a different story. Our flight from LAX to London had been delayed, leaving no time to spare for a stop at our hotel.

The hair on the nape of my neck prickles. An electric shiver runs down my spine. I jerk my chin up.

Blue eyes blaze at me—cerulean, cold, never-ending whorls of cornflowers in summer time, the dark depths of a lake before the water freezes over. How could so many facets be intertwined with his gaze? I swallow; sweat beads my palm.

The words from *Happiness is a Warm Gun*, by the Beatles scroll across my mind. Heat flushes my cheeks. I have a penchant for the Beatles, but why the hell did I have to think of that particular song?

Saint glances from me to my 'husband.' His jaw tics. Anger rolls off of him, a thick black cloud that slams into my chest, sinks into my blood, hooks into me and seems to yank me toward him. *Closer, get closer*. I gasp and my fingers tremble.

Saint's gaze intensifies and I shudder. My toes curl. Why am I so affected by his presence?

Adam nudges me.

I blink, then tear my gaze away from the stranger. "Summer." I hold my hand out to my stepdaughter. "It's lovely to meet you."

She's beautiful in her wedding dress. At twenty-one, she is a year younger than me. And she has already found the man of her dreams. Me? I am taking it one day at a time. I am trying to survive. I clutch my handbag to my side.

Summer swallows. "I didn't realize..."

"That you had a stepmother?" I ask.

"...that I had a father." She glances at the man she is meeting after fifteen years.

Adam shifts uncomfortably. "I was hoping you two could get acquainted," he mumbles.

Across from me, Saint widens his stance; his hands are clenched at his sides. Huh? Is he upset about something?

"I didn't mean for this to come as such a surprise." I force myself to focus on Summer, "I wish there had been a way I could have warned you of our coming...but..."

Summer nods, "You don't need to apologize." Her eyes narrow, "I understand how it could have been."

I glance from Summer to her new husband, Sinclair Sterling, who hovers protectively over her.

He and his six friends—often referred to as the Seven by the media—co-own 7A Investments. They are among the richest, most powerful men in the country.. and... Saint is one of them. Why the hell can't I stop thinking of him?

I clear my throat, "Perhaps, we can catch up once you are recovered from your wedding and the honeymoon—"

"There is no honeymoon," Sinclair interjects.

Summer's body tenses again.

Strange. His words are brusque. Yet he hasn't been able to look away from her, his body leaning into hers. Funny how body language conveys so much more than words.

Like the man who hasn't glanced away from me since our eyes first met. Goosebumps pop on my skin.

"Not until we've sorted out the little business between us." Sinclair nods toward Adam, "Tomorrow." He steps around us and walks off, guiding Summer along.

"I won't be more than a minute." Adam strides toward a group of men in a corner of the garden. I glance after him, wanting to ask him not to leave me alone with Saint.

Too late. He prowls closer, "Victoria, is it?"

Black coffee, crushed ice, hot chocolate sauce—the timbre of his voice coils about my waist, slithers down to the hollow between my legs.

I clench my thighs together.

That voice? What I wouldn't give to have him read aloud from a Harry Potter novel. *Oh, my god, did I think that?* Why is he insinuating himself into my every obsession? I shift my weight from foot to foot.

He tilts his head, looks me up and down. Those blue eyes pale until they resemble chips of ice. My heart begins to race.

This man? He'd not take 'no' for an answer. Never turn down a challenge. His lips curl and he widens his stance.

The movement draws my attention to the fabric tented at his crotch. *What the—?* Is he turned on? And he's making no move to hide it either? The arrogance of the man. A warmth pools deep inside of me. A melting sensation thrums out from my core. And why am I not able to stop my response? No way, am I going to indulge his interest... Or his ego for that matter.

"Mrs. Rhodes to you." I tip up my chin, up, all the way up to peer into his beautiful face, "Are you the hired help?"

His expression falters, then a chuckle rumbles from within him.

The harsh sound grates across my skin. All of my nerve endings pop in response. Why am I so tuned into him?

He abruptly stops laughing, pretends to flick something off of his suit.

Bastard. So, he thinks he can disguise his surprise by feigning boredom? Typical.

His resting dick face is all hard angles, cut lines, a mean upper lip, patrician nose and prominent chin...spoilt by that full pouty lower lip which hints at something more—sensuous, luxurious, a personality that indulges in hedonistic pleasures, that controls and does not hesitate to take. My core clenches. I raise my hand, ready to chew on my fingernail. *Ha!* And wouldn't that be a dead giveaway of how much I am affected by his presence?

I tuck my elbows into my sides. I will not give in to the temptation. But would I give in to him?

No. No way, would I indulge this melting sensation that seems to have gripped my center. I square my shoulders, twist my fingers together in front of me.

He drops his gaze to my hands, then up to my face, "You're not wearing a wedding band." He frowns.

I cover my left hand. "Not everyone who's married wears one."

He thrusts out his chin, peruses my features. His blue gaze deepens. *Don't blink. Don't look away.* When you meet a predator, it's best to not show any fear. My heart beat ratchets up.

His nostrils flare.

Bloody hell, can he sense my uncertainty?

He tilts his head, "Your husband left you on your own?" His voice ripples up my spine. My scalp tingles.

What in the ever lovin' hell is happening to me? I brace myself, tip my chin up. "He knows he can trust me," I reply.

His lips curl, "But can *you* trust *me*?"

I blink. The hell does he mean? My fingers tingle and my palms itch. I've tried every bloody remedy to cure myself of this horrible nail-biting habit. But the events of the last few months have wiped out any progress I had made.

He holds out his hand. "Saint Jordan Killian Caldwell," he drawls.

"Did you miss a name?"

His features go blank, then his lips curl, "Very good."

"Not looking for your approval," I mutter.

"You sure?" His lips kick up in a smile that isn't one at all.

I shiver.

"I'm Saint to my friends."

I glance down at his proffered hand, then thrust mine behind my back.

"Good thing I am not one of them," I mutter.

He lowers his arm. "No, you're not." His eyes gleam, "You and I, we could never have such a bland relationship."

"No?" My belly flutters.

He shakes his head, then looks me up and down. "In fact, you don't feature on my radar at all."

Jerk. Pretentious, spoilt, rich prick who wears his privilege as if the world owes him. I firm my lips.

He flicks another invisible piece of dust from his tailored jacket. The breadth of his shoulders stretches the fabric. His biceps strain against the cloth. He widens his stance, and I can't stop myself from taking in the sculpted abs outlined through the white dress shirt that sheaths his muscles. Power surrounds him. The force of his magnetism is a tangible sensation that pours off of him, hits me in the chest. I gasp. My throat closes.

"Good bye, Victoria." He turns to leave, takes a step away, then another. His jacket stretches across his tight butt—clearly, he forgot to remove the stick when he left home. My lips quirk. He prowls forward and his slacks mold to powerful thighs. I swallow. Shit, this man wears that suit like it was stitched onto him. The muscles of those powerful thighs coil and coil, barely contained in those pants that narrow over boots. Huh? He wears faded cowboy boots that've seen far better days.

What the hell?

Is that a quirk, or another affectation? Why would he wear boots that simply don't match the rest of his £7000 suits? Only when my heel sinks into

the ground do I realize that I've placed my stilettos squarely in his footstep. I bite the inside of my cheek.

Let him go; don't say it. Don't let curiosity get the better of you.

"The more you think, the more you find; what am I?" I call out.

He tenses, then swivels to face me.

"What did you say?"

Those cold blue eyes bore into me, the force of his personality pinning me in place. My heart begins to race.

"N...nothing." I wave a hand in the air, "Forget it." I turn away.

Hard fingers clutch at my wrist. I am spun around with such force that I stumble. The grasp on my arm increases in pressure, and I find my balance. He keeps my hand imprisoned behind me, his arm lined up against mine, my back curved, my breasts thrust up. The heat from his body crowds me, envelops me. Less than an inch separates us. How would it be if he had plastered my chest to his? I flick out my tongue to wet my lips. His gaze drops to my mouth. His nostrils flare.

"Repeat what you said," he rasps.

"No."

He lowers his voice to a hush, "Do it." All other noises fade away. My mind focuses on him. I take in the creases that fan out from the edges of his eyes, the furrows on his forehead, the tendons that pop at his throat.

"A puzzle," I whisper. "The answer is a puzzle."

"Why did you ask me that question?"

"I wanted to take you by surprise." I firm my lips. "That's all."

"You expect me to believe that?" He searches my features. "That you'd ask me a riddle for the hell of it?"

"Why? Does it scare you?"

The wind blows, and a tuft of his hair falls over his forehead. I raise my hand toward it. He grabs my wrist, wrenches it behind my back, then lowers his head until his nose bumps mine, "Be afraid, Victoria. Be very afraid."

"Of you?"

"Of this game you are playing." He releases me and I slump back on my heels. My chest heaves. My heart pounds so hard I am sure it's going to tear out of my rib cage.

"Or what?" I purse my lips.

"Or get ready to get hurt." He straightens the cuff of his shirt. "For I never lose, and when you do—" he straightens, fixes me with that penetrating gaze,

"—no one will be able to save you."

1

Saint

"And what if I don't?" Her low voice slices through my guts. "What if I don't want to be saved?" she whispers. Her lips tremble and her chin wobbles. Her beautiful green eyes grow impossibly large in her face. An act, all an act. She's married, for fuck's sake.

"Is that how you trapped your husband?"

She pales. Her breath catches.

A sharp pain stabs at my chest. Shit, now I am upset because I hurt her feelings. Bloody fuck, do I have my balls or what?

She turns to leave, my rib cage tightens. My lungs burn. I swoop down, grab her wrist, and pinpricks of heat crawl up my arm from the touch. *What the fuck?*

She shivers, did she feel that too? Nah. Surely, it's a figment of my imagination.

I tug at her; she angles her body half toward me, half away, her handbag a red slash of color against the brown of her dress. "People are watching," she hisses.

"The fuck I care?"

She glances at me, "What if I do?"

"Do you?" So I'm attracted to her. Shit happens. She's another man's wife, the kind of complication I've preferred to steer clear of. What is it about her that insists I stay, tug at her wrist until she turns to face me?

She shakes her head. One side of her beautiful mouth twists. "But I'm

afraid my husband does."

"And you care about his feelings?" I glower.

"I care about mine." She tips up her chin. Her eyes blaze with an inner fire. "If I were looking for an affair, it wouldn't be with the likes of you."

"Oh?" I peruse her features, "And are you looking for one?"

"What?"

"A lover. Someone who could arouse you with a glance, who would kiss you until you moan, someone who would pull you aside and take you while your husband mingles with the guests." I lean in close enough for her sweet sugary scent to lace my nostrils. Damn, but she's aroused. "Is that what you want?"

"No." Her eyebrows twist.

"Good." I release her so suddenly that she stumbles. "For when I take you, there will be no space for sweettalk, no emotions involved, no reason for hesitation. I'll treat your body like it were mine."

She draws in a sharp breath.

"You scared, yet?" I drawl.

"No," she mumbles.

"You should be."

A gust of wind blows her hair across her face. I reach up to tuck it behind her ear.

She shivers.

I unbutton my jacket, shrug it off.

She frowns. "What are you doing?"

I place it about her shoulders, position my mouth next to her ear, "When I finally drive into you, you'll weep not because I'm hurting you, but because you are empty without me."

Her breath hitches.

"Because you ache for me and will do anything for my fingers in you, my tongue on yours, the squeeze of my hand on your hips, the burn between your thighs as I drink from your wetness." I lower my voice.

Her breasts heave.

"When you plead with me to hurt you, to hold you down and claim you, to put you out of your agony even as you ask to be tormented further; when you beg for me with your pretty mouth, when you yearn to be filled in any way I deem fit... Then, and only then, I might let you come..." I pause, "Or not."

She swallows.

"And when I finally take you, it will be unexpected, life-altering, mind-blowing, intense. Everything else before will fade in comparison. "

Her breathing grows more ragged. Good. I step back, pull the lapels of my jacket together. My knuckles brush against her breasts and she shivers.

My groin tightens and my balls hurt. Fuck me, but this might be the first time I've talked myself into a hard-on—thanks to her.

"You want that, hmm?"

She shakes her head.

I chuckle. "If I touched you between your legs, you and I both know you'd be wet. And you are soaking, aren't you?"

She bites down on her lower lip, spots of color burning high on her cheekbones.

I lower my voice to a hush, "Answer me."

She trembles, "Yes."

"Do you want me?"

She tips up her chin, "What if I do?"

"All you have to do is ask."

"And you'll give me what I want?" Her eyebrows knit.

"I'll make sure you get everything you deserve." I look her up and down, "The time you spend with me will be the single most pleasurable time of your life."

Her lips part.

Her pupils dilate.

"You feel me?"

She nods.

"Say it."

"I... I feel you," she whispers.

"Good."

I turn to leave. Take one step, another.

"Wait," she calls out.

Bingo, I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling. Give it another second, then turn to glance at her.

"Your jacket." She begins to shrug out of it.

I hold up my hand, "Keep it." I pivot and leave.

What the hell happened there?

Why did she ask me a riddle? How did she know about the ghosts that

have haunted my worst nightmares since the incident when six of my friends and I had been kidnapped? And why the hell had I allowed myself to be drawn into further conversation? I'd seen the hurt in her eyes and had wanted to replace it with a twisted pleasure. A primal part of me had wanted her to wear clothes I bought for her. Had wanted to replace memories of any previous encounters with her husband with those that my words had aroused in her.

Does she enjoy it when he fucks her?

I clench my fingers at my sides. What the hell is wrong with me? She's taken, married to another. I should let her go. So why does every pore in my body insist that this is not over?

I head inside the townhouse that belongs to my friend Sinclair Sterling, aka the groom of the wedding. Striding to the bar, I lean over the counter, "Where the fuck did she come from?" I slide my fingers into my pocket, searching for the pack of cigarettes that isn't there. Shit, why did I quit again? Whose bloody idea had it been to give up smoking? I sure could do with a puff now.

Weston tops up my champagne flute. "Who are you talking about?" he asks.

"Victoria," I mutter.

"You mean the woman you've been ogling—"

I snarl.

He snickers, "—I meant 'staring at' for the last half hour."

"Fuck off." I reach for the champagne.

"She's married." Weston pours the remainder of the bubbling liquid in his glass.

"Yeah." I raise the flute to my lips.

"Isn't that off limits, even for you?" He overturns the bottle, places it in the bucket of ice.

He's right. I stay away from married women... Normally. Don't need the kind of emotional baggage that comes with them. Hell no, I prefer my hookups to be neat—swoop in, decimate, get out.

I chug down the drink, then grimace. "Isn't there any real alcohol in this place?"

"That's £20,000 you chugged down there, ol' chap."

I stare into my glass. "Could have fooled me." I survey the shelf of liquors behind the bar. "Whiskey," I growl. "Why are you bartending

anyway?"

"Because Damian decided he preferred the company of one of the fairer sex than our esteemed selves."

"Right," I mutter.

Weston half turns his body, reaches for the bottle I'd have chosen myself. Good man. He places the bottle on the counter, pulls out tumblers, then proceeds to pour in a generous measure. I dunk my hand into the bucket, pull out ice-cubes that I plop into my drink.

"Classy." Weston grimaces, uses ice-cube tongs for his. "So, you interested in Summer's stepmother?"

"She's Summer's age." I glower.

"You're not seriously considering this, are you?"

"Why not?" I swirl the liquid in my glass. "Besides, something about that marriage is not right."

"You can never tell from the outside," Weston retorts. "Only those in the relationship have an inkling of what's happening."

"Come on." I jerk my chin, "Watch the two of them. You really think she has feelings for that piece of shit husband of hers?"

Weston glances past me. He takes a sip from his glass, "Didn't think you were the kind to indulge in speculation."

Me neither. I rub the back of my neck. What the hell am I doing thinking about possibilities, about could-have-beens? Hadn't the events of my past taught me to move on swiftly? To never look back, never dwell on the piece of shit hand I'd been dealt. I chug down my drink.

"You're right." I set down the glass with a thump. "I am going to find out everything about her, ex-boyfriends, what food she likes, her taste in clothes —"

"Wouldn't you rather ask her about it?" He tilts his head.

"What would the fun be in that?"

He stares at me, then nods. "True. Knowledge is power and all that."

"I am going to dig out every piece of dirt on her and why she's married to that fucker of a husband." I tighten my fingers about the bottle.

Weston pulls out his phone, moves his fingers over the screen. "I know just the person to help you."

2

What is always in front of you but can't be seen?

Answer: Your future

5 days later

Victoria

Sunlight shines off the polished casket of my husband. Adam Rhodes died 4 days ago in his home city of London of a heart attack. He was fifty-five years old.

If I sound like I am reading the words from an impersonal obituary, it's because I didn't spend much time with him. I had played the role of his wife for less than two months. Nevertheless, I should cry, shouldn't I?

I bite down on my lower lip, stare as the casket disappears out of sight into the ground. No one deserves to die that young. I hadn't spent much time with him... Yet the fact that he was breathing one second, gone the next is...a shock.

A wind blows and goosebumps dot my skin. That's London for you. One moment you are warm in the sun, then the breeze brushes over you and it's as if someone walked over your grave. Not a good comparison right now. My lips twist. I hunch my shoulders in my jacket—okay, Saint's jacket. It dwarfs me, and I had rolled up the sleeves so it would fit. Why the hell had I worn it? What the hell had I been thinking? It had seemed like a small act of defiance, one way to exert control over my life, I suppose. Had I wanted to be

surrounded by his scent? I huddle into its warmth.

Next to me, Summer's shoulders shake. She clings to her sister Karma. Both girls had reconnected to their father after so long, only to lose him again. This wasn't supposed to happen. It means I am on my own.

An electric current surges up my spine. I stare past the open grave. Blue eyes bore into me. The force of his physical presence crashes into me. The impact of his dominance pulls at me. The hollow feeling in my belly intensifies. The melting sensation in my core deepens. *Shit.* My 'husband' is in his newly-dug grave, not a few feet away, and I can't stop eye-fucking the man—the almost stranger—the man who'd threatened to hurt me if I engage with him again. *What the hell is wrong with me?*

He takes a step forward, and hell, if I'm going to let him approach me here in front of my family—my dead husband's family. That makes me a widow, right? A pressure builds at my temples. This entire thing is getting out of hand. This is not what I had agreed to when I had bargained with the kidnappers for Nina's freedom.

I'd agreed to pose as wife to Adam Rhodes on this trip, and returned to my home country, as part of the plan. But Saint...? This chemistry between us...? Hell, if it isn't a complication. In that sense, Adam dying had been opportune. It means I don't have to add the role of cheating spouse to my persona.

I squeeze my eyes shut. Bloody hell. How can I be this callous? I barely knew the man who had posed as my husband, but when had I become so insensitive that I couldn't pause long enough to mourn the end of someone's life?

I turn to Summer. "I have to go," I choke on the words. I don't have to fake the confusion or the pain that I am sure is etched on my face.

She glances at me, "You okay Victoria?"

I nod.

"Why don't you come home with me and..." She glances at Sinclair and her voice trails off. So, the two of them haven't resolved whatever has been marring their relationship? I wish I could offer her some advice, but glass houses, and all that.

"You could come to our place," Karma offers. "It's a tiny apartment, but you'll have company."

"I..." I swallow. "I think it's better if I am on my own." I glance between them. "Not that I don't appreciate the offer. Honestly, you two have been

more than generous, considering how much of a shock the last couple of days have been." My chin wobbles. I twist my fingers together. "I need to get my head around what's happened."

Karma opens her mouth to speak, but Summer shakes her head at her sister. Karma frowns, then subsides. Whew! Okay. I don't want to tell any more lies... I need to crawl into bed and think about how to put the next phase of this plan into action.

Summer reaches forward and hugs me. I pat her shoulder. "Thank you for accepting me," I whisper.

"You're welcome." She steps back, "We need to stick together, huh? It's the only way to get through this shit that life insists on throwing at us."

I squeeze her hand, then brush past her, and head for the black limo that had brought me here. I twist open the door handle and sink inside the vehicle.

"Move over."

Saint ducks inside, forcing me to scoot over.

He drops into the seat opposite me, slams the door shut.

"What are you doing?" I gape.

He half turns and raps on the partition that separates the chauffeur from the passengers, then straightens.

The car pulls away from the curb, leaving me trapped with this...this man whose face I have seen only once; whose features are burned into my mind. Hell. No way, am I riding with him. Not for one second more. I grab at my handle; the door doesn't open. The hell? I slap at the barrier between the seats. The driver doesn't respond. Hit the switch that opens the communication channel with the chauffeur,

"Pull over. I want to get out."

There's no answer.

"Stop this car now, or I am going to call the police."

"Go ahead." Saint smirks.

I pull out my phone from my handbag, position my fingers over the keypad. And pause. A beat, another.

"Thought not." Saint takes the phone from me and pockets it. "I'll take that jacket now." He jerks his chin at my attire.

"What?" I gape.

"My jacket, my rules." His eyes glint.

Jerk. I undo the buttons, shrug off the jacket.

"It wasn't your color anyway," he comments.

"No?"

He shakes his head, "It accentuates the dark circles under your eyes."

"Fuck you very much." I hold out the jacket to him.

He chuckles, then jerks his chin. I follow his gaze to the coat hanger by the window on his side.

It's either maneuver around him or over him to reach it.

"Do it."

What a complete bastard.

To hell with it, I am not going to allow him to intimidate me. I half crawl over him, reach for the hook at the far side, miss, then swear aloud.

His chuckle floats from over me, his scent surrounds me, and the corded muscles of his thighs graze against my stomach. I shiver, reach up for it again. Success. I hang the damn thing up, then retreat to my side of the seat.

"You get much sleep?" His voice dips, takes on that gravelly tenor that sends a fresh surge of heat down my spine. Hell, this crazy reaction to his proximity? Clearly, I hadn't imagined it from our first meeting.

"What do you think?" I glance out through the tinted windows as the car eases onto the main road. "Where are we going?" I ask.

"Where do you think?" I hear the amusement in his voice.

A fresh burst of anger flares to life in my chest. I turn on him, "Stop this, whatever it is."

"You started it." He folds one leg over his other knee, and my gaze is drawn to the beat-up cowboy boots.

"Is that the same pair you had on the other day?"

He stiffens, then circles his ankle with his thick fingers. "Curious about me? Want to get to know me better, hmm?"

"Of course, not."

I turn away, glance at the bumper-to-bumper traffic. Who knew there was a graveyard in the middle of the city tucked away behind all those trees? That's London for you. Full of surprises. You are never too far from a park, or as it turns out in this case, a resting place reserved for the very rich.

"I am taking you to your hotel." Saint's gravelly voice chafes over my skin. I'm instantly wet... Okay, wetter. Oh, my god! If anyone can seduce with words, it is this man.

"This is my car," I turn to him, "so it stands to reason that I am the one taking you—"

His smile widens.

I snap my mouth shut. "That's not what I meant."

"Oh?" He tilts his head. "I beg to differ, but let me be absolutely clear, you won't be taking me anywhere. I'll be taking you. And I promise you, I will take you, and when I do, it will never be a meeting of equals, for..." He leans in close, "I hold the power. Never forget that."

I stare into those cold blue eyes.—the blackness that crawls in their depths, that pulls at me, calls to me, that resonates with that most intimate part of me, the one that I've never acknowledged, that wants to be taken without mercy. How dare he find out about my innermost needs when I had never acknowledged them myself? Only when my palm connects with his face, do I realize what I've done.

I gasp. My fingers tingle. I take in the reddening fingerprints on his cheek.

"I... I'm sorry," I whisper.

He peels back his lips, his teeth flashing white against his tanned skin. "Oh, you will be."

He swoops down. I cringe away, but he's too fast. He buries his fingers in my hair, tugs me forward. I strain against his hold. He applies pressure—not bruising, not punishing, but just enough for me to lean into him. The black scarf slips from around my neck.

He lowers his gaze to where the tops of my breasts are exposed from above the low-cut neckline.

His jaw tics.

"What belongs to you, but is used by others?"

His voice coils around me, slithers down into the crevasse between my lower lips, reaches deep inside, touching, stroking, molding to my contours—a living entity that wants and takes, that never stops, that will not be satisfied until I submit to him. *Submit.*

"Answer the bloody question." His tone rams through the jumbled quagmire of my mind, pulling me in, drawing me down, insisting that I focus my attention on that beautiful visage.

"You have one second to answer." He raises heavy-lidded eyelids; a flush of red suffuses his cheeks. So, he's not impervious to me either. This, whatever it is between us, affects him as well.

What does that mean? Can I use it to my advantage? Do I dare leverage it to get what I want from him?

I tip up my chin. "I... I don't know." I swallow.

"Are you sure you want to find out?" He leans in close enough for his scent to overpower me. The heat from his big body slams into my chest. His breath sears my cheeks, and our noses bump. He drops his gaze to my mouth. I part my lips, close the remaining millimeters between us. The world tilts. He grabs my shoulder, applies enough pressure that I slip off the car seat and down onto the floor on my knees.

I glance up at him, "You have some nerve."

He smirks, widens his legs.

Don't look down. Don't. I glance down at the bulge that tents his crotch, which is definitely considerably larger than what I'd noticed at the wedding. Saliva pools in my mouth. How big, how beautifully heavy he'd feel down my throat. What the hell am I thinking?

"I just buried my husband," I swallow.

"You didn't love him."

My jaw drops, "How dare you arrive at that assumption?"

"Am I wrong?" His gaze burns into me. A pulse beats at his temple. He peruses my features, "Tell me."

I shake my head.

His shoulders relax. Huh, does it mean anything to him that I had no feelings for Adam? That it was all a front to get me here? Why is it important to him that I didn't love another man?

I blink at him.

He lowers his chin, "Ask me to pull the car over and leave."

"Would you do it?" I frown.

"Nope," he chuckles, "but it sure was fun allowing you to think you had the option."

Anger twists my chest. Blood thuds at my temple. I raise my hand again.

He doesn't take his gaze from my face. "Don't," he rasps.

One word. A softly spoken command. My belly quivers. The force of his personality seems to grow until it fills the space, pushes down on my shoulders, holds me in thrall of this strange connection between us. I lower my arm

"Good girl."

A flush burns my cheeks. Why does his praise mean the world to me? Why do I want to please him with every fiber in my being? This is unnatural. I frown.

"You think too much, Gigi." He touches his finger to my forehead.

"My name's Victoria," I retort.

"Gigi suits you better."

"Why is that?"

"Short for Good Girl." He presses his knuckles below my chin, "Also you look like a Gigi." He turns my face up, "Definitely, Gigi."

I stare up at him. I've always hated my name. How the hell did he perceive that? My pulse begins to race.

"Also, the answer is 'my name,'" he drawls.

"What?" I frown. "What do you mean?"

"The answer to my earlier riddle, of course. And you're welcome."

"For what?"

"I've decided to spare you the blow job."

"What?"

He nods.

"Don't tell me you didn't think about it?"

"Of course, not." I lie.

"How about this? The more you cram into it, the wetter it grows. What is it?"

"Another riddle?" I bite the inside of my cheek.

"You started the game," he reminds me. "Think you can keep up with me?"

His lips curl in that smirk—that I am coming to hate.

"This your idea of fun?" I set my jaw.

"No, but this is."

He lowers his zipper and his cock springs free. Hard, massive, it points up at me, inviting me, mocking me. A vein pulses up the underside. The head is swollen, nearly purple— How is he this aroused? Why is it that every time I see him, he seems to be erect? Why do I care? So what if my mouth waters and a pulse flares to life between my legs? The man's seriously packing, and hell, if I don't want to wrap my fingers around that beautiful length. *No, no, no, did you call his dick beautiful? Look away, look away.* I raise my gaze to his face.

"No boxers?"

Did I say that? Why is it that there is no filter to my thoughts? I am not normally this way. I am reserved, aloof... That's what I've been told, anyway. Is it the role I'm playing that's allowing me to lower my barriers? To speak what's on my mind and damn the consequences? I mean, how much worse

could it get, right?

"You prefer I wear boxers?" he asks.

"I don't prefer you at all."

"More lies." He clicks his tongue. "We'll have to work on that."

"I am not working on anything with you," I mutter.

"Oh, but you will." He grips his thick cock, swipes himself from root to head. A bead of precum appears at the top.

Saliva pools in my mouth. Why is the sight of him getting himself hot so hot? I've seen my share of porn online, researched more in preparation of this role—yeah, the nerd in me couldn't stop until I'd done a bloody thorough job of it—but this...? Saint's thick fingers wrapped around himself is...a study in eroticism.

"A hole." His voice is harsh.

I blink up at him, "Is that the answer to your last riddle?" I whisper.

"Did it turn you on when I said that?" he asks.

Heat flares low in my belly. My core pulses in agreement. My throat closes. My mouth is so dry I am sure I can't force out a word.

He jerks his chin as if he's already heard my answer, then releases me, only to scoop up the moisture from his dick. He holds out his thumb. "Open." His voice is low, hushed. The dark edge to his tone brooks no refusal. *Obey him. Do it.*

My mouth waters. Heat curls low in my belly. I lower my mouth, close it around his finger.

3

Saint

I glance down at the back of her head. Her pink tongue swirls around my finger, then she takes me in, sucks on my digit. My cock jerks. Bloody hell. She isn't supposed to affect me on such an elemental level. This yearning need that boils up inside of me, that had compelled me to glance at her across the freshly-dug grave of her husband and think: mine. What the fuck is that about?

I don't do emotions.

Nor relationships.

Definitely never allow a woman to take control. Ever. I scowl as she takes my finger deeper into her mouth. She presses the length of her tongue to my digit, and heat radiates from the contact; blood rushes to my groin.

"Fucking fuck."

She sucks in her lips, mocking the motion of what she could do to my cock. A pulse flares to life behind my eyelids, at my wrist, even in my fucking balls. She leans back, releasing my finger with a wet plop.

"Is that enough?" she snaps.

"We haven't even begun."

"This is wrong." Her lips tighten. "Whatever the relationship between Adam and me... We just buried him. It's basic human decency, that we don't —"

"Fuck?" I tilt my head. "But we aren't."

"A technicality." she insists.

"Oh, believe me, when we screw, there will be nothing technical about it."

She trembles. The limo moves forward with a muted lurch. Silence a beat, then another.

"Don't do it." She murmurs.

"You mean this?" I reach down, swipe myself from base to head.

She gulps. The black of her pupils bleeds out, leaving only a circle of green around them.

This woman... Her response is the single most erotic thing I have ever seen.

Her gaze latches onto my motions as I pump myself back-forth-back.

"Why?" she asks. Her features twist. Her gaze, though, doesn't waver. She watches with a single-minded intensity that's as much of a turn on...more so...with the anticipation that builds between us.

Because there's a strange pleasure in denying myself access to what I could so easily have. One glance and she'd be on her back, opening her legs to me...but that would be too easy. Besides, I need her to come to me; to put herself at my mercy. Until then, this will have to do.

I increase the pace of my movements.

Her breathing grows ragged. Her chest rises and falls. I watch her watch me pleasure myself, and fuck, if that isn't the most erotic sensation ever.

The tension tightens at the base of my spine. Fuck, if I don't come right now. I squeeze the base of my cock to hold myself in.

"I absolve you of responsibility, Gigi," I snap.

She jerks her chin, "What do you mean?"

"You don't have to pretend. You want to do this, but your conscience doesn't permit you. Well, blame it on me. Use me as your excuse. When we get to the other side, you can resume your role in the real world, but for now, there's only me, you, and this orgasm that's pushing for release. Allow yourself to enjoy this, Gigi."

She draws in a sharp breath, her lips part, and it's as if it's a signal.

My orgasm roars out; my balls draw up. I position my dick and come all over her face, her chest, across her arms.

Her chest rises and falls; her shoulders snap back.

"Don't you dare come, Gigi."

"What?" she gasps.

"You heard me," I admonish.

She licks her lips, her shoulders heave.

I reach across and rub my cum into her face, her neck, into the creamy skin of her arms.

Then I reach for the tissue holder, snatch up some sheets and clean myself off. I tuck myself in, help her onto the seat, making sure to keep the length of the seat between us.

"You bastard," she snarls.

"You're frustrated. I understand." I smirk. This is a new low, even for me. Shit. Why eviscerate her ego completely? Is this the only way I am able to communicate? To hide behind the façade I have so carefully built to hide from the world?

She makes a noise deep in her throat.

I shake my head. "Don't do it."

"What?"

"Whatever bodily injury you were planning." I glance at her sideways. "I'm stronger than you."

"No shit." She tosses her head.

"You don't get it now, but it's for your own good."

"What?" She throws up her hands. "You coming all over me—"

"Which you enjoyed."

She opens her mouth—

I slash my palm across the air, "Don't deny it."

She flattens her lips, "—or that you didn't let me come?"

"Ah... Now that," I tap my fingers on my chest, "is easy to fix."

"I'm sure I don't want to know this."

"Oh, but you do. All you have to do is come to me and ask me for help."

"Help?"

"From whatever situation it is that you find yourself in." I turn, scan her features. "I have power, Gigi."

"And money," she says bitterly.

"More than you can imagine." I nod. "Whatever problem you have, I can resolve it for you."

"In return for what?"

I look her up and down, "I'll think of something."

"No doubt." She turns to glance outside, her profile bleak. Her chin wobbles. That same strange heat stabs at my chest, a reaction I seem to have when I hurt her.

Fuck. This...is unacceptable.

"Or not." I straighten.

The limo pulls up to the curb in front of her hotel.

She reaches for the door.

"There's one thing more."

She pauses.

"You won't come," I command.

"What?" She turns around to stare at me. "The hell do you mean?"

I lean back, place my arm across the back of the seat. "Your every orgasm belongs to me."

"No."

"Yes," I nod, waggle a finger in the air. "No cheating, darling. You will not come until I give you permission."

"Fuck you."

She pushes open the door, flounces off. The limo pulls away, turns the corner, then stops.

I push open my door, step around, and slide into the driver's seat.

"You better know what you're doing," Weston growls from the passenger seat.

I glance over him, laugh, "The uniform suits you."

"I didn't have to wear the hat." He tosses it down between the seats.

"Aww, women love men in uniform," I snicker.

"You're envious of how I look in scrubs," he retorts.

I shoot him a sideways glance. "Still can't understand why you chose to become a doctor."

"Same reason you wear those beat up cowboy boots."

"Sentimental value." I raise my shoulders.

"Keep telling yourself that," he mutters. "Besides, considering the amount of time I'm spending to help you with your affair, I may not be a doctor for much longer."

"Not an affair," I mutter, easing the car back in traffic.

"Yeah." He scratches his jaw, "Seriously, you could have allowed the woman a little time to recover from the funeral."

"It's all a bloody act." I spot a break in traffic, step on the gas, and the limo pulls forward.

"The private investigator come through with information?"

"Some." I frown. "Enough to confirm that she's not as innocent as she'd

want me to believe."

"And her marriage?"

I draw in a breath, then pull out my pack of cigarettes. I depress the button for the lighter, then toss the pack over to Weston, "Light one for me, will you?"

"Thought you quit."

"Don't fucking nag me, man."

He shoots me a sideways glance, then pulls out a cigarette. He leans forward, grabs the lighter from the dash and lights it up. He blows out smoke, before placing it between my lips. I draw in a puff, then another.

"So, her marriage is—?" he prompts.

I blow out a breath. "Couldn't find any evidence of it being legal."

Weston turns to me, "You mean...?"

I hold up my hand, "I don't think it's genuine."

"Maybe it's wishful thinking?" He drums his fingers on his thigh. "You sure that you aren't splitting straws."

And isn't that the fucking truth? Why the hell can't I simply walk away from her?

"We'll find out soon enough." I draw in a breath. "For now the scene is set."

"Scene?" He glowers at me. "Don't push it, man. You're already w-a-a-y too involved with this woman."

"Involved?" I laugh. "You know how much I love riddles. It's been a long time since I've found one that challenged me."

"Be careful, Saint." He snickers, "Some puzzles are best left unsolved."

4

What is more useful when it is broken?

Answer: An egg

Three weeks later

Victoria

"Am I intruding?" I stare across the office of the executive level of 7A investments. This is it. I couldn't put it off anymore. I have nowhere else to go in this city. After Adam's death, I'd moved out of the hotel and into a studio in Hackney.

I am playing the role the Mafia has demanded of me, but the resources I have to rely on are meagre—what I have left over from the job I'd started after graduating from UCLA. A month into it, I got the call that Nina had been kidnapped, and my entire life had changed.

"You're already here." Saint glares back. "May as well come all the way in." He drags his gaze down to my chest. A flush blooms on my cheeks.

I haven't seen him since that encounter in the limo, but his every word, the expression on his face as he'd come, the way he'd massaged his cum into my skin, marking me as his... I remember every single detail. I had masturbated every night to the image of his orgasm; and I had not come. Damn him, but I couldn't let myself climax.

It wasn't for trying, honestly, but every time I came close to the edge, I lost courage, I couldn't see it through. I felt bereft. Rudderless. Needing,

wanting, searching for something...someone to lead me. To take control. Damn the man, I don't need his permission to come. I don't.

His perusal shifts to my belly, my core. Moisture pools in my center. Sweat beads my palm. The invisible connection between us crackles, tightens further. My scalp tingles. The hair on my neck rises. Is the chemistry between us more potent than I remember?

My head spins.

"Victoria, are you okay?" Summer asks from across the room.

I open my mouth to answer when a sound reaches me. I glance down to find a puppy sniffing at my ankles. Huh? Why hadn't I noticed the little fella earlier? He whines, plonks himself down on his haunches and looks up at me with melting eyes. My heart squeezes. A pressure builds at my temples. Jesus, what is wrong with me?

I bend, pet him. He licks my fingers and warmth travels up my arm.

He turns, runs to his bed, and settles there with his chew toy.

He's so cute, just a baby. A heaviness grips my chest. If only I had someone to call my own. A pet? A child? The emptiness inside of me stutters, rolls into itself, grows larger, broader, swells inside, taking on a physical shape. The visceral need to procreate is a tangible thing that claws at me, shoves out at me, pushes me to draw in a sharp breath. Oh my god, what's happening to me?

Why is the sight of a dog affecting me so much? Is it because the meeting with Nina's kidnapper has shown me how quickly everything can shift? He'd told me that the plan had changed to accommodate Adam's death. No longer is it about reporting back on the activities of the Seven. My stomach ties itself in knots; I now have to win the trust of one of them.

Specifically, I have to retrieve a crucial piece of evidence that is in Saint's grasp, and get it back to them.

And I have to do this on my own. The hairs on the nape of my neck prickle.

Can I do that? Can I use the chemistry between us to win his confidence, only to betray him? My guts clench; my core melts. Why does the thought of staying close to him turn me on? Why does the fact that I would have to turn against him feel so wrong?

There is no other route to saving Nina. I have no choice but to go through with this.

My throat closes. Specks of black dot my vision.

"Victoria?" Worry threads Summer's voice. She steps forward, but the other man in the room, who I recognize as her husband, places a hand on her shoulder.

I glance between them. Guess they've worked out whatever issues they may have had? That's good. I am pleased for Summer. She deserves every happiness she can get after what she's been through. And me? What about me? I draw in a sharp breath. *One step at a time. Don't panic. This is no time to have a breakdown.* I straighten my spine. "Everything will be fine now." As I hear my words, a strange calm grips me.

I turn to Saint, "I've been looking for you."

He smirks, "About time."

Funny he should say that. I've spent the time since I last saw him researching him. Not that it had taken much effort to unearth his business success, or his weakness for beautiful women. A little more digging had unearthed his inclination for the darker kind of pleasures. The hair on my forearms rises. He doesn't believe in hiding his tastes; more likely he doesn't care who knows about it. Good. I can use the knowledge to my advantage.

I run my clammy palm down my dress; then take a step forward.

He watches me approach. That strength of his presence beckons. Tension vibrates off of him. The potency of his personality slams into my chest. I gasp and my guts twist. My belly seems to fold in on itself; I sway.

The ground comes up to meet me, but he's already there.

"Hey." He grips my shoulders, straightens me, "You okay?"

"Help me," I gasp.

His lips move. Is he speaking to me?

I frown, raise my hand. He catches my wrist. Those dark brows knit. A vein bulges at his temple. Is he angry? Why is he angry?

The world tilts; heat surrounds me, envelops me. The hard barrier of his chest digs into my cheek. That's when I realize that he's scooped me up in his arms. What the—? Had I almost fainted? Like the heroine of a Victorian novel. Finally conforming to my blasted name. I snicker.

"What's so funny?" he asks.

I glance up at the stubble on his chin. It's only noon. Did he not shaved today? Or is he one of those men who prefers that fashionably unshaven look?

"You sure you want to know?" I mutter.

"I want to find out everything about you."

I blink. Did he say that? What does he mean?

He moves toward the door of the room.

"I can walk," I protest.

"Clearly not." His voice is hard. Anger ebbs and flows around him, encompassing me in a thick fog of awareness that grates across my nerves; it swipes over my breasts, down my belly, headed for the obvious end goal that is my quivering center. I squeeze my thighs together.

His nostrils flare.

Hell, he can't smell my arousal, can he?

A chuckle rumbles up his chest.

Bastard. All of this is amusing to him.

He reaches the door, then pauses. "I am taking my business across to my space." He turns to survey the other two, "You guys cool with that?"

"Saint," Summer's voice is resolute, "don't hurt her."

Saint's muscles tense, then he tilts his head, "I won't do anything that Victoria doesn't want me to do."

He glances down at me, "We understand each other, don't we?"

The hell does he mean by that?

I open my mouth to ask, but he's already striding out and down the corridor.

"I am not your business," I protest.

He laughs, "So why are you here?"

Well, hell. He has me there. I am the one who stumbled in and collapsed at his feet. Which had not been part of the script, by the way. What the hell happened to me? I swear I am not a damsel in distress...though that's the part I've been told to assume. Lucky for me then, that my actions corroborate my persona, huh?

He walks past two offices, then shoulders open the door to the last one. He steps into one similar in size to the one we left behind. A bookcase lines one wall; on the opposite wall is a massive painting of a question mark.

A question mark? The outline is filled in with shades of blue—jeweled, hypnotic. The more I stare at it, the more I am pulled into it. My head swims and my vision fills with spots. *Shit.* I shake my head to clear it, then drag my fingers through my hair. This has to be Saint's office. I stiffen. Apparently, conforming to stereotypes of the weaker sex has its benefits. I'd found my way into Saint's inner sanctum. *Can I accomplish my goal as quickly?*

"Let me go," I huff.

"That's not what you were saying a few minutes ago." His shoulders heave. A chuckle rumbles up his chest.

"You're an asshole," I mutter.

"So, they say."

"And a condescending prat."

"At your service," he drawls.

And I turned to him for help? Not that I had a choice; but hell, if I stay silent, he'll walk all over me.

He'll take me for granted, use the force of his personality to subdue me, no doubt about that. Men such as him are so used to getting what they want. I'd become another of his conquests. He isn't known as the most eligible bachelor in London for his good behavior, that's for sure. No, I can't simply give in to him. I have to intrigue him, hold his interest long enough to win his confidence, to get close to him so I can get ahold of the information I need so badly; but damn, if I am pandering to his already swollen ego for that.

I tip up my chin. "Release me," I demand.

He yawns, continues walking toward the far end of the room. What the hell? He ignored me?

I begin to struggle in earnest, shove my elbow in his groin. He huffs, glances down at me and his gaze widens.

Good. That'll teach him to underestimate me.

"Let go of me you prick," I snarl.

His biceps flex. The muscles of his forearms ripple against my back.

The next moment I fall through the air.

5

Saint

She bounces on the couch, her glorious dark hair falling about her face. She shakes it back, scrambles up. I place my hand on her shoulder.

I should let her know exactly what I have in mind for her. How I plan to ensure it's a long time before I let her go again. Oh, I've been receiving minute by minute reports of her movements; but nothing compares to having her in my office, on my couch, under me, as I proceed to strip her of every shred of dignity. As I bring her to the edge of orgasm and never let her come. "So, you obeyed me, huh?"

"What?" She frowns.

I lean in and sniff her neck. The sugar sweet scent of her arousal, magnified, more complex than before, fills my nostrils. "Good girl." I grin down at her. "You haven't had an orgasm since we last met."

Her mouth opens and closes. "You have a nerve." She tries to sit up. I apply enough pressure on her shoulder so she sinks back into the cushions.

"Take your hands off of me."

"No."

She blinks. "You can't just...just..."

"Command you?"

"Stop me," she grinds out.

"I can. I have." I straighten and she stays where she is this time. Good. "Have you eaten?"

She scowls.

"I'll take that as a no." I stalk over to the massive table that takes up almost the entire length of one side of the room. I snatch up the phone. "Meredith?"

"Saint?" M replies, "She there with you?"

"Yeah," I mutter.

"Do you know what you're doing?"

"Don't you trust me?" I scowl.

Her voice softens, "Be careful, Saint."

"Always." I smile. "I was going to ask for—"

"I ordered you two a late lunch," she interrupts me. "It's on its way."

There's a knock on the door.

"I think it's here already. What would we do without you?"

She chuckles. "I'm immune to your charms, but I'll accept the compliment."

I drop the phone in the cradle, stalk to the door.

A girl stands there, carrying a tray of food. Another intern? How many of them do we employ here?

I scowl at her and she pales. Her arms tremble. "Uh, may I come in?"

"No."

She gapes.

I take the tray of food from her, then shut the door in her face.

"Treat them that way and no one will want to work for you," Victoria mutters.

I turn, march over to the couch. "Pay enough money and it's surprising how much they'll put up with."

She swings her legs over, places her bag on the floor next to her. "That your personal philosophy?"

"Sure." Whatever she wants to believe.

I place the food on the coffee table next to the couch and whip off the covering. The tangy scent of soup fills the air.

Her stomach grumbles. She glances from the food to me.

"It's lentil and quinoa soup." I add, "Vegetarian, as well as filled with complex carbs."

She frowns.

I pull up a chair and seat myself opposite her, then dip a spoon into the broth. I bring it to her lips, "Open."

Her pupils dilate. Is she remembering the last time I commanded her to

do so? The blood rushes to my groin.

She opens her mouth and I feed her the soup. Watch as she licks her lips. My pulse begins to thud. I feed her a few more spoonful's.

A drop clings to the edge of her mouth.

I lean in, lick it off.

She draws in a sharp breath.

"Tastes good," I murmur.

She swallows.

"The soup, I mean."

She frowns.

"What's on your mind?" I ask.

"How did you find out that I was vegetarian—?" her words trail off. "Did you have me investigated?"

"You don't think I'd let you anywhere near me without doing that, do you?"

She pales.

"I'm sure you have nothing to be worried about. After all, you are ordinary, hmm?"

"Bastard," she bites out.

"Not to mention that you tend towards hypoglycemia," I mutter

She gapes at me. "You know that too?"

"Is that why you fainted?"

"Almost fainted," she scowls.

"When did you last eat? You need to keep your blood sugar levels steady."

"Why do you care?" she huffs.

"I don't." I raise my shoulders. "But I need you strong enough to answer my questions."

"Is that why you're feeding me?" Her chest heaves.

"I am doing it because it amuses me to see you lap up all the attention."

A snarl escapes her, then she raises her hand.

"Your penchant for using your palm..." I tilt my head, "I'll remind you of it, when my handprint graces your butt cheeks."

She shudders, "You won't." She curls her fingers into her fist.

I sigh, "Don't make this worse on yourself."

She hesitates, then lowers her hand into her lap.

"Good girl."

She flushes, then parts her lips for the next spoonful, and the sight of her tongue... That hunger in her eyes, fuck. I press my thumb into her mouth.

She sucks on it, and fuck, if I don't feel the tug all the way to the tip of my cock.

She lets go of my digit, then smacks her lips together, "Tastes good." She raises her chin.

"You upped the ante." I allow my lips to curve.

"You didn't think I'd simply allow you to take me for granted?"

"Trust me," I scoop up more of the soup, hold it out to her. "I much prefer a fight." I tip the spoon, the soup drips into the 'V' of her neckline.

"What the hell—?" She cries out, glances down at herself. "Did you just try to burn me?"

"If you can't stand the heat, then get out." I glare at her.

She pales.

"Well?" I replace the spoon in the bowl of soup. "What's it going to be?"

She glances from me to the door, then back at me, "What if I leave?"

My heart begins to race and sweat beads my palms. I wipe my fingers on the starched white napkin, put it aside. "You won't."

Her mouth opens and closes. She splutters, "Why you presumptuous, cocky—"

"Are you?" I frown. "Leaving?"

She purses her lips, twists her fingers together.

"Want me to take the choice out of your hands?"

She doesn't reply, peers into my face, then rubs her thighs together. My groin tightens. My muscles harden. I lean over, lick the trickle of broth that I spilled on her neck.

She freezes.

I follow the trail down to the valley between her breasts.

She shudders. "Oh, my god," she whispers.

"Want me to touch you?"

"What? No." She straightens, "Of course, not."

I rise to my feet, pivot and head for the door.

"Wait," she calls out.

I wipe the smile off of my face, turn.

She looks at me, then away.

I tap the toe of my boot against the floor.

"You're going to make me say it, aren't you?" she says bitterly.

I pull back my cuff, check the time on my watch. "My next appointment's waiting."

"Fine." She hunches her shoulders.

"Fine what?"

"Fine, I want you to touch me."

I cross the distance between us, fit my knuckles under her chin. She glances up at me, her green eyes shining with that inner turmoil I'm beginning to recognize.

"Not so hard now, is it?"

"This is not why I came," she whispers.

"Shh!" I press my thumb to her lips.

She gulps, opens her mouth again, and I shake my head. She subsides. All of the confusion and all of the emotions she's feeling are reflected in her eyes. So fucking vulnerable, this woman, yet so sassy.

"You're not as innocent as you seem," I say.

Her gaze widens.

"But that's okay." I frame her face with my hands. "I am going to enjoy unravelling your hidden agenda."

She sits up straighter. "Takes one to know one."

"Don't make the mistake of thinking you know me, Gigi."

"Don't flatter yourself," she mutters. "You're not so special. Just another spoiled billionaire a-hole, who thinks he can use his power and influence to get anything he wants."

"Gazillionaire." I grin, then slip my palm under the heavy curtain of her hair. "And you're sitting here, aren't you?"

Color flares on her cheeks. She tries to rise, but I wrap my fingers around her nape and hold her down.

Her shoulders jerk and the pulse at her neck flutters.

"Poor, Gigi. So confused. So out of your league."

"I'm more than a match for you, rich prick." She bares her teeth.

A shudder works its way down my spine. My balls throb. I haul her up by the scruff of her neck. She gasps and her breasts push up, the nipples beaded against the black cloth of her dress.

"Fucking hate that color," I grumble. I lower my head until I can make out the little creases between her eyebrows, the flecks of gold in those green irises beckoning me. Calling me. I rake my gaze down to her mouth. Her lips part. She flutters those thick eyelashes down. "Please," the whine bleeds from

her lips.

"What do you need?"

"I... I don't know," she murmurs.

"You do."

I draw in a breath and her scent grows straight to my head. A hot sensation stabs in my chest. Fucking fuck. This woman, she is too potent. Weston was right, I am way too deep into this game already.

I release her so suddenly, her rear hits the couch with a thump. Turning, I stride to the door.

"You're a real piece of work you know that?" she yells after me.

I raise my hand in the air. "Rest up, Gigi. You have until I finish this next appointment to figure out why you came. After that, the choice is out of your hands."

6

*I am often mistaken for being true. What am I?
Answer: A lie*

Victoria

"Help me."

I snap my eyes open, jackknife up, heart racing, pulse pounding. I try to swallow and my throat hurts. Sweat slicks my palms, slides down my back. The blood thuds at my temples and my stomach twists.

After Adam's untimely death, I'd received another call. This time with instructions that I had to get close to Saint, and get hold of the evidence he has on the Mafia. The man on the phone had also played me a recording of Nina's voice crying for help. Then he'd warned me not to breathe a word about this to anyone else, before hanging up. I drag my fingers through my hair.

I've barely slept a wink the last few nights, nervous about this encounter with Saint.

Clearly, my subconscious associates that asshole with security. Enough that, for the first time in weeks, I'd fallen into a deep sleep in the middle of the day. On his couch, in his office, no less.

A sound reaches me through the door. I stiffen, swing my legs over and a jacket falls to the floor. *Huh?* It's light gray in color, different from the one he had loaned me. He hadn't been kidding when he'd said that he hates the color black on me.

Had he come in while I slept and decided not to wake me up? Had he watched me sleep, and covered me with the jacket? I blink.

At least I hadn't drooled. Small mercies. I pick up the jacket, then bury my nose in the luxurious fabric.

The scent of him laces my nostrils—masculine, complex, layers upon layers that sink into my skin. My cheeks flush. My thighs clench. Ridiculous. I can't have such a reaction to his scent. I drop the jacket on the couch, then spring up to my feet, and walk toward the desk.

Starlight streams in from the windows. Huh? It had been late afternoon when I'd arrived. How long did I sleep? I glance at the sleek wall clock on the far side of the room. What the—? It's late—almost 9pm. Why did he let me sleep away the evening?

I sink into the massive leather chair; the scent of him deepens. My belly flutters. My throat dries. *Why the hell am I having such a strong reaction to the presence—? No.* My lips twist. *Technically, that would be his absence—of this man I barely know.*

I touch the pad of the laptop in front of me and the screen lights up. It's fingerprint locked. I'd checked it as soon as Saint had left, of course. It wouldn't have been that easy, right? I have to get into his files to get what I need, which means—my shoulders slump—I have to get close to him. No choice.

I glance at the desk, spot the riding crop on it. "What the—?" Who keeps a riding crop on his work desk, in his office? Saint does; that's who. I shake my head, reach for the top drawer. It's locked. Well hell, of course it couldn't be that simple.

I open the drawer below; there's stationery, pens, excel sheets printed with rows of numbers. I wrench open the drawer at the bottom... my breath catches. A gun? *Huh?* He keeps a gun? Another noise reaches me through the door. Shit. Where the hell is Saint?

I snatch up the revolver. The weight is reassuring. Two months ago I'd never seen a gun in my life. Now? Well, I'll take every break I get.

The one thing my experience has taught me is never to be taken by surprise. I shut the drawer, then walk across the floor. Opening the door, I step into a corridor. Strain my ears... Nothing. Scratch that... Is that a sound from down the hall? I glance down the passageway, then the other way. Right. I march down the hallway to the set of double doors, and fling them open.

Pale blue eyes cut into me; his eyebrows slash down.

I take in the breadth of his shoulders ensconced in the same white dress shirt he had on earlier. Only now, the front is unbuttoned and pulled apart to reveal his cut torso. Black hair clings to the eight pack abs that ripple and flow down to meet the waistband of his pants... His unzipped pants where a woman bobs her head. So, this was his very important appointment?

She grips his powerful pant-clad thighs, which buck and flex under her touch. He parts his legs, then clasps the back of her head. The veins on his muscled forearm flex.

A moan bleeds through the air and I'm instantly wet. My mouth waters. My scalp tingles.

Omigod, why is that the most intensely erotic thing I have ever seen? I seriously can't be thinking that now. Get out of here, get out. My feet seem stuck to the ground, my legs too heavy to carry me out of there. I watch, riveted, as he brings up his other hand, the veins on his forearms popping.

His shirt sleeves are rolled up to his elbows; his biceps bulge as he swipes a finger across his lower lip.

"You want to share it when you have it, but when you want it you don't have it." He rumbles, "What is it?"

His tone rams through the jumbled quagmire of my mind, pulling me in, drowning me down, insisting that I focus my attention on that beautiful visage.

His lips curl. He is laughing at me.

He knows exactly the picture he presents.

So damn arrogant. So confident.

Did he orchestrate this entire tableau for my benefit? *Nah, why should he? Bet he has a mile-long queue of women outside the door ready to suck his every appendage.* I chuckle.

His glare intensifies. "You have one second to answer."

"I... I don't know." I swallow.

"A secret," he drawls. "That's the answer." His eyelids grow hooded. "What secrets are you hiding from me, I wonder?"

"None." I swallow.

"Everyone has secrets." He chuckles.

"Even you?"

"Especially me." His grin widens.

The wet sound of flesh hitting flesh fills the room. I drop my gaze to

where the woman kneels between his thighs. His forearms flex, he spreads his legs, yanks her head closer, then begins to use her mouth in earnest. Back-forth-back; her entire body shakes.

A gagging noise splits the rhythmic effect.

My head spins. My core clenches and I chafe my thighs wanting... Needing more. So much more.

His chest seems to expand further and further; his shoulders swell. His pale blue eyes glow with a strange inner light.

He lowers his chin, raises an eyebrow, and a snarl rips up my throat.

A heavy sensation stabs in my chest; my vision tunnels. *I am not jealous. I am not.* I don't want him that way. Besides *he had...left me there on the couch, while he'd indulged himself?* What a complete jerk.

My heart begins to race; adrenaline laces my blood. I raise the gun, aim it at Saint.

He stares back. His shoulders stiffens.

The woman between his legs glances around. I level the gun at her. She pales.

I wiggle the gun and she rises to her feet, only to glance at him. What the —? I have a weapon trained on her and she looks to him as if seeking permission?

Saint's lips firm. "Leave."

My toes curl, my scalp prickles... and the hair on my forearms rises. Jesus, no man should have a voice like that. My arm shakes. The woman passes me, then bolts.

Silence descends. A beat, another.

I hold Saint's gaze, tip up my chin.

Two can play this game. I will not be intimidated. Will not be coerced into breaking the silence. I stare down the barrel of my pistol, at the rat's ass of a man in my cross hairs.

He relaxes into the chair. The soft material of his pants outlines the contours of his powerful thighs. *Don't look there, don't.* I glance at his crotch, which is unzipped. His dick arrows up. Is it thicker than what I remember it to be? Nah, that must be my imagination, surely—

"My face is up here," he drawls.

I jerk my chin up. His lips curl in a smirk, and moisture instantly pools at my core. Damn the man, he knows the effect he has on me. So what? I tighten my grip on the gun. I hold the weapon. So why does it feel like the

one between his legs is more lethal? *Jesus, cliché much?*

"You do need to up your game, Gigi." He tilts his head.

Anger squeezes my chest.

He is toying with me. Asshole is having fun at my expense. I'll teach him what it means to sit on that lofty, privileged perch of his and sneer down his nose at those who have to fight for every bit of help, for every shred of kindness, for every soft word, tender touch...every gaze filled with love, tears, blood... "Shut up." My voice emerges—harsh, guttural. Nothing like the sophisticate I am trying to portray. I draw in a deep breath. My hand trembles.

Walk away, right now, while you can.

I can't. I won't. I have to face him down. I have to find a way to ensure that I come out of this with some small shred of my dignity intact.

He grips his gorgeous shaft, swipes it from root to tip.

My throat dries. Heat flushes my skin and sweat beads my palm.

"Stop that," I croak.

"Don't tell me what to do." His command lashes across my skin. My fingers slip. The stuffing from the chair next to his head explodes, but he's already moving.

I hear the thud of his boots on the carpet, see a blur of movement, then the gun is knocked from my hand.

I hit the ground, face down. His heavy weight presses into me. His hardness stabs into the curve of my waist. Those solid thighs grip mine on either side. I am surrounded by him. Heat from his massive body slams into me, pins me down. Moisture dribbles out between my legs. I strain and he places his cheek next to mine, his breath raising the hair on my forehead.

"You have my attention, little Gigi."

He licks the shell of my ear.

Goosebumps pop on my skin. My vision narrows; my toes curl. "I want more than that." I shiver.

There's a pause, then his chest vibrates. "What?" He growls.

"Take me as your sub."

7

*I am given with pleasure when taken by force. What am I?
Answer: A kiss*

Saint

"Do you have any idea what you're asking for?" I push back and flip her on her back.

Her green eyes deepen in color, glittering emeralds that cut through me, hurt me, scoop up every last drop of humanity left in me and render me incoherent.

"Well?" I glare at her.

"Y...yes." She stutters.

I rise to my feet and she pales.

"On your knees," I growl.

She hesitates.

I lower my voice to a hush, "Now." Her shoulders stiffen, then she pushes up to kneel at my feet. It puts her face at eyelevel with my crotch. My groin hardens.

I reach down, grab my cock. Her breath hitches. She drops her gaze, watches as I massage my dick.

She licks her lips and my muscles go solid. My shaft lengthens. *Ah hell, hadn't meant for things to get out of hand so quickly...literally.*

I widen my stance to accommodate my arousal and she makes a sound deep in her throat.

"That's not for you." I smirk. "Yet."

"What?" She peers up at me from under sooty eyelashes.

"You'll have to earn it first." I allow my smile to widen.

Her eyebrows draw down, she flicks out her tongue to touch her lower lip, and my cock instantly twitches. *Hell*. This response to her is interesting. Not what I expected. Best to put her in her place right away. I tuck myself in, then stalk forward to retrieve my gun.

"What are you doing?" Her squeak fills the space.

My lips twitch. I straighten, turn to her.

Her cheeks pale. "St...stop. Don't come closer."

"Why not?"

"This...this isn't what I want." Fear vibrates off of her, bleeds into the space between us... My dick instantly lengthens.

Do you blame me? She'd hit upon my weakness, then proceeded to lay her insecurities bare to me... *Well, of course, I am going to take advantage.*

"Let me be the judge of that." I stride forward.

She jerks her chin up, "Don't come closer."

"That's not what you said earlier."

"I... I didn't think—"

"What—?" I pause in front of her. "That I'd call your bluff?"

Her chin wobbles, "Are you. Will you...?"

I lean forward.

Her shoulders rise and her throat moves as she swallows.

"Rule number one, never question me."

"And if I do...?"

The next second, I press the gun to her temple. Her gaze narrows as her eyes blaze. *Bloody hell, she has some strength, this woman.* She raises her chin, and damn, if my dick doesn't follow suit. I don't need to look down to know that my cock's saluting her impudence.

"So, tell me, Gigi, why is it that you sought me out?"

"I told you it was to—"

"Ask me to be your Dom?"

She nods.

"You think I believe that?"

"Why else would I be here?" Her gaze narrows, "It isn't for your politeness or consideration, clearly."

My lips twitch before I wipe the smile from my face. I grip her hair and

tug so her head falls back, "Tell me the truth."

"Couldn't it be because I saw the man behind the asshole face you show the world? Perhaps I want to get to know you better?"

"Do you?"

Her gaze skitters away.

A hot sensation coils in my stomach, "Thought not." I wrap my fingers around her neck and her gaze widens. "Perhaps I should take you at face value, after all."

"What do you mean—?"

"Shh!" I draw the barrel of the gun over her lips and her face pales. Fear radiates from her. My pulse begins to race. *Finally*. "Let's see what you're made of, shall we?"

I yank her up to her tiptoes, until she's level with my chest.

"Such a tiny little thing, you are. Not a hair out of place, even after spending hours on the couch in my office. What would it take to mess you up, huh?" I drag the barrel of the gun down her cheek—She swallows—past that lush lower lip, to the hollow at the base of her throat. Goosebumps pop on her skin.

"Not that courageous now, are you?"

She swallows, then tips up her chin and opens her mouth. I click my tongue.

Her gaze narrows, her eyes sparking with that familiar light of defiance. *Oh, good. Now we're getting somewhere.*

I drag the pistol down, hook the barrel into the dip of her neckline. She stills, the only movement, her chest rising and falling. Her nipples pebble against the fabric of her blouse. My vision narrows and I draw the gun over the nipple.

She shudders. My shaft lengthens.

"You enjoy that, hmm?"

She shakes her head.

I glare at her, "Don't lie."

"I'm not."

"Admit it. You are aroused.'

"No." She sets her lips.

"We'll see about that, shall we?"

I toss the gun to one side, then pull her forward.

She falls into me, "What the hell? You tossed a loaded gun, you—"

"Relax, I clicked the safety on." I squeeze my fingers around her nape, my fingers meeting in the front, that's how slender the length of her neck is. "The only gun you need to be worried about is the one in my pants."

She makes a gagging noise. "Ugh, that was terrible, even for you."

"And if you want to gag, there are other ways to bring that on too."

"Keep your cheap shots to yourself." She huffs, "Why do you keep a gun anyway, and in an unlocked drawer?"

"Why were you snooping in my office?" I retort.

"I..." She swallows, "You left me on my own in your space." She raises her shoulder. "It was fair game."

"Hmm." I lean into her, "And you... little Gigi, are in my space. Does that make you fair game too?"

I tighten my grasp on her, and she trembles. Her thighs quake.

Pressing her against me, I sense her every move, every breath she takes, the trembling of her eyelids. Her lips part, her hips wriggle, and damn it, but I can't stop myself. I lower my head, close my mouth over hers. I suck on her tongue, bite down on her lower lip, shove my free hand under her skirt, finding that melting core between her legs.

I slide my fingers in between her panties and skin, drag my knuckles across her clit.

A whine bubbles up her throat; I swallow it.

I thrust a finger inside her core, and hell... The melting softness is my undoing. I add a second finger, then another. Her spine curves and her neck arches. I hook my fingers inside of her, finding that hidden center of hers. Her entire body bucks.

I tear my mouth from hers, "Don't you dare come, Gigi."

She shudders, thrusts her pelvis forward.

I release my grip around her neck, yank my fingers from her pussy. I step back and her legs give way.

I catch her, push her into the door and pin her hips with mine. A pulse beats to life against my temples, on the backs of my eyelids, even in my balls. *Jesus. Hell.* This isn't how it's supposed to be.

I am supposed to get my women off, reduce them to globs of liquid need, make them crawl to me for release... And while I'd done all that to her... I'd never before been this aroused... This need to bury myself inside of her, scratch my name into her cells, her skin, tear into her and show her how it can be between us? No. No way, am I doing that. I release her and she sags

against the barrier.

Back the fuck off, before she pulls you in with those beautiful eyes, that gorgeous visage, the innocence about her which is...all a façade. A trap. One way to ensure that I forget what this entire charade is about—to get to the bottom of whoever set her up to lure me in. If she thinks it is that easy to veer me off course, to distract me from the one thing that has kept me and the Seven focused all these years, then she has another trick coming.

"In which sport do winners move backward and losers move forward?" I let the words hang in the air between us.

She blinks, then asks, "Which...which one?"

"A fucking tug of war is what." I chuckle. *Bloody hell.* Why had I allowed those words to escape my lips? Why the hell am I showing her a glimmer of my vulnerability?

She makes me weak, is why. No way, am I allowing that to happen again. Not when I have a hell of a lot more at stake than some piece of pussy which doesn't mean anything to me. But she isn't just another anything... She is... Gigi. An enigma, a puzzle. A riddle I am going to solve, even if it means hurting myself in the process.

I turn, snatch up my gun and shove it into my waistband.

"Wait."

I shrug on my shirt, turn to her. She swallows.

"What about...?" Her voice trails off.

"About?" I growl.

"My proposition."

"Let me think." I drum my fingers on my chest, peruse her from head to toe.

Her cheeks flush. Her eyes glitter with that inner fight. Damn, but she has a hidden depth, a fierce perseverance that is both endearing and... *Endearing? The hell?* Since when have emotions ever featured in any relationship, huh? I take, I allow a select few to make me come...then walk away. That is it. No relationships. No entanglements. Nothing that can touch the part of me that I keep hidden away. Nothing to tempt me to cross the line that is forever etched in my memory... Until her. I crack my neck, yawn, then shake my head, "No."

"What?" She gapes.

"One touch and you were ready to throw yourself at my feet, bare yourself to me, and all but ask me to take you right there. I prefer..." I

pretend to think, "...a bit more spirit, a bit more spine, a bit more oomph. Not to mention..."

I glance at her gorgeous breasts, her curvy hips, her delicate ankles. If I touch her again, I am a goner. If I look into her eyes, I'll never find myself again. No, this is the right thing to do. I have to walk away from her. "...I prefer my women to have more curves."

"You bastard."

The color leaches from her face and she sways. I take a step forward, then stop myself. Why do I care if she is hurting? That is the whole point, remember? Hurt her feelings enough that she'll never turn to me again.

"Want me to spell it out for you, Doll?" I reach her, then thrust my face into hers, "I don't want you."

8

*Why did the two lovers end up in prison?
Answer: Because they stole each other's hearts*

Victoria

I stare at my reflection in the shiny elevator door—hair mussed up, lips swollen and bare of lipstick. I look...like I was thoroughly kissed. He did more than that. He turned me down, he insulted me, and I stood there and took it. What choice did I have? I can't force him to take me as his sub, can I?

I stumble out of the office building of 7A investments, my hand bag at my side.

Was it only a few hours ago that I had torn into the building?

A gust of wind buffets me. I sway; the rain slicks my hair back, floods my sight. I step forward, my feet encounter thin air, and I pitch forward. A scream rips from my throat and I am hauled back.

"Hey, you okay?"

I turn around to encounter sharp gray eyes.

"Are you all right?" the woman asks again.

I swallow, nod. Open my mouth to thank her, but no words emerge. My heart is racing so hard that I am sure it's going to jump right out of my rib cage. She peruses my face, "Victoria?" She frowns.

I peer through the rain. She's as tall as me, wearing a raincoat cinched around her waist.

"Have me met?" I scan her features.

"You're Summer's stepmother, right?"

I wince. That is so not the identity I need to be riddled with... But yeah, no getting away from it. I nod and her face cracks into a wide grin. "I saw you at Sinclair and Summer's wedding..."

I glance at her features, then shake my head, "Sorry, I have a bad memory for names."

I glance up at her clear umbrella.

"Oh, shoot." She steps forward to hold her wide umbrella over me. The rain stops pounding my face.

"It's Amelie." She prompts.

"Amelie?"

"I'm Summer's friend?"

"Ah."

"I'm a pastry chef." She grins, all bright and happy. Christ, she makes me feel a hundred years old. Was I ever that hopeful about my future? Maybe before the Mafia had gotten to me? When I had been a student at UCLA? No, I'd always been a brooder, a thinker...some would say a dreamer, even. Look where that's gotten me. I bite my lower lip. She frowns, peers into my face,

"In fact, I was on my way to meeting her right now. Why don't you come along?"

I stare, then shake my head, "I honestly don't want to impose."

"Oh, you're not imposing, and Summer will be glad to see you."

I chew the inside of my cheek. Somehow, I don't think so.

"She's mentioned how much she wants to get to know you better."

"She has?" I tilt my head. Is she saying it to make me feel better? Or is she really trying to be friendly?

A man almost walks into us, then excuses himself to veer past us. I stare. "Did he apologize?"

She laughs. "That's London for you. It's very civilized, isn't it?"

"I'd forgotten."

"You're British, of course. I could tell from your accent. So how did you meet Summer's father?"

I tense, pull myself up straight, "I think I need to leave."

Her face crumples. "Oh, I'm sorry. I hadn't meant to be nosy. Sometimes my mouth doesn't grasp what my brain is trying to communicate. Often, I speak nonsense, and by the time I've realized what I've said, it's too late."

I draw in a breath. All that bubblyness is overwhelming.

"I said too much again, didn't I?" She grimaces, her gaze turning stricken.
"Please forgive me, please."

I jerk my chin. "Don't worry about it."

She locks her arm with mine, then begins to walk. I keep pace. "It's just us girls tonight. Sinclair's allowing Summer the evening off."

"*Allowing* her the evening off?"

"He's sooo possessive about her. Honestly, that man is 100% alpha... And of course, there's the rest of the Seven. Put them all in one room, and whoa." She makes a smacking sound with her lips, "I swear my ovaries can't take it."

"There's seven of them?"

She nods, "I haven't seen the seventh, of course."

"Oh? Why's that?" Perhaps she has her uses, after all? Maybe she can shed a little more light on the man I have to find a way to get close to?

"Baron, that's the guy who's not around. He's a kind of mystery figure," she adds obligingly.

"What does he do?"

She raises her shoulders. "Don't know... Anyway, the ones who are here are more than enough to keep a girl occupied, if you know what I mean."

Ah! "So you have your eye on one of them?"

"Maybe..." she giggles.

The sound is so infectious, I can't stop my lips from curving. Maybe she isn't bad company, after all.

We reach the entrance to the tube station and I hesitate.

She turns to me, "It's only a few stops on the train to get to Summer's place."

"Her house?" I swallow, *uh*, "I really don't think that's a good idea."

She grips my arm, "Nonsense, you're soaked."

"I'll dry."

"Surely, you don't want to be alone?"

I bite my lips.

"It's a good old-fashioned stay over, which we haven't done in a while, and that's important, you know? Female friendships are ah-may-z-i-n-g!" she sing-songs.

Not always, but...okay.

"We women, we need to have each other's backs..." She rocks forward

on the balls of her feet, "...especially when you need a shoulder to lean on, ya know?"

I narrow my gaze.

"Not that you need anyone else..." She jostles the strap of her hand bag, "...but we'd love to have you. With Summer married...we need more single gals in our group to exchange notes about eligible men..."

I wince.

"Ouch." She hunches her shoulders, "Didn't want to remind you of your newly-single status."

I lower my chin.

"Jeez, didn't mean to imply that you had to start looking right away or anything, not so soon after your husband's death... I mean—" she makes a choking noise.

I draw myself up, pat her shoulder. "It's okay. Summer's father and I were married, but we weren't ever intimate."

Her lips open in an 'O.'

Shit, hadn't meant to reveal that to her. What the hell is wrong with me?
"That's our secret, huh?"

She grins, "You betcha. See, we're already getting along so well." She steps into the tube station. "You must come with me. Summer would never forgive me if I didn't bring you along."

I wrap my arms about my waist.

She turns, "Come on, you'll enjoy it. I promise."

I shuffle me feet.

"Jeez, I'm sorry." She glances past me, then breaks into a run. "Taxi," she calls out.

A black cab pulls up to the curb.

She wrenches open the door, tumbles in, then beckons, "Coming?"

Half an hour later we draw up in front of a gorgeous townhouse in Primrose Hill. I lean forward to pay off the driver. Amelie waves me off. She hands over a few notes, then opens the door and jumps out. I follow her across the sidewalk. She opens the gate, then bounds up the path to the front door.

The taxi drives off. I glance up and down the road. The trees are bathed in the fading sun, raindrops glittering on the leaves. The hair on the nape of my neck prickles. *Is someone watching me?* I stare through the fading light...but nothing stirs.

Voices reach me and I turn to find Amelie and Summer talking in front of the open door to the house. I hesitate. *Do I want to be here? I should turn and go, but where?* To the short let in Hackney, which is all I am able to afford? No, I am better off walking in, facing the women. Learning more about the Seven. Okay, about one of them, in particular. I was handed one last opportunity to find my way out of this mess and I am going to take it. I square my shoulders, then walk down the path.

When I reach the short flight of steps leading to the door, I look up. Summer smiles at me, holds out a hand. The breath rushes out of me. I take the steps, pause when I reach her. She closes the distance between us, hugs me. "Welcome home."

Tears knock at the backs of my eyes. *Jesus, why am I getting this emotional?* Summer steps back, then tugs on my arm, "You're soaked, let me get you some fresh clothes."

Half an hour later, after having showered and pulled on the clothes that Summer had left for me in the guest bedroom, I walk into the cozy room overlooking the back garden.

Summer had offered to wash and dry my clothes in the washing machine and I had agreed.

Amelie looks up, then jumps to her feet. She walks forward and takes my hand, "Come on, we're having Margaritas and ice cream."

Thunder cracks outside, then lightning illuminates the space in front of the room. I jump, my heartbeat ratcheting up.

Amelie's hand on mine tightens. "I don't like storms either," she whispers. In that moment, I want to hug her close. She tugs me forward and I follow her, sinking down on the large circular settee that faces the large window at the back of the room.

Summer walks over, a pitcher of margaritas in her hand.

"Umm. I'm not sure if I should," I mumble.

"You absolutely should." Summer laughs.

I hesitate.

"If you don't, our hostess will be most unhappy and you don't want that do you?" Amelia leans forward, holds out an empty glass.

Summer tops it off. Amelie hands it over and I wrap my fingers around it. "Could I get a bigger glass? I'll finish this in no time."

Amelie stares at the soup bowl-sized circumference, then cackles.

Summer laughs.

The fourth girl chuckles. She comes forward holding, her own glass. "I'm Isla, by the way." She raises her glass. "What are we drinking to?"

The three look at each other, then Summer turns to me, "To having family close."

I swallow.

"To friendship," Amelie clinks hers with Summer's.

"To... Orgasms?" Isla flutters her eyelashes.

I allow my lips to twitch. "To being fucked until I can't walk straight for days," I offer.

There's silence, then the girls burst out laughing. Summer sputters, "I'll drink to that."

"As if you need to?" Isla winks at Summer, "If the sparks between Sinclair and you are any indication, that's a normal state for you."

Summer makes the sign to zip her lips, "Not saying anything."

"You never share any details," Amelie pouts.

"Not one to kiss and tell." Summer raises her glass, "To guys who love us."

"To the losers who didn't deserve to keep us," Amelie tosses her head.

"The sexy bastards who are gonna be so lucky to meet us," Isla clinks her glass.

"To..." I chew on my lower lip, "TGIF."

The three stare at me.

"Thank God it's Friday?" Amelie furrows her eyebrows.

I glance at each of their faces, "Tongue Goes in First."

Amelie hoots, "I love your step-mama, Summer."

I wince, glance at Summer, who shakes her head. Her phone pings. She picks it up, checks the screen and smiles. "Sienna says she's bummed not to be here, but the pregnancy is exhausting her. She's going to stay in."

"Sienna?" I ask.

"Jace's wife." Summer sets the phone down. "He's a friend of the Seven. They moved here from LA because Sienna's pregnant and they want to bring up the child in Jace's home country."

"That sounds wonderful. It's beautiful that they can plan for the future, a life together." A ball of emotion clogs my throat.

Where has this...hankering for becoming part of an unit come from? To have someone to call my own. A family, kids. I had hoped that I'd have it all one day, until Nina's kidnapping had turned my world upside down. It could

have easily been me. Hell, sometimes I wish it had been me. I'd have gladly traded places with her.

She and I? We're... Solid.

Until I met her, I was always a background friend. I never fit in with any particular circle of friends. All through high school, I'd find these cliques. They'd be close with each other and I'd sort of latch on, but I was never permanent with them.

They wouldn't have even noticed if I wasn't with them.

All of that changed when I met Nina. With her, I didn't feel left out. It was like I had found someone who got me. Someone who recognized a kindred soul, know what I mean? She had my back.

We promised to look out for each other, to be the sister we each had always wanted and never had. And then she was gone. My throat closes. No way, could I abandon her when she needs me. I'd do everything, and more, to help her.

I take a sip of my drink. The cold liquid slides down my throat. It hits my stomach and warmth instantly tingles up my spine. "Yum." I glance down at the cocktail. "This is good."

"Isn't it?" Summer licks her lips. She glances around, then sinks down into an overstuffed cushion. "I am surprised Saint allowed you leave the office on your own."

"Oh?" I sink back into the settee while the other two sprawl out next to me. "I didn't think he wanted me there a second longer."

"I don't know." Summer levels me with a stare. "He sure seemed keen to take care of you."

My cheeks heat. "It isn't what it seems." I cringe. Ugh, is that the oldest excuse in the book, or what?

Summer frowns, "Perhaps he doesn't quite know how to share what he feels for you?"

I choke on my drink. "What he feels for me?" I set my glass down with such force that some of the drink spills. I glance around. Summer hands me a box of tissues and I pull one out, mop up the drink from the table. "He left me in his room, for a so-called important appointment." I wad the tissue into a ball, "And when I find him, it's with his—" I clamp my lips shut. Damn, I want to confide in them, but can I trust them? Will I be able to trust anyone after the events of the last few months?

"Ooh." Amelie rubs her hands together. "Did you catch him with his

pants down?"

Heat flushes my cheeks. I toss the balled-up tissue onto the table, "The details don't matter."

Summer looks thoughtful, but doesn't speak.

Amelie pouts. "Aww, and I thought you were going to be fun."

"Trust me, I am the most boring person you'll meet."

Amelie, looks me up and down. "It's the quiet ones who have a sting in the tail."

"Sure," I hold up my forefingers on either side of my forehead, "and these are my horns."

She giggles.

Summer tilts her head, "At any rate, he got the color back in your cheeks."

And how.

She pulls up her knees, rests her chin on them, "Did he at least kiss you?"

"Of course, not." I scowl.

"Did he make a move on you?"

I shuffle my feet.

"Are you attracted to him?" Amelie chimes in.

"Do you like him?" Isla asks in a breathless tone. "You do, don't you?"

"Hold on." I hold up my hands, scan their expectant faces. "Yes," I exhale.

"Yes, what?" Amelie bounces on the cushions.

Whoa, is she excitable or what? I let the silence draw out, then reply, "Yes to all of that."

"I knew it." She holds up a hand, and Isla high-five's her.

"Hold on." I frown. "Did you two have a bet going?"

Amelie peers at me from the other side of the settee, "You don't mind, do you?"

I raise my shoulders. "Not as long as you'll help me with what I have in mind."

"Ooh!" Amelie takes a hefty sip, then balances the glass on the arm of the sofa. "Give."

"It's all straightforward."

Not.

"Clearly there's chemistry between Saint and me, and I want to stay in London." I say, sticking to the barebones version of the convoluted reality of

my life. "I don't want to return to the US."

Summer's shoulders stiffen. "So you want to get together with Saint?"

"I saw him first at your wedding." I nod toward Summer. "There was an instant connection between us. Of course, I was married to your father then —"

"But you had no feelings for him," she says.

I glance toward her. "It's not like that. I cared about him, but...Was it that obvious?" Clearly, I'm not as good an actress as I like to think, if both Saint and Summer had seen through my charade.

She scowls, "Only because I'd been trying to figure out why the hell a beautiful woman like you would want to be with him." Her features harden. "He was all wrong for you. Besides," she looks me up and down, "you'd be good for Saint."

"I... I would?" I blink.

She nods. "He needs someone who won't put up with all that alpha bullshit."

"Like you and Sinclair?"

She smiles and her eyes gleam. "I'll tell you a secret."

"Oh?"

She leans forward, as do the other women.

"These men," she tilts her head, "the trick to managing them is to let them show you their worst side; let them rage and rant. And then, when they think they have you cornered, you pull the rug out from under their feet."

I frown. O-k-a-y.

"You get what I'm saying?" She peers into my face.

No. Yes. "I...think so."

"Good." She grins. "I think you'll be fine."

"So, you don't mind that I'm hoping to get together with someone else, so soon after your father's death?"

She slashes the air with her hand. "It's unusual, but I wasn't close to Adam. He didn't deserve to die that early, and while I forgive him for abandoning me and Karma to the foster system in the UK... Well, I do believe that he had our best interests at heart and..." her lips firm, "that's what counts."

Right.

I peruse her features, then reach over and grasp her hand, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For welcoming me into your home, into your circle... For not being..."

"A bitch?" She chuckles.

"Yeah." *That too.*

"I leave that up to my sister Karma." Her brow furrows, "Wish she was here today."

"Where is she?"

She taps her fingers on the carpet, "Off on holiday in Sicily with some hottie she hooked up with."

"Oh?" My heart begins to race. It's only a coincidence. It doesn't mean anything. Lots of people go to Sicily on holiday with a man... "So, it's new love, huh?"

Summer flips her hair over her shoulder, "That's the thing. I've never met him. It was all so sudden. One minute she was calling me to spend the night with her—which is not Karma at all either, by the way—the next she's texting me to say she's jetting off on an Italian holiday."

"Sicilian."

"That's what I said." Summer frowns.

"Not the same thing—" I bite my lips. *Shit, shouldn't have said that.* I widen my gaze, "I'm sure she's having a great time. Everyone deserves at least one dirty holiday with an alpha male of their dreams, huh?"

"Is that why you chose Saint?"

I wince. "

"But that's not the only reason, right?" Amelie inches closer. "You want the security that Saint's money can provide, and the chemistry between the two of you makes for an interesting starting point."

"I..."

She waves a hand in the air, "Hey, I'm the last to judge. I mean, relationships have been built on far less. Besides you're one of us, and Saint clearly needs you in his life."

"He does?" My head whirls.

She nods. "He just doesn't know it yet."

Oh, man, I can't keep up.

"You do realize that he's among the most twisted of the Seven?" Amelie's gaze narrows.

Interesting. Behind that overeager, always ready to please façade, is a sharp brain. And I should be the last to judge a woman by her looks.

"I am aware that he has certain hidden proclivities," I venture.

"He's a dominant?" Isla frowns.

"They all are." Summer waves her hand in the air.

Amelie turns on her, "Even Weston?"

I glance at her features. Her lips are parted, eyes slightly dilated. Is that how I looked when I walked in on Saint?

She jerks her head to me, and I glance back at Summer.

"All of the Seven will stop at nothing to get their own way." Summer holds my gaze. "These men are bloody arresting, right?"

None more so than Saint.

I want to tame him, while simultaneously throwing myself down at his feet and begging him to take me—is what I want to say. But I'd already pushed it with the TGIF comment, and I don't want these women to think I'm weird. Besides I need them on my side... fast. I nod my head. "You can say that again." I mumble.

Summer chuckles. Isla snorts.

"You thought he wouldn't be able to say no to you, that you'd make an offer he couldn't refuse?" Amelie cuts in.

I blink. *Am I that transparent, or are these women unusually perceptive?*

"You did, didn't you?" Amelie crawls close to me, her gaze wide. I glance at her. Her cheeks flush. "Go on, give." She scans my features, her expression expectant.

"Yep."

"Wait, what did I miss?" Summer glances between us.

"I believe step-mama here asked Saint to become her dominant."

Summer laughs. "No, you didn't."

"Yes." I tuck my hair behind my ears. "Though trust me, there's no," I make air quotes, "'asking' the man for anything. He wants, he takes," I mutter. "End of story."

"You're right about that. Bet that made for an interesting conversation, huh?" Isla nods.

"You have no idea." I reach for my drink.

"He turned you down?" Amelia wiggles her legs, her gaze arrested.

My shoulders sag.

"How dare he?" Summer grabs a cushion and punches it.

"Yeah." Isla sits up. "We need to teach him a lesson. You're beautiful...gorgeous. You're exactly the kind of challenge he needs."

"Bet he knows it too." Summer looks me up and down. "Maybe that's

why he did an about-turn? He knew if he took you on, he risked getting involved."

I shake my head. "You should have seen him, when I walked in on him. He was..."

"Angry?"

"Turned on?"

"Ready to throw you down and shag you?"

I circle the rim of my glass with my forefinger, "Distracted."

"What?" Amelie frowns.

"He was busy," I reply.

"All an act." She huffs.

Summer raises an eyebrow, then nods. "I think I'm familiar with that act. He didn't want you to see how much you affect him." Her lips curve, "Trust me. I saw the way he was eating you up with his eyes at my wedding."

"Perhaps he was interested, but he sure as hell disguised it well," I mutter.

"Only one way to find out." Amelie taps her finger to her cheek.

I glance at her warily. "Why do I have the feeling you are the last one I should be taking advice from?"

"Aww... Come on, V," she pouts, "you don't mean that."

I draw in a breath, "I guess not. After all, I get by with a little help from my friends."

"Did you quote The Beatles?" Summer chuckles.

I redden, "Old habit."

"It's delightful. You're delightful. In fact," she scowls, "you are not what I expected."

"Oh?" I meet her gaze, "What did you think I was?"

"Cold," Isla interjects.

"Hard," Amelie adds.

Summer wriggles around and makes herself comfortable, "You know... You turned up unannounced at my wedding as my father's wife, someone I never knew existed. And you were perfectly turned out, designer clothes and all."

"I prefer to be well-dressed. What's wrong with that?" I scowl.

"Not a thing." Summer looks me up and down. "Bet, that's what turns Saint on. Bet he wants to mess you up."

I flush, "Maybe." I glance between them, "What are you guys thinking?"

"I think," Amelie sits up on her knees, "you're going about this all

wrong."

"I am?"

"You went in and asked him outright. Guys don't respond well to that."

"And what do you know about that?" Isla teases. "You, who haven't had a steady boyfriend in forever."

Amelie doesn't miss a beat, "I am not the one in question here... Also, I've observed human behavior up close."

"You're a pastry chef," Isla snorts.

"Exactly." Amelie's lips curve. "I've seen humans naked and vulnerable. Not literally," she hastens to add, "but you ever observe people enjoying their dessert? They let their guards down, and tune in to their baser instincts. You can tell a lot about a man by the way he eats his pudding."

Isla makes a gagging sound. "PJ. PJ," she singsongs.

"PJ?" I frown.

"Poor joke," she clarifies.

Amelie reddens. "Uh, that's not what I mean."

Summer chuckles. "Sure, you did."

"Okay so it came out all wrong, but you get me, right?" Amelie waves a hand in the air.

I take in her scarlet features. A smile trembles on my lips.

"Anyway, don't mock it until you try it." Amelie turns to me, "As I was saying..."

"Yes?"

"I think you should make Saint jealous." Her eyes gleam, "Very jealous."

9

I am an odd number. Take away a letter and I become even. What number am I?

Answer: Seven

Saint

The music reverberates from the walls of the nightclub. The blonde leans in and shoves her ample bosom into my face.

I glance down her neckline, yawn.

She grabs a cushion from the next chair, slaps it to the floor between my legs, then drops to her knees. She lowers the zipper on my pants and my dick springs free.

I shove a hand into the pocket of my slacks. I could do with a fucking cigarette about now.

She bends and takes me into her mouth.

The blood thuds at my temples; my balls shrivel. *Hell, I don't want her.* I grip her hair, she moans—the sound too exaggerated, too theatrical... Nothing like the soft breathy cries, the whines, the keening groans from Gigi. *Why am I thinking of her again?*

I yank the blonde's head back. She glances up, a frown between her eyebrows.

"Leave."

She scowls.

Guess I owe her an explanation? Not. "It's not you..." I crack my neck,

"it's me."

Her lips turn down, then she stiffens, springs up. "You're a jerk, you know that?" She pivots, then flounces off toward the exit.

"What happened?" A male voice snickers. "No lead in the old pencil?"

"Shut the fuck up, Weston." I glance over to where he's sprawled on a settee—a woman between his legs. Her head bobs as she blows him.

Not a muscle moves in his face. His features are deadpan. He's not enjoying that so much as tolerating it. Yeah, when you hop from one blow job to the next, it happens. Things leave you bored. *Flashing eyes, moist lips, the scent of her arousal in the air.* My cock is instantly erect. *The hell?* Just thinking of her seems to have the most bizarre effect on my libido. Unacceptable. No-one, not even one of the Seven, are allowed to get close. So why is it that I can't get the images of our encounter out of my head? "Clearly, I don't like her."

No fucking riddle there to solve.

"Who are you talking to?" Weston peers past me.

The fuck? Did I say that aloud? I scowl, "None of your bloody business."

"The man doth protest too much."

"Focus on your own asinine problems."

"Of which, I'll have you know, I have none." He taps the head of the woman whose face is stuck to his groin. She obediently increases her pace, raising and lowering her head at double the speed. He glances at the one on his right and she thrusts out her chest, squeezes her breasts, moaning in what is clearly fake desire. He frowns, "Less noise, more action." The woman subsides, her entire body gyrating with the effort of her ministrations on herself.

"I don't know, from where I am, you seem..."

"Occupied?" He smirks.

"Stupefied."

"At least I am getting some satisfaction... You, however..." he looks me up and down, "...are a sorry state of affairs."

I tense. "Fuck off, douchebag."

"Oh, I intend to." He widens his stance. The blonde between his knees peers up, he frowns, and she goes back to the services she's providing him.

"So, it's come down to this, huh? Just two of the Seven trading insults." I tuck myself back in, then jump to my feet, begin to pace.

"Well, Sinner's too infatuated with his new wife, Edward's out... Priest

and all that, Damian's off doing whatever it is that rock stars do, Arpad's island-hopping in the Baltics, and Baron..."

"Fucking Baron." I drum my fingers on my chest, "Bet he's laughing at us from whichever corner of the world he is in."

"Of all the Seven of us, he took the incident the worst."

I stiffen.

"Not that it hasn't affected all of us in different ways. It's a bit much for twelve-year-old boys to have been subjected to what we were—"

"Stop." I grimace.

Weston's shoulders tense. Then he grips the hair of the woman in between his thigh. He tugs and she moans. He yanks her head back and forth, using her mouth to get himself off. His mouth firms, then he pulls her off of him. He snaps his fingers and all three women in the room rise to their feet. Turning, they fade toward the exit.

"Well trained." I smirk.

He grabs hold of a napkin from the side table, wipes himself then tucks himself inside of his pants.

"Bet they didn't pose much of a challenge to you, hmm?" I ask.

"Is that what you are looking for?" He tosses the cloth aside, then fixes himself and stands to his feet.

Is it? I raise my shoulders. "I'm cool, ol' chap. Easy come, easy go."

"That's what Sinner used to say." He mutters, "Then look what happened to him..."

"Sinner's a fucking fool, letting his emotions getting entangled with a woman. Not that I have anything against Summer."

He chuckles, "Of course, not."

"I am not going to make the same mistake." I crack my neck.

"You trying to convince me or yourself?" He asks.

"Neither." I shuffle my feet. "Mind you, of all us, Jace and Sinner are the happiest right now."

"No doubt ensconced with their women." He shudders.

"Tying themselves to one woman for the rest of their lives." A hot feeling stabs at my chest. *Whoa. I'm not jealous. I'm not.* Burying myself in the same pussy every night, waking up with the scent of her in my nostrils, her moans echoing in my ears, the thrum of her cunt vibrating at my fingertips... Nah. My groin hardens; blood drains to my cock. Clearly, I need a diversion. I did the right thing, turning her down. I am never going to give in to the

temptation her body affords me. Nope.

Shouts reach me from the theatre below. Turning, I prowl over to the floor-to-ceiling window that overlooks the stage.

Weston joins me.

I gaze down at where a woman hangs in a graceful split from the pole in the center. The shouting dies down. She stays motionless, a long statue of grace. Her leg muscles are coiled, her calves seem to be carved out of stone. Surely, her ankles are too delicate to bear the weight of her body? Then the strains of a familiar song crash over the space. Is it The Beatles?

Who the fuck strip teases to a song by the bloody Beatles?

She arches her arm at a right angle to her body. A ripple runs through the crowd. I freeze.

Victoria does, and damn, does she give the song a whole new meaning.

She leans into the move, her hip jutting out...the silvery strip of nothing digging into the crease between her legs, stretching to outline what would be pink, juicy, pussy lips. A shimmer of lust crawls up my spine. The hair on the back of my nape rises. The music pumps up...

I stare as she twirls around once, then again. Bends one leg, thrusts out the other, then lets go, to stay poised on one arm for a second—the crowd gasps—then she wraps her arm up and around her leg, thrusts out her breasts. Her nipples are outlined against the shimmery top...that hugs every curve of her body, baring her creamy shoulders. The arch of her neck, the sweat that beads that beautiful skin, clings to the regal arch of her brow, slides down her temples, across that soft curve of her cheek. She throws her head back, lips parted, spine arched in the simulation of the first throes of an orgasm.

The lyrics crescendo. She's dancing to *Come Together* by The Beatles. Jesus H Christ. Come together, indeed.

Her eyelids snap open. Familiar green eyes, stare up at me. *Her eyes.* I glare. Under the harsh spotlights, her skin glows—white, transparent, so fragile. *All mine.* A growl rips from me.

"How dare she?"

10

Victoria

His pale, blue eyes glitter, and even from across the space that separates us, they resemble chips of ice. Hard. Mean. His nostrils flare. Is he angry?

His jaw tics; his shoulders seem to grow in size.

No, he's not angry; he's livid. I gulp and all of my nerve-endings seem to flare. His chest heaves and the shirt stretches across the planes, outlining every single ripped muscle. No one should look that gorgeous, that lethal. My belly clenches.

I unfurl my body, coil my legs around the pole, twirl—once, twice, thrice—flatten out my body parallel to the floor in a flat line...

Stay... Stay... My biceps flex, my triceps stretch, all of my muscles coil, then I lower my legs until I'm parallel again, this time to the pole, lower my legs, until my toes touch the pole. Let go of the pole, to drop down to a crouch, then spring up, arch my back, my neck, snap out my head, search the window above. It's empty.

What the hell—? My stomach bottoms out. My arms and legs tremble.

The lyrics of my preferred song to dance to thump against my breast bone. So close, I had been so close. I could have sworn I'd caught his attention... I should have known better.

Just because he is interested in me—Oh, I'd caught the flicker of curiosity in his gaze from the moment he'd laid eyes on me—so what? He met many men and women, a billionaire like him who has the freakin' world at his feet. What does he know about being helpless, at the mercy of those who could

change your life in an instant?

If I don't manage to intrigue him, I'll never be able to break Nina free of the Mafia's clutches.

Goddam him. I grab the pole with my arms, pull myself in, then scissor my legs wide apart, in a 'V' swirl, once, twice... It's thanks to Nina that I'd taken classes in pole dancing. She'd enjoyed it and had nagged me until I'd gone along with her. She thought it would help me gain confidence in myself, and help me come out of my shell. And truth is, I'd found it liberating.

On the pole I can let go of all of my inhibitions, forget I am a nerd who doesn't fit in anywhere. I can let the music get to me, allow the lyrics to twist my insides, slam against my temples, my chest, between my legs. I twirl around the pole, faster, faster—the world spins, lights flash behind my eyes. I loosen my grip, my body flies through the air, muscles loose, shoulders coiled, and I land on a roll. The audience gasps, I spring up to my knees, lower my head. Sweat drips down my temples, from my chin, splatters onto the floor.

The music rises to a crescendo, then switches off.

The cheering from the crowd smashes into me. I open my eyes, and notice the worn cowboy boots in my line of sight. The hair on the nape of my neck rises. I run my gaze up the tailor-made slacks that mold to powerful thighs and cup the bulge between the legs. I gulp. Snap my head back.

"Get up."

His lips move. I hear him above the hoots and whistles of the crowd.

I glide up to my feet, the audience cheers. "Victoria!"

"Victoria... Show your tits."

A snarl rolls up his chest. His biceps bulge. Anger strums off of him and my nerve endings spark. I've seen Saint laid back, bored, cruel intent writ in his every expression. But this...? Saint Livid, every muscle in his body taut, layer upon layer of muscle vibrating with surprised tension...? My thighs spasm and liquid heat curls in my belly.

"Victoria, take it all off..." Another scream from the audience rips between us.

He growls, takes a step forward, "Do it."

I blink.

"Take off your clothes."

"H...here?"

"Isn't that why you're here? To show off your assets? To cash in what

you have for money? He shoves his hand into his pocket, pulls out his wallet. He holds up a credit card. The light flashes off of it, blinding me for a second. "This is what you want, right?"

I swallow, then tip up my chin. "Of course." A cold sensation stabs at my chest. My fingers and toes turn to ice. I fold all of my emotions into that tiny space deep inside. Raising one shoulder, I shrug off my scanty sparkly top, then shrug down the other side.

The fabric catches on my hard nipples, stays poised a second. One more breath and it will fall. Another hoot from the audience, "You're blocking the view, you asshole."

I wince.

Saint holds up a hand and the audience quietens.

He moves in closer, closer, until his chest brushes my half naked torso. Goosebumps flare on my skin. He swoops out his arm. I wince. He digs his fingers into my hair, tugs. I arch my head, bare the column of my neck for his perusal.

A bead of sweat runs down my temple. He drops his head and licks it up. I shudder. All of my pores pop.

"That was a terrible song to strip to, by the way."

I blink. Of all the insignificant things to say... "Not a Beatles fan, huh?"

"Hate them."

"Oh, goody." I flutter my eyelashes. "I'll make sure to strip to only them from now on."

His gaze narrows and his blue eyes lighten until they resemble water swirling under ice—deep, dangerous. He's lethal...a man who'll never let go once his interest is aroused. I gulp. My heart begins to race.

"Say that again..." His voice lowers to a hush.

"I'll make sure to..."

His hand swoops out, then he tears off the strip of cloth from over my middle. I am instantly wet. *Damn him, why do I find this hot?* It isn't. He wants to belt me, teach me a lesson for what I did. I'd dared to throw down the challenge and he had risen to it—I drop my gaze to where his arousal tents his crotch—in more ways than one.

"Do it." My voice trembles, and I... I hate that. I will not allow him to see how scared I am. Worried that my body will enjoy what he is going to do to me. Find that I want it, welcome it. Ask him to ravish me right here in front of everyone. "Lost your courage?" I tip up my chin and his features twist. He

bends his knees, grabs me by my thighs, then pushes me down on the padded platform.

I stare up at him, raise my torso. He covers my body with his, plants his hips between my legs, his hardness stabbing at the hollow between my legs. His gaze bores into me. My heart begins to race, adrenaline lacing my blood. Fear claws in my gut. I raise my hand and my palm connects with his face. His head snaps back.

He straightens and my fingerprints are outlined on his cheek. *Oh, dear! That's not good, is it?*

I gulp and he bares his teeth.

I raise my hand again and he catches it, then brings up my other arm. He yanks my palms up and above my head, shackles my wrists with his fingers. Then thrusts his hand between us. I hear the click of his belt buckle, the rustle of his zipper, then his dick nudges my entrance.

"You want this, don't you? This is why you've been haunting me since I saw you. This is why you came to me for help. Admit it. You want what only I can give you."

I nod.

"Say it." He scowls, "I want to hear you.""

"You. Only you," I gasp. My insides twist and my core aches, even as moisture laces my cunt. "I need you."

Not like this.

Not like this.

"Like this," he hisses. "You want me on this stage. You want me to take you in front of everyone. You're an exhibitionist."

I freeze. How did he guess that?

"You want to be taken and broken, until you are set free. You want me to paint your insides with my cum, to rub my name into every pore of your body, say it..."

Yes.

Yes.

"You pushed me until I crossed the line, until there was no going back." His features twist. The blue in his eyes deepens until they seem almost black. "Say you want me to punish you, you want me to fuck your past right out of you," he snarls.

Goddam him for laying my soul bare in front of the world. My chin wobbles. My scalp itches. *Why is this happening? Why did it have to turn out*

like this? I'm only doing what is needed to save myself and my friend... So why can't he get on with it?

"Do it."

My voice emerges as if from far away. I wrap my legs around his waist, thrust my hips up.

11

Saint

Her wet heat sears up my shaft; my groin hardens and my spine tingles. My thighs flex, grow rigid. "Jesus, fuck." The growl rips out of me. I balance my weight on my elbows, peer into her eyes.

Angry green sears through me. Emerald, jade and all the fucking precious jewels in the world couldn't compare to the brilliance in her eyes... *And now what? I am waxing poetic?*

"What are you waiting for?" Tears glitter in her eyes.

For me? For her? My heart squeezes. *The hell?* Why do I want to find out what's making her come onto me, haunt my every step, force herself on me.? Almost as if she is under duress. I stiffen, my shoulder muscles tensing. *Is that what this is? Is she trying to trap me somehow? But why? It doesn't make any sense.*

"This is what you want, right?" she seethes, her features a hard mask. "Me at your disposal. Well, here I am, so why don't you take what I am offering and be done with it? Why don't you—?"

I shake my head.

She blinks.

"Not like this." I pull back, everything in my body protesting. My pelvis jerks—wanting, needing to be inside of her. *Not yet.*

Her mouth opens and closes. "Wh...what are you doing?"

I lock my muscles, push up and off of her. "You can't top from the bottom, sweetheart."

She scowls, then glances away.
I pinch her chin. She peers up at me from under her eyelashes.
"Guess what the masochist told the sadist?" I scan her features.
"What?" She swallows.
"Hurt me."
Her pupils dilate and her breathing grows ragged.
I peel back my lips, "And what did the sadist reply with?" I ask.
She tilts her head, "I...I don't know."
"Exactly."
She frowns.
"He said 'No,' Sweetheart."
She pales.
"To everyone else, you may be a fragile beauty, but your façade doesn't fool me."
She swallows, then tosses her head, "I have no idea what you mean."
"I can see the cracks in your perfection, the need that eats away at you."
Her breath hitches, "You don't know what you're talking about."
"Don't you?" I allow my lips to curl, "I plan to break you, and when I am done with you, you'll regret ever having caught my interest."
Her lips part, and the scent of her—lilies with a dash of pepper—teases my nostrils. My dick twitches. My fingers tremble. They fucking tremble. I let go of her and she sags back.
I thrust out my chest, then tuck myself in my pants. "We do this my way."
I say.
"What's that?"
"Thirty days Victoria. If you can survive for thirty days without breaking, I'll take you as my sub."
She frowns. "That's...too long," she splutters.
"Twenty-four seven."
"What?" Her cheeks pale. She sits up. Her breasts jiggle and her nipples perking up to salute me... So does my dick. *Fuck*.
"You'll work with me and warm my bed...but you can't give in to me."
"The hell? Do you have any idea how twisted that sounds? It's impossible. How the hell am I supposed to put up with your arrogance?"
"Your choice. Take it or leave it."
She twists her fingers in front of her, "Saint."
"You don't get to call me that."

"But—"

"You don't question me either."

"How?"

I make a zipping motion with my fingers over my mouth.

She squeezes her lips shut.

Thank fuck. Another word from her and I'd have tossed that stupid fucking agreement that I pulled out of my ass into the horseshit pile where it belongs. "Yes or no?"

Footsteps head toward us and shouts slice through the fog in my head, "Saint."

I shove the noise away, focus on her. Her face pales, then she jerks her chin. I slide up to my feet. Rake a last glance across those creamy breasts, her concave stomach, the slit between her pussy lips. My cock jerks and my balls thrum. I squeeze my fists at my sides. *Walk away before you do something you regret.*

A new voice calls out, "Saint!"

I jerk my chin up. Weston glowers at me. Behind him, three other men—the bouncers from the club—stand shoulder to shoulder, forming a wall between him and the crowd that's busy turning the place upside down. Too fucking bad.

We own the joint. We can do what we want with it, and that includes the possessions in it... Except her... She belongs to me. Mine to do with as I chose.

I glance down and she opens her mouth.

"Nod for yes, shake your head for no."

She stares.

"You can do that, hmm?"

She glowers. I smirk.

"Well?"

I angle my body to leave and she brings her fingers to her mouth, bites her nails. *Huh?* Who'd have thought the perfectly turned out Victoria would turn out to be, not only an accomplished stripper—but also has the gross-as-fuck habit of biting her nails? She's nervous. *Good.* Time things fall into the form I prefer them to be.

I tilt my head.

She nods, a jerk of her chin. My muscles relax. *Thank fuck. No, I hadn't been tense, or on edge... Of course, she was going to accept my proposal.*

She had to. She'd dogged my footsteps, crawled into my gut... Time I show her who is the master of her. There can be only one man who commands her every waking moment, her every second at night, her dreams, her nightmares, her innermost fears, her deepest desires... All of it belongs to me... Temporarily. It buys me time to take her apart, piece by piece.

To figure out what the hell she wants from me...and why? And if I use that time to coax her into my model of a willing sub... Well, that is my prerogative. She tips up her head so her gaze collides with mine. I shrug out of my shirt, hand it to her.

"Get dressed." I turn to leave.

"Wait," she calls out.

I glare at her over my shoulder.

She pales, then shrugs into my shirt, which hits her mid-thigh. The sleeves cover her arms completely. I frown. She darts her fingers to the front and begins to thread the buttons through the holes. *Good.* She gets me. Finally.

"When..." she swallows. "...when do we start?"

"You'll find out soon enough." I turn back, take another step toward Weston. A man behind him breaks through the chain of bodyguards.

He barrels forward, tries to brush past me, his gaze set on Victoria.

I swing and my fist connects with his jaw. He crumples to the ground. Silence descends. The mob behind stills.

I scan their faces, "Anyone, else?"

12

*What did the baseball glove say to the ball?
Answer: Catch you later*

Victoria

"Why hasn't he called yet?" I chew on my fingernails. I haven't heard from the asshole in an entire seven days.

Well, except for the call from one of his assistants—not Meredith—directing me to a private clinic in Hampstead Heath. The doctor—a woman—had given me a complete physical and drawn enough blood for a series of blood tests. *Jesus, the brute is thorough.* He's probably having me tested for every STD under the sun.

The doc had wanted to administer the contraceptive injection, but I'd opted for birth control pills. I'd been surprised when she hadn't insisted otherwise.

The acrid taste of nail polish laces my tongue. I hold up my fingers and groan. Every one of my finger nails is bitten down to the quick. Ugh. This definitely doesn't go along with the sophisticated image I try to portray. I fist my fingers at my sides, glance around the tiny flat. Amelie had invited me to move in with her and I had agreed.

Truthfully, it had been a weight off my shoulders. No way, could I afford the rent at a studio. Hotels or long-term rentals were out of the question... Besides, I'm not planning on being broke that long. Just for a few days, until I get my feet under me. Until I manage to lure in one gazillionaire with the

worst attitude ever. I have to get him to... what...fall in love with me?

Get me pregnant with his child? I shake my head. Not that, much as I want one. This is not the right time to bring a baby into this world. Really, I just need to get him to trust me enough so I can get close to him

I'd been stupid to think my charms, such as they are, would work...

I'd danced at that club, hoping to catch his attention. At least, it had worked. Maybe too well...? There had been a strange light in his eyes when he'd directed me on how exactly he wanted me to speak to him... Which is to say, hold my silence. A thrill tickles my spine... It had been hot. The way he'd taken charge, even as everything inside of me had insisted that I stand up to him—not give in, not yet. I had held my own...and that...had seemed to seal the deal... It had been a risk to coerce him to lose control. He'd taken the bait, come for me, and I'd been sure he was going to fuck me right there. The fact that it had taken place before the entire assembled audience... That had only turned me on even more. Damn him, but I'd wanted him to claim me then. Couldn't resist the strength of his body which had covered me, held me down, helpless in his hold.

I'd known he wouldn't let anything hurt me... No, he is saving that pleasure for himself. I thrust my forefinger into my mouth, chew on my fingernail... My teeth dig into the soft pad of my finger... "Ow." I shake it out.

"Have you tried coating your fingertips with salt?" Amelie flounces into the room... "Or better still, chilies." She holds a tray with two cups of steaming tea. In between them is a green chili.

I stare at it, then fold my arms behind my back. "No way, am I rubbing that on my fingertips. Knowing my luck, I'd probably touch it to my eyes instead."

She places the tray on the center table, then sinks into a sofa. "So...the plan didn't work?"

I purse my lips, shift my weight between my feet.

"It did work?"

"I... I'm not sure."

She frowns. "Explain."

I twist my fingers together in front of myself, "He, uh, asked me to wait for his message."

She sits up, "That's good, right?"

"He hasn't called."

"He will." She leans forward and picks up her Kindle.

"You sound sure," I huff.

She shoots me a glance. "You don't sound convinced."

I raise my shoulders.

She holds up her Kindle. "Trust me, I have firsthand knowledge of how to play a man and reel him in."

"Huh?"

"Romance novels, baby."

"Oh." I blink. "You...you're joking right?"

Her eyes gleam. "Haven't you read *Fifty Shades of Grey*?"

I shake my head.

Her mouth drops open. "No way."

I walk over, sink into the overstuffed armchair next to her.

"You could have fooled me." She studies me from toe to head.

"What?"

She waves her hand in the air, "You're so graceful... You practically ooze sex appeal."

"I do not." I fold my arms around my waist.

"Sure do. In fact," she scowls, "every movement of yours seems to be choreographed. Even wearing this outfit."

I glance down at my simple knee length sweaterdress; I'd bought it at a charity shop to keep me warm in the London weather.

"You're so well put together." She says.

I bite my lips. "My ma loved black and white movies from old Hollywood. I watched them all with her. I loved the old-world glamour, how beautiful and powerful the heroines seemed. I guess I internalized their mannerisms—how they walked, talked...flirted," I lower my gaze, "seduced."

"Ah, now that makes sense."

"It does?"

"You have an old-world allure about you." She places her Kindle on the settee next to her. "An air that suggests you are a challenge."

"Does it now?"

"Bet that's why Saint can't help but be intrigued."

"Enough to keep me waiting, huh?"

"He likes to play games... All the Seven do."

"And you know them well?"

"I've only met them a couple of times, thanks to Summer, but they are all men at the top of their game, and you've set your sights on the most intriguing of them."

I bite my lips. "Saint confuses me."

"How?"

"He saw me dancing, came barreling down from where he was. He marched up to me, and I swear, I thought he was going to go all caveman and drag me out of there."

"But he didn't?"

I shake my head, pull my feet up under me. "He seemed to change his mind, and decided to humiliate me right there...."

"Then?"

I swipe my hair back from my face. "Then he stepped back, almost as if he was recalibrating his strategy. He accepted my offer."

She blinks, then whoops, "So that's good right?"

"Maybe." I shift around in the chair, "I may have overdone things. He seemed to get all jealous. So much so that he beat up a man who charged up to me."

She sits up straight, "He did?"

I nod. "It was..."

"Dramatic?" She asks.

"A surprise." I shiver. "Guess I simply knew what to say to intrigue him."

She tilts her head, "He has a hidden side, huh?"

"I researched him before approaching him."

"You did?"

I nod, "There are enough pictures of him leaving well-known BDSM clubs."

"Are you worried that you're out of your depth?" She purses her lips. "You think you'll be able to handle the lifestyle?"

I shuffle my feet... "Um," I glance at her, then away. *Shit, I revealed too much.*

How many times does a person lie, before the lie becomes the truth?

Too many.

And now I am asking riddles and answering them, as if I learned the technique at the feet of the alphahole himself. *Shit. Get a grip.*

"I've, uh, always been drawn to it." I tip up my chin, "I've never practiced it before... I hadn't seriously thought of dipping my toes into it,

until Saint." That much is true, at least.

"So, you chose him because you were curious? I mean, he's not the only one of the Seven who has a hankering for that stuff, you know?"

I twist a strand of hair around my fingers, "I chose him because..."

"Because?" She asks.

It's so tempting to spill my plan...the part that really matters. If I could get it off my chest to even one person, it would help me feel lighter... I open my mouth, then shake my head. I can't. This part of my plan? It's the part that counts. It's also the one thing I dare not speak openly about. Call me superstitious, but I don't want to spoil my chances by revealing too much... too soon... "Doesn't matter," I cut the air with my hand.

Her lips draw down, "Aww, and it was getting interesting, too."

"I'll let you know when there's something to talk about."

"Promise?"

"On the existence of a fifth Beatle." I hold up my hand.

She scowls. "There wasn't one."

"I know." A smile twists my lip.

"Not fair, V."

I chuckle, "Let's say, if he doesn't call me, I am—"

My phone pings. I glance at it and freeze. Amelie jumps to her feet, crosses the floor to me. "It's him, isn't it?"

I show her the text.

Alphahole: Come down.

Jesus, is there a shortage of words in his vocabulary, or what?

"Alphahole?" She chuckles. "Quite complimentary of you to call him that."

"Not me," I choke out. "That's the rat's ass of a jerk keying his phone and ID into my phone."

"He did that?"

I throw up my hands. "I know, stalkerish much?"

A horn sounds from below and she darts to the window. "There's a car there...all dark and shiny... OMG." She turns. "He's here, waiting by the car for you." Her voice is breathless, "This is exciting. This is what you wanted, right?"

My fingers tremble. I swallow. *Is it? Is this what I'd been hoping for?*

He's opened the door. I only have to step through now. I firm my lips, look up at her, "I never keyed in his name..." I purse my lips.

The only time my purse had been out of my sight was when I had fallen asleep in his office. Had he hacked into it then? I wouldn't put it past him. He's infringed on my privacy... Which, is a positive sign, right? It means he is interested. I force my fingers to un-clutch from around the phone.

Walking to the center table, I pick up my mug of tea, then sink into my arm chair. My phone pings again. I glance down.

Alphahole: Don't keep me waiting.

I set my jaw. The arrogance of the man. Of course, I'd had an inkling he'd want to get his own way, but this... Expecting me to drop everything and jump to his demands? No way.

My phone buzzes.

Alphahole: I know what you're doing and it won't work.

Alphahole: You sure you want to go down this path?

Alphahole: Don't make me come up there. You'll regret it.

My heart beat ratchets up. My pulse begins to race. *Don't give in to him. Don't.*

There's a banging on the door. I jump.

13

Saint

The door opens. I glance down, then past the blonde who stands there, to the dark-haired woman who's captured my imagination.

I tilt my head and she juts out her lower lip. Oh, I'd like to bite down on that glistening flesh and teach her who exactly calls the shots around here. I jerk my chin and she crosses arms.

"Saint."

I look down at the blonde haired woman, "How are you, Amelie?"

She looks me up and down, "you here for Victoria?"

I try to move past her, she plants an arm either side of the door frame. I pause, glance down at her, "Is there a problem?"

She frowns, "you tell me." She taps her foot on the floor, "Is there, Saint?"

Huh? "What do you mean?" I scowl.

"You treat her good." She lowers her voice. "You hear me?"

I meet her gaze, allow my features to take on an expression of sincerity. "Always." I raise my hand, "you can trust me to do what's right for her." I say honestly.

"Amelie." Victoria springs to her feet, then crosses the room. "You were leaving, weren't you?"

"Was I?" Amelie frowns, then turns around.

Victoria nods, "Yes, you were."

Amelia takes in a breath, Victoria's gaze widens, and Amelie tosses her

head. "Fine, be like that, V, but you owe me."

Victoria's mouth curves in a smile. Her features light up. I blink. She's fucking beautiful. I want her to smile like that at me. The hell am I thinking? I draw myself up to my full height.

Her green eyes twinkle, "I promise I'll make it up to you." She says.

Amelie nods. She marches to the crowded table in the center of the room, and picks up a handbag. Turning, she moves toward me. "You better not hurt her."

"Amelie!" Victoria's mouth falls open.

I chuckle, "I won't do anything to her..."

Amelie frowns, then jerks her chin.

"I promise." I glance down at Amelie.

"I'll hold you to that." She scowls, then brushes past me.

I straighten, "Nothing that she doesn't want me to, that is."

Victoria stiffens. "What was that?"

I saunter inside, "Oh, you heard me all right, so don't pretend otherwise." The door closes behind me with a snick.

Victoria pales.

I prowl forward; she takes another step back.

I reach her and she stumbles to put space between us; her hip grazes the window sill. She stiffens.

"You afraid?"

She raises her head, "No."

I swoop down, grab her waist, and twirl her so she faces the window pane. She squeaks.

I lean in, slap my hands on either side of her, "I hate liars."

"I'm..." her breath hitches, "not lying."

I step back, so quickly she flinches. Then turn my body, so I am at right angles with her. "Last chance."

Her spine stiffens and she shoots me a glance. "Told you, I'm not."

My palm connects with her butt with such force that her body jolts forward and she braces herself on the window. Her cheeks turn fiery. "How...how dare you?"

"Don't challenge me."

She opens her mouth and I bring my hand down on her arse again. Her shoulders jerk; her breathing grows ragged.

My dick is instantly hard.

She turns around, bites her lips, then her gaze narrows with intensity. She makes a low sound deep in her throat. Her fingers flex. Every part of her tenses, until she's fairly vibrating with anger.

I chuckle.

"It's not funny."

"You're right." I draw my gaze from her hair messed about her shoulders, down to the turn of her dainty ankles. "What it is, is fucking arousing."

She pulls back her shoulders, "This is all a joke to you, isn't it?"

"On the contrary," I flex my fingers.

She swallows.

I crack my neck.

Her pupils dilate.

"I take disciplining you seriously."

She raises her nose, "Forget it, it's off, it's..."

"Turn around, face the window."

She scowls.

"Do it."

She firms her lips.

"Now."

She swivels to face forward.

I plant my feet between her legs, shove them apart. Her spine arches and her shoulders knot. I wait...wait... A gust of wind blows through the open window. Her hair flows about her face. She half turns. "Why the hell don't you—?"

I raise my hand and spank her arse. She huffs. And again. Her knuckles whiten and her face falls forward. "Stop."

"Shut up."

I slap her rounded flesh again and a low moan bleeds from her lips.

All the blood drains to my groin, my cock lengthens, and my balls grow heavy. *Jesus, fuck.* I've barely touched her, and I already want to be inside of her. I need to get ahold of myself. Need to stop her little cries from coiling in my belly, from affecting my presence of mind... *Focus, focus, on her. Her needs. What she desires. Only her.*

I spank her again and her entire body trembles.

Once more. Her legs buckle. She straightens, then draws herself up to her full height.

"Don't ever question me again."

She stays silent.

"Get me?"

She jerks her head.

"Say it."

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

"Yes... Sir."

"Good girl."

Her pupils dilate. *Shit, she liked that.* I hadn't meant to compliment her yet. She has to work for it. I have to make this challenging on her, else she'll see right through me.

"Let's get out of here."

I pivot, stalk to the door.

"Wait."

I keep walking.

"Wait, please... Sir."

I pause. "What is it?"

"You are aware that you need to get to know me first, right?"

I shoot her a glance. "What does that mean?"

She locks her fingers together, "As a Dom... You need to understand me as a person before you..."

"Before I start training you?"

She nods.

"Too bad, this is how I do it."

She frowns, tucks her elbows into her sides.

"You know you're acting like a selfish prick, don't you?"

"Took you this long to figure that out, Sweetheart?"

She brings her fingers up to her mouth, then tucks them behind her back, "So now what? I follow you?"

"Yes."

"What about my clothes, my things?"

"Leave them."

"What?"

I yawn, "Did you forget that you're mine for the next 30 days?"

"I don't get it, what do we do for this much time?"

I smirk.

She flushes.

"My, my, what a filthy mind you have, my little Gigi."

She draws herself up to her full height, "Don't call me that."

I plant my hands on my hips, "I'll call you what I want, when I want, and you'll answer to it."

She bites her lower lip and my gaze drops to the pulsing flesh. A growl rips from me, "Any more questions?"

She tips up her chin, "I'm not leaving without proper footwear."

Before I can say anything, she marches over to the shoe rack by the door, and exchanges her ballet pumps for stilettos. Images of taking her from behind when she's dressed in nothing but those heels fill my mind. Fuck.

She turns to me.

"Well?" I tilt my head.

She glances to the side, then back at me.

I draw in a breath. *Patience, patience.* "Out with it."

"My phone."

I follow her gaze to the device on the armrest of the only chair in the room. "What are you waiting for? Take it with you, will you?"

Half an hour later, I ease my car up to the curb in front of Selfridges.

"Wow, the place hasn't changed at all." She peers up through the window.

"Why should it? It's a hundred-year-old department store; tradition is what it's all about."

"Is that what you like?" She turns to me, "Tradition?"

"Money." I turn off the engine. "And everything it can buy. That's what I like."

"Can't fault your taste in vehicles." She runs her fingers over the dash and my cock instantly twitches.

Fuck, this reaction to her every move is crazy. I reach for the car door, "You like my chariot?"

"Chariot?" She shakes her head. "Whatever. Please don't answer that. And what's not to like?" She opens the car door on her side, "It's a macho car."

"I'm a macho man."

She blows out a breath. "I should have seen that coming." She steps out. I follow suit, zap the doors locked, then walk around to her.

"You prefer to drive yourself?" she asks.

"Always." I glance down at her. "I never trust another man with my possessions."

She brings her fingers up to her mouth, chews on a fingernail. The way her mouth sucks on her digit... *Fuck me.* The blood drains to my groin. *How the hell do I get her to stop that, huh?*

I swoop out my hand and grab her wrist. "Bad habit," I growl.

"So are you." She tosses her head.

I chuckle. "We agree on something there." I bring her hand to my lips, suck on the very same fingertip that she had placed inside her mouth.

She swallows, "Uh, can I have my hand back?"

"Never." I lower her hand, weave my fingers through hers because... Why the hell not? Then stalk into the department store.

Once inside, I release my hold on her, instantly missing how her small hand felt in mine. Soft, fragile; to be treasured and protected. Ridiculous. I prowl forward, leaving her to dawdle behind.

She glances around the aisles, the displays, then pauses. "Saint?"

I continue on.

"This is ridiculous," she mumbles.

"What did you say?" I growl.

"I meant... uh! Sir?"

My dick instantly twitches.

"You may speak."

"Where is everyone?"

"Gone."

I increase my pace.

Her footsteps speed up.

"What do you mean, gone? It's the weekend, not to mention the first week of December. The busiest time of the year for shoppers..."

"So?" I pause and she almost stumbles into my back. My fingers twitch to help her, so I tuck my arms in my sides. She scowls, then draws herself up to her full height.

"So where are the customers, the salespeople?"

"I told them I was coming."

"Ah!" Her gulp is audible. "So...so they cleared out the place?"

"Yep."

She stares, "What about the business they'll lose?"

"What about the business they'll gain from me and the rest of the Seven?"

"Right."

She marches ahead.

"Victoria."

She doesn't turn back.

"Gigi."

Her shoulders stiffen, and I can't stop my lips from quirking. So fucking prickly.

"Stop or you'll regret it."

She tosses her head, "I am regretting ever coming to you."

"Admit it. You're secretly looking forward to what I am going to do to you."

"Yeah, sure, I spend all my days and nights wondering only about that."

"I knew it."

She jerks her head around to stare at me, "Do you believe everything that feeds your ego?"

"Always."

Her gaze widens, "It's useless having a conversation with you."

I prowl toward her. "Poor Victoria, always so in control, always knows her mind and what she wants.... Or so she thinks."

She tips her head back, all the way back, "I don't think, I know."

"What you are, is too damn uptight."

She grits her teeth.

"See, that's what I mean." I whisper my knuckles over her jaw and her breath hitches. "You're too focused on containing all of that passion inside of you. You think you want to direct the course of your actions, when all along, you've been waiting for someone to come along who can force you to relinquish control."

"And I suppose you think that someone is you?"

"I don't think so." I drop my head until my lips are poised above hers. "I know so." I close my mouth over hers.

14

Victoria

Step away, turn away. Break this stupid sham of an arrangement or whatever the hell it is and run the hell away from him. His lips meet mine, fuse, clasp. I will not give in, will not open to him. He swipes his tongue across my mouth and goosebumps flare on my skin. He tilts his head, nibbles on my lower lip. Heat flashes low in my belly. The heat from his body swoops around me, curls into me, draws me closer, closer. He opens his mouth, sucking on mine, asking, demanding, insisting... A groan bleeds from me. I part my lips and he deepens the kiss. He simply takes. His tongue tangles with mine; he drinks from me. Fills my senses with his dark edgy scent, the hardness of his body a shield against the world. The dominance of his posture pushes down on my shoulders, holds me in place. A growl rumbles up his chest, and my nipples pebble into painful tips. My sex clenches; my toes curl. I raise my hands to his shoulders, dig my fingertips into those corded muscles—seeking, wanting. He tears his mouth from mine and steps back. Cool air assails my face, the flushed skin of my neck.

"So, I was right."

I lower my hands to my side, blink, sway. "What do you mean?"

"Your control will be mine, Victoria, " He brushes past me and I shake my head to clear it. By the time I turn around, he's striding away and toward the elevator. He stabs the button and the doors glide open. Of course, even the cage doors would obey him.

But I won't. Not if it's the last thing I do.

He steps inside, then turns, "Coming?"

As I approach him, the doors slide toward each other.

"What the hell?" My jaw drops open.

He jerks his chin up, "See you on the third floor. Don't keep me waiting."

The doors close, leaving me behind. *Asshole shut the escalator doors in my face? I can't even... How dare he?* Anger pulses in my veins and adrenaline laces my blood. I curl my fingers into fists... He did it. Purposely. To rile me. To get under my skin. I will not let him unnerve me. Will not allow him to break through the barriers I've put up against the world. Self-preservation. Holding onto what is mine. I won't let him in. Will never allow him to see the real me.

Oh, two can play this game. He can push. And I can pretend...to give in to him. Enough to get what I want from him: Nina's freedom, and mine. And a little bit more. A piece of myself that only belongs to me. That I'll never share with him. Yes, that is only right.

I intend to walk away from this mess with a tangible result; one that I can stake a claim on. One which no-one else—not the Mafia, not Saint—can take away from me. That is the way out. The ultimate control over my future and his, and I'll own it.

I'll have the last laugh.

I pivot, walk toward the escalators. When I reach the third floor, the same eerie emptiness greets me. Beautiful displays, mannequins with gorgeous dresses. The scent of expensive perfume lingers in the air. Jasmine, roses, and a more seductive note... Pinewood maybe? ...With a darker edge of... Chocolate? I glance around and realize that I have followed the scent up the corridor.

Counters on each side display designer clothes, sun wear, formal clothes. I reach a double door at the end, and when I touch one of the handles, the door slides open. My heart begins to race. I stop at the rack of dresses, drag my finger down the array: green, blue, pink... all colors except black. I reach the end, fingers poised over a vermillion sheath. I hesitate.

"Try it on."

I spin around and watch as the man I've come to resent steps through the door. It snicks shut behind him. The hair on my nape rises.

"Go on. It's all for you."

"For me?" My voice trembles. Hell, I hate that he has this effect on me. And after what he did earlier... Allowing the elevator doors to close in my

face... I should simply leave. But what is the point? He'll simply track me down. No doubt about it. No, best not to show how much he upset me with that gesture, and I'm not sure why. It's not the worst thing he's done to me, but maybe I'd expected more from him? Maybe a more gentlemanly approach? Right. Saint may have been brought up in wealth. He may have gone to the best schools. But underneath that cultivated man-of-the-world façade, he is a rake, a man who doesn't care about worldly pretenses. He takes what he wants. No apologies. Is that what attracted me to him? Not only... It's the Mafia's mandate, of course, that I win him over. Although, I'm not sure that's going to be possible. But I can keep him occupied, take his mind off his work, his business interests, try to keep him close. And this uncomfortable friction between us can only help, right?

He crosses the floor to drop into an armchair positioned at the far end of the room.

"Don't keep me waiting, Gigi."

A shiver runs down my spine. It's the first time anyone has had a nickname for me. I've always been Victoria before this... Had insisted people call me by my full name. Saint... He'd smoothly transitioned to calling me by a completely different name and somehow it felt... *Right? Doesn't matter.* This is all temporary, until I have what I want. For now, I'll give the devil what he wants... *Pretend; that's all you need to do.*

He nods toward the space in front of him. I stiffen my spine. Head toward it.

"With the dress."

I draw in a breath, turn and snatch the beautiful material off the hangar. Soft, smooth, the dress whispers between my fingers. I dig my fingertips into the cloth, then pivot and march to the center.

I face the mirror, meet his gaze in the reflection.

His blue eyes flare. He leans back, folds one leg over the other.

"Strip."

"What?"

He grabs his ankle, holding his leg in place. "You heard me."

"You want me to take off my clothes?"

He glares at me and a frisson of anticipation grips me. He lowers his brows and my fingers tremble. I draw in a breath, hold his gaze.

"Unless you want me to..." He places his feet on the ground.

"No, I... I'll do it." I glance around for a space to put the dress.

"Drop it."

I let the fabric whisper from between my fingers. It pools in shimmering layers of crimson at my feet. I straighten. *He's seen most of you already, so what does this matter?* That was...in front of a crowd. This... Alone with him in a room... It feels...more intimate. Like I am putting on a show for him, which I am. Which is daunting, and damn him, also more arousing... Which is what he intended me to feel, no doubt. Asshole. He probably knows exactly how it will make me feel. Doing one more thing out of my comfort zone. One step closer to the edge... Closer to the deep darkness that laps at my mind, calls to me, pulls at me, tugs on me.

"Don't keep me waiting." His voice lowers to a hush and my nerve-endings pop. I reach for the button on the back of the dress, undo it. Tug at the zipper, which slithers down, baring the skin between the two halves.

Goosebumps flare on my skin. I sense his gaze following my gestures, as I tug one sleeve down my shoulder, then the other. The dress slithers down to pool around my ankles. I kick it out of the way.

Don't look up, don't. I glance up at the mirror and our gazes clash. His eyes are darker, deeper, like pools of desire locked in droplets of ice. His nostrils flare; his chest rises and falls. Ah! So, he isn't as impervious as I'd thought him to be either.

Holding his gaze, I reach for the straps of my bra, undo them. They whisper down my breasts, catch on my nipples. I draw in a breath and my breasts heave. The nylon slides down my arms, baring my torso completely. His fingers clench around his ankle. His jaw tics.

He jerks his chin toward my panties.

What the—! I don't need to remove them to try on the dress.

He glares at me and I shiver.

He tilts his head, I dip my fingers into the waistband of my panties, watch as his shoulders tense.

I lower the scrap of fabric down my thighs, to my ankles.

The blue in his eyes deepens until it seems black. Color flushes his skin. "Stay there."

I freeze, watch him in the mirror as he rises to his feet, approaches me. He pauses behind me. His gaze holds mine in the mirror. His big body dwarfs mine—me bent over, fingers entangled in my panties.

"Hold your ankles."

I swallow and my breathing deepens. He hasn't touched me, but he

peruses my position—open, bare, my most intimate parts on display.

One side of his lips curls, "You do not want to challenge me, not now." Damn the man, and his ability to reduce me to a quivering mess.

"Do it, Gigi."

His voice slips into my skin, warms my blood, coils in those deepest, most secret places of mine, where I've never allowed anyone else. Not him either. *Never*. I steel my spine, curve my fingers around my ankles.

He drags a knuckle down my spine and I shudder. My knees almost give way. I must have moaned or made some incoherent cry, for he stills.

"Shh." He grips my hip to steady me. "You're doing so well, don't spoil it."

A fire lights somewhere inside of me. He praised me and insulted me in the same breath. Only Saint could do that. Simultaneous push-me and pull-me, irritate me and pleasure me.

I tip up my chin, open my mouth to speak. He dips a finger in my pussy.

I gasp. *What the—?* "You could have warned me, you—"

He slides his finger inside my channel. I huff. He adds two more digits. Too much, too full, he has to stop, he can't do this, he...he twists his fingers, hitting that spot deep inside. My toes curl; my scalp tingles. My entire body seems to lengthen, my hips arching up, enveloping even more of his wicked fingers.

He pulls out, only to stuff his fingers back in. A groan bubbles up my throat. I lower my head, my hair falls around my face, and I tighten my grip around my ankles. I cannot give in, cannot. He rubs his thumb on my clit and a trembling zips up my legs.

"Please..." I mumble. *What am I begging for? Why am I asking him for more? Keep quiet, don't show him how much this is affecting you. How could he have found his way right through to the secret core of me?* "Saint, please."

"How many?" His voice shoves through the noise in my head.

"What?"

"How many men have you had?"

I crack open my heavy eyelids, try to peer through the heavy blanket of my hair.

"Tell me, Victoria. How many have fucked you here?"

Anger flares inside, then crashes with the desire. "What's it to you?"

His muscles stiffen, tension shimmers off of his frame. "Everything about you is my business. Tell me, or so help me, I am going to pull out my fingers

and—leave you aching and wanting."

I hesitate.

His fingers leave me.

My pussy spasms, needing, hurting. Empty, so empty. I cry out. "Three... you bastard. Three. Is that enough?"

"Including your husband?"

Tears prick the backs of my eyes. Fucking Saint. He had to ask that question, didn't he?

"Answer me."

"What do you think?"

"I think Adam Rhodes didn't give a bloody fuck about you," he growls.

A chuckle trembles from my lips.

"So, I'm right?" he asks.

I nod.

His gaze intensifies, "But he fucked you?"

"He...did his husbandly duties, if that's what you're asking."

His fingers tighten on my waist.

"Did you love him?" His voice is impersonal as if he's interrogating a business prospect. Cut. Dry.

Everything is so fucking black and white for him. If he only knew the choices I'd had to face.

"Did you?"

"No."

I hear him release a breath. *Why should it matter to him if I'd wanted someone before him? Not that I want him either. Of course, not.*

"Thank you for sharing that."

What the—? Is he being polite?

"I gave you what you wanted." The words tumble from my lips. "Are you satisfied?"

"Not yet." He brushes his knuckles past my slit.

Pinpricks of pleasure dart up my spine.

Damn him and his touch. Why is my body so damned responsive to him? Why did it have to be him who could elicit this reaction from me when no one else can?

He teases his finger into my back hole and everything inside of me tenses.

No.

No.

"Yes," he growls. "Here... How many have had you here, my impudent little wannabe sub?"

"Ah!" I stutter.

"Tell me, or I swear I'm leaving." The heat from his body recedes again.

I gasp. "Stop. I'll tell you." I sense him still.

Wait.

Wait.

I swallow. My fingers spasm. My thigh muscles bunch. If I do this, I am giving away one more part of myself. Another secret that will no longer belong to me.

Another thing he can hold over me.

Another weapon he can use against me.

"Now, Victoria."

I gulp, then squeeze my eyes shut. "No one," I whisper. "You... You'll be the first."

15

Saint

The first. The only? The fuck am I thinking? Why does it mean so much to me to mark her in a way that no one has before? I've had my share of women, certainly never expected any one of my partners to come to me untouched... So why am I asking something of her that seems so out of character? It's her. She is shattering my control. I told her that I would break her down; I hadn't counted on the impact she'd have on me. I have to get back in the lead, have to wrest back my hard-earned self-restraint. Only one way to do it.

I drop to my knees. Her entire body freezes. I lick her from her swollen nub all the way up to her star-shaped opening.

Her shoulders shake. She moans and her knees seem to give way. I swoop down, wrap my fingers around her thighs. "Hold on."

I drag my tongue up her clit, retrace the path to her back hole. A whine spills from her lips and it's my undoing. I thrust my tongue inside her channel, lick her, flick my tongue in and out of her.

Her entire body shudders and her breathing grows ragged. A trembling grips her, swoops up her legs. I don't stop. I angle my head, haul her even closer until she's riding my face. Her body tenses, her pussy clenches, and moisture beads her cunt. So fucking sweet, so soft. My dick lengthens; my groin hardens. I need to be inside her. I must. I fondle the curve of her hip, insert a thumb into her back hole.

She shudders, her thigh muscles spasm, and I recognize the giveaway sigh. She's close. So close. I curl my tongue inside her and a low keening cry

emerges from her lips. My vision tunnels and my muscles bunch. Close, I am so close. I drag my mouth from her, scramble up to my feet. Pivoting, I stalk away.

"What the fuck?" Her startled exclamation follows me.

I reach the exit, shove open the door.

"Where are you going, you asshole?"

I pause, "I think it's your asshole that's pushing you to speak now."

"You filthy, horrible, monster."

The hair on my horrible neck bristles. I swerve and a wind disturbs my suit sleeve as a vase sails by. It crashes onto the floor, shatters.

I turn, sweep a wary gaze over the disheveled woman, who's walking toward me. She's managed to pull up her panties in double-quick time—impressive. Other than that, she's naked. Her tits bounce, her hips wiggle, and her dark hair flies around her face. She holds up the twin of the vase that she'd thrown earlier. I duck again...but am not that quick. The heavy artifact grazes my shoulder, before crashing to the ground.

I stumble, then right myself. I brush my sleeve. "Are you quite done?" I drawl.

She clenches her tiny fingers into fists. "I am going to kill you."

"Join the queue. You'll have a long wait, by the way."

She bares her teeth and a snarl emerges from the controlled, always put together sophisticate she'd once been. This side of Gigi... I frown... It's innervating, energizing... It's fucking sexy.

"Wanna fight?" My lips curl.

"Fuck you, Saint."

I can't stop the grin that splits my face.

She snarls.

I raise my hand, "Now, now, Tory, we can work this out."

"I hate being called Tory, fucking hate it."

O-k-a-y. "Victoria."

"I loathe my name. Stupid, prissy, old-fashioned." She walks forward, fists in front. "Are you aware of the number of stupid Posh Spice references I have had to endure?"

I blink, glance around the room. What can I use as a shield? The table... Too heavy. Besides, it would hurt her if I held it up. Come to think of it... better not move from here, best to hold my stance, look her in the eyes. Her pupils are so black they seem to have expanded, until only a circle of stormy

green remains.

"It doesn't help that I look like this."

I risk a quick glance down to her perky breasts, the tiny waist, the flare of her hips and that juicy, sexy, core of hers. The pink cleft between her lower lips would be glistening, from her cum. *Fuck.*

My cock thickens, my belly coils... *Fuck, fuck, fuck, look up, look away, before you reveal how much her presence affects you.*

I squeeze the bridge of my nose, and she snarls, "You can't stand to look at me, can you?"

I snap my eyelids open, "Now, that's not what this is about."

"You fucking hate my body," she huffs.

I tilt my head, "Not true."

"My tits are too big.

My fingers clench. "They're gorgeous," I growl.

"My waist is too tiny." She pouts.

"It's fucking beautiful." I furrow my brow.

"My hips are too large," she wails.

I pretend to study her curves, then scratch my chin, "Now that you mention it..."

She opens and shuts her jaw, then charges at me, "Why you jackass, you rotten excuse for a man...you."

She flings herself at me, and I take the full impact of her weight. She throws her fists, catches me in the side, against my rib cage. She peppers me with her blows. I don't react. I brace myself, allow her to hit me. "I hate you." Slam. "Bloody loathe you." She snaps her forehead into my chest. I wince... on her behalf. That had to hurt. She raises her arm again, then drops it to her side. "You're dreadful. How could you do that to me? How could you...?" Her shoulders shudder and her tiny body sways. Wetness blots my shirt. I glance down at the back of her head.

"Gigi?"

She shakes her head, her crying intensifying. A hot sensation stabs at my chest. I scoop her up, cuddle her against my body. She's so fucking light, so perfectly formed. Why the fuck hadn't I noticed that before? Because I'd been too focused on myself. On what I wanted from her, on trying to figure out why the hell she'd come to me with that crazy proposition of hers... And I will find out... But meanwhile, I am going to hold her, until this storm she's found herself in blows over.

Her sobs increase in strength.

Shit, the fuck am I supposed to do now?

I've had women cry out in passion, weep when I've brought them to orgasm, wail when I've fucked the hell out of them. But this...weeping woman... One I've begun to appreciate more than any other female in my life... *Holdonabloodys second*. I've barely spent any time with her, so why does she affect me so much?

Do I understand her better than anyone else outside of the Seven?

Yes.

Fuck, what does that mean?

Nothing. I can have girlfriends... No, not like that... I mean, girls who are my friends. Yeah... No, she isn't a friend. *She is... Something... Somebody I am going to take on as a sub, remember? Yeah, got it.* I cuddle her close and she wraps her arm around me. I stalk over to the chair I'd vacated earlier. Sit down with her in my lap.

I rock her and pat her hair, but her crying only seems to grow louder.

Shit, shit, shit.

The band around my heart squeezes. Gotta do something. What does one do to quieten someone who's crying? I rock her back and forth, back and forth. She digs her fingers into my shirt, her nails digging through, into my skin. She's still weeping...but it's not as intense as earlier, right?

I continue to rock her, hum under my breath. She snuffles. Her crying lessens. I hum again...then croon the song.

She hiccups, then falls silent.

"Your pitch is off-key, by the way." She snuffles.

"I'm tone deaf," I reply cheerfully. But at least she's stopped the waterworks. Man, that was close.

She peers up at me from under her eyelashes, "Did you sing—"

"*While my Guitar Gently Weeps* by The Beatles?" I crack my neck. "Seems that way."

"Why?" She asks.

"It worked, didn't it?" I scowl, "Couldn't stand by and watch you have a bloody meltdown."

She huffs, "I meant, why The Beatles?"

"Why not The Beatles?"

"You hate The Beatles."

"I hate tears even more, besides, when a naked woman—"

"—Almost-naked," she protests.

I chuckle, "*Almost naked* woman throws herself at me... I had to catch you. I couldn't have you hurting yourself."

Her gaze flickers.

I fit my knuckles under her chin, so she has no choice but to glance at me.

"Only I am allowed to do that, Gigi."

She swallows.

"No one else can hurt you, except me," I lower my chin, "you feel me?"

Her pupils dilate. Her chest heaves, then she nods. "I understand... Sir."

My dick hardens at that. *Shit, what am I doing, cuddling her? I fucking hummed a song for her? Bloody-fucking-hell!*

I lean forward and she presses a hand into her chest, "It's okay, Saint, I won't tell."

I frown.

"I won't tell the Seven or anyone else. It's our secret."

"What the fuck you talking about?"

She darts me a look from under those sooty eyelashes, "That you secretly have a thing for The Beatles."

"I don't have a 'thing' for those knobheads."

"Yet you knew the words to their song."

"Who doesn't?"

She stares at me.

"What?" I scowl.

"Not everyone knows the correct words to that particular song."

Shit, is it getting hot in here?

"Admit it." She sits up in my lap.

"No."

"You secretly like them... You think it's 'uncool'—" she makes air quotes with her fingers. "—to say so."

I set my jaw, "I don't."

"It won't take away from your macho, hotter-than-hell image."

I lean back in the seat. "You think I'm macho?"

"Umm." She shuffles her feet.

"Answer me."

"Maybe..." She chews on her lower lip and my gaze traces the action. Bare lips with all the lipstick bitten off. Mascara trails down her cheeks, her eyelashes are spiky from the tears she'd shed, she's not wearing clothes...

And yet, she's trying to coerce me into revealing something more about myself. It's not a big deal...but...if it means so much to her, hell if I'm going to give it to her so easily....

"Yes or no, Gigi?"

She throws up her hands. "Fine, yes, you're macho as hell, fucking sexy, the most virile man I've ever met."

"Don't forget overpoweringly charismatic."

She draws in a breath.

"And an asshole."

"You mean, alphahole?" I smirk.

She tosses her head.

"And dominant."

"Your ego is so large that—"

"It's bigger than Beatlemania at its height?" I smirk.

She blinks, "See?" She stabs a finger in my chest. "So, you admit they were a phenomenon?"

"So were *The Stones*, and they had a fuck-ton more attitude."

She raises her shoulders, "Too rebellious."

"Too conformist." I lower my chin. "Goody-goody on the outside and bitchy, on the inside."

"Over the top, bad boys, too much sex, too much fast living, too much everything."

"Exactly what you secretly covet."

She scoffs.

"Admit it. What you need to loosen up, is a whole lotta fucking." I raise an eyebrow.

"Speak for yourself." She gathers her hair to one side. Her tits jiggle again, and my dick instantly perks up. Shit, is there a direct connection between her sensual actions and a particular part of my anatomy?

I adjust her position so she's straddling me. "Tell me what you feel for me," I say, "and if I'm satisfied, I might let on what I think about that old-fashioned, overrated, ridiculous boy band."

"Boy band?" She splutters. "You called them a boy band?"

"I changed my mind." I stab my tongue in my cheek, "They were a bunch of dicks who hated each other..."

Her shoulders stiffen.

"Oh, and Lennon was especially a douche-dick."

She clutches her fingers at her sides as twin spots of color appear on her cheeks.

Hell, this is more fun than sitting in a business meeting negotiating the crap out of my opposing party.

"And The Beatles copied The Stones."

"The Beatles copied them? The Beatles?" She sputters, "Your timelines are all warped."

I lean in close enough for our breaths to mingle, "Are you aware that you get this cute little line between your eyebrows when you go all maniac?"

"I'm not bloody Flashdance," she huffs.

I laugh.

"Nice one, Rhodes."

"That's not my surname." She slaps a palm over her mouth.

I frown, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"N...nothing." She tries to scramble off my lap, and I grab her shoulders to hold her in place.

"Explain."

"There's nothing to explain."

"Yes, there is, what you said—"

"Was a slip of the tongue." She tips up her chin.

"You're a bad liar."

"Not lying."

"You've been heaping on the bullshit from the moment we met."

"What?" She frowns, "What do you mean?"

"You went out of your way to catch my attention, you led me on, capitalized on the chemistry between us. You made me an offer you knew would pique my interest."

"Not my fault you found me a challenge," she huffs.

"You're more than that for me."

She freezes.

Shit, shit, shit, hadn't meant to say that. Talk about a slip of the tongue, huh?

She swallows, lowers her head, "You're not making sense."

"It's simple. You wanted to become my submissive, but I've changed my mind."

She pales... "B...but we had an arrangement."

"Consider that void."

"You can't."

"I can."

"So what...does that mean?" She glances around her, "All this, bringing me on a shopping trip and stuff... Wh...why did you do it?"

"Felt like the thing."

"You wanted to catch me off balance?"

I peruse her features. She's quick, all right. Not that I had expected anything less... Not after the way she'd maneuvered herself under my skin in such a short period of time.

She wriggles around on my lap. My cock jerks in my pants.

Her breath catches. Her pupils dilate.

I smirk. "No denying that our bodies communicate with each other on a completely different level."

"That's the cause of all this...this mess." She holds herself rigid, not moving an inch. Her shoulders knot; her eyebrows twist together. "I think it's time to put an end to this...stupid arrangement. Don't you think?"

"I agree."

She opens and shuts her mouth. "You...you do?"

I nod, "I have a completely different arrangement in mind."

I peel back my lips.

She pales. Her throat moves as she swallows.

"What?" Her voice quakes... "What is it?"

"Marry me."

16

What did the female giraffe ask the handsome male giraffe?

Answer: Wanna neck with me?

Victoria

After that pronouncement he'd shoved me off his lap... Literally. I'd fallen on my arse again. It was getting to be a habit around him, that. When he wasn't spanking me, I seemed to be constantly swept off of my feet—pun intended. I can't remember the last time I'd gotten this physical so many times in a day and I'm not talking about down and dirty sex... Not that I'd had any of that either.

He'd brought me to the edge again, so close, so near to exploding all over that wicked tongue of his, and then he'd pulled back. He'd denied me the orgasm. He'd left me angry, frustrated, horny as hell... and I'd lost it. I'd wanted him like a bitch in heat... An addict who craved one last teeny tiny hit... He'd known exactly how to throw me off kilter. I'd lost my equilibrium. I had stumbled and made a mistake and he had pounced.

Marriage?

I'd assumed he'd meant a fake marriage...but he'd clarified it would be real, all right. I'd be tied to him, unable to escape him. Bound to him. I couldn't divorce him...not for a year. And during that time...he'd train me as his sub. At his convenience. "Of course," I snort. Everything is about him. About what he wants. How he decided to change the tone of our relationship with a flick of those thick, elegant fingers. I huff. Straighten my shirtdress

down my hips.

It's crumpled, but hell, not like there is anyone in this entire godforsaken building to notice.

I could refuse him, of course. I haven't accepted his proposal yet. I could turn him down. *You won't. You can't.*

This entire arrangement suits my needs even more. It is a bondage from hell. I squeeze my fingers at my sides. Don't have a choice, but to go through with it. Besides... I want it. I want to be a real wife. I want to belong to someone, to have someone to call mine... Soon...very soon, I'll have the real thing. Until then... If I have to make do with Saint... Face it, it isn't a hardship, the things he does to me. The response he elicits from every pore of my traitorous body...is everything. It is what I have always hoped to have one day... If I can get even a small portion of this crazy, weird chemistry that traps us and turns everything about us to ashes? So be it. I will burn.

But I'll ensure he shatters too.

I may be going down, but I'll be taking Saint with me.

He changed the rules completely, but if he thinks I am going to back off now? He has another think coming.

He doesn't know me.

I swipe the hair back from my face, survey my flushed features. Hell, I don't know myself anymore.

I am losing perspective. Everything I had fought for, what I had thought I'd held dear to me, all of it gone... Thanks to one overbearing, over-the-top, Beatles-hating, complete wanker of an alpha male. My insides clench and sweat beads my forehead. What am I going to do? What *can* I do? My heart begins to race. I need to get out of here and into the open air. I march to the door, out into the corridor. My footsteps echo. I glance around at the brightly lit aisles, the racks of clothes, the displays. All bloody creepy, without the sales people.

The asshole didn't even wait for me. He'd merely told me to take my time to adjust my appearance and he'd left. That's it... No word, no explanation about when we'll meet next. Nothing.

I walk up the corridor toward the escalators. The hair on my forearms rises. I am alone, aren't I?

I glance around. Nothing...except the bright lights, the rows upon rows of designer wear. I hurry my pace. Footsteps sound nearby. *What the—?* I break into a run, reach the escalator, race down it. My heart begins to thud.

Adrenaline laces my blood. *Who could it be? I have time to deliver on my part of the deal. I am doing everything I can about it.* I reach the second floor, the first. By the time I reach the ground floor, sweat beads my forehead. I clutch my bag close, reach for my phone and pull it out... *Who should I call? Amelie? Summer...? Saint... No...not him.* He'd simply gloat about how helpless I am. I am just scaring myself; it happens. Especially after everything I've been through over the last few weeks.

I reach the exit doors, push them and burst onto the sidewalk. A man passing by eyes me curiously. I glance away, stagger toward the bench on the sidewalk. I need to catch my breath, consider my options. I sink down onto the platform, hunch my shoulders. *Think, think.* I can deliver my end of the bargain. By marrying Saint, I'll be even closer to my target. All I have to do is go through it, pretend... No... No pretense here. I feel something for him... I have from the moment I'd first seen him. Something primal, something that makes me feel alive. And I want more of it. I want to luxuriate in it. I wanted to rip out my soul, fill myself with him... Use him for my own selfish needs, before the inevitable happens, and I have to walk away from him. I sigh. I have no choice in that... I simply have to make the most of the cards I've been dealt.

I straighten my shoulders. Pluck my compact out of my purse, snap it open. *That's it, Victoria... Calm, composed. A survivor. You can do this. You can.* I pull out a tube of my favorite lipstick, twist, and raise it to my lips.

A hand touches my shoulder. I jerk and the lipstick smears. I glance to the side, "Wha—?"

"Victoria?" The elderly woman smiles at me. Her greying hair is pulled back in a sleek chignon; creases fan out from the sides of her eyes. "Are you okay, my dear?"

"What? Yes." I frown, "Do I know you?"

"I'm Meredith, I'm..."

"Assistant to the Seven?"

Her features light up. "Indeed. We met when you came to the 7A offices?"

"Of course. I remember you now." I glance past her at the pedestrians. Pinpricks of awareness dot my neck. "What are you doing here?"

"I was passing by and saw you."

"Right." I glance back at my reflection in the compact mirror, then scrounge around in my bag.

"Here." She offers me a tissue.

"Thanks." I use it to fix my face, then snap the compact shut.

"So, you happened to be here the same time as me?"

"Coincidences." She raises her shoulder. "People think London is a big city, but really, it's a village."

"Hmm." I slip my compact into my bag. "I'm afraid I need to be somewhere else."

"I'm afraid I can't let you leave yet, Victoria." She smiles, her eyes twinkling up at me.

I frown. "Why is it that all of you seem to speak in such riddles?"

"Us?"

"Saint, and everyone connected with him."

"Perhaps you're finding hidden meanings because you're playing in them yourself?"

I pale and the world tilts around me.

"Victoria, what's wrong?"

Her voice seems to come from far away. There's a roaring in my ears. My vision tunnels. *Games. Playing. Hidden meanings. Not what it seems.*

"Victoria?" A hand grips my fingers. "My dear, you're freezing."

My teeth chatter. "It's just... The weather... It's gone cold suddenly."

"That's London for you, my dear. Still, I like it best when it's raining." She rubs my freezing hand between her warmer ones. Her flesh is smooth, unmarked. No calluses. Such well-preserved skin. Wonder what hand cream she uses. A chuckle rolls up my throat. *Am I getting hysterical?* I bite the inside of my cheek, swallow down the bile that laces my tongue.

"Better?" She peers into my face.

"Y...yes." I meet her gaze. "Thank you."

"Come on, let's get some food into you. Have you had lunch?"

"N...no."

"There's a lovely spot around the corner, that serves the best afternoon tea.

"But."

"No buts. Saint would never forgive me, if I left you here, on your own."

I twist my lips. "Oh, I don't think Saint would care either way."

"I think you'd be surprised, my dear." Her eyes gleam.

I frown, "What are you not telling me?"

She laughs. "I'm not hiding anything from you, I promise."

Where have I heard that before?

"You're right to be this cautious, but I am not the enemy. In fact," she rises to her feet, "I am on your side."

"You are?"

She holds out her hand, I take it and she pulls me up. "Most definitely." She begins to walk. I keep pace.

"Anyone who'll bring Saint to heel gets my vote... And when it happens to be the right kind of woman who can stand up to him, then trust me, I'll do anything in my power to ensure that the two of you are happy."

I stumble over a crack in the pavement.

She grabs my arm, "You all right?"

"Of course." I glance up at her, "But you have the wrong idea here."

"Do I?"

I nod, "Most definitely."

We take the zebra crossing across Oxford Street, then turn right.

"It's not like that between me and Saint."

"Then how is it?"

I peer sideways at her. Is she making fun of me? Maybe having a laugh at my expense. She meets my gaze, her own clear. Her features are composed into an expression which seems to portray... Curiosity...? A slight concern, perhaps. Can I trust her? I raise my shoulders. Does it matter? I have nothing to lose... I have come this far... I only have to see things through, and if she can help me, well, then why not?

"He asked me to marry him."

Her gaze doesn't falter. No surprise on her face.

"You knew?"

She turns her head, navigates us around a couple loaded with shopping bags. "I had hoped, though I have to admit, I hadn't thought Saint would have the balls to pop the question."

I choke.

She chuckles. "I'm a plain talking kind of gal."

"I can see that."

"Get it from my mama. She raised eight of us, and she suffered no fools."

"Right."

"Comes in handy when you have to herd the Seven and their friends along in the right direction. Know what I mean?"

I snort, "I am getting an idea who actually wears the pants in 7A."

She leans in close, "Let's keep that to ourselves, huh? Our secret."

A warmth spreads in my chest. "You bet."

"So, back to you and Saint," she pauses, then turns right and away from the bustling High Street. "You were saying?"

I wasn't...but fine...if she wants to know what my answer was. "I haven't said yes...yet."

"Are you going to?"

"Should I?"

"Are you asking my opinion?"

I turn to her, "I am."

"I think you should take your time about it."

I jerk my head toward her, "You mean...?"

She nods, "He needs you more than you realize."

"He doesn't depend on anyone." I bite the inside of my cheek.

"He wants you in his life."

"His asking me to marry him...? It's a trap," I insist.

She pauses, turns to me, "Is he trapping you or himself?"

"I don't know."

"Saint doesn't do anything unless he's completely sure of it."

"He's doing this to get revenge."

"For what?"

"For..." *Should I tell her? Should I?* "For crawling under his skin, for distracting him... I don't know." I rake my fingers through my hair. "He wants to punish me."

"And would that be so bad?"

I blink. "Are you implying what I think you are?"

"Don't let my age and gray hair distract you."

My mouth opens and closes... "You mean...you are...into the same lifestyle as the Seven?"

"I've known them since they were boys. They've been through a lot, each of them... They've each found their ways to cope. And while I don't necessarily condone it... I realize it's one way of coming to terms, to find balance in their lives."

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Which was?"

"Uh... Are you into the S&M stuff as well?"

"Maybe I am..." She raises her shoulder. "Maybe I am not. What

difference does it make? After all, it's not me who has a marriage proposal from someone who means more to me than I am letting on."

She strolls forward.

I turn, follow in her wake. *Jeez... What the hell was that all about? What does she even mean? Is she that privy to the private lives of the Seven...and their friends? Does she know their associates? Business partners...? Their enemies?* I swallow and my heart begins to race. *Was I wrong to confide her? Maybe Saint didn't want me to tell anyone about his proposal. But then, he hadn't mentioned otherwise. Why would he even want to marry me? What does he get out of it? A willing slave...yes...but there are so many other women out there who would be more than happy to oblige. Why me?*

She comes to a stop in front of a beautiful heritage building. I glance up to find the elegant lettering that states, Claridge's.

She walks up it, "You coming?"

"This is what you meant by an elegant little spot?" I blink. It's only one of the most iconic hotels in the world.

"Oh, they have the best tea and sandwiches, and after the morning you've had, it's only fair I treat you, right?"

I follow her up and into the plush reception area. The liveried man by the door does a double take. "Meredith!"

"Dorian, how are you?"

Dorian walks forward, takes Meredith's hand and kisses her knuckles.

"Fit as a fiddle, my dear. And who is this charming young woman?" the built-like-a-tank man asks. Doorman, my foot. Clearly, he's there to take care of any trouble that erupts. *Is there going to be trouble?* My heart begins to race.

"This is Victoria."

Dorian tilts his head. "Ah! Good to meet you." He shakes my hand, with a half bow, then I am treated to the hand-kissing as well. He steps back, beckons us to proceed. "Your guests are waiting, Meredith. Best seat in the house for you ladies."

I trail after Meredith, "Guests? Did he say guests?"

She waves a hand in the air, "It was time to call in the reinforcements. Such devious planning to take on one of the Seven needs strong English Breakfast Tea, girlfriends, and of course, cake. Lots of cake."

Half an hour later, I lean back, "I'm stuffed." I pat my lips with my napkin.

Amelie pushes the tiered cake stand toward me. "But you haven't had the scones yet."

I stare at the shortcake-like baked goodies. A groan wells up my throat, "But—"

"You must." Summer plops one of the rectangular delights onto my plate.

"I can't."

"You can do this." Amelia's lips quirk.

Jace's wife, Sienna leans forward, pats me on the shoulder. "It's good for you."

I glance around at the faces of the women I've come to count as family. I've known them for only a few weeks, and yet, each of them has gone out of her way to make me feel welcome here. They had accepted me into their little circle...no questions asked. How rare is that?

"If you insist..."

"We do." Meredith nods.

"If Karma were here, she'd say 'if you *incest*.'" Amelie snickers.

Summer chuckles, "That girl has a sense of humor that would be more in keeping with the sensibilities of a teenage boy."

"Such non-sequiturs." Amelie tosses her head. "Honestly, she is going to get into trouble for it someday."

Summer's features firm, "What the hell is she doing in Sicily anyway? Why can't she come back? I can't help but get the feeling that she's not telling the entire truth."

My pulse thuds at my temples. "But she is fine, right?" I pat some clotted cream and strawberry jam onto my plate.

Summer's forehead furrows. "She's been messaging me, but..."

"But?"

"The messages are not like her. I mean, she tells me that she's okay, and that, in itself is weird. No jokes, no puns, no sarcasm." She looks around the table. "Have you ever known Karma to speak without resorting to some underhanded acerbic quote?"

The others shake their head.

"Maybe... Uh, it's the man she's with?" I slice the scone, then lather some of the cream onto the flaky surface, followed by a dab of jam. "Perhaps he's changing her?" I bite into the scone.

Amelie quirks her eyebrow, "Is Saint changing you?"

The bite of scone goes down the wrong way. I cough.

Summer hands me a glass of water and I down it.

"So, what's the latest between the two of you?" Isla pipes up.

I place the glass back on the table, then reach for the rest of the scone.

"These are good."

"Don't change the topic," Amelie pouts.

"Let the girl have some tea." Meredith pours me a cup. "Milk?"

"I like it black."

She hands me the cup. I sip from it and the slightly acrid, bitter yet sensual taste of tea fills my senses. Almost as potent as his scent. The man who has turned my world upside down. I glance up, to find five faces turned in my direction. "What?"

"You're falling for him, huh?" Summer's brow furrows.

"No." I place the high-grade china carefully back in the saucer. Then survey the features of my friends. "I am already in love with him."

"Oh," Amelie's jaw slackens. Then she snaps her mouth shut, leans forward. "He'll hurt you, girl."

My shoulders slump. Correction. He's already wounded me in a way he'll never know. Just not as much as I am going to hurt him. But I have no choice. I peer up at her. *Should I tell her?* I take in the assembled women.

"You can trust us with anything. You know that, right?" Meredith's soft voice interrupts my thoughts.

I glance at her, then look away.

I scan their faces, "Why is it that all of you are so welcoming? You don't even know me."

"Oh, but I do." Summer's lips kick up in a smile. "It wasn't long ago that I was in your position. You see me and Sinclair and you think it was all roses and shit from day one?"

I shuffle my feet, "Guess not. I mean when I saw the two of you at the wedding, the tension between the two of you was palpable. But then you both seemed to have worked things out."

"We did." She chuckles. "It wasn't easy."

"I'm sure."

"I was lucky I had the support of these wonderful women." She looks around at the group. "It's tough doing this on your own. You haven't had it easy, V."

Tell me about it.

"I want to extend our support to you... If you'll take it." She touches my

shoulder.

"We'd love to help you." Amelie takes my hand.

"You bet," Isla adds.

"We have a vested interest in this. There can be no better woman than you to deliver Saint his comeuppance," Meredith says.

A lump of emotion blocks my throat. *Tell them, tell them everything. Come clean. This could be your last chance.*

It'll put your life in danger.

It could save Saint from ruin.

I open my mouth, but I'm stopped by a familiar voice, "Why, Victoria, what a surprise to see you here."

I turn. My face pales. "You?" I swallow down the bile that laces my throat.

The tall man comes to a stop on the other side of the group. His gaze bores into me, in his eyes a warning.

"Who're you?" Amelie glowers at him.

He tilts his head, "Hello Tory." He smiles.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. My vision narrows, the band around my chest tightening. This can't be happening. Not here, not now. Not when I had been so close to finding a way out.

I shake my head, try to speak, but the words die.

"Victoria, you okay?" Summer whispers.

Meredith glances at the man, then back at me. My breathing catches while my hands and legs seem to grow numb. I can't move, can't say anything.

Can't do anything but watch as she rises to her feet. "You must be a friend of Victoria's..."

"Indeed." Antonio's smile widens. "You don't mind if I borrow her for a second do you?"

17

*Look in my face, I am somebody; Look at my back, I am nobody. What am I?
Answer: A mirror*

Saint

"Hit me, motherfucker." I swing with my gloved fist. Arpad ducks. I stumble. Straighten, then pivot and rush toward him. He sidesteps me. I rush forward, slamming into the ropes that demarcate the boxing ring. Using the elasticity to brace myself, I turn, shake my head.

"Wanker," I growl.

Arpad snickers. "Speak for yourself."

He slams one gloved fist into the other. "Tired already? Heard you had trouble with your performance with some woman the other day. You losing your touch, motherfucker?"

I bare my lips. First, that slip of a woman had made me lose control completely. Now, this tosser actually thinks he can defeat me? "I've never lost a fight with you before."

"Always a first time." He hunches his shoulders, takes his stance. "You going to attack or are you going to yammer all day like a pussy?"

"The fuck?" Anger claws my insides. It's not at my douchebag of a friend, who's grinning like the joke's on me...which it is... I mean, I am not that far up my own arse that I don't see the signs. Coming undone around a woman while trying to figure out what the hell her game is and drawing a blank every single time? Not advisable. Especially when, clearly, she doesn't

share the same feelings I have for her... Hold on. Hold... The fuck... On...
Feelings?

Who the fuck talks about feelings?

There is none of that here. This is pure and simple, a challenge I took on... And purely because she intrigues me. And yeah, she had belonged to the motherfucker who had ruined our lives... And he is dead... But so what? Doesn't mean I can't make him pay by owning the woman who had been his wife. Possession is 9/10ths of the law, or what-fucking-ever that means. There. I have admitted it to myself. It's a chance to get some retribution for what was done to me and the rest of the Seven. That is the only reason I had embarked on this crazy mission. That's all.

"You okay, Saint?" Arpad frowns.

"The fuck you going on about, dickhead?"

"Just," he rolls his shoulders, "you were mumbling to yourself."

"I wasn't."

"Yep." He nods, "So, it's true then."

"Do I even want to know what you are yodeling on about?"

"You tell me."

"Nothing to confess... And PS, the last time I checked, you weren't the priest among us."

"But I am the best to forgive your sins, considering nothing you say or do could ever shock me." He leans forward on the balls of his feet. "After all, with Jace and Sinclair out of the picture, you and I head up the list of most-wanted felons of the carnal kind."

"When it comes to pleasures of the flesh, I'm ahead of both of you," a new voice chimes in.

I jerk my head as Weston enters the room.

"Too bad you don't fight," I rub the back of my neck, "else it would have been satisfying taking you both on at the same time."

"You know I can't get in the ring. Have to save my fingers," he flexes his digits, "for important procedures."

I smirk, "Is that the operation theater or the theater of operations you're talking about?"

"Both," he chuckles. "So you have some of your faculties left about you?"

I throw up my hands, "What the hell are you two nattering on like gossiping women about? I—"

My neck snaps back. "Fuck." I reel back from Arpad's blow. The world

tilts. I glance up from my prone position on the floor of the ring, to meet Arpad's snickering expression.

I spit out blood, "Fucker."

"My pleasure." He holds out his arm and when I take it, he hauls me to my feet. My ears ring; pain fills the cavity behind my eyes. I shake my head to clear it. "Asshole." I train my gaze between the two grinning idiots.

"Now that we have that out of the way..." Arpad uses his teeth to undo the straps on the gloves.

"So..." He turns to me, "What's gotten your knickers in such a twist, that you went down in the first round?"

"None of your business." I strip off my own gloves, drop them to my feet.

"Oh, but it is." Weston steps into the ring.

I glance up as they close in on me.

"What's this?" I scowl, "An intervention?"

"You bet." Damian hangs over the ropes.

"The fuck you doing here, rockstar?"

"Heard you were having a moment." He grins.

I crack my neck. "So what, you flew in to gloat?"

"Of course." The light glints off Damian's golden blonde hair. "I was between concerts. What better way to use my down time, than to be around to witness another epic fall?" He waggles his eyebrows.

I roll my shoulders, "Sorry to disappoint, ol' chap, but you were misinformed."

"Oh?"

"You mean you didn't shut down all of Selfridges to pick out the wardrobe for your woman."

I choke.

"Personally," Damian snickers.

"By the way, while you were at it, did you choose a ring?" Weston trains a glance in my direction, his countenance all serious-like.

"Do you guys have nothing better to do than trade gossip?"

"When it comes to you," Sinclair prowls forward, "there's nothing better."

I scowl at him. "The fuck are you doing here?"

"Edward's been delayed," Sinclair drawls. "The Father had to tend to an emergency with his flock, but he's here in spirit."

"Shit, that's a terrible pun, Sin."

He laughs, "It's the environment." He glances around the space, "Why

you can't use the gym at one of your fancy hotels, I don't understand. For a man who loves rare £400,000 smoke sticks, your choice of venue to get the shit beaten out of you, sucks."

"What's wrong with it?" I glance around the shabby-chic environment.

Jace had bought the building next to the Claridge's, then left the run-down gym as-is.

I like it because, well... Occasionally, it's an interesting experience to slum it. Also, it's the one place I can count on finding someone who can hold their own against me. Men who have their own devils to defeat.

"It has character, you gotta admit," Arpad grins. "Besides, it's growing on me."

"Don't laugh too soon, dipshit. It's a fluke that you won today."

"The first of many, no doubt."

"Wanna go another round?"

"Only after Saint confesses." Weston claps me on the shoulder, "Come on, man. I have too much invested in this."

"The fuck you talking about?"

"We may have bet a million," he chuckles.

"Or two." Arpad folds his arms over his chest. "You did it then? You took her on as your sub?"

"Nope." I glance around at their faces. "I asked her to marry me."

Silence, then Sinner doubles over in laughter. "And you made fun of me for doing the same?" He chuckles, then laughs louder.

Weston holds out a hand.

Arpad glowers, "Don't have a check book, nor a pen..."

"You don't need either." Weston pulls out his phone from his pocket, swipes the screen, then hands it over to Arpad. "Key in your password, ol'chap."

Arpad punches in his numbers.

"Jesus F'ing Christ. I can't believe this shit." I stalk over to the opposite side of the ring. "That's it, I am outta here."

"Hold on, Saint," Arpad smirks.

"Don't leave us hanging now," Sinner chortles.

"Can't believe you're being such a pussy," Weston's voice stops me. "I mean, if you're afraid of the woman..."

I turn.

Weston raises his hands, "If you're in love or some shit, you can tell us."

I scowl, "Back the fuck up."

"Enlighten us then?" Weston grins.

"You remember when Sin here decided to fake a marriage with Summer?"

Sinclair scowls, "That was to lure her father out into the open."

I motion with my hand.

"The father who had a connection to the Mafia..." Weston rubs the back of his neck. "After whose death... Sinclair realized his true feelings."

"He married Summer, they lived happily after." Arpad drawls, as he removes his boxing gloves. "The fucking end."

"And blah-fucking-blah, yes; but what about the Mafia?" I undo the Velcro strip on one boxing glove, and take it off, then the other.

"We're tracking them down." Weston leans forward, "The only clue we have is the name Adam Rhodes offered before he died."

"Which we aren't sure is a lead or the mumblings of a man doped out on painkillers." Arpad rocks back on his heels.

"He was on his deathbed, so one would think there was some significance to what he said," Sinclair muses, stroking his chin.

"He mentioned a Byron and a Capo," Damian glances around the group.

I grunt, "Then, Sinclair and I got messages from an anonymous source who knew our phone numbers, and quoted Byron. There's something else."

Sinclair stiffens. Weston drums his fingers on his chest.

"I received a USB with a video. It was dropped off in an unsigned envelope to my office."

All of them turn to me.

"When?" Weston scowls.

"Right after Sterling's wedding." I rub the back of my neck.

"Why didn't you tell us about this before?" Sinner growls.

"I am telling you now," I grunt.

"And?" Damian asks, "What did it contain?"

I step through the ropes, snatch up my phone, then straighten.

The guys crowd around and I play the video I'd downloaded from the USB.

Arpad swears, "That's the first evidence we have of that bastard."

"Considering we were blindfolded all through the incident—" Weston's voice tails off.

"Fucking, fuck." Damian growls.

I stare at the back of the man—the one whose voice has haunted my nightmares for so long. My pulse rate ratchets up.

"This is... significant." Weston drums his fingers on his chest. "It could help us make real headway in tracking down those bastards."

"Which is why I engaged a private detective to run with it." I widen my stance.

"The same one who's checking up on Victoria?" Weston straightens.

"About that..." I roll my shoulders. "There's a connection between her and the Mafia."

"No." Arpad frowns.

"Yep," A headache drums at my temples. "She was sent with Rhodes for the explicit purpose getting close to us."

"And...?" Weston growls.

"And," I glance around the men, "that's all I know so far."

Sinclair swears. Damian lowers his chin.

Weston and Arpad watch me with varying expressions of incredulity.

"Clearly, you need a better investigator," Arpad growls.

"You happen to know her, by the way." I tilt my head.

Arpad stiffens, "Is it...? It can't be..."

"Karina," I nod. "Weston recommended her, and she's a trusted friend of Jace's."

He swears under his breath, "A bloody nuisance is what she is."

I lower my chin, "She's trustworthy. That's what matters."

"You're evading the issue at hand again." Weston moves toward me. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you're worried that you are in over your head."

I toss my phone at Sinner who snatches it up from the air.

I turn to Weston, "Pick up the gloves if you dare, Doc." I beckon at him. "Happy to go another round."

"You know I don't fight with my hands," Weston frowns. "I need to protect them."

"Maybe you're afraid I'd beat you?" I step back into the ring.

"I'm a surgeon, man." He blinks. "It's not a bloody excuse. And I can whip your arse with my hands tied behind my back."

"Oh?" I bounce on the balls of my feet, "Less talking, more fighting."

"Oh, I'll be doing more than that, you bloody twit." Weston steps into the ring, "I'm going to dislocate your jaw, finish what Arpad started." He folds his arms behind his back. "And without using my fists."

"Living dangerously, Doc?" I smirk.

He bends his head and rushes me.

I duck, then sweep his legs out from under him. He goes down, rolls, then springs up and rushes me. I evade him, dance over to the other side. "Come on, Doc. Show me what you've got."

Weston growls, takes a step forward, when a whistle pierces the air.

I jerk my head around. "Edward?"

The Father crosses the floor to the ring, then jumps up onto the platform. "Getting a little tired of refereeing the brawls between you boys." He frowns. "What are you guys, ten?"

"Hold on." I crack my neck, "Not my fault the wanker here decided to challenge me."

"Bet you were the one to push him into throwing the first hit, when you know that, as a surgeon, he holds back from getting involved in fights of any kind," Edward retorts.

"Yeah," I blow out a breath.

"And Weston, you should know better than indulging this spoilt brat here."

"Spoilt brat...?" I scowl. "Hold on there."

Edward glares at me and I firm my lips.

Of the Seven of us, Edward is the one who'd gone all the way to the dark side...then found light... Hell, if he turns any more pious, I'll hear angels singing whenever he walks in, which isn't to say I don't see the halo around his head right now. My point being... Oh, yeah, when the Father speaks, all of us Seven, and many of our friends and associates, listen.

"Sorry," I hold up a hand.

"Not me you should be apologizing to."

"Right." I turn to Weston, "Apologies and all that, no offense meant."

Weston drags his fingers through his hair, "None taken, you piece of shit."

"Twat," I smirk.

"Jerkhole," he grins.

"Get a room, you two," Arpad spreads his arms along the ropes.

"Nah," Weston lowers his chin, "What would Victoria say to that?"

"None of your business," I turn on him.

"Shit, you were right, Arpad." He shakes his head, "The boy's in love."

"I'm not, you twerps." I crack my neck, "I am going to say this only once,

so you all had better listen up.

"Of course, it had to happen to Saint next," Sinclair teases.

I glower at him.

He raises his hands, "Go on, Saint, what's your plan then?"

I scan the faces of the others. My friends...as close as I'll get to having brothers...not that there's any blood connection between us... Well, if you don't count the blood that was spilt during the time we'd been kidnapped and held together. The longest days of my life... And when you go through an experience like that together... Well, it changes you. It unites you in ways you don't need to always elaborate with words.

It is for my friends—the dipshits I often love to hate—and also for myself, that I need to go through with the fake wedding.

Also, I need an excuse to keep the woman, who has unearthed feelings I'd thought dead since the incident, near me.

"My plan's simple. Keep her close, and the Mafia will follow."

Weston tilts his head, "You don't need to marry her for that."

"It's simpler that way."

"How?"

"It's foolproof in the short term. Victoria, I happen to find out, is old-fashioned enough that she'll respect the wedding vows."

"That's why she'd marry you so quickly after burying her first husband?"

I growl.

Weston doesn't back down, "Go on, tell us your reasoning, Saint Killian."

"Don't use that bloody name"

"It is your middle name, isn't it?"

"Among others."

"Well, then?"

"I should be able to coerce her into tying the knot sooner than not."

"Meanwhile, you get information about the Mafia from her?"

"Exactly," I prop my hands on my hips.

Weston smirks, "And during this time, of course, you make full use of your marital privileges?"

"Hey," I frown, "don't go there."

Weston blinks, "Wow, possessive about her too."

"What's it to you?" I lower my chin.

He turns to Sinclair, "Sound familiar to you?"

Sinclair chuckles, "All too much, and you know the funniest part of this?"

"No, tell me," Weston jokes.

"He has no idea that he's already well and truly fucked."

"Hook, line and sinker," Weston rubs his hands together.

"Hey, I'm here, you wankers," I growl.

"Barely," Arpad snickers. "Your mind has been elsewhere all this time."

"Yeah, I've been focused on how to take down the bastards who fucked up our lives."

"Is that what this is about? This elaborate plan of yours to keep her close?" Weston asks.

"What else can it be?" I glower.

"Clearly, you can't see what's right there in front of you." He scratches his jaw.

"Which is—?"

"Saint?" Sinner holds up my phone. "Call for you." He reaches over the ropes, "It's Meredith. She says it's urgent."

Shit! My heart begins to race. *It can't be about her, can it?* I did ask Meredith to check in on her after I'd left her in Selfridges. *She has to be fine. Has to be.*

I close the distance between us, then grab the phone from him.

"Meredith, is she okay?"

Anger twists my guts as I listen to her reply.

"I'm coming."

18

Victoria

"What do you want?" I tuck my elbows into my sides. *Don't lose it, not now. You're in a public place, there's nothing that he can do to you. You're safe. Safe?* Ha, when was the last time I'd gone to bed without waking up in the throes of a nightmare? When had I last walked down a street without looking nervously over my shoulder? Just because I am in the middle of a hotel, next to a crowded room packed with people, doesn't mean I am safe from the man who'd kidnapped Nina. I will not let him scare me – for Nina's sake.

I tip up my chin, hold his gaze. "Well?" I ask.

"You're taking too long." Antonio stares at me with those dark eyes, so lifeless.

The first and only time I'd met him was when he'd informed me about Nina's situation. It had been the singular, most scary event of my life. I'd stared into the face of darkness and realized how lucky I was not to be in his grasp. Unlike Nina. Shit. "Is she okay?"

His forehead crinkles. Those dark eyes seem to reflect some kind of inner turmoil. Before I can process what I think I've seen, he schools his features into a mask. "Do you have what I need?"

A chill runs down my back. "I'm trying my best," I reply.

"It's not good enough."

"He's a billionaire." I clench my fists at my side. "Are you aware how many women seek him out? I can't throw myself at him; that would be counterproductive—"

"You're playing too hard to get." He frowns.

"I'm being true to character."

"We are running out of time." His jaw hardens. "You've lost a month already."

"I... I had no choice. Adam's death—"

"Was unfortunate." He lowers his eyebrows. "I should have known better than to entrust such an important mission to him. He was weak. It's not a surprise that his heart gave out, at the most inopportune time."

"How can you talk badly about someone who is dead?"

He widens his stance. "If you don't deliver what I need, it will be Nina's turn."

"Please," I beg him, "don't hurt her."

His eyes shift away from mine. Then, he straightens his shoulders, "Two weeks. I'll give you two more weeks to get me the information."

"You can't be serious," I cry out. "I'm not a miracle worker, I need at least another month to win his trust, enough for him to give me access to his confidential information, I—"

"Three." He widens his stance. "Three weeks. Not a second more."

"That's very little time." I wring my fingers.

"Time you put your body to good use, hmm?"

The color fades from my cheeks.

He scrutinizes my features, "You didn't expect to get away from this without fucking him, now did you?"

I swallow. "No...but..."

"What is it? Tell me quickly." He looks at the expensive watch on his wrist. "I'm running out of time, Victoria."

"I... I..." I am not stupid. Of course, I knew I'd have to go to bed with Saint... But that was before... I'd realized how much he affects me. Perhaps a part of me had hoped that I'd somehow manage to get away without being hurt. Who am I kidding? I had taken on this role knowing I'm likely to lose everything.

"It's fine," I pull myself up to my full height, "I'll find a way to do it."

He jerks his chin, "Good."

"And Nina?"

I can't interpret the look that comes into his eyes. "You don't need to worry about her." He rolls his shoulders. "Stay focused on your task. The faster you get the USB from him, the sooner you can go free."

He looks past me, "In fact, I'll help you along in this charade."

His arm snakes out and he grips my shoulder.

"What... What are you doing?"

The hair on the nape of my neck prickles and an electric current runs up my spine. *Oh! God, no. It can't be. Saint's here; he's watching.* "Let me go."

Antonio yanks me to him with such force that I stumble into him. He lowers his head and his breath mingles with mine.

The next moment he's yanked away from me. Antonio's body arches through the air. He hits the ground with a thud.

I open my mouth to scream, then clap a hand over it. I take a step forward.

"Leave, Victoria," Saint's hard voice whips through my mind.

"But..."

He jerks his head around, and his blue eyes lighten until they resemble chips of ice. Did he overhear any of that conversation? No, he couldn't have. I have to hope for that, at least. So why is he staring at me as if he wants to wrap his fingers around my neck and choke me...as he fucks me? As he buries himself inside of me, covers my body with his, merges his scent with mine, his lips over mine, those hard pecs cutting into the soft curves of my breasts as he fucks me, takes me, paints his essence on me and wipes out everything I have seen and heard and experienced—"Victoria."

I flinch.

"Go," he jerks his chin.

My gaze darts around him to Antonio, who jumps up to his feet.

Saint turns around, deflects a blow from Antonio, who steps back, knees slightly bent, fists balled. A trickle of blood drips from his nose.

"Not bad for a spoilt playboy," he snickers.

Saint steps forward, until his chest slams into Antonio' "If I see you anywhere near her again... I'll—"

"You'll?"

"I'll beat the fuck out of you."

Antonio chuckles. "I'll have to take you up on your challenge one of these days, knowing fully well that you won't be able to win."

Saint snarls. He raises his arm. I jump forward and grab his shoulder, "Let him go," I pant. "He's baiting you. Can't you see that?"

Saint shrugs off my hold, "I gave you a simple command. If you don't obey it—"

"What are you going to do?"

His jaw tics, a nerve throbs at his temple, and his entire body goes rigid. Anger thrums off of him, mixed with...an intensity that had not been there before. If I'd thought Saint had been upset earlier...that was nothing... Nothing compared to how every muscle in his body is wound up, tightened, coiled into a mass of lethal fury that could plough down anything that gets in his way. He could kill Antonio; I have no doubt about it. There is no way I am going to let him do it. I won't let him get into trouble because of me... *And yet, you are going to sell him out. I don't have a choice about that. I have too much at stake.* But I could buy him a little more time...a few more days of freedom. For myself...for him.

"Tell me what you'll do to me if I don't follow your orders, Saint."

His gaze flicks to me, "I'll make you regret this."

"Without giving me a chance to say 'yes'?"

"What did you say?"

"I said 'yes.'"

Saint frowns.

Antonio steps back, "I'm sorry."

Saint turns to him, as if I hadn't accepted his proposal. Maybe he doesn't understand what I am alluding to? Perhaps he already regrets asking me to marry him? Either way, this lack of surprise or any kind of response from him is...strange, to say the least.

"Didn't realize the lady was taken," Antonio raises his hands. "I never meant to trespass on what's yours."

The two men exchange a glance.

Saint wraps his arm around me and pulls me close. The heat of his body slams into me, his big frame dwarfing me. I melt into him, and for a second pretend that I am his. That he belongs to me, that I am a woman who agreed to marry a man who in a few short days had stripped back the layers I've shown to the world. Who'd known how to arouse me with a look, a touch, a spanking across my backside. My nerve endings crackle and my scalp tingles. I swallow, force myself to stay where I am.

"No hard feelings, ol'chap?" Antonio holds out his hand.

Saint sets his jaw, "Leave before I have you thrown out."

Antonio chuckles. "It won't come to that." He glances down at me, and Saint's hold tightens, until I can barely breathe.

"Good luck, my dear, though by the looks of it, it will be your man who'll

be needing it."

He brushes past us.

Saint stiffens. I peer up at him to find the pulse racing at the hollow of his neck. I lift my fingers to touch the skin, and he releases me. My knees threaten to give way. I put out a hand and brace myself against him.

"Who was he?" Saint asks.

"No one." I retract my arm, press my elbows into my side. "He was no one."

"He didn't seem like nobody. You guys seemed to be engaged in intimate conversation when I arrived."

"How did you find us?" I ask.

"Meredith called me."

"Right," I shuffle my feet. "Did you hear what I said earlier?"

He frowns.

"About my saying 'yes,' I mean."

"Your agreeing to marry me?"

I nod.

"I didn't expect otherwise."

I glower, "Very sure of yourself."

"Always." He widens his stance. "Unlike you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You can't lie to save yourself... Tory."

"Don't call me that. I told you I don't like it."

"So I can't, but he can?"

The blood rushes from my face. "How...how much did you hear?"

"Enough."

"It...it's not what it seems, Saint."

He chuckles, "You can do better than that."

"No, really," I grip his arm.

He shakes it off, "Don't come near me."

My heart begins to thud and sweat beads my palms. This is not good. I can't afford to have Saint angry with me. Can't have him put distance between us—not when I am so close to getting everything I want.

"I'll do it, Saint."

He regards me from under those thick eyelashes.

"I'll do anything you want."

"What does that mean, exactly?"

"I'll marry you. I'll obey you. I'll give you anything you need from me."

He drums his fingers on his chest, "You'll agree to everything I ask?"

I nod.

He walks a slow circle around me. I stare ahead. Allow him to take his measure of my body, my curves, welcome his heated gaze that flows over my waist, down the cleft between my arsecheeks, around my thighs to the front, where he pauses, his gaze fixed on the triangle between my legs.

"You'll strip for me?"

"Of course."

"Let me slap your pussy?" His voice lowers to a hush.

I shudder. Squeeze my thighs together.

"Answer me."

"Yes," I snap out.

He tilts his head to the left, then the right.

"I'll take your arse, of course," he assures me.

My sex clenches and my heart begins to race.

"Of course," I tip up my chin.

His lips curl. "Wasn't asking you for your permission."

I draw in a sharp breath.

"In fact, I won't be giving you much of a heads-up on anything I have in mind. Suffice to say, Gigi, by the time I'm done with you, you won't be able to remember your name, let alone how you deceived me."

"D...deceived you?"

He doesn't know. No way. He can't know the true reason for my having approached him in the first place. "Wh...what do you mean?" I whisper.

He jerks his chin to the side, "Why him... Your former lover, who you invited here to meet you publicly, and all because you wanted to make me jealous, hmm?"

I blink. Is that what he thinks this is? That I am cheating on him? If only it were that simple. I chuckle.

"What's so funny?"

"N...nothing." A giggle bubbles up, I try to swallow it, choke. I press my lips together, can't stop the cough that breaks free. "Excuse me." I bring my hands up to cover my mouth, end up snorting. Tears roll down my cheeks. I sway. Shit, am I having some kind of a nervous breakdown? Is this a bout of hysteria? Didn't Freud cure hysteria by orgasms? Is that what I need? I wheeze, draw in a breath, then double over, my shoulders shaking.

"Victoria, what the fuck?"

Saint's boots appear in my line of sight—those same cowboy boots he's been wearing since the day I met him. For someone who's a gazillionaire, his taste in footwear is definitely eccentric.

I resist the urge to shuffle my feet, to squeeze my thighs together. It is a test, all a test. It won't be as bad as he's implying it's going to be. It can't be. He's just trying to intimidate me. I can take anything Saint throws at me and rise above it. I can.

"I...I'm sorry," I gasp, then straighten and drag the back of my hand across my face. "It's just you... I..." Another bout of giggles bubbles up. I hunch my shoulders, try to tamp down on the laughter. More tears spill down my cheeks. "Saint... I..." The words catch in my throat. I try to get them out, but end up snorting again. What the hell is wrong with me? I am making a bloody spectacle of myself in front of this man who I am supposed to seduce. I am supposed to take on an unapproachable persona; as close to my Posh Spice alter ego as possible. Instead, I am having a complete breakdown, Kardashian style.

I laugh so hard that my knees sway. Saint grabs my shoulders, steadies me.

"Look at me."

I shake my head, glance to the right, the left, anywhere else but at him. If I do, I'll... I'll lose what little composure I own right now. Correction, I have zero self-possession left. I am drained, empty, alone... Always alone. I had Nina, but even that was taken away from me. This feels so hopeless.

"Saint," my voice seems to come from far away.

"Victoria, the fuck is wrong with you?"

I raise my head, glance up into those blue eyes. Burning bright. Sparks flare in their depths. Hot, he is so hot. Alive. Vital. Everything I am not.

"You're so beautiful." I raise my hand and he catches my wrist. His fingers dig into my skin. Real. Reassuring. Solid. He'll protect me. He'll hurt me. He'll ground me, show me how to stay in the present. "Saint, please..." My lips grow numb. I can't feel my arms and legs anymore.

"Don't you fucking faint on me."

I chuckle, "I never faint."

"Liar."

He's right, of course.

The world tilts and darkness pulls me under.

19

Saint

I pace back and forth in front of the bed... My bed. She is here, in my room, in my suite. Wrapped up in my sheets... My heart begins to thud. I've never brought any woman here. Prefer to restrict my liaisons to an impersonal hotel room that is permanently booked for me a few floors below in the hotel.

So why her? Why is she the first woman I've brought to this suite?

Maybe it's because she's going to be my wife.

Or maybe it is because of how pale she'd gone right before she'd crumpled. Her legs had gone out from under her and she'd collapsed. A dead weight. If I hadn't been there to catch her, she'd have hurt herself. And I can't have that. Not while I still have so much to unravel about this woman who'd appeared out of nowhere and entranced me. It's only because I don't know much about her...except for what I have uncovered, which has only fueled my fascination with her.

Thankfully she'd woken up enough for me to get some juice and crackers smeared with peanut butter into her. She'd refused everything else, preferring instead to sleep.

When was the last time I had taken care of anyone like this? *Never.* That's the answer. I ball my fingers into fists.

"What the hell are you doing to me, Gigi?" I hear my words and realize I spoke them out loud. That's what she's reduced me to. I am mumbling to myself as I fret about the health of a woman I don't give two fucks about. I don't... I don't have any emotions for her; no feelings. Nothing that could

expose the person I once was...before... the kidnapping, before my mother died. *Fuck.* I shove my hand into my pocket.

Why did the submissive cross the road?

Because her master asked her to.

My heartbeat slows.

It runs and runs but can never flee... What is it? I snap my fingers. *You know the answer, you know it.*

Time. That's it.

Present in the sun, but not in rain.

Doing no harm, and feeling no pain.

What is it?

My breathing evens out.

A shadow.

I had been a shadow of my former self... Until I met her.

I'm not going to let her get away, not until I have resolved the puzzle that she is. I walk closer and stand over her.

Sweat beads her forehead. She thrashes her head from side to side; her chest heaves. Her fingers dig into the sheets at her side. She moans and my heart squeezes. I cup her cheek and her eyes snap open. "No," she wheezes. "Don't do it."

"Do what?" I frown.

She knocks my hand away, rolls over, then scuttles up against the head board.

"Gigi?"

She swallows. "Don't...don't come near me."

"Victoria?"

Her chin wobbles.

I switch on the lamp and light floods the room. She blinks at me. "Who... who are you?"

"Victoria, it's me, Saint."

She draws in a breath. "Saint?"

I nod, walk around to stand at the foot of the bed.

She stares at me, her eyes wide in her face. Her cheeks are too fucking pale. I stalk around to where she huddles and she freezes. Her muscles seem to lock, then she hunches into herself, making herself smaller.

I reach for the bottle of water on the bed-stand and she winces.

"Easy," I keep my tone firm, pour a glass of water and offer it to her.

She eyes it warily.

"Take it."

She hesitates. I take a sip from it. "See?" I tilt my head, "It's safe to drink."

She takes the glass from me, brings it to her lips, and drains it. Some of the liquid runs down her chin. I reach out, wipe away the wetness with my thumb.

She stays silent. I drag my finger across her lower lip. Her mouth opens. I slide my digit inside and she sucks on it. She sinks her teeth in, and fuck me, but I feel the tug all the way to the tip of my dick.

I reach for the now empty glass, pry it from her fingers. She swallows. I place the glass on the nightstand. The slight thump breaks the silence.

She shudders.

I push down with my thumb and she opens her mouth wider. I slide in my forefinger, my middle finger. She swipes her tongue across them. My shaft lengthens in my pants; the blood thuds at my temples. I pull away from her and she stiffens, watches me from under hooded eyes as I take a step back.

"What are you not telling me?" I scowl down at her.

"What do you mean?" She frowns back at me.

"Why did you have that nightmare?"

"Th...that?" She shoves her hair back from her face. "It was...nothing."

"I came in to find you thrashing on the bed, begging someone not to come near you," I growl.

"So?"

"Did he hurt you?"

"Who?"

"Don't pretend you don't know who I mean."

She tilts up her chin. "N...no." She swallows.

"Lying to me again?"

"Of course, not."

I bend down, peer into her eyes, "Tell me. What's got you terrified, Gigi?" I search her pale features. "Why are you trembling so much that you can barely sit upright?"

"Maybe it's your nearness?" Her lips twist.

"Is it?" I scowl.

"Or maybe it's the thought that you are going to own your dominance and show me what you are made of?" She looks me up and down. Her chin

wobbles.

Something hot stabs at my chest.

Fuck, is this an act she's putting on? When she's hurting and unsure, and yet she's taunting me to get the better of my control.

"What are you hiding from me?" I rub the back of my neck. "Why can't you tell me what's got you so fearful that you had to come to me with a proposition that is so unlike your personality?"

"You mean someone as proper as me? Someone who seems so conservative? I couldn't know my tastes, could I?"

"Do you?" I lower my hands to my sides, "Do you know what you're asking of me? Are you ready for everything I am going to demand from you?"

Her chest rises and falls, she firms her lips. "I could ask you the same thing." She reaches forward.

"Gigi... No..."

She grabs my crotch, squeezes my erection.

A groan rips out of me. The blood thuds at my temples. "What are you doing?"

"What does it seem like?" She brings up her other hand to massage my balls and my vision tunnels. "Gigi," I warn her.

"Saint." She peers up at me from under her sooty eyelashes. "I've seen enough porn online to know what turns me on. I've spent my life trying to fit in, trying to be something I am not. I need you to set me free, want you to let me embrace my fantasies, I want this Saint, I—"

"Take your hands off of me," I snap.

She blinks.

"Now."

She pulls back, her face, pale. "I... I'm sorry."

"Show me."

"What?" She drops her hands in her lap.

"Show me you understand what you're asking for."

"But I... I meant it." She blinks rapidly. "I...do want you."

"You don't get to set the pace." I prop my hands on my hips. "You feel me?"

"B...but." She wrings her hands together. "I—"

"On your knees."

She draws in a breath.

"Now."

She scrambles to the floor, fingers twisted in front, head bowed, her dark hair flowing about her shoulders.

"Beautiful."

A visible shiver runs up her spine.

I unhook my belt, lower my zipper, a moan bleeds from her, and fuck me, but I can't wait any more.

I wrap her hair around my palm, yank. Her head falls back, her gaze wide. Color flushes her cheeks.

"Open," I demand.

Her lips part.

Fuck, the way she looks right now? My heart begins to race.

"I'm going to fuck your mouth, now."

Her gaze widens and she draws in a breath as if to say something. I don't wait. I thrust my dick between her lips.

Warmth, heat. Goosebumps explode on my skin. "Fuck," I grit my teeth and sweat beads my forehead. "Fuck, Gigi."

She swallows, and the suction sweeps up my spine. My groin hardens and my thigh muscles spasm. I tighten my grip on her hair.

"Do you have any idea what you do to my control?"

Her nostrils flare, she tips her chin up, and her eyes dart green fire.

"I'm going to use your mouth and you're going to take it, and when I come, you are going to swallow every last drop."

Her chest rises and falls; the pulse races at the base of her neck. The sweet scent of her arousal envelops me and my balls tighten. My vision narrows, my chest hurts, and fuck her, but I can't hold back any more.

I pull her forward; my dick slides down her throat. I yank her back and her teeth graze the soft skin of my shaft. Tendrils of fire race up my spine.

I use her mouth, repeat the motion, again and again, then once more. Spit gathers at the corner of her lips, overflows down her chin.

She sucks in her cheeks and my balls draw up. "Jesus, fuck, I'm coming."

I wrap the fingers of my other hand around her neck, then drag her forward. The sight of my dick disappearing in between her wet swollen lips, combined with the vibration of my cock down her throat... Bloody hell, it's the most erotic thing ever.

My scalp tingles, my knees tremble, and the coiled tension from my groin explodes out. I come, shooting my spunk down her throat.

"Swallow it," I snarl, "Do it, Gigi."

Her throat moves and tears roll down her cheeks, as I keep coming. She swallows down my cum. The sticky liquid spills over the edges of her mouth. Her breathing roughens, her fingers curled into fists at her sides.

I pull out, and the white streams of cum spray across her face, her clothes.

She licks her lips, back straight, shoulders squared. Her hair sticks to her forehead. I grab her under her arms, yank her to her tiptoes, and close my mouth over hers.

The taste of myself combined with her sweet breath, the honeyed taste of her lips, the complex notes of our joined-up essences... All of it sinks into me. Something stirs in my chest. *No, no. I will not be drawn to her. Will not allow myself to feel for her. Will not allow her to reach though the carefully cultivated layers to find the part of me I have guarded for so long.* I tear my lips from hers, scan her flushed features.

I tilt my head, "I hate you."

20

Victoria

With those few words he shatters the peace that I'd found in his arms. When I'd opened up to him, and asked him to set me free... I'd meant it. Until that moment I hadn't realized how much I'd wanted to let go of my inhibitions, to not worry about what the world thought of me, to revel in what turned me on and own it... if this was the chance to do it, then I was going to embrace it. Then he'd gone and said those three words.

"What?" I tilt my head, "Why would you say that?"

"Because... I can?" He lets go of me so quickly, that I stumble.

The backs of my knees hit the bed and I sit down with a thump. "I... I don't understand."

He zips up his pants, then yanks off the belt. The leather whips through the air and I eye it warily. If he thinks I am going to be afraid of his implied threat, he has another think coming.

"Is this another one of your games, Saint?"

He bares his teeth, "Is that what you think it is, Victoria?"

I squeeze my melting pussy together, "I... I don't know what to think."

"Good." He folds the strip of leather, then jerks his chin towards the settee in the room.

"What?" I frown.

"Lean over it."

"You must be joking."

He glares at me and the blood rushes from my cheeks. Guess not. I rise to

my feet. *Move. Do it.* I force myself to take a step toward it, then stop, "Give me one reason I should agree to your stupid ideas?"

The belt whips out, catches me across my breasts. I cry out, stare at him. My nipples harden. He glances at my chest, and his lips twitch. "That's what I thought. You like it, don't you?" He reaches out and pinches one of my rigid nipples.

I yell, "Jesus."

He laughs.

"Your ego is so big that I wonder you haven't been crushed by the weight of it yet," I snarl.

"That's what I think every time I look at my—" He looks down at his crotch.

"Seriously?"

He jerks his chin toward the settee, "Go on."

I swallow. He raises his belt; I head toward the blasted settee.

I hear the whine through the air a second before pain grips my backside. I stutter, speed up my pace. When I reach the settee, I pause.

I hear his footsteps behind me. *Shit.* I fall forward until I am draped over the arm. Butt in the air.

Bloody hell, what have I gotten myself into? Had I known he had this streak of meanness running through him from the beginning? Had I sensed it? Wanted it, even? Wanted him to strip me of all dignity, to tear down the pretense I had clung to, that I was in control? Because I'm not. I haven't been. Not since the day Nina disappeared. I didn't know what had happened to her and I allowed my mind to go to all of the usual places, picturing her lying in a ditch somewhere next to an overturned car, crying for help. I allowed my fears to create a story that couldn't possibly be true. Only to find out the truth was much worse than I could have ever imagined.

They'd taken her. And then...because I just wouldn't give up and kept looking for her, insisting the police do their job...they took me. My entire life had unraveled around me. And I had watched, helpless, unable to save her or myself. A part of me had fought back and clung to something indistinct, had wanted to hope that I was still there, hidden inside. The girl who was a fighter, who had never backed down from a challenge.

The part I cling to now when he jerks my skirt up my legs. Air hits my exposed back side.

A beat. Another. He hasn't moved from his position behind me. I sense

his presence though. Hard. Heavy. Throbbing. That immovable dominance that vibrates off of him and pins me in place. Waiting...waiting. I squeeze my thighs together, hear the whine of the belt as he snaps it.

I cringe, clench my buttcheeks. He laughs, "Fooled you, hmm?"

"Asshole."

"What was that?"

"Nothing," I mutter.

"So much sass, Gigi?"

Hate the name... No, I lie. It does strange things to me when he calls me that. I've always been Victoria. I'd hated being called Tory, especially by them. And no one bothered to find a nickname for me...before him.

I sense his gaze on my back, down the crease between my buttcheeks where my panties are bunched up. I reach behind to pull it out and he clicks his tongue.

I redden. *Shit, I hate that.* Hate it when he demeans me. Treats me like I am his toy, his slut. *His.* I squeeze my eyes shut. Where did that thought come from? My sex clenches; my belly quivers. Why do I find that a turn on? I am sick in the head, no doubt about it. Is that why I am here, doing what he wants...waiting... Waiting for him to take the next step. To do something... anything...whatever he wants to me.

I swallow, "Saint."

"Shh!"

His whisper comes from somewhere above me. I turn my head to find him staring at my butt. "You're fucking beautiful, you know that?" His voice is contemplative. There's an intensity to it that sends a shudder down my spine. My stomach flip flops and goosebumps rise on my skin.

"Saint..." I clear my throat. "Please..."

"Hmm." He rolls his neck and his joints pop. I wince. It's like a declaration of what is to come. The calm before the storm. The silence before the tsunami hits the shore. *Do it, do it. Don't delay.*

"I know what you want, Gigi."

"You do?"

He nods, "And I'll give it to you. Every single experience that you ache for, I promise you'll have it... And some you don't dare even think about, though in your heart you want it. Know what I mean?"

I open my mouth to speak, but the words dry up. My entire body braces... My muscles wind up, toes digging into the carpet. My clit pulses and my

pussy squeezes down, wanting...needing him. His cock. His fingers. His thick thighs between mine as he tears into me with his cock. Moisture flows from between my legs and I can't stop the whine that spills from me.

"Good girl," he growls.

I shudder.

"I promise you'll get what you deserve...but first..."

I swallow.

"First, answer this riddle."

I snarl at the back of my throat. Enough with the stupid riddles already.

"Did you say something, pet?"

I shake my head, bite down on my lower lip and turn away. Fuck him, and his ability to reduce me to a trembling mass of need. My skin feels too tight for the rest of my body. My scalp feels like it's on fire. I rub my thighs together and he laughs, "Look at you. So impatient, hmm?"

Get on with it already.

"About that riddle."

Fuck off.

"Soon, but first tell me... The more you take, the more you leave behind. What is it?"

I frown. Of course, my mind goes straight to that one thing. *Could it be? Is it?*

"You dirty girl," he chuckles. "I know what you're thinking, but it's not that. It's so easy, Gigi. Go on, take a shot."

"Um," I try to form the word, but my throat is too dry. *It is, is it...?*

"Footsteps, of course."

I sag onto the couch. *Jerk.*

"One more, one more." He comes around, brushes aside my hair. "You ready, Gigi?"

I glare at him. He smirks, "Oh, but you're getting there, aren't you?"

I shoot him a glance meant to convey exactly where he can take his dick and stuff it... Up my arse. *Hell.* I squeeze my eyes shut. *Why, why is it that I am empty and hollow and aching inside, even as every part of me wants to slap his stupid, handsome face?* Right before I throw myself at his feet and ask him to lick me up, eat me up, slap my cunt, drink from it... "Ohhh."

I hear my whine, so pathetic.

"You're gorgeous, sweet thing."

I crack my eyelids open. Beseech him with my gaze. *Please, please.*

He straightens, "Not yet."

I can't stop the snarl that rips from me then.

"My god," I hear him breathe from above me. "So much spirit, so much beauty, so much everything you are, Gigi. You'll be the death of me."

I swallow. Is he aware of the likely truth in his words? No one's ever focused their complete attention on me, made me the cynosure of their ministrations in this manner before.

A tear squeezes out of the corner of my eye. He bends down, scoops it up. He sucks on his finger and my heart stutters. *Why is that so damn intimate?*

"About that riddle, then."

I blow out a breath.

"It's easy, I promise."

Famous last words... *Whatever. Can you get over it already?*

"I am what you saw, but not what you see. What am I?" He asks.

A shadow. A mirage. An emotion from the end of time. *It's you, Saint, you.*

He nods, "A memory, Gigi." His features twist. "And I am going to leave you with so many that it will drown out everything and everyone that came before me, I promise."

I hear him move, sense him bend, the heat of his body intensifying a second before he tears off my panties.

What the—?

I hear the whip of the belt, then the fire explodes across my butt, up my spine. I cry out. He doesn't stop. He goes at it—one butt cheek, the other, back to the first—I scream again. The next—I shriek.

Each time he hits me, my body jolts forward. My sex clenches. A trembling builds from my toes. He spans me so hard that my body pushes up to my tip toes. My clit rubs against the hard edge of the settee, and omigod! A quivering sweeps up from my toes. It can't be. There's no way he has brought me to the verge of orgasm so quickly, right? He leans back and the cool air grazes my butt. He dips his fingers into my exposed pussy. I shudder.

"You're fucking wet for me."

I ball my fingers into fists.

"You want my dick inside you. Don't you, you little slut?"

I shudder. *How dare he call me that?* My sex clenches around his finger. *Why do I like it so much?*

He adds a second finger inside and my trembling intensifies.

"Say it, Gigi."

"No."

He adds a third, a fourth, the emptiness at my core growing bigger, wider. *I want more. I want his fat cock inside of me. I do.* A sob wells up.

"Admit you want to be taken in every way possible. You want me to debase you, to show you exactly what it means for a woman to be open and vulnerable and completely broken down by her man."

Is he my man? Is he?

"Tell me, Gigi. Tell me you need this, to be split wide open for all of your hurts to pour out, for your insecurities to be drawn out of you, for your every nightmare to be exposed, your spirit broken and yearning...for me."

No.

"Tell me you want me to remove every evidence of other men and replace it with pain, and more pain; to gouge out every thought, every emotion, every feeling you've ever carried for anyone else but me. Tell me you want me to fuck your past out of you."

"No."

"Liar."

The heat at my back escalates. He stabs his tongue in between my arsecheeks and the climax propels up my thighs. My vision narrows and my heart stutters. *No, how can he? Why is he doing this? Why is he insisting on barreling into my deepest, darkest, most intimate of spaces?* He laves my most forbidden place and I throw back my head. The orgasm coils in my belly; my thighs clench.

He pulls away and it recedes.

What the—? My eyelids—which I hadn't realized I'd shut—fly open. I turn around to find him tugging on his shirt sleeves. He flicks a spot of invisible dust from his shoulders, and a hot molten wave of anger explodes inside me.

"How dare you...?" I sputter.

He licks his lower lip and heat sweeps up my front from throat to hair line. *Is he recalling my taste? Showing me what I could have, and withholding it from me purposely for... What? To put me in my place? To show me what I can't have?*

The anger thrums close to my heart and my chest tightens. "Why?" I snarl "Why are you doing this?"

"You don't get to ask the questions."

"I am tired of your treating me like...like..."

He angles his head. "Go on, complete that statement."

I open my mouth and he raises a finger, "But remember, one wrong word and I'll walk away. And we both know you can't afford that."

My heart begins to race. *What does he know? How much has he guessed? Why does he always remind me of everything I have to lose if this arrangement goes wrong?* I stare at him and he chuckles, "Wise choice, little Gigi."

"I hate that name."

"Lying again?" He clicks his tongue.

"What are you going to do?" I jut out my chin.

His nostrils flare as he rakes his gaze over my semi-naked body. A flush heats my skin, but I refuse to move. I will not give him the benefit of discovering how much he's unnerving me. I grit my teeth. *Stay, stay.*

He cracks his knuckles and my belly clenches.

He takes a step forward. Everything in me waits...waits. *Close the distance, you bastard. Do it... Do it, now.*

He raises his hand. The buzzing of a cellphone cuts through the thick silence. My nerve endings pop.

He slides his phone out of the pocket of his slacks. "This had better be important." His eyebrows furrow as he listens. He drags his gaze down to my bare butt cheeks. His pupils darken. *Does he want me that much? If I'm so affected by his presence, surely, he is too. Isn't that why he's strung me along so far?* He hasn't allowed me to get close, but he hasn't pushed me away either. He's toying with me. Not that it surprises me at all. I didn't expect more from this...this beast. *But why is he putting himself through the same kind of torture that I am experiencing? Why can't he take me and be done with it? Why drag this out until neither of us can bear it?*

He raises his hand, and I am sure he's going to palm my butt, to resume where he left off.

"They did what?" he snaps into the phone.

Color pops on his cheeks. His jaw tics. *What the—? What could it be that has gotten that kind of reaction— hell, any kind of reaction—from him?*

He straightens so quickly that I wince. "I'm coming..."

I splutter.

He slides the phone into his pocket, pivots, turns to go, and I jump to my feet, "You can't do this."

He takes another step forward.

My heart hammers so fast, I am sure it's going to jump out of my ribcage. I race around him, plant myself in his path, "You can't leave me like this."

He surveys me from head to toe, then bends.

I stumble back.

He straightens, tosses a scrap of fabric in my direction. My panties flop against my chest. "You'll come when I let you, and not before."

He saunters past me to the door.

Bastard.

He reaches the door and my pulse rate ratchets up. Surely, he is not going to walk away, while I am hungry and aching and wanting...wanting. My skin feels too tight for the rest of my body. His massive shoulders fill the doorway. I take in his narrow waist, the tight fit of his pants cross his gorgeous arse... My sex clenches. I inch my fingers toward my clit. He raises his hand over his shoulder, "Don't you dare, Gigi."

"What?"

"You will not bring yourself to orgasm. Have you forgotten about that?"

"The hell?"

"Hell is when I bring you to the edge of coming a few more times, when you walk around throbbing for my dick to fill you up, for my lips on you, my fingers inside your arsehole, for every part of me teasing you up the slope only to..."

"To," I breathe.

"To leave you unfulfilled, of course."

He shoulders open the door. I walk my fingers toward my center once more.

"If you disobey me... I'll..."

I swallow. "What? What will you do?"

"I'll punish you and the spankings you've received so far will seem like I've been teasing you all along."

"As if you'd know," I scoff.

He turns to survey me, "Oh, trust me, I will. Your every orgasm belongs to me from now on. Do you understand?"

21

Saint

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." I swear as I swipe myself from root to head. My dick lengthens and my balls throb. I slap my other hand against the wall of the restroom on the ground floor of the hotel. Pathetic.

I'd walked out of my suite, commanding her not to come. The call could not be put off; so I had made it out, completed my errand, and returned to the hotel, in record time.

But damn if I am heading back to my room. I do not need her. I am not dependent on her. No way am I going to allow her to see how vulnerable I am with her.

Which means I'm left me with balls the size of all the number one hits of The Beatles put together... *Fuck, had I thought that?* The woman's affliction for those losers is getting to me.

I have to fuck her out of my system... Or at least, jerk her out, to get relief.

So, I'd walked into the men's restroom and locked the door behind me. I blow out a breath, then scan my reflection in the mirror—dilated pupils, irregular breathing, a sheen of sweat dampening my brow... *Fuck*. What a dumb idea it had been to think I could get through this unscathed. I'd thought I was in control... How wrong I had been. I'd thought I could keep her close, so I could steer the proceedings, slow the pace when needed.

Fuck, fucking fuck. I squeeze my cock and pain grips my groin. I massage myself once again. The blood thrums through my veins and my pulse rate

ratchets up. The scent of her—sweet and sexy, warm and giving, and opening to me—clings to my nostrils, percolates into my skin, winds its way down to coil in my groin. My thighs spasm and my balls draw up. Her green eyes—beseeching, half-drugged with lust, stormy with anger. The sound of wet flesh closing around my fingers. Her mouth around my dick, sucking on me, dragging her teeth up the underside of my swollen shaft. Her slickness, her little moans, her head thrown back as she'd verged on the edge of climax.

The tension in my belly twists in on itself. I squeeze the base of my cock harder. *Fuck me, but I am going to come, I am going to—*

A banging on the door filters into my consciousness. I ignore it, focus on my own pleasure—how I am going to thrust forward into her sweet cunt, rip into her melting pussy and— "Saint, open up this second, you asshole."

I whip my head around, stare at the closed door, "Fuck off."

"If you don't open it, I am going to kick this door down."

"It's an antique door, you tosser." Not that I fucking care about the money. I could replace it, of course, but damn, if I don't have a soft spot for history and heritage...and all that emo shit... And beautiful women who hurt from the inside out, who pretend to be strong when they are already broken. *Since when had I given in to the urge to collect wounded things to my collection?*

There's another bang and the entire door frame shudders. "I swear, I'll take it out of your share of the profits, wanker."

"You're the wanker, beating yourself in there into your hand like a pathetic pussy."

"Bitch," I swear aloud.

"I heard that, you tosser."

Fucking Weston. I tuck my erect dick inside my pants and zip myself up. Then stalk over to the door and fling it open.

Weston brushes past me and glides inside, looking for all the world like he's stepped out of a fucking photo shoot. "Jesus, do you have to deck yourself out like a peacock every time you step out?"

He leans a hip against one of the basin's, "Unlike you," he glances down pointedly at my worn-in boots, "I prefer to be prepared."

"I happen to have interesting taste."

"Including in women?"

"Don't talk about her," I snarl.

He smirks, "That why you're diddling yourself in secret?"

The back of my neck heats, "I wasn't." *Fucking fuck, now I sound—what?—about fifteen? When I had to beat myself off to sleep most nights.*

Weston chuckles, then sniffs the air, "I don't know... Smells like sex in here...the self-gratifying kind, I mean." He makes a rude gesture with his hand. "Didn't know you had to resort to that to get some these days."

I glower at him, "I told you I wasn't."

"So why did you lock the door?"

"Because..." I pull myself up to my full height, "the last I checked, I own this hotel."

"Which you're going to run into the ground by the looks of it," a new voice sounds. I groan. I don't need to turn to know it's Arpad who's walked in.

"The hell are you doing here?"

Arpad saunters in, "Weston seemed to think he'd need back-up."

"And that's you?" I smirk.

"No, that's us," Damian moseys in.

I scowl. "Why'd you have to bring him along?"

I jerk my chin toward Edward, who strolls in. He kicks the door shut, then leans his shoulder against him.

"What?" I take in their faces, then fold my arms over my chest. "Whatever it is, the answer is 'no.'"

"I didn't ask a question," Arpad grins. "Any of you hear a question?"

The others chime in.

"Nope."

"Nah."

"Naw."

I tap the toes of my boot on the ground. "Well? Say your piece, you dickheads. I have an appointment to keep."

"Correction, you ran out of the earlier meeting before we could discuss FOK Media, so we decided to move the venue," Edward says.

"To a restroom... And here I thought this was an intervention."

"Nothing like a public toilet to remind us of the kind of shit we've faced since the fuckers changed our lives in the incident and..." Weston stalks over to one of the urinals, "we're not done with the intervention." He lowers his zipper, then the tinkle of piss hitting porcelain fills the room.

"Jesus Fucking Christ," I growl.

"Don't take the Lord's name in conjunction with a profanity," Edward

admonishes.

"Sorry, Father. How many Hail Mary's should I say to repent?"

"None, this time," Edward looks down his nose at me, "but you can tell us what's got you all aflutter."

"Aflutter?" I choke.

Damian laughs. The others snicker.

Weston flushes the urinal, then walks over to wash his hands, "How else do you explain your running out on us earlier, only to surface locked up in a restroom, jerking off?"

The room explodes in laughter.

"You walked in on this wanker wanking himself off?" Arpad chortles.

"Fuck, that's funny." Damian smirks.

"You caught him diddling?" Weston chuckles.

"Stop. Shut your fucking traps!" I roar.

Silence descends.

Then Edward snorts, "Ever seen Saint lose his shit?"

"Shut up, Father, before I tell them how I saved you from humiliation in a public loo on the wrong side of the tracks."

Edward pales.

The others fall quiet.

"You never did know your limits did you, Saint?" Weston growls.

"Shit, I'm sorry." I dig my fingers into my hair and tug on it. "I didn't mean for it to come out that way. Can you guys forget I blurted that out?"

"No need to apologize," Edward squares his shoulders, his stance rigid. "No big secret. After the incident, I went through a phase of trying to rediscover my sexuality. Let's just say, I didn't make the smartest of choices and Saint here, saved my arse."

"It's nothing." I roll my shoulders, "Yeah, I found him in a compromising position, but hell, we've all been there. We were all in some fucked-up space after the incident, and hell, if we each didn't make mistakes in trying to figure out our shit."

"Is that what she is? Your mistake?" Weston's voice is calm.

I squeeze the bridge of my nose, "No." I lower my arm, then scan over the faces of the men who are my brothers by dint of the blood we'd spilt together. "And therein lies the problem."

"What's the problem?" Damian drums his finger on his chest, "You like the chick? You keep her."

"I can't."

"And I thought I had problems," Edward snickers. The priest, the one among us who is the kindest, who'd never stoop to the level of the others, takes a dig at me.

"I deserve that," I rub the back of my neck, then begin to pace.

"I thought the fake marriage was the way to keep tabs on her whereabouts, except..."

"Except?"

"The danger is closer than I expected. I ran into her with a man whose reputation is bad news, to say the least."

"That was the emergency?" Weston asks.

I nod.

"Who was he?"

"I had my PI run a check on him and guess what...?"

"He drew a blank?" Arpad fills in.

I nod, "So I called in a favor with a buddy of mine at Scotland Yard and..."

"He's a wanted criminal?"

"Worse, he's suspected of being the member of an international crime organization."

"Fuck," Edward swears.

"Yeah."

It's serious enough for the Father to swear, and worrying enough for none of the others to rib him about it.

I begin to pace, "So you see, I don't think it's right to put off marrying her."

"How is marriage going to protect her?" Arpad scowls.

"I can keep her close to me. It will make it clear to the world that she's under my protection."

"And that will stop the Mafia?" Edward places the tips of his fingers together.

"Maybe not...but it'll make sure I am there to stop them if they try to hurt her."

Arpad scans my features, "You're serious about this, huh?"

"What have I been trying to tell you all this time?" I scowl

"So, do it now," Weston interjects.

"Now?" I frown.

Weston straightens, "Sure, Father here will marry you two, while I make some calls and have the paperwork rushed through for you guys."

"Hold on, hold on! I should marry her right away?"

"Today. In the next," he glances at his watch, "hour or so, tops."

"Ah," I run a finger around my collar, "a bit too soon, isn't it?"

"You've proposed to her. Explain you can't wait."

"Don't preach to me about how to handle a woman—Sorry," I jerk my chin toward Edward, "Didn't mean it that way."

"Hey, you can insult me any way you want. It will be worth it to see you tie the knot." Edward tilts his head.

He seems too calm. "I'd, uh, hoped for something quick at the town hall."

"— which I plan to preside over to ensure it's all done in the right way." Edward's lips kick up in a smile.

"You're getting back at me, is that it?" I mutter bitterly.

"You know your earlier faux pas of blurting out how you saved my ass?"

I glower at Edward.

"This is how you can make up for it," he says.

"By tying the bloody knot?"

"By getting chained up for real."

"I'll be divorcing her soon anyway. It's all a fucking farce, until I get to the bottom of this entire situation."

"You sure?" Weston scowls, "I mean, there's something between you two, isn't there?"

"All a farce," I snicker. "I know how to be convincing enough that she bought it completely. She's not my type. Besides, I don't plan to shackle myself to anyone for the rest of my life."

"Thought it was kids you're against," Damian pipes in.

"That too. Marriage, children, the whole shebang." I cut the air with my hand. "Not for me, and definitely not with her."

There's a noise at the doorway. I stiffen. Glance past Edward, who's already stepping away from the door. He wrenches it open.

The scent of lily and pepper tickles my nose. "Shit." I spot the back of a woman running, her red handbag clutched to her side. It's her. *Fucking fuck.*

I race past Edward, who grabs my arm. "Get her back, Saint," he urges.

"I plan to."

"Apologize to her."

"Fuck," I clench my fingers.

He scowls, "Don't be an asshole."

"Right."

"We'll be waiting for you in the ballroom." He releases me.

"Fuck, bloody fuck." I race out the door and after her.

22

Why was the broom late?

Answer: It overswept

Victoria

Fuck him. Fuck him. I hate him. Tears stream down my face as I race for the exit of the hotel. I should have stayed in the suite and licked my wounds, but truthfully? I had been horny for him. I had positioned my fingers over my clit and wanted to rub myself, wanted to shove my fingers inside of my pussy and bring myself to orgasm... Except, it wouldn't have helped. I would have been empty and aching... Okay, emptier than before. Now that I know what it feels like to have his fingers inside of me, his lips on me, his tongue stabbing into my deepest most intimate of spaces... *Fuck!* Besides he'd told me not to come...and... Fuck me, but I couldn't defy him. I had obeyed him. Like an idiot. I had paced the floor of the suite, until I had driven myself crazy with the thoughts whirling around in my head. Where could he have gone? Why had he left me so suddenly?

Was there someone else?

Why not, though? He asked me to marry him. Doesn't mean he is going to be exclusive. Of course, not. He has some—make that many—women lined up and waiting for him...this entire time. It's not like he is going to stop that when we are married. Married? Ha. The entire thing is a bloody charade. A stupid game to please his ego... He'd chosen me because he could. Clearly, that's the answer I'd get if I asked him, so why bother? And from

what I had overheard...? Fuck the man. Did he have to declare the status of our relationship out loud to his friends? Is nothing about our relationship a secret from the rest of the world? There is so much he isn't telling me...so much unsaid stuff between us. What a pitiful turn of events this is.

I race toward the main doors of the hotel.

"Stop her!" his voice growls from somewhere behind me. I increase my pace. The doorman steps in my path.

"Get out of my way."

"I'm sorry, I can't."

I race around him, reach the doors, and another liveried man plants his body between me and my exit.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"I have to get out of here."

"Sorry Ma'am," he shifts his weight from foot to foot but doesn't move.

I feint right, but he moves with me. I brush past, make to step out from under his arm. Another man steps up from outside.

Fuck, I have no way out.

I grit my teeth, "Get out of my way."

He looks up, and past me. His throat moves as he swallows, "Please accept my apologies, but he pays my wages, you understand."

"Of course, he does," I swallow down angry tears, pull out my cell phone, "and if you don't let me through, I'm calling the police."

"You're not."

His voice sounds so near, so close. If I turn, I'll find him at my heels, behind me, close enough for me to lean back and allow my head to fall back against his shoulder...for him to lower his cheek next to mine, wrap his arm around my waist, pull me up against him and—I raise the phone, begin to punch in the numbers. He snatches it from me.

"Hey," I pivot around, and he holds it up and out of my reach.

"Give that back," I scowl.

"Take it, if you can reach it."

I stand up on my tiptoes, swoop up my arms. My fingertips reach halfway up his biceps.

"You'll have to do better than that," he chuckles.

I twist my lips together. *Ridiculous*. I am not indulging in this kind of childish behavior. All of this may be a laugh for him, but for me, it is the veritable end of the bloody line. I fold my arms over my chest, draw myself

up to my full height. "Don't toy with me, Saint."

"Oh?" He tosses the phone to his other hand. "Come and get it."

I frown. The only way to get my phone is if I find a way to climb him.

He smirks.

Oh, no, I am not falling for that. "You want my phone? Fine, keep it then."

I turn and march toward the exit.

This time, no one stops me. I stalk out of the hotel and the cold air assails me. Goosebumps pop on my skin. I hunch my shoulders against the wind, walk up the sidewalk. Where am I going? What am I going to do? That jerk was my last hope, and surely, I have blown any chance of having any kind of relationship with him. *Why did I have to eavesdrop on that conversation of his? More worryingly, why did it hurt to hear him dismiss me?* So, he doesn't want marriage or kids, and definitely not with me. Tears push at the backs of my eyes. *I will not cry, will not.* I knew all of this... Nothing is a surprise. Not after how he'd treated me—

He'd treated my body with scant regard, he'd used me for his pleasure, then he'd brought me to the edge, over and over again...until every part of me yearns for his touch. For the rough caress of his fingers between my thighs, inside my cunt, pinching, tugging on my sensitive nipples. I shudder, and it's not from the cold. My belly aches, and it's not only because I can't remember when I last ate. My sex clenches and it's because... *I hate him, I do; and yet, every time he treats me like I am nothing, each time he shows me how little I mean to him...it turns me on. How sick is that? Why do I have to be this attracted to him? Why is it that the more he ignores me...the more I want to throw myself at his feet and ask him to take me...to not give me a choice? Bloody hell.* I squeeze my fingers at my sides. Tears fill my eyes, blocking out my sight again. The heel of my stilettos catches on the pavement. I trip forward. The stony surface races up to meet me...then halts.

I'm pulled back and around.

Heat slams into my chest and my nipples are flattened against a hard surface—not the ground where I was headed... No, this is...much worse. I look up and into the burning blue eyes of the man who holds my life in his hands...and who isn't aware of it. "Saint," his name tumbles from my lips like a prayer... Or a plea for help. How strange.

How could one man be both my worst enemy and the only one I'd trust to have my back, literally?

"For a sophisticated woman of the world, you sure can't see where you're going," his voice sounds from above me.

"For a billionaire with many business interests, you sure spend too much time stalking me."

His jaw tics; his left eyelid throbs. He releases me so quickly that I stumble back. He shoves my phone into my chest. Before I can reach for it, he's withdrawn his hand. The device slides down my body; I snatch it up. "Asshole."

He chuckles, "I much prefer, alphahole."

Anger sears my chest and the band around my ribcage tightens. My vision narrows and something inside of me snaps. I hook my leg around his, tug. His gaze widens, then his body arcs back.

23

Saint

"Fuck." My back hits the sidewalk, my head connecting with the concrete.

Stars flash behind my eyes and spots of black crowd my vision. I lay there winded, stare up at the gray London skies. That, at least, is predictable. Shades of darkness envelop this city in wintertime. It's what I like best about it. Shrouded in mysterious light, it always appears in mourning or about to regret the actions of its past, exactly like my life. I blink and the thought dissipates. Fucking hell, the knock to my head clearly impacted more than my thinking process. It seems to have shaken loose emotions I hadn't realized I have.

Huge green eyes fill my line of sight, "Saint?"

I scan her gorgeous features—her pale cheeks, the bitten lips that only enhance her fragility. Except she isn't. It is all an act, this vulnerability that she wears around herself like a cloak, to mask the deviousness that lies inside.

"I know."

Only when I hear the words do I realize that I have spoken aloud.

"Wh...what do you mean?"

"I know why you asked to become my sub."

She purses her lips, adopts an expression of disinterest.

"Don't you want to know why, Gigi?"

She shakes her head.

"Come on, aren't you a little bit curious?"

She glances away, "I think you should get up from the ground." She looks around her, "It's dirty."

"But so are you..."

"What?" She whips her head around.

"Is that why I am attracted to you?" I glare at her.

She trembles. "You...you don't know what you're saying."

"Perhaps, for the first time, I do." I hold out my arm.

She stares at my proffered hand, "What...what are you doing?"

"You felled me, you can help me up, hmm?"

She swallows.

"Go on, Gigi, I don't bite." *And I always speak the truth...not.* "Don't keep me waiting."

Footsteps approach us.

She flinches.

"Do it before they get here and I'll forget this happened."

She looks up at my face, reaches for my hand.

I grab it, then pull back.

She loses her balance. The next second she falls onto me. "The hell?" She sputters, "You tricked me."

"No more than you're trying to trick me with the lies you're spinning around me, sweetheart." I bury my fingers in her hair, yank her close. "I am going to show you what happens when you poke the lion in its den."

"Saint, no—"

I smash my mouth to hers, thrust my tongue in between her lips. I devour her, suck on her with such force that our teeth clash. I hold her in place and consume her. Swipe my tongue across the roof of her mouth. I am going to punish her for what she's doing to me. For weaving a spell around me from the first time I'd met her. Enticing me, luring me into her trap. If she thinks I am going into this blindfolded, she is so fucking wrong. I am going to give her a taste of how it will be from now on. Me—the marauder, the destroyer... And she—she'll bloody well accept everything I give her, and more. I tighten my grip until my fingertips dig into her scalp, and I fucking mouth fuck her.

Her body slackens, then she kisses me back in earnest. She sucks on my tongue, pushes her lips into mine, opens her mouth completely, allowing me to take and take and... My chest lurches; my groin hardens. Blood drains to my cock so fast and so hard that my head spins. *Fucking hell.*

I tilt my head and she mirrors my action in the opposite way. The yin to

my yang. The bloody darkness to everything that is wrong in me. The tempest to my storm. The turbulence to the raging intensity that roils in me, that shoves at my ribcage, that urges me to lean up, until her upper body is curved in sync with mine. We're not in resonance though. Nothing about us matches. Everything about this is wrong, which is why I must show her exactly how she is going to pay. I tear my mouth from hers, then push up to my feet, taking her with me.

I release her, and she stumbles, then rights herself.

Her features are frozen, her mouth slightly parted, those beautiful lips swollen and throbbing. Only when my breath raises the hair of her forehead, do I realize that I have leaned into her.

I jerk back. Then, pulling out the handkerchief from my breast pocket, I pat at my lips, "Your technique sucks, doll."

She whitens. The hollows under her cheeks throw her features into sharp relief.

"Jerk," she snarls.

I laugh, "I'm just getting started." I pocket the piece of linen, then yawn, "You'd better come in. You don't want to keep my friends waiting."

She blinks, "Friends? What do you mean?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you? We're getting married in..." I look at the watch on my wrist, "...precisely half an hour."

I turn to the hotel as my guards from the hotel arrive. "Are you okay, Sir?" one of them asks.

"I'm fine." I run my fingers through my hair.

The other guard walks past me, "You all right, Ma'am?" he asks Victoria.

She nods, takes a step forward and seems to lose her footing. He steadies her, and something inside of me explodes, "Get away from her!" The next second, I find my hands twisted in his collar. I plant myself between him and Gigi, "Don't you fucking touch her."

He raises his hands, "Uh, sorry, Sir, I was trying to help—"

"Well she doesn't need your help, so back the fuck off."

"Of course, Sir." He glances toward Victoria and my vision tunnels. I haul him by his collar and—

"Saint."

I raise my fist; she wraps her fingers around my bicep. "Saint, stop."

Her touch sinks in through the fabric of my tailormade suit. Her touch is more precious... *The fuck am I thinking?* I shake off her hand, release the

man's collar. He lurches back, then squares his shoulders.

"Leave us," I snarl.

He pivots and walks back to the hotel.

I turn on Victoria, "Never stop me again in public, do you understand?"

She stiffens, then draws herself up to her full height, which puts her at eye level with my chest. *Shit*, she is tinier than the mental image I have of her. Perhaps it is her resilience, her feistiness, the layers of prickliness that cover her like a second skin, that contribute to her larger-than-life image, huh? *And the fuck am I thinking, waxing lyrical about this woman, huh?*

"Answer me," I growl.

She opens her mouth, when a voice interrupts us.

"Sometimes we are less unhappy in being deceived by those we love than in being undeceived by them..."

"The fuck?" I angle to the side, spot the owner of the voice, a man sprawled against the wall of the hotel.

He's dressed in a worn shirt and pants which have seen better days. His matted hair flows to his shoulders. He holds up a sign, that reads,

"And thou art dead, as young and fair..."

"Why didn't you complete the fucking poem?" I growl.

He appraises my features. The expression on his face is neither happy, nor sad. He's content. *Yeah, fucking imagine that? Bloody blissful motherfucker. This is what not having money can buy you, huh? Peace.* I laugh. Then unhook the bloody watch on my wrist. I drop it into his upturned hat.

A sharp inhalation of breath draws my attention. I glance over my shoulder to find Victoria's gaze fixed on the piece of jewelry I'd dropped.

"Why did you do that?"

"Why not?" I rub the back of my neck. "Why should I be the only one to suffer excesses?"

"That was what, £5000?"

"£30,000."

Her jaw drops open. "You didn't..."

"I can do anything I want, Victoria."

She wrings her fingers in front her, her gaze roaming over my face, then flicking back to Homeless Guy.

I turn to the man. "Fucking Byron, I hate him."

The man grins, his teeth bright against his lips. Huh? For someone who lives on the streets, he sure has perfect teeth.

"Have a cigarette, mate?" He glances between us.

I glare at him, then pull out the pack of cigarettes in my pocket and hand a cigarette over.

"You smoke?" She scowls. "I didn't know that."

"Lots you don't know about me."

She walks up to stand next to me, grabs the packet from my hand.

"Hey," I protest.

"These things will kill you," she scoffs, then drops the entire pack in his lap.

"You worried about me?" I frown

"Of course, not." Her face flushes.

Homeless guy looks between us. "Lighter?" he asks.

"Jesus, fuck. Get your own bloody light."

"Don't swear," she scolds me.

"I'll do whatever the bloody fuck I want." I dig out my lighter and hand it over to Homeless Guy, who promptly pulls out a cigarette and lights up.

24

*What flowers are kissable?
Answer: Tulips*

Victoria

I did. I had said 'yes' to him. *Oh, hell.*

I stare at my reflection in the mirrored surface of the elevator doors. Saint towers next to me, his frame dwarfing mine, his shoulders taking up too much space, his presence drawing in all of the oxygen in the enclosed space. I take a breath and my nose fills with his scent—dark, edgy, packed with pheromones that find their way unerringly to the source of my emptiness... My empty core. *Hell.*

"Is that a 'No'?" he asks.

I should say the word. Tell him it's all off. That I don't care what he's found out, that I don't give a damn about the Mafia and their hold on me. I should escape from this trap that's closing in on me, leave everything and everyone behind... Take on a new name, move to another city, another country... But where could I go?

I don't have a passport. The Mafia took that from me after I reached England. Even the possessions I left behind in his suite belong to this character that I am playing.

If it were only me, I wouldn't hesitate to leave, but Nina's life is at stake. She is in their clutches. If I do anything wrong, she'll pay the price. How could I bear that? I can't let anything happen to her.

I have to find a way out of this... Have to do what is needed without giving away the last bit of my pride.

"No."

"Excuse me?"

I turn to him. "You heard me. The answer is 'No.'"

He stares at me, then spots of color burn on his face. His jaw tics. A nerve pops at his temple. "Say that again."

I angle my body, plant my feet firmly into the floor and face him. I look him in the eye and repeat, "I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on this earth."

His eyes gleam and he peels back his lips. A dense cloud of anger rolls off of him. It slams me in the chest and I gasp, take a step back.

He lowers his chin. My nerve endings crackle.

Shit, shit, shit. What have I done? I am fighting something inevitable here... I mean, I only meant to show him I'm not a pushover. It's the only way to hold onto his respect... Not that he has much of that. Not for much of the world, and definitely not for me. The only person he seems to have an ounce of caring for...is the person who calls him at the most inopportune times, the one for whom he seems to drop everything and run. Is it a woman?

What do I care who it is? What matters is that he is here, trying to steamroll me into doing what he wants and... I am not going to be taken for granted. Not like this and not by him. So I need his help...but damn it, I hadn't imagined the attraction between us either. He wants me, if for no other reason than to fuck me... As long as I manage to foster a smidgeon of that interest, I'll be able to reel him in... I hope.

The strap of my bag slides off my shoulder before it thumps to the floor between us.

He kicks it aside.

"Hey, that's the only one I have."

"Fuck that, I'll buy you a shopful of bags," he leans in close, "and fuck you for what you do to me, Gigi."

He drops his head until his lips are positioned a millimeter from mine. Close enough that I can make out the lines radiating from the edges of his eyes. Close enough that I can see the little scar that nicked the edge of his left eyebrow—why hadn't I noticed that before? Close enough that—he swipes out his hand. I flinch. The next second the elevator lurches to a stop.

"What was that?"

"What do you think?"

I turn to find the stop button blinking. My eyes bug out... "You...you *The hell did I say?..*"

"Paused the elevator? The least I could do to convince my errant bride, hmm?"

"Not your bride."

"That's right." He twines a lock of my hair around his fingers, then brings it up to his nose to smell it. "But you will be."

"No."

"Yes."

"Make me."

Satisfaction is etched into every hard line of his face.

"I... I...didn't...mean..."

He raises one eyebrow, "Oh, I think you did mean..." I start to shake my head, but he places a finger across my mouth, "Shh." The warmth seeps into my skin, the scent of him crowds me, and his dominance pushes down on my shoulders, holds me in place.

I draw in a breath and my chest heaves.

He presses down on my lower lip. I open my mouth.

He eases his finger inside and I curl my tongue around the tip.

His blue eyes deepen into an aquamarine. Flecks of silver burst to life deep inside. An answering tremor coils in my belly. My toes curl. My scalp tingles. And all this when he isn't doing anything more than touching me with his fingertip.

"I know what you need," his hard voice chafes my skin. My sex clenches, the emptiness inside of me roaring to life.

I want to speak to tell him, this isn't fair. He can't simply overpower me without trying too hard.

"I..."

He shakes his head.

I frown, open my mouth. He clicks his tongue. Goosebumps dot my skin. *Shit, he didn't do that, did he? Treat me like I am his property?* Like all he has to do is say kneel and I'll...do it. Hell, I'd keep my mouth open and willing until he'd stuffed his fat cock inside, while he'd shoved his fingers inside my pussy and commanded me to come... And damn him, I'd do it too. That's how much power he has over me.

I clench my fingers at my sides, force myself to not move a muscle, not a

breath, not a twitch of my eyelashes, nothing to show how completely, utterly defenseless I am in front of him.

He swipes his finger along the inside of my mouth, then pulls it out and sucks on it. I'm instantly wet. He lowers his palm between my legs and cups my pussy through my skirt.

A whine bleeds from my lips and I arch into his touch.

"You were saying?" he drawls.

"I... I..." He squeezes my tender core and a shot of lust spirals upward. I bang my head back against the elevator wall.

He grinds the heel of his palm into my pussy and my eyes roll back in my head. "Saint... Please."

"I know what you need, Gigi."

"You...you do?"

"Absolutely, sweet thing. You want to be treated like the traitor you are."

"What?" I jerk my gaze to him. "What...did you say?"

"You think I don't know the identity of the man you were with earlier?"

The blood drains from my face. My heart seems to stop beating. I can't feel my hands or legs. "You..." my voice cracks. I clear my throat, "You know?"

"Your identity?" His lips twist. "I've suspected it since I spotted you at Sinclair's wedding. Imagine my not-so-surprised face when it turned out that little Miss, or should I say Mrs., Standoff here is a spy for my enemy."

"It...isn't what it seems."

He chuckles, "At least try a new line."

"It's true, I—"

He pushes up into my center with such pressure that all my nerve-endings pop. More moisture pools between my legs and my thighs spasm. I grab his forearm and he shoves my hand aside. "You don't get to touch me."

"Saint, don't—"

"That's 'Sir' to you."

I swallow.

"Say it."

I shake my head. Not like this. I didn't want things to go so wrong between us. Can't stand the hatred that flares in his eyes. The narrowness of his gaze, the cold edge of his anger that slices into my heart, rips through my guts, freezes my blood until I can't breathe. Can't speak. Can't do anything but stare at him, with a silent plea in my eyes.

Sweat beads his forehead. He meets my gaze head on. The skin is drawn over his cheeks as if this entire proceeding is not easy for him either. No, I don't believe that. He holds all of the cards right now. Hell, he holds my cunt in his hand. One word and my entire world could come crashing down around me. What's left of it, that is. And poor Nina— She'll be lost to the murky depths of the world that Antonio has her trapped in. All because this asshole of a gazillionaire, with an ego bigger than the entire city of London put together, can't bear to lose.

"You know what your problem is?" I stare into his face, "You can't stand to be vulnerable."

He frowns. "What do you mean?"

"You were attracted to me. You wanted me. Hell, you were all set to bed me, no strings attached. Then you realized someone had beat you to it... No..." I shake my hair back from my face, "You realized that I, a woman, had run circles around you and your uppity friends and none of you had any idea." I widen my smile. "None."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," I nod. "In fact, if you hadn't seen me with Antonio—"

"Don't mention his fucking name."

"Ah! So that's it?"

"What?" His eyebrows knit.

"You're jealous."

"You're wrong." He leans forward until his nose brushes mine. His chest expands, then expands some more. His shoulders seem to grow even wider. His left eyelid twitches. *Shit, that isn't a good sign at all, is it?*

"You're missing something, little Victoria," he growls.

"What?"

"I am not the one with everything to lose. You are."

Anger sweeps up my spine. I draw back my shoulders, then squeeze my thighs together, locking his hand between my legs. "The only thing I have to lose here is the fact that you haven't fucked me, so why don't you, and be done with it, hmm? Then we can bury this chemistry and get on with our lives. In fact," I bring my hand up and grip the tent at his crotch, "I'll help you along. That's what you want, isn't it? To fuck me out of your system? To have me until you get tired of me? So why don't you do it and cast me aside? That way, we don't have to go through this sham of a wedding or the arrangement of you becoming my Dom. Why pretend there is any

relationship possible between us, when really, we hate each other? Fuck me already, and we can call it quits."

Don't say yes. Don't. Don't let me walk away. Please don't.

He hauls me up by his grip on my pussy so I am perched on tip toe. His nostrils flare as he surveys my face, "No."

I blink. "No?"

He nods, "I have a better idea."

"What?"

"I'll quiz you about The Beatles. If you get every answer right, I'll let you leave. If you get even one wrong... I..." He massages my clit through my clothes. My sex shudders and a tingling emanates from his touch, sweeping aside the cold, heating my blood, leaving a fiery, tangled, throbbing need in its wake. *Shit. Say it, damn it. Complete your sentence.*

He twists his hand with the right torque that his heel slams into the swollen bud of my clit. A trembling sweeps up my legs, past my waist, and my nipples pebble until I can't stand it anymore. I am one yearning mass of need, waiting to be filled by him. His cock. His fingers. His tongue. "Please," the word bleeds from my lips.

A fierce satisfaction grips his features.

Then he releases me so quickly that I fall back against the wall.

The climax instantly ebbs. "No," I gasp. "Not again. You can't do this."

He lifts one eyebrow. "You bet I can."

He ambles back, until he's propped up against the opposite end of the cage. His big body takes up almost the entire breadth of the constricted space. *Shit.* I flatten my back into the barrier behind me.

"What now?"

"Now, I ask the questions. Remember Gigi, one wrong answer." His grin widens, "One mistake and you lose all say in what's going to happen to you."

"For...how long?"

"For as long as I deem necessary to tame you, of course."

"You're crazy."

"Are you ready?"

No.

No.

I square myself holders. "Fine. Go ahead."

He nods.

" John Lennon and Paul McCartney sang backing vocals on which

Rolling Stones single??"

"It was called." I frown. "We Love You."

"Correct." He smirks. "Next question," he pins me with his gaze "The Beatles couldn't read music. True or false?"

"True," I reply.

"What's your favorite color?"

"Blue," I blink.

He clicks his tongue, "Don't lie to me. Tell me the truth and I won't catapult you off a cliff."

"You're a Monty Python fan as well?" I can't stop the smile that curves my lips.

"I ask the questions," he smirks, then waggles a finger at me, "and you haven't answered the last one."

I throw up my hands, "Fine, red. My favorite color is red." I stiffen, "And did you just trick me into revealing something personal about myself?"

"Only I get to ask the questions, remember?" He angles his head. "How long did it take The Beatles to record their first album?"

"24 hours." I wring my fingers together. *What's he getting at? Why is he sneaking in questions about my personal preferences in between?*

"What's the make of your favorite car?"

"Maserati." I scowl, "Not fair, why do you even care what—?"

"What was the name of the last album by The Beatles?"

"Abbey Road."

"Your favorite flower?"

"Lilies." I purse my lips, "Honestly, you could have asked, I'd have—"

"John Lennon changed his middle name from Winston to Ono after marrying Yoko Ono. True or false?"

"True."

"Not bad, I have one last question for you." He grins something fierce and it feels like a cold hand touches my heart. He's trying to throw me off kilter, trying to ruin my concentration. *That's all it is. Focus Victoria. Don't let him get to you. Don't—*

"When is Beatles Day celebrated?" He tilts his head.

"Umm.." I chew on the inside of my cheek, "It's celebrated on June 25th?"

"Ehhhhh!" He makes the irritating sound of a gameshow buzzer and says "Wrong."

"What?" My jaw drops.

"You got that wrong."

"Can't be." I stiffen.

"It is."

"You're messing with me," I snarl.

"I'm not."

"I don't believe you."

"Check the answer on your phone."

I bend, pull the phone from my bag, "I don't have a signal."

"I do." He hands me his phone, which I notice is logged into the hotel Wi-Fi. *Why the hell hadn't I thought of that?*

I pull up the search engine on his phone, then tap in my question. The screen fills with links. I open the first one, read it. Beatles Day is celebrated on 10th July, not to be confused with Global Beatles Day.

He grabs his phone from my hand, shoves it in his pocket.

My heart begins to thud. "No," I swallow. "It can't be."

"It's true, Gigi. You lost."

"Piss off," I snarl at him. My guts churn and my breathing goes shallow. This can't be happening. How could I have lost to him, and on a Beatles' quiz? "Hangonasecond," I frown. "How did you know all that?"

"All what?"

"Don't try to be obtuse; you know what I mean." I stab a finger in his direction, "How did you pick up all those facts about my favorite band?"

He blinks, then cuts the air with his hand. "Everyone knows the answers to those questions."

"No," I shake my head, "They don't."

"It's all there in the public domain."

"So you read up on them?"

He raises his shoulders.

My pulse begins to race. I take a step forward, "Admit it, you did."

"Nah."

"Don't lie to me, Saint."

"Okay..." He tugs at his collar, "Maybe a little."

"Ha!" I clap my hands, "I knew it."

"Only so I could use my knowledge at the appropriate time."

"When you could take me down?" I grimace.

"Exactly." He taps his foot on the ground, "Doesn't change the fact that

you lost."

My stomach flutters. *What does it mean? What's going to happen now that he's beat me at my own game?* He has all the bloody cards, leaving me exposed. With nowhere to hide, I glance sideways at the alarm button.

"There's no need for that."

"No?"

He shakes his head, "We're done here."

"We are?" Shit, why am I echoing his words? This entire encounter has a bit of the surreal attached to it. I bend my knees, grab my purse. It feels solid, familiar; I slip the strap over my shoulder.

"What now?"

"Now? We get married."

25

Saint

I had revealed my hand. *Shit!* I hadn't meant to tell her I knew about her, had planned to keep that piece of information to myself. But when she'd almost completely shattered, when her gorgeous lips had parted, her pussy clamping down, reaching for the relief only I could provide, when her sugary scent had deepened, fuck, if the blood hadn't left my head permanently to park itself in my dick. Reaching down, I adjust myself, then snatch up my phone and shoot off a text message, before following her.

She walks ahead of me, thank fuck, so she can't see the evidence of exactly how she affected me in there. I'd trapped both of us in the elevator. Because, yeah, cliché much? Couldn't pass up the opportunity to try to subjugate her, let her know that I hold the power... I sure hadn't bloody intended to hand it over to her.

She pulls the rug from under my feet... When she isn't keeping me on my toes, that is. Does she know that?

She pauses at the end of the corridor, where the double doors open into the ball room. We're on the floor below my penthouse suite on the top floor of Claridge's. I couldn't have chosen the venue better; guess the Seven have their uses...sometimes. Allowing me to get married and afford a quick getaway after the ceremony with my—hold on there.

I halt so quickly that my heels dig into the plush carpet below.

Marriage.

Bride.

This isn't real. It's a quick ceremony to seal the deal. Like it's something I do every day—not. Treat it like a painful meeting, one in which you're surrounded by opponents looking to tear you down. I rub the back of my neck; right now, I'd take that over this mock wedding.

She turns to glance at me.

"Go on, open the door," I growl.

She frowns. "This really is unnecessary. You know that, right?"

"Is it now?" I draw up next to her. "I think it's the one thing that will bind you to me, prevent you from running away and spilling everything you've seen and heard to your handler."

She flinches. "It...it isn't like that."

"Oh?" I scrutinize her features. "Enlighten me, then."

She wrings her fingers together, "I... I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

She wraps her arms around her waist, glances away.

Anger shoots through my veins. Damn her, what is she hiding from me? Why did it have to be her to entrance me so? If only I could erase thoughts of her from my mind and return to my life as it had been. I wrap my fingers around her throat.

Her gaze widens. Her pupils dilate. I scan her flushed features, the way she's arched into my hold on the balls of her feet, handbag dangling at her shoulder, yet every part of her ready, in sync with my needs, her face upturned, her breathing ragged.

"Shit, you like it when I'm rough, don't you?"

She swallows.

"Is breath play your thing, Gigi? Does it get you off?"

She nods.

"Who else has touched you like this?"

"Nobody else," she whispers.

Could that be true?

"Am I your first dominant? Were you telling the truth when you said your arse is untouched? Tell me Gigi, tell me."

She opens her mouth. "Yes," she chokes out, "it's true."

"What is?"

"All of it. You're my first... Dom." She hiccups, "And no-one else has taken me there."

"Your arse belongs to me, Gigi."

She stares.

I tighten my grip. Color blooms on her skin and she rubs her thighs together, her gaze fixed on my face as she stalks my features, trying to read my intentions, what my next move is going to be. I pull her close enough that her breasts almost touch my chest. Almost. "Say it," I growl.

"Yours," she whispers.

"What is?"

"My arse is yours."

"And your pussy?" I bring down my other hand to cup the warmth between her legs, knowing she'll be wet. "Fuck, I can feel the stickiness of your cum through your clothes, you know that?"

She gulps; her chest rises and falls.

"Answer me, Gigi. Who does your cunt belong to?"

"You, Sir."

"And your breasts?" I release her core to pinch her nipple through her dress.

She moans.

"Tell me, Gigi."

"You, they belong to you."

"And your hungry gaze, with which you watch me as I come, who does that belong to?"

"You."

"Your hair, your skin, the nails on your toes, the eyelashes that frame those gorgeous eyes... Whose are they?"

"Yours."

"And you. Who do you belong to, Gigi?"

"You, Sir. I belong to you."

"Damn fucking right." My cock hardens impossibly and my balls tighten. The doors open. I yank her close, press my lips to hers. "Don't fucking let me down now," I whisper against her mouth. "You feel me, Gigi?"

She nods.

"Saint... Victoria, why is it that you two can't keep your hands off each other for the few minutes that's needed from you to seal this holy union?"

Victoria tries to pull away. I release her neck, only to wind my arm around her waist and pull her close. She resists, but I tug with enough force that she falls into me. I keep her there, pressed from thigh to hip, tuck her under my arm. *Good.* I have her where I can finally keep an eye—and other

parts of my body—tuned into her.

I glance at Edward, "Perhaps because there isn't an unholy couple in history who've attempted to make a go at this bloody ceremony?"

"Saint," Edward admonishes me, "language."

"Fuck, Father. Seriously?"

Edward frowns, then steps back. We walk through, and come to a halt. I glance around the assembled faces.

"The fuck?" I glower. "What's this, a circus?"

"You're getting married, ol' chap, couldn't pass up the opportunity to invite our friends to witness your downfall," Weston ambles forward.

Amelie breaks away from his side and darts forward.

She embraces Victoria, "Oh my God!" she whisper-screams, "You're doing this? You're actually gonna go through with this, V?"

Victoria pats the woman on her shoulder as her eyes meet mine.

I glare at her. She swallows, something in her gaze pleading with me, beseeching me... For what? Reassurance? Asking me to tell her that it will all be okay? Perhaps a promise that all the bad stuff will go away and we'll live happily ever after? Not. She's not getting anything of the sort from me.

I turn away, crack my neck. "The fuck is it so hot in here?"

Weston blinks. He peers into my face, then chuckles. "You nervous, man?"

"Of course, not," I frown.

"You should be." He grins, "Not every day that one of the most confirmed bachelors in town decides to walk down the aisle."

"It's a fake wedding, dickwad," I growl.

He laughs, "You sure about that?"

"Of course, I am... I mean, it's real to begin, but I plan to walk away from her when—" I twist my lips.

"When?"

"When all of this is over, of course," I wave a hand in the air.

"What is over?" He folds his arms over his chest, "Explain it to me, Sherlock."

"When we've tracked down the members of the Mafia who did this to us, make sure they are locked away, or better still, six feet under. And when she is safe, when—" my voice tapers off. *Shit, do I mean that? No. I don't mean that.* Did I propose a marriage to tie her to me? Of course, I did, but only so I can keep my property safe. Because she is the key to unlocking the door, to

leading us to those who turned our lives upside down.

"You gonna complete your sentence anytime soon?" Weston smirks.

"No," I growl, then drag my fingers through my hair. "You don't have to seem so pleased with yourself. You wait until it's your time."

"My time?" He cups his chin, "I'm not the one who proposed a wedding to get close to an asset."

"She's more than that," I frown.

"Of course, she is...to you." He slaps my shoulder. "It's what landed you in this mess."

"Fuck." My heart begins to race. Sweat beads my palms. "You're talking as if my life is over..."

"In a way, it is... Beginning of a journey, and all that bullshit..."

"Don't you have a procedure to attend to? You're supposed to be a hot-shot doctor—"

"Who wouldn't pass up the chance to be there for one of his closest friends."

"Ha," I snort. "What a crock of bull-fucking-shit. You're here to ensure I am tied up so you can capitalize on the assets of 7A Investments and FOK Media."

"Now would I do that?" He raises his hands. "After all, everything is spelled out in black and white. No way, can I go against the split of profits."

"There are other ways to go behind our backs and take what's not due to you."

"Especially when it's money that should have come to you." He nods, "Now, I am not saying it hadn't crossed my mind." He grins. "Not my fault if I pull it off either, given you and Sinner—" he jabs a thumb over his shoulder, "are occupied with matters of the heart, and all that."

"This isn't a matter of the heart," I growl.

"You're right, again." He slaps my shoulder. "It's your dick that's leading you on, man. You should've fucked her and gotten it out of your system—"

I redden.

"What?" He opens and closes his mouth, "No."

"Shut up," I mutter.

He takes me by my shoulders. "Look into my eyes, my child. Tell me it's not what I suspect it is."

"Back the fuck off, wanker."

He searches my features, "It is, isn't it?"

"What is?" a familiar voice sounds behind him.

I groan, "No, no, no. Enough of this asinine chitchat."

Arpad saunters up, "The man doth protest too much."

"Why the fuck aren't you on your watch already?"

"Because," he opens his arm wide, "I had to see you safely married first."

I glare at him, "You seem in a rare, fine mood, ass wipe."

"Temper, ol' chap. Gotta watch that old ticker, now that you're getting into a different phase of your life. You're going to have your hands full, as it is, dealing with the wife... The kids."

"What?" I gape. "No kids," I cut the air with my hand, "no way."

"No patter of little feet in your living room then?" Damian prowls over, his golden locks glinting in the light from the chandelier above. "You mean, you don't want the little devils waking you up early in the mornings?"

"Nope."

"But...but, you'll have so much fun teaching them to play Cricket. Oh, wait, the potty training comes before that. That could be fun; you'd be a natural at it."

I stare at him in growing horror, "Jesus, I have no idea what you're talking about. I will never have kids as long as I live, okay?" Why is my voice rising, making it sound like I'm panicking?.

Victoria glances across the room at me. I meet her gaze, my features rigid. *Did she hear what I said?* Well, best that she knows. Not that it matters. I don't intend to get into any situation where that is a likely problem between us.

"What do you have against children?" Weston frowns.

"Nothing, so long as they aren't mine."

How can I explain that I don't want my DNA to be propagated? Not after I'd realized exactly how out of control I could get. Not after the time I'd almost killed the man who'd tortured me, who'd hurt me like no one else ever had. The only way to forget those images was to lock them away deep inside, along with my ability to feel. If I can't feel, I won't feel that burning anguish that came from my body physically breaking down—when my mind couldn't steer my responses, when I had lost all ability to be in command. I'll never lose control again. Never.

I widen my stance. "I won't hear another word on this topic from any of you." I survey their faces. "Ever again."

"These guys getting to you, huh?" Sinclair ambles over. He seems rested,

his suit impeccable, as always. Fucker looks about ready to walk the ramp, while I?

I raise my arm and sniff myself. "Shit! I think I forgot to shower after the gym."

"No time for that now," he grins.

"We can push this back by an hour..." I shuffle my feet, "Maybe two?"

"Now come on, you got us all here. Hell, I had to put off taking Summer Christmas shopping, so we could attend your nuptials. The least you could do is give me the satisfaction of going through with it."

"Because, of course, that's a good enough reason to get married, huh?" I glower.

"As good a reason as any, considering you aren't acknowledging the real reasons why you're doing it," Sinclair snorts.

"And you know that, how?"

"Because I was in your place."

"Don't listen to Sterling," Weston leans forward on the balls of his feet. "He's not in any position to give you advice, considering he's got the old ball and chain firmly attached to his ankle."

Sinclair bares his teeth, "Watch what you say, Kincaid."

"Not saying anything wrong."

"Maybe not, but it's not as bad as it's cut out to be either.'

"Isn't it?" Weston drums his fingers on his chest, "That's what the pussy-whipped ones always say."

"I'm not—"

"Sin, darling."

Sinclair whips his head around.

Summer waves at him from the corner, where she's huddled with her friends. "Come over, babe. You gotta hear this."

Sinclair's face lights up. He pivots, moves toward them.

"Pussy-whipped." Weston shakes his head, "The man who couldn't stand to be among people, now willingly allows himself to be drawn into the midst of a crowd." He makes a gagging sound.

"I heard you," Sinclair glowers at him over his shoulder. "I'll get back at you for this, tosser."

"Too fucking late," Weston mutters. "He's sinking, man, and he isn't even aware of it.'

I watch as Sinclair stalks over to Summer. He wraps his arm around the

tiny woman, draws her into his side. She literally melts into him and he nuzzles her hair.

A waitress materializes next to Damian. "God help us. I need a drink." He takes the glass of champagne, glances at the hem of her skirt, which barely reaches mid-thigh.

"When do you get off?"

She bats her eyelids, "Anytime you want."

He downs his drink in one shot. Then hands the empty glass to me.

"The fuck?" I frown, "What are you up to?"

He takes the tray with the remaining drink glasses from her, and thrusts it at Weston, who grunts, "Don't make too much noise, will ya?"

Damian smirks at the girl, "You heard that. I am going to make you scream like you never have before."

Her chest heaves. "I can't wait," she breathes.

He jerks his chin, then stalks to the exit.

"The fuck is he going?"

"I think he's cutting his losses." Weston reaches for a flute.

I take it from him, replacing it with Damian's empty one. "Thanks." I toss it back. The champagne goes down smoothly. "I'll be billing you guys for the expenses of this rush job, of course."

"You're a real piece of shit, you know that?" Weston drawls. "The least you could do is pay for your own wedding."

"Wasn't my idea to have it here in this hotel, losing business for the time we have to shut it down for the ceremony."

His jaw drops. "You serious?"

"Of course." I grab another flute of Champagne from a passing waitress.

"There wasn't anything else scheduled for this room a couple of hours ago, you cheap (insert insult of your choice). Were you expecting a last-minute booking?"

I shrug, "Maybe."

He hands the half-filled tray over to the woman, then grabs two glasses for himself.

The waitress hesitates, then glances at me, "Congratulations, Sir."

"Fuck off," I growl.

She pales, then scurries off.

"Take it easy, man," Weston cautions.

"What-fucking-ever." I glance around the room, filled with the Seven

who are in town...and Summer and her girlfriends.

Victoria glances up at me, her face pale. Her gaze flicks to the door, then she looks away. *Fuck*. I can see the hollows under her cheekbones. Has she eaten anything at all?

"Perhaps it's time to get this shit-show on the road, huh?"

"We're waiting for Jace and Sienna," Weston takes a sip of the champagne. "You stock good stuff, at least. I'll give you that."

"Enjoy it, asshole. You're paying for it, after all."

Weston makes a tscking sound, "Someone's nervous."

"Bitch!" I grumble, "I can't wait for it to be your turn. I'll fucking gloat."

"Sure. Considering I am not about to fall into the trap anytime soon."

A laugh peals out. He glowers across the room. I follow the direction of his gaze to where Amelie is talking with the other women. Amelie gesticulates excitedly, then props a hand on her hip. She tosses her hair, thrusts out a hand, in what I assume is a punchline in her joke. Summer and Isla laugh.

"That woman, she's bloody annoying."

"Who?" I ask, taking in Victoria's erect figure as she stands silent, her lips curved in the makings of a smile.

"Amelie," he snorts, "she talks too much, laughs too much, and have you noticed what she's wearing?"

"Huh?" I glance at her dress, "What's wrong with it?"

"Too much skin." He looks her up and down, "Her legs are too long for her dress. And her hair... Why is she wearing it up? And those fuck me heels? Seriously, you'd think she was trying to attract every male in the vicinity."

"You're attracted to her?"

He laughs, "Not bloody likely." He continues to watch her. "She's not my type."

Amelie turns her head, catches his eye. She draws herself up to her full height and flips him the bird, then turns her back on him.

"What the fuck—?" he sputters.

I laugh, "Yep, she's definitely not your type."

"What do you mean?"

"She has too much spirit for you."

"Hmm." He strokes his chin. "Maybe, maybe not."

Amelie whispers in Victoria's ear and Victoria's smile broadens. Her

features light up. My breath catches. She's beautiful, the woman I'm about to marry.

I roll my shoulders.

Married? I am fucking getting married. Had it been a moment of insanity when I'd told her to get hitched to me? Or... I can't stop my gaze from wandering over her curves. At least, she's not wearing black. Red. That's her color. Her dress is conservatively cut, but it clings to her body, highlighting those high perky breasts, the swell of her hips, those long, long legs that I want wrapped around my waist...my head—No, not yet. First, I am going to bend her over and take her from behind as I've promised myself. Sheath myself in her virgin hole... *Fuck*. My dick lengthens. I've never cared before about being any woman's first in any way...but with Gigi... Something about her makes me want to claim every new experience of hers. She is mine to own. To break. To possess. To use in getting to my final goal.

I pull out my phone, cue it up, then hand it over to Weston.

"What's that?"

"Ask the staff to cue it up over the speakers in the room, will you?"

"Now?"

"Right away."

He snatches up the phone and walks off.

My heart begins to race. Sweat beads my temples. I curl my hands at my sides, then glance over again.

Victoria tips up her head. Our gazes clash—green, emerald seas, stormy with a hint of wariness, fortified with that strength I am coming to associate with her.

She swallows and her lips tremble. I take in her features—her flushed cheeks, the straight set of her shoulders, her stiff spine. She is ready to take on the world, to face anything. The woman has a resilience that belies her delicate build.

I hold out my hand. She draws in a breath. I hold her gaze, jerk my chin. She draws herself up to her full height, hesitates.

She twists her fingers in front of her. Under the skirt of her dress, her thighs move. Is she turned on? Can she sense the imprint of my fingers inside of her, my tongue licking her clit, my mouth biting down on her pussy as I take her to the edge, only to draw back, leaving her waiting, wanting, needing.

The opening notes of *All You Need is Love* by The Beatles fill the room.

The crowd quietens. Her gaze widens.

Come. I curl my fingers.

She takes a step toward me, and another.

I stay where I am, brace my feet against the plush carpets, hand outstretched, stalking her as she closes the distance between us.

When she reaches me, she pauses, glances down at my hand, then back at my face.

I allow a smirk to curl my lips. *Make a dash for it. Try to escape. Do it.*

She places her hand in mine.

I blink.

The warmth of her fingers bleeds into my skin. Her touch is soft, like the petals of a flower, waiting to be torn from its stem. Her palm trembles and she draws back, but I shackle her wrist with my fingers.

She shudders.

I draw her close, weave my fingers with hers. Stare down into her eyes, drinking from that glimmer of anticipation, of surprise, of...Something more I can't quite define. Her scent crowds my nostrils—subtle lilies, a dash of pepper, laced with that sweetness that tells me she's aroused. My groin hardens and my cock thickens. I squeeze her fingers.

"You chose a song from The Beatles," she whispers.

"This is your day." I nod toward the front of the room. "Ready, Gigi?"

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*What did the hamburger buy his sweetheart?
Answer: An onion ring*

Victoria

No, I'm not ready. I'll never be ready. He walks forward and I follow. Not that I have a choice. Not that I am going to resist. It doesn't matter what transpired before this. I am here... With him now... Next to him, as he moves toward where Edward, the same minister who married Sinclair and Summer, waits for us.

"What about the paperwork for the wedding?" I whisper.

"It's taken care of."

"But how...?"

He angles an eyebrow, "Does it matter? I am the third richest man in the country. Do you think something like paperwork would get in the way of me from getting what I want?"

Right. Of course. Anything can be bought with money...except me. He probably thinks that's why I'm standing here in this sham of a ceremony, tying myself to him for as long as he intends to have me? I stiffen my shoulders. I've got this. I'll let him think what he wants. I can get through this. I've made it this far... I'm approaching the last mile. This will make it easier for me to keep an eye on him. Surely, the proximity will ensure I can wrangle my way into his affairs.

I lean into him, "What were the results of the blood tests?"

"You're clean. So am I." He angles his head, "Not that we needed to know in advance of tonight."

Huh? I furrow my brows. *Does that mean...?* He doesn't intend to fuck me on our wedding night? And it would be fucking, make no mistake. He's told me, in no uncertain terms, that he means to have me... Or perhaps he's not the bare back kind...? A hollowness grips my stomach.

"Funny," I whisper back, "I would have thought you'd be the kind who wouldn't let a rubber come between you and your wife."

"You're right," his lips twist.

"I am?"

He nods. "If you had been my wife, I'd have taken your cunt with nothing except our skin separating us. I'd have shagged you raw, until we melded into each other... But then... You're not my wife, are you...? Not really."

My heart twists. A pressure builds behind my eyes, "You're a piece of shit, you know that?"

"Takes one to know one, dear Gigi."

"I fucking hate you." I try to pull away.

His grip tightens and he holds me in place. "Hang onto that sentiment. You'll need it for what I have planned for us tonight."

The song dies away.

That he'd remembered to choose a song...for this event. What does it mean? Does he have feelings for me, despite his tendency to retreat into his douchebag extraordinaire persona?

My head spins.

My belly lurches and my pulse begins to thud. His cryptic comments are getting to me. Hell. What am I doing? Why am I here? Had I actually thought I'd get through this and find a way to rescue Nina?

I glance around the space. Amelie's gaze meets mine. She smiles, holds up crossed fingers, then pushes the tips against her forehead and mimics a gun firing off. A chuckle wells up, even as a tear trails down my cheek.

I will not cry. Will not. I swallow down the lump that blocks my throat. *Just get through this. One step at a time. I can do this. I can.*

Next to Amelie, Summer catches my eye. Her features are pinched. She looks from me to Saint, then back to me. Her forehead creases. I read the question on her face. How I wish I could confide in her. We aren't related by blood, but I'd trusted Summer on sight.

Just like I'd been attracted to Saint right away. And see where that got

me? I force my lips to curve into a smile. Then lean into Saint. He stiffens. Then he brings my fingers up to his lips and kisses my knuckles.

Isla sighs.

Amelie's gaze widens.

Even Summer's features relax at that.

Of course, these women are Summer's friends, and she's married to Sinclair, one of the Seven and among Saint's closest friends. Clearly, they would believe him. They have no reason to doubt his tactics. I have no one here on my side. It is me against all of them. Me and my wits. We are well-acquainted with this situation. I turn forward as Saint comes to a stop.

He releases my hand.

The doors to the room open behind us. I hear whispers, then footsteps sound. Amelie appears next to me holding a posy of flowers.

She thrusts it at me, and I take it.

"How?"

She smiles, "Saint messaged me to get them from the flower shop in the lobby."

"He did?"

I glance at the bouquet of delicate blood red lilies. Is that why he'd asked me what my favorite flower was? My head whirls. This makes no sense. Though it's a relief to have something in my hands to hold onto, instead of wringing them in front of me.

Silence descends on the crowd. Edward looks between us. "In what is becoming a practice for quick weddings among the Seven, I am pleased to welcome all of you here today to celebrate the union of Saint Jordan Killian Caldwell with Victoria."

Behind me, I hear the sound of whispering, a small commotion. Edward looks over our heads, "Late but you're in time... Jace and Sienna."

"Sorry, Father... We rushed over as soon as we heard." Jace grins.

"You're forgiven, considering..." Edward nods at someone I can't see.

"We're here now," Sienna's voice interrupts. "Didn't mean to steal the attention from the bride."

I glance sideways in time to see Sienna walk up to take her place in one of the chairs. She places one hand on her belly, waves at me. "I'm sorry," she mouths.

I shake my head. My gaze slips back to her belly. I can't stop a smile from curving my features. How would it be to be pregnant? To swell with a

child? Saint's child. A girl with his dark hair and blue eyes, that nervous energy coiled in her as she beams at boys and reduces them to mush.

Jace dips his head and places his hand over Sienna's. He kisses her forehead. They smile at each other in that secret way couples who love each other have. Something that I won't.

Tears prick the backs of my eyes again. *Jesus, the hell is wrong with me?*

More waterworks. Must be the prospect of getting married for the first time that is doing me in. It seems...to mean something. Despite the fact that it is meant to be a sham; standing next to Saint, facing the minister, seems to signify a start. A change of circumstances. Something important.

Saint shifts next to me. Heat from his body flows around me, warms my chilled skin. Goosebumps flare on my arms.

Edward turns to Saint, "Do you, Saint Jordan Killian Caldwell take Victoria..." He turns to me.

"Just Victoria," I mumble.

"Take Just Victoria," Edward smiles, "to be your lawfully-wedded wife?"

Behind me, a chuckle runs through the crowd.

This is happening, really happening. I swallow hard. My palms begin to sweat and the bouquet slips from my hands.

Saint swoops down so fast, I blink. He straightens, holding the bouquet, then turns and shoves it at Damian, who takes it from him. He glances past Damian, who's lips curve in a genuine smile.

Saint makes a noise in his throat. A warning? Nah, it can't be. He has no reason to be jealous anyway. When Saint is in the room, everyone else recedes into the background.

"Saint?" Edward prompts.

Saint squares his shoulders. I hear him take in a breath. *Huh. Is he as nervous as I am?* I peek a glance at his profile—patrician nose, square jaw, the hint of a cleft in his chin. His mouth tightens. His jaw tics... He is feeling something, all right. Perhaps this entire situation is as strange for him as it is for me? Of course, he's the one who proposed it, so why does he seem so unsure?

He shuffles his feet and his shoulders flex.

"Saint?" Edward asks, his brow furrowed.

"Ask me again," he growls.

Edward wipes all expression from his face. "Do you, Saint Jordan Killian Caldwell take Victoria to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold,

to cherish and protect, 'til death do you part?"

Saint's throat moves as he swallows. The skin of his knuckles is stretched tight. He's...under pressure, all right. Nervous energy emanates from him. The force of his dominance pins me in place; it's mixed with something else—anger, frustration, the usual edginess, but multiplied.

He rakes his fingers through his hair. It's the first time I've seen Saint uncertain...unsure. My heart twists. A hot sensation stabs at my chest. I reach over and run my finger over the back of his palm.

He stiffens. Then catches my hand, threads his fingers with mine.

A murmur runs through his friends. Edward shoots them a glance. It dies down.

Saint straightens, grips my hand. He stares ahead. "I do." His voice is hard, confident. I swallow. If I closed my eyes and focused on his voice, I'd think he means it. If I bring my attention to where we are joined... Where his hand encloses mine, where he holds my hand firmly, his much bigger palm engulfing mine, I will have no doubt that he means every word of his promise.

I swallow. Heat flushes my skin. The blood thuds at my temples, my pulse pounding. This...this is so right... That surely, it is all wrong. This, whatever is between us, cannot survive. There is no space for it. We are two people colliding at the wrong place, wrong time... Nothing good can come of this... Unless I find a way to make this right. I have to hold on to the time I've been given with him, show him the real me. Love him, open myself up to him, and hope and pray that when I leave, he will not hate me. That he'll realize I had no choice but to do what I did.

I draw in a breath, focus on Edward's words.

"Do you Victoria take Saint Jordan Killian Caldwell, to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, 'til death do you part?"

"I do." As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I know that I mean it. Something inside of me seems to settle. A calmness washes over me. It's as if my entire life, I've been headed in this direction. Everything I've done and experienced, all of it has brought me here, to stand next to Saint, holding his hand in mine as he turns to face me.

"I suppose it was too much of a rush to get rings so—"

"I have a ring," Saint replies.

"What?" I open and close my mouth.

A murmur runs through the assembled group.

"You do?" Edward frowns, then jerks his chin, "Okay, then."

Saint pats his breast pocket, his forehead crinkling. "Uh, maybe I forgot it..."

"Saint!" Edward admonishes him.

He releases my hand to feel his left pocket. "Oh, shit," he grimaces. "I can't believe I left it behind."

"Come on, Saint," Arpad calls out.

"Get with the program, you tosser," Damian smirks.

"You losing your touch, old sport?" Weston chuckles.

Edward holds his forefinger and thumb to his lips and blows. A piercing whistle echoes through the space.

The group settles.

"Right, now that you grownups, who prefer to behave like children, have settled down..." He trains a stern gaze on Saint. "Stop dicking around, will you?" Edward scolds him.

Laughter breaks out from the crowd.

Saint pats the right-hand pocket of his slacks, pulls out a ring. "Here it is."

He reaches for my left hand, slips it on my ring finger. An emerald, set in a simple platinum setting, gleams in the light from above.

"It belonged to my mother," he says.

I shoot him a surprised glance.

"Don't read anything into it." His features harden, "It happened to be at hand."

Right.

"You may kiss the bride," Edward grins at us.

"No, wait—" I begin to protest, but Saint hauls me close, bends me at the waist, then he kisses me. It's not hard, not punishing, nothing like his previous kisses. He nibbles on my lower lip, and when I open my mouth, he licks his tongue across my upper lip, tracing the curve of my cupid's bow. He wraps one arm around my shoulders, curls the other around my waist. He pulls me so close that his warmth surrounds me, his body shields me, and his shoulder blocks out the sight of everything else. I close my eyes, sink into the warm, trembling, buttery sensations that melt my insides. My toes curl and my scalp tingles. All the pores on my body pop. He tilts his head, deepens the kiss, tangles his tongue with mine. His taste is enticing, with that dark edge that calls to me, pulls me in, tugs me in, shudders down my spine, coils in the

pit of my belly, slides warmth between my thighs. Liquid heat bleeds through my veins, turning me into a mass of quivering, burning, aching goo. An aching hollowness that wants, needs, demands— He breaks the kiss.

I open my eyes, gaze into those burning cerulean depths of his. His features wear an expression of shock...surprise...lust... His nostrils flare. His gaze drops to my mouth. "Gigi, I—"

A burst of applause rings out. I shudder. He firms his lips. A nerve throbs at his temple. He straightens, pulling me up with him.

The clapping intensifies.

He smiles down at me. The expression on his face is open, carefree. So damn happy. In that second, he's a man, I'm a woman. We have our lives together in front of us. United. Never alone. I have him. He is mine. For now. For this second. My lips curve. His smile widens, white teeth sparkling against his tanned skin. He winds his arm around my waist, pulls me into his side as he turns.

"Bravo."

"Beautiful."

"Congratulations."

"Well done!"

Confetti rains down on us. I blink, "Oh."

"Surprised?" he whispers.

"I wasn't expecting..." What? Nothing. Anything. I try to find the words to explain, but my brain cells have all turned to mush. "I... I don't know what to say."

"Enjoy it." He brings me in closer, and I can't stop myself from melting into his side. "Today is your day, Gigi."

He flattens his big hand over my hip. His grasp is warm, possessive. When he's like this... I can almost believe he means the tender words he's just said.

"You...you confuse me, Saint." I turn to him. "One moment, you're the most heartless bastard I've ever met... The next..." I shake my head.

"The next?" He prompts.

"You seem human, almost vulnerable." I search his features. "I think you hate yourself for not being able to conceal your feelings from me."

"Do you?" His gaze falters... Those blue eyes lighten, and for an instant I am sure I can see right through that façade he loves to wear like armor.

"You don't fool me," I declare.

"Good." His lips curve in a smile that's genuine, and predatory, and so... Saint. Filled with secrets, as if he senses what I am thinking, as if he knows what I want before I do... As if he can anticipate my every move before I make it.

"That will make the upcoming days more of a challenge."

"What?" I squint up at him.

"Enjoy it, dear wife," his features harden, "for things are about to change."

I stiffen, peer into his face.

He's wearing the same smile... But already, that hint of sensitivity that I'd spotted is gone. He jerks his chin, nods toward his friends, his expression still open, his handsome profile every bit as gorgeous, as genuine as he'd seemed a moment ago. But his eyes... Those blue eyes are dark...almost black. Was everything he'd done today an act? Had he been leading me on? And I'd wanted to believe him. For a few minutes there, I had dared to hope.

His lips curl.

He'd taken me to the edge, pretended to care, then he'd pushed me over and watched me fall.

"You bastard," I try to pull away.

His hand around my waist is solid though. He keeps me pinned to his side. He lowers his chin, nuzzles my temple, "Keep that smile, Gigi. You don't want them to know that something is wrong, do you?"

I swallow.

"Do you, pet?"

"No... No."

"Good." He kisses my temple, his breath hot like a lover's touch, "Store up the happy memories, for soon you'll wish that you never set eyes on me."

"Newsflash, asshole," I keep the smile plastered to my face, "I already wish I'd never met you, that I had never agreed to come to England, that I'd never posed as Adam's wife, that—" I stop to take a breath.

He grins down at me, "Go on, don't let me stop you."

I grit my teeth, hold his burning gaze. How had I thought there was passion in his eyes? It's a need to get even. To get revenge. That's all this is about. Retribution. I am a pawn caught between two opposing forces, and by the time this charade is over, there may be nothing left of me—nothing but this burning need to avenge myself. With Saint. With the Mafia. With Antonio... With everyone who has taken advantage of me. I've had enough

of being backed into a corner, of being underestimated. I am going to make sure this brute realizes it too, by the time I am done.

I direct my next words at him with deadly intent, "I wish that I had asked someone else to be my Dom."

His gaze sharpens and his fingers dig into the curve of my hip.

"You dare say that to my face?" His nostrils flare. Color sears his cheeks, and damn it, but my sex clenches instantly. Goosebumps flare on my skin and a shiver runs down my back. This...this is what I want. Saint—angry, blinded with jealousy, coming for me, taking me with no quarter. This language I understand. This passion is what we have in common and I am going to make the most of it.

"Why, worried you won't measure up to Adam Rhodes?"

A vein pops at his temple. "You know how to push me over the edge, don't you?"

"Maybe I should have asked one of your friends." I glance past him to where Damian is watching us. He raises the bouquet of flowers. I smile, shake my head, "Yeah, who better than a rock star god to take my virgin ass?"

"You cunt," he bares his teeth, and a little thrill shudders down my spine. This is it. I've done it now. I've broken through his control. What is he going to do next?

Saint doesn't disappoint.

He bends his knees, peers into my eyes, "I think it's time we consummated this marriage, don't you?"

Saint

"Turn around and hug the post."

She tips up her head and glares at me.

I'd rushed her up here to my suite in the penthouse of the hotel, without bothering to say goodbye to my friends. If they thought I was in a hurry to get her alone in a room, well, that's too bad. I don't give a fuck what kind of impression I left behind. All that matters is getting her to obey. To bend her to my will, to lean her over the bed and teach her a lesson. But first— "Do it," I growl from my position near the doorway.

She hesitates, twists her fingers. The emerald of her ring catches the light from above and sparkles. *Fucking hell*. I'd given her the ring that had belonged to my mother. The one she had given to me before she'd left me and my father.

I'd held onto it, the last reminder of the only parent who had loved me. Why had I given it to her? Why had I carried it around with me since I'd met her? Had I subconsciously known that the occasion would present itself, and had wanted to be prepared? No matter. It is done. No going back now. Not that it means anything, of course. An empty gesture. It had been the most convenient solution to send a message to the Mafia that this is serious. They'll believe I've swallowed their bait. They'll see me as a sitting patsy, ready to be reeled in by them. Really, it's a way to lure them into reveal their next hand... Meanwhile I have more pressing matters. Namely, a wife who insists on baiting me, throwing her past in my face, daring me to do the one

thing I swore I wouldn't—fuck her like I mean it.

Do I want to go through with it? Am I so taken in by her that I'll throw all caution to the wind and transform this into a real wedding night?

She draws herself up to her full height.

I jerk my chin in the direction of the massive four-poster bed. The best money can buy, of course. I had it flown in from Russia. It belonged to some fucking Czar or the other... The fuck I care? I'd seen it at Christie's and wanted it. The only piece of furniture in the entire suite that I had chosen. All with an eye for my relaxation, of course. I smirk.

The pillars are made of solid oak and wide enough for the purpose I have in mind.

I hadn't meant to sleep with her tonight, but she had eviscerated my carefully calculated control, something she is surprisingly skilled at doing. Too bad. She'll have to cope with the fall-out. She is going to need all that gutsiness she's shown so far to get her through the night.

"Don't keep me waiting," I snarl.

She pales, then marches across the room to the closest post.

"Lean in, Gigi. Wrap your arms around it."

She does.

I approach her and she stiffens.

I press my palm into the small of her back and her entire body trembles. I apply enough pressure for her breasts to flatten against the surface of the post.

"Stay there," I growl.

She stands motionless.

I step toward the walk-in closet, choose a couple of ties, then turn and stalk toward her.

"What are you doing?" She half turns.

"Don't," I command.

She pauses, then faces forward.

I cup the back of her head, turn her face, until her cheek is pressed into the wood.

"Like that. Don't want to hurt you now, do we?"

"You're concerned about me?"

"Only because you're my property. You serve a purpose."

"And what's that?"

"Haven't you figured it out, Gigi?"

I reach over her, twist one tie around her wrists. She stiffens. "Why are you—?"

"No questions," I snap.

She purses her lips together, gazes up at me as I test the knots. Good. There's enough leverage for her to move her wrists, so the blood circulation will not get cut off. At the same time, it's secure enough that she can't escape.

I step back, then twist the other around her eyes. "No, Saint—"

"Any more talking and I'll stuff your panties in your mouth."

She wheezes. "B...but."

"Take what's coming to you. Don't you want to show me how good a submissive you can be?"

"You're supposed to be taking care of my needs, you asshole."

I slap her butt.

"What the fuck—?" she howls.

"Language Gigi."

"What?"

"If you want to curse, I prefer alphahole, I've told you that. I won't repeat myself again. And taking care of your desires is exactly what I'm doing."

"Not," she huffs.

"Don't mock it 'til you try it, darling."

She firms her lips.

I step back, then survey my handiwork. Her back is stiff, her shoulders straight. Good. I want her to fight this. Need her to resist this. Hope she understands that this is the only way. For her? For me? Of course, I am being selfish. I get off on her pain, on how I'll feel when I have her broken and begging and trusting only me to take care of her needs. That there is no going back now. I am her salvation. Her only hope. She has to give up her secrets to me, has to tell me why she is here. That is the only way for me to accept her... And *I want that*. I drag my fingers through my hair. *More than anything else*.

Turning, I march to the desk by the window, rummage around in the drawer, until I find what I am looking for. Clasp the pair of scissors, I walk back to stand behind her.

"Wha...what are you going to do?"

"Shh," I lean forward and lick her lips. "Trust me."

"Why...why are you saying that?" She swallows.

"You'll see." I squat down, then take the scissors to the hem of her dress. I drag the blades upward, cutting through the fabric. I straighten, snipping away at the cloth and it parts all the way to the neckline. A final snip and the dress parts.

"If this is some warped way of punishing me—"

I laugh. "Punishing? I haven't even started, my lovely wife."

She swallows. "Don't...don't call me that."

"Why not?" I switch the scissors to my other hand, then drag my knuckles across her ring.

Her fingers tremble.

"We were just married."

"I was there, you...you brute."

"Finally, your vocabulary is expanding."

I step back, then cut through the sleeves. The dress pools around her feet. Another snip, and her bra drops off. I return the scissors to the drawer, then turn back to her. The long slender column of her back meets the flare of her hips. Her long, toned legs end in those fuck-me stilettos she so favors.

I move closer. "The first time I saw you, I swore I'd have you naked and begging for my touch."

"Fuck you."

"You bet, but first—" I reach down, tear off her panties.

She screams. Her entire body curves. Her butt trembles. Her thigh muscles coil. I kick her legs apart and she wheezes, "Untie me, you scoundrel."

I chuckle, "If those are the extent of your insults, I fear there's much I have to teach you."

"Bastard."

"Technically, I am not. Though my father would have wished otherwise."

"I don't want to hear your sob story."

"But I want your sobs, little Gigi." I drop to my haunches in between her parted thighs, lower my head and swipe my tongue up between her pussy lips.

She cries out.

My breath catches, "Fuck, you're soaking."

"I...it's a mistake."

"Tell that to your body. You want me, Gigi. You know how that makes me feel?"

I wrap my fingers around her thighs, then thrust my tongue inside her soaking channel.

"Oh, my god," she moans.

My dick lengthens. My groin hardens. I tilt my face, then thrust my tongue inside her cunt again and again. I lick up her pussy juice, swipe my tongue all the way up into the valley between her arsecheeks. I curl my tongue inside her puckered hole and she whines. "Oh, Saint, please..."

"Like that, Gigi," I mutter against the most forbidden part of her. "Tell me what you want."

"You..." she gasps. "I want you..."

I rise to my feet, unzip my pants; shove my hand down my boxers and take out my cock. My blood throbs at my temples, in my balls. "Where..." I clear my throat, "where do you want me?"

She bites on her lower lip.

"Where Gigi?"

"I ... I.." she stutters.

My vision tunnels. I swipe my throbbing cock across the valley between her arsecheeks. She shudders.

"Do you want me here?"

She nods.

"Say it aloud."

"Take me, Saint. Please."

Thank Fuck. I draw back, then insert my thumb inside her puckered hole. She groans. I ease my finger inside. She bangs her forehead against the pillar. With my remaining fingers I scoop up some more of the moisture from her pussy, then add a finger to my thumb.

"Oh." Her shoulders hunch. "It's... it's..."

What?"

"Different," she huffs.

"No shit." I set my jaw, "I am going to ensure you never forget our first time."

I dip my other palm between her thighs. I cup her pussy, shove three fingers inside her soaking channel, and her entire body bucks. She throws her head back, her hair rippling about her shoulders. "Ohmigod," she gasps. "Saint... I... I..." A trembling sweeps up her legs. Her breathing goes shallow. A whine spills from her lips. "I'm...going to come—" she gasps.

The doorbell sounds and I pull out my fingers.

"No!" Her body jerks as if she's unable to stop herself. She whips her head in my direction. "Don't you dare leave me—"

The bell sounds again.

"Sorry, sweetheart, no choice."

I take a step back, lose my footing and stumble. *Shit*. I'm as off balance as she is. Truth be told... If the doorbell hadn't rung—as I'd planned for it to—I'd have taken her right then, in the arse, then proceeded to tear into her pussy too. Good thing I don't trust myself around her anymore. *Since when have I needed checks and balances around another person, huh?*

Since I met her.

Since she'd flipped the entire situation by proposing the one thing I've wanted more than anything—to take her as mine, to make her submit, to bend her will to mine, have her shatter around me. *Fuck*. I drag my fingers through my hair. Who is breaking whom here? I'm no longer sure.

The bell rings again. She straightens, "Saint...?"

I don't reply. I pivot on my heels, push my dick back into my pants as I walk out of the bedroom, past the living room, and wrench the door open.

A room service attendant straightens. Her face pales. On the cart in front of her is a bottle of Champagne, a bowl of strawberries, and a variety of cheeses and dips.

"Should I wheel this in?" Her voice trembles.

"No," I growl.

"Ah...compliments of the—"

"Leave," I pull the cart into the room.

"The staff and the management wish you—"

"Fuck off—"

"But... Damian wanted me to tell you—"

I glower at her.

She pales, opens her mouth again.

"The fuck?" I jerk my chin over her head. "You tell that motherfucker to stay away from me and my wife and one more thing—"

"Wh...what?"

Sweat beads her upper lip. *Good god, isn't there anyone who can talk to me without looking like they are about to have a coronary? Yeah, that's where the Seven come in.* Fuckers can be counted on taking me down a notch at any time. And her, of course. She can go toe to toe with me. I frown. *How dare she?* She is going to be taught a lesson, all right.

"Uh... Mr. Caldwell," the waitress stutters.

"Make sure I'm not disturbed again."

I slam the door in her ashen face. *Good, no one should be happy today.* This wedding isn't a cause for celebration. It is...a fucking massacre. Mine... and hers. I am sinking into a maelstrom of emotions, caught in a quicksand that threatens to overwhelm me. Soon, I will be in over my head. Only thing? I am taking her down with me.

I shove the cart into the bedroom.

"Saint?" Victoria gasps, "Who...was that?"

"Not your concern."

"Why do you sound angry?" she scowls.

"I'm not angry."

"Are you hungry?"

"Are you?"

"So, you're hungry." She nods.

"I'm not, and I told you to keep your mouth shut, didn't I?"

"Definitely hangry."

"I'm not a fucking child," I scowl.

"You're acting like one." Her lips curve. The glistening flesh calls to me. I could forget all this. I could walk over, kiss her, untie her, throw her on the bed, climb on top of the bed and bury my aching cock inside her soft, gorgeous, heated pussy. I could—

"Saint."

"What?" I growl, shaking my head. *Jesus, being this close to her is doing weird things to my head. Maybe she's right. Maybe I am hungry. Is that why I am feeling lightheaded?*

She shuffles her feet, "Did you order us something to eat."

I sneer, "I ordered something all right."

28

Victoria

He prowls closer, his footsteps muffled by the carpet as he approaches. The creaking of wheels gets louder—he definitely ordered something. That is a food cart, isn't it? The clank of silverware, of plates being moved around, reaches me.

I sense him shift his weight. There's silence then a pop. I jump. "What the —?"

"Relax," he laughs. "Thought the occasion called for some bubbles, don't you think?"

I worry my lower lip. *Should I agree?* I swallow and my throat protests. Cold, bubbly champagne. I hadn't managed to nick a glass at the wedding—at my own wedding. I worry the ring on my left ring finger. The weight is already familiar. *Damn, that's not good. I won't be wearing it for much longer, after all.*

The sound of liquid hitting a glass reaches me. My tongue swells. I lick my lips.

"Want a sip, darlin'?"

It's fine. It won't hurt. Besides I could do with some Dutch courage about now. "Yes, please."

"You're forgetting something."

Am I? What... Oh! "Yes, please, Sir!"

"That's my girl."

I flush. *Shit, why does that make me so happy? I'm not going to pander to*

the ego of this over-the-top, tyrannical, motherfucker of a guy who is...my husband. Bloody hell. "Can I get that champagne?" I whisper.

"Of course."

His footsteps grow closer. Something cool touches my lips. The cold liquid fills my mouth. Bubbles break on my tongue. *Yum.* I swallow it down, open my mouth again. More of the bubbles flow in, overflow my chin. Coldness hits my chest.

"Oops."

More liquid slides down my skin. I shiver.

"Sorry, babe."

"No, you're not." I lick the remaining liquid from my lower lip.

"Do that again and I won't be responsible for what happens next."

"Oh," I swallow.

"Not that either," he groans. "When you form your mouth into that shape, all I can think of is having it wrapped around my cock."

Wetness pools between my legs...and it's not from the champagne. My nipples pebble and my sex clenches. I chafe my thighs, try to hold in the ache. *Shit, this is crazy.* Perhaps it's the forced not-being-able-to-climax thing that has me wound so tightly. I am on the edge of the precipice. One more touch, one more caress of those fingers in the most intimate of my places, one more kiss, one more nip on my clit, a tug on my nipples and I'll shatter.

"Saint," I whine.

"I know."

A wetness curls around my nipple. I gasp, "What are you doing?"

"What does it feel like?" He licks the cold champagne off the curve of my breast.

I whimper.

He swipes his way down the underside of my breast. His large palms descend on either side of my hips. He holds me down as I mentally follow the progress of his tongue, down my belly, to my navel. He dips his tongue inside my belly button. My pussy seems to fold in on itself.

"Damn you," I huff.

He nips on the sensitive skin above my pussy. I jump.

"You're forgetting something again, babe."

Right.

He presses a kiss to the top of my aching, throbbing, trembling core.

"Say it. Go on."

"Damn you, *Sir*," I snarl.

"Good girl." He drags his chin across my clit. I shudder. *Omigod*. That was... That is... Oh! He rubs his whiskered skin straight down my lower lips. My thighs spasm and my scalp tingles. Goosebumps pop across my skin. "Please, Saint."

"You've got a choice now."

"I do?"

I sense him nod against my core. "You answer my questions correctly and I'll let you come. Get them wrong and... Well... You'll have to find out what happens then." He nips on my clit, I moan. *Hell, this... This is torture. This is heaven*. This, with his face between my thighs as he presses a soft kiss to my dripping cunt. As he licks up my cum from the inside of my thigh, then straightens to press his lips to mine. "Open."

I oblige, and he slides his tongue inside my mouth. The taste of me, of him, of the lingering tang of the champagne, goes straight to my head.

When he tears his mouth from mine, I sway toward him, seeking more, wanting more.

"Saint," I huff, "Please, Sir, please."

He laughs. "Do you hear yourself, little Gigi? You're too greedy."

"I'm not."

"Yep, you are." The heat of his body recedes and a cry escapes my lips. I strain against my restraints. Reach out with my leg, feeling for him, searching for him.

"Now. Now." He clicks his tongue. "I promised to take care of you, didn't I?"

I nod.

"I'll give you what you're aching for, but first you need to answer a few questions."

"What the fuck, Saint?" I cry out. "Another bloody riddle?"

"You know I can't live without them."

"I thought you weren't dependent on anything or anyone," I pout.

"Indulge me on this one."

"Like I have a choice?" I toss my head.

"You do. Of course, you do."

Not. He knows it. I know it. So why the bloody hell is he pretending otherwise?

"Ask your stupid questions," I mumble.

"You hungry?"

"Is that the question?"

"Yes."

I pause, tilt my head. "Is this a trick? So help me, Saint, if it is—"

He pops a cracker, topped with something savory, into my mouth. I crunch down. Flavors explode on my tongue. *Yum*. I crunch down the food. Then open my lips. "More."

"First tell me what that was."

"That's what you want to know?"

I sense him nod.

Silence stretches. I run my tongue over my teeth, suck down the taste, "That was...hummus?"

"Well done, Gigi."

His footsteps thump on the carpet. Then another cracker is placed on my tongue. This one is slathered with something pungent, sharp, salty. The taste overwhelms me. I gulp it down, then scrunch up my face, "Ugh..." I grimace.

"Was that...blue cheese?"

"You didn't like it?"

"I hate aged cheese. It tastes like old shoe."

"You've tasted old shoe?" I hear the smirk in his voice.

"It smells like old socks. They're similar in taste, right?"

"Don't know," he chuckles. "I've never tasted it myself. Open," he commands.

I part my lips and he places another cracker in my mouth. "And this?"

Complex textures—buttery, soft, creamy... I crunch down on the cracker and fresh taste envelops my taste buds. I swallow, smack my lips. "Burrata," I exclaim.

"You weren't kidding. You do prefer fresh cheeses, hmm?"

"I never lie when food is concerned," I sniff.

"No, only when it's real life."

My shoulders droop; my face heats. "Damn you, Saint."

"Yeah."

There's silence a beat, then another. I can't hear him. *Where is he? What is he doing?*

Something brushes against my lips; I open my mouth again, crunch down on what I assume is a cracker. Fire erupts on my tongue. "What the—?" I splutter. My eyes water. My mouth feels like it's been doused in flames.

"Here."

The cool edge of glass is placed against my mouth. He holds the back of my head in place. "Drink up."

I hesitate.

"It's water, Gigi. I am not completely insensitive."

Right. I chug down the icy liquid and the edge of the searing pain recedes.

"What was that?" I gasp.

"You tell me."

I shake my head, "I barely tasted the food, you jerk."

He chuckles. "Go on, bet you can take a guess."

I set my jaw.

He caresses my pussy, which instantly clenches. *Hell, what am I doing?* I hate him, yet I need him. I can't stop my body from leaning into his touch. Push my pelvis forward, so more of his skin connects with mine. *Bloody. Hell.* "Why are you doing this?" I snarl. "Why can't you simply fuck me and be done with it."

He leans in close enough for his nose to bump mine. "Because that's not what you want."

"And you know what I want?"

I sense him nod. "Of course. Why do you think I accepted your offer?"

"Because you want to humiliate me?"

"You mistake my intent." He clicks his tongue, "This was so you could find out more about your tastes."

"That's what you think this is?" I scoff. "You having my best interests at heart?"

"Not really." He pauses. "I'm using you to get back at the men who changed my life and those of the Seven."

"Has it occurred to you that they're using me too?"

Silence.

"What...what did they do to you Saint?"

He stiffens. Anger radiates off of him. I flinch.

What the hell am I doing? Why did I ask him that? Is it because my eyes are bound? Is it because I can't see him, that I am so tuned into him that I can discern the imperceptible edge of fear—helplessness even—that bleeds from him? Nah, that's my imagination. There is not an ounce of weakness about this man. Not only am I unable to see, but my remaining senses have been fooled by him as well.

"It's fine," I swallow. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"You giving up so easily?" His hard voice whips through my head.

I straighten. "Giving up?" I allow a smile to curve my lips. "I haven't made it this far by losing hope. It's the only thing I have to cling to." *And you? What about you? Why do I want to lean on you?* What insanity is this, that even bound and blindfolded, knowing he can do anything to me, I trust him...to play with my body any which way he wants?

That's all this is—a carnal need for him to possess me, break me, show me how it can be between a woman and a man. So what, if there aren't any emotions involved? It'll make it easier for me to lure him to whatever... Whatever it is that the Mafia has planned for him. I don't care what happens after that. I don't. As long as they free my friend. That's all this is about. It doesn't matter that my heart will be shattered by the end. I'll find a way to go on. I always do. I tip up my chin, "Chili pepper."

"What?" He sounds surprised.

"That was a five-spice sauce."

"You're right."

He pauses, then tears the blindfold from my eyes. I blink. His face comes into focus. "So...you'll untie me now?"

He scratches his chin.

I frown. "The deal was, if I got the answers right you would—"

"I would...?"

An understanding sinks into my mind. "You... You..."

"I'll...?" he prompts.

"You'll let me come?" I train my gaze on his face. *Please. Please say, yes. Please.*

He shakes his head.

I stare.

"I changed my mind," he smirks.

"What?" That familiar anger thrums up my spine. My blood thuds at my temples and my heartbeat ratchets up.

He steps to the cart, scoops up some of that last spicy dip onto his cracker, then pops it in his mouth. Color sears his cheeks, then he reaches for more of the Champagne and washes it down. "Whew, you weren't kidding there. It is hot."

"You...you horrible man."

He chuckles.

"You can't do this to me."

He cuts off a slice of cheese—not the blue cheese, something else that looks like cheddar?—and bites into it. His jaws move. He tips the bottle of Champagne up, then chugs down more liquid. The strong column of his throat flexes as he swallows it down. *Why the hell does he have to look sexy, doing something as simple as eating?* He reaches for a strawberry, is about to pop it into his mouth then stops.

"Do you like strawberries, Gigi?"

"What?"

He frowns, "Answer the question."

Class-A wanker. That's what he is. A douchebag of the first order. A bloody, horrendous brute of a man who...hides a hurt that is eating away at him from the inside. I blink. *Shit, I don't need flashes of insight about his character...* That will only elicit empathy for him. *Am I looking for a spark of redemption in this guy? No, that would only make what I have to do to him so much worse.*

I purse my lips and he scowls, "Yes or No?"

Shit, nothing is simple with this guy, is it? He is so...so...complicated.

He glares at me and I shiver. My scalp tingles and my toes curl. *Oh, shit, this...is not going to end well. Not at all.* "Yes," I croak. "I... I love strawberries."

"So do I." His eyes twinkle, "Especially when they're soaked in your cum." He steps around, then drops to his knees between my still-parted legs.

29

Saint

I press the fruit into the opening of her pussy. She inhales. I drag the strawberry up her dripping cunt, then bring it to my mouth. I bite into the fruit and the tart, tangy, fruity taste bursts on my tongue. Laced with it, is the sugary sweet taste of her cum. My dick tents my pants and my vision tunnels. *Fuck. I need more.* Much more. More of this, more of her essence. I swallow the rest of the fruit, toss away the stem, then reach for another strawberry. They are now my favorite fruit ever. I fit the fruit in the opening of her channel. Her entire body shudders. "Saint," she breathes.

Yeah, I know exactly how she's feeling.

I scoop up more of her juices, bite off the entire fruit. The tastes fill my senses, go to my head. The world tilts. *Fuck. What is she doing to me?* Dropping the stem, I snatch up another of the berries. I slide it into her wet pussy.

She groans.

"How does it feel?" my voice cracks. I swallow. *Shit, this entire experience is getting to me.* I set out to show her I could have my way with her; turns out, I am the one at her mercy. Starved for her taste, addicted to her scent. Needing to wallow in her gorgeous essence, mark her with my cum. Stake my claim on her before this—whatever it is between us—comes to an end.

"Tell me, Gigi." I press the berry deeper into her sweet cunt.

"It... it," her voice shakes, "It makes me want more. So much more. I

want to taste it." She gulps, "Please... Sir."

Her words sink into my blood, race straight to my belly and coil in my gut. *Fuck this.* I slip the strawberry out, then rise up to my feet and offer it to her, "Eat it."

She takes a bite, chews and swallows. Her gaze grows heavy. Her cheeks flush.

"Well?" I frown. "How does it taste?"

"Sexy." Her blush deepens. "I mean...it...tastes like nothing I've ever eaten before."

I crunch on the rest of the fruit, toss away the stem. "Want more?"

She nods.

I scoop up another. Reaching between us, I roll the fruit in the cum that trails down her inner thigh. I bite on it, offer her the rest. Take another strawberry, stroke it up her pussy.

Her legs buckle. I grip her shoulder to support her. Offer the fruit to her, then eat the rest. I repeat it with another berry, then another. My breathing deepens and sweat beads my spine. My mouth waters; my dick lengthens. I reach for the next berry, but when I press it to her cunt, she groans, "I can't... I want..." She arches her spine, pushes the back of her head into my chest.

She parts her lips and I pop the strawberry in. She tears off half of it. I bite down on the other half, chew and swallow, then go in for seconds. I press my lips to hers, lick up the tangy taste of the berry, the sweetness of her mouth, the complex notes of her cum. My dick throbs and a pulse beats to life on my eyelids, at my temples, even in my fucking balls. I toe off my shoes, then reach down, shove down my zipper, then my pants and my briefs; kick them aside. I grab my dick, position it between her arsecheeks. The head of my weeping cock, nudges against her back hole.

I bring my fingers around to the front, slip them inside her cunt. Her pussy clamps down on me. I groan, "Fuck, you're so ready for me. Can you feel that?"

"Saint." She turns her head, licks the side of my jaw. Another ripple of pleasure tears down my spine. A pressure builds in my groin. I push forward, until my dick is inside her puckered hole. A whine slips from her lips. "It's too much," she gasps.

"Not enough." I bring my other hand around, insert my thumb into her mouth. She bites down on my digit, and I feel the pull all the way down to my shaft.

"Gigi, fuck," I groan, "I need to be inside of you."

"Then do it." She nuzzles my cheek. "Take me. Come inside me."

"What?"

"Do it the right way," she whispers.

"It has to be this way." I growl.

"It doesn't have to be like this," she pleads.

"You worried that it will hurt?" My thighs spasm and my cock lengthens inside of her.

She gasps, a bead of sweat running down her temple, "Not me, but I think you're not ready to face whatever is between us."

I frown. "And what's that, exactly?"

"You pretend not to feel anything, but the fact is..." she peers up at me from under her sooty eyelashes, "...fact is that you sense the connection, how attracted you are to me, and it worries you."

"Me?" I snort. "Sweetheart, the only thing you should be worried about is how much of me you can take inside of you." I angle my hips and my shaft slips in through her tight ring.

She gasps. A growl rips from me. I grit my teeth, stay where I am. *Stay. Stay.* I set my jaw so hard, pain shoots up my face. "Fuck," I snarl. "You're fucking beautiful."

"And you're a fucking coward."

The drumming at my temple intensifies. A tightness pushes down on my ribcage. Sweat pours down my spine until my shirt sticks to my back. Fucking with her is primal, angry, visceral...a messy coalescence of our combined body fluids, of lust and caution, a need to subdue and suppress, a primal urge to own, to mate. To push myself and her to the edge where nothing else remains. Not our pasts, not her betrayal, not the way I have to use her for my own selfish ends. Not the sensual way she rubs against me, the curve of her hips pressed into the hard bones of my pelvis. Not how she strains against her restraints, her face buried into my neck as she licks the sweat that clings to my skin, as I pull out of her so suddenly that she whines.

"Fuck me, Saint, please."

"I am going to slap your pussy until you cry, spank your arse so my fingerprints are etched into your memory, choke you while you suck on my dick." I search her features, "Do you want that?"

She nods.

"I'll plug your mouth with my tongue, as my fingers cram your spasming

back hole, and crush you under the weight of my intention. Then I'll screw you until you scream my name and ask me to let you come, and even then, I will not. Not until every part of you has been stamped with my essence, my name written on every cell of your body... until your breath is mine, your heartbeat mirroring my urgency as I thrust into you again and again... Until you beg for release."

Her breath hitches.

"And even then, I won't let you come... You willing to play this game with me, Gigi?"

She nods

"Good girl."

Reaching up, I untie her restraints. She pulls back her arms. I flip her around, hook my hands under her thighs, lift her up and into the pillar. She winds her long legs around my waist

I bend my knees, peer into her eyes. "You sure?" I growl.

"You having second thoughts?" she huffs.

I twist my lips, "You on birth control?"

"You think I'm lying?"

She meets my gaze, green eyes clear, the smooth, unfurled calm of the surface of a lake, just before I dive into the depths. Cool, peaceful, everything I've searched for. Every damn slice of heaven I've wanted. I am going to hell, and I am taking her with me.

Her pupils dilate until the black seems to bleed out, leaving only a circle of green at the edges.

"I dare you." She smiles, a beautiful curve of her lips that punches me straight in the gut.

"Fuck you, Gigi."

I piston my hips forward and drive inside her.

She screams, "No, no, no," and throws her head back against the pillar.

"What the actual fuck?" I look down to where we are connected.

Her pussy clenches down on my cock, even as she digs her fingernails into my shoulders. *It can't be. Can it?* The world ebbs and flows around me. My leg muscles spasm and my fingers grow numb. I glare at her face, "Tell me it's not fucking true, Victoria."

"I am...was a virgin," She swallows, her face pale, then tips up her chin. "So what? It was an inconvenience."

"You used me?" I begin to pull out.

She snarls, buries her heels into the backs of my hips. "Don't you dare!" she cries out.

"Don't tell me what to do," I glare at her.

She throws her arms around my shoulders, leans in close. "You're a coward," she whispers in my ears.

"It won't work," I laugh. "You're trying to goad me on, hoping to make me lose control, I—

She bites the side of my neck. Buries her teeth until she breaks skin. Goosebumps pop on my skin. The pain thrums across my nerve endings and my cock hardens even further inside her. "Jesus," I swear. "You're a hellion."

She pulls back, a drop of blood—my blood—glistening on her lips.

"And it turns you on." Her eyes gleam.

I snarl, grip her thighs so hard that she winces. But she doesn't back down. I'm marking her. She'll have marks where I held her—so? This is what I set out to do, didn't I? Claim her?

"Damn right, it does. You're going to regret this." I draw in a sharp breath, and the scent of her arousal—hot, pungent, with the lingering scent of strawberries, blurring with the faint hint of copper—fuck—it crowds in on me, pushes down on my chest. Shoves at me, urges me on... Further, further. "Fuck you, Gigi; and fuck me." Oh, wait. I'd been fucked since the day the Seven and I had had our lives irreversibly changed by the incident.

I plunge into her with such force, my balls slap against her skin. Lower my head kiss her. The taste of copper, mixed with strawberries and her inherent sweetness—all of it goes to my head. I pull back, then push into her, burying myself inside her to the hilt, impaling her with such force that the entire bed shakes. The headboard thuds against the wall; a crash sounds somewhere in the distance. *Fuck that.* A grown boils up her throat. I swallow it, then I begin to fuck her in earnest. I thrust into her again and again. Angle my hips, propel forward. I push into her. I want to tear into her pussy, mark her as mine. *Mine.* The word echoes in my ears, thrums in my veins. I tear my mouth from hers, peer into her face.

"Look at me," I snarl.

Her eyelids flutter.

I click my tongue, "Eyes on me, Gigi."

She snaps her eyelids open. Her gaze locks with mine—pupils blown, the darkness so wide, it overwhelms her eyes. I see myself in them—a frenzied, pushed-to-the-edge, out-of-control male whose only goal in life is to fuck this

woman. To make her come. To ensure that her first time is so fucking mind-blowing, that she'll never glance at another man again.

"You're mine, Victoria."

Her breath hitches.

"Mine! You feel me?"

She nods

"Say it."

"I am yours."

"To take and to pleasure..."

She swallows.

"Repeat after me," I growl.

"To take and to pleasure." Her chin wobbles.

"To use..."

"To use."

"To rip apart."

She hiccups.

I glare at her.

She pales. "To rip apart." Her lips glisten.

"To piece back together." I scan her features.

A tear slides down her cheek, I lick it up. "Don't stop, Gigi."

"To piece back together," she whispers.

I lower my forehead to hers, "So help me, God."

"So help me..."

I thrust forward and she screams, "God!"

I close my mouth over hers, absorb the sound. I fuck her, with more intensity than I've done anything else before in my life. I pull her close enough that her breasts are flattened against my chest, her nipples hard enough to imprint themselves into my skin.

My balls draw up; the pressure builds at the base of my spine.

I pull back, gaze into her eyes. "Come for me, Gigi," I growl.

Her body bucks, her eyes roll back in her head, her spine arches, the trembling sweeps up her legs, her breasts thrust up, and her mouth opens. She shatters, and so do I. I come, shooting hot gusts of cum inside of her, watching her, matching her, taking her with me, over the edge. Sparks of white flash behind my eyes. My knees seem to buckle under me. I stagger back, still inside of her, holding her to me. Make it around to the bed and sink down on my back, pulling her to me.

Tension drains from my limbs. I cuddle her and she turns her head into my chest. I tuck her head under my chin. Her muscles twitch, her breathing evens out.

I let sleep pull me under, making sure to keep her plastered to me.

The images swamp me. I know I'm dreaming but I can't stop myself.

"Don't go, Mom."

My mother grips my arms, "I wanted to stay for you, but I can't. I can't do this, Saint. I'm sorry."

"So that's it?" Anger suffuses my chest, "You're leaving?" I take a step forward. At thirteen I already tower over her.

Her lips firm. "I tried, Saint, I really did. But it's too hard. You know what they say about ensuring you have your oxygen mask on before you fit it over your child, during turbulence on a flight—?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"This is my version of it, Saint." Her lips twist "I need to breathe. I need to make sure I survive, else I'll be of no use to anyone else."

She turns away, wheels her suitcase along as she heads for the door.

"Jasmine," my father calls after her, "if you leave, you'll never get another penny from me."

She pauses at the door. "You think I married you for your money, William? You are wrong. All I wanted was you, a home for us that I could fill with love. But that wasn't enough for you. You wanted more power, more money...more everything. It's why your son was kidnapped, and even then, you didn't have the time to negotiate for his release."

"I paid up, didn't I?"

She whirls around. "Open your eyes, William. Money doesn't buy everything."

My father prowls forward. "It bought his freedom," he nods at me.

"At what cost?" She asks.

"He's free, isn't he?" my father huffs.

"Is he?" Her eyebrows knit. "Look around yourself, William, you've created a space which suffocates me."

"And whose fault is that?" My father prowls forward. "You couldn't cope with the fallout of his kidnapping. You couldn't be strong enough for him. Don't push your shortcomings on me, woman."

"Oh, so you want to talk about my shortcomings, do you?" The skin around my mother's lips whitens. "And you think you're perfect, you—"

"Stop!" I bunch my fists at my side, "Both of you, shut up."

Silence, a beat. My mother flips her hair over her shoulder. "This is why I need to leave." She waves a hand in the air. "If I stay, it's only going to get worse, and that's not helping any of us."

Her fingers tighten on her suitcase. "I'm sorry, Killian. I truly am. But you are strong, you'll get through this."

I won't.

I love you, Ma. Please, don't leave me, is what I want to say. Instead I press my lips together, force myself to swallow the scream that bubbles up inside. My throat hurts, my head feels like it's going to burst. What's wrong with me? Couples divorced all the time, and it happens to be my turn to face the shitstorm. Big fucking deal.

So why the hell do I want to bawl my eyes out right now?

"Let her go." My father prowls forward.

I glare at him, "You could at least pretend to care."

"It's no use." He drags his fingers through his hair. "People fall out of love, Saint."

The band around my chest tightens. "That's a bloody lousy excuse and you know that."

My ma wipes the tear that's rolled down my cheek. "You're hurting, Saint, but this too shall pass."

"What-fucking-ever," I growl.

She frowns at me. *Sure, rebuke me for my bad language. Like you actually care.* If she did, she'd stay, wouldn't she? I fold my arms over my chest.

She scrutinizes my features.

"What gets broken without being held?" she asks.

What's the answer? What is it? I cast around in my mind...come up blank.

"Well?" She tilts her head.

My heart begins to race. "I... I don't know." I force the words out. Sweat beads my palm.

"A promise." Her lips twist. "Imagine you are in a dark room. How do you get out?" Her chin wobbles.

I swallow, my fingers tremble and I shove them into the pockets of my pants, "I...I don't know the answer to that either."

"Stop imagining." She draws in a breath, "You get to imagine your life anyway you want it to be, so stop imagining what you don't want. Get out of the dark room. Face your fears. You, and only you, have the power to save yourself. Remember that, Saint."

She grimaces, then pulls off her ring, hands it over to me.

I stare at it. *The fuck am I going to do with that?*

She grabs my hand, pries open my fingers and closes them around her ring. "This is for you, Saint."

She brushes past me, down the steps.

My father draws abreast. He places his hand on my shoulder; I shake it off.

"She knew what she was getting into when she married me." His voice is hard, "She knew my business would always come first. She wanted more, and that wasn't part of our bargain."

He meets my gaze, unflinching. His blue eyes, so like mine, are cold. Calculating. A shiver runs down my spine.

"So this was all a...transaction?"

"You could call it that." His jaw hardens.

"And what about me?" My heart begins to thud.

His expressions forms into a mask. "You were a mistake."

"A mistake; it's all a mistake." I snap open my eyes. It's that same familiar nightmare that has haunted me for so long. Why has it surfaced now? I glance around the room; it's empty.

30

Victoria

"Fuck, fuck, fuck."

I hunch into the corner of the shower stall. What did I do? Why did I do it? I'd taunted him, until he'd lost control. Oh, he'd called me out on that, all right. He'd known I was manipulating him. Well, to the extent that someone like Saint could be, that is. He hadn't reached his level of success without learning how to manage his impulses, how to gauge his opponents and move in for the kill when they least expected it.

Bet he hadn't been expecting the surprise I'd pulled on him.

My sobs well up, the tears flowing down my cheeks. I pull my knees into my naked body as the water pours over me. My hair sticks to my face, my shoulders. I fold my arms over my knees, drop my head onto them, and allow myself to cry. *Shit. Why am I falling apart now? Why are my arms and legs shaking?* Goosebumps flare on my skin. My heart slams against my ribcage. A ball of emotion chokes my throat. I try to breathe, but my lungs burn. *The hell is happening? Am I having a nervous breakdown? And about what? Finally losing my virginity?* It's not a big thing... Not a milestone. *Why had it even hurt?* Hadn't I read somewhere that the hymen has been bred out of us?

It was stupid of me to have held onto it so far. Not that I had tried too hard to lose it. I had been too busy working toward a scholarship, and in university I'd focused on my studies. Been too much of a bookworm, and far happier to spend my time with fictional characters than in the real world. If it hadn't been for Nina, her... I'd have never seen much outside of the class

room, either.

I hope she's okay. She has to be... It's the only thing that makes all this worthwhile... Except, when he'd taken me with that ferocity, it had completely floored me.

When he'd stared into my eyes and made me repeat those words... My sobs intensify. It had felt... Real. Like I was truly wedded to him, joined to him. He'd marked me, the asshole. He'd fucked me with a determination that had cast aside everything else that had happened in my life. It felt like I was starting with a fresh slate...

I left Victoria behind. All that remains is Gigi. *His Gigi. Hell, this is insane.* The thoughts whirl around in my head and my arms and legs seem to go numb. *What is wrong with me? I have to get out of here. Away from him.* Before he realizes the extent to which he's already imprinted on my cells. I draw in a ragged breath, then lurch up to my feet. My legs prickle with pins and needles, then crumple. The ground comes up to meet me. *Shit!* I brace for impact, and hit something hard...solid...warm...vertical.

"Victoria."

His voice curls around me. His grip on my shoulders is reassuring, familiar... His slippery skin under my cheek...too inviting. I can't afford to be drawn to him, can't have him finding out what I am going to do to him. Can't allow him to realize how our entire encounter has affected me. I shove at his shoulders, "Let me go."

"Not a chance."

He wraps his big arms around me, pulls me into him. One big palm rubs across my back. "Cry as much as you want. I won't judge."

His voice is soft...so unlike how he's ever spoken to me before. A fresh burst of sobs wells up. *Shit, it's like everything pent-up inside of me has been building up, waiting until I couldn't hold it in anymore.* A spark to dry wood and it had flared out of control. The tears don't seem to stop. My cheeks heat, my eyes burn, and I try to pull away from him. He cups the back of my head, presses my face into his shoulder. Then he sinks down onto the bench in the shower stall and pulls me onto his lap, the water flowing over both of us.

Damn it, I don't want to lose it like this with him. It's exactly the kind of weakness he'll exploit to his advantage. I try to speak and hiccup instead. Try to pull away again. He tightens his grip even further.

He cuddles me close enough for his shoulders to block out most of the water. A safe haven in the center of a storm. A shield against the worst that

life had thrown at me. *Why do I want to believe that he can protect me from what is to come? Why do I want to sink into him, forget about everything that has happened to me and conspired to bring me here, in this shower, in his hotel suite, wrapped around him, crying my eyes out?* It makes me sob harder...as if that were possible.

He holds me tightly. Vibrations rumble up his massive chest. I press my ear closer against his ribcage. I sense him move, rock me to and fro. I listen to the purr that thrums up his throat—a low humming, subvocal I recognize. I pick up the notes of a tune that had wafted up the stairs when my mother had played it at night, in our home in LA. I had often fallen asleep to it.

Now I focus on the words of *Hey Jude*, tune into it, use the familiar melody to ground me. I swallow down my tears. He continues to rock me, singing the words under his breath.

"This is getting to be a habit," my voice cracks. I swallow, "You singing to me."

I sense his lips curve against my hair.

"You seriously do suck at it though," I mumble.

He chuckles. "Should I stop?"

I shake my head, nuzzle into his chest, "It's curiously loveable..." I hesitate, "or maybe I should say loveably curious."

"That's a first," he laughs. "No one's ever called me either one of those. But then I've never acted so out of character as when I am with you."

Wait, what? Every time I want to hate him, he has to go and do something which destroys that resting dick face persona he's cultivated.

He runs his fingers down my arm. Goosebumps flare on my skin and I shiver.

"You're cold." He shifts his weight under me, and I shake my head.

"Don't go."

"I wasn't..." he hesitates. "I was going to run you a bath."

"A bath?" I swallow to clear the scratchiness in my throat.

"Thought that would help ease the soreness."

"Soreness?" *Oh, he means... Right.* My cheeks heat, which is stupid, considering everything he's done to my body already. I've never felt this naked, and not just in the physical sense.

I bury my face deeper into his chest.

He chuckles, "Don't go all shy on me now."

I shake my head. I will not speak. If I do, it will only reveal how,

embarrassed I am by my outburst. He rises to his feet, steps out of the shower stall, and walks over to the sunken bath tub. He lowers me to the edge of the tub, keeps a hold of me. Then bends down to open the faucets. Water pours into the tub and steam rises, warm against my back. He wraps my arms around his waist and his thick dick nudges against my neck. If I turn my head, I can open my mouth and take him in, and— He cups my cheek, "There's time for that later."

Jesus. What? He can read my mind now? Heat flushes my cheeks again. This is not me...really—blushing, crying, collapsing at his feet like a complete idiot. *God! The hell is wrong with me?* I tip my chin up, "Don't think that you have broken me."

His lips curve, "Oh! Trust me, you will, and when you do." He kisses my forehead, "I'm going to enjoy building you up again."

I swallow. The warmth in his gaze, OMG... my heart stutters, my core pulses. All the pores on my skin seem to pop.

He whispers his knuckles across my jawline, "You're one heck of a woman. Has anyone told you that, Gigi?"

I flush even more. My cheeks must be scarlet by now. He has a habit of reducing me to a puddle of gooiness, a trembling mess who has no idea whether she is coming or going, or what the hell her life is all about. Before I met him, it had been easy. I mean, besides losing my best friend to the Mafia.

I had set out to save my friend and had landed directly in his grasp; one I am in no hurry to evade. Not yet. Just for a few hours, a few days, can't I pretend that all this is real? The way he regards me with tenderness in his eyes, how he scans my features as if to make sure that I am okay. How he rubs his thumb across my lower lip, then bends to kiss me. A brush of his lips—soft, barely there, a feather-light whisper of emotion that dances over my skin, sinks into my blood, warms the space around my heart, melting the barriers I'd built up against him, against the world, against anything that could hurt me. "Saint... I need to tell you something."

"Shh!" He deepens the kiss. Nips on my lower lip, swipes his tongue across my mouth with such intensity that I melt... I ooze into a puddle at his feet.

He leans back and I sway toward him.

"Later," he chuckles. Then leans past me to empty a bottle of something into the tub. The scent of roses, lavender, and something spicy fills the air. I sniff it.

"That's a very feminine bath product you have there."

"It's for you."

"Oh?" I squint up at him. "Were you that sure that I'd end up here in your suite?"

He hesitates, then reaches for my left hand. He twines his fingers with mine, rubs his thumb across the wedding ring...*my* wedding ring, the one he gave me. Which belonged to his mother. My heart stutters. A warmth coils against my rib cage. The pressure builds again behind my eyes and I snifle.

"Hey." He places his other knuckle under my chin. "Waterworks again?"

"No one's more surprised about this than me." I swallow down the lump that crowds my throat. "I've never once, not in the past many years, broken down like this."

Silence descends. I glance up, survey his features. His face is expressionless.

"You don't believe me?" I wipe the back of my hand over my nose.

"Oh, but I do." He frowns. "You have a strong will behind that fragile exterior. It's what attracted me to you from the beginning."

"Because I was a challenge?"

"Not only." He scans my flushed face, my hard nipples, down to the triangle between my legs. "You were a riddle I wanted to solve. Tough, yet hurting; sensitive, yet so prickly. Soft skin that hides a myriad of conflicting emotions." He places his hand over my heart. "That push-pull inside of you, Gigi, it's a fucking potent force. It makes me want to pull you apart, piece by fucking piece to find out everything about you... Taking my time over it as I tease multiple orgasms out of you, and have you trembling, shivering, pleading with me to stop, and even then I won't...not until you forget about everything except us; except for the lust that strums between us, the sensations that spark between us when we are together, the pull that ties us when we are apart—when—"

I place my hand on his mouth. "Stop," I whisper, "I can't...take more of this; it's...too soon, Saint."

He takes in my features, peers into my eyes, then nods.

"Later, then." He lowers his head and brushes his lips over my forehead. "For now, let's enjoy our bath, shall we?"

He holds out his hand, so gentlemanly, the gesture so different from how he's acted so far with me that I blink. And, hold on, had he kissed me earlier, on my forehead? A peck, with something resembling affection? My head

spins. I grab at his hip.

"You okay?" He scoops me up in his arms again, bridal style. "Gigi?"
I blink, stare as his features fade in and out in front of my eyes.

"Victoria." His voice snaps through my head.

I jerk my chin. "I... I'm a little befuddled."

"Tell me about it," he chuckles. "It's not like me, to fall asleep so soon after making love."

"What do you mean?" I squeeze my eyebrows together.

He steps into the bath tub—still wearing his socks, huh?—then lowers himself into the massive tub that's big enough for five people. He settles me on his chest.

"I hadn't intended to black out that quickly after our love-making."

"That..." I stab a finger in his direction. "Why do you insist on using that phrase?"

"Which one."

"Don't pretend."

"No, really." He scoops up some water, pours it over my shoulders.
"Please do clarify what seems so wrong with what I said."

"You said love-making, not fucking, or shagging, or screwing or any of the other ways you could have expressed yourself."

He raises his shoulders and lets them drop. "Semantics, my lovely girl."
He pours out some shampoo and proceeds to work it through my tresses, "If you prefer it though, I could say fucking."

My belly flips-flops.

"Or shagging."

I wriggle my hips.

"Or screwing," his voice lowers to a hush.

My nerve endings spark. My sex clenches, the emptiness inside of me yawning, stretching and coming back to life. *Why is it that the filthiest words from his mouth turn into weapons of seduction? Why does it sound so damn hot coming from him?* On the other hand, it is a relief. This alphaholish behavior? That's the side of Saint that is familiar, the one I can handle.

"Not fair," I huff. "With that voice of yours, you could literally talk me into an orgasm."

His eyes gleam.

I wave my hand in the air, "Can't believe I said that. Like your ego needs any more stroking."

He pushes up his pelvis and his dick throbs against my hip.

"That's not what needs stroking."

"Oh, my God!" I push up, or try to—for he simply wraps his large arms around my waist, and holds me in place.

"Where do you think you're you going?"

"To get dressed."

"Not happening."

"Why...?"

"Why not?"

"I... I need some space."

"Not happening either."

I exhale a breath, then turn to scowl at him, "Saint, really, you are a confusing man. Has anyone told you that?"

"Me?" He leans back against the bath tub. His biceps bulge with the motion. Hard, thick, ropey...like other parts of him. *Jeez, get your brain out of the gutter. You're accusing him of having a one-track mind?*

"Is there anyone else here with us?" I ask.

"You tell me." His features form into that mask I am coming to hate. The one that says: gone is the warm, caring, easy-to-get-along-with man I'd briefly witnessed, leaving behind the one I hate... And lust after, since the moment I'd met him. No... Not true, I'd lust after him in any...and every form.

Goosebumps dot on my skin. I fold my arms around my waist. "What's that supposed to mean?" My words stay suspended between us for a second.

He holds my gaze, peruses my features, then runs a hand through his hair. "Adam Rhodes."

Of course. I glance away.

He reaches down, runs his big hand across the flesh of my upper arms. Warmth seeps into my blood instantly—insidious, seductive, pulling me, grounding me, anchoring me to him. *Shit.* I pull away. He releases me.

"You were married to him, but..." He seems to hesitate. Huh, Saint? Uncertain about something? I tilt my head.

"You want to know why I was a virgin?" I ask.

A nerve throbs at his temple. He doesn't reply. Doesn't say a word. Watches me intently. Waiting...waiting... The silence stretches for a beat. A bead of sweat crawls down my temple.

His jaw tics.

My nerves stretch, my belly trembles, and I firm my lips, "It wasn't a marriage at all, we were each playing a role."

"Clearly."

I wince at the bite in his voice.

"He...he wasn't a bad man," I say.

"And there was no sexual relationship between the two of you?"

"He... I... We agreed to keep it platonic. He needed a woman on his arm. I needed..." I bite my lip. I turn away.

This time he reaches out and pinches my chin, "Tell me. Don't hold back now." His jaw tics. A dense wave of anger spools off of him.

"Security. It was an arrangement, that's all." My nerve endings crackle. "You have nothing to be jealous of," I mumble. "We were only married for a month."

"You didn't love him, yet you married him. Makes me wonder what hold he had on you." His grip turns punishing.

I wince, but don't pull away. The pain he inflicts is a reminder that I am alive... So is he. There is hope for both of us... I just need to make it right by him...while figuring out how to also rescue Nina.

This is the perfect moment to tell him why you are here. Confess it. Win his trust... And what if he hates me for it?

Worse, what if the Mafia finds out?

There is no telling what they'd do to Nina if that happened. I bite the inside of my cheek. I can't betray her. I have to keep up the pretense. "No hold, Saint," I lie, "other than the kind a man with money has over a woman who needs security."

"Is that important to you, Gigi? Security?" He drags his hand down my arm, until his fingers brush the ring on my left hand.

I glance down at the emerald winking against the bubbles.

"Sure," I swallow. "You've always had money. You didn't have to scrimp and save for small treats, or watch your mother work two jobs to support you, or work your butt off to win a scholarship to college. You're not the one who was left alone when your mother died, then meeting the one person who became your best friend only to lose her; you aren't at the mercy of—" I twist my lips. *Shit, what is wrong with me? Why does he always catch me unawares? I almost blurted out everything that happened to Nina...to me. Dammit.*

"Mercy of...? he tilts his head.

"Mercy of fate, of course. We can plan all we want, but life takes us in directions we'd never intended to go."

He lifts his other hand in the air, twirls his finger, "You mean like this."

I glance around the massive bathroom that is three times the size of the room in which I had grown up. "Exactly." I turn to glance at him.

He lowers his arm, slides his hand between my legs, inserts two fingers inside of me.

I shudder.

He hooks his fingers, and I can't stop my internal muscles from clamping down on him. A shiver of lust crawls up my spine and my breathing goes ragged. I half close my eyes, take in his features. He watches me with curiosity, a hunger in his eyes, his lips pressed together as if intent on the task at hand. He twists my arm around my back, so my chest is pushed forward. My breath trembles and my nipples pucker to hard points. I wiggle, lean in, needing him to close his mouth around them. He holds me in place.

"You still sore?"

His voice fades in and out of my hearing. I focus on his fingers sliding in and out of me—soft, gentle. *Christ, he doesn't have a tender bone in his entire body, yet there is no mistaking the barely imperceptible movements of his digits inside of me.* I draw in a breath, and his scent, dark and edgy—now laced with roses, which only heightens the pheromone-laced impact of his essence—goes straight to my head. My head spins. My eyelids flutter shut.

"Victoria?" His voice seems to come from far away. "Gigi?" His breath whispers over my cheek.

"You okay?" His lips quirk.

I nod.

"Are you sore?"

I nod again. He ceases that beautiful friction, withdraws his hand.

"No." I force my eyelids open, "I mean, I am sore, but not tha-a-t sore."

"Ah," his lips twitch.

A flush creeps up my throat, but damn that. I want his fingers back inside of me. Want him to do all of those things he's been hinting at over the past few weeks.

"You asked what I needed, Saint?"

His gaze narrows. He looks down his patrician nose, the skin stretching tight over his cheekbones. He jerks his chin.

I raise my head, "I want you to fuck me like you don't care about me. Can

you do that? Can you screw me without mercy?"

31

Saint

Fuck, bloody, fuck. She is hiding something from me. It's there in the curve of her cheek, the angle of her chin, in how she lowers her eyelids to stop me from reading the emotions that claw at her. In how she wraps her hand around my neck and leans in close enough for our eyelashes to tangle. In what she asks me to do, "Will you do this for me, Saint?"

"No." I reply.

She pales. Her chin wobbles. Then she firms her lips and retreats. I swoop out my hand, grab the back of her neck. "I am going to make love to you instead."

Her gaze widens. Her pupils dilate. She opens and closes her mouth, "I... I...don't think you should do that."

"Why not?"

"It could...uh...lead to complications."

"This is already far from simple." Her neck is so fragile that my fingers meet around the front of her neck.

"It's not what I want."

"You lying to me?"

She chews on the inside of her cheek. "I am not going to admit the truth to you."

"I'll get it out of you yet." I haul her close. Graze the heel of my palm over her pussy. *Gently, gently. Don't want to hurt her more than I already have now. F-u-c-k. This entire emo mindset is going to take some getting used*

to.

She whines, and I can't stop my lips from curving.

"You like that, hmm?"

She opens and shuts her mouth, "Saint."

My name from her lips sounds like a whispered prayer. I close the distance between us, "You wanna come for me, Gigi?"

She nods. I swipe my thumb between her lower lips and her body shudders. Her hand on my shoulder spasms, she digs her fingers into my skin, attempts to pull herself closer, to impale herself on my fingers.

"First, answer this riddle."

"What?" she blinks.

"Would you rather have a hamster or a cat?"

"Is that a trick question?"

"Answer me, Gigi."

"A cat."

"What would you call him or her?"

"You're asking me this...now?"

"No better time to get to know you than when I have my fingers inside of you, hmm?" I press my thumb into the bud of her clit. She stutters.

"What's that?" I slide my finger in and out of her again; she groans.

"What's the name you'd choose?"

"Cats," she gasps. "I've always wanted to own two cats. I'd call them Salt and Pepper."

I frown, "Like that crazy cat-obsessed fucker Lennon did?"

She blinks. "How the hell do you know that? Have you been reading up on The Beatles?"

"You know what they say—nothing like knowing everything about your enemy to get the better of them. Knowledge is power, and all that."

"And you, have you ever had a pet?"

"You don't get to ask the questions."

She pouts, "That's not an answer."

"It's the only one you're getting." I twist my fingers inside of her and her entire body bucks. "Oh... Saint... Oh, I'm..."

"Come for me, Gigi."

She opens her mouth and a low wail keens from her.

I withdraw my fingers, bring my mouth to hers, "How do you feel?"

"Knackered," she whispers, then yawns.

"Good."

Keeping her in my arms, I rise up and step out of the bath tub. Walking over to where the towels are stacked on a shelf, I lower her to her feet. She winds her fingers around my waist as I pull out a large towel and dry her off first, then myself. I scoop her up and march over to the bed, lower her to the mattress. Sinking down next to her, I draw the sheets over us, before tucking her into my chest.

When was the last time I spooned someone this way? Never... Yeah, that's the honest answer. So why her? Why this woman who holds a piece of the puzzle of who was behind the incident that turned the lives of the seven of us upside down?

Why her?

Why me?

Why this strange obsession with her that is quickly turning out to be a fixation?

"Saint?" her husky voice reaches me.

"Hmm?"

"Can I ask you a riddle of my own?"

Nope. Never. I'd sworn never to allow another to question me. To trick me again. To trap me into revealing more than I should, to stepping into a situation which could lead to my demise. Perhaps it is the sex... Or the fact that she has crept under my skin, or that the fucking has completely undermined my barriers...but hell... Answering one question wouldn't matter, right? I mean, what do I have to lose, hmm? Maybe it is the false sense of security that having my wife in my arms seems to envelop me in, which allows me to comply with her wishes. This once.

"What do you want to know?"

She remains silent for so long, I am certain she's fallen sleep. Her breathing grows steady, her muscles relax, her body twitches as she settles into me.

I tuck her head under my chin, wrap my hand around her waist, my palm coming to rest over her pussy...my favorite place. *Yeah, that's how much of a goner I am. Maybe there is something in this marriage thing, after all? Something like, announcing your intention to the world ensures that you follow through on your word...or...the fact that I had been her first. Her fucking first. I shouldn't care, but fuck... How could she have been a virgin? Surely, she would have had partners before me? Not that she was*

inexperienced either. She'd enjoyed the sex, hadn't shied away from it... So *what is she hiding from me?*

I wind my fingers across her now-drying hair, and smooth it about her shoulders.

"My question is..."

I pause.

"Would you rather have a baby of your own or would you baby-sit?"

My heartbeat ratchets up, "The fuck kind of question is that?"

"Forget it," she mumbles. "I have no idea what prompted that question anyway. It's not like it matters. Not like this...thing between us is real or anything. It's a means for you to get what you want, right?"

"The man who came to see you earlier... He wasn't your lover?"

"No," she shakes her head.

"So he was..."

"My contact with the Mafia... My handler."

I still my hand.

"The Mafia planted me to play the role of Adam's wife." She turns in my arms, her lips swollen from my kisses, her cheeks flushed from the hot bath. "But you knew that already."

I tilt my head. *Should I reveal how much I know? Has she guessed how much I've already uncovered about her past?* "Go on." I pull back my arm. She shivers and I pull the blanket up to her ears.

"They...they wanted me to keep an eye on him."

"Adam knew about it?"

She nods, "He had no choice, but to accept that I was reporting on his activities back to the Mafia."

"And you, Gigi? Did you have a choice?"

"It...it isn't that simple." She licks her lips, brings her hand up to chew on her nails. I weave my fingers with hers, pull it down between us.

"It really is. Tell me what they have on you and let me help you."

"Is saving damsels in distress your specialty?" she asks.

"I'm no fucking white knight, and you know it."

"You're also not as much of an asshole as you make yourself out to be," she muses.

"Each of us have the stories we tell ourselves, and the masks we put on to face the world," I answer.

"And you, Saint, what's the persona you've bought into?"

I allow my lips to kick up, "I am not the one with the agenda here." She pales, turns away from me. I tug on her hand so she has no choice but to stay facing me. "Don't push me away, Victoria. This is our chance to come clean so we can make a fresh start of it."

"Is that what you're offering?"

I hold up her hand with the emerald ring glittering on it. "Isn't this proof enough?"

"Is that why you gave me your mother's ring?"

"Not only." I run my thumb across the smooth surface. "It felt right. When my instinct points me in a particular direction, I follow it."

"What does your instinct say about me?" She lowers her chin, peers up at me from under her eyelashes. That green gaze of hers deepens, stormy emotions caught in their depths.

"My head says that I shouldn't trust you."

The remaining color leaches from her cheeks.

"Let me go." She yanks at her hand, but I don't release it. I use the leverage to haul her into my chest. "My instinct says to ignore what my logical mind is pointing out to me—that you are dangerous, that for both of our sakes, I should walk away from you, that if I were a betting man, I should cash in my chips and leave, that you are a riddle with more than one answer as a solution. Too bad, when it comes to you..." I search her features, take in the hollows under her eyes, the sharp jut of her cheeks, "I have no choice but to follow my heart, Gigi."

She bites on her lower lip, "I... I am not sure what that means."

"It means..." I cup her chin, "why don't we trade secrets, hmm? Hell, I'll even start with answering your question..." *The fuck. Am I actually going to do this?*

"What's your answer?" The skin around her eyes creases.

"That I want neither." I set my jaw. "I don't intend to have children, and hell, I'm definitely not qualified to be a babysitter."

She pales.

"Does that disappoint you?" I search her features.

Her lips turn down, then she tips up her chin. "It's what I expected. Besides, it was a hypothetical question."

"Good, then you won't mind if I ask you another."

Her eyebrows knit together, "What?"

"Why did you ask to become my sub? You could have approached me

with another proposition. So why this?"

She draws in a breath, "I researched you, found out about your tastes, about some of the other women." She flushes.

Something hot blooms in my chest, "Does that make you jealous, Gigi, imagining me with another woman?"

She tips her chin up, "You know it does." She places her hand over my cock, "And if you dare look at any of them again, I'll..." She squeezes my balls.

I groan...then wince. Her jealousy is a fucking turn on. Does she realize that? Sweat beads my forehead. Heat swarms in a knotted coil at the base of my belly, "What else did you like about what you saw?"

"You ..." she swallows, "You had what I was looking for."

"What is that?"

"You are the kind of man who'd know what his woman needs when she doesn't. You wouldn't allow her pleas to get in the way and that... It's not easy."

"That's an awful lot you are supposing," I smirk.

"I followed my instincts." Her lips quirk.

The band around my chest tightens. This woman... She is fucking strong... That sassy side of her? Surely, it will be my downfall.

"And what do your instincts say now?" I tilt my head.

"That you know what's best for me." She squeezes her hand around my erect cock and blood rushes to my groin.

"The things you do to me when you say that." I groan. My heart begins to race. "But, you need to recover first."

She shakes her head. "Later. I need this Saint. I do."

I draw in a breath, "One more question, then."

"But..."

"You ask."

She rubs her cheek into the pillow, her fingers rubbing across the swollen head of my shaft.

"Gigi."

"Saint?"

"Ask your question."

"Why do you live in hotels? Why doesn't a man like you not have a mansion of your own?"

"You heard about that?"

"Summer may have mentioned it." She flushes but doesn't back down, "Will you answer that?"

I raise my shoulders, "It's too much of a commitment to have a place of my own. Besides, given the hotel chains I run, it seems like a waste not to use the facilities they afford me." I twist my lips. "Nothing like keeping the staff on their toes... Every time I stay in a hotel, I force the management to up their game."

Will she believe me? Can she look past the obvious to what I'm not saying?

She frowns, then jerks her chin, "Guess it makes sense."

My ribcage feels too tight. *Can't she look past the front I am putting up?* Fuck that. I had been happy this far, had figured out how to make the most of the cards I had been handed. Had even managed to find a balance of sorts, thanks to my more extreme tastes. *Why did she have to come along and disturb that? Why does she make me yearn for more? Bloody hell.* I shake my head.

One more chance. Give her one more chance to reveal the truth. Say it, Gigi. Tell me why you're really here. Confess it and I'll do what is needed to keep you safe. I'll do anything to extricate you from whatever situation you've found yourself in.

She twists her fingers around my cock.

I place my hand over hers, "My turn to ask a question."

"Right." She blinks, squares her shoulders.

"You ready, Gigi?"

She nods.

"Why did you agree to marry me?"

32

Victoria

"It's not like you gave me a choice?" I set my jaw.

"You could have left," he retorts. "It's not like I was holding you captive."

"Weren't you?" I massage his balls, squeeze the base of his cock at the same time.

"F-u-c-k." Color flushes his cheeks. His blue eyes deepen into the color of azure.

His fingers spasm over mine.

He wraps the fingers of his other hand around my neck in that possessive grasp I'm coming to recognize.

"Who's holding who captive here, hmm?" His gaze intensifies. He releases his grip on my hand, only to cup my pussy. "Tell me why you agreed to marry me."

I shake my head; he slips three fingers inside my cunt at the same time. *Omigod!* My eyes roll back in my head; my grasp on his cock tightens.

He circles his thumb around the swollen bud of my clit, and my entire body bucks. A trembling sweeps up from my toes, surges toward my womb.

He pulls out his fingers from my pussy and I whine, "No, goddam you, don't do this."

"Your answer, Gigi, why did you marry me?"

"Because I wanted to, you asshole." I tip up my chin, "Is that enough for your ego?"

"No."

My jaw falls open, "You can't be serious."

"Oh, but I am, my darling." His lips twist, "Tell me the real reason, and I promise I'll let you come."

"You're an unfeeling brute." Anger tunnels my vision.

"And you're a cunt."

My pussy instantly clenches. Hell, why do these filthy insults from him resonate with that secret part of me? "Fuck you, Saint," I snarl.

"With pleasure Gigi, but first, your answer."

I swallow; a flush steals up my throat. Goddam him for forcing me to bare the part I hate to him. "After we met, I began to fantasize about you." I glower at him, "Once I realized the kind of kink you indulged in...it became worse. My dreams became steamier. Then I stumbled across that woman giving you head in your office...and..."

His breathing heightens, "It turned you on?"

I nod. "When she blew you, and you threw your head back, the chords of your neck stood out in relief, your beautiful chest bathed in sweat, as you gripped her hair and held her in place. You fucked her face and all I could think was... I am going to kill that bitch," I swallow, then whisper, "and..."

"And?" His nostrils flare.

"And that I want that." I swallow.

His biceps bulge. This was turning him on even more, huh? I tilt my chin up, push my breasts into his chest.

"I knew then that I needed you. I yearned for you to break me, to make me forget about everything else, to force me to remember only the shape of your face, the fullness of your dick down my throat, the imprint of your fingers in my cunt as you made me come. The—"

He lowers his head, blots out the world, then closes his mouth over mine. He robs me of my breath, my words, my will to live without him. He simply takes it all from me. He fucking absorbs every last thought from me. In that moment, he makes me his. He flips me on my back, notches his dick at the entrance to my pussy, then cups the top of my head. Huh?

He plunges forward, burying himself to the hilt with such force that my entire body moves up. My head hits his palm— *Huh*. Even in the midst of passion, he remembers to stop me from hurting myself— That's so unlike what I've come to expect from this complex male.

He tangles his tongue with mine, brings his other hand down to grip my butt. He slides his thumb into my back hole, pulls out and thrusts back inside

of me. His balls slap against my tender flesh as he fills me. He impales me, fills me up, joins me to him with such intensity that tears spring to my eyes. The pressure radiates out from my core, up my body, toward my extremities. Every inch of my skin seems to flare with a strange iridescent glow. My scalp tingles, my toes curl, and I arch my back, knowing I am going to—

He releases my mouth, glares into my face, "Come for me, wife." His command rips through me, hurtling me up, up, over the edge. The pressure in my chest explodes out; flashes of white blind me.

When I come to, he's poised in exactly the same position.

"Jesus," I croak.

"You do know that's also the name Lennon gave one of his cats, right?"

"What?"

"Face it," he rubs his nose with mine. "Your hero, John L, was a cat lady in disguise."

A giggle bubbles up my throat, "I can't believe you're telling me this... now...when..." I glance down, "when you're inside of me."

His dick lengthens, pushing against my inner walls. Another trembling spirals up from where he's sheathed inside of me. "What the—?"

"You keeping count this time?" He tilts his hips and the head of his dick brushes against my cervix.

"Saint!"

"Gigi," he leans down and licks my lips. "Are you keeping count?"

"Of what?"

He pulls back, then pounds into me, and ohmigod, the climax crashes over me. I throw back my head and a keening cry emerges from my lips. Another shudder rolls over me, I pull back my shoulders, thrust my pelvis up as liquid heat pools between my legs.

"How many was that Gigi?"

"What?"

"How many orgasms so far?"

"Two?"

He clicks his tongue. "Let's make that three."

His dick thickens inside of me. Holy shit, no way is he still erect. I force myself to focus on his face, his deepening gaze, the dark hair stuck to his forehead, the sheen of sweat that covers his shoulders. I dig my heels into the backs of his thighs, push myself up, and wind my arms around his neck.

His big body trembles, and he braces his weight on his elbow, then slides

a second finger inside my back hole. The tension coiled in his muscles vibrates out, the heat from his body intensifies, and his heart beat ratchets up. I turn my head into the crook of his shoulder, bite down on his skin, and his cock jumps. A shudder grips his body and his hoarse cry fills my ears, "Fuck, Gigi." His entire body stiffens, then he comes, shooting hot streams of cum inside of me.

He collapses onto me, his weight pressing me down into the bed. I wind my limbs around him, lick the blood from the broken skin on his neck.

The muscles on his back ripple. He turns and brushes my lips with his, "You're full of surprises, Gigi."

He begins to pull out and I shake my head. "Stay," I whisper against his lips.

He hesitates, then flips us over, so I am once more on his chest, with him inside of me. I snuggle into him, the warmth of his body a contrast to the air hitting my back. I shiver.

"You cold?"

"A little." I rub my cheek against the fine hair that peppers his chest. He reaches out behind me, the muscles of his body rippling as he pulls the sheet over both of us.

He folds an arm around my back, tucks my head under his chin.

"I have another question for you," I venture.

He stills. "I hate answering questions."

"No shit," I slip out my tongue and lick his skin.

His cock instantly jumps inside of me. I chuckle, "Where do you get this stamina from?"

He folds an arm behind his head, "I learnt a long time ago, that I had better make the most of the moment at hand. You never know what's going to happen next, you get me?"

I press my chin into his chest, peer up at him. "Does this have to do with the incident?"

"The girls have been gossiping, huh?"

"Summer may have mentioned it in passing."

"What did she say?"

"That it was up to each of the Seven to talk about what happened to them."

His brow clears.

"What was your question?"

"You changing the topic?" I frown.

He draws the hair away from my face, "When it suits me."

I snicker, "Do you always get your way?"

He smirks, "Is that the question?"

"Did it matter to you so much that I was a virgin?"

"Why do you say that?" he asks.

"Because," I run my tongue over my teeth, "since you discovered that you were my first, you've forgotten to be as much of a douchebag to me."

He gazes off into the distance, "You're right." He scratches his chin. "I never expect any of the women I sleep with to be virgins... Certainly, never expected to marry one." He lowers his gaze to my face.

"So it was a big deal for you?"

He cups my cheek, "If you mean, does it appeal to the primal, chauvinistic man in me that no one has been inside of you before me, that I was the first to make love to you? Then, yes. I'd never thought it would be important...and it isn't... And it is."

I lower my brows, "What do you mean?" He runs his fingers through my hair. His fingertips drag across my scalp. Tendrils of heat ripple from the contact. I turn my head and lean into the touch. "You were saying...?" I prompt.

"That making love to you was more significant than I thought it would be. My being your first was a bonus, but even if I hadn't been, it wouldn't have mattered... But you were... And it makes me wonder, why the hell you didn't sleep with anyone before me?"

"Because I was saving myself for the right man...?"

"Who is probably not me."

"My," I blink, "what's prompting this soul searching?"

"Let's see... Was it the strawberries dipped in your cum which may have become my favorite food of all time? Or the mind-blowing sex after? Or the fact that you've been so receptive, so responsive to my touch?" He trails his hand down my spine.

I shiver.

He pinches my chin, tips my head up, presses his lips to mine and kisses me. Gently. Softly. Slowly. So bloody thoroughly. My heart begins to race all over again. Wetness pools between my legs.

"Being inside you is my favorite place in the entire world." His dick thickens, punctuating his words.

"Saint," I whisper.

"Let me, Gigi." He nibbles on my lower lip, and pushes up and into me. He makes love to me gently, barely a thrust in his every move, he propels his hips up with enough torque for his hardness to chafe the inside of my channel. He brings his other hand between us and cups my breast, the calluses on his fingers setting off pinpricks of pleasure that travel straight to the space between my legs.

He holds my head in place, then places his other big hand on my butt. "Hold on, sweetheart," his whisper curls around me, sinks into my blood, wafts over, encouraging me to give in, sink in, to open myself up completely, irrevocably to him. His gentleness is so firm, yet so demanding, it's a complete contrast to the sadistic part of him.

Both sides of his personality are the same, yet different. Both authoritative in their own way. He pistons his hips up and down again and again, hitting that space deep inside of me that he seems to always find with such precision—that sends pleasure shooting up my nerve endings to my extremities. My toes curl, I dig my fingers into his hair, and hold onto his shoulders. "Saint... I'm... I'm..."

"Come with me," his voice ripples across my skin and I shatter, my entire body trembling, melting, spiraling down a tunnel at the end of which is him. Only him. His hoarse cry threads through my subconscious mind, and he comes inside of me. Sleep tugs at the edges of my vision. My muscles relax. He pushes my head down into his chest. His heart beat thuds in my ears. Reassuring. Hypnotic.

"Sleep, Gigi, I'll keep you safe. "

33

Victoria

Over the next three weeks Saint is true to his word.

He takes care of my every need. He is attentive to me, from the moment we wake up in the morning, when he insists on ordering and eating breakfast with me, often joining me for a quick shower before he sets off for work. So we haven't had a honeymoon, not that I expected it, but this is close. He doesn't want me to worry about anything. He insists I stay in, make full use of the hotel's facilities—the pool, the sauna, the daily appointment with the masseuse, not to mention the access to the best beauticians in the city in the in-house salon.

I can't remember the last time I felt this pampered.

In the evenings, Saint frequently texts me from the office, commanding me to be naked and ready for him, usually arriving within twenty minutes of the message. And then he'll tease me, often spank me up against the post, arousing me before fucking me with that intensity and the hint of cruelty which characterizes his every move. A few times we've indulged in more of the games where he tests my taste in alcohol. I admit, I had more luck with that than with the food. What can I say? Clearly, I am a closet alcohol slut.

He's taken me on the bed, of course... And on the table by the window, on the carpet, in the walk-in closet, where we'd ended the night tangled up in clothes—his and mine.

One night, he'd met me in the restaurant downstairs as I had been finishing dinner. He'd had a drink, then waited until I'd finished dessert. After

that, he'd been in such a hurry, he'd hustled me into the ladies' restroom and proceeded to fingerfuck me against the door. The fear of being caught had been enough to make me orgasm within the first five minutes. Then again, when he'd ripped off my panties and stuffed his dick inside of me. And a third time, when he'd thrust into me again and again with such force that my body had bucked into the door, and he'd commanded me to come in that authoritative voice—the one which has me rushing to obey him. I'd slumped against him after that. He'd stuffed my knickers into his pocket, scooped me up and carried me off to his private elevator, and then upstairs to his bed, where he'd proceeded to tie me spread-eagled to the bedposts, and then... Worshipped my body. There is really no other way to describe it.

He had touched every part of me, kissed every nook and cranny, massaged every curve, rubbed my breasts, nibbled on my nipples, my fingers, my toes—all with that same single-minded intensity, as if he had a point to prove... To himself? To me? He had wrung two more orgasms out of me that night...until I had begged him, pleaded with him, cajoled with him to take me and put an end to my agony... He had finally relented then—turned me around on my arms and knees and thrust into me with such force that the entire bed had jolted. Then he'd proceeded to take me again and again until he'd come deep inside of me. He'd touched a part of that I hadn't even known existed. Perhaps it had affected him too, for he'd been gone the next morning.

I'd spent most of the day recovering.

That was two days ago. He hasn't touched me since, which is strange... considering we've had sex every night for almost three weeks... He has an insatiable appetite, and enough stamina to make my knees go weak thinking about how he's marked me each time.

Tonight is the first time since we got married that he is running late at the office. A meeting of FOK Media with all the Seven—well, minus Baron, he'd said. I glance at the clock: midnight. Shit. Where is he? Is he really at work?

Why hasn't he called or texted me?

I sit up in the bed, where I have been tossing and turning over the last hour, trying to sleep. Damn it. I have no intention of keeping his bed warm, like a good little wife, waiting for him. *And isn't that exactly what you've done over the last 3 weeks?* Yeah. I haven't left the hotel, content to hide myself away here. Have turned down invitations to meet the girls, even an invitation to tea with Meredith.

Amelie had called me a few times, to check that I was okay. We'd chatted

and I'd reassured her I was fine, just coming to terms with my newly married status. She'd made me promise that I'd call her if I needed anything; I hadn't, of course.

Fact is, I don't want to break this pattern of marital bliss we seem to be indulging in. It sure feels like marital bliss.

Or perhaps it's the calm before the storm? I shake off the hardness that coils in my chest. I need to keep busy...while I waited for my 'lord and master' to turn up.

Thankfully, he has stopped insisting I call him Sir, which is a relief. What caused him to change his mind? Not that it has stopped him from being as demanding in his needs toward me. All of which I have been happy to comply with.

Our time together is almost up. Was it wrong of me to not try to get the information needed before this? Had it been foolish of me to try to make the most of the time Antonio had granted me? He'd assured me he'd keep Nina safe during this time. Had I been mistaken in trusting him on that? He won't hurt Nina, I am sure of that. If anything, his expression had indicated that he has feelings for her, but that's my intuition. What if I'm wrong?

What if I had been stupid to allow Saint to lull me into a false sense of security? I haven't wanted to do anything to upset the balance of sorts that we seem to have established. Where the hell is he, anyway?

I shove the covers off of my body, then forgo my clothes in favor of a bathrobe. This late, there won't be many hotel guests around. I take the elevator down to the heated indoor swimming pool on the first level. Draping my bathrobe over a lounge chair, I dive in, begin to swim laps. The rhythmic ebb and flow of the water over me, the burn in my arms, the power of my body pitted against the resistance provided by my headlong rush—all of it sinks into my blood, calms me. I reach the far end of the pool for the fourth time, when an electric current runs up my spine. I thrust an arm out, push forward, raise my eyes and spot the figure at the head of the pool. My muscles bunch, I miss a stroke, go under, then come up gasping. My heart begins to thud, my pulse beating at my temples as adrenaline laces my blood. I propel through the water, toward the man who stands motionless. Waiting...waiting for me. I reach the edge of the pool, hold onto the rim.

Run my gaze up those beat up cowboy boots, the tailored slacks that outline those powerful legs, to the tent of fabric at his crotch. My throat dries. Of course, he's aroused. He hasn't had sex for...three nights now. Unless, he'd

sought out someone else before coming here?

Ask him, damn it. And what? Sound like a nagging wife? I toss my head. No way. Besides, that would be a dead giveaway that that I've been thinking of him all day. And no way, am I giving away what little power I am clinging to in this relationship

I tip my chin up, meet that searing blue gaze.

"How did you find me?"

"Very little happens here without my being aware of it."

I glance up at the corners of the ceiling. "The cameras?"

He nods. "I switched them off, by the way." His lips kick up.

My throat closes. He reaches down, unbuckles his belt. The sound of leather against his buckle rasps across my sensitized nerve endings. He lowers his zipper and my pulse rate ratchets up. His thick shaft spills out. He widens his stance, grabs his cock and pumps himself hard once. A bead of precum appears at the tip of the angry head. My mouth dries.

I can't take my gaze off of his swollen dick as he proceeds to massage himself. His strokes are ferocious, punishing. His breathing grows shallow; my chest rises and falls in tandem. His shaft thickens, and even with the distance between us, I can see the veins along the underside pulsing, throbbing. My sex clenches, my nipples tighten, and goosebumps pop over my skin. I lick my lips, gulp down my anticipation. Don't move. Don't say anything. Wait... *Wait*. He massages himself once more, then stops.

What the—?

As I watch, he toes off his shoes. Letting go of his dick—which stands erect without any help from his hands, thank you very much—he shrugs off his expensive jacket, drops it to the chair, followed by his shirt. His tanned skin gleams in the warm ceiling lights; his eight pack abs flex as he proceeds to pull off his socks.

He shucks off his pants, along with his boxers, then poses in place for a second. Enough for me to take in the awesome sight of that naked expanse of 100% masculine alpha male who belongs to me. He is mine, from the moment I'd laid eyes on him. Why had I ever thought I'd be able to avoid his charisma, his power, the raw animal magnetism that emanates from his sexy-as-fuck presence?

I gulp, my hand slips, and I slide back into the pool, only he's already there. He dives into the water, arcing up to close his arms around me. His lips find mine and he plants his bulk between my thighs, so I have no choice but

to part them. Then he thrusts inside me, instantly filling me as he impales me completely. All I can do is grab onto his shoulders and hold on, as he pushes forward, pins me against the side of the pool, and proceeds to fuck every thought out of my head.

He swipes his tongue across my lower lip, brings his hand down to cup my butt as he slides his finger inside my puckered back hole. My entire body bucks. He winds his fingers around my neck, holding me in place, before ripping his mouth from mine. He peers deeply into my eyes, holds my gaze, urging me with his expression to strain against him, push my pelvis forward, match his thrust for thrust. He kicks his hips forward one last time, bottoming out inside of me, then whispers, "Come."

The climax instantly crashes over me as he comes inside of me, his body spasming along with mine. I sag against him, all thoughts fucked out of me as I float in that strange after-space that comes from being completely and utterly spent.

The world tilts. I sense him tugging me along to the steps at the side of the pool. He scoops me up in his arms, then walks out of the water. He snatches up one of the towels piled by a lounge chair and dries me off, then himself. He picks up my bathrobe and places it around my shoulders. He helps me into the robe then ties it around me with great care. He fetches his pants and steps into them. Carrying me in his arms he takes the private elevator up to his suite. Once inside the room, he strips us both, then carries me into the shower.

He proceeds to shampoo my hair, then seats himself on the stone bench in the shower before washing every inch of my body. He begins to soap himself, and I catch his wrist.

"Let me," I clear my throat, realizing those are the first words I have spoken since I saw him at the pool.

He nods, then leans back, spreading his arms across the back of the bench. I reach around to shut off the shower, then pour out the liquid soap. I work it in across his biceps, down his corded chest, digging into the dips between his pecs. He makes a noise of satisfaction, then sinks back, widening his stance. I massage down his belly, to his thigh, then sink my knuckles into the tense backs of his calves. Sitting cross legged on the floor, I place his large foot on my lap, brush my fingers between his toes. Then hold up his foot to massage the underside and gasp, "Saint."

He instantly tugs on my grip. I let go of his foot and he stamps it flat onto

the floor.

"What happened?" I ask.

His jaw tenses.

"Those scars, Saint..."

He sets his jaw, "What about them?"

"Did you get them when you were kidnapped?" I swallow, "Did they do this to you?"

"What's it to you?"

"Not all of the scars are old."

"What do you mean?" He lowers his arms to his lap, his movements deliberate, "What are you trying to say, Victoria?"

Shit. When he calls me by my full name, it's never a good sign.

"Just that, if you're trying to hurt yourself..."

He rises to his feet and my heart thuds in my chest. I have to look up, have to sweep my gaze up every ripped inch of him to meet his gaze.

His eyes blaze, then a shutter comes over his face. "I'm not." He steps around me and heads for the shower door.

"Saint," I jump to my feet, turn toward him, "you can talk to me."

"Oh?" He straightens. "And why would I do that?"

"I'm your wife."

He turns then and his lips curve in a smile that doesn't reach his eyes, "Fake wife, darling."

I wring my fingers together, "You don't mean it, you are simply lashing out at me because you are confused inside."

"We spent some time together; the sex was okay," he tilts his head, "sometimes."

Bastard.

"Don't go mistaking the last few days for some kind of intimacy between us." His lips twist, "It was a transaction, make no mistake."

I swallow. My throat hurts and my eyes burn. Was I wrong to imagine that the last few weeks had shifted the tone of the relationship between us? No, it *can't* be. I tip up my chin, "You're lying."

"And you..." He looks me up and down, "You are replaceable." Turning he grabs a towel, and leaves.

34

Saint

No one can replace her and that is the problem.

I dry myself with the towel, then toss it aside.

She has crawled under my skin, sunk into my blood and I can't get enough of her. I'd been heading to work the last three weeks every day—including weekends—because hell, I had to make a point to her, and to myself, that I'm not dependent on her. This entire sham of a relationship will be over soon enough. She is going to trip up and expose the real reason she propositioned me. I'll walk away from her then, and what... Find another? I ball my fists at my sides. What will happen to her once I find out her secret? Where will she go? If she thinks the Mafia will let her walk away, she is being awfully naïve. They'll kill her. My heart begins to thud and a cold sensation coils in my chest. I can't let that happen. I'll figure out a way to extricate her from whatever mess she is in...regardless of whether there is a chance for us together. Fuck. I pace the carpeted floor the water drying on my skin. What *is* wrong with me? Why *can't I* fight this need to... What? Take care of her?

I'd let down my guard enough to take off my socks today. That...has never happened before. Not when I'm in the dressing room of the gym, nor with any other woman. The socks stay on, always. I am not hiding the scars... It's more that I don't want to answer any questions about them.

Have I become so relaxed in her presence that I had not only taken off my socks, but also had allowed her to wash me? A first. No one had been given

that privilege...before her. I had begun to look forward to coming home to her — Home? Did I call this hotel suite—which is a transient place to stay, at best—home? Is it home because she is here? Why do I enjoy waking up with her coiled into my side? What is Gigi doing to me? Whatever it is, it has to stop.

The bathroom door opens, a cloud of steam wafts out, and from it, she steps forward into the room.

I draw in a breath.

She's naked.

Not that I hadn't seen her without clothes earlier. But the sheer impudence with which she glides forward—head high, spine straight, perky breasts thrust up, breasts that tremble with every step she takes—that's different. She hasn't shown that fighting spirit of hers over the last few weeks. Perhaps I've been too busy taking what she offers, I haven't challenged her recently, and damn, if I haven't missed the thrust and parry between us. She walks around the bed to her side.

I twist my lips. Step forward. "Stop," I growl.

She ignores me, pulls back the covers, no doubt preparing to slide in and fall asleep. And leave me tossing and turning next to her? No way.

"Do as I say, or I swear, you'll regret it," I stalk to her.

She turns her back on me... *Big* mistake. I reach her, and she stiffens, pulls her shoulders back. I swoop down to grab her around the waist and she swerves to the side. What the hell?

I angle toward her; she brushes past me. I pivot, turn to face her as she backs away.

I lower my voice to a hush, "You don't want to do this."

She pales, then tips up her chin, "I am doing this. I'm not playing your games anymore"

"You'll regret this." The pulse thuds at my temple.

She tosses her head, "So, what's new?"

I take a step forward.

She skitters back, "Afraid you'll lose the chase?"

My heartbeat ratchets up.

"Is the big bad billionaire worried that his wife will be able to outrun him?"

My vision tunnels. The hair on the nape of my neck prickles. I drum my fingers on my chest. "Be careful what you wish for, sweetheart, for when I

catch you this time, I won't show any mercy."

She throws back her head and laughs. She fucking laughs. "You're funny, Saint, you know that?" she wheezes. "I have news for you, asshole."

I growl.

"—Oh, you don't deserve the title of alphahole yet. All you've done so far is threaten me and use your wealth and so-called power to keep me under your control. Well, let me tell you, that's not gonna work anymore."

"Oh?" I bare my teeth.

She winces, then pulls herself up to her full height, "It's true. Anyone can be a bully... But to use your wealth to actually make a difference in the world? To use your power to help those less fortunate? To bare your heart and show your feelings? To make yourself vulnerable enough to be hurt? That's true strength."

I roll my shoulders. "You done?"

"No." Color suffuses her cheeks. She closes the distance between us, thrusts her finger into my chest. "I thought you were different, that behind that obnoxious persona is someone who—"

"Cares? Who feels? Who had fallen in love with you? Who would change his life for you? Who would reform for you and help you in whatever little plan you have going here?"

She pales.

"I have news for you, doll. Your cunt is no magic pussy, that one taste of it, and poof, I turn over a new leaf."

She swallows.

"You...you're hurting, Saint. That's why you are trying to hurt me."

I laugh, "What a crock." A bead of sweat slides down my back.

"You're afraid." She leans in and her scent envelops me.

My groin tightens; my gut churns.

"That's why you're lashing out at me. I understand, Saint. Let me help." She raises her hand toward my face, "You're—"

"Bored," I yawn, then step back. "Save your insights, my sweet fake wife, for I couldn't give a fuck about your thoughts."

A lone tear squeezes out of the corner of her eye.

A hot sensation stabs at my chest.

"Take a good look, sweetheart," I spread my arms, "cause I am not changing."

She searches my features with an intensity that borders on hate... *Love?*

Nah! Not that. *Never* that. Everything between us has been a charade... *Well*, except that she'd been a virgin. Fuck, what *does* it mean that she came to me untouched? Sweat beads my palms. Nothing. *It means* nothing. Another maneuver in this scheme of hers to catch me off kilter. If she'd intended to get close to me... Well, she has succeeded. And it stops here. Now.

"Get out," I jerk my chin toward the door.

"What?"

"Out of my bedroom," I growl.

"No."

I blink. "Excuse me?"

She ducks under my arm, then slides into the bed and pulls up the covers to her chin. "I am sleeping here. You take the couch."

35

Saint

"What the fuck?" I glance up at the ceiling.

My wife had thrown me out of our bedroom and I had taken it. The fuck had happened there? Had I actually dragged my sorry arse out of there and retreated to the living room...like a loser? My present condition certainly seems to indicate so.

I shift my frame on the couch in the living room, which had seemed comfortable enough on the face of it, but try squeezing a six-foot-four-inch frame onto the bloody thing for the night...and fuck, it isn't a laughing matter. How the hell had everything gone so tits up? How had I allowed that tiny woman to get the better of me? Had I actually agreed to turn the marital bed over to her for the night? And why hadn't I simply checked into another hotel room for the night? Why can't I bear to leave her alone, even for one night? Because she is my asset and I can't leave her unguarded. Bull-fucking-shit, what a crock that is. All the time I'd been away at the office, she'd been on her own. Okay not quite. I'd had my people tailing her, yes, even in the hotel. So what? It's the only way to find out what the hell her endgame is in all of this.

I fold my arm over my eyes, stretch myself, and my bloody legs hang over the side. Shit. Clearly, I am too large for this space. I turn over, punch the cushion under my head. How the hell had it come to this? I am in the most expensive suite, in an iconic hotel owned by me, in a city where I am—okay was—the most eligible bachelor—in a country where I am consistently

among the top five richest men. And here I am, spending the night on a couch? Fuck. I turn over and slide off of the couch. Hit the floor on my arse. Insane. This is beyond ridiculous. This is a clear sign that I am pussywhipped.

If I told any of the Seven about this... Well, outside of Sinner—bet that fucker would empathize with what it is to be faced with an angry wife. Jesus, that's the second time in a row I've referred to her as my wife. She's your fake wife, you wanker. *As you've reminded her over and over again. And broken her heart. You hurt her, you bloody reprobate.*

I drag my fingers through my hair.

But hell, if her words hadn't hit home. She'd struck a nerve—more than a nerve. She'd pushed herself into my deepest darkest space, the place I'd vowed never to let anyone into. She'd insisting on unearthing my secrets, bared my insecurities and held up a mirror to my flaws. Of which I have many. I've never hidden them. And I'm not starting now. I've never denied that I am callous. What was it she called me? A brute. Yep, that's what I am. Someone who doesn't give a fuck about others. Who goes after what he wants and takes it, damn the consequences. So, what am I doing, skulking around in the dark, on my arse in my hotel suite? This space is mine. I push up to my feet. And she is mine—for the duration of this sham marriage. At least. And no one keeps me away from what I own, least of all my sassy, devious, spit-fire of a wife.

I stalk to the door of the bedroom—how dare she shut it on me?—and shove it open. I step into the semi-darkness. The curtains are pulled back and the brightness of the streetlights pours in through the window, illuminating the figure on the bed. I prowl over to her, rake my gaze over the figure tucked in, looking quite comfortable. Her fingers are tucked under her cheek, her lips slightly parted. Her chest rises and falls; her cheeks are flushed. No doubt she'd fallen asleep as soon as I had left, while I had tossed and turned in my make-shift bed.

I grab the sheets and pull them off.

"What the—?" She sits up with a little scream, breasts heaving, naked body glimmering in the moonlight. My throat closes. The blood rushes to my dick. Fuck. I don't have any clothes on either. Good. This should make it convenient.

"Move over," I snarl.

She blinks up at me. "Saint?"

"Who the fuck else?" I growl. Of course, *it's* me. Who had she expected? Her late-husband? That fucker, Antonio? I bunch my fists at my side.

She glances down, takes in my stance, then brings up her hands to cover her breasts. Anger thrums at my temples. I am her bloody husband. She doesn't get to hide her gorgeous body from me. And why the hell is she staring at me with fear in her eyes? I wouldn't hurt her. Well, not physically at least— Okay, well...only when it is required. Then, I'll do what's needed to her body, to give her the most pleasure I can. What is wrong with that? It is for her own good, isn't it?

And the way you hurt her with your words... *Is that for her own good too?* I bunch my shoulders, glare at her features.

"Wh...what's wrong?" she stutters.

Nothing. Everything. "You're on my side of the bed."

"Oh," she glances around, then scoots over.

"Not so fast." I swoop down. Another scream leaves her lips. I scoop her up, then plonk down on the bed, with her spread across my lap.

She wriggles. I lean my weight on the small of her back.

"Let me go."

"No."

"What are you doing?" she huffs.

"You were in the wrong."

"Why? Because I slept on your side?" Her tone is incredulous.

"Yes."

"That's preposterous," she tosses her head.

"No, that's cause for punishment."

Her entire body stills, then a shudder crawls up her spine.

"You like that, don't ya?" I palm her butt.

She bucks again and I lean more of my weight on her. I am using my superior strength to overpower her, exactly what she'd accused me of doing earlier. Well, good. I *am confirming* her already-low opinion of me, right? I snicker.

She turns to glare at me, "You're looking for an excuse to spank me."

"Oh?"

She nods, "Couldn't bear the idea that a woman had gotten the better of you."

I squeeze her butt cheek and she shudders.

"Go on," I bare my teeth, "why did you stop?"

"If you wanted to touch me, you only had to—"

I raise my hand and she winces.

"You were saying?" I ask.

"That...that...if you wanted to make love to me, you only had to ask—
ow!"

My palm connects with her backside and she huffs.

I raise my hand, slap her other butt cheek.

She cries out, "It hurts, you oaf."

"Good." I spank her first butt cheek again and the other, and the first, then the other.

"Ow, ow," she screams again, aaaand my cock engorges. She wriggles her body, tries to pull away, and the friction against my shaft is so fucking sweet. A groan rips out of me. I increase the intensity of my spanking, alternating between her arse cheeks.

She grabs hold of my leg, grinds her clit into my thigh. The blood drains to my groin and all of my senses hone in on her.

"Fuck, Gigi, I want you."

I stop, and her entire body quivers. The redness of my palm prints stands out against the curve of her butt. I bend, kiss the wounded skin. She moans, and my heart stutters.

I stand up with her in my arms, then turn and lower her to her arms and knees onto the bed.

"Hold on."

36

Victoria

That's all the warning he gives me, before he lines up his dick against the entrance to my soaking wet channel.

"Saint."

He pistons his hips and slams his cock all the way inside of me.

His balls slaps against my tender flesh; pin pricks of pain dance up my spine. My thighs tremble; his grip on me tightens. Vibrations radiate from the point of contact. A melting sensation coils deep inside of me.

"Saint," I groan.

"I know." The words are strained. He stays there, with me impaled on his shaft. A second. Another. His cock throbs, stretching me, as my pussy adjusts to the intrusion.

"You ready, Gigi?"

Even before I can nod, he pulls out, then thrusts forward. My entire body jerks.

A tingling sensation sweeps up my legs. I curve my back, thrust back, trying to take more of him inside. More. I need more.

"P-please," I stutter.

"What?"

"Please take me, Saint."

A growl rips from him. He begins to fuck me in earnest, and I meet his every thrust, pushing back with my hips, digging my knees into the bed for purchase.

"You're so damn tight. Even after all these weeks, I can't get enough of you. You're a witch, Gigi. You've completely undone me."

His words send vibrations of heat swirling in my belly. Everything in me is focused on him, on how he's buried inside of me. On the pulsing, seething, aching hollow that he leaves inside of me each time he pulls back. "It's not enough," I gasp. "I want..."

"Tell me," he growls. "Tell me what you need."

"I need—" I widen my knees, then reach back between my legs and squeeze his balls.

His dick jumps inside me, lengthening even further. He groans, then pulls out completely.

I whine, "What are you doing—?"

He flips me over, plants himself between my thighs. The bed dips, as he plants one knee, then the other, on the bed.

I open my mouth to demand what he's doing, and squeak when he guides his cock to my trembling opening.

I glance down at the sight of his shaft poised to enter me... *Holy shit!* It's the hottest thing I have ever seen. I gasp, draw in a breath, then scream as he buries himself inside of me—full, complete. The trembling screeches up my spine. The blood drums in my temples, and my vision wavers. "Saint," I whisper, "I am going to come."

"Don't you dare, Gigi."

His voice is fierce.

He drags his hands up the backs of my thighs, loops my ankles over his shoulders.

He pulls back, then slams inside me again, and the sensation of his gorgeous thickness filling me, stretching me... *My God!* I'll never be the same after this. Fucking, love-making... Whatever name I may give it... It's a primal meeting of our flesh, our souls. Something knotted inside of me dissolves. The climax bubbles up, waves of tension ebbing, then flowing forward. "Saint," I choke, "I can't..."

"You can," he growls.

The fullness inside me pushes up, needing wanting, demanding that I give in to it.

"Saint," I whisper.

"Eyes on me," he snaps. I jerk my gaze up to his, and the force of those blue eyes pins me in place. My chest hurts and a pressure builds at the backs

of my eyes.

His lips kick up, a fierce smile lighting up his face.

"You're beautiful," the words spill out of me.

His smile widens and his gaze intensifies. "And you're mine."

"Yours." I nod.

"Come with me." He thrust forward and my orgasm overpowers me. I arch my back, open my mouth, and hear the sound of someone wailing. That's me, I know, but I can't stop myself. Tears blur my vision and I collapse, as he comes inside of me. I hear his harsh groan from somewhere above me. He slips down to cover my shaking body with his, his face nestled against my breast.

We stay in that position for a few seconds...maybe minutes. He anchors me as my body quakes and tears stream down my cheeks. Finally, my breathing steadies, mirrors his. I sense his heart thudding against my chest. His weight on me grows heavy, my limbs protest, but I don't say anything. This...whatever this is...it's different.

Does he realize how things have subtly shifted between us?

He stirs, then moves onto his back, pulling me on top—and wow, he's still inside of me. I mean, that's not easy to achieve, I'm sure, but he pulls it off without missing a beat.

He drags his palm across my hair and his fingers snag on a knot.

I wince.

"Sorry." He plays with my hair, undoing the knot with the same intense precision that he seems to bring to so much in his life.

"I began self-harming not long after my mother died, " his voice rumbles against my ear. "So much was not in control, then. I had no idea how to cope with the anger inside of me, which was already building after the incident. And when she died, my world fell apart. She was the only one who understood the level of PTSD I had from the incident, the only one who indulged my compulsion to speak in riddles."

He pauses, his throat moving as he swallows.

"But the strain of it all became too much for my parents. They broke up. She left home. Right after she left, my father told me I was the reason for the change in their relationship. I was a mistake, you see? There was no space in their marriage for me. He blamed me for what had gone wrong."

"Oh my god." I stare at him horrified. *Why the hell would his father say that? And his mother? How could she have left Saint, when he needed her the*

most?

His features tense. "A month later, she died in an accident. I'm afraid I didn't take it well."

"I'm so sorry," I whisper.

"You have a knack for getting to the truth, don't you?"

I glance up at him, "Only with you, Saint." I rub my cheek against his chest. "Only you."

He pulls me close, tucks my head under his chin. "Sleep." His voice is soft, but my body seems to obey his command on instinct. Darkness closes over me.

"What? When did it happen?"

Saint's voice filters into my sleep-addled brain.

I come awake slowly, tuning into his words.

"I can't come right now, I'm..." He stops speaking. Guess he's on the phone? Who is he talking to? The same person who'd called him the last few times when he'd left me?

I hear his footsteps thud as he walks away.

I crack my eyelids open, glance down to find I'm sprawled on my front... on Saint's side of the bed. I'd gone to sleep on him... Had he woken up to find me coiled into him? Had he thought me weak? Because I'd submitted to him? I'd trusted him. Had I been wrong to do so? I glance over my shoulder to the open doorway of the bedroom and spot Saint. He's naked... Of course, he is. The man doesn't have an unconfident bone in his body.

He holds his phone to his ear, bends his other arm and runs his fingers through his hair. His biceps bulge, the planes of his back undulating. My mouth dries. I swallow.

He glances back toward me. I clamp my eyelids shut.

His voice filters through to me, "Are you sure the information is accurate?"

He listens. "The pickup is going to take place in an hour?"

Footsteps approach the doorway.

"Right."

I crack my eyelids open, enough to watch him lean against the doorjamb.

"I'll make it."

What the fuck—? He's leaving me after what took place between us?

His gaze roves over my shoulders, across my body wreathed in his sheets.

Can he tell that I'm awake?

He glances away. I relax into the sheets. His scent is all around me; the heat of his body warms the bedclothes, tempting me to roll over and wallow in the remnants of his essence. Shit. I am getting addicted to him. Why does he have to be so...so...irresistible. So damn tempting. A 100% masculine hunk who has no idea how lethal his charm can be... And he isn't even trying.

"I know..." his tone lowers. "I am well aware that I got married three weeks ago, but this... What we do together is important."

Well, shit. Of course, whoever is on the other side of the phone takes precedence. My stomach churns and my breathing goes shallow.

Don't let him see how pissed off you are. And I have every right. That last time together, it went beyond the realm of fucking. Besides, isn't he the one who'd said he was making love to me on our wedding night? His actions of last night—especially the way he'd lashed out at my asking about the scars, only to return to our bed and confess that he self-harms—it backs up his words.

So who is he talking to now?

He widens his stance, giving me a full-frontal view of his cock.

I swallow.

"Got it," His voice dips, "I'll be at Mill Hill East Broadway in half an hour." He disconnects the call then crosses the floor toward the walk-in closet. I hear the sound of clothes rustling.

He's doing it then? He's leaving?

I sit up in bed. "Saint," I call out.

He steps into the room, dressed in sneakers, jeans and a sweatshirt that stretches across his chest. My breath catches. Saint in casual wear is even more potent than Saint in office clothes.

I clear my throat, tip up my chin, "Where are you going?"

His shoulders bunch.

"It's a business meeting." His glance flickers away then back to me.

My heart begins to race. He's lying; I know he is.

"In the middle of the night?" I ask. "And dressed like that?"

He raises his shoulders, then sighs, "It's a work emergency." He heads for the door.

"Don't leave."

He turns to look at me and his expressions softens, "I'll be back soon."

I straighten my shoulders and the sheet falls to my waist. "You're leaving me?" I pout.

His gaze falls to my breasts; his chest rises and falls. "Not of my own volition." His voice is husky.

He tears his gaze off of my body, "You keep the bed warm, babe. I'll be back before you know it."

He crosses the living room to the front door. I hear the sound of the main door to the suite snick shut.

I jump out of bed, then race to the front door. I press my ear to it, hear the sound of the elevator door closing.

Where the hell is he going so early in the morning?

I walk back into the bedroom, take in the messed-up sheets, a pillow thrown to the floor. There's a dent in the pillow on his side of the bed, where we'd both slept. A shiver works its way up my spine.

I'd thought...that he had feelings for me... *Love*? Nah, that's too strong a word. Possession. The marriage is a bullshit fake to end all fakes...but perhaps it had elicited some primal feeling in him? Something that made him want to exert his ownership over me...because in some way, he's made me his.

Am I his?

Is he mine?

Sure, he'd shared more of himself with me. That doesn't mean anything; not when he'd lied to me about the call and left. I chew on my fingernail. There must be a good reason for his actions; there has to be. So why couldn't he tell me?

For that matter, why haven't I revealed the reason I am here?

Why haven't I told him about the hold the Mafia has on me? I could use his help. The thought has crossed my mind. But... I chew on my lower lip... What if I told him and the Mafia found out about it? They'd hurt him...and Nina. Sure, Saint has resources at his disposal...but the Mafia... They're everywhere, and they are ruthless. I can't play with both of their lives; I can't take the risk of something happening to them.

I curl my fists into my sides. I can't endanger the lives of both of the people I've come to care about.

No, the only way to protect both Saint and Nina is to complete what I came to do. But first, I have to find out why he lied to me.

I need to catch up with him, and find out why or who he keeps rushing off

to see.

Walking to the closet door, I wrench it open. Ignoring the clothes he bought me, I cross the floor to my bag on the far end. Strange. I can't find any of my underclothes in the bag. Well, I am not going to wear the lingerie that he bought for me, it doesn't seem right to do so, not when he could be cheating on me as we speak... shit, don't do that, don't make assumptions, not until you find out the truth for yourself.

I forgo the underwear and pull on my jeans and a top; then tug on ballet pumps.

My heart begins to race. Adrenaline fills my blood. I grab my handbag from where I'd dropped it on the table near the door, then race out.

I punch the button to the elevator and the doors slide open. I step in, take it to the ground floor. Moderating my pace, I reach the guard by the door. It's the same guy who'd come toward us the day Saint and I had had our altercation on the sidewalk.

"Ma'am." He touches his finger to his forehead, in a semi-salute, "Can I help you?"

I bite my lips, "Uh... Actually, yes." I tip up my chin, "Can you get me a rental car or a taxi, please?"

He frowns.

"Saint told me I should ask you for help if I need anything." I add.

He stills, then nods. "I won't be a minute, Ma'am, if you'd wait here?" He disappears out the front doors. I shift my weight from foot to foot. A group walks in, and I shuffle aside.

I wring my fingers together; sweat slides down my back. What am I doing? Will I be too late to catch him?

The doorman walks in. He extends his arm and I take the key fob from him.

"It's the red Maserati parked right in front."

"A Maserati?" I blink, "Oh, but I don't need anything that flashy—" Not to mention that it'd stand out on the road. "Isn't there any other car, a little less...uh... Expensive?"

"Mr. Caldwell specifically allocated this one for you."

"Right."

Had he remembered my tastes from our conversation a few weeks ago? That must be it. What does it mean that he did? And when had he indicated to the doorman to direct me to this, if I asked? Had he guessed that I might want

to drive my own car at some point?

"Ma'am?" the doorman prompts me.

I curl my fingers around the key fob, then eye his name tag. "Thank you, Dorian."

He nods, "No problem." He holds the door open for me.

I walk down the steps, press down on the key fob to unlock the car doors. I slip into the driver's seat, then program the way to Mill Hill East on the GPS.

It takes me 30 minutes to get there on the highway. I ease into a parking lot on the main street, then walk up the sidewalk. I spot Saint's Jaguar almost immediately. It's parked outside a coffeeshop.

Is he meeting someone here? I peek in through the glass wall, but can't see him. I turn to go...then glance back. There, at the far end, are the unmistakable broad shoulders which could only belong to one guy. His dark hair curls at his collar. He's facing away, talking to someone. I try to peer past him. *Damn* it. I can't see who's in the seat opposite him. *Show me your face. Go on. Do it.*

As if she hears me, the woman in the seat rises to her feet. She's tiny, perfectly curved and wearing black skintight jeans. Her blonde hair flows to her waist. I can't make out the color of her eyes, but no doubt, they are as stunning as the rest of her. She blows out a breath, folds her arms over her waist.

She hauls her handbag over her shoulder, then throws her hands in the air. Her slim, tight-fitting shirt rides up, revealing a smooth flat stomach. I ball my fists at my sides. Of course, she's model perfect. Is she his ex-girlfriend? Ex-something? Or maybe...current?

Her gestures are heated as she talks to him.

He leans back, runs his fingers through his hair.

She stabs a finger at him. He squares his shoulders.

She turns to leave, takes a step away, only for him to jump to his feet. He grabs her wrist. His face is in profile, but there's no mistaking the anguish in his features. I've never seen him this...disturbed. Not in all the time that I've known him. Nothing I've said to him has ever made him this overcome with emotions... Well okay, almost. The only time I've seen him this overcome is when we made love—no, fucked. That's all it was. He'd fucked me, and that last time, I was sure I'd broken through to him, just as he had shattered all of my defenses. I'd been sure it was the beginning of... Trust? Love? Whatever.

Doesn't matter.

The woman he's talking to tries to pull away. His lips move, and her features crumple.

He pulls her to him and she buries her face in his shoulder.

He holds her close... My guts churn. *Fuck you, Saint.* Fuck you for making me want to...believe. Moisture streaks my cheek. I dash away the tears. I will not cry over this...two-timing, conniving jerk. I step away, retrace my steps back to my car. The red Maserati gleams in the dawn light.

Why did he have to remember my preferences and then go and do this? Damn it, I want to give him the benefit of doubt. But hell, if that scene didn't indicate there is a relationship between them.

I stomp over to the car, open it and throw myself inside. Smash the door closed with enough force that the entire vehicle shudders. I cringe. The car is new... And I am not jaded enough to not appreciate the power under my hands. I grip the steering wheel, press my forehead to it. "Bloody hell." *Why did you have to do this, Saint?*

I slap my hand against the steering wheel. Pain sweeps up my arm. It helps center me. I focus on the vibrating threads that sink into my nerves, follow them to where they disappear. Draw in a breath, allow the calm to steal over me. Somewhere along the line, I've become a masochist. When I inflict pain on myself, it helps me feel alive. It's something I can control. My response to it... To him. Why is it that I had felt compelled to hand that power over to him? Asking him to take me on as a sub had been...unplanned. It wasn't until I'd seen him that day, sprawled back in his chair, his glorious cock in his hand, as he'd looked me up and down with the smirk that had dared me to issue the challenge to him. I'd wanted to surprise him, wipe that satisfied smile off of his face. He thought he had me pegged? Well, he has no idea who he is dealing with.

He thinks he can take me for granted? He has another think coming. I am going to teach him not to mess with me. Over the last few weeks, a part of me had felt I was taking advantage of him.

Now, my conscience is clear. I can conclude my mission. I can complete the mission and save Nina. There is no more reason to hesitate. I wipe the tears off of my face, then reverse the car out of the parking lot.

Thirty-five minutes later I pull into the parking space reserved for Saint at the offices of 7A investments. I am his wife, right? What's his is mine, and all that. I can take what rightfully belongs to me. I slam the doors shut, reach

the elevators meant for the penthouse where the Seven have their offices. I call for the elevator and it arrives in seconds. I step inside, press my thumb into the receptacle meant for identification. It lights up green. Of course, it does. Saint has already shared my identifying information with the entire security system.

I tuck my bag into my side, jab at the button for the top floor. The doors close. The numbers above the elevator door increase. They open onto the executive floor. I step out and stride confidently toward the last office on the floor, where this entire bloody saga had begun. *Don't run. Don't hurry. Keep your pace. You are his wife. You have every right to be here, remember?* At least, it's a floor only frequented by the 7 and those to whom they have given clearance. And it's too early for the employees to be around. Not that any of them could come to my aid, if Saint were to catch me. But why would he? He is with his... Girlfriend? Mistress? Whoever it is. I am safe...as safe as could be expected for a woman about to commit a crime—one that will free my friend. I wrench open the door to his office. There's that dark and edgy scent of his—pheromones and leather, laced with a woodsy scent that is uniquely Saint. My belly flip-flops. Hell, the scent of him is enough to turn me on. *Get what you need and get out of here. Do it.*

Rounding the table, I plop my bag on his table then drop into his chair and yank at the top drawer—it's unlocked. My breath catches. I ease it open. There, on top of the papers is...a USB drive? I stare at it. This is too convenient. Did he place it there for me to find it?

I snatch it up and insert it into the laptop.

I place my forefinger on the lock-pad and the screen springs to life.

I freeze. Did he really trust me enough to have my fingerprints recorded onto his every device? Can I access all of his secrets...so easily? The hair on my forearms rises. It's a trap. It has to be. I stare at the screen; but damn it, I have to take this opportunity. I can't not do it.

A window pops onto the screen, prompting me to access the files on the USB stick. There's one file so I click on it and a video begins to play. The image of a boy tied to a chair fills the screen. His face is streaked with dirt, hollows under his cheeks. He's wearing a school uniform, his white shirt streaked with mud...and blood? His breathing is ragged. There's a sound off-camera, then he stirs, looks up and straight into the camera. I gasp. He's blindfolded but that patrician nose... The slant of his jaw? It's Saint. My heart begins to race. A man moves into frame, his back to the camera, he slaps the

boy. Saint's body jerks.

The man leaves; Saint slumps back in his chair, blood trickling from a cut in his lips.

My stomach lurches and bile laces my throat. Shit, I can't be sick, not now. I click out of the video, eject the flash drive, then shove it into my handbag.

I turn to leave, then hesitate. I mean, come on, I have access to his computer. Do I dare? I pause. Do I? Fuck it. I swivel to face the screen, open up his email folder and scan through the emails. What am I looking for? Any clue to the woman? Anything to indicate who she is? The subjects of the emails all seem boring...work related. Shit, this is getting me nowhere. I click out of the emails. What now? I open up the pictures folder... Peruse the images. There. I click open pictures of Saint with Sinner, Saint with Weston and the other guy from the Seven... Arpad? Yeah that's his name... Saint with... I pause. It's a picture of Saint with the girl I saw him with earlier. It's taken somewhere in the open, by a river...? The two of them are fishing. Saint's smiling at her—shit, he never smiles like that.

His features are relaxed, his clothes more weather-beaten than anything I've ever seen him wear. My fingers tighten on the mouse. Damn it, this was a mistake. What do I care what the relationship between them is?

I click out of the pictures, scan the names of the other folders...

Anything else? Anything. Come on. There's a folder called "Gigi."

I click it open... then open up the file called 'Beatles.' Beatles, huh? It has files...marked in the order of years. From 1963—the year the first Beatles album came out—to the current year. I open the first file... A page filled with facts... Every single detail of every hit, links to relevant events that happened to the Fab Four in that year—the tours, the albums released, girlfriends at that time, news headlines they made. Wow. *Did* he do all of this research? Nah! Probably had some minion pull it up for him... He is thorough, I have to give him that.

I scroll down to the file marked "Gigi." Gigi? I click it open...and it is filled with riddles. Questions about the Beatles... So this is how he prepared for his meetings with me, like I was some kind of acquisition. It's so very Saint. Being thorough, strategic... He'd been planning on how to converse with me...because he'd realized The Beatles were a pet obsession for me? But why? Why would he go about it in such a methodical fashion... Almost as if he—

"Victoria?"

I jump and the hair on the back of my neck prickles.

I look up to see his familiar features towering in front of me.

"Saint...?"

Saint

Her features freeze and her gaze widens. I step into my office.

She swallows.

I prowl forward and the color fades from her cheeks.

"What a surprise to find you here, *wife*."

She draws in a breath, then tips her chin in that gesture of defiance I am coming to recognize so well. My woman will never give me an inch; she'll make me fight for it. And fuck, if I don't love that about her.

Love? Fucking love.

There is that word again. A confusing emotion—one which muddles my instincts, clouds my intuition, and causes me to doubt my own judgment.

I reach my desk, pause in front of it with my legs spread wide apart. I prop my hands on my hips, "You have something to tell me?"

She swallows.

"Out with it, Gigi." I glance over the part of her that is visible above the monster hunk of a wood, which— Truth be told, I'd bought the desk in a fit of defiance. I'd wanted it to be the biggest desk among all the Seven. Don't judge. I'm entitled to spend my hard-earned money how I like it, right? Especially on her. I'll shower her with whatever she wants, and stuff she doesn't even know she needs. Hell, I'd trade in all of my riches for one more night of ecstasy with her—under me, in my bed, bent over my desk, ass in the air... Gigi crawling over to me across that wide surface, asking me to punish her for a crime she'd committed. I lower my voice to a hush, "Say the word,

sweet thing." She pales. Her chest rises and falls. "Confess to your misdoings and I'll mete out your punishment."

She bites down on her lower lip. I jerk my gaze to that glistening flesh—pouty, full, pink and sensuous. Like the melting triangle of goodness between her legs. My dick lengthens and her gaze drops down to my crotch. I don't need to look down to know the crotch of my pants is tented right then.

"Do it," I growl.

She flinches. Her upper body moves, then she rises to her feet. She grabs the arms of my chair, swings her legs up, and hoists herself onto the chair.

"What the fuck?" I blink.

She's naked from her waist down.

No panties. Nothing except the curve of her hips silhouetted against the light pouring in from the wide windows behind her. Nothing except for the smooth expanse of her creamy thighs marked with reddened scratches. I'd done that, at some point during the last night, when I'd gone down on her. After she'd fallen asleep on my chest, her breathing had deepened. I'd stayed unmoving for an hour... Maybe two? Until I'd been sure I wouldn't wake her. Then I'd slid her onto her back, parted her thighs, settled in between her legs and feasted on her. I'd made sure not to wake her...had been gentle, soft, soothing, slow... I had licked and slurped and eaten her out, until she'd quietly come under me. Then I'd moved up to kiss her, to share our joined taste with her. She'd sucked on my tongue as I had eased into her; I'd finished myself off with a few thrusts. Hell, I'd been so turned on by the act of tonguing her cunt that... I hadn't been able to stop myself. I'd left my stamp on her. I'd claimed her over and over again. The phone call had woken me up and I'd left. Saying 'no' hadn't been an option. Some things are too important. Not even my feelings for her could prevent me from acting.

I'd wrapped up my meeting, checked up on her—yeah, I'd bugged her phone. So? Don't judge. Only I can keep her safe... And if that means I am stalking her? Well, it's for her own good, right?

"Gigi," I breathe. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" She grabs the hem of her top and pulls it off. No bra... Fuck... Her pink nipples perk up, inviting me to come closer, closer. I bump into the desk... *Shit*, when had I bridged the distance between us?

"Victoria, have you forgotten the rules?"

"On the contrary, Saint." She climbs up onto the desk on all fours. "I'm submitting to you completely. This is what you want, right? Me...begging for

you?" She crawls toward me, her breasts jiggling; her beautiful shoulders arch with each forward motion.

"You don't know what you are doing."

"Don't I?" Half-way over, she stops. Dropping down, she picks up a riding crop with her mouth.

She glances up, the strip of leather caught between her pearly white teeth. Fuck, fucking fuck. My groin hardens and a pulse flares to life at my temples, behind my eyelids, even in my fucking balls. "You're playing a dangerous game," I growl.

She glides forward, head held up, green gaze daring me to inch forward, to bend from my waist, to take the offered object of punishment from her. I shake out the modified whip. It whistles through the air. She flinches and a bead of sweat dots her upper lip.

"I know what you're doing, Gigi." She's trying to distract me. I drag the switch between my fingers. Her gaze drops to my hands. I slap the crop on my outstretched palm. Her shoulders shudder and her breathing grows erratic.

"You want this?"

She touches her tongue to her lips. My hand shakes. It fucking shakes as I hold it up.

"Say it."

"I...I..."

"Now."

"I want it, please. Saint. Use it on me. Make it hurt enough that I forget everything else that came before it. Own me, Saint. Hit me on my behind, then fuck me in the arse."

"Bloody fuck." My vision tunnels, and my cock insists on springing forward—ready, impatient to be done with all of the preliminaries. To simply bury my aching self inside her welcoming heat, to finally come home. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph," I snarl.

"Those... Those were the names of the three cats Lennon had at one point," she answers.

I laugh, "You're perfect, you know that? The answer to my twisted prayers." I push the tip of the crop under her chin.

She stills.

Drag the leather down her throat, between her breasts, down the concave of her stomach to where the bud of her clit peers out.

She shudders. "Saint..."

I withdraw the crop the same way, drag it under my nose, "Your scent, Gigi." I glare at her. "The sweetness of your arousal is more potent than honey." I swipe my tongue up the strip of hide.

A whine bleeds from her lips.

I swipe the crop through the air. "Turn around."

She instantly complies. The creamy mounds of her arse thrust out at me.

"Fucking gorgeous."

She swivels her head.

"Don't," I admonish her.

She faces forward.

I drag my crop across her buttocks and her entire body trembles.

"Which Beatles album spent the longest consecutive time at number one?"

"Their debut album... *Please, Please Me.*"

"You bet." I bring the crop down on her arse.

She screams, "Bu...but I got the answer right."

"So?"

"Sadist."

I chuckle, "Now you recognize my true nature." I tilt my head, "Which song by the Beatles features only thirteen different words in the lyrics?"

"It's a love song recorded by John for Yoko," She bites her lower lip.

"Tell me Gigi." I prompt.

"*I want you...*" she huffs.

I bring the cane down on her backside.

She cries out, "I hate you."

"I don't." I slap the whip across her backside. She chokes. "In fact, I think I may even be falling in lust with you."

I lower the crop again and again. She cries out, wriggles her hips, throws her head back. The skin of her arse cheeks blooms red. The tracks stand out against the creaminess of her skin. "Fuck, Gigi. I need you now."

I loosen my grip and the switch slips from my hand. I drag my knuckles up her pussy. "You're soaking, babe."

"Saint, please," her voice is strangled.

"You ready for me?"

"I've been waiting for you since before I knew who you were," she whispers, "when all I had was a hope and a wish for someone to push away all the memories that hold me back."

"What's holding you back, Gigi?"

"I...I can't tell you."

"You will."

"I... I..." she huffs.

I lower my face, press my cheek to hers, "Say it... Say what's on your mind."

"They... The Mafia... They kidnapped my friend, Saint." Her voice trembles, "They're holding Nina hostage. They...forced me to play the role of Adam's wife."

"Why you?" I cup her pussy. Her thighs clench.

"Why did they contact you?"

"Nina was my roommate at UCLA." She swallows.

"You were close?" I strum her pussy lips.

"Very." She shudders. "My parents moved from London to LA when I was twelve. My father left us shortly afterward." Her lips twist. "My mother ended up having to work two, sometimes three, jobs to make ends meet. Her focus was to put me through college so I could find a good job and carve a better future for myself."

She blinks; her chin wobbles.

I drag the wetness from her cunt to her back hole. "You got a scholarship to UCLA," I prompt.

Shit, why had I said that? Me, the cold-hearted bastard who could string out an entire business discussion without showing mercy... The slightest hint of uncertainty from her and I can't stop myself from reaching out to help. This has got to stop.

I smear her wetness into the valley between her butt cheeks. She shudders. "That's where I met Nina," her voice quavers. "After my mother died, she was there for me; she pulled me out of the emotional hole I'd dug myself into. Clearly, the Mafia knew how close we were."

I dip a finger inside her back hole. Her butt clenches and her entire body jerks.

"Saint," she protests.

"Complete what you were saying," I instruct.

She swallows "There was no way I could abandon her." She tips up her chin, "But you know all this already, don't you?"

I grunt.

"Yet you married me?" she asks.

I tilt my head.

"Why?" Her chest rises and falls. "Why would you do that?"

"To keep you close..." I draw in a breath, "Not only that, though. It may have started out that way, but I fell for you somewhere along the way. You understand that, right?"

I slip another finger inside her back hole and she groans. I pause, giving her time to adjust to the intrusion.

"Oh, my god, Saint..." she mewls. "Please, it's not enough."

"Soon, darling." I pull out my fingers, then grip her hips to hold her in place. "What hold do they have on you, Gigi?"

"I... I told you everything already." Her shoulders stiffen, her spine ramrod straight.

Why is she not telling me everything?

"What have they asked of you?" I lean over, kiss the shell of her ear.

She moans.

"You have to tell me if you want me to help you."

I position my dick between her arsecheeks and she shivers.

"Let me take some of the burden off of you, Gigi. Tell me why you're running scared? You're my wife, sweetheart. I'll do anything for you. You know that, right?"

"Will you, Saint?" She thrusts out her hips and my dick nudges the opening of her puckered hole. Lust spirals up my spine and tension winds tight in my groin. I need to be inside of her. Need to take her again. "Anything," I force out the words through clenched teeth, "Anything for you."

"Then tell me who the phone calls are from? The woman for whom you'll leave your wife and go running? Who is she, Saint?"

I dig my fingertips into her hips and she winces. I loosen my grip, slightly. It'll leave marks on her there. *Good*. If this is the only way I can assert my ownership on her, then so be it.

"You...saw us?"

She nods. "I...followed you."

"That's why you came to the office?"

"I came here because... I couldn't bear to return to the bed we'd shared, after... You left to meet another woman."

"You have no idea what you're talking about," I growl.

"Then tell me, Saint." She turns to glance at me.

"I... I can't; not without putting you in danger."

"Me?" She blinks.

"It's the kind of thing you want no part of."

"Why can't you let me be the judge of that?" she scowls.

Fuck, fucking fuck. She has no idea what she's asking of me.

"Why can't you trust me to decide what's best for you?"

"Is it?" She swallows. "Or is this more convenient for you?"

"There you go, doubting me again." I blow out a breath. "Besides, I am sworn to secrecy. I made a promise to her."

She winces; her face pales. "What about the promise you made to me? You swore to take me as your wife, to cherish and to protect me."

"All of which I intend to do."

"Then start with this. If there's even a small chance for us to be together, then tell me what it is you're hiding?"

"I..." I lower my chin to my chest, "I can't, Gigi. It's not my secret to tell," I hold her gaze, "but I can show you how much I want you."

"It's not enough." She tosses her head, "You can take your dick and stuff it—"

"Oh, I am going to stuff it all right." I bare my teeth, "Inside you, where it belongs."

"No," she tries to pull away.

I hold her in place, "Yes."

"I don't want this."

I shove my hand around and between her legs, "You do." I slide my fingers inside her soaking cunt. "Whatever our differences may be, however divisive the secrets between us, there's one place where we can't hide from each other, and that's when we fuck."

"Fuck off."

"I intend to, only I am going to take you with me, sweetheart."

I shove my fingers in and out of her and she whines. I grind the heel of my palm into her clit; she throws back her head. She snaps back her shoulders, thrusts up her hips. My dick stabs into her backhole, and she groans.

"Damn you, Saint. Damn you for the responses you wring from my body."

"Good, the feeling's mutual then."

I pinch the swollen nub of her clit and she screams. Her body bucks and

her knees part further. She lowers her cheek to the desk, shoves her trembling butt toward my face.

"Fuck, Gigi, I have to take you." I release her pussy, squeeze her arse cheeks, holding them apart. "Now." I kick my hips forward, and my dick slips inside her puckered hole.

38

Too much. Too full. Three weeks of Saint owning my body and I haven't adjusted to his size.

My knees shake and my nipples pucker. The flash of pain settles into a dull throb. Something inside of me gives, eases open, and he slips inside further. A groan rumbles from him. I open my mouth, wanting, needing to scream out my surprise. Of how it's strange and yet...real. How he's pinning me here, to the present, with his massive cock that throbs, lengthens, pushes at my boundaries.

"Saint," I choke out his name.

"Killian."

"What?"

"Call me Killian."

"You're fucking killing me with your cock." A giggle wells up my throat, "Your timing...is just..."

"Impeccable?" He chuckles.

"Ridiculous." I mumble.

"I prefer quirky. Admit it, Gigi, if nothing else, we're well matched. You, with your weird obsession with that ancient boy band..."

"And you, with your strange affliction for riddles," I choke out.

He stays still, his length embedded inside of me.

"Why do you like to ask questions?" I force myself to ask, to think about something. Anything other than how weirdly arousing it is to have Saint stick his cock inside the most forbidden part of me. A tremor spirals out from where we are connected. "Shit." I dig my palms into the smooth surface of

the desk, force myself to breathe, "You going to share a little more, Saint, or is this off limits—?"

"It forces me to think rationally," he replies.

"Rationally?"

I sense him nod.

"Every time my emotions threaten to get the better of me, the questions help me find my balance."

"So, it's a coping device?"

His grip on my hips tightens. He bends forward and the heat of his body sears my back. The hard jut of his pubic bone digs into the curve of my butt.

"You trying to analyze me?"

"Uh...understand you," I stutter.

"What if I don't want you to?" He swipes my hair off of my neck, presses his lips to my nape. I can't stop the moan that tumbles from my lips. The intensity of his touch, the intimacy with which he handles my body...it's... mind boggling. He's crawling his way inside of me, imprinting himself into every hidden part of me... Soon, there'll be nothing left but to open myself completely, to offer up the last unseen parts of me... Soon. Not yet. I can't. Not if I want my friend to survive. That's why I am here, remember? To get the information from Saint and hand it over. I 'm so close...so damn close. "Saint," I whine.

"Easy, Gigi." He slides his palm between my legs and cups my pussy. "My beautiful..." he strums my pussy. "Responsive..." he pinches my clit. "Soaking wet..." he slides three fingers inside my melting core, brings his other hand around to grip my neck. He squeezes and a heat sears up my spine, the pressure at my temples growing. Spots of blackness weave in front of my eyes. I need, I want... I must have.

"I know."

He pulls out, only to push my legs apart. His dick nudges my pussy, then he pushes forward and impales me. His thick length slams home, filling me, stretching me, holding me in place—immovable, unshakeable. The only man who truly gets me.

He thrusts forward again and again. Tilts his hips and pushes into me. He bloody owns me. This man. He's imprinted himself on my soul.

He pushes his cheek into mine. "Come for me, wife." His possessive whisper sweeps through my mind. The trembling sweeps up my back. Pauses. Waits.

"You're mine, Gigi, you feel me?"

Was there ever any question?

He releases his hold on my neck and the climax smashes into me. I hear the sound of a distant screaming...recognize it as me. Flashes of white overwhelm me as he empties himself inside me. My knees give way, but he's there. He wraps his big arm around my waist, secures me to him. My head lolls, I allow my hands to flop by my side. I am one big oozing gooey mess. At his mercy. His to command. To hold and to piece together any which way he deems fit.

He pulls out of me and I can't stop the groan that leaves my lips. He pulls me up, cradles me close, then carries me in his arms bridal style. "Where..." I swallow, "Where are we going?"

"Shh, babe, let me take care of you."

He cuddles me and I allow myself to curl into his chest. Coil my fingers in his shirt. "You didn't get undressed."

"I was in a hurry," he chuckles. "Next time."

Will there be another time? I have what I came for. Once I hand it over... I'll be far away from here...from his friends...from the girl friends I made here... What then? Nina will be free and everything can return to the way it was.

Will it? My throat closes. Will anything be the same without him? What am I going to do when I can't see him, feel his skin on mine, his rough fingers between my legs, his presence, his dominance, him. How am I going to live without him?

I turn my face into his chest, inhale his dark scent.

"Did you sniff me?"

His voice sounds from above me.

"Don't tell me you don't smell me?" I huff.

"Roses and something tart."

"Huh?"

"That's your scent, Gigi."

He shoulders open the door of the ensuite, walks toward the counter next to the basin. He lowers me on my back.

I wince.

"Hurts, huh?"

"You don't have to sound so pleased."

He laughs, "I didn't spank you half as much as I wanted to."

I peer up at him from under my eyelashes. "Oh, please. You went for it, all right. I was counting.'

"Oh?" He snatches up a wash cloth, moistens it under the running water.

"What are you doing?" I frown. He rummages in the cabinet below the basin, pulls out a tube of what looks like ointment. "What's that?"

"You don't get to ask the questions, remember?" He picks me up in his arms again. "Can't you simply enjoy your man taking care of you?"

Is he my man?

Am I his?

What's next?

Shit, my mind's going into overdrive. All of my nerve endings seem to be firing at once. Far from being exhausted by the happenings of the past half hour... His spanking, and then his fucking, seems to have awakened me completely. I've never felt this alive, this... Open to him. It feels like we've turned a corner. I shake my head. I must be hallucinating from all of the hormones in my blood stream that his fucking must have released.

He approaches a chair I hadn't noticed in the corner of the spacious bathroom.

He places me over his lap, baring my arse to his gaze.

"I'm convinced you have a fetish for backsides," I grumble.

"Only yours." He presses the cool cloth to my hurting skin. I moan.

"Good?" he asks.

"Very."

He holds the fabric there a little longer, then drops it to the side. I sense him opening the tube he'd pulled out earlier, then coolness laces my burning backside. The hurt instantly recedes.

"Oh," I snuggle into his lap. "That feels amazing."

"Enjoy it, Gigi." He continues to lather on more of the—antiseptic I assume? Then caps the container and drops it to the floor at the side. He runs his fingers up my spine, to my nape, digs his fingertips into my scalp.

I arch into his touch, "That's so good."

"Hmm."

He leans over; I hear the tap run. He parts my legs, drags a wet cloth across my core.

I tremble. This...caring version of him? I know he has it hidden behind all that grumpy alpha-maleness, but it always takes me by surprise.

He flips me up, taking care not to abrade my backside, then carries

me back into his office. He crosses the floor to a large armchair and sinks into it, holding me.

"Let me know if it hurts."

He lowers me into his lap.

I wince, then settle in.

"Okay?" He asks.

"Yeah." I coil into his chest.

He plays with my hair, strokes my shoulders, runs his fingers down the side of my arm. With long masterful strokes he massages my aching limbs, my thighs, my calves.

The tension drains from me. I yawn suddenly, then shake my head, "I think I'm falling asleep."

"You're coming down from the high."

"Right... The spanking?" I mumble. "But a few seconds ago, I was sure I had never felt more alive."

"You enjoyed it?"

"Of course." It's an admission of how only he can pleasure me. So what? It's not like I have anything more to hide from him. Well, nothing more than the biggest secret of all. I yawn again and tears streak my cheeks. "I think I need to take a nap."

"You do that." He strokes my hair. "It'll refresh you for the party tonight."

"Party?"

"Oh, yeah. Sorry I forgot to mention it to you." His fingers still, then he wraps them around my neck. His grip tightens. I grip his wrist and he releases me, only to cup my cheek. So possessive. So nice?

"One of the things that the Seven insisted upon." A whisper touches my forehead. Did he kiss me? "They took the last few weeks to organize a proper party to celebrate our wedding. Can't be helped. A man of my status needs to use this occasion to his advantage."

I frown. Status? Saint doesn't care about that. He makes his own status, as far I know. What is he not telling me? What is he hiding from me? I open my mouth to ask, but he pulls me in closer. "That okay by you?" His scent intensifies around me.

My head spins. "Sure, why not?" Everything is okay, so long as he keeps me wrapped up in him. I crack open one eye. "Will I need a dress?"

"It's taken care of." He chuckles, " You grab 40 winks, while I get us

home."

I snuggle in, then mumble, "Don't forget my bag from your desk."

39

Saint

"What do you think?"

I glance up from where I'd been pacing in the living room of the suite. She stands framed in the doorway to the bedroom. The green gown clings to her breasts, seeming to be kept up by nothing except their perkiness. It cinches in at her impossibly tiny waist, only to flare around her hips, and flow down in straight lines, to her toes. She props a palm on her waist, thrusts out a leg through the slit that rides all the way up to the waist.

My hand tightens on the glass of whiskey I hold. "The fuck are you wearing?"

Her eyebrows lower, "Have you forgotten that you picked out this dress?"

So what? She has no business looking that beautiful, that over-the-top seductive in that outfit. When I'd seen it in the store...all I had thought of was how well it would match her eyes. I'd imagined her wearing the gown, and fuck, if I hadn't come right then. Of course, I had picked it out for her. Had wanted her to wear a dress that was revealing enough to make her uncomfortable. One of my crazy-ass ideas that had seemed brilliant at the time. Why does she have to look so delectable in that? Why the hell does it matter to me that men will eat her up with their eyes? I toss back the rest of the whiskey, place it on the counter of the bar I had been leaning against.

"Turn around."

"What?"

I circle the air with my finger.

She frowns.

I jerk my chin. She draws in a breath, then does a slow turn for me.

"The fuck?" The back of the dress is far, far worse. It dips in a V that plunges down all the way to the top of her arse crack. The shadowed cleavage between her ass cheeks mocks me. I was inside of her not a few hours ago.

I'd carried her into the private elevator at the office—it was too early for any of the other Seven to be around—then to the top floor, where I had directed my helicopter back to my hotel suite. That way, there had been no chance of anyone seeing her in her undressed state. I'd let her sleep in my bed, watching her as she'd not stirred... Not until I'd woken her up an hour ago to get dressed. I'd left the outfit for her, needing to see her wear my choice. It is perfect for her. It brings out all of her best attributes, the silver-tipped heels on her feet giving her a few added inches that accentuate the jut of her butt, the proud thrust of her cleavage.

I prowl toward her, place my palm flat in the middle of her bare back.

She shudders, "Saint."

"Get out of this dress."

"I will not." She turns to glare at me, "I put a lot of effort into looking good."

"Is that what you call this?" I step back, look her up and down,

My heart stutters; she so fucking beautiful. And yet... She still hasn't revealed the real reason she came to me.

I draw myself up to my full height. "Step out of it, Gigi, or I'll make you do it."

"Try me," she juts out her lower lip, then turns away.

I push her up against the wall, hook my finger in the 'V' of her dress and tug. The delicate fabric rips.

She gasps and the sound coils in my belly. I'm instantly hard.

She looks over her shoulder. "What are you doing?" her voice is breathless.

I yank at the cloth and it parts all the way down to the hem. I let go and it pools to the floor.

"Jesus," I take in the silver thong that rides the top of her butt.

"The fuck are you wearing?"

She wriggles her feet, tries to angle her body. I apply more pressure to her back. She arches up.

"Answer me," I growl.

"What does it look like?" The anger in her voice slices straight to my gut. My belly tightens. My cock tents my pants.

I run a finger down the silvery thread caught between her arse cheeks.

Her thigh muscles ripple.

"Saint," her voice hitches, "please."

"Please what, Gigi?" I plant my thigh between her legs, pushing them apart.

She shudders, "Why...why are you doing this?"

I dip a finger inside her pussy. The melting heat clings to my skin. "That's why," I growl. "Because I only have to glare at you, and your body instantly responds." I yank on the thin silver fabric and it snaps.

A small scream leaves her lips, "You...you don't want to do this."

I laugh, "Don't you realize? In no way, can you tell me what to do."

I unbuckle my belt, lower my zipper.

"Stop," she snarls.

I yank her butt toward me, position her right, shove her legs apart further, and—

"Don't—" her voice breaks.

I pull out my dick, position it at the opening of her melting pussy. Drag my hand up and around to cup her breast, "I want you," I growl.

"Not yet."

I squeeze her nipple, run my tongue up the curve of her ear, "Yes, yet."

"First answer my riddle."

"Huh?" I pause, "What did you say?"

"Answer my questions. If you get it right, you can have me... Else..."

"Else?"

"You have to wait until I am ready."

"You know I don't allow anyone else to question me."

"Why not?" She frowns at me, her cheek flat against the wall. "What are you afraid of Saint?"

"Nothing."

I roll her nipple between my fingers. Her mouth parts.

"See, your body can't deny me."

"That's true," she swallows, "but you relish challenges, Saint, and I'm challenging you to own my mind."

"What does that mean?"

"Answer my question...and I promise, I'll never stop you again."

The familiar fear bursts through my mind. My heart begins to race. Sweat beads my temple.

Fact is that I'd take her anyway I can get her...but... I also can't deny her. My dick nudges the soft opening of her pussy, and I force myself to stay there. Stay.

"What is always too late?" Her voice slices through the lust in my head.

Don't answer. *Don't*. Damn her, she is the only person I'll always answer. Fuck her for exploiting that, and fuck me for answering.

"Regret," I snarl.

She tips up her head, "Some try to hide, some try to cheat, but time will show, we always will meet."

I pause, my pulse rate ratchets up. "Death," I grind out.

"When I sneak up on you, you'll never be the same again." She smiles, "What am I?" A tear slides down her cheek.

I bend into her, lick it up. "Betrayal," I growl.

She swallows.

"You going to betray me, Gigi?"

"What do you think?" She tips up her chin, her gaze challenging. "The mighty Saint, who's never had the courage to lose his heart ever before... You think I have the guts to betray you?"

"I think," I grip her hips, position her just right, "that you already have." I propel my hips forward and enter her.

Her head falls back against my shoulder. She brings up her hand and I grab her palm, flatten it against the wall, pressing my fingers in between hers.

"My God, Gigi, you're..." My cock lengthens inside of her. She thrusts back, grinds her butt into the hard wall of my pelvis. "Please." The word spills from her lips.

A groan rips out of me. I grind my teeth so hard, pain rips up my jaw. I lower my head to the curve between her neck and shoulder, "Fuck you for getting to me. Fuck me for not being able to resist you. Fuck us both for what we are doing to each other." I bite down on her neck.

She screams.

Her pussy clamps down on my cock. I pull out, and the friction of my dick against the melting walls of her channel is too much. More blood rushes to my groin. I drag my fingers up to her breasts, squeeze her nipple.

Her body bucks. I rip my teeth from her shoulder, turn her head to mine. "Open your eyes," I growl.

Her eyelids flutter open, her pupils so big in her eyes, they seem to swallow up most of her iris, leaving only a ring of green at the circumference.

"Saint," she whispers.

"I fucking love you," I snarl.

Her face whitens. "You can't."

"Too late," I bare my teeth. "Congratulations, you got what you set out to do."

I propel my hips forward, bury myself inside her with such force that my balls slap against her skin.

Her mouth opens and her throat moves as she tries to speak. I shake my head, "Save it for later, babe, cause both you and I are going to pay for this." I pull out and thrust back in, impaling her again and again. Her body jerks and spasms grip her body, sweep up her hips, her breasts.

Her gaze widens, "Omigod," she gasps, "I'm going to..."

I pull out, and come on her back.

"What the—?" She blinks.

I step back, survey the white ribbons of my cum that crisscross her curves. Pulling out my handkerchief—monogrammed because, what the fuck? I gotta play the part of gazillionaire dickhead with no details spared—I throw it at her. "Clean yourself up."

I tuck myself back in, turn and stride to the lift.

"Oh, and Gigi," I glance at where she hasn't moved from against the wall, "don't be late."

40

Victoria

I pause outside the entrance to the ballroom of the Claridge's—the same one where, only a few weeks ago, I'd wed Saint. Wed him? Ha, that has to be a euphemism for... The most mind-blowing sex ever... Okay, so I don't have experience to compare it to; but hell, if that matters.

I've seen enough porn online, heard enough from friends in university, swapped enough secret fantasies with Nina to know... What I had with Saint was exceptional.

I shudder, nervously toy with the ring he gave me. The emerald warms against my skin. *Stay strong, you can do this Victoria. You only have the next few hours to get through... And then what?*

Escape? Get out of here, away from the Mafia... At what cost? You'll give up the man who'd professes to love you? He may as well hate me. That's what his tone had implied. No, Saint doesn't understand the meaning of the word love. He is obsessed...fixated, maybe... Sure, he finds me attractive, but he'll forget me. He'll move on quickly. To another hotel suite, another lay, another woman to take and conquer. My heart stutters. He'll forget about me soon enough...and I... I will be free.

Still tethered to the thought of him—his touch, his feel, the crude way he'd taken me earlier, how he'd torn off my gown, not caring for the fact that it was new and expensive. It shouldn't matter to me. That flaunting of his wealth had been a crude gesture... One meant to put me in my place. And I had found it hot. I had been instantly wet and throbbing and aching for him.

My nipples tighten against the short black sheath. I run my hands down the fabric that clings to my thighs.

This isn't one of Saint's purchases. It had been in the bag I'd packed before leaving Amelie's. No way, am I wearing anything else bought by him. Not after how he'd reacted to my wearing the previous one. What the hell had come over him? He'd been like a man possessed. He'd fucked me, then not allowed me to climax. Just like he'd refused to tell me who that woman is. There has to be a simple explanation to it... So why won't he reveal it? How can it be for my safety when it is tearing me apart from inside?

And all that, after he'd professed his love. *Hell!* I clutch my hands around the simple silver purse that dangles from my hand.

Why did he have to go and do that?

Almost as if he'd known that it was his last chance to tell me his true feelings. And he'd meant it. I squeeze my eyes shut. *Deny it as much as you want...but there had been a hint of desperation in his tone, a dangerous glint in his eyes.* And the way he'd fucked me...as if it was our last time.

He is no fool... He knows something is going to happen... So he'd played his last card. He'd...hit me where it hurts—hoping it would hold me back from what I have to do.

If he thinks his declaration is going to stop me... Well, he has misjudged me. He isn't the only one who plays with people's feelings, who can set their eyes on a goal and use anything and everything...and anyone, to get to it.

Sweat beads my palm; I wipe it on the silky fabric of my dress. My knees knock together and my throat dries.

"Victoria, honey, are you okay?"

Amelie grips my shoulder.

"Why don't you sit down?" She leads me to an armchair pushed up into an alcove of the hallway a few feet away.

I sink into it. She keeps her hand on mine, and takes the seat next to me.

I draw in a breath, then another.

She grabs a bottle of water from the antique table in front of us, unscrews the cap, and hands it to me. I take a grateful sip.

"Better?"

I nod, then lower the bottle. "Is my make-up okay?"

She surveys my face, "You're always perfect, V."

I shake my head. If she only knew.

I reach over, place the bottle on the table.

She squeezes my hand, "Now, tell me why you were having that panic attack."

"I wasn't."

She stares at me. "Is this to do with Saint?"

A giggle bubbles up, "What in my life isn't to do with him right now?"

"It's normal for newly-weds to feel overwhelmed."

Not like this, it's not. I squeeze my fingers together around the bag in my lap.

"When are you guys going on your honeymoon?"

"There's not going to be any honeymoon."

She frowns. "Of course, there is. Saint asked Meredith to book tickets to —" she snaps her mouth shut. "Ugh, sorry. Did I give away a secret?"

I toss my head, "Doesn't matter. Saint's good at putting on a show."

She peers up at me from under her eyelashes. "You know that's not true... I mean, all the Seven are consummate actors and jerks—"

"And a-holes of the first order."

She nods, "But you saw how hard Sin fell for Summer and see how devoted Jace is to Sienna. When they fall, they fall hard. They don't stop until they've swept their women off their feet."

I shift in my seat. "It's really, really not like that. All this..." I wave a hand in the air, "is an act."

"Saint said you'd say that," she nods.

"When did you talk to him?" I stare at her.

"Umm." She changes position, "I wasn't going to tell you, but—"

"But?"

"—seeing as how much of a tizzy you've got yourself into, you should know—"

"What?" *Don't tell me, don't. Please.* "What is it?" I scowl.

"Remember when I ran into you outside the 7A offices that night?"

"Yeah..." my voice trails off. *Shit. I don't want to hear this, I don't.* I grip the arm of my chair.

"What do you think I was doing there at that time of the evening?"

"I thought that..." my voice trails off, "...that you'd come to meet Weston?"

"That ridiculous, selfish, no-good reprobate?"

Uh, oh. "Strike that." I wave my hand in the air.

"Why would you even think I'd arrived for a rendezvous with Weston?"

she grumbles.

Nice, one. I've put my foot in my mouth now, haven't I? "Forget it," I mumble.

She glares at me.

"Honestly, Amelie," I lean forward, take her hand in mine, "I didn't mean to piss you off, but there's chemistry between you two..." And that's putting it mildly.

"I've barely had a single conversation with the man, and anyway," she sniffs, "this isn't about me and Weston."

"Right," I snatch up another bottle of water and hand it to her.

She uncaps it, drinks from it, then sighs, "So, as I was saying... I was there that night because Saint called me and asked me to come by. He thought you could do with some company."

"Hold on..." I reach for my bottle of water, press it to my aching temples. "He asked you run into me?"

She twists her mouth, "He told me to pretend it was a chance meeting."

After he'd told me he didn't want me and allowed me to assume that he wasn't accepting my proposition... My head spins. I squint at her, "You're not making any sense."

"You're telling me?" She chugs down more water. "He swore me to secrecy."

"And you agreed?"

She reddens, "Hey, I thought it was romantic. Besides, he told me that he'd—" she chews on her lower lip.

"What?" I peruse her features. "He made you a deal?"

"He said," her gaze flicks away, then back to my face, "that I'd get to make the wedding cake, and take credit for it. He said he'd ensure all the media would cover the event and my name would be mentioned."

"But the wedding ceremony was impromptu..."

"Not the one that's about to take place."

"Oh?" I frown, then stiffen, "Oh."

She nods and her features scrunch up, "He's been...uh... planning this for a few weeks. He—ah!—" She shuffles her feet. "He wanted to surprise you with a society wedding that'd get a lot of attention."

"Oh, he did, did he?" I growl. The nerve of the man. *How dare he take me for granted?* There's a bitterness to my voice that I can't disguise when I ask her, "Did he also pay you to friend me?"

"Of course, not." She sits up straight. "Look V, I swear, he only wanted to make it special for you."

I snort.

"Besides," she wriggles around trying to find a more comfortable position. "I could hardly turn him down."

"Of course, not," I echo her.

She stiffens, "It's not easy, trying to make it on your own."

"You bet, it isn't."

She scowls, "It's cut-throat out there." She waves her hand in the air, "Think of what this kind of exposure could do for my business."

I stare at her, "I'm thinking a lot of things, all right."

She reddens. "Please try to understand, V. I mean, if you guys were going to get married, then why not keep the catering for the wedding in the family, huh?"

"I suppose Isla's doing the wedding planning?" I ask.

She glances away, then back at me.

"Of course, she is," I scowl.

I suppose that makes sense too. I mean why look outside when the talent is in your circle of friends? So why does it feel like a bloody betrayal? I place the cap on the bottle, screw it back in place with deliberate precision. "So, the time when Meredith met me outside Selfridges..." I glance up at her, "She brought me here to meet all of you. Did Saint put her up to that as well?"

"You'll have to ask Meredith about that." She swipes the hair back from her face.

"Did he ask you to round up all the women so you all could keep an eye on me?"

"It...it wasn't like that." She leans forward to take my arm.

I shake it off, "All this time, I thought, perhaps, I had a support circle here, that perhaps I had a chance of finding a place where I belonged... I should have known that asshole would set me up. It was all about making sure that he was informed of my movements."

"He wanted to keep you safe."

"Bullshit," my voice echoes around the space.

A couple speaking at the far end of the corridor looks our way. Like I care? I glare at Amelie, "It was a way of controlling me, making sure he could monitor everything I did. He wanted to see if I'd give myself away."

"Give yourself away?" She frowns, "What are you talking about? Saint

wanted to ensure that you didn't feel lonely, that's all."

"You believe that?"

She holds my gaze, "I do, Victoria. Saint's madly in love with you. I've never seen a man more besotted. Sure, he may be unorthodox in the way he shows it, but you have to admit, it's romantic that he's been so... Forceful."

I throw back my head and laugh.

The couple glances at me again, then move away, putting more distance between us. Good.

Too bad, Saint hadn't gotten the memo as well.

"Keep kidding yourself that way, girlfriend— Oh, I forgot, you're not really my friend, are you?" I rise to my feet.

"Please, V, don't be like that."

I turn to leave.

"I admit Saint prompted us to befriend you. Our friendship may have started out that way, but we've all grown to like you... Hell, you've become my BFF so damn quickly..."

I pause, then turn to glance at her, "BFF?" I chew on my lower lip.

"I swear." She holds up her hand.

"I want to believe you; I do." I shift my weight from foot to foot. "But imagine if you were in my place and you found that your... Uh... The man you're interested in goes behind your back and gets to the women you think are your friends. What would you think of it?"

"I..." she blinks rapidly, "I'd think he cares for me... A lot."

I scoff, "Wait until it's your turn and one of those alphaholes sets his sights on you. I'll be sure to ask you then, how it feels... Then again, I probably won't be around."

"Oh, pfft," she waves a hand in the air. "Of course, you'll be around. And I'm not the settling type. I intend to focus on myself. I've planned a retreat to rediscover myself," she beams.

I squint at her, "What do you mean?"

"I am going to take a few weeks off over Christmas. I'm going away to an isolated cabin in the countryside. It's owned by the Seven, and it's one of the things Saint promised me in return for..."

I throw up my hands, "Jesus, I can't believe you agreed to that."

"I knew I shouldn't have taken him up on that offer." She blinks, "I'll refuse him; I won't go to the cabin. In fact, I'll tell him I don't want any credit on the cakes and desserts I provided for the wedding party."

I scan her features.

She wrings her fingers together, "Shit, I'm sorry, V... I really didn't think it would upset you this much."

Maybe it's me. Maybe I am overreacting. Everything is running away from me, this entire sequence of events moving too fast for me. I hunch my shoulders. I feel so alone—so damn on my own. Nina has always been there for me. And she isn't here... and I have to go through with this sham of a fake wedding. It is the only way to keep on track, and complete what I came here to do. She'd be free and it would all have been worth it. It would, right?

"V," Isla approaches me. "I'm sorry."

I draw in a breath.

"Please tell me that you're not angry with us."

I sigh.

"Please... p-l-eee-ase," Amelie singsongs.

This woman! I may not have known her long, but her happy-go-lucky nature is a thing of beauty. She wears her heart on her sleeve, hadn't blinked an eye before inviting me into her home. If there is one thing I know, it's that when I need her most, Amelia will be there to help me, just like Nina had been.

"Fine," I mutter.

She whoops and throws her arms around me. "OMG! Thank you, V. Thank you. Everything is going to work out now. I promise you. Saint loves you. He really does."

Hell, he's fooled all of them; but I can see through him.

I pat her back, then straighten my shoulders. "Guess I'd better get this over with, huh?"

41

Saint

She had to do it, huh? She had to take the goddamn USB. I'd checked the drawer after she'd fallen asleep, when I'd gone to grab her purse, and it was gone. Then because, apparently, I have a hidden masochistic side, I had checked her purse...and spotted the fucking thing. *Fuck*. So this is how it feels to have your life go tits up.

I toss back the whiskey, then place the empty glass back on the bar counter. The bartender tops it off. I lift the glass to my lips, take a healthy sip.

"Living the dream, I see?" Weston slaps me on the back.

I chug down the rest of the amber liquid, slap the glass back on the bar.

"Easy, ol' chap." Weston leans his hip against the bar, watches as I reach across and grab the bottle from the bartender. I tilt the bottle of Macallan's Single Malt to my mouth, swig from it.

"As classy as your shoes," he clicks his tongue.

"What's fucking wrong with my shoes?"

"A bit worn out for the rest of your suit... How much did that set you back by? £10,000?"

"£20,000," I toss back more of the whiskey. It burns a path down my gullet, and sets off a burn in my stomach, "but who's counting?"

"Trouble in paradise, I take it?"

"Fuck off," I growl.

"It's only your goddamn wedding we're here to celebrate," he smirks.

"Fake wedding, douchebag."

"This is exactly how Sinner started out... Now look at him," he jerks his chin.

I follow his gaze to where the wanker stands in a corner, arms around Summer. The two are engaged in intense eye-fucking... The kind I indulged in with Gigi. No, that was real fucking... *Fuck* that... It was some intense shit. The harder I took her, the more she gave me. The more I pushed her, the deeper her resistance grew. Hell, I'd intended to punish her...maybe myself, when I'd taken her against the wall. Couldn't stop myself from tearing the dress off of her—the beautiful dress I'd imagined her in when I'd bought it.

I should have blown off this entire fucking party and simply stayed in my suite with her. Hell, she deserves more than this impersonal hotel space. She deserves a home... A real one, with furniture and curtains that she's picked out, and all that shit that women seem to thrive on. Not that Gigi is like other females. She is fucking stronger than she seems. A sultry seductress whose call I can't resist. One glance at her and I lose myself. She only has to be in my vicinity for my dick to take notice...and other parts of me...especially that offending feeling in my chest that has assailed me since the first time I'd kissed her, "Fuck."

I raise the bottle to my lips and glug down some more of the liquid.

"That's the economy of a third world country you're drinking down, by the way."

I wipe the back of my hand over my lips, "I am not going to apologize for being born into wealth." I slap the bottle back on the corner, "Not that it helped when we were kidnapped."

"Money's overrated," he rubs the back of his neck.

"But it's a necessary evil," I counter.

"Sometimes I do wonder what would have happened if I'd stayed with Doctors without Borders... Would I have been less of a douche then?"

"No," I shake my head.

"Touché." He frowns, "And your glowering Romeo mood is catching."

"Not glowering," I growl, "not a Romeo." The hair at the nape of my neck rises; electricity flickers across my nerves. She's here.

"Here comes your Juliet," Weston confirms.

I brace my shoulders. Since when *have* I needed Dutch courage to face a woman? Since when have I made a habit of drinking enough to layer on a veneer of indifference before facing a room full of people? Since that bloody beautiful, dark-haired witch had gotten under my skin.

"She still in mourning?" Weston frowns.

"What? Of course, not," I shake my head. "That piece of shit husband of hers was one only in name."

"Sure doesn't look that way, given what she's wearing."

"She didn't..." I pivot, take in her slender figure poised at the entrance. She's draped in black. The dress clings to her curves, covers every inch of her torso, and ends above her knees. It is far from the seductive gown she'd worn earlier... Just the opposite.

The high collar grazes the tip of her chin—not a sliver of skin on show. The full-length sleeves drape over her wrists to cover her palms, leaving only her fingertips exposed. She's wearing high, over-the-knee boots that come to mid-thigh.

The six—or is that eight?—inch heels boost her legs so they seemed to go on and on. Slender yet muscled, perfect to coil around my waist. She takes a step forward and a slim band of skin peeks out between her dress and boots. I'm instantly hard—Okay, harder. By any standards, her dress is more than demure... And that's the issue, because the flash of skin is almost obscene, given every other inch of her is covered in black. She raises a hand to flip down the veil attached to the jaunty hair accessory attached to her sleek hair. The thick strands are caught up and tied at the nape of her neck in a demure bun—that screams for a man's hands to rip out the pins and drape the waterfall of dark desire about her shoulders. The slash of red across her lips highlights her full, pouty lips. The overall effect is part widow-part slut.

"Fuck," I squeeze my fingers into fists.

Next to me, Weston grimaces, "She's doing it on purpose, to get a response out of you."

"No shit," I growl.

"She wants you to lose your shit in front of all of the guests," he warns.

"The fuck I care?"

"She's baiting you, Saint."

"She fucking succeeded." I take a step toward her.

"You don't want to do this," he grips my shoulder.

I shake him off, "Oh, but I do." I pause, shoot him a sideways glance, "Can you ensure that all the paparazzi have their cameras on us?"

He frowns, "You sure about this?"

"A hundred fucking percent." I stalk toward her.

A guest steps in my path. "Fuck off," I growl at the man clad in an ill-

fitted suit.

He pales, then draws himself up, "I didn't come here to be insulted."

"Too fucking bad, you just were."

"You'll pay for this." He holds up his phone, snaps what is, no doubt, a shot that's going to be all over the internet.

"Knock yourself out, tosser." He's confirmed that it had been the right decision to invite every piece of shit news reporter and key influencer in town.

I walk toward her as men and women step aside, their gazes tracking my progress. Good. She takes a few steps forward, her gaze fixed on me.

I thrust out my chest.

She tips up her chin.

I look her up and down. She props a palm on her hip, angles her body. She strikes a pose, ensuring I take in every detail of how the fabric clings to the slope of her shoulders, the thrust of her breasts, the tiny waist ensconced in lace. She leans her weight to the side and the dress pulls tightly on her thigh. My cock twitches. I hasten my pace.

She stays rooted, her chest visibly rising and falling. I near her and the color from her already pale cheeks leeches out.

"You going to faint?" I curl my lips, "Not had your orange juice or whatever it is you need to stave of the shakes?"

She firms her jaw, "Your concern is touching." She pretends to flick a tear from her cheek, "Went straight to my heart."

My lips twitch, "And I wasn't even trying." I come to a halt so close that she has to tilt her head right back to keep her gaze locked with mine. A single strand escapes from the hairdo and floats across her cheek.

"You've made your choice, hmm?" I raise a hand.

She flinches.

I twine the hair around my finger, then tuck it back behind her ear.

She swallows, "It seems that way, doesn't it?" Her voice is firm, "You do you, Saint."

She bites down on her lower lip and my gaze drops there.

"Oh, I plan to do you first, darling wife." I swoop out my arm, wind it around her waist, and haul her to me with such force, she crashes into me—from breasts to waist to hips, she's plastered to me.

Her gaze widens and fear trembles off of her.

"Don't disappoint me now, my love. This is what you wanted—an open

spectacle in front of the world, with every eye on us. A signal to those you work for that you've accomplished what you set out to do."

Her throat moves; she wets her lips and lowers her gaze to my mouth. "Yes..." she whispers. "It's what I need. I want you to hate me, Saint. Everything I've done is so you abhor me—so you forget me when I leave."

"Where are you going?"

"Somewhere you won't be able to find me," her smile twists. A single tear rolls down her cheek.

"Save the fucking histrionics," I snarl. "I love you, doesn't mean I am going to let you get away with this."

She stares, then chuckles, and a giggle spills from her. She begins to laugh.

"The fuck is wrong with you?"

She glances past me, pales.

"What is it?" I frown.

"Kiss me."

"What?"

She throws her arms around my neck, raises her chin, presses her lips to mine.

"Don't—"

She bites on my lips, digs her fingertips into my hair and drags them across my scalp. My groin hardens and my vision tunnels. A groan tears out of me. Fucking fuck, I can't refuse her, I can't resist her. Fuck her for rendering me so helpless.

I drag her up to tiptoe, deepen the kiss.

She sucks on my tongue, kisses me back with a fervor that borders on desperation. The hair on my nape rises. My heart twists in my chest.

This entire sequence of events, starting with her walking into that office and asking me for help... Was any of it real? A hollow sensation roils in my stomach. A bead of sweat slides down my back. I tear my mouth from hers.

"The fuck is happening?"

She swallows, peers into my eyes.

"Tell me, Gigi, I can help you." I scan her anguished features.

"I can't let you," she whispers.

"No," my pulse begins to race, "don't do this."

She cups my cheek. "Promise me, you'll put this behind you, and move on."

"The fuck you talking about, woman. If you think I am going to let you put yourself in danger, you've got another think coming. I won't allow it, Gigi, I—"

"You ready to leave, Victoria?" a new voice booms.

My heart slams into my chest. I swing around to face a familiar face.

"You?" I snarl, "The fuck you doing here?"

Victoria

"Hello, Antonio."

He comes forward, arm outstretched.

Beside me, Saint stiffens, "Get the fuck away from her."

"Afraid it doesn't work quite that way, old sport." Antonio turns to me, "You going to tell your new husband, or should I?"

I tip up my chin, "I need a second."

"You've run out of time." Antonio smiles, white teeth flashing against tanned skin. He prowls toward me.

I shudder, take a step back. Saint's warmth envelopes me; he wraps an arm around my waist. "You don't have to do this," he whispers in my ear.

I do. I don't have a choice. If I don't do as he says, he'll kill the friend who's meant more to me than any family. No, I have to do this, with no help from anyone else.

I yank at Saint's arm. His muscles flex, "I am not letting you go."

"I was never yours to begin with."

"The fuck?" he explodes.

I elbow him in the waist. He huffs and his grip loosens enough for me to pull away. I turn on him, "I'm leaving you."

"What?" He frowns, scans my features then chuckles, "You're getting back at me for my asshole attitude, huh?" He lowers his voice, "You know that's because I can't help myself. It's in my blood, I'm a born wanker." He raises his shoulders, "but for you, Gigi... For you, I'd change."

I swallow, then shake my head. "You...won't." *I don't want you to.* "Your uncompromising meanness is too much a part of you. Besides...this entire arrangement between us was a farce."

"Not for me." He takes a step forward, "It may have started off that way, but I developed feelings for you."

"Like I care?"

"Of course, you do," he growls. "You love me, Gigi."

"No," I back away from him.

"Yes. You do. You're too frightened to admit it." He glares past me. "What does he have on you?"

"Nothing." I retreat another step.

Antonio's heat assails me. My skin crawls. My fingers jerk. Don't shrink back; don't show how afraid you are right now. His massive hand descends on my shoulder. The blood drains from my face.

"Don't fucking touch her," Saint's feet don't seem to touch the ground as he crosses the distance between us.

"Don't come closer," I swallow.

"Stop right there," Antonio snaps.

Saint's jaw tics. A vein throbs at his temple. He folds his fingers into fists, and his entire body tenses.

A woman screams. People scramble back.

I glance sideways and freeze. Antonio holds a gun, its barrel trained on Saint. My heart jackknives in my chest. "You promised," I whisper. "You said you wouldn't hurt him. You promised that if I gave you what you needed, you'd release my friend."

"Maybe I lied," Antonio smiles, his thin upper lip a slash across his face, "maybe I didn't. It's up to you how this plays out."

I swallow.

"Tell him to stand back."

"Stop hiding behind her, you coward," Saint growls. "Let her go and fight me."

Shit, shit, shit. The hell is he doing? "Shut up, Saint," I huff.

He glares at me, the skin around his eyes crinkling.

"Don't tell me what to do," he pulls back his shoulders.

"This once, will you listen to me?" I whisper-shout.

"She has a point," Weston walks forward.

Antonio points the gun at him, but he raises his hands, "Easy there."

Antonio turns back to Saint. "For someone who was kidnapped and tortured, you turned out well."

"Tortured?" I blink.

Saint's jaw hardens, "Let her go, and you and I can talk this out."

"Oh?"

Saint nods. "What do you want? Money? Fame?" He glances around at the assembled paparazzi. "Though why you'd want every single camera in the country on your back—"

"Not mine. Yours."

"What?"

Antonio turns to me, "Hand it over."

"What's he talking about?" Saint growls.

I nudge my fingers into my purse, pull out the flash drive.

"I believe this is what you are looking for," I hold it out to him.

He turns the gun on me. "Don't attempt anything funny."

There's an indrawn breath from Saint. Tension screams off of him. Does he recognize it? Does he realize it's the USB from his desk? Will he ever forgive me?

"No, tricks." I raise the device, "Take it. Everything you want is on that."

He holds out his palm and I drop the device onto it. He pockets it, then grabs me and holds the gun to my temple. Sweat beads my upper lip.

My heart races so fast, I am sure it's going to break out of my ribcage. My knees buckle and the world tilts around me. Antonio tightens his hold on my waist, yanking me closer. I flinch, hunch my shoulders.

"Let go of my wife," Saint growls.

"Wife?" Antonio laughs, "Is that what you call this relationship?"

Saint's shoulders bunch, "Shut the fuck up."

"Have you told her what they did to you when you were kidnapped?"

I half angle my body, glance from Saint to Antonio. "Of course, I know about the incident," I force my voice to stay steady.

"Oh?" Antonio begins to inch back. "Has he told you what they did to him in that cell? How they tortured him and his friends? How they systematically broke him?"

Saint growls low in his throat. The fine hair on the nape of my neck rise. "Of course, he did. We...we have no secrets."

Shit, what am I saying? What does it matter that Antonio is trying to push Saint until he loses control? Why can I not allow that? I straighten my

shoulders. I need to deflect Antonio's attention for as long as I can.

"You told him your secrets, Victoria?"

I pale. "I... Have none."

Antonio grins, "You'll have to do better than that." He jerks his chin toward Saint, "Even your husband doesn't believe you."

Don't look, don't. I swing my head in Saint's direction. He's glaring at me, his features contorted. His blue eyes blaze with... Anger? Hate?

My pulse rate kicks up. Shit, why *does* his opinion of me matter? "I never withheld anything from you." I glance away, "Not out of choice, at least."

"I believe you."

I whip my gaze to his face, "You do?"

"Of course. All of your actions have a reason."

"Oh!" My heart stutters and warmth coils in my chest. "You believe me?"

"Always." Saint's lips twist, "Even your lies tell me a story."

"Saint, I—" I step forward.

Antonio pulls me back.

I cry out.

Saint jumps forward.

"Stop right there," Antonio aims his pistol at my husband.

"I... I'm fine," I choke out. "Don't come close."

Saint's throat moves as he swallows. "Get away from her," he growls.

"Get back." Antonio, waves his gun and the crowd scrambles away. "The rest of you too."

I survey the room and find Sinclair—with Summer behind him—Weston, Damian and Edward standing in a semicircle.

Amelie and the girls are clustered in a corner away from the action.

Antonio jerks his chin, "I won't warn you again."

"Get back, you guys," Saint growls.

Weston hesitates. Damian and Edward stay unmoving. Sinclair balls his fists at his sides.

"She's my wife," Saint's shoulders bunch, "I take the risks."

"Fuck that," Weston scowls. "We have each other's backs."

"So what if we don't always like each other," Sinclair mutters.

"Except Baron." Damian glowers. "He prefers to keep his shit separate."

"Fucking Baron," Edward agrees.

Antonio glances between them, "You guys are insane."

"Am I late...?" Arpad walks in with a blonde on his arm. She screams.

There's a soft pop. I blink at the gun in Saint's hand. Where the hell had he kept it hidden?

Antonio staggers. "Fuck," he swears aloud, takes another step back.

"Let her go," Saint growls.

Antonio retreats toward the door, keeping me between him and Saint.

"Ask your husband to put down his weapon, or you're going to be widowed twice over," Antonio growls.

"No, don't hurt him." My pulse rate goes through the roof. "Saint," I swallow, "do as he says. Please."

Saint doesn't move. His gaze is fixed on my face. His features are hard, his eyes glaring pools of blue. Is he angry at me?

Why is he angry at me?

Antonio reaches the door. "Say goodbye."

"No," I snarl, helplessness filling me. "You can't do this. I did everything you asked me to do."

"Too bad I never keep my word." Antonio raises his gun toward me. Flashes light up around me, then everything goes dark.

43

Saint

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." I pace the floor in the waiting room in the hospital. "I am her husband. I should be in there with her."

Damian watches me from the chair he's sprawled in. "You did a good enough job convincing the doctor in charge to allow Weston to be present."

"He's a doctor, isn't he?"

"A surgeon... A heart surgeon, no less." Arpad straightens from the window, where'd he'd taken up position since we'd arrived at the hospital.

"So? He's the only medical professional I'll trust her with."

"Saint, you're being unreasonable." Damian frowns, "This is the best hospital in the city, and the doctor you have attending is a specialist."

"Fuck that. Can't trust anyone, and you know that."

Damian draws in a breath, "Can't say I disagree with you, but has it occurred to you that you're not helping things with your crazy, possessive streak."

I turn on him. "Wait until you fall in love and it's your wife in there fighting for her life—"

He raises a hand, "Shit's not for me. You and Sinner, collapsing one after the other... Nah, seeing what you two went through is more than enough to put me off any kind of relationship, let alone marriage."

"Famous last words," Sinner walks in, his arm around Summer.

Summer breaks away and stops in front of me. "How is she?"

I drag my fingers through my hair, try to speak but the words stick in my

throat. I turn and begin to pace again.

Damian replies, "She's in surgery; Weston is in with her."

"The doctor allowed him in?" Sinclair frowns.

"Romeo here didn't give him a choice," Damian mutters.

"He nearly decked the paramedic who asked him to release her into their care," Arpad grimaces.

"Asshole dared to ask me to stand back from her," I growl.

"Only because they needed to check her vitals. You understand that, don't you?" Damian straightens. "Honestly, you needed to take a chill pill, and let the professionals get on with their work. You were only getting in their way."

I take a step toward him. Arpad and Sinclair both step in front of me.

Edward ignores the proceedings, his face buried in a book, in the chair he's occupied since we'd arrived here.

"Hold on," Sinclair reaches for me.

I sidestep him, "Don't fucking touch me, man."

"Sure," Sinclair rocks back on his heels, "It's understandable you're feeling on edge and all. I get it."

"Oh, do you now?" I smirk. "Just because you're married and all that shit, you think you understand how it feels to have the woman you wronged take a fucking bullet for you?"

"Jesus, Saint, you're living up to your name."

"The fuck you mean?"

"You're taking the sins of the entire world on yourself. See what I did there?" Sin raises an eyebrow and smirks.

"You douche, this is not the time to indulge in fucking word play."

"Says the man who has a riddle to suit every occasion," Arpad mutters.

"Not this one." I dig my fingers through my hair, tug on the strands. "My mind's a fucking blank." Also, not true. All I can think of is her pale face, her limp figure crumpling to the floor. I'd raced toward her and caught her before she had hurt herself further, thank fuck. I'd carried her out and to the ambulance, I'd refused to let go of her hand on the ride here.

I flex my fingers. Blood stains my palm; I stare at it. My heart begins to race. The scars on my soles itch. *Whack-whack-whack*. I flinch.

"Answer this, boy, and you go free."

It's a trick, always a trick. He asks me questions to which I never have the answers. This is how he plays with me. Traps me in my mind, trying to crack the puzzles. I've never gotten an answer right so far. Goddamn him. It's a

sure way to mess with my head. He'll never let me go free, not even if I get it right. Damn him, he's screwing with me. If I get out of here alive, I'll never be caught unaware.

"Saint."

I'll read up until I know the answer to every fucking question ever. No one will ever ask me a riddle again. I'll be the one in control. Always.

"Saint!"

There's a touch on my shoulder, I pivot around, fists raised in front.

"Easy," Sinner steps back, putting distance between us.

Damian and Arpad freeze.

Edward slaps his book shut, "The answer's a minute at a time."

"What?" I frown.

He places his book on the seat next to him, then leans forward, "The answer to the question that's on your mind."

"You a mind reader now, along with being a priest?" I glower.

"If the occasion demands." Edward places his elbows on his knees, "You're wondering how you're going to get through the time she's in there?"

"Fuck off."

Edward winces, "I'll let that pass, this time." He raises his hand. "Your turn to ask a riddle."

I glare at him, "Fuck that."

"Fine, I'll go then." He smiles, "A prison you feel safe in, yet never quite happy. Whenever you try to leave, it only grows bigger."

He glances around the space, "Anyone get it?"

"Comfort Zone?" Arpad ventures.

Edward nods, "Very good."

"Here's another." He taps his fingers together, "If you break me, I do not stop working; if you touch me, I may be snared; if you lose me, nothing will matter. What am I?"

"Your heart?" Damian asks, then stares at Edward, "Shit, there's a parable hidden somewhere in that, isn't there?"

"Of course, there is," I growl. "Edward here, is a cheeky bugger. He leverages his status as a priest to get away with sin."

Edward loses some of his color. He straightens, then shakes his finger, "Not gonna distract me there, Saint."

I snarl.

His grin widens. He lowers his hands, "The more you carry it with you,

the heavier a burden it becomes. What is it?"

Silence.

He scans the faces of the group assembled, "No one?"

"Go on, Father, tell us," Arpad drums his fingers on his chest.

"A guilty conscience." Edward's lips kick up in a smile.

"Enough," I snarl. "Spit out whatever it is you are trying to say."

"Do you have one?" Edward asks me.

"Mine's bigger than yours, Father."

"Not getting into that argument with you." Edward's grin widens, "I mean, do you have a guilty conscience?"

I run a finger under my collar. "Of course, not."

"You could have fooled me," Edward's eyes twinkle.

"Okay... So I owe her an apology." Fucking more than an apology, actually. "I owe her my life." I rake my fingers through my hair. "I was careless; I panicked when that fucker restrained her. He touched her and I couldn't do anything about it." I crack my neck from side to side, "I won't let that bastard live."

"He let her live." Weston enters the room, wearing his surgical garb.

"What?" I turn around, "What do you mean? How is she...?"

He watches me with a considering gaze.

My throat closes. "Is she?" my voice cracks. Jesus, fuck. I curl my fingers into fists, "Tell me Weston, or so help me I'll—"

"He could have shot her in the chest or in the head, but he didn't." Weston rubs the back of his neck.

"He shot her," I growl. "She was bleeding."

"It was a flesh wound."

I blink.

"What?" Damian straightens.

Edward rises to his feet.

Arpad, Sinclair and Summer move in closer.

"So... She's fine...?"

"The doc stitched her up, but she's okay."

"Right." The knot in my chest eases. I head for the entrance when a nurse enters. "The patient is asking for—"

"Me," I step forward, "I'm her husband."

She glances past me, "Dr Weston, she wants to see you."

"There's a mistake." I frown, "She must have asked for me. Saint? She's

my wife."

The nurse's features taken on an expression of pity. I stiffen. I hate that look, have seen enough of it.

"Let me through," I growl.

I brush past her and she touches my arm, "I'm sorry, but she doesn't want to see you."

Victoria

I dig my fingers into the hospital bed. My shoulder throbs. The pain from the gunshot wound matches the throbbing sensation in my chest. At least they pulse in synchrony. That has to count for something, huh? A giggle bubbles up my throat.

Hell, don't lose your shit now. Deep breath, stay calm. You've come this far; you can see it through to the end.

I shut my eyes and see Saint's face—his concern, the way he'd seemed to appear from out of nowhere and catch me as I fell. The last thing I remember is the fear in his eyes, the paleness of his beautiful features, the vein throbbing at his temple. Then his arms had closed around me, he'd cradled me to his chest, and I had felt safe... Safe, despite the fact that I'd been shot.

I'd known then that he'd do anything to protect me. He really did mean what he'd said. He cared for me... As for love? Perhaps he does love me, but will he accept this child...? Will he want to participate in bringing up this child, when he'd told me in no uncertain terms that he doesn't want children.

Weston walks into the hospital room, "You okay?"

I nod, try to swallow, but my throat is dry. I glance toward the side table. He walks to it, pours out some water and hands me a glass. I accept it and take a few sips.

"He wants to see you."

My fingers tremble. The glass tips and water splashes onto my hospital gown.

My heart hammers in my chest. "I don't... I can't..."

He leans forward, rescues the glass and places it back on the table.

"Does he know?" Weston pulls up a chair and drops into it.

"No," I twist my fingers together. "Did you tell him?"

He shakes his head, "But Saint has a right to know."

I tip up my chin, "That's for me to decide. He won't want it."

"Whatever is between the two of you, that's your business." He leans forward, "But I am his friend, and I owe it to him to let him know."

"I'm his wife." I set my jaw, "It's my decision when I decide to share this with him."

"So you will tell him?" He frowns.

I twist my fingers together, "When it's the right time."

His jaw tics, "You want this child?"

I nod, "More than anything else in the world."

"How long have you known?"

"I... I guessed...when my period didn't arrive on time." I raise my shoulders. "But I put it down to the stress of the last few weeks."

"Did you plan this?" He frowns.

"No," I swallow.

He sets his jaw.

"Really." I hasten to add, "I understood how precarious my situation with Saint was... I even started taking the pill. No way, would I have been this irresponsible."

Yet here I am, pregnant.

Weston raises an eyebrow. "When you say you 'even started taking the pill,' do you mean you just started when you and Saint got together?"

I nod.

He shakes his head, "Victoria, it can take up to seven days for birth control to become effective."

My mouth drops open.

"The doctor must have told you..."

"Oh, my god," I whisper, "I must not have heard her."

Had I planned this subconsciously? I've always wanted a child of my own... No, I wanted Saint's child. I admit it, but I didn't consciously plan for it to turn out like this. I hunch my shoulders.

"I... I wouldn't hurt Saint." I swallow, "Not on purpose."

He changes position, surveys me for another beat. "I believe you," he

says, then places the tips of his fingers together. "As your doctor and your friend, I'd advise that you allow him to share the load. This is when you need him the most."

"I don't need anyone."

He scowls, "Victoria."

"Swear it," I sit up and hold out my hand, "Swear you will not tell him yet, that you'll give me the chance to break the news to him."

"Fuck." He jumps up. "This is why I steer clear of all entanglements. It's a bloody minefield. I don't want to get dragged into this."

"Promise me, " I plead.

"I can't not tell him. However," he turns to me, "I'll delay it on one condition."

"Of course," I huff. "You Seven know how to haggle. Everything is a negotiation for you guys."

"Maybe," he raises his shoulders, "if it gets me what I want..."

"What?" I meet his gaze, "What do you want from me?"

"Meet him, once."

I shake my head, "No, no, that's not happening."

There's a commotion at the door, then Saint stalks in.

"Don't think he's leaving you a choice." Weston's face softens, "Let him help you, Victoria."

"Keep your promise," I implore him. "That's all I want."

Saint draws abreast with Weston, "What are the two of you talking about?"

"The Doctor was just leaving," I look pointedly at Weston.

He turns to go.

"You should join him," I turn my head to the side, study the view from the window—a road, a building across the street. Rain patters down the window pane. Bleak. Miserable. Just like my life is going to be without him. *Shit. Stop it.* This is the right thing to do...for him...for me...for the child I'm carrying. Saint isn't ready to have children and I'd never force that on him.

His father had called him an intrusion... A mistake. And mine? Well, mine had checked out, leaving us to cope on our own. The track record for fathers being present and engaged in both of our lives is not reassuring, to say the least. I bite the inside of my cheek. I won't let my child go through the same experience. It would be better for my child to never know a father, than to be rejected by one. If that means giving up the man who's come to mean so

much to me, then so be it.

"Gigi."

I bite my lips. "Don't call me that, please."

He hesitates, then lowers himself into the chair. "How are you?" he asks.

"I'll be better once you're gone."

He makes a low noise in his throat, "If anything had happened to you—"

"I'm fine."

"He shot you."

"Antonio didn't intend to hurt me."

"Except he did," his voice cracks.

I turn to face him, and flinch. His hair is mussed, his face unshaven. Redness rims his eyes... And his gaze. Oh my God! His blue gaze burns into me with an intensity that makes my heart lurch. "Saint," I say his name before I can stop myself.

"I have my guys on him. He's revealed himself and I am not letting him go until I take him and everyone associated with him down.

"You can't," I bite the inside of my cheek.

"What? Why not?"

"If you do, he'll kill my best friend. The deal was for me to win your trust, to find the evidence you had on the Mafia and return it, in exchange for —"

"Your friend's life?" He snarls. "And what about your life, Gigi, your safety is my priority. You, are my priority. Nothing is more important than you. And that fucker dare pull out a fucking gun and threaten you, in front of me?" His nostrils flare. His biceps bulge, his shoulders seem to grow in size. Hell, Saint in full blown protective alpha mode is... bloody hot. I am going to miss that... so bloody much.

"I won't let him get away with it." He glares at me.

"I hadn't expected him to pull that stunt, Saint. Honestly. If I'd known he was going to hijack your event and ruin your reputation..."

"Fuck that," he swears.

"But...but he made you look like a loser." I protest.

"You're still here, aren't you?" He scowls.

"I can't stay, Saint."

His jaw tics, "If you think I am going to let you walk, with that man loose out there..."

"If he'd wanted to kill me, he'd already have done it. He wanted to cause

a diversion to escape. He won't reveal himself again. His face is too well known. Besides, I am of no use to him anymore."

He frowns, "So stay with me. I thought I was in control, but all along, it was you who was leading me on. You were always one step ahead, Gigi—"

"Victoria," I correct him.

"Fuck that," he growls. He widens his stance, and damn him, but my gaze drops right to the tented fabric between his legs. Surely not. He can't be aroused. Is that Saint's resting position? It has to be. That's how big, how thick... How bloody massive his larger-than-average dick is. I'd felt it inside of me, curled my fingers around it and squeezed him, massaged him and made him come, had taken him down my throat and swallowed his cum, had shattered all over his fingers, ridden his dick as he'd brought me to climax. My thighs clench. My stomach flutters, I press my hand to my belly.

"What's wrong?" He frowns.

"Nothing." I bite the inside of my cheek.

"Stop lying."

"Fine," I glower at him. "You want to hear why I don't want anything to do with you? Why I know there's no future for us?"

"Tell me," he leans forward, his fists balled between his knees. "Tell me why you want to leave me."

I stare into his face and my heart begins to pump hard enough to pound in my throat. My palms begin to sweat. *Do it; tell him.* I brace my shoulders, "I don't want you."

45

Saint

"What?" I blink.

"I hate what you do to me."

"You don't." I scan her features.

"I loathe that we can't be honest with each other." She meets my gaze unblinking, "I despise how you bring out the part of me that I have hidden from for so long."

She pulls off my ring from her finger; holds it up. The stone glistens in her palm. I stare at it, my heart pounding erratically.

"Take the ring, Saint."

I hold out my hand and she drops the piece of jewelry into it.

"What gets broken without being held?" I close my fingers around it.

She blinks, chews on her lower lip, "Is it...a promise?"

My lips twist.

Her face pales further.

"Imagine you are in a dark room..." I peer into her face, "How do you get out?"

She curls her fingers at her sides, "Stop imagining," she whispers.

"When my mother asked me the same questions, I didn't have an answer for her. For a long time I was convinced that it's why she left me."

"Oh, Saint," her features twist. She half sits up, reaches for me.

I pull away, "I don't want your pity."

She half smiles, "Pity is the last thing on my mind where you are

concerned."

I straighten.

She lowers her brows, "How old were you when she left?"

"Thirteen." I shuffle my feet. "A year after the incident."

"When you and the Seven were kidnapped?"

I nod. *Shit, it never gets easier to talk about this.* I square my shoulders. "They held up the car I was in, knocked my driver unconscious, and abducted me on the way home from football practice."

"Is that why you prefer to drive yourself around?"

I nod, "And why I keep a gun on hand." I raise my shoulders, "No way, will I be so vulnerable again."

"And the riddles?"

"What about them?"

"What got you so dependent on them?"

I lean forward, squeezing the ring in my palm with such force that the emerald cuts into my skin. The soles of my feet burn; I press my heels into the ground. "I can't talk about that," I straighten.

"Can't or won't?"

I rise to my feet, "Does it matter?"

"And the woman?" She asks.

I scowl. "It's not what you think it is." I stare into her face.

She scoffs. "You expect me to believe that?"

"Believe it..." I raise my shoulders, "or not."

She stiffens, "Is she your sister? Your cousin? Hell a blood relation of some kind?"

I shake my head.

"So who is she?" Her eyebrows knit.

"She's a... friend."

"A friend?" She glowers at me.

"Also a business associate." I crack my neck. "There's uh! Nothing between us."

"Fine, say I believe you." She wrings her fingers together, "What were you talking about with her?" She sets her jaw. "Why do you go running every time she calls?"

Shit, I'd done no wrong so why the hell am I feeling defensive?

I draw in a breath, "I can't tell you. I told you, I won't put you in danger."

She throws up her hands. "And you want me to stay? When there are so

many secrets between us?"

"When I make a promise, I keep it, Gigi. Unlike you."

She pales.

"Shit." I drag my fingers through my hair, "I didn't mean it."

"Sure you did."

We glare at each other. She's right. She brings out the worst in me. She makes me feel things I never have... She makes me hurt. *Fuck! Why is this thing between us so complicated?* Sweat trickles down my back. "You're right." I glance away. "Whatever was between us, it's over."

I turn to leave.

"And you say you love me?" she huffs.

I walk toward the exit.

"I can be a game, but there are no winners, what am I?" her voice stops me.

I pause, then because I can't fucking resist, I answer, "Blame."

"What's another name for Saint?" she asks.

I grip the door frame, "Don't do this, Gigi."

"Answer me," she snarls.

I step through the doorway.

"Coward," her voice follows me out.

I freeze.

"You heard me," she huffs, "You don't have the courage to face up to what's between us."

"And you do?"

"Yes." She presses her hand to her belly, "Everything I am doing is out of love."

"For whom, Gigi? Everything you're doing is to punish me."

"There are some things bigger than you and me."

"Like what? Lies? Betrayal? Your affliction for that...man who shot you? He's taking advantage of you. He's using you Gigi."

"So be it."

"He'll never let your friend go."

"He will."

"It was all a farce. If you leave here, you'll never be safe."

"We'll see, shall we?" She sets her jaw.

I glare at her, "Why do you have to be so stubborn?"

"Why do you have to be so...blinded by your own ego?"

"It's the only thing that's kept me alive so far."

"What kind of living is it, if you can't even come clean to your own wife?"

"Oh, so *now* you are my wife?" I thrust out my chest.

She throws up her hands, "Just leave Saint, please."

"I intend to." I turn to go, when the phone in my pocket vibrates. I slide it out of my pocket, see the message from an unknown number. I swipe open the screen, play the message. A video flickers to life.

A woman speaks into the screen, "This message is for Victoria." She swallows, "V? This is Nina. I am fine." She glances at someone off-screen. "Antonio has promised not to hurt me as long as no one comes after him." She firms her lips, stares at the screen, "I am fine V, really. Call off whoever is shadowing Antonio. He'll take care of me." A smile curls her lips. "I believe him, V." She pauses, then adds, "Take care of yourself." The message switches off.

"What is it?"

I walk over to her, hand her the phone.

She glances at me, then back at the screen. I play the message for her. She pales, replays the message once again, then hands the phone back to me.

"You believe her?"

She nods. "No reason for Nina to lie."

"Yet, you kept the truth from me. Why didn't you tell me what the Mafia wanted from you?"

She pales.

"Why, Gigi?"

"Because...I had to protect you Saint. I couldn't...risk the Mafia finding out. What if they did something to you? I could have never lived with myself," she draws in a breath.

"You wanted to protect *me*?" I scowl.

"Why not?" She sets her jaw, "Is that so difficult to understand?"

"Yes," I growl, "because you don't get to put yourself in danger for me... You never get to endanger yourself for anyone else—especially not for me. I can take care of myself, you feel me, Gigi?"

"Oh, spare me the macho bullshit," she mutters.

The fuck is she talking about? Of course, I am macho. I was born this way... No excuses there. I can't stop myself from taking care of her, any more than I could stop myself from breathing. I glare at her; she glowers back.

Stubborn woman.

Why can't she understand that if something were to happen to her I'd never survive it? *Fuck*. I rake my fingers through my hair. "You make me a little crazy, Gigi, you know that? You make me do things that I can't explain. You fucking tie me up in knots, and that makes me desperate. It makes me miss things I didn't know I wanted in the first place."

"Like?" She stares at me, "Like what?"

"Like, being married to you, for one. I had no idea that I needed you—your touch, a glance, the whisper of your voice to infiltrate the recesses of my mind."

"What else?" she whispers.

"I want you, isn't that enough?"

"I want more." She swallows, "Can you give me that, I wonder?"

My heart begins to race. "What is it?" I ask. "What more do you want?"
Do I want to hear it? Do I?

"Will you answer my riddle?" A small smile curves her lips.

"You know I only ask, but never answer," I scowl.

"Just this once, Saint." She squares her shoulders, tips up her chin and holds my gaze, "Please."

My pulse thunders at my temples; my palms grow cold. *Shit, why am I nervous about agreeing to this? Don't do it, don't.* I jerk my chin, "Fine then."

Her lips twist. "What's easy to make, but impossible to keep forever?"

I peruse her features. *What is it? What could it be?* A glimmer of a thought brushes against the edges of my mind. *Nah, it can't be. Not that.* I glance around the room, drag my fingers through my hair, "I...can't guess what it is."

"I'll give you a clue." Her chest rises and falls. "You'll see me soon but you can't see me yet."

I frown; my heart begins to race. *What the hell is she hinting at? "I..."* I swallow. "That sounds implausible."

Her lips curve in a small smile, "Here's another hint." She leans forward, "The more you give up, the more it gives back to you."

My pulse rate ratchets up. *She isn't saying what I think she is, is she? Nah. Not possible...* I widen my stance. "That defies the laws of physics," I say. "I don't think I like the sound of it," I laugh, the sound nervous. *Bloody hell! What's wrong with me?* My palms begin to sweat. The ring slips from

between my fingers, clatters to the floor, rolls toward the bed. I swoop down and grab it.

Her gaze falls to my hand, "You can guess it."

"I can't." I rise to my feet, clutching at the ring like it's a bloody lifeline. "Besides, whatever it is," my voice cracks; I clear my throat, "I don't think there's space in my life for it."

I pivot, head for the door.

"So, this is it then?"

Her voice brings me up short.

I pause, slide the ring into my pocket.

"How can you say you love me, when you don't want to fight for us?" she cries out.

"There is no us. Not anymore." I stalk forward. "You were right. There are too many secrets between us, Gigi. That's no way to start a relationship."

I reach the exit.

"Saint?"

I don't turn around. "Goodbye, Victoria."

46

What did the cat say to her Valentine?

Answer: You are purr-fect for me

Victoria

I tear open the envelope, pull out the papers. "No." They slide from my fingers, hit the floor in a cloud of white and black. Like my life. I thought it would get easier with time, but every passing minute of every hour of every day, the hollowness in my chest grows bigger, more turbulent, louder, pressing outward, making my heart race, filling me with panic, telling me I was wrong. I should have given him a chance. A choice. Another opportunity to rip me apart, tear out my heart and trample it to pieces under his size 13, dusty cowboy boots.

Yeah, I know his shoe size.

No thanks to that weird-as-shit, eccentric taste in shoes he has. Who remembers the shoe size of a man who broke her heart? Correction: Okay, I left him, so technically I broke my own heart. I've been numb since I left the hotel, my life an endless cycle of days and nights.

The nights... They are the worst. The darkness taunts me. The cold sheets wind around my limbs, weighing me down, pulling me into a restless sleep filled with images of him, our time together, how he'd kissed me, how he'd wrenched orgasms from me. How he'd run his fingers over my skin, thrust them into my pussy, taken me, curled me into him, spooned me as we'd fallen asleep. Hell. The only way to escape is to wake up, make myself chamomile

tea, and watch mindless television. Shit. I am turning into a hermit, never leaving the house, except for the checkup at the hospital, that had confirmed that my pregnancy is progressing well.

I massage my stomach—my child... Saint's child. Had I subconsciously planned this all along?

Is that why I'd asked for contraceptive pills instead of the injection?

Had I hoped that I would fall pregnant?

Had I wanted it all along?

I had been on a mission for the Mafia, for hell's sake. And my subconscious thought was that *this* was the time to bring a child into the world? How irresponsible could I be? Am I such a dreamer that I'd hoped, somehow, everything would work out? That I'd get together with him and we'd live happily ever after? The band around my chest tightens. I'd been incredibly stupid... And lucky that, somehow, I'd managed to avoid being hurt so far. If you don't count the emotional hurt, of course.

I stare at the fallen sheafs of papers. Lucky, huh? I burst into tears. Damn hormones. And damn Saint, for allowing me to fool myself into hoping for a more permanent relationship.

I stumble over to the settee in the tiny living room and bury my face in my hands. I had spoilt my life...and his or hers—this little one who will never know a father. The bloody asinine man has haunted my every waking thought, has crawled into my dreams, has me second-guessing myself every time I am at the supermarket, sure that I'll see him in the next aisle. As if he would be shopping in the supermarket. Shit. I *am* losing it, I *am*.

The sound of a light knock at the door has me wiping my tears. By the time I open it, I've composed myself.

"Victoria?" Amelie frowns, "Have you been crying again?"

"Moi?" I press a hand to my chest. "Why would I?"

"Don't lie." She steps forward and her foot brushes the papers on the floor. "What's this?" She bends to pick them up.

The pressure builds behind my eyes. *I will not cry, will not.*

"Divorce papers?" She glances up at me.

"Read it." I bite on my lower lip, "The asshole is making sure I have nothing to do with him."

"That's what you said you want, right?" She walks across to the coffee table and places the papers there. Then straightens, "It is, isn't it?"

"Yeah." I bring up my legs, to sit cross-legged on the sofa. Somehow this

is the only position that feels comfortable nowadays. Don't ask.

"You don't sound convinced."

"What do you want me to say?" I shove a cushion behind me.

"That you want him to come after you, discover that you are pregnant, and then fall to his knees and apologize for being a bloody idiot."

"Right," I laugh. "You obviously don't know Saint."

"Not as well as you." She glances pointedly at my belly, "What are you going to do about it?"

I swallow, then place my palms over my belly. "I want this child. It's just, I'd thought, I'd hoped..." My face crumples. "It's hard, Amelie. I knew it wasn't going to be easy to do this on my own...but I hadn't realized how daunting it would be."

"Oh, V." She rounds the table, sinks down next to me and pulls me close. I bury my face in her shoulder and allow the tears to come.

She pats my head, holds me close, "Let it out, V. You've been through so bloody much. I don't know of anyone who could have come out of it still standing."

"And pregnant," I mutter through my tears. "Not that I'm complaining. I mean, it's the one good thing to have come from all this mess." I wipe my tears, and sit back, "Do I look terrible?"

She looks me up and down, "Yes."

I chuckle, "Gee, thanks. I can always count on you sugar-coating reality, huh?"

"That's my specialty. Comes with being an expert pastry chef."

I snicker, "That's a terrible joke."

"You smiled, didn't you?" She leans across, and snatches up the tissue box. "What are you wearing anyway?"

I pull out a few of the tissues, blow my nose. "An old shirt I'd forgotten I own." It's one of Saint's. I packed it by mistake. Okay, so it wasn't a mistake. I wad the tissues in my hand and hunch my shoulders. "What the hell am I going to do, Amelie?"

I stare at the advertisement on the television screen, showing a family sitting down to Christmas dinner.

"If there's anyone who can cope with this, it's you." She rubs circles on my back.

I snort, "I'm not feeling capable of much at the moment, I can tell you that."

Another image flashes on screen, this time showing the opening credits of "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas."

"Bloody depressing." She picks up the remote control and switches off the TV.

I chuckle, "I thought you like Christmas."

"I do." She links her fingers together, "But I've been overworked filling up orders for Christmas parties since—" she reddens. "Sorry didn't mean to bring up the... Uh! ...wedding party."

"It's fine." I pick up a cushion and hug it, "I 'm glad at least you and Isla benefitted from all that publicity."

"More like notoriety," she snorts. "But really, it seems whoever said that all PR is good PR, has it right. Isla's booked up into late next year and I have more orders than I can fulfill for the foreseeable future. "

The paparazzi had blown up the internet with accounts of how a mystery man had held the wedding celebration hostage, then escaped without taking anything. People had taken to calling it a prank pulled by one of the Seven.

Saint had encouraged it by releasing a short statement to the media clarifying that no one had been hurt by the escapade. He hadn't answered any further questions from the media—who had speculated for days, before one journalist had concluded that it had been a giant waste of time—except for the desserts served at the party, which had been incredible. One thing had led to another, and the internet had blown up with people wanting to find out who had planned the wedding and what the guests had been enjoying; so Isla's wedding planning venture and Amelie's catering business had boomed in its wake.

All's well that ends well... Everyone got what they wanted, including Antonio. A shiver runs down my spine. He seems to be sticking to his promise of leaving me alone...so far. If he'd wanted to kill me, he could have when he'd shot at me. He seemed to have purposely missed at that close range. Well, I guess that means he is letting me get on with my life... Such as it is.

"What are you going to do for Christmas?" Amelie asks.

"I haven't given it much thought." I glance around the flat. "Maybe I'll stay in here, get some rest," I say.

"You mean stay in and get depressed?"

"I won't." I hunch my shoulders, negating my own claim, "I'm trying, Amelie." I stare at the blank television screen.

"Why don't you come up to the cabin with me?"

"Cabin?" I frown.

"The one that Saint said I could borrow for the holidays?" She flushes, "Shit, I can't say anything without putting my foot in my mouth."

"It's okay." I force out a laugh, "It's not like I can go through life being upset every time his name is mentioned."

"I... I won't go, if that helps. I can stay here and keep you company?"

"Nonsense." I frown, "You deserve this time to rest and rejuvenate."

She turns to me, "I don't want you to be on your own."

"I've survived the last few weeks, haven't I?"

"Have you?" She looks me up and down.

I flush, "Do I look that bad?"

"Worse."

I yank my hair back from my face, "I...haven't felt motivated."

"It's understandable. It's why I'd rather you not stay on your own through the holiday season."

"And I'm not coming with you, to the cabin."

"Why don't you stay with Summer and Sinclair—?" she asks.

"And risk running into him?" I straighten my shoulders, "Okay, I know that's being a coward, but right now, I'd rather stay as far away from him as possible.'

"You mean cooped up inside here, drowning in your own thoughts?"

"What would you have me do?"

"Let me help you," she glares at me.

"You have." I sag against the sofa, "You know, I couldn't have come this far without you. It's thanks to you that I found this apartment to house-sit for the next year... and within walking distance of the hospital too.

She shuffles her feet, "Seriously, it's not a big deal." She waves a hand in the air, "I wish you could tell Saint about the child."

"You haven't heard him speak about how much he hates kids."

"That's only until he realizes you are about to have his." She plonks her palms on her hips. "A man like him will do anything to protect his own flesh and blood."

"He sure did a slap-up job of taking care of me."

"Only because you hid things from him."

"What about the secrets he held back from me?"

"Did you ask him about it?"

"I did," I swallow. "He didn't want to reveal them to me. We have no common meeting ground."

"Except one," she, once more, looks down at my belly.

I redden, "Seriously?"

"Marriages have been built on less, and the sexual chemistry between the two of you is clearly off the charts. I mean, you're pregnant with his child."

"No kidding."

"So, you're going to give up on the two of you?"

"He's the one who gave up on me."

"Give him one last chance?"

"No."

She throws her hands up in the air, "You're so stubborn."

"Guess that's how I've gotten through the shit life has thrown at me, huh?"

"You sure you won't let me come to the hospital with you?"

I shake my head. "It's a routine check-up, I'll be fine."

Saint

"You're a dickhead."

Weston's voice comes through loud and clear over the phone.

"Why you had to break up with her and then send her divorce papers, without trying to at least make up with her one last time..."

"Look who's giving me relationship advice," I snicker. "The man who can't hold down a single woman for more than week."

"Out of choice, bitch. The more the merrier, as they say," Weston retorts. "More than what I can say for you. Did you manage to, at least, get to the office today?"

I take a sip of the whiskey, then wince at the taste. Shit, not even good old Macallan fine malt *seems* the same. Face it, nothing *compares* to the taste of her cunt, her mouth, her lips... *Fuck*, fucking fuck?

"You okay, ol' chap?"

"Why the fuck are you calling me anyway?"

"Why do you think?"

"I think I am going to hang up, dickwad—"

"Hold on, I'm getting another call."

"Don't you fucking put me on hold, Weston—"

The call goes silent. Then classical music drifts over the line. "The fuck?" He has Mozart playing while he puts me on hold? I hang up, then begin to pace. Is he right, should I have tried harder? But this is what she wants, right? A clean break. Neither of us needs to look back. I had made sure she came

out of the entire incident with her identity concealed. It had cost me thousands to track down every single paparazzi in that room, and pay them off enough that they would leave out all mention of her. I may have had to lean on one or two of the errant ones to ensure they destroyed all evidence of that day. But it had been worth it. The event had faded away from public memory. The next scandal had surfaced and we were yesterdays' news.

Like me and her—

Fuck. I rub the ache in my chest. —Except for the emptiness that crawls in my guts and the thoughts that crowd my mind. Not to mention the nightmares that seem to be never too far away when I sleep—the voice asking me questions, demanding that I answer them. Fuck. I rub at my temples. This is insane.

I had let her get under my skin... That's the only reason I am beginning to unravel this way.

Once she signs the divorce papers, I can walk away, and have nothing more to do with her.

So, we are no closer to finding out who was behind our kidnappings. Antonio? Well, the man had disappeared. I'd had my PI on his tail and Antonio had given her the slip. He hadn't been seen or heard of in the last three weeks since the party...

And that message. Why doesn't that reassure me in the least? The hair on the nape of my neck rises. Shit, I am simply imagining things. The man is long gone. He'd gotten what he wanted—the USB which had been sent to me.

He can keep it, for all I care.

If it leaks on the internet... Well, it would only lead to more speculation—not that I care—but it would be easy enough to suppress it.

If it were to happen, which it won't. Clearly, the man had wanted to get his hands on it. For what, though? Why was it so important to get a hold of it?

The phone buzzes in my hand. Fucking Weston. I silence it. It rings again, I switch it off. The phone on my desk rings. I walk to it and snatch it up, "What?"

"It's Weston."

"Tell him to fuck off."

"He says it's urgent." Meredith's voice is patient, "I think you should take this call."

"Fine," I glower at the receiver.

"Asswipe," Weston drawls back.

"Jesus, can't you fucking go away to a place where there are no phones—preferably no means of communication—so I don't have to hear from you?"

"Same to you, with knobs on," he snickers. "Listen," his voice turns serious, "I called you because I've gotta come clean to you about something."

"What?"

"Promise you won't go all apeshit when I tell you."

"Shit." My heart begins to thud, "Just say it."

"I don't know, I promised her I wouldn't."

"Who?"

"Victoria."

"You and she spoke?"

"At the hospital that day, and I'd been hoping for the two of you to come to your senses. Hell, I'd hoped she would tell you herself. Not that I should be breaking doctor-patient confidentiality... But I warned her."

"Fuck that. If you don't tell me right now—"

The sound of honking reaches me over the line.

"Bloody cunt," he swears.

"What?"

"Not you. This fucker who's trying to overtake me—what the hell—?" he swears aloud again. There's more honking, the sound of brakes screeching.

"Weston, what the fuck—?"

The sound of metal scraping against metal, then Weston's voice comes on the phone again, "Shit, Saint, this is not over not by a long shot. She's preg—"

The line goes dead.

"The fuck?"

I glare at the receiver. My fingers tremble and my knuckles are white. How strange. I place the phone back in the cradle. Then reach for my phone. She's what? She's...fine. She has to be. And Weston? Shit, my heart begins to race. The noise in my head clears. He was in an accident. I need to get to him. I reach for the phone and dial my operative.

Half an hour later, I race up the corridor of the Whittington hospital. My investigator had tracked down Weston with a speed that had impressed even me. Well, I owe her a small fortune—but she'd delivered. This time, I barrel into the private room, and swerve. A jug of water misses me narrowly and

crashes to the floor behind me.

"The fuck?"

I glance at Weston, sprawled on the hospital bed. His arm is in a sling, cuts and bruises mar his face, and his shirt is torn... Other than that, he seems fine. Which is more than I can say about the white-faced nurse who turns to me.

She throws up her hands, "Are you family?"

"A friend."

"Fine. Then," she thrusts a small plastic cap filled with pills at me, "you make him take those."

She brushes past me.

"Hold on, is he okay?"

"He won't be able to use his arm for a little while." She raises her shoulders.

"The fuck?" He snarls, "I am a surgeon. I need to use my hands."

She winces, then turns and scurries from the room.

I turn to face my friend. Sweat beads his forehead and dirt smudges his face.

"You okay?"

He sets his jaw, "Totally."

I glance at the pills.

"You're not going to make me take those," he growls.

"Nah, man." I set them down on the table next to the bed, "I am not your nurse. Besides, you're funny about painkillers, right?"

"Yeah," he scowls at his injured arm. "The fuckers say I need to rest my hand," he growls.

"What happened?" I ask.

His face reddens, "I fractured my finger, apparently."

"Finger?" I clear my throat, "Don't tell me... It's..."

"My fucking middle finger." He holds up his hand with the sling, showing me the bird... Or rather, his middle finger in a splint.

He winces, then lowers his hand. "Hurts like a bitch, too," he grumbles.

A chuckle bubbles up; I change it to a snort.

"You think this is a joke, Caldwell?"

"Of course, not." I keep the grin on my face though. "You're a doctor. Can't you make them change the diagnosis?"

He glowers back, "Funny. Should I laugh at that?"

"Don't care, ol' chap, just don't cry on my shoulder."
He pushes into the bed, "Why are you here, you dickhead?"
I stop laughing. "What happened?" I lean forward.
"This car came out of nowhere and forced me off the road."
"You sure?" I steeple my fingers together.
"Do I look like I am kidding?"
"No," I drag my fingers through my hair. "Well, the good news is, it's only a fracture."
"To my hand. My right hand. My fucking dominant hand. You know what this means, right?"
I straighten, "You'll be out of commission for a little time?"
"I am a surgeon, asshole. If the arm doesn't mend properly, I'll never be able to operate again."
"Shit," I pale. "I'm sorry man."
"Fuck." He bangs his head back against the headboard, "Fucking, fuck."
"Easy." I frown down at my friend, "At least, you're alive."
"They weren't trying to kill me, just put me out of commission."
"By causing you to fracture your middle finger?"
He scoffs, "It wasn't an accident, man, I'll tell you that."
"So, you think this was done on purpose?" I frown.
"Sure seems that way to me?"
"Why would anyone want you out of commission?"
"Beats the hell out of me." He straightens his shoulders, "One thing is for sure, we need to double the security on all of the Seven and those who matter to us."
A frisson runs down my spine, "Before the accident, you said something, before you got cut off..."
"That I was being forced off the road?" His forehead crinkles.
"No at the end, you said Victoria was..."
"Pregnant."
"Shit." The world sways around me. I sink into the chair, "That's what she was trying to tell me."
"She told you and you let her go?" he snaps.
"Not exactly..." I stab the heel of my shoe into the floor. "She asked me a riddle, which I couldn't solve—"
"Hold on." He leans forward, "*She asked you* a riddle."
"Yeah."

His gaze widens, "You never allow anyone to challenge you."

"I let her, okay?" I squeeze my eyes shut. "Only her," I swallow. "It's complicated."

"No shit."

I hear the smile in his voice, crack my eyelids open. "Don't feed me a line about sentimentalism and all that shit."

"You're doing that, all by yourself."

I sink back in my chair, massage my chest, "I think I'm going to have a cardiac."

"Handy I'm right here, then, isn't it?"

"Har, har," I snarl. "You're fucking annoying, man. "

"Speak for yourself."

"Fuck this shit." I dig my fingers into my hair and pull at it, "Why couldn't she tell me?"

"It sounds like she did," he says. "You simply didn't want to answer the riddle."

"She could have simply told me, you know?"

"And then what? Would you have accepted her and the child?"

"Maybe. I don't know." I lower my chin to my chest, mumble, "This is bloody complicated."

"Tell me about it."

I glance up to find him staring at the sling.

"I'm sorry about your finger."

He sighs, "Me too." He grabs another pillow and props it behind his shoulder, "What are you going to do now—?"

My phone buzzes.

I pull it out. It's a message from an unknown number. *Huh?* I swipe open the message.

Come and get her. She's in East London. You know where to look.

I pale.

"What's wrong?" Weston frowns.

"You were right; this is not over yet." I jump to my feet, race for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To rescue my family."

Victoria

I had been stupid, so stupid. I try to swallow and my throat hurts. A drumming sensation presses in at my temples.

I yank at the ropes that tie my wrists behind my back. I try to open my eyes, but the darkness presses down against my eyelids. Shit, had he also blindfolded me? I feel along the floor with my feet... At least, I still have my boots on. Good thing I'd opted for them over ballet pumps. I'd been half way to the hospital, crossing the garden that bordered the side of the building, when someone had grabbed me from behind. I'd opened my mouth to scream and a soft cloth had been thrust into my face. I'd drawn in a whiff of a sweet, cloying scent, and had begun to black out. I'd been drugged, there was no doubt about that.

My guts churn and bile rushes up my throat. The baby... My heartbeat ratchets up. This can't be good for the baby, surely? I draw in a breath, another. *Take it easy. It's going to be fine.* I swallow down the nervousness that clogs my throat. Who could have done this? Antonio? What does he want now? Where am I?

Footsteps sound; I freeze. Who can it be? Will they hurt me?

Silence for a few moments. I hunch my shoulders, hold my breath. *Go away, please don't come close.* There's a sound of shuffling so close. A bead of sweat runs down my spine. Who is out there? My captor? What is he going to do next?

I hear a click and the hair on the back of my neck rise.

"Come out of there." A familiar voice rips through the silence, "I know you're in there. I'm giving you five seconds to reveal yourself before I start shooting.

"No," I try to say the word out loud but my voice is muffled. "Saint, it's me," my words are garbled. I can barely speak through the gag in my mouth. I shuffle forward, my feet thumping against a barrier.

"Who's there?" His voice is tense. The sense of danger ratchets up. Shit, he can't shoot. I won't let him hurt me... Us. Worse than what might happen to me and the baby, it would destroy him. I wriggle forward, kick out again and slam into a barrier.

The next instant, there's a creak of a door being opened and the air shifts. The darkness lightens by several shades. Had I been thrust into a closet? An electric current runs up my spine. It's Saint. He's here. I try to speak again, my voice muffled.

"Victoria." My blindfold is pulled off. I blink against the brightness. Arms wind around me. He scoops me up, restraints and all, and places me on the ground.

He pulls off the gag; the bindings around my wrists loosen. I crack open my eyelids to find him kneeling over me. There's a flash of steel, then the ropes around my ankles give away. I collapse into him. "Saint," my throat hurts and a headache pounds at my temples.

"Jesus, Gigi." He pulls me into his lap and cradles me.

I press my ear to his chest, listen to the thundering of his heart. He rocks me back and forth. "You're safe," he mumbles into my hair. His grip tightens around me and pain shivers up my arm. I whimper.

"Are you hurt?"

He pulls back to peer at my arm. I look down to find the sleeve ripped. A thin trickle of blood stains the cloth. A growl rips from him.

I shudder, "I... I'm fine."

"You're bleeding."

"It's a scratch," I insist.

"Who hurt you?" He pinches my chin, so I have to peer up at him, "Did you catch a glimpse of who it was?"

"No," I swallow, "I was walking to the hospital."

"Hospital?"

"For the check-up."

"Check-up—?" His voice trails off. A strange look comes into his eyes.

Fear? Anger? Then his features close. "Is everything okay? Are you—?"

"I'm fine." My chest hurts; the back of my throat burns. Shit, why should it matter to me that he doesn't want kids? This entire thing had gone wrong. He was supposed to have guessed my riddle, then embraced me, kissed me, and taken me home. To his hotel room, I mean, because of course, the man doesn't have a place to call his own. He prefers the transience that being in a hotel room gives him. The freedom from relationships, from someone like me.

I push at his chest.

His grip tightens. "Victoria."

"Saint."

We speak at the same time.

"I..."

"You..." I swallow, "you were saying?"

A dull thud echoes around the space. I stare at him and his gaze widens. "We need to get out of here." He rises, carrying me.

"I can walk," I protest.

He ignores me and heads for the doorway. For the first time, I glance around, taking in the space. It's an empty room with a closet in the corner, the one I had been locked in. I shudder.

He holds me closer, "You're safe."

His voice rumbles in his chest. I shouldn't feel the need to lean on him, to thrust my nose into the strip of flesh that peeks out from between his lapels, and inhale his scent. My lungs fill with his essence and my heart rate stabilizes. Shit, why do I feel so secure, so protected when I'm with him? For so long, I had depended on myself—my instincts, my ability to withstand anything thrown my way. And how had that worked out, huh? I'd done a slap-up job of it—negotiating Nina's release, and my continued freedom, by agreeing to play a role in Saint's downfall.

Tears prick at the backs of my eyes. Even my bloody hormones are no longer on my side.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"For what?" He prowls down the steps, reaching a landing that opens into another vacant room.

"For everything."

"I should be the one apologizing for being so hardheaded."

"No arguments there," I snicker through the ball of emotion in my throat.

"Guess that's one more thing we agree on."

He walks out onto the landing, glances around, then continues down the dilapidated steps toward his Jaguar, parked outside.

A couple of boys in hoodies mill around nearby. I take in the house next door—paint peeling, garbage cans over-filled, with trash on the pavement outside. Across from us, there's a boarded-up store. The other houses on the street seem as deserted. The electronic lock beeps, then he opens the door on the passenger side and places me in it. "Buckle up."

He leans back, shuts the door, and walks around. One of the boys stops him. They speak, then he pulls out his wallet, pulls out a few notes, and hands them over. He reaches into another pocket to pull out a card. He slips that to the second boy and they fist bump. In seconds, he's in the driver's seat, and starts the car.

"What was that about?" I ask, as he eases the cars from the curb. The boys step back, watch us as we pull away.

"Told them to call me if they see anyone coming in or out of the house."

"How did you find me?"

He pulls out his phone and hands it to me, then focuses on the road ahead. I read the text. "Who sent it, you think?"

"Antonio?" he growls.

"Perhaps." I lean my head back into the seat. "It's confusing. Why would he ask you to call off those following him, then kidnap me, only to send you my whereabouts? And how did you know exactly where to look?"

His jaw tics. "When we were abducted, that's the house where we were held. I should have bought it and torn it down a long time ago. Guess none of us wanted anything to do with it. After that incident, we simply wanted to put it behind us and move on." His knuckles turn white.

"Saint," I turn to him, "Why...would he send you to the same place?"

"A warning about what would happen if I screwed with the Mafia?" He growls, "He has no idea how personal he's made this. No way, am I letting him go without having my vengeance. He dared touch you, Gigi. He's going to pay for it."

His harsh tone slices down my spine, my nipples bead, and lust curls in my belly. Hell, hearing him all worked up on my behalf is way too much of a turn on to resist.

The phone in my hand—his phone—pings again. I stiffen and my heart begins to thud. I glance down at the screen.

"What does it say?"

I wet my lips. Read, and re-read the message.

"Aloud, Gigi."

Maybe it's the fact that he uses my nickname, or the way his voice stretches with tension, or the command in his tone that whips across my skin and makes my pussy clench. Shit, I want every dirty thing he can do to me again. Is this any way for a pregnant woman to be thinking? Is it the hormones? The fact that I am carrying his baby, that's making me so aware of his nearness.

His voice lowers to a hush, "Don't keep me waiting." That dominant edge of his intent slices through my barriers, reducing me to a trembling mess inside.

I swallow, then scan the words again, "You found her. Don't let her go."

"What?" he snaps.

"That's it." I dig my heels into the floor, "That's all it says."

He stops at a traffic light, then snatches the phone from me. He scans the screen again, then swears under his breath, "The hell does that mean?"

I twist my fingers in my lap, "Apparently, Antonio has a conscience after all."

"What do you mean?" The signal turns green, he presses down on the accelerator, and the car leaps forward. My breath catches; my heart thuds in my chest.

"Sorry," he mutters. "It's just— I don't get it. Did he stage this, to get us to speak again?"

"Seems that way," I huff. "He was never an easy man to comprehend."

"Don't talk about him."

A warm sensation blooms my chest, "You jealous?"

He laughs, the sound bitter, "My wife has a history with another man, a past I don't know anything about. What do you think?"

"I was a virgin."

His knuckles on the wheel tighten. "There are other ways to have a relationship, other than a physical one."

"And you think that's what I had with Antonio?"

"You tell me."

"He was my contact with the Mafia. He's the one who negotiated a deal with them to ensure Nina's release—in return for getting him the USB with the video clip of you being held in that room."

He makes a noise deep in his throat.

I glance sideways at him, "I'm sorry, Saint."

"For what?"

"For giving the media a chance to tear down your reputation."

"I don't give a fuck about that."

"And your company, the losses it suffered because of the ensuing media uproar?"

"I managed to shut down most of the journalists who were there that day."

"How?" I turn to him, "Of course, you paid them to stay quiet."

"Just when you think money doesn't buy everything... It surprises you with how much it does help."

"So, I guess you survived that unscathed then."

"Except for the fact that my wife betrayed me, and handed over the most important piece of evidence of what had turned my life upside down."

I wince, bunching fingers into fists.

"You could have simply asked me. I'd have given the USB to you."

I swing around to face him, "You would have done that?"

"Maybe," he raises a shoulder. "Of course, I'd have extracted my punishment for it."

My toes curl.

"And you'd have loved every minute of it."

His lips twist in that smirk that's hot and mean, and seems to promise more of all the filthy things that he'd ever done to me.

I fold my hands in my lap, "I'm not coming to your hotel."

"I'm not allowing you to return to that apartment."

"You know where...?" I straighten, "Of course, you do. I'm surprised you don't own the entire building."

He stays silent.

I turn sideways in my seat, "You do, don't you? You own the building."

He stays focused on the road.

"What did you offer Amelie this time?"

"Nothing. She refused to help me. I..." he flicks a quick glance, "I used my resources."

"It was too much to hope you'd simply let me leave and get on with my life?"

"What about the life you carry inside of you?"

I pale. "You...you guessed?"

"Weston told me," his features harden.

I stare straight ahead. "You couldn't crack my riddle that day. Imagine that? You, who are able to solve almost any puzzle. You couldn't guess the answer."

"Even I have my shortcomings, it seems," he retorts.

"Or maybe you didn't want to find out what I meant?" I tip up my chin, "Admit it, you don't want this child."

49

Saint

"I want to take care of you, Victoria." I keep my gaze focused on the road. "Since the first time I saw you, it's all I've wanted to do. I can't share you with anyone else."

"Not even our child?"

"I didn't say that." I tighten my jaw.

"What are you saying then?"

Her voice sounds tired, defeated. I glance sideways to find her hunched back into her seat. Dark circles surround her eyes. There are hollows below her cheekbones. Her beautiful hair is disheveled. She looks fragile, exhausted by everything she's faced. I tighten my fingers on the steering wheel. I had failed in my duties as her husband. I had promised to protect her, shield her from the world. I had let my fears, the bad things I'd imagined could happen, get in the way.

Oh, a part of me had guessed what she was trying to say that day.

My subconscious had clocked the way she had placed her palm on her belly, how she'd glanced at me with hope and trepidation. How she'd straightened her shoulders, ready to take on anyone, even me—the man who was hers. I slam my hand against the steering wheel.

She stiffens.

"Sorry," I mutter under my breath. Fuck, for someone who always knows what he wants, I sure am unable to interpret the signals that my brain is trying to send me. "Come back with me, Gigi. Give me a chance to show you how it

could be between us."

"You mean, hurt me again? Trample all over my feelings and refuse to acknowledge what's between us?"

"I love you. I've told you that already. Hell, I married you."

"And served me divorce papers."

"I thought that's what you wanted."

Her lips turn down. She glances away.

Anger laces my blood. Frustration twists my guts. "Let's talk about this later, shall we?"

She nods.

That worries me more. Gigi's always been a fighter, feisty to the core, challenging me at every turn. Fuck, that's what had attracted me to her—that core of unshakeable steel inviting me to push her, control her, try to manipulate her to get a response from her. Perhaps the entire ordeal had finally caught up with her. That fucker, Antonio, had accomplished what I hadn't been able to do during the course of our time together. No way, am I letting him get away with this latest attempt at trying to kidnap her. If he thinks simply getting some woman to record a video asking me to keep away was going to cut it, then he is wrong, so wrong.

I pull up at the curb of Claridge's. Jumping out of the car, I walk around to open the door. She steps out. I grab her hand, entangle our fingers, and lead her up the sidewalk.

A gust of wind blows, knocking over the sign the homeless man holds. It falls right in my path. I pause, glance down.

"How should I greet thee?

With silence and tears."

I swear aloud; she stiffens.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Nothing..." I step over the hardboard sign, head for the door of the hotel.

"Thanks for dinner," Homeless guy calls out.

I pause, half turn, to find he's packing up his shit. He places his hat on his head, then rises to his feet.

"You ain't as much of a tosser as you seem," he chuckles.

I blink, watch as he plonks the sign over his shoulder, then marches up the road.

"Is that fucking odd or what?" I pivot, stalk toward the hotel.

"Why did he thank you for dinner?" she queries.

"He probably eats every night at the hotel," I mutter.

"He does?"

I nod, "All of the leftovers of the day are donated every night, in a makeshift soup kitchen we set up in the back."

Her forehead furrows, "You do that?"

"It's economical." Heat suffuses my face, "Don't go making me out to be empathetic or some such shit, because I'm not."

"Of course, not." Her lips curve slightly.

The wind blows again and she shivers. I pull her close, steer her up the steps and through the open door. Bypassing the main elevators in the lobby, I head for the one at the far end of the floor. The doors open almost immediately, and I step inside with her.

I frown, "Did you see his face? The guy who took you?"

She shakes her head, "I only heard him a couple of times through the closed door of my room."

She curls her finger into my shirt and I cuddle her even closer. "You're safe with me, Gigi."

"So you keep saying," she sniffs.

"I mean it."

She peers up at me, "I know."

"I won't let Antonio or anyone else get to you."

"Antonio won't hurt—"

"That's all I am going to say on the topic," I growl.

She purses her lips. For a second, I am sure she's going to counter me, then she draws in a breath and nods. "Truce?"

"For now."

"Jesus," she huffs, "can't you ever let me have the last word?"

"Never," I allow my lips to curl.

She frowns. The doors open, I step onto the penthouse floor, then guide her to my hotel suite. Once inside, I pull her with me, through the living room, into the bedroom, then the ensuite.

"What are you doing?"

I don't answer. If I do, no doubt, my words will hurt her further. I reach the tub and turn on the water. Steam instantly rises in the air. I lift her onto the counter, then undo her buttons.

She tries to pull her shirt off. I catch her hands in mine, "Let me, Gigi, please."

She tips up her chin, searching my features. What is she looking for?

Her green eyes darken and her lips part. Her fingers tremble in mine. I move in closer. She parts her legs and I step into the space between them. "Gigi," my voice comes out harsh.

"I love it when you call me that."

I allow my lips to curl, "Thought you hated my nickname for you."

"I lied," she whispers.

"I know," I lower my head, until our eyelashes tangle.

"I'm sorry," her lips tremble and a tear slides down her cheek. I bend down and lick it up. A sob catches in her throat.

I place my forehead against hers, "Don't cry, Gigi." I swallow down the lump that blocks my throat. Fuck, what is it about this woman that guts me so completely?

"Didn't mean to," her chin wobbles.

"I'd fucking slay anything that causes you misery. I'll drown out the entire fucking world, set fire to the monsters that lurk in the dark around you. I... I'll rip open my chest and show you what it means to be near you."

"Would you accept this child as yours?"

My eyes fly open. "I'll never shirk my responsibilities when it came to the two of you."

"That's not what I asked."

I step back, reach above her to pull out the antiseptic and cotton wads. "It's all I can give you right now."

"It won't be enough."

"Can we take this one day at a time? I am trying Victoria, I promise I am." I place the medicines on the counter next to her, then reach for her shirt. This time she allows me to undo the buttons, help her out of the shirt.

I take in the mark on her shoulder. A growl rips out of me, "Fuck." I reach out to touch the fading scar. She flinches.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not anymore."

"Fuck, this was my fault."

"Stop trying to take responsibility for everything." She squares her shoulders. "I am the one who played ball with the Mafia... Things were bound to get a little crazy. I mean, it's not like they'd have let me walk away

without paying a price."

I grit my teeth so hard, my jaw hurts. "I'll ensure they never get to you again."

"I know." She smiles a little, "I always knew you would be my knight in shining armor."

"More like the villain."

"I have a thing for bad guys."

"I noticed." I chuckle, "So long as it's me you're talking about and not that bastard..."

"You really don't have to worry about Antonio."

"How can you be so confident?"

"Nina, the woman in the video?"

I nod.

"He...has a thing for her. It's the only reason I agreed to take on this entire mission, knowing he'd never let anything happen to her. It's why he'll take the evidence I gave him to the Mafia and ensure that they stick to their word."

"I hate it," I growl. "No way, am I going to put your future in the hands of that motherfucker, I am going to track him down and when I do—"

"What?" A new voice rings out. "What will you do?"

I swivel around, ensuring my body is between her and whoever's walked in.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

50

Victoria

"Antonio," I try to scramble off the counter, only Saint steps back, imprisoning me.

"What game are you trying to play, Victoria?" Antonio's hard voice fills the space.

I shove against Saint; he doesn't move. He may as well have turned into a concrete wall. "I need to talk to him," I mutter, keeping my voice to a whisper.

Saint's shoulders bunch.

"You can talk from where you are."

Right. I glance down at myself, then do up my buttons. I give his back another shove; he still doesn't move. I huff, then peek around him, "What are you doing here?" I scowl at Antonio. "I thought you'd be on your way back to Sicily by now?"

"Sicily?" Saint exclaims.

"Shit." I clap my palm over my mouth.

"The hell?" Antonio looks between us, then folds his arms over his chest. "You bugged the USB drive?" He glowers at me, "You thought I wouldn't find out?"

"Bugged?" I blink, "I didn't."

"That was me," Saint says.

"What?" I exclaim.

Antonio swears under his breath, "I should have trusted my instincts and

left when I had a chance."

"That, you should have," says another voice.

Antonio swings around.

Weston stands there, arm in a sling.

Antonio reaches for his gun, but Sinclair steps inside the bathroom door, gun aimed at Antonio, "Don't even think about it."

Antonio freezes.

Sinclair jerks his chin and Antonio walks forward. Weston steps aside, allowing Antonio to walk through.

Sinclair follows.

Weston glances at Saint, "You guys okay?"

Saint nods, "Thanks, man. I owe you."

A look passes between them, then Weston retreats, "We'll be in the living room. Don't take too long; we need to figure out what to do with this mofo."

The door closes.

Saint swings around to face me. "You okay?" he grips my shoulders.

A trembling grips me as adrenaline drains from my blood. "You...you knew that I was going to hand over the evidence to him?"

"You didn't mention that he had connections to Sicily?" He retorts.

"He's part of the Mafia... of course they're connected to Sicily." I mutter, then throw my hands up. "I didn't think it was important okay? I peer up at him, "Guess we still have secrets from each other?"

He peruses my futures, then exhales a breath. "Why the hell can't we trust each other?"

"I'm trying." I mutter.

"Yeah." He rubs the back of his neck. "So am I." His lips quirk, "and to answer your question, I suspected that you might do so."

Oh.

I raise my fingers to my lips, he grabs my wrist. "No biting your fingernails." He admonishes me.

O-k-a-y. I peer up into his face, "So, all this time, when you pretended you wanted nothing to do with me, you—"

He nods. "I had my men follow you. I tracked your movements."

"Even in the apartment?"

He frowns.

"Please don't hold back, Saint."

"There are cameras at the apartment," he finally concedes.

"You spied on me?"

"Not...always."

"But you did."

"On occasion..." He draws himself up to his full height, "I watched you bring yourself to orgasm every night, and wished I was there. It should have been my hands on you, my cock buried inside you, it should have been me wringing those moans from you instead of an inanimate object."

My cheeks burn, "Shit, you saw all that?" It should be creepy and awfully stalkerish, so why do I find it strangely reassuring that he'd had his eye on me all this time?

He tilts his head, "How else do you think I survived the last few weeks?"

I frown, "Yet you didn't guess I was pregnant until Weston told you."

His chest rises and falls, straining against the shirt he wears. "I am a dick. What can I say? The mind recognizes what it wants to."

I chuckle, "Well, we make a fine pair, don't we?" The hair on my forearms rises. "We're so bloody wrong for each other."

"On the contrary, I can't think of anything more right. You bring out the worst...and the best in me. You drive me insane, Gigi. You tie me up in knots, and every time I think I've figured you out, you throw me a surprise."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's good...and bad." He leans down and licks my lips, "And it's definitely a bloody turn on. Thing is, there is no one for me but you."

"Even though I am pregnant with your child."

"Especially because you are pregnant with my child," his blue eyes deepen with some emotion I can't quite place.

"I don't want you to feel like you have to do the right thing by me."

"I only want to do all the wrong things to you," he smirks.

"You know that's not what I mean."

He pulls away and the cold air swoops over me. Damn it, why do I miss his presence already?

"I swore never to bring any child into the world—to allow myself to become that vulnerable, to imagine what could happen if he or she was kidnapped and kept hostage..." His entire body tightens, "If any child of mine had to go through what I did, I swear, I'd kill anyone and everyone who'd harm a hair on their head."

I stiffen, sweep my gaze over his face, "Is that what you're afraid of? Being vulnerable?"

"Not being able to protect my child from the world. That's my worst nightmare."

"You protected me, didn't you?"

"I allowed you to get kidnapped on my watch." He scowls.

"You found me didn't you?" I half smile. "I bet you watched me every hour of the day and night to ensure I was safe."

"And still, he managed to get his hands on you."

He doesn't deny it then. I am not sure how that makes me feel. Cared for? Creeped out? Both? And turned on? To be the focus of someone's attention to the exclusion of anything else... Is there any other feeling in the world that can equal that absolute single-minded intensity of his gaze?

"You saved me." I grab his hand and press it to my belly, "You saved both of us."

He squeezes his eyes shut, "Stop trying to make me into some kind of hero. I'm the kind of monster you should stay away from!"

"Oh?" I bite the inside of my cheek, "Who would you rather see me with, Saint?"

He growls.

"Who's the man for me? Who do you think can protect me the way you can? Who'd watch over me like my own protective guardian angel, and ensure he was there each and every turn so nothing ever touched me?"

His nostrils flare.

"Tell me, Saint."

"Me," he growls, "Only I can do this. I trust myself for this job, no one else."

I chuckle.

He glowers, "Don't think you've won this argument."

"No?" I tip up my chin.

He shakes his head, "We're just getting started, Gigi."

He grabs up the cotton ball, then helps me out of my shirt and dabs antiseptic on the scratch on my arm. I hiss and he bends his head and blows on the wound.

Goosebumps rise on my skin.

"Cold?"

"No." I watch as he straightens, then tosses the cotton into the dustbin. He rips open a bandage, and sticks it over the wound. "It's the best I can do, until I can get a doctor to come in and check you out."

"I'm fine."

He drops the sticky paper from the bandage into the waste basket then straightens, "Humor me."

"But—"

"If not me, for the baby."

Right. "Fine," I swallow, "but don't think you can always use the baby as an excuse."

"If it gets you to do what I want..."

I frown, "Honestly, Saint, you could at least pretend you aren't trying to get your own way."

"What fun would that be, huh?" he shrugs out of his shirt, then drapes it over my shoulder.

"What are you doing?" I frown.

"Wear this."

I glance at my shirt, which is ripped and dirty. Not that I want to wear it again. It reminds me too much of what had transpired—that feeling of helplessness, of sitting in the dark and waiting for the worst— *No.* I shake my head. *Never again.* I don't want to be in that position ever again.

Saint snatches up my soiled shirt. "I'll get rid of it."

I peer up at him, "Thanks." I pull on his shirt and his scent of dark masculinity instantly cocoons me. My heart skitters and my pussy clenches. *Shit, not the time to think about sex. Not.* I button up the shirt, then fold up the sleeves.

He drops the shirt into the bath tub, "I'll get housekeeping on it."

I nod. Of course, he'd have servants at his beck and call. *Where the hell do I fit in with all of this?*

"Hey," he hooks his knuckles under my chin so I have no choice but to meet his gaze, "everything will be okay, I promise."

A slight pain catches at my lower belly. I rub at it.

"You okay?" he asks.

I nod, then push off the counter, "Let's get this over with."

51

What is mine but only you can have?

Answer: My heart

Saint

I stalk into the living room, making sure to keep myself between her and the guys. Right now, I don't trust any other male around her—definitely, not that bastard Antonio. Is it the fact that she is pregnant? Pregnant. My heart begins to thud. *Shit, what am I going to do about that?* How will it feel to have a child...a fragile life dependent on me? Will I be able to do justice in my role as their father?

Am I good enough for this? Will I be able to fulfill my responsibilities? What if I can't? What if I fail?

Just as I had all that time ago?

When he'd asked me the riddles.

And I hadn't known the answers.

And he'd hurt me. I hadn't been able to defend myself.

Will I be able to protect my family? My palms begin to sweat. The soles of my feet burn. I stumble and someone grasps my elbow. Warm fingers entangle with mine. I glance down to find Gigi holding my hand.

"You okay?" she whispers.

I glance into those green eyes, "Now, I am."

Her lips curve in a slight smile.

"I love you," I keep my voice low enough that the others can't hear me.

She blinks, as if surprised, then her cheeks flush, and she glances away. A hot sensation stabs my chest. Does she have any feelings for me? Will she forgive me for what I did—that I hadn't been able to accept the fact that she was having my child? My flesh and blood. *Mine*. I tighten my grasp on her hand, then step forward. I urge her to sink into an armchair and stand next to her.

Antonio looks up from the settee across the room. Weston is seated in a chair on his left. Sinclair leans a hip against the wall, his gun trained on Antonio.

"Have you explained our plan to him?" I ask.

Weston nods.

I turn to Antonio. "You agree then?"

He lowers his chin, "You mean turn against my people, and lead you to the person responsible for what happened to the Seven of you?" He glances up, "What do I get in return?"

"You get to walk away from this alive."

"And if I don't?"

I lean forward on the balls of my feet, "We'll hand you over to the authorities, and trust me, you'll never get to be a free man again."

He sits up straight, his massive frame taking up a big portion of the settee, "I'm not exactly a free man now."

"You'll have a chance to rescue Nina—"

His jaw hardens.

Ah! Interesting. This is his weak spot. Clearly, the man isn't as smart as I'd given him credit for. If he were, he would never have revealed it to me.

"You'll have the means to leave the Mafia, start a new life with her, if that's what you want..."

The skin around his lips whitens. He squeezes his fingers together, and the skin of his knuckles stretches white.

This is a calculated move, of course. Dangling everything he wants in front of his eyes, only to rip it all away. Unless he cooperates, of course.

I prod him, "What do you say?"

Antonio glances at Gigi.

"Don't look at her, you asshole," I growl, then clamp my lips shut. Apparently, Antonio isn't the only one unable to control himself. This woman has come to mean more than anything in the world to me.

He tilts his head, "You love her?"

I frown, "What's that got to do with anything?"

He levels an intense stare, daring me to answer him.

"Of course, I do, you piece of shit."

"You'll take care of Victoria?" he asks.

I take a step forward and Gigi grabs my hand. I glance down and she shakes her head. *Shit, I'm letting him provoke me. Again.*

"Better than myself," I reply.

"You're aware there's nothing remotely romantic between us, right?" he uncurls his fists.

"The hell are you trying to say?" I growl.

"Nina was my ward, so to speak. I was responsible for her wellbeing. Human relations... They can be complicated, you know?" He drums his fingers on his thigh, "At some point, my feelings for her got more intense. I got personally involved. She'd never forgive me if something were to happen to her friend."

I drag my fingers through my hair, "So why did you shoot at Victoria?"

"It was a flesh wound. It got your attention, made you realize how much you need her in your life."

"You kidnapped her," I thrust out my chest.

"And sent you to her," he tilts his head, "because you still allowed her to walk away, after almost losing her once."

He's right.

"And here you are confronting us again, instead of escaping?" I frown. "Why didn't you ask Victoria about the bug when you took her?"

His jaw hardens, all expression wiped off from his face.

"Well?" I lean forward on the balls of my feet, "What's your play?"

Antonio glances around the room, then turns his gaze back on me.

"There's no play."

I straighten, "You're lying."

"I discovered the bug, after you rescueded her." He grits his teeth.

"You believe this asshole?" Weston mutters.

"Nah, do you?" I tilt my head.

Antonio's lips quirk, "The one time in my life I do something unselfish..." He shakes his head.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

He sighs, "You had your head so far up your ass, you couldn't see how important she was to you. I wanted to push you along, make you come to

your senses and own up to your feelings." He cups his chin in his hand. "It's what Nina would have wanted."

"That doesn't explain why you came storming into the hotel," I retort.

His features stay impassive.

"Well?" I growl. "Now is your chance to come clean, you bastard."

"When I discovered the bug, I got pissed off. By putting me at risk, you put Nina in danger and that sent me off the deep end." He draws in a breath. "I wasn't thinking clearly... I charged back to challenge Victoria on it," he says. "By the time I came to my senses, I was already here in your hotel..." His voice tapers off. "I knew it could be a mistake, but I thought I might be able to turn the situation to my advantage."

"You wanted to be found out by us?" I scowl before another thought occurs to me, "You hoped we'd make you an offer to work with us?"

"That's what I had calculated," he nods.

"You took a risk." I rub the back of my neck. Should I believe him? Is he telling the truth? "You willingly put yourself in danger. Why?"

"It seemed like my best shot," Antonio says simply.

I glare at him, "That's not the only reason, is it?"

He hesitates.

"I am calling the cops," I threaten.

"You wouldn't," Antonio growls. For the first time, he seems shaken. Good.

"Try me," I drawl.

He glances at Gigi, then back at me.

Anger crowds my mind. "That's it," I snap, reach for my phone.

"Wait," he mutters.

I keep my fingers poised over the keypad.

He sits up straight, places the fingertips of his hands together. "Nina," he says, his voice shorn of all emotion, "I did it for her."

"For Nina?" I frown, "Explain."

"I promised Nina that her friend would be taken care of, and I thought you would do that, but you're an idiot—"

I growl.

He holds up his hands in supplication, "The point is, you weren't taking care of her, and I needed to make sure that you did. That's what triggered the idea of Victoria's kidnapping..." He shrugs, "You went through a similar experience," he meets my gaze—the fucker actually looks me in the eye—

and says, "and you needed something drastic to—I don't know—make you realize that you were fucking things up."

My vision tunnels; the blood pounds in my temples. Only when my fist connects with the side of his face do I realize that I have closed the distance between us. His head snaps back and blood erupts from his mouth.

"That's for putting Victoria's life in danger, you bastard."

He chuckles, wipes the blood from his face and looks around the room, a satisfied gleam in his eyes.

The fuck? I raise my fist again.

Weston grabs my shoulder. "Let him be."

"No," I growl. "You heard what he said. Asshole's fucking with me."

"He's illustrating how emotions can make you lose your cool to the point that they trip you up," Weston cautions.

"Weston's right," Sinner adds.

"The fuck I care about that?" I snarl.

"Fucker's methods are unconventional," Weston agrees, "but damn , if it didn't work, right?"

Gigi makes a sound somewhere between a cry and a laugh. "He got through to you, Saint. I was never in any danger, and besides," she steps forward, "he did it for Nina."

I straighten, make to swing at Antonio again, but Gigi grabs my arm. "Please, Saint, he put his life at risk for Nina, and that has to mean something."

Fuck, if that negates how he'd threatened Gigi's life, but if she says... Well, then... I draw in a breath. "This Nina," I say, trying to piece things together, "she's important to you?"

"I already told you she is." His dark gaze grows inscrutable. "It's why I'll take this deal with you."

"So, you're agreeing to spy on the Mafia and help us track down who was responsible for the kidnapping when we were kids?"

He nods, "It won't be easy, but I have some ideas."

"Life's not easy," I glower.

"If something goes wrong..." he glances at the other two, then at me, "If they discover I've turned on them, I need you to promise get Nina out."

Victoria squeezes my hand.

"For my wife," I growl, "I'll do it for her."

He jerks his chin, "Guess we have an agreement then."

"What about the USB you appropriated?"

"The Mafia wants it back." He tucks his elbows into his side.

"The fuck would they want that for?" I rub the back of my neck.

He raises his shoulders, "My guess is that the USB is marked in some form that can help them trace it back to its owner. They want it to help track down the snitch who sent it to you." He cracks his neck. "I'm only the messenger in this. Suffice to say, it's my ticket to get back in with them."

I scowl.

Antonio continues, "As for Victoria..."

I growl.

He raises his hands, "I let her go—doesn't mean the Mafia won't change their mind and come after her."

"You focus on your mission," I lean forward on the balls of my feet, "I'll take care of what's mine."

Victoria tugs on my sleeve.

I turn to her. Her face is pale.

"You okay?"

She presses a hand to her belly; sweat beads her upper lip,

"Victoria!" My heart begins to thud, "What's wrong?"

"I...I'm not sure." She pitches forward.

Saint

"It's my fault." I drag my fingers through my hair, "I didn't get to her in time, and now she's in there struggling for her life."

I dig the heels of my boots into the carpet, survey the bland surroundings of the waiting room in the hospital—the same hospital where Weston had been admitted earlier.

"Now, let's not jump to conclusions," Sinclair squeezes my shoulder. "Let's wait for the doc's verdict." He continues, "By the way, in case you were wondering, I cleared things up with Antonio—"

"I wasn't."

"Nevertheless, I removed the bug on the USB and sent him on his way."

I ignore him, "What's taking them so long in there?"

"Uh, the fact that you insisted Weston be present as they examine her?"

"They should be used to it by now," I mutter. "Besides, it's Weston's hospital, isn't it? And he was already with us. They can damn well do as he says...and me, for that matter."

"Not that I don't understand the sentiment," Sinclair sprawls in his seat, his suit none the worse for wear. "But...even I know better than to get in the way of doctors and such fine professionals who are specialists in their field."

"Easy for you to say." I squeeze my fingers into my sides, "If that had been Summer in there..."

His jaw flexes. "Fine," he purses his lips, "what's your point?"

"My point is..." I draw a blank. Run my finger around the sleeve of my

shirt. "It's...shit..." I squeeze the bridge of my nose. "I don't know, what it is." *What's wrong with me?* My wife had collapsed, and this time I hadn't acted quickly enough. I had watched, rooted to the spot, as she had slumped forward, collapsed to the floor. I'd rushed to her, pulled her into my arms, watched as her body had bucked in my arms. Her eyes had rolled back in her head, and all color had leached from her face.

My hands and feet had gone numb, I could barely move, and couldn't string two thoughts together. Me, the man who always has an answer to every question. I couldn't do anything but hold her in my arms... And pray.

Fuck! I've never been religious, never been to a church in my life. But if there is a power larger than all of us, then I had appealed to it for help. I had sworn that if she was okay, I'd contribute a good chunk of my assets to FOK Media—that's short for *Full of Kindness*, nope I kid you not—the non-profit that the Seven of us had founded. I'll use the money to do good... In my own way.

I'd held her hand all the way to the hospital in the ambulance. She'd regained consciousness en route and had cried. She'd been out of her head with panic that she was losing the baby—our baby, fuck! The little being whose presence was only beginning to take shape in my life... Had it been snatched away before it had materialized?

I hadn't wanted the baby... But if anything happens to either of them, I'll never forgive myself... My heart begins to race and a hollow sensation roils in the pit of my stomach. Bile laces my tongue and I swallow it back. No, I am not going to lose her or the child. I want both of them. I need them in my life—to anchor me, to love, and to be loved. Is this what it means to love and to be loved? To rip out my guts, expose myself to the world, to share my deepest weaknesses and invite the possibility that I'll never recover from the sucker punch?

I jump up from the chair and begin to pace. *One foot in front of the other, don't lose it. You owe it to her to keep it together. You need to be strong.*

But if I had been better at taking care of her, she wouldn't have landed here in the first place.

If I hadn't taken her up on the offer in the beginning, it would have never come to this. I ball my fingers at my sides. I couldn't have resisted her. No way, would I have turned her away. The thought of her with any other man...having anyone else's child? I dig my fingernails into the palms of my hands with such force that pain shoots up my arm. She is mine. This child is

mine. Everything I want is in that room, waiting for me to acknowledge it, to accept it. Am I too late? Have I missed what was right in front of me all along? I want this child, need her in my life more than anything else in this world.

If something were to happen to her or to the child, I'd... I drag in a sharp breath.

Footsteps sound.

I swivel around as Weston walks in the door. He pauses inside, leans his shoulder against the door frame. Whiskers darken his cheeks and his eyes are bloodshot.

He hadn't been in there long...maybe an hour or less. Had he given up hope so quickly? Was there nothing that could be done?

His gaze meets mine; he shakes his head.

"No," my knees buckle.

Sinclair grips my shoulder, "Steady, ol' chap." He turns to Weston, "Stop dicking around, you prick. What's the prognosis?"

Weston looks me up and down, "Now you understand how it feels."

"What... ?" my voice cracks. My vision tunnels as specks of black pull at my subconscious mind.

He tilts his head, "Do you see how it could be if you lost her?"

"You...you bastard." I stalk forward, covering the distance between us. "How dare you play with my feelings?" I roar.

"Thought you didn't have any..."

"Shut your trap, motherfucker. Tell me how she is."

"You sure you want to know?"

I grab my wanker of a friend by his collar, yank him to his toes.

"Hey," he winces, "I'm already wounded."

"Your hand won't be the only thing you can't use, if you don't answer my question."

"They are fine." He breaks into a wide grin, "Mother and baby are doing fine."

Adrenaline laces my blood. A pulse pound at my temples. I pull back my fist and let it fly at him.

Victoria

"It may only be given, not taken or bought. It's what the sinner desires, but the saint does not. What is it?" Saint pauses inside the doorway of the room.

I peer up at him from the bed.

He prowls inside, drops into the chair next to me, then takes my hand, "That was the question I was asked, by my kidnapper."

"The one you couldn't answer?"

He nods, weaves his fingers with mine. "I'd answered each of his riddles until then, but this one... It evaded me. Perhaps it was because I was exhausted by then. Maybe I had given up hope somewhere inside. Each time he took me out of the room where I was being held with the other boys, I was sure I would never return.

Each time, he would hang me upside down and throw questions at me. Anytime I couldn't answer, I was flogged on my feet until I managed to come up with the right answer. That day, I knew I was close to my breaking point. My brain was fogged. I had used up all of my reserves of energy. When he asked me the question, I barely heard it." His throat moves as he swallows.

"What happened then?"

"He whipped my feet. Every time he stopped and asked me if I knew the answer, I couldn't form the words. The blood flowed down my legs, along with it my life. The beating went on longer than any time before. Until I couldn't feel my feet anymore. Until the fire from the wounds ran down my legs, down my spine, slammed into the back of my head. Until some of the

capillaries in my eyes broke, and blood ran down my cheeks. Darkness crowded in on me. I thought I was going to die... I never did guess the answer that day. He left me hanging there for hours... Days... Who knows?" He shrugs, "That's how the cops found me when they rescued me. I woke up in a hospital, wondering what the answer was. I couldn't guess it all this time... Then the answer came to me as I paced the floor of the waiting room outside, appealing to whichever higher power might hear me that you'd be okay."

"Oh," I swallow and a hot sensation grips my chest. "What was the answer?"

"Forgiveness," he peers into my face.

"That was the solution to the riddle?" My heart begins to race.

He nods, "Will you forgive me for everything I put you through, Victoria?"

I try to pull my hand away, but he holds on.

"Why?" I purse my lips.

He frowns.

"Why should I forgive you, Saint?" I ask. "You refused to accept our child."

"The one you didn't tell me about?" he retorts.

"I all but revealed it to you in the form of a puzzle."

"You could have come outright and told me," he scolds.

"To you? The master riddler?" I throw up my hands. "You who can crack almost any puzzle?"

His jaw tics. He shuffles his feet.

"You tested me again and again with your games. Yet the one time I asked you the one question, the answer to which mattered so much to me, you pretended not to know the answer."

He squeezes the bridge of his nose, "I think I knew what you were trying tell me. I guessed it, my subconscious alerted me it, but I didn't want to accept it." He winces. "I made a mistake."

"Wow," I blink, "You're actually acknowledging that you're not perfect."

"Seems today is a day of many firsts." He rubs his thumb over the pulse on my wrist, "Including my telling you that I want you, Gigi." He leans over and cups my belly.

A shiver runs up my spine.

"And I want this child more than anything in the world. If anything had happened to the two of you, I wouldn't have been able to live with myself."

He whispers his knuckles across my jaw, "Promise you'll never scare me like that again."

"I scared myself." Tears prick my eyes.

"Hey, don't." He wipes away the moisture that trickles down my cheek, "I am here, and I'm not going anywhere."

"Never?"

"I plan to be by your side. Through sickness and through health. Through ups and downs. Even when the children we have together are grown up and have left home, I'll be there taking care of you, protecting you, providing for you."

"Saint," I whisper. A ball of emotions chokes my throat. *Is he saying what I think he is?* My heart stutters and a warmth fills my chest.

"It's true," he nods. "I was too afraid to acknowledge what the thought of becoming a father does to me."

"What is that?"

"It makes me feel as vulnerable, as out of control, as I had been all that time ago when I was kidnapped and held captive. When I had no idea if it was day or night, where I was, whether I would survive to the next hour. I swore then, I'd never allow myself to lose control."

"And having a child is exactly that." I bring my other hand up to cup his face, "To cede power. Children bring their own brand of energy, and will create their own futures. You'll never be able to completely control the circumstances around them."

"I am going to try my damndest," he growls.

"And I am going to call you out when you get too overbearing," I trace my thumb over his pouty lower lip.

"I can't change." He glowers, "It's what I am."

"Won't stop me from chipping away at your grumpy-pants ego." I set my jaw.

"Won't stop me from trying to fuck the sass out of you." He smirks, and damn him, but I'm instantly wet.

"You can try," I pout.

"I love that you can stand up to me." His features soften, "I might even let you get your way."

I blink.

"Sometimes," his lips curl.

"Well thank you so much," I grouse.

"If you behave."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

"There's one more thing."

Of course, there is.

He slides his hand into his pocket, pulls out the ring, then slips it onto my finger, "Never take it off again."

Two days later

Victoria

I glance through the window of the townhouse on Primrose Hill. The beautiful back garden rolls down from the residence at a gentle slope. There's an infinity pool in the middle of the garden and beyond that the view of the city stretches out.

Heat sears my back, a tingle runs up my spine, then Saint steps up, boxing me in with his arms on either side.

"Like it?"

"The view, you mean?"

"Also, the view." He chuckles, "You love the house, admit it."

I turn in the circle of his arms, "Cocky much?"

"That's my middle name, baby," he smirks.

"Will I never learn not to feed your massive ego?" I huff.

He leans in close enough for his hardness to brush against my waist, "Not the only thing that's massive."

I laugh, "Not that I am complaining, but I think we should wait."

His face pales, "Shit, are you feeling okay? No pain or anything... Should I call the air ambulance?" He reaches for his phone, swipes the screen and presses a number.

I grab his wrist. "I'm fine, really. I meant, wait until we return to the bedroom."

"Oh," he breathes out a sigh of relief, then hangs up.

Then I frown, "Hold on a minute, did you say, air ambulance?"

He reddens. "I didn't want to be caught unawares again. And no way, can my heart survive another ambulance ride to the hospital, so..." He cracks his neck, looks past me, "Uh, the infinity pool is wicked, huh?"

"Don't change the topic."

"Would I dare?" He glances down at me.

"Yes, you very much would dare." I frown, "What have you done Saint?"

"Nothing," he purses his lips, looking for all the world like an errant child. Why do I get the feeling my hands are going to be full with not one but two kids? The man in front of me often acts like one.

"Tell me," I scowl. "Remember what you said: no secrets."

He blows out a breath, "Why the hell did I promise you that, remind me?"

"Because you love me?"

He squares his shoulders. "Exactly. Which is why I had to do it."

"Do what?"

He tilts his head, "Don't freak out when you find out."

"What?" My heart begins to thud. "Out with it, Saint."

He rubs the back of his neck, a sure sign that whatever he's done is going to freak me out.

"It's only an air-ambulance," he mutters.

There's a *whomp-whomp* sound behind us and a breeze blows in through the open window.

I turn, and my jaw drops, "No."

He moves in, places his chin on my head, "I had to, babe."

I stare as an honest-to-goodness helicopter rises up beyond the infinity pool. I spot the sign of a red cross on the side that indicates it's used for medical purposes. It whirs over us, followed by a slight thump as vibrations roll down the walls. Did it land on the terrace of the townhouse? "Oh, my God," I turn to face him, "I can't believe you have a helicopter on stand-by."

"Maybe I can't control everything, but hell if I can't try to bring down the risk. This way, if there's an emergency, we can get to the closest hospital in under five minutes."

"I... I..." I open and close my mouth, "Only you'd do something so audacious."

"You're worth it, babe."

"You sound like a cheesy commercial."

He blinks, then chuckles, "I do, huh?" He lowers his forehead to mine, "That's what you do to me, darling. You've turned me into a blubbering shell of my former self."

"Hey," I swipe at his shoulder, "don't blame me for that. It's been barely twenty-four hours since you accepted your role as a father-to-be, and I can't believe you've already... Done all this."

"What?"

I wave my hand in the air, "You bought this townhouse on Primrose Hill —"

"I've had my eye on it."

"You had it furnished enough that we could move in right away."

He leans back, "Feel free to change anything you want."

"That's not the point."

"Then what is?"

"It's you." The waterworks threaten again. Shit, is it the hormones? Or is it the fact that, with Saint there to lean on, I finally feel secure enough to let go of all of my fears? In its place, there's a vulnerability that is new, that threatens to overwhelm me. That seduces me to simply melt into him and let him make all of the decisions. Hell! Is this what it means to be a real submissive? To have the onus of decision-making taken away from me? And why do I like that so much?

"Hey," he tips my chin up, "what is it?"

"You're overwhelming me, Saint."

"Ah," his lips quirk. He wipes away my tears, "And?"

"I like it."

"So?"

"I'm not sure if I want to."

"But you do," he smirks.

"I do?" I frown.

"Of course, my lovely Gigi. If you'd allow yourself to relax into the moment, you'd see that this is exactly what you need."

"B...but."

"Trust me, babe."

I peer up into his eyes. Do I dare put my faith in this alphahole of a dominant male, the father of my unborn child, who's changed his entire life for me overnight?

"I do," I whisper.

"Excuse me?" he frowns.

"I do trust you, more than myself. I believe in you so much that it hurts," my voice cracks.

His nostrils flare, "Do you have any idea what it does to me to hear that from you?"

He bends in close enough for our breaths to mingle, "You're mine, Gigi." He touches his lips to mine.

His touch sinks into my blood, coils in my belly.

"Promise me one more thing?" I whisper.

"Anything." He kisses me again.

"Promise you'll see a psychologist for the flashbacks and for the...scars?"

"You mean for my self-harming?" his voice is wry.

I peer up into his face. Hope blooms in my chest. The fact that he had called it by that term... That is the first step to recovery. It won't be easy, but as long as we are together, we can overcome any challenge.

"Will you?" I prompt him.

"For you," he searches my face, "if it makes you happy."

My heart does a little lurch, "It does." I smile up at him.

"And you make me happy, Gigi. Very happy." He crashes his lips to mine. I gasp and he swipes his tongue inside of my mouth—owning me, dominating me. I shiver, and his grasp tightens. He nibbles on my lower lip, and heat suffuses my skin. He rains kisses down my chin, my throat, down to the hollow between my breasts, on each nipple.

My scalp tingles and my toes curl. He drops to his knees in front of me, places a soft kiss on my belly. "Mine," he growls. A melting sensation pulls at my core. He drags his hard fingers down my thighs, coaxing them apart. My knees weaken; he grips my hips, holding me up. Then, through my dress, he nuzzles the triangle between my legs.

"Oh." Goosebumps dot my skin.

He inhales deeply and the sound is so erotic, so right, blood rushes to my lower belly. My pussy trembles. I dig my fingers into his hair and tug.

A low growl rumbles up his throat. The vibrations sink through the fabric of my outfit and warm my blood. I shiver, "Saint."

He presses his face into my pussy and a throbbing flares to life—hot, aching. My bones seem to melt all at once.

"Saint," I plead.

He slips his fingers under my dress, traces the backs of my knees.

Sensations radiate from his touch. Every part of me that he touches seems to turn into an erotic zone.

"Saint!" I whine.

I sense his lips curve against my melting core. He slides both of his palms up the backs of my thighs, leaving pinpricks of pure lust in their wake. He cups my butt cheeks, squeezes gently. I draw in a sharp breath, grab the back of his head and urge him closer, closer.

He slides those wicked fingers under my panties, grazes the crevasse between my arse cheeks.

I shudder. Memories of how he'd taken me there swamp me. "Please," I gasp out.

"You like that, hmm?"

I nod.

He pushes aside the fabric of my dress, then buries his face in between my legs. The hot, aching tension inside of me winds up tighter—begging, needing more, so much more. I thrust my pelvis forward, but his grip stops me. He peers up at me from under those thick eyelashes; I take in the sight of his handsome face framed between my thighs and moisture pools between my legs. "Saint," I pant, "don't stop."

"You aren't completely recovered from your episode," he replies.

"Fuck that." I toss my head.

He chuckles, "I am proving to be a bad influence on you."

"Oh, please," I frown, "I was swearing long before I met you."

"Oh?" He tilts his head and his eyes gleam. "And this?" He slips his finger up to brush my pussy.

A moan spills from my lips.

"Were you doing this as well?"

"You know I wasn't. You are well aware that you're my first."

"And your only." His gaze intensifies, "I plan to keep you so happy, so satisfied, that you'll never want for anything..."

My panties grow damper. Damn it, how can he bring me so close to the edge with simply a glance?

"Except for your orgasms, of course." His lips twist in that sneer-smirk that is so very Saint.

"Stop that," I huff.

He chuckles, "What's life without a few games between us, hmm?" He rubs his nose up my pussy lips, and even through the double layers of fabrics,

his hot breath sears my delicate skin.

"Oh," I gasp, "please come inside me. I need you inside of me."

He pauses, leans back on his haunches, "I don't want to hurt you."

"What happened was a fluke," I reassure him.

"I don't want it to happen again. If something goes wrong, I swear..."

"That's why you have a helicopter stationed above, ready to rush me to a hospital, huh?" I jerk my chin upwards.

He frowns, rolls his shoulders, "Still."

"No," I shake my head. "No excuses. Please, can you make love to me?"

His blue eyes turn that dark turquoise I am beginning to recognize as the first sign when he is out of control. He firms his jaw, "You sure?"

I scowl, then release him, to shove my fingers under my dress and drag down my panties. They catch on his hands as I tug, and he releases his grip on me. I angle sideways, then shimmy the fabric down to my ankles, straighten and kick it off.

"That clear enough for you?" I ask.

A low chuckle rolls from his lips. He rises to his feet, scoops me up in his arms. Turning, he walks out of the living room and up the steps. "I never did give you the grand tour," he rasps.

"I've seen enough to know the house is beautiful."

He takes the steps two at a time. When we reach the landing, he turns into a hallway, heads toward the double doors at the end. He carries me into a large room, with a familiar four poster bed mounted on a platform.

To the right, a bank of floor to ceiling windows open out onto the sprawling slope of Primrose Hill.

"Wow," I take in the room, "You had the bed moved from the suite?"

He shuffles his feet, "It's where we first made love. I couldn't leave it behind, could I?"

OMG! That is...hot and romantic and sentimental. This man is a teddy bear inside. "I thought it came with the hotel room?"

He scrutinizes my features, "I ordered it the day after I met you at Sterling's wedding."

"Oh?" My heart stutters, "You were so confident that you were going to have me?"

"You bet," his lips curl.

And that arrogance of his? Honestly, I can't make up my mind whether to slap him or kiss him. "Guess I don't get a say in whether we're keeping it?" I

pout.

"Nope." He heads for the bed, steps up on the platform, "And not in how I take you once we are in it either."

He lowers me onto the mattress—slowly, gently, his every move such a contrast to the fierceness of how we'd fucked before that I can't stop the moan that escapes me.

"Shh," he places his finger on my lips, "let me take care of you."

He steps back, unties the sash on my wraparound dress. It parts in the front. He eases it off of one shoulder, then the other. Pulls me up into sitting position, to take it off of me completely then unhooks my bra and pulls that off.

I shiver.

"You cold?"

"No... It's how you look at me...like...like..."

He steps back, rakes his gaze down my chest, to the hollow between my legs. "Like?" he prompts.

"Like you want to own me."

Color smears his cheeks, "I thought that's what I wanted too, but I was wrong."

"I don't understand."

"I want to imprint myself into every part of you, sink into you, until it's impossible to tell where you begin and where I end. I want you to think of me even when you're not aware of it. Turn to me before you have a rational thought, coil into my memories as you drift off to sleep, dream of me when you are awake..." He frowns, "I want you to be me. That makes no sense, does it?"

My lips tremble, "I think I understand."

"You do?" His eyebrows knit.

I nod, "You want to love me like you've never loved anyone before?"

"More than I love myself." He brings his lips to mine, kisses me sweetly—a touch, a nibble, a deep drinking from my lips that sets my head reeling. The world tilts.

I look up to find he's stepped back.

He strips off his shirt and my throat closes. The light pours in through the open windows, highlighting the dips and hollows between that eight pack. My belly quivers and my sex clenches. I'll never get enough of his gorgeous body...or the raging intensity of the feelings he manages to cloak so well with

it.

He toes off those ancient cowboy boots, shoves down his pants and his boxers, along with his socks. He straightens and his dick springs out—thick, heavy, the head swollen and weeping with need. I hold out my arms. He sinks down to join me. I wrap my legs around his waist, loving the feel of his hard planes biting into my flesh, his thick thighs a heavy comfort between mine. I trace the planes of his back and his muscles coil—so vital, so real, and all mine. His shoulders blot out the world and his face fills my line of sight. He lowers his head so our noses bump. A giggle tumbles from my lips.

"You're gorgeous, Gigi."

Heat sears my cheeks.

His lips kick up. Then he bends his head and captures my lips with his. His touch sinks all the way to my bones; heat tugs low in my belly and my pussy clenches. I tip up my chin, meeting his tongue with mine. A groan rips from him. He drags his palm down my side, settles it on my hip in a gesture that's possessive and intimate.

His cock nudges my opening. I tilt my hips up. "Please," I mumble in my throat.

He slides his dick into my melting pussy. So good, so full, so heavy, and so right. A groan rips from him, or was that me? He stills as I adjust to his size. I dig my heels into his back, wrap my arms around his breadth, and urge him on. He slides in further, his shoulders bunching, the muscles in his back flexing with tension. He's holding back, not allowing himself to give in completely. A smile curves my lips. I drag my fingers down the length of his spine, tracing each contour, each dip and crevasse. He shivers. Oh, this is different. A rush of power engulfs me. I reach his taut butt, dig my fingertips into the tight flesh. His entire body shudders. "I don't want to hurt you," he whispers against my lips.

"You're hurting me now."

He pulls back, "What?"

I smirk, "Unless you complete what you set out to do."

His lips twist. He eases himself inside of me—gently, slowly, his weight stretching my super-sensitive channel. Every ridge of his shaft slides, chafes against my flesh, sending pulsing, coiling, roiling sensations up my back, toward my extremities. The climax builds almost instantly, swelling from the point where we are joined.

He tilts his hips and his cock dips inside further, until he bottoms out.

"You're my other half, Gigi," he whispers. "You're the better half of my conscience, the edge to my sense of humor, the lightbulb in my creativity, you're my heart," he whispers.

I swallow down the lump in my throat. Hell, I'd been wrong. He could simply tell me what was on his mind and I'd come with the intensity of his true self.

"Saint?" I clear my throat.

"Hmm?"

"I love you too, but... Would you please just shut up and fuck me now."

He chuckles, then rocks his pelvis again and again, each thrust sending waves of pleasure shooting out from the contact. The orgasm whips up my spine. I strain up and into him, plastering my breasts against him. He holds my gaze with his, scrutinizes my every response, searches my features with an intensity that pierces my heart. My pussy clamps down on his dick and his cock pulses. The climax swells and pauses, waits. I open my mouth and the cry sticks in my throat. I swallow, moan, plead with him silently.

His gaze intensifies; those blue eyes sparkle, glow with that cold heat that calls to me, beckons to me. "Come," he whispers.

I splinter into little pieces. He closes his mouth over mine—soft, searching—drawing another moan from somewhere deep inside of me that he swallows. Another low groan from him, his shoulders shudder, and he comes, filling all of the empty places inside of me. His muscles bunch, then he flips me over and onto him, without pulling out.

I coil into his broad chest, wrapping my fingers around his biceps, or trying to—considering their width.

He draws his warm palm across my back, from nape to arse and back again. There's a whisper against my hair.

I turn my head, place my chin on his chest, "You're a hidden romantic, Saint Jordan Killian Caldwell."

"I actually did miss one," he drawls.

"What?"

"When we first met, you asked if I'd missed a name." He flexes his shoulders, "Turns out, I did."

"What is it?" I rest my chin on his chest. "No, let me guess."

He raises his eyebrow, "Do I want to know?"

I snicker, "Is it, insensitive wart?"

He smirks.

"Giant squid?"

He chuckles, "It is giant, though I'd rather liken it to an octopus than a squid."

I choke, "You're a mugglepuff, you know that?"

He blinks, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You don't?" I sit up.

"Nope."

I gape, "You've never read Harry Potter?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" he glowers.

"You hate The Beatles..." I count off on my fingers, "You've never read a Harry Potter novel," I shake my head. "Next you'll tell me you've never seen, *When Harry met Sally.*"

He reddens.

I throw up my hands, "What the hell am I doing with you?"

"Does it help that the missing name is Harry?" he drawls.

I pout, "You're kidding me."

"Believe it," he raises his shoulders, "or not."

I peer into his face, "That's such a typical Saint-Douchebag-Caldwell retort."

"And it turns you on," his lips curl.

"Now hold on a second—"

His phone buzzes.

I freeze.

His jaw tics.

It buzzes again.

"Let it go," I whisper.

He searches my features and swallows, "I can't."

He sets me aside on the bed, then straightens. He reaches for the phone from his pants pocket, checks the message and silences it, then proceeds to get dressed.

I watch the play of muscles on his back, the coil of power in his thighs as he stalks to the door.

A hollow sensation smolders in the pit of my stomach. *He dare walk out on me again?* I stiffen, curl my fingers into fists.

This time I won't let him leave. This time I am going to fight for what's mine.

"Saint," I yell after him. "Where the hell are you going?"

He pauses, turns around. "Aren't you coming with me?"

55

What did the bee say to the flower?

Answer: Hello, Honey!

Victoria

An hour later, I watch as Saint eases his Jeep into the deserted parking lot.

I'd dressed quickly and followed him out earlier. He'd led me to the garage in the basement, which had been a surprise, considering I'd never seen him drive anything but the Jaguar. I'd been shocked to find that, in addition, he has a Jeep, a Harley—of course he has a Harley. What billionaire doesn't huh? More surprising, had been the SUV—a Mercedes SUV.

I'd paused in front of it and he'd simply tilted his head in that manner which is meant to convey, *Of course, I have a car which can be fitted with a baby seat.*

I'd stared at it and he'd said, if I didn't like it, he could get me another. I'd simply shaken my head, too bemused to say anything. I'd followed him into his Jeep, stared around at the simple interior. With his jeans, black sweatshirt and beat up cowboy boots, this vehicle feels more like him than anything else. Is the obnoxious billionaire persona an act then? I frown. Will my alphahole ever stop surprising me?

"You okay?" his voice slithers down my spine, coils in my gut. Now that smoky, sensuous burr of his tone... I'll never get used to that.

"I'm good."

"So why are you biting your nails?"

Oh. I pull my hand back, then shove it under my thigh, for good measure.
"Something on your mind, babe?"

Hell, why does he have to be so intuitive when it came to me, huh? I flip my hair back, then mutter, "You taking me to meet that woman?"

He nods.

'Is she like, your ex?' is what I want to ask, but he'd denied anything between them, and damn him, but I want to believe him. Besides, I am not going to turn into a nagging shrew, not when he's taking me to meet her. I'll find out soon enough, what this is all about, huh?

His gaze stays focused on the road.

I glance sideways at him, and my stomach does that little flip-flop at the sight of his patrician nose, that mean upper lip, the pouty lower lip—moisture beads my core. Shit, I am pregnant and he'd made love to me—in the sweetest way possible—just before we left the house, so why am I already turned on by taking in the profile of his face?

I turn to stare ahead as he veers off of the main road. The narrow road he's turned onto winds its way through a heavily-shaded strip of trees. He takes another turn, then pulls into a driveway.

He switches off the ignition and silence descends.

I peer through the windshield at the field in front of us, "Are we still in London?"

"We're in Zone 4 of the city, so on the outskirts."

He reaches to the dash, pockets a small paper bag, then opens his door. I open my door and step out. He comes around the vehicle, holds out his hand. I take it. He weaves his fingers with mine, "Ready?"

No, I'm not. I take in a breath and nod. He leads me toward the small two-floor cottage. I sniff the air, assailed by the scent of dried hay and huh, is that the manure I smell? The pounding of hooves splits the air. I glance up as a horse gallops over from the edge of the field to the wooden stile.

His dark black coat glints in the sunlight. He tosses his head, snorts.

Saint, lowers the zipper of his sweatshirt, then pulls out the packet and empties out a couple of sugar lumps.

"Is that for the horse?"

He smiles, walks toward the fence, "Devil here, is a pure-bred Arabian. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to sneak him a treat, could I?"

He holds out his palm and the horse moseys over and licks up the cubes. Devil snorts again. Saint reaches up to run his fingers over his long nose. The

horse, whines, stamps his feet. The horse lowers his head and Saint scratches him behind his ears until a rumbling sound emerges from him.

What the—? I blink.

"He sometimes behaves more like a dog than a horse," a voice explains.

I whip around to see a woman walking toward us. She's the one Saint met the other day. Tiny, exquisitely curved, her legs are enclosed in boots and slim jeans. Her plaid shirt is tucked into her hourglass waist. Her hair flows around her shoulders. Behind her, the door to the house stands open. Guess I'd missed that, entranced by the ease with which Saint had petted the horse.

She walks up and holds out her hand, "I'm Tink."

"Tink?" I frown.

She sighs, "Yeah, I was named Tinkerbelle. I do prefer Tink, though."

"Don't blame you," I mutter. "I'm Victoria." I take her hand.

"Your name suits you." She looks me up and down, "You do bear a resemblance to Posh—"

"Don't say it, please. I don't know her, have never met her. She is no relation to me..."

"—Spice," she completes her statement. "Sorry, bet you've heard that a million times and hate it as much as I do my name."

"Hate to say it, but yours suits you, too," I bite my lips.

"Well, guess we are kindred, huh?" She drops my hand, turns to Saint.

"You made it," she jerks her chin.

"It sounded urgent."

"Sorry, but I think you need to see this one," she replies.

Saint pulls away from the horse, dusts his palms on his jeans, then reaches for mine, "Shall we?"

Tink leads the way inside, past a small living room, to another room that's furnished like an office. A bank of computer screens fills most of one wall. There are more screens sitting on the desk, each showing different images, two of them have maps with dots blinking on them. Whoa, someone loves their technology.

She slips into the chair, pulls up surveillance footage.

The screen shows a group of girls in a room which looks like a dormitory. Some of them are lying down, some sitting. One of them paces back and forth. She pauses, glances round the room, looks straight at the camera. Her desperate eyes seem to fill the screen, as she begins to weep.

The other women in the room sit up. One of them gets out of her bed to

approach her... One of the others gestures to her. She hesitates, then falls back.

Tink shuts it off. "Sorry," she apologizes, "it's hard to watch."

Saint wraps his arm around me and pulls me into his side. I rub my cheek against his sleeve.

He kisses the top of my head, "Shouldn't have allowed you to see that... But I wanted you to meet Tink and find out about the work we do together."

I look up at him, "So, you and she..."

"She runs an initiative that helps rescue those kidnapped or those who go missing." His lips stiffen. "No one should go through what I went through; nor the kind of mental trauma..." he peruses my features, "inflicted on Nina, and then on you."

What I'd been through couldn't begin to compare with his experience; but we'd both survived the challenges thrown at us.

Is that why we're attracted to each other, because we are survivors? No, it's more than that. We could have met anywhere, in other circumstances, and yet, the connection between us would have been there.

"This is why you respond so quickly every time she calls?"

He nods, "It normally means she's tracked down the whereabouts of a victim or victims," he nods toward the screen "and needs my help."

"Saint finances the efforts." Tink glances between us, "I'm sorry if I've called him at inopportune times. Sometimes I've needed backup, and since the operations are kept secret, I can't risk calling in anyone else."

I tighten my grip around Saint's waist. "So this is what you were doing?" My cheeks heat.

"You didn't think..." Tink glances up at Saint, then makes a face.

"Ugh, I wouldn't date him. He's way too up his own arse." She laughs, "Besides, he's more like a brother to me."

Saint tugs on her hair, in a decidedly sibling-like gesture.

"When did you two decide to start this?" I ask.

Saint shuffles his feet, "I've already told you that I took my mother's death hard." He rubs the back of his neck, "Let's just say, I was out of control for a while."

"That's putting things mildly," Tink snorts. "He opened fire in his house when his father was away."

"O-k-a-y." I peer up at Saint, "Did you hurt anyone?"

He shakes his head, "But I destroyed the place. My father packed me off

to go work with his friend."

"That's my father," Tink clarifies.

"He was an urban Cowboy, you could say." Saint rolls his shoulders, "He and his friends ran the adjacent farms. They trained and sold horses, and ran a riding school specializing in equine therapy."

"In the middle of London?"

"Zone 4; it's on the outskirts," he reminds me. "But yeah, they are technically in London."

"Wow," I glance around the space, "This place is something..."

Tink nods, "After my father died, Saint became my defacto guardian."

"The stint with Tink and her father saved me. Her father was more a parent to me than my own. If it were not for Tink's dad... I would have ended up shooting myself."

I glance down at the faded Cowboy boots.

"Those are—"

"My father's," Tink completes the sentence.

"I borrowed them from him," Saint says, "when I lived here on the ranch. It's where I was reborn a second time, in a way. Since then—"

"You wear them because they help you remember to stay sane?"

He nods.

Tears prick my eyes. I turn my face into Saint's arm. "I'm sorry that I doubted you," I whisper.

Saint wraps his arm even closer around me, "You couldn't have known, and I should have told you about this earlier."

I shake my head. "It would have been too dangerous."

Tink smiles, "She's a keeper, Killian."

He drums his fingers on his chest, "I have good taste, huh?"

I swipe at his shoulder, "So that's why you had the riding crop on your desk?"

"Want me to use it again on you?" he smirks.

"Ugh," Tink grimaces, "TMI, you guys."

"Sorry," he snickers, "couldn't resist."

His phone pings. He slides it out of his pocket and his lips curl.

"What are you up to?" I huff.

"Weston's on his way to the cabin in the countryside to get some alone time over Christmas." He pockets his phone.

There's silence for a minute.

"Hold on a second." I scowl, "Isn't Amelie headed there as well?"

"Is she?" His lips twitch.

"Saint Jordan Killian *Harry* Caldwell," I grumble.

"Uh-oh," he drawls, "am I in trouble?"

"You set this up?"

"Me?" His gaze widens.

I stare, "You sent them both up there?"

"Oops." He smirks.

TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT, TURN THE PAGE TO READ WESTON AND AMELIE'S STORY IN THE BILLIONAIRE'S CHRISTMAS BRIDE

**THE BILLIONAIRE'S
CHRISTMAS BRIDE**

1

"I am just a girl standing in front of a salad, asking it to be a doughnut."
-From Amelie's diary

Amelie

"Aww, they clearly like each other," the radio show host exclaims.

"They hated each other, couldn't stop trading insults—" the male announcer interrupts her.

"Only it was all build-up, OMG..." the first announcer cuts in. "The feels, the emotions.. They wanted to stab each other, but turned out, it was a different kind of stabby that they had for each other."

"Is that what they're calling it these days, Ivy?" The man snickers, "Good thing this is a late-night chat show."

"I can always count on you to keep me in line, Wolfgang," Ivy quips.

"Call me Wolf," the male announcer drawls.

"Right, well," Ivy clears her throat. " For everyone listening on this blustery night in the lead up to Christmas..." She pauses to take a breath, "The question I'd like to pose is, is it rude to interrupt someone mid-sentence by uh! distracting them? Email us, text us, call in and tell us after the break. This is Smile FM..."

I snort aloud, then switch off the radio tuned into the local radio station. The talk show hosts seem to be living in la-la land, or is it the Christmas spirit that's affecting them? More likely, it's the chemistry, between them, which not even the airwaves could disguise. Must be nice, to have that kind

of sizzling attraction, huh?

The kind that makes you want to slap the man, punch him in the nuts, maybe; right before you jump on him, wrap your legs around him, and—

That...had been the kind of no-holds-barred romance I'd hoped for when I had met my ex. He'd done everything right, hadn't attempted to kiss me until our third date. In short, he'd been a gentleman...of the double-crossing kind.

Bastard had dumped me after three weeks.

He'd seen my name connected to all the notoriety that had followed my friend Victoria and her now-husband Saint's wedding... His mother hadn't been happy about it, and as he'd rushed to inform me, he couldn't go against his mama's word... So, I'd been dropped.

On the other hand, my fledgling pastry business had taken off.

Everyone wanted the desserts that had been featured prominently in the publicity accompanying the marriage... I had more orders than I could fulfill. I had worked around the clock in the lead up to Christmas. I'd fulfilled my last booking this morning and handed over the reins of the company to my assistant—yep, I made enough money in the last month to finally hire the intern who had worked with me since I'd started the business.

I can trust her to keep the business going, while I take some time off over Christmas and New Year's. A few days of no work, no waking up in the early hours to bake... Not unless I want to do it for pleasure; and damn, if I am not going to bake the hell out of some new recipes that I want to try out.

I am going to use the next week to unwind, to reconnect with the girl I'd once been—carefree, happy, with hope in her eyes and a spring in her step—before business worries had taken over my life. I hunch my shoulders. At twenty-five, I am not that old... Except for the fact that I've never met a man with whom I've managed to hold a relationship down for more than uh—three months.

Well, to hell with that.

I am going to make the most of what I have. To start, I'll rejuvenate over the festive season, then bounce back into London all bright-eyed and ready to take the New Year by storm. Yeah! I turn off the highway, down the narrow road that leads me deeper into the countryside. My sturdy Volkswagen eats up the miles, until I get to a turn-off. I glance at the GPS... Yup, this is the road. Well, what the hell? I turn down the unpaved path. I'd wanted solitude. Guess I am getting it, one way or the other. I drive another mile, turn another corner...and drive up to massive gates.

I roll down my window, pull up the security app I'd installed on my phone, then reach out and wave my phone over the keypad in the wall.

The gates swing open. Awesome, and on the first try!

I continue down the driveway to a single-story bungalow, with a porch running around it, then park the car. I switch off the engine and listen. There... I can hear it... The silence. I can't stop the smile that lifts my cheeks. Most people don't like to be alone... Me? I thrive on it. As long as I can bake during the day, then curl up with my book-boyfriend in the evenings, with a glass of my favorite bubbly—champagne only, I'm strict like that—and surrounded by bubbles in a bathtub... Oh yeah, that would be a bonus. I push the door open, then walk around to retrieve my two suitcases. Don't judge. I like to have the comforts of home with me when I travel. So, what if I am only a few hours away from home? I need my favorite set of PJs, my bath bombs, my wine...and this. I walk around to the front of the car, open the door to the passenger side, and retrieve my most prized possession, the tools of my trade—my pastry chef bag, without which, I never go anywhere.

Sliding the strap of my baking toolkit across my chest, my handbag over one shoulder, I begin to drag one of the suitcases...which promptly gets stuck in the muddy ground. I haul at it, there's a cracking sound, then the valise dips to one side. Shit, did I break it already? To be fair, it had been a surprisingly cheap buy from the charity shop. I should have known better than to buy it, even though it had been marked down by about 70%. I wipe the sweat from my forehead. I straighten, take a step back, and instantly lose my footing. I hit the ground on my butt.

Bloody hell, this is all going tits over arse. A whistling sound emerges from the trees.

Goosebumps flare on my skin. Shit, is there someone...or something out there? It's all well and good to want to be alone... But in the countryside? I hadn't considered how...spooky it could all be. A low humming sounds in the distance. Is that a bird? A plane? Crap, there is no Superman around here to rescue me. I am on my own. *Better get your arse in gear, woman.* I jump up to my feet. Best get indoors, turn on some lights, then I can come back for my luggage.

A breeze blows and I hunch my shoulders. *Damn it, how can I be warm and cold at the same time?*

I take another step, trip over some rocks. *Hell, I need lights, and fast.*

Okay, hold on, I've got this.

I grab my phone from my handbag, switch on the flashlight. A beam of light illuminates the way. I walk toward the patio, take the steps up to the front door, shove my hand into my handbag and scrounge around for the key. Where is it? Where the hell is it? There! I pull out the key and insert it into the lock. The door unlocks. Woo!

I push against the door, walk into a spacious living room. Switching off the light, I drop the phone into my handbag. Then I take stock.

There's an unlit fireplace in the center, a settee beyond that, facing the door, complete with a rug in front of it. To my right are big French windows, to my left is a bookcase, with floor to ceiling shelves, filled with books. Yay, that's another point for this place. Next to it is a small table with liquor bottles.

I walk to it, place my handbag on the bar counter, next to a wall clock that's turned face down. I turn it face up; realize it's stopped. Huh? Guess it ran out of batteries. I replace it on the counter, turn around. That's when I hear the low sound of whistling again. I gulp. Guess I hadn't imagined it then?

It's a whistling, and of the human variety. This is not from an animal or a bird. The hell? I glance around the comfortable space. Everything looks undisturbed, though how would I know? I hear the sound of something sloshing from the direction of the back door... What the—? Did the intruder decide to take a bath?

Is there a hot tub of some kind on the patio at the back?

I take a step forward, then stop. I need a weapon. I am not going out there alone. Shit, why had I thought it was a good idea to come here on my own, remind me again? I hadn't been running away, I hadn't... Yeah, right. I'd needed to take myself away from all of those shiny, happy, faces celebrating bloody Christmas, which honestly, I do love... I do... Just not this year. This year, I need to catch a break... And hell, if I haven't caught something, alright. A burglar, more like it. I unclasp my satchel of baking tools, reach in and remove a—spatula? The humming sound increases in pitch, then a full-blown song reaches me. The hell? I squeeze my fingers around my weapon... Don't laugh; a spatula can do plenty of damage when it connects with someone's balls.

I lower my chef's satchel to the ground, then unbutton my coat and shrug it off. I stalk toward the door at the far end.

The sounds of water splashing reaches me through the patio door. Huh? Maybe there is a hot tub out there...

Then a male voice breaks into a rendition of *Nothing Else Matters* by Metallica. What the—? There's someone out there, all right, and the singing's not bad, actually. My thief, has a thing for classic rock, and can carry a tune. I hum the lyrics in sync with him... *The hell?* I pause, draw in another breath. *Now or never. Do it, Amelie. Go for it. Whoever it is, he has no right to be here. Shit, should I have called the cops?*

The singing stops abruptly. *What the—? Did he hear me approaching?*

I half angle my body, turn to leave; the door to the patio flies open.

I pivot around, raise my weapon, and find I am confronted with a wall of muscle. Naked chest, water running in rivulets down those sculpted abs that narrow into a concave belly which points to his thick, long—

"My face is up here," he drawls.

Heat flushes my cheeks; I jerk my gaze up. Grey eyes clash with mine—stormy clouds that boil in a sky which hints at oncoming snow. Sleet. Hail. An uncompromising will to get his way, no matter what. A shiver runs down my spine and moisture pools between my legs.

The skin between his eyebrows crinkles and his nostrils flare. *No way.* He can't smell my arousal, can he?

That mean upper lip thins further. His pouty lower lip juts out above a chin that wears days' old growth of beard. Thick dark hair covers his jaw. *How would it feel to have him draw those rough whiskers across my inner thighs? Right before he dips his head, darts out his tongue, and licks my innermost secret place.* Goosebumps dot my skin. *Shit, what's wrong with me? Why did my mind go there? You know why... Because this handsome piece of 100% male goodness is, quite simply, the most wickedly delicious piece of dessert I've ever laid my eyes on.* My throat dries. Also, I happen to know him.

"You?" my voice comes out breathless.

"What are you doing here?" he snaps at the same time.

"What are *you* doing here?" I retort. "And in a hot tub, on the patio of this house, no less?"

"I am not in the habit of answering queries posited by women who look like they've been dragged in from a storm."

"What?" My jaw drops. I am gaping, and it's not only because the words complete the image of the man I've loathed from the moment I first saw him

at the wedding of one of my best friends. "Dr. f'ing Weston," I snarl.

"That's Doc Kincaid to you." He yawns.

Of course, his surname would have to have the word kink in it in some form. "And are you?" I scowl.

"What?"

"A real doctor?"

He raises his hand, stabs the air with a cigar I only now realize he holds between his fingers. "Do you want to find out?" He looks me up and down, waggles his eyebrows. "I could give you a thorough examination." His gaze settles on my breasts, slides down to my core. "Make sure everything is in working order." He snickers.

Heat fizzes low in my belly. Hell, with that kind of hotness, this man could clearly get my cake batter to rise in seconds... *Wait, did I just think that?*

I make a gagging noise in my throat, "Does that line actually work?"

"You'd be surprised." His lips curl.

Oh, that smirk. My stomach seems to bottom out... Or maybe that's because I haven't eaten since breakfast.

He draws on his cigar, cheeks hollowing for an instant, before he puffs out smoke. Cherries, cloves...cinnamon. Yum. My mouth waters, "How would it be to bake a cigar dessert?"

"What?" He frowns.

Shit, did I just say that aloud?

"Nothing," I mumble, "and you haven't answered my question."

His voice lowers to a hush, "I'll answer yours if you answer mine." Another shiver ladders up my spine. *How did he manage to make that seem like an innuendo?*

"Is everything a trade to you?"

"You should try it." He smiles, a full-blown grin that highlights the laughter lines that stretch from the corners of his eyes. I mean, could this guy be any more perfect? I allow my gaze to take in the breadth of his shoulders, that gorgeous neck, the swell of those hard biceps, the smattering of hair on those forearms—*No, do not look lower; don't do it*—to the splint that he sports around middle finger of his right hand.

"What happened to you?" I scowl.

"This?" He raises his middle finger to show me the bird by default, "I fractured my middle finger in a car accident."

"How convenient," I scoff. "You can announce your jerk-face nature without speaking a word."

He chuckles, "You always this nice to injured men?"

"You always go around flashing women?"

"You enjoyed the view." He raises that goddam cigar again to his mouth, wraps those beautiful lips around the smoke stick.

And I'd love to get my mouth around his fat, juicy cigar too.

No, no. Enough with the terrible metaphors. But, hello, can you blame me? I am only a woman standing in front of a man—a naked, gorgeous-as-hell, stud muffin of a male who pulls the cigar from his mouth, and blows out a cloud of fragrant smoke from between pursed lips.

Moisture melts my core. My toes curl.

Jesus, there should be a law against him using his mouth like that. Of course, I could find other uses for that mouth of his too... *No, no no. Why are you insisting on going back down that route?*

"Nothing I haven't seen," I toss my head.

"Unlikely." He lowers his right hand—the one with the splint and the default flip-me-off-bird to his crotch.

What the—? Don't look there, bitch— Don't bloody watch him grasp himself and squeeze.

I gulp, the sound audible in the small space. And damn him, but I can't take my gaze off of that gorgeous part of his anatomy.

He moves his arm to his side, "I rest my case."

Hell, but a certain part of him is far from being in resting position. Gulp. Did I just word play on his dick play? Clearly, his proximity is rubbing off if all I can think of are these poor jokes.

"By the way," his tone is conversational, "you planning on defending yourself with that?" He jerks his chin.

I tighten my grasp around the spatula and raise it. "This has been known to strike fear in the heart of burglars and those who've tried to break in on me before," I snap.

"You were burgled?" His jaw hardens.

"None of your business."

"Answer the bloody question." He takes a step forward. I scoot back. My leg brushes something warm and furry, which moves.

"Whoa!" I struggle to find my balance then, for the second time in ten minutes, the world tilts, and I find myself falling... Falling.

The spatula slips from my grasp. I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting for my butt to connect with the hard ground, only I'm yanked upright. Heat envelops me and my breasts flatten against something unyielding. I don't need to open my eyelids to know it's his chest, the one with the cut planes, the eight-pack abs. I slap my palm against that wall of muscles which coil, move, and writhe under my fingertips. I gulp and my legs threaten to give way under me, but his hold around my shoulders tightens. I spot the smoldering smoke stick of his on the ground.

"Your...cigar," I stutter.

"You noticed," he quips.

I grimace, then nod my head toward the floor. "I meant that one."

"Forget that." His breath feathers over my hair and liquid lust shoots through my veins. The scent of pine and cloves mixes with that edgy darkness that is purely Weston. Speaking of—something hard stabs into my waist—the aforementioned "cigar." A groan boils up my throat. Not fair—this crazy attraction to someone I've barely met a couple of times. Why does he have to smell so delicious? Bet if I licked his chest, he'd taste more decadent than the chocolate mud pie cake recipe I've been wanting to bake. I'll lick the frosting off his cupcake any time. *Nooooo*. Not again. Enough with comparing his unmentionables with my favorite stuffed goodies. OMG, how would it feel to have him stuff his goodies in my cannoli? *Wait, did that even make sense?*

His voice dips, "You haven't answered my question."

"What?" I blink.

"Someone broke in on you?" He enunciates his words at a slow pace as if I am slow of mind... Which, I admit, at the moment, I seem to be. His larger-than-life charisma has turned my brain cells to mush. "Tell me," he coaxes. Is he using the same tone he'd use with the puppy to make him obey? Well, hell, if it isn't working on me as well.

"Y...yes." My stomach clenches. "But I fought off the thief...." I force out the words.

His muscles coil; tension radiates off of his body. "You confronted the man?" he snaps.

"Yeah," I hunch my shoulders, "It happened a week ago... No biggie." I swallow as my heart begins to race. It hadn't been pleasant, that almost encounter. I had been alone in the kitchen of my bakery at 4 am... Hell, it had been horrible, actually. The guy had thrown a fright into me and I had

thrown this spatula at him. "I chased him off. Yay. See? I'm fine, still alive." And bloody shaken, but I'm not going to tell him that.

His grip tightens, "Did he hurt you?" His jaw tics.

I stare up into his tight features. You'd think Mr. Jerkass here is all concerned about my safety.

"Did he?" his voice snaps through the noise in my head.

"N...no," I shake my head.

"No, what?"

No, I will not give in to this insane chemistry between us. I didn't come all this way to run slap-bang into a man who is, surely, far worse than the one who recently broke my heart. "No, he didn't do any harm. He ran off before I could use the spatula on him." I tip up my chin. "Though I can't promise the same to you."

He chuckles, "I love a good fight, don't you?"

Jackass.

A whine sounds behind me.

I shoot a sideways glance to spot a puppy plant his behind on the ground...exactly the kind of position I'd have been in, if 'Mr. Overbearing Brute' here hadn't grabbed me first. Oh, so that's what I'd brushed against earlier and almost fallen over.

"Max," Weston talks to the dog, "you hungry, buddy?"

The puppy whines again.

"I'll be right there, little fella." His voice takes on a cajoling tone, and damn him, but my ovaries seem to spasm. *The hell is he doing to me?* Before this, I've never thought about kids... Hell, I've barely managed to embark on a halfway decent career, and I've never thought of myself as someone who'd want a family. But Weston, with his smoldering glare, his hard face, his harder—um—body, and that coaxing manner with which he talks to Max... I can see him with a child tucked under one arm, and me under his other... Heck, I can see me under him, period. My mouth waters. My panties dampen further. *Get your mind out of the gutter, you slut.*

"Isn't he Sinclair and Summer's pet?" I frown. My friend Summer had married Sinclair Sterling, one of the seven billionaire co-owners of 7A investments. The media had labelled them the Seven and, Dr Douche here is one of them.

"Summer and Sinclair are away on an extended honeymoon," Weston grunts.

"Aww. So you decided to puppy-sit?" A warm glowing ball lights up inside of me.

He glowers, "Don't gush any sweet icky stuff now—uh, what's your name again?"

Poof—that warm feeling I mentioned? Forget about it. The hell is wrong with this man? "You know my name all right, you ass." I stab my finger in his chest, "So why are you pretending otherwise?"

"Me?" He blinks, "Do I?" He tilts his head, pretending to think, "Is it Lily?"

A slow burn starts up my spine.

"No... No." He cracks his neck, "It will come to me, it will... It's Malia, right?"

Anger laces the edges of my vision. I draw in a breath, then another. *Stay calm, he can only get so much more obnoxious, right?*

"Wait, let me try, one more time..." He pats his temple with the palm of his injured hand. "It's...something French, isn't it? Like... Valerie, Malory, maybe? No, I have it." He snaps his fingers, "It's Celine. I got that right, didn't I?" He chuckles.

I clench my fists, then raise my hand toward his face.

He catches my wrist. "Tsk, tsk," he clicks his tongue. "What a temper you have, little one."

"Don't 'little one' me... You... You wanker."

"Finally," his eyes gleam, "here kitty, kitty, show me your claws."

"I'll do better than that," I hiss, "I'll show you how it is to see the sun at night time."

I bring up my knee, aim for his groin.

2

Weston

What the hell? I know what she intends to do, a second before she moves. I step aside and her knee grazes the outside of my thigh. I release her shoulders only to grab the nape of her neck. "Stop that," I scold her, "or you'll hurt yourself."

"The only one who's gonna be hurt here, buster, is you." She swings out with her fist.

As if this tiny thing could do anything to injure me? Oh wait, I'd done that on my own, when someone had run my car off the road a few days ago.

I angle my body, but I'm not fast enough. Her fist grazes my side; a burn of heat trickles down my spine. She didn't hurt me. Instead, my body is responding to her in a manner that leaves no doubt of the fact that certain parts of me would very much prefer to be in more intimate contact with her.

"Stop," I growl.

She makes a noise deep in her throat, "You uncouth, obnoxious, horrible, man." She swings with her other hand, the shot too wide to do any harm. But it causes her to lose her balance, and she topples over, crashing into me.

Softness, curves, the weight of her breasts, even through the layers she is wearing, is a thing of beauty against my chest. I release her nape, only to wrap my hand about her shoulders and haul her close.

"Let me go," she chokes.

"No." I say all casual-like, hoping she'll take the bait. Whaddya know? The little thing hits out with her fist again, this time catching me on the wrist

of my injured hand. Pain flashes up my arm and sparks of brightness dot my vision. Shit, she hadn't been kidding about her threat.

I grit out the words through clenched teeth, "Stop it before I do something I regret."

"Ha," she scoffs. "I am not scared of bullies like you."

I draw in a deep breath. "Don't threaten me."

"Don't underestimate me." She raises her fists.

Ooh, I am so scared. I stifle the chuckle that crowds my throat. Max whines again, I glare at him from over her shoulder. He wags his tail, mouth open, tongue lolling. Of course, I could get my staff in the hospital to behave with that look, but it has little effect on the little rascal. I frown at Max. He pants back, then turns and runs off in the direction of the kitchen. That buys me, maybe, a minute before he'll be back. Best make full use of it. I train my glare on the handful of woman who glowers up at me. She barely comes to chest level... And that hair? Is she actually sporting streaks of purple? And there is so much of it... Her hair, I mean. It flows like spun gold around her shoulders, catching the light that filters in from the patio behind her.

"Hey," she snaps her fingers, "what are you staring at?"

"Your hair." I reach out with my bandaged hand to touch the shining strands. I bring it up to my nose and sniff it.

She stiffens. "What are you doing?"

"What's that smell?"

"What?" She tips up her perky little nose, sniffs the air.

"That." I grasp a handful of her hair, bury my nose in it, and draw in a deep breath. "Vanilla, sugar, apples...butter." The mix of scents go straight to my head. "Why the hell do you smell of dessert?" I frown.

"Ah, maybe because I'm a pastry chef?" She scowls. "What the hell do you think you're doing anyway?"

"Speaking of." I let the hair slide out from between my fingers-...*Why do I miss its softness already?* "I'm not letting you stay here. You do realize that?"

"What?" She blinks. "What did you say?"

"I was here first."

"Excuse me?"

The light in her blue eyes intensifies and little creases appear on her forehead. Oh, this is going to be good. "Here, at the cabin." I smirk. "I am staying here until New Year's."

"I'm staying here until New Year's," she says through clenched teeth.

"Nope," I emphasize the word with a popping sound, and practically see the smoke pour out of her tiny ears. Beautiful, shell shaped ears, that I'd like to curl my tongue around, suck on those pretty earlobes before easing it into that hole. My groin hardens. Hell... there are other parts of her which I'd like to push into as well... Lick her up, suck on the melting flesh between her thighs, nip on her lower lips, before I thrust my tongue inside her soaking channel and bring her to the edge.

"I am too." She props her hands on her hips, her curvy, deliciously rounded hips, which is one of the first things I'd noticed about her too. She's so different from the women I normally encounter... Hell, she's not my type at all. Soft, sassy, perfectly shaped for my hands. My fingers tingle. *I will not touch her, will not.* I tilt my head. "From where I am, you are...on your way out."

"What?" She blinks. "I am standing right here."

"That can be easily changed."

I take a step forward, and honestly, I'd totally expected her to retreat. To shuffle back, maybe even turn and run out of the house... I should have known better, after how she'd threatened me with that spatula earlier, for she doesn't move. She stands her ground, so my feet bump hers. I lean into her; she tips her chin up.

I lower my face toward hers, closer, closer. "You can't win this, Buttercup."

"Buttercup?" She scrunches up her forehead. "Why the hell are you calling me after the Princess Bride?"

"It was after a Powerpuff Girl, actually," I chuckle.

"Powerpuff?" She grimaces.

I nod, "You're small, annoying, and too headstrong for your own good."

"How do you even know about those cartoons?"

"I may have watched them with my little niece."

"Awww." Her gaze widens; her eyes go all sparkly as fuck. *Ah, hell!*

My neck heats. "Don't make it out to be anything more than what it is," I grunt.

"Which is?"

"That I babysit on occasion," I mutter.

"You also babysit?" Her features take on the expression I have seen on the faces of the women who have fallen for some of my friends. Specifically, Jace, Sinner and that mofo Saint. All of them ended up married, and

shackled, and buying townhouses, and planning extended honeymoons, and baby showers... *Argh!* A shiver of trepidation runs up my spine. *Shit, no, no, no, I am not going there.* These kinds of entanglements, and all the bloody relationship fuck-ups that come with it? Not for me. So not my tumbler of whiskey—you didn't think I'd say cup of tea, now, would you?

Besides, what the hell am I doing, sharing that piece of information about myself? She'd gotten past my guard, obviously. It's the only reason I'd let that slip. More to the point, why the hell are we still talking, here in the house I co-own?

The hair on my nape prickles.

"How the hell did you get here?" I frown.

"I drove, of course." She sniffs, "What about you?"

"I was driven here by my chauffeur," I grumble.

"That's why there's no car parked outside." She nods. "How do you plan to get around for the time you are here?"

"I don't."

"Guess you can't drive with that finger, huh?"

"I can bloody drive, if I want." I scowl, "I choose not to; besides, every time I want to head out, I'll message my driver."

She opens and shuts her mouth, "Let me get this right. Every time you want to go out, you'll message your chauffeur who'll come in from where? London?"

I glare at her, "Don't be daft. He's staying in the nearest town. It takes him, maybe, 45 minutes to get here."

"To take you back into the village, and return."

"Umm, yeah." I raise my shoulders, "That's why he's called a driver. He drives me around," I snicker.

"I could do that."

"What?"

"Drive you around."

"Why should I want that?"

"Since we are going to be sharing this house—"

"Nope, we're not. I own this place with the rest of the Seven."

"Saint offered it to me for the duration of the holidays." She scowls, "Pretty sure he loaned the space to me first."

"I am one of the Seven. I take precedence," I declare.

She gapes at me and... Damn... Every time she opens her mouth, I want

to shut her up with my tongue, or other parts of me that would very happily nestle into that warmth. Why the fuck does she turn me on, when she's the type of complication I can do without?

"Out," I snarl.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" She sniffs, "Why can't we work this out like adults?"

"Like adults, huh?" I smirk. "Trust me, the kind of things I want to do with you right now would definitely be classified as 'adult.'"

She reddens. "Can't you speak a sentence without coming across all lecherous?"

"I haven't even started," I smirk, "and PS, it's you who can't take a hint. Do you want me to spell it out for you?"

"You're a jerk, you know that?"

I yawn. "Get out of the house or I'll throw you out bodily."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me."

She raises her fist and I move. I grab her around the waist, haul her over my shoulder.

She yelps, "Let go of me, you oaf."

"You sure about that, Buttercup?"

"Stop calling me that."

"Not gonna oblige you. Next?"

She makes a huffing sound and the warmth of her breath sears my back. She wriggles her body, tries to scramble off. I place my arm across the back of her thighs.

She brings her fists down on my back, rains blows. How cute. As if that's gonna make a difference. From where I am, it's more like a massage. Don't tell her that, though. I stalk forward, and Max chooses that time to dart out.

Blame it on the fact I was distracted by her wriggling arse positioned so close to my face. Or the fact that I was having too much fun. Or that a part of me was bloody angry with that turd Saint, for having put me in this situation.

Clearly, he'd double booked me and this little puff pastry of a woman... whatever the fuck he'd been thinking, he is mistaken. I have no interest in her; none whatsoever... especially when she's proving to be such a distraction that I barely manage to sidestep Max.

My bare feet slip from under me. The world tilts.

The woman across my shoulder shrieks. I tighten my grip on her, as the

ceiling recedes further. I manage to find my balance, lurch back a couple of steps, through the door. I must have spilled something earlier. My legs slip out from under me a second time.

I arc back through the air...and still holding her, hit the hot tub and tumble into the water.

"Woman," I growl, "you're going to rupture my eardrums."

"I'll do more than that, you...you horrible man. You...you Fruit Salad."

I blink, "Did you compare me to a dessert?"

"I'm not done you...you Carrot Cake." She rears up so quickly, I loosen my grip. She pulls away, and over...smashes straight into my injured finger. Bright lights flash behind my eyes... Jesus F... She hadn't been kidding when she'd said she'd show me the sun in the night time... Hold on. What the hell am I thinking? My brain seems to freeze, then pain ratchets up my spine, through my skull... A growl rips from me, "The hell are you doing?"

"You started this." She lurches up to her feet, stands over me, with my torso in between her legs.

Her wet blouse stretches across her chest, highlighting every gorgeous curve of that magnificent bust.

My cock twitches; my mouth dries. I can only stare at the nipples that salute me, the water that drips down the fabric outlining her flat stomach, the indentation of her bellybutton, down to the valley between her thighs, where her jeans have ridden up to kiss the cleft between her lower lips. What I wouldn't give to be able to place my lips there... I swallow. My dick lengthens.

Shit, bet if she looks down, she'll see exactly which parts of me are excited by this little rough play... Which it isn't... Foreplay, that is. It is an accident, that's all.

"Why the hell couldn't you watch where you were going?" She glowers.

"Me...?" I scowl. "I am as steady on my feet as I am with my fingers... Speaking of," I raise my throbbing hand, and glare at the offending digit, "You probably fractured it again, thanks to your clumsiness."

"It was already broken, you idiot."

"Heard about multiple fractures?" I growl. "And don't call me an idiot."

"Oh, pfft. I'll call you anything I want, you reprobate."

"Mind your tongue, Buttercup."

"Oh, stuff it." She swings one leg over. "And for the record, I'm the one who's staying, not you."

"Oh, no, you're not." I grab for her leg. She squeaks, evades me and jumps up and out of the tub. There's a howl... "Max." I turn to find her squatting down. She rubs the puppy's head. "Oooh, little fellow, did I hurt you? I didn't, did I?" Max whines again.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she coos, makes kissing noises at the mutt, who whines. No wonder he's making the most of having her attention.

She plops onto her butt, cross-legged, pulls the puppy into her lap. The dog, lifts his head, licks her face, her mouth. Hmm. He whines again, she strokes him, and lifts him to her chest. The little bugger cuddles against her breasts. *What the—?* I glower. *How does he get to do that and not me? Wait, hold on? Am I seriously jealous of a canine?* I shake my head.

"Enough of this nonsense," my voice rings around the space.

The puppy shivers, snuggles his body tighter against her chest.

"Put him aside," I scowl.

She peers up at me, "Shh."

"What?"

"You're scaring the baby," she admonishes me.

"Baby?" I growl.

Max moans... No, really. That dog has definitely been taking acting classes, for he bleats out another piteous little whine that has her cuddling him, rocking him side to side. "There, there, little fella. Did Daddy's heavy voice make your heart go pitter-patter?" She lifts him up, and the dog plays along. He licks her lips...right on the mouth.

"Hey!" I growl.

I push up to standing in the hot tub, water flowing from me like I turned on the shower. The water splashes out onto the dog and the woman, who bows her head to shield him. "Stop that, you're making him wet." She huffs.

"Oh, yeah?" I scowl down at her bent head, the way she croons to the pet, hair flowing in a blonde waterfall about her shoulders, her dripping clothes that outline the curve of her shoulder...and that... The sight of the perfectly turned swell of a what should not be a seductive part of anyone's body... But on Buttercup... It's a bloody turn on. The blood rushes to my groin and my head spins. Must be the fact that I hit my hand. That's why I am feeling lightheaded. No other reason. It's why I step up and out of the sunken hot tub, to loom over her.

More water pours over her, drenching both woman and dog. He yelps, cowers into her further.

"What are you doing?" She tries to protect him with her body. "You're an insensitive dog parent."

"I'm not a parent, this is not a child, and you...are completely insane."

She peers up at me, from under her spiky eyelashes. Her gaze runs up my thighs, my crotch, getting an eyeful of my rather spectacular appendage—yeah, I'm well hung, deal with it—up my impressive eight pack—it is eight, I know, I've seen myself in the mirror—to my mouth. She gulps; her cheeks turn a fiery red. "You... you..." She swallows, "Why are you flashing the little mite?" She props her palm over Max's eyes. "You could have stunted his growth, with that exhibition," she huffs. "I mean just because you are ... Uh, massive... You don't need to go around shocking little doggies with your penchant for running around naked."

And that's when something inside of me snaps. My vision tunnels and the blood thunders at my temples—anger...and frustration...and jealousy... Yeah, bloody hell, I am living with rage that she's giving all of her attention to that...that... Usurper... I am going to teach her a lesson about ignoring me—one she won't forget in a hurry. I bend over, grab the nape of her neck with my unhurt hand, and haul her up to her feet, with just enough force for her gaze to widen.

"What did you say?"

"Th...that you're scaring him."

"After that."

"That you're running around naked."

"Before that."

She blinks rapidly, the dog wriggles in her hold. "M...max," she stutters.

I click my tongue, "Not the word that you are looking for."

"M...massive?" she wheezes.

"You noticed, huh?"

"Kinda....h...hard not to..." she swallows, tips up her chin, "considering..."

"Considering." I drop my head, thrust my face into hers. "Considering?" I lower my voice. "Complete the sentence, Buttercup."

She gulps, "Considering you've been waving that in my face since—"

I lower my head, close my mouth over hers.

3

Amelie

Finally, finally, finally he's kissing me... He's... Oh! Warmth, heat, the taste of him pours through my veins, fills my senses. Hot, lush, complex and fiery, notes of ginger, cardamom, bitter orange and sumptuous creamy champagne. Oh, my...he tastes like my very personal favorite dessert... If I had to bottle this taste, make it into a dessert, it would be called... Kinky Banana Split? No, Kinky Pavlova, maybe... Kinky Almond and Chocolate cookies with pomegranate seeds and a splash of brandy... Oh, my, my. I'd totally dive into that concoction headfirst; after I'd scooped up the cream from the dark surface, licked it up, and my fingers... Then rub the mixture all over that delicious torso, down to his impressive bon-bons and— Wait, did I just call his balls bon-bons? Does that make his very impressive dick a...rhubarb and chocolate cock pop?

A giggle boils up my throat. Above me, he freezes, leans back until his mouth is poised just above mine. "What's so funny?" he rasps.

"N...nothing." I'd lick his shaft like a penis cake—I choke.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"N...no," I gasp.

"What are you thinking?" He frowns down at me. An expression of genuine frustration on his face. My stomach flutters. Jesus, if that isn't the hottest thing I have seen... This alpha male, all flummoxed... Not to mention, still wet and naked, and holding my nape like I am a kitten.

Max whines in my arms. I glance down. "I think he's cold; I need to get

him inside the house."

"He can wait."

"You'd allow a baby to freeze?" I scowl.

"He's a dog..."

"A pet."

"A mutt."

"A child." I frown.

"Fine."

"Fine what?"

"We'll take him to the other room, but first, 'fess up."

"What?" I blink rapidly.

"What made you chuckle earlier?"

"Nothing."

"It's something." He glares at me and a shiver runs down my spine.

"Maybe," I finally say.

"So, you were lying to me?"

"No," I stutter.

"I hate liars."

"Trust me, you don't want to hear this," I mumble.

"Trust me," he lowers his thick brows, "I do."

"You won't like it."

"Let me decide that."

Like hell, I will. I snicker to myself. *If you think I am going to tell you my X-rated thoughts, you have another think coming.*

"Fine," I grumble just as Max whines again, "Can I set him down first?"

He peers into my face, then nods.

"Let go of me," I demand.

"No."

I stare, "You serious?"

"Always."

Tell me about it. This grumpy-pants a-hole needs to be shown how to laugh a little more, in life.

"Fine," I mutter, then bend down. He bends with me, not taking his palm off of the nape of my neck. *Don't look at his crotch, don't.* I stare at his turgid cock that springs from a nest of dark hair as I lower myself, place the puppy on the ground. Max shoots off toward the kitchen.

He hauls me up. "Tell me now," he threatens, his voice hard.

"But... I need to go with him and—"

He glowers at me, and that familiar melting sensation crawls in my gut.

"P...penis-shaped cake," I blurt out.

"What?" His glare intensifies.

"It...it's a thing..." I assure him. "There's this town in Portugal where penis-shaped cakes are gifted to women as fertility charms." Not that I need any such help with this man. Just being this close to him is enough for me to get pregnant... *Eeeugh! What am I thinking?* I pull back, but his large hand on my nape tightens.

"And you know this, how?"

"It...it's ah, based on research I came across."

"Research, huh?" He bends his knees, so his face is more at eye-level with mine. "Why do I have this sneaking suspicion that is not true?"

"It is..." I lie, casting about in my head for something...anything to tell him. "Uh, I am writing a book."

"A book?"

"A cook...cookbook...for desserts that are aphrodisiacs..."

"And this... Uh, cock cake—" He frowns.

"A chocolate cock pop," I correct him.

"Chocolate cock pop...is an aphrodisiac, hmm?" His lips twitch.

"Don't mock it till you try it," I mumble.

"Hmm." He tilts his head, "You have a point there." He applies pressure on my neck—not enough to hurt, just sufficient for my knees to tremble.

"Wh...what are you doing?"

"What do you think?"

He peels back his lips and his teeth flash against his tanned skin. He eases me down and I drop to my knees.

Hell, he handles my body like I am made of room-temperature butter... Would he lick me like I am a toffee-topped crumpet too? That large rough tongue of his would lave my flesh, dig into the nooks and crannies of my sensitive core, strum on my pussy lips, nibble on my cream and sugar... *No.. No... No.* "No," I shake my head.

"Don't mock it till you try it," he growls.

I'm eye level with that part of him that has taunted me since I walked into this house. No, even before that... Since I first saw him, across a crowded room at my friend Summer's wedding, when he'd prowled toward the bar, leaned against the barrier, stance wide, reached for a tumbler for whiskey and

I'd seen the tendons of his throat stretch as he'd swallowed it down.

"Open," he growls.

I tip up my chin. "You're no dessert," I huff.

"No, I'm better."

He releases me, only to grab his dick and—what the—? I stare. I can't help it. I mean, I shouldn't. I should look away, spring to my feet and follow Max into the kitchen, then keep going until I reach my car and get out of here. I could do it, too. He's not holding me back. I should get away from him; away from this insane start to what was supposed to have been a quiet time, of reflection, and experimentation, of coming up with ideas for new desserts that I could use to differentiate my business from the rest... Which is exactly what I have been doing since I walked in here.

Hold on a second... Is being with him sparking off brainwaves of the culinary, and face it, the lustful kind? And hell, if the two don't go together. Desserts and orgasms, puddings and sex, cupcakes and clit stimulators...

Whoa. Hold on. Back up there. That idea I'd pulled out of my arse earlier, of writing a book about desserts that are stimulants... Well, it's not a bad idea at all... In fact, it could inspire an entire range of recipes...that I could use for my occasions-themed menu—valentines, anniversaries, birthdays, weddings... Hmm. I chew on my lower lip, watch as he squeezes himself from root to swollen head of his fat dick. My mouth waters and my belly clenches... Hell, what am I thinking? I'm not seriously considering...

He squeezes his cock, so it stands straight out, staring at me in the face, with precum oozing from the slit, and hell... I'm only a woman kneeling in front of a beautiful dick, wanting to lick it.

"Do it," he insists. "Open up, Buttercup."

"Did you just rhyme your words with my so-called pet name—?"

He shoves his dick in between my lips... He's not tender or gentle, by any means... He takes it like it's his right, to have his shaft in my mouth, filling me, bumping up over my tongue. "Swallow," he growls.

What the hell? How dare he think he can command me and I'll obey? How can he take me for granted...? Because I haven't left yet, have followed his directions so far, allowed him to maneuver me into this place of supplication, where I peer up at him, watch the sweat bead his forehead,

"Now." He glares at me, and heat flares in my belly; a shudder runs down my spine and my thighs spasm, I resist the urge to squeeze them together. I will not show him that his dominance is turning me on, that his complete

arrogance in assuming I'll do what he asks is...a bloody turnoff.

"Amelie." His voice lowers to a hush.

So, he remembers my name, huh?

His jaw tics, "Take me down your throat."

And his tone brooks no argument. I tip my chin up, open my mouth further—wide enough for his cock to slip in, ease down my gullet. I cough and tears squeeze out of my eyes. I swallow and a groan rips out of him. His massive thighs on either side of my face ripple as if unseen currents grip him, the same ones that writhe down my legs, to my toes. My fingers tingle and my scalp itches. I raise my hands, grip the outside of each of his legs.

"Fuck," he rasps, "you have no idea what you're doing to me."

Oh, trust me, I do. Question is, why the hell am I still here?

"You want to leave?" His voice cuts through my mind. *Huh?* Has he been reading my thoughts? "Do you, Buttercup?" he asks.

Is it the fact that his nickname is growing on me—because it belonged to my childhood heroine...the one I'd wanted to be when I grew up? Or because the strain in his tone is evident? Because he doesn't touch me anywhere... Well, except for the most intimate part of him in one of my orifices. I swipe my tongue up the bottom of his cock over the throbbing vein, to the rim of his swollen head. I circle it, and another growl rips out of him. The heat pours off of him, and down on me. The strength of his dominance seems to grow, coiling around me, pinning me in place. Moisture pools between my thighs. Hell, what is he doing to me? What am I going to do to ensure that he doesn't take me for granted again? That he doesn't simply put me down as another of the women who've succumbed to his charms... Okay, so I am as guilty, but hell, if I am going to walk away from this encounter without making an impression. Yeah, did I mention I am bloody competitive by nature? It's been my downfall... The reason I'm here, about to spend Christmas on my own... I should take him up on the out he's extended to me and scam... I should.

"You scared you won't be able to finish what you started?"

He snickers. The bastard snickers—with his dick in my mouth. *Sheesh, men!* They can be so naïve. So full of their own ego, they can't see the truth when it stares them in the face. That I am going to make him regret every little insult he's thrown my way since I walked in there.

"You make up your mind yet, Buttercup? Either get out so I can complete this on my own or—"

I cup his balls and squeeze.

His big body freezes. I bring up my other palm, begin to knead that gorgeous well-hung part of him. His dick thickens and the muscles under his belly coil, ripple like there's some kind of internal struggle that holds his guts hostage.

"Are you sure, you want to do this?" His voice is so low, so harsh, a tremor courses through my veins and my toes curl. I lean in just a millimeter more, enough for his shaft to slip further down my throat. A growl rips out of him, "Last chance, Amelie." His voice is strained.

I peer up into his features. His jaw tics; a vein pops at his temple. The pulse between my legs beats in tandem. I lean back on my haunches, so his shaft slides out to the edge of my mouth. Then wrap my lips around his head, squeeze his balls at the same time.

"Jesus, fuck," he swears.

A thrill runs down my spine.

I knead his balls and the muscles in his stomach jump.

"You've done it now." He digs the fingers of his uninjured hand into my hair, and tugs. Pinpricks of pleasure race across my scalp. "I am going to fuck your face."

4

Weston

The hell am I doing? I'd meant to haul her to her feet and throw her out of the house, so I could get on with the quiet time I'd hoped to have over the holidays. Instead, I can't stop myself from tugging down on her hair. She flinches, raises her head, and the sight of those pink lips wrapped around my cock—bloody fuck—lust spirals through my veins hot and hard. Fuck. "I am going to do this my way, Buttercup. You understand that, hmm?"

She stares up at me, pupils blown, the green of her irises a slim circle around the black. Bloody hell, she's aroused, and so hot. I ease her head forward, and my dick disappears inside her mouth. My vision narrows and my scalp tightens, "Bloody fuck, I can't stop." I tighten my fingers in her hair; she winces. Lust spirals down my spine. The thought of bringing her to the edge, of hurting her just enough to give her the kind of pain which will heighten her pleasure...hell. My breathing grows ragged and my chest heaves. "Nod if you understand," I snarl.

Her eyebrows knit and her tiny hands massage my balls.

Pinpricks of heat race up my back. "Amelie," I warn her.

Her gaze widens and her movements become more frantic.

She leans into me until her elbows are positioned on my thighs, her head tipped up, her entire body tiny enough to fit exactly between my legs. She releases me, only to whisper her fingers up the back of my butt, into the crease between my arse cheeks...and that's when I snap. I drag her back a few inches...enough for her to pull back her hand. She draws in a breath, her

cheeks hollow, and fuck, if I don't feel the suction all the way to my head. This woman, where did she learn to blow me like this? If I give her free rein, she'll suck my brains through my dick. A chuckle flicks up my throat, and anger...a slow burn of an emotion that's very much like jealousy. *What the —?* Am I jealous of whoever she was with before me? I've never had a problem with that before. All of my partners have been seasoned, experienced enough... Jaded and cynical. Happy to fuck and walk away... And her... I am going to fuck her, all right... And then what? I'll have to let her go. My guts twist. Why the hell is that an issue? This entire encounter has had the touch of surreal to it from the moment I'd opened the door of the hot tub area and seen this pixie of a woman.

Fuck her mouth, show her I'll take no quarter, make sure she understands that all of those dreams she carries around in her head—babies and puppies and all things nice? That's *not* what she's going to get from me. What she can expect is a man who knows what he wants, who goes after it and claims it... who takes no prisoners, as I am about to show her. "I need to see you nod your assent," I reiterate.

She pauses...a beat, another, then she jerks her chin.

Thank fuck. I haul her forward and my dick slides down her throat. Hot, moist, so fucking good that I almost come on the spot. I bring my other hand to the base of my cock, squeeze it to stop myself. Then I begin to use her mouth. I pull her back and forward, and again. Each time, my cock slips in between her gorgeous lips. Once more and her teeth graze the skin of my shaft. Ripples of pleasure flood my skin, my balls harden, my groin tightens, and I can't remember the last time I came this close, this quickly. I haul her close; this time her lips fasten around the girth of my cock, and when I pull her back, she curls her tongue around my swollen head. Goosebumps pop on my skin, my thigh muscles bunch, and the tension in my belly grows, becomes enormous. *Fuck.* "I am going to come."

She stares up, holds my gaze.

"You're going to take all of me, you understand?"

She nods.

"Every single last drop."

She brings her hand back up to cup my balls again and I explode. Hot gusts of cum pour out of me, and she swallows, not breaking eye contact, and damn her, but it's the hottest, most erotic thing I have seen ever. Liquid spills down her chin, onto her top, but she doesn't pause. She continues to suck on

me, swallowing until I swear there's nothing left in me to come. I step back; my cock drops from her lips with a wet plop. The hair on the back of my nape rises. I haul her to her feet, peer into her features. "You're something else, you know that?"

She opens her mouth, and damn her, but I don't want to hear her speak. No explanations. No need to dissect what just happened. So I do the only thing I can, considering the circumstances. I drop my head, place my lips over hers.

Mistake... Mistake... All of my senses jangle. A shudder of electricity screams up my spine and my dick instantly perks up... *The fuck?* I just came. It's a record, even for me. *Why the hell is she having this effect on me?* I pull back, but she rises on tip toe, throws her arms around me... Or as much of me as she can reach which, considering she comes to chest level, means she winds herself about my upper arms. She tilts her head, follows me. She parts her lips, swings her leg about my thigh. Only when my palm cups her butt, do I realize I've hoisted her up. She locks her ankles around my waist, licks my mouth. Heat flushes my cheeks; blood thunders at my temples. A growl rips from me, and I tighten my hold under her butt.

The scent of her, that sweet pastry essence, fills my senses, goes to my head. I can't stop myself; I kiss her back. Then yank her close enough for her breasts to flatten against my chest; for me to feel the hard buds of her nipples bite into my flesh.

A moan whines from her. She loops her fingers around my neck, digs her fingers into my hair and strains in my hold. Her melting core cocoons my hardness. My dick nestles against the crotch of her jeans, which I am happy to report is soaked right through. She wriggles around, trying to get closer. A chuckle rips from me. So impatient, this little thing is. I drag a hand up her spine, to lock my palm about her nape. She stills; a sigh trembles from her lips.

Hmm, she likes a firm hand, huh? Happy to oblige. I swipe my tongue over her teeth, down the seam of her lower lip. She groans; her body trembles. She pushes her core into my cock, which happily nestles into her. Fuck. This willing, quivering mass of woman is too enticing, too seductive... too much everything. If I continue to kiss her, I'll have to take her, and one time won't be enough. I'll have to fuck whatever it is between us out of my system, which could take...days... Hell, weeks... Probably all of the time that I'd allowed myself here... And how is that going to work out, hmm?

I lessen the intensity of the kiss. She whines, coils herself into me, as if she wants to crawl under my skin... Fuck, if she hasn't already, in some way. *Which is not too bad, hmm? What the—what am I thinking?* I don't want a woman in my life. Not now. Not when I'm trying to heal myself. I need to rest up, ensure my mind and body are rested and ready to go. It is my career at stake, if I don't mend. As a surgeon, the operations I perform demand that my faculties be more than a 100% when I perform procedures. It's the one thing that makes my life worthwhile—being able to save others. Perhaps because when I am in surgery, I am in control. It is in my hands to take charge, to see the operation through, ensure I do my best, snatch people back from the jaws of death and restore them back to their lives.

Something I could only hope for during the time I had been kidnapped and held hostage. Is that why I like to play God? Or as close to it as it gets, when I hold someone's heart in my palms...like she held my balls in hers. Her touch, her kisses, the flow of her hair about her shoulders, the pulse of her blood at the base of her neck, at her chest, between her thighs... Why do I want to acquaint myself with every goddam nook and crevasse of her body? I tear my mouth from hers.

Her chin wobbles, she blinks, and a whine spills from her lips. "Weston," she mumbles.

My name from her mouth, her tongue drawing out the vowels, her every part reaching, aching, wanting me... Fuck... I can't do this. Can't allow myself to feel whatever it is that connects us. I am not ready for this... Will never be ready for whatever it is that she wants from me—the kind of commitment not spoken, but voiced with her actions, her reactions to me, since she had entered.

"Weston?" She peers up at me, "Hey..." She cups my cheek, and her touch sinks into my blood. My pulse rate ratchets up and my cock—that needy part of me—instantly stands to attention. Fucking fuck, I gotta get out of here. Max chooses that moment to come tearing back into the space. Thank fuck. He parks his little body next to my leg, then paws at my ankle.

"The puppy," I say, "he needs to be fed."

She swallows; the brightness dulls in her eyes. My heart stutters. It fucking stutters at that. Why the hell is she affecting me like this? I can't let her get to me. Not now. Not ever.

"So you know, I am not sorry."

"Huh?" Her eyebrows knit, "What are you talking about—?" Her gaze

widens as I grip her under her armpits and hold her away from my body. The cold instantly infiltrates my chest. Fuck... Now I am getting melodramatic, or perhaps, I've simply been standing around without clothes for too long.

"Don't you dare, Wes—"

I release her.

She plops into the hot tub and water splashes over the sides.

"You asshole," she splutters. "How dare you?"

"Oh, I dare, alright. In fact, I'm just getting started. I am taking over the house for the holidays. You'll have to find yourself other accommodations."

"Weston— You motherfucker," her screech follows me. "Come back right now, or else..."

I pause, glance at her over my shoulder, "Or else?"

"Or else...you'll never find out about the proposal I have in mind for you."

5

Amelie

"Proposal, huh?" He arches an eyebrow.

"Yeah." I nod. *What the hell am I doing? And after I'd blown him... Willingly, I might add... What the hell was that all about?*

Not that I have anything against giving a blowjob, but honestly, it's not something I've done before with a man I don't know well... And that is the problem. With Weston, there had been this instant reaction to him, from the time I'd first seen him. I'd wanted to slap that smirk off his face, then hit him in the dick, right before I pulled him close and smooched the hell out of him. Shit, this...push-pull reaction I am having to him is insane. From the time he'd walked through the patio door, he'd been mean to me. He'd been pushing my buttons, all right, trying to get a reaction out of me. And you know what? I am not going to let him win this David and Goliath game we have going on here. I'd been promised I could have this space over the holidays and I intend to make sure I do.

If it means sharing with this a-hole of a man... This hot and sexy, ripped, 100% macho maleness of a billionaire, doctor... Gulp. Then so be it. I am not going to let him crowd me into corner, or overpower me with his status.... Okay, so maybe I am a little overwhelmed by his uh, larger than life assets... but come on, who wouldn't be? And that kiss at the end? When I'd flung myself at him...because, well, I am a slut... Fine, fine, so berate me, but I swear, there had been something about the power I'd been able to wield over him, when I had taken him in my mouth, and his body had responded to

mine.

Whatever his issues with me... Physically, the signals he's been broadcasting are clear—he wants me. And let me tell you, there's something very satisfying in that, in knowing that this powerful man is helpless in the face of whatever it is that our bodies are communicating with each other. And face it...sharing a space with him would be no...hardship... Except for that horrible attitude of his, of course. I'm willing to give him a chance though... Who wouldn't? Not when he'd kissed me back... He had. He had pulled me to him, closed that big sexy mouth of his over mine and kissed the hell out of me... Enough for my knees to go weak, for my pussy to clench, and my panties to dampen all over again, like I'd just run into the Thames. Okay, so maybe not the last comparison, considering the Thames is grimy as hell, but you get what I mean, huh?

"I... I am not leaving," I say.

"Yes, you are," he reiterates.

"Nope."

"Yes."

He leans a hip against the door, and damn him, couldn't he have, at least, put on some clothes? I mean, this entire encounter? He's been butt-naked, and it's a mighty fine butt, and massively corded thighs, and that eight pack...and... Hell, not going down that path right now.

"You'll want me to stay, I promise you."

"Huh?" He folds his arms over his chest. Those biceps bulge, his shoulders fill the doorway, and it's not because its narrow. The entrance, I mean.

"I'll be your housekeeper—cook your food, clean..." I wave a hand in the air, "Considering you're laid up with that...uh, injury, you'll need someone to take care of your needs."

"Needs, huh?"

Shit, I hadn't meant to word it that way, but whatever, at least he's listening to me.

"You bet." I swing one leg up over the lip of the hot tub, then scramble up and straighten. "You hadn't thought about how you were going to manage over the holidays without being able to use your hand."

"Hmm." He raises his injured palm, then scratches at his jaw. "You offering to help?"

"Do you want me to help?"

"You want to keep house for me?" He smirks.

I frown. Asshole, of course he'd twist my words around to suit his needs.

"I'd cook and clean the house..." I mutter, " You'd have to pick up after yourself. I am not picking up your dirty laundry."

"What else?"

"What do you mean?" I frown.

"What else can you do for me?" he drawls.

"I could...uh, drive you around, like I already said."

"And?" His lips curl and his eyes gleam.

Oh, no, no, he's not getting at that. "Whatever it is you're thinking, you can forget about it," I huff.

"How do you know what I am thinking?"

"A man like you has only one thing on your mind."

"As opposed to a woman like you?"

"I'm not the one walking around naked."

"Does it bother you?"

"Of course, it bothers me." I swipe my hair over my shoulders. "How would it feel if I were to walk around without clothes?"

"Are you offering?" He smirks.

I throw up my hands, "Oh, forget I said anything. Clearly, this entire discussion is going nowhere... Meanwhile—" A whine sounds from beyond him, "Don't keep Max waiting. Feed the poor thing, will you?"

He scowls, "Don't tell me what to do."

"Oh, my God." I plant my hands on my hips, grimace when that dislodges more water from my clothes. "You're bloody impossible."

"And you're staying out here."

He walks inside, slams the door behind him. *The hell?* I race forward, try the door. It's locked. Of course, it is. I bang on it. "Weston, you asshole, let me in."

No answer, not that I expected one... But how dare he simply...lock me out? I kick at the door. Pain shoots up my leg. I groan, then glance around the patio. There are heaters out here around the hot tub, so I'm not cold. The wind blows, and I shiver... Okay, scratch that. I won't freeze, but damn, if I am standing around here waiting for that bastard to come back and get me.

I stalk past the tub, jump down onto the grass. I walk around the side. Ha, he's going to keep me out the house, is he? Not if I can help it. I break into a sprint, jog up the field surrounding the house, around to the front. Reaching

the door, I find it...closed. *Bugger*. I try the door handle, and it's locked. I throw up my fists, ready to punch my way through...? As if that would help... Think... Think... What can I do...? I walk down the steps, get back into the car...search for my phone. Shit. My handbag—I left it inside the bloody house, along with my chef's satchel. *Argh!*

I slam my palm on the steering wheel, and the horn blares. Hell. I press down on the horn a little longer. I'd left the keys in the ignition... So, at least, I am mobile, but without my phone and my wallet... Hell, even if I went out into the village... which is a 45-minute drive away, I couldn't do much. Damn it, I can't even call anyone for help.

Ugh! I grip the steering wheel, take a deep breath, then another. *Don't lose it. You can think it through.* He isn't going to leave me out... Nah! He wouldn't...would he? Damn it. It would be just like that reprobate who has chocolate tarts for brains to do something exactly so...assholish. *Argh!* Anger ladders up my spine. I swipe my wet hair out of my eyes... Great. Here I am, soaking wet, with no dry clothes in sight... Uhm, no, I do have my suitcase where I left it outside. There's a distinct boom, then drops of water drizzle down. Shit. That doesn't help. No way am I going to get soaked all over again. I snatch up the keys, step out of the car and lock it. Then run over to my suitcase... I drag it up the steps to the front entryway, and place it against the wall.

Then retrace my path down the steps, then around to the back porch.

The wind blows. I shiver and step closer to the warmth emanating from the tub. Hmm. Should I? I glance around for the controls, spot a switch. When I throw it, the bubbles begin to churn in the tub. I dip my hand, and yep, the water's warm. I turn the dial further toward the red. With the rain smattering outside and the floor patio heaters going full force... Well, it is not too bad. But that doesn't get me inside the cabin. I hear scratching at the door—Max trying to get out again.

Okay, I'm not going to stand around here, as if waiting for him... I am going to... I grab the hem of my blouse, pull it off. I hear Weston talking to Max, then the sound of the door being unlocked. I strip out of my jeans. The door begins to open. I race toward the tub, jump inside, unhooking my bra at the same time.

6

Weston

What the—? What the hell is she up to now?

I walk out of the door and onto the patio in time to watch her sink into the hot tub. There's a flash of pink, then she holds up her bra... something slinky and made of scraps of nylon. My jaw drops and my belly hardens. She can't be doing what I think she is. She can't be undressed...and turning the tables on me...can she?

I'd fed the mutt...then proceeded to take a cold shower...before pulling out clothes. When I could delay no longer, I'd walked out. Okay, also because I was curious. The last thing I'd expected was for her to reverse engineer the scene I'd played out for her earlier.

I stalk forward and my foot brushes something wet. I glance down to find her abandoned blouse...then her jeans... I follow a trail of clothes strewn across the patio that leads me to stand over her.

"What are you up to?"

"What do you think?" She tosses her bra at me and I catch it. Damn her, but I want to smell it. Would it have her scent...of sugar and spices and everything nice? *Argh!* I really have to stop reading to Birdie, my niece. Now I am thinking in nursery rhymes? Or is it simply her nearness going to my head?

She scoops up some of the hot water, pours it over her shoulders. The bubbles cover her up to the swell of her breasts, but she's naked below it... Is she? Did she take off her panties? I glance around, can't see the abandoned

lingerie...so she must have it on... Would the cloth be transparent enough for me to see through it to that melting center of her, that I desperately want to get my hands on? My cock throbs and blood thunders at my temples. "Get out of there."

"No."

"If you don't step out..."

"What? You'll step in?"

Oh, I'm tempted to, but considering I spent the last few hours in there already, I'll pass. Doesn't mean I am going to let her get away with this little tease-filled antic, either.

I toss her bra aside then reach over to grab her shoulder. She twists her body and water splashes onto my shirt. "Oops." She giggles in a voice that seems to imply she's not sorry at all.

"Why you little—" I scowl, then straighten. "Stand up," I snarl.

"Make me."

"You don't want me coming in there. Trust me."

"Oh?" She tilts her head, "We'll see, shall we?" She slaps the water; more of it splashes onto me. *What the—?* I fold my arms over my chest, lower my voice to a hush, "Up." I growl.

She swallows.

"Do it."

"You sure?" she asks.

"I won't repeat myself."

"Fine." She juts out her chin.

"Fine?" I frown. Why is she agreeing so readily? She's up to no good, for sure, she— She rises to her feet. Water pours from her slim frame down the jut of her hips, in between her legs...and fuck, I was wrong. She doesn't have her panties on.

The water slides down her flat stomach, down to the triangle between her legs. And I can only watch as a drop clings to her pussy lips, begging me to go closer, closer. My knees bump into the side of the hot water tub. I blink.

"My face is up here," she drawls.

I can't stop the chuckle that rumbles up my throat. "Very good." I tilt my head. "Clearly, you've been paying attention to our conversation, and PS," I make air quotes with my fingers, "you ain't got nothin' that I haven't seen already."

She blinks, then gapes at me, "I was wrong about you."

"Oh?"

"You're not just an asshole, but a bloody, egoistical brute with no manners."

A grin threatens to split my face. I swallow it with a cough. "I'll give you one thing though; you got my attention."

"Hallelujah." She raises her arms skyward and tilts her head back. Her tits jiggle with the action. My cock instantly springs to attention. Fuck. It's not like I haven't seen better-looking women—certainly, those with bigger tits, slimmer waists...curvier hips... But the complete package of the woman who stands knee-deep in bubbles, with her hair sticking to her forehead...the flushed cheeks, the pink lips... Yeah, the ones between her legs as well... All of it comes together in an amalgamation that is uniquely her... Something I want to get to know better... To own and to understand, to pull apart and piece together until she makes more sense... Until I get her out of my system, that's all. Perhaps that's reason to keep her around a little longer?

I jerk my chin, "Come on."

"Huh?" She frowns.

"Out of there. Chop, chop." I clap my hand. "You've got a lot of work to do."

Turning, I head for the doorway leading back to the house.

"Wait," she calls out.

I reach the door, step inside.

"Does this mean you accept my proposition?"

"It means," I turn to glance at her, "you'd better get inside before I change my mind."

She stares back, spine straight, shoulders hitched back. She props a hand on her hip, breasts thrust up, nipples pebbled— Hell, if she isn't as aroused as I am feeling. This is going to be interesting. I start to close the door. She springs into action, clambers over the side of the tub. "Wait," she screeches.

My lips twitch as I try to keep the smile off of my face. "You have one minute to get your arse in here," I drawl.

"Bastard," she huffs.

I yawn, "You're getting repetitive, Buttercup."

"Aargh." She makes a sound deep in her throat, "I hate that ridiculous name."

"Prefer Blossom? Or Bubbles, maybe?"

"No," she scoffs, "all three of the Powerpuff girls are dumb."

"Hey," I lower my chin, "you did not just say that."

"Yes, I did." She grabs her blouse, pulls it on and it falls to mid-thigh.

My gaze, of course, goes there, to the curved flesh that jiggles as she moves. The women I've dated before have been emaciated, by comparison. None of them had that lustrous skin that I itch to mark, the delicate turn of ankles that invites me to run my tongue up the hollow, scooping the water droplets that are sure to be nestled there, up her calf and her inner leg, to that object of my obsession—her beautiful gorgeous core. *Fuck*.

"Just for that, your first punishment is watching the cartoon characters on loop."

"Punishment?" She grabs her boots and her socks; one of her shoes slips from her hold and hits the ground. "Crummy apple crumble," she swears,

"Did you use a dessert as a swear word?" I chuckle.

She rescues her footwear. "You could help, instead of ogling my body," she grumbles.

"Oh, if I were ogling, you'd know it, sweet thing."

She straightens, her cheeks rosier than they had been a few moments ago, "You're a chauvinist."

"You're a submissive."

She stiffens, "How dare you say that?"

"You want to be taken without being given a choice. Somewhere deep inside, you want to be dominated. At your core, you prefer to have all options taken from you, so you can relax into your true self."

She scoffs, "The hell you mean?"

"Right now, as we speak, you want me to bend you over the nearest chair, then part your legs, strum your clit, finger your pussy and make you come, right before I sink my hard, throbbing...aching...length into your melting center."

She draws in a breath, stares at me. Even through the darkness, her blue irises shine... The light in my darkness, the silvery fucking lining to my black cloud of a bloody life... And I am waxing poetic, all right, and all because this woman here has crawled under my skin. I want to grab her and pull her close and kiss her... Right after I turn her over my lap and spank all that impudence out of her. Speaking of... "Okay, I'm shutting the door." I let the barrier swing.

"W-a-i-t!" She scampers forward, then slips through the crack between the door and the frame. The door snicks shut. Silence, a beat, then another.

This close, the scent of her—that vanilla and apples essence of her, laced with that sugary-tart sweetness that lingers on my tongue like a memory of that smell...when you go to the mall and you walk past the candy shop and smell the sugar? That smell intensifies. My mouth waters as my cock lengthens. I curl my fingers at my sides.

"Go on," I jerk my chin, temporarily capable of little more than monosyllabic words and spastic movements.

She scowls, "So you can stare at my arse?"

"If you'd rather ogle my butt instead..." I shrug, which has the added benefit of relieving some of the tension I'm feeling.

She snatches up her satchel, wears it across her chest, then bends to pick up her coat. Her toolkit jostles forward and smacks the back of her head. "Ow." She straightens, and her coat slips down to trail on the floor. "Shit," she swears aloud, "I am a mess."

"And I'd love to mess up my bed with you in it," I cough.

"What did you say?" she sputters as she scoops up her coat again.

"Just that you are pretty in your disarray."

She stares. "Somehow, I don't believe you."

"Somehow, I don't think I care."

"Is this some kind of NLP technique?" She frowns.

"No idea what you are talking about." I turn away.

"This entire mirroring my words thing you have happening."

"The only mirroring I want to do is of the 69 kind," I snicker.

"That's it," she snarls, "I've changed my mind."

"Hmm."

"I thought we could find a way to get through the holiday season, but clearly, if I spend any time with you, it's going to drive me insane."

"Goes both ways, sugar," I retort. The patter of paws on the wooden floor announces the arrival of Max. He jumps up, places his paws on my legs, as if he hasn't seen me in years, instead of minutes ago when I'd fed him. "Hey Buddy, whatcha doin', hmm?" I scratch at his head behind his ears and he makes a low, rumbling sound in his throat. He attempts to jump up again, but this time I oblige. I snatch him up, cuddle him, turn to watch her watching me.

I tilt my head, "What?"

"Every time I think you're a horrible monster, Max saves the day."

"Should I be thankful?" I smirk, digging my fingertips into Max's skin.

He makes a deep groaning sound.

"Did he just...?" She blinks.

"Max is every bit as expressive as you," I snicker.

"Thanks." She tosses her head, "Doesn't get you off the hook. I'm still leaving." She marches past me, snatches up her handbag from where she'd placed it on the bar counter.

She heads for the door, then pauses, to rifle around in her purse.

Wait for it.

Wait for it.

Wait for—

"You asshole." She turns on me.

"Alphahole." I correct her.

"You took my phone."

I lower Max to the floor and he darts off toward the kitchen. I follow him, shut the door that leads from the living room, then lean against it.

"You did, didn't you?" she grumbles.

"If you mean that piece of shit technology that went out of date..."

"Hey, don't insult Hedwig."

"Hedwig?"

"My phone, you idiot."

"Who gives a phone a name? Wait, you named your phone after the owl in Harry Potter?"

"Wow." She swallows, "You placed that?"

She stares at me, her gaze taking on that familiar googly-eyed look.

I hold my hands out in front of me. "Don't go reading anything into it. And for the record, owl post wouldn't work, in real life," I mutter.

"What do you mean?"

"It's a scientifically-proven fact that owls can't stay in flight while carrying packages."

"Just because it isn't supported by science, doesn't mean it doesn't work."

"What do you mean?" I frown.

"Magic, remember?"

"Which is what you believe in, of course? Stars and unicorns and all that girlie shit."

Her face heats, "You could do with believing in a little of that yourself."

"When you're kidnapped and starved for days, and tortured to within an inch of your life, you lose faith in all that stupid stuff very quickly," I snap.

Her features scrunch up, "I'm so sorry for what happened to you and the Seven."

"I'm not. If it weren't for that incident, I'd still be naive—"

"Like me, you mean?"

"You said it." I let my lips curl.

She frowns, "Why am I debating this with you?" She holds out her hand, "Give Hedwig back to me."

"Sorry, I can't."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't remember where I put it." I grimace.

"What?"

"If you find it, you can keep it." I raise my shoulders.

"He belonged to me in the first place."

"He..." I shake my head, "It...the phone's mine now."

"No, it's not."

"Alas, poor Hedwig, he's going to have to spend Christmas without you, I'm afraid."

Her features contort, and I am sure she's going to stamp her foot and rage, and have a full-on tantrum. This should be interesting. I head to the armchair by the fireplace, drop into it, then pick up my novel.

"The hell are you doing?" she squawks.

"Reading."

She makes a snarling sound at the back of her throat. I hear the thump of her toolkit satchel hitting the floor, then a softer crash—that's her handbag—followed by the soft sound of her wet clothes hitting the wooden floor. Good. Footsteps approach; the next second she grabs the book from my hand.

"Hey, you only had to ask."

"I did, for my phone. Remember?"

"I mean the book." I lean back in the chair, fold one leg over the other.

She peruses the cover of the book, then blinks. "Harry Potter? You're reading Harry Potter?"

She glances at me, with...stars in her eyes, once more.

Oh, no, no, damn it. "Why do you think I recognized your reference, which I can tell you, is way too obvious. You need to up your game, Buttercup."

Her features tighten.

Bloody fuck, I shouldn't have insulted her...but what the hell? I need to

live up to my reputation as someone who doesn't give a damn about anyone else... Besides, that strange gooey expression of hers... It scares the shit out of me. Har, har. Ask me to perform a complicated bypass, I am there. Ask me to try to figure out why I have this strange push-pull reaction to her, and hell, if it doesn't flummox me. Time to set this right and lay down the rules. We'll see then, how she copes. Fuck that hint of hopefulness I've spotted on her face throughout the evening. It is time to show her what I am actually made of.

"Don't let the fact that I am reading the Potter fool you."

"God forbid," she mutters.

"It's only so I can keep up with my older niece."

"How many nieces do you have?"

"Two...and I am not answering any more questions."

"Like I care."

"I think you do, actually. And I have to warn you right now."

"What?"

"Don't fall in love with me, Buttercup. You'll only have your heart broken."

7

Amelie

My jaw drops. Again. The arrogance of the man. "I wouldn't fall for you, if you were the last man on earth.

"I'll hold you to that."

"What is that supposed to mean?" My heart begins to race.

"You know," he replies, his tone hard.

Sweat beads my palms, and it's not because the inside of the room is warmer than it was before... When had he lit the fireplace? Probably when I was outside. The light from the flames flickers over his face, throwing his features into relief, deepening the shadows under his cheekbones, hollowing out the spaces under his eyes. His dark hair appears almost blue, and those grey eyes seem almost colorless. Deep and fathomless. What would I find if I looked into those depths? A soul that would take, a male who'd possess, who'd pleasure me in the way no one else ever has. A dominant man who'd push aside all of my doubts and teach me how it is to be claimed. A shiver runs down my spine. *Is that what I want? Is that why I haven't left?* Hell, it could be just the two of us in this house—a faint scratching comes from the direction of the kitchen—and the puppy. Not another living soul for miles around; no business demands on either of us. He'd come to heal and I had come to find...something... That spark inside of me that had vanished...and which I had been hoping to recapture. That leap of faith that had pushed me to start my own business... That makes me take a step forward...close the distance between us.

He watches me as I move closer. He lowers his feet to the floor, parts his thighs. I step in between them. He tips his chin up. It feels...different this way. Me looking down on him. The angle intensifies that brooding edge that coils under the surface. I want to find out what makes him tick. Why he blows hot and cold; why he'd decided to spend the holidays alone...when he could have been with any woman... Instead, he's gotten me. I frown.

He shakes his head.

I scowl.

"You have no idea what you're letting yourself in for," he mutters, half to himself.

"And you do?"

"I've been around the block many more times than you."

"You sure?"

"Have you?" he shoots back.

"Maybe not as much as you," I concede, "but I've had my share of boyfriends."

"How many?"

"What's it to you?" I snap.

"If we're going to get through our time together, then there are some ground rules you need to follow."

"You?" I scowl.

He tilts his head.

"You meant *we* need to follow, surely?" I elaborate.

He stares at me with those almost-colorless eyes and another shiver of electricity runs up my spine. *Shit, he doesn't even need to speak to me and I know what he means. Is it because I am that tuned into him?* More likely, I know exactly the kind of obnoxious, merciless man he is. My toes curl. *Why the hell does that turn me on?* It shouldn't be so appealing. I shouldn't be this attracted to him... It's precisely the fact that he wouldn't care about my needs, that he'd simply take what he wants from me, that I find...refreshing. There would be no pretensions with this man. It would be all give... At least, there would be no surprises, huh? So, I won't be disappointed. Is that how low my expectations have fallen?

"You shouldn't overanalyze everything," he remarks.

"You shouldn't take everyone around you for granted."

"Now you're doing that NLP shit..." he points out.

I half laugh, "You going to explain exactly what this is about?"

"This?" He looks perplexed.

I point to the space between us, "This."

"Ah." He steeples his fingers together. "It's simple. I am willing to let you stay here for the holiday season."

I frown.

"But?"

"Did I say a 'but'?"

"There's always a 'but' with people like you."

"People like me?"

"Overindulgent, spoilt, rich pricks who think they own the world."

"That's because I do."

I snort; I can't help it. "Why am I not surprised that you said that?"

He raises his shoulders, "It's a fact."

"Whatever," I mutter.

"What was that?"

"I said, 'What-fucking-ever,'" I say, with more aggression than I am feeling.

"Hmm, you have spirit. That's good."

"Oh, stop talking in riddles."

"That's Saint," he chuckles.

"What?"

"Doesn't matter." He draws in a breath, then straightens his shoulders, "Enough beating around the bush. It's six days to Christmas. We spend it together. You do everything I ask of you in that time."

"What does that mean?" I stare.

"Exactly what it sounds like. Nothing hidden."

"Does it mean...uh...?"

"What?"

"You know."

"No, I don't." He smirks.

Oh, spit it out already, why the hell am I being coy? "Sexual favors," I burst out.

"Only if you want it to," he replies.

I blink. "You mean..."

He nods.

"So, if I decided I didn't want to blow you again..."

"You'd be missing out," he rolls his shoulders, "but your call."

"You sure?"

"Would I lie?"

"Wouldn't you?"

He grins. "I love this little sparring thing we have going on..."

I purse my lips together, "It's not 'little' anything."

"That's true," he chuckles.

"Oh, my God!" I throw up my hands. "We get on each other's nerves. That's all it is."

"Hmm," he scratches his jaw, "you may be right there. We'll have to tone it down though, when we're seen in public."

"Public?"

He nods, "I have to go to visit my family sometime before Christmas and you'll come along, of course."

I stare at him. Has he gone mad? Why is he jumping around topics like that? "Wh...what do you mean?"

"You'll come with me, as my date, to visit with my family in the lead up to Christmas." He speaks slower this time, as if I didn't understand him the first time around. I still don't.

"No, I won't."

"Yes, you will."

I blink. He's so bloody confident, it borders on delusional. *I hadn't mistakenly agreed to this earlier, had I? No, of course not.* "Why the hell would I do that?" I scoff.

"Because you wanted a place to spend the holiday season, and this is the only space available."

"No, it isn't." I shuffle my feet.

"Ever tried finding a place to stay over the holiday season? It's either sold out, or so expensive, it would be out of your price range."

"How do you know what my price range is?"

"Whatever it is, I can afford it." He smirks.

My jaw drops. Again. Shit, I've been doing a lot of that since I got here... But this...this...wanker... He's got his head up his arse. No doubt, he thinks the sun shines out of it too. I snicker.

He frowns. "Also, you can't do that while you are here," he drawls.

"What?"

"Think impertinent thoughts."

I blink, then laugh, "Man, you're something else, you know?"

"As you are going to find out."

I open and shut my mouth, I mean... Why am I standing here arguing with him? I should just march out of here, figure out alternate arrangements across the new year.

"Giving up so soon?" he drawls.

"What do you mean?"

"Guess you know that you can't last the next six days without falling for my charms."

"What charms?" I look him and down, "You're a douchebag, is all."

"Exactly what you find so attractive, hmm?"

"You have no idea what I like, or not."

"Oh, trust me," He sits forward in the chair, "I have a very good idea what you...want.... Question is," he lowers his voice to that hushed tone that sinks into my skin. My blood heats; moisture laces my core. *How the hell does he draw that reaction from me without trying too hard?*

"Do you, Buttercup?"

I swallow, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"We'll have to work on that too."

"What?"

"This entire self-denial thing you have going on... It's cute..." he tilts his head, "but it can get wearying after a while, for both of us."

I stare, trying to keep pace with his thoughts.

"It is?"

He nods, "And we don't want that."

My head spins; my skin heats further. *Why the hell is it so warm inside?*

"I... I think I need to go."

I turn to leave, reach the door, when he calls out.

"A million pounds."

I pause, then turn, "Excuse me?"

He's standing in front of the chair. "You heard me." He props his palms on his hips. "I know how much in debt you are."

"My business is doing well." My heart begins to race; sweat dampens my palms. *Dammit, why the hell does this guy make me nervous?* "In fact, that's why I am here, to recuperate from the stress —"

"No doubt, caused by the college loans you carry. Not to mention, the ones you took out to finance your fledgling little business."

Argh, did he just call my thriving enterprise 'little,' which it is, but what

the hell gives him the right to come across all condescending like that? "And you know all this...how?"

"Do you deny it?" he asks.

Do it. Don't give him the satisfaction of finding out how right he is. I open my mouth, shut it again. Damn it, but I can't tell a white lie. Not even to save my arse. Which might be more literal than I realize. A giggle bubbles up.

He frowns. "If you did make a success of your business—"

I open my mouth to protest.

He holds up his hand to stop me, "—which is dependent on your business acumen as much as on your ability to be a cook—"

"I'm a pastry chef, you knob."

"Cook." He closes the distance between us, "Even then, you'll be paying off your loans for the next twenty years."

My pulse rate ratchets up. *Shit*, those numbers... Not that I wasn't aware of them. I prefer not to think about it, that's all. I mean, sure, I could look on the negative and the fact that I'll be paying off the loans forever... But I've been confident I could turn the corner at some point. What's the other option? Not take risks, work a nine-to-five... Nothing wrong with that. It's not for me, that's all.

"So?" I sniff.

"So, you'll work back-breaking, long hours, behind a stove—"

"An oven, you prick."

"If you keep alluding to that part of me, I'll have to assume you've been thinking of it."

"No, I haven't."

He grins. *Bastard*. My cheeks heat. So, fine, I've been thinking about that particular attribute of his nonstop since I sucked on him, like my own private lollypop. *Gah!* So? Hey, it was a bloody good blowjob too, thank you very much.

"As I was saying," he drums his fingers on his chest, "you'll waste away your best years, working non-stop, trying to pay off the loans. Before you know it, you'll be forty and single, not having had the time to find a man—"

"I don't need one," I snarl.

He laughs, "Meanwhile, the debt is going to stop you from expanding your business further... And that, you do want, hmm?"

I scowl. He's got me there. I have plans. I want to grow my business to

set up a store front... Then a chain, not only in England, but abroad. And while I'm sure I won't let debt stop me, not with the help of expert advice on how to structure my business holdings... Still, nothing like cash in hand to inspire confidence, especially from future creditors.

"One million, huh?"

His eyes gleam.

I frown. Damn it, have I walked into a trap? I shouldn't have shown interest in his offer, but I'm human, okay? I mean... No, I won't sell my principles for money... But this is an awful lot of money. Not something to sneer at, get me? Besides, what principles is he really trying to pay me to betray? It's not like he's offering to pay me for sex. I chew on my lower lip; his gaze drops there. The tendons of his throat move as he swallows. Huh? He's affected by me as well? I mean, I know he wants me... That entire blowjob thing between us... It had confirmed he wants to get in my pants... But this... His hooded eyelids, the way he watches me with single-minded focus... My scalp tingles. A bead of sweat trickles down my spine.

I clear my throat.

He jerks his chin up, "Per day."

"What the—?" I gape. "You didn't... Why would you—?" I rake my fingers through my hair. "This entire thing is bizarre."

"It's a little out of your comfort zone, I understand." He shoves his hand in the pocket of his jeans, "But opportunities like this don't come often."

"You're telling me," I laugh. The sound comes out weak. Shit, I sound uncertain. And I am not. Not about my answer... Just his intention. "Why?" I frown. "Why are you so keen on ensuring that I stay?"

"You said it." He tilts his head, "I am not much use with this—" He holds up his finger in the splint. "Until you pointed it out, I hadn't realized it." He nods.

Nice one. Blame it on me that he'd come up with this insane idea, huh.?

"You could get a housekeeper...or something."

"Not over the holiday season. Besides, why would I look for a stranger when I want you?"

"Umm, because you don't know me well either?"

His gaze drops to my mouth.

"That...that was a one off." I redden. "It doesn't mean you know me as a person."

He raises his shoulders, "You're a friend of Summer and Victoria's,

women who are trusted by the Seven."

"Right," I draw in a breath.

"So?" He tilts his head.

"So?" I shuffle my weight from foot to foot. *What do I say?* I twist my fingers together. "One million for every day makes it..."

"Six million pounds." He nods.

"S... six?" I squeak.

"It'll set you up for any kind of expansion you want to finance for your business."

I narrow my gaze. How could he have intuited my plans? "How do you know that?"

"You're ambitious, I get it." He stares back, "Not that much of a stretch, to know that you'd be planning to grow your enterprise.

"Right." I scowl at him. "I guess that makes sense. I mean, you weren't stalking me or anything, before I came here to find out this information, were you? Although, it does beg the question, how did you know about my debt?"

He chuckles, "Don't flatter yourself, babe. We check into anyone who enters our orbit. Can't be too careful, you know?"

"Hmm." I fold my arms around my waist. "It's what Sinclair and then Saint did before they proposed to my friends," I say, referring to the now-husbands of Summer and Victoria, respectively.

His lips quirk, "You think that's what this is about? My sneaky way of trying to form some kind of fake marriage proposal with you?"

Hmm, when he puts it like that, it sounds pretty far-fetched, but still, "You did ask me to accompany you to see your family."

"Just a way to get them off my back," he grumbles. "You're going to be hanging about here. I may as well as put your time to good use."

"Jeez, you have a foolproof way of charming women," I mutter.

"Right?" His smile broadens and his features light up. He is taking the piss, isn't he? I mean, no one could mistake his attitude to be anything but self-satisfying, egoistical, narcissistic—*gah*—I'm running out of adjectives.

"Well then, you'd best get your luggage in..."

"Hold on, hold on." I blow out a breath, "Nothing's settled."

"Of course, it is."

Gah! I almost cross my eyes at the sheer lunacy of this situation. Six days with an egomaniac, who is going to make every moment a living hell. Would it be worth the money? Six million freakin' quid! *Ohmigod!* That's what's at

stake here. How many zeros are there in that number anyway? I pout, "You sure...uh...this isn't another way to—"

"Get in your knickers?" He raises an eyebrow, scans my features. "Face it, Buttercup. If I wanted," his voice lowers to that seductive hush, "I could take you now, and you wouldn't say 'no.'" His lips curl in that hotter-than-bubbling-custard-sauce smirk. *OMG, how could I compare him to one of the food dishes that I am famous for?*

He closes the remaining distance between us and that scent of his—pine and cloves and an edgy depth that coils around me—pins me in place. I can't move, can't think, can only watch as he looks down on me from his superior height.

"N...no," I stutter.

He pauses inches in front of me, "Did I ask a question?" His lips twitch. What a stupid idea this was. Damn...but six million. Six freakin' million pounds. Hell, I'd do anything for that. Even put up with his alphaholiness for a limited period of time. I mean, this is only for a short period of time, right? It has an end, after all, this time with him.

"Fine," I mutter and my stomach flip-flops. *Shit, what am I getting myself into?*

"The arrangement is dependent on one thing."

Knew it. I scowl, "Now what?"

"You can't sleep with me during our time together."

I blink. "So, you'll pay me a million pounds a day, to be your glorified housekeeper, and sex is not part of the bargain?" I pause. "And if I sleep with you?"

"Then the deal is off."

Huh? I peruse his features. Is he for real? Is this...weird-ass bargain as good as it sounds?

"So..." I try to give voice to my thoughts, "Everything but sex?"

"Not gonna repeat myself." His lips quirk.

What's the catch, huh? What is it?

I stare at him; a low smoldering burn begins to curl in my belly, "So..." I gulp. "Wh...what's not off limits, then?" *Why is my voice shaking?*

"You sure you want to know?"

No.

No.

"Yes." I clear my throat, "I need to know before I sign on the dotted line,

right?"

"Hmm." His eyes gleam. He bends his knees, thrusts his face into mine, "What's not off limits includes, but is not limited to, squeezing, fondling, strumming, stuffing, kneading, massaging, pinching, spanking, hurting you, tying you up, making you scream, cry, beg, plead, howl—"

"Stop," I gasp.

He nods. "That's another thing you need to learn—to not tell me to stop when you don't mean it."

"Of course, I do."

His lips curl. He swoops out his hand to cup my pussy through the blouse that covers me to mid-thigh.

I squeak, grab at his wrist. He digs the heel of his palm into my core, and the strength of his touch, presses up through the soft fabric of my blouse into my clit. Sparks of heat, of lust, and streaks of emptiness slam into my gut. I shudder, "Oh, my God."

He rotates his palm in circles. Pinpricks of need swirl up my spine, my thighs spasm, my toes curl, my scalp tingles, and damn him, but he's barely touched me. How could my body betray me like this? Is this what I want?

He releases me, retracts his palm, and I jerk my pelvis forward. *What the hell?*

He tilts his head, brings his palm to his nose and sniffs, "That's what I thought. You are so aroused, if I had continued my ministrations, you'd have come."

"Not," I sniff.

"Fine then." He smirks, straightens, turns to leave.

"Stop," I burst out.

He keeps going. *Asshole.*

"Don't," I call out, then bite on the inside of my cheek. "Please," I mumble.

"What was that?" he asks.

"Please," I half snarl, "don't go."

He pauses, then shoots me a glance over his shoulders "Admit it first."

"What?"

"That you want me."

I swallow.

He glares at me.

All of my nerve endings pop; a delicious edge of anticipation crackles up

my legs, my back. I nod.

"Say it." He lowers his chin, "Tell me you wanted me to caress your pussy, shove my fingers into your cunt, make you wet, drag the moisture around your slit, and bring you to the edge."

My breathing grows shallow and my chest heaves.

"Well?"

"Yes," I sputter. "Yes." Jesus, now I sound like I am about to orgasm and he isn't even touching me. And everything he'd said... It was filthy, and erotic, and no holds barred...and I want it. *Gah!* Maybe that last breakup had gone to my head? On the flip side, I haven't thought about my ex since I got here, huh? Perhaps that's what I need—a firm hand to keep me under control, a jerk-ass to occupy my thoughts and keep them off of my past, and his dick... Admit it. Since seeing that gorgeous cock... All you can think of is how it would feel inside of you—pulling, stretching, filling, bumping up against your innermost walls, driving you higher, higher. My knees seem to buckle. I push my heels into the floor to steady myself.

"You're right," I manage to force out the words. "What you said turned me on."

"That's a start." He draws himself up to his full height, walks back toward me. "Believe me, it's good for you to speak what's on your mind."

"Oh?"

"You have no idea what it does to keep your innermost desires bottled up inside."

"Is that your prognosis?" I mumble.

"That's my advice, as your doctor." His eyes gleam. "Don't hide your needs. Bring them out. Live them, revel in them. It's good for your mind, and of course, your heart." He leans forward places his palm over the skin above my left breast, "Let go of your inhibitions. Put yourself in my hands for this interval of time. I promise, I'll take care of you, Princess Buttercup."

I stare at him. He meets my gaze, unblinking. His features are composed, even sincere. And my soufflé rises every time I make it. Not.

I shuffle my feet. "Well..." I blink rapidly. *It seems too good to be true. Is there a catch? There has to be a catch. An egomaniac like this wouldn't suggest this unless there was something in it to trip me up. But the money, OMG, what I couldn't do with it.*

"You'll stick to your part of the bargain?" I scowl.

His eyes gleam. He holds out his hand, "You have my word."

I glance down at his palm, then back at his face, "Hmm."

"Go on," he cajoles, "I promise, I'll keep my end of the agreement."

"Will you?"

"Try me." His lips curl. Bastard. He's challenging me. Bet he thinks I'll turn tail and run out screaming about now. Which I should, but I won't. Because... Yeah I'm stubborn that way. I haven't come this far by backing down at the first sign of trouble, and no dominant, macho, sexy as fuck, obnoxious prat is going to deprive me of my much-needed holiday, not to mention the opportunity to get a head start on my career...my life. My bloody future beckons. All I have to do is embrace it.

"Fine." I place my hand in his.

His wide palm engulfs mine, warmth from his skin sizzles up my arm. Electricity zings up my spine. *Whoa. The hell was that?* I try to pull back my hand, he holds on.

"You good, Princess?"

No.

No.

"Of course," I stutter. "Why would you think otherwise?"

He surveys my features, "You seem pale."

My guts twist. *Bloody hell, this is happening. This is really, really happening.* My stomach flips and my heart thumps in my chest. *Damn... What the hell am I doing?*

"You not going to faint or anything, are you?" he asks.

I stiffen; my head instantly clears. "Of course not," I huff.

He nods, "Also...you're welcome."

I blink. *No, no, don't react. Don't say anything to this obnoxious bonehead.* He pauses a few inches from me. Sweat breaks out on my forehead. "For what?" I force out the words, knowing I shouldn't, but wanting to know what twisted notion his very clever mind has thought up.

"For accepting my invitation to the most exclusive private New Year's Eve party in London."

I open my mouth to refuse, but he shakes his head, "Think before you say anything. Trust me, you want to be there. The kind of contacts you'll make there will give you a lead over your nearest competitor."

I firm my lips together, mind racing.

"The list of guests is a who's who of the well-connected from around the world. It's perfect to build contacts, invaluable for a fledgling business like

yours."

I peer into his face. Is he making fun of me? Trying to undermine my efforts as a business person? But his features take on a sincere expression. Hmph. Not that I am buying it, but he has a point. It won't hurt to be there. Invitations to those kinds of events...are like gold dust. Of course, I could work hard...but being at the right place, at the right time... Well, that's when things get interesting.

"I...guess...that makes sense," I venture.

He nods. "If we last until then." He smirks.

"Is that a challenge?"

"No, it's a fact. Do you think you can get through our time together without walking out in a huff?"

8

5 mins later

Weston

"OMG, you're such an ass."

She marches out of the house, slamming the door behind her. The crash reverberates through the living room. Max whines and runs to the exit. He scratches at the door, then barks and jumps up onto it.

"Hey buddy." I amble toward the puppy and scoop him up. He stares up at me with soulful eyes; a small whine catches in his throat.

"What?" I growl. "Why are you making those moony faces at me?"

What the—? Am I talking in some kind of puppy lingo with him? I mean, seriously. I scowl at him. "Don't go thinking you can soften my heart or anything." I frown.

He blinks at me.

I angle my head.

He tips up his head and licks my face, my mouth...

"Hey—" I arch my neck, but am no match for the little guy's persistent slobbering. A chuckle rumbles up my throat. Who'd have thought I'd be giving in to a mutt, of all things?

"You want me to go get her, huh?"

He licks his chops, and I swear, he jerks his little head.

"What the—?" I frown, "You can't understand me, can you?"

He pops his head on my shoulder, gazes at me with those soulful brown

eyes, pleading, asking... Something hot stabs at my chest. *That...is probably my ego having a cardiac. The fuck am I thinking? And I am supposed to be a heart surgeon. Duh.* If anyone knows the ins and outs of that particular organ, it's me, and here I am, imagining all kinds of ridiculous things. Blame it on the pup. Blame it on that sassy, little Buttercup, who had taken one look at the bedroom...and the queen-sized bed in there, and had thrown up her hands in disgust. She'd marched right out—still holding onto her handbag and that infernal satchel-like bag over her back, and banged the door shut.

"It's not my fault. You know that, right?" I address the puppy. "She should have asked if there was a second bedroom. Hell, she could have asked to inspect the premises before agreeing." I frown. "Why hadn't she?" I muse. "Why had she agreed so easily to the arrangement? I mean, sure, six mil is a lot..." I glower at the little dog, who stares back, unblinking. Had I wanted her to turn it down? Show me that she was different from the other women I'd dated so far? And what? I'd expected her to throw it in my face and walk out? I raise my shoulders.

Well, my conscience is clear, at least. I am more than compensating her for her time... Which begs the question, "What the hell had I been thinking when I'd asked her to stay? And accompany me for the Christmas visit to my family...?" I ask the mutt. It had seemed like a brilliant idea—two birds, one stone, and all that. And the little fact that we'd have to share the bed? Hell, I hadn't thought of it until she'd walked into the room, but it's going to make things entertaining, for sure, huh?

The puppy yawns.

"Thanks." My lips twist. "You sure know how to handle me, little bugger, huh?"

He licks my mouth again.

I wince. "Okay, not sure how I feel about that."

He whines again, wriggles in my hold. I put him down and he runs to the exit. I follow him, shove open the door, and he races down the steps to the parked car. He leaps on the door. She opens it, careful not to hurt him... He jumps inside. Through the darkness, I make out the two of them in the front seat.

I watch for a second longer. Is she wearing her coat? I don't think she took it with her. So that means she is wearing that skimpy blouse...in the biting cold. At least, she had her boots back on.

I march inside, shrug into my coat, grab hers, then stalk to the car. I reach

the passenger side, try the handle. it's unlocked. *The hell?* I slip inside, drop the coat on the space between the seats, "You forgot this." I glare at her.

She pales, holds the puppy closer.

Max snuggles into her breasts, and stares at me.

His expression implies he's got something I don't. I scowl at him and he pants, tongue lolling. *Is the damn mutt laughing at me? And now I'm jealous of a bloody puppy? The hell? Do I still have my balls?*

I glare at her profile. "Why didn't you lock the bloody door?" my voice booms out in the space.

Max whines.

She frowns. "Do you have a thing for scaring helpless puppies?"

"Not as much as for ensuring that sassy women don't get themselves kidnapped."

"Who's going to kidnap me here?" She waves a hand in the air.

"Things are not as safe as they seem."

She huffs, "You're acting too dramatic."

"No, that's you."

She strokes Max's head and addresses him, "What are you doing here?"

"If you're going to stay in the car, you may as well turn on the heater."

"It's my car—"

"No mistaking that." I glance around the cramped space. My knees are almost doubled up in front of me. I lean down, grab the lever to push the seat back.

"What are you doing—?"

The grip comes off in my hand. I stare at it.

"Yeah... I was going to warn you..." Her voice trails off.

"Does this thing even start up?" I reach for the car keys, but she grabs them first.

"Stop insulting KITT."

I stare. "You named your car after—"

"Knight Rider." She nods, then brightens. "You know about the series?"

"This isn't anything like that KITT," I growl.

"Shh," she pats the dash, "you'll upset her."

"Of course, your car had to be female." A headache begins to drum behind my eyes.

"Why not? KITT isn't the prerogative for a male name."

"What-fucking-ever." I massage my temples.

"You're a sore loser."

"The only thing getting sore here are my knees."

"I know you're getting along in your years...but maybe you need to get that looked at."

I scowl.

Her lips kick up and her entire face brightens. Damn, when she smiles, her features resemble those of an angel... *No. What? Hello, bloody Christmas spirit must be getting to me.*

"I'm not old."

"You're older than me."

"You're what, twenty-five?" I snicker.

"If you wanted to know my age, you only had to ask."

"Like I bloody care?"

She purses her lips, "Don't swear in front of the baby."

That's when something inside of me snaps. *Of all the annoying, getting-on-my-nerve, blonde-haired bombshells in the world... This...tiny, pint-sized, sassy-as-fuck, with the sexiest tits-that-I-want-to-suck-on-like-cotton-candy woman walks into my house... Yeah, my place... Mine. Hold on. The fuck am I calling mine? Her? The cabin ... Yeah, that's what I'm referring to. That's all it is. It's not about her... Not at all. Naw. Hold on... Did I compare her breasts to a treat...? Cotton candy? What the fuck?* I reach forward, grab her shoulder.

She squeaks.

Max growls in his throat.

I shoot him a dirty look. Fucker changed camps, deserted me so easily... Wait until he comes looking for treats. *Guess who wears the pants around here, you mutt!*

Max whines.

"Hey," she hunches her shoulders over the puppy, "back off, you big bully."

"Not happening." I firm my grip on her. She winces but doesn't back down. *Hmm.* This woman has a backbone, all right. I am going to take so much pleasure in breaking her down. "Get out of the car," I growl.

"No." She firms her lips.

"You have until I count to five."

"Whatever." She continues to pat the puppy's head.

"Four." I set my jaw.

"Count faster." She rubs behind Max's ears and the mutt makes a contented sound. *Hell. How dare she ignore me...for a...a dog?* She is fucking with my head, all right.

"Three." I lower my chin.

"Guess he knows his numbers, huh?" she sing-songs to the puppy.

My pulse begins to race.

"Two." I move in closer.

"I am soo scared," she simpers

Adrenaline spikes my blood. My pulse thuds at my temples, behind my eyelids, even in my fucking balls. "Don't say I didn't warn you," I lower my voice to a hush. She pales, a visible shudder running up her spine. *Good.*

"One." I apply just enough pressure so she turns to me.

"What are you doin—?" Her gaze widens.

I yank her toward me, puppy and all, lower my lips to her taunting mouth.

9

"I could give up chocolate, but I am not a quitter."

-From Amelie's diary

Amelie

Warmth, heat, the hardness of his chest digging into my breasts... But his lips...his lips... They're soft and coaxing...and completely not what I expected. Not after how he'd grasped my shoulder... Certainly not, after how he'd kissed me that first time...all demanding and dominating... Oh, he's still ruthless, hellbent on taking from me... But with his mouth, he seduces me. He nibbles on my lower lip and I part them. He swipes his tongue across the seam of my mouth, and a moan trembles up my throat. He releases my shoulder, only to cup my cheek. His warm breath mixes with mine and I draw of his in greedy gulps. I want to bottle that essence of his, roll around in it, absorb in it, bathe in it, let it tease my core, slink up my channel... *Argh!* Everything in me wants him to lick me down there with as much finesse as he's demonstrating with his very able mouth. "Wes," I hear myself plead with him... *Did I say that aloud or was I simply thinking it in my mind?* He tilts his head, easing his tongue over mine. A ripple of pleasure darts up my spine. All thoughts drain from my head. I move in closer, strain against his chest. Bring my arms around his—a whine cuts through the air.

I pull away, but he holds me in place. "Ignore him."

"But..."

"The pooch will survive."

"He's getting restless," I insist. "Did you take him out earlier?"

"Open the door and let him out."

"No." I stare at him. "Out here?"

"It's a gated property," he replies.

I turn down my lips and he glares at me. A frisson of something—nervousness, fear, something I can't quite identify—quivers in my stomach. I lick my lips and his gaze drops there. Those colorless eyes seem to turn into mirrors—cold, hard. He could cut me, and hurt me, rip me apart, and I'd enjoy it all. I gulp, the sound audible. He jerks his chin up, then draws in a breath. "Fuck," he growls, "you owe me."

"What—?"

He reaches across me and I shudder, then almost cry out when he straightens. He cuddles the puppy against his chest, "Stay," he growls.

Is he talking to me? Before I can respond, he's shoved open the door, and stalked toward the house. What the hell is he up to?

He pushes open the door, squats down to lower the puppy to the floor, then pats him. Even now, when he's angry with me, he can't resist making sure the puppy is comfortable, huh? The man may disagree, but it's clear to me that he has a soft spot for the pet... Which, surely, shows that he isn't all that alphasolish as he makes himself out to be, huh?

He rises to his feet.

Which doesn't mean I am going to stay out here and wait for him to come back. And what? Finish what he started? The way he'd kissed me earlier... Softly, gently, revealing that part of him I'd sensed under those layers of brutishness... If he did it again, I know I'd give in to him... And hell, if I am going to let that happen. At the very least, I am not going to give in to him that easily.

He turns.

I shove open my car door and race out.

"Hey," his voice follows me.

I pick up speed.

"Stop. Where are you going?"

Good question. If I'd wanted to get away, all I'd have had to do was turn the keys, start the car, and drive away; I'd have had to wait while the gates opened, but I'd have managed to leave. Which I hadn't.

And it's not like I can leave the property, considering I have no way of opening the gates now.

So, what is this? A dash for freedom, to show him that I don't mean to obey him? Do I want him to chase me? Either way, I'm not going to give in so easily.

"Amelie," his voice whips through the still night... My name from his lips...? Ohmigod! A thrill runs down my spine. Moisture laces my core. I increase my pace.

If he wants me, he has to come and get me.

I pound down the driveway.

"Princess." He's so close. Adrenaline laces my blood; a giggle catches in my throat. *What the hell am I doing? What's wrong with me? Am I toying with him? With myself? Doesn't matter.* This is one race I plan to win. I plan to... Something—someone—his big arms catch me around my waist. I scream as the ground comes up to meet me. The next second, I am hauled up and around, and against that firm chest. Heat from his body surrounds me, envelops me; my thighs clench; my scalp tingles. A burst of excitement ignites in my veins. "Let me go," I squeak.

"No."

He drops my coat—he'd picked it up from the car?—and yanks me up to my toes, thrusts his face into mine, "Where the hell do you think you are going?"

"Somewhere... Anywhere... To get away from you."

"What if I don't let you leave?"

"Do you want me to stay?" I jut my chin, daring him. *Say it, do it. Just one word... Anything to show you're as affected with this...chemistry between us.*

He looks me up and down, "I don't care either way."

Jerk. My insides twist; anger sputters up my spine. He releases me so suddenly, that I stumble. Then right myself. *Goddamn him.*

I stand there and watch that snickerdoodle of a man bend to pick my coat.

He straightens and his shoulders once more block my line of sight. I take in how his waist tapers down to meet his powerful thighs. My mouth waters. My fingers itch. I want to reach out and trace the cut abs outlined by his shirt.

His lips kick up. Heat flushes my cheeks. Of course he is well aware of the effect of his nearness on me.

He tilts his head, "Have you decided?"

I peer up into his face, rake my gaze across his strong features, that mean upper lip, his broad jaw. My nipples pucker and my toes curl. What would

happen if I stayed? And if I leave? Will I always wonder how it would have been to spend a few days with him?

"Amelie?" His voice is impatient.

"I... I...am not sure," I stutter.

He peruses my features. "Turn around," he orders.

I do. I sense him close the distance between us, then he drops the coat over my shoulders. I shove my hands through the sleeves, and he pivots me to face him. I stare at that broad chest that's going to haunt my dreams for a long time. *Hell.*

He places his knuckles under my chin, applies pressure so I have to tilt my head up. I meet his gaze.

"You can leave now," his voice is harsh, "or you can come into the warmth."

"Come into the parlor, said the spider to the fly," I mumble.

"Oh, you're no fly, Buttercup." He grunts, "More of an annoying, pesky mosquito."

"And you're what...an octopus?"

"I can certainly wrap my arms and legs around you in a similar fashion." He chuckles. "To keep you warm, of course."

"Of course." I draw in a breath, "Fine, I'll stay."

"Good."

"On one condition."

"You don't make the rules, babe." His voice is soft, almost playful. His eyes take on that flinty look I'm coming to anticipate, and hate. My toes curl.

"But I'll let you have your say," he adds, "this time."

"You...you'll sleep on the couch," I state.

"No."

"Fine, I'll sleep on the couch." I tip up my chin.

"You think I'd let you do that?"

"Why not?" I scowl.

"A deal is a deal." His grin widens, "Six days—same house, *same bed*. You'll cook and clean and do everything I ask of you. Every day you complete, I deposit one million pounds in your account."

I gulp. OMG, I'm going to do this. I am. I can't turn this down. I tried. I went so far as trying to run away, but who am I kidding?

I can never turn down a challenge; and I admit, a tiny part of me is curious about whether I can actually resist him. I have to, of course.

Otherwise, I'll lose any measure of self-confidence I have in myself.

I pull back; his hands drop away. I tug the coat closed, then turn and walk around him toward the house. I reach the porch steps, then turn around, "Coming?"

He scowls. My insides knot. Guess he's not happy I took the lead. Too bad. I don't care that he's pissed-off. That seems to be his perpetual state of mind. But why does he have to be so hot when he glowers at me? I reach the door, then turn again. "Would you bring in my remaining luggage, while you're at it?" I suppress a giggle as I walk into the cabin.

10

Weston

"What the fuck do you have in them, stones?" I'd hauled her bag over the threshold of the house, and into the bedroom.

"Did you pack for a month?" I glower.

"I believe in traveling with everything I need."

"Clearly," I mutter.

Grabbing a bottle of beer from the kitchen, I return and prop myself on the bed.

"What are you doing?" She drags her second suitcase into the bedroom.

"What does it look like?"

She dumps the bag in the middle of the floor of the room, "Why don't you drink in the living room?"

"My house."

"It's not yours," she huffs. "You co-own it with the Seven."

"Semantics," I grumble. "It's more mine than yours, at any rate."

She opens her mouth.

I shake my head. "What made you decide to become a pastry chef?"

She blinks. "Why do you want to know?"

Good question. Why the hell do I care? Except I am intrigued... Fine, I want to understand what makes this bundle of energy tick.

"I don't care either way," I take a healthy swig of the beer, "but it's the kind of conversation you women seem to love."

She opens and shuts her mouth, then straightens, "So this is your idea of

being polite?"

"Nope," I finish off the beer, place the bottle on the sideboard, "but this is." I yank my shirt over my head, toss it aside.

"What are you doing?" she squeaks.

"What do you think?" I rise to my feet, drop my pants, along with my boxers.

Her indrawn breath fills the space. I don't stop the grin that tugs at my lips. Buttercup can deny it all she wants, but the attraction between us is alive and kicking. It's making this entire exercise a hell of a lot more interesting. It's definitely the reason I'm allowing her to stay. If nothing else, to see how far I can go before I stop resisting her. I get back into bed, pull the covers up to my waist, then switch off the lamp on my side, leaving the room in darkness.

Silence for a beat, then another.

"How is this polite?" her voice cracks. She clears her throat, "Seriously, can you enlighten me here?"

"I'm sleeping on my side of the bed, aren't I?"

"Gah." She makes a sound deep in her throat.

A chuckle rumbles up my throat. I swallow it. "You're welcome."

I hear her moving around, then, "Why is this clock not working?"

I glance up to find her holding the digital timepiece in her hands. She turns it over, fiddles with the little compartment at the back, "Huh, it has no batteries." She turns to me, "Did you do that?" She frowns.

My heartbeat begins to race. "I don't know what you're talking about." I sink back into my pillow, close my eyes.

"The clock in the living room, too, had been dismantled."

What the hell does she want to know? Why can't she leave it alone already?

"Do you have something against clocks or something? Maybe you don't like the idea of time running out?" She chuckles.

I turn my back on her.

I hear her open the drawers, "Okay I found the batteries. I am going to—"

"Put it back." I snap.

"What?"

"Put the bloody clock back where you found it."

There's a pause.

"If you don't do it, I swear I'll come there and make you do it."

She huffs. There's a click as she places the timepiece back on the table.

"I've returned the batteries to the drawer," she mutters. "So don't get your dander up about it."

The breath I'd not been aware of holding rushes out.

Shit, the hell is wrong with me? Why the hell am I getting worked up over this little thing? It is a clock—a functioning clock. Doesn't mean anything. Why the hell can't I bear the thought of it counting down the time as I sleep?

The numbers mounting, the hands moving, the tick-tock-tick-tock of the countdown as he'd watched me closely, peered into my face, searched for a reaction, anything to show I was afraid, that I'd give in and break, ask for help. Ask it, do it. My heart thunders in my chest. Close your eyes. Count down the time.

Twelve o'clock.

Eleven o'clock—

I hear the sound of something connecting with that massive suitcase. Then a howl, "Bloody hell!"

I switch on the light. "What are you doing?"

She sits on the ground, nursing one booted foot. "Taking out my frustration, you oaf." Her hair flows about her shoulders. Her cheeks are pink. From anger? From embarrassment at seeing me naked? Considering she's already had her mouth on my dick... Well, isn't that cute.

"There are better ways of dealing with it." I lower my gaze to her heaving breasts.

"Aargh, stop that." She yanks off one boot, then the other. "Turn away."

"Why?"

"I want to undress, you... you neanderthal."

I laugh, "Running out of insults?"

"Oh, I have plenty where that came from." She pulls off her other boot, then rises to her feet. "Some privacy please?"

"Not happening." I lean back against the headboard, fold an arm behind my neck. Her gaze darts to my biceps; she swallows. I scratch my chest and her breasts heave. A glimmer of sweat gleams over her upper lip. "Is it too hot in here for you?" I grin.

She huffs, then undoes the button of her coat and pushes it off her shoulder. She glances around, then walks to the closet and pulls it open. She surveys the contents, then hangs it up. "You didn't bring too many clothes, did you?" she grumbles.

"Worried about me?" I smirk.

She throws up her hands, then steps back and slams the closet doors shut, "It's pointless making any conversation with you."

"You were the one who declined to answer my question."

"Whatever." She pulls off her jeans, giving me a flash of pink underwear. My groin instantly tightens. *Fuck*. She is more modestly dressed than women wearing skimpy bikinis on the beach... So why does she seem so much more alluring, so attractive...? So fucking gorgeous, as she folds her jeans then places them on the chair near the bed. She lifts a corner of the cover, then slips inside. She stays on the far end... Right at the end. "Any further and you'll slip off."

"I'll manage."

"I won't bite."

"Ha," she snorts, "famous last words."

"Unless you want me to?"

She stills. Tension pours off of her to fill the space between us on the bed. I switch off the light, then fold my arms over my chest. "If you stay that stiff, I'll have to tickle you."

"Wh...what?" she squeaks.

"Not good for your muscles to be so bunched up. You'll have a headache when you wake up."

"Like you care?"

"A deal is a deal, Buttercup."

"I wish you wouldn't call me that."

"I wish you'd relax a little."

If anything, she tenses further. I turn away from her, close my eyes. The stress that rolls off of her slams into my back. My shoulders bunch, My muscles coil, ready to spring... *Fuck*. I turn back to her, scoot over.

Her gaze widens, "What are you—?"

"Hush." I pull her to me, so her back is pressed into my chest, then I spoon her.

She makes a noise of alarm.

I tighten my arm around her waist. "Raise your head."

"What?"

"Do it, woman," I snap.

She does as I ask. *Fuck, finally*. I slip my arm under her neck, throw my leg over hers.

She doesn't say a word. Nothing. Her entire body goes stiff... As hard as my dick, which instantly lengthens. It nestles against the curve of her hip. Well, someone's happy, at least. I tuck her head under my chin.

"Weston," she whispers.

I sigh, "Now what?"

"What is it with you and clocks? Do you have a phobia or something?"

Or something. Not that I am going to tell her about it. I'd already given away enough with that half-arsed fit I'd thrown. Shit, do I have my balls about me or what?

"Weston—"

"Goodnight, Princess."

She huffs, but stay's silent.

Thank fuck.

I close my eyes, count back the time on the hands of a clock. Restart the stopwatch.

Twelve o'clock.

Eleven o'clock.

Her shoulder muscles relax.

Ten o'clock.

Nine o'clock.

Her breathing grows more uniform.

Eight o'clock.

Seven o'clock.

She wriggles her butt. The blood rushes to my groin.

Six o'clock.

She thrusts her feet in between my legs. The coldness from her toes shivers over my skin. I swear aloud, "Did you dip your feet in ice?"

"Sorry," she mutters.

Five o'clock.

Four o'clock.

She pushes her body into mine. My cock lengthens, stabs into the valley between her butt cheeks.

Three o'clock.

She rubs her cheek against the pillow. Then digs her toes into my calf. "The hell are you doing?" I grouse.

"Can't sleep," she mumbles.

I turn her over to face me. *Mistake.* The moonlight floods in from the

open window, highlighting her baby blues. Her hair clings to her forehead; her nose turns up above those gorgeous pink lips. My heart stutters. It fucking stutters. The fuck? "What is it?" I grumble.

"I forgot the chocolate."

"Chocolate?"

"And I need fresh eggs, cinnamon, butter—"

"You've lost me."

"To make breakfast."

I shudder and mime throwing up in my mouth. "Who has chocolate for breakfast?"

She laughs. "Chocolate pancakes, dummy." Then she adds, "What do you like to eat in the morning?"

"Anything but chocolate." I grumble.

"Wh-a-a-t?" Her eyes go all round, "You don't like chocolate?"

"Why settle for chocolate, when," I drag my gaze down her body, "there are other things that make for a tastier breakfast."

She gapes, "Do you only think of sex?"

"Do you only think of desserts?"

"What else is there?" her voice cracks.

I scan her pink-tinged features. "Are you blushing?"

"Of course, not." Her face grows fiery.

"What are you thinking?"

"Nothing."

Oh, it was something all right. "Go on, you can tell me."

She shakes her head.

I glare at her, lower my voice to a hush, "Say it."

She trembles. "I... I was thinking how much I'd like for you to eat me out."

Amelie

What the hell am I doing? Why did I blurt that out? I'd honestly not realized that it was what I had in mind, until he'd commanded me to speak... And hell, when he assumes that voice, that hushed tone which whips through my mind, I can't stop myself. I have to obey him. But did I have to tell him the truth? Couldn't I have deflected?

His nostrils flare and his grip on my waist tightens. "Say that again," he

rasps.

"I... I..." My throat closes. How can I repeat what had come out in a moment of utter lunacy?

"Complete your sentence," his hot breath sears my lips. My panties instantly dampen. My thighs clench and I can't stop the small whine that spills from my mouth.

"Ask...and you shall receive." His lips curl. An answering quiver thrums at my center. *OMFG! I can't even... This man... How can I refuse him anything? Why the hell had I agreed to stay...? Is that why I hadn't wanted to leave?* I blink; all thoughts empty from my mind.

"Please," I breathe out. "Eat me."

Even before the words are out of my mouth, he's flipped me on my back, "With pleasure, Alice." He smirks from above me.

"A...are you my white rabbit?"

"You'll have to let me know."

I blink, then heat sears my cheeks. Is he alluding to my favorite vibrator? "That's not what I—" My breath hitches as he slides down my body.

His hard chest presses down on my breasts, my belly, then his head is between my thighs. He shoulders apart my legs, places one of my hands on his ear, then the other on the other side. "Hold on." His eyes glitter.

"What the—"?" I gasp, then tighten my fingers around his ears, for he's buried his face in my pussy.

He nuzzles my flesh.

I whimper.

He blows on my throbbing core, and hell, but I almost come right then.

"Not yet, Buttercup." I sense his lips curve against my center.

"Don't...don't stop," I gasp.

"Hmm," he makes an appreciative sound deep in his throat.

All of my nerve endings seem to explode.

"Which dessert should I sample first, you think?"

"Wait," I gasp.

He peers up at me.

"The arrangement."

"What of it?"

"You said no sex."

"So?"

"Does this count as sex?"

"I thought we already covered this, Buttercup."

"As long as you don't...uh...you don't—"

"Sink my dick into your pussy?"

My cheeks flush, "Yeah, no penetration, in the traditional fashion, equals no sex, right?"

"Sure, if that's how you want to see it."

"I..."

He drags his fingers up my pussy lips.

I huff.

"So?" He smirks.

"Yes..." I force out the word.

He stares back.

"Yes, that's the definition, for the...uh, the arrangement." I clarify, "As long as you don't uh, penetrate my puss—eee" The word comes out on a whine for he's replaced his finger with his mouth. OMG. OMG. A moan trembles from my lips.

"My, my, Buttercup," he mutters against my core, "is this how greedy you are when you bake?"

What the—? I blink. Why is he still talking? Didn't his mom teach him not to talk when his mouth is full? Why can't he—?

He raises his head. Cool air envelops the heated, melting triangle between my legs, right before he slaps my pussy. Right on it, across my swollen core, which erupts in a miasma of sparks, that travels out from the contact, up my spine, and explodes behind my eyes. The room tilts. *Ohmigod*. Sweat beads my brow. The pain fades, leaving behind an ache that swallows me up from the center. "What was that for?" I shudder.

"Answer the question, doll."

"Wh...which one?"

"Should I taste you here?" He dips his head, slips his tongue inside my backhole.

My entire body snaps to attention. All of my pores pop. My chest rises and falls.

"Or here?" He drags his wicked tongue up my slit.

I moan.

"Maybe I should be as greedy as you and not wait?" He fixes that instrument of torture-pleasure, aka his mouth, around my throbbing bud, and I shoot up from the bed.

"Wes!" I howl.

He releases my pussy. "You still haven't answered the question," he rumbles.

"Wh...what?"

"Last chance, babe."

He leans back, and I thrust up with my pelvis, trying to recapture that earlier feeling, honing in on his tongue.

"Well?" he asks. "You need to ask for what you want, darlin'."

Maybe it's that endearment that makes me crack my eyes open. "All of it," I gasp. "Please lick me, suck on me, thrust your tongue inside my—" I huff, for he's done just that.

He twists his tongue inside of me and goosebumps flare on my skin. He slides his big arms under my legs, pushes up my knees on either side of my body, then he swipes his tongue in and out of me, and again. He slurps his way down to my backhole and up to my cunt again and again. I cry out, but he doesn't stop. He slips his tongue in between my pussy lips, samples me like I am the tastiest puff pastry. He bites down on my clit and I scream, dig my fingers into the space behind his ears and yank.

A growl rumbles up his chest and the vibrations swell my core, pour over me like the sound waves from a fucking dinner gong— *Wait, why am I thinking with this bizarre metaphor?* Except, hell, if I am not ready, I'm going to...

"Come," he growls into my hot, melting core, and I explode.

My climax crashes over me, shoves me up...up...up. Maybe I black out. I force myself to open my eyelids, look down to where he's still between my legs, my knees splayed out. "Wow," I breathe.

He doesn't smile back. He stares at me. His gaze unwavering.

"What?" I croak.

"You ready, yet?"

"Huh?"

He drops his mouth, nuzzles my pussy.

I moan, "I can't."

"I haven't even started, babe."

"No...no."

He licks my lower lips and pleasure radiates out from my core.

"Oh, my God."

"Hold on," he says.

"What?"

He rises up, grabs my wrists and holds them over my head. He wraps my fingers around the wooden bars of the headboard. "Stay," he commands.

I stare at him. *As if I could move.*

One side of his lips kicks up; he presses a firm kiss to my lips, then slides down to position his face over my pussy. He grabs my knees, pries them further apart so I am splayed wide for him. I should blush or feel shy, for heaven's sake. Those are my most intimate parts, served up to him for display; but all I can think is, *please... please... please.*

"Lick or suck?" he asks.

"Anything, either... Both," I gasp out.

He glares at me.

I shiver... "Anything you want."

"Right answer."

He drops his head and thrust his tongue back inside my melting channel.

"Oh, my God," I whine. "More, please, don't stop...don't..." I push myself up and into his face, not caring what he thinks of me. Any restraint holding me back is gone. Poof. All he has to do is touch me and I'll do anything for him. Damn it, I should have known that... But I'm not sleeping with him.. Yet. I mean, technically this doesn't count. Like the blowjob... Anything other than full penetration... Yep, that's it; anything else is fine. It is. "Fuck me with your mouth, please," I plead.

He laughs, "One fuck-me-with-your-mouth, coming up." He releases my knees, only to grip my arsecheeks. He squeezes down and I whine. He pries them apart. *What the—?* He hauls me up, slips his tongue down and inside my arsehole. *Oh, my f'ing god.* It's like nothing I have experienced before. No one...has touched me there, and this man? He slides his tongue into that forbidden part of me... As if, as if... We are lovers. No, fuckbuddies... Not... Anything-but-fucking-buddies, that's what we are. A giggle wells up, turns into a scream, when he begins to fuck my backhole with his tongue. He thrusts in and out, in and out, brings his hand up to grind his heel against my clit, and that tightness inside of me snaps out, expands... "Wes..." I moan. "Weston..."

He doesn't answer. He can't, because his mouth is full of me.

"Wes. Wes. Wes," I chant. *Aloud, or in my mind?* No matter, if food is a religious experience for me, then his tongue-fucking me has to count as a close second. The orgasm screeches up my legs, up my spine.

He slides his tongue out, replaces it with his finger, another, then shoves his tongue inside my pussy.

"Weston," I scream.

He releases my other knee and grabs my breast, squeezes my nipple so hard, stars burst behind my eyes.

"Oh, my God, I am going to...going to..."

He slips his thumb inside my mouth, at the same time that he crooks his fingers inside my backhole, then tears his mouth from my pussy and growls, "Come."

11

Weston

Her body bucks, her spine curves, she opens her mouth, but no sound emerges. Her eyes roll back in her head as she shatters. I tilt my head, lick up the cum from between her pussy lips. *So fucking sweet. Is she made of the sugar that she likes to bake with?* Her climax seems to go on and on. Her shoulders jerk, her head thrown back, and the arch of her throat beckons.

I crawl up her body, fit my mouth to hers. I slide my fingers inside her pussy, she moans, and I swallow it up. I swipe my tongue over hers, tasting our joined-up essences. I drag my other hand up the curve of her waist. She shivers. I cup her cheek, lean back and peer into her features, "Look at me."

Her eyelids flutter. Those blue eyes peek up at me, pupils blown, still high on the orgasm. Something hot stabs at my chest. I flip over on the bed, pulling her with me. I coil her over my chest. Another spasm runs up her spine. I tug her closer, wrap her up in my arms.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, what am I doing? I hadn't meant for it to get this... intense, this complicated. *Keep things light, stay away from all entanglements*, has always been my motto. And I've succeeded so far, haven't I? I had asked her to stay...because I'd thought it would be entertaining. Okay so that's not the full truth. The last time I'd spoken to my mother, she'd asked me if I'd met anyone yet. It is the one thing—the only thing—she wants from me. For me, I guess. It had been a flash of instinct that had had me stipulating she come along to the Christmas dinner. My family... They'd pulled me out of the depression I had fallen into after the 'incident'

when I had been kidnapped along with the rest of the Seven. They'd reassured me, never allowing me to falter.

The incident had turned everything upside down. The only people who had seemed to get me after that were the rest of the Seven, and not only because they were, each of them, mean motherfuckers, as unfeeling as me... It was the shared experience of the days that had changed our lives, scarred each of us in similar, yet unique, ways.

Still, my parents had been encouraging, supportive, taken me to therapy, tolerated my outbursts at them as I'd struggled to come to terms with what had happened. They had been stellar in their roles and duties toward me. It's not their fault I've turned out to be an asshole. Blame that on me... Maybe it's the way I was born.

So, it had been a spur of the moment decision that she accompany me to see my family for Christmas. *The hell had I been thinking?*

This pint-sized woman with the sassy attitude, honeyed mouth, and a cunt that tastes like all the forbidden delights she specializes in baking—has clearly addled my thought processes.

I drag my fingers down the waterfall of her golden hair. Softer than cookie dough— *What the fuck? I do not think in food metaphors.* Her proximity is definitely affecting me. I stay still, watch her eyeballs move behind her now-closed eyelids. She snuggles into me; her breathing deepens. I stay still until her body twitches. She's definitely out cold. Apparently, I tired her out. Too bad I can't say the same about me. My muscles coil and bunch, my mind racing. I need to figure out what the hell to do with her. My proposal stands, but the boundaries are blurring... Hell, I am still here, holding her, caressing her, watching her as she sleeps. The fuck is up with that? I ease her down onto the bed. She doesn't stir. Good.

I slide out of bed, pull the duvet over her. Turning, I crash into her suitcase, which plops over. I glance over to find she's still sleeping. I shake my head. What I wouldn't give to be able to switch off like that, huh? Since the incident... I've never slept for more than three, maybe four hours a night. Useful when you're at medical school and need to study before exams... A bitch at any other time. I pull on my jeans, a sweatshirt over my long-sleeved T, socks and boots.

Grabbing my phone from the side table, I walk through the living room, Max stirs from his rug near the fireplace, lifting his head. I go over, pat him on his flank. He licks my hand, then burrows into the special cushion I'd

ordered for him. Hey, don't go all gooey-eyed. It was simply to ensure he'd be comfortable enough to not want to share my bed, okay?

I slip out onto the back porch. Early dawn lights up the horizon as I head toward the shed at the back of the property. I open the door and walk in, then head for the work bench. I switch on the desk lamp, and when my phone buzzes, I slide it out of my pocket, swipe the screen.

"Hey, motherfucker," Damian's image fills the space.

"Same to you, dickwad," I mutter.

"What's gotten into you?" He peers into the screen as if he's there in real life with me.

"What's gotten into you?" I growl. Now I'm doing the fucking NLP mirroring shit Buttercup had talked about. *Why the hell am I thinking about her, huh? Didn't I come here to get away from her? Huh? Had she actually pushed me out of my own space?* I scratch my jaw. Now, that would be the first.

"Uh-oh." Damian clicks his tongue, "I've seen that look before."

"What bloody look?" I frown.

"The one that says you're about to fall."

"Fall?"

"For her."

"Who?"

"The woman who's there in the country manor—"

"Cabin," I correct him.

"Whatever." He grins, "Admit it. You're attracted to her."

"What shit are you talking about?" I grumble.

"You denying you hooked up with a woman in a difficult-to-reach place?"

"It's four hours away from London."

"My point exactly," he smirks.

"You city fox."

"So are you," he replies, "which is why, when Saint mentioned that you were going to be there, and not alone..."

"Hold on." I rub my temple, "Saint told you I was going to be here with a woman?"

"Aren't you?"

"That's not the point." I tilt my head, "How did he know that I was here... ah!" I stiffen. "That cunt," I growl. "He fucking played me, didn't he?"

"Hold on, I'm adding Arpad to the call," Damian says.

"What? No," I protest.

Too late. The screen blinks, then Arpad appears in another window. "Hey, bitches, you're chin-wagging like old ladies, I see."

"Hey, fuckface," I growl, "why aren't you in a boat in the middle of somewhere with no reception?"

"I have my own satellite, dickwad."

"Of course, you do." I rake my fingers through my hair. "Why are you guys calling me, anyway?"

"Checking in, ol' chap." Damian chuckles, "Making sure you're still alive after that face-off."

What face-off?

"You and Amelie...?" Damian prompts.

"What is it with you guys?" I crack my jaw from side to side, "Can't you give a man space?"

"Space?" Arpad cackles, "Did he just say what I think he did?"

"Aww, cho chweet," Damian makes kissing sounds.

Arpad cracks up laughing.

My face reddens. "That's it; I'm hanging up now."

"Hold on." Damian pretends to wipe the tears from his face, "You haven't told us what you intend to do with her?"

"What's it to you?" I growl, "And don't talk about her."

"So, it's like that, huh?" Arpad snickers. "You seeing what I'm seeing, Rockstar?" he asks Damian.

Damian stares at me, then shakes his head, "My, my, the doctor who had his arse splashed all over the internet for making a sex tape has met his match, huh?"

"It's a damn fine arse," I grumble, "and if you don't have a sex tape to your credit, you technically are persona non grata in the online world."

"But does she know about it?" Damian asks.

My neck heats and my heart begins to thud. "Why would it matter to her?"

"It would matter if you didn't tell her," Arpad points out, "Hold on, I'm adding the Father to our chinwag, so he doesn't feel left out."

"What the fuck?" I growl as Edward's face appears in another window on the screen.

"Hey Doc, how's it going?" Edward asks.

"It was going all fine and dandy until you lot decided to intrude."

"Sorry to cut in on your alone time with your lady—"

"Not my lady," I grumble.

Damian snickers.

Arpad chortles.

"What the fuck are you jokers laughing at?"

"You, arsehole, and how you've been played."

I scowl, "Fucking Saint."

Damian nods.

"He double-booked me with her. Wait until I get my hands on the dickwad; I'm going to throttle his neck.

"Victoria won't like you getting your hands on her husband."

"Man," I rub the back of my neck, "not that I begrudge them their happiness, not after everything they've been through... But he could have *not* intruded in my life," I grouse.

"Jace, then Sinner, and Saint," Damian drawls. "You'd think it was catching...all that happiness."

"Bull-fucking-shit." I sink into my chair, tip it back. "I'm not falling for whatever madness possessed those knobs to get hitched."

"Just make sure you give me enough notice," Edward pipes in.

"Notice?" I crack my neck, "The hell you going on about Father?"

"If you plan on getting hitched—"

The two front legs of the chair land on the ground with a thump, "Hitched? What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Your last-minute plan that you don't know about yet." Edward stabs a finger at me, "If you're planning on doing it, I need a little notice. I have a life too, you know. I can't always drop everything and put in an appearance to marry you guys, you know—?"

"Wait, what?" I run a finger under the collar of my shirt. "You lost me there."

"A million?" Arpad asks Damian.

"Money is beginning to lose its appeal," Damian grumbles.

"You wankers," I growl, "the fuck are you all betting on?"

"We need to up the odds," Arpad replies, as if he didn't hear me. What a tosser.

I grip my phone with such force that my fingers hurt. "Shut the fuck up, you bitches."

"It's happening, all right. You see how he's losing his shit, huh?" Arpad continues.

"What do you suggest?" Damian talks over me, "Wanna play with something a little more personal?"

"What do you have in mind?" Arpad rubs his jaw. "Property? Shares..." He snaps his fingers, "I have it."

"What you thinking of, dipshit?" Damian drawls.

"If he gets married, accept the gift I send you."

"Ooh, thanks darling, for thinking of me," Damian deadpans.

Arpad grimaces, "Cut that shit out. You won't be laughing when you see what is it."

"A woman?" He waggles his eyebrows, "A hot honey, no doubt. Why would I refuse it, huh?"

"You on then?" Arpad asks.

"And if he doesn't?" Damian jerks his chin at me.

"I'm here, you bitches."

"Oh, he will." Arpad smirks, "I present to you exhibit A... Also known as, the man who has no idea that he's counting his last few days of freedom."

"Newsflash, you toffs, I ain't planning on giving up my bachelor status anytime soon, and PS," I growl, "you can't go around placing bets involving the lives of others."

Damian's gaze widens, "Since when has Mr. Obnoxious here, developed a conscience?"

"Since he's the one about whom such bets are being placed?" Edward offers.

"Since he decided to shack up with her?" Arpad replies.

"I am not shacking up with her, you reprobates," I snarl.

"The two of you...in a cabin...in the middle of nowhere..." Arpad waggles his eyebrows.

"It's four hours from London," I remind them again.

"Wait until it snows," Edward chimes in... "I am not marrying you in a remote ceremony."

"For the final time," I jump up from my chair so fast, it crashes back, "I'm not getting married. She just happens to be here, and I'm putting the time with her to good use."

"No doubt," Damian says with a straight face. "If that's the story you're going with."

"I am taking her home to meet my family."

Silence, then Damian addresses Arpad, "Shit, can I take back that bet I agreed to?"

"Too late, old sport." Arpad chuckles, "Told ya, he won't last the holidays, but wow." He scowls at me, "You've only been with her since yesterday. Isn't that a little too soon...?"

"What are you talking about?" Clearly I am being slow on the uptake here. "And how do all of you know about her—?" Realization dawns. "That fucker—Saint." Anger sweeps my blood, "He let you all in on his dumbass plan?" I roll my shoulders, "Don't you have anything better to do than trade gossip?"

"Aw, he's no longer any more fun," Arpad shakes his head.

"Wankers gone for a toss." Damian grins, "Does that make him a tossing wanker or a wanking tosser?"

"Guys, go easy on him." Edward grins, "He's one dropkick away from having his heart broken."

I raise my phone and bring it down, intent on smashing it, then stop myself. Fuck, if I don't need the bloody device right now. Not that I can't replace it, but if what the Father said is true and snow is on its way... Then hell, all the money in the world couldn't deliver me an alternative mode of communication. Maybe I should have insisted on having the helicopter parked on the helipad in the field. Damn, missed opportunity.

"For the last time, there's nothing between us," I growl. *Why the fuck am I even explaining it to these douchebags, huh?* Maybe it's because they are the closest I have to non-blood family; though right now, I'm not sure if they are my friends or my enemies.

"You don't have to convince us," Arpad nods.

"Right, I don't care about your personal uh—relations. Of course, I care about your state of mind, which at the moment, seems rather frayed at the edges," Edward points out.

"As I was saying," I draw in a breath, "she happens to be here; so am I. We've come to an agreement, and that includes taking her home to get my mother off my back."

"Right, you keep fooling yourself, ol' sport." Damian grins. "Not that I'm not rooting for you. I mean, I want you to get through the holiday season without getting hitched." He scratches his chin, "Although, if you did get married, I'd still win, in a matter of speaking, so—"

"Fuck you, motherfuckers." I hang up. *What the fuck was that all about?*

The hair on the back of my neck rises and I hear a sound behind me. All of my senses go on alert; I pivot, fists raised.

12

Amelie

"It's me; it's only me," I squeak.

His chest heaves, his color pale. He glares at me as if he's seen a ghost.

"Weston?" I prompt.

His gaze fixes on my face. His jaw tics. The tendons of his throat move. The skin across his knuckles stretches tight. If his control had been less than perfect, I have no doubt, I'd be on the ground, with his fist buried in my face. Hell, I wouldn't mind other parts of him buried inside of me, given what had transpired between us earlier. It's clear that we are as compatible as cheese and biscuits. *WTF?* Enough with the cheesy comparisons... *Nooooo, now I am punning on my own poor jokes? Gah!*

"Wes?" I take a step forward; he watches me. I raise a hand; his gaze stays on mine. I reach up on tip toe and cup his cheek. "You okay?"

He blinks, lowers his fists.

A breath I hadn't realized I was holding whooshes out. At the same time, he draws his in.

"Wes?" I step close enough for my boots to kiss his. His gaze intensifies. Those colorless eyes seem to mirror every emotion, every confusion, every screwed-up, mixed-up thought that I feel inside.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Why wouldn't it be?" He steps back from me and the heat of his big body recedes.

A hollow feeling coils low in my belly. *What had I been expecting?* That

after the way he'd made me orgasm earlier, he'd...be more tender toward me? Maybe throw me down and decide to forget about our 'arrangement' and make love to me? *Hell, I want him to fuck me... There, I've said it out loud. Well, not really out loud, thank God.* I'd settle for him having me any which way—frontways, sideways, bent over, with my arse up in the air for him... My cheeks heat. *Jesus H, something about this man brings out the filthy girl hidden inside of me.* The one who wanted to hold onto more than his ears as I rode him off into the sunset. Huh? That picture... It's hot... And all wrong.

"What are you doing here?" He frowns.

"I, uh, woke up and you were gone—"

He looks me up and down, "Is that a... What are you wearing?"

I glance down at my pullover. "What?"

"Is that a reindeer with glitter on his nose?"

"Oh, you mean my Christmas jumper?"

His features take on an expression best described as loathing.

"Let me guess." I push a finger into my cheek, "You hate Christmas-themed sweaters."

He grunts, "And reindeer, and Christmas carols, and mulled wine..."

"What?" I stare at him. "You're joking."

"Nope." He rolls his shoulders, "Can do without that shit, and anything to do with the festive season."

"But it's the silly season." I stare at him, horrified. I mean, Mr. Grumpy McDick here is surely just trying his best to scare me off. "It's not working."

"Huh?"

"This entire, alphaholish, man-about-town, who sacrifices baby goats to the devil and screams at little kids—"

"And kicks kittens," he adds, "don't forget that."

"That's what I mean," I slap my palms on my hips. "You'd never do that."

"Because you've seen me tolerate Max?"

"More than tolerate." I scowl, "Why are you so intent on putting yourself down?"

"Why are you so intent on believing I am something I am not?"

"And what are you? Billionaire—"

"Gazillionaire."

"Doctor."

"Surgeon," he corrects me.

"Someone who's hiding away from the world because he has some deep-

rooted hurt."

He laughs—a fake, hard noise that prickles over my skin. My stomach clenches. *Shit*, this is not the man who had pulled me on top of him and stroked my hair until I'd fallen asleep. This is not the generous lover, who'd dived into my pussy and eaten it out like it was creme brûlée.

"What happened?" I frown. "Why are you like a chef with a hangover?"

"Maybe because I don't like the look of your face this morning?"

My heart cracks a little; it fucking splinters. *Asshole, jerk, clod*. I glare at him, "Oh, you seemed to like me well enough last night."

"I was proving a point."

"What?" My heart begins to race and sweat beads my palms. It can't be... He can't be this...arrogant and mean, this ready to hurt me... Not after how he'd kissed me and touched me like I belonged to him. *Does he do this to every woman he takes to bed? Does he make them all feel that special?* Maybe, whichever female he's with for the moment is made to feel like the center of his universe. "What point?" I insist, "Tell me."

"That you won't get through the holiday period without sleeping with me. That all I have to do is look at you and you'll open your legs for me. That you're so needy, you'll do anything for a touch, a kiss, little bit of attention, to make you feel special—you—"

My hand connects with his cheek before the thought has time to form in my brain. Pain shoots up my arm and my palm stings. I lower my arm, my breath coming in pants like I've run a mile to get here... When I'd walked over to the shed in search of him, and overheard the last of the conversation... I don't mean anything to him. Fine. I'm a transaction. That's all right too. But this... Insulting me just out of spite... No, this is unacceptable.

I step back, "The deal's off, you horrible man. All the money in the world isn't worth putting up with the lies that pour out of your mouth."

He tilts his head as the outline of my fingerprints blooms on his cheek. "Leave then," he drawls.

"You think I can't?"

"Do it. See if I stop you." His features close; those colorless eyes seem to grow darker. *Is he hurt? Why should he be hurt? He provoked me. What did he expect?* That I'd simply take it...because...of this attraction to him...that I'd hope would deepen into something else? Ha! How stupid could I be. Or maybe, he thought I'd stay because of the money. Think again, asshole.

I pivot to walk away, and that's when the world seems to explode. I slap

my hands to my ears as a clanging sound overpowers the space. *What the hell? What is that?* All of my brain cells seem to knock together at once. I turn... "What's happening—?" That's when I notice the wall... No walls, plural, of clocks. Every single available space across the walls of the room is chockablock with clocks. Old clocks, antiques, made of steel, of wood, newer models made of glass and chrome... And every single one of them is mechanical. Their alarms clang out in different tones to indicate it's nine in the morning. I blink...turn around in a circle, taking in the sheer variety of time-keeping devices. "Wow." I turn to face him as the last of the sound dies away. "Holy shit," I breathe. "What is this...place?"

"It's mine," he says simply.

"But the cabin... I mean, that palatial house which you guys refer to as the cabin." I mutter, "It belongs to Saint?"

"It belongs to all of the Seven."

"Oh."

"The last person who had access to it was Saint. When I injured my finger, I told them I needed to borrow it for the duration of the season."

"Right, so he sent me here..."

"Knowing I was here already."

"Why would he do that?"

"To fuck with me?" His lips twist.

"But this place..." I glance around the walls again, "This is yours?"

"I built it in the backyard."

"You constructed it by yourself?"

"I employed an architect. And a builder."

"Of course." I walk up to a clock on my left. In the center is a horse, hind legs reared up in the air, its white mane caught as if in mid-jump. "And these clocks?"

"I collect them."

"Are they valuable...?"

"What do you think?"

I hear the humor in his voice, turn around to find him seated at the desk pushed up against the wall. I walk over, lean over his shoulder to find him looking through a magnifying glass at the guts of a clock.

"You repair them?"

He picks up what seems to be forceps, and which seem too delicate for his thick fingers to hold, and begins to tinker with the parts of the clock.

"You're an uh, horologist?"

"I like to repair clocks. It's a way to unwind."

I snicker, "Ha, you can be funny sometimes."

"Yeah, that's me—a hoot," he says in a voice that signifies something to the contrary.

I stare at his bent head. His dark hair falls to about his shoulders, and is mussed on top. Has he been running his fingers through them? The locks had been surprisingly silky to touch yesterday when I'd held onto those ears and... I shift my weight from foot to foot.

"But you disabled the clocks in the cabin."

"They came with the house. I hadn't acquired them."

"So, because you found—" I wave my hand in the air, "all these, and fixed them, you're fine with them?"

"I put them together; I know what they are made of. I can trust them to be accurate."

"Unlike the ones back there."

"Yep."

"So, you are fine surrounded by these..." I turn a circle, "time pieces on the wall, just not the ones you didn't acquire yourself."

"Sounds about right."

"You know how weird you sound?"

He shoots me a glance, "Says the woman who calls her phone Hedwig, and who uses the names of desserts as swearwords."

"So, what's wrong with that?" I frown.

He snickers, "My point exactly." He focusses on his work.

I shuffle my feet, wind a strand of hair through my fingers.

"I haven't forgiven you yet," I mutter.

"You can leave at any time."

But I don't want to, and therein lies the problem. What the hell is keeping me here? Him? This chemistry between us that I have to explore? What happens if I do explore it further? Will I survive the time we spend together?

And what if I did walk away?

Would I forever wonder how it could have been between us? What if he was...the one? Ha, me and my romantic notions. But this is Christmas; I'm allowed to indulge myself, right?

I lean around him and stare at the contents of the clock's insides on the table.

He continues tinkering away...or whatever it is he's doing there.

The pieces of the machinery seem to be disjointed, yet they come together to form a certain symmetry, to dance together and make music. Like us.

If he were to only give us a chance. Do I want to give him a chance?
"Weston, you're not a douche, you know."

He grunts.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "Why do you have to be this macho?"

"Why are you still here?" he growls.

"Because I cooked bloody breakfast and came here to call you. Then, you had to go and pull that..."

He straightens, "What?"

"That..." I wave a hand in the air. "That...obnoxious McFuck act of yours."

He swivels around to face me, "What was that? What did you call me?"

"Obnoxious?"

"After that."

"Mc...McFuck?"

"What does it mean?"

I raise my shoulders, "Dunno, it just, uh, seemed appropriate."

He chuckles, "You're a funny one, Buttercup."

I groan, "I am not sure I like that name yet."

"I am not sure I like you either." He looks me up and down, his tone serious, "But hell, if I don't want you to stay."

"Is that an apology?"

"For what?" He glares.

"For being horrible to me."

"Was I?"

I huff, "Fine. Whatever. And," I tuck my elbows into my sides, "I'm sorry too."

"For what."

I jerk my chin toward the reddened skin of his cheek.

"I deserved it," he replies.

I open and shut my mouth, "You...you did?"

"You should know though, that it turns me on when you get physical with me."

I squeeze my eyes shut. *Do not lose it; do not.* I draw in a breath, "I'll ignore that."

Turning, I stalk to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I made breakfast." I pause, then turn to scowl at him, "Aren't you coming?"

Fifteen minutes later he pushes back the plate with a sigh. I'd made chocolate pancakes for me, regular ones for him. Why had I bothered...? Good question. Perhaps because, as much as I hate him, I hate seeing him starve. Food is sacred. It's how we nourish not just our bodies, but our souls, and if there is a soul that needs some sustenance... It is this alphahole's. A slurping sound fills the space. I glance sideways as Max licks the bottom of his bowl. He raises his head, then patters over to push his nose into my lap. "Hey boy, you still hungry?"

"Don't feed him more," Weston warns.

I frown, "I wasn't going to."

"Yes, you were too." He grins, "When you twitch your nose, it means you're thinking something sappy in your head."

"Am not." I set my jaw.

"Yep, you were." He chuckles, "And PS, you're welcome."

I frown up at him, "For what?"

"For the compliment I'm about to give you."

I shake my head. Jeez, this man... I mean, he can't be real. He can't be this incorrigible, can he? He stares at me; I meet his gaze.

His lips curl, and of course, my heart does that little flip-flop it always does when he goes all bad boy on me. "Fine. I give in." I huff, "What compliment?"

"You're not a bad cook." He smirks.

I open and close my mouth. "That was a delicious breakfast," I half-snarl.

"My, but you like your own cooking, huh?"

My lips turn down, "You can tell, huh?"

His brow furrows. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I know I'm not svelte and long-limbed, like some of the women you date."

He frowns, then looks me up and down, "Firstly, let's get something straight. You look incredible."

Wait, was that a compliment? It was a compliment. Wasn't it?

"And secondly," his eyes gleam, "have you been keeping tabs on me?"

"Of course not." I huff.

"You've been keeping tabs," he concludes, looking way too self-satisfied.

"Hardly."

"It's okay, you can admit it." He smirks, "It's only natural to want to follow what I have been up to. Some of us have the kind of irresistible charisma that attracts attention."

Oh, that compliment thing I said earlier, forget it.

"You're so full of yourself," I scoff. "Seriously, how can someone say what you do and keep a straight face?"

He stares at me.

I fidget in my seat opposite him. "And yeah, maybe I tracked your exploits in the media, a little." I admit.

He arches an eyebrow.

I throw up my hands. "Oh, all right, so I did read up about you."

His grin widens.

"I was curious how you looked in your scrubs, okay?" My cheeks flush.

He blinks, "In my scrubs?"

I nod, "I have a thing for men in uniform."

His grey eyes grow stormy, "I could wear them for you, if you ask nicely."

I gulp, chafe my thighs together to relieve that gnawing emptiness that's been building since I woke up this morning. Then he had to go and spoil it all with his rudeness.

His features tighten. "I'm sorry," he offers.

I stare. "For which part?" I ask. "For being horrible to me from the moment I walked in here or is it for a specific insult?"

He tips back his chair until it rests on the back legs, "On second thought..." He scratches his chin, "What can I say? That's me. It's not my fault."

"No?" I frown.

"It's the way I was born."

"That's your excuse, huh?"

"At least, I don't lie. My life is an open book." He winces as he says it.

"What?" I ask.

"Maybe too open, on occasion."

"What do you mean?"

He rolls his shoulders, a dead giveaway that he's uncomfortable. Less

than 48 hours with him, and I'm interpreting his actions. What is that about anyway?

"Tell me."

He folds his arms over his chest, "For the record, I like your curves."

Heat sears my cheeks. "You're kidding me."

He shakes his head, "I like that you have a healthy appetite. There's something sexy about a woman who enjoys cooking and eating."

"Thank you, and it's baking."

"You cooked breakfast," he points out.

"Yeah." I shift in my seat. Hell, I'm terrible with taking compliments. "And you are deflecting."

He barks out a laugh, "You caught me there."

"What is it?" I ask, genuinely curious. What could make this confident, dominant man, this uncomfortable?

"I may have a...uh, sex video to my name."

"Sex video." I blink.

"My ex—" He raises his shoulders, "She got hissy when I dumped her. Took it out by leaking a video."

"Oh," I swallow. My guts twist and something bubbles up my throat—something hot and angry and twisted. Something like jealous. *Holy shit, why the hell do I care who he slept with? Except, I do, for some reason.* Not like I have a claim on him or anything, but hell, for some reason, I've been trying to not think of the women in his past. I mean, if I don't acknowledge them, then they don't exist, right?

"A sex video, huh?" I clear my throat, "Is it uh—explicit?"

He glares at me.

Right. "Of course, it is," I mutter. Something hot presses down at my temples. *Shit, okay. This isn't good. What does it matter to me what he did?* He's paying me. It's the only reason I'm here, right? Not. I stare back at him, and therein lies the issue. I've been falling for this obnoxious, alphahole from the time I'd first laid eyes on him. A ripple of something claws down my spine. *Don't fall in love with him; don't.* He'd warned me about that already. Apparently, he knows me better than I know myself. I push away from the table so fast that Max yelps. "Sorry, buddy," I mutter, then walk past the table.

"Where are you going?" he asks

"None of your concern."

"You haven't finished your breakfast."

"So?"

"So, you'll need your strength."

"Oh, to hell with you. Don't pretend to care about me when you clearly don't, and—" He swoops out his arm, snags my wrist.

"Let go," I say through clenched teeth.

He doesn't answer. Instead, he tugs on me, with just enough force that I am pulled toward him. He turns his chair, then lifts me up by my waist and props me on his lap.

"What are you doing?" I mumble. My cheeks heat. Not that his lap isn't comfortable, and hell, if the entire maneuver wasn't hot. I mean, he'd handled my body like I'm made of candy floss. Do I taste as sweet to him? "Let me go." I dig my elbow into his chest.

He huffs, "Stop wriggling." There's a hint of a smile in his voice.

"And if I don't?" I twist around to face him. The curve of my waist bumps against the hard length of him in his pants. "Oh."

He grins. "See what you do to me?"

"Did you say that to *Ms. Sex Video* woman?"

His features shudder. *Damn it, why did I have to go there?*

"Sorry, none of my business."

"I didn't." His tone is clipped, "I never told her that. Nor did I ever seat her in my lap like this or..." he leans around me, grabs my plate and pulls it over, "...feed her breakfast." He scoops up some of my chocolate pancake, then holds the fork up to my lips.

"Open," his voice is husky.

A shiver runs down my spine. He's only giving me food, so why does it have to feel this...erotic?

"I'll eat it if you do," I whisper.

"Hmm." He glances from me to the piece of food on the fork, then back at me. "I have a better idea."

He brings the fork to his mouth, closes his lips around the chocolate crepe. He chews, swallows, then leans in and places his lips on mine. I gasp, and he darts his tongue inside my mouth. The taste of chocolate, of dark edginess and hot sex...the unique flavor that is Weston-fucking-Kincaid fills my mouth, coats my tongue, overwhelms my senses. My head spins. My toes curl. He pulls away and I lean forward. I hear a sound of protest. Hell, is that me?

I crack open my eyelids—when had I shut them?—to find he's scooping up another forkful of the breakfast that I will always associate with him. *Gah!* I did not think that, did not allow myself to indulge in such utter sentimental crap.

"Did you like that?" I whisper.

"Let's say that I may have underestimated the merits of dessert for breakfast."

"Are we talking about the same thing?" I frown.

"I was talking about your chocolate pancake," he snickers, "which you should eat." He raises the fork, "You need your nourishment."

I part my lips and he slides the food into my mouth.

I chew then lick my lips.

His gaze drops to my mouth, "My, my, what beautiful lips you have, little Red." His eyes gleam.

"All the better to kiss you with," I murmur.

His gaze intensifies. The heat from his body seems to deepen. A bead of sweat slides down my spine.

He picks up another forkful of the crepe, holds it up. "Finish it," his voice lowers to a hush, and I'm instantly wet. My nerve endings pop; my brain cells seem to melt all at once.

I close my mouth around the fork, wipe the tines clean, chew, then swallow.

"What a gorgeous throat you have, little Red," his voice is hard. As is the evidence of his arousal that stabs into the valley between my butt cheeks.

"All the better to take you in my mouth," the words tumble from my lips. *What am I doing?* Indulging this man's love for nursery rhymes and children's fairy tales is one thing, but taking it to the extent where the story of Little Red Riding Hood comes to mean something else completely? Not to mention, what was that thing with the rabbit? Had he actually compared himself to my favorite vibrator?

He scoops up the last morsel of food from the plate, holds it up to my lips. "You have a choice," he says.

"I do?" *Do I even want to know?*

He nods, "You can have your last bite before, or after."

"After?" I gulp, "After what?"

"After Christmas shopping."

13

Weston

I watch as she peruses the range of baking produce on the shelf in the only grocery store in the nearest village.

A woman walks behind me, "Excuse me," she says stiffly. I move aside. Hell, the aisles of this place are so narrow I have to flatten my back against the shelf to ensure I am not blocking the route. And the ride in the car over here? Why the hell had I agreed to that torture? Probably because, by the time I'd realized that the only means of transportation available to get to the village was in her dinky car—a bloody Volkswagen—it was too late. When was the last time I'd been a passenger in anything other than my chauffeur driven car...? I don't even remember.

So why had I done it now?

Why had I told her that I'd take her out shopping?

When what I'd wanted to do was eat her out right there on the dining table...for breakfast; and if I had my way, for lunch and dinner too. One taste of her sweet cunt had not been enough. The blood rushes to my groin.

Is that why I'd brought her here...? Because I'd wanted to get away from the cabin and the intimate atmosphere that seemed to be building between us. I lean a hip against the shelf. My shoulder brushes the stocked cans; one falls off of the top shelf, bumps me on the head. I throw my arm out, catch the can before it hits the ground, even as stars flash behind my eyes.

The fuck? From the time I'd met her I seem to be getting rather well acquainted with heavenly bodies, especially hers... Jesus, what's wrong with

me? Next, I'll be spouting poetry, comparing her to a summer's day... No, not Shakespeare now. I'd loved poetry in school, had not hidden my love for the Bard, even acted in school plays. Then the incident had taken place. I'd been enroute home from a rehearsal for a play. And that had changed my proclivity to take part in extracurricular activities. Other than hanging out with the Seven... Not that we'd spoken much. We'd preferred to take our frustrations out on each other... You could say we'd spent a lot of that post-incident time beating each other up. It had been our own personal coping mechanism.

I wonder, have I channeled my love for the spoken word into the nursery rhymes I recite with my nieces? Is that why the fairy tales I read to them have etched themselves into my subconscious mind?

It had been hot though... That entire series of events at the breakfast table... I'd wanted to take her right then. Tempt her into spreading her legs open for me, so I could bury myself inside her sweet cunt. Would she have resisted me? Was the money so important to her that she'd continue to deny herself the release that came from only the most intimate act, of my cock enveloped within her wet channel? Is that why I can't stop myself from tempting her to cross the line? Is that why I'd set such an impossible-to-uphold term to the agreement?

Does she really think she is going to get through the next six days without giving in to me? And if I want her to fail, why hadn't I moved in when I had her ready and willing this morning? Fuck. I drag my fingers through my hair. She is not the only one getting in too deep. The difference is, I know how to turn the tide so it won't drown me. Hopefully.

I stare at the can—it's chocolate. Figures. The one thing in the world I hate more than the thought of losing her. *Hold on... Hold on... I meant losing to her. Yep, that's what it is. Bloody fuck.* I rub at the rapidly forming bump on my head. Did the run-in with the can knock my brains out of whack too?

I prowl up the aisle to where she stands in front of a display of frozen treats.

"How much longer will you take?" I growl

She squeaks, then shoots me a sideways glance. "You startled me," she mutters, then turns her attention back to the display. I follow her gaze to the Sticky Toffee Pudding she's salivating over. I reach for it, but she grabs my arm. "What are you doing?" she scolds.

"You want this?"

"Of course, not."

"Why do you deny yourself?"

"I'm going to be baking enough, as it is. If I also buy these goodies, I'll turn into a Christmas butter ball," she mutters.

"Don't you mean buttercup ball?" I chuckle.

She shoots me a sideways glance. "Knew I could count on you," she snarls, then turns and pushes her loaded shopping cart forward.

"Hold on."

She doesn't stop. No matter. I catch up with her, drop the tin of chocolate onto the heap of shopping. "You sure you have enough there?"

She frowns. "You mind your own business."

"But you are my business."

"Whatever." She speeds up, turns the corner and crashes her cart into a man. Some of the items fall out.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She bends at the same time that the man she'd run into says, "Excuse me." The stranger grabs a can of chocolate—motherfucker, it's the same can I'd placed there earlier. I scowl. He snatches up a few of the other items, then straightens at the same time as her. Their heads bump. Something explodes inside of my chest. My vision narrows. I stalk forward.

He places the items in her shopping cart. "I'm Hunter," he holds out his hand.

"I'm Amelie." She raises her arm, and I plant myself between them.

"And she was just leaving." I thrust my hand in his, squeeze the motherfucker's palm.

The expression on his face doesn't change; he doesn't flinch. I scowl at him.

He glances from me to Amelie. "Uh, a pleasure to meet you," he says.

"Can't say the same," I grunt.

Amelie huffs, "Don't mind him." She grumbles, "He was born with a lemon in his mouth."

I frown, "What does that mean?"

"It means that you have a terrible attitude and you are the most impolite person I know."

"Good," I mutter. "You done here?"

Hunter chuckles, "How long you guys been together?"

"We're not—" Amelie starts.

"Long enough." I thrust out my chin at Hunter. "What kind of a bloody

name is that anyway?"

His expression hardens, then he barks out a laugh. "You're refreshingly candid."

"That's not all I'll be if you don't get out of my face," I shoot back.

He holds up his hands, "Not intruding on your patch, buddy." He glances around me, "Bye Amelie."

"Bye," she choruses back.

The man squeezes past me; my shoulder bumps his. He shoots me a narrowed gaze over his shoulder.

I glare back at him.

He frowns.

I glower.

His shoulders tense, then he jerks his chin.

Good, he got the message.

He pivots, walks away.

"What the hell was that?" Amelie huffs.

"None of your bloody business."

"Why are you so angry?"

"Why were you talking to him?" I snap.

She gapes, "What do you mean? He helped me pick up the groceries. What did you expect me to do? Ignore him?"

"Yes."

She shakes her head, "You've lost it." She pushes the cart forward, muttering, "Of all the crazy, asinine things you could do, this one takes the cake."

I stare after her. *The hell is wrong with me?* So maybe I did overreact, but hell, when he'd bumped into her, all I could think was, mine. *She's mine...* For the next few days, at least.

She struggles with the shopping cart, and I stalk forward, grab at it. "Gimme that."

"Fine." She raises her hands. "For being such a crazy-ass jealous man—"

"I'm not jealous."

She rolls her eyes, then snorts, "No, I forget that's your CRGPF."

I frown. "Excuse me?"

"Your chronic resting grumpy pants face," she clarifies.

Only when I'm around you. She does something to me. Yeah, she confuses me... I blow out a breath. Jesus, now I am going all googly-eyed

over some chick who'd dropped in on my life and turned it upside down. *You can't let her get to you; no way.*

I jerk my chin.

She frowns.

I glare at her.

She pales, then juts out her chin and walks forward and out of the shop. I join the queue. When it's my turn, the woman at the checkout counter opens her mouth.

"Don't—" I growl.

"But, Sir—"

Bloody fuck, is the entire population of this village out to get me? I pull out my wallet, then separate a large stack of bills...and prop them on the counter. "Keep the change."

Her gaze widens, then she proceeds to check out the items.

Thank fuck. So, this is how it is to shop for yourself? What a nightmare. I pull out my phone, depress the buttons on the keypad. When my driver comes on the line I tell him, "I need a few things delivered to the cabin." I give him the list.

Arms full of shopping bags—I had to leave the shopping cart behind at the store—I step out and stalk toward the Volkswagen. Of course, she's nowhere to be seen. *Where the fuck is she?*

I place the bags next to the car, look around. A familiar figure in tight jeans, coat buttoned to show off those curves, catches my eye. She's talking to the man from the store—Hunter. *What the fuck!* My feet eat up the distance between us.

She reaches up, pats him on the shoulder, and a hot sensation stabs in my chest. I lengthen my strides, reach them. "Get away from her."

Hunter looks between us and frowns. "I didn't mean any harm."

"Of course, you didn't," she interjects.

I glare at her.

She pales.

"Go to the car."

She frowns.

"Now."

"But," she pouts, "I was only..."

I bend my knees, thrust my face into hers. "Do it," I command.

She opens her mouth, then seems to change her mind. Turning, she stalks

off.

Thank fuck.

Can't let her out of my sight; got to keep her safe from anything untoward, and that includes strange men sniffing about her.

Hunter glances after her, "Everything okay?" He frowns.

"Shut the fuck up." I growl at him.

He turns to me, "You're Weston?"

I stiffen.

"Dr Weston Kincaid, I presume?"

"How the fuck do you know my name?"

"I'm a friend of Damian's."

"Hmph," I glare at him. "And you know him, how?"

"Our fathers are good friends."

"What are you doing here?"

"The same thing as you, I assume."

I frown.

He chuckles, "I am home for the holidays. I am also the MP for the area."

"Right." I roll my shoulders, "That why you were here? Campaigning?"

"Among other things." He smiles, "Anything you need." He holds out his hand, I ignore it.

"Stay away from her."

"You got it." He keeps his hand extended, "Take it, you never know when you might need help."

I ignore his hand while I stare at his face and something clicks, "You're Hunter Whittington?"

He tilts his head.

"You're standing for the upcoming elections."

A genuine smile splits his face, "Whew." He mock mops his brow. "My PR isn't that bad then."

I jerk my chin. So, he's a well-known politician, albeit one who's being tipped to be the next Prime Minister. *We'll see.*

I turn to leave.

"Make sure you stock up for the next few days."

"Why's that?" I ask.

"The weather," he says. "There's a cold spell coming on."

14

Amelie

"Cold spell, is that what they're calling it? More like, the Beast from the East," I grumble.

The wind whistles through the gaps in the shutters. I shiver, pull the shawl around my shoulders tighter. I'm sprawled out on a cushion, near the fireplace. Sir Grumpy Dickface here, had hauled in wood from the woodshed... Yep, this place has a freakin' designated space where the wood blocks are stocked. All chopped by minions before the onset of winter. To my surprise, Alphahole here, had hauled enough wood in on his own—broken finger notwithstanding—and without protest. Okay, so maybe that's unfair.

He'd helped me with my luggage, hadn't balked about carrying the bags of groceries to the car and then to the house... He'd even ridden, without complaint, in the cramped passenger seat. Unlike the journey through the grocery shop, which had been interesting. In fact, I'd been half-expecting that he'd have called his own driver to ferry us to the village, but he hadn't. Huh?

I shoot a sideways glance at the stony-faced man reading Harry Potter, Max at his feet. His hair is tousled—a perpetual just-rolled-out-of-bed look, which suits him too bloody well. He'd changed into a Henley and jeans, with soft moccasins on his feet, when we'd gotten home. Dinner had been... without incident... Actually, he hadn't said a word. And that had been...a relief...or not. Maybe I prefer his alphaholish behavior...to this lack of communication which...seems uncharacteristic.

I clear my throat, then glance toward him. His head is bent over the book.

He raises his cigar to take a puff. The scent of cloves and pinewood deepens.

I'd wanted to buy a Christmas Tree but I hadn't raised it with him... Well, given how he'd blown his fuse at my talking with Hunter... It had been cute, actually, that fit of jealousy he'd exhibited. Not that he'd admit to it. He had nothing to be jealous of, of course, but it had been refreshing to see him show some semblance of human emotion, after that rather brutish start to our relationship. Relationship? Are we in a relationship? Nah.

He blows out another puff of cigar smoke, that almost-Christmassy scent deepening. My mouth waters and I rise to my feet. "Do you have another?"

"What?" He replies without looking up. Huh?

I pause in front of him. His eyes stay glued to the page.

So, Mr. Potter is worthy of a lot of attention, but darn it, this once, I wish he'd prioritize me over the adventures of the boy wizard.

He raises the damned cigar to his lips and this time I snatch it from him.

He frowns.

I raise my shoulders, "I asked."

He watches as I lift the smoke stick, purse my mouth around the end wet from his. A shiver runs down my spine. It seems intimate to do this. I draw on the cigar, choke a little. A slight burn races down my throat. I blow out the smoke. My head spins. "Whoa," I giggle, "This is good."

"Don't inhale," he cautions me.

"I know how to smoke a cigar."

"How to puff a cigar," he corrects me.

"That's what I said." I scowl down at the smoke stick, then raise it to my lips, I take a long drag. The smoke swirls down my throat, fills my lungs. I blow it out without coughing. A buzz works its way down my limbs. My fingers tingle; my toes curl. "Hmm." I stare at the cigar, "Why is it that smoking a cigar kissed by you is almost as good as kissing you?"

"You sure about that?" His voice is tinged with humor.

I glance up, "Oh, what?"

"You want to test out that theory?"

I blink, then heat sears my cheeks. "Damn." I drag my fingers through my hair. "I didn't just say that aloud, did I?"

"You sure did." He sets the book aside on the side table, then leans back in his chair. The firelight glows off of his beautiful face, highlighting the shadows under his cheekbones. The dark blonde strands of his days-old beard glint. He resembles a pirate, an old-world marauder, someone who'd swoop

in and take and ravish. A melting sensation flares to life between my legs. Oh, hell... This man, he's bloody potent.

His eyelids grow hooded; he watches me as I take a final puff from the cigar. The smoke lingers between us, framing those gleaming colorless eyes that survey me with more than a modicum of interest, and questions. Damn, he has so many questions in his eyes. As do I.

"Why did you tell me about the sex tape?" I blurt out.

The expression on his face doesn't change. He doesn't speak immediately. The silence grows, a beat, another. At his feet Max sighs. He springs up to his feet, looks at me, then at Weston, before pattering away toward the kitchen.

I glance back at Weston to find he's staring at my face.

"What?" I tilt my head. "Shouldn't I have asked that?"

He shakes his head, "Truth is, I am not sure why I mentioned it."

He rolls his shoulders, then settles deeper into the chair, "It felt like it was best to be upfront with you, considering—"

"Considering?" I prompt.

"You're coming home to meet my family, and if it did come up in conversation, I didn't want you to be surprised."

"Your family knows about it?"

He stares back.

"My mother is aware, yes..."

"Oh." I swallow, "And your father?"

"He died when I was sixteen."

Right.

"Heart attack."

My throat closes. Why is he sharing his past with me? What does it mean? *Nothing*. It means nothing at all. We're having a conversation, that's all it is. "Is that why you became a heart-surgeon?"

"Among other things." His features close.

Right. That sharing part? Guess I spoke too soon.

"My parents are retired and in Spain." I shuffle my feet. "I'd visit them more often, but they are happy in each other's company. They had me late, you see. I don't think they were prepared for how a child would turn their lives upside down. I mean, they never shirked their duties. Just... I think they were happy when I left home."

He scowls, "You miss them?"

"Sometimes." I raise my shoulders.

"You don't want to spend Christmas with them?"

"They uh, don't care either way, and this year... Well, I wanted some downtime, know what I mean?" I peer up into his face.

"You're spending Christmas with my family, so you won't be alone," he declares.

I frown. Am I that transparent that he'd guessed that I didn't particularly want to be alone through Christmas?

"Careful," I warn him, "or I'll begin to think that you are being nice to me."

"And what? Is it Christmas?" He smirks.

I stare, "You made a joke? Wow!" I clutch my chest, "It's a Christmas miracle."

"Don't get your hopes up." He firms his lips, "My family isn't the easiest to get along with."

"What family is?" I pull my hair over my shoulder.

"Now who's being nice?" He chuckles.

"Not me." I tip up my chin.

"Liar." His gaze grows intense.

I swallow, glance away. Shit, this is...getting... Uh, more emotional than I'd expected. "Your family," I prompt. "What did they say when they found out about your, uh, escapades?" *No, I don't want to talk about his sex tape, but damn if I don't want to know more about him.*

He frowns, then rolls his shoulders, "They were...disappointed."

"No!" I blink. "You Mr. Billionaire, money bags, surgeon of all he surveys."

"Yeah," he blows out a breath. "Impressing the world is so much easier than impressing your own blood."

"Tell me about it." I glance around for an ashtray to drop the cigar in, then spot it on the side table.

I lean toward it, when he reaches for the stub, "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't snub it out." He takes the stub from my fingers, lays it to rest on the ashtray. "If you do, the cigar oils flow out and burn, and it causes an unpleasant smell."

"So cigars are another of your passions huh?"

"It's a thing that unites us Seven."

"All of you smoke? I mean," I make air quotes, "puff?"

"I like to occasionally indulge."

"Is it bad for you?"

"You mean because I am a surgeon?"

I nod.

"Most things that you have a weakness for are bad for you." He looks me up and down.

"And you?" I meet his gaze, "What about you?"

"I am the worst, of course."

I take a step forward. He widens his stance, and I step in the 'V' between his legs. *What am I doing? Why can't I stay away from him? As long as I don't sleep with him, it's fine, right?* The arrangement still stands.

"The papers?" I lower my chin. "From your lawyers, I mean. When will they arrive?"

"I'll have them for you by tomorrow."

His phone vibrates from the side table, "In fact, that must be it."

He makes no move no reach for it.

"So..." I swallow.

"So?" He runs a finger up the side of my arm. Goosebumps flare in the wake of his touch. A slow burn begins to hum, creeping, swirling up toward my heart. It would be so easy to lose myself in his presence, to forget the outside world exists. Just him and me, locked away in this cabin and—the lights blink off just then. "Oh." I glance up toward the bulbs set in the rustic settings in the ceiling.

"The wind must have gotten to the power supply."

Right. I glance down to find him watching me from under hooded eyes. If he'd been handsome before, lit by the firelight and nothing else, he's devastating now. My throat dries, my belly twists, and moisture laces the secret area between my legs.

"Weston." I whisper, "I—"

Barking sounds from outside.

15

Weston

"Did you hear that?" I stiffen.

She freezes and her gaze widens. "Was that—?"

"Max." I'm already moving. I grab her by the waist, lift her and set her aside.

She squeaks. I jump to my feet, race toward the back door. I grab the handle and the door swings open. "I swear I shut it."

Footsteps sound behind me. I turn. "Stay inside," I stab my finger at her.

"Like hell, I am." She pauses, chest heaving. Her beautiful tits rise and fall. I glance at them and my belly hardens. *Shit, not the time to get distracted.*

"Get back in," I growl.

"No way." She folds her arms over her chest.

More barking, this time farther away. "Fuck." I pivot, race down the steps. She follows. "Stay behind me," I growl at her over my shoulder.

Amelie juts out her chin, then nods. *Thank Fuck.* If she'd tried to disobey me, I'd have bodily hauled her inside and tied her up. I shake my head, dislodging the image. Hell, if she doesn't bring out the caveman in me. I turn, then bolt across the back garden. The light from the patio streams out. I race toward the shed, the direction from which I'd heard the barking. It's silent now. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.* My heart begins to race and my pulse rate ratchets up. I slow down as I near the shed. I hear movement behind me, then she pulls abreast. "Is there someone in the shed?" she whispers.

I train my gaze on the darkened shed. The hair on the back of my neck prickles. The knot in my stomach grows. I reach the side of the shed, press myself against the wall. Amelie follows my lead. I turn, place a finger to my lips. She swallows. I hold up my hand. *Don't move*, I mouth the words.

She bites the inside of her cheek, then nods. I point to myself then at the door of the shed; she jerks her chin. I turn back toward the door. *Shit, wish I had some kind of weapon*. I bite back a laugh as I think of her spatula. I bunch my left fist at my side. Of course, the finger on my right hand is hurt, so I won't be much use if there is, indeed, someone inside. A whine sounds from inside the shed so I move toward it. *Wait, wait*. There's no other sound inside. If there's someone in there... Well, I'll have to deal with it. I slip in through the crack between the door and the frame. There's a shuffling sound, then a low bark. "Max." I feel my way across the wall, hit the switch. The lights blaze in the space. I glance around, draw in a breath.

"Oh, my God," Amelie breathes next to me.

"I told you to stay outside," I remind her.

She ignores me, takes a step forward. "Wes... Your... your clocks."

My stomach knots and a hardness winds itself around my chest. "Fuck, bloody, fuck." Almost every clock in the place has been smashed. I move forward and my loafers crunch on the glass. *Shit*, should have changed into my boots before I rushed out, but fuck that. I stalk forward to my table. A shuffling sounds from underneath it. I pull back the chair and a growl rips out of me.

"What happened? Where's Max?" Amelia rushes forward. I plant my body in between her and the dog, but she's already there. "Oh, no," she cries out, "Max."

I sink down to my haunches, reach for Max. He whines, shrinks away. *Fuck*. "Something—more likely, someone—scared him."

The poor pup is shaking. My gut tightens and my pulse pounds behind my eyes. "I am not going to let him get away with this," I swear.

"Who? Who could do this?" Amelie's voice is low.

"I don't know, but you can bet your ass, I am going to find out." I lean forward, lay my hand on the side of Max's head, "Shh, it's okay, little guy. I'm here now. We'll take care of you, hmm?"

Max whines, folds further into himself.

"Fuck," I swear aloud and he flinches.

"You're frightening him."

"Don't be silly," I growl.

Amelie squats down next to me, loses her balance and grabs at my thigh to right herself. Pinpricks of heat vibrate out from her touch. I glance at her hand, which seems too delicate, too fragile against the broadness of my leg. She leans forward, on her knees, holds out her hand. "You okay, baby?" she croons.

Max blinks up at her, then whines. *Is he playing it up for her? No, he's hurt, but why the hell did he back away from me? And why is he shuffling forward toward her?* She caresses the side of his face, rubs her palm over his flank. He whimpers, then crawls toward her. She lifts him up, carefully, and cradles him. "You poor thing, are you hurt? Don't worry, we'll take care of you now." She turns to me, "We need to take him to the vet."

I place my hand in front of the mutt's mouth. He blinks, then licks my fingers. "Let's go." I rise to my feet. She follows, cuddling the dog close to her chest. His little body trembles. *Why the hell didn't he want to come to me?* I frown, looking from the dog to the tiny woman who rocks him, making soothing noises in her throat. A strange feeling coils in my chest. Jealousy? A little... That the dog preferred her over me... Not that I blame him. Given a choice I'd have laid my head on her breast...and done more than just cuddle, of course. *Enough, motherfucker.* Best get them both out of the shed, at least. I step over the glass. "Watch out," I caution her. She glances down at the glass, places a foot between the shards. "You're in your socks?" I swear.

"Yeah... I didn't have time to get my shoes."

More glass shards crunch under her feet. I growl, "Fuck that." I turn and sweep up both woman and dog into my arms. She squeaks, "Put...me down." Max continues to shake.

"Not a chance"

"But you're hurt."

"And you'll be hurting on parts other than the soles of your feet if you don't shut up."

"Oh," she draws in a breath. "I can walk," she mumbles.

"You're not wearing shoes." I stalk forward. "How could you be stupid enough to come out without your shoes?"

"Excuse me for caring enough about little Max," she huffs.

"You should have stayed inside, like I told you to."

"Why the hell are you angry now?" She frowns.

"You don't want to know." I stalk toward the cabin. "It's enough that I

have to take care of the mutt, add you to the mix and—"

"You don't have to take care of me."

"Right," I mutter. "Tell that to the thief who decided to break in."

"Not my fault that the lock to the cabin was weak."

"There's a security system for both the cabin and the shed... And one that runs around the perimeter of the property that—"

"The cabin," we both say in unison.

I jerk my gaze down to hers.

Her face whitens. "You don't think he went to the—"

"Only one way to find out."

I tighten my arms around her, "You should stay here while I go check out the cabin."

The lights flicker then go out.

"Oh, no," Amelie squeaks. "Do you think the intruder had anything to do with this?"

I frown, not wanting to answer her.

She draws in a sharp breath, coils in closer to my chest. Hmm... this is not too bad, huh?

"Are we safe here?" She gulps, "Maybe you should call your driver and we should leave here?"

What, and miss this opportunity to find out how much more she can take before I break her? No fucking way.

"Relax." I infuse a tone of reassurance into my voice. "It's probably the incoming storm."

"You... you sure?" She peers up at me.

"Positive." I glance down at her upturned face. The starlight brings out the silver in her blue eyes, turns the blonde hair about her shoulders to spun gold. *Spun gold?* What the fuck? Clearly, I've been reading too many fairytales to my younger niece. Jesus, do I still have my balls or what?

"Oh, look." She raises her chin.

I glance up as the first flakes of snow hit my nose. "That's all we need," I grumble. "Fucking snow."

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Her voice is dreamy.

I glance down to find her sticking out her tongue to catch a flake.

"It's polluted water," I warn her.

She scowls, "No one can accuse you of being a romantic."

"No one can accuse you of being practical."

"If I were, I never would have left home at eighteen to go to culinary school, against my parents' wishes."

"Where did you study?"

"At Le Cordon Bleu, Paris."

"Funny, I can't see you at a snooty French course like that."

She frowns up at me. "You're right," she replies, "I hated it. The course taught me a lot, gave me the basics, but... I couldn't wait to get out of there and into the real world."

"You don't like rules, huh?"

"I like to be free."

"Do you?" I allow my lips to twist.

"Of course." She scowls, "Why do you ask?"

"I think you'd like to be tied down. In fact, I am positive you'd love to test your limits; to find out how much you could take before you break down and beg for your release."

She gulps; her pupils dilate.

"You... You're wrong." She whispers.

"Are you sure?"

16

Amelie

"Of course, I am." I squeeze my thighs together. Damn it, stop imagining the scene he's laid out.

He doesn't know me or my needs or my likes. He has no idea how close he came to hitting on a certain forbidden dream I've harbored... One that I won't give in to, no matter that it is being laid out by the meanest, sexiest toad-in-the-hole ever. And that would be an insult to toad-in-the-hole's everywhere. I blow out a breath. I totally have to stop with these weird food-related metaphors that I seem to come up with when I am around him.

"How do you know if you haven't tried it?" He lowers his voice and studies me, "Have you tried it?"

I bite down on my lower lip. *Damn it, why can't I lie to him? Say it; do it*. "Uh... Not really," I venture.

His eyes gleam, "I think you might be surprised."

"The only surprise would be if there isn't an intruder in the cabin," I mutter.

He walks up the patio, past the now-silent hot tub. He stops at the entrance. "I need to go in and check the place first," he grumbles.

"I'm coming with you."

"It's safer here."

"It's colder." The snowflakes intensify, more of the white, powdery stuff sticking to my lips. I lick them off. His nostrils flare. Did that turn him on? Why is he so attuned to me? Is that why he'd laid out that stupid condition

that I can't sleep with him if I want the money? Maybe it was to give me a way out of having sex with him... Except damn it, now I want to shag him. OMG!

Do I want the money so badly that I'll do everything but allow him to fuck me? Okay, don't answer that. It isn't fair, putting this big ol' hunk of chocolate slab on one side and my future on the other. *Would you give up his spotted dick for the chance at realizing your dreams?* Not that his dick is spotted...but it has a certain rhyme to it, know what I mean?

He bends as if to lower me to the floor.

"No, no, please no." I pout, "Don't do this. Don't leave me out here alone." Max whines to punctuate my words. *Good boy.*

He glares at me. His shoulders seem to swell. The full force of his dominance seems to weigh down on my shoulders.

I gulp, "We...Weston?" *Crap, why is my voice trembling?*

"You owe me, Buttercup." His voice is low, hushed.

"Can... can we go in?" I shiver.

He frowns, then jerks his gaze away and in front. Whew. The breath shudders out of me. I glance forward as he steps inside the house. He walks into the living room. It's silent, the space lit by the flames from the fire.

He glances around the space, his muscles tensed. I look up at the jut of his jaw. The hair covering his face seems thicker. Jeez. Do his whiskers multiply by the hour or something? Isn't that a sign of virility? At this rate, he's gonna have a Santa Claus beard by the time it's Christmas Day. And he can take me across his knee anytime. I snicker, and he looks down at me, catching me off guard. Heat sears my cheeks.

"What were you thinking?" he growls.

"N...nothing."

"Don't try that. I know exactly when your thoughts turn X-rated."

"Huh?"

Max grumbles in his throat.

"I think you can put us down now," I manage to say.

He stares at me a second longer, then stalks over to the cushion in front of the fire. He lowers me down to it. Max wriggles in my hold. I place him on the floor and he stretches, yawns, then patters off toward the kitchen.

"Well, he seems okay." I clear my throat, the adrenaline fades away and my limbs tremble.

"Hmm."

"Should we take him to the vet?"

Weston straightens. "Let's watch him tonight, and if he shows any signs of trauma tomorrow, we can take him then. I think he just had a fright."

"That's a plan." I yawn so hard, my jaw cracks. My eyelids seem heavy all of a sudden. "Sorry," I mumble. "It hit me all at once, I think."

He peels off the socks from my feet. His fingers brush my ankle. I shiver. He runs his fingers up the heels of one foot, then the other. Goosebumps pop on my skin. "What are you doing?" I say, breathless.

"Making sure you didn't cut yourself."

"I'm not hurt," I insist. I tug on my foot and he releases me.

"You should take off your loafers." I say.

"Excuse me?"

I glance down at his feet, "Uh, you're dragging in the snow from outside, not to mention the glass pieces from the shed."

He frowns, then retraces his steps to the door, toes off his shoes. I stare at his beautiful feet... beautiful naked large feet. My throat closes. My belly flutters.

I had no idea I had a foot fetish, until I met Dr Grumpy Pants Kincaid. Hell I had no idea I had a fetish for other male parts either... Not *all* male parts... Only *his* male parts. My belly flutters. My throat closes. Bloody hell. Clearly, I am obsessed.

"Why don't you wait here?" His voice cuts through my thoughts.

I tip my head up to meet his gaze, and warmth laces my cheeks.

"You okay?" He frowns.

No, of course not.

"Of course I am." I fold my hands in my lap.

He looks at me intently until I nod, then straightens. "I'll check the cabin and lockup, to ensure we're safe. Then we can go to bed." He grabs a log and heads toward the bedroom.

My eyes widen, but before I can worry too much, that dumb voice inside of my head chimes in. *We. Gah!* He used the 'We' word. I stare up in his direction. *Doesn't signify anything, bitch.* Wait, does he mean go to bed to sleep or go to bed for something else? And omigosh, isn't that all cozy? So domestic. Would it be like this if we were together...? Maybe married, with kids... *What the f—?*

"Bedroom's clear," he says as he stalks toward the other end of the house.

I shake my head, push myself up to my feet. Clearly, I am delusional, or

the Christmas season is affecting me, or the way he'd swept me up in his arms like I didn't weigh anything at all, and proceeded to carry me in here had made a huge impact on me. No one had ever done that before. No one. *Shit*. I am this...close to doing something stupid. *Gah!* Like giving up the money and giving in to him. *No, no, no*. I need advice. Need to talk with someone.

I march to the bedroom, which is illuminated by the moonlight coming in from the window, then reach for my handbag; my fingers brush my phone. Huh?

So he decided to return it to me? When had he put it back? Why would he do that? Is this his way of making up for the douche he's been thus far? My head spins. Talk about being complex. The alphahole is certainly the most complicated man I've ever met; and the most intriguing... Don't forget gorgeous. Why does he have to be this difficult though? It sure makes this entire relationship hard work... And unique... No wonder I can't stop thinking of him. And no... Our relationship is strictly professional. *Yea, keep telling yourself that, bitch*. Regardless, I am going to take every break I get... Like this phone. He returned it; now I can use it.

I grab the phone, glance around.

Where can I speak without him hearing me? I walk into the ensuite bathroom, lock the door behind me. *Shit, it's dark*. I switch on the light on my phone, walk over to the bath candle at the head of the tub. I grab it, rummage around in the drawers under the sink, until I find a lighter. I light the candle, place it on the counter next to the sink.

Then, for good measure, I crawl into the bathtub.

I swipe the phone screen, notice a text message. It's from Julia, one of my oldest friends. She'd left high school, gone to Australia for her gap year and stayed on as a nanny for a family there. Last I heard, she'd planned to stay on for another year. I peruse her text:

Hey Amelie, change of plans. I'm returning to London. Should be there just after Christmas. Can I stay with you until I find a place of my own?

Oh, yay!

It's going to be awesome to have her back, especially considering Summer is on her honeymoon. Victoria is still in that early stars and sunshine phase in her relationship with Saint. Karma... Well, she seems to have

forgotten about us, since discovering her hottie on her extended Sicilian sojourn—a hottie she is still hiding from us. So that leaves me and Isla—the only other single woman in our clique, and Julia, when she returns.

I text her back:

Awesome news.

Can't wait to see you! Of course you can stay with me. Come over when you land.

I press send, then call Isla. She picks up on the third ring.

"Hey," her voice is breathless.

"Did I disturb you?" I keep my voice low.

"Nope. Just me and my Hitachi getting all cuddly." She snickers. "If I were to fall pregnant now, I'd give birth to batteries."

"What the—?" I snort, then swallow down the wrong way and start coughing. "That was such a bad joke, it was good." I clear my throat. "At least someone's having fun." I bite down on my lower lip.

The silence stretches, then, "Amelie?"

"Yeah."

"You okay?"

"Of course."

"Why are you whispering?"

"Because I don't want to be heard?"

"Aren't you at the cabin?"

"Yep."

"So why the secrecy thing?"

"What secrecy thing?"

"You're still whispering, babe."

"Right."

"Amelie?" she asks, worry in her voice. "Everything okay there?"

"There was a break-in at the cabin."

"What?" I hear the sheets rustle, then the click of a lamp, "Are you okay? What happened."

The line buzzes and I glance at the screen. She's asking for access to

video mode. I decline.

"What the hell?" She demands. "Why aren't you on video?"

"Uh, because, I'm hiding in the bath tub."

"What the—?" Her voice sharpens, "Why are you hiding? Did the intruder hurt you—"

"I'm fine," I mumble.

Why'd I have to go and blurt that out to her? Maybe I needed someone to empathize with me, huh? Not that Weston hadn't. He had taken care of me, even if it was grudgingly... Still, I needed to hear a familiar voice, someone unthreatening with whom I don't need to pretend.

"Then why are you still whispering?" Her voice sharpens, "Is the intruder still there?"

"No, no. I think Wes scared him off."

"Weston?"

"Yeah."

"He's there with you?"

I draw in a breath. "I walked in on him, completely naked, as he was wrapping up his hot tub session."

Silence, then she chuckles, "You found him naked?"

"Yeah."

"In the hot tub?"

"He'd just been in...yeah, and he didn't have a stitch of clothing on and he had a cigar."

"Hot damn." She laughs, "Talk about phallic symbols, hmm?"

That's true. He'd been all but sending me subconscious signals... Okay, seeing his massive dick upfront? Not that subtle...but you have to give the man full marks for making an impression.

"That's not all," I add.

"You mean there's something to top off that picture?" She chuckles.

I frown, "Wipe that image from your mind, please."

Silence again. "Did you just ask me to refrain from imagining the hot doctor naked?"

"Yeah." *Shit, I know how that sounds...* But I really don't want her going there... Nowhere near that very male, very gorgeous naked ass...or dick, of said doctor...because...well I am...

"Are you jealous?"

Of course, I am. "No, no, nothing like that..." I bite my lips.

"It's fine; I understand." I can hear the grin in her voice.

"Nothing to understand."

"You're holed up with him over the festive season, huh? Planning a hot and dirty week, eh?"

"No, no," I hasten to clarify, "nothing like that."

"Oh?" Her voice is credulous.

"No, seriously, uh... He wants me to meet his family over Christmas."

The silence stretches this time. A beat, another.

"Family? Christmas?" Her voice sounds strangled. "Isn't that uh, premature?"

"It's part of the deal."

"The deal...? What deal? Amelie, what the hell is happening there?"

The phone vibrates again; I glance at the screen. She's asking for access to my video again. I huff out a breath, then agree.

Isla's face fills the screen. Her eyes are wide, concern writ across her features.

"Finally," she huffs. "The hell have you gotten yourself into?"

"Me?" I frown, "Why are you yelling at me, when it's that asshole's fault that I am here in this bath tub?"

"Where is the doctor?"

"He's shutting down the house for the night."

She raises an eyebrow.

"What?"

She makes the motion of zipping her lips, "Nothing."

I scowl, "Out with it, bitch."

"It sounds like you two are playing house up there."

"Yeah, and Max is our child," I say, only half-joking.

"Sinclair and Summer's puppy?"

"Yeah, Weston's dog-sitting."

"He can't be that much of an asshole if he's dog sitting."

"He knows how to fool people, huh?" I mutter.

She peers up at me through the screen. "The deal," she prompts. "What's that all about?"

"He's paying me a million pounds a day for my time."

"A million?" she splutters. "You sure?"

"Yeah, we shook on it."

"Hmph." She purses her lips, "He's filthy rich. No doubt, he can afford

it." Her forehead furrows, "And what does he want from you in return?"

"Uh, I'm going to have to housekeep for him, until we leave here."

She bursts out laughing. "You? Housekeeping?" Isla has been to my place.

"Shut up," I say, before giggling along with her.

She snickers, "So, what does that mean? *Housekeeping*." She emphasizes the word, as if it has a hidden meaning.

My cheeks heat. "Well, uh..." I shift my body. *Why can't I get comfortable?* "It means I have to do everything he wants."

"Ooh," she perks up, "you mean kinky games?"

"Sort of..." I look up at the ceiling before continuing, "except, I'm not supposed to sleep with him."

"Excuse me?"

I hurry to explain. "As long as I don't have sex with him, I get the money."

She blinks rapidly. "That..." she frowns, "that makes no sense."

"Right?" *Glad I'm not the only one who thinks so.*

"I mean, shagging him would be almost as good as getting the money in your account."

I squeeze the bridge of my nose, "This entire thing is gonna go tits-up on me."

"So, he'll come through with the money. You're confident of that, right?"

"Right."

"And all you have to do is get through the next few days... Break bread with his fam..."

"Yeah," I nod.

"So, what's the problem?"

I stare at her.

"Oh." She tilts her head, "OHHHHH."

I turn down my lips, "Now you see?"

"You want to ride him horizontally?"

"Don't be crude." I laugh.

"You want to fuck him, get it on with him, shag him until you can't walk straight, until you're enveloped in a sex haze...?"

"Gee thanks," I mutter. "Thanks for laying it all out there."

"So, do it." She raises her shoulders.

"What?"

"You want him; take him. He won't say no. Shag him; live out your wildest dreams with the dirty doctor."

"And then?"

"Then go back to your life."

"My indebted-to-hell life," I complain.

"That does suck..." she taps a finger to her forehead, "unless."

"Uh-oh!" *Do I want to hear this?*

"You, change the terms of the deal."

"You think I could?"

"Sure. Revise it to include money *and* sex."

"Ah...But..."

"What?"

"Doesn't that make me a slut...in his eyes?"

"Aren't you already one?"

"N...no." I mean... "Maybe."

"Is it him or yourself you're worried about?"

"I don't understand."

"You want to keep your conscience clean—keep your skirts clean, so to speak. Do what he wants, on his terms, take the money, and run."

"Yeah."

"Think you can keep it that simple?"

"I..." I hang my head, "I'm not sure."

"So, call off the deal. Forget about the money. Go for the man."

"But... but, I need the cash."

"Then do as he says."

"I don't want to." I pout.

She throws up her hands, "Gah, you're making my head hurt."

"Tell me about it." I press my fingers to the bridge of my nose.

"So..." she scans my features, "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

There's a knock on the door. "Amelie?" Weston's voice reaches me.

"You okay in there?"

"Shit, I gotta go."

"Let me know what you decide."

"Thanks, Iz."

"Bye, babe."

Weston bangs on the door again and raises his voice, "Amelie? Is

everything okay?"

"Yes, coming." I walk over to the commode and flush it. Then check my appearance in the mirror over the sink. My hair is all over the place, skin flushed, no makeup, lips wiped bare. Ugh. And is that...? I lean in closer. Yep, there's dog hair on my sweater. "Damn it." I take off my sweater, glance around, then toss it into the laundry basket. My blouse is crumpled, but it'll have to do.

"Amelie?" Weston sounds pissed. "You coming out or do I need to come in there?"

"Hold onto your britches," I yell back, slide my phone into my pocket, then turn toward the mirror. I mean, it's not even a question anymore, is it? No sex. That's fine. I can still stick to that plan, but it would be nice to have a bit more fun with him at least, no? I grab the bottom of my blouse and whip it off.

"Amelie." Weston juggles the knob, "I'm coming in."

"Wait!" I toss aside the blouse and scamper for the door.

17

Weston

She opens the door, and I stare. Her tits... Her beautiful...gorgeous breasts, ensconced in her bra salute me. I glare at her chest, then at her face.

"Just," she swallows, "getting ready for bed."

I frown down at her. She walks forward. I don't move.

"Uh, excuse me?" She squeezes through the space between me and the door jamb.

She saunters over to the bed, walks past her suitcases propped up against the wall, to her side of the bed. She unzips her jeans, shoves them down, bends to take them off. Her heart shaped butt juts out. I clench the fingers of my right hand, wince when my injured finger protests. "Fuck," I growl.

"You, okay?" She tilts her head, shoots me a glance from her bent over stance.

I glare at her and she pales. Then straightens and kicks her jeans to the side.

I take a step forward.

She scrambles over to the bed, "Uh, I think I'll go to sleep." She slides in between the sheets, pulls the comforter up to her chin. She turns over on her side.

I'd lit candles on the side tables, and their light flickers across her delicate shoulder blades. Her creamy skin is perfectly smooth, perfectly soft, perfect to be marked by my fingerprints. I take a step toward her, then clench my fist at my side. *What the fuck? Is she playing with me?* And I'd started this

goddamn game. What a bloody mistake. *Why the hell had I put the money between us? Why hadn't I flipped the agreement the other way? Asked her to sleep with me in exchange for the money? Fuck.* I reach the bed, stand over her.

Her shoulders quiver. So, she's aware I am here? Hmm.

Her fingers clench at the covering that flows over her shoulder. I reach for the fabric, tug. She shudders, then releases her grip on it. I draw the sheet down the curve of her waist, down the jut of her beautiful arse, until it pools about her ankles.

The swell of her butt catches the candlelight—gorgeous, beautiful, curved at just the right circumference, it'd fit so right into my palms.

My fingertips twitch. I sink to my knees by the bed, press a kiss to that point where her waist meets the swell of her hips.

She shudders. "Weston," she whispers.

"Shh." I nibble my way to the swell of the enticing flesh to the valley between her butt cheeks.

"Oh, my God." Her entire body quivers.

I am not a religious person—well, not unless you count the time I'd been kidnapped and had prayed to every power that might be to help me... And now, faced with the sheer gorgeousness, the beauty that is this woman unclothed— Yeah, I send up a prayer of thanks to that power that I am here. Is this why the cops had found me, still and lifeless, ready to give up? I had been hanging on by a thread, reaching for something in the distance, not within reach...a belief that I'd get through it. Can I get through these days with her? When, with every moment, she is sinking into my blood, wrapping herself up around my heart... *Heart? What? Fuck that.* I am not ready for that kind of entanglement.

Nothing and no one will undermine the lifestyle I've worked so hard to build. I'll never let another in... I fuck them and leave them. That's what I am good at. I'll never allow myself to lose control. Never put myself in a position where I am vulnerable.

I slip my tongue into the space between her arsecheeks. Her entire body jerks. "Wes," she moans, and my groin hardens.

"Do you want me, Princess?"

"Ah," she gulps, "I... You know I do."

I squeeze her arse, part the cheeks then nudge my tongue into her backhole.

"Jesus, Wes," she groans. "What are you...doing?"

"What do you think?"

"Why do you always answer my question with a question?"

"Because it's my prerogative to ask and yours to submit."

She huffs, "Where is that written?"

"In Doc Kincaid's manual of '100 ways to torture—I mean—pleasure a woman,'" I chuckle.

She stills, "Bet you have it written down too." She grumbles, "Methodical and detailed grumpy pants that you are."

"You think you know me, huh?" I nibble my way down to the apex between her legs, slip my tongue in to the sweet hollow of her pussy.

"OMG," she hisses, tries to pull her legs up.

I grip her thigh. "Don't move," I growl.

"But," she whines, "this is not fair."

"Good." Time she felt a little bit of the agony she's been putting me through. I lick the entrance to her channel and her entire body bucks. I slide my hand around to cup her pussy, slide my tongue in and out of her wet, melting core.

She groans, throws out her hand to clutch at a pillow.

I bring my other hand up to squeeze her breast and she cries out, "Why are you doing this?"

"Because... I can?" I murmur against her center. "Because you won't stop me?"

"Does this... Uh, count as—?"

"Breaking the arrangement?"

She nods.

"No," I slurp the moisture that trickles from her center, "but all you have to do is say the word and I'll put you out of your misery."

"Fuck," she hisses.

"Yeah, exactly." I allow my lips to curve into a smile, then press little kisses to the back of her thigh. I suck on the soft skin, and the taste of her goes to my head. I bite down on the tender flesh and she moans.

"Please, please, please," she pants.

"You know I can't." I smirk. "But say the word, and I can take you—" I drag my tongue up her thigh, retrace my way to her backhole, "here."

"Oh," she gasps. "I... I...am not sure about that."

I raise my head, slip a finger back inside her puckered hole. "You mean

this?"

She groans, "I... I think I hate you."

I twist my finger inside her, then slide two fingers inside her pussy.

Her body jerks, goosebumps pop on her skin, a quiver works its way up her legs, her thighs, she clenches her butt around my intrusion, and her pussy clamps down on my finger.

"Oh, my God, Weston, I am going to—"

I pull my finger out from her asshole, from her channel, then rise to my feet.

She stills, "What the fuck?"

She turns on her back, then springs up.

"What are you doing?"

I yawn, "I'm tired."

She gapes, tracks my progress around the bed to my side. I grab my sweatshirt and peel it off, along with the vest I have on underneath. I reach for my pants.

She squeaks, "You're undressing?"

"It happens." I smirk, "I have been known to do so when I want to get into bed."

I shove down my pants and boxers. I kick them aside and straighten. I turn to face her. Her gaze widens as she takes in my full-frontal nudity, rakes her gaze down my stomach to where my dick stands to attention. *I'm aroused—of course, I am. And that's too fucking bad. I don't intend to do anything about it. Guess I am going to suffer along with her... Uh, who am I punishing here? Her or me? Both of us. Right, whose idea had this entire fucked-up arrangement been?*

I climb between the covers, then fold my hands behind my head.

Next to me, she stays perfectly still, muscles vibrating with tension. The nervous energy vibrates off of her, reaches out to me. My shoulders bunch. I close my eyes, begin to count down.

Twelve o'clock.

Eleven o'clock.

Ten o'clock.

She shifts position.

Nine o'clock.

Eight o'clock.

She turns over on her side, facing away from me.

Seven o'clock.

She mutters under her breath.

Six o—

She sighs aloud.

That's it. "What's wrong?" I snap.

Silence from her.

I close my eyes again.

Six o—

She jerks on the cover, pulls it off of me.

"What the fuck?" I turn to her, "What's wrong?"

"I'm...c...cold." Her teeth chatter.

I frown. The temperature had dropped and the heating hasn't come on yet.

She shivers again.

I turn, scoot over, then drag her to me.

She squeaks, "What are you doing?"

"Making the fuck sure that I can get some shut-eye."

I tuck her head under my chin, lock my arm around her waist, and pull her close enough for my dick to nestle between her arsecheeks.

She wriggles her hips, "You're... Uh, you're hard."

"Deal the fuck with it," I growl.

"But, I can't—"

I close my palm over her mouth, "Sleep, Princess."

She draws in a breath, another, then licks my palm. My cock instantly lengthens. "Don't do that, not unless you want to be brought to the edge of climax again...and left unfulfilled."

"You won't," her voice is muffled against my hand.

"Try me." I snuggle her closer, throw my leg over her thigh. She stills, muscles wound up. I close my eyes, start my countdown.

Six o-clock.

Five o'clock.

Her chest rises and falls.

Four o'clock.

Her breathing deepens.

Three o'clock.

Her shoulder muscles loosen; her body twitches.

Two o'clock.

I lower my palm to cup her breast. Not intentionally, of course. It's a logical resting place. Besides, the shape is a perfect fit for my palm. Sleep overcomes me.

Something cold nudges my face, a wet tongue licks my mouth, "Seriously, Buttercup, we need to talk about your morning breath." I crack open my eyelids. Max gazes soulfully at me. I am on my back; Max rides my chest. He flicks out his tongue, I turn my head to the side, then stiffen. The bed is empty. *Where the hell is she?*

I set Max aside, swing my legs over the side, and head out of the room. A crash reaches me from the kitchen, then a scream. *The fuck?* "Princess?" I race toward the commotion.

18

Amelie

"Aw... Hell... Butterfingers." I glance down at the mixing bowl I had overturned. I'd woken up early, determined to try a new recipe for chocolate banana muffins...and managed to drop the bowl.

No wonder he calls me Buttercup. But I admit, I prefer Princess. There's a thud of footsteps, the sound of barking. I glance up as Weston barrels through the door and into the room, Max on his heels.

"What's wrong?" He stalks into the room, "I heard you—"

His shoulders block out the rest of the room. The planes of his chest are hard. I rake my gaze down his concave stomach, to where his cock juts out between those powerful legs and those gorgeous feet that he's currently about to place in a puddle of chocolate sauce.

"Watch out—"

His feet slip on the gooey streak on the floor and his big body tilts back. Shit, I leap forward, reach for him... I mean, what the hell am I trying to do? It's not like I could stop him from falling, and hello, he isn't wearing any clothes, so I couldn't exactly grab onto anything, except...Well... You know. A-n-d nope, I don't want to risk hurting that part of him. I stumble aside.

Too late, I realize I am about to step on a banana peel. Yes, really, a banana peel. Can my life get any more cartoonish? I twist my body, lose my balance anyway, and pitch forward. "Oh, no, no, no," I wail, throw up my hands, squeeze my eyes shut and connect nose first with a hard barrier. Shock waves ricochet through my head, down my spine. The breath whooshes out

of me. "Ugh!" I flail around, and my arms are caught and twisted behind me.

"The hell is wrong with you?"

His voice rumbles below my ear and that's when I realize I am sprawled over his body. His very naked body. My cheek is smooshed against that delectable chest, my breasts flattened against that eight pack, my pelvis positioned right over that hard, gorgeous part of him that stabs into the cleft between my pussy lips.

Max dances around us, barking near my ear. "Max, stop," I pant, then try to pull back from the annoying man I am currently draped over.

He scissors his legs around mine, "Stop struggling."

I tip my chin-up, "What are you trying to do?" I scowl.

The light shining through the window brings out the gold flecks in his eyes. Huh? So his eyes aren't completely grey? Imagine that.

"I heard you scream." He glowers up at me, "I was convinced there was an intruder in here."

"No, it's just me," I huff. Gosh, he's grumpy first thing in the morning, huh? Is it because he hasn't had his way with me yet? Would stabbing his dick inside of me put him in a better mood? My thighs clench. My nipples tighten.

He tilts his head, his lips taking on that curl that I hate... And love. *Oh, my God, stop acting like a sex-crazed slut—but hello, can you blame me?* That mussed up hair, that broad chest, over which I am sprawled. That warmth of his that rises up from his big body, to coil around me, sink into my blood, and travel straight to that emptiness in my center. *Gah, stop that.*

I push back; his grasp tightens. That hard length of his pushes up and into my very eager center. I gulp. *Okay, don't panic; don't.* Pretend it's normal. Just a conversation, that's all this is. I tip up my chin. "I, uh, had a little accident," I mutter.

"I can see that." He pushes back my hair that's come loose from its bun on top of my head, then rubs at a spot on my cheek. He brings it to his mouth, sucks on his digit. "Chocolate." He grimaces, "Of course, it's chocolate."

"Is there any other kind of ingredient worth waking up early for?"

"There are other reasons worth losing sleep over," he smirks.

I scoff, push at his chest, "Let me go."

"No."

Max shoves his face between us, aims his tongue at Weston's mouth. Wes groans, turns his face the other way.

Max barks, wags his tail, turns to me instead. I crane my head away, "Chocolate isn't good for you, Max," I scold.

Max pants, then shoves his nose into my throat. "Ooh, it's cold." I giggle. He licks my throat, then proceeds to place his paw on my breast.

"Hey," Weston releases my arm, grabs Max by the scruff of his neck and places him aside. Max barks. The moment Wes lets him go, he jumps forward toward me, shoves his nose down my blouse.

I laugh, "Max, no, that tickles."

"Bloody hell," Weston swears. He releases both of my arms, then grabs Max. I roll away from him. Weston jumps to his feet, stalks across the kitchen and places Max in the hallway. He points a finger at the puppy. "Chocolate on the floor, buddy. I don't want you getting into that." Max groans.

I swear, that dog can speak.

The mutt blinks up at Weston who shakes his head. "Nice try little fella, but you can't come in here right now." He closes the door.

I spring up to my feet, and slip again, on the gooey dough this time, slide forward, tilt back, grab hold of a chair which tips over. *Gah!* The world tilts again; I squeak, throw out a hand, which is grasped. I am pulled upright.

"Steady." There's amusement in his voice.

"Thank you." I tug on my palm, but his grip tightens around my wrist. He tugs, I careen forward, and he grabs me and swings me up. I wind my legs around his waist.

"Hello, there." He waggles his eyebrows.

"What are you doing?" My voice is breathless. Bloody hell. His dark, edgy, masculine scent entwines with the chocolate-banana notes of the muffin mixture. My mouth waters and it's not for the muffins. My head spins and I dig my fingers into his shoulders.

He walks to the other side of the table, then plops me on it. He keeps his fingers on my hips. "That's better."

"For...for what?" I clear my throat.

"For breakfast, of course." He grins, then steps back. He leans around me, grabs the chocolate sauce we bought.

I frown, "I was going to use that to cook."

"I have a better idea." He holds it upside down, squirts. I glance down to find it dripping into the valley between my breasts.

"Wh...what are you doing?" I gulp.

His lips curl, he drops his head, and licks the sauce from the top of my cleavage toward the hollow of my throat.

"Oh," I stutter.

He sucks on the delicate skin at the base of my neck and I feel the tug all the way down to my core. My pussy spasms and my thighs clench. "W... Weston," I plead.

He pauses, "Do you want me to stop?" He leans back, "Should I leave?" He takes a step back.

I throw out a hand and grab his hip, "Wait."

He tilts his head, "What do you want?"

I want you inside me; I want you to fuck me right here. I blink, "I... I want to complete the recipe I set out to cook."

He frowns, "You want to make breakfast?"

"Y...yeah," I nod, "it's a new recipe I'm trying out for—"

He scratches his chest and my gaze drops to those cut abs. Not that I hadn't noticed them before... I mean, I'd managed to look away though, so he wouldn't catch me staring, but now that he's drawing attention to it, well... I can't help but stare. "For a doctor you sure have a great physique."

"For a chef, you sure haven't figured out the obvious."

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"You were making... What was it you were going to create?"

"Muffins." I frown, "Banana chocolate muffins."

"The oven," he jerks his chin over my shoulder, "the electricity's not back."

"Oh!"

"And the refrigerator isn't working either," he adds. "Or didn't you notice?"

"I... I didn't," I confess, and I had opened the refrigerator to pull out the ingredients I needed. Hell! I drag my fingers through my hair. "How can I be such a ditz?"

"Maybe your mind was otherwise occupied?" He chuckles.

"How do you mean?"

"Want me to spell it out?" He takes a step forward.

I shake my head, "No, no, it's fine. You're right, I was, uh, thinking of other things."

"Oh?" He smirks, "Did it involve me in anyway?"

"Ah, your family actually. When, uh, when do we set off to see them?"

"In four days."

"Four days." I gulp, glance around the room. Four days, during which I still have to resist him. *How the hell am I going to get through this?*

"What should I do about breakfast?" I pout.

"I have an idea." His grin widens, "Why don't I make my special instead?"

Twenty minutes, later I sit across the table from him. He'd, thankfully, changed into sweats and a long sleeved T-shirt, which damn, it only set off his broad shoulders even more. I mean, the only thing to beat the sight of this man unclothed is him sitting across the table, with Max at his feet. I'd cleaned up the kitchen by the time Weston had returned with the little guy in tow. I'd topped off Max's bowl, which he'd wolfed down in minutes, before taking up his position by the table.

Now, he watches as Weston pours the cereal into the bowls. He tops his off with milk, offers it to me. I refuse. Yeah, for a chef, I don't like milk. Not in my tea, nor in anything else.

"This?" I mutter, "This is your idea of cooking?"

"Hey, don't mock it until you've tried it."

He uses his uninjured hand to dip his spoon into his bowl, and begins to eat.

"It's not chocolate," I whine.

"Precisely." He scoops up more of the stuff.

I frown, "How the hell am I going to get through the days without cooking?"

"You could clean."

"Yeah, well." I shuffle in my seat. I absolutely hate household chores. Yeah, a tiny detail I'd left out. I know.

I glance down at my bowl, begin to scoop up the mixture. I eye it, then force some of it into my mouth. The flavors explode on my tongue. I crunch down, swallow it, reach for more.

"Not bad, huh?"

I raise a shoulder, "It's all right." I eat some more. "I couldn't use firewood to fire up the oven, could I?"

He stares across the table, "Probably not."

"Can I call someone to come and take a look?"

"I already called for service, but they won't come until the storm blows

over."

I frown, glance out the window. Snow comes down in heavy flakes. It does look bad, and if people are being careful before venturing out... "Maybe the roads will be blocked and we won't be able to get there?"

"The storm's supposed to blow itself out in 48 hours."

Right.

"Maybe the roads will be too slippery?"

"I've asked my driver to come by to take us there."

"Your driver?"

"He's on standby in the village."

Of course. My shoulders droop. And I'd been hoping to put the time to good use by trying out new recipes, huh?

"Perhaps," he rolls his neck, "I could take a look at the generator."

"You would do that?" I cry.

"Hmm." He looks me up and down, "How badly do you want it?"

I frown, "What is that supposed to mean?"

He leans forward, "I mean, how far would you go to get the generator working, I wonder?"

I swallow, wriggle around in my seat, "How far do you want me to go?"

"I want you to beg."

"Excuse me?"

"Beg me to do it."

"No," I scowl.

"Fine then." He pushes back from the table, pivots to leave.

I frown, watch him as he prowls toward the door. I train my gaze back on the man, or rather on that fine piece of ass of his, those power thighs that undulate as he puts more distance between me... And the muffins I so very much want to bake. Is there not one thing in your life that you can complete? Not a relationship? Just about hold onto a business that if you don't comply with his wishes... You'll lose the money to ensure that it survives. Ugh, why do I always find myself stuck between a rock and a hard place? And no, I am not talking about certain parts of his anatomy that would give granite a run for its money.

He steps out of the kitchen and I call out, "Wait." I spring up and my chair careens back. "I beg you," I call out, "please fix the generator."

He shoots me a look over his shoulder, "Get on your knees, and ask like you mean it"

"Wh...what?"

"You heard me."

I scowl. *If he thinks I am getting down on the floor—I confess, I didn't do a great job of cleaning up earlier and there are crumbs everywhere. Ugh! Note to self: make sure to be more detailed in all parts of your life, so it doesn't come to bite you in the arse—or in the pussy—* My thighs tremble.

"Do it," he tilts his head, "or our deal is off."

"Fine, fine, whatever," I huff, then swing my leg onto the table.

19

Weston

"What are you up to?" I frown as she scrambles up onto the table, on her knees.

She looks at me with wide eyes, "What? I'm doing what you ordered me to do."

I growl.

"You didn't specify where." She flutters her eyelashes at me.

I scowl. Of course, I didn't, but then, I hadn't expected her to kneel on the table either. This woman... Every time I think I have her pegged, she throws me a surprise. *Goddam it.* I pause at the door. Max whines, and I bend down to pat him. He pushes his nose into my hand, then drops back on his hind legs.

"Stay there." I growl, then straighten, and shut the door in his face.

"Why...why did you do that?" she squeaks, her tone so close to panting that a chuckle grips my throat. I swallow it down, then turn and crack my knuckles. "Why do you think?" I growl.

She gulps. Fear and excitement wafts off of her. Fuck! My dick thickens. She watches me as I prowl toward her, closer, closer. I pause in front of her; her spine straightens.

I roll my neck; she winces.

I glare at her and color fades from her face. "What...what are you going to do?" she whispers, all wide eyed, and my groin tightens.

I put my finger to my lips.

She swallows. Her eyebrows knit as I circle around the table to stand behind her.

"You misinterpreted what I said," I chide.

"What?"

"I told you to kneel."

"I'm kneeling."

True. I scratch my chin, "Sassy and impertinent. You don't know how to follow orders, huh?"

"I'm not one of your patients," she scoffs.

"No, our relationship could never be that...professional." I place my palms on either side of her body, bend toward her, forcing her upper body forward until she puts her palms on the table.

She shivers. Does she feel the heat from my body? Does she realize how much I want her right now?

"Weston," her breath hitches, "what are you doing?"

I palm her butt. The silence stretches a beat, another.

She shudders. "You... Are you..." She arches her back, and I flatten my palm onto the center.

"Am I?" I prompt her.

"Are you going to punish me?" her voice cracks.

"Should I?" My lips curl. I apply pressure and she curves her spine, juts out her arse.

I release her, step back. Hmm, perfect. I raise my left hand, "Beg for it." I take aim.

"For what?" She turns to glance at me over her shoulder, her gaze wide, lips parted.

Blood rushes to my groin. Hell, I haven't started, and already, I am so close to losing control. One glance at her upturned nose, that sweet mouth, and all my promises to myself go out of the window.

"Eyes forward," I growl.

She gulps, then obliges, turns her face to look ahead. *Thank fuck.* Any more sass from her, and I swear I'd have turned her over my knee... And that would have been too easy...for her...for me... Yeah, this is more arousing—the anticipation, the build-up, the sweet ache as she waits...waits.

"Say it," I snap.

"Please," the words tumble from her lips, "slap me, spank me, treat me like I'm your..."

"My—?"

"Your property, your uh—Christmas present."

"That the best you can do, Princess?"

"Like you're Santa and I'm a naughty child." She swallows.

"And have you been a bad girl?" I lower my voice to a hush, "Tell me, Princess."

"Yes," she breathes, "I have been terrible. I disobeyed you. I willfully misinterpreted your directive, I—"

My palm connects with her butt.

"Ow," she howls, "What are you—?"

I raise my hand, bring it down on her arse with enough force that her entire body jolts.

"Ah!" she cries out.

Crack, crack, crack. I slap her on alternate arse cheeks.

"Argh." She throws her head back, her shoulders shudder, she squirms, and tries to pull away.

I grip her hip. "Stay," I command.

A ripple shivers up her spine. She tenses, clenches her thighs together.

"Or you can go."

She draws in a breath.

So do I.

Will she go? Will she take this opportunity I am giving her to get away?

"Nothing standing in your way, Princess," I remind her. "You can leave right now. Walk away, and I won't stop you."

"The money," her voice is low, but I hear her. Of course, it comes down to that.

"I'll pay you for the two nights you spent here."

"You...you would?" She half turns, then changes her mind and positions her head to stare forward. "You'd do that?"

"Of course," I mutter. "I'm a jerk, not a cheat."

"And I'm not leaving."

"Say that again."

She gulps, the sound loud in the silence of the room.

"I... I want to stay."

"You want to see this through?"

She nods.

"Why?"

"You're not the only one who wants to fulfill your side of the bargain."

"Good." I slap her arse.

"Hey," she snarls, "I told you I wasn't leaving."

"And I am not letting up."

She lowers her chin, "And when you're done, you'll take a look at the generator?"

"You bet."

"Fine," she tosses her head, "have at it—"

I step back, walk around her to drop into my seat, and resume eating.

"What are you doing?"

I crunch down more cereal.

"I'm talking to you," she scowls.

"I'm not."

She stares at me as I shovel more of the disgusting stuff into my mouth. Cold breakfasts have never been my thing. And since when have I wanted to taste chocolate-laced savories in the morning, huh? Come to think of it, when had I begun to stop hating chocolate? Bloody hell, this woman is changing me and she isn't even trying.

I push back, stand, "I'll check out the generator now."

I turn to leave and there's a sound behind me. I hold up my hand. "What do you think you're doing?" I ask without turning around.

"Uh, I'm going to finish my cereal?"

"No."

"What?"

I pivot to glare at her over my shoulder, "You stay right there, Princess."

"Bu...but," she blinks rapidly, "you're leaving."

"And I haven't given you permission to move."

She gapes, "So you want me to stay right here, on the table, on all fours?"

"You can get naked if you want," I chuckle, "or not. Up to you."

"You're a prick," she mumbles, "a sadistic, jerk-face, wanker."

"And you're going to obey me," I inform her.

She glowers at me, "I hate you."

"And I love that wrinkle you get between your eyebrows when you're angry." I blink. *Did I just say that? I didn't say that. And the worst thing? It's the truth.* I frown at her.

She stares back.

"Stay." I stab a finger in her direction, because well, I need to reinforce

my rich prick status. Then turn and leave.

I make a detour to collect my phone from the bedroom, then step out, past the silent hot tub. At some point in the night the snow had turned to rain. Now as I stalk across the lawns they glisten from the overnight storms.

When I reach the shed at the back, I hesitate, draw in a breath, and walk in. The glass from the broken clocks glitters on the floor. I stare at it, my life's work—a fortune in antique clocks that I'd bought and fixed myself. I walk to the nearest one, pick it up. Its face is cracked, but the mechanism works. I could piece it together once more. I glance around the space... Hell, I am going to reassemble every single one of these pieces. That's not the problem, though. I stalk forward, toward the table at the far end. Fact is, someone was here... They intruded on my privacy... Which I don't give a fuck about... But her... She was here. So was Max. They'd frightened the dog and it could have easily been her. They could have hurt her... My belly knots. Fuck, if I am going to let that happen again. And it's only because I am responsible for her, until Christmas... Perhaps until the New Year, if I have my way. I cannot put her at risk again. Whoever targeted me, won't hesitate to come for her either.

I have to find a way to protect her...for as long as she is here... And later? I cannot allow them to get to her.

I pull out my phone. My first call is to the company that manages the services to the cabin and the shed.

I give them the go-ahead to switch on the electricity to the kitchen, and only to the kitchen. With the fancy bucks we pay to the private supplier, anything is possible. As for the water supply? I ask them to ensure there's only enough for two days—nothing like water running out to test the mettle of a person, huh? As for the power cut? I orchestrated that too. Just a test, a way to exert complete control over the situation, and on her. Only I hadn't counted on a goddam intruder, violating my personal space. If something had happened to her—! My shoulders bunch. Goddam it, I have to find out who was behind the break-in.

Then I dial Damian's number.

"What?" he grumbles.

"Did I disturb you?" I ask.

"Yes." He yawns. "You woke me up, you knob."

"Good." I roll my shoulders, "We have a problem."

"Not we," he mutters, "you." He yawns again, so loudly, I hear the sound

of his jaw cracking over the phone. "Don't pull me into your personal shitstorm, motherfucker," he warns.

"The shed was broken into last night."

There's silence, then, "What do you mean 'broken into'?"

"Exactly that." I begin to pace. "Someone got in, then got to my collection of clocks."

There's a pause. "Didn't know you still collect and repair them."

"I never stopped."

I also don't talk about this affliction of mine with the Seven.

"I had Karina check on the security for both the cabin and the shed, so whoever managed to break in—"

"Was no ordinary burglar," he completes my thought.

I stay quiet and the silence extends.

"The Mafia." I blow out a breath. "They were behind this," I growl. "I should have known that they wouldn't stop coming after those close to us."

"And is she?" Damian asks.

"What?"

"Is she close to you?"

"We are sharing the same cabin," I snap.

"That's not what I meant."

"That's all you're getting," I retort.

Damian doesn't respond.

"If the Mafia thinks this is going to scare us off, they are wrong." I snarl.

"We won't stop until we find out who among the Mafia was behind our kidnapping," Damian agrees.

"If they're breaking in and entering now, they must be getting desperate," I mutter.

"We must be getting close to a breakthrough." Damian grunts, "Have you heard anything from Saint or Sinner about the latest on the investigations?"

"Not since they found their lady loves," I gripe. "Not that I begrudge them their happiness, but clearly, it's time we take things into our own hands."

"The New Year's eve party," Damian replies. "We'll all be there."

"Everyone except Baron." I say, referring to one of the Seven who prefers to stay clear of us and conduct his business remotely.

"Except fucking Baron," Damian agrees. "The rest of us will be there. We are bound to get an update then."

"Right." I pinch the bridge of my nose, "Meanwhile, I need to up the

security here at the cabin."

"You going to ask Karina for help, again?" Damian asks.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You know how upset Arpad's going to be about that?" he replies.

"Whatever is between her and Arpad is not my problem," I bite out. "Her investigative and security services are the best in the business and—"

"You can't trust anyone else when it concerns the safety of those you care about?"

"Right," I nod.

He chuckles.

I frown, then straighten. "I mean, no," I growl. "I mean, yes, I can't trust anyone else with securing the space and no, I don't care about her."

"Man, you're delusional," he scoffs.

"What is that supposed to mean, you piece of shit?"

He laughs, "When you get repetitive in your insults, I know you're not thinking straight."

"Fuck that." I frown, "Are you helping me or not?"

"Do I have a choice?" he replies.

"Nope," I bark, then move the phone to my right hand. "I'm stuck here with this bloody broken finger, with my woman..."

"Did you say *your* woman?"

"A slip of the tongue." I grunt, "I'm here with her and Max, and it's my responsibility to keep them both safe."

"That's all this is about, huh?"

"Of course, what else would it be?"

"You tell me." I hear the grin in his voice.

"Once you're done indulging your asinine sense of humor—maybe you could sober enough to hear me out?"

"Aren't you forgetting to say something?" he drawls.

I stay silent.

"A word beginning with 'p'?" he prompts.

"Piss off." I oblige him.

He chuckles, "Good to know you have some game left in you yet."

"That was me being polite, you tosser," I growl. "If you don't help me out, I'm going to release the video I have of you making out with your harem."

"Harem?" his voice is cautious.

"You don't think that what takes place in Vegas actually stays in Vegas."

"You recorded me?" his tone is flat

"Don't pretend you didn't do the same." It was a trip the two of us had taken, a few years ago. The rest of the Seven hadn't been available that year over the Christmas break and I had flown into LA to join Damian. We'd taken his private jet to Las Vegas... And the rest, well...as they say, it's recorded for posterity. His, not mine.

"What do you take me for?" Damian laughs, "Of course, I have a stockpile of pics and videos on each of the Seven, including you." His voice is pleasant. "Perhaps I should upload the video of you..." his voice trails off.

"Yeah," I quip, "I jerked off to you and your three women, which face it, is nowhere as interesting as what I have on you. Not that it doesn't make you look good... I mean, they were all over you, and your face can only be seen in one frame." Which would be more than enough for him to capture the headlines of the media that day. "It's slow over Christmas, and you have a big single coming out. No doubt, it would ensure that happy families everywhere would want to look you up to find out what the fuss is all about." Not. It would effectively cost him his reputation... Oh, he'd recover from it all right, but not before the Christmas single tanked... Probably.

"Whose idea was it to release a Christmas song anyway, huh?" I snicker. "Isn't that what reality show winners and washed-up rock stars go for... Oh, wait." I laugh, "That's what you are, someone who's yesterdays' news."

"Fuck off," he growls.

"With pleasure, after you've promised to help me."

"After that incredible selling job, how can I refuse?"

"Aww," I coo, "did I hurt your itty-bitty wittle feewings, Mr. Rock Star?"

"Sometimes I am not sure why the Seven of us keep in touch," he grumbles. "It's not like there's much love lost between us."

"Maybe it's something deeper," I muse, "a shared moment—a few days in time that changed the course of our future."

"There is that." He sighs, "I could, of course, release your video anyway and see how it plays with your little girlfriend, huh?"

"Not my girlfriend, and PS, I told her about the sex tape already, so—"

"You told her?" He coughs. "Isn't that unusual for you?"

"What?" I frown, "Just making sure she understood that she can't underestimate my sex god status." I brush an imaginary speck from my sweater, as if he can see me.

"You being upfront with a woman?" I sense him shake his head. "So, it's that serious, huh?"

"Of course, not."

"Just for that, I'll do this for you."

"For what?" I crack my neck.

"To see you fall. Fuck, it must be something in the air..." He continues, "It started with Sinner, then Saint, and now you."

I move the phone away from my ear, and stare at it before switching to speakerphone, "I have no idea what you're talking about." I frown.

"Of course, not." His voice is calm, "You have no idea, do you?"

I grit my teeth, "You're getting on my balls, Savage." I growl, "One click and your video gets uploaded."

"No, you won't do it," he retorts.

"Wanna test me?"

There's silence, then he sighs, "The fuck do you want from me?"

"Listen," I speak into the phone.

20

"There is no we in chocolate."

-From Amelie's diary

Amelie

The overhead light flickers and comes on. I blink. Guess the alphahole kept his word. He managed to fix the power supply to the kitchen, which means I can bake. Yay. I bite down on the inside of my cheek, glance around the space. Why does everything seem so bright? The place is bigger than I realized. The candles I had lit earlier appear weak. Too bad the attraction I feel for him shows no similar signs of waning. Dark or light, morning or night... It's a constant source of irritation that gnaws at my gut, forces me to act out of character. Like now. Why am I still on my hands and knees, on the bloody kitchen table, waiting for him?

I had said that I would obey him, but surely, this is out of bounds, even for someone like him. I mean, leaving me stationed here like I am his...possession? Am I his? Do I belong to him...? What hold does he have on me that I'd rushed to do his bidding? What would have happened if I'd gone against his decree? Hello... What am I thinking? Decree, huh? I snort. Like he is the master of all he surveys and I am his... *Don't think it; don't think it. Slave!*

Noooo, I can't allow myself to think that.

I can't allow him to have this hold on me.

But the money...the bloody millions that he holds over me? Well, he said

he'd deposit the money for the nights I've already spent here...and Weston wouldn't go back on his word. Well neither would I, and I am still here, right? I'm not leaving.

I am simply, a woman standing in front of the most dominant, hot-as-fuck, alpha male she's ever met, wanting to ask him to fuck her.

There you have it—the story of my life. That ol' perception-reality thingummy... The one I can't hide from when I face the mirror.

Guess there had been more comfort in the gloom of the morning light. Everything had seemed so much more intimate. Now—I glance down at myself—I see myself through his eyes. A stupid woman, who'd allowed this obnoxious, mean-ass to manipulate me... To use his money to seduce me, to coerce me to do his bidding. *Where's your pride, Amelie? Where's that strength of character, that streak of obstinacy, that blind confidence in yourself that had you taking risks...and loans...and putting everything you have into this venture? Turning your passion into a livelihood?* My bloody foot. What a pipe dream. I'd sailed along blissfully in my little boat, even though I was fighting against the current... Until Weston bloody Kincaid had unleashed a storm that threatened to engulf my teacup. *He can dip his teabag in my hot water anytime.* I giggle, then shake my head. That's it. I am losing it, completely.

I straighten, scramble back, then off the table. My knees creak and my thighs spasm. Jesus, am I out of shape or what? I stalk over to the shelves by the oven, lean down and rummage around. There! I snatch up another large bowl—not a mixing bowl, but it could work. Thank God, we bought enough flour and chocolate and bananas to last me another round. I grab my provisions, measure out the flour on the old-fashioned scale. Seriously, it has weights and everything, I snort again. Lifestyles of the rich and famous, huh? They have all the time in the world... No, they have servants; that's what it is.

I pour the flour into the mixing bowl, break the eggs, then begin to beat it together. When it's smooth enough, I reach for the ripe bananas, peel the remaining three and drop them in. I mix them in too, then pour in the milk.

I hum to myself, shimmy my hips, taste some of the concoction. Yum.

Footsteps sound behind me, "What are you doing, Princess?"

His voice is all casual, nothing threatening about it, and that makes it worse. I straighten, reach for the pack of chocolate chips.

"You're only making it worse by not answering."

His voice is right behind and above me. I yelp, lose my grip on the packet and the entire thing tips in. "Gah!" I place the half-empty pack to the side, then whirl on him, "Look what you made me do."

"I give you one thing to do." He holds a finger right in front of my face, "One, and you disobey."

"You were gone a long time."

"Less than half an hour."

I throw up my hands, "Exactly. How long did you think I'd stay in that ridiculous position for you?"

He bends his knees, then peers into my face, "Until I gave you permission to move."

I toss my hair back from my face, "I couldn't wait, I wanted to get back to the baking."

"Is that right?" His voice lowers to a hush and my nerve endings spark, "So eager to make your crumpets—"

"Muffins." I correct him.

"Same thing." He shrugs.

"It's not." I gape at him, "Why do you constantly try to get on my nerves?"

"Because I can?" He looks me up and down and my belly quivers. He raises his gaze to my face, "Because you are mine for the next four days—mine to command, to order about, to play with as I see fit."

"I'm not your...fuck toy."

His eyes gleam, "Don't bet on it."

I purse my lips, then tilt my chin up, "You're beginning to annoy me. You're illogical as hell, full of yourself, totally obnoxious, and cannot decide what you want."

"Oh?" He peels back his lips and his teeth shine against his tanned skin.

"If it wasn't for your...your...broken finger...I'd..."

"You'd..."

"Teach you a lesson."

"Go on," he drawls, "try me."

"Don't say I didn't warn you," I mumble.

"I'm soooo afraid." He holds up his hands, as if to ward off an attack. "Princess Buttercup and her idle threats. Has no one warned you not to play with the big bad wolf?"

"Your references are all mixed up," I snarl.

"And that disgusting mixture in that bowl... Is that the best you can do for breakfast?"

That's it, I am letting him have it. He can say anything about me, but my cooking? No fucking way. I am bloody good at what I do, and no one, definitely not a neanderthal, alpha billionaire can take that away from me. I make a noise deep in my throat.

His features brighten, "Ooh, did I hurt your feelings? Does the princess want to be saved from herself, yet?"

"Newsflash, alphahole." I shove my hand behind me, search for the mixing bowl. "This Princess can save herself."

My fingers brush the smooth surface, I snatch the vessel, fling its contents at him.

21

Weston

"Oops." Her lips quiver and her chin wobbles. She drops her gaze to my chest.

I glance down to find splotches of the brown gooey mixture sticking to my pullover. "That item of clothing costs £7000," my voice is calm. No hint of the anger that bubbles up inside... Along with something else—frustration. 48 hours... I've tried to teach her to obey. I've ordered her to obey me, told her to follow my directions. I've walked naked in front of her, slept with my body coiled around hers. I've raced toward her when I thought she was in danger... Been on the phone making sure I could find a way to protect her... And what does she do? She greets me with this...this goop? A low growl rumbles up my chest.

She blinks, "Did you just...did you?"

"What?"

"You, ah, sounded like Max when he's frustrated."

I glower, "Did you compare me to a bloody mutt?"

A snort spills from her throat.

The fuck? "Are you laughing at me?"

"Me?" She bites down on her lower lip. Her cheeks redden. She lowers the bowl—her hand trembles... Is it from my proximity or from the weight of the vessel? Maybe it's fear of how I'll react. Good. The blasted container dips. I grab hold of it.

"Ah, thanks," her voice is strangled.

"Don't thank me." I reach past her, lower the bowl to the counter.

"Wait," she bursts out.

"What?" I frown.

She angles her body, scoops up some of the mixture. She glances from it to me, "It, uh, has chocolate."

"So?"

"I missed a spot."

"Excuse me?" I glare at her.

She bites her lips and her eyes gleam.

"Don't you fucking dare, Princess, I—"

She tosses the stuff at my face. It hits my cheek, and some of it drips down my chin, onto my chest.

"There," she angles her head to the side, "much better."

"That's it," I growl, "you're going to pay for that."

She squeaks, tries to duck around me. I plant my injured hand on the other side of her, caging her in.

"Apologize," I growl.

"No."

"Say you're sorry."

She sticks out her tongue, "You can go and dunk your swollen head in that stupid hot tub."

"I have a better idea." I reach for the mixture in the bowl, scoop up a palmful.

"No, no, no." She angles her body, takes in what I am doing. "You won't," she breathes.

"Oh, you bet I will." I smash the gooey stuff in her face.

She screams, wriggles around. I thrust my hips into her, to hold her in place, then rub the mix into her face, down her neck, across her chest... over the fabric of her blouse that encloses her breasts, and draw circles around her erect nipples. The blood rushes to my groin. My dick lengthens, nestles happily into the valley between her legs.

"Wes... Weston," she gulps.

"Shh!"

I glare at those peaked delights. I reach behind her to gather more of the goop and trail it over one breast, then the other. The mixture dribbles down from each mound. "Beautiful." I lower my head, close my mouth around one.

"Ah," a moan leaves her mouth. "Wes... Please."

I glare up at her. "Stay still," I command. "Don't say a word."

She purses her lips, draws down her eyebrows. She opens her mouth.

I click my tongue. "Don't," I growl, "Nothing; nada."

"But—"

"Another word and I'll stuff this mix in your mouth, and I promise you, that would be a waste, cause I plan to use every drop of your muffin mix to draw out your pleasure."

She swallows, then presses her lips together.

"Excellent."

She stares at me.

"Should I reward you for that little bit of compliance, hmm?"

She nods.

"All right then." I reach behind her, snatch up some of the mix. I hold my fingers to her lips, "Open."

"But—"

I plop my fingers inside her mouth. She bites down with her teeth and I feel the tug all the way to the tip of my dick. My cock thickens, pushes up into her.

Her gaze widens.

"Feel that, Buttercup?"

I bring my other hand to massage her breast, then press my hips forward with enough pressure that her pelvis cradles every throbbing inch of my very aroused shaft.

She swallows, and the suction on my fingers, sends a shudder of heat racing down my spine.

"Fuck." My breathing grows shallow. I ease my finger out from between her lips, and bring it to my own. I lick my glistening fingertips.

She moans, "Jesus." She gulps.

"Nothing to do with the man above," I mutter, "but if I don't have you right now, the one between my legs is going to hate me for a long time."

She chuckles. "You're so corny." She grins up at me, her features alight, with so much mischief, so much life, that fuck, my cock thickens even more.

I frown. "Silence," I snap.

She winces, then pouts.

Fucking adorable. I shake my head. The fuck am I doing, thinking about her in those cutesy adjectives? And cutesy—? What the fuck? How did that even get in my vocabulary. I frown down at her and she stares back.

"I'm corny, hmm?" I reach behind her, grab the bowl with both hands, then upturn it over her head.

She gasps.

The mixture flows down her face, her neck, her chest, down to where our bodies are joined. "That's better." I place it down behind her, then straighten. I step back, rub the mix down her front, across her stomach, to the valley between her thighs.

Her breath hitches.

I pat the mix into the apex of her thighs, onto her jeans.

"Ah," she trembles. I sink down to my knees, then thrust my face into her sweet, core. I bite down on the fabric that covers the crotch of her jeans and her entire body bucks. She grabs at my hair and tugs. The pain rams straight down my spine, to my cock. I grip her thighs, pry them apart, then dig my teeth into the now-damp cloth that stretches across her pussy.

She screams. "Oh, my God, ohmigod...oh...my..."

I rise to my feet, bringing her up with me, and hoist her onto the counter and straight onto the bowl I'd placed behind her, which tips sending more of the gooey mess to pool around her. She shivers, tips her chin up.

"I need to be inside of you."

She nods. She opens and closes her mouth, her gaze pleading with me. But she doesn't speak. About time. "You worried about our arrangement?"

She jerks her chin.

"So maybe I should..." I step back.

She scissors her legs around my waist.

"Don't want me to go, huh?" I study her face. "Want me to fuck you?"

She frowns back.

"Where?"

She purses her lips.

"In your mouth?"

She shakes her head.

"Your pussy?"

She nods.

"I have a better idea." I lean in until our breaths mingle, "How about I take your arse?"

She swallows; her pupils dilate.

"You want that, huh?"

She bites down on her lower lip and her little teeth worry the tender skin.

I rub my thumb over the swollen skin and she gulps. "Maybe I'll save that for later, huh?"

Her shoulders rise and fall.

"Maybe I shove my fingers in your arse, while I tear into your pussy with my dick, while I stick my tongue down your throat?"

She nods, then shakes her head, then throws her hands up.

I know the feeling. "Decisions, decisions." I chuckle.

She digs her thighs into my hips, uses it to leverage herself up, then smashes her lips to mine.

22

Amelie

I press my mouth to his, fold my arms about his shoulders, and proceed to climb him, like he's a massive tree... Or hell, like he's Santa fucking Claus, come to grant me all of my wishes. Is it Christmas yet? Gah! Almost... though it sure seems like all of my dreams have come true. This man... He drives me mad, he makes me want to slap him and kiss him. Love him and hate him... Throw myself at his feet and beg him to put an end to this growing, yearning, emptiness inside. I cling to his big frame, bite down on that full, pouty lower lip of his that's hypnotized me since the first time I saw him. I slip my tongue inside his mouth, suck on him, pour all of myself into that kiss. My head spins, my pussy clenches, and my nipples hurt. I lose my hold and begin to slip down, the muffin mixture sloshing and giving with each contact of my clothes against his. Shit, I scramble to hold on, and he places his broad palm against the seat of my butt.

Heat instantly flushes up my spine. I shudder.

He wraps his other palm around the back of my neck, and holds me there.

I release his lips, lean back—well, put as much distance between us as his firm grip allows, which is about uh—an inch...maybe a little more. Our noses bump; his long eyelashes graze my forehead. Hell, how can a man have such feminine lashes?

"So greedy," he mutters, "so damn sexy. Such a tiny package, but so much potency packed into those curves."

Shut up and fuck me already, is what I want to say. Instead, I hold his

gaze, look deeply into those grey eyes, past the colorless, mirror-like surface, to that darkness that pools inside, the flecks of gold that intersperse their depths. Contradictions, such complexity he holds within himself.

"You can trust me." I whisper.

He blinks and his features open with the surprise.

"I won't hurt you," I add.

Where is this coming from? If anything, he's the one who can break me. His dominance could crush me, his strength could render me powerless, as his lips tease me, taunt me, his fingers dig into the curve of my hips, and his dick throbs against my aching center... "Please," I mumble. *What do I want from him? Why is it that this push-pull between us makes it so difficult to bare myself to him?* I cup his cheek, "Take me. Use me. Fill me up with your cum, bury yourself inside of me, and fuck your past out of me."

Wait, did that even make sense...? "I mean—"

"Shh..." He rubs his nose against mine, the gesture tender and gentle and so unlike any other emotion he's shown toward me. A pressure builds behind my eyes. Shit. A little bit of affection, and I'm ready to bawl my eyes out.

He rakes his gaze down my features, then he brushes his lips across mine, once, twice. He lowers me back onto the countertop. "You on birth control?"

I blink.

"Are you?" He frowns.

I nod. "Yes," I clear my throat, "I'm just coming off a relationship so..."

He glares at me and I feel the blood drain to my core. How the hell does my body recognize his intentions before my mind has fully digested what he wants from me?

The sound of a zipper being lowered reaches me. Air hits my swollen center. "Up," he growls.

I wind my arms about his shoulder, raise my butt. He shoves down at my jeans which move an inch, then get stuck around my hips. "Umm."

He shakes his head and I stop talking. He glances around, notices my chef's satchel on the table. He hauls me up by the waist, turns and takes a step, then plants me on the table. I'm not light, I have curves—Hey, don't begrudge me my chocolate—and of course, he's a powerhouse of muscles, but the way he maneuvers my body... Well... My knees turn to jelly. Bloody hell, this guy is machismo personified, and I am putty in his hands. And now—he whips out a pair of kitchen scissors. Then steps back, holds up my leg and proceeds to cut the fabric up one side.

What the—?

He does the same for the fabric on my other leg and it falls away, then cuts my blouse at each shoulder.

"Weston—"

He shakes his head.

"You can trust me," his lips quirk as he repeats my words back at me.

Can I though?

I frown.

He locks his gaze with mine, then raises the scissors. He glances down, then I feel the give of my bra straps. My breasts spring free. His nostrils flare. He bends, licks a nipple, before sucking on it.

Goosebumps flare on my skin.

"So fucking sweet, you're one melting mass of chocolate, Buttercup."

Jeez, he makes me sound like a dessert...which is flattering, I suppose.

He pulls back, I hear the snap of the blades cutting through the fabric of my blouse. The garment falls off. Air hits my skin, goosebumps pop along my forearms, and my nipples harden.

He straightens, places the tip of the scissors to the center of my chest, without cutting the skin. I shiver. He drags the blade up over the mound of one breasts, circles the nipple, which instantly pebbles further. Down to my belly button. I swallow. He glances down and his breathing grows labored, "Fuck me," he growls. "I can't hold out any longer."

He tosses the scissors aside, reaches for his zipper and lowers it. His cock springs forward—big, throbbing. I've seen it before...but somehow, he seems bigger. More aroused. The swollen tip is almost purple with need, and drops of precum bead the slit. Saliva pools in my mouth; my chest rises and falls.

I reach for him, but he grabs my wrist. "If you touch me, I won't last," he growls.

I frown, implore him with my eyes.

His gaze intensifies, then his lips quirk. "Later," he promises. "For now, I am going to take your cunt." He swoops down, grabs my thighs under my knees, pulls my legs up and apart so they're at my ears and I fall back to my elbows. He glares down directly at my sex.

OMFG! My head spins. I am open and displayed for him, my arousal so strong I can smell myself. Is that gross? His nostrils flare... Uh, guess he can scent me too?

"Look at yourself." His grip tightens, "You're so wet, so ready. You want me, Princess?"

Gah, is that even a question? "I..." I open my mouth and his lips curl.

Trick question, huh? I pout again, thrust my pelvis up and against his hold.

His smile widens. "Hold yourself open for me," he commands.

I blink. He can't be serious.

"Do it," he snaps.

I don't even realize I've rushed to obey him until I feel my fingers brush my cunt. Damn him, is there anything this man can't get me to do? I pry open my pussy lips, and his gaze intensifies. "Fuck me," he mutters, "I am going to drink from you."

Yes. Yes.

"Scoop up your cum and offer it to me."

Wh-a-a-t? My vision narrows. Black spots dot my line of sight. My heart begins to pound so hard, I am sure it's going to break out of my chest.

"Now."

His hard voice whips through my head, erasing every other thought. I am a vessel, an empty canvas which he'll paint with his cum. No, what? *Don't think. Don't react. Do what he asks.* I slip one finger, then a second into my channel. My chest heaves. His throat moves as he swallows. He's as affected by this connection... This, whatever it is that he's doing to me, is arousing him just as much. I curl my fingers inside of myself and a moan rises up. It's nowhere close to what I need, but the way he watches me... How he follows my movements with his heavy-lidded gaze...is as erotic as looking on while he fucks me... Okay, I lie... Not the same... But it is hot nevertheless. Know what I mean? I hold up my glistening fingers, and he closes his mouth around my digits, drags his tongue over the skin. My sex clenches and more moisture pools in my core.

"How the hell do you taste so sweet?" He licks his lips, "Of chocolate and the most tempting honey."

"You hate chocolate," I mutter.

"That's true." He tilts his head, "But, it tastes different on you."

"It does?"

He nods. "It tastes like sin when I lick it off your lips."

"Oh." My belly quivers. That was almost poetic. *Gah!* Who'd have thought the brute could actually string words together until they sound erotic.

"In fact," he peers into my features, "I am convinced you have desserts for all three meals." He stares at me, "You do, don't you?"

"What do you think?"

"I bet you sneak that black gold in between, too." He lowers his gaze back to the triangle between my thighs, "Makes me wonder if you taste as incredible there as you did the last time..."

Why don't you try it for yourself; why don't you—? I gasp as he does just that—drops his head, licks me from asshole to cunt, and again. He stabs his tongue inside my channel, and begins to drink from me. He slurps on me, licks my swollen nub, lavishes attention on it, then bites on it. Goosebumps flare on my skin; I arch my back off the table, push myself up and into his face. More, more. My fingers tingle. I itch to take my hands off my pussy, to grab hold of his hair and tug him to me, to force him to fuck me with his tongue until I come.

"Don't you dare."

I blink, to find him leaning above me.

"I'm not done yet."

What's he talking about? I'm done, more than done. I'm on the verge of exploding like a pie that's been left too long in the oven. Ugh, these comparisons are terrible, and my brain cells have turned to mush.

"Eyes on me," he commands.

I watch him as he lowers his chin, his unshaven whisker-edged visage, and rubs it up my pussy.

"Ah!" My entire body bucks. I writhe under his touch, thrash my head from side to side, "Oh, my God, oh, my God." He does it again and I see stars. The climax rushes up from my toes, screams up my spine, and threatens to explode. I can't stop, I can't.

The next second he straightens over me, positions his dick at my entrance. "Condom," he growls, then reaches into the back pocket of his pants, pulls out a wrapper.

Does he walk around with one all the time? Was he that confident that he was going to fuck me...? When the agreement was for us to do everything but? Will this change things between us? What will become of the money? Could I allow him to pay me after this...? Wouldn't that reduce everything between us to something it wasn't? What is it anyway, what—?

"Stop."

He frowns down into my face.

I draw in a breath. Am I that transparent? Or is he that perceptive? Does he have a sixth sense that he can focus on simultaneously wrapping his dick and reading my expression? What the hell am I thinking? Why am I tying myself up in such knots? I glance around... What the hell am I doing here, with him, holding my pussy open to him like a sex-crazed pervert? I withdraw my fingers from my cunt, open my mouth to speak. He leans in and presses his lips to mine. He swipes his tongue inside my mouth, across my teeth, draws from me, shares my breath so absolutely. I stutter.

He pulls back, peers into my face, "Do you want me to stop?"

Do I?

"Once I take you, there's no going back."

Uhhh?

"If you want to leave, I won't stop you."

Won't he?

"But if you stay..." he glares at me, "if you stay, you're mine."

23

Weston

"Mine to protect. Mine to possess and break. Mine to fuck so hard you won't walk straight for days, and when you do, you'll sense my cock in your deepest most intimate of places. I plan to not stop, not until we've fucked whatever is between us into the open, until my skin fuses with yours and I have invaded your secrets, gleaned your fears, and infused your innermost thoughts with my presence."

Her pupils dilate, and her face pales.

This is it then; she's going to refuse me. I've bared myself to her, told her what I am thinking about and she'll decide it's not for her. She's going to turn away from me, tell me she doesn't want me or my money. She's going to — She reaches out her hand, tugs at the condom I hold. She rips open the wrapper, then reaches down between us. She eases the condom over the swollen head of my cock, struggles with it. The condom slides over the rim and she smooths it down. I glance up to find her forehead furrowed in concentration. That line between her eyebrows crinkles. I lean down and press my lips to it. She positions my shaft at the entrance to her pussy.

"I want you," I mutter against her forehead. I press my lips to her eyelids, one after the other, to the tip of her nose, then press my mouth to hers, " I want to kiss you until your mouth can't ask for more." I nip on her chin. "Every part of you tastes of a different dessert."

She giggles and the sound is so light, so beautiful. My throat closes. I pull back enough to take in her features, watch her gaze widen as I kick my hips

forward and impale her. Her mouth parts, a soundless scream that only I can hear. I wait for her pussy to adjust to my girth, for her channel to grip my dick, flow, melt, tug on my shaft. The tension builds at the base of my spine. Shit, I've never been so close to coming, so quickly before. The taste of her swirls on my tongue; the scent of her envelops my senses. I grip the backs of her thighs, drag my hand up one, then the other, urge her legs over my shoulders. "Hold on."

She nods, locks her ankles around my neck. I press my elbows to the table on either side of her head, then push in further. Her entire body seems to thrum; her eyelids flicker. She brings a hand up to my face. I turn my head and kiss her palm, then grip her wrist and twist her hand over her head. Her gaze widens and her breathing grows ragged. Fuck, if my little show of dominance didn't turn her on even more. I bring her other hand up, shackle both of her wrists with my uninjured hand.

I pull back, then thrust into her with enough force that the entire table jostles. Something—one of the plates, or both—crashes to the floor. I begin to fuck her in earnest. Pull back, push forward, back, forward again. With every plunge, her body moves up the table. I wrap my fingers around her neck, lean some of my weight on her to hold her in place. Her pupils dilate further, the blue so light, the color of her eyes seems to mirror mine. I see my reflection in them, sense the climax building inside of her. I squeeze my fingers around her neck, and she gasps. Her chest heaves. She digs her heels into my back, tugs her hands in my grasp. I pull back, all the way back to the edge of her channel, then tilt my hips and impale her with such force that her eyelids flutter, she throws her head back, arches her spine, and the trembling shudders up her body, her chest. "Come." I loosen my grasp and she shatters. Her pussy clamps around my dick and moisture bathes my shaft. Her orgasm seems to go on and on, and when her shoulders slump, sweat beads her forehead, her upper lip. I bend down, lick it off. She stirs.

"Eyes on me," I demand.

She cracks her eyelids open, locks her gaze with mine, and I begin to move again, thrust into her, angle my hips and sink deep inside of her. Bury myself in her sweet melting cunt again and again. She reaches up, locks her lips with mine, her eyes still on mine. Something hot stabs at my chest, my balls draw up, the tension in my groin snaps and I come inside her.

Her eyelids flutter; her body twitches. I pull back, just enough for our breaths to mingle, then stay there and watch as her muscles uncoil, one by

one. I watch her as her breathing deepens. A flush creeps up her cheeks. When I pull out of her, she stirs. "Don't move," I whisper. Her lips curve. I pull off the condom, tie it up, then leave it on the table. I'll have to come back for it later.

I scoop her up in my arms, kick the door to the kitchen closed behind me, and carry her to the ensuite in the bedroom. I lower her to the floor near the tub, take in her curves. "You're gorgeous." I lean in to kiss her, before placing her in the shower stall.

"Your splint," she murmurs, "you'll get it wet."

"It's waterproof." I reassure her.

She wraps her arms around me, presses her nose into the skin bared by the 'V' of my shirt collar. "You smell like chocolate." She giggles.

I lower my chin and kiss her head, "And you smell of me."

"Mmm." She nuzzles against me and my heart begins to race. A tightness coils in my chest. Shit... This... Tenderness... This whatever connection is there between us... It is the beginning of the end. If I continue down this path, it leads to a slippery slope. One I have no intention of traversing. Not for a long time. If ever.

I pry her arms from round me, and step back.

She frowns.

"Gonna look in on Max," I say. "Why don't you shower first, huh?"

She peers up into my face, then nods.

I pivot, shrug out of my sodden pullover and pants and dump the clothes in the laundry basket on the way out.

Once in the kitchen, I dispose of the used condom, along with the remnants of her clothes. I clean up any chocolate within reach of his short, little legs, then top off the food and water bowls for Max, who scrabbles in and attacks the food like he's been starving. Speaking of, I need more of her. Fuck, this is ridiculous. I drag my fingers through my hair.

I've been away from her for a few minutes, and already, I miss her.

That sensation when I was inside her...? Fuck. It was...different, yet familiar. Like coming home. Home? What the fuck? I shake my head. So, the sex had been intense—more intense than any experience I've ever had before—it means we're compatible in bed. So, I'll fuck her, give her pleasure, make her orgasm more than she has ever before. I'll ensure her time with me is the single most incredible experience of her life, that it spoils her for any man after.

The band around my chest tightens. Of course, there'll be men after me... She isn't mine...except for the length of this time that I've bargained from her. For the days that are left, I can make good on my promise. I can protect her, take care of her every need, treat her like the princess she is. And when we are done... I'll walk away without a second thought.

I clench my fist at my side. Why the hell does it matter to me what she does after that, huh? I'll use her for my needs, then leave. It's what I do best. No commitments. Nothing holding me back. It will be a great break. I glance down at my hand with the splint... And the sex will, surely, only help the healing, huh? My heart hammers in my chest. So why the fuck am I standing here in the middle of the kitchen, still naked?

I straighten, march toward the door, when a scream sounds from the direction of the bedroom. I race forward.

24

Amelie

I stare at the spider that crawls across the floor. My skin feels too tight, my stomach twists in knots.

Shit, I can face grown chefs having a tantrum, or irate clients. Hell, I'd even face an alphahole who wanted to force me to submit. But the creepy, crawly, eight-legged species...? Gross. I could do without them. My pulse races, my heart hammers, and adrenaline fills my blood. I glance around, then spot the towel and snatch it up. I hold it out in front of me, sidle toward the exit, when footsteps sound and Weston's massive figure fills the doorway.

"What's wrong?" His chest heaves, his gaze alert. He has the fingers of his uninjured hand curled into a fist. Huh?

"The hell?" He stalks inside.

I glance down and scream again.

He flinches, "Jesus, woman, why are you having a breakdown?" He pauses mid-step.

"That..." I point my towel at the floor in front of him.

He glances down, then lowers his foot...missing the spider by an inch. A breath whooshes out of me.

"It's... it's..." I gulp.

"A spider?"

"Eek." I sidle back from both of them... "Please, can you get rid of it?"

He glances down at the bug, which scuttles toward me.

I scream, then dance around it in a wide circle that places me directly in

front of Weston. "I hate those things," I whine.

"All that sass and spirit... I thought you were a spitfire, then along came a spider and frightened little Miss Muffet away."

I blink a little. "Did you just compare me to another nursery rhyme?"

"Can't seem to make up my mind about you, huh?" His warm palms descend on my hips. He lifts me up—like literally snatches me up from the floor—and plants me at his side.

My belly and other parts of me flutter. Shucks, every time I try to hate him...he disarms me...shows a part of him that unnerves me.

He grabs a tissue, scoops up the insect then heads for the doorway.

"Wh...where are you going?"

"To get Miss Muffet's spider outside."

"Oh." My cheeks heat. "Won't you be, ah...?" I look his gorgeous, unclothed figure up and down, and all thoughts leave my mind. OMFG, he's...hot. I mean, I knew he was and yep, he's had his cock and tongue and fingers inside of me... But when he flaunts his eight pack and those powerful thighs and the—uh!—all of him in full-frontal, then... Well...Uh, what am I trying to say? I blink.

"I'm beginning to think you prefer the sight of my dick to my face."

I jerk my chin up, "Nothing like that... I mean," I wave my palm in front of me, "yeah, I do... I mean, I like both... I mean..."

His chuckles at my blathering response. "Get in the shower," he orders. "I'll be back."

I shiver. He turns and stalks off, and I admit, I watch that tight, glorious arse of his until he's out of sight. Hell, I'm in a sex haze. And I admit, it's almost as good as the endorphins brought on by a chocolate binge... Okay, better... Surely, it must be the most pleasurable way of losing calories. At this rate, by New Year's, hopefully, I'll have lost some weight. I snort... Likely story. I only have to look at desserts for the pounds to kiss my thighs... Not that he'd complained...

I turn and survey my figure in the mirror—flushed face, reddened patches on my neck and chest... My breasts seem almost too big for my narrow waist and my hips.

But hey, at least, I look like I sample my desserts. I mean, imagine if I were reed-thin. And a dessert chef? I toss my head. That would send out the wrong signal, completely. I love my curves, okay... Normally... When I'm not having sudden bouts of self-doubt. Doesn't everyone have them?

I hear him talking to Max in the kitchen.

Shit, better get into the shower as alphahole had commanded. I head in that direction, then stop. *The hell am I doing?* Because he'd ordered me to... Would I give in and do what he'd asked? So, we had an arrangement... But won't that be null and void, considering we've slept together? I blow out a breath...

Well, then... Guess I'd better kiss the money goodbye, huh? My guts twist. Okay, so it means I am back where I started—debts to pay off, a business to run... Correction—a business I have nurtured with sweat and passion... and chocolate. I chuckle. A business which I've enjoyed building up. So what, if sometimes, when I'm bone-weary tired, I've wished I had someone by my side to share the load?

I am good at what I do. I don't need some bloody man to help shoulder the burden. Certainly, not a mean-as-hell, epitome of masculinity whose bearded chin is a potent weapon that can rub me to orgasm like Alladin's lamp. I snort out a half-laugh. Those stupid fairy tales and nursery rhymes that he often speaks in... It's getting to me. It's as bad as my pudding fetish.

I hear his footstep thudding down the hallway, and head for the bathtub instead. It's a small act of defiance, but hey, it's the best I can do. I reach over, plug the drain, then flip on the taps.

I am about to step in, then pause. I race to the sink, rummage around in the cabinet underneath... Aha! Bath bombs, and chocolate-flavored, at that... OMG... Yes! Half running back to the tub, I drop them in.

"What are you—?"

I hear his voice taper off as I climb into the tub and stretch out.

The hair on my forearms rises and I tip up my chin to find him watching me through hooded eyes.

I cup my breasts and squeeze; his nostrils flare.

I drag my palms down my waist, to the space between my thighs.

He shakes his head.

I pause, "What?"

"Who does your pussy belong to?"

I swallow.

"Tell me, Princess." He lowers his voice to a hush. My nerve endings pop. "Say it," he insists. "Who owns your sweet cunt?"

"You," I swallow, "you do."

"Damn right." His lips curl and he jerks his chin.

I lean back in the tub.

"Spread your legs," he commands.

I am instantly wet, and it's not from the bath water, I assure you. Hell, he could ask me to eat strawberries instead of chocolate and I would... No... Not that. Anything but that. Honestly, I don't have anything against those fruits, but nothing comes between me and my chocolate, except... I peer up at him from under my eyelashes, "Why is it that only you get to tell me what to do?"

"Because, I can," he growls. "Because you promised to do everything I asked of you," he adds.

"And what about the fact that we already slept together?" I ask. "Doesn't that mean the agreement is void?"

"Fuck the agreement. I propose something new."

"You... you do?"

He nods.

"I'll pay you what I promised, as long as you let me fuck you."

25

Weston

Shut up, shut up. What the fuck are you saying? Why did you have to take everything that happened between the two of you and make it into something twisted?

Because I can? I tense my shoulders.

Because that last time I'd taken her, the way I had kissed her had been... different. *It had meant something... Don't ask me what... I have to figure that shit out, but holy fuck, that had gone beyond fucking...* It's the kind of experience you don't forget, which is why I am back here, watching as her gaze narrows. As she tightens her lips, as the color fades from her cheeks. As she swallows, then folds her arms around herself. "Excuse me?" Her voice is low but firm, "What did you say?"

"You heard me." I fold my arms over my chest, mirroring her... Because she's right, that NLP shit works... Why the hell am I echoing her words? I widen my stance, glance down at her, "I'll pay for the remaining time I bought from you, as long as I can—"

"Fuck me?"

I tilt my head. "I am not going to repeat myself."

She swallows, "So, this is it?" She hunches into herself, "That's all this is to you? A transaction?"

"I told you from the beginning, that's all it was." I lower my chin. "Wrong place, wrong time... Although, perhaps it was the right occasion for you, huh?" I drag my gaze down her body, pausing at her breasts, then at the

gorgeous flesh between her legs. My dick throbs and my balls harden. Of course, I still want her. That hasn't changed. I'll have to do my best to get her out my system; there is no other way out. "Well?" I roll my shoulders, "What do you say?"

"Why are you doing this?" She stares. "Why are you suddenly conforming to your alphahole persona?"

"This is who I am." I raise my shoulders. "Deal with it."

"I don't believe it." The water rises up to over her breasts. "What happened in the last few seconds that you went from...?"

"Dominant?"

"With a heart...to an unfeeling brute who reduces everything to a transaction."

"If you thought everything that happened between us was anything but, you're wrong."

"I'm not." She brings up her knees, covering the sight of both her pussy and her breasts.

My fingertips tingle. *Lean over, pry those long thighs apart. Get in there with her, bury your face against her sweet cunt and bring her to orgasm. Make her forget everything that you said since you walked back in here. I lock my thighs, dig my feet into the floor.*

"What's different between how it was to what it is now?" I frown. "I was going to pay you. I am still paying you... Only now there's sex—the penetrative kind— thrown in for good measure." I shrug, like it means nothing to me.

She doesn't react. *Shit, that's not a good sign.* I'm not that blind; I know exactly how I affect her when I curl my lips and command her.

"Well?" I tap my toes, "You in or out?"

She swallows. "Don't do this," she whispers. "Don't reduce what we had into something it's not."

"You're the one who's making it out to be something different." I glare down at her. "Take it or leave it."

She pushes her forehead into her knees. "I... I can't do it."

My heart begins to thump. Sweat beads my forehead. *Shit, don't make her choose, you wanker. The hell are you doing pushing her away? You had it all...for a few seconds. You could have handled this differently, shown her exactly how much you care. You could have, for once in your fucked-up life, done the right thing.* Instead... I'd decided to go all billionaire alphahole on

her... Because...face it, that's what I am. That's how I intend to stay, and no sassy, curvy, chocolate-scented, gorgeous woman like her is going to reveal the feelings that churn under the surface.

"Fine, then." I turn and stalk to the door, then pause. "I'll pay you for the two days you spent with me, and we leave tomorrow."

I pivot, move forward.

Wait for it. Wait for it.

"Hey," she calls out. "What did you mean? Where are we going?"

I turn, glance over my shoulder, "To meet my family of course."

"It's not yet Christmas." She rises to her feet and the water flows from her shoulders down her waist, to splash onto the almost-filled bath tub. Her blonde hair curls over her forehead, sticks to her shoulders. The scent of... chocolate—of course, what else—laced with something honeyed and spicy swirls through the air.

"It's almost Christmas." I raise a shoulder.

"It's not the same," she scowls.

"It is now," I curl my lips, "because I say so."

She swallows, "And if I say no?"

"Are you saying no?" I glare at her.

She pales, opens her mouth.

I shake my head.

She purses her lips shut.

"Well?" I snap.

"No," she replies.

"What?" I growl.

"No, I'm not saying no." She winces, "I mean, yes, I'll come with you to meet your family. But that New Year's Eve thing? You can forget that."

I glower at her.

She juts out her chin, snaps back her shoulders, and doesn't blink.

Bloody hell, that sass of hers is back, thank fuck. Damn, if I don't hate it when her spirit is cowed.

"Fine."

"Fine." She tosses her head.

I turn.

She calls out again, "But the roads, the storm..."

I can't stop the grin that splits my face.

I wipe it off of my face, turn, "What storm?"

"Uh, the one that caused the roads to close and the electricity—"

The overhead lights come on and she blinks. The brightness pours over us, envelops us, cuts the space between us as if it's a barrier. How strange. Apparently, this time, the darkness had been kinder.

"Oh, and Princess?"

She angles her head.

"Shut off the tap, will you?"

26

"Life is uncertain; eat dessert first."

-From Amelie's diary

Amelie

I stare through the window from the backseat of the luxurious SUV. We'd left early this morning, heading toward the outskirts of Durham, where Weston's family home is.

Max whines from the back. I turn around and pat his head. Weston has his faults, but he hasn't stinted when it comes to Max. The car has a specially fitted pet booster seat in the rear, complete with a tether attached to his harness to keep him safe. Max licks my hand, then turns to glance out of the window. I swear, the puppy is more human than many of the two-legged variety of animals I've met... Present company included, of course. I shoot a sideways glance at the man in the seat next to me. His hair brushes against his collar, his beard seemingly fuller than what it was a few hours ago... Is he sprouting hair by the minute? Does it mean when he drags those whiskers across my pussy it will feel more intense than before? Ha, not possible. Whoever had said that once you go beard, you don't go back, was bloody right.

He raises his hand and drags his fingers through that hair on his chin. I gulp, then squeeze my thighs together. *Come on, you can't be turned on by that simple act.* I wriggle around in my seat. *Get a life, woman. He misled you, remember? Made you think there was a storm outside that kept you*

marooned in the cabin, without electricity, when there was nothing of the kind taking place.

"What else did you lie to me about?" I mumble.

After that break-up in the bathroom... Could it be qualified as a break-up when we were never really together? Sure, in the carnal sense, I mean, but there was never any relationship between us, was there...?

Well, after the end of that relationship that never was and which shall never again be referred to by me, I'd stood there dumbstruck and naked and in the bath tub. The water had spilt over the sides and I had scrambled to shut off the tap. Of course, the alphahole had had the last say there, as well. Damn, but I hate the man. Hate his superiority complex, hate how, without even trying, he'd managed to turn my life upside down.

"What do you mean?" his voice rumbles over me. His presence thrums in that enclosed space. His larger-than-life persona pushes down on my shoulders, keeps me pinned to my side of the back seat.

"The storm," I mutter, "you lied to me."

"Not my fault you didn't check the weather."

"My phone didn't have a signal..." I bite the inside of my cheek. I could have tried harder. I could have checked online when I'd called Isla from the bathtub. Bloody bath tub; I hate bath tubs.

I'd clambered over the side of the tub, almost slipped and fallen, dried myself off, wrapped a towel around myself.

For the rest of the day we'd ignored each other. I'd made grilled sandwiches for lunch and we'd eaten them separately. I'd spent the rest of the day avoiding him... Cleaning the house... Or at least, trying to. Dinner had been soup and a pasta dish, the ingredients available, thanks to our trip to the supermarket. We'd eaten together at the dining table in the kitchen. He'd offered to help load up the dishwasher. I'd refused. And he'd headed outdoors with Max. I was reading in the living room, when he'd come in. He'd ignored me, headed off to the bedroom.

By the time I'd gone to bed, jerkface was under the covers...on his side of the bed, the white sheets pulled up to his waist, his sculpted chest all angles and planes, his biceps bulging from where he'd folded his arm behind his neck.

I'd almost crawled into bed right then, and cuddled up next to him... Not. Thankfully, I'd managed to retrieve my clothes from my bag, marched back into the bathroom to change. Dressed in pajamas and socks, I'd slipped

between the sheets, after building a virtual fort between us with pillows and cushions. I'd fallen asleep almost at once... At least the sex had worn me out... Fringe benefits. I snort aloud.

"Care to share your thoughts?" he drawls. That voice... Dark and edgy and with an hint of mystery that had entranced me from the beginning, ripples down my spine. My nipples harden and my toes curl. I clutch my handbag to my chest. Hopefully, it will hide exactly how turned on I am. *Gah!* This is so not fair.

I rub at my temples, shake my head. "It's nothing," I respond.

"It's something." I sense him turn to me and tip my head so my heavy hair falls over my face. Anything to hide from him.

"Nothing of consequence," I insist.

"Whatever is in that bag, seems to be of consequence though."

I blink, shift the bag into a more comfortable position. "It's—"

"Don't say nothing," he growls.

"Cookies."

"Huh?" His forehead furrows.

"I baked cookies," I explain.

"Cookies?" He seems taken aback, "You made cookies?"

"We are going to see your family. I am a baker..." I raise my shoulders.

"That's why you were up early this morning?"

I nod. I'd remembered to charge my phone, and set an alarm, and woken up a few minutes before it had gone off. Guess those years of getting up before dawn and heading off to get my baking done for the day had come in handy. I'd switched off the alarm, crawled out of bed and out from under the weight of his arm.

He'd shoved aside the pillows at some point in the night and had pulled my body against his, and spooned me... No wonder I had slept well. I had turned and seen his features relaxed in sleep. His beard had seemed thicker, his pecs closer to a work of art, and that beautiful throat...that gorgeous throat... I'd moved in to inhale his scent at the base of his neck, where it would be the most potent. He'd stirred. I'd frozen. His muscles had relaxed and I'd scrambled off the bed. Lucky escape...

Was it, though? If he'd woken up then, would he have...taken me over his lap and spanked me? My sex clenches. I squeeze my thighs shut. Dip into my bag and pull out the tin—I'd emptied out the contents and repurposed it. I pop the lid and the scent of vanilla and chocolate, and the touch of cinnamon

I'd sprinkled on at the end, fills the space.

He reaches for one; I slap the lid on his fingers.

"Ow." He pulls back, shakes out his hand, "Do you want to break a finger in my good hand?"

"Did I succeed?" I bare my teeth.

"It'll take more than a batch of your cookies to bring me down," he retorts.

"Don't bet on it," I scoff.

"Hmm," he glares at the tin, then at my face, "my mother doesn't expect gifts."

"It's Christmas."

"My presence is gift enough."

My jaw drops, "Do you seriously believe that?"

"It's what she insists, every time."

"Of course, she'd say that. She's your mom, after all. Doesn't mean you shouldn't get them anything. Besides..." I peer up at him.

"Besides...?" he prompts.

"Besides, after spending time with you, I can vouch that your presence is less a gift and more of an unwelcome surprise." I snicker.

"Har har." He scowls. "Feeling cheeky this morning, are we?"

"Feeling grumpy, as always, I see?" I shake my head, "You could collapse soufflé, just by your proximity."

He stares at me. "What-fucking-ever."

"That so eloquent. Impressive go-to-word for Mr A-holasaurus." I snort.

"Woman, your metaphors are—"

"Stupid?"

"Creative." He nods, "I'll give you this round."

"Ooh." I hold up my fist.

He glares at me.

"Fist bump. Come on, come on," I coax him.

"Nope." He holds up his right hand, with the upright middle finger, "Injured, remember?"

"Aww." I deflate like the bloody soufflé I'd mentioned, and crap, now I'm hungry.

"Coming back to the topic at hand," he continues. "You could have bought my mother something on the way. We could have stopped at one of the stores in town."

"I believe in the personal touch," I retort. "Unlike you."

"Oh, trust me, when it comes to you, my touch is as personal as it gets." He smirks.

I draw in a breath. Patience, patience. Don't react. *He's being this...overt to get a rise out of you. Don't stoop to his level... Can I be at eye-level with his crotch-candy though?... Eeeeagh, I did not think that.*

I lower my chin, hiding behind my thick fall of hair. "Has your family always lived in Durham?"

He sighs loudly, then leans back.

Whew! Dodged that one. After how he'd pulled that cheap stunt of lying about the storm, I should seriously have been angrier... But for some reason...I'm not. Maybe I'm flattered that he lied to ensure I'd comply with his plan. But...what else did he lie about? I chew on my lower lip.

"My mother moved there after my siblings and I left home. I grew up in London," he explains. "After the incident..." he pauses.

I hold my breath. *Is he going to tell me about himself? Is he going to share a little more of what goes on behind those colorless eyes of his?* Weston doesn't come across as closed off... But his demeanor...that hard outlook of his hides so many secrets. I turn to him, "The kidnapping you mean?"

He nods, then rotates his neck from side to side, "I was one of the lucky ones. My parents rallied around me. Even my asshole of an older brother became protective for a period of time. And my younger sister? Well... She sensed something was amiss. She'd crawl into bed every night and comfort me while I sobbed myself to sleep."

"You...cried every night?"

"I was twelve." His lips twist. "The incident forced me grow up fast... But at night, when I couldn't hide from myself anymore, the demons would come out to play. I don't think I have slept properly since ... Until..." He trails off, then turns to me, a strange look on his face.

My throat dries. "Until?" I prompt.

"Until that first night in the cabin, when I spooned you in bed."

My cheeks flush. I turn, crack open the window, and the outside air rushes in. "Why are you telling me this now?"

"No reason," his voice is emotionless.

I turn to find he's staring ahead.

"Not long now," he says in that same colorless tone.

Right, guess that's me being put in my place, huh?

"Did they hurt you?"

"Who?"

I frown, "The...men who kidnapped you with the rest of the Seven."

"Are you really interested in finding out about it?"

I open my mouth, then shut it. "Guess not." I turn away once more, ball my fingers into fists, "I'm trying to be polite, that's all."

"Don't be."

I swallow, "We're going to see your family. We should, at least, put on a veneer of politeness."

"My mother would prefer it if we were to speak our minds; she can spot something fake from a mile off."

I turn on him, "And you think we can get away with..." I point between us, "this?"

His lips stretch in a smile that is not one at all, "Why do you think I asked you and not someone else?"

"I don't understand."

He turns, trains the full force of those grey-silver eyes on me, "There's enough chemistry between us to pull this off."

I open my mouth.

He raises his hand, "Don't deny it. We may not be able to stand each other, but you know what they say?"

"What?"

"There's a thin line between hate and a connection."

What a condescending jerk.

"From where I am, it's a 100% loathing," I force out the words.

"Good."

"Eh?"

"It'll seem realistic, after all. Nothing like make-up sex to cement a relationship, huh?"

Weston

Make-up sex? What the fuck am I talking about? Clearly this entire idea—which I'd pulled out of my arse, by the way—is a bad one.

The SUV crawls up the driveway of the Victorian house on the outskirts of Durham where my mother lives. The ivy covers most of the west wing, the leaves a burned red this time of the year.

The vehicle stops in front of the steps leading up to the house.

Before my driver can come around, she's pushed open the door and is hopping out. She opens the passenger door, hauls Max into her arms.

"I have his leash." I frown.

"I'm going to carry the little fella."

Right.

She hauls him closer to her face, "Hey baby, missed me, boy?"

Max licks her nose, her chin.

She laughs.

I scowl.

How dare another male intrude on my territory?

I growl deep in my throat.

Both Max and Amelie turn to me.

"Did you just growl?"

"So?" I glare at her.

She bites her lips, "Uh, you don't have to be jealous of Max." She tips her nose up.

"Me?" I laugh, "Woman, you are delusional."

"Now who's lying?" she scoffs.

"You seriously need to stop being obsessed with me."

She gapes at me, "You know what? This conversation is pointless." She straightens and stalks around the car, heading for the stairs. The dress she's wearing flies up and exposes a flash of her creamy thigh. She takes the steps, and I notice the dark line running up the back of her stockings. My dick twitches, my groin hardens, and this is so, not the fucking time. I don't want to walk into my family's home sporting a hard on.

I adjust myself, then duck out of the car.

Peter—Sinclair's chauffeur who's working with me since Sinclair is away, and because my finger's still bloody busted—walks around to pop open the lid of the trunk.

I turn and stalk her as she walks up the steps to the front door.

"She keeps you on your toes, huh?" Peter asks.

I tilt my head.

"The two of you remind me of how it was with Mr. Sterling and Ms. Summer before they got together."

"You're mistaken." I scowl, "There's nothing like that."

He places both of Amelie's suitcases, and a considerably smaller suitcase—i.e. mine—on the ground; he slaps the trunk shut.

I frown down at Amelie's pink frothy wardrobe on wheels. "You'd think she were packing for a month instead of two nights."

He chuckles, then reaches for the suitcase, but I shake my head, "I'll carry her load."

He peers up at me, "You do that, Sir."

I frown, open my mouth to ask what he means, but he's already walked off, with the rest of the luggage.

What-fucking-ever. My brain cells are, clearly, not functioning at full force, which is why I'd read between the lines. He didn't mean anything by that... He didn't. Did he?

I shake my head and follow Peter up the steps to where she stands, at an angle to the door.

I dump the bag, pause next to her, "Couldn't you have packed more sensibly?"

She turns to me, an expression of almost comical consternation on her face, "No. I need it all. I mean, you weren't helpful at all, gave me no

pointers on what to wear, or what to expect, so I had to make sure I had all of my emergency clothes on hand."

"And that?" I point to the chef's toolkit that she has slung over her other shoulder.

She tucks it under her arm. "I don't go anywhere without this."

"Right." I drag my fingers through my hair, "Look, maybe this wasn't a good idea after all, I mean—"

The door opens. "Weston," my sister's voice calls out.

Next to me, Amelie stiffens. She swallows, clutches at her handbag. The skin stretches white across her knuckles. I should revel in her nervousness, in how out of her depth she seems. I mean, isn't that the point of this entire charade, to show her who is more superior in this relationship? *Is there a relationship between us? And who, exactly, is out of their depth? Her? Or me?*

I grip her shoulder. She peers up at me, and I hold her gaze before saying softly, "It will be fine." *What will be fine? Why the hell am I trying to put her at ease?*

She parts her lips, and fuck it, I can't resist. I lower my head and brush my mouth over hers. She draws in a breath and I deepen the kiss. Swipe my tongue inside to tangle with hers, draw of that chocolate and honey taste of hers. My head spins.

I break the kiss, survey her face. Flushed cheeks, dazed eyes. She blinks, sways. Good, that should take her mind off of the upcoming ordeal—I mean, the family stuff. Not that I don't want to spend time with them, but so many people all at once, can be a little overwhelming, especially since my family doesn't take shit from me.

There's a commotion behind me, then, "Unca Wes." Arms wrap around my legs. I glance down at my niece.

"Present... Christmas." The little imp smiles up at me. Well, one of us has our priorities right, at least.

"Phoenix," my sister calls out to her daughter, "let Uncle Wes and his friend inside the house, at least, and it's impolite to ask him what he's got for you. Speaking of," she turns to me, "I didn't realize you were bringing a guest." She looks between us.

Amelie's body goes even more rigid; she turns to me, "You didn't tell them?" Her gaze narrows on me and color flushes her cheeks.

Oh, this is going to be so much fun. That thing about keeping her off

kilter? I intend to deliver on that.

"I like to be spontaneous," I allow my lips to curve.

Amelie makes a sound deep into her throat.

I train my gaze on my sister, "Kirsten this is Amelie. Amelie...this is my younger sister, Kirsten."

"Amelie," Kirsten's eyes bob between us. She shuffles her feet in that manner which is a dead giveaway that she's dying to quiz me... Not that I am going to allow that.

Max barks from his vantage point against Amelie's breasts. I seriously needed to have a man-to-man with that pooch.

Phoenix tugs on my hand. "Moosic..." she chants, "moooooosic."

"Hey, honey." I release my hold on Amelie, then bend to swing Phoenix up in my arms.

The little girl giggles, "Mooooosic."

"Music?" I turn to Kirsten for help.

"Yea, music," Kirsten sighs. "She's driving us mad with her music blocks."

"Mooooosic bo-k-ssss," Phoenix warbles. "Unca Wezz."

I chuck her under her chin and she giggles. "Play...play... Unca Wezz."

Right.

I glance toward Amelie, who smiles at the little girl. "Hey, baby doll," she coos, "What's your name?"

Phoenix blinks at Amelie, then holds out her arms.

"Oh." Amelie looks at Phoenix, then at me.

I reach over, fasten Max's leash to his collar. "Told ya so," I whisper into her ear.

She scowls, lowers Max to the floor, and her handbag slides down her arm.

"Let me get that." I grab the bag before it hits the floor.

Then I straighten and hand Phoenix over to her. Amelie cuddles Phoenix, and her other bag—the chef's toolkit—bumps her back. I reach for it; Amelie frowns.

"You can trust me," I snicker.

She raises one eyebrow, "Can I?"

"Of course, Sweetheart." I raise one eyebrow.

She opens her mouth, to protest, no doubt. I lean down, press another kiss to her lips, and slide the bag off of her shoulder in the same move.

I step back, swinging her chef's satchel over my other shoulder.

"Smooth," Kirsten laughs.

"Doggy," Phoenix pants.

Max woofs, wags his tail, pawing at Amelie as he tries to get to the little girl.

"Wait...." Amelie protests. Phoenix pats her cheek. Amelie glances down at her and her face breaks into a smile. "Hey pumpkin, what's your name?"

"Phe," she grins, jumping a little in Amelie's arms.

Amelie props her on her hip, "Hey, Phe." Amelie's smile widens, "Whatcha wearing on your head."

Phoenix touches the unicorn shaped hairband, "Pepper."

"Good name." She leans in closer, "What about your friend behind you?"

Phoenix gazes at her wide-eyed, "You...can see him?" She gulps.

"Yep, I can. What's his name?"

"Jack." Phoenix bobs her head, "Jack. Jack."

"Jack?" I turn to Kirsten.

Kirsten nods. "He's imaginary," she says in a low voice.

"Ah." I glance back at the woman, who bends her glossy blonde head toward the dark blonde-haired kid. Something hot stabs at my chest.

"You want one of your own, huh?" Kirsten nudges me.

"What?" I turn to her, "Of course, not."

Kirsten tilts her head, "Hmm." She looks me up and down. Seeing...what? The bags over my shoulders, the dog straining at the leash, the other end of which I hold onto with my uninjured hand...

I scowl at her, "You have a weird look on your face."

"I am not the one who's changed." She grins, then reaches up to pat my cheek. "Finally," she titters, "I can't tell you how I was looking forward to this day."

"You are not making any sense," I grumble.

"It's normal—so much happening in so little time," she waggles her head, "but when it's right, it's right, you know?"

"No," I glower.

The fuck is wrong with my sister? Had I grown another head on my way here?

"Hey," a new voice mumbles. I glance up as my eleven year old niece ambles into the room.

"Skye." I hold out my fist. "Whassup?"

She walks over, ignores me, then frowns at Amelie, "Who're you?"

"Skye!" Kirsten exclaims. "You apologize right now to Amelie, you hear me?"

Skye rolls her eyes, then sighs, "Yeah, fine, whatever. Sorry... Amelie. Pleased to meet you, Amelie. Hey, Uncle Wes." She tosses her head. "There," she jerks her chin in Kirsten's direction. "Happy now?" She turns on her heel and flounces off.

"Whoa." I blink. "What happened there?"

"Sorry." Kirsten turns red. "She's already turning into a teenager. I shudder to think how she's going to be in a few years' time."

She crosses over to Amelie, "Let's get you inside." She holds out her arms to Phoenix, who jumps back into Kirsten's arms.

"Mommy!" Phoenix throws her arms around Kirsten's neck, then strains in her grasp to peer at Max, "Doggy, doggy, play...play."

Kirsten lowers the little girl to the ground, "Come on, let's go in." She hitches her arm through Amelie's, "Was the trip okay?"

The three of them walk in.

I stare after them, then down at Max, who whines, and strains at his leash. Amelie's bag slides down to the crook of my arm. How the hell did I get stuck with this? Brilliant surgeon? Check. Obnoxious billionaire? You bet. Carrying my girlfriend's luggage into my family home? Wh-a-t? Time for a reality check. Why the fuck did I think this was a good idea? Who suggested this? Oh, wait, that was me.

Peter walks out. He glances down at the pink suitcase then at me,

"Keep this the fuck to yourself," I mutter. "Not a word to the rest of the Seven."

He chuckles, then schools his expression into one of indifference. "Of course, Sir, you can trust my discretion."

What-fucking-ever. I stalk forward, my progress somewhat impeded by the blasted tank on wheels that I pull along.

"Oh, Sir?"

I turn.

"The pink brings out the blonde in your beard."

Peter walks off.

Blonde hairs in my beard? I don't have blonde hairs in my beard. The only blonde hair my beard has been close to...is her pussy hair. Those luscious lower lips of hers that had indicated that she was a natural blonde,

and fuck me, if that hadn't been a turn-on. My dick twitches in agreement. I pause. Nope, not going there. The last thing I need is walking in with a chub the size of England in my pants. I shake my head, and follow Max into the house. Of course, the bloody pooch has to lead the way.

He barks, tugs on his leash, which slips from my hand, He darts forward.

"Max." I quicken my pace.

Footsteps approach down the curved stairwell.

"Weston," a woman's voice calls out.

I pause, turn toward the woman who walks down the steps, the first love of my life, the one woman who has my complete irrevocable devotion.

I smile up at her.

Her features light up, "You came."

Amelie

I hear the sound of barking, the patter of nails on the wooden floor. I turn as Max races toward me, his leash dragging behind. "Hey, you." I bend down to pet the little guy, who jumps up and licks my face as if he hadn't done the same thing not five minutes ago. "Down, boy," I laugh.

Phoenix squats down to rub the puppy's back, "Doggy," she squeals. "Love doggy." She holds out her arms to Max, who jumps on her; the two collapse on the floor in a flurry of arms and legs and doggy barks and little girl exclamations of delight. My smile widens so big that my cheeks hurt. Damn, I love this. What are little girls made of? Sugar and spice and puppy dog tails. Ha! Why should only little boys have the right to dogs, huh? Talk about my own spin on the ol' nursery rhyme.

The hair on the back of my neck prickles. I glance up to find Weston walking forward to greet a woman approaching him. She's wearing a beautiful peacock-green colored dress that flows to below her knee.

He bends and kisses her cheek, "Mother."

I straighten, holding onto Max's leash. So, this is his Mum? Guess alphaholes have parents too... I mean, of course they do; it's just difficult to imagine Weston as a small boy...vulnerable and innocent.

She reaches up to touch his face, "Why do you look different?"

He frowns down at her, "It's the beard, perhaps?"

She tilts her head, the gesture so similar to Weston's, my throat closes. There's no doubt about the blood relationship between the two.

"That's not it." She steps back, takes him in, "It's not the handbag you're carrying either." She giggles.

He shuffles his feet. I blink. I mean, I've never seen him this uncomfortable before. I stifle the giggle that rises up. Trust a mom to put her son in his place huh?

He straightens and turns to me.

I stiffen. Not that I am doing anything wrong, but I bet it seems like I was staring at him, which I wasn't. Okay, I was. I clutch Max's leash. He whines, pulls toward Weston. "Shh, Max," I whisper to him, "Not now."

Weston turns to me; he jerks his chin.

I shake my head.

He glares at me.

I pale.

He holds out his hand.

I sigh. Okay, hell, I'd been hoping to put off this meeting with his family... Not that they are my in-laws or anything, but authority figures of any kind? I run a mile. And not because my own Ma was a strict disciplinarian—okay, maybe it is that. It doesn't take a shrink to tell me my issues with not wanting to conform have to do with my home and the convent school I was educated in. Yeah, the nuns wouldn't be happy with how I've turned out. I purse my lips.

"Amelie," Weston's tone lowers to a hush. To anyone else, I'll bet it sounds normal, but damn, if I don't recognize the demand in it. Shit, I'd left home because I wanted to be independent, I thought... Until I met him, and the kind of disciplining Weston has in mind... Hell, if I don't respond to it from that place deep inside that had resisted being told what to do. My head spins. Is that why I want his kind of dominance? Because I had hankered for it... A structure that imposes boundaries within which I can be myself... Had I held onto the illusion of control until I met a man who I trusted enough to hand it over to? Is that man Weston? I gulp.

Weston frowns, "You okay?" I hear his voice across the short distance.

Max whines, brushes against my leg. I bend, scratch his ear, then straighten. Best to treat this like breaking an egg. Just aim for the center, tap it against the side of the bowl, do your best... Either way it's going to break, you just want to be around to catch the yolk. Me and my stupid metaphors. I walk forward, Max straining at the leash.

When I reach them, I pause. "I'm Amelie." I hold out my hand, "Pleased

to meet you."

Weston's mother smiles. The lines etched around her eyes deepen. "What a pretty name."

She takes my hand between both of hers.

"That's very kind of you to say so," I reply, schooling my features into a neutral expression, "and thank you for having me."

Max yelps, she glances at him, and her face breaks into a broad grin. Her features brighten and those grey eyes sparkle. The resemblance between her and Weston becomes more pronounced. Strange, huh? Considering Mr Grumpy-grump's face rarely wears an expression that's not borderline angry.

"And who's this?"

"Max," I reply.

She releases my hand, bends down to pat the puppy. He wags his tail, jumps up at her.

"Is he yours?"

"Uh, he belongs to my friend Summer and her husband."

"Ah, the Sinclairs." She straightens, "Is that how the two of you met?"

"Yes," I say.

"No," Weston declares.

We stare at each other, for a beat, another. I scowl at him. This is what happens when you don't get your stories right. And jerkalope here, didn't want to talk about it before-hand.

I tuck my elbows into my side, open my eyes wide, stare at the alphahole. *He got us into this one, he can dig us out of it. This should be good.*

His mother chuckles, "Which is it, then?"

"I saw her shopping for groceries at my local supermarket. She was talking to herself as she decided which brand of chocolate to buy for baking, and that was it."

"Oh," I blink. *Damn, but he sounds so sincere. I almost believe it myself.*

"Ah." His mother nods. "Chocolate and sex—the unbeatable combination."

"Wha—?" I gape at her.

"Mother," Weston admonishes.

She laughs, "It's not like you were conceived through immaculate conception." She chuckles and looks at me, "I hope I didn't shock you."

"No...Yes." I chew the inside of my cheek, "I mean, it's not shocking, except it came from you, so..."

"Ah," she grins, "you mean from a woman in her fifties. We're supposed to know our place, take care of our grandkids, and leave the running of the world to our husbands and sons."

I hunch my shoulders. Shit, what is the right response here, "No, I think it's women, and especially those in the prime of their life, who have brought up children to face the world, and who have stood by their men, supported them while following their own passions, who wield the power."

She tilts her head, then laughs. "Good save." She chuckles, "Call me Rosie." She pulls me in for a hug.

I take it. "Rosie." I nod.

Phew! Guess I passed that test... Whatever that was.

She releases me, and steps back, "You can take him off the leash, dear."

I stare at her.

"Weston, I mean." Her eyes twinkle.

"Ah," I open and shut my mouth.

"Just messing with you," she chuckles, then glances at Max.

Right. Is that where Weston gets his warped sense of humor, not to mention his dominance?

I unhook the leash from Max's collar. Max bounds off, toward the living space at the far end of the hallway, following the sound of Phoenix's laughter.

I twist the leash around my palm, wondering what to do with it. Weston places his hand on mine; I look up. One side of his lips kicks up. Is that supposed to be reassuring? The warmth from his touch sinks into my blood. I draw in a breath and my heartbeat slows. How strange. This man... Who I am not sure how to react to... Who I am sure I hate... Who I have definite feelings for... When did his presence become so reassuring?

He twines his fingers with mine and the leash slips from my grasp. He catches it, glances around. A maid wearing a uniform materializes. Huh? Of course, they'd have staff. They are rich and the house... Well, it seems the kind that has been in their family for generations. "Master Weston?" The older woman smiles.

"Mary, how are you?" He hands the leash over to her.

"I'm very good, Sir." Her smile widens. "The luggage has been sent to your suite already," she adds.

"Excellent," he grins at her.

Wow. That's two smiles in as many minutes. Seems the alphahole can

lose the obnoxiousness on occasion... Just not with me.

"How is Veronica?" he asks Mary.

"Grown up and at university. She has her own life now."

"You miss her, huh?"

Mary raises her shoulders, "Always. But I'm also glad to have her out of my hair." She chuckles.

She turns to Rosie, "Dinner is served Ma'am."

Rosie touches my arm, "Shall we?"

29

Weston

"You're not sleeping on the couch." I growl at her.

Dinner had been mercifully quiet. Kirsten had taken Phe and Skye up to get them ready for bed. Max had mercifully tagged along, not wanting to part from the girls.

Which means we are alone, in my room, and I intend to take full advantage of that.

"Excuse me?" She frowns up at me.

"You heard me," I drawl. "Get your sweet tush into bed." I jerk my thumb over my shoulder, pointing at the massive four-poster that occupies the center of the room.

"We are not together; this is all a farce." She glowers, "Have you forgotten that you wanted me to come here to put on a front with your family? I have done that, and now I want some privacy."

"No." I fold my arms over chest.

She gapes, "What...what do you mean?"

"Exactly that." I glance down my nose at her, "We need to keep up the pretense."

"In here?" She glances around the spacious suite that takes up the entire top floor of the house. It also comes equipped with its own kitchen, a fact I had pointed out to her earlier. Why was that? Why does it matter to me that she feels at home in this space? I shake my head, narrow my gaze on the woman who scowls up at me.

"No-one's going to come in here," she insists.

"You don't know that. One slip-up, and this entire charade will amount to nothing."

"That's all this is—a farce." She juts out a hip, props her hand on it, "So why the hell can't you allow me to sleep on my own?"

"Because..." *You're mine*, is what I want to say, but fuck that. I have no claim to her. I can't call her mine. I don't want to have any relationship with her, do I? So why the hell am I being this unreasonable? I crack my neck, draw in a breath, "As long as you are here, under my roof, you do as I say."

"It's not your roof," she growls.

"It belongs to my family," I retort.

"I don't care."

"You should, because in one second you are going to be breaking a record, one that you'll remember for the rest of your life."

She balks, "Wh...what do you mean?"

"Just try to walk out of that door, and I'll have you on your back and make you orgasm so fast, and so many times, that you'll forget all about the world outside this bedroom."

Her chest heaves, her face pales, she swallows hard, and clenches her fists by her sides, "You wouldn't dare."

"You know better than to challenge me, Princess."

"I'm not your princess."

"You're right," I look her up and down, "you're the woman I am paying to keep me company."

She falters, then pulls her shoulders back, "You forget that we no longer have an arrangement."

"So why are you here?"

She bites the inside of her cheek, "Because..."

"Because?"

"Uh, I didn't want you to let your family down."

"Bull-fucking-shit," my words crackle through the space.

She winces. "Keep your voice down," she hisses at me. "You may not care about your family hearing us, but I do."

"The walls of this suite are thick enough for you to scream all night long and no one would notice."

She swallows, twists her fingers together, "You're lying."

"Want to try it out, hmm?" I take a step toward her; she skitters back.

I tilt my head.

She holds my gaze.

I widen my stance.

She tips her chin, "You...you don't scare me."

"So you keep saying."

"We are here with your family; your sister and nieces are sleeping on the floor below. You won't try anything with them so close."

"You think I'll stop because of that?"

"I saw you with them, Weston." She narrows her gaze, "You respect your mother, you love your nieces, you'd do anything to protect your sister... You're not half as much of an unfeeling man as you make yourself out to be."

"You're right about that."

"I... I am?"

I nod, "I'm much worse." I lunge forward.

She screams, pivots, then makes a run for the door.

I swoop down toward her, grab her across the waist and throw her over my shoulder.

"Let me go, you oaf," she yells.

I stalk toward the bed.

She wriggles, brings her fists down on my back. The jolt travels down to my cock, which is already erect. Is it wrong that I am getting off on her struggle? On her curvy butt that wriggles so near my face. I tilt my head to nuzzle the side of her hips.

She stills. "Did you..." Her voice cracks, "Did you just do what I think, you did?"

I bring down my hand on her arse.

She howls, "What the fuck?"

"Language, Princess." I smirk, "And don't question me again."

Her body tenses, all of her muscles coil, and tension rolls off of her in waves. *Wait for it. Wait for it.* She bucks her body, then digs her knee into my chest with enough force that my breath catches. She lowers her head, buries her teeth in my back. Pin pricks of pain race from the contact. My dick throbs and my groin hardens. I change direction and head for the ensuite bath.

"The hell are you doing?" she yells again.

"Not so worried about waking up the family now, huh?" I chuckle.

"You douche, how dare you use your strength against me?"

"Because I like to play dirty?" *Because I am losing my mind, that's why.*

The thought of her walking out of here, never looking back... Hell no. My chest tightens. No way, am I letting that happen. And it's not my ego speaking... It's the fear that I'll never see her again. Never scent her gorgeous essence, never hold her curves, bury myself in her sweet cunt; never pit my will against hers. I stumble, then right myself.

The challenge... That's what attracted me to her. It's why I keep taunting her, trying to get a rise out of her, and why I can't let go of her either. What do I want to do with her? I want to get a rise out of her. Revel in her spirit, that fire inside of her that could burn through my past, rejuvenate me, give me a reason to move forward. I want to live fully, to feel for the first time in my life. I want her. Only her. I march into the bathroom, turn on the shower.

"Let go of me," her scream slices through my ear drum.

"Stop that," I growl.

"You stop what you're doing and release me this instant."

"Your wish is my command." I swing her around, plonk her down under the shower. She opens her mouth and the water pelts her face. Her scream is cut off in a series of unintelligible words.

"I can't hear you," I taunt.

She kicks out, I angle away, and she tips over.

I grasp her shoulder and keep her upright.

She swings at me, connects with the arm of my injured hand. Pain explodes behind my eyes.

"Fuck!"

I loosen my grip and she throws herself at me. Her weight connects with my chest. I stagger back, hit the wall of the shower cubicle. She hooks her leg around my waist, hauls herself up, and climbs me like she's a cat and I am her personal scratching post... Fuck. She lowers her head, digs her teeth into my neck, on the side of my injured finger.

"You little hellion!" I grab the back of her neck, tug. She doesn't let go. I apply pressure; she holds on. Pain shoots down my injured arm and my finger hurts. I squeeze down, her shoulders tremble, and her body arches. She gasps and her hold loosens. I pull her back, lower my face to hers, "I am going to teach you a lesson that you'll never forget."

30

Amelie

Water from the shower drums against me. His grey gaze clashes with mine. His features twist into an expression of rage...? Of arousal? His nostrils flare. "I am going to fuck you like you are mine."

Am I his?

Is he mine?

Do I want him to fuck me?

No.

No.

"Yes." I peel back my lips, "Finally."

He crashes his mouth into mine, thrusts his tongue inside, sucks on me, demands that I open myself to him, that I give in to him. *No, no. I can't. Yes, you can. Show him you won't back down, that you're not scared of what he does to you. That you will not turn and hide from the emotions he evokes in you.* I tip up my chin, wind my arms around his neck, dig my thighs into his waist, press my melting center to the hardness that tents his pants.

"Fuck me," his harsh whisper chafes my skin and my nerve endings flare. My brain cells seem to evaporate. Poof, I am smoke. I am one melting, writhing mass of need in his arms.

Take me. Tear into me. Sink into me. Push all thoughts out of my head. I don't want to think, don't want to worry about the future, the past. All that matters is me, here, with him, clinging to him, holding on with every single strand of strength in my body. Him. I want him. Only him. I tear my mouth

from his, "Fuck me."

Before the words are out of my mouth, he's flipped positions. My back presses into the wall. The weight of him pins me. His massive body cuts off the water. The blood drums in my ears; my pulse thuds against my neck, my wrists, at my ankles... The beat between my legs grows, louder, needier, angrier. "Now," I huff. "Do it."

His lips twist. He brings his hand up to curl his large fingers around my neck. I gulp. Shit, I'd asked... Demanded that he fuck me. Isn't that, like, against the rules of dominance with this man? Am I not supposed to ask for what I want?

His fingers meet around the diameter of my neck. He presses his thumb into the pulse that skitters at the base of my throat. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

I frown.

He tilts his head.

I lower my chin.

He glares at me and the blood drains from my face, straight to my cunt. My head spins. My throat closes. I flick out my tongue to touch my lips; his gaze drops to my mouth.

He growls and my stomach seems to bottom out. Oh, my God. This man... He's too hot, too much. Too everything.

"Do it," he barks.

I hesitate.

"Or not." He steps back.

I lose my grasp around his waist; my legs begin to slide down. *No, no, no. I want this. I do.* "Please," I gasp.

"Please what?" His fingers tighten around my neck and my airflow slows. I open my mouth, try to breathe. My lungs burn. I thrust my thighs into his, hold on. *Don't let go. He's testing you. Don't give in; not yet.*

"I... I..." I try to form the words, but my brain cells don't comply. "Wes... I..."

"Want me to help you?"

I nod.

"Want me to play with your pretty cunt?" He tilts his hips and his thick length stabs my sensitized core.

I moan. I'm not proud. I tried to resist, tried to hold onto the last shred of my dignity that lies in tatters around me now. "Yes," I beg. "Yes."

"Want me to squeeze your butt," he grips my arse, "before I cram my fingers into your arsehole?" He drags his fingers down the valley between my butt cheeks. His touch sinks through the sodden mess of my clothes, my panties, into that empty part of me inside, that curls in on itself, throbbing with a need that only Doc Grumpyface can fulfill.

"Don't stop," I whine.

"Want me to..." He brings his hand around, and grabs my pussy.

I wordlessly push my core forward, begin to fuck his palm like the out-of-my-head, sex-starved, stupid idiot that I am.

He hauls me up, his right hand around my neck—apparently, his injured finger does nothing to restrain his movements; with his other, he grips my pussy—pins me against the wall, and stares into my face.

My feet don't touch the ground, and I should be scared. This position implies exactly what we are—me at his disposal, at his mercy, his to do with as he pleases. His grasp is firm enough to prop me up, allowing enough air to reach my lungs that I don't suffocate, and yet... The lowered oxygen heightens my reactions, my sensitivity to his every move. I watch him watch me strain against that large hand at my core, and all of my nerve-endings seem to catch fire all at once.

He slides his palm under me so his fingers are flat against my butt. He presses his thumb through my tights and my panties into my swollen nub. Sparks explode behind my eyes. I throw my head back and pant. He rubs circles with his thumb around my clit. My pulse rate ratchets up.

"Look at me," his command whips through my thoughts.

I lower my face, crack my eyes open.

"Who do you belong to?"

"You."

"Who do you come for?"

"You."

"Who will you shatter for?"

"You," I groan, "Only you."

"Shatter for me, my Princess. Right fucking now."

He releases the hold on my neck and my climax explodes up my spine. Spots of white fold in to my line of sight. My pussy clenches; moisture floods between my legs. I hear the sound of someone wailing... Me? Is that me? My ears pop; my throat closes. A whine pours from me.

"Good, girl." He bends, licks my lips, "I am going to fuck you now."

Wh-a-a-t?

I blink as he lowers me to the floor. My knees give way; he holds me up with his fingers around my neck. My shoulders slump, I should say something... Do something...?

He reaches around to shut off the shower, then grabs the hem of my dress, pulls it over my head, and tosses it aside.

He glances down at the tights, reaches for the waistband with his injured hand. He pauses. I hook my fingers in the waistband of my tights and tug them down along with my panties. The lycra sticks around my thighs. Shit, and I'd worn them in the hope of seeming sophisticated. Go figure! I try to peel them off, but the damn thing resists. Shit! I yank it down further, manage to twist it around my knees. Another tug and I shove it down to my ankles, peel it off. Whew! I straighten, and with a low growling sound he's on me.

He lowers himself to his knees, pushes his face into my pussy and fastens his mouth on my melting core. "OMG." I yell, "Wes, Wes... Wes." I chant his name as he stabs his tongue inside my channel, swipes his tongue up from my backhole to my clit. He bites on my clit and I arch off the wall. OMFG! This man's tongue should be worshipped; also his mouth, and his dick, and his digits... Gah! He slides his finger inside my melting pussy and I shudder. My knees seem to give away. I begin to slide down the wall, dig my fingers into his hair for purchase and tug on it. He growls. My nerve endings spark. *Ooh, I like that.* A lot, actually. I yank at that luxurious hair on his head.

He peers up at me, "You know you'll have to pay for that, huh?"

"Promises, promises." I smack my lips.

His nostrils flare. He rises to his feet, and keeps rising. I mean, he is tall. I know that, but in that enclosed space he is larger than life. A lethal, vital, sex machine of a man. My sex clenches, heat coils low in my belly, emptiness gnaws deep inside. I need him. Want him... Yearn for him to fill me up and put me out of my misery. "Wes," I groan.

"Here baby, right here."

He plants his thigh between my legs.

"I am going to make this so fucking good for you, Princess." He thrusts his fingers...two...three inside my pussy.

I gasp; my knees buckle. One thing I can confirm. Weston-built-like Adonis-Kincaid, always delivers.

He wraps his fingers around my neck, holds me upright, even as he shoves the fingers of his other hand in and out of me. I moan, reach for his

shoulders. He doesn't stop; he scissors his fingers inside of me. Goosebumps dot my skin; a trembling begins from the soles of my feet, inches upward. He releases his hold on my neck, then turns me around. *What the—?* I sense his hot breath on the curve of my hip a second before he pries my butt cheeks apart and rims his tongue around my backhole. *Oh, my God.* The trembling pulsates from where he slides his tongue in and out of me. He slips his palm between my hips and the shower wall, then grinds the heel of his hand against my pussy.

"Weston," his name is torn from my lips. I sense his lips curve against my arse... Is that even possible? Then he thrusts his fingers inside my pussy, and I explode. The orgasm sweeps up my thighs, my spine. I slap my palm against the shower wall, hold onto his forearm with my other hand. He continues to lick me, shove his fingers in and out of me, extending the climax, which seems to go on and on. He pulls away his hand, removes his tongue, and just like that, my orgasm fades. No way, he can't command my body with such...finesse, can he? My knees give way, for real this time. His arms come around me. He turns me toward him, pinches my chin, so I look up at him.

"Wow," I gasp, "that was..." I swallow, "It was..."

"Just the beginning."

"Huh?" My head spins. "I... I don't think I can..."

"You can."

He grins down at me, that toe curling, sex clenching, scalp tingling smirk that sends a surge of heat racing up my spine.

"Are you a sex god?" I mumble. *Hell, did I blurt that out?* Must be my sex-addled brain that's speaking. Not my fault. *Gah.*

"That's Dr Sex God to you." He laughs, "And you're welcome, again."

"Huh?" *Do I want to know why? Don't ask him; don't.* "For what?"

"For the third, fourth and fifth orgasm that you are going to experience."

"No." I blink.

"Yes." His lips curl. He reaches behind him, shuts off the shower, then steps back and rakes his gaze down my naked body. I will not cover myself, will not hide what he's already pinched and massaged and teased and licked and sucked and... I press my thighs together.

"Hmm," he smirks.

"You going to take off your clothes, or what?" I mutter.

He unbuttons his shirt, whips it off, then unfastens his belt. My gaze

drops to his crotch. *Don't stare; look away, you slut.* He shoves down his pants and his boxers, kicks them aside. He straightens and I gulp. OMFG. I take in his cock that stands to attention against his stomach. It's thick and wide, and longer than I remember it to be. How had I managed to take him down my throat?

I must have made a strangled noise, for he chuckles. "It will fit," he assures me, "I'll make it."

That's what I'm afraid of.

I sidle away and toward the door of the shower cubicle.

"Where do you think you're going?" he drawls.

"Ah, I...uh... I need to pee."

"Will you pee on me?"

"What?" I stare at him, "Are you serious?"

He laughs, "No, but coming to think of it..." He scratches his chin, "Can I pee on you, instead?"

"No," I stutter. "Is that, like, your kink or something?"

He frowns, "Never thought of it before, but," he looks me up and down, "you have to admit, it's an effective way of marking my territory."

My jaw drops, "You're crazy."

He steps forward, plants himself in the doorway, "Crazy is what I feel every time Max insists on occupying your attention."

I frown, then stiffen, "Wow, you're jealous."

He frowns.

"You resent that Max prefers my company to yours."

He folds his arms over his broad chest, "You done?"

I plant my hands on my hips. "Come on," I wheedle, "at least, admit that you don't want Max anywhere near me."

"You're wrong."

"Oh?"

He nods. "I don't want any male—no man or animal of any kind—near you."

I swallow. My heart begins to race. I know he's dominant, and an alpha, and demanding... But this crazy possessive side of him? Wow, it's hot as fuck. We stare at each other. Water drips from the shower onto the ground. I swallow and the hair on the back of my neck rises. *Say something...anything to break the silence.* I lower my arms to my sides, "Do...do you mean that?" I ask.

He tilts his head, drums his fingers on his chest, then straightens, "Want me to show you?"

31

Weston

What the fuck am I playing at? Why are you allowing her to see how much she affects you? Peeing on her? Seriously? Fucking fuck, it's not something that had crossed my mind... Not before her. Is that how much I want to possess her? Is that how much I want to imprint myself on every cell of her body? My vision narrows. The hair on my forearms rises. This crazy-ass need to own her... It's new, it's different, it's real. I bend my knees, peer into her face.

Her pupils are blown; the blue in them has deepened to an almost purple. Her cheeks are flushed, her pulse skitters at the base of her neck. "Do you, Princess?"

"I..." She bites the inside of her cheek, then lowers her chin, "I do."

"I didn't hear you."

She draws in a breath, tips up her chin. She takes a step forward until her toes bump mine. "I want you to show how much you want me, what you'll do to possess me, how much you need to ensure that no one will have me like you do."

"Good." I step away from the entrance of the shower stall, jerk my chin, "After you."

She frowns, then walks past me. I follow her past the bath tub, out the door of the ensuite, into the bedroom. She approaches the foot of the bed.

"Stop," I call out.

She pauses, angles her body.

"Don't turn around."

She trembles, but obeys.

I stalk over to her, wrap the towel I'd snatched on my way out of the bathroom around her shoulders, drag it down her back, over the lush curves of her butt, her strong calves, about those shapely ankles—that I want locked around my neck, fast.

She gasps.

I straighten, then circle around to her front.

Her chest rises and falls.

I lower my gaze to her chest and her shoulders quiver. I pat the towel about her creamy breasts; her nipples pucker. I lower my head, bite down on the pebbled flesh. She moans.

A droplet of water slides down the valley between her breasts. I lick it up, then follow the trail of another down to her belly button. I curl my tongue into the indentation; she groans. Lower my face to her pussy and close my mouth around the delectable flesh. She gasps, and the sound of her pleasure percolates into my cells, filters through my blood, straight to my balls.

I straighten, peer into her face.

"Get on the bed—on your back, legs apart, pussy exposed, hands behind your neck, so you can't touch yourself," I growl.

Her muscles quiver.

"Do it," I snap.

She scrambles up on the bed, turns around, lies flat, spreads her knees, locks her fingers behind her neck.

I smile, "My, aren't you the obedient one today."

She glowers at me and I widen my stance. I draw the towel, now damp with the water from her body, down my chest, my stomach, my thighs. Her gaze follows my every move, her pupils dilated, breasts swollen. I toss aside the towel, lower my gaze to her pussy, to where the evidence of her arousal drips down her inner thigh. My dick throbs; my groin hardens.

I lean over, scoop up her cum, and suck on it.

She whines.

"Want some?"

She nods.

I tilt my head, arch an eyebrow. "Maybe later." I smirk, "If you've been good enough, that is."

She groans, mumbles something under her breath.

"What's that, Princess?"

She stares at me, then presses her lips together.

I laugh, "You're learning fast."

I fist my cock, swipe it from root to tip. She glances at it and her lips part.

"Want a taste of this?"

She pouts, doesn't reply.

"Damn, but you beat me at my own game, huh?"

She scowls.

I chuckle. Then walk around the bed to the side table, pull it open and get a condom.

I slip it on, walk back to the foot of the bed.

"Soft fuck or hard fuck?"

She purses her lips.

"Both?" I tilt my head, "Neither?"

She shakes her head.

"One after the other, maybe?"

She swallows; her chest rises and falls.

"Maybe I should decide, huh?" I tap a finger to my chin. "Perhaps I should surprise you?"

I lean over, grab her by her ankles.

She squeaks.

I pull her forward, until her hips are almost at the edge. I kneel on the bed, draw her legs over my shoulders, position my dick at her entrance.

Her belly quivers, her thighs spasm, and goosebumps flare on her skin. Good, I am not the only one who's not going to be able to walk away from this unaffected. "You ready, Princess?"

She tips her chin up, opens her mouth. I plunge inside her. Her entire body bucks. She flings out her arms, grabs hold of the sheets. I wait, wait for her to adjust to my size. Her eyelids flutter and a bead of sweat trickles down her temple. "Eyes on me," I order.

She looks up, holds my gaze. The pleasure and hunger, and that edge of desperation in them, mirrors the strange confluence of emotions inside of me. I grip her thighs and hold them further apart.

Her breathing grows shallow, but she jerks her head, and I begin to fuck her in earnest. I plunge into her again and again. The bed shudders with each thrust. The headboard slams into the wall, punctuated by her cries, her moans, her gasps, her whines, her wails. Each sound from her beautiful lips

sinks into my blood, curls around my heart, hacks away at the walls I have built up against the world.

My God, this woman... She tears me apart. The scent of her, the taste of her, the sweet poison of her cunt...will be my death. I pull back, stay poised at the edge of her channel, move over her, until my face is close to hers. My lips above hers, breathing in her perfume, her essence. The very breath that we share ties us together.

I kick my hips forward, sink into her. "Come," I command, and she arches up and off the bed. I fit my mouth to hers, draw from her scream as she breaks apart under me. I sink in and out of her, drawing out the aftermath of her orgasm, reveling in her complete submission. My chest hurts, my temples throb, my balls draw up and I let myself come inside of her.

I collapse forward on my elbows. A bead of sweat trickles down my chin and plops on her cheek. Her eyeballs move behind her closed eyelids. I pull out of her, tie the condom, then walk over to the waste basket and toss it in. When I return to the bed, I pull the covers over her, slip in between the sheets and pull her to me.

I spoon her, our bodies in sync from throat to chest to hips. I throw my leg over hers and fall asleep.

When I wake up, I am on my own.

I glance at the dent in the pillows, the mussed-up sheets, the scent of sex, of chocolate and cinnamon, is heavy in the air. Her scent. My dick lengthens. Shit, haven't I had enough of her? My fingertips tingle. Why the hell do I want to touch her, pull her to me and hold her, then bury myself inside her again and again? I shake my head. The fuck is wrong with me?

I sit up, swing my legs over the side of the bed. I head for the walk-in closet, step in and pull on a pair of sweat pants. When I step out, I hear a sound from behind the door that leads to the kitchen. I head toward it and the scent of chocolate deepens. I wasn't dreaming then? I step inside, come to a stop.

She stands at the counter, back to me, wearing a shirt—my shirt. It falls to half-way down her thighs, clings to the swell of her butt. The valley between her arsecheeks is a dark shadow that calls to me. I curl my fingers into fists. Fuck, get a grip on your desires, asshole. I take a step forward. She throws her head back, sways those ample hips from side to side, bumps, grinds. I reach down adjust the thickness that tents my crotch. Jesus H Christ, what is she up to now?

She flicks her head from side to side, holds up her spatula—that same infernal spatula she'd threatened me with the first time I saw her at the cabin. I move toward her. She lowers her chin and screeches. What the fuck? I stare as she croons under her breath, then rotates her body in a figure eight. Huh, is that what they call twerking? I grab my very interested dick, pull on it as she moves her butt in the opposite direction. Sweat beads my forehead. Fuck, she only has to twitch that gorgeous arse and this asshole will come running. Fuck.

I stalk to her. She angles her body, lowers her head and sings into the spatula, the lyrics from a famous Christmas anthem—so famous that even I recognize it.

I shake my head. "Are you singing Last Christmas by Wham!?"

She howls out the next set of lyrics in answer.

I wince. As gorgeous as her pussy is, as sassy as her temperament is, as beautifully sharp as her mind is... Her singing voice...? Well, let's just say I sing better, and I've been asked not to sing.

I close the distance between us, place a hand on her shoulder.

She screams, turns, and brings the spatula down on me.

Amelie

The spatula connects with his hand... His injured hand. His shoulders bunch and the color fades from his cheeks. To his credit, he doesn't cry out in pain. His big body goes solid; his chest planes seem to expand and grow bigger as he draws in a breath. Then he takes a step back, another, until the backs of his knees connect with one of the stools at the breakfast bar. He sinks down into it, brings his hand up to his chest and cradles it there. Sweat beads his forehead.

"Ow," he mumbles.

"Bloody apple crumble," I wheeze. The spatula slips from my hand, falls to the floor, bounces once. Goopy chocolate sprays across the floor, dots the edges of his sweats.

"Oh. My," I gasp, "Ohmygod." I take a step forward and my foot slides on the chocolate crepe batter. I stumble, then right myself. "Oh, hell," I cry. "I am so sorry. So sorry. I didn't mean it." I leap forward, reach for his hand.

He jerks back.

I freeze.

"I didn't mean it. You surprised me," I blubber, "Did I hurt you? Ohmigod, omigod, of course, I hurt you. Oh my—"

"Stop," he barks out the command.

I stutter, "I'm sorry, I really am."

"You mean you didn't hurt me on purpose?"

I open and close my mouth. "How could you think that?" I cry. "Do you

really think I would—?"

One side of his mouth curls.

I purse my lips together. "You horrible man." I step toward him.

He holds up his good hand, "Stop, before you make it worse."

"Oh." A pressure builds behind my eyes. "Is it bad? Did I break it again?"

"It hadn't healed enough for that to happen." He grunts, "No, you hit the finger in the same place it broke the first time around."

"I didn't." I scowl. I hadn't hit his finger, only his palm, I swear. I stare at his finger in the splint, then back up at his face. "You're so adept at working around that, that I forget sometimes you are injured."

"Is that a compliment for my dexterity?" His lips kick up.

"Something like that." I stare at his features. His color's definitely better than it was a minute ago. "Do you want any painkillers?" I shuffle my weight from foot to foot, "Maybe some of the chocolate cookies I baked and brought here?"

"Haven't you given them to Mother?" He frowns.

I glance away, twist my fingers together. "You were right. It was a stupid idea. I should have ordered something from the shops or stopped on the way here to buy something."

"It was a thoughtful gesture," he replies.

I shoot him a sideways glance. Is he, like, pulling my leg?

He meets my gaze, holds up his hand and winces.

"Oh." My chest tightens. "It's hurting, isn't it? Is it bleeding? Sure I can't get you something for the pain?" I step forward. He widens his stance. I slip in between his legs, glance at his injured palm. "Can you, uh, wiggle the other fingers or something?"

He bends the others, shows me the bird by default.

"Guess you're feeling all right, huh?" I slide back, but he moves his thighs in, traps me in place.

"Oh." I gulp.

"Hmm," he tilts his head, "were you serious about your earlier offer?"

Which one?"

"About making the pain better."

I chew the inside of my cheeks, survey his features, which take on an expression of innocence. As if. I'd bet my last chocolate éclair that he has something up his sleeve.

"Depends," I venture.

"On what?"

"On what you want me to do."

"I'll only tell you if you agree to it."

"I can't agree to it unless you tell me what it's about."

"Trust me." His eyes gleam.

Ha, I draw in a breath. "Famous last words," I mumble.

"I heard that." He holds up his uninjured hand. "If you don't want to do it, you don't need to."

"Really?"

He nods, "I swear on chocolate."

Hmm. I frown, "You don't like chocolate."

"But you do."

"You're supposed to swear on something you hold dear." I huff.

"I swear on you."

My mouth drops open. *Oh, my. Did he say that? He didn't. Should I ask him to repeat it? Nah, ignore it.*

"Fine." I swipe my hair over my head, "What is the thing you want of me? What should I do to make the pain better?"

He holds up his injured finger, "Kiss it."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"Okay." I draw in a breath, lower my head, and press my lips to his finger. I straighten and he tightens the net formed by his thighs, pulls me closer. My core brushes the prominent tent at his crotch, the one I have been trying to ignore.

"I did what you asked," I say, my voice breathless, "let me go."

"That's not the only place it hurts." He sticks out his lower lip.

"No?" I bite the inside of my cheek.

Weston has the kind of pillowy lower lip made for a pout, but honestly, this is the first time he's pulled that one on me.

Apparently, it takes a rap from a spatula to turn him more amicable. Note to self: next time, aim for his hard head. That might knock some sense into him, *hmm?*

"No." He shakes his head, "What about the finger between my legs."

I stare at him for half a second, then groan. "Eeyuck, your lines are getting worse."

"And you're getting better at easing my pain."

I shake my head, "So, you want a blow job, before breakfast?"

"Definitely before breakfast, and during and after too."

I squeeze my eyes shut, "I'll pretend you didn't say that."

"You promised," he wheedles. "Come on, Princess, just a kiss. Take the frog out of the well; show it the world."

I laugh, "That was almost clever."

"Right?" He smirks; his chest seems to swell with how pleased he is with himself. This man? I don't know if I should slap him or kiss him. Or both, one after the other.

I frown.

He chuckles, "You hurt me; it's up to you to make it better."

He has a point there.

I drop my gaze to his crotch, then to his face.

His gaze narrows.

I bite down on my lower lip, and those grey eyes lighten, a sure hint that he's aroused. I squeeze my thighs together. So am I. He raises his hand, rubs his thumb over my lower lip, until I release it. "You are not allowed to hurt that; only I have the permission to do that."

"Oh." His words coil around my heart and my blood begins to pound in my veins. That possessiveness in him? It kills me every time. I reach forward, palm him through his pants. He groans. His chest planes seem to harden.

I rub at his length, and I swear, his dick thickens.

"Take it out," he murmurs.

I swallow, slide my fingers down his waistband and curl my fingers around his shaft. The muscles of his belly jump. I push down the waistband; the heavy length of him fills my palm. The vein on the underside throbs, the head swollen and angry. Moisture beads the slit.

"Suck me off," he orders.

I bend my head, lick my tongue around the head. The salty, tangy taste of him fills my mouth. I peer up at him. "I want..." I swallow, "Can I...?"

"What is it?"

I reach around him, scoop up some of the chocolate mixture from the table, rub it across the head of his cock.

"Jesus," he breathes.

I hold his gaze, lower my head again and take him inside my mouth.

"Fucking, fuck." He digs his fingers into my hair, tugs. My scalp hurts. Goosebumps ripple down my spine. I lick the chocolate off his dick and the

dark taste of cocoa, edged with his cum, the musky taste of Weston, swirls over my tongue. I swallow; he draws in a breath. He loosens the hold of his thighs around me and I sink to my knees. I grip his thigh for support, squeeze the base of his dick, and his entire body seems to grow rock solid.

"Take me down your throat," he growls.

I bob my head forward, and gag. Saliva drips from the edges of my mouth and my lungs burn. Jesus, he's too big. Will I ever get used to his size?

"Breathe through your nose," he directs.

I swallow, and his fingers dig into my scalp. Shockwaves of lust race across my skin. I moan, take in a breath, then another.

"Eyes on me."

I peer up at him, at those colorless eyes that reflect back what I am—his woman, his slave, his to do with as he wants. And what do I want? Him. All of him. His corrupted tastes, his filthy ways, that tenderness he hides deep inside and reveals to his nieces, his family, to Max. I want that. I want to be at the center of his world, command his attention as he demands mine.

I tilt my head and he slips further down my throat. My chest heaves, my breasts ache, and that empty sensation between my legs intensifies.

His features twist. He brings his hand to my face, rubs away the drool from my chin. He cups my cheek, and something like tenderness glitters in those eyes. He tugs on my hair; I pull back. His dick slips out with a pop. He hauls me up to my feet, peers into my face. "What are you doing to me?" he whispers.

"Whatever it is," I lean in close enough for us to share breath, "I feel the same."

His eyebrows knit. He searches my face again. The raw intensity of his gaze sweeps through my mind, pushes away all other thoughts. He bridges the distance between us, then closes his mouth over mine.

33

Weston

It wasn't supposed to be like this. This sweetness. This feeling of absolute surrender from her that punches me in the gut. My heart begins to pound and the blood thuds at my temples. She parts her lips; I deepen the kiss, swipe my tongue inside her mouth, draw from her taste, suck on her lips... And she gives and gives. A hot sensation coils in my chest.

Without taking my mouth from hers, I bend my knees, grip her under her thighs and lift her up. She wraps her legs around my waist. Her soft core cradles my dick, her breasts thrust up and into my chest. I tilt my head, crush my lips to hers. Her scent fills my senses, her taste goes to my head. I stalk forward and into the bedroom. She winds her arms about my shoulders, tilts her chin up. The softness of her mouth, the heat of her pussy, her pebbled nipples that are imprinted into my skin—all of it sinks into my blood. A pressure builds behind my rib cage. I lower her to the bed, but she doesn't let go.

I lean over her, supporting my weight on my elbows. I press her down into the mattress, thrust my tongue down her throat, drink from her, wanting more...more. I reach down, position my throbbing shaft at the entrance of her pussy.

She moans deep in her throat, digs her heels into my back. The condom. I tear my mouth from hers. "Protection," I mutter.

"I'm on birth control." She stares up, blue eyes darkened to an azure, stormy clouds in their depths. "Come inside me," she whispers, "I want you,

Weston."

"Like this?"

"Only like this." She pushes her hips up, her melting core opening, giving, needing.

"Fuck." I kick my hips forward, and slide into her, all the way in.

Her body jerks and the breath leaves her in a rush. I hold her gaze and begin to move, thrusting harder with each shove, plunge, thrust, propelling forward again and again. She grips me with her thighs, buries her fingers in my hair and tugs. I look deeply into her eyes, into the horizon I've seen all this time, the one that had seemed so far away when it was always right here. In front of me. Under me. With me... Next to me. "Come with me," I push into her, impale her, bury myself so deeply that my balls slap against her thighs.

She opens her mouth in a wordless scream; her body shudders and moisture fills her channel and bathes my dick, as I come inside of her. I thrust a few more times, as her body trembles in the aftermath of the climax, then reach down, scoop up the liquid that spills from us. I hold it to her lips. She sucks on it, swallows.

"How do we taste?" I ask.

"Of sin and chocolate," her lips quirk, "of cruelty and togetherness; of lust and secrets." Her voice lowers, "A strength to do what it takes."

"Can you take what I am going to do to you?" I wonder aloud.

"What?" She frowns.

I pull out of her.

She lowers her legs. I lean back on my knees, then stand and step away, over to the side of the bed. "Get up," I jerk my chin at her.

Her forehead creases, but she sits up. Her shirt—my shirt—that she wears is pushed up about her waist and her pussy glistens with the evidence of our combined cum. The sleeve slips down one shoulder, baring the reddened skin of her chest. Skin I'd touched, sucked, marked, fondled...lips I'd worshipped, breasts I'd cupped, nipples I'd pinched. I step back, rake my gaze one last time over the concave of her stomach, the curve of her hips, the creamy expanse of her thighs, the delicate nip of her ankle, her toes, her hitched breath as she swings her legs over and straightens.

"You can go now," I tell her.

"Wait," she straightens her shirt, "what do you mean?"

"Leave," I jerk my chin toward the door.

"W...where?" she stutters, "What just happened."

Everything. "Nothing," I growl.

She takes a step forward, "That... What took place between us... It was different. I was sure you felt something for me. I know that you want me."

"So?" I pull the waistband of my sweats up my waist. "I want many women... Doesn't mean I have to keep them around."

"I am not one of them," she snarls.

"Oh?" I look her up and down, "Just because my dick loves you," I smirk, "because I see your face and my dick gets hard, I hear your voice and my dick gets hard, I know you're in the next room and my dick gets hard... Doesn't mean I feel the same."

"You're not making any sense." She twists her fingers together. "I know you're scared. You've never allowed yourself to open up to another—"

"You think I opened up to you?"

"You did." She steps close and our toes bump, her nipples brush up against me; that chocolate and honey of her scent intensifies. My heart begins to pound and my chest hurts. *Shit. Let go of her, get her out of here. Walk away; don't look back. Release her from that stupid-ass arrangement that never was.*

"You'll get your money. All of it," I snap.

She blinks, "Excuse me?"

"The million a day for six days? It's yours."

"You think this was only about money?"

It had to be. "What else could it be about?"

"Did you think, for even one second, that maybe I wanted to be with you?"

"You wanted to be shut up with me in a cabin with no electricity, over Christmas?"

"Why not?"

"You wanted to spend Christmas getting to know my family?"

"It's the first time I've felt at home anywhere." She sets her jaw.

My guts twist. *Shit, this isn't easy. Why do I feel like I am tearing out my heart? Why the hell do I care that she seems close to a break down? You've barely met her... You know everything about her. I know nothing of what she wants... She wants you, that's clear. She needs you as much as you are drawn to her. She senses the connection that binds you together...*

And that is the fucking problem. I don't want it. I can do without it. I

have enough demons of my own to contend with. I don't need this beautiful, gorgeous angel who swept in and threatens to upset my carefully structured life... Which had, by the way, gone down the shitter since she'd flounced into that cabin and turned my life upside down.

"Too bad; they are not yours."

"Too bad for you." She tips up her chin, "I'm yours. You know it and it scares you."

"You think I am scared?" I laugh.

"I think you are petrified. For the first time, you don't have a plan and it terrifies the hell out of you."

"The only thing that terrifies me is that I'll have to hold you while you have a breakdown, and trust me, Princess, that's not on my list of most-wanted things to do right now."

"I don't believe you." She clenches her fists by her side. "All of this is an act."

"That..." I tilt my head in the direction of the bed, "was an act. Guess I'm good, huh? I take credit."

"For what?"

"I won the bet with myself."

"What bet?"

"Making you fall in love with me... Remember what I told you?"

She squeezes her eyes shut, "That you'd break my heart."

"Have I, Princess?"

She stiffens, opens her eyes, stares straight into mine, "Mine is not the only heart that's breaking; and you know what else?"

I tilt my head.

"You care about me. You're in love with me, but you don't want to admit it. By the time you realize it, it will be too late. You'll come begging for forgiveness, and guess what I am going to do then?"

Sweat beads my palm... *Tell her to leave, to take her chocolate scent, her crazy-ass satchel of baking tools, her penchant for swearing in a vocabulary that consists solely of desserts, and walk out of here. Don't look back at her. Don't indulge her questions. Don't ask her what she means by that tirade.*

"What?" I growl, "What the fuck would you do then?"

She reaches behind her, grabs the box of cookies she'd baked and empties it over my head, "Is that answer enough for you?"

Turning, she walks out.

34

Amelie

What the hell had happened there? One second, he'd been inside of me, his cock nestled in my pussy, his lips on mine, my legs tangled about him... The next, he'd ordered me to leave.

If there were a classic case of a man who was running scared that would be Weston Fucking Kincaid. Alphahole extraordinaire. Douchebag of the highest order. Bloody fruitcake, who doesn't know his arse from his head... No. I shake my head. Reprobate snackadoodle who has his head stuck so far up his arse, he has no idea how good the pie is. I sniff. Not even when said pie hits him in the face, and splatters its contents over his beautiful mouth, and he licks it off and— *OMG, what am I thinking?*

I stumble down the stairs, almost miss a step, then right myself, slip on the next one, and come to a halt at the landing. My heart races, my pulse pounds, and a pressure boils behind my eyes. *I will not cry; will not.*

There's a patter of paws on the wooden floor. Max comes bounding out of the open doors of the suite adjacent to the landing.

I bend down, gather him up, then sink down to sit on the step. "Hey little fella, did you miss me? Did ya now?" I rub his head, hold him close. A tear runs down my cheek; Max licks it up. He whines, then pushes his nose into the crook of my neck. I hug his little body closely as more tears flow down my face. *Shit, stop it, stop it. Not your fault if he's such an ass, a completely obnoxious man, Mr. Scrooge McFuck... Gah!* Just because one of my favorite authors had released a book about a similar a-hole with that name doesn't

mean I have to call him that, huh?

I swallow down the ball of emotion in my throat. I have to get out of here, return to my life... Spend Christmas alone? My heart begins to thud. How could he do this? How? A sob catches in my chest. I glance around, then down at myself. Shit, I am still wearing his shirt—nothing else. I had left everything behind in that alphahole's room. No way, am I going back for it.

Max barks, wriggles in my hold. "Oh, sorry little guy, did I crush you, huh?" I set him down, he darts forward toward the double doors that lead into the suite. Kirsten bends to pat him. Max brushes past her and rushes inside.

She straightens, then takes in my appearance.

I flush, "Umm... Uh, it's not like what it seems."

She tilts her head, "Why don't you come in and tell me about it?"

Twenty minutes later, I curl my legs under me, and take a sip of the fragrant cup of hot chocolate—no, it's never too early in the day for comfort food—that she'd handed me.

Max places his paw on my borrowed PJ's, and stares up at me. "I swear he has a sixth sense, huh?"

"Mum, why was Auntie Amelie crying?" Phoenix asks in a loud whisper.

Kirsten, pats her shoulder, "Because, uh, she had a fight."

"Lover's quarrel, huh?" Skye wanders into the living room, her specs too big for her face. She has a book in her hand.

"Don't you have homework to do?" Kirsten scolds her.

"I've completed my math assignment."

"What about Latin?"

"I hate Latin."

"Does she have to study Latin?" I ask.

"At her school, yes." Kirsten's forehead furrows, then turns to Skye, "Go on, finish it."

"But... M-o-m," she wails, once more seeming her eleven-year-old self.

"I don't need to study Latin to become a vet."

"You want to become a vet?"

She smiles, "I looove animals." She snaps her fingers; Max perks up, jumps off the sofa and races toward her.

"She and animals." Kirsten shakes her head, "I swear, she is a dog whisperer."

"And a cat one, and a hedgehog one," Skye adds.

"Hedgehog?" Kirsten scowls, "Young lady, if I find any more of those creatures in your room...I'll..."

"Relax, Ma, I was only kidding you," she smirks. Her features resemble her uncle's, aka the alphahole, aka the man who'd fucked me so thoroughly a few seconds ago... I blink. That tightness in my chest returns. I lower my chin, hide my face once again in my mug.

Kirsten draws in a breath, "Back to your studies, with you."

"Whatever." She returns to her room, Max at her heels.

"Can I do my homework too?" Phoenix beams up at her Mom.

"Go on then." Kirsten pulls Phe close, kisses her on the cheek. Phoenix turns to leave, then turns and runs to me. I place my mug back on the table, just in time, for she throws her arms around me.

"Oh," I hug the little girl back, "thanks, baby."

She kisses me on the cheek, then turns and races away.

"Kids," Kirsten sinks back in the arm chair, "they can sense when you're unhappy, you know?"

I nod. "They are both beautiful; congratulations."

"Thanks." She beams. "Their father's the disciplinarian; I spoil them I'm afraid."

"When will he be back?"

"Patrick?" Her face takes on a dreamy look, "Tomorrow, or tonight, if he can. He's on a business trip with our oldest brother."

"Really?"

She frowns, "I take it, Weston didn't mention that they work together?"

I shake my head.

"My father started a media company, that Liam now heads up."

"That's your oldest sibling?"

She nods, "Patrick works with him. Weston... Well, after the incident, he changed. He needed to do something more meaningful with his life."

"Is that why he became a heart surgeon?" I ask, "Or was that to protect his own heart?"

She stares at me.

I flush. "Umm, sorry, didn't mean for it to come out that way, it's just..."

She waves her hand, "No offense taken. I was surprised, is all. I never thought about it like that, but you may be onto something." She pauses, as if to commiserate with me. "I know how obnoxious my brother can be."

"That's putting it mildly." I mutter.

"I assume he's told you about the incident?" she asks.

"Some." I reply, my tone cautious. "He mentioned he and six of his friends were kidnapped and held captive for nearly a month when he was twelve, and during that time, each of them was exposed to some horrific punishment meted out to each of them by the kidnappers. It's why he has a trigger when it comes to clocks and time-keeping devices," I swallow, "I guess."

She nods. "After the cops rescued Weston and the other boys from the kidnappers," she leans forward, "he felt like he had been given a new lease on life. He wanted to make sure he made the most of the opportunity. It's one of the reasons he wanted to become a surgeon." She crinkles her forehead, "Then our father died of an heart attack and that strengthened his resolve."

So, I'd been right about the second part, at least. I meet her gaze, "He seems to think it's because it gives him control over life and death."

"Do you believe him?" she scoffs.

"I am not sure what to make of him," I say honestly.

She looks me up and down, "So you guys had a fight this morning?"

"More than that." I heave out a sigh.

To her credit, she hadn't been taken aback when she'd found me standing by the doorway to her suite. She hadn't asked me any questions either. She'd loaned me her clothes, then handed me the cup of hot chocolate. Hell, she hadn't even been surprised that I'd asked her for cocoa, instead of tea... And that, puts her right at the top of my list.

"What happened between you two?" she asks.

"I..." I glance away, "I think we broke up."

"Fights are normal. They're healthy in a relationship—"

"This is more than that." I jump up and begin to pace. "He told me to leave."

"The room?" her tone sharpens.

"His suite, his life... He told me it was over."

"He told you so, in no uncertain terms?"

Had he? I turn to her. "Yes," I reply.

"I don't believe it," she scowls. "I saw the way he looks at you—"

"How?" I fold my arms around my waist. "How does he look at me?"

"Like he wants to eat you up?"

"Yeah." My cheeks heat. "I mean, we don't have any issues in that, uh, department."

"The kind of chemistry between you two? It could boil water at fifty paces."

I laugh, "I thought I was the only one who made cooking analogies."

"I've been spending too much at home with the kids, ensuring dinner's on the table when my husband arrives from work every evening."

"Do you regret it?"

"Not for a second." She leans back in her chair, reaches for her mug of tea. "I had a corporate career as a lawyer. I enjoyed it, but I wanted more. I needed the entire 360 experience—home, kids... I'll go back to practicing part-time when the kids are older."

"And you'll be fine with that?"

"It's all about balance, Amelie." She smiles, "Once they are old enough to leave home, I am sure I'll go back to practicing full time."

"And you don't see it as a compromise?" I head back to the couch, drop into it.

"For whom?" She chuckles, "I have it all, as far as I can see."

And I have nothing. I twist my fingers together in front of me.

Her features twist, "Hell, I didn't mean it that way. The last thing I want to do is hurt your feelings by rubbing in my..." she circles her hand, "...all this, in your face."

"You're not." I lean forward and touch her knee. "Honestly, you aren't. I appreciate your giving me the time to recover, and for the clothes."

"Anytime." She takes my hand in hers, "I like you, Amelie."

I laugh, "You've known me all of two seconds."

"I go by my gut, and unlike my brother, I actually heed what my instincts tell me."

"Too bad that idiot McDick has no such inclinations." I take a deep breath, "Well, I guess I need to head off."

"Where will you go?"

"I need to call my friend Isla, make arrangements to stay with her. I also need my clothes, which are—"

"Stay here."

"What?" I attempt to withdraw my hand, but she doesn't let go. "I mean it," she says. "Stay with me, as my guest. We have the entire floor, and the guest room is free."

I stare at her, "But—"

"We'd love to have you."

"You don't need to say that..."

"I never say anything I don't mean." Her features take on a haughty look, one so familiar, one I've seen on his face. Shit, staying here, surrounded by his family, where their every action would remind me of the man I need to try to forget? No, just no. Not that I don't like Kirsten, but... To be so near him, and yet, not with him? Gah. I'd have to OD on chocolates to get through the ordeal, and that's definitely not something I can afford, not if I hope to get through the festive season with some semblance of a waistline.

"Thank you," I turn my palm over and clasp hers, "but no thank you."

Her lips droop. She peers into my eyes, then lets out a breath, "There's nothing I can do to convince you, huh?"

I shake my head.

"One night." She lowers her chin. "Stay for dinner tonight, meet Liam and Patrick."

I frown, open my mouth to decline, and she drops her gaze to my pajamas. "You owe me."

"You don't play fair, do you?" *Just like him.*

"It's genetic. Our father ingrained the habit of negotiation at the dining table, I'm afraid."

She rises to her feet.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"To get your things from Weston's suite."

35

Weston

"You seem nervous, ol' chap," Damian drawls at me from the screen of my phone.

"And you seem full of shit, as usual," I mutter, as I pace in front of the fire in the living room of my mother's home. I'd gone for a run, and when I'd returned, Amelie's clothes and bags had gone from the bedroom. Guess she'd left, after all.

I'd sat on the bed in a daze and wondered if I'd done the right thing.

Yeah, I had. Of course, I had. I didn't need her staying and complicating the situation, aka the state of my feelings for her, further. I'd worked out at the gym after that, pushed myself as much as I could, considering I couldn't do weights yet with my broken finger. Then I had showered and changed into formal clothes for the traditional family dinner at home.

I run my finger around the collar of my shirt. Not that I dislike suits... But hell, if I don't feel more comfortable in scrubs. There is a certain freedom that comes from not having to pretend, when all the power and control is at your fingertips as you perform a surgery, knowing the life of a human depends on you. It is the best adrenaline rush—a responsibility I never take lightly, walking on the edge of a thrill that I crave. One slip up and things would never be the same. *Did I slip up with her?* I scowl. Fuck that. I am not second guessing my actions, no way.

"Fake girlfriend, slash fiancée, slash wife-to-be not helping with your problem then?" Damian smirks.

"What problem?" I growl.

"That you can't get it up, of course."

I frown, "Where do you get your asinine ideas from?"

"The same place you come up with your brainwaves of sharing a cabin with a woman you've met only once before." He chuckles.

"About that," I crack my neck, "it's over."

"Oh, yeah?" Damian tilts his head, "Hold on, I'm adding Arpad to the call."

"Don't..." I begin to protest, when Arpad's face appears in a window. "Man, and I thought I was bad at relationships, this has to be a record, even for you," he snickers.

"Fuck off," I growl.

"So, you think it's over, but it's not really over?" Damian pipes in.

"I am not going to explain myself."

"What are friends for, if you can't use our shoulders to cry on... Or not." Arpad's screen shakes and droplets of water splash the surface.

"Where the fuck are you?"

"On my yacht, enjoying everything life has to offer, unlike you."

"Why the fuck do I take your calls?" I grumble.

"Because you have something on your mind, and need to vent, like a girl?" Damian laughs.

"Because you are heart-broken?" Arpad snickers.

"Okay, bye," I hold my finger over the screen.

"Ooh, someone's antsy. Did we hurt your feelings? Are you upset you're not getting married like Saint and Sinner before you?"

"You look grumpy. Not jerking off either, are you?"

I shake my head, "Fuck that, and fuck you two," *and fuck the woman who put me in this situation, where I am not able to string together two words. Fucking fuck!*

I hear the pattering of paws on the floor, then Max jumps up on the sofa and shoves his face in mine. "Hey," I protest, but he licks my mouth, then turns and peers into the screen.

"Hello, ol' boy," Damian chuckles. "You keeping Uncle Weston company while he fucks up his life?"

"A woman *and* a dog?" Arpad chuckles, "Should I fetch your slippers and dressing gown next ol' chap?"

"Jesus, fuck." I am not sure what I'd intended to accomplish through this

conversation, but it wasn't being at the mercy of a mutt and two of my 'friends.'

"At least, I saved the Father from the burden of a virtual wedding." I grouse.

"Speaking of," Arpad drawls, "I'm adding Edward to the call."

No, fuck, no. Why do I insist on calling my 'friends,' knowing I'll be put through the wringer each time?

"Someone mention my name?" Edward's face flickers onto the screen.

"I was just leaving," I grumble.

"You want to hear this." Edward gazes at me with those clear eyes of his which have seen so much and which have yet managed to retain a modicum of innocence. Enough for him to sleep with his thoughts at night, at least.

"How do you manage it?" I snap out.

"You mean, hold down a conversion without losing my wits?"

"That too," I grunt. "How do you always seem so upbeat and energetic?"

"Umm...Maybe because he has no worldly attachments?" Damian offers.

I stare at the Father, who jerks his chin, "I realized the only way out of the aftermath of the incident, was to be true to myself at all times," he says.

"What if the only thing that can soothe my mind is the one thing I must never have?" I mutter.

"Are we talking about someone in particular or a metaphor?"

"What do you think?" I mutter.

Silence stretches across the space. Neither of the other two assholes respond with an off-the-cuff remark. Thank fuck for that. Perhaps it had been the Father I had been waiting for. Guess that's why I'd agreed to this call, which was supposed to be about 7A investments and FOK Media—which stood for Full of Kindness by the way—the companies that the seven of us own.

"I think you're fighting your future," Edward's tone is serious.

"I make my own future," I insist.

He quirks his lips, "You believe that, after everything you've been through?"

"It's because of everything I've been through that I believe it."

Edward tilts his head, "You can't control everything around you."

"Is that why you took the easy way out and gave up the real world for the spiritual one?"

Edward pales. Damian stiffens. Arpad's silent disapproval communicates

through the screen.

"Fucking hell." I drag my fingers through my hair. "I didn't mean that Father," I mumble.

"You did," Edward's voice is calm. "I'm glad you are able to speak your mind. In such matters, clear, concise communication is the only way forward."

"What do you mean?" I peer into the screen, trying to discern his features. "Tell me, Father."

"Some of that honesty you displayed earlier... That's what you need to bring to your relationship with her."

"Eh?" I shake my head, "You're making absolutely no sense."

"You know I am." Edward's lips quirk, "Hand on heart, ask yourself what it is that you must do in this situation."

"Haven't I been asking myself that all along? Would I be asking you this question if the answer was at all clear to me?"

"You're the business man here, Weston. Your gut knows what it wants; your heart simply has to fall in line."

"You're not shoddy in the business space yourself." I crack my neck. "You've held your own in all of the business decisions we've made thus far."

"Don't change the topic," Edward admonishes. "What is it that your gut says you should do now?"

"What if it's not clear to me for the first time, huh?"

"Wrong answer," Edward snaps. "You're beginning to piss me off."

I blink. Edward angry? It never happens. That he swore at me? I can count on my fingers the number of times he's done that. "I am not sure what to say," I rasp.

"You don't have to say anything, and you do know what you have to do. Your stubborn-ass head is getting in the way. You're trying to think about this along rational lines, when you know what you have to do."

I laugh, "Have you been spending much time with Saint?" I ask. "You're speaking in riddles."

Edward shakes this head, "Stop deflecting; it won't work." He frowns, "You going to follow your gut and your heart on this? Or are you going to spend the rest of your years regretting the one decision you should have made, which would have changed the course of your life, but you didn't because you were too much of a pussy?"

I stare at him. "I can't believe you said that." I shake my head. "You, of

all people, should know I don't shy away from hard decisions."

"But this is much more than that." He tilts his head, "It's, perhaps, not your decision to make. Perhaps this time, you have to allow the circumstances to wash over you, and go with the flow?"

I laugh. *As if I would ever do that?* I haven't come this far in life to bow before events, not if I have my way. "I'm not sure what you're implying but —"

The screen pixelates and my voice echoes back at me. *Huh?* Bloody technology, always fails you when you need it the most. The connection restores.

"Hey man." Damian peers back at me from the screen.

Arpad jerks his chin. "Still here for my sins," he grumbles.

"Where's Edward?" I frown.

"Seems he dropped off?" Damian mutters, "Perhaps he's had enough of you acting like a fool, and decided to cut out?"

"Yeah, well, fuck that." *And fuck him.* My heart begins to race. "Not my decision to make, huh? We'll see." I toss my head.

"You coming out to London for the New Year's party?" Damian asks.

"I'll be there."

"Are you bringing her?"

"That's up to her." I frown. The hair on the back of my neck rises and a tingle runs down my spine. "I need to go, guys."

I hang up and turn. My gaze widens. "What are you doing here?"

36

Amelie

I tip up my chin and march into the room. *What the hell am I doing here? Why had I allowed Kirsten to convince me to stay?* He frowns as I walk past him to the bar, and pour myself some sparkling water. Yeah, I need my wits about me. I'm not going to fuck this up, or give the alphahole the time of the day either.

I glance around the beautifully furnished living room. The painting above the fire place is definitely an original, the settee in the room is made of plush leather and strewn with cushions, giving it a homey look. The wooden floor gleams, no doubt, polished every day by minions. I take in the corners of the room, the other walls—no clocks. Of course, not. Is his family aware of Weston's trigger? Had they done away with all time pieces? Of course, they know about his affliction, right?

Footsteps sound behind me as Weston prowls over, "I thought I told you to leave?"

A ripple runs past my nerve endings. *Don't show how nervous you are. Don't let on how much his nearness affects you.*

I turn, glance around him. "Hey, Kirsten," I wave at his sister.

"Come on over, babe, you gotta see what Phe has drawn for you."

"Coming." I march past him, head high, spine straight, my heart booming in my rib cage. He locks his fingers around my wrist.

I squeak.

"Don't ignore me," he growls under his breath. That harsh edge to his

voice? Gah! My nerve endings all flare at once.

I stiffen, glance sideways. "Let go of me," I whisper.

"You don't tell me what to do."

"And you don't get to tell me what to do anymore. You told me to leave, remember?"

"And you disobeyed me."

"You're not my keeper, not even my lover. Any right you had over me, you forfeited right then."

"Have I now?" His fingers tighten on my wrist—and he's using his left hand, which is not his dominant hand, but it might as well be. Is any part of this guy less than 100% assertive? *And why am I going all gooey inside?* Hell, he told me to leave, and just before Christmas. What kind of a monster does that? *And why the hell does my body refuse to behave around him?*

"Yes, you did." I raise my gaze, force myself to see this through, "I'm done with you."

He frowns and something flickers in his gaze. "Amelie, I—"

"Aunteee Amelieeee." Phe runs across the room and throws herself at me.

I tug my hand, but Weston still doesn't release it. I half bend, rub the little girl's hair. "Hey, baby, watcha have there for me?"

She holds up the craft paper, showing an outline of a princess that she's colored in, complete with tiara. "Who's this?"

"It's you." She smiles widely. "Princess Amelie."

"Awww." My heart stutters. I tug on my hand again, and this time, Weston releases me. I lower myself to a squat as he takes my drink from my hand. I ignore the gesture, accept the drawing from Phe. "It's beautiful."

"So pretty," Phoenix giggles.

"Yes, you are." I pull the little girl close and kiss her cheek loudly.

She bursts out laughing, then pulls away. I rise to my feet, glance at the drawing. "Aww," I sigh, "it really is pretty."

"You're prettier," Weston's deep rumble surrounds me. I shiver. *Hell, this really was a bad idea.*

I begin to walk away.

"Amelie," he calls out.

Don't stop; don't.

"Your drink."

I wave a hand in the air, "You have it."

I walk toward Kirsten, joining her and the girls. Skye has her nose buried

in a book, as usual. She glances up at me, then at the drawing. She snorts under her breath, turns back to her reading.

Kirsten grimaces, then mouths 'sorry.'

I laugh. I remember being far worse at her age. Of course, my parents, being the strict disciplinarians they were, didn't help. It's why I had rebelled every inch of the way. Christmas at home had been quiet, my parents not wanting to change their routine much, even for the festive season. Perhaps there is comfort in everyday chores? More likely, they were so content in each other's company, I'd never fit in with them. Always the third wheel, the outsider looking in. Then they'd retired to Spain; and with that, all expectation of my visiting them for Christmas had been dropped—on both our sides. Our communication had dwindled down to the occasional phone calls, then that had stopped too.

Don't get me wrong, they did their best for me, always provided for me, gave me everything I needed... Except a sense of belonging... The kind of warmth I find here. Max runs into the room, heads straight for me and jumps up.

"Hey boy," I lift him into my arms. "Missed me huh?" He licks my face, and I giggle, "Wow, so much affection, and you saw me what, three minutes ago, huh?"

I glance up and meet Weston's gaze. He raises the glass—the one he had taken from me—and brings it to his lips. He drains the water, then lowers the glass and licks his lips.

I swallow. Shit, what craziness is this, that his every glance is filled with undertones? A crazy sexual tension that will never abate between us. Too bad... He is an alphahole who will never change colors.

"Patrick," Kirsten cries out, then moves forward to greet the man who's just walked in. He opens his arms wide as Phe races for him. He catches the little girl, swings her high and she squeals. "Daddy, you're home," Phe cries.

"I told you I'd be." He kisses her on the cheek, lowers her to the floor, then turning, sweeps his wife into a kiss.

"Ugh," Skye makes a gagging sound, then turns back to her book, which she's reading standing up, by the way.

"Hey, sweetheart, a kiss for your old man?" Patrick grins at her. Skye glances up, sighs, then walks forward and offers her cheek. Patrick hugs her close, and Skye seems to thaw enough to put her arm around him to hug him.

I can't stop the giggle that bounces out of me.

Warmth envelops me, and I don't need to turn round to know that Weston has moved in to stand behind me. "You went against my order."

I snort. "What you going to do about it?" I tip up my chin, "Oh, and I am here because Kirsten asked me to stay. I'll be gone tomorrow, and then we'll never have to meet each other again." I thrust Max at him.

Weston grabs the puppy, mostly because I took him by surprise, no doubt.

Max whines, wriggles around. Weston sets him down and he prances toward the girls.

He straightens, glares at me, "You're still on my turf."

"Whatever." I throw my hands up, pivot and flounce toward the door. Wide shoulders fill the door and a tall man walks in. His features are vaguely familiar. *Huh?*

He glances at me, and his face lights up, "Amelie." He strides toward me.

I blink up, trying to place him. "Hunter?"

"How are you?" He places his hands on my shoulders, then bends to kiss me on each cheek. "This evening just got more exciting," he whispers in my ear.

I chuckle, pat his shoulder, "What are you doing here?"

"Yes, that's what I'd like to know." Weston stalks forward to glare at him. The two men are the same height. Hunter wears a suit that is every bit as well cut as Weston's. His dark hair curls over his collar. He's every bit as handsome as Weston. So why the hell don't I feel the same attraction toward him?

He glances between us, then grins, "I was invited."

"Who the fuck by?" Weston snaps.

"By me."

Another man stalks into the room. I blink. His features, his build, that bored, annoyed perma-dick face... It could be Weston, only it isn't. The creases around his eyes are deeper, his gaze so cold that I shiver. I take a step back and Weston's warmth cocoons me. His big palm rests on my waist and I don't push it off. His touch grounds me in the face of his darker, older sibling walking through the door."

"Liam," Weston drawls, confirming my suspicion.

"Weston," Liam jerks his chin. His gaze rests on me for a second; there's no change in expression on his face, no acknowledgement that he's seen me. And I thought Weston was a jerk? I bite the inside of my cheek. "Hunter's with me," Liam tilt his head. "I am supporting his campaign to run for Prime

Minister."

"Thought this was meant to be family only," Weston growls.

Liam barely glances in my direction, "Considering you have your latest piece here, you shouldn't speak, huh?"

I wince. Weston's big body stiffens behind me. Anger thrums from him and he takes a step forward. "Apologize to her," he growls.

I blink. Go figure. Alphahole here, gets all macho and protective when faced with the threat of an enemy. Or perhaps he wants to save face because I'm here as his guest... Except, I'm not.

I turn on him. "I don't need you to fight my battles," I snap, then turn to Liam. "For your information, I am here because Kirsten invited me to stay." I step forward, tip my chin up, "And I don't really care for your impoliteness...and for your apology, even less."

"Liam," a female voice whips through the space.

I look around him and wince. It's Rosie. Of course, it's their mother. That's all I need. What a nightmare. Why did I accept Kirsten's invitation to stay, again?

Phe skips over to me, then slips her hand through mine. I meet her gaze. She tugs on my arm, I bend down, and she whispers, "You're not leaving, are you?"

I draw in a breath, then shake my head. "Not yet," I whisper back.

I straighten as Rosie walks into the room. She glances between her sons, "Everything okay?" There's a warning edge to her voice.

"Yes, Mother," Liam grates out.

She turns to Weston, who hesitates. She tilts her head, and Weston pulls back his shoulders, gives Liam a hard look. "Apologize first," he insists.

I am about to tell him to forget it, when Liam walks over to me. He takes my shoulders then bends to kiss my cheek. "I am sorry about my earlier remark," he says, "I'm afraid Weston tends to get on my nerves. I didn't mean to insult you that way."

He straightens. Weston tugs me closer so I am out of Liam's reach.

Liam looks between us and smirks, then walks around us toward the dining room. *What the hell was that? Apology my foot.* He may have sounded earnest, but that condescending look on his face? Jesus, he is one tough customer.

Rosie turns to Weston, who draws in a breath. He walks over to her, kisses her cheek, "We're good, Mother."

"Good." She pats his cheek. "Let's eat." She walks toward the dining room.

OMG, now that's power, huh? She's got these alphas to heel, and that's a talent she'd have learned early. And how, I mean, seriously, how does she do it? She's the true leader here.

Hunter, Kirsten and Patrick follow. Phe skips forward, with Skye trailing behind.

Weston turns on me and the scowl on his face deepens. He bends his knees, thrusts his face into mine, "I've called the car service. They'll be here after dinner for you. Don't find an excuse to stay back this time, you get me?"

Weston

Why the hell is she sitting next to him? I frown across the table as Hunter leans over to say something to Amelie. She giggles, her cheeks rosy. From his company? From the wine? From the warmth in the fireplace, maybe?

I stab my fork into the chestnut and bring it to my mouth. "Why is she talking to him?" I grumble under my breath.

"Because unlike you, she has manners and knows when to be polite, especially at family dinners." Kirsten nudges me with her elbow, "Can't take your eyes off her, huh?"

"Of course, not." I glance down at my plate, "This food is fucking bland."

"Lost your appetite, huh?" She snickers.

I glower, "Don't try to get a rise out of me."

"I thought I was the only one who could," she replies, "until—"

"Until?"

"Her, of course," she chuckles.

I don't need to look up to know she's glanced across at the pesky, curvy woman who I'd invited into my life. Holy fuck, what the hell had I been thinking? "Why is she still here?" I roll my shoulders.

"I can't believe you asked her to leave, and so close to Christmas."

"It's two days to Christmas," I grumble. "Enough time for her to join her family, if she chooses."

"You're a class-A douche," she hisses at me. "Is it because you're in love with her that you're being so terrible to her? Is that why you're going out of

your way to insult her, to ensure she'll never look at you again?"

"No, to the first, and as to the second... Well, that's my nature."

"Ha," she snorts. "You can't pull off your mean-ass persona with me, dear brother. You and I are too close for that."

And isn't that the truth. Kirsten is two years younger than me, close enough for us to hang out together. Growing up, I was her protector and she was my shadow, who tagged along with me on all my boyhood adventures. Unlike Liam, who at eight years older than me, was someone I hadn't gotten to know as well. There'd always been a chasm between us, which had only increased after our father had passed on.

I blow out a breath. "I'm not in love with her," I insist again.

"Keep telling yourself lies; that's a specialty of yours, huh?"

"Don't push me on this one," I say through clenched teeth.

Amelie's giggle reaches me. I glance up to find her leaning into Hunter. I clench my hand around my fork, which slips from my fingers and smashes into the plate. The clash rings out and everyone at the table turns to glance at me.

"Sorry, still getting used to using my non-dominant hand for every day stuff," I scowl.

Amelie straightens, glances at me and away. Good. At least, she's heeding the warning.

"Your finger troubling you, much?" my mother asks.

I glance down at my right hand. "The cast comes off next week, then a few more weeks of therapy and I should be back at work by mid-January, at the latest," I reply.

"How did the accident take place?" Liam asks from his position at the foot of the table.

After father passed, Mother assumed the responsibility of running the business, until Liam took over. She still holds veto power on the board and is the head of the family.

"I was forced off the road," I reply.

"Forced off?" Liam frowns.

"No need to concern yourself. I am looking into it, with the Seven."

"The Seven." His lips twitch, "You place too much importance on their friendship."

"At least I have friends, unlike you," I shoot back, then wince. Shit, a few minutes in the company of my family, and hell, if the old insecurities don't

come tumbling back.

"I'm focused on my goals, on preserving and growing the family name. I'd do anything for it."

"Including getting married and producing an heir, no doubt?" I scowl.

"If that's what's needed of me, I won't shirk my duties." Liam wipes the edges of his lips with his napkin.

"You're getting married?" Amelie leans forward, her gaze sparkling. "Who's the lucky woman?"

"Someone I haven't met yet," he says coolly.

"So, you don't know her, but you're marrying her?" She frowns.

"Until he does, he doesn't get to take over the family business," Kirsten explains. "Nor, for that matter, can Weston."

"Huh?" Amelie scowls across the table.

I stiffen, nudge Kirsten with my knee. She shuffles away. Fuck! Why do little sisters always have to be such a pain?

"Explain," Amelie insists.

"Until both of my brothers marry, and specifically for Liam, until he produces an heir, they cannot get access to the family business—"

"—Or to their trust funds," my mother completes the sentence. "It's tradition," she elaborates. "Something decreed by my husband's grandfather, and which I hope my sons will honor."

"And Kirsten?" Amelie asks.

"I don't count," she smirks. "Only a woman, after all, and all that."

"And you know your father changed his will to ensure that you inherit your share of the money," Mother retorts.

"I don't get access to the company," she protests.

"Do *you* want access to the company?"

"Guess not," she admits. "Still, it would have been nice if Dad had given me the choice."

"He made sure you'd be taken care of—"

"Not that Kirsten would have lacked for anything, as long as I am here." Patrick folds his arm around her and pulls her close.

Amelie's features grow wistful and she glances from Kirsten to me. I glare at her, she bites down on her lower lip, and damn it, of course, my cock instantly notices.

I hold her gaze. She looks away, raises her glass, "A toast to Kirsten and Patrick." She smiles.

I glance over to my mother, who seems surprised. Then she surprises me, by raising her glass. "A toast." She coughs, rubs at her chest.

"You okay?" I frown.

"Never been better," she smiles, the skin stretching around her mouth. A gleam of sweat glistens on her forehead. She raises her glass in her left hand, her dominant hand, which trembles. All of my senses pop. My visions, tunnels. Even before the glass slips from her fingers, I rise, then rush over to her. I catch her as she sinks into her chair, her breathing ragged, her skin pallid.

"Liam," I snap at my brother, "call an ambulance."

He jumps to his feet so fast, his chair topples over with a crash. He pulls out his phone, walks away as he dials.

I hear the sound of Max barking. Phe begins to cry, then is hushed. More chairs being shoved back, the slap of footsteps on the floor, then Hunter and Patrick crowd me. "Move back," I snap, and they comply.

"Weston," my mother whispers as I lower her to the ground. Sweat beads her upper lip, "Weston." She coughs again.

"Don't talk," I say.

I reach for my mother's wrist to check her pulse and glimpse the steel band attached to her watch—the bloody watch that my father presented to her when they got married; the one she'd put away after the incident, when she'd found out about my trigger. Why the hell is she wearing it? My heart begins to race, the blood thundering at my temples. *I stare at the watch—the hands on the face, the big hand moving fast, so fast, the small hand following pace, the countdown for my life as my kidnapper had hauled me into the small room across the corridor from where I had been imprisoned with the rest, as he'd tied me to the chair, attached the rigged clock to my chest. "Will you survive it this time? Follow the countdown, the ticking of the clock as it edges closer to the end."*

He'd ripped off my blindfold—the light had cast his face in shadow so I hadn't been able to get a good look at him—then left me with only the ticking for company, and I had screamed against the gag, tried to pull free. "If you move, the bomb goes off. If you disturb the clock, it goes off. If you so much as breathe too hard...it goes off. Hell, if you so much as live...it may go off... Will you survive this round?" His voice echoes through my head. I stare at the moving hands of the watch.

"What do you think, Weston?" my kidnapper asks. "Will you live or will

you die this round?"

Live or die?

Do I want to die?

What do I have to live for? Why can't someone rescue me and put me out of my misery? If I get out of here, I'll never allow anyone else to control my life...never. Never.

"Weston?"

Never relinquish your power. Never.

"Weston!" Something connects with my cheek. I fall back, glance up into familiar blue eyes. The eyes of an angel. The blue of the ocean, the sky. The only place where I could be safe, where I can soar above it all, away from here, away from these memories, the clocks that tick down to my demise.

"Weston." Those blue eyes blaze at me; silver sparks in their depths. Huh? "You need to help her. Snap out of your shock. Now!" She raises her palm, then slaps me again, and again.

I blink. "Amelie?"

"Thank God," she cries. She pinches my chin, turns my face to where my mother is sprawled on the floor, her hand extended. I press my thumb to her wrist. *There's no pulse.*

"Mother!" I touch her shoulder. "Rosie," I call out her name but she doesn't respond.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I tilt her head back, lift the tip of her chin and, lean in closer. Her chest doesn't move. I listen over her mouth and nose for breathing sounds, hold my cheek over her nose. *Fuck, she's not breathing.*

I place the heel of my left hand on the center of her chest, place the heel of the other hand on top of the first hand, interlace my fingers, My injured finger screams in protest—I ignore it. I push down with my arms and hands, using my body weight to compress her chest.

Tick-tock-tick-tock- Push-now-push-now.

My own personal song that has a rhythm that corresponds to the compressions per minute required for the rhythm.

Tick-tock-tick-tock. Push-now-push-now.

Sweat beads my brow; pain sears my arm. I reject it, continue with the momentum.

Tick-tock-tick-tock-push-now-push-now.

I count to 30 compressions, then tilt her head, lift her chin up, pinch her nose. I seal my mouth over hers, blow. Check to make sure that her chest

rises. Blow again twice. Then back to chest compressions, count to 30, followed by 2 rescue breaths.

"Weston?"

I focus on my mother's face. *Come on, come on, breathe.*

"Weston, the paramedics are here."

Breathe. Breathe. I continue to push down to the rhythm in my head. *Tick-tock-tick-tock-breathe-now-breathe-now.*

"Weston!" Arms grab my shoulders. I wince; pain radiates from my injured finger; a coldness coils in my gut. I am pulled back. I lower my injured arm to my side, watch as the paramedics take over, blocking out the view of my mother. "It's my fault," I gasp.

"What? No." Amelie's face fills my line of sight. "Weston, it's nobody's fault."

"I froze," I mumble under my breath.

"Weston." Amelie cups my cheek, "Baby, look at me."

"The one time I needed to be in control of my senses, and I lost it. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe... All I could think of was—"

"The incident," she whispers. "Oh, baby, stop torturing yourself."

I raise my gaze to her face, "What's it to you?"

"What?"

"Why are you still here? Didn't I tell you to leave?"

"Weston, man, get a grip on yourself." Hunter touches my shoulder and something inside of me snaps. I rise to my feet, plant my uninjured fist in his face.

He reels back. Fire burns a trail up my arm from the burst skin on my knuckles. "Fuck." That hurt like a bitch, but what-fucking ever. "You keep the fuck away from her, you hear me."

"Man, you have this all wrong." Hunter puts up his hands; blood drips from his cut lip. *Good.*

"Weston," Amelie shoves herself between us, "what's wrong with you?"

"You," I growl. "You're what's wrong." *Fuck you, what the hell are you doing? Making sure you cut all ties with her, huh? You could have accepted her tenderness, her compassion, her softness—that always seems to make you unravel, that makes you weak. She makes me want everything I swore I don't need. Fuck me. And fuck her and,* "Fuck all of you." I stumble back.

She grabs hold of my suit jacket. "Weston, please stop," she sobs.

"Look at you," I snarl, "all empathetic and shit, when really all you want

is my money. Admit it."

"No."

"Don't lie, that's why you accepted my deal. Its why you came here, why you're still here. Because you think I'll succumb to your charms? That perhaps I'll settle down and play happy family with you? Well, you can think again. That's not what I want."

"You don't mean it."

"You're right." *Shut the fuck up. you wanker. What the fuck are you saying? Don't do it; don't do it.* "I do want it."

Her chin wobbles, "You do?"

I nod, "Just not with you."

"At least you are being honest." Her features crumple and tears drip from her eyes. She wipes them away, straightens herself, "You may as well admit that you thought up this arrangement, because you wanted to fake a marriage in order to access your trust fund."

As if I need the family money? I am doing fine, more than fine, on my own steam.

I glare at her.

She tips her head back.

I flatten my lips. "Fine," I snap. "That's why I came up with this idea of a fake relationship. I should have known you were all wrong for it."

"Fine." She pulls herself up to her full height, "There's one more thing I need to tell you."

"Oh?"

She nods. "Go fuck yourself."

She brushes past me, walks out of the room, my house, my life... My everything.

My vision tunnels and my heart hammers so fast, I am sure I am having a cardiac as well. *Stop her; stop her.* I step toward her. Liam plants his body in my path.

"Get out of my way," I growl.

"Get ahold of yourself first." Liam grabs my shoulders. I shake him off, raise my fist—the wrong one—the one with my injured finger in a splint. *Fuck.* He swerves; my hand grazes his face. Pain crashes behind my eyes. The next moment something slams into my face, the world tilts, and darkness pulls me under.

Weston

"You're a wanker, you ass," Damian frowns down at me.

I tilt my chin up from where I am sprawled out on the examination table.

"Welcome back, Sleeping Beauty," Arpad drawls from the other side.

This scenario is all wrong. As a doctor, I am used to being in there, with the action, inside the OR, where I use my talent, my wits, my instinct, to save lives. Instead, I am sprawled out here...like the loser I am. *Loser, fucking loser.*

I try to sit up, and my entire body protests. I wince. Damian touches my shoulder. "Take it easy, Kincaid," he cautions.

"Fuck off," I mutter. What's wrong with me? I shoved her away. I knew what I was doing, I was aware of it. I had done it while in full possession of my senses. I hadn't been able to stop myself. What should I have said instead? Please stay; don't go. All the shit I threw your way? Those were my issues, not yours. My insecurities, my bloody fallacies about myself. I thought I was invincible, invulnerable, I thought I could control my fate, I thought... I could live without your touch, your kisses, your beautiful cunt... your spirit, your sass, your lips that clung to mine, your heart...your tender heart, your fun-loving attitude, that I admit, sometimes got on my nerves. I mean, can anyone be that chirpy, that happy all the time? What hurts of your own had you been hiding underneath? I'd never bothered to find out... And now, it is too late.

"Too late," I mumble.

"What's that?" Damian lowers his head to my eye level. "The fuck did you say?" he demands.

"It's too fucking late." I drag my fingers through my hair. "I let her go, man."

"Who are you talking about?"

My head whirls; I squeeze my eyes shut to stop it. Run an internal check on my vitals—pain in my right shoulder and my left, my left eye hurts like a bitch, my broken finger is numb and my chest... The band around my chest, that hollow sensation in my abdomen... I straighten, "Mother, how is she? Is she...?" I swallow. *Don't say it; don't think it.* "Is she...?" I swallow down the ball of emotion in my throat. Shit, since when did I become this weak? This unable to take on my share of the burden for my family? This selfish that I am slumped in a corner worrying about myself... My bloody love life, which isn't... It is more than that. Hell. I sit up; my head spins, "Whoa." I slouch down again, "The hell is wrong with me?"

"They had to sedate you."

"What?"

"You had a bit of a breakdown, ol' chap?"

"What?"

"You lost it there," Arpad's somber voice reaches me.

"You're not making any sense, man." I straighten. My shoulder hurts like a bitch—my right shoulder. I glance down at my injured finger; the splint has been replaced by a fresh one.

"Yeah," Damian drawls. "You hit Liam, who decked you. They hauled you into another ambulance, brought you here. You were lucky that you didn't fracture that finger again, though you're going to have to wear that splint for a while longer."

Right!

"And my mother?"

"She's fine," Damian replies.

"She had a—"

"She didn't," He shakes his head.

"What?" I scowl, "She had a cardiac arrest."

"She didn't."

"I don't understand." I scowl.

"She had symptoms resembling a cardiac arrest, but your CPR saved her. But it wasn't a cardiac arrest."

"You are not making any sense."

"She was poisoned."

"What?" I shake my head. "How did that happen?"

"They are trying to find out."

"The food we ate." I rub the back of my neck "The rest of us are fine?"

"Everyone else is, as far as I know," Damian confirms.

"She was targeted," Arpad offers.

"Do they know who did it?" I glance between them. The two men exchange glances.

"What are you thinking?" I growl.

Damian glances down at me, "Who has a vendetta against the Seven?"

"The Mafia," I breathe.

Arpad's features harden; he doesn't comment.

"Fucking asspricks." My stomach churns. Sweat beads my forehead. "They changed our lives... Traumatized us. Hell, I thought I'd gotten over my bloody trigger...but fucking-fuck... I froze when I saw my mother's watch."

"We heard," Damian replies, his tone quiet.

"I couldn't help her." A ball of emotion closes my throat.

"From what we heard, you gave her CPR, which saved her life."

"I didn't do enough." I rake my fingers through my hair.

"Aren't you hearing what we're trying to tell you, asshole? It wasn't your fault."

"Right," I draw in a breath, "I get it." I swing my legs over the side. "I need to go see her,"

Arpad stops me with an arm on my shoulder. "She doesn't want to see you."

"What?"

"No one in your family wants you there."

"Excuse me? Are you joking?"

"Not after how you acted with her..."

"What? You just said my CPR saved her. Why are they pissed at me?"

"Amelie."

"She's not their concern."

"By all accounts, she is now."

"The fuck do you mean?"

"She's in there with them," Arpad adds.

My heart begins to race. *Shit, can I put this right somehow? Have I been given another chance?* If I can get to her and explain my actions... I rise to my feet and the world lurches around me. "Fucking fuck." My legs give way under me and I crash back onto the examination table.

"Man, you're pathetic." Damian glowers down at me. "They don't want to see you. You don't want to go there; it could get ugly."

"They're my family; they'll see me," I insist.

"You sure?"

"I mean, so I was, uh—unreasonable with her."

"You think?"

"Okay, I was an ass. I hurt her—"

"More like broke her heart. What were you thinking? Asking her to leave in front of everyone? A moose would have more sense than you."

"A moose?"

"It's Christmas, and all that," he explains.

"Right." I lurch back up to my feet; my legs seem to hold me this time. I take a step forward, sway. Damian grabs my shoulder. I shake it off, "I can fucking do this on my own."

"Fine, man, whatever." He exchanges a look with Arpad, who shakes his head.

"You bitches have anything to say, you can say it to my face."

"Still crotchety in his old age," Arpad mutters.

"If you cunts can't help me, then you can fuck off," I growl, step toward the exit of the room. By the time I reach the doorway I am panting. I grab the doorframe; sweat beads my forehead. *Shit, the fuck is wrong with me?* My shoulder hurts, but my fractured finger seems to have gone numb, thank fuck. I propel myself forward, make it into the corridor and crash into a nurse. The young woman straightens, shoots me an annoyed glance, then blinks. "Dr Kincaid?"

Thank fuck. She recognizes me from when I'd done my residency in this very hospital. I need all the breaks I can get; so long as I reach her in time.

I glance down at the nurse's badge. "Marcy," I kick my lips up in a smile, "Can you help me?"

She flutters her eyelids and my gag reflex kicks in. *Shit, has to be the drugs I am on. It's no wonder I feel like I am flying. It's also the only reason that I can't tolerate another woman putting the moves on me. Yeah, nothing to do with the fact that a sassy, curvy, pastry chef has entranced me. Sure,*

keep telling yourself that, fuckhead. My head spins. I put out my hand to steady myself and Marcy grabs it. *Fuck, this is not right—me touching another woman. The fuck is wrong with you Kincaid?* Eyes on the prize, remember, and right now, I need help in getting to where Amelie...and my mother, and yeah, the entire family is.

I hold onto Marcy's shoulder, "Can you help me?"

Amelie

"How dare he do this?" I mumble under my breath. *How dare he tell me that he doesn't want me, doesn't want a future with me? Get over it; get over him.* Every time he's pushed me away, I've returned to him. Like an ant attracted to sugar, like cream on milk, like jelly on the floor—gah, stop. Even my metaphors are beginning to sound pathetic. *Just leave, before he hurts you further. Pulls away at any final shred of self-respect you have left, before he destroys your confidence completely.*

"Did you say something?" Kirsten asks me from her perch on the chair opposite me. We are in the waiting room of the hospital in Durham, where the ambulance had taken Rosie.

I'd seen Liam deck Weston, had seen him crumple to the ground, had lost my shit and run to him, then had ridden with him in the second ambulance to the hospital.

Once the doctors had confirmed that he was going to be okay, I had turned to leave, but Kirsten had stopped me. She'd insisted I stay with them while they waited for the 'all clear' from the surgeon so they could visit with Rosie.

"I think I should leave." I turn to her, "This is a family matter."

"You are family," she insists. "My asshole brother may not see it yet, but he loves you."

"Does he?" I chuckle, but it's completely devoid of humor. "He has a funny way of showing it."

She searches my features; her own soften. She takes my hand in hers, "Sweetheart, I understand how upset you must be with his behavior. I have no words to apologize for god-knows-what-all he's said and done to you. All I can say is, please be patient with him."

"You think I'd be here otherwise?" I swallow. "Only, I'm not sure it's helping."

"Oh, it is, more than you can imagine." She hesitates, "You're the first woman he's brought home. Ever."

"Oh." I swallow, "I... I am...?" My heart begins to beat faster. Does it mean anything? Does it? No.

"That was part of the pretense." I say. "So he could show you all that he intended to settle down. After all, he needs to get married to claim his inheritance, right?"

"Only he doesn't need the money," Kirsten points out. "He's rich enough, not to mention successful enough, in his own right."

"That's true." I admit. "But it doesn't negate that he asked me to pose as his fake girlfriend. Why did he have to boil down the attraction between us to that? Why did he have to turn it into something so...transactional?"

"He can't seem to stop destroying what's dearest to him." Kirsten smiles at me, but it's a sad smile. She holds my hand between her palms.

"Tell me about it," I choke out. "I've tried; I really have. When it comes to him, I seem to have some self-destructive tendencies of my own."

"The chemistry between the two of you..." She fans herself, "Honestly, it's off the charts. I see the way he follows you around with his eyes, like he wants to eat you up."

I redden. "Is it that obvious?"

"You have no idea." Her lips quirk. "It's different, it's special, it's something that's not easy to come by... Maybe once in a lifetime, even."

"You think I don't know that?" I tug on my hand and she releases it. I drag my fingers through my hair. Shit, somewhere during the last few hours, my hair had loosened from the chignon I'd pulled it into. Bet I look a sight, to match how I am feeling inside—beaten, broken, sad... Hell. This isn't why I had left London. This is not what I had bargained for when he'd walked into the cabin naked, swept into my life like a freshly baked baguette which I couldn't keep away from. OMFG, that's it then. That last metaphor... Hell, why does it remind me about certain parts of him which are as beautifully endowed? As thick... As gorgeous to put my mouth on. I rise to my feet.

Kirsten glances up at me. "Where are you going?"

"I... I can't do this." I swallow, "You understand, don't you? If I want to come out of this with even some small part of me intact, I need to go." I turn to leave.

"It's the incident," her voice follows me.

I pause, then turn to her. "So I am told," I say.

"You said he mentioned it to you, but has he told you what they did to him?" she queries.

I shake my head.

"Maybe you should ask him."

"Maybe," I tilt my head, "maybe not." Maybe I've had enough of Weston and his entire family—much as I have come to like them, Kirsten especially, and the kids, and hell, even his mother... She's something—formidable, strong, a true matriarch who holds them together. For good or bad, they are a unit. They fight and hate each other, and when there is a crisis like this, they come together too. They have each other's backs.

Something I've never had. I'm not part of a family; I have my own, but I've never belonged there. Is that why I had wanted to start a company, a business of my own? To create a family, of sorts? Is that what has driven me thus far? Had I sensed that about Weston, and was that one of the reasons I had been attracted to him. That and his gorgeous, beautiful dick, of course, and that caring demeanor of his, which he hides so bloody well. If it had not been for Max, and how he'd taken care of his nieces... Or how he'd been toward his mother, hell, I'd have missed that completely. All in all... It is time to put this behind me, to go home to the future I would build for myself.

I turn, walk toward the exit.

"Amelie," Liam's voice stops me.

I turn to find him striding toward me. "Are you leaving?" He frowns. Those features, so like Weston's, tighten. A lump forms in my throat. Shit, this is not good. Just because he reminds me of the alphahole, who I must try to forget, doesn't mean I need to get all teary.

"Yes," I straighten my spine, "I must go."

"Have you spoken to Weston?" He tilts his head. His dark gaze, so like Weston's yet not, sweeps over my features. No, he's not Weston. He's colder, darker, unfeeling. Weston has that sly hint of humor in his eyes, that hint of wickedness which tempers that mean edge—not that he couldn't be horrible, but always, always there was that playfulness that peeked out, that

sentiment that compelled me to tug on it and unravel the man inside... The one I love. "Bloody hell." I bring my hand to my mouth.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Nothing." *Everything.*

A shiver runs down my spine. *What have I done? How could I have fallen in love with that...that grumpy ass?* A hollow sensation permeates my legs. I stumble. He grips my shoulder and rights me. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"No, I am not," I whisper.

Weston's voice slices through the air. "Get away from her."

I stiffen. *Don't turn; don't face him, until you have gotten ahold of yourself.*

He sounds so close to me that I draw in a breath.

The hair on the back of my neck rises, and heat invades my back, a sure indication that he's standing not far from me.

I pull away from Liam, who doesn't let go. The hell? I frown up at him, and his gaze widens. His lips quirk. Huh? Is he toying with Weston? I tilt my head; he subtly shakes his. "About time you decided to make an appearance," he drawls.

"Take your hands off of her," Weston snaps. My nerve endings crackle and I shuffle back, but Liam's hold stops me.

"Or what?" He raises his gaze to meet Weston's. "What are you going to do, little brother?"

"I am going to kill you." Weston's voice is even—no emotion, no sentiment. The hard edge to it ripples over my skin. *Shit, he isn't joking.*

"Let me go," I hiss at Liam, who steps back.

He tilts his head, not breaking eye contact with Weston. "What's got your knickers in a twist, huh?"

"Step aside, Amelie," Weston growls. My heart begins to race. I take in his features, the messed-up hair, those grey eyes, almost colorless, a clear indication that he's in the grip of emotions. When he's like this, he tends to lose control. He doesn't care how much his actions could hurt him, or those around him. He's like a wounded animal, ready to hit out at whoever, whatever seems to be a threat.

"Wes," I whisper.

He raises his fist...his left fist... Shit. If he wounds that...it will take him even longer to heal. What if he wrecks any of the fingers of his intact hand? Already, he's going to be laid up longer than anticipated with his unhealed

injury.

"Wes," I grip at his sleeve.

His gaze on Liam, he lowers his chin. "I am going to take you down, motherfucker," he growls.

"Not sure I'd use that adjective considering we are brothers," Liam chuckles.

"How dare you put your hand on her."

"What's it to you? Thought you weren't interested in her."

Weston's features harden.

"None of your business," he snarls. A vein throbs at his forehead. "Come within an inch of her and I'll deck you."

"Oh, I'll do better than that." Liam leans in closer, "In fact, I might make a play for her. After all, you've relinquished your claim on—"

Weston swings.

I gasp.

Liam laughs.

I stand on tip-toe, throw my arms around Weston's shoulders... Or as much of him as I can reach, considering how big he is. "Stop it," I snap. "Now."

He blinks, arm raised. Huh? The alphahole stopped in his tracks? Guess Rosie's not the only one who's able to bring them to heel. Maybe I picked up something from her, after all.

"Wes," I lean into him, push my breasts into his chest, dig my fingers into his uninjured shoulder, "look at me, babe."

His big body shudders; his chest planes seem to go rock hard.

"I should fucking thrash him for laying a finger on you."

"But you won't," I declare.

I peer up, to see his throat move as he swallows. The tendons of his beautiful throat flex; the pulse beats at the base of his neck. I reach up and kiss him there, suck on that space where his scent is most profound. Dark edginess, cool pine, warm cloves... My senses cloud with Weston.

"Wes," I tip my chin up, "kiss me."

He glances down, those colorless eyes filled with an emotion... A hint of something that is so very close to... No, not that. He doesn't feel that for me. Oh, he wants me all right, he lusts for me, needs to possess me and claim me, so no one else can, but love... Ha! The alphahole only loves himself. "Kiss me," I insist. "Do it."

He drops his head, closes his mouth over mine. He swipes his tongue in between my lips and drinks from me. He curves his arm around my shoulders, yanks me to him, crushes me to that beautiful, broad, gorgeous chest of his, and kisses me, and kisses me. My head spins; I swear I see stars. He kisses me until my knees tremble, and I hold onto his sleeves, and then I am kissing him back. I open my mouth wider, grind my pelvis into the hard column that tents his pants and I pour myself into that connection between us, where his mouth takes from me and I offer myself up... Completely, wholly, absolutely. His hand comes up to cup my neck, he tilts his head, softens the kiss, until it's his lips on mine, nibbling on my mouth, brushing over mine, tasting of me, inviting me, enticing me, to slide my tongue inside his mouth, to partake of him, to drink from him, to open myself to accept what he is offering—his past, my life, our future together, what I am, what he is, a shared path, for he is mine. And I am his. His, and only his. I tear my mouth from his, so fast that my teeth catch on his lip.

He winces.

I stare at the drop of blood that blooms on his lower lip.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"I'm not." His lips curl.

"I am leaving you." I peer into his eyes.

"No." He frowns.

"Yes," I reply, "let go of me."

"What?" He shakes his head. "I can't."

"You can," I thrust out my chin, "and you will."

"No fucking way," he growls.

"Yes, way." My lips tremble and my voice cracks, "Goodbye, Wes."

He looks into my eyes, really looks, and the color fades from his cheeks. "Princess," he whispers. His fingers curve around the nape of my neck. A shiver runs down my back and my sex clenches. Hell, when he does that... Holds me like I am his, promises with his gaze to fuck me like I am his... When he stares at me like I am the only thing in the world that matters... Then I know...

It's time I get away from him. I hadn't meant to fall in love with him... How could I allow myself to feel so much when I was still the woman he'd paid to bring home to meet his family? I don't mean anything to him. I'd been a challenge... Someone to seduce, to buy with his wealth and use as a fuck-toy to pass the time. Hell. The pressure builds at my temples. I am only

making this worse on myself. I need time away, time to process everything that has happened. I needed to get away from here.

"Please," I mumble, "let me have this."

His throat bobs and the skin around his eyes creases. Then he lowers his hand.

I step back, walk around him.

"Princess."

I pause.

"This isn't over."

I turn to him, "Yes, it is. You know it is."

His features twist.

I turn, head for the exit.

40

Christmas Day

Weston

I stare into the amber liquid at the bottom of my glass. *Fuck, fucking fuck.* I'd stood back and let her walk away. I hadn't gone after her. I'd held my balls in my hand and allowed her to leave. Am I a man? Can I call myself a male worth his manhood? I hadn't stopped her; I hadn't. *Bloody fuck. Why hadn't I?* For once in my life, I had faltered. I had stood by, and for the second time, let her walk out, and this time, there is no going back. I'd had my chance and I had blown it. I had allowed my emotions to get the better of me.

When she'd stared into my eyes and pleaded with me to allow her to win... I had wanted her to. Not that this is a game, or a war. Okay, so maybe it is a fight between us—this push and pull. This constant thrum of arousal that laces the air, that connects us and makes us want to go head-to-head... Even as I want to yank her to me and kiss her, and suck on those sweet-sugary tits of hers, bury my fingers in her moist pussy, dip my tongue in the crevasse of her belly button, sink to my knees in front of her, thrust my head between her legs and ravish her, please her, make her come.

Hell... Her happiness and her needs, they come first. Her confidence? I never want to shake that. Her sass and fire, her independence? They are a fucking turn on. It's what had challenged me. It's why I had noticed her in the first place. In a world filled with compliance, she had stood out. She had baited me, hated me, pushed me away, and that had only aroused me further.

I'd wanted to...what? Curb her? Tie her to me? I should have known better. A free spirit like Amelie needs to be nurtured, to be allowed to soar as she wants... And I'd be in the background watching, applauding, encouraging, paving her way... Fuck. I shake my head. What am I thinking? What happened to the dominant surgeon who didn't give a fuck about anyone else...except his patients? To be fair, I'd cared for them, but they had been a way to nourish my ego. Fuck. Everything in my life so far has been one long trip to soothe that scared boy inside of me. The one who had never recovered from the incident.

So, I was kidnapped.

I was hurt.

I was...abused. Mentally and emotionally.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. So what? Shit happens; deal with it. How could I have allowed those few days to color my life so completely? Enough to not recognize the only good thing that had come my way. Her.

"Bloody fuck." I drain my glass then hurl it against the wall of the living room. The glass bounces off of the hard surface, hits the floor, bounces again, comes to a rest at my feet. Go figure. *Can't do even one thing properly, can you?* I kick the offending object and it rolls toward the door. A booted foot stops it.

I groan. "Fuck off," I grunt.

"Merry Christmas to you too," Damian's chirpy voice echoes through the drumming in my head.

Fuck.

I turn away, head toward the bar in the corner of the living room. I grab a glass, reach for the bottle, miss it, swoop down on it. *Finally!* I pour myself a healthy measure of Macallan's. *Fuck that.* I fill the snifter to the top. Set the bottle down on the bar counter with a thwack.

"Careful, ol' chap. That whiskey's older than you."

"So's your nagging," I growl.

"Seen yourself in the mirror lately?" Damian continues.

I frown, "Heard yourself lately?"

"No need to, ol' chap." He smirks. "I rest confident in the power of my good looks."

"Jesus," I swear, "Can you hear yourself?" I wince.

"No sweeter sound in the world, right?" He grins.

I stare up at him. "Did you just say that?"

"What?" He frowns.

"Have you any idea how pompous you sound, you prat?"

"So?" He straightens his arm, tugs on the sleeve of the white button-down that shows below his jacket.

"So?" I raise the shoulders, "So it's bloody off-putting."

Damian frowns. "Who are you, and what have you done to my douchebag wanker of a friend?" he mutters.

"I'll let you know when I find the fuck out." I bring the glass to my lips, take a sip, then grimace. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to substitute alcohol for coffee. I hadn't stopped drinking since I'd dragged my sorry ass home, after seeing my mother in the hospital yesterday.

They'd discharged her this morning, thank fuck. The poison, whatever it was, had vanished from her system. It had left her weak, but she was stable. Thank the bloody gods. I'd lost one parent already; I'm not ready to lose another. I don't want to lose her. "Fuck." I raise the glass, down half of it. Sweat breaks on my brow. My left hand—so far unhurt. Maybe I need to remedy that? Sure, go for it, wipe out the career you've worked so hard to build, huh? Why not, while you're at it, light a flame to everything you've achieved thus far... All of it is nothing, meaningless without her. I slap the glass onto the bar potty it cracks. Huh? The amber liquid bleeds out onto the mahogany counter top.

"You all right?" Damian's voice is concerned.

"Yes. No." I plant my elbows on the bar, in the whiskey which seeps into my sleeves, but whatever. Why the fuck should I care that I smell like a distillery? It's not like she's there to bury her nose in my chest, to rub her cheek into my shoulder, turn her face into my arm pit and coil into me like the feline, sensuous woman she is. "Go away," I moan, then bury my head between my palms. *If I press my hands tightly against my ears, would it block out the sound of her laughter?* I snicker. *Getting delusional now, huh? You've gone mental; admit it.*

"Wes," Damian grips my shoulder, "you've gotta get yourself in hand."

"For what?" I mutter, "I let her leave. Didn't have the balls to go after her either."

"Maybe you aren't ready yet for this relationship."

I stiffen. "The fuck do you mean?"

"She was too good for you, ol' chap."

That she was.

"She's someone who deserves better."

"She deserves the best," I agree.

"And you're all wrong for her."

"Clearly."

"You did the right thing."

Huh? I scowl.

"If you can't make her happy, you should let her go. If she comes back to you—"

"—She won't," I mumble. "She bloody hates me."

"I hate you. The world doesn't like you, man, it's normal."

"Thanks," I grumble. "Nice to know I can trust you to have my back."

"Always," I hear the laughter in his voice, turn and shoot him a glance.

His features are schooled into a serious expression, which is seriously weird. Which also means he's trying to rile me.

"The fuck's on your mind?" I growl.

"Me?" He points to himself, "Nothing, man. I'm not the one with a broken heart—"

"I break hearts. I don't get mine broken..." my voice trails off.

He nods. "Sadly, I believe you've crossed over to the dark side."

"What?"

"You remember the thing that had its claws into first Jace, then Sinner, and then Saint?"

"No, I don't." I scowl, and I thought I was delusional?

"I'm afraid you've fallen prey to it as well."

I straighten, lower my chin to my chest, "I have no idea what you're talking about. And it's not because I'm a bit hungover—"

"A bit?" He snorts, "Don't you have to stop drinking before you can be hungover?"

I glare at him. "Okay, my head is pounding, and clearly, I've poisoned myself with enough alcohol that I may spontaneously combust at any time—"

"Attaboy." He pats my shoulder, "Tell it like it is. I knew you'd come through."

I shake off his hand, "You're bloody creepy when you go all paternal."

"Me, paternal?" he laughs.

"Stranger things have happened." I roll my shoulders. My stomach copies the motion. "Shit." I wipe the sweat from my upper lip, "I don't think I'm feeling that well."

"Wonder why that is, huh?" Liam stalks in.

"Oh, bloody fuck," I groan. "Thought you'd crawled away under whatever rock you'd been found under."

He shakes his head, "Man, you've gone and done it now."

"What?"

Damian chuckles.

"What?" I ask again.

Liam folds his arms over his chest, "Shit or get off the pot."

"Eloquent, as always." I grimace.

His dark gaze takes in my features, "You look like hell."

"Still better-looking than you."

His forehead crinkles, "Why do I even bother with you, huh?"

"Because you know, at heart, I am the one destined for greatness."

"You've proved that already," he mutters. "You got your way in the end—became a surgeon, saved lives. You make the difference between life and death. You saved mother's life."

He comes forward, grips my shoulder, "Thank you."

Is he for real? "Did you just go all polite as fuck on me?" I scowl.

Liam's features twist, "Guess not even soulless bastards can resist the spirit of Christmas, huh?"

"You mean it, don't you?" I shake my head in disbelief. "You're actually thanking me for the first time ever, that I can remember."

"It is the first time," he confirms. "You can thank your woman for that."

"My woman?"

He nods. "Seeing you fall apart—"

"I didn't fall apart—" I snarl.

"—then give in, for the first time in my living memory, showed me, you have a human side. You're not as obnoxious as you come across."

The headache between my temples intensifies. Should I even bother to make sense of what is happening around here?

Arpad saunters in. "What are you still doing here?" He asks.

"That was my next question," Damian chuckles.

"I don't care either way, by the way," Liam drawls.

I glower. He steps back, then brushes his sleeve, as if to rid himself of all trace of contact. Wanker. Hold on... That's what I was...or had been... Then she'd swept in, and damn, if all those carefully built walls hadn't come collapsing around me like confetti. Did I just think confetti? Does that word

even exist in my vocabulary?

Liam turns to leave, then shoots me a look over his shoulder.

"Oh, and Mother said to invite her over when you see her." He stalks off.

"When am I going to see who?" I glower.

"You gonna enlighten him?" Damian smirks.

"Nah, it's inevitable. It's more fun to watch him fight it." Arpad leans his hip against the bar.

Damian glances at me, "Tick-tock, ol' chap."

The blood drains from my face. I stumble, then right myself.

"Fuck." Damian leans forward to grab my shoulder, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say it like that. Of all people, I should have remembered about your triggers."

"Fuck that," I growl. "The Mafia; they broke into her bakery."

"When?" Damian straightens.

"She mentioned it to me, when we first met."

"But you weren't connected with her—"

"They'd have seen her at Sinclair's, then at Saint's wedding." I squeeze the bridge of my nose. "If they have been watching us—"

"They may have followed her to the cabin—" Arpad mutters.

"Which was broken into." My heart begins to race. "Fuck. And I let her leave. She's home, alone. If something happens to her..."

"It won't."

"By now, they must realize she means something to me. I brought her to meet my family, after all." Fuck. I'd put her in the path of danger.

"The cops—" Arpad ventures.

"We can't trust them," I growl. "We know they are connected with the Mafia. One leak and—" I don't voice my fears. "Besides, no way am I waiting around here. I need to make sure she is safe."

I stalk past them, toward the door.

"I have to go to her."

"Hold on," Damian calls after me, "You're not planning on driving, are you?"

41

"Yesterday I wanted cookies. Today I am eating cookies. Yay! Follow your dreams."

-From Amelie's diary

Amelie

"I am such a loser," I cry into the phone as I pace my apartment.

"Wait, hold on, back up," Isla calms me. "Start from the beginning."

I balance the phone, with Isla peering out at me from the screen, on the kitchen table, "Kirsten called me a car—okay a limo. It was a freakin' limo service that she ordered to get me from Durham to London. Can you believe it? That's how these rich folks live, and clearly, I am not one of them."

"Who's Kirsten?" Isla asks.

"The alphahole's sister."

"So, we are back to calling him alphahole, huh?"

"Weston fucking a-hole Kincaid," I growl into the phone. "I never want to hear his name again."

"Urm," Isla clears her throat.

"Don't say it—" I warn her.

"I was only going to say that you just mentioned this name."

"That's what I was afraid of." I wrap the strands of my hair around my palm, "I mean, not that I am complaining about the limo, or anything."

"Of course, not."

"Not after I found the liquor bar in the back of the car."

"I assume you did it justice?" she snickers,

"Yeah," I hiccough. "Oops, sorry." I walk to the kitchen, fill a mug with water—because hell, I always drink water from coffee mugs. That's my little rebellious streak, right there. I sip from the mug, and walk over to the window of my studio apartment. The view is nothing like that from the cabin, or from Weston's mother's home. How funny I'd never been to his place. Where does he even live in London? It's official, I am in love with a man whose neuroses I know better than the basic stuff, you know, like his address, his favorite color. That's me, I do everything upside down, like my life. Fuck me now. I hiccough again. "Sorry again," I mumble.

"The bar in the limo?" Isla reminds me. "I assume you drank of all the whiskey?"

"Nope," I say, all smug. "No whiskey for me. Never touching that stuff, from now on."

"O-k-a-y."

"I sucked down all the champagne because I am celebrating."

"You are?"

"Yeap." I walk back to the shelves in the corner of what passes for my kitchen space, and open the door. Scrounge around. There. I retrieve the boxed wine I'd been gifted with, God knows when. Now is the time to open it. I unscrew it, peel back the plastic seal thingy, then look around for a glass, and fuck it! I tilt it to my mouth, draw from it. The cold liquid hits my gullet and I almost gag. Ugh! Is that vinegar or what? "Argh," I gasp.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I place the boxed vinegar-that-had-once-been-wine back on the shelf and eye it. Do I dare drink more of it, or not? Shit, I can't even decide on the small things in life anymore. My mind is well and truly broken, thanks to that, that... "Idiot." I swear down the phone. "Fucking wanker that he is. A tool. A reprobate. A prick of the first order."

"That, he is," Isla agrees. "So what are you doing back in your apartment?"

"Haven't you heard anything I just told you?" I cry.

"I have, doll, and I think you love that about him."

"Oh." I pull out a chair and sit down with a thump. "That's true, right?"

"So, what made you walk out on him?"

"He was...just insufferable," I snap.

"And?"

"And cock-headed."

"Which is an asset, I assume?"

I hear the smirk in her voice, "Isla, honestly..."

"Admit it, the sex was great."

"Off-the-walls hot," I admit.

"And despite his money, he decided to focus on becoming a doctor."

"True," I admit, reluctantly.

"And he's good with dogs."

"And kids."

"And kids," she agrees. "So?"

"So?"

"What didn't you like about him?"

"Well, I fell in love with him, for one."

"Hmm."

"What?"

"I mean, that was bound to happen. You set yourself up for that, girlfriend, when you agreed to go along with his fake relationship thingy."

"Hello, it was supposed to only be for a few days, and it was contingent on my never sleeping with him."

"That was clever of him, huh?"

"Was it?" I scrunch up my forehead. "You think so?"

"Of course, babe. He used reverse psychology on you. I mean, tell you not to sleep with him and—"

"—and of course, I'd only want to sleep with him." I reach for the wine, swig from it. Grimace. Argh! It's worse than I thought. I set it back with a thump, then jump up and begin to pace.

"And then, he took me home to see his family."

"At Christmas."

"At Christmas." I rake my fingers through my hair. "And he was really cute with his nieces. Hell, the man reads Harry Potter."

She shrieks, "Whaat?"

I wince. "Pipe down," I plead. "You almost burst my eardrum there."

"He reads Harry Potter? How many men do you know who read Harry Potter?"

"He was reading it because he wanted to be able to discuss it with his niece."

"No," she breathes.

"Yes." I hang my head.

"So, he fucks like a god, saves lives like he is God, and reads the kind of books that—"

"—make me want to worship his brain. Yeah," I scowl. When she puts it like that... "I mean, he's not perfect, you know."

"No?"

"He has a beard. I mean, it's unkempt, which is fine if you go in for that sexy just-rolled-out-bed-on-Christmas-morning look."

"Sexy Santa," she snickers.

What I wouldn't give to see him in nothing but a Santa hat.

"Don't call him sexy," I pout.

"But he is," she protests.

"I mean, I can call him sexy, but not you."

She stares at me.

"What?" I frown.

"Nothing." She clears her throat, "What else do you not like about him?"

"He's overbearing, dominant, uh, commands me do stuff, overrides me a lot, hates chocolate—"

"Are you sure?"

"Well, he did eat the chocolate banana muffin batter I made," I offer.

She gives me a perplexed look. "Muffin batter?"

"It's a long story..."

"Okaaay... So, he hates chocolate, but he ate what you made anyway."

"Hmm." And he did say that he was coming around to its taste especially when he licked it off my lips. My cheeks heat. Then he wouldn't let me out of his sight because he wanted to keep me safe. Okay, so I won't tell her that. I bite the inside of my cheek. What else? What else?

"He made his brother apologize to me for being rude."

"Now that's not very gentlemanly is it?" she chuckles.

"Shut up." I wipe my hand across my face. What else? "He did tell me that he wants a future, but not with me."

"You sure? Maybe he was angry or something."

"He was." I hunch my shoulders, "But I can't let that pass, can I? I mean, people speak the truth in the heat of the moment."

"Maybe he wanted to hurt you?"

"And I emptied my box of cookies on his head."

"You did?" She giggles.

"And told him to fuck off."

"Good."

"I should have told him to fuck off more."

"You still can."

"And he doesn't love me."

Isla stares at me, "Did you tell him that you love him?"

"No, of course not."

"Then how can you expect him to reciprocate?"

"Whose side are you on?" I scowl.

"Sweetie, you know I'll always back you up. And I am not saying there is no fault on his side, or that it wasn't wrong of him to have turned your relationship into a barter game of sorts...but—"

"But?"

"It seems there's something between the two of you that's powerful, and if I were in your shoes..."

I tilt my head, "You would...?"

She draws in a breath, "I wouldn't let go of a chance at true happiness that easily. I mean, I'd pursue that guy and sit on him, until he confessed his feelings."

"You would too," I giggle.

"Not that I've been in your shoes."

"Not yet," I smirk.

"Not that I don't want a man or anything...but..."

"But?"

"I'm not in a hurry. The single life's pretty fun too, you know? And as long as I have my book boyfriends..."

"That's what I used to think." I purse my lips, "Then that real life a-hole comes along, and damn, if he doesn't spoil all the book Romeos for me."

"Aww sweetie," she murmurs, "what are you doing there all alone? Why don't you come over to my place?"

I pause.

"I mean, I am only an hour away, if you drive."

"I left my car back at the cabin." Hell, I knew I should have asked the driver to drop me off at the cabin and driven myself here... But yeah, the stupid champagne had gone to my head by then, and I had alternated between giggling and crying. *Why do I always make the wrong decisions, huh?*

"You could call for a taxi?"

The thought of dragging myself out of here and getting dressed and facing her family— Not that I don't like Isla's parents. They're awesome, actually. But to have to put on a face to the world, right now? Nah, no way. I'd rather spend the time baking, and if I happen to eat a lot of what I make? Well, too bad. Life is short, after all. And stressed spelled backwards is desserts, and Mary had a little lamb and the mouse ran up the clock. *Shit, time out. Stop with the nursery rhymes. Stop thinking about anything to do with that asshole, okay?*

"It's fine." I swallow, "I think I'm better off on my own."

"You sure?" She frowns.

"Yeah," I nod. "I'll have a bath and then bake, and I'll feel better then, for sure."

"I don't think you should be on your own now."

"I'll be good." I shake my hair back from my face. "Once I start the baking, I'll lose track of everything."

"But—"

"I'll be fine." I reach for the phone, "I promise."

"You sure?"

I hunch my shoulders, pull my lips up in a smile. "See?" I point at my face, "I'm good."

"Hmm." Isla peers up at me. Someone calls her name and she looks off camera, "I'm coming Mom." She turns back to me, "Gotta go, doll."

"Right."

"Bye."

I blow her a kiss.

She cuts the call. I place the phone down, then glance around the place. Only one way to deal with this. *Fuck the a-hole. Fuck the a-hole. I did fuck him, remember? No, like really fuck him. Gah.* I spring up so fast my chair screeches back on its legs. Oopsie. I bring up my play list on the phone, put it on speaker. Then turn on the oven. What should I bake, huh?

Two hours later, I've pulled the pies out of the oven, left them to cool on the wire mesh. Also, I've chugged down the horrible, almost-vinegary boxed wine, and another bottle of wine. *Gah.* So not a good idea. My stomach rolls and I grab my middle. Argh, maybe a hot bath will help, huh? I march into the bathroom, run the water, toss in a few bath bombs—chocolate, of course. I light the candles, then head back to the kitchen for the wine... Of course, I'm out. *Gah!* The corner shop should be open and have wine, huh? Should I?

Shouldn't I? Fuck that. It's Christmas, after all. I run back to the bathroom, turn off the water, then head over to the shop across the street, pick up one... okay, three bottles of wine, pay the man behind the counter.

"Merry Christmas," he choruses, eyes twinkling.

"And to you." I smile at him, then head back. When I reach home, the door to my apartment is ajar. WTF? My heart begins to race. Is it the same thief who broke into the bakery? Is he back? Gah. I turn to leave. A noise reaches me from the direction of the kitchen. He's in the kitchen. In the kitchen? My pies? No frigging way am I letting him eat them. I made them for myself.

For me. Moi. I deserve that bloody treat after the last few days I've had. I glance around for a weapon. What can I use? I curl my fingers around the bottle of wine, push open the door to my apartment, then creep past the living room. I reach the doorway to the kitchen, pause. His back is to me. His broad shoulders are clad in a black, long-sleeved Henley that clings to the planes of his back which flex, move, ripple with each of his movements. His narrow waist, that tight butt, those powerful thighs outlined in his jeans. He blocks out the sight of the dining table... Where I'd left the pies to cool. His legs are spread apart and the muscles of his triceps flex as he jerks his arm back-forth-back... What the hell? He can't be doing what I think he is. Is he? I take a step forward. He freezes. Shoots me a glance over his shoulder.

"You?" I swallow, "What are you doing?"

Weston

"What the hell do you think?" I growl at her, hold her gaze. *Don't let her look down; don't allow her to see what the hell you've gotten into here.* Caught with your dick in a pie...and by the woman you're in love with...? Hold the fuck on there. Firstly, that isn't a metaphor—being caught with my dick in a pie, I mean. And I know what you're thinking, and fuck, but I can promise it wasn't inspired by a certain, uh, notorious movie. I mean, I am past the stage of being pimply-faced and ready to shag everything that moves...because I only want to be inside one woman, her... Or, uh! A pie baked by her. Bloody fuck, this is a shit show.

"I... I am not sure what you're doing here?" She takes a step forward, and every muscle in my body solidifies... Except uh, a particular part of me that's throbbing inside the sweet, moist, center of a certain dessert that was baked by her. I mean, can you blame me? Peter had driven me here, and I'd told him to leave, confident that I was spending the night here. Hey a man can hope, right? It is Christmas, after all. I'd walked in here, and the entire place had smelled festive... and of her—that sweet sugary scent of hers mixed with the scent of apple pie, which happens to be my favorite, and all of it had gone to my head... Or rather, to my groin, and she hadn't been around, so I'd done the next logical thing. I'd reached for the pie she'd baked, buried myself in its center. Not that it's a replacement... Far from it, but needs must and all that. It's what she's reduced me to, a man...standing in front of a woman he loves—*no, no, no, not love, never love, in lust—yeah, that's better; a man in lust,*

standing in front of his woman with his dick caught in a pie, that she'd baked.
Fuck.

This is all her fucking fault.

I glare at her.

She pales. Her chin wobbles and she bites down on her lower lip, and fuck, if my dick doesn't jump again; inside the goddamn pie I hold with my left hand, in a position that if she came around and saw, it would be very clear what I am up to.

"Don't come closer," I snap. Bloody hell, that's a first—me asking a woman to stay away from me. Not that it matters, of course, because she sidles closer. Bloody woman, can never do what she's told.

"Stop," I growl. "Stay where you are."

She frowns. "My apartment." She huffs, "I can do what I want."

"Wrong."

She blinks. "I rent this flat, you ass."

"Guess who owns the apartment block?"

Her forehead crinkles, then she opens her mouth and shuts it again.

"Well," I smirk, "made the connection yet?"

"You," she swallows, "you own it?"

"Finally." I raise my gaze skywards, "Took you long enough to get that, huh? What's wrong, you eat too much dessert? All that cream gone to your head?" *The fuck?* The connection between my mouth and my brain has well and truly snapped, that I am hurling insults at her... *Shut the fuck up, you wanker.* But fuck, I have to distract her, and what else is a man supposed to do when he's caught with his cock in his hand... Technically, in a warm, soft, juicy, moist confectionary, but you get the picture, huh?

Color sears her cheeks.

"Is that how you got in?"

"I got in because you left the door open." I growl, and my chest tightens, "Do you know how dangerous that is?"

"Did you...did you find out I live here and decide to buy the place?" She frowns.

"Don't flatter yourself," I reply. "It's merely a coincidence, I assure you."

She flattens her lips, "Is it also a coincidence that you're standing like that?" She takes a sideways step; I mirror her movements, in the opposite direction.

"Like what?" I twist my body. Thank fuck for all those gym sessions, not

to mention working out with Saint at his horse ranch. My shoulders are wide enough to cover what the rest of my body is up to—I hope?

"Like," she chews the inside of her lip, "like you're holding your...uh.. your..."

"Dick?" I supply. Fuck, yeah. Clearly, she's not going to let go of it, and damned if I am going to be apologetic about being found out. I turn around, allow her to have the full-frontal view. She lowers her gaze to where I hold the plate with the pie in front of my groin...with my dick stuck inside.

She gulps, the sound audible in the silence. Awesome. This is when she tells me to fuck off... Or better still, turns and runs screaming, huh? Instead, she licks her lips. "Why did you stop?" she asks.

"Huh?" I blink, "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." She squeezes her fingers around the bottle of wine, "Why don't you finish what you started?"

"I will, on one condition."

She tilts her head, her gaze locked onto where my dick is sunken into the pie.

"Amelie," I snap.

"What?" She raises her gaze to mine, her pupils blown, her lips parted.

Jesus, I may have just met my match in food kink. Well, figures. She's a baker. I couldn't have picked better.

"Join me," I growl.

"How?" Her forehead crinkles, "How do you mean?"

I glance at the bottle of wine, then back at her.

"No." Her gaze widens.

"Yes."

"No way," she mutters. "I'm not putting that...inside...."

I thrust my hips forward and my cock sinks into the warm, moist, stickiness of the pie. A groan rumbles up my throat.

A whine bleeds from her.

I scowl at her, then at the bottle, "Do it."

"But."

"Now," I snap.

She gulps, pulls the bottle of wine from the brown paper bag. She unscrews it, drops the cap on the floor, then takes a gulp.

"Good girl," I growl.

She draws in a breath, then walks to the table, on the opposite side from

me, and places the bottle on it, then hesitates again.

This woman, is she hell bent on killing me? "What is it?" I huff.

She glances toward the doorway, "Uh, I left the door to the apartment ajar when I came in... shouldn't I shut it?"

"Leave it," I order her.

"But—"

My balls ache, my groin hardens, and a snarl rips from me, "I swear, if you don't take off your clothes right now, I'll—"

She unbuttons her coat, tosses it on the chair, then reaches behind to unzip her dress. The material slithers down around her ankles; she steps out of it.

She straightens and the sight of the triangle of pink fabric between her creamy thighs—"Jesus, fuck." The blood drains to my cock, I pull the pie close, and my shaft sinks into the moist center. I stare at the shadow of her flesh outlined against the crotch of her panties, "Take it off," I command. "Don't stop, Amelie."

"Or what?"

I jerk my chin up to her face. Her lips twitch.

"You don't want to tease me."

"Oh?"

I nod, "You have two choices here."

"Do I?"

I allow my mouth to curl, "Either you fuck the bottle and get fucked in the arse by me, or—"

Her chest heaves.

"Or, you fuck the bottle and I fuck you in the cunt, then in the arse."

"Choices, choices," her voice wobbles.

"Take that bloody wine bottle and ride it, Amelie, or I swear, I'll spank you so much you won't be able to sit down for months."

She scoffs, "You exaggerate."

"Do I?" I lower my eyebrows, "Give me a chance to demonstrate just how much I enjoy delivering on my threats." I peel back my lips, "Do it, Amelie. One chance to get my hand on that beautiful curved behind, Princess."

"Jeez," she swipes her hair over her shoulder, "some people have no sense of humor."

"Humor, huh?" I pump my hips forward, impale the bloody apple pie—the hell am I doing? Fucking an inanimate object, when the focus of my

obsession is right in front of my eyes.

She shivers, my thigh muscles spasm, and this entire scene is bloody wrong... and so fucking right. "Don't keep me waiting," I grind out.

She swoops down, grabs the wine bottle, brings it to her mouth, then proceeds to close her lips around it, taking it in—as she had my cock, previously. Holy mother of all that's dear to me... That has to be the hottest thing I have ever seen— No, Amelie pulling the bottle out of her mouth, only to lower it between her thighs? That... I swallow. That is bloody erotic. And it shouldn't be. I mean, it is a woman—my woman, turning me on, by easing herself down onto the neck of the bottle. It is not what I expected from her. It's everything I wanted her to do.

My cock lengthens. I grip my fingers around the damned plate of apple pie and follow her movements. In-out-in... She parts her legs, sinks down onto the bottle, the length of which disappears inside her pussy.

My shaft jerks; a pressure coils in my balls.

"Jesus, Princess," I snarl, "you're fucking turning me on."

Her breasts rise and fall, she straightens, lifts her gaze to mine, holds the connection, then impales herself again. She groans and the blue of her irises fades, leaving behind large pupils so black, they seem to take up most of her irises. My throat closes and my heart begins to race. I stare into her eyes, kick my hips forward again. Her movements intensify; so do mine. A bead of sweat trickles down her throat, trails down the shadow between her breasts. My pulse thrums; the blood pumps in my veins. I grip the plate of pie, push into the melting core, again and again. My balls draw up, the pressure in my groin tightens, harder, further, my senses pop, my vision narrows. "Come," I growl.

And she throws her head back, arches her spine, and reveals the slim column of her throat; a shudder grips her body, her thighs clench, a low keening moan spills from her lips, and I can't stop myself. My balls draw up and I come, shooting my load inside the fucking pie. I straighten, slap the plate with the dessert onto the table.

Her legs seem to weaken. She sways, then raises the bottle of wine from between her legs. Her knuckles are white and her hand trembles. She blinks, then licks her lips. She tips up her chin; I crook my finger at her.

She hesitates.

I jerk my chin. She takes a step forward, and another. She closes the distance, pauses in front of me. Tips the bottle of wine to her lips and drinks

from it. Her throat moves as she swallows; a drop of red trickles down her chin. I scoop it up, bring it to my mouth and suck on it.

Her gaze follows my actions; her lips part. She holds out the bottle of wine to me. Is she daring me? Does she think she can match me step for step? Does she? I snatch the bottle from her, raise it to my mouth and chug down a mouthful. The complex notes of wood and cherries, chocolate and honey.

I lower the bottle. "Perfect with pie," I declare.

"Isn't it?" Her lips quirk.

She reaches for the serving spade on the table.

"What are you doing?" I growl.

"What do you think?" She cuts off a slice, brings it to her mouth, "Should I eat it?"

The fuck? I glare at the piece of pie, then at her face.

"You wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I?" She tilts her head.

Woman's enjoying it. The thought of her eating the evidence of my arousal? It's a fucking turn on... Hotter than anything I have experienced before.

"Will you?" I lower my chin.

"You daring me?" She raises the slice, "What would you do if I ate this?"

"What do you want me to do?" I counter.

"I want you to—" She glances at the pie, then at my face, "I want you to let me take the lead in bed."

43

Amelie

His forehead crinkles. He glares at my face, and the skin around his eyes tightens. He's considering it. He's actually thinking about it? A dominant man like him... Would he give in to this? Does he want me to eat this...proof of his desire? Does he think I won't? Am I going to do this? I hold his stare. *Say the word; do it.* A bead of sweat slides down my temple. His gaze darts to it, then back to my eyes.

"Do it," his voice is casual, his stance relaxed. *Huh? Does he think I won't? Is he the only one who can get away with playing games?* He's so sure that I won't surprise him, he raises the bottle of wine, swigs from it, then licks his mouth. "Mmm," he smacks his lips together. "Wine and the honey of your cum," he says. "This has to be my favorite drink ever.

I raise the pie to my mouth.

His gaze intensifies.

Bite off a piece.

He freezes.

I chew on it, swallow, his chest rises and falls.

I bite off another piece, chew on it.

His shoulders bunch. His chest planes seem to harden, and he draws himself up to his full height. "Eat it all," he commands.

His rough voice chafes across my nerve endings. My sex clenches. I squeeze my thighs together, stuff the rest of the piece into my mouth.

He curls his lips. "Swallow," he growls, and moisture pools between my

legs. Hell, only Weston fucking Kincaid could make that order sound so filthy, so bloody naughty. I gulp down the food in my mouth.

"Open," his voice is rough, his breathing uneven. I part my lips; he raises the bottle of wine to my mouth. "Drink," his voice lowers to a hush. Hell, why do I get the feeling that he's planning something...a scene that's out of my dirtiest fantasies?

Rolling around in the aftermath of my dessert? Check.

Slurping down wine that tastes of my arousal and his mouth? Double check.

Pulling back with suddenness so the wine spills across my chest? You bet.

"Oops," I murmur, glance down at where the wine blots the cloth of my bra. "I think I am going to have to take it off."

"Hmm." He raises the bottle to his lips, drinks from it. "I have a better idea, Princess."

"You do?" I peer up at him from under my eyelashes.

"I do." He nods. He holds up the bottle; my gaze widens. He tilts it, I open my mouth to protest, but already he's poured the wine on my hair.

"What the—" I splutter, "What are you doing?"

"Worshipping you, of course," his voice is sincere, his tone husky.

I take in his features as the liquid drips down my cheeks, my chin, splashes onto my breasts, clings to the cloth that covers my crotch.

"Weston," his name emerges, breathy from my throat. Damn, if I don't sound aroused and turned on—I glance down to where his erect dick—make that two of us. "Weston?" I swallow. What am I asking of him? What do I want from him? "You...you going to deliver on your promise?"

He smirks, "What do you think?"

"I think," I raise a finger to his cheek, drag it down the luxuriant growth of beard on his chin, "you look like Santa Claus."

He stares, then chuckles, "Have you been a naughty girl, Princess?"

"Oh," I shift my weight from foot to foot, "I tried, Santa. I promise, I wanted to be good...but then...I met this man."

"A man, huh?" He leans forward until his chest grazes my breasts, nipples hard, and surely, outlined by the sodden bra, which, if he'd look down, he'd see. But he isn't, because he's staring into my eyes.

He lowers the now empty bottle to the table with a soft thump. "Pray, tell me more about this...encounter of yours," he breathes. The warmth from his

body surrounds me; his big, aching, gorgeous shoulders shut out the rest of the world. He bends his knees, thrusts his face into mine, "Don't make me wait." His voice is low, with an edge of that cruelty that is so Weston, which rolls down my spine.

I shiver. "He..." I clear my throat, "He's the most annoying, most obnoxious, most full-of-himself, egoistical—"

His biceps flex; the next instant he grabs my pussy. A whine bleeds from me, "Ah," I stutter, "He's... he's..."

His mouth curls. "He is...?" he prompts me as he begins to massage my core.

"Hard," I mumble. "So hard."

He grinds the heel of his hand against my clit and goosebumps flare on my skin. I shiver, "And sexy, and dominant, and knows just what to do to arouse me to fever pitch, and when he tells me that he'll let me lead in bed, I know that he—"

He digs his finger into my melting channel through the cloth and I groan.

"You were saying—?" he smirks.

"Was I?" I blink.

"Yep." He nods, "Something about wanting to lead in bed?"

"Yeah," I swallow, "this once."

He fixes his left palm around the nape of my neck, then lifts me up by the hold on my pussy, and plants me on the pie. I squeak, wriggle my hips around, trying to evade the moist filling. He tightens his grip on my pussy. He pushes down with his other hand, and I still.

"Look at me," he growls.

I glance up, trace his features with my gaze—that patrician hooked nose, those clear eyes, the lush dark hair that flows about his shoulders, that pouty lower lip that I want to suck on. I lean up, he holds me in place with his hold on the nape of my neck. His strength is awesome, like really awesome. Why didn't I realize how he could overpower me with minimal resistance?

I reach for his cock, but he clicks his tongue, "So impatient." He snickers.

I scowl. "But I want to touch you."

"Not yet."

"You made a promise."

"And you know what kills me?" He shakes his head, "You actually expect me to keep it too."

"Won't you?" I peer up at him, "Won't you let me take the lead?"

"Nope." He shakes his head.

"But you said—"

"I lied."

Of course, he did. I mean, if he'd allowed me to actually set the pace, I'd have... Thrown myself at him, climbed him, impaled myself on his dick like he'd fucked that pie. The pie... Hell. I wriggle around, and the filling sticks to my behind. "Weston, uh, the filling is getting into all the places it shouldn't," I mumble.

"On the contrary." He grins, "It's filling up exactly the right areas, which I am going to enjoy licking."

"Oh," I gulp; my core clenches. Jesus, is he going to enact the picture he painted right now in my mind?

"Oh, yes." He mocks my strangled exclamation. "And that's only the beginning... Once you are clean, I plan to fill you up with my dick in your pussy, my fingers in your arsehole, and my tongue in your mouth. I am going to make sure every hole in your body bears my imprint. Then I am going to fuck you so hard, you won't know where you begin and where I end, you'll lose sight of what day it is, what time—" he swallows, "what time—" His voice roughens, "What time—"

"What time of day it is," I supply, "whether I am indoors or not, what the weather is like outside, what—"

He releases my pussy, only to plant his big body between my legs, forcing my thighs to widen.

"What ingredients I use in an apple pie—" What the hell am I warbling on about?

He thrusts his dick inside of me, filling me, stretching me, packing me to the brim, with such confidence that I gasp.

"Wes, I... I..."

"Complete the sentence." He glares at my features, "Do it."

"I..." I swallow, "I...want..."

"What?" He brings his free hand to my breast, squeezes it. Sensations radiate outward from the contact. My pussy clenches around his dick and his grin widens. "You were saying?" he prompts, "Something about the apple pie —"

"Fuck the apple pie," I mutter.

"Did that already." He chuckles.

"Sheesh," I grumble, "are you for real?"

"Does this feel real?" He pinches my nipple and I yelp. He bends his head, sucks on it, and I feel the pull deep down in my womb. Everything he does seems to awaken parts of me that had hitherto been happy to exist without communicating with me.

"Weston," I gasp, "you're forgetting something."

He releases my breast, glares up at me, "I am?" He blinks, then his forehead smooths, "I am."

He turns his head, fastens his mouth around my other breast. He sucks on my nipple, curls his tongue around the pebbled bud, bites down with his sharp teeth, and I yell, dig my fingers in his hair and tug.

He grunts and his dick lengthens further inside of me—is that even possible? He continues to lave my nipple, sucking on it, dragging his teeth around the tender flesh, then opens his mouth wider, taking in as much of my breast as he can fit. Heat, lust, pleasure, pain... All of it... None of it... A confluence of emotions whirls inside, tugging at my lower belly, arrowing to my cunt, which clamps tighter around his engorged flesh. Of course, he is pleasuring me, but ultimately, he is the beneficiary. How could someone be so...on target all the time in how he plays my body?

"Weston," I pant, "Please, please, please, please—"

He pulls out of me, raises his head, steps away.

"What the hell?" I blink, "You come back here and fuck me, you hear me?"

"Are you telling me what to do?" His lips quirk.

"You bet I am, you pussy tease, you—" I squeak, for he's grabbed my hips and flipped me over. I am on my arms and knees, butt pushed out in his face. The hell? Then a wetness sinks into my pussy, up my slit, across the valley between my arsecheeks.

"No," I shudder, "Weston, no."

He stops, "No?"

"No," I huff. "I mean, yes. Don't stop, whatever it is that you're doing, don't, oh!" He licks my puckered hole and my entire body trembles. It's filthy, and dirty and it's hot. So bloody hot. "Oh, my God," I breathe. "Oh, my, G-o-d." I yelp, for he swipes his tongue down to my cunt, then licks his way back up to my forbidden hole and back, again and again. My knees tremble and my elbows wobble. I sink down to support my face on my arms. "Wes," I gasp, "oh, you're, I'm—" My entire body seems to shudder. "I'm—"

"Don't you dare come," he growls against my sensitive clit, right before

he bites on it. I howl, the sound muffled against my arms. My shoulder shudder, I slide my knees apart, thrust out my arse, giving him more access. He can eat me out like the sweetest of desserts, lick me, suck on me, insert his tongue into my pussy and drink of me. A trembling grips my legs, my back. He begins to fuck my backhole in earnest, shoving his tongue inside, curling it in, before he pulls out and bites on my butt. I huff.

"You taste fucking amazing," he mutters, "like apple pie and my cum."

I chuckle. Now that, would be one hell of a dish to put on the menu of my next pop-up delivery special. He grips my thighs, pushes them further apart. I crack open my eyes, stare down from across the length of my body, to between my legs, to where he swirls his tongue up my inner thigh, licking off the crumbs, then the other side. He meets my gaze, licks his lips, then declares, "I am going in for seconds."

44

Weston

"I am going to fuck you with my tongue." I take in her flushed face, her parted lips, her heaving breasts, "You ready, Princess?"

She blinks. "Do I have a choice?" she moans.

"Nope." I smile in anticipation, smack my lips together. Her breathing grows shallow, she licks her lower lip mirroring my desire, and my cock throbs, reminding me I needed to get on with the program. I'd promised to clean her up, before filling her up again, and I'm a man of my word—when it suits me, of course. I smirk, thrust my face into her pussy and close my mouth around her cunt. She moans, her thighs tremble, and liquid heat streams from her wet channel. I slurp it up, shove my tongue inside her cunt, mirror how I want to fuck her with my shaft—in-out-in— until her entire body shudders, and again.

She groans. "Weston, please..." she whines.

Yeah, I know the feeling. I reach down to grab my cock, pump it once, scoop up some of the pre-cum from the weeping head, then slide my fingers inside her backhole.

"Oh," she wheezes, then pounds her tiny fist into the table, "I'm coming, I'm—"

I tear my mouth from her pussy, grasp her waist and haul her off of the table and onto her feet in front of me. Her legs seem to give way. I hold her up, kick her legs apart, then scoop up her cum and ease it into her backhole.

"Wes..." she moans, "I haven't... I mean... I can't..."

"You can," I growl.

I add a second finger inside of her, and she groans, "It's too much...It's—"

"Not enough." I pull out my fingers, scoop up some of the mashed-up apple and smear it into her puckered hole.

"Oh." She grips the edge of the table, lowers her chin to her chest.

"Relax," I command, then press my palm into the center of her spine. I apply pressure and she bends over, placing her cheek on the table.

"Beautiful." I praise her.

She pushes her hair behind her ear. "Be gentle," she whispers.

"Is that what you want?" I stare at her, "Is that what you truly want, Princess?"

She swallows, then squeezes her eyes shut.

"Tell me," I repeat. "You wanted to take the lead. This is me giving you the choice to direct the proceedings. Do you want it tender or do you want me to take you like you are mine?"

She nods.

"Which one?" I ask.

"Both," she replies. "I want you to take me like I am yours, and I want to take it like you are mine." She cracks her eyelids open. "Please," she whispers.

My heart begins to race, my chest tightens, and something hot twists my heart. *Fuck*. Emotions, feelings, a strange melting sensation that steals up my spine, encircles my ribcage, bears down on my shoulders. I bend over her, until my chest is flush with her back, "You fucking destroy me, you know that?" I press my lips to hers and kiss her. I wrap my fingers around the nape of her neck, tilt my head, ease my tongue inside her mouth, and open myself up to her.

She draws in a breath—my breath, then parts her lips, sucks on my tongue and kisses me back. That melting sensation? It extends to my stomach, my belly, my extremities.

I ease my dick inside her puckered hole.

She groans. I swallow the small sound, bring my hand around to strum her cunt. Good thing it's only my middle finger which is broken. Leaves me plenty of others to play with her clit, slide my forefinger into her pussy, and begin to finger fuck her. She parts her legs, opens her mouth wider. I kiss her in earnest, dance my tongue over hers, allow her to drink from me as I thrust my hips and notch my dick further inside of her. A whine wells up her throat.

I drink of it, wind my fingers about her neck, and apply pressure.

Her pulse races at the base of her throat and her chest rises and falls. I slide my thumb inside her pussy, scissor my fingers in her channel. She groans, clenches around my dick, and I fucking see stars. Sweat beads my upper lip, slides down my temple. I dig my heels into the floor, flex my thighs, wait...wait for her to adjust to my size, tear my mouth from hers and kiss her nose, her cheek, her eyelashes, which flutter. "You're perfect, Princess," I whisper, "gorgeous, beautiful, inside and out."

She shudders, opens her mouth, then closes it again. I kiss her on her lips, on her chin, nibble my way up to her earlobe and suck on it.

A moan wheezes from her.

I ease my tongue inside her ear and she trembles. Drag my tongue about the shell of her ear and her entire body bucks. I bite down on her earlobe and she cries out. Her inner muscles give and I slip inside, filling her to the hilt.

A groan erupts from me... Or maybe that was her.

"Jesus." I press my cheek to hers, "You're so tight, so hot...so much everything." My pulse begin to race. "I want you." I mumble half to myself, "I've never needed anything as much as I need you. I have to fuck you, make you mine as completely as I am yours."

She draws in a breath. "Why," she asks, "why do you want me?"

"Because I love you." I snap my eyes open, "Of course, whatever is said in coitus...stays in coitus." I mutter, "I mean, anything said in the heat of passion is—"

"The naked truth?" She stares at me from under hooded eyes. "Will you get out of your own way for bloody once and accept what it is you feel for me?" she snaps.

I glare back at her, but she doesn't back down, "Admit it, alphahole, you fucking love me."

"Love to fuck you," I agree.

"You ache for me." Her lips quirk.

"For the rapier-sharp edge of your mind that I love to challenge."

"You can't live without me," her voice is smug.

I scowl. "Adore your pussy." I rotate my fingers inside of her, and color smears her cheeks. "And your arse, which belongs to me, by the way," I inform her, even as I pull out, then thrust inside her with enough impact that her entire body jolts up the table.

"Stop deflecting," she pants.

"Stop talking," I retort.

"Thought you loved my sassy comebacks," she mutters.

"Love your sassy arse." I propel my hips forward, begin to fuck her in earnest.

Her eyes roll back in her head. "Fuck," she groans, "it hurts."

I frown, begin to pull out, "Maybe I should have waited... Should have prepared you better. I could—"

She lowers her chin, trains those blue eyes on me. "Don't you dare," she growls. "You bloody well finish what you fucking started."

Thank fuck. My dick lengthens. I grit my teeth, stay poised at her entrance.

"Another thing I crush on..." I force the words out through gritted teeth, "Who'd have thought your potty mouth would turn me so on?"

"Thought it was all of me? The entire package?" She flutters her eyelashes at me. "Come on, give credit where it's due, Doc. Give me the satisfaction of hearing it from the horse's mouth."

"You calling me a horse?" I arch an eyebrow, then thrust forward and inside of her.

"Oh." She squeezes her eyes shut. "That..." she gulps, "that feels so fucking good."

She bites down on her lower lip, and fuck her, but I can't resist her when she does that. I lower my head, lick her mouth. "Look at me," I order.

She cracks open her eyelids, and those shining baby blues of her stare into my soul.

"Stay with me," I whisper, then propel my hips forward. My balls slap against the underside of her butt, and I sink into her. Her spine arches and her gaze grows frantic. A ripple speeds up her body. Oh, she's close, so close. I tear my mouth from hers. "Come," I growl, and her pussy clenches around my fingers.

Moisture slides out from between her thighs as she shudders. Her eyelids flutter and I click my tongue, "Open your eyes, darlin'."

She tips her chin up, and I hold her gaze, as I thrust forward. My balls draw up, my cock lengthens, the tension in my groin explodes out, and I come inside of her.

I slump forward, hold my weight up on my elbows, then lower my lips to hers.

"Wow," she whispers against my mouth. "That was something."

"Yeah," I kiss her, "it was."

I pull out of her and she winces. I pull her up, then scoop her into my arms.

"You okay?"

She gazes up at me, her cheeks flushed, her hair stuck to her forehead, her eyes glazed.

"Princess?" I ask again. "Talk to me."

"Hmm." She snuggles into my chest. "Do I have to?" she mumbles, then yawns so loudly her jaws crack.

"I wore you out, huh?" I stalk out of the kitchen.

"Where are you...going?" She yawns again.

"Where's the shower?" I ask.

"Mmmm... That way." She jerks her chin to the side.

I walk down the hallway, reach the bathroom door and shoulder it open.

"I don't think I can stay awake." Her eyelids flutter.

"Just as long as you're awake when I fuck you again."

Okay, maybe not. I prop her up in the shower, turn on the water, soap her up, and wash every inch of her delectable body. She falls asleep in my arms halfway through. That doesn't stop me from slipping my throbbing dick inside of her and taking her. Or again later... When I've dried her and myself off and pulled the covers over her naked body—after I've made sure to close and lock the door to her apartment and ensured all of the windows are safely shut—I slip in beside her, curl my body around hers and try to fall asleep.

Only I can't, because I have a raging hard-on. Her proximity does that to me—turns me on, twists me inside out until I am sure I am one big, seething mass of need. I pull her leg up and over my hip, then guide myself inside of her soft pussy. A sense of peace, of rightness, steals over me. Fuck, this is what I've been missing all along—this melding sensation as I sink into her melting channel, and finish myself off in a few strokes, as I orgasm inside of her and she stirs. I curve my arm around her waist, pull her close and fall asleep with my dick nestled within her warmth.

Twelve o'clock.

Eleven o'clock.

Ten o'clock.

The goddam timer—an old fashioned clock fitted to run backwards—as my kidnapper had informed me, never stops counting down.

Every hour it helpfully rings out the time, so even though I am

blindfolded, I have no choice but to follow along in my head.

Nine o'clock

Eight o'clock

Seven o'clock

Every hour brings me closer to the time when my kidnapper is going to come through the door.

Six o'clock

Five o'clock

Four o'clock

Twelve hours, that's how long he'd said he'd be away.

Three o'clock

Two o'clock

One o'clock

The timer passes the twelve-hour mark, and stops. The silence stretches. A beat, another.

My heart begins to race and sweat pools in my armpits. I tug my wrists against my bindings, and pain shoots up my arms. I draw in a breath and the acrid taste of fear fills my mouth. Something is wrong.

Why hasn't the bomb gone off as he'd said it would? Why hasn't my kidnapper returned for that matter? My throat closes, my hands and feet grow cold.

Today, I won't survive the beating. Today, something is different. Today is the day when he finishes it. When he doesn't stop electrocuting me until...my heart gives out.

My heart pounds in my chest, my pulse races, and my stomach coils in knots. The pressure builds at my temples. What's he going to do to me when he gets here?

My head spins and coldness grips my arms and legs... I won't last the day. I have to get through today. Need to focus, focus. Stay still; count down again.

Twelve o'clock.

Eleven o'clock.

Ten o'clock.

My heart beat slows and my pulse steadies. How strange. My biggest nemesis is also the only way I can calm my mind. Stay still, in the moment. You can't give up. Not yet. The door creaks open. I jolt upright. The change in the air indicates he's in the room. Footsteps approach as the door snicks

shut. The hair at the back of my neck rises. Fuck. He's here, he's going to hit me...any moment. The floorboard creaks to my right, to the left, behind me. He circles me, comes closer.

"What should I do with you?" he mutters. "Leave you in your filth or put you out of your misery?"

Let me go, I try to say, the words muffled by my gag. Let me the fuck go, you asshole.

"Weston. Weston," he says. "When will you realize that resistance is futile?"

I yank my wrists against my bindings, strain the muscles of my legs. The ropes around my ankles dig into my skin. The ticking of the clock around my chest fills my ears...my mind. It grows louder, ricocheting inside of my head. The fuck is he up to? Why the hell is he not untying me?

He pats my head; I jerk away. The time-bomb around my chest beeps.

"Oops," he laughs, "sorry." He chuckles, "Forgot for a second there that you had to be absolutely still." He shuffles his feet, "Remember what I said about your being let go in twelve hours?"

I nod.

"Guess what? Today is your lucky day."

I stiffen.

"Today is the day I leave you here, with an hour to countdown. When it hits one o'clock... Boom!" He claps his hands together.

My shoulders bunch and the blood pumps in my ears. My heart hammers so loud, I am sure I am going to be sick. Let me out of here. Let me out.

"Sorry, my boy. Some things are best left up to fate, you understand?"

No. What the fuck is he talking about? I lean forward, shake my head. No, don't leave me here, don't.

His footsteps recede.

Stop. Don't go.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you." His voice reaches me from the direction of the doorway.

"If you're lucky, the bomb may not go off."

Bloody piece of shit, he's fucking toying with me. It won't go off. It won't. The door shuts behind him, leaving me with the ticking of the bloody clock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

Three o'clock.

Two 'o clock.

So close. An hour to countdown. An hour to my death. Or not? Any moment now. Any moment.

"Weston?" A man's voice calls out, "Weston, you in there?"

The door slams open and I jerk up.

"What the fuck?"

Stay back, don't come close. The bomb—it's going to detonate, it's going to—

"Weston?"

I tug on my bindings, but they don't give. Fuck this, if I'm going to die, I'm not taking another innocent life down with me. The ticking of the bomb seems to get louder... Or is that hammering in my chest? Sweat slithers down my spine. I tug my feet, strain at my restraints. The chair lurches forward. Tick-tock-tick-tock. The timebomb stops. Then—

"Weston?"

I snap my eyes open.

"Wes?" Her worried gaze holds mine. Her blonde hair is tangled about her shoulders. I rake my gaze down to her bare breasts, to her belly, to where her thighs grip my waist.

"Wes?" She reaches down to touch my face.

I pull away. "Don't," I clear my throat.

"You going to tell me about what happened when you were kidnapped?" she prods. "Is that what your nightmare was about?"

"What's it to you?" I grind my teeth together so hard that pain shoots up my jaw.

"You have to ask me that, after everything we've been through? After you told me that you love me?"

"About that..." I frown, "I didn't—"

"Shut up," she snaps.

"The fuck?" I growl, "You dare tell me to shut up?"

"Oh, I dare more." She smirks. "I dare to fuck you while you are tied up."

"Tied up?" I frown, then pull at my arms, which are bound above me. I glance up, tug at one leg, then the other. "You bound me to the bed?"

"Close." She smiles, "I bound you to the bed spread-eagled."

45

Amelie

What the hell am I doing? I reach down between us, massage his erect shaft. His chest planes lock and his shoulder muscles ripple. "You think you're going to get away with this?" he growls.

My heart begins to race. My throat closes. The taste of fear coats my tongue and I swallow it down.

"Correction." I allow my lips to curl, "I know I am going to get away with this." I swipe my fingers up his dick to where the swollen head throbs. I squeeze and his hips buck. I drag my thumb across the slit and his body jolts.

"Amelie," he warns.

"Weston," I echo his tone.

I slide my other hand down to cup his balls.

His throat moves as he swallows. "You really, really don't want to do this." His voice lowers to that hush as he speaks, to that edge of meanness which chafes at my nerve endings, that ripples down my belly, then coils in between my legs. Moisture laces my core. His gaze intensifies and his nostrils flare. Hell, as usual, he's so tuned into me, he can sense my arousal.

I squeeze his balls; he grunts. I slide back, lower my head, close my mouth around his shaft. His thigh muscles spasm and his entire body seems to go still. I hold his gaze, bob my head, take him in until his length bumps the back of my throat.

"Fuck." His jaw tics; his shoulder muscles bunch. "You don't know what you are doing," he snarls.

I rise up, so his dick plops out with a wet sound, "On the contrary." I lick the angry head of his cock, "I have a very good idea what I am doing to you."

I swirl my tongue around the rim of the angry throbbing head; he growls.

I drag my teeth across the sensitive skin; his body bucks.

"Oh." I blink. This is fun. It seems I can elicit a response with the smallest action.

I slide my tongue down the length of his shaft; sweat beads his forehead.

"Are you hot?" I ask.

"The fuck do you think?" he snarls.

I giggle. I can't help it, honestly. To see this virile, dominant alphahole laid low by a touch... Mmm. It's sweet revenge. I weigh his balls in my hand, then drag my finger down between his butt-cheeks to tease his backhole.

He grunts, "Fucking fuck." A vein throbs at his temple, his biceps bulge and the veins of his forearms ripple.

Holy shit, he's not going to break free, is he?

He yanks at his bindings which tighten, but hold—Whoa, guess the knock-off Ferragamo scarves are of good quality, after all.

His thigh muscles tense as he pulls on the bindings that circle his ankles. The bed frame creaks, but he stays tied.

The breath rushes out of me. *Gah, that was close.* I lower my face to his groin, begin to give him head. I take him down my throat—gag—*breathe through your nose, breathe through your nose*—I pull back, glance up to find his gaze fixed on me. A vein throbs at his temple; color highlights his cheeks. Wow. He seems aroused and angry—but definitely turned on.

"That all you got, babe?" His lips twist, "Giving up so easily, hmm?"

I frown. Typical of him to turn this into a competition, huh?

I prop my elbows on his hips, swirl my tongue around his cock. "You taste," I frown, "you taste like dark chocolate with a dash of sea salt."

He groans, "Jesus, woman, only you could compare my dick to a dessert."

"It's good," I offer, "I mean, you could do with a trim—"

"The fuck are you talking about?" he scowls.

"I mean the hair on your chin, you dummy." I chuckle, "What did you think?"

"I think when I get loose, I am going to turn you over my knee and spank you."

"Hmm." I dip my head, take him in, swipe my tongue up his cock, then pull back. His balls harden and his shaft lengthens, "Oh," I blink, "that's

interesting." I massage that engorged part of him.

"The fuck?" he snarls. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Having my cake and eating it too." I chuckle. My, but I am full of terrible sayings, but hey, if the shoe fits. I raise my shoulders, open my mouth, and take him down my throat again.

"Fuck." His swearing fills the air above me. His cock jumps. Heat seems to leap off of his chest and slam into my shoulders, pinning me in place. I gasp, rise up and position myself above his erect shaft.

He growls low in his throat, the sound a rumble that hints at an inner conflict. He peels back his lips and his teeth glint against his skin. His shoulder muscles seem to broaden, his big body tenses, waiting, waiting...for me to make my move. *Holy shit... This is true power.* Holding the most responsive part of him in my hand...before I sink down and impale myself on his very erect, very hard cock.

"Ah." I throw my head back, breathe in as I adjust to his size. He'd fucked me earlier, but damn, if his every penetration doesn't feel like the first time.

"Ride me," he growls. "Fuck my dick and make yourself come."

His words sink into my blood. I rise up, slam myself down onto his dick. The entire bed creaks. I clench my insides around his shaft, and he groans.

"Amelie," his voice is strained.

I lower my gaze to his face, hold onto his hips for leverage, then I begin to ride him. I raise and lower myself again and again. I don't break the connection between our eyes. His grey eyes reflect back the heat, the tension, the absolute and complete need to own him that grips me. His heart, his soul, his every emotion. I clench my pussy, squeeze my thighs together. "Weston." Only when I hear my voice do I realize I've breathed his name aloud.

"Don't stop," he replies. "Don't you dare stop, until you come."

I swallow, brace myself, then lift up and sink back down at the same moment that he thrusts upward and into me. His cock fills me, stretches me. His gaze burns into me, and I can all but taste his intensity as his big body stiffens, as his shaft jerks inside of me. He pistons his hips upward—fucking me, cramming into me, setting off pin pricks of heat that radiate out from my core, up my spine. The trembling crashes over me, and I gasp, and strain for release. Close, so close.

"Come," he growls, and I shatter. My climax smashes into me. White noise fills my ears, my mind. When I come to, I'm on my back and he's braced over me.

"How?" I frown, "You got free."

"You didn't think your scarves were strong enough to hold me, did you?"

"So, all this time—?"

He nods, "I pretended to be tied down."

I scowl, "You allowed me to take the lead?"

"This once." He dips his head, kisses me. "Don't expect it to happen again."

"Yeah, yeah," I mutter, "Of course, the Big Bad Alpha Claus isn't going to allow this helpless woman to get away with anything."

"Helpless, my ass!" he scoffs. "You're dangerous, is what you are."

"Why, you flatter me." I flutter my eyelashes.

"And you..." He peers into my face, his features intense, "You..." He swallows, "I love you."

"Oh." A fierce something flares in my chest. Heat sears my cheeks. *Holy shit, am I blushing? No, I am not. Of course, not.*

"Aren't you forgetting something?" he growls.

"Am I?" I tilt my head, "Max is not here, so we don't have to take him for a walk. I showered last night, so I guess I can skip today, and it's Christmas today. Of course, Merry Christmas, Mr. Alpha Claus."

"Merry-fucking-Christmas," he rumbles, "but that's not what I mean."

"No?" I chew the inside of my cheek; my heart flutters in my chest like I'm just about to eat a freshly-baked chocolate croissant. Yum. Only one thing gives me more pleasure. "Umm." I screw up my face, "Let me think... Let me think... Am I forgetting something?" I raise my shoulders, "Nope."

He runs his fingers up my side, "Is that right?"

I giggle. "That's right."

He digs his fingers into my ribcage, and I snort. "Please... Don't—" I gasp.

"My, my, how ticklish you are, little Red."

"All the better to laugh with you, Mr. Claus." I chuckle, then scream, as he tickles my armpits. The laughter wells up my throat. I wriggle around, try to avoid him, but he leans his weight on me.

I howl.

He laughs louder. He holds me captive under him, proceeds to tickle me until I lose my breath. "Stop... No more..." I pant, "Please."

He pauses and his chest heaves. He glares at me, takes in my features. "You're the most beautiful present I have ever received for Christmas," he

whispers.

My heart literally melts in my chest. Okay, not literally, but I mean, come on... That was bloody unexpected. I cup his cheek, urge his face closer, "I am still waiting for my gift."

"Oh?"

I nod, "Tell me what happened when you were kidnapped."

He blinks, then his features shutter.

Hell, me and my big mouth. Why did I have to go spoil that perfect moment? He pulls back, shoves off the bed and glances around the room.

I sit up, "Weston, I'm sorry."

He spots his pants and steps into them. Shit, he's leaving... After all that? He loves me. He'd made love to me. Hell, he'd taken my ass... And damn him... It had taken courage to allow him to do that... I'd enjoyed it...but honestly, it had been a leap of faith to trust him with that... And now...what? He decides to up and leave? And why the hell am I apologizing?

He heads for the door. I jump up on my knees; the bloody sheet is wound around me... How the hell did that happen? "Weston stop right there."

He reaches the exit.

"Stop," I yell. "You can't just leave."

He pauses, then turns to glare at me with that look of superior disdain that I hate.

"Don't tell me what to do," he growls.

Argh! I throw up my hands, "You and your stupid dick-headed ideas."

"Didn't see you complaining earlier when I had you pinned on said dickhead," he snaps back.

"Don't change the topic."

He opens his mouth to speak.

I hold up my hand, "What did I say, to get you all hot under the collar, huh?" I scowl. "What's wrong with my asking you about the incident that clearly impacted you so much you're having nightmares to this day?"

He draws himself up to his full height, which only draws my attention to the width of those beautiful shoulders, those eight—no ten-pack abs—ten pack? I mean, who has a ten pack? Is that even a thing? Apparently, yes, I have the evidence right here in front of me.

He widens his stance, "You can't see it, can you?"

"What?"

"You're so involved in your emotions, your need to find out all my

secrets. You have no idea how much it hurts to bring it up, do you?"

"If we are..." I pause. *Say it. Should I say it? Whatever.* I have nothing to lose, except my future... Yeah, fine, if I can't say what's on my mind with him, then this, whatever is between us, is worth nothing. I draw in a breath, "If we are going to have a future, then I need to know about this."

"That's where you are wrong."

My heart begins to race.

Don't say it. Don't say it.

"I said I loved you," he rolls his shoulders, "doesn't mean we have anything keeping us together."

Turning, he leaves.

46

Weston

Nice one. Get right to the heart of it, twist her guts and deliver her a sucker punch. *You're a piece of work, you know that?* Fuck! I stalk out of the apartment block. My bare feet hit the sidewalk. Huh? I'd forgotten to put on my shoes, apparently. I drop my shoes on the concrete, reach for the socks. And, of course, I've forgotten them. I shove my feet into my shoes—take a step forward, the backs of the shoes bite into my heels. Great, I'm sure to get blisters. Good. I deserve that...and more, much more for what I just did. What the fuck happened there? She asked me a simple question and I freaked. Not that I hadn't discussed the goddamn incident with the Seven in the years since—and with the shrink my mother had insisted I see. I'd hated it then...but they'd taken no shit from me. Good for them. I thought I'd dealt with the aftermath of what had happened...but apparently, not.

First, I'd frozen when my mother had collapsed...

Then the realization that I love her—fuck! I stumble, then right myself. I love her.

I've fallen for her.

When had she snuck up under my skin, coiled her scent around my heart, wormed her way into my every waking thought? Somewhere between her walking in on me naked at the cabin and apple-pie gate, I'd opened myself up to her in a way I had never done before. Her sass, her ability to hold her own against me, the way she fights to hold onto every inch of her dignity, that need inside of her to be dominated in bed, even as she blazes forward, trying

to build her business.

She is a smart cookie, my woman. Takes no shit from anyone, and that includes me. It's one of the things I love—the fact that I can be myself with her, secure in the knowledge that she'll give back as good as she gets. Fuck. I drag my fingers through my hair... I left her and haven't stopped thinking about her. How can I already miss her? Her laughter, the way she wrinkles up her nose when she's thinking, how she talks in her sleep... How her features scrunch up before she climaxes, how she draws herself up to her full height, tips up her chin and assumes that haughty ice-princess persona when she is pissed off with me.

How her features had crumpled when I'd told there was nothing keeping us together. I squeeze the bridge of my nose. Why the hell had I said that? Bloody ego of mine. No way, could I stand to share my weakness with her, huh? Would it have been so fucking terrible to tell her what had happened during the time I had been held hostage as a boy? Why the fuck is it so difficult to talk about it still, huh? All the bloody therapy in the world had clearly not helped. Maybe there is a part inside of me that's broken and nothing can fix it—except her. She could have, had I given her a chance. But I'd opted to lash out at her—at the one person who is more important to me than life itself. Fuck. I rake my fingers through my hair, move forward. My foot connects with something on the ground. There's a dull thud. I look down to find coins spilled on the ground, and next to it a steel can is overturned.

"Sorry." I bend, scoop up the money and drop it back into the container.

"Got a cigarette?" a voice asks.

I glance up at the homeless man seated behind the receptacle. He has a Santa hat perched on his head. Had she actually nicknamed me Alpha Claus? I smirk. Talk about being kinky. But hell, if my North Pole hadn't been a snug fit in her stocking. I shake my head. The hell am I thinking?

"Oy," he waves his hand in front of my face, "got a smoke?"

I blink, shake my head, "Huh? Nope, sorry."

"Spare some change instead?" He peruses my features, "You okay there, man?"

"Sure," I mutter, shove my fingers in my pants pocket, come up empty. Search the other pocket and pull out my phone. Huh. "Guess I forgot my wallet." I glance back at her apartment block—okay, technically my block. But fuck, if I am going back there, not after that scene. Best to give her time to cool off, and then what? Beg her forgiveness? Fuck that. If she can't

accept me the way I am...then too fucking bad. Her loss. *And yours.* A fine curvy, gorgeous, love-of-my-life-sized loss. "Fuck," I swear aloud.

"You need a drink," Homeless man drawls.

'Yeah."

"Or maybe two," he offers.

I roll my shoulders, "Sounds about right." *Why not?* Liquor seems to be the way forward. Days and weeks and months of pouring myself into liquid amnesia. At least, I am old enough to cope that way... Hadn't had that luxury in my teenage years when my brain had turned to mush after the incident. It wasn't until I had found my calling as a surgeon, that I'd found a goal in life, a way to ground myself and keep moving forward. Until her—she is what makes it all worthwhile. Someone I can take care of, protect, share my fears, my deepest desires... Someone with whom I can build a future. "Bloody fuck," I growl. *Why the hell can't I stop thinking about her?* This is not good at all. "Not good."

"Women, huh?" Homeless man folds his legs under himself to sit cross-legged. I stare at his bare feet. There's something wrong with this picture. I frown. "Your shoes," I say, "what happened to them?"

"Got stolen." He raises his shoulders, "Shit happens." He scratches his jaw—which is cleanshaven? That's what it is. I glance down at his feet again. His toenails are clean and cut short, so I hadn't been mistaken. This guy is finicky about his grooming.

"Take mine." I reach for my shoe, tug it off and offer it to him.

He eyes it warily, then takes it from me and slips it on. "Imagine that; it fits." He chuckles.

I slip off the other one; he shoves his other foot into it.

The shoes do look good on him, actually. I tilt my head, stare up into his features. His eyes are clear...a glitter of intelligence in their depths.

"What happened to you?" he asks.

I frown, "What do you mean?"

He points at my middle finger in its splint.

"That?" I crack my neck, "Someone ran me off the road."

"The world's a dangerous place." He nods. "Gotta take care of what's yours."

I nod. "You're onto something there."

"Thanks for the shoes." He shakes his head and the bells at the end of his Santa hat jingle. "Merry Christmas."

"Sure. Whatfuckingevery, man."

I rise to my feet. A man jostles my shoulder as he passes.

"The fuck?" I turn to watch him hurry into her apartment block. I frown. Clearly, this isn't my day. I turn to leave.

"You've got to see what's in front of your eyes," Homeless Guy calls after me.

I pause.

"When we two parted

In silence and tears,

Half broken-hearted

To sever for years," his voice fills the space.

I turn on him.

He holds my gaze.

"Pale grew thy cheek and cold,

Colder thy kiss;

Truly that hour foretold

Sorrow to this," he recites.

"What the fuck was that about?" I growl.

"Byron." He blinks.

My heartbeat ratchets up, "Who the fuck are you talking about?"

"Lord Byron, the poet," he replies. "Who did you think it was?"

I shake my head. Of course, it was the poet. This fucker has no connection to the Byron that the Seven had identified as the head of the Mafia... The ones responsible for kidnapping us and changing our fucking lives. Does he?

"Don't delay." He turns to stare up at the apartment block.

I follow his gaze to the window on the first floor, her apartment. A man's shoulders fill the space.

"The fuck?" I straighten, stare at the window. *There's no one there.* I didn't imagine that. I didn't.

Had she replaced me that quickly? I'd barely left and she'd found someone else to take my place? Someone else to bring her to orgasm, to hold her when she shatters, someone else to gaze into those baby blues of hers and declare his love for her as he holds her in his arms? "How dare she?" I stalk forward, retrace my steps to the apartment block.

Amelie

What the hell had happened? One second, he'd been tickling me and we'd been laughing together. The next, he'd rolled off me, off my bed, headed out of the apartment—and what the hell was that whole thing about not having a future together? Did he mean it? That that... Dumbass fruitcake. That... Mother-trifle... Argh! I can't even get my insults together.

I stand in the middle of the kitchen surveying the remnants of the apple pie—now crumbled all over the dining table. I fold my arms around my waist, over the shirt I'd slipped on, his shirt... Because Mr Alpha dickhead had marched out leaving it behind. I glance out the window. He had to be cold with that bare chest of his exposed to the elements. No doubt, every woman who passed him would ogle him. No doubt, he'd indulge them too and preen.

I curl my fingers into fists and my fingernails dig into my palms. The hell is wrong with me? Why do I already miss him? Do I want to see him again? Why the hell do I want to spend time with a man who is an obnoxious, full-of-himself prat of the highest order. I lean forward, scoop up a crumb of the apple pie. I suck on my finger and the familiar taste of sweet and savory fills my mouth, interspersed with that edgy, darkness that is him. I stare at my wet finger—

That's what it is. He is the contrast to my forced self-confidence. I mean, I can try to pretend to the world that I have it all under control. I can live by the “fake it 'til I make it” motto, which I had embraced as my own so long ago—

Except, I could never fool him.

He'd cut through all that sassiness, all that bravado I present to the world, and known me. He'd seen me for what I am. A woman who wants to be taken, to be possessed, to be taken care of. With him... I trust him to take control. Only with him can I find the strength to surrender completely; and he...? He'd known what I needed even before I had. He'd seen me for the eclair I am. All hard on the outside, but drop me in water and I'll dissolve and impart my sweetness to my surroundings—no wait, that metaphor is all wrong—I mean, hard on the outside, soft on the inside... Well, partially... There is more to me than that. I am more like a sticky toffee pudding—mess with me and I'll screw you up bad... Hell, what am I thinking?

Fact is, there's something between us—something hot and vital and real, something that attracts us to each other even as the contrasts highlight how different we are. I hate him. I love him. I can't live without him. I stiffen. Damn, why the hell did I have to go and fall for the wrong man? At least, he'd confessed he loves me—right before he'd walked out on me. Why the hell can't he let me in on his secrets? Can't he see I want to understand him? That I want to spend my life with him? And he wants it too; he does. Only the alphahole has too much of a bloody ego to see it.

I kick the chair in front of me, which topples over. Pain shoots through my foot. "Ow." I hop around on one foot, then fall against the table, which creaks, put out a hand to right myself, and my fingers brush against the spatula I had used earlier. It hits the kitchen timer, which rolls over. Ah, just what I am looking for.

I snatch up the egg-timer, rotate the dial, and the ticking of the countdown fills the room. I turn toward the oven when the thud of a footstep vibrates behind me. My heart slams into my chest. *Is it him? Is he back?* The dense scent of a man's cologne fills my senses.

I've smelled this scent before; it's someone else. Someone who is in my kitchen, with me. My hackles rise. I grab the spatula on the table, turn as a hand closes over my mouth. I scream but the sound emerges muffled. My heart begins to thud. My throat closes. *Let go of me, let go.* I swipe at his arm with my weapon of choice. His grip over my face tightens. I pull my knee up to kick back at him. He grabs me around my waist.

"Stop struggling or I'll hurt you," he snarls in my ear. His voice is sharp, an edge of desperation heightening his tone. Hell, this man is dangerous. He wouldn't hesitate to follow up on his promise.

I slump in his grasp. He begins to drag me across the kitchen when I hear, "Amelie?" Weston's voice calls out from the direction of the living room, "Where the fuck are you? Who the fuck are you with? Couldn't wait to get me out your hair and invite your lover in, huh?"

His footsteps approach. *OMG, it's him.* I need to get his attention. If I can just manage to get this intruder's hand off of my mouth... I begin to struggle in earnest, hit out with my leg, pull back my elbow, and it connects with his stomach.

He grunts, then begins to drag me toward the cupboard in the corner. No way, no way am I letting him get me in there. I bite down on his hand. He swears but doesn't release me. He yanks on my hair so hard that I see stars. Pain ricochets down my spine and tears of frustration fill my eyes. Dammit, I am not giving in like this. I refuse to be a damsel in distress. Fuck this. I double up my knee then kick back. I connect with his shin, and pain thuds up my leg. The bastard huffs out a breath. His grip loosens. Finally! I wrench my face to the side, then scream.

"Amelie." Weston barges into the room.

The intruder swings around, putting me in front of him. He swings his arm around my neck, yanks me against him. He's tall and broad; the heat of his body curls over me and my skin crawls. "Let me...go." I cough, swipe at his arm with my spatula. He grabs it, wrenches it from my hold, then throws it at Weston, who steps aside in a move so graceful that I blink. The man can move...and not just in bed. If I get out of this alive, I am going to sit on him, in said bed, and ensure that we not leave that space for weeks.

Weston glances at me, "You okay?" His voice is toneless. His features are hard. Gone is the kinky doctor, the demanding lover, the son who cares for his mother... In its place, is a man far more lethal than the intruder who has me in his grasp.

"Amelie?" Weston snaps, "Answer me."

"Yes." I squeak, then clear my throat. "I am fine."

He turns his gaze to the man who holds me captive.

"What do you want?" he asks. "If it's money, let me get to my wallet—" He takes a step forward.

The man swoops out his hand, grabs a knife from the rack next to the cooking range. He presses its edge to my neck and the blood drains from my face. No, no, no, this can't be happening. My pulse rate ratchets up, my heart hammering so hard in my chest, I am sure it's going to jump out. My head

spins. No, I will not faint, no way. I bite down on the inside of my cheek, draw in a breath, then another. The silence stretches. A beat, another.

The ticking of the countdown clock fills the space. Weston's gaze darts to the egg timer—his face pales. A nerve throbs at his temple, beating in tandem with the stupid tick-tock of the timer. Ugh, why did I have to wind it up? Because I could? Because I thought I was alone. Because I was being spiteful... Gah! Death by kitchen timer... Nooo, that's like a terrible B-grade screamer movie. I am not going out this way, not without a fight. I raise my hand and the intruder presses the knife deeper. Pinpricks of pain spark out from the cut and I feel a drop of blood trickling down my throat. The ball of emotion in my chest seems to expand. I try to swallow, but find my mouth is too dry. Hell, do something, anything.

I stare at Weston, at the sweat that glistens on his forehead. *Look at me, look at me*, I urge him in my mind. *Please baby, tear your gaze away from that stupid egg timer—if we get out of this, I promise I'll throw away every single, stupid timer in the house... I'll switch to those silent ones, the newer digital ones even*—I cringe. Okay, so they are not my favorite, but no choice. Needs must, and all that. The intruder grips my arm, urges me to take a step forward.

Weston doesn't move—the muscles of his massive shoulders lock and his chest planes could be hewn out of rock. Everything within him seems riveted by that horrible timer. *OMFG, what the hell am I going to do now?*

The intruder nudges me and I move forward, closer...closer to where Weston stands, rooted to the spot. His jaw tics and the tendons of his throat bulge. His arms are locked into his sides—frozen in the moment that he'd spotted the timer.

How long did I set it for? Ten minutes? Five? Oh God, please let it be for five or less. Why did I have to touch that stupid thing? Can I rewind back this morning...to the time in bed, when he had reached for me and tickled me until I couldn't stop laughing? Had it been just this morning? And why hadn't I thrown my arms and legs around him, clung to him and not let him leave? We could have still been in bed, all toasty and warm, and fucked each other until we'd collapsed again. Yes, that's what I want when this is over—an entire non-stop marathon of make-up sex. Weston, darling, please hold on, just a few more minutes, just a— The intruder shoves me forward, I stumble, slip on some of the remnants of the apple pie that are still on the ground. My legs slide out from under me, and I scream.

There's a blur of action. I sense Weston move—he swoops down, grabs the egg-timer, hurls it toward me.

48

Weston

The egg-timer rings as it sails through the air. It grazes the forehead of the intruder—who's wearing a mask. Of course, he is. Motherfucker! And my aim with my left hand sucks! Jesus, and I call myself a surgeon? When I most need precision, I am fucking hampered by the bloody splint. The asshole sways, then the knife slips from his fingers and crashes to the ground.

Amelie lurches forward. She stumbles and my heart slams into my ribcage. I jump forward, reach her as she collapses. I yank her to my side and behind me.

I raise my hand at the bastard, who's still standing. Why the hell is he still standing? I bury my fist in his face. He howls. I swing my fist at him again, he arches back, and I graze his shoulder. He straightens, then swings at me. I raise my left arm, deflect the blow. He comes at me again. I swear, angle my body to protect her. He lands a punch in my shoulder. At least it's the unhurt arm. I grunt, try to weave away. Behind me, Amelie stiffens and wriggles in my grasp. I turn my face—big mistake, asshole lands one in the side of my head. Sparks flare between my eyes. I growl, shake my head.

Amelie snarls, tugs in my grasp. "Let me go," she whispers.

"No," I growl, pull away as the bastard tries to deck me again.

"Unhand me, you macho ass." She pulls away, but I refuse to release her. She buries her teeth in my bicep. *The fuck?*

I grunt, loosen my hold on her, just as the intruder buries his fist in my other shoulder. A growl rips from me; my entire arm throbs...especially the

motherfucking middle finger in a splint—"F-u-u-c-k!" I shake my head, focus my attention on the motherfucker. I curl my fist—my bloody left fist—swing at him, land a hit, then again. He grunts, lumbers backward. I head butt him, and he crashes into the counter behind him.

I raise my arm as Amelie yells, "Take that you bastard." She heaves the spatula at the stranger, catches him in the nose. He howls, presses his palm to his face, pushes away, turns and lurches around the dining table. "You bloody prick, you dare break into my apartment?" She grabs the next available weapon—which happens to be the other pie—the one left to cool on the counter behind her. She throws it at the retreating figure, catches him in the shoulder. He grunts, stumbles, steadies himself at the doorframe—asshole's wearing gloves as well.

"You think I am afraid? Huh? You think you can come in here and invade my space... you... you..."

"Dickhead?" I supply.

"No, that's an insult I reserve for you," she cries.

She glances around, reaches for another knife, throws it at him...misses. The blade embeds in the doorframe.

The intruder runs out of the kitchen. The next second, the door to the apartment slams behind him.

"You fucking prick, you horrible, mangy-faced, skiving, conniving, dodgy cocksucker—" She grabs hold of a whisk, hurls it at the door, picks up the pastry brush and throws it, then reaches for a wooden spoon.

I reach for her, "Amelie."

"Randy, ass-whipped... ignominious—" She throws the spoon in the direction of the door, but it only makes it halfway over before hitting the floor. She stumbles forward, reaches for the cookie cutter. I grab her wrist. She swings at me, her gaze wild, hair flowing about her shoulders.

"Princess, stop," I admonish her. She stabs the rolling pin in my chest, "Ouch." I grunt, press down with my fingers, "He's gone, Buttercup."

"What if he comes back?" she pants.

"He won't," I promise.

"What if he does?" she insists.

I lower her hand, slide the rolling pin from her fingers, "Then, uh, I promise to defend us from him, with—" I raise the rolling pin, "This?" I frown.

She glances at it, then at my face. "That's ridiculous." She giggles.

"It is, huh?" I quirk my lips, then hold up the blasted thing in a defensive gesture, "Well then, am I Westley enough for you?"

"No." She shakes her head, "I prefer you as Weston."

"And I fucking love you, any which way." I peruse her flushed features. "Even armed with deadly kitchen utensils—"

"Baking tools," she corrects me.

"What-fucking-ever." I fling the rolling pin aside, hold out my arms.

She jumps up and into my embrace.

"Fucking hell, Buttercup, you fucking bloody scared me," I say as I scoop her up.

She wraps her legs around my waist. "You stupid oaf, you left me, in the bed, on my own." She hiccoughs.

"Yeah, I am that and more," I agree. "You can call me any bloody insult under the sun and I deserve it all."

"He...he..." She buries her face in my chest, "He held a knife to my throat, oh, my God!" Her entire body shakes, her shoulders treble and my heart, my bloody heart stutters.

"Shh." I brush my cheek against her hair, "Shh, babe, I am here."

"You turned your back on...", she mumbles. "You walked out. How could you do that?" She digs her fingers into my shoulders and I wince.

Fuck, that's how much of a weak motherfucker I have become. I can't even hold up to being mauled by my woman. I reach the table, lower her onto it.

She clings to me. "Don't leave me," she mumbles between gusts of sobbing.

"Don't cry, Princess, please." I hold her close, wrap my arms around her. She doesn't let go, just buries her face in my chest and sobs. I try to pull back, and she only sobs louder.

"Babe," I mutter, "I just want to make sure that you're not hurt."

"You hurt me." She hiccups, "You ass, you broke my heart."

"I am so sorry, Cookie, I truly am."

"Huh?" She leans back in the circle of my arms. "Say that again."

"I am sorry?"

"No after that."

"I truly am?" I frown.

"No, you stupid goof, in between those two phrases."

"What did I say?" I blink.

"A word beginning with C?"

"Cunt?" I smirk.

She slaps my shoulder.

I wince. "Ouch, easy there, darling. I'm afraid he managed to get in a few hits as well."

"You'll survive," she grumbles. "Say it, you idiot, the nickname you just used."

"You mean Caramel?"

"No."

"Candy."

"Nooooo," she growls.

"Cherry pie?"

"You are such a tease." She digs her fingers in the shoulder of my hurt arm.

"Hey," I wince, "you're hurting me."

"Good," she huffs, "you deserve it."

"I do," I agree.

She blinks, "Wow, you're actually agreeing that you are a jerkface?"

"Yep."

"And a dickhead?"

"But I am your dickhead, darling Cookie."

"I like that name best." She sniffs, "Especially when you kiss me after saying it."

I survey the skin of throat, which seems unbroken, thank fuck.

"How dare that bastard threaten you with a knife." I trace my thumb over the pulse that flutters at the base of her throat. "When I get my hands on him —"

"You will not go after him," she scolds.

"I must," I reply. "He came after what belongs to me."

"Do I belong to you?" she asks.

"Of course, you do." I run my finger down the hollow between her breasts, around her nipples.

"What are you doing?" Her voice is breathless.

"Uh, taking care of you."

"He didn't hurt me there."

My vision tunnels, "Bastard touched you. I am going to kill him, I—"

She grips the 'V' of the shirt—my shirt, and tugs. The buttons pop and the

shirt gapes to reveal the creamy curves of her breasts.

"What are you doing?" I stare at the curves, the nipples that she reveals when she shoves the shirt down her arms.

"Cookie," I breathe, take in the spread in front of my eyes. My throat closes. I stare at the blush that colors her gorgeous skin, her pink nipples that harden into plum-colored pebbles. I bend down, close my mouth around one, and tug. She moans. I bite down and she cries out. I suck on her sweet flesh and she sinks her fingers into my hair. I kiss one breast, then the other, straighten and peer into her face. "You're mine, Princess, my woman."

Her pupils dilate and her breathing grows shallow.

I pull away and she frowns, "Where are you going?"

"To lock the door to the apartment."

"No." She scissoring her legs around my waist. "Don't go." She grabs my arms. "Please." Her lips tremble, "Stay with me."

"You're safe, Cookie."

"Only as long as I am with you, Wes." She leans in, drags her tongue around my nipple. I groan. She bites down on the nub with her sharp teeth and I feel it all the way to my cock. My dick lengthens in my pants. The tent at my crotch stabs into her core, still covered by my shirt and her panties.

"Fuck," I growl, "I really should secure the place first."

"You really should check out how wet I am for you."

I reach down between her legs, push aside her panties, and my knuckles graze her melting core.

She pants and I groan, "You're mine, Amelie. Only mine."

I lower my zipper, grab my cock and position it at the entrance to her channel.

"Mine to make love to, to bring to climax over and over again, mine to claim." I kick my hips forward, thrust inside her moist channel. My balls slap against her inner thigh, pressure builds in my groin.

Then the doorbell rings.

49

Amelie

"Expecting someone?" He pulls out of me, the head of his fat dick poised at the entrance to my pussy.

I groan, dig my fingers into his tight flank. "Ignore it!" I plead.

His nostrils flare and the skin pulls tightly across his cheeks. "Sure you're not expecting any lovers? Anyone I need to know about?" He massages the curve of my hip.

I shiver. "You're the only one in my life, Doc," I moan.

"Damn fucking right." He pounds into me again, with such force the entire table shakes. The mixing bowl crashes to the ground, rolls, then comes to a stop.

In the silence that follows I can't stop the giggle that bursts from my throat.

"You think it's funny?" He frowns.

"No," I chuckle.

He pulls out, then sinks back into me. "Yes," I gasp, "yes, it is actually."

"Clearly, I am not doing this right, if you are thinking about something else other than how I am going to tear your pussy apart, how I am going to sink inside you so deep you'll feel like you are splitting in half."

He pumps his hips forward, rams into me, and his balls slap against my inner thigh. *Oh, hell!* A moan spills from my lips. I reach up, wind my arms around him... Well, as much as I can reach, that is. This man is so broad, I reach maybe halfway around his back.

"Wes." I pant... "Please."

"You're fucking killing me, Princess." He bends his knees, loops his arms under my knees, and pulls my legs up and over his shoulders.

Instantly, he slips deeper inside, the crown of his cock hitting that secret part of me—one I didn't even know existed until now. "Oh." I open and close my mouth. "Oh, my," I gasp.

"When I saw that motherfucker with his hands on you, my heart stopped." He growls, "I swear, if you do that to me again, I'll—"

"You'll?"

"I'll chain you to my bed and never let you go until I've fucked every hole in your body over and over again, until I've covered you under layers of apple pie and licked them all off of your skin, off every gorgeous curve, from between your legs, from the tops of your breasts, the slope of your butt, the turn of your ankles, the valley between your arse-cheeks. Then I'll fuck you until I take you to the edge, but I won't let you come. I'll start all over again, this time with chocolate, then cream, then work my way through every ingredient of your dessert repertoire."

"Oh." I blink. My pussy clenches around his dick.

"You like that, hmm?"

"I..." I gulp, "I..."

He smirks, "I am going to fuck you now."

I blink, stare up into those hard features—a flush smears his cheeks, those gray eyes are pools of desire, of lust, of everything I've always wanted and hoped for but never thought possible. I see myself reflected in them—him, me, us... Our future. "Wes," I groan, "don't stop, don't—"

He thrusts forward, impaling me. His shaft fills me, stretches me, his girth imprinting every ridge, every hard inch of him against every millimeter of my sensitive channel. Goosebumps flare on my skin, and pinpricks of pleasure and sparks of heat shoot out from the contact. He slams into me again and I cry out, throw my head back, hold onto him and wait, wait— He begins to fuck me with domination, with precision, with that complete self-assurance that is so Weston. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God," I chant.

"That's me, baby." He pulls out. "Never forget."

He propels his hips forward, sinks into me, hitting that place inside again and I howl, "Wes, please. I'm, I'm going to—"

"Come with me, Princess," he growls, and I shatter. The climax screams over me, and I cry out again. He kisses me, absorbs the noise I make, as he

continues to fuck in and out of me, before sinking into me once more. He tears his mouth from mine. "Look at me," he growls.

I force my eyes to open, meet his gaze as he spills himself inside of me with a grunt, his features contorted into an expression of dominance and ecstasy that is so very Wes. He leans his forehead against mine.

My eyelids flutter shut as I float down from the space he always takes me whenever we make love, where everything is golden and happy and peaceful, save for my heart that hammers. The blood pounds at my temples; it mirrors the thump-thump-thump in his chest.

There's more banging, then the sound of the door to the apartment being pulled open.

"You there, Amelie?" A woman's voice calls out.

I snap my eyes open, "Oh, hell—" I gasp, "It's—"

"Amelie!" The voice sounds closer, "Where are you? My flight got in earlier than expected, I'm—Oh... OH!" There's the sound of a startled exclamation, "Oh, I'm sorry."

I turn my head over my shoulder and heat flushes my face. "Julia," I exclaim.

"Ah..." My friend glances from me to Weston, then back at me, "Umm... I'm so sorry..." She averts her eyes, "Ah, my flight just got in... I came in straight from the airport...uh! Why don't I go get coffees for all of us? I'll be right back."

"Wait, Julia..." I shove at Weston who, of course, doesn't budge an inch.

"It's fine, don't worry." She turns away, waves her hand in the air, "It's all good, honest. I'll, uh, be right back." She scampers off.

I turn to Wes, "Let me go." I slap at his shoulder.

"No," he smirks, "in case you've forgotten, I'm still inside of you."

His dick pulses inside of me and I blink, "You're hard again? How's that possible, you just ah, came..."

"So?" He bends his knees and kisses me, "Merry fucking-Christmas, by the way."

"You can say that again." I throw my arms around him and kiss him back, "Please can we get dressed, before she returns?"

Ten minutes later, I watch him in the mirror in my bedroom. He'd jumped in the shower a few minutes ago, and now he shrugs into the shirt I'd rescued from the kitchen floor.

He does up the buttons—the one's that had survived when I had ripped it off earlier. Gah! Had I actually done that? Around him I seemed to turn into some kind of sex addict. But can you blame me? I stare at the gorgeous planes of his chest being hidden by the fabric. My throat dries. The pleasant ache between my legs intensifies. I'll never get enough of him, never.

He tugs on the lapel of his shirt. "I can keep this off, if you prefer." His lips curl.

"Not a chance." I close the gap between us, then stab my finger into his rock-hard abs, "I don't feel like sharing right now. Besides, this picture-perfect cut physique belongs to me, you get me?"

He chuckles, "My, my, how possessive you sound, little Red?"

"All the better to scratch you with." I drag my fingernail down the demarcation between his pecs. Why the hell can't I keep my hands off of him?

"I can't wait to see you in scrubs," I mutter.

"I am sure I can oblige." He smirks, "kinky doctor-patient games are my specialty."

"And here I thought it was food kink that got you off." I widen my gaze.

"When it comes to you, babe, everything I do takes on another dimension." He runs his big palm down the curve of my waist and slaps my butt.

"Whoa, whoa," I protest. "What's that for?"

"Keeping you warm." He massages my arse, then cups the other cheek with his free hand and squeezes. My sex instantly clenches. He drags me up on my tiptoes, and the tent in his crotch pokes me.

"You're hard," I mumble.

"You're soft." His grip on my backside tightens and my nipples instantly pucker. Moisture pools between my thighs. "This is not the time," I half protest. "Julia will be back any moment."

He groans, "I think I much prefer the cabin. At least, I could have you to myself there."

I chuckle, "I'll always remember it as the place where I walked in on you naked."

"If I had my way, you and I would be naked for a month, on an island in the middle of nowhere."

"Just as long as there is an oven where I can bake." I warn.

"I'd rather see you baking in the sun... Naked, of course."

I shake my head, "Don't you think of anything but sex?"

"Do you?" He chuckles.

"I think you're fast becoming my favorite dessert, Doc Kincaid," I reply.

"You know you are always mine." He laughs and his features light up. His hair is all mussed up, thanks to me—I'd clung to it, when he'd insisted on going down on me, one last time before he'd released me. Seriously, the man is insatiable. The soreness between my legs is testament to that—and the hickeys on my neck, the bitemarks on my breasts—which is why I am wearing this long-sleeved turtle-neck sweater and a fresh pair of jeans. I glance down at his bare feet, "Did you lose your shoes?"

"Gave them to the homeless guy outside the apartment building."

A warm feeling seizes my chest. "You did that?" I ask. "You gave the shoes you were wearing to someone who needed them?"

He raises his shoulders, then widens his stance. "Don't go reading anything into it," he mutters. "It seemed like the thing to do; no big deal."

I scan his features, "I don't know of too many people who'd do that, you know?"

He cracks his neck in a gesture I am beginning to recognize. He does it when he's embarrassed and trying to hide it.

"You're full of shit Dr. Kinky-as-hell-Caid," I say. "You try so hard to come across all dominant and hard-ass, but in reality, you're like... like..."

"Like?"

"A Jammie dodger."

"A Jammie dodger?"

I nod, "One of those cookies which is double-layered, and hard on the outside, but is filled with sweet gooey jam in the center."

"Hmm." His eyes gleam. "You can taste my jam any day, baby."

"Eeyugh," I make a gagging sound, "I left myself open to that, didn't I? Will I never learn?" I groan.

"It's too easy to tease you." He steps closer, "You're the jam to my cookie; the pumpkin to my pie, the chocolate in my toffee."

"Thought you hated chocolate?" I swallow.

He bridges the distance between us, draws me to him, "That's what I thought too." He searches my face, "But then I tasted you and—"

"And?" I whisper.

"I realized it was missing an ingredient."

"Which is?"

He lowers his face to mine. His breath mixes with mine, our eyelashes tangle, our feet bump, he parts his lips, and the doorbell rings again.

"It's Julia," I groan. "I have to get the door."

50

Weston

She twists her body. My grasp loosens and she pulls away, then pivots and scrambles for the door.

"You," I mutter to the empty room, "it was you that I missed."

Jesus, fuck, can you hear yourself? Did you just confess that you were incomplete without her? Was I? How much do I need her in my life? Could I go on without her? A future without her would be...bleak, dull, no patches of color, no scent of complex notes, no flavors that beckon and open up my senses. Without her... I am less than half the man I could be... I rub the back of my neck. What the fuck? What just happened? Why is my heart thumping? The blood pounds at my temples and my shoulder muscles knot.

Without her... There is no future... There is no me... Bloody hell. I rotate my head, dig my fingers into my hair and tug on it. I can't leave here without her, no way. I don't know what the future holds, but if I don't keep her close... I'll never have a chance of finding out either. As long as she is with me... I stand a chance, at having everything I didn't even know I had wanted... She makes me chuckle, lightens the load I've carried alone for so long. I want her by my side, in my house, in my bed. My ring on her finger, her hand in mine, her body writhing under me as I bury myself inside of her, as I try to tame her, hold her down and fuck her, as I open myself up to her and claim her. I am going to chain her to my side in a way that she'll never leave. I have to do it. Have to get her to see things my way. That her future is mine, that I am her future, that she is my... Everything.

The band around my chest tightens and a ball of emotions fills my throat. A pressure builds behind my eyes, fuck... This...this thing that tears me apart inside and twists my guts, that buries its weight in my stomach, knots my insides and coils in my chest...dries up my throat and hardens my balls. It has to be... It has to be...fucking love. I grab my hair and tug on it. I'd said it out loud earlier, but I'd shrugged it off as something you say in the heat of the moment. But this...this gasping for breath, this sensation of my heart having been scooped out of my body, this nervousness inside of me that grows and grows, even as a desperation tightens my skin, my shoulders, my spine... All of it points to the fact that I am a fucking goner. I am in love... Bloody fuck, I am... And there's nothing I can do about it. My heart begins to pound so hard against my rib cage, I am sure I must be having a cardiac... Except I know I am not... It's the emotional shock causing my palms to sweat. My thigh muscles bunch. I lower my hand, not surprised to find that my fingers are shaking. I stalk out of the bedroom into the tiny living room space.

She faces Julia, who offers her a coffee from the takeaway tray. "I don't want to impose," she mutters.

Amelie curls both of her palms around the paper cup. "It's no imposition," she says.

"No, it isn't," I agree.

Both women turn to me.

Amelie frowns.

Julia tilts her head. "We haven't met, I'm Julia," she says.

I walk forward, halt next to Amelie, "I'm Amelie's boyfriend." Yep, I am well and truly pussy whipped. Since when had my identity become secondary to my position in her life, eh?

Amelie draws in a breath.

Julia smiles. "Good to meet you, Amelie's boyfriend." She holds out the tray of coffee.

"Thank you." I accept one of the cups, swig from it. Damn, but why couldn't it contain a shot of whiskey, at the very least? I suck down more of the coffee.

"You two been dating long?" she asks.

"Yes," I reply.

"No." Amelie shoots me a glance, her gaze narrowed.

"Long enough for me to ask her to move in with me." I smile.

Julia looks between us. "Congratulations." She holds out a hand. Amelie

ignores it.

"You... you..." She gapes at me.

"You're coming with me." I say simply.

"I'm not," she splutters, tries to pull away.

I tug her closer, tuck her into my side, and tiny thing that she is, she fits right there, plastered against me.

"Come on babe," I plead, "I can't leave you here, not after the break-in."

"Break in?" Julia exclaims.

"Yeah," I reply, without taking my gaze from Amelie's face. "Someone broke into the apartment earlier today."

"It...it was the same man who forced his way into my bakery." Amelie swallows.

"He was wearing a mask," I remind her. "How can you be sure?"

"I'm sure." She nods. "I... uh, recognized the scent of his cologne."

"You did, huh?" Something hot stabs at my chest. Whoa, what the fuck? Why the hell am I all twisted up inside because she smelled another man's aftershave? This is bloody ridiculous. "That settles it," I growl. "You're not staying here a second longer. You're coming with me."

Her gaze narrows, "I don't think so."

"Yes, you are," I snap.

Her features pinch and she sets her jaw. Fuck, I can't let her go all obstinate on me. Not that I don't mind whipping it out of her, but well, we have company—not that it would stop me, but Julia is her girlfriend, and the one thing I've learned from the rest of the Seven hooking up, is that, you did not show down your woman in front of her friends.

My woman. Mine. I draw her even closer.

She tilts her chin up, "What are you doing?"

"Convincing you." I lower my head, press my mouth to hers, keep the kiss soft, coaxing. I nibble on her lower lip, and when she gasps, I swipe my tongue inside her mouth, just a quick in and out, enough to remind her what is in store if she comes with me, enough to communicate that I need her, want her. A whine tumbles from her lips. My dick instantly lengthens. I tighten my hold on her shoulders, lessen the intensity of the kiss, pull back, brush her lips with mine one more time. "See, that's all settled."

"Oh." Her eyelids flutter, "Wes—"

"Don't say no." I peer into her face, "Come home with me."

She holds my gaze, her chin wobbles, then she nods. "Okay."

Okay! The breath I'd not been aware of holding wheezes out. *What the bloody fuck? Had I been nervous as I'd waited for her reply? Had I actually given her a choice? And if she had refused? Would I have left...? No, I'd have parked myself here and ensured there was security around the clock. Not that I have anything against this flat... Except there is no telling if the intruder will be back. Besides, I want her in my space, in my bed. I have to be inside of her again.*

I stare at her, and her pupils dilate. She licks her lower lip, and her breathing goes ragged.

"Right, get what you need," I say.

She turns, then gasps, "Oh, my God, Jules. I can't leave you here."

"What rubbish." Julia looks between us. "I'll be fine."

"No way, am I letting you stay here. What if the intruder returns?"

"I'll lock the door from the inside," she insists.

"It's not safe," Amelie shuffles her feet, "I don't feel comfortable leaving you here."

I frown. I can't allow her to stay on, but I don't want Julia to come with us either, not when I want Amelie to myself... No way, am I sharing her with anyone else... Not yet... Not for a while, which means... There is only one way out. "I have an idea."

51

Amelie

"Holy fuck." I stare out of the window at the view of Tower Bridge from the window of Weston's penthouse.

He'd informed me that I was on his guest list, so I could come and go as I please. Also, my fingerprints had been added to the fancy-ass security thingy on the front door to the apartment. So I had to simply touch my palm to the lock pad provided and—wowza!—the door would open to let me in. Oh, he'd let me try it and it had worked on the way in. Woo. That is some fancy shit. The kind of security only the seriously well off could afford.

Don't get me wrong, I knew he was loaded...and talented, and over-the-top dominant...but this... All this luxury that surrounds me... It's too much. When we were at the cabin, London had seemed so far away. It had been easy to forget about daily life, my debts, my growing business, the fact that he is so bloody out of my league. And at my apartment... Well, that had been my turf. I had felt more in control maybe... Which is a laugh, considering it has been broken into. It is also the place where he told me he loves me.

"Did you mean what you said?"

I hear the words and curse myself. *Why the hell can't you filter your thoughts, bitch? Why is it so important to know what he feels for you?* He wants me. He was taking no argument about leaving me behind at the apartment either. So, he lusts after my body... I mean, that's good, right? It's a start. The fact that he finds me attractive? Heat sears my back, then his big arm wraps me around my waist. He pulls me back and flush against his big

chest. Instantly, I feel tiny and cherished and taken care of. Big mistake. He is going to lure me in, fuck me senseless, keep me in a sex-induced haze, and when I wake up from it, I will regret every little piece of me I had shared with him.

"Do you actually want to know the answer to your question?"

Of course, he knows what I was referring to... And yeah, I definitely want to know the answer.

"No."

I shake my head.

"Liar," He pulls me close so my back is plastered against his perfect chest. Heat from his body cocoons me, sinks into my blood.

My toes curl. My thighs clench. *Get your mind out of the gutter, you slut.* "Umm," I hesitate. "It was nice of you to have a security system put in my flat, and on such short notice."

Yeah, he'd made one phone call and in half an hour, his security consultant had arrived, armed with an array of devices. She'd checked out the place, then rigged it with enough alarms and sensors to satisfy his exacting demands. It had taken less than two hours from start to finish, during which time, Julia and Weston had gotten along well. I'd watched from the sidelines as he'd charmed her, put my friend at ease, so that by the time it was time to leave, she was completely convinced that this was the right move for me. Well, apparently, he saves that hard-headed, demanding alphahole side of his for me... Not that I am complaining. It is part of his appeal—I admit, that firm hand of his is a bloody turn on for me. If only I could always live in this sex-haze of a bubble, huh?

He wraps both of his arms around my shoulders, enveloping me in that gorgeous scent of his. "You're deflecting, babe." He bends to nibble on the shell of my ear.

I shiver.

"Didn't think you were such a coward." He blows in my ear, and I shiver. Bloody hell, with him, every part of me turns into an erogenous zone. Bet I've sprouted nerve endings where none existed before... *All the better to sense you with, Mr. Wolf.*

He spreads his fingers over my stomach. The width of his palm is so wide that the tip of his thumb brushes the underside of my breast. My nipple instantly pebbles. *Stupid, stupid, that I am so responsive to him.*

I pull away from him. Of course, he doesn't let me budge, not a

millimeter. Against his strength, I am helpless. His force of will, his confidence... How is it possible that he always seems to know what he wants? Unlike me. My entire life is a two steps forward, one back kind of scenario. "Let me go," I mumble.

"Not a chance," he growls. The edge of his voice shivers down my spine, sinks into my center.

"Wes," I plead, "you're making this very hard."

"I'll make it simple." He releases me, only to flip me around. "Look at me."

I stare at his chest, the smattering of hair that peppers the dent between his perfect abs. We'd walked in and I had headed for the view and lost my composure. Now, when I lean in and press my nose into his skin and inhale, notes of sweetness mixed in with his darker scent fills my senses. "You smell like us," I whisper, draw in another breath, then bend and lick him. "You taste like honey and chocolate bomb overlaid with cinnamon and cloves and a dash of vanilla." Yum!

A groan rumbles up his chest.

"Woman you've got to stop comparing me to desserts."

"Oh?" I glance up at him, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day instead?"

"Shakespeare?" He tilts his head.

I stare up at that perfect visage, that strong jaw, the mean upper lip that hints at the dominance inside that drew me to him...those thick eyebrows, the eyelashes that fringe his keen gaze. Everything about him is right, more than right. He is the complete package—he fits me; body, mind and soul, and damn it... This is all wrong. I can never have him, could never keep him. What do I have that could hold his attention? Why does he have to understand me so well? Tears knock against the back of my eyes.

"What's wrong?" He frowns.

"I don't belong here."

"You belong with me."

"I don't want you."

"You do."

"I can't do...this."

"What?"

"Whatever this is." I wave my hand in the air, "Playing house...or rather playing mansion—or whatever it is the other half calls it."

"Is that what you think this is?" He seems perplexed.

"Isn't it?"

"Maybe," he concedes. "Maybe not." He releases me, then steps back. He'd changed clothes, and now his tailored slacks mold his thighs and cling to that spectacular butt as he paces the floor in his Italian shoes—how many of them does he have in his closet, huh?

He drags his fingers through his hair, drawing my attention to how his biceps bulge against his button-down shirt. My mouth waters. *Whoa down girl, haven't you feasted on his delectable body enough?* And that's the problem. I'd prefer to lick his sculpted abs—and uh, other parts of him—over chocolate. Shit, I am so screwed.

"I am not sure what this is between us," he concedes.

"You're not?" I blink. The asshole is always bloody sure of himself. He rolls his shoulders now, then cracks his neck, then pivots to face me, with his eyebrows knitted into a look I can only describe as confusion. This is a first.

"I'm not," he confirms my suspicion. "When I walked in and realized you were in danger, when he held that knife to your neck, something changed."

"It did?"

"I thought I'd failed you. If something had happened to you, I could have never forgiven myself."

"You're not my keeper," I mutter. "I've taken care of myself for so long."

"And look where that has gotten you." He scowls.

"What?" I blink, "Did you just say what I think you did?"

"Look," He holds up his hands, "I'm not saying you haven't tried your best, but I could make things much easier for you with my money, my contacts."

I swallow and something hot stabs at my chest. My throat closes and my eyes burn. Why the hell had I thought anything had changed? Because he'd chased that goddam burglar from my apartment? No, hold on, I'd played a part in that too. Because he'd ensured that my friend would be safe in my apartment? That was because he wanted me close, where he could keep an eye on me, take care of me, control me. That's what this is about.

He wants me here so I can be his little fuck toy. He'd have his way with me... Oh, yeah, I'd enjoy every second of it too.. And then what? He'd throw me away? Well, he'd have paid me for my time...

And I don't want it. I'd rather live in debt for the rest of my life, than be obligated to him.

Not that it wasn't part of the arrangement. I mean, I'd gone into it with my eyes open, not realizing I was giving him what he needed—a way to manipulate me.

Whatever the future might hold for us, whatever there could be between us... As long as the money stands between us...the money I had accepted...it would always be a relationship which would be measured, a connection which had a number attached to it... It's too finite. Too tangible. Too...restrictive. Something that goes against how I had lived my life, the future I wanted for myself. I want him, all right, but not at the cost of my self-respect.

If I stay, and accept the money, and allow him to treat me like one of his other women, someone whose bond is tainted by the materialistic aspects of life... We don't stand a chance. Not the way I want.

"This...is all wrong," I say.

He closes the distance between us, "I don't agree."

"I don't want your money."

He stares, "Excuse me?"

"I don't like how it makes everything too easy."

"Are you kidding me?" He scowls. "That's what it is meant for—to pave the way, to achieve dreams, to help you get what you want."

"I can do it on my own." I tip up my chin. "I will achieve my goals, on my own merit."

"What are you saying?" He glowers, "You're not making any sense to me."

"For the first time since I met you, I am making sense to myself."

His gaze widens, "So you admit that I affect you?"

I throw up my hands, "That has never been in dispute. I mean, come on, it's clear we can't keep our hands off of each other. Put us in a room and we'll end up in bed. Hell, I hear your voice on the phone and I'm wet."

"You are, huh?" He smirks and his shoulder muscles seem to broaden.

"OMG!" I slap my forehead, "Of course, you'd choose to focus on the more obvious. Of everything I said, is that the only thing you heard?"

"You want me; I want you. We're good together." He raises his shoulders, "What else is there?"

"Everything." I swallow, "And nothing." I peer into his face, "After all that we've been through, you still don't get it, do you?"

"Is this about the money?" He scowls, "Because if that's the case, I'll

double what I am paying you."

"Money?" A chill spreads across my skin. "You think it's about the money?"

"I'll triple it."

"Triple?" I stare, "You'll triple the money?" *Is he for real? Isn't he hearing anything I am trying to communicate to him? And I thought he got me?*

"That's eighteen million pounds in your bank account on New Year's Day."

I cough. That's a bloody hell of a lot of money. I'd never see that in this lifetime, for sure. If I accepted it, I'd never be able to live with myself. I'd hate myself every day for the rest of my life. Besides, what's the difference between one million and eighteen million, huh? Other than the zeroes? That's the thing with money. The more you have of it, the less it does for you. Nope, I may have been blinded by what the money could have done for me—could still do for me, but not anymore.

"I'll throw in this penthouse," he growls. "Hell, say the word and I'll sign it over to you."

I open my mouth, then purse my lips together, "Good bye, Weston."

I brush past him, spot my suitcases by the door of the living room. He'd had his driver deliver my suitcases to this address. Sneaky bastard had planned it all along... How did I miss it? How come I didn't see through him? I was an acquisition for him. A possession. Hell, he even dropped the 'L' word in the height of passion, hoping it would convince me to give in to him. Well, fuck him, and his money and his bloody view—which is spectacular, I've never seen that view of London in real life before and will probably never do so again. Tears prick the backs of my eyes. *Get out before you bawl your eyes out over that ass.*

I ignore my luggage; it will only delay me, and I don't want that. I have Peter's contact details; I'll ask him to deliver it home. I'm sure Weston won't stop him, will he? I hesitate. Too bad. I'll have to risk it then. I am not stopping here for one second more. I grab my chef's satchel from the coffee table, tuck my handbag into my side, then head for the door.

"Don't you want to check out the kitchen?" He calls out.

I pause. "What?"

"The kitchen," he says, "it's to your right."

I stare straight ahead. Focus my gaze on the double doors to this blasted,

beautiful penthouse. *Get out of here, get out of here.* I take a step forward.

"It has a never-before-used double oven that you have to see."

"It does?"

"You bet." He walks past me, heads toward what I assume is the kitchen.

"And all the ingredients you'd need to bake apple pies..."

I swallow.

"Macaroons," he drawls.

I tighten my grip on my bag.

"Triple chocolate cake," he adds.

I turn to him, "Nothing I can't do in my kitchen."

"With this view?" He jerks his chin toward the kitchen, "Not to mention, the complete range of baking tools that you'll need to whip up your specialties."

"You know how I feel about your flaunting your wealth in my face, right?"

"Who said anything about money? This is simply a fully-equipped kitchen, crying out for the right chef to inaugurate it and give it purpose."

I frown. *How the hell does he know exactly how to get to me?* I mean, his words... They are like coffee in the morning, like oats for granola bars, like custard for fruit salad, argh! Stop it...your comparisons suck. Besides, I don't plan to stay. I'll take a peek, check out the kitchen... I mean, it's only a few minutes more, right?

Weston

She glances at the big-ass oven—the sleek, professional one, perfect for a baker to use at home, the one I'd had installed yesterday... Whew! She hates my money, but fuck, if it doesn't have its advantages. I've never given the money a second thought, to be fair. Perhaps, it's what comes from being born into wealth... And my career as a heart surgeon? Let's just say, it pays well. And I had invested with the Seven. We had chosen our ventures carefully, especially FOK media which had been a passion project and an investment, which is already paying dividends. So, fuck if I am going to apologize for the money that was mine by birth and which I had helped multiply through my hard work. I get where she's coming from though. She wants to strike out on her own... And I am not stopping her. I'm simply removing obstacles from her way, giving her the best chance of success. Doesn't she realize that? Why can't she accept the fact that everything that is mine is hers? If I could serve up the world on a platter to her, I'd do it. I stiffen. Do I think that? All that emo shit that I'd been sure was not for me...? Clearly, I'm rolling in that shit, thanks to Ms. Chocolate Cookie... Hell, I've even accepted the presence of chocolate in my life, and Christmas, and all that shit that has never mattered before? I want it all...with her. That's it. I need help—need to figure out how to solve this conundrum that I have worked myself into.

I pull out my phone, pace the floor of my bedroom, as I dial Damian's number.

"Motherfucker!" he says as his greeting.

"Merry fucking Christmas to you too, asshole," I reply.

"Yeah, yeah, same to you with knobs on." He yawns, "What are you doing on the phone with me? I thought you'd be shacked up with your bride in the penthouse."

"Jesus, I'm not married man. Far from it."

"Why aren't you?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Straight question, man." He yawns again. "Why don't you put a ring on her finger, put the two of you out of your misery, and let the rest of us get some sleep, huh?"

"Whoa, whoa." I cough. "You're not mincing any words here. What's up? You got a woman there you're eager to get back to?"

"What do you think?" He chuckles.

Yeah, he's with someone.

"Look I need your advice," I mutter.

"I gave it to you already. Don't expect me to make your decisions for you."

"Christ," I mutter, "what's prompted this level of candidness."

"Maybe it's the Christmas spirit, bro." I hear him move around. "Maybe I am tired of watching you screw up over and over again." His footsteps thud on the wooden floor, then the rustle of clothes reaches me. "Hold on." I hear the sound of muffled voices, then he comes back on the call. "So, where were we?"

"You sent her away, huh?" I ask.

"Bros before hoes and all that..." he replies, "Also, she's not the one, so..." I sense him raise his shoulders.

"How do you know that she isn't?"

"When you know, you know," he says, "and you do know, you just don't want to accept it."

"You're full of platitudes," I grumble.

"And you're full of shit," he retorts. "Why the hell don't you have a conversation with her?"

"I've tried, believe me."

"Have you, though?"

"What?"

"Told her how you feel. Have you done that?"

"I told her I love her."

There's silence, then he says, "How did you say it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, did you say it like you meant it?"

"Of course," *I think...* "only she didn't say it back."

"She didn't?"

"Nope." I begin to pace, "Maybe she doesn't feel the same way. I mean, I'm not the easiest when it comes to matters of the heart."

He bursts out laughing, "Says the heart surgeon."

"Har, har." I continue, "It's because I am so intimately conversant with that particular organ that I am wary of it."

"Have you thought of the possibility that maybe she doesn't love you?"

"What do you think, I'm stupid?"

"Do I need to answer that question?"

"Don't bother." My stomach ties itself in knots. "She probably doesn't, man, and that's fine. Perhaps in time, she'll develop feelings for me."

"Who are you and what have you done to Dr Asshole Kincaid?"

Heat flushes my neck, "Fuck off, man. If you have something to say, say it."

"You're pussy-whipped."

"You have no idea." I squeeze the bridge of my nose, "It's why I offered to triple the money I'd agreed to pay her—"

"What?" he explodes. "You did what?"

"You heard me," I mumble. A hollow feeling coils in my chest. I squeeze the bridge of my nose, "Fuck, I shouldn't have done that, huh?"

"The opposite, man. You need to take the money out of the equation."

"What do you mean?"

"Change the tone of the relationship."

"How?"

"Replace it with something...that means more to you than money... Offer that up to her... Something that you'd never have imagined giving to anyone else, or giving up for someone else." He pauses, "It could also be something that's ingrained in you... perhaps a habit which you'd change for her?"

I blink. "That...that's profound, bro."

"Sometimes I surprise myself." He laughs. "It's easier to be objective when it comes to other's problems, know what I mean?"

"Yeah," I blow out a breath. "I have to do this, right?"

"You bet," he replies, "it's time you left behind the boy who was

kidnapped for good."

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"Q: What do you call a lamb covered in chocolate?

A: Candy Baa."

-From Amelie's diary

Amelie

I slide the tray of chocolate cookies out of the oven. Yeah, I've been here for a half hour already. What can I say? I'm a sucker. And it doesn't take me much time to mix up the cookie batter. Not when all of the ingredients, and more, are available... And the oven...? Whoa!

I rake my gaze over the sparkling steel surface of the top of the range oven... The man has his faults, but he hadn't compromised when it came to the kitchen. I turn to glance out of the window; the evening light of the city pours in through the large panes. I can see the Thames and the bridge. OMG, Tower Bridge gleams as it picks up the rays from the setting sun. The entire scene is almost surreal, and beautiful, and completely not what I am used to.

But you could...you could stay here, bake in this kitchen every day, sleep in his bed every night, have him fuck you and bring you to orgasm. Hell, bet he'd even proclaim his love again and probably mean it this time... You could have everything you've dreamed of... So why the hell are you holding out? That fucking independent spirit of mine... Why the hell do I have to be this adamant?

It had seemed all right to take his money earlier... But that was before I realized I want more, want him to want me for who I am. A cakehead, who

has to figure out things her own way, without help or interference... At least, he'd left me alone to get on with the baking. *Where is he anyway? Why hasn't he checked in on me yet?*

I place the cookies on the cooling trays I'd found.

I had been on the verge of leaving and he'd managed to stall me. Clever man—he knows me too well. I smile at the thought, until I realize it's not true. If he really knew me, he'd know what I want from him. He wouldn't be trying to buy me. Suddenly, I want to cry. I need to get out of here.

I walk toward the door, then pause. I wonder what else he has in this big-ass place? Should I explore? Shouldn't I leave instead? I pause... But the cookies. Okay, I'll stay until the cookies have cooled.

I set the alarm on my phone, pocket it, then creep out of the kitchen. I head for the living room; he's not there. Turn and walk into the next room. It's a playroom, filled with toys. Bet Phe spends a lot of time in here.

I walk into the next room—a study filled with books where an eleven-year-old pre-teen would love to spend time. Yep, this is Skye's. I guess his family comes over to visit often. Does he babysit his nieces? Of course, he does.

I head into the adjacent room. The scent of cigar smoke and something else—his scent, those heavy testosterone notes tease my nostrils. This is his space, a study, more of a man-cave, complete with volumes of medical journals on the shelves.

I peruse the titles, glance down. Huh? He has an entire shelf filled with the Harry Potter books. So, he liked to read them for pleasure? Aww. A warmth trickles through my chest. I stiffen. No, you cannot allow yourself to soften. Damn it, maybe this hadn't been such a good idea.

I'd hoped to find something that would incriminate him, allow me to nurture my need to have a low opinion of him. Instead, all signs confirm that this is a man who loves his family, who has the kind of quirks I enjoy. And yeah, he is a surgeon, and he does save lives. I hunch my shoulders. The man is bloody complex and too attractive, and I don't stand a chance. This had been a bad idea. Speaking of, where the hell is the Doc? Had he been so confident that I would stay, that he'd left? Had he done it to give me some down time? To cool off maybe, and come to my senses? Typical male manipulation. I huff. He knew if he left me alone in his space, I'd investigate it. I reach the doors to his bedroom, hesitate. Go on, do it. A quick peek, that's all it is.

I shove open the doors, enter a room which I swear is as big as my apartment. My feet sink into the carpet that stretches out toward a massive king-sized bed in the center. To one side, sliding doors open onto a terrace, beyond which is the inevitable spectacular view of Tower Bridge. And at the far end? That has to be a walk-in closet. I march toward it, push open the doors and peek in. It's filled with an array of his pants, shirts, ties, suits, scrubs, his designer shoes. No watches, of course. I know, now, why he doesn't keep those accessories. Also, one entire side of the closet is cleared out. For what? Did someone else just move out? Or had he been so sure that I'd move in with him? Presumptuous, much?

As I near the kitchen, the scent of freshly baked cookies teases my nostrils. My mouth waters and my belly grumbles. I hasten my pace, head for the oven. Ha, life's so much better when you have cookies in your hand. And really, I should have left, but procrastibaking is my specialty. You know, when you have a million things to do, but you put it on the back burner and prefer to bake? I snort, then brush my hand over the apron that I'd pulled on. It's a designer piece, that much I can tell. Who makes designer aprons? More to the point, who buys them? Weston fucking Kincaid does, that's who.

I lean over the cookies, inhale the heady perfume. OMG, almost as good as fucking... Well, that's what I used to think. Then I'd met Weston and okay...baking is my second favorite pasttime now, the first being, riding his monster dick, licking the frosting off of his penis... Stop, stop. Enough already. Change of topic, focus on something else. I reach for a cookie and bring it to my mouth.

"Is that for me?"

His voice sounds so close, I squeak. The cookie slips from my fingers. He swoops down catches it.

"Good save," I mutter as he straightens and turns to me.

He glances at the piece of cookie in between his fingers, then raises it and holds it to my lips.

"Open." His gaze is fixed on my face. He peruses my features, searching... searching for... What? My compliance? That I'll throw myself at his feet and ask him to fuck me? That I'll reveal my feelings? Tell him how I've fallen for him, that I want a future with him? Have I allowed him to distract me because I don't want to leave? Because I already miss him—his large body that pins me down and allows me to be weak... Secure in the knowledge that he'll catch me. He'll take care of me... I know that...but I want

more. I part my lips and he pops the cookie in. I bite down. The soft texture melts in my mouth. I lick my lips. He lowers his gaze to my mouth, watches me with that intensity that's so Weston. I chew, swallow, open my mouth. He feeds me more of the cookie. I chew, swallow again. This time, his breath catches. The tendons of his throat move, his shoulders bunch. "Amelie," his voice is harsh and soft at the same time.

"Don't." I should turn away. This is where I walk away and never look back. Write off the past few days, count this Christmas as a lost cause, then go home to my apartment—now secure, thanks to him—and bake until I can't see straight. Then swallow down enough wine that I don't remember much of the immediate future. Go through the motions in life... Move on... Pick myself up again and plod forward, one freaking step at a time.

He holds up the last piece of the cookie.

I shake my head, "You have it."

He glances at it then pops it into his mouth. He chews on it and that's when it sinks in.

"It has chocolate," I mutter.

He raises his shoulders, "So?"

"Thought you didn't like it?"

"Told you I was coming around to it." He bends his knees and peers into my face, "In fact, it's fast becoming my second favorite dessert to eat."

My heart stutters. One stupid bit of praise from him and my heart literally seems to melt, like the chocolate in those stupid cookies.

Don't ask him. Don't.

"What's the first?" I mumble.

"What do you think?" His lips curve.

My cheeks heat. My belly flutters. *Don't blush. Don't let him see how much that compliment pleases me.* I swipe my hair over my shoulder. "Don't think that you can get back in my good graces by praising my cooking."

"Baking" he corrects me.

"Right." I drag my fingers through my hair. *Why the hell do I get the feeling that everything is out of my control, right now?* "It's time I left."

I brush past him.

"Stop," he calls out, then softly adds, "Don't leave, Cookie."

I hunch my shoulders, keep my gaze trained on the door. *You don't want this, don't want him like this. You are a big girl; you can move forward on your own. You don't need any alphahole to jerk you around and think he can*

buy you with money.

"Princess," his coaxing voice follows me, "I'll let you take the lead."

Weston

What the fuck? Did I actually say that? And I meant it, too. Anything to make her stay.

Why can't you tell her how much she means to you? Well, I am about to show her that. And isn't showing better than telling, and all that fucking emo stuff that women believe in?

She pauses at the door, hesitates.

"I mean it." I keep my voice firm. "You can do what you want with me, and I won't stop you. I'll let you take the lead in bed."

She turns to glance at me, "You will?"

"Yep." I jerk my chin.

"Right now?"

"The deal's valid for the next ten seconds."

"Deal, huh?" She frowns.

Fuck, seems I can't change my vocabulary that easily. Go on, you can do this, for her sake. Tone it down, asshole. Keep it easy; don't show how much you need her to retrace her steps, and return to you. And once she does... I'm never letting her go. I am going to find a way to tie her to me. Yep, I have to. Don't fuck this up! I loosen my shoulders, force my muscles to relax. "Okay, not a deal then, an open invitation."

"Invitation?" She chews on her lower lip. Damn her, why does she have to seem so enticing? I force my attention off of my throbbing groin, narrow my gaze on her.

"Anything you need, babe." I hold up my hands in what I hope comes across as an unthreatening gesture, "You name it, you can have it."

She frowns, "What's the catch?"

"No catch."

"I don't believe it."

"Better believe it." I allow my lips to curve.

She stares at my face.

"What?"

"Did you actually smile without smirking?"

"I don't smirk..." I protest.

She arches an eyebrow.

"Okay, maybe sometimes," I concede.

"All the time," she grumbles. "I've never known you not to smirk, not that it isn't hot in a mean kind of way—"

"Aha, so you do find it hot?" My mouth curls.

"I rest my case," she snaps.

Bloody fuck, what the hell does she want me to do? Change my personality overnight? It's taken thirty-three odd years to cultivate this dickface persona. But for her... I'd give that up too... Only with her, that is. To the rest of the world, I'd still be the asshole surgeon with the bad attitude... But for her... I'd do anything.

Does that include letting go of control...for a tiny window in time...allowing her to have her way with me? My balls tighten; my skin crawls. Giving up choice? Not something I'd ever imagined doing...not before her. Only for her.

She is my woman and she'll get her satisfaction when, where and how she needs it. Everyone else will deal...and that includes me. Fuck. I wipe the smile off my face. "Better?"

She raises her shoulders. "Maybe," she takes another step forward, "maybe not."

"I know something that will make it better." I begin to smirk again.

She scowls.

I grimace, school all expression from my face. Best to keep my mouth shut, lock my muscles, dig my feet into the floor. I stay still... Wait... Wait for her to come to me, to tip her head back and meet my gaze.

"Anything, huh?" She drags a finger down my chest, down to my waistband, in the direction of where my cock tents the crotch of my pants.

Blood rush to my groin; pinpricks of heat follow in the path of her touch. "Anything," I growl.

She unbuckles my belt, and my dick thrusts against its restraints. Fuck, at this rate, I am going to come in my pants and she's barely touched me yet. My fingers tingle. I raise my hand.

She glances at it, then at me, "You promised," she reminds me.

I curl my fingers into a fist, then raise my hands and lock them behind my neck, "Indeed." I keep my gaze trained on her face.

Her pupils dilate and color pinks her cheeks. She lowers the zipper, then shoves my pants and my boxers down in one sweep.

The breath catches in my chest as I kick aside my clothes.

She reaches down and winds her fingers around my throbbing dick. My groin hardens, my balls tighten, and I grip my hands together. *Don't release them. Don't reach for her. Don't push her down onto her knees. Don't ask her to take you inside that gorgeous mouth and don't ask her to suck you off... Don't.* She reaches for her shirt and whips it off.

I stare. "What are you doing?"

"What do you think?" She pulls off her bra, then shoves off her boots, and wriggles out of her jeans and panties. Her full tits jiggle as she straightens. She runs her hand down her stomach, to where her pink pussy glistens. She strums her lower lips and my cock jumps in response.

"Huh?" She stares down at her crotch, then drags her fingers up to the swollen bud of her clit. My dick lengthens, I bunch my shoulders, and my balls grow impossibly hard.

"Jesus," I snarl.

"You shouldn't swear using his name on Christmas Day."

"If you don't get on with what you have in mind, I am going to—"

"Going to?" She flutters her eyelashes, "What will you do?"

I narrow my gaze. Why that sassy, little sex kitten. Apparently, giving Princess Buttercup a long leash means she thinks she can run away with it, huh? I glare at her. She pales, but doesn't break the eye contact. "Well," she asks, "shall I continue?"

"Do it," I growl.

"Hmm." She pushes a finger into her cheek, "You don't seem like you're having a good time."

"Doesn't matter." I dig my fingers into the palm of my hand, draw in a breath, count down the time.

Twelve o'clock.

Eleven o'clock.

Ten—

"What are you doing?" she frowns.

"Counting down the time in my mind.

"Why would you do that?"

"It's a technique that helps me find equilibrium."

"And yet clocks trigger you?"

"They used to."

"But not anymore?" She nods, "You didn't flinch when the egg timer rang in my kitchen."

"I may have been too busy saving someone's arse to notice." I mutter.

"You mean someone's gorgeous arse, right?" She wrinkles her nose at me. Fucking adorable. My heart stutters... It bloody stutters. Damian was right, I am pussy-whipped... And I want to whip her pussy too, every chance I get.

"Someone's curvy, beautiful, egg-shaped bottom, to be precise," I reply.

"My butt isn't egg-shaped."

"Wanna bet?" I drawl. "It's as smooth, and as curvy as that blasted egg timer you have—which, by the way, is a hideous piece of kitchenware, with no aesthetic sense."

"Are you saying my butt is ugly?"

"You are not butt-ugly, no," I clarify. "But if you don't get on with your seduction routine—I promise the marks I'll leave on your backside will not be pretty."

"You promised that I could lead," she scoffs.

"But you're not," I snap. "You're talking your mouth off, when you could be putting said orifice to much better use."

She throws up her hands, "Are you going to let me do this my way or not?"

"Fine, fine." I crack my neck. "What fucking ever. Take your time, dawdle, say whatever comes into your mind, while I suffer in silence."

"Hardly suffering and it's not like you've stopped speaking either."

True. I scowl, "You seem to bring out the worst in me, Buttercup."

"As do you." She chuckles, then glances around her before heading to the refrigerator. She pulls out a bottle of milk, then shuts the door and walks toward me.

"Anything, huh?" She asks.

I glance at the white liquid in the bottle, then up to her face, "Anything."
She holds up the bottle, tilts it over my chest.

55

Amelie

What the hell am I doing? I should have left an hour ago. Yet, here I am—first seduced by his kitchen, and now, by the man himself, who stands in front of me, naked as the day he was born, cock thrust up and out at me. OMFG, his dick... I've seen it up close, I've had it down my throat, inside my pussy, my asshole... And yet, I swear as the milk pours down his chest, pools in the nest of hair at his groin, and drips down from his balls... I've never seen something this... erotic. This hot. This...gorgeous...almost as orgasmic as the sight of a triple chocolate cake lathered in freshly whipped cream.

A moan wells up my throat and my breathing goes ragged. I empty the rest of the milk on him, place the bottle on the island, then lean in and trace a path between the demarcation of his pecs, down his concave stomach. I dip my tongue inside his belly button; his abs ripple. Holy fuck. This... This is too much fun. The way his body responds to my touch? Wow... That's power. All six-feet four-inches of alpha hunk, at my mercy. Mine to do with as I want. Mine to tease, mine to hold and squeeze. Mine to climb up and wrap myself around him, if I want.

I bring my palm up and weigh his balls; a groan rips out of him. Every muscle in his body solidifies. I drag my tongue along the hair that arrows down to his shaft. His dick jumps and his thigh muscles spasm. I circle around to the underside then trace the path to its logical end, the tip of his dick. I close my mouth around him and he swears, "Fucking fuck, you're

killing me, Princess."

I haven't even started.

I straighten, then turn and march back to the refrigerator. The hair on the back of my neck rises, and I know he's stalking me, watching my every move, waiting for me to push him to the edge, and I will...but first, I want to have some fun. He'd teased me and taunted me and I am going to return the favor.

I pull open the refrigerator. Oh, yeah! I straighten, pivot with the bowl of Jell-o—who'd made it? A housekeeper? Does he have a housekeeper? Of course he does. He's rich, remember? Filthy rich. Well, fuck that. I'm rich too, when it comes to talent. I can bake like a goddess and I can tease like a slut.

I bump my hip against the refrigerator door to shut it, then run a finger around the rim of the bowl. His gaze narrows and his nostrils flare. He glances at the quivering gelatin, then up at my face. He tilts his head, a warning look in his eyes. A shiver runs down my spine. Oh, he's going to get back at me for this, I'm sure... But whatever... I'm not going to stop, not when I am having so much fun. I amble over to him, wriggle my hips when I stop in front of him. His chest rises and falls. I dip a couple of fingers into the gelatin, scoop some of it out, and hold it up to his mouth. "Open," I command.

"Lick or suck, Princess?" he growls.

"Whatever you please," I breathe. A bead of sweat runs down his temple. Moisture beads my upper lip. Hell, is the heating on in here, or what? He lowers his head, closes his mouth around my fingertips. I feel the tug all the way down to my cunt. A moan spills from my lips. His mouth curves, he licks his tongue about my fingertips, swallows, then nips on my fingers. Moisture oozes between my legs. Oh, shit. I'm as turned on as he is. This was supposed to be his punishment... Ha! How stupid of me. The only person who will come out at the losing end of this bargain is me. I turn, place the bowl of Jell-o on the island, then grab my panties and pull them on.

"What are you doing?"

I don't reply, shrug into my jeans, find my bra and pull it on.

"Princess?"

"Shut up," I mutter, "I know what you're doing."

"Oh?"

I nod. "You're trying to lure me into staying."

"Am I?" he growls.

I snatch up my blouse, shrug into it. "Yes, you are." Tears knock at the back of my eyes, and honestly... I don't know why. I mean, why the hell should I feel like the entire world is ending? I could stay; he wants me to stay... But that would be empty, wouldn't it? I'd still be only a possession to him, something he had bought.

"Amelie, talk to me." He frowns. "What the hell is going on in that pretty head of yours?"

"Nothing, asshole." I toss my hair over my shoulders. "You can take your...your penthouse and fancy kitchen and oven, and all your privileged-as-hell shit, and stuff it where the sun don't shine."

"Princess..." he takes a step forward; I hold up my hand.

"Don't you dare," I snarl. "Don't you fucking say anything. Don't try to stop me. At least this once, would you stick to your word, and stay right there, until I am gone? This once, can you allow me to leave with a modicum of self-respect?"

He stares at me, his features wearing an expression of frustration. "Amelie, please."

I flip him my middle finger, then grab my phone, snatch up my chef's satchel and my hand bag from where I had placed them on the kitchen island and march out.

56

Weston

I squeeze my eyes shut. The woman I love walked out. I hadn't had the balls to tell her how much I cared for her; all I'd been worried about was emptying said balls into her. I lower my arms to my sides.

I should have stopped her; should have hauled her over my shoulder and marched into the bedroom, where I'd have thrown her on her back and thrust into her, kept her pinned down until she forgot all about leaving me... About the money, and her business and my bloody ego, which, as per usual, stood in the way. Jesus, couldn't I have said something...anything to stop her from leaving?

Woulda. Coulda. Shoulda. Since when had I begun to over-analyze my reactions, huh? Gone are the days when I'd forge ahead, not caring who I offended. Hell, I had never cared about how my actions affected those around me.

Apparently, she affects me in more ways than I care to admit. Not the least of which is how my groin knots, my cock thickening as I yearn to be inside of her. I grab my shaft and squeeze, swipe it from root to head with practiced skill. Only, it's not doing it for me at all. I need something more, something warmer, moister, something that would clasp me the way her cunt had when I had thrust into her and taken her.

I glance around, take in the empty milk bottle, the bowl of Jell-o—my cock jerks, bombarded by images of how she'd scooped up the gelatin and offered it to me, her lips parted, tongue caught in concentration between her

teeth.

The princess had challenged me. *Me*. The alphahole who has never allowed *any* woman to take the lead... I'd handed it to her, and she had left me. I hunch my shoulders, reach for the Jell-o, scoop up some from the center. Hmm, this has possibilities, huh? Except... I tilt my head. The damn Jell-o is too bouncy and it's bound to fall apart. No, I need something else. I plop the Jell-o back, glance around, and spot the basket of fruits in the center of the island... Hmm... I reach for a peach, glare at it. Apparently, doing it to the apple pie had not been enough. Here I am, searching for more substitutes for her pussy. The last time, I'd resorted to such desperate measures, I'd been...fifteen? And horny as fuck. Nothing has changed...

Except, now I know how it feels to make love to my woman. Jesus, the fuck is wrong with me? Getting sappy and sentimental over her? Thankfully, I still have my balls... Time I put them to good use, huh? I stare at the peach, what if I were to scoop out some of the pulp in the center along with the stone? Hmm... This won't do at all... One more thing that has changed since I was fifteen... My bloody cock is twice the size it had been... Okay, three times if you measure the length of the hardon that I'm sporting. Fuck.

I toss the peach aside, reach for the watermelon. Desperate times and all that... I glare at it, pump my cock again. Am I going to do this? Fuck a bloody watermelon? Would it be cheating on her if I did? A fruit is an inanimate object, right? As in, it doesn't have feelings, in the technical sense of the word, so it can't reciprocate sentiments... So, it does not constitute being unfaithful if I stick my dick in it, does it? I frown down at the offending fruit, massage its curved circumference. It's smooth...too smooth... Too cold... Nothing like the living flesh of her butt, the slight indentation of the dimple in the center of one arsecheek, that I had caressed before I'd cupped her backside and squeezed, then hauled her up so she could wind those gorgeous legs around my waist, before I'd pushed her up against the nearest hard surface and—

Fuck. Stop this line of thinking, you prick. It should be her heart you're focusing on. Her needs. The fact that she had thrown my money back at me... Hell, no one had done that before. But she isn't like anyone else I've ever encountered. Amelie...with her sass and her wit, and her habit of swearing by using names of desserts. Jesus, she is more delectable than any creation I've ever sampled. And I had let her leave. Again... I...

If I had stopped her, she'd have never forgiven me. She'd pleaded with me

to let her leave...and I had... I'd stood there and watched her flounce out. What do they say? Something about, if you love someone let them go. If they return, they belong to you... And if they don't...?

Fuck that. No way, am I going to stand around here while she...*figures out her feelings*... I take a step forward, then stop. Wow, even my thoughts are dismissive of her feelings. And if I go after her...? I'd coerce her, bulldoze over her feelings, her choices... Hell, I'd ensure that she comes around to my way of thinking...and that... Fuck... This is not the time for my alphaholish, caveman-ish behavior. I mean, that's what I am. No excuses but... I hadn't become a surgeon without knowing when it was time to pull back.

I can't lose her.

I have to be strategic.

Have to trust...hope that she'll come back. And she will. She has to. I snatch up my phone from the corner of the island, dial my banker's number. When he comes on the line, I tell him to cease all further payments to her accounts. I am not surprised when he informs me that the money I'd sent through earlier had been returned electronically by her already. Yeah... Buttercup knows how to get a move on me.

I toss my phone aside, roll my shoulders. She'll return to me; she has to. The connection between us is too strong. She wouldn't ignore it... Would she? Nah! She'll get my message, get what I've been trying to communicate to her... Which is...that I can't live without her. She'll figure it out. She is smart, switched on. The love of my life has a razor-sharp mind. Surely, she'll glean what I was trying to communicate with her. Meanwhile... I glance toward the liquor cabinet. Only one thing a man can do when forced to bide his time. I stalk toward the bar, grab a bottle of whiskey and twist it open. I raise it to my lips.

Amelie

*"Past pleasure doubles present pain,
To sorrow adds regret,
Regret and hope are both in vain,
I ask but to — forget."*

I take in the words scrawled on the board held by the homeless man. I'd ridden the elevator down, and walked out of the apartment building.

Every step I'd taken had echoed the thumping of my heart. I am doing this. Really doing this. I am leaving him. Good thing I had gone online and returned the money already. A few days ago, I'd checked my bank account and the zeroes in my account had brought home exactly how much I stood to gain from this relationship. I could pay off my debts, expand my business, ensure my parents are taken care of for the rest of their lives... And he'd always take me for granted. He'd known that I could be bought. Next time we came to an impasse... He'd know how to get his way. Throw more money my way...

And no, it's not only the money that binds us. There is so much more—emotions and conflicts and a buzzing physical attraction that shows no sign of abating. There is so much there to build on... But the money...would always be a barrier... Unless he looks past it. Unless I take a risk, and leave him... Give him space to figure out his shit, while I do the same thing. I'd pushed forward, and had almost stumbled across the outstretched legs of the

homeless guy.

"Excuse me," I mutter and step around him... Which is when I spot his shoes: tailormade, Italian leather, spotless, and polished to within an inch of its life. They seem familiar. Huh? I stare at them. Where have I seen them before?

"Pretty fancy, huh?" Homeless guy chortles, "Think these will impress the ladies?"

I glance up at his face. "I am sure they'd have an impact," I say. "Where did you get them?"

He frowns, "You mean, what's a man like me doing with shoes like these?"

My cheeks heat. Hell, that hadn't come out polite at all, had it? "I meant, uh... They seem familiar. Someone I know had a similar pair."

"Boyfriend?" He asks.

"He's...ah, currently no friend," I mutter.

"Ach!" he cackles, "Had a fall out with your man, huh?"

"Maybe, probably." I raise my shoulders, "He's an arrogant so-and-so. Know what I mean? He thinks he can buy anything."

"Not you, obviously." He nods.

"Exactly... See?" I flick my hair over my shoulder, "And he claims to love me."

"Do you?" he shoots back.

"Huh?" I frown, "Do I what?"

"Do you love him?"

"Yes," I reply. "Wait, I mean... No... I mean, yes...but..."

"No buts." He tilts his head up, pulls his legs up to sit cross-legged, "You gotta tell him that."

"I do?" I scowl.

"Absolutely," he jerks his chin, "better to take the risk and be sorry than to be a coward and—"

"Regret it," I complete his statement. "Yeah... Well..." I glance away. A pressure builds behind my eyes and my heart begins to race. What the hell is wrong with me? This constant back and forth... This not knowing my own mind... It's bloody tiring. So much easier to plan out a menu and bake. Even though the outcome of a dish is not completely in my hands, at least I can control the environment... Decide the ingredients. And if I change something, hell, I know the risks of what I'm doing. But with him...? I can't predict a

thing. Not my reaction to him, not his ability to throw me off guard... Well, except for that sizzling attraction between us that throbs and ties us together. For better or for worse—that is one thing I can count on. The one ingredient that would never fail to liven up the dish... I mean, the relationship... I mean... I blink, turn to him. "I should, right?" I ask.

He lowers his board to the ground, then glances toward the apartment. "Go on, then."

I take in his features, those intelligent eyes undeniable, despite his unkempt whiskers.

"Who are you?" I frown. "What are you doing here?"

"All the world's a stage and we are but actors," he chuckles.

"First Byron, then Shakespeare?" I stare at him. "You have a thing for poets?"

"Or for pompous wankers who churned out pretentious shit."

"Sounds like someone I know," I mumble.

"Don't we all?" He rises to his feet, sketches an exaggerated bow, "Don't delay, young lady." He snatches his hat with the change inside and slams it on his dreadlocks. "Goodbye." He hauls the board over his shoulder and walks off.

"Bye." I turn, retrace my steps toward the apartment. What a strange man. He was well educated, no doubt about it. And his accent... I could have sworn he sounded almost posh. And when he'd smiled...his teeth were perfect. Which is bloody odd in England. I mean, when was the last time I'd met anyone with even teeth... Other than the alphahole... And the Seven...who had clearly spent a fortune on the dentist. But normal people like me... Hell... We can't afford that kind of dental work. So how had the homeless guy swung that, huh? I turn to call out, but the sidewalk is empty. Geez, he must have doubled his speed to get away from me or something. I shake my head. The shoes did fit him though. Chalk it up as one more good deed for Dr Grumpy McDick. He has his redeeming points... A lot of them, actually.

Too bad it isn't enough... Is it? I shake my head. *Stop overthinking this. Just march back for the last time and tell him how you feel.* As easy as baking banana bread, which would be done in double-quick time in his oven. Fine, fine... Don't think about his kitchen, or his equipment... No, definitely don't think about the tool he hides in his pants either. *Get on with it; don't back out, bitch.* I stomp inside the apartment, and head for the elevator door, which glides open. Shit, even the elements are working with me on this.

I reach the penthouse, push the door open and walk in. I cross the living room, pause only to place my satchel and handbag on the center table, then peek into the kitchen. There's no one there. Hmm. I pivot, head for the bedroom, when I spot movement. I pivot head toward the sliding doors at the far end of the living room, pulling them aside. I step outside and onto the terrace, walk another few steps and spot the hot tub... This one's sunken into the decking with steps leading down, and at the other end of it...is him. I'm drawn to him like chocolate to a clean surface... know what I mean? I pause at the tub.

He's sprawled in the water that froths around his waist, the bubbles covering the bottom half of his body. Not that I have any doubt about the state of his undress. He leans back, raises a bottle of whiskey. His biceps bulge and his shoulders flex. He brings the bottle to his mouth, swigs from it. The tendons of his throat move as he swallows.

I am instantly wet.

He raises his other hand, places a cigar between his lips. I rake my gaze over his features, watch him watch me with unblinking eyes, as I take another step forward. I reach the edge of the tub. The water writhes below me. My heartbeat writhes in my chest.

He glares at me from under hooded eyelids. He lowers the cigar, blows out a cloud of cigar smoke. The scent of cloves and spices, of darkness and lust, passion and fucking... Hell... I'll always associate the scent of cigar smoke with wild, out-of-my-head desire.

He doesn't move, doesn't say a word.

I shuffle closer, my toe brushing against something smooth. There's a plop as it falls in. I glance down to find an egg timer floating on the surface.

I bend my knees, reach over and scoop it up.

He glances down at the object, then up at my face. His lips twist, he swallows and opens his mouth, and I'm sure he's going to say something. Instead, he takes another swig from the bottle of whiskey. The skin across his knuckles stretches white... Huh? I peer across the distance and at his features... Lines radiate from the corners of his eyes, and the hollows under his cheekbones seem more pronounced. Why had I not noticed that before?

He keeps his gaze focused on my face, the skin around his mouth tightening. That's it—something's on his mind. But what? Why would the most confident man I have ever met seem unsure of himself.

"Why are you so on edge?" I laugh nervously. "I'd think you were going

to pop a marriage proposal or something," I mutter, "if I didn't know you better."

His face pales. My gaze widens. I take in the way he holds onto the whiskey bottle. The skin of his knuckles stretch white. Then the bottle slips from his grasp, hits the decking and rolls away... "Fuck." He swears, then straightens. His lips twist. An expression I can't fathom grips his features.

"Holy shit." I gasp, "Is that what you are going to do...? I gulp. "No way. You aren't, are you?"

Again, he glares at the stupid egg timer I am holding. What the hell? I stare down at the curved object, raise it, fiddle around with it. I twist it and it comes apart in my hands, revealing something shiny, something with a perfectly-cut sapphire that winks back at me.

My throat dries. My heart begins to thud. "What...what is this?" I squeak.

"A fucking gummy bear," he growls, "what do you think it is?"

"I... I..." I glance at the ring, then back at him, then at the ring again.

"How... how long have you been planning this?"

"Since I met you?" He tilts his head, "Strike that. From before I met you. The ring was my grandmother's."

"Oh!"

"You mean oh, yes, don't you?" he drawls.

"Wait, wait." I draw in a breath. *Stay calm, don't lose it now.* Need time to think, just a bloody second here. I tip up my chin, train my gaze on him, "How did you rig the timer to accommodate it, considering I was gone for less than half an hour?"

He yawns.

"Of course. You repair clocks, so you could adjust a stupid egg timer, huh?" I pout.

"Not apologizing for the fact that I pulled off an almost-miracle, babe." He thrusts out his chest, "Besides it is Christmas."

"Wow," I stare. "Seems you're getting into the spirit of the season, after all?"

"As you are coming around to the idea of our wedding."

"Yes." I nod.

"So, it's settled then." He grins.

"What?" I shake my head. "No, no, no, I didn't mean it that way. I mean, not yet... I mean... What the hell!" I exclaim. "This can't be happening."

"It is." He shakes out his palm—the one with which he'd gripped the

whiskey bottle.

"Did you hurt your good hand? I ask.

"I've been hurting in other places since I met you," he grumbles.

"Anyone ever tell you, you have the manners of an oaf?" I scowl.

"Only you, babe." He rises to his feet—the water pours off of those sculpted abs, his concave stomach, drips off of that spectacular cock. *Oh, my God!* I swallow, take a step back, stumble, drop the ring, let go of the pieces that formerly constituted the egg timer, swoop down, catch the ring. I straighten the ring, slip it onto my left ring finger. I blink, open my eyes in surprise. "It fits."

"Of course, it does," he snaps.

"Presumptuous, much?" I huff, turn my hand this way and that. The heart of the ring glows with silver sparks. Wow. My pulse thuds at my temples; my stomach bottoms out. OMFG, does this mean, what I think it does?

"You're marrying me," he growls. "What's so presumptuous about that?"

"I haven't said yes."

He looks at my hand then back at my face. "You're wearing the ring. Are you saying no?"

"You haven't asked...you...you...ass!" I yell.

He blows out a breath, stalks his way across the length of the sunken pool to where I stand. He glances into my eyes. Despite the fact that I am standing on a higher level, we are at the same height... That's how fucking big my asshole is. I gulp; he frowns. His chest rises and falls, then he reaches out and takes my left hand.

Weston

"I won't take no for an answer," I tell her.

She scowls, tugs at her hand. I hold on. *Fuck, get a grip, asshole. Stop thinking about yourself. Get rid of the fear that she'll refuse you and leave...* Nope, not this time. I'm not going to fuck this up, nope. I've conducted quadruple bypass surgeries... This...this should be a cakewalk... Not.

I shake my head, bring my other hand up, and enclose her slim palm between my much larger ones.

I clear my throat. She glances at me, and suddenly, my scalp feels too tight. My heart hammers and my muscles tense. I rotate my shoulders, bend my knee and press it into the side of the pool.

"Amelie," I peer up into her face, "will you be the chocolate to my whiskey, the caramel to my bourbon—?"

She blinks.

"—the spice to my tea, the fruit filling to my pie—"

Her lower lip trembles... *Huh? Is that a good sign?*

"—the butterscotch to my toffee," I raise one eyebrow, "the cookie to my coffee?"

She giggles, then slaps a hand over her mouth.

I allow a smirk to curl my lips, lower my head and brush my mouth over her knuckles, "Well?" I tilt my head up at her, "Amelie, will you marry me?"

"Not good enough," she replies.

"What?" I blink.

"You can do better than that."

"What the fuck?" I growl.

She shakes her hair from her face, "Go on, Mr, Alphahole. Why should I marry you?"

"Because I'll make you happy?"

"So can others."

"Because you can cook in that bloody kitchen with the oven I had installed specifically for you?"

"You...you did?" Her gaze widens. Damn, if I don't see heart-shaped little icons in place of her irises.

"It was nothing," I mumble. Why the hell had that popped out? Hadn't meant to blurt that out.

She looks away, then back at me. "What else?" she asks, her voice an octave lower than earlier. That's good. I am on the right track... *Go on, motherfucker, lay it out. It's now or never, you loser.*

"Because every time I see you, I can't see a way around fucking you, giving it to you until you're a whimpering gooey mess in my arms?"

"Oh!" She trembles. "Keep going," she says, her voice breathy.

I turn her palm face up in mine, bend and lick the skin between her fingers.

She shudders.

I drag my tongue down to her fingertip and kiss it.

"Because we're going to fuck right now in this pool, then on the decking, in the living room, in my bed, on the bloody kitchen island...on every surface in my home, and when the sun comes up tomorrow, we'll know every nook," kiss, "cranny," kiss, "crevasse of each other's bodies."

She makes a humming sound deep in her throat.

"You like that hmm?" I smirk.

"Much better," She agrees. "You're getting the hang of it, Mr. Alpha Claus, but it's not enough."

"You're right," I agree.

"I am?" She frowns.

"I haven't told you yet, how I'm going to walk you places, my Buttercup, up the aisle, into each day of our future lives...ease you into bed every night, wake you up with my tongue inside your melting pussy every morn—"

She chokes out a laugh, "And you were doing so well."

"Right?" I grimace, "I can't help myself, my sweet Cookie. When I see

you, I lose sight of myself. When I scent you, I ache to be inside of you. And when I see you in pain," I swallow, "I want to turn the world upside down until I soothe it all away."

"Oh," she stutters, "that...that was romantic."

"I'm not done yet."

"No?"

"Not even remotely." I allow my lips to curve, mirror the happiness that filters through her gaze, "I'll take care of you, I'll love you, shield you from the elements, ease obstructions from your path—"

She frowns.

"Because that would be my prerogative." I declare.

"If that's not what I want?"

"We could discuss it," I say slowly.

"We could?"

"Perhaps."

Her forehead creases and she tugs on her hand again. My heart rate gallops. "I won't do anything you don't want me to," I add.

"Hmm."

"I promise." I hold up my right palm, "We can fight over it, then kiss and have hot make-up sex."

"As long as you don't steamroll me into agreeing." She frowns.

"As long as we agree to disagree," I say at the same time.

She huffs.

I twine my fingers through hers, "Come on, babe. Allow me to help; it's what I do best."

"I want to build my business on my own merit, you know?"

"And I understand and completely get that...but if I can pave the way so you spend your time on the actual creation and less on fighting through roadblocks?"

She shuffles her feet, then glances at me. "For every pound you spend on paying off my debts, you'll also put one toward a scholarship for someone less privileged who wants to study baking at a school of their choice."

"Done," I blow out a breath. "You can manage this each year through FOK media, a division of 7A investments that was set up for exactly such causes."

She blinks. "You agree?"

I straighten my shoulders, "If that makes you happy..."

"This makes me happy." She sinks down onto the decking, sticks her legs into the hot tub and, parts her legs. Finally, fuck! I move into the 'V' between her thighs.

"You make me fucking happy," I hold her gaze, peer into those baby blues which mean more to me than life itself. "It was a time bomb," I say. "They wrapped a timebomb around me and left me in a locked room for days."

Her chin wobbles, her face pales. "The kidnappers?" she whispers. "They did that?"

I nod. "If I so much as moved or breathed wrong it could go off, so they said."

"What...what happened next?"

"My kidnapper... I couldn't see his face because I was blindfolded... Which didn't help, because I could imagine the moving hands of the clock in my mind." I swallow; my fingers tremble.

She grips my hand, and warmth chases away the ice that had crept into my veins. I focus on her beautiful face, those flushed features. "He kept coming in and torturing me, sometimes beating on my legs, sometimes hooking me up to electricity. Each session was timed, it lasted precisely an hour, all of which was counted down precisely by the clock." I chuckle, the sound harsh. "The torture went on for days I thought, but it was really only for forty-eight hours, so I found out later."

She gasps, "Oh, Wes." She places her palm over my chest, "Baby, I'm so sorry."

I focus on her gaze, the silverly sparks in her eyes. "That last time..." I force out the words, "he said he'd be back in twelve hours. I counted down the time, past the twelve hour mark. He was late. I knew then, he was going to kill me. He came in and started raging at me, told me he was going to kill me. He hooked me up to the electrodes. I sensed him move away to start the electricity. I knew there was no way I was going to survive that session. I prayed that my heart would give out before the pain got too bad. He switched on the electricity, and left."

"Wes, no." She throws her arms about me, "Oh my God, that's terrible." She presses her cheek into my chest and moisture dampens my skin. She's weeping, for me? Something inside of me dissolves. I fit my knuckle under her chin, tip up her head.

"The cops arrived within minutes of that... They broke through, switched

off the electricity, had their best bomb disposal expert dismantle the one around my chest. Turns out, it was a hoax all along."

"What?" She gasps, "I mean it's a good thing, but still... That bastard."

"Yeah." I cup her cheek, "I escaped with no outward scars... I was lucky, unlike some of the Seven."

"It's why you guys are so close."

"Close? Ha!" I smirk, "The only person I want to be close to is you, baby."

I lower my head, brush my lips over hers. "You're welcome, by the way," I whisper.

"For what?"

"For the three words you were going to tell me earlier, but didn't, and which you are going to reward me with now."

"Reward you?" She pouts.

"Yep." I reach down, lower the zipper on her jeans. She grips my shoulders, rises up, and I yank down the pants and panties, ease them over her hips, then step back and pull them off of those gorgeous legs. I stare at the pink flesh between those beautiful thighs. "For the orgasms I am going to bring you to in the next hour."

"So sure of yourself. If you think you can trick me into—"

I step between her legs, hook her knees over my arms, pull them up and over my shoulders, then notch my dick against her pussy, "Into?"

"Saying that I want you—"

I lunge forward, impale her in one motion. She stutters, then her pussy clamps around my dick.

"Say it," I growl.

"I... I need you," she gasps.

I pull out of her, stay poised at the entrance to her channel. "Look at me," I pant.

She raises her head, sears me with those beautiful blue eyes.

"Princess," I lower my head to hers, share my breath with hers, brush my lips over hers "I want to hear you scream out those three words." I kick my hips forward, sink into her.

She curves her spine, throws her head back, "I love you," she yells. "Love you, love you... Only you."

My vision tunnels; blood beats at my temples. I haul her to me, kiss her hard. Then, I begin to fuck her in earnest—thrust into her, bury myself in her

sweet pussy again and again. Bring my arms around her, pull her to me as, with a last ferocious drive of my hips, I sink inside of her. "Come," I growl.

Amelie

His command slices through my mind. His voice echoes in my subconscious. Heat from his body slams into me, sinks into my blood. Everything in me snaps tight, then I shatter. Moisture gushes out from between my thighs as the climax sweeps me up, higher and higher. I throw my head back and scream, *I love you, I love you*. Or maybe I just chant that in my head.

Black specks flicker at the edges of my vision. Above me, his shoulders draw back, his chest muscles harden, his body shudders, his cock thickens inside of me, then with a harsh groan, he comes inside of me. I slump against his chest, am half aware that he hauls me up in his arms, steps out of the hot tub and carries me inside. I must have snoozed, for when I open my eyes next, I am tucked into his side in his bed. I rub my cheek into his hair-roughened chest. "I would have told you anyway," I mumble.

"Hmm?" He rubs lazy circles over my upper arm.

I glance up to find him sprawled against the sheets, eyes closed. He has one hand flung behind his neck. A slight smile curves his lips. So, this is how it is to see the brute relax... In his den, surrounded by his possessions, in the arms of his woman. *His woman*. I reach up, cup his cheek.

"I love you," I whisper.

He smirks. "I know."

I hit his shoulder.

He laughs, cracks open his eyelids, "I adore you, Princess."

"Oh." I open and close my mouth, shake my head.

"What?" he grunts.

"Nothing."

"Say it," he drawls, "I promise I won't bite."

I purse my lips, scan his relaxed features, "I can't get used to this emo version of you."

He sighs, "No pleasing some people."

"Not that I don't want you to be nice to me and all that," I explain.

"Actually, I think you don't." He grins, then lowers his gaze to my breasts.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means." He flips me over onto my back and my breath hitches. His eyes gleam and his big shoulders seem to swell further, if that is even possible. He glances up at the headboard, then back at me.

"Don't you dare," I huff.

"You challenging me?"

"Maybe," I mumble as a frisson of heat runs up my spine.

He glances around, then rolls off of the bed. I lower my arms. He turns to me, points his finger, and says, "Stay."

"Bossy," I grumble.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet."

He stalks over to the walk in closet. I hear him rummaging around, then silence. A few seconds later he walks out.

I gasp. "Oh my."

"Like it?" He stands there in his scrubs. The green material molds to his torso, outlines the cut abs of his chest, tents at his crotch—ha! so what's new?—and clings to his powerful thighs.

"You look—"

"Hot?"

"I was going to say yummy."

"Is everything a food reference to you?" He laughs.

"Is everything about getting the last word with you?"

He tilts his head, "Except with you."

"Oh?"

"You know it's true, babe. After all, I let you get away with chocolate."

"Someone had to change your mind about the devil's food." I chuckle.

"So you decided to feed it to the devil himself?"

"Are you the devil?"

"Where you are concerned, I am your lover and your protector, your lord and master, your to-be husband."

I curl the fingers of my left hand around the ring, "I haven't said yes to marrying you yet."

"Oh, you are about to." He raises his hand, and I spot the black ties he holds in his grasp.

"What...what's that for?"

He grins at me and his eyes glint. He stalks around the bed, then places his knee on the bed, throws his leg over my waist and straddles me.

"Wes." I draw in a breath.

"Trust me, Cookie." He leans over and ties my wrists to the headboard. Then rolls off of the bed and walks away again. What the hell?

He returns holding an egg timer in his hand.

"How many of those things do you have?"

"Enough." He grins. "Since you seem to have a penchant for the blasted thing, I figured I'd buy enough to see us through the rest of our lives together."

My heart stutters. OMG, did he use all the words that I've wanted to hear from him? "You're awfully confident." I tip up my chin.

"Nothing I can't deliver on, Princess." He winds up the egg timer. The ticking down of the timer fills the room.

"Doesn't that sound trigger you?" I ask.

"I'm changing it's association in my head." He places the timer on the side table, then climbs onto the bed and straddles me. "Close your eyes." he raises the second necktie he holds in his hand.

"B... but." My heart begins to race. My mouth dries. I can't stop the trembling that runs up my spine. "Wes."

"Trust me." He leans in and kisses me, a hard reassuring kiss, that sinks into my blood. I am instantly wet and he hasn't even started.

He peers in my features, "Okay?"

"Okay."

He leans over and wraps the tie around my eyes. Darkness engulfs me. My senses pop. The ticking of the timer heats my blood. "W...Wes?" I whine.

"I'm here." He cups my cheek, then his lips meet mine again. He licks my mouth, then whispers. "I forgot to tell you one thing."

"What?"

"You won't come until the timer rings."

60

Weston

"Not fair," she gasps, craning her neck toward me.

"All's fair in bed." I lower my head and kiss her breast. She moans; the sound travels down my spine and my guts churn. My heart begins to race. I cup her other breast and my fingers tremble.

The ticking of the clock grows louder; my stomach hollows out. Maybe this had not been a good idea. I close my mouth around her nipple and bite down.

She gasps.

My groin hardens.

I drag my mouth down her stomach, to her belly button, flick my tongue in and out of the indentation.

She moans. Her thighs tremble. I grip the curve of her waist, nibble kisses to the apex between her legs. I blow on her pussy and her body bucks, "Weston," she pleads.

The sound of her voice slices through the noise in my head. This time it is about her. Not about what the bastard did to me. Not about how he'd tied the ticking timebomb to my chest and left me. I hook my arms under her knees, pull her legs over my shoulders.

I smooth my hands down her trembling thighs, and cup her pussy, "Mine," I growl, "only mine." I lower my head, swipe my tongue up her lower lips.

She whines.

I curve my tongue around the swollen bud of her clit; she shivers. Slide my hand down to squeeze her arse cheek.

Her entire body shudders.

I slide my finger inside her backhole; she bucks.

I insert my tongue inside her channel, ease it in and out of her. Bring my free hand to her clit and pinch it.

"Oh, hell, oh, hell." She digs the heels of her feet into my back, thrusts her pelvis up and into my face. The sweet scent of her tugs at my nostrils, the warmth of her juices coats my tongue. My belly clenches and my dick lengthens as the ticking of the clock counts down in the background.

I need more, more.

"Wes?"

The tick-tock of the clock grows louder. My fingers clench; a bead of sweat slides down my back. I drag my mouth up and to her face and kiss her deeply. She opens her mouth to me, and I thrust my tongue inside. I drink from her, that addicting, honeyed essence of her, mixed with the taste of her cum. My belly trembles, I dig my knees into bed, ease a finger inside her channel and bear down.

"Weston," she screams, "Oh, my God, Wes."

More, I need more. I need her warmth, her happy-go-lucky nature, her sass and fire. I need all of her, subsumed into me. I need her to ground me. I release her lips, then reach up and tear the blindfold from her.

She blinks, then her gaze narrows on me.

"What's wrong?" she asks. "Wes?"

"Nothing." I mumble.

"Something is."

"I need..." I frown.

"Me, take me, Wes." Her chest heaves, "Please, baby, come inside me."

Her blue eyes gaze into mine, the silver sparks in their depths similar to the sapphire I'd bought her... Except she is here, vital, real... Nothing else in my past, or my future, matters. Only her.

I loosen the drawstring on my pants, then grasp my dick, and notch it against her wet opening.

"Amelie." I brush my lips over hers. "I love you," I say. "I love it when you smile at me. I love it even more when I am the reason for your smile."

Those sappy words? Yep, that's me. Alphahole extraordinaire felled by a woman who is the sassiest, brightest, most special woman I have ever met.

"Oh, Wes," she sighs, "I love you too."

I slide inside her; she trembles. I stay there, allowing her to adjust to my size. I ease my tongue inside her mouth, tangle my tongue with hers, bring my other hand up to untie her bindings. She wraps her arms about my shoulders, pulls me closer. I prop myself on one elbow to keep my weight off of her. I hold her gaze, keep the connection, as I pull out of her, then thrust back in. Her pussy clenches around me. She digs her fingers into the back of my scalp, tugs on my hair. My cock jerks, thickens, and I begin to fuck her in earnest. In and out of her, as I slide a finger inside her backhole.

She groans and I swallow the sound, continue to kiss her, as I kick my hips forward, impale her to the bed. My balls harden, a pressure building in my groin. I don't stop. I thrust into her, again and again. She arches her spine, pushes up to meet me. Locks her ankles around me, flattens her breasts against my chest planes, strains against me, consumes me.

The ticking of the clock fades. I tear my mouth from hers, "I'll never get enough of you. Not until every inch of you is married to every inch of me, and not even then. Not until I've broken you completely, and myself. Until every part of you bears the imprint of me, every cell in your body recognizes that you are mine. Mine. Only mine, you get me?"

She nods. "Only yours," she whispers. "Always yours, love you Wes—"

I kick my hips forward and bury myself inside her with such force that the entire bed shakes. The headboard slams into the wall; somewhere something crashes to the floor. The timer rings as I growl, "Come with me, Princess."

Her mouth opens in a silent cry. She holds my gaze as she shatters, as her body trembles under me, as my orgasm takes hold and I come inside of her.

Her chest heaves, sweat beads her upper lip, and I bend down and lick it up. "Yum." I smack my lips. "How the hell do you manage to taste so sweet?"

"How the hell do you manage to turn sex into an orgy each and every time, my love?"

"Hmm." I bump my neck to hers. "Love it when you talk dirty to me, babe."

"Love it when you—" She blinks. "Did you hear that?"

I frown, "What?"

"Did somebody call your name?"

I angle my head, "Don't hear anything."

I reach down to kiss her again, when, "Weston, where the fuck are you, asshole?" Damian's voice reaches me from the direction of the doorway.

I groan, "The fuck?"

She giggles, "Looks like your friends decided to pay you a visit on Christmas day?"

"Something I can do without." I grouse.

"Weston... Hey...oops. Sorry, man," Damian apologizes.

I turn, glare at where Damian stands in the doorway, face averted.

"I didn't see anything. I promise."

"Fuck off," I growl.

"A bit too late, old chap."

"Where the fuck is the wanker?" Another voice—Arpad's calls out.

"If he thinks he can spend Christmas on his own, he's got another think coming. What's he up to— Oh hell, did we interrupt something?" *Is that Edward?*

I grab a pillow, throw it in the direction of the doorway. "Back the fuck off, you tossers."

"Sorry."

"Didn't mean any harm."

"You ah—finish what you started. We'll be at your bar."

The voices fade.

"Close the fucking door behind you," I call out.

The door slams shut.

This is what happens when your friends have unrestricted access to your apartment, something I intend to rectify at the first opportunity. I draw in a breath, glance down at my fiancée, "Where were we, babe?"

"We need to get out there." She stabs a finger in my chest.

I lower my head to hers, "In good time."

61

Knock knock!

Who's there?

Imogen.

Imogen who?

Imogen life without chocolate... (and Weston...)

-From Amelie's diary

Amelie

I walk into Weston's living room just as the doorbell rings.

Weston—who's changed into slacks and shirt— opens it as Saint, Sinclair and Jace walk in carrying a massive Christmas tree wrapped in a net. Weston leads them to the far corner of the room, where they cut off the net and proceed to set it up.

Weston turns to me, crooks a finger. I frown; he smirks. I mentally throw up my hands, walk over to join him. He wraps his arm around me tugs me into his side.

"Did you plan this?" I ask.

"What?" He grins.

"All this." I jerk my chin toward the Christmas tree currently being set up by his three friends, then to the bar where the other three are having an argument about the latest cricket scores.

The doorbell rings again, then the door is pushed open, and Isla walks in, followed by Sienna—Jace's wife, who pushes a pram with their newborn son.

Victoria follows her.

She smooths her hands down the green dress, as always, looking like she's stepped off a catwalk. She pauses halfway into the room, when Saint looks up. He closes the distance between them and pulls her into a kiss. His large hand covers her stomach protectively. Yep, these two are next in line to have a baby.

"Oh! How romantic." Isla waves a hand in front of her face. She turns to me and her face cracks into a big smile. "Well then, did you two make up your differences?"

"What differences?" Weston smirks, pulling me in for a kiss.

She chuckles, then her gaze widens, "Oh wow!" She gasps, then walks over to us, "Is that what I think it is?" She stares down at my hand.

I hold out my palm. She grabs my fingers and squeezes. "Ouch," I gripe.

"That's one big-ass ring, you bitch." She leans back, glowers at me, "You were holding out on me?"

"Relax," I assure her, "It happened only a few hours ago. He proposed—"

She squeals so loudly that everyone else in the room turns to us.

"Omigod, omigod." She claps her hands, " This is awesome! Another wedding to plan."

"Ah...no." I shake my head.

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"No way, am I going in for the whole song and dance of a society wedding."

"But Amelie," she whines, "you only get married once."

"Which is why it's going to be something low key, and romantic... Something with a specially-crafted menu of desserts."

Weston, bends his head. "Will it have cock pops?" he whispers.

"Chocolate cockups," I correct him.

"What-fucking-ever," He grumbles, "as long as you bake them only for us, and only you eat them."

"Possessive, hmm?"

"Just don't want anyone else's mouth on my penis, except yours."

"You got a deal." I grin.

"What did I miss?" Summer flounces in, hair flowing around her. She's in a festive onesie with glitter threaded through almost every inch of it.

"Woman, you're too bright for me." Sinclair prowls toward her. He makes a grab for her, but she evades him and giggles. He swoops down, hauls her

close and she melts into his arms. They kiss, until her phone begins to ring. She tries to pull free, but he doesn't let her go. "Sinner," she mumbles against his mouth, "I need to get this."

"Fuck it," he responds.

"It may be Karma. I've been hoping that she'd call."

He releases her lips, but holds her in the circle of his arms.

She pulls out her phone from her bag, "Hello?" she says. Her face brightens. "Karma!" she exclaims. "Where have you been? I was beginning to get worried."

She listens for a second, raises her gaze to Sinner.

He frowns down at her. *Everything okay?* He mouths.

She raises her shoulders. "You sure, you're fine?" she asks, then listens to the reply. "So you won't be home for the New Year either?"

Her lips curve down. "Aww honey, I miss you." She listens some more. "Well if that's what you want..." She tips up her chin, a worried set to her features. "Right, okay. Well I'll see you soon, I hope. You take care, sweetheart, oh! And Merry Christmas." She cuts the call.

"How is Karma?" I call out to her. "When is she coming back?"

Summer turns to me, "She sounded... Fine... I guess." Her forehead furrows. "She's staying on in Sicily for a while longer."

"Ooh." Isla rubs her hands together, "That's so romantic. Maybe her new boyfriend doesn't want to let go of her, huh?"

"Maybe," Summer says slowly. "I wish she'd come home. I want to meet him, you know? Make sure he's treating her right."

"I'm sure she's fine, babe." Sinclair kisses the top of her head. "He's probably being possessive, that's all."

She snorts, "You should know."

"You bet." Sinclair smirks, "Once you find the woman of your dreams, you never let her out of your sight, or out of your bed. You make sure you keep her satisfied enough that she never wants to leave your side; you—"

"Enough." She turns in his arms, slaps a hand on his mouth, "Honestly Sin, you have no filter."

"Not when it comes to you, I don't." He grins down at her.

"But when it comes to you, I know exactly what turns you on."

His eyes gleam, "And what's that?"

"You're all about the chase, my love."

"Am I now?" His lips curl.

"Yep." She tips up her head, "Like now—"

She yanks back in his grasp. His grasp loosens, and she pivots and takes off toward the inner rooms.

"What the—" He seems startled. "You come back here Summer, and finish what you started," he growls.

"Not happening." She laughs, "You going soft, Sin? Worried you've lost the edge? Bet you can't catch me." She disappears around the corner.

His jaw drops, "Why you little..." He takes off in hot pursuit.

There's another knock on the front door; it swings open, then Julia walks in. She glances around the room, then spots me. Her face brightens.

"Jules." I wave at her, "What are you doing here?"

"I invited her." Weston brushes his lips over my hair. Seems Dr. Alpha Claus can't keep his hands off of me, huh? I snuggle into his side. "Thanks," I say. "And by that, I assume you knew this little get together was happening?"

"I had an inkling."

"Is that my Christmas gift?" Damian draws abreast. I look up to find his gaze arrested by Julia.

"She's my friend," I warn him.

He tilts his head, a considering expression on his features. "She's hot," He declares.

"She's off-limits to you, douche," Weston glowers at him.

"Shouldn't the woman have a say in that?" Damian interrupts.

"As long as Amelie gives you the go ahead..." Weston raises his shoulders.

Damian turns to me, "Well?" He smiles, "What do you say?"

"Do you promise to treat her right?" I scan his features. "Promise you won't hurt her."

"I promise to treat her however she wants me to." He smirks.

"Hmm." I frown. "Julia doesn't suffer fools gladly."

"And, rock stars?" His grin widens, "what does she think of them?"

"Why don't you ask me directly?" Julia's voice interrupts us.

Damian pivots to face her, "Better still, how about I show you...?"

*TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT, TURN THE PAGE TO READ **DAMIAN & JULIA'S STORY IN MARRYING THE BILLIONAIRE SINGLE DAD***

MARRYING THE BILLIONAIRE SINGLE DAD

1

#DamianSavage can I have your babies?

#DamianSavage you're my baby daddy, so what if your last album sucked?

Damian

"Shaving foam," I hold out my hand.

Riley clambers onto the chair and gets the can. She shakes it, then piles the foam into my outstretched palm.

"Thanks, Poppet." I slather it on, then smear the residue across her face.

She shrieks, "Ugh, Daddy." She wipes the foam off of her face and makes a gagging sound.

I laugh, then wipe my hands clean before gliding the razor up my chin.

She perches on the bathroom counter, "You're so handsome, Daddy."

I chuckle, "You're biased, sweetheart." I tilt my head and run the razor up the other cheek.

"I'm not." She shakes her head. "Even my teacher thinks so."

"Your teacher?" I narrow my gaze on her.

She jerks her chin, "She's always asking me about you."

"She is?" I frown. That's what comes from being famous; everyone seems to think they have a claim on you. And because I'm a single dad, every woman seems to want to use Riley to get to me.

She scrunches up her nose, "I think she wants to kiss you."

Wha—I lower my razor and stare at her.

How does she know about kissing? Is it normal for a five-year-old to know about that? Who could I ask about it? Not my friends; none of them are single dads so they'd have no idea what I'm talking about. Add that to the list of queries I need to investigate online. I blow out a breath. Why the hell is she growing up so quickly?

"Do you have to go?" She pouts.

"I promised Uncle Weston I'll be there for his Christmas Party."

"B...but," she purses her lips, "I want you to stay home and watch Frozen with me."

Frozen? *Again*. I wince. "You can watch it with Meredith." The only person I'd trust to babysit my precious little girl. Hell, she'd rightened me out when I was at my most rebellious. If anyone could take care of Riley, it would be her.

"But she's not as much fun as you, Daddy," Riley whines.

I frown at her. "Don't trouble Meredith while I am gone."

She juts out her lower lip. Uh-oh. I know that look. It means trouble. My daughter has an unbending spirit, which is all too familiar, for I was the same way. Still am. Dare me not to do something, and hell, if I don't want to rush in to prove a point. *Not much fun from the other side of the fence now, is it, ol' chap*. I heave out a sigh. "Riley," I warn, "promise you'll behave."

She huffs, then winds the hem of her dress about her fingers. "When will you be back?" she asks.

"Not until later." I glance at my reflection in the mirror. How the hell am I going to manage her at fifteen if she is such a handful at five? Maybe I need to get her to socialize more with kids her age. Is it spending so much time with me that is making her grow up so quickly?

"Will you be home in time to tuck me in, Daddy?" she whines.

"I don't think so." I shoot her a sideways glance, "Remember, I was going to stay out tonight while Meredith takes care of you?"

"But I don't want Meredith." She folds her arms over her chest, "I want you, Daddy, you."

I take in her scrunched-up features, her too bright eyes, and a part of me wants to give in, to agree that I'll be back in time to tuck her in. Would that mean I am giving in too easily? Wouldn't I be spoiling her if I agreed to her demands so quickly?

"Maybe..." I wipe the remnants of the shaving foam from my face with a towel, "Maybe just today, Meredith could tuck you in?"

Her chin trembles. "But I want *you* to read to me at bedtime."

I swallow the lump in my throat, then rinse the razor under the tap. "I did read to you yesterday," I remind her. "It's just one evening Riley."

"But...but, I don't want to wake up and not find you at home." A tear slides down her cheek, "I feel safer when you are here, Daddy. Otherwise, I have nightmares. Please, can't you come home tonight?"

I take in her pinched features, her furrowed forehead, and a hot sensation stabs at my chest. This little girl has me wrapped so tightly around her finger, I'd do anything for her. No way, can I stand to see her unhappy. I'd give anything to put a smile on her face. "Fine." I heave out a breath, "Fine, I'll be back home tonight—"

"Yay!" She claps her hands together.

"On one condition," I hold up my finger.

"Uh-oh." She folds her arms over her chest, suddenly looking more like a teenager than ever. "Am I in trouble, Daddy?"

"Not yet," I grab a towel and wipe my face, "but you will be if I come back home and I find you still up."

"B...but..." she blinks, "don't I have to be awake for you to read to me?"

I gape at her. What the—? Did she just try to twist my words around? When did she get this clever? "I said," I pronounce my words slowly, "that I'll be home at some point tonight, *not* that I'll be home in time to read to you."

"But I want to see your face before I go to bed, Daddy," she pouts.

"Riley," I warn her. "Didn't you say that you are all grown up? Grown up girls go to bed on their own. They don't wait up for their fathers to come back home before they go to sleep."

She blinks rapidly, and her shoulders slump, "Guess I'm not grown up then." She peers up at me from under her eyelashes. "If you promise to be back in time to read to me, I'll promise not to trouble Meredith."

What the—? The little imp is bargaining with me? Only this little girl could get away with something like that.

"Why you little monkey." I scoop her up and pretend to tickle her.

She shrieks, "Daddy, stop, stop—" She bursts out into peals of laughter. "Daddy, please..." She giggles and my heart blooms.

Just like that, everything is right with the world.

I hold her close and press my forehead to hers. "I'll be back home tonight, but I don't want you to wait up."

She pouts, "But Daddy—"

"Or I can be home in time to read to you and then you don't get pancakes for breakfast Sunday morning."

"But I loooove pancakes," she protests.

"You gotta choose, Riley." I tilt my head, cross my fingers mentally. "Which one is it gonna be?"

She sighs, a big gust that blows her hair up from her forehead. "Fine, I'll let Meredith read to me tonight."

"And you promise not to trouble her, or stay up until I come home?"

She pouts, and I hold her gaze, keep my features calm.

"Okay, fine, I won't stay up until then."

"And you won't cause trouble for her?"

She lowers her chin.

"Riley," I warn her again.

She purses her lips, "I won't cause trouble for her." She peers up at me from under her eyelashes. "But I get to choose the book she reads."

I open and shut my mouth. Jesus, was I this difficult growing up? This stubborn? At least, I know where she gets it from. My daughter's a chip off the old block. Warmth fills my chest. I've delivered many chart-topping hits in my career, but my proudest creation is, without doubt, this lively little bundle right here.

"You don't want pancakes?" I tilt my head and hold her gaze.

She juts out her chin, then, "Fine, fine." She throws up her hands, in a very grown-up gesture. "You choose the book, just as long as I can see you when I wake up."

2

Julia

"Did you know that hating someone feels disturbingly similar to loving them?" the female radio announcer asks her co-host.

"You mean when your stomach twists at the thought of that person and your chest hurts?" The man responds.

"Oh, so you do get it?" she exclaims.

"I thought that was heartburn." He chuckles.

She groans, "Wolfbane you suck, you know that?"

"It's Wolfe, and PS, that's only one of my many talents, darling Poison Ivy."

"It's Ivy," she retorts, "and if you're listening, don't forget to tune into the next episode of this guest edition of the Daily Date, where we invite you to speed date on air. Send your application via email to—"

I switch off the ignition of the Volkswagen, and the radio shuts off. Speed date...and that, too, on-air? Who'd set themselves up for that torture, huh? The only thing worse will be walking into this party where I don't know most of the guests. I glance up at the imposing building that overlooks the Thames. What the hell am I doing here?

I should be back at my apartment—okay, technically my friend, Amelie's apartment. Right about now, I'd like nothing better than to be tucked into bed and sleeping; instead, I'd accepted Amelie's boyfriend's invitation to a Christmas gathering because... Well, I don't want to disappoint them. Besides, I do want to see her, and if that means having to put up with a bunch

of strangers, well then, guess I'll simply have to suck it up.

I get out of the car, walk into the reception area of the apartment block. The porter glances up at me.

"Julia Andrews here to see—"

"I know." He smiles. "They're in the penthouse." He jerks his chin toward the bank of elevators, "I was told to expect you."

Right. And of course, it had to be the penthouse. Where else do full-of-themselves, upper-class prats live, huh? Okay, come on. So maybe I shouldn't judge them before meeting them. Yeah, best save that for later. I chuckle as I ride up the elevator to the top floor. I step out, and straight into a living room filled with so much natural light that I blink. Talk about being on display, huh? The floor-to-ceiling windows at the far end reveal a view of London that makes me catch my breath. I walk forward, then pause when I spot Amelie, and next to her, a familiar face. Wha—? No, it can't be, can it?

He glances in my direction and my pulse begins to thud.

He stares at me and the full blast of those arctic blue eyes slams into my chest. I gulp; my stomach twists. The rays from the setting sun casts the lower half of his face in shadow. His shoulders bunch as he glares across the short distance that separates us.

He tilts his head, and I take in the hollows beneath those cheekbones, the hooked nose, that prominent jawline, that beautiful throat with tendons that flex, the hollow at the base of his throat, and that sculpted chest... That gorgeous eight pack, which obviously, I cannot see through his T-shirt, but I know is there because the last time I saw it was on the celebrity gossip sites. I blink. No, it can't be. Is it...is he who I think he is? I frown; he glowers back.

He props his hands on his hips and his biceps stretch the sleeves of his leather jacket, which only enhances the breadth of his massive shoulders.

He widens his stance, drawing my attention to those narrow hips, the powerful thighs clad in jeans with the kind of distressed look that he must have paid thousands to get just right.

He slides his hand into the pocket of his jeans, outlining the length of what he's packing... And trust me when I tell you that all of those accounts by the paparazzi don't do justice to Damian 'Big D' Savage. Bad boy rock star, famous for his onstage tantrums and offstage dalliances. What's he doing here?

I move forward. Damian's scowl deepens. What's his problem?

He rakes his gaze down my face, to my chest, down to my hips, my

ankles, then says something to Amelie.

Amelie frowns at him, then jerks her chin in my direction.

Gah! Are they talking about me? No. No way. He can't be interested in me, can he?

I drag my fingers through my shoulder length hair. My fingernail catches on a knot. Damn. I should have, at least, made an attempt to freshen up before coming here, huh? Except, I couldn't be bothered. Not after the debacle that my life has turned out to be.

I'd gone to Australia, excited to be with my boyfriend and looking forward to exploring an entire freaking new continent. I had returned heartbroken, with no savings and in urgent need of a job to pay my bills. Welcome to my sorry-ass life, peeps. That's why I've sworn off men. And that includes hot as hell, macho rock icons as well... Right?

I straighten my spine, hitch my backpack over my shoulder, then proceed toward Amelie. She pulls her hair to one side of her face and blue fire flashes on her left ring finger. Well, hell, so her boyfriend proposed, huh? Good for him. Unlike my ex, who'd decided he'd rather have sex with another woman, never mind that I was bound to walk in on them. Yep, my life is one never-ending cliché.

"Julia doesn't suffer fools gladly," I hear her tell Damian.

"And rock stars?" Damian grins back at her. "What does she think of them?"

What the hell—? Why is he talking about me as if I am not in the room?

"Why don't you ask me directly?" I challenge.

Damian jerks his chin up, "Better still, how about I show you...?"

"Show me, huh?" I plant my hands on my hips, "You ain't got nothin' that I haven't seen before."

"Don't bet on it." The too-full-of-himself asshole stares down that hooked nose at me. His blue gaze narrows and those cerulean eyes seem to bore into my soul. A shiver runs up my spine. This man? His presence is potent. He leans in close and the heat of his body slams into my chest. All of my nerve endings seem to fire at once. Damn him. Why am I so drawn to him?

"I don't bet." I school my features into a mask of indifference. "I prefer certainties—a path to my goal, one from which I never veer."

"Is that a challenge?" He curls his lips, and that smirk... OMG. That upper lip of his seems to thin further. Combined with that puffy lower lip, that square jaw, the tendons of his gorgeous throat that stand out in relief and

highlight the hollow at the base of his throat... Hell... He's lethal, all right. And too handsome to be real. Guys like him exist on the covers of magazines, in online memes that I drool over in secret. Nah, he occupies a different world, a rarefied space I have no intention of joining. So what, if I am attracted to him?

"Take it any way you like." I raise a shoulder. "I don't care."

There is an indrawn breath. I turn to find Amelie staring at me with huge eyes. She shakes her head, moves toward me, only her fiancé pulls her back. He whispers in her ear. She blinks and her cheeks turn pink. He pivots her around and they walk off, leaving me alone with this reprobate of the first order...aka, this big, grumpy male who glares at me with... Something like intent in his eyes.

The hair on the back of my neck rises. My stomach trembles. "Ah... I... I guess I should circulate among the guests. Uh... Don't want to seem impolite or anything, know what I mean?"

I turn to leave, take a step forward, then another. Okay... Maybe this is going to be fine. I'll just sidle out of here and— Warm fingers encircle my wrist. I am pulled around, and hauled up against the massive chest of the afore-mentioned douche canoe... My breasts are plastered against those ripped abs, which I can feel through the T-shirt he wears under his jacket. I gulp and my knees tremble... They bloody tremble. "Let go of me," I demand.

"Make me."

"What?" I narrow my gaze on that sinful-as-fuck face. "You release me right now or else—"

"Or else?" He peels back his lips and his teeth gleam against the tan of his sculpted features. At my silence, he continues, "You were saying—"

"That this is a misunderstanding." I huff. "I am not interested in you."

"Neither am I in you." He widens his stance.

"Doesn't seem that way from where I am, buster."

"How much control on your anger can you muster?" He tilts his head.

"Just because you think—mistakenly—that you're superior?" I flip my hair over my shoulder.

"I am going to break through your tightly controlled exterior."

"Wait." I gape, "Did you rhyme your words to mine?"

"So did you."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did." He grins and my stupid heart stutters. It bloody stutters.

He peers down into my face, his blue eyes glittering. "So much sass," he growls. "I wonder how it would be to peel back the mask you wear to the world, to unveil the passion that lurks under the surface, to show you how it could be if the right man were to touch you in your secret places, the ones you think you have hidden away," his voice lowers to a hush, "but which I can see, feel, touch, suck..."

My core clenches. I swear my panties self-combust.

"I don't care for self-obsessed, insufferable, prats," I declare. "You've got the wrong woman."

He lowers his head until our eyelashes tangle. "I don't think so, baby."

"You're no Johnny," I stammer.

"Huh." His forehead wrinkles, "Dirty Dancing?"

"Oh," I blink, "you...you placed the reference?"

"Rock star, remember?" He relaxes his hold and I put some space between us.

"Like I could forget. Though, considering you are not on social media anymore, I'm beginning to think that you want the rest of the world to."

"You've been stalking me?" His lips curl.

"Of course, not."

"So how did you know that I pulled my social media accounts?"

"It was, uh...all over the news."

He stares at me.

I redden. "You couldn't miss it. Biggest news of the decade: the rock star who decided to disappear from the media's eye, cancelled his concert dates, decided to focus on—"

He tilts his head.

"On his personal life," I mutter.

He glares at me. I throw up my hands, "Yes, fine. Okay, so I did read up on everything I found, but only because I loved your earlier albums—" *Hello. Understatement of the year. I've downloaded all of his music and I listen to it on repeat. Not that I'd ever confess that to him.* "I admit, I wondered what happened, that you decided to go into hiding..." And how I'd love to help him find his mojo again. He can use his mojo on me anytime. In fact, he can use the other parts of him too, especially the one that's rumored to be eleven inches long. At least, meeting the rock star has improved my sense of humor. I snicker.

He frowns. "Do I look like I am in hiding?"

I am more interested in what you have hiding in your pants. Gah! I hope he's not a mind-reader. I step back. He grabs my shoulder and holds me in place, then lowers his head to my neck and sniffs.

"What the—?" I gasp, "Did you just sniff me?"

"Your scent," he rumbles. "It reminds me of clay and vanilla; soft and creamy, yet so spicy." He frowns, "Why the hell do you smell of playdoh?"

"None of your business."

"You work with clay," he accuses me. "Are you a potter?"

"I'm a clay artist, you idiot." In my own time, and when I'm not too busy being a nanny, but he doesn't need to know that. Not that being a nanny is not something to be proud of. It's just, he's an artiste...and famous, and hell, if I don't want to match up to his creative level.

"Hmm." He takes in my features, then leans in closer, closer. He drags his tongue up the side of my cheek.

My breath catches. That was bold, and weird, and okay, such a dominant gesture... My belly trembles. "You...you..."

"You taste bloody delicious." He smacks his lips. "Can I lick you again?"

Yes.

Yes.

"No." I splutter, then snap back my shoulders. "How dare you?" I blink at him. "How could you—?"

"You can say it." He lowers his voice to a hush.

"What?"

"Tell me how much you want to touch me, put your hands on me." He smirks.

The blood rushes to my cheeks, my fingers tremble, and my toes curl. What the hell? One flirtatious glance from him and I'm melting into a puddle of slurry. One more second in his presence and I'll likely throw myself at him and beg him to play me like his favorite guitar. *Ugh, get your mind out of the gutter... Or rather, out of his pants.* A chuckle bubbles up and I swallow it down. "Keep your distance," I insist.

"Or what?"

"Or," I hold up my fists, "I'll unleash my Krav Maga powers on you."

"Krav Maga?" He blinks. "The form of self-defense favored by the Israeli secret service?"

I nod. "I've learned it, I uh..." I move back; he follows.

"Have you now?" He lowers his voice to a hush and my thighs clench.

Whoa, this is not good. I shouldn't have this over-the-top reaction to a man I've just met... In real life. In reel life—on screen and online... Well, that's a different matter altogether. Not that I am going to reveal that. No way. Best I leave while I have some dignity intact.

I angle my body away from him, "I... I have to go."

"No," he snaps.

"What?"

"You're not leaving," he tells me.

"What the—?" My jaw drops. "Of course, I am."

"Oh?" He tilts his head and his eyes gleam. "Don't challenge me." He looks me up and down, and damn it, I'm instantly wet. My knees tremble, my toes curl, and a rush of heat sweeps up my spine. What the hell is this reaction to this... Full-of-himself, hot-as-Hades, larger-than-life male? And why did I just think all of those adjectives in one sentence? That's it, I've gotta get out of here. *Now*.

"Goodbye." I turn; then squeak when he grips my shoulder and yanks me around and to him until I am pressed to him from toe to thighs to chest.

Something hard stabs into the cradle of my core. I draw in a sharp breath. Hell, did I say eleven inches? Nope. No way. This is surely bigger. The man's seriously packing a monster something in his pants and nothing I've read has done any justice to the real thing. So, this is what they mean by *there are three of us in this relationship*? I chuckle, then turn it into a snort.

His frown deepens, but there's a twinkle of amusement in his eyes.

"I shall call you lover, and you're welcome."

"I'm not and... For what?"

"Not yet," he corrects me, "and...for the kiss." He smirks.

"What kiss?" I scowl, "And you have some ego presuming—"

He swoops down and closes his mouth over mine.

3

Damian

The sweet scent of eucalyptus fills my senses. The taste of her, like lush oranges, coats my tongue, fills my lips, drips into my bloodstream. My head spins and my groin hardens. I tilt my head, deepen the kiss. She moans at the back of her throat and the sound wraps around my ribcage. My heart begins to race. I drag her up, widen my stance to take her weight, then wrap my arms around her slim body and nip on her lower lip.

She gasps, opens her mouth, and I swoop in.

I dance my tongue over hers, splay the fingers of my palm across her waist, down to the curve of her butt. I squeeze her arse and she shudders. I suck on her essence, draw breath from her mouth, and offer her mine in return. I bend her backward and push my hips forward, intent on taking her, right here, right now. A growl rips out of me. I tear my mouth from hers, "Bedroom. Now."

She stiffens. "What did you say?"

"I don't repeat myself, sugar." I allow my lips to kick up. "I want inside of you."

"And I want..." Her lips—swollen with the pressure of my kiss—tremble. She flutters her eyelids... "...want..." She inhales.

"What is it?" I glare at her. "Say it."

Her gaze narrows, "...to kick you in the nuts."

I sense her bend her knee, and twist my body aside; I pivot her around at the same time, flip her over to my front so her hips are flush against my

crotch. I wrench her arms in front of her and shackle her wrists with my fingers so she's imprisoned in the circle of my arms.

"You were saying?"

"I wasn't," she snarls. "And you're overstepping your boundaries."

I laugh, "I haven't even started. And isn't it time you were honest with yourself?"

"About what?"

"About how you find me irresistible. It's natural, after all."

"Is it?" She glances up at me.

I nod. "It's normal for someone like you to find my presence overwhelming."

"Overwhelming?" She opens and shuts her mouth.

"Yep." I take in her flushed features, the spark that lights up her green eyes, turning them into pools of gold-tinged fire. "I mean, it happens. After all, my charisma, my larger-than-life persona—"

"Your smaller than normal weenie, for which you are clearly compensating with your words."

I smirk. "Aww, come on baby, you and I both know that this—" I push my hips forward, ensuring that every inch of my throbbing length is imprinted against her curves, "is the opposite of small and unlike anything you've seen before."

"A status I mean to keep." Color smears her cheeks.

Is she blushing? She makes a choking sound in her throat... Okay... Oops, maybe not.

"You don't mean it." I smirk.

"I do," she says through gritted teeth, "and if you don't let go of me right now, I'll—"

"You'll?"

"Hey, you two. Are you coming into the kitchen to taste the dessert Amelie created?"

I jerk my chin toward the entrance to the kitchen, where Weston glances between us.

"Unhand me," she huffs.

"In my own time."

"Julia," Amelie calls out from next to Weston, "you okay?"

"Yes, she is," I reply.

"What the hell?" she splutters. "She's speaking to me, not you, you..."

you..."

"We'll be right there. Why don't you go along? We'll follow," I tell them.

"Jules?" Amelie frowns, "Should I wait?"

"Tell her you're fine, and that you'll be along soon enough," I command.

"Why should I lie?" She glowers.

"Because it's the truth," I lie.

"Not."

I click my tongue. "That's the first thing you're changing, this inability to speak your mind."

"Oh, I am more than capable of saying what's on my mind. And right now, you don't want to read my thoughts, trust me."

"On the contrary." I release her, take a step back, only to circle her wrist with my fingers and tug.

She squeaks, but her body follows my direction as I twirl her around to face me, bend her arm behind her, and curve her back. I lean in close enough for us to share breath. "I want to know every last thought of yours, your deepest most intimate secrets, your fears, your desires, what you hate, what you run from..." I frown. "What are you running from?" I lock my gaze with hers, peer into the depths of her green gaze, past the golden embers that crackle and swirl. My breath catches in my chest and sweat pops on my brow. *The hell? What am I doing? Why am I holding her captive?*

She can do as she wants. I don't know her. I have no claim on her. If I want a woman, all I need to do is snap my fingers and she'll throw herself on the floor, part her legs and offer up everything I desire... Except, I don't. The thrill of success, of fame, of easy lays and meaningless shags that took a piece of my soul with every interaction... All of it pales in comparison to the vital, feisty woman I hold in my arms. How curious. How not what I need right now. What an irritation this is getting to be.

Why the hell had I kissed her in the first place?

I release her and she stumbles back. "Not that I care." I flick my fingers over the front of my leather jacket. "Have a nice life." I brush past her, head toward where Amelie and Weston track my progress. "Your friend was just coming." No pun unintended. I compose my features into a polite facade.

"Rockstar," her voice reaches me.

I swagger forward.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

Likely not. I always pay my debts, never let another get in the way, nor

play with my emotions, so no, I don't think I am. I move forward.

Footsteps sound behind me, then she draws abreast.

"Stop," she demands.

I chuckle. No one tells me what to do. Definitely not my friends. Absolutely not this chit of a woman I've just met.

"If you don't, you'll never find out about the proposition I have for you."

4

Julia

"Proposition, huh?" He stiffens, then pivots and fixes me with the full force of his blue eyes. Storm clouds before the rain falls, the depths of the sea that I had gazed into, on a trip to Byron Bay. I blink and the mirage clears.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I force out the words through a throat gone dry.

A slow smirk curls his lips. He bends to thrust his face into mine, "You tell me, babe." He drags a finger down my cheek, "Would I?"

"I think..." I tip up my chin, "you're intrigued." I tug on my earlobe, then shuffle my feet.

"Is that what this is about?" He hooks his finger in the V of my blouse, "You trying to catch my attention? If so, you have it, sugar."

What am I doing? I should have let him walk away, then left here and begun job hunting in earnest. I should be searching for my next job as a nanny, while working on my clay artistry skills. And then what? A lifetime of taking care of others' children...? Not that I don't thrive on that. When I am with little ones, something raging inside of me quietens. This need to give, to nurture, that is so much a part of me, finds an outlet.

Other girls dream of being doctors and pilots... Me? I want kids of my own, a large family, a husband... None of which is looking likely very soon, so... Considering I caught the eye of this... Man, who is definitely out of my comfort zone... My one chance to live voraciously.

To throw caution to the wind and indulge myself in all the ways he'd

offered. I mean, why not? I've walked the straight and narrow, and look where that has gotten me? Single, with no prospect of a relationship in sight, while my friends are settling down. Not that it is any reason to offer myself up to this god-like man... Ugh, I am pathetic, putting him up on a pedestal.

So, he is a rock star...and tabloid fodder, a face that launched a thousand memes... And me, the stupid woman who tilts her chin up and declares, "One night."

"What?" he frowns.

"You heard me." Thank god, my voice doesn't tremble, "Give me one night; you and me."

He takes in my features. "You're serious?"

I curl my fingers into a fist at my side, "Why? Are you scared about the earlier reaction you had to me?"

"Reaction, huh?" He tilts his head, "I am sorry to tell you, babe, that kiss did nothing for me."

"So what was that column in your pants when you were plastered to me?"

He looks me up and down, "A physiological reaction brought on by my nearness to a woman, who," he smirks, "just happened to be you, in this situation."

Jerk.

He chuckles, and heat flushes my cheeks. "That's not true and you know it," I mutter.

"Is that right?" he drawls.

I draw in a breath, then jut out my chin, "Prove it."

"What?"

"Prove that you didn't feel anything when you kissed me." *What are you doing? Did you just ask him to kiss you again? What the hell, you complete idiot.* But do you blame me? That kiss...was something. And how the hell can he deny that it affected him? Maybe I'd imagined that crazy reaction to him. The only way to be sure is to kiss him again, right?

His glance drops to my mouth, "You sure?"

No.

No.

"Yes." I chuckle, "Wouldn't be asking otherwise, now would I?"

"I don't know." He leans in, gets in my space. "It seems to me, you are a sucker for punishment."

"And you're avoiding the challenge."

"Julia?" Amelie calls out, "You guys coming?"

"Two minutes." I hold up my hand.

He smirks. "It will take us a lot longer than that to finish."

I peer at him from under my eyelashes, "Considering you haven't even started—"

He lowers his head until his lips are almost on mine. Almost. His shoulders block out the sight of the room. Heat from his big body pours over me, cocoons me, pulls me in closer, closer. Or maybe it's he who closes the remaining distance between us. Our noses bump, our eyelashes entwine. His lips part; I lick mine.

Then he straightens, "Sorry, not sorry, babe. You're not my type. No offense." He turns away, heads into the kitchen.

I blink, sway for a second. *What the hell? How dare he?* He's toying with me, is he? I pivot, march into the kitchen, "You stop right there, Rockstar—" Six faces turn to glance at me.

"Uh..." I flush. "Hey..." I clear my throat, "I mean, hello. I mean, I didn't mean it that way. I mean..." I bury my face in my hands. "Forget it. Rewind. Maybe it's best I leave... Come back in and start all over again," I mumble, then backtrack from the scene of my humiliation.

"Jules." Amelie hurries over, and grabs my arm. "Everyone, meet my friend Julia." She turns me to face the crowd of interested people.

There is a chorus of hellos.

I raise a limp hand, "Hi." I wave. "I'm Julia. Call me Jules," I shuffle my feet.

"Lovely to meet you, Jules," a woman with dark hair flowing to her waist calls out. "It's good to have you with us for Christmas."

I jerk my chin, "It's, ah, nice to be here too." I cringe. Nice? Couldn't I have come up with some other adjective? Anything else to enliven the status of my boring life?

Thankfully, the rest don't seem to notice. They turn away to talk amongst themselves. Everyone, including the rock star, who turns his back on me. Is that good or bad? At least, I am not at the receiving end of those glowering glares of his...the panty-melting kind, I mean... Which, I admit, I miss already. Damn it, why am I so shaken? I rub my fingers on the fabric of my jeans-clad thigh.

"I think it's best I leave while I still have some dignity intact," I mumble. "Not that I have any left. What the hell was I thinking earlier?"

"I don't think you were thinking at all." Amelie chuckles.

"You're right about that." I scowl. I had reacted to the presence of the dominating, larger-than-life male who prowls over to join the other men clustered on the other side of the island. And why the hell am I still watching him. "I... I shouldn't have come."

"What nonsense." Amelie winds her arm through mine, "I want you here with me. After all, it's not every day that a woman gets engaged, huh?" She holds up her hand and I stare at the sapphire that glitters on the ring around her finger.

"It's gorgeous," I say sincerely, even as my heart twists inside of my chest. Shit, I will not be envious, will not. She deserves all the happiness in the world. I turn and throw my arms around her. "Congratulations." I squeeze her shoulders. "How did you meet him?"

"We met at Summer's wedding, then ended up double-booking the same cottage over the festive season."

"No," I gasp.

"Yes." She nods. "I thought the sparks between Weston and I were pretty explosive, but I've changed my mind."

"Oh?" I lean back, peer into her face, "Why's that?"

"Because, the chemistry between you and Damian is enough to set this house on fire." She stares at me meaningfully.

"Hmm." I glance away, unable to meet her eyes. There's something between me and the rock star, all right. Some crazy connection that's throwing me off kilter and making me act so out of character. *One night*. Had I actually propositioned him? What the hell had I been thinking? My cheeks flush. Good thing he'd snubbed me, huh?

The same woman who'd welcomed me earlier totters over to us in her stilettos. "Hi," she says in a breathless voice, "I'm Isla."

"Jules." I shake her hand.

She pulls me in for a hug, "Soooo nice to meet you." Her embrace is warm and effusive.

"Hey," I pat her back, "so, you're Amelie's friend, huh?"

"As are you." She leans back, her face wreathed in a big smile, "Which makes us friends-in-law, huh?" She giggles.

I blink. Wow, the optimism pouring off of this woman... No wonder, she and Amelie get along. Unlike me... The cynical, non-believer in love, or men, for that matter. Hell, I so don't belong here. "I need a drink," I declare.

"That's my girl." Isla grabs my arm and drags me to the corner of the room...opposite from where the rest of the crowd—including the rock star—is huddled. "What do you fancy?" She rubs her hands together.

"Why don't you let me do this?" I reach for the bottle of tequila, pour it into the blender, follow it up with the lime juice, the orange liqueur. I add in the agave and the syrup, followed by kosher salt, then blend it all together.

"You've done this before," Isla comments.

"Yep." The one thing good about being in Australia... I had partied my ass off...when I was not working. Which had been a surprise. I was—am—a loner, but being in a foreign country had been freeing. I could let go of my inhibitions. Somehow, it had felt like I wouldn't be judged.

I pour the mixture into the margarita glasses that Isla helpfully provides, then top them off with garnish. "Here you go."

"Ooh, this looks good." Isla gulps down a mouthful, then smacks her lips, "Woman, I almost came from that sip."

I giggle. "If only it were that easy."

"Tell me about it." She shakes her head, "Have you ever come with someone fingering you?"

"Never," I shake my head.

We both turn to Amelie, whose cheeks redden.

"Oh, don't even ask her." Isla tosses her hair over her shoulder. "Bitch has a new fiancé, who is a surgeon, so he's clearly good with his fingers, in more ways than one."

"Who's good with his fingers?" A woman in a pink onesie with glitter down the front saunters over to join us.

"Nothing you need to worry about, Summer," Isla scoffs. She leans in close to me. "And another who clearly has had too many O's, courtesy of her rich bastard of a husband," she says in a whisper loud enough for the rest of them to hear.

"Not my fault that the Seven are men of many talents." Summer chuckles.

"The Seven?" I tilt my head.

"That's what the media calls the guys." Amelie nods toward the men. "And that includes your rock star." She smirks.

"Not my rock star."

"Oh, are we talking about the encounter between Damian and Julia?" Another woman, a brunette in a perfectly-tailored dress, glides over to us.

"We are not," I snap.

"Yep," Isla confirms.

"Totally." Amelie nods.

"Gosh, that was some kiss, huh?" Summer fans herself.

Heat sears the back of my neck. Of course, they'd all noticed that. I offer the brunette a glass of the cocktail, and she declines. "I'm sticking to water." She points to her glass. "I'm Victoria, by the way."

"Are you also pregnant?" I joke.

"I am, actually." She nods.

I splutter, then cough and place my drink back on the island. "Jeez, sorry."

"No worries." She chuckles, "I'm still getting used to the idea, myself."

I glance at her flat belly, "Are you in the first trimester?"

"I am." She nods. "I'd have preferred for the others not to know until later, but the Seven are so close..."

"Or maybe they just like to pretend that way," Isla scoffs. "The way they get into arguments with each other, you'd think they were enemies."

"Wanker," a male voice rings out from behind us as if to punctuate her words.

There's the sound of something crashing into wood. I glance up to find Damian and another man as tall as he is, with dark hair and piercing eyes, engaged in arm wrestling.

"The other one's called Sinclair; he belongs to me," Summer chirps. "Who do you think will win, by the way? Yours or mine?"

"Mine," I reply, then press my lips together. "I mean, he's not mine." I jerk my chin toward the rock star.

"Freudian slip, huh?" Isla exchanges a glance with Summer.

"Freudian nothing," I scoff. "I'm simply punch drunk with jet lag, is all." And maybe a little bit worried about finding my next job. Okay, I am very worried about my situation. The money in my bank account will barely stretch to a few more weeks. No way, am I going to borrow from my family. My mum had warned me against taking off with my boyfriend. I'd ignored her, to my detriment.

Wouldn't she love to say I told you so, now. My shoulders sag. That's not fair. She's not like that, but I'm too embarrassed to tell her. As for borrowing from Amelie? Nope. She is already doing so much for me. No, I need to find a job quickly, though the agencies I'd called prior to travelling home to London had warned me there weren't any live positions at the moment. None

had sounded very hopeful about an assignment coming up soon either. And hell, if I don't need a job quickly.

"Or maybe you're reeling from that kiss, huh?" Isla chortles.

I groan. "Can we pretend that never happened?"

"Nope." Summer laughs.

Isla chuckles. "Remember, I've seen each of the women here succumb to one of the Seven. Once they set their sights on you, you don't stand a chance."

"And you?" I frown. "What about you?"

"I'm busy building my wedding planning business." She gathers her long hair over one shoulder. "I don't have time for such shenanigans."

"Like we did?" Amelie snorts. "But trust me, when you know...you know."

"That's how it was for you and Weston, huh?" I ask.

"I met him and I had this sinking feeling..." She presses a hand to her stomach. "I was hot and cold all at once, know what I mean?"

"Isn't that normal in London weather?" I say dryly.

She laughs, "Oh, trust me, it's a completely different sensation." She looks me up and down, "Is that how you felt when you saw Damian?"

"Nope," I lie, then chug down the rest of my margarita, cough, and place the now-empty, soup-dish proportioned glass back on the counter.

"Prove it," Isla challenges.

"What?"

"Show us that whatever is between the two of you didn't affect you."

"What are you talking about?" I half laugh.

"You heard me, girlfriend." She taps a finger on her chin. "Demonstrate that he doesn't make your knees go weak and your pussy all moist."

"Isla," I scold. "Mind your, uh, p's and q's."

Isla chokes on her drink.

Amelie slow blinks, "Keep up the bad jokes and you'll have won all of us over in no time."

"All of whom?"

She makes a circular motion with her fingers, "The collective."

"Is there a collective?"

"Given you've already caught Daddy D's eye, I'd say you are on your way to becoming one of us," Victoria adds.

"Daddy D?" I frown, "Why do you call him that?" That's not how the

media refers to him, at least.

Summer, Victoria and Amelie exchange glances. Then Summer pipes up, "It's because he's the oldest of the Seven."

"He's not that old." I scoff, "He's what, thirty-two?" That's what his Wikipedia page indicates. What? So, I sneaked a peak, or two, at it.

"He's closer to thirty-five," Amelie offers.

Isla wrinkles her nose. "Though you have to admit, the years sit well on him. Imagine you could be bratty with him," she waggles her eyebrows, "and Daddy D would be only too happy to dole out the punishments, huh? Bet you'd enjoy that too."

I throw up my hands, "Seriously, you guys need to stop with the trying to get us together." Speaking of, I turn back to where Damian and Sinclair are arm-wrestling.

Damian's neck ripples with tendons. He leans in, jaw clenched. The biceps of his arm bulge and he growls deep in his throat. A shiver runs down my spine; moisture laces my core.

Gosh, the rock star going all caveman-like is bloody hot. And somehow, so different from what I expected him to be. His social media used to be about him on stage performing, or recording in his studio, or else on the red carpet, accompanying one celebrity or another. There isn't much more of his personal life in the scene I am looking at right now. So why does it feel so intimate? I am merely a stranger who ran into him by chance. Providence. Kismet. Whatever you want to call it. *And what are you going to do about it, huh? You going to take fate into your own hands and do something with it?*

Damian's shoulders stretch the width of his T-shirt. A vein throbs at his temple, then he smashes Sinclair's fist into the surface of the island. "I won," he fist-pumps in the air.

Sinclair straightens in his suit, which seems to have been tailor-made for him. There is so much designer wear in the room—the kind you don't normally see on catwalks because they are created exclusively for the kind of men that these Seven are.

"Where are the others?" I frown.

"Others?" Isla enquires.

"You all referred to Seven. I count four in the room."

"Baron's the secret one. No one knows about his whereabouts," Summer muses.

"And Arpad and the Father aren't here," Victoria supplies.

"Hold on." I turn to her, "Did you say Father?"

Isla nods. "Edward's a priest," she replies. "The incident impacted him so much, it urged him to find his calling, apparently."

"The incident?" I tilt my head.

Amelie nods, "The Seven were kidnapped together and held for ransom when they were in their pre-teens. And that kind of shared experience... It binds you together for life. Know what I mean?"

"I let you win this round. Doesn't mean I'll go easy on you next time," Sinclair's cold voice cuts through the space.

Damian chortles in response.

"Excuses, excuses." He pokes a finger in Sinclair's chest, "You're getting soft, you wanker. Admit it, the old ball and chain is weighing you down."

"Perhaps it's giving me a purpose?" Sinclair glances past him at Summer. His features light up in a smile that's so open, so real, so everything, that my heart thumps in my chest.

He prowls past Damian, and heads to her. Summer meets him half-way and the two kiss.

The women behind me ooh and aah. A ball of emotion blocks my throat. Damn it, what's wrong with me? It's just a man kissing his wife, and pulling her to him and ravaging her mouth thoroughly. Jesus, that's hot as hell, and now I feel like a voyeur. I glance past them to where Damian watches, a bored look in his eyes.

"Go get a room, you guys," he taunts.

Sinclair straightens, then grins down at Summer. "I think I might do just that." He swoops down and tosses her up over his shoulder.

She yelps, "Sinner, what the hell?"

Sinclair raps her on her backside and she squeaks, "Sinner, behave."

"Not what you told me the last time I took you over my knee, my darling wife."

My cheeks heat.

He marches past me, carrying the now-giggling Summer. No doubt, to make hot, heavy love to her. My belly knots and sensations ripple down my spine. Damn it, there is way too much chemistry between the couples in this room, not to mention all that testosterone from the gathered men.

"Well, look who we have here." A new male voice sounds behind me. I turn and have to look up, all the way up, to meet the piercing gaze of another man.

5

Julia

"I'm Arpad." He holds out his hand.

"You're one of the Seven." I place my palm in his much larger one.

"My reputation precedes me?" He smirks, then bends to kiss my knuckles. I blink. Gosh, each one of the Seven is more lethal than the last. I mean, put them all together, and honestly, no woman stands a chance. It's like having a range of delectable thoroughbreds preening and vying for attention. Not that any of them are horses... Well, okay, they are stallions, all of them, especially the man who's glowering at me from the sidelines. Continuing to ignore Damian, I focus my attention on Arpad, "So what are you doing here?"

"Yeah, something I want to know as well." A hard voice sounds from somewhere behind and above me. Heat sears my back, curls around me, rolls straight down to the triangle of heated flesh between my legs. I shiver.

Arpad looks from me to the man standing behind me. "Rockstar," he drawls, "something bothering you?"

"You," Damian snaps.

I gasp, turn to shoot the rock star a glance.

He glares at Arpad, who chuckles. "I see all that time you've spent on R&R isn't doing much for your disposition. Not that I blame you, considering your Christmas single flopped."

Damian growls. He actually growls. "Fuck off, Beauchamp."

Arpad's lips twist, "If you fancy a fight, I'd be only too happy to oblige."

"Oh, yeah?" Damian steps up to stand chest to chest with the other guy. "Don't think I'll back down."

"I'm counting on it." Arpad flicks open the buttons on his long-sleeved shirt, then rolls up his cuffs.

Damian shrugs out of his leather jacket—Why the hell did he put it back on?—and hands it to me. "Are you really going to do this?" I hiss.

He doesn't reply. Typical. I grab his jacket— Why the hell am I doing that? I should simply throw it down on the floor and walk away. Instead, I slip it on. It's big enough to dwarf me, and his scent... Oh, his spicy, dark essence envelops me, and I swear, my ovaries spasm.

"Step back," Damian orders.

"What?"

He turns, leans in toward me, and I skitter back.

His lips kick up in that smirk that would give Billy Idol a run for his money... And Damian Savage has far more presence.

"Good." He nods. "Now stay there."

"What the—?" I scowl, take a step forward, when Isla grabs my hand.

"Stay," she insists.

"But."

"Trust me." She lowers her voice, "You don't want to poke the beast right now."

I stare at her, "You make him sound like some primitive species."

"Which is what they are. Primal to the core, especially when it comes to their women."

"You have much experience?"

"Only from the outside," she firms her lips. "It's also why I've sworn never to be mixed up with them."

"Famous last words," Amelie drawls. "That's what I told myself, and now look." She waves her left hand in the air.

Isla makes a gagging sound. "I'm so tired of all my friends falling for one of the Seven, which is why I am so pleased you are here, Julia." She hooks her arm with mine.

"You are?"

She nods. "You're not going to get caught up with that self-entitled rock star."

"I'm not?"

She shakes her head. "You have too much common sense to become

another of his conquests."

I frown, "You mean, I'm not his type?"

"You are the kind of woman who'd rather take things into her own hands, and set your own terms."

"So, I should go after him, rather than the other way around?" I muse.

"All I'm saying is, don't give in too easily," Isla urges. "Rock star or not, make him work before allowing him close to you."

"Only, don't think it's easy to get one of the Seven out of your mind, once you get involved with them." Victoria slips onto one of the barstools, places her glass of water on the island. "I set out to seduce Saint—but then I fell too." She jerks her chin in the direction of the large glowering man who stands with his arms crossed over his chest.

"I don't see you protesting much, girlfriend," Isla huffs.

"At some point, I realized it was best to give in and enjoy the ride." Amelie looks at me. "Know what I mean?"

"Are you trying to tell me something?" I frown.

"What I am saying..." Victoria smiles—with that soul-deep contented smile that only those who have found their other halves seem to wear like it is some kind of secret, which I admit, from where I am standing, it is.

"You're saying...?" I prompt her.

"That you best not underestimate what entangling in any form with the Seven means," Victoria replies. "Once you step into their circle of influence, you won't be able to catch your breath. The force of their personalities will overwhelm you, and by the time you come to your senses, it'll be too late."

I clear my throat, "You make it sound like they are some kind of cult."

"Not a cult." Her features grow serious. "But they are a tribe. These men are wild beasts who wear a veneer of sophistication so they may pretend to fit into society."

O-k-a-y.

"They may fight with each other, but because of the incident, they'll always be united in ways we can never understand," Amelie adds.

"So," I turn to where Damian and Arpad circle each other in the space that the rest of the men have cleared, "they are still hurting from the trauma of the past?"

She nods. "Which means, when the right woman comes along... Well, let's just say, it accelerates the healing process in a way that is life changing."

Damian throws a blow, Arpad ducks, then drops down and kicks the rock

star's legs out from under him. I draw in a breath, take a step forward, but Damian springs up to his feet and lands his fist in Arpad's pretty face. Blood explodes from Arpad's nose and he staggers back. Damian cracks his neck, raises his arms in mock victory, "You're going soft, Beauchamp."

Arpad shakes his head, says something unintelligible.

Damian laughs, "Guess the round is mine then."

"Now's your chance," Isla coaxes.

"What?"

"If you want to take your future into your own hands, instead of allowing the Seven to get to you, this is your opportunity."

Too late. Damian has already made an impact on me. The chemistry between us is off-the-charts crazy. She's right about one thing, though. I am done being an onlooker to my own life. This time, I am going to steer my own fate. I am going to throw caution to the wind, live life to the fullest, and then walk away with my ego and my heart intact.

One last dalliance before I find a good man to settle down with and live my quiet, boring life.

I hitch my bag over my shoulder, then walk forward, still wearing his jacket. "Hey, Rockstar," I call out. "This is your last chance to accept my challenge. You in or out? Do you have the balls?"

Weston whistles.

Saint snickers.

Damian jerks his head toward me, "Balls, huh? I'll show you my balls all right, sugar. I—"

That's when Arpad closes the distance and lands a punch to Damian's head.

6

Damian

I come to with a start to find I am on my back on the floor of the kitchen of Weston's apartment. "Bloody hell." The pain ripples down my spine. I raise my hand and my knuckles throb; my shoulder screams in protest. "What the hell happened?" I open my eyes and her green gaze clashes with mine. Delicately arched eyebrows, an upturned nose, pink lips that curve in a bow so perfect it should be illegal. She flicks out her tongue to lick her lips and I feel the tug all the way to my groin. "Juliet?"

"You are no Romeo," she scoffs.

"You don't know that yet."

"I know that you can't hold a fight." She frowns.

"Only because you distracted me," I sneer.

"Not my fault that you have the attention span of a child."

"Child is the father of man, after all," I mutter. *What the hell? Did I just say that out loud?* Clearly, that blow to my head ruffled up my brains, not to mention my thinking process.

"And Daffodils are my favorite flower," she grouses.

"Not bad. You got the Wordsworth reference." I smirk.

Damn it, my cheeks hurt, and clearly, I am a bloody mess.

"Didn't take you for the poetic kind." She sniffs. "And, actually, I do prefer the Bard to Wordsworth."

I open my mouth and she frowns. "Don't say the obvious."

"You don't know what I was going to say," I point out.

"I do," she grumbles, "and yes, my mother loved his plays. She wanted to call me Juliet. My dad thought Juliet a bit much, so they settled for Julia." She smiles a little. "It's one of the things my mom and I like to do together."

"What else do you do together?" I peer into her face. "Other than read Shakespeare?"

"None of your business."

"You sure?" I look her up and down. "After all, you're the one who challenged me, despite being a stranger."

"Hardly a stranger," she huffs.

"Just because you see me on tabloid headlines doesn't mean you know me."

"Just because I look like the quiet, mousy kind—

"You, and mousy? Have you seen yourself in a mirror?" I laugh, then wince when my right eye throbs, "Ouch."

"Frozen peas." She glances up, speaks to someone out of my line of sight, "Is there a bag of frozen something to put on his bruised eye?"

"Arpad, asshole," I groan. "I am going to get you for this, mofo."

Arpad thrusts his face into my line of sight, "Looking none the worse for wear, Savage." He grins, "Apparently, I upgraded your pretty boy looks."

"Apparently, you don't value your life." I swipe out with my fist; he swerves.

"My, my, getting beaten didn't do much for your temperament, I see," he muses.

"Sod off." I lurch up to sitting position, the world sways, my stomach churns, and... No fucking way, am I going to be sick. I shake my head and the ringing in my ears worsens. How the hell did I manage to get myself into this situation?

"Here, let me." Julia reaches over with a bag of frozen peas in her hand. I snatch it from her, hold it to my aching eye. The pain instantly recedes. I pin her with my open eye. "This is all your fault," I glare at her. "If you hadn't called out to me, I wouldn't have turned and given this joker here an opening."

"Don't flatter yourself." Arpad chuckles, "I would have beaten you anyway, though I confess, your girlfriend's presence sure helped distract you."

"Not my girlfriend," I protest.

"He's the last person I'd choose for a boyfriend," she snaps at the same

time.

I frown up at her, "Not the impression I got earlier, babe."

"The proposition I had in mind was not of the relationship variety."

"Oh?" I lower the bag of peas, "Funny, I'd put you down for the rainbows and unicorns and shit kind of woman."

"Umm." Arpad stares between us, "You two sure you don't want to borrow one of Weston's spare rooms? He has enough of them, god knows. And by the way, do you promise to name your first born after me?"

"Shut up," I say at the same time as her.

She scowls at me.

I glower back at her.

Arpad rises to his feet. "Uh, I guess I need to see a man about a dog."

"Don't come back in a hurry," I call out after his retreating figure.

"I think Victoria needs me." Saint prowls away in Arpad's wake.

"I'll be right outside, Jules," Isla calls out. "You need any help—"

"She won't," I snap.

"Uh, okay," Isla says brightly, "but, you know, if you want back-up..."

"I don't." Julia turns to her. "In the state that the rock star is right now, I doubt he poses any danger to me."

What the hell? How dare she dismiss me that easily?

"Hold on a second." I lean forward, then groan when my hurt eye chooses that moment to set off a series of spasms that thud against my brain. "Ow," I groan.

"Like I said," she nods to her friend, "I think my virtue is safe for the moment." She smiles.

Isla pivots and leaves.

"I'll show you how safe you are with me," I reach for her with my free hand.

She scoots back, shakes her head. "Now, now, you're hardly in a position to misbehave, Rockstar. At least, wait for the swelling of your eye to go down."

"The only thing swollen is between my legs, and trust me, it's not going away. As for anything going down..."

She sucks in a breath and flushes, then shakes her head. "Stop joking around."

"Who's joking? I'm being very serious." I look her up and down. "Since I met you, you've been a pain in my side, and in other parts, and by the way,

that proposition of yours? It's unacceptable."

"It is?"

"Yeah." I nod. "I don't need a night. Give me an hour and I'll draw enough orgasms from you to last you a lifetime."

"My, my," she scoffs, "someone has a big ego."

"Not the only thing that is big—"

She opens her mouth to respond.

I raise my hand. "And you know it's true, considering you've been stalking me online."

She reddens. "I haven't."

I click my tongue. "Don't lie now, and by the way, the answer is yes."

"Yes?"

"To the question you have in your mind."

"Which is?"

"That it's eleven inches."

She drops her gaze to my crotch. "So, *not* in competition with Dirk Diggler, then?"

"Very good, though if there were a competition, I'd win." I nod. "Not that I'd have expected you to have watched Boogie Nights."

"Because I'm female?" She scowls.

"No, because it's considered porn in polite circles, and also, you're welcome."

She jerks her chin up, her cheeks fiery. "For what?" She clears her throat.

"For the chance to touch it." I smirk.

"Aargh," she makes a gagging sound, but her cheeks go pink, "As if I want to do that." She swipes her hair over her shoulder.

"Sure, you do." I toss the bag of peas aside, hold out my hand.

She glances at my palm, and her features grow wary.

"I won't bite," I assure her.

"I wouldn't bet on it."

"You're right," I tilt my head, "I can't make that promise where you are concerned. In fact, I am sure by the time the hour is over, I'll have eaten you out many times over."

"What the—" She throws up her hands. "Can't believe you said that out aloud."

"Believe it, baby, and I am just getting started."

She stares, then firms her lips and shakes her head. "Maybe this was a bad

idea."

"Maybe you're getting cold feet."

"Maybe..." Her gaze narrows. "Maybe I finally realized how uncivilized a man you are."

"Maybe that's what attracts you to me." I reach toward her.

She evades me, then springs up to her feet.

I grab her ankle, and she tumbles straight into my lap.

"What the—?" she splutters, her hair about her shoulders.

"Well, hello there," I purr.

She pushes against my chest.

I wrap my arms more tightly around her. "Lost your nerve, hmm? Didn't take you for a coward."

She tips up her chin and her green eyes glow with an inner fire. There she is. There's the fighting spirit in her that has made this encounter so much more enjoyable from the beginning.

"Didn't take you for a...a..."

"Handsome, charismatic, larger-than-life personality?" I offer.

"More like an obnoxious, over-the-top, sleazy douche."

I allow another smirk to curl my lips. "I think the lady doth protest too much."

"Do you always speak in such archaic prose?"

"Only when I am in your presence." I chuckle.

"Hmm." She peers up at me from her position in my lap, and yeah, we are both on the floor of Weston's kitchen, considering I'd gone down like a light when Arpad, that bastard, had KO'd me—a favor which, by the way, I am going to return with compounded interest. You can count on it.

"Well?" I tilt my head. "You have until I count to five."

"Five?" She wrinkles up her forehead. "What do you mean?"

"Stay and be kissed, or run away, and we'll forget that you chickened-out on your so-called proposition."

She pouts, her lips twisting into a sexy 'O' that has my groin tightening further.

"Five." I start the countdown.

She scans my features, her gaze landing on my lips. "I think..." she swallows, "I think that—"

"Four."

She licks her lips, glances left, then right.

"Three."

She wriggles her bottom against the thickness that tents my groin.

A growl rips up my chest. "Two."

I lean in; she gulps.

I hold her gaze and her pupils dilate. Her chest heaves. The pulse at the base of her throat increases the intensity of its pace.

I lower my mouth to hers, stop when there's less than a millimeter that separates us. "One." I press my lips to hers. That's when my phone pings.

7

Julia

"Your phone." I gasp and sidle back.

"Fuck that." He swoops down, clamps his fingers on my neck. "You had your chance to leave, Flower. You lost it; now, you're mine."

"And you are what, a cave man?" I huff.

"Only when it comes to you." His eyebrows knit; he scrutinizes my features. "What is it about you, that makes me want to tear through your tightly controlled veneer and expose the passion that seethes under the surface?"

"Who uses verbs like seethe?" I scoff.

"I'm a song writer, and a rock star, remember?"

"You forgot the 'has-been' part," I retort.

His jaw tics and a vein throbs at his temple. His blue eyes blaze with silver sparks that flare and coil, then fade away, leaving a mirrored coldness in their wake.

"So, the flower has thorns, huh?" He peruses my features. "I have you in my grasp. May as well make the most of it, hmm?"

He lowers his face. I turn my head, or try to, only to find I can't move, because he tightens his grasp on my neck, so I have no choice but to meet his kiss head on. I clamp my lips shut.

He swipes his tongue across my mouth. A shiver runs down my spine, my belly trembles, my limbs shake, and damn him, but this nearness to him... It's potent—a drugging, mind-melding kind of force that draws me to him,

that coaxes me to open myself up, throw myself at him and ask him to lick the lips between my legs too. Gah, what the hell? Now I am thinking in pornographic detail, something I don't normally indulge in. Clearly, it's his proximity that's affecting me. "Please," I whisper against his beautiful mouth. "Please ..."

He brings up his other hand to cup my cheek. "What is it?"

Heat sinks into my blood, arrows to the space around my heart. My core clenches, my toes curl... Jesus, somehow his gentleness is even more potent than his brute force.

I raise my hand, wrap my fingers around his wide wrist. The rough hairs abrade my skin. Goosebumps pop on my forearms.

He stays quiet, his lips so close to mine that if I lean in a millimeter more our noses will bump. He stares into my eyes, holding my gaze, searching inside of me, finding the parts of me I have never before revealed to the world.

"Please," I whisper. "Please...don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't stop."

He closes the distance between us, fits his mouth to mine. I open my lips, and he thrusts his tongue inside, draws on my breath, sucks on me like I am the last note in one of his songs. I close my eyes, tilt my chin up, grip his shoulder and move in closer. Push my breasts into his chest. A shudder grips him. He tears his mouth from mine, "Leave here with me."

He meets my gaze and my mouth dries; my belly trembles. How can his smirk be so hot, so filled with a promise that I don't dare acknowledge?

"I don't do this normally," I tip up my chin. "I'm not that kind of a woman."

Why the hell do I care what he thinks of me? I'd all but told him that I was up for a fling, so why the hell am I delaying now?

"What kind?" He frowns.

"You know... The kind who sleeps around?" I mumble.

"There's no chance of either of us sleeping tonight." His lips curl.

"Oh."

"Keep your mouth open and I won't be able to resist stuffing it." His grin widens. "And it won't be with Christmas pudding, either."

My core clenches and my pulse thuds at my temples. Why the hell is his crudeness such a turn on?

He drags my hand to his crotch, massages his impressive length.

I squeeze his hardness and he draws in a sharp breath.

"It's gonna feel even better when I'm inside of you," he growls.

"I really never jump into bed with strangers," I feel compelled to say.

"And yet it was you who proposed we spend a night together," he points out.

"About that..." My cheeks heat, "I've never done that before; this is the first time I've been this bold."

"I know," he rumbles.

"You do?"

He nods, "But then, you also know a lot about me, don't you?" He stares into my eyes and heat flushes my cheeks.

"You...you're right," I mumble. "I may have, uh, had a small crush on you."

He stares.

"Okay, fine, so maybe I followed your coverage in the press."

He clicks his tongue.

"Fine, fine." I throw up my hands. "I stalked your social media. I know you have a type that you go for."

"What type is that?"

"Blonde, curvy, willowy."

He looks me up and down, "You'll do."

"Jerk." I scramble away and jump to my feet. "Forget this conversation ever happened."

"A bit late for that, Flower."

I grab my backpack from where I'd dropped it on the floor earlier, then turn to leave.

He wraps his fingers around my ankle again. "One hour," he repeats. "Give me one hour, and if, at the end of it, you are still standing, you can leave."

I glance down to where his thick fingers shackle me. "Is that a threat?"

"A promise."

"One hour?" I purse my lips.

"Starting now." His eyes gleam. He releases his grip on my ankle and rises to his feet...and keeps rising.

"Just one hour?" I search his features.

"That's all I'm asking for." He holds out his hand. He sounds sincere; bet

it's all an act though. I stare down at his hand, then back at his face.

"Well?" he coaxes, lips curved in a smile that could charm the panties off of many a woman. And has. The bad news—my knickers are damp too. Damn it, I can't accept. And if I refuse? I'll never forgive myself for passing up the opportunity to find out what it was to be brought to orgasm by Big D alphahole himself. Besides, I'm the one who'd started this insane sequence of events. I can't back out now, can I? I jerk my chin.

"Is that a yes?"

I nod again.

"I need to hear you say it."

"Yes." I swallow, reach for his hand, when he pulls back.

"I changed my mind."

"What?" I blink, as he bends his knees, then scoops me up and throws me over his shoulder.

"Hey," I squeal, "put me down."

"You promised me an hour. Now we do things my way."

"What if I don't...want to?"

He stalks toward the door of the kitchen. "Trust me, Flower. I promise, you won't regret it."

8

Julia

"Famous last words." I glance around the apartment on the 65th floor of The Shard. Bloody hell, this has to be the only apartment at this level in London. I mean, I had no idea there were apartments in The Shard—the tallest building in London—but there you go. You learn something new every day. Like...the fact that I hadn't resisted him as he'd hauled me out of Weston's apartment and into the elevator. We'd ridden down in silence and then he'd led me to his bike.

Yep! The big bad rock star drives a road hog... A massive Harley, which had been pure sex between my thighs... Okay, almost as sexy as having Mr. Grumpyants Rockstar there... Gah, stop thinking about that.

He'd made a smooth exit from the Christmas Party. I have to give him credit for that. Not that I'd wanted to be there a second longer. Not when almost everyone there had seemed to be in love, or one half of a devoted couple, not to mention the level of bromance that exists between the men... They hate each other, and clearly, would also do anything for each other... The kind of circle of friends I've always longed for...and never had. Well, except for Amelie, who is one of the few who's survived the transition from childhood to adulthood. So, there's that.

Both she and Isla had stepped in as Damian had carried me out. They'd asked me if I was okay, and I'd assured them I was in full possession of my faculties and was leaving with Damian of my own free will... Ha! If only that were true.

I dig my feet into the lush carpet in the apartment. This is bloody prime real estate in the heart of London. I knew this guy was successful, but somehow, being here in his place...brings home just how out of my league he is. I walk over to the floor to ceiling windows that comprise an entire side wall of the bedroom. London stretches out below me... Picture postcard perfect... Unlike my bloody life, which is turning out to be the fodder of a B-grade romance movie... Minus the happy ending, which this association with out-of-my league, sexy-as-hell rock star guarantees I will not have.

I place my palm against the glass, which feels cool to my touch. Why the hell am I so feverish? Besides... I pull out my phone from my backpack. Forty minutes of the allocated sixty have already passed, and I haven't orgasmed once. Maybe he changed his mind, huh? Perhaps this is just a way of... What? Showing me the inside of his bedroom? I shake my hair back from my shoulders. Nah, that doesn't make sense. He'd all but whisked me here, without giving me the slightest chance to reconsider, so where the hell is he?

He'd stepped out into the other room to make a few calls, he'd said, and that had been—I look at my phone— ten minutes ago now.

"Miss me?" Heat sears my back at the same time that his voice sounds from behind me.

I swallow and my knees threaten to buckle. I drop the phone into my backpack, then lower it to the floor. "Of course, not," I stammer.

"Liar." He places his face close to mine. "You can leave anytime."

"I know."

"I'm not keeping you here."

I start to turn my head, but he clicks his tongue, "Keep looking ahead."

"But—"

I sense him shake his head. "Eyes forward," he orders.

"I am not your possession...something that you can manipulate," I protest.

"You sure about that, Flower?"

"I hate that name."

"Lying again?"

I stiffen, "Of course, not. Why would I? I—"

He steps away. The heat of his body recedes and a chill crawls up my spine. I shiver, stay poised, forehead pressed into the long floor-to-ceiling windows.

"Why are you here?"

The rough edge of his voice wraps about my shoulders, sinks into my blood. My toes curl. Hell, why am I turned on by the harsh edge of his tone, huh?

"You know why," I mumble.

"I didn't hear you." I hear the smirk in his voice. Jerk.

"I said, *you know why*," I repeat, a little louder this time.

"Do I?"

"Of course, you do," I snap.

"Then say it aloud. Ask me for what you want."

I bite on the inside of my lip. I want to ask him. I do, but damn him, he knows why I am here, so why is he making me repeat it? "No," I mumble under my breath.

"What's that?"

"I said, *no!*'

Whack! Pain grips my backside. "What the hell—?" I howl. "You slapped me?" I turn my head to see his face, ready to rip into him.

He jerks his chin up. "Stay facing forward."

I grit my teeth and comply. "Why...?" I stutter, "Why did you—?"

"You don't get to ask the questions." He spansks me again.

I cry out. "Oh, and you can?" I sputter.

He slaps my butt and the pain blooms up my spine. Tears spring up in my eyes, and moisture blooms between my legs. What the hell? I've never been spanked before... Hell, all of my previous partners have been... Civilized, disciplined... Boring? I shake my head. *No, no, no, don't go there.* I want him to hold the door open for me, just as long as he slaps my ass when I walk past him. What the hell am I thinking? I mean, don't get me wrong. I'd prefer a man who breaks the headboard of my bed rather than my heart, right?

I snicker aloud, then sense him straighten behind me. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," I mumble.

"Something is." He palms my butt.

I shiver. "You...you...don't want to know."

"Oh, but I do." He drags his knuckles up the valley between my butt cheeks and I shudder. "Damian," I whisper, "please..."

"Please what?"

"Please don't."

He slaps my arse again and I whimper. He spansks each arse cheek one after the other. I groan. He does it again. I press my forehead into the glass,

flatten my palm against the glass barrier and thrust my butt out. More. I want more.

He steps back. "Your time is up."

"Bu...but... We spent most of the hour in transit to get here."

"London traffic." He shakes his head. "It can be a bitch, right?"

"But what about my, uh...my..."

"Say it, babe." I hear the grin in his voice. What a bastard. He knows why he invited me here. What does he want me to do, beg for my orgasms?

"That would be a start."

"So now you can read my mind?" I huff.

"I wouldn't be as successful as I am if I weren't perceptive."

"An aptitude you've clearly lost, considering your last two albums were flops, as was your Christmas single."

Silence. A beat, then another. The hair on the nape of my neck rises.

"You're right."

"I am?"

"Of course. It's no secret that my career is in the toilet, but I'll tell you one thing I'm still good at."

"What?"

"Denying bratty women their orgasms."

"No, no, no!" I turn, and this time he doesn't stop me.

"Yes." He nods, then turns to leave.

"Don't you dare, Rockstar," I snarl. "You come right back here and finish what you started."

"Oh, that reminds me. I forgot... One more thing..." He glares at me over his shoulder. "You won't come until I give you permission." Turning, he stalks off.

9

Damian

"What the fuck was I thinking?" I grab my dick and pump it once, then again. The cold water pours over me. I wince as goosebumps dot my skin. Not that any of it helps with the bloody hard-on that I've had since refusing to put her and myself out of this insane misery. Since I'd left the apartment last night, I had jerked off at least four times, but not even that had helped.

I pound my forehead into the wall of the shower.

Pain shoots through my head. Not that it helps with the problem between my legs. I swipe my cock from base to head again. The water beats against my shoulders, runs down my chest, drips from my balls. I'd all but come in my pants yesterday, and that had been from spanking her. The curve of her butt, the indentation between her arse cheeks, the way she'd thrust out her hips to fit into the palm of my hand. *Fuck*. The blood rushes to my groin and my shaft lengthens.

Her scent had filled my senses, her soft hair flowing about her face, reflecting the glow of the city that had poured in through the windows. Good thing I hadn't brought her home. If I had, I wouldn't have been able to turn and leave as I had. Her anger and frustration had been palpable in the hotel room, and her arousal—by god, that sweet, sugary scent of her had been overpowering in that space.

Enough to make me want to turn and march right back and take her against that window. To turn her back to face the pane, part her thighs, and sink into her moist softness. She'd have taken all of me in as I'd pumped into

her, sheathed myself in her tight channel, even as I'd strummed her clit, eased a finger into her backhole, and worked my thumb into her mouth. I'd have taken her completely, utterly, thoroughly, have pleased her and brought her to the edge. Then I'd have pulled out and come all over her clothes. Those tomboyish clothes that she wore—jeans and a shapeless shirt... The kind that made me want to tear them off of her to see what she was hiding. Her curves, her dips and hollows, the contour of her gorgeous waist, the sweet indentation between her thighs. I'd have torn off her garments, dropped on my knees and pleased her with my mouth. I'd have licked her slit from arsehole to the honey of her pussy, pinched her clit, woven my tongue in and out of her, bitten down on her melting flesh and commanded her to finally come.

My balls draw up, my cock thickens, and I climax. I shoot my load against the wall. The water pours over me, washing away the evidence. I stay there, shoulders clenched, thighs so fucking hard that the muscles threaten to go into spasm at any moment.

I turn off the shower, reach for my towel and step out. Wrapping it around my waist, I walk to the door, fling it open and step out. I pull on jeans and a T-shirt from the closet, before I head down to my studio.

I pass my guitar on the stand in the corner, hesitate, then stalk toward it. I lift the Stratocaster, then I notch the strap over my shoulder, fit the beauty under my arm. It's almost as satisfying as strumming the lips of her cunt, playing the arch of her spine as I dip her under... *Mine, all mine.*

A touch, a look, her lust drips down my throat as I devour her soul.

Her body is my damnation.

Her breath my rhythm,

The curve of her belly my devastation,

The sweet flesh between her legs my salvation...

Starlight in a darkened sky,

A spark that destroys,

How far will I go to make her mine...? Only mine.

I pause, the echo of the notes dying away as I hear my daughter's voice come through the baby-cam sitting on the side table.

Shit, I'd been busy jerking off, then composing, while my daughter needed my attention. What kind of a father does that make me, hmm? I place the guitar back on the stand. Then pivot and stalk out of the room.

I race down the hallway and up to the door on the far end, push it open,

and walk into my daughter's bedroom. She's sitting up in bed, her hair tumbling over her shoulders, her features pinched. "Daddy," she mumbles, her lower lip quivering.

"Hey, sweetheart." I sink down onto the bed. "What's wrong, baby?"

"I... I had a nightmare."

"The same one as last time?" I frown.

She nods, "I ... I dreamed that you left me."

"But I didn't. See, here I am." I wipe the tears from her soft cheeks. My heart twists. "Don't cry, baby," I murmur. "Daddy's here's now." I scoop her up into my arms.

She clings to my shoulders. "Dad," her voice hitches, "I... I don't want to be a baby."

"You're only five, Riley. You're allowed." I pat her back as she hiccoughs.

"B...but I want to grow up fast, so I can take care of you."

I frown, "Take care of me?"

"I know how sad you are that Mummy left us."

I am sad, but not for the reasons she thinks. "I am fine, sweetheart. You needn't worry about me."

How does my little girl always sound so much more mature than her years? Is it because her mother left us, forcing her to grow up overnight? Is it because I was a shit father, too engrossed in my career?

I had tried to manage releasing albums while doing my best by Riley, but I had quickly discovered that being a single father doesn't go well with being a rock star. So, I'd cut down on tours and appearances to stay home and take care of her.

The result... My albums had flopped, and the Christmas single I had been counting on had bombed. It had been a disaster, the kind of low I hadn't experienced since my early years when...

Right after the incident, I had gone on a bender, ready to wreck my life. I had survived it, thanks to music... Question is, would that same music be the end of me? The pressure to deliver another hit is stifling. It's not for the money—of which, thanks to the investments I've made with the rest of the Seven, I have more than enough of. It is about salvaging my ego, proving myself as an artist again.

I have to do it, for myself. For Riley... So when she looks back, she won't remember her father as a failure. If I flop, it would mean all the time I spent

away from her wasn't worth anything, and that... that would be too painful. No, the only way I can justify the time I lost with her is to be successful.

Somehow, I have to come through, if not for myself, then for my daughter. I want her to be proud of me.

I rise up to my feet, carry Riley with me to the window. "I am not going anywhere, Poppet, I promise, and you don't need to worry about me."

She leans back and stares up into my face, "Can I have pancakes for breakfast?"

"You bet."

"With strawberries and jam."

I stare, "Who has pancakes with jam?"

"I do, Daddy. I do."

"Hmm." I frown past her at the gates to my home, where I see a car pulling up. What the hell? Who could it be? A woman gets out of the car—a pink Volkswagen. Do they even make them in that color?

The sunlight glints off her hair so dark that blue sparks seem to light up the air. Juliet? What's she doing here? She walks up to the panel by the gate and leans in. The intercom connected to my phone buzzes.

I place Riley on the floor. "Go on, and brush your teeth. I'll see you in the kitchen."

"Okay, Daddy." Riley bustles off in the direction of the bathroom.

I head for the staircase, taking the steps two at a time. Reaching the front door, I depress the button on the side that unlocks the gates, then swing the door open.

I lean a shoulder against the door frame as she parks the car in the driveway. She gets out of the car, hauls her backpack over her shoulder and approaches the house. She notices me, comes to a stop at the bottom of the steps.

"What are you doing here?" She frowns.

"What are *you* doing here?" I scowl.

"I am here for my next assignment."

"Assignment?"

"I am a nanny." She glowers up at me.

"I thought you were a potter?"

"A clay artist." She all but stamps her feet. So fucking cute. My lips twitch.

"Hold on a second," I hold up my hand. "So, you're a potter *and* a

nanny?"

She draws in a breath. "Yes," she grits out. "Being a nanny is my full-time job; being a clay artist is my hobby."

"So, you're a nanny potter?"

"You make me sound like Harry Potter," she grumbles.

"Just as long as you're not a pothead."

"Of course, not." She draws herself up to her full height. "I am responsible, and very good with kids. I can provide you with references." She scrambles around in her ragged backpack, the same one she had last night, and which she insists on carrying over one shoulder, and why had I noticed that?

She produces a sheaf of papers.

"Why would I need to see your references?"

"Uh," she scowls, "because I am here to take care of your daughter."

"No." I straighten.

"No?" Her jaw drops. "What do you mean, *no*?"

"I don't need a nanny. Goodbye."

I begin to close the door.

She throws up her hand. "Wait, I'm not making this up. The agency told me I was being sent to take care of the daughter of a well-known celebrity."

"I didn't ask any agency for a nanny."

"But... but..." Her forehead crinkles. "They called me and sent me an email to confirm." She whips out her phone, starts up the steps to offer it to me.

"I'm not interested," I growl.

She pauses, one foot on the step above. "What?"

I peer over my shoulder, then step forward and close the door behind me. "I didn't ask for a nanny."

"Are you sure you didn't ask and forget?"

"Are you accusing me of a faulty memory?"

"I am saying," she takes a deep breath, "that I need this assignment."

"Too many debts, huh?"

She straightens her shoulders. "What do you mean?"

"You certainly left Australia in a hurry after your boyfriend dumped you, and in the middle of the bush, no less. You barely had enough money to buy your ticket back home. And not only do your student debts beckon, but your failed aspiration to be a—what was it?" I snap my fingers. "A potter." I nod.

"Your failure to become a potter haunts you."

"Fuck you," she snarls.

"No, thank you."

The color leaches from her face, "How... How do you know all of this?"

"I make it a point to find out everything about those I come in contact with."

Especially when it's a curvy sprite, with wide innocent eyes, who I can't get out of my mind.

"Must be fun to have such a trusting nature." She drops the phone into her bag. "So, I have a few student loans, and a jerk of an ex. Big deal." She swipes her hair over her shoulder and her fingers tremble. "It's not uncommon."

"A £100,000 debt that you'll spend the next twenty years paying off."

"So?" Her chin wobbles.

"So, good luck with that." I pivot, reach for the door handle.

"Stop," her voice is choked.

I allow my lips to twist, then push open the door.

"Wait... You... You are right."

"Oh?" I say without turning around.

"I need this job."

"Hmm."

"If I don't get this position, I am in a lot of trouble."

If you get this role, you are in so much more trouble. I push open the door and step through.

"I...need this assignment," she pleads. "The agency doesn't have any other role for me at the moment. Hell, there aren't any roles going for a nanny anywhere in London, it seems." She shakes her head, a look of disbelief in her eyes. "Trust me, if there were an alternative to this, I'd take it."

I pause, glare at her over my shoulder, "How far will you go to get this job?"

"I'll," she swallows, "I'll do a...anything."

"You sure about that, Flower?"

"It's not like I have a choice, do I?" she grumbles. "I mean, I'd rather go throw myself off a bridge, but then—"

My heart begins to race. I turn, march down the steps so quickly that she pauses mid-step and stumbles. I swoop out my hand and grab hold of her bicep. "What the fuck did you just say?"

"I... I..."

I haul her up to her tiptoes, then lean down and thrust my face into hers. "Say it," I dare her.

"I... I didn't mean it," she stutters.

"Don't ever talk like that again."

"O—okay."

"Good." I peer into her features. I should let go of her. I need to get back inside to take care of my daughter, and yet, with her scent in my nostrils, the curve of her arm under my fingers, those big green eyes that hold mine, the lips that tremble and call to me, to close the distance and close my mouth over hers... I... I lean in close enough for our eyelashes to entwine, for us to inhale a shared breath. *Kiss her, kiss her... Do it. No bloody way!* If I do, I am lost, and she is a distraction I cannot afford. Not now. Not when I need to take care of my motherless child and a career that is fast unravelling unless I do something to turn it around. On the other hand, I've never felt as alive as I do in her presence.

Only one way out. I need to turn this situation to my advantage. If I can use her sweetness, her vitality to kickstart my muse... Then huh, why not? As long as she benefits from it too... Yeah, that would make this a transaction that's beneficial for both of us, right?

I hold her gaze, then lower mine to take in her rose bud lips. "I have an arrangement in mind."

"Oh? You mean being a nanny to your daughter?"

"Only if you pass my test first."

"Test?"

"An hour with me every day for the next six days, doing everything I want."

She stares at me. "What does that involve?"

I glare at her face, then slide my gaze down her breasts, to the space between her legs. By the time I raise my gaze to her face, her cheeks are flushed.

"Well? You did say that you'd do anything."

She tips up her chin, "Anything but that."

"That's not what you said earlier, when I left you at the apartment yesterday. In fact, if I recall correctly, you pleaded with me to finish what I started."

Her cheeks heat; her breathing grows shallow. Bet she recalls how I'd

smacked her butt, huh? My fingers tingle, and I curl them into fists at my sides. "So, what do you say, Flower?"

She glances at me, then shakes her head.

"No, thank you, I'll just have to figure this out another way." She turns to leave.

What the fuck? No one turns me down. No one. Especially not this tiny little thing who needs this gig as much as I need to make a success of my next album.

"A hundred thousand pounds for each day you spend with me."

10

Julia

"Excuse me?" I choke out.

"You heard me," he says through gritted teeth.

I pivot to face him, "I... I am not sure I heard right."

"What did you hear?"

"A hundred thousand pounds?" I blink at him. "Per day? One hour per day?"

He nods.

"To be a nanny?" I slowly blink.

"I told you, I don't engage nannies for my daughter."

"Why not?"

"I don't like her getting close to people who'll one day leave her. I want to avoid further heartbreaks in her life."

"Heartbreak?" So, someone else had left his daughter and him... Was it his wife? But he'd never been married. If he had, surely, I'd have heard of it. But then, I hadn't known he had a daughter until just now. How had he managed to keep that from the media? So, who is he talking about then?

"Your daughter's mother," I burst out.

He freezes; his gaze narrows. He regards me with a cool expression. "What about her?"

"Where is she? Isn't she around to take care of your daughter?"

"What interest is that to you?"

I swallow, then hold my papers close to my chest, "I prefer to get all of

the facts before I engage in any kind of, uh, arrangement."

He folds his arms, leans a hip against the door jamb. "Very wise." He rakes his gaze across my features, "She's no longer in the picture."

"Hmm." I shuffle my feet, then hitch the bag over my shoulder. For all the media's best efforts to infringe on his privacy, Damian has, apparently, managed to keep his personal life a secret. What else do I not know about him?

The band around my chest tightens.

Shit, why the hell am I jealous now? If I could find another assignment, I would turn him down and walk away, but there's nothing else on the horizon... Except this gig as a possible nanny for the daughter of this irresistible jerk-ass of a rock star... Or not? What the hell is he suggesting with this set-up anyway, huh?

"Well?" He frowns.

"Was she... Is she your girlfriend?"

He hesitates, then replies, "Yes." He rakes his fingers through his hair. "Yes, she was."

Holy shit, so he hadn't married her. And he is no longer with her. A warm sensation blooms in my chest.

"Any more questions?" He glares at me and I shiver. That edge of meanness in his gaze; it's such a turn on. I rub my thighs together.

His nostrils flare, and one side of his lips curls. "So, we have a deal, then?"

"What?" I blink, "No... Not yet... I mean, you're not making any sense. That much money to spend such a short period of time with me? It's—" I shake my head, "it's bonkers."

"Tell me about it," he takes a step toward me and I stumble back. He grabs hold of my shoulder, and pin pricks of heat sizzle out from his touch. My core clenches.

He rights me, then lowers his hand, and of course, I miss it already.

His jaw tics, he firms his lips, then shoves his hands into his pockets. We stare at each other for a second and goosebumps break out on my skin. The air between us is so charged that if he were to touch me again, I am sure I'd come on the spot. *Ugh, stop that.* "I am really not sure what you're offering me," I finally say.

"It's simple." He leans back on the heels of his feet as if he wants to put distance between us.

Good, I don't want anything to do with this man, either... Except, damn it! This chemistry between us is intense. The kind I've been dreaming about, but which I was sure only existed in romance novels. I mean, there is a 'one' for everybody, right? So what, if the men I meet, including the ones I am attracted to, like the a-hole in front of me, turn out to be douches of the first order, eh?

Daddy Grumpypants looks me up and down, and I resist the urge to wipe my sweaty palms on the front of my pants.

"Trust me. Where you are concerned, nothing is simple," I scoff.

"That's stating the obvious." He smirks. "So, are you in or out?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You rhyming your words with mine?" He drawls.

"Of course not, you...you swine."

He quirks an eyebrow.

"I... I couldn't help it." I throw up my hands, "You are doing my head in."

"You and me both, Flower." His jaw firms. "And this meeting is over." He turns to go.

"Wait," I cry out. "You can't leave me like this."

"Like what?" He smirks over his shoulder.

"You...you know." I flush.

"No." He shakes his head. "I made you an offer; you turned it down. That's the end of our non-relationship. Have a good life." He heads toward the house and every cell in my body snaps to attention.

No, no, no, no. He can't just... Stalk off and leave me hanging. And why the hell had I obeyed his order, huh? I'd spent the night tossing and turning, sure that I had been running a fever. Only...a part of me had known better. I'd wanted to bring myself to climax, but every time I came to the edge, his earlier command had held me back from it. My body seems to have a mind of its own. One which insists on following his direction. It is forcing me to comply... *Aargh! Stop, stop. Tell him what you want.*

"Orgasm," I blurt out.

He pauses.

"At least let me come, please?" I curl my fingers at my sides.

He angles his body. "So," he drums his fingers on his chest, "you want me to give you permission to achieve satisfaction?"

Asshole's gloating, but whatever, as long as I can somehow relieve this

burning, clawing sensation in my center. I jerk my chin in his direction and his eyes gleam.

"On one condition," he purrs.

"What?"

"You accept my proposition."

"A...a hundred thousand pounds for every day I spend with you?"

"Which would come down to, normally, an hour a day, which is all I can spare." He nods his head toward the house. "Occasionally, it might be more."

Of course, he has to take care of his daughter.

"No Sundays, though," he adds. "I have a full schedule on Sundays and won't have time for—" he gestures to the space between us.

"Wouldn't it be easier to simply have a trial period for me as the nanny for your daughter—?"

"No." He straightens. "Take it or leave it."

He turns to go.

I call out, "Wait."

He pauses.

"For how long?"

He angles his body, glares at me over his shoulder, "Until New Year's Eve."

"That's..."

"Today's December 26th... Boxing Day," he reminds me.

"I know," I snap. "That's five days?"

"Six including today."

"So, six hours?"

"More or less."

"How many...orgasms is that?"

"That's for you to lose track of." He laughs.

"And you'll pay me for each day?"

"Of course."

"You sure you can afford it?" I frown. He's not poor, but he's going through a rocky patch in his career... Well, okay, this is also me making conversation so I can buy myself some time.

"You sure you can afford to ignore it?" he scoffs.

"No."

"Good. It's a deal then." He holds out his hand.

I ignore it. "What's in it for you?"

He glances down at my breasts, then at my crotch. By the time he glares at my face, my mouth is dry, my pussy wet, my scalp tingling as if someone has run their fingernails across it.

"Right." I nod. "Can I think about it?"

"Nope."

My jaw drops.

"Decide in the next second or this is over... Not that there ever was anything between us."

I narrow my eyes, "I think you protest too much. There definitely is a lot between us—which is the only reason you are suggesting this insane arrangement."

"Oh?" He yawns. "Keep kidding yourself, sweetheart. You're nothing but a convenient hole to wring satisfaction from."

I draw myself up to my full height. "Fuck you, asshole."

"Alphahole." He smirks.

"A-class douche canoe." I tip up my chin, "You know what? You can stuff your stupid-ass proposal in your darkest part."

"You mean my heart?"

"Only you'd say that," I splutter.

"Listen, I have to go attend to my daughter. Why don't you...uh, head on to the greenhouse? I'll meet you there."

"Greenhouse?"

"Yes."

"You want me to wait there?"

"Unless you'd rather wait here?"

"Don't do that."

"What?" He frowns.

"Rhyme your stupid sentences with mine."

"Where you're concerned, that's not the only thing I hope to rhyme with." He snickers.

I make a gagging sound. "That was a terrible pun."

"You're right." He raises his hands. "I really have to get back." He jerks his chin in the direction of his garden. "Go on." He turns to leave, glances back over his shoulder. "Or not...your choice."

Turning, he marches inside and shuts the door on me.

Motherfucker actually had the gall to not invite me inside. I stare at the door a second longer. Maybe I should bang on it and demand that he let me

in? And then what? He's only going to refuse me... Or tell me the deal is off. Or worse, he'd allow me in and then I'd be in the same space as him...and his daughter? A tiny version of him, with all of his presence and none of his cynicism. I swallow... Nope, I'd be a goner all over again.

Maybe this is better... I won't risk breaking my heart twice over, for I am very sure that his daughter would be as adorable as he is. Hang on, did I just refer to him as adorable? Jesus, I am tying myself in knots. I turn, head for the greenhouse in the corner of the sprawling grounds when the gates swing open. A car draws up and parks near the house. A woman slides out. She smooths her gray hair, hauls a designer bag over her shoulder, then pauses when she sees me.

"Hello there." She smiles. "Were you visiting Damian?"

"Umm," I hitch my backpack over my shoulder, "I'm still visiting him." I shuffle my feet.

"Why don't you come on in?" she nods toward the house.

"He, ah, asked me to wait in the greenhouse."

"The greenhouse?" She glances over to the structure at the far end of the yard, then back at me. "Hmm." She scrunches up her forehead. "He didn't want you to come in, huh?"

"He didn't," I confirm. "Is that normal?" I ask. "I mean, clearly, you are allowed in...so..."

"I'm the assistant to the Seven, so I came by with some papers for him to sign."

"Right. I'm Julia...Julia Andrews."

"Andrews?" Her forehead wrinkles.

"I know..." I grumble. "No relationship to the actress, at all, or to Julie & Julia, or to Juliet from Romeo and Juliet."

"Of course, not. You'll get your Happily Ever After, unlike her."

"I will?"

"Of course, dear." She holds out her hand, and I take it. "I'm Meredith, by the way."

"Nice to meet you, Meredith." I release her arm. "Guess I should be going along then."

"Julia," she calls after me, "don't be too hard on Damian."

"What does it matter what I think about him?" I turn.

"Just a..." she looks me up and down, "just a feeling." She studies me a moment longer, then finally says, "Just give him a chance, okay?"

I prop my hands on my hips. "Why is it that all of you women seem to think he needs to be handled with kid gloves?"

"That's not what I meant; quite the opposite."

"Oh?" I step toward her. "Explain."

"He'll push you away, ensure that you hate him because of his actions."

"I already do," I inform her.

"It's all a front." She leans in closer. "The incident, you see... It didn't break him."

"It didn't?"

She shakes her head, "He managed to survive it. In fact, he made a complete recovery, after therapy. It was what happened after that, which snapped his confidence."

"You're joking." I chuckle, "I haven't met a more obnoxious, more over-the-top alpha than Damian 'Big D' Savage."

"Big D?"

My cheeks warm. "Just what the media calls him."

"The media?"

"Yeah." I wave my hand. "You know, what I read about in the tabloids on social media..."

She fixes me with a steady gaze that reminds me all too much of my mother. It's probably why I rebelled so much growing up, enough to give up a well-paying position and take off with an almost virtual stranger to the other end of the world... Eek, stop that, don't blame your parents for your lack of a career. I mean, I did want to be a nanny. I love kids, wouldn't have come this far if my natural child whispering instincts hadn't kicked in when I was younger. It's just, I want more. Children of my own, a chance to pursue my creative aspirations. Gah! Stop that self-pity.

"You can't blame me, the man practically invented headline news with his crazy antics—"

"Until he didn't."

"Right." He did go quiet for a couple of years, then bounced back with his disastrous albums. Hold-on-a-sec... "The time when he disappeared from the news, when he was supposed to be off the grid, composing his next release —"

She nods.

"What happened during that time?"

"Not my secret to tell."

"And his daughter?"

"He mentioned his daughter to you?" She frowns.

"Why? Doesn't he talk about his daughter to people?"

"Not to strangers—" Her features clear. "Oh." She looks me up and down. "Oh, so I was right then."

"I don't like the sound of that Oh." I half chuckle. "And what do you mean, exactly, by that?"

"No, no, don't mistake me, my dear." She closes the distance between us, grabs my hand, "This is good, Julia."

"It is?"

Yep." She nods. "Very, very good."

"I... Umm, you're making me nervous, Meredith."

"Don't be." She smiles, and her features light up. "You have no idea how much progress you've made with him."

"Progress?" My head begins to spin. "What do you mean?" What the hell did I miss? Why do I get the feeling there's something very obvious that I'm not getting?

"I mean, he's invited you home, someone outside of the Seven." She taps her foot on the ground. "That's a first."

Oh! "He never invites anyone else home?"

She shakes her head.

"How about the women he's seen with?"

"All a front."

"Really?"

"They were nothing special, not like you."

"Not like me?"

"He asked you home, didn't he?"

"Not exactly." I glance at the door. "Considering he didn't let me in."

"He will. It's only a matter of time."

"What if I don't want to continue being associated with him?"

"Well, that," she glances at the door then back at me, "that would be a pity, but it's your choice, of course. You need to think of yourself first."

"I do?"

She nods. "I mean, he is an overpowering man. All the Seven are. It takes a special kind of woman to catch their attention."

"Right."

"It takes an even stronger personality to hold their interest."

"You mean, I'm not special or strong?"

"Not what I said." Her face grows serious. "You need to think carefully about if you want to be involved with him. The Seven, you see, are the kind of men who, once they set their eyes on their women, will not back down. They will not stop until they get what they want. And you have to be either able to go toe-to-toe with them and hold your own against them or—"

"Or?"

"You may as well cut your losses and leave now."

"Are you asking me to leave?"

"He asked you to stay, didn't he?"

"He did." I frown at her, take in her shrewd gaze, the straight cut of her dress, her expensive shoes. "Who are you to him, anyway?"

"Let's just say, I am the one who helps the Seven to keep their offices running smoothly."

"You are more than their assistant, aren't you?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?" She chuckles, reaches into her handbag, then thrusts a card into my hand. "If you need anything, just call."

"Why would I need anything?" I frown.

"A friendly voice, a need to speak... We could all do with a friend on the other side of the phone, right?"

"Right." I pocket the card. Why do I get the feeling that there's something very obvious here that I am missing?

"I'd better get along then." She heads up the steps, then pauses, to glance at me over her shoulder, "Oh, and Julia?"

"Call me Jules."

"Jules," she nods at me, "it's the ones who are the most hurt who need the most love."

"You mean Damian?"

"I mean," her grin broadens, "don't forget what I told you earlier... Don't let him push you around."

Julia

"You haven't left?"

His hard voice chafes across my skin and all of my nerve endings seem to pop at once. I turn so quickly that a cloud of butterflies rises up from where they'd settled on my skin.

"Oh, you scared me." I press a hand to my chest.

"Were you expecting someone else?" He smirks.

"I was kind of hoping you had forgotten about me," I retort.

"No chance of that happening." He laughs, then swoops out a hand so quickly, I flinch. He scoops up something from my cheek, shows it to me. An eyelash.

"Make a wish." His voice is low and edgy and soft. How the hell can he be so many things at once? I close my eyes, then blow.

When I look up, he's staring at me, his nostrils flared, a look of something like...desire in his eyes. I glance away, then back at him. "Damian," I swallow, "who's taking care of your daughter, while you're here?"

He straightens, schools his features back into that look of indifference I am coming to realize is a mask, one he's perfected over the years, the image he likes to project to the world. Same way as I'd prefer people to think of me as happy-go-lucky, a wanderer... A nanny, always borrowing a family to call her own rather than making one for herself. Does that make me a cuckoo? The bird that lays eggs in another's nest and has them bring up its chicks as their own. No, that's backward. That doesn't make sense.

"Meredith's with her," he replies.

"Does she help out with your daughter?"

"Sometimes." He takes a step back, then folds his arms over his big chest.

"Is that her name?" I jerk toward the cursive tattoo that peeks out from around his left forearm.

"Whose?"

"Your daughter's."

He glares at me, and a shiver runs down my spine. Jesus, when he looks at me, all angry and grumpy, it's so fucking hot. I swallow, hold his gaze. Well, I am not going to run scared from jerk-ass, here. "Go on," I coax, "you can tell me. You won't be struck by lightning if you do."

He doesn't respond.

"It's a joke." I raise my shoulders. "You were supposed to laugh."

"Hmph." He widens his stance. His features take on a strange look before he shakes it off and resumes a look of bored indifference.

Silence stretches, a beat, another. A cloud of butterflies takes wing from the flowers nearby. I follow them as they dance over to another set of flowers in the corner of the green house.

"This place." I clear my throat, "It's beautiful."

"You're beautiful."

I turn my head to find his gaze on my face. I redden. "Uh, thanks." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, "When you said greenhouse, I didn't realize it would be so...enchanted. Did you build it by yourself?"

"I had help," he drawls. "And yes, that's my daughter's name."

"Riley is a beautiful name," I offer. "How old is she?"

His forehead scrunches. He draws himself up to his full height. "Have you thought about my proposal?"

I tilt my head. "One hour a day for six days, huh?"

"That's six hundred thousand pounds in the bank at the end of it."

Whew! That's a hell of a lot of money. Enough to pay off my debts, allow my mother to retire from her job, get a fresh start, focus on becoming a pottery artist and not worry about paying my bills. And yet, when I'd wanted to spend the night with him, it had been because... I'd desired him, had felt a connection with him when he'd kissed me. He'd taken that and turned it into something sordid. Something transactional, where he wants to buy me.

It is a lot of money he's offering; but really, is that all I am worth? Can I place a value on myself...with such ease? Besides, I'm not seriously considering this, am I? Would I sell myself, for cold hard cash?

"Well?" His voice cuts through my thoughts, "What do you think?"

"It's not enough," I inform him.

"Excuse me?" He frowns.

"You want me for an hour a day for six days, for some unfathomable reason. Well, it's going to cost you."

"Oh?" He peruses my features, something inscrutable in his eyes. As if I am following a script he already knows, one that I am finding my way through, blindfolded.

"How much?" He drums his fingers on his chest, "Tell me quickly. I don't have all day."

I grip my fingers tightly together and sweat pools under my armpits. "One million," I say under my breath.

He holds a hand behind his ear, "What was that?"

"One million for all six days." I draw myself up to my full height. "Take it or leave it."

"Well then," he yawns, "you'd better get going."

"Oh." I stare at him. Disappointment and something else, a strange

sensation like I had missed the one thing that could have changed my life completely, twists my insides. I open my mouth to speak, and he lifts an eyebrow.

"Never mind." I shove my hair back from my face, hitch my backpack over my shoulder. "Goodbye." I brush past him and head for the doorway.

"One million pounds." His voice follows me.

I don't stop.

"Per day."

"What?" I stumble, then right myself. "What did you say?"

His lips twist, "Exactly what you heard."

I pivot to face him, "One million pounds per day, for six days?" I blink, then pull on my earlobe.

His grin widens. "Good." He closes the distance between us, "See you at six pm."

"Hold on. What the hell? I didn't agree to—"

"Sure, you did," he replies.

"No, I didn't."

"You tugged on your earlobe," he points out.

"What?"

"You do that when you've inwardly come to a decision."

"I... I do?"

"Yep." He smirks down at me, "You're too easy to read, Flower."

"Just because I quoted from Wordsworth, once..."

"It's also your eyes."

"What?"

"They're green like the new shoots that come up from the ground in early spring."

"Wow," I breathe, "who'd have thought an obnoxious d-bag like you could be romantic."

"Don't let my words fool you." He half turns, then shoves his hands inside his pockets.

"Your biggest hit was a love song."

He winces, "It was a rock ballad."

"One with some sexy, angsty verses that had everyone going gaga over it."

"Including you?"

"Never." I snicker. "A little too sappy for my liking."

"So, you prefer not to face your emotions, huh?"

"And you?" I close the distance between us. "Do you ever face your feelings?"

"All the time." His features close. "Every fucking time I think I've found peace, something happens that reminds me how everything can change in the blink of an eye."

"Is that why you think money can buy everything?"

"Doesn't it?"

I twist my fingers together, wanting to deny it, but hell if, he doesn't have me there. One million pounds per day for six days. OMG, OMG. My heart begins to thud and my pulse rate ratchets up. That's... Way more money than I thought I'd see in my life... Ever. It is... A lifechanging amount.

I lick my lips, and he locks his gaze onto my mouth, "Open."

"What—"

He shoves his thumb inside my mouth. "Suck on it," he orders.

I swallow, my nipples harden, the flesh between my legs buzzes with anticipation, with recklessness, with need... A gnawing something opens up low in my belly. I close my lips around his digit, suck on it. I swirl my tongue around the pad of his thumb, absorb the salty taste of him. The dark edginess that sinks into my blood heads straight for that churning, yearning pit that gnaws at my core.

His chest rises and falls; his nostrils flare. He presses down on my lower lip, and I open my mouth. He inserts his thumb deeper inside. I swallow. His breathing grows ragged; a bead of sweat slides down his throat along the demarcation between his sculpted pecs. Moisture pools between my thighs. A moan bleeds from me... Needy, wanting... A kind of hunger I've never faced before... Will never again.

Holy hell, what kind of draw does this man...this almost-stranger have on me? He's barely touched me and I am ready to self-combust.

He draws out his thumb, then brings it to his mouth and sucks on it. He drags his digit across his lower lip and I can't stop the groan that spills from my throat.

His lips kick up in a smile. He wipes his finger across the fabric of his pants. "You'll do nicely."

Turning, he heads for the exit.

I stare after him. What the bloody hell—how dare he? Had he...? "Don't you leave," I cry. "Not again." I curl my fingers at my sides. How had I let

myself be taken in, all over again? "Damian, you bastard—"

He pivots, prowls over to me.

My heart begins to thud, my pulse races, and the flesh between my thighs clenches. He holds out his hand. "Give it to me," he demands.

"Wh...what?"

"Your phone." He curls his lips. "What did you think?"

"I will not."

"Either you give it to me or I take it. Your choice."

Anger thuds at my temples and something very close to hate crawls up my spine. "Just because you're bigger than me, don't think you can bully me."

"Bully you?" He laughs. "I haven't even started, sweetheart." He crooks his fingers, "Don't keep me waiting, doll."

I frown.

"Your phone." He bends his knees, peers into my face. "Now," his voice lowers to a hush, the dark edge of his tone sinking into my blood. My belly trembles. My scalp tingles. I pull out my phone, hold it out to him.

"Unlock it."

"You mean you don't know my password?"

"Hmm." His brow crinkles, "Good point, I need to rectify that."

"Jesus." I stare. "I was joking."

"I wasn't."

"You wouldn't invade my privacy that way..."

He stares.

"Would you?" Of course, he would. Nothing is beyond the reach of this alpha male. He can have any woman he wants, so why the hell had he extended this stupid-ass agreement thing to me? "It makes no sense," I shake my head, as I unlock my phone.

"Don't try to discern the pattern of a plan that's clearly above your pay grade." He smirks.

My jaw drops. Bloody hell... What an ass. "Why... You..."

He snatches the phone from my hand. His fingers move over the screen, then he slides it back into my open backpack. "All set," he declares, then turns and prowls toward the exit.

"That's it?" I demand. "You're going to leave me here and walk away?"

He raises a hand, "Save the small talk for later, sweets."

My vision tunnels, anger slams into my chest. "Wait!" I call out after him.

"Did you place the call to my agency, and then get cold feet when you saw me?" I demand.

He halts, then glares at me over his shoulder, "Why would I do that, hmm?"

"Because you want me at your mercy?"

"I had you at my mercy earlier. I was the one who left, remember?"

Can't deny that.

He strides over to me, then bends his knees and thrusts his face into mine. "I'm not sorry for buying you," he whispers, "and I am not sorry for everything I am going to do to you."

My core clenches. "Is that a threat?" I breathe.

"A promise." His lips curl. My ribcage tightens. Hell, every nuance of his expression is hot and sexy and a bloody turn on. I am fighting a battle I can't win... Not without preparing for it, and right now, I am so out of my depth, it's not funny.

"And by the time I'm done with you, you won't be either."

I raise my hand, intent on slapping him, but he grabs my wrist.

"Let me go," I hiss.

"Don't tell me what to do."

"You're crazy," I insist.

"Takes one to know one."

"Oh, so now we're on the same level?"

"No," he mutters almost to himself. "You're on a different plane, one where we can never see eye to eye, and that's what makes whatever is between us a challenge, one I can't resist. I won't stop until I've broken you down, until I've figured out what makes you tick, until I have you melting and crawling and begging for my mercy, and even then, I won't release you. Not until I have sampled that sweet essence inside of you, bathed in the passion you keep hidden inside of you, until I have used the creativity that you harbor to fire mine, until I have your thoughts, your words, your every cry as you orgasm, trapped in my cells."

"What, the—" I blink, "What are you talking about?"

His lips twist, "Wouldn't you like to find out?"

He releases me so suddenly that I land on the ground, on my arse.

Turning, he stalks off again.

"Damian," I call out after him, "I know you didn't mean that earlier insult."

He reaches the door to the greenhouse.

I wipe the sweat from my face, and scramble to my feet. "This isn't over, not by a long shot. You're not the complete jerk hole you make yourself out to be, you know. You messed with the wrong woman though. I am going to get to the bottom of your secrets. I won't stop until I bring you to your knees," I yell.

He throws open the door. A gust of cool breeze wafts in and goosebumps pop on my skin. I shiver, wrap my hands around my waist.

"Knock yourself out, sweets," he drawls, then surveys me over his shoulder. "Just make sure you're not wearing panties."

11

Damian

You'll do nicely? What the hell was that about? What had I been thinking when I'd tossed out those words? Not to mention, that speech about her being a challenge?

I had been as cruel as fuck. No wonder she'd been so furious. Flower has a temper, all right...and a fighting spirit...not to mention, impressive negotiation skills. That back and forth there, I hadn't expected. It had been oddly stimulating too. Pitting my wits against hers had made me feel alive in a way I hadn't felt for months. I want to revel in her vitality, draw on it, imbibe it and allow it to fan the flames of something that has died inside of me.

Doesn't forgive the fact that I hurt her.

A half hour after I'd left her, I'd glanced out the window and seen her drive off. Thankfully, she'd given herself time to cool off before leaving. Good. No way, did I want her distracted while driving. It's the only reason I've put my people on her. They'll keep her safe... And ensure if she meets anyone else that I'll be the first to know.

I am protecting my investment, that's all. Hey, it is an agreement that we came to, and I intend to honor every part of mine. By the time we come to the new year, she'll be rich and I'll be... Well, hopefully, I'll have managed to write enough songs to fill an album.

I glare at my reflection in the mirror of the rundown dressing room of the gym in central London owned by Jace. A close friend of the Seven, he and

his wife Sienna had moved to London from LA when Sienna was pregnant, partly so they could be close to Sienna's sister Bella who is studying in the city.

He was the first to fall for the family trap, followed closely by Sinclair, then Saint and Weston. Shit is going down fast and I don't plan to be part of that particular train. Nope. I have more than enough on my plate, trying to resurrect my career...and taking care of my daughter. Maybe it's stupid that I insist on being a hands-on parent, but I am determined to make up for the time I lost with her. I am going to ensure that Riley will never feel the absence of her mother. Speaking of, I glance up at the clock on the wall.

I have half an hour to work out, before I leave for my six pm with one sexy, hot-as-fuck woman who owes me a few orgasms—or is it the other way around? I chuckle. The look on her face when I had left her earlier...Clearly, she had been turned on and frustrated as hell. Good. That's how I felt too, after all. Though, the lack of fulfillment had clearly sparked me to write, which is a bloody good sign, considering I've been blocked for nearly six months.

Six months since I have composed anything worth stringing into a tune... Six months since I have picked up my guitar... Then, one encounter with her, seeing her writhe under me, spanking her arse as I had brought her to the edge, had seemed to break something inside of me... Or rather, break through the fog I had been mired in, enough to spark the beginning of a song... Something... The first inkling of a star in the night sky, the first scent of bread baking in the oven, the heady sensation of a child's first kick in the womb, hinting at the promise of a new life. Holy shit. I blink, then grab for my phone and key in the words. This is good, bloody good. I sink down onto the bench, continue writing out the stream of consciousness... It's garbled... but it's a start. Get it the fuck down, get down the words...the flow. Ride it as far as you can. Catch the wave, motherfucker. Don't screw this up.

"What the hell are you chuckling about, asshole?" A familiar voice reaches me from the direction of the door.

"Fuck off," I growl back, then focus on my screen.

The next moment an arm reaches over my shoulder and grabs the phone from me.

"Hey," I protest, "give that back."

"Not a chance in hell, brother." Arpad walks backward, reading through what I'd written. "Holy shit, Savage, this is some emo stuff."

The back of my neck heats. I jump up to my feet, stalk after him. "And you're going to be in some serious shit if you don't return my phone to me."

Arpad glances up, "Lost your balls already, huh?"

"The fuck you talking about?"

"You in love, bro?"

"You lost your mind, *bro*?"

"When was the last time you wrote such sentimental lyrics...hmm?" He pretends to think, "For that matter, when was the last time you wrote anything?"

No shit! "Those are not my words, you prick, and besides, it's none of your bloody business." I reach for my phone; he tosses it over my head.

"What the fuck?" I turn to find Edward has snatched the phone from the air.

He reads the screen and his eyebrows rise. "You wrote this?" He glances up at me.

"Nope." I glower at the Father. "It's. Not. Mine."

"Oh?" Edward scans it, "Where did you find these lyrics, they're..."

I set my jaw. If he makes fun of them, I am going to—

"They're not bad." The Father tilts his head.

"Not bad?" I splutter.

"They're very good, actually." He chuckles.

"They are?" I stiffen. "Is that good good, or bad good?"

"It's bad good, which makes it good good..." Edward tosses the phone back at me. "In fact, it's so good, it makes me wonder what prompted you to write it."

I glower at him.

"Not that you wrote it," he placates me.

Bastard.

"But if you had written it," Arpad picks up the narrative, clever bugger that he is. He raises an appraising eyebrow. "I'd wonder, what sparked it."

The back of my neck heats. Shit, no way. Now I am embarrassed when my asshole friends compliment me on my words. Like I am in kindergarten or something. I glance away, then back at them. "Nothing... Everything..." I raise my shoulders, pocket the phone. "Does it matter how it happened?" I mumble.

"Something prompts you to break your creative block?" Edward surveys my features, "Yeah, I'd think it's significant."

"It's her, isn't it?" Arpad drawls. "She inspired the ol' muse, I take it?"

"Who are you talking about?" I narrow my gaze. "And that's none of your business."

"You know who I'm talking about," Arpad barks a laugh, "and going by your touchy reaction, I take it I was right?"

I glower at him.

"Thought so." He nods, "You going to keep her around a while longer then?"

"Maybe..."

"You come to some kind of an arrangement with her yet?"

"Why does it have to be an arrangement?" I snap. "Why couldn't it be a normal relationship?"

"You and normal?" He chuckles, "Hello, you are one of the Seven. Have we ever done anything in the normal way?"

He has a point there.

"So," the asshole persists, "it is an arrangement?"

"It's not *not* an arrangement," I finally concede.

"Good grief, you're resorting to hiding behind wordplay. Thought you saved that for the stage." Arpad chuckles. "Clearly, the situation is far worse than it seems."

"Oh, fuck off." I crack my neck. "I got inspired, I wrote a few words. Big fucking deal."

"It is, though." Edward walks toward me. His features wear an almost understanding look... Which I'd hate on anyone else, but this is Edward. The one of us Seven to have suffered the most from the incident. No wonder it turned him off life, in general... Though he'd deny it, of course. For him, the church is his calling, serving God is his passion, which is noble of him, of course. If only I didn't get the sense that he is avoiding the real issues at hand. Not that this is the time to tell him, not when I am facing a crisis of my own. And is that what this is, a crisis?

I firm my lips. "Something you want to get off your chest, Father?" I tilt my head.

Edward pauses in front of me. He peers into my features. "It's different."

"What is?"

"The lyrics you wrote?" He purses his lips. "It's the first thing that's you."

"Like I give a fuck."

"Everything you wrote before this came from a place of anger, but this..."

His forehead furrows, "It's raw, it's the words of a man who's finding there's more to life than the selfish focus on himself."

"What else is there to life?" I roll my shoulders "Except sex and drugs and rock n' roll."

"Love." Edward's lips kick up.

"Love?" I laugh. "You're not in church, Father."

"Stop trying so hard, Damian," his voice is soft. "Sometimes you need to enjoy what you have in front of you."

"And I thought the Rockstar was getting overly emotional. Jeez, Edward, between the two of you, I hope it doesn't catch on." Arpad glances between us. "Glad things are clearer for me—the open sea, the wind in my hair. I don't need much else."

"It's also called escape." I smirk. "What are you running from, dipshit?"

"The same thing as you, dickwad," he chuckles.

We stare at each other, then he jerks his chin toward the open door and to the boxing ring in the center of the main room, "Wanna fight it out?"

I crack my knuckles. "Thought you'd never ask."

Edward glances between us. "Mind if I stick around to watch two grown men make utter asses of themselves?"

Arpad cracks his knuckles.

I draw myself up to my full height.

"So, you enjoyed the little surprise I sent your way, huh?"

"Wait." I blink. "What are you—?" I stiffen. "It was you?" I snap. "You sent Julia to me?"

He nods.

"You called up her agency and asked for her to be my nanny?"

"Bingo." He pretends to shoot at me while making a popping sound.

"The fuck?" I growl. "Why the hell would you do that?"

"'Cause the sparks between the two of you that day were intense, 'cause it was the first time I'd seen you interested in something other than your own grief?" He folds his arms across his chest, "Because, apparently, I care about you enough not to see you fuck up your life?"

"Oh?"

"Not that you deserve it, of course," he nods. "In fact, I think I should start by rearranging your pretty features. It may help wring some sympathy from your to-be girlfriend."

"Don't talk about her, you piece of shit."

He laughs "You angry enough to give me a proper fight this time?"
I step forward and bury my fist in his face.

12

Julia

Alphahole: Strip.

Alphahole: On your hands and knees. Arse in the air.

Alphahole: Don't ignore my commands or you'll pay for it.

"What the hell?" I stare at the text messages on my phone, then around the room. I'm back at the bedroom in the apartment he'd taken me to the first time. It's five minutes to six pm, and hell, I'm early. Not by much, but why the hell couldn't I have waited and made an entrance?

My phone vibrates again.

Alphahole: Why haven't you taken off your clothes yet?

"What the—?" How does he know what I'm up to? Are there—I straighten, glance around the room—are there cameras here? Surely not. Or... I glance at the mirror on the wall opposite the bed... Hmm... Bet that's where it's hidden. Two can play a game here, huh?

I shove the phone into my purse. Yeah, okay. So I had dressed up a little. I mean, you can't blame a woman for taking care of her appearance when she is going to spend some time with a rock god, huh? Not that it matters, considering the man isn't here... Except for his orders by text messages...

which, admittedly, are hot. Hmm. And, of course, I do want those orgasms he promised me... I'm not in this only for the money, after all.

I still don't understand, though. What does he get from this? Unless he gets off on watching me come? I stiffen. It's what he'd implied earlier... Only I hadn't believed him... Maybe... Maybe he is observing me even now? I wouldn't put it past him to have cameras in this place. Perhaps, he has one in this mirror, and is staring at me right now?

I watch my reflection as I raise my chin, run my tongue across my lips, then reach for the strap of my dress. I lower it down one shoulder, then the other, allow it to drop. I let the fabric pool around my ankles, kick it aside. I weigh my heavy breasts, run my hand down my belly to cup the flesh between my legs. This won't do; something is missing. I turn, head for my bag, pull out my phone and switch to one of his songs. The song that wasn't his most famous, but which has always been my favorite.

The strains fill the air. His harsh voice croons out the words; they pour over me, wrap around my shoulders, slither down my chest, into the dip of my navel, down into the hollow between my legs.

I place the phone on the nightstand, walk around to stand midway between the foot of the bed and the mirror.

I grind my hips in tandem to the slow rhythm of the song, once, twice. Narrow my gaze on my reflection in the mirror...knowing, no wanting, him to be on the other side of it.

Look at me, Rockstar. Know what you are missing, every second that you are not here with me.

I reach behind me, unhook my bra and shrug it off. I cup the underside of my breasts, massage them, throw my head back and forth as I pinch my nipples. Then bring the mounds together, imagining what it would feel like if he were to slide his dick in the valley between them. A hot flush spreads across my skin, my core clenches, and moisture beads my center. I drag my palm down my belly, hook my fingers under the band of my panties. I slide them down my legs, and step out of them. Hold up the lacy briefs in my fingers before dropping them to one side.

I straighten, part my legs, and slide my fingers between my thighs to play with my pussy lips. I bring my other hand up to my breast, squeeze the nipple again. A groan spills from my lips; a shiver of lust runs down my spine.

I sway to the music, slide my finger inside my channel, bring my other hand up to my hair. I wrap the strands around my palm and tug. Another

moan wells up my throat. My breathing grows ragged. I dig my fingers into my scalp, shudder as goosebumps rise on my skin. I thrust another finger inside of myself, and a third, the girth stretching my entrance. I curl my digits inside like he would if he were here. He'd shove his fat cock inside of me—in and out, and in again, and keep going.

He'd slam his dick inside my pussy, again and again, not letting up, not when my knees tremble, not when my thighs spasm, and not when moisture pools in my core and overflows to run down my thighs. Not when I throw my head back, close my eyes and pant, shake with the pressure that builds at the base of my spine and fills my womb and snaps tighter, tighter, edging me closer to the edge... Closer.

"You will not come."

His voice whips through my mind. *Asshole*. As if he could command me when he isn't here. Why should I obey him anyway, huh? So what, if I am wound tighter than the rock star ever has been on stage in front of his adoring millions? He'd perform duo rhyme and I am performing for him... And for me... Yep, no doubt about it. I am enjoying being able to scrape my fingernails across my scalp, widen my stance as I shove my fingers in and out of my pussy, as I bend my spine backward, dig my feet—still in the fuck-me pumps I chose for this occasion—into the floor and aim higher, higher for that release that lingers on the horizon.

"Your orgasm belongs to me, Flower."

I snap my eyes open.

"Your mind may defy me, but your body knows how to follow my command."

Heat sears my back, envelops me, curls around my waist, down into the hollow between my thighs. "D...Damian," I gasp.

"Were you expecting someone else?"

"N...no."

"Why did you stop?"

"What?" I blink.

"You were giving me a show, weren't you, Flower?"

I stare forward into the mirror, at how his blue eyes blaze as he holds my gaze. His large shoulders block out everything else as he towers over me. He's dressed in a leather jacket and jeans, heavy motorcycle boots on his feet. His hair is tousled. Did he ride here on his bike? He props his arms on his hips, lowers his gaze to my pussy.

"Keep going," he growls. "Fuck yourself for me."

I stare at his features, slide my fingers in and out of myself. Color sears his cheeks; his nostrils flare. He lowers his hands to his sides, curls his fingers into fists. I press my thumb into my clit; his chest rises and falls. I cup my breast with my other hand and squeeze my nipple.

He inhales sharply.

I work a fourth finger into my channel and my entire body convulses. OMFG. He raises his gaze to meet mine in the mirror, his blue gaze deepening to a shade of almost cerulean.

He reaches around to place his big hand on mine. I shiver. Goosebumps dot my skin.

"Damian," I whisper.

He lowers his head to nuzzle the curve of my shoulder and my belly trembles. "Damian," I gasp again.

"When you say my name like that, it fucking turns me on, you know that?" He presses himself against me and the hard length of his arousal stabs into the curve of my hips. I groan, throw my head back against his chest as he squeezes my arse.

I shudder. "Damian," I whine.

"Don't stop," he commands.

I swallow, continue to shove my fingers in and out of myself. His hard fingers engulf mine, making the gesture somehow more intimate, like it is him fucking me. He slides the fingers of his other hand into the valley between my butt cheeks and I groan. He pushes a finger into my backhole. I can't stop the moan that whines from me.

"Damian...please." My fingers tremble and my knees knock together. He tightens his grasp on my hand which is between my legs. The force of it pushes my fingers deeper inside my channel. I gasp. A trembling begins at my toes, flows up my calves, my thighs.

"Oh, Damian," I moan.

"Open your eyes," he orders.

I flutter open my eyelids—when had I closed them, hmm?—meet his gaze in the mirror. His burning blue gaze holds mine.

He presses a kiss to the curve of my neck, then parts his lips and bites down on my skin. Pain pinches my nerve endings, shoots straight to my core. He curls his fingers around mine, pushes them into me, and again. He proceeds to fuck me with my own hand, even as he keeps my backhole

plugged with his own. He releases his hold on my neck, only to bend in close. He places his lips next to my ear, gazes deep into my eyes in the mirror. "Come," he growls.

13

Julia

The climax crashes over me; sparks flash behind my eyes. Moisture gushes out from between my thighs. I hear the sound of someone scream... I know it's me... It can't be. Have I ever sounded so unfiltered? So completely consumed by the moment. By him. By the passion that ignites between us, by the heat in his gaze that holds me in place as the orgasm smashes into me. I tip up my chin, thrust out my breasts.

"Damian!" I cry out as the climax recedes, leaving me empty. So empty. My knees give out from under me. I fall into him, slide down, and he steadies me with his hold on my hand and my fingers still inside of me. He holds me upright with his grip on my pussy, licks the shell of my ear, and fuck, that's hot. And erotic. And for all that, he hasn't even fucked me... Not in the conventional sense.

"Jesus," I whisper.

"Nothing to do with him." He smirks. "And you're welcome."

"I haven't thanked you yet," I jut out my chin.

"Oh, you will, before the hour is out. That is, if you have any voice left." He releases me, only to flip me around. He drops to his knees, shoves his head in between my legs, and swipes his tongue up my pussy. I cry out, grab at his thick hair, and hold on.

He squeezes my butt cheeks. I pant.

He slides his tongue inside my melting channel. I moan. My belly trembles and my toes curl. "Damian, Damian," I chant as he tongues me in

and out, and in and out. He inserts his finger into my backhole, closes his mouth over my swollen core. I howl, bend over his head, try to close my thighs. A chuckle rumbles up his chest. He proceeds to eat me out, suck on my clit, before shoving two fingers into my channel. "Damian, no," I howl.

His lips curve against my center—or I swear that's what he must have done—for the next moment, he adds two more fingers inside my sensitive core. He curls his fingers and I explode. The climax grips me, and I clamp my pussy around his fingers, grab hold of tufts of his hair as the sensations smash into me, then fade away. Leaving the sound of my heartbeat pumping in my ears. My bones seem to melt; all of my brain cells have surely self-combusted. I can't think, can't do anything except slump against his broad shoulders. I sense him move, crack open my eyes to find he's scooped me up and carried me to the bed. He tucks me under the covers. "Sleep, Flower." He kisses my forehead, then turns to leave.

I grab his wrist. "Stay," I whisper.

He hesitates.

"Just for a few minutes."

"I need to leave to take care of my daughter."

"Of course."

This man, he's the most macho man I've ever met, and yet, every single night, he makes it a point to be home to put his daughter to bed. I'd been so caught up in his media image that this...caring side of him...is a surprise. What's worse, it makes him even more irresistible. And that... That isn't fair, at all. I twine my fingers with his, brush my thumb across the roughened skin of his knuckles.

"You've been fighting again?" I yawn.

"Fucking Arpad," he says without heat. "The man knows how to get to me."

"You two close?"

The song on my phone switches to another; he reaches over to shut it off.

"Why did you pick that one?" he asks.

"It's from your first album. Your earlier work was so much better than your later tracks, not that I didn't like them, but somehow your later songs seemed to—"

"Lack heart?" He winces, then chuckles, "At least, you're honest."

"Your turn." I glance up into his face, take in his features, which seem almost relaxed. Apparently, getting me off, relaxed him too. "You can tell

me." I half smile. "I won't tell anyone."

"He and I, we were together through most of the incident."

"You supported each other through it?"

"More like fought each other, and that helped us stay alive."

"Oh?" I frown. "You mean the two of you had to trade blows when you were kidnapped."

"Not only." His features close. Damn it, and we'd been getting along so well.

"I need to go," he insists.

But I don't want you to leave. I bring his hand to my face, kiss the broken skin across his fingers. "There, that should help."

"Is that a fact based in science?" He chuckles.

"You bet." I yawn so loudly my jaws crack. "Damn," I whisper, "apparently, orgasms make me sleepy."

"And even more alluring."

"Did you say alluring?" I frown. "Your vocabulary never ceases to amaze me."

"Now I know why my parents paid for my expensive private school tuition." He laughs.

"Why?" I mumble.

"It was just so I could impress you, of course." He laughs, then bends in to brush a kiss over each of my eyelids. "Sleep, Flower. When you awaken, you'll feel better."

Darkness pulls me under. When I awake, I am alone.

14

Damian

"But Daddy, Salad wants to read Calvin and Hobbes." Riley folds her arms over her chest.

I glance up from the copy of *Alice in Wonderland* that I had been trying to read out loud—'trying' being the operative word here, for Riley is having none of it. "You're too young for Calvin and Hobbes."

"But Mommy read to me from it."

Ah. I bite the inside of my cheek. How do I tell her that her mom made a mistake? Not that I could come out and admit it openly, huh? So, what should I tell her? That Calvin and Hobbes has the kind of language that is just a little too mature for her.

"Daddy," Riley's bottom lip quivers. "you promised..."

"I promised I'd read to you."

"From a book of my choice," she lisps. She only does that when she's upset. Shit. A tear rolls down her cheek.

"Don't cry, baby." I push the book aside, then scoop her up in my arms. "I promise I'll read Calvin and Hobbes to you, just not yet."

"But...but..."

I cuddle her closely as I lie down on the bed. "Alice had a white rabbit, you know."

"White...white wabbit?" she gazes up at me with her big blue eyes so like mine.

Damn, she sounds so young. Well, she is young. Except, she normally

sounds so much older than her years that I forget. Then she lapses into the language of her younger years, and damn, if my heart doesn't almost break. "Yeah, she followed the white rabbit down the hole and that's when her adventures began."

"Ad—ventures."

"Yep, she meets a crazy queen, a mad hatter—"

"What's a hatter?"

"Someone who makes hats."

"You wear a hat..."

"A cap," I correct her. "A baseball cap."

"What's the difference?"

"A cap? Well, uh, it has a rim that doesn't go all the way around, unlike a bowler hat."

"A bowler hat?"

"Yeah, you know... The thing that the twins wear in the adventures of TinTin."

"TinTin?" She sits up, "Who's TinTin?"

"TinTin has a dog called Snowy."

She scrunches up her features, "D-a-a-d, I want a dog."

Shit, no way, can I deal with a dog on top of a kid. Christ, how did we land on TinTin anyway? Weren't we talking about Alice and her adventures?

"There's a dog in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland too." *I think.*

"Really?"

"Yep." I pick up the book in relief. "Here, let me read to you..."

Ten minutes later, she's fast asleep... Shit, there is no dog in *Alice's Adventures*... Fuck, if I couldn't do with my own version of a white rabbit though. The kind you imbibe, not the dildo... Shit, don't think of a dildo when you're putting your daughter to sleep, you ass.

I slide out of the bed. Riley stirs. I freeze, wait until her breathing deepens. Whew! If you'd told me a few years ago that I'd be turning down gigs to spend time with my daughter... W-e-l-l, I'd have laughed long and hard. The final joke is on me, though. I smooth the cover about my daughter's shoulders. Her cheeks are rosy, her cherubic face relaxed in sleep. She's so fucking gorgeous. Fuck, don't swear—not even by way of thinking, in relation to her. Bloody hell, this parenting thing? I suck at it.

I back away from the bed, close the door behind me, keeping it slightly ajar, exactly how Riley prefers it. I head down the steps toward the kitchen.

The empty kitchen where Meredith put aside dinner in the fridge, no doubt. She's taken to coming by more and more often. Clearly, she's worried about me. Hell, she treats all Seven of us as part of her extended family. She'd helped us after the incident, given us a place to hang out away from our homes where we could be ourselves without the constant worried attentions of our close families, or worse, the kind of indifference that came from parents who couldn't cope with what had happened. Like mine. They'd been alright though, I suppose. They'd taken me to shrinks, helped me to deal with it. Just... They had never been able to stop treating me with kid gloves. The result? I had rebelled in the typical way...

I had left home at eighteen to form a rock band. It hadn't been easy, but the challenge of it...had kept me going. And the Seven. All of them had encouraged me. Even that fucker, Baron, who'd preferred to leave the rest of us behind as he travelled across the world to wherever the hell he is right now... He'd made sure to send me a letter congratulating me when my first album had been a hit.

Now that I am scraping rock bottom... Yeah—a rock star bottom, I suppose. I can call it that. I snicker—Well, now that I am as close to the starting point as I had been, in terms of being a failure, that is... I have nothing to lose, huh? I can simply follow my instinct, give tune to the kinds of words I wouldn't have been caught dead writing before... At least, I am writing, thanks to her. I walk into my study and make sure the baby-cam is switched on, so I have eyes and ears on my angel.

Then strum my guitar as I begin to compose the rhythm for the words that have been buzzing in my head from earlier.

Space, presence, amalgamation of a lifetime.

I take,

You yield.

My presence fills your void.

Balance...

I claim the openings you leave.

The chase,

The hunt,

The thrill of the beyond.

Taking, moving, taking, moving.

Empty as a dance without a partner.

Demented as a man without his wife...

What the hell? My fingers slip on the chords, the sound jarring in the empty space. Wife? Where did that thought come from? I place the guitar on the couch, then jump up to my feet. Shit, this wasn't meant to happen. This... this itch inside of me, the crawling, damning need that lodges in my gut and aches to get out and I cannot, will not, let it... I hope.

I snatch up my phone and dial.

"Hello, motherfucker." Arpad's voice comes through.

"Hello to you, too," I blow out a breath.

There's a pause, then he switches to video. His face appears on screen.

"What's wrong?"

"What could be wrong?" I rub the back of my neck.

"You wouldn't be calling if there wasn't something."

"True," I concede.

"Your stalker bothering you again?" He scowls.

"It's been quiet on that front." I sigh. Maybe too quiet. Not that I am complaining. I'd gone off social media but it hadn't deterred the die-hard fans from trying to track down where I live. One of them had sent me threatening notes, then had been caught trying to sneak onto my property a few months ago. It's why I'd had Karina beef up the security around the house; and why I had cancelled my gigs and all engagements to stay home. No one can protect my daughter the way I can, after all. And no way, am I going to let anything happen to her.

"What are you going to do about it?" He frowns.

"About what?"

"Her."

I scowl, "Why the hell did you have to send her to me?"

"Why would I not?"

"You're deflecting."

"And you're still in mourning."

"Fuck that," I hunch my shoulders.

He pauses, "It wasn't your fault, Damian."

"You don't know that. If I had handled things differently, if I had made more time for my family, things would have been different."

"You can't change the past, but you can affect the future. It's in your hands."

"Is that why you saw fit to steer things around, so I couldn't avoid her?"

He clicks his tongue, "You forget things so quickly."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember, I said that if Weston and Amelie decided to get married, you'd have no choice but to accept the gift I sent you."

I pause. "Motherfucker," I swear out aloud. "She's not an inanimate object you bastard."

"But she is a gift, and she's what you need right now."

"Oh?" I stare at his face on the screen. "The fuck you think you are, playing with our lives?"

"Someone has to, considering you don't want to move on from where you've been stuck for too long."

"Jesus, Arpad." I shake my head. "This...is all wrong. You shouldn't have done this."

"Why not?" he retorts. "You were too much of a loser to take what was right in front of you. Left to yourself, you'd have never seen her again."

"And rightly so. She deserves fucking better."

"That's for her to decide."

"She's better, away from me."

"That's your decision."

"Huh?" I stare at him.

"I've done my part," he raises his shoulders, "the rest is up to you."

15

27th December

Julia

"Bastard!" It's six pm, and once again, I stand in between the mirror and the bed in the same room as yesterday. Only he hasn't texted me yet.

Why hasn't he texted me, yet?

I glance down at my phone, then throw it on the bed. I will not allow him to see how anxious I am. Will not allow him to find out just how pissed off I am that he didn't call me after yesterday. Hell, when I awoke, he was gone. Which I expected, but not even a note left behind. I'd woken up a few hours later to find I was alone and covered in the sheets. The mattress next to me was cold and uncreased so I know he never laid down beside me. He'd simply taken my orgasms—okay, so I had given them to him freely—and he'd gone. "Asshole."

No doubt, if he were here, he'd ask me to call him Alphahole. A title that, strangely, does fit him. Only Damian fucking Savage would have the ego to claim that label, and with no sign of irony either. He'd mean it... He actually believes every single legend the media spins about him. Well, the length of his cock, for one... Not that I have seen it yet... I've felt it, learned the shape of it through his pants...but he hasn't even taken off his clothes yet. Hmm. He's devoted himself to my pleasure, it seems. And not that I am complaining, but that yummy body of his? I definitely want to see more of it.

Just as I want to find out more about the man and his daughter. I could

call up Amelie or Isla and ask, I suppose. But somehow that doesn't seem right. I want him to tell me about his life...want to get to know the man who pays for my company better. Hell. If only I didn't need the money. But damn it, I can't turn away from the millions he's dangled in front of me. I'd checked my bank account, and already, the number of zeroes in it had confirmed that Damian is a man of his word—Ha! And if that's the case, why isn't he here already?

I pick up the phone and look at the clock. It's already been ten minutes since I got here. Ten minutes without his touch on my skin, his fingers in my pussy, the imprint of his shaft against the softness of my belly... And damn it, today I want more. I need more. I need to get him to share more of what lurks behind those blazing blue eyes.

I need to do something different. Need to get him to react. But how? I glance around the space—the wide headboard on the massive king-sized bed that takes up most of the room. I run my fingers down the scarf I draped around my neck before leaving home. Hmm... What if I surprise him? Or is that what he expects from me? To do the unexpected because he hasn't asked something specific of me? Maybe... But hell, if I am going to pace the room waiting for him... I am going to take some control of the situation—something he doesn't want, but too bad.

I grab the bedspread, throw it over the mirror. Good, now he has no idea what he's walking into. I head for the bowl of fruit kept on the coffee table by the settee, pick up one, then I walk over to the bed. I shed my clothes, making sure to keep my heels on—yeah, I'd dressed again for that asshole—then I climb onto the bed.

16

Damian

Six-twenty p.m. I'd have delayed it further, except she'd cut off all visual to the room. She'd thrown the bedspread over the mirror, and the app I'd been using to track her, courtesy of the camera in the frame of the mirror, had gone dark. How the hell had she guessed the location of the camera anyway? The woman is resourceful. And smart. Of course, she is. It's why she'd intrigued me from the moment I'd seen her. I use my keycard to let myself into the apartment.

I walk through the living room, lit by the glow of the city lights coming into the space, and step into the bedroom...and stop. My breath catches. Blood rushes to my groin. "What the fuck?"

I stalk to the foot of the bed and glance down at my woman on her hands and knees, on the bed, facing away from me. I take in the curve of her arse, emphasized by the light that flows into the room... The flesh of her thighs, the sweep of her calves, her feet clad in fuck-me shoes. A growl rips out of me. "What the hell are you doing?"

She glances over her shoulder and I catch sight of the apple she holds in her mouth. Her green eyes gleam. Her pink lips contrast with the red of the skin of the apple. Her neck is arched, her shoulders pulled back.

I take in the unpainted fingernails, her palms pressed into the bed. The globes of her pert breasts mirror the shape of the apple, her nipples dark, their color a contrast to the white of the sheets on the bed. I drag my gaze down her belly to the lushness of her hips and the sight of the ripe flesh between

her legs. Moisture glistens against her lower lips and I know she's ready for me.

"How dare you start without me?" I growl.

She draws in a breath and the apple slips from her mouth.

"Don't let go of the fruit, or you'll regret what I am going to do to you even more."

Her gaze widens. A hint of something like fear glimmers in her eyes.

She quickly grabs the apple, puts it back in her mouth. Good.

"Eyes forward!" I order.

She blinks, hesitates. I swoop down and slap her arse.

She cries out, or at least I presume she does, for its muffled by the bloody apple in her mouth...Jesus, what the hell had she been thinking? Why is she offering herself up like that to me? Doesn't she know I am less Adam and more the serpent in the Garden of Eden...?

"Remember what I said, Flower? Don't let the apple fall."

I slap her arse again and again. Left cheek, then right, then left. Pause.

I step back, survey the reddened bloom of her butt, my fingerprints clearly standing out against her pale skin. Moisture drips down her inner thighs. "That turned you on, hmm?"

She trembles. I reach down and kiss the curve of her butt; she shudders. I press another kiss to her other arsecheeks and she shivers.

"Remember," I whisper against her skin, "hold onto the apple."

I straighten, undo the buckle of my belt.

She stiffens, turns her head.

I click my tongue, "Don't turn."

She stares ahead.

I slide out my belt, and the whine of the leather across the waistband is loud in the space.

She curves her back, clenches her butt.

"Three lashes, Flower," I drawl, "and you'd better not orgasm."

She tips up her chin. I snap the belt. The leather connects with her backside. Her entire body jerks. Her thighs spasm. I straighten, then lower the belt again. The crack of the strap against her skin leaves a pink welt across her butt. My cock lengthens. *Fuck me.*

This...thing inside of me, this need to see her ready and open and willing...for me... Why the hell have I never felt it with anyone else before? A hum winds down my spine and my groin hardens. I lower my arm and lay

the last lash across her butt. She jolts, the apple rolls from her mouth, and a cry spills from her lips. All of my senses pop. I grab her hips, flip her around, then bury my mouth in her pussy. I drag my tongue up to her swollen clit and she screams out.

She tries to pull away. I grip the backs of her thighs, pull her close, until my face is jammed in between her folded legs. I thrust my tongue inside her melting channel. She grips my hair and tugs. The pain shivers down my spine, and my balls harden. I lick my tongue up her pussy lips again and again, bite down on her clit, and she arches her back off of the bed.

"Damian," she cries out, and fuck, my name from her lips... It's sweeter than the screams of adoring crowds as I face them from on stage.

I tear my mouth from her pussy, rise up and over her, fit my mouth to hers, thrust my fingers knuckle-deep inside her channel, wrap my other palm around the back of her neck, my fingers resting on the pulse points on either side, and kiss her and fuck her with my fingers, in and out, in and out. Her core clenches around my fingers; her mouth opens further as I dance my tongue across hers. She strains against me, pushes her nipples into my chest, parts her legs wider as she tilts her hips, pushes her pelvis up, coaxes me to grind the heel of my palm into her cunt. A groan trembles up her throat. I tear my mouth from hers, peer into her eyes, pupils blown, the green now merely a circle that rings her dark irises.

"Come," I order, and she shatters. Her features twist, her lips part, and her muscles tauten as moisture floods from her center.

I pull my fingers out, ease them into her mouth. "Lick me off," I command.

She wraps her tongue around my digits, in the creases between them, across the junction where my fingers meet my palm. The slide of the wetness sinks into my blood, arrows straight to my cock. This woman... Nothing with her is predictable. Just when I think that I have her tamed, she springs a surprise that completely floors me. She holds my gaze as a tear slides from the corner of her eyes. I bend and lick it up.

She releases my fingers, tips up her chin. "Why did you do that?"

She's come apart under me, and yet, there's nothing timid or submissive about her...yet. "You don't get to ask me the questions." I increase the pressure of my fingers around her neck. She swallows.

"Understand?" I lower my face to hers, until our lips almost touch, "Answer me."

"Yes," she whispers.

"Good." I release her, then slide back and off the bed. Straightening, I tug on my shirtsleeve.

"You're already dressed in your formal clothes?" She frowns.

I glance at my watch. "Don't want to be late." I jerk my chin toward the closet at the far end of the room, "Get dressed, remember we have a wedding to attend?"

17

Julia

"Do you Amelie Elizabeth Abram take Weston George Kincaid to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

Weston glances down at his bride, his features lit up with such adoration that my heart skitters. Jesus, all that love in the air. Is it possible for someone to feel so much love for his wife-to-be?

"I do." Amelie giggles.

Her simple, knee-length, off-the-shoulder, white dress should seem almost too casual, except she wears the glow that seems to often characterize brides.

Damian stands to attention on the opposite side of the gathering, not a single bone in his body relaxed.

The entire wedding has clearly been planned to be a small intimate affair, on the ranch owned by Saint and his cousin Tinkerbelle. The weather is freezing, but the space is surrounded by freestanding outdoor heaters, which cast a circle of warmth around us.

"You may now kiss the bride."

Before Edward has completed his statement, Weston swoops down, drags Amelie up to her toes, lowers his head, and kisses her.

Applause breaks out from the assembled group. Sinclair pulls Summer into his side. She tips her head up and he presses his lips to her forehead. The puppy she holds in her arms whines. Summer holds the dog up to Sinclair who scratches the little fella about his ears.

The dog barks, Summer lowers him to the ground, and he bounds over to where a little girl, bends to play with him. Behind her, a tall man frowns down at the scene as if he's not quite sure what to make of it. "That's Liam," Isla whispers to me.

"Is he perpetually angry?" I frown.

"He's scary," Isla shivers, "in a mean, dominant, cold, sexy, tear-your-panties-off and not take no for an answer—" her chest heaves, "obsessive, compulsive, calculating, single-minded," her tone grows raspy, "fuck you until you can't walk straight for days, kind of way."

"You mean he's a high-functioning sociopath?"

"Hmm." She looks him up and down. "More like a sexy, stalkerish, manipulative, psychopath who just happens to be a billionaire."

"How can you find that hot?"

"I don't." She turns to me. "I mean, not really."

I stare at her.

She blushes. "I mean, come on. Damian's just as controlling, as self-assured, as provocative, as fine a specimen as they come—"

"He's better than that," I mumble.

"As much of a harsh, yummy, vigorous, macho, eight-pack-abbed—"

I snap my head in her direction, "How do you know that he has an eight-pack?"

"He is tabloid fodder." She raises her shoulders.

"Keep your eyes off his abs, his corded forearms, not to mention that beautiful, sculpted, whiskered jaw that leaves rug burn in its wake—"

"Whoa, you did it then?" Isla turns on me so quickly that I retreat from her.

"Woman, you'll get whiplash, if you keep that up," I hiss.

"Admit it," she crows. "You shagged that fine piece of arse. Please say, you did."

My fingers tingle and my sex clenches. "No." I feign disinterest.

"No way." Her gaze widens. "Tell me you didn't pass up the opportunity to test drive that fine piece of machinery."

"Down girl," I mutter. "Let's just enjoy the wedding without getting all hot and bothered."

"As if that's going to be possible when you're surrounded by all of this testosterone. Not to mention, all that dopamine that the couples in love are transmitting all around us."

Next to us, Jace whispers in Sienna's ear and she blushes. Next to them their baby sleeps in his pram.

Saint wraps his arm around Victoria, tilts her chin up to his and kisses her.

Isla sighs. *Yeah, you and me both, girlfriend. Don't I know the feeling?* If only there were someone special out there for me... The hair on the back of my neck rises. I glance up and across the room to where Mr. Smoldering Gaze Rockstar leans his hip against a wall. Clearly, he'd rather be anywhere else but here. Clearly, a marriage—not even one of his best friend's, carries much significance to him.

"The way he eats you up with his gaze," Isla shakes her head. "You sure nothing happened between the two of you, yet?"

"Not...sure," I reply under my breath.

"What does that mean?" I hear the confusion in her voice but don't glance up. I know how that sounds... But hell, how else do I classify what almost happened between us?

"You mean, you guys haven't done it yet?" she probes.

"We haven't *not* done it," I offer.

She huffs. "You are talking in riddles. Like the rest of the women did once they hooked up with one of the Seven."

"I haven't hooked up with him," I insist.

"Of course, the chemistry between the two of you is just a mistake, then?"

"It must be," I mumble, my gaze captivated by the beautiful profile of the man who'd captured my imagination from the moment I'd seen him first perform on stage.

He shoves a hand in the pocket of his beautifully-cut slacks. Surely, they must have been cut to his physique while he was standing in front of the tailor, who, no doubt, wept as he stitched them to fit every powerful muscle of those sinewed legs— *Gah! Stop drooling you idiot.* It's just cloth, fabric that many others wear, except on Damian f'ing Savage, formal pants and button-downs seem to be poetry in motion. *What the hell am I thinking?* I shake my head; he jerks his chin up and locks his gaze with mine. Those blue eyes of his seem to penetrate my heart, my skin, my soul. My throat closes and a bead of sweat slides down my spine.

Around me, confetti rains down on the newly married couple.

Damian straightens and his shoulder seem to bulge. His biceps flex, stretching in the full sleeves of his formal wear. He doesn't take his gaze off

of me. My heart begins to thud. He brings up his thumb and runs it across his bottom lip, and bloody hell, my entire body seems to snap to attention. My belly clenches and moisture pools between my legs. What the—? What kind of hold does he have on me?

"Nice dress, by the way," Isla whispers.

"What?"

"Your gown."

"Oh, it's borrowed."

"From whom?"

"Uh, Damian told me to wear it."

"Damian?" she whisper-screams. "So, you did spend time with him, after all?"

"Shh," I grab her arm, "you'll attract attention."

"So I should." She stares at me. "Tell me all, bitch."

"There's nothing to tell." I glance back at the space where I'd last seen Damian, and find the space is empty. Huh?

"Well?" She shakes off my hold, only to grab my arm instead, "So you did shag him?"

"No," I snap. "Uh, we've done stuff, just not that."

"I don't understand."

"Tell me about it." I glance around the space as Weston and Amelie accept congratulations from the rest of the crowd. I should go up and wish her well too. Except, damn it, I can't, not yet. Not when I'm not sure what I've gotten myself into. Not sure if I have a job to go to, either... Shit, a job I needed. Why the hell couldn't he let me see his daughter? Am I so abhorrent to him? A shapeless piece of clay? Well, I certainly feel dowdy, compared to the glowing faces in this room.

"You okay?" Isla hisses.

"No. Yes." I swallow, "I don't know." Tears prick the backs of my eyes. *No, no, no.* "I... I need a moment."

I step back from her and she releases her grasp on me.

"Where are the restrooms?"

"First floor, to the far right." She searches my face, "Want me to come with you?"

"No." I shake my head. "I'll be fine, I just need to get away." I turn, skirt the crowd, and head inside. The sounds of laughter and conversation fade as I walk across the beautiful lounge, head up the steps and to the right of the

hallway. Follow it to the door that's partially ajar at the end. I peek inside, then gasp when a warm hand descends on my shoulder. I'm pushed inside so abruptly that I stumble. I turn to find Damian leaning against the door. He lowers his hand to grasp the doorknob and a lock snaps into place.

"Wh...what are you doing?"

He unhooks his belt and the buckle clanks as he pulls it off. My nerve-endings pop. I drop my gaze to his crotch, to where the evidence of his desire tents the fabric of his pants. OMFG, it's not possible that he's as big as he seems, is he? My toes curl. My scalp tingles. I dig my heels into the floor, curl my fingers into fists at my sides.

"On your knees," he orders.

My jaw drops. "You're crazy."

"For you."

I glance up at his face and his lips twist.

"You're joking," I whisper. "Not even you can be that much of a bastard."

"Oh, good, so I don't need to pretend." He wipes all expression off his face. "Do it," he snaps.

My thighs tremble and my knees hit the floor with a thump that sends pain shooting up my legs.

"Touch yourself."

I gape.

He tilts his head, "You don't want me to come there."

I tilt up my chin. "On the contrary," I raise my gaze to his face, and flinch. The skin is drawn tightly over his cheekbones, his jaw tics, and the creases around his eyes seem to deepen. He seems like a man possessed, one who is this close to losing control, and I am not sure why.

"What...what did I do?" I whisper.

"What makes you think it's something you did, hmm?"

"Isn't it?"

"Yours is not to question why."

"—But to do or die?" I joke.

He draws in a breath; the planes of his chest seem to flex.

In two steps, he closes the distance between us, grabs the hair at the back of my head and tugs. Pain lances down my spine, arrows straight to the emptiness that crawls in my core.

"I told you never to talk about dying, didn't I?"

I stare up into his face. His jaw tics, his features twist, and he looks like a

man who's seen a ghost. *Oh, hell.* "I'm sorry," I whisper. "I didn't mean to bring back memories—"

"I told you not to speak," he snaps.

"You didn't," I protest.

"It's understood."

"What? Now I'm supposed to read your mind?" I huff.

"Nope, now you take the punishment I am going to mete out to you."

18

Damian

"Show me your pussy."

"What?" Color smears her cheeks.

"You heard me."

What the hell are you doing, asshole? Let her go, get away from her, turn around and head back home—to...my daughter? My life...shorn of all creativity, one filled with responsibilities that weigh heavily on me. A life filled with yearning for something...more.

I love my daughter—the light of my life, the one who makes it all worthwhile... And if I don't work another day in my life, she'll be provided for. But would she be proud of the music I've created so far? Would she see my fall from the pinnacle of success I'd once occupied? Would she remember me as a failure...one who couldn't compose anymore? And the songs I have out there... They are hardly the kind I'd want her to listen to. I have to come up with more, so much more, something that will ensure that she sees me in a new light. The kind of father I've always wanted to be, one she'll remember with pride. With the kind of emotion I'd wanted to feel for my own parents and hadn't quite been able to, given the distance that had grown between us since the incident.

No, I want more for my daughter. I have to do right by her. I have to make her proud of me if it is the last thing I do... And this sassy, proud woman is going to help me with that. She will play a key role in helping me reinvent myself. So what, if I am being selfish about it? I owe it to myself,

don't I? I simply have to make sure she benefits from this arrangement too.

"Do it, Flower," I coax her. Where the hell did that come from? I am not supposed to show her any mercy, yet here I am requesting her to fall in line with my plans. I shake my head, straighten my shoulders. "Don't keep me waiting." I lower the pitch of my voice.

She shivers, then slides her hand under her gown, flips it up.

"Fuck." I stare at the pink flesh exposed between her thighs. "What the hell? You didn't wear panties?"

"Neither did you."

I tilt my head. "Not in the habit of wearing frilly underwear, not even for you."

She flushes. "You know what I mean."

"No, I don't."

"I mean...that." She jerks her chin toward my open fly.

"What?"

"You're gonna make me spell it out?"

"Anything to see you squirm, sweetheart." I chuckle.

"Asshole."

I click my tongue. "You know how I prefer alphahole, or even Master would do very nicely."

"Go fuck yourself."

I laugh, "I'd much rather see you fuck yourself."

"Argh." She throws up her hands, and her dress flows down around her knees.

"Now you've done it."

"What?"

"You disobeyed my command."

"I...I didn't."

I glance down to where her dress covers the sweet flesh she'd exposed earlier.

She follows my gaze, then pales, "It...it was a mistake."

That's for sure. "Oh?" I take a step forward.

She stumbles to her feet. "Honest, I... I didn't mean to."

I move toward her. Her gaze flicks around the bathroom.

"Don't even think about it," I murmur.

"You... You don't know what I am thinking about."

"Don't I?"

"If you did, you wouldn't be standing there talking to me."

I close the distance between us.

She squeaks, dodges around me and makes for the door. She grabs the handle, twists it, then swears. "Why the hell isn't it opening?"

"Guess."

She turns around, then stares at the key I show her. I slip it into the pocket of my slacks.

She swallows audibly. "Oh, hell."

"Indeed." I quirk my finger at her, "Come 'ere."

She shakes her head.

I draw in a breath. "You're making this more difficult on yourself."

"And you're t...talking in riddles."

"Nervous?"

"Of course, not." She hiccups. "Oops." She slaps a palm to her mouth.

"Did you just hiccup?" I frown.

"Not me." She hiccups again.

I chuckle. "Such a little liar."

"I'm not." She glowers at me.

A tiny line appears between her eyebrows. Fucking adorable. Wait. Hold on. Back up. I did not just think of her as adorable. WTF?

"Prove it."

"What...what do you mean?"

"Come closer."

"No, thank you." She folds her hands together in front of herself. "I'm, uh, good right where I am."

"Don't say I didn't warn you." I move toward her.

She squeaks, then darts toward the window on the side.

"What the hell—?"

She grapples with the sash lock of the window pane.

I reach her, clamp my hand around the nape of her neck.

She shudders, tries to wriggle away.

I increase the pressure about her nape, and she lowers her forehead to the glass. "Please," she whispers.

"Please what?"

"Please let me go."

I slap her butt.

She studders, "Wh...what was that for?"

"Lying again?"

"I'm not."

I take a step back, hold her still with my grip on her neck.

"Last chance," I snap.

"For what?"

"To tell the truth."

"I... I don't understand."

I take aim, then bring down my palm with such force on her arse that her entire body jerks. She rises to the tips of her toes. Her hair flows around her shoulders. "Ohmygod," she screams.

"Wrong answer." I spank the curve of her butt again and again.

She howls. "Stop," she gasps.

"Answer me first."

"What's the question."

"Do I make you nervous?"

"Yes."

"Do I turn you on?"

"Yes."

"Will you defy me again?"

"Yes," she stutters, then gasps. "No, no, you bastard, I won't. I'll do what you tell me to."

"Too late, Flower." I hook my finger into the V of the neckline at the back of her dress and tug. The material rips, the sound slicing through the space.

Goosebumps rise on her skin. "What the hell—?" She turns her head and I tear the flimsy material from neck to hem. The fabric parts, leaving the exposed length of her body from shoulder to hip to the cleft between her thighs to the turn of her beautiful ankles. My groin hardens; my cock lengthens.

She kicks back. I angle my body to avoid her, then plant my thigh between her legs. She wriggles her arse, and Jesus, the warmth of her center sinks through the fabric of my slacks. I lean in, press the weight of my crotch into her back. A trembling grips her. She plants her palm flat against the pane.

Below us, a white mare gallops by, followed by a dark stallion. Nature in action, the dominant and the female with whom he was meant to mate. I place my cheek close to hers, and another shudder rolls up her spine. "Shh," I

whisper, "I won't hurt you."

"Oh?" She turns to glare at me, the green of her eyes burning bright, "What do you call this then?"

"Taming the shrew."

"I am no shrew," she protests.

"Sure could have fooled me, sweetheart, for you definitely need a firm hand."

"I don't need anything from you. I don't need you," she snarls.

"Wrong." I lower my head and nip on her lip.

She moans.

I rub my thumb over the pulse that flutters at the hollow of her neck. Her pulse rate ratchets up; the sweet scent of her arousal deepens. I slide my other hand between her legs. "You're fucking soaking." I press little kisses to the corner of her mouth, make my way up to the shell of her ear. I bite her ear lobe and her entire body jolts. "See how you respond to me?"

"That's...uh.... Just physical."

"That's a start."

"For what?"

"For what's coming next."

"Which is?"

I thrust two fingers inside her pussy. She yells. The sound slices straight to my gut, and goddamn me, but I am so hard, and I can't wait any longer. I need to taste her, I need to have her falling apart on my fingers, on my tongue. "I want you helpless and broken and shattered for me to pick up the pieces. Only me. You understand?"

"No," she snaps.

"Yes." I release my hold on her neck, only to sink to my knees between her legs. I squeeze her butt cheeks, then thrust my tongue inside her pussy.

19

Julia

OMG. OMG. He curls his tongue inside of me and I groan. He flicks his tongue across my pussy lips, and I push my forehead into the glass. There's a whinnying sound from far below. I glance down to find the mare prancing about as the stallion stalks her. Jeez, talk about life imitating nature. Or is that life imitating art? Whatever it is, nature unfolds her drama down in the field, and up here, my very own racehorse of an alpha begins to thrust his tongue in and out of me, fucking me with his tongue. "Oh, God," I groan. He picks up speed.

He slides a finger into my puckered hole, then thrusts his wide palm between me and the window pane. He fastens his fingers across my core and I gasp, "Damian." I try to turn. He pinches my clit and I yell, "No, goddamn it, no."

He pulls his fingers from inside of me. Cool air envelops my heated flesh. What the—? I glance over my shoulder to find he's stalked to the shower cubicle. He wrenches open the door, grabs one of the bottles from the receptacle inside.

"What are you doing?"

He pivots. "Eyes forward," he commands.

I take in the bottle of conditioner that he uncorks as he marches over to me.

"No." I swallow.

A smile pulls at his lips, and it's not the good kind. I gulp, "D...Damian?"

"Yes, Flower?" His grin widens.

"You...you won't."

"Is that a challenge?" He stares into my face.

"I hate you," I mumble.

He pauses, widens his stance. "Leave."

"What?"

"You heard me." He jerks his chin toward the door, "Go."

"You...you don't mean it."

"Have I ever said anything that I don't mean to you?"

"N...never."

"Right." He cracks his neck. "So, stay and let me take your arse, or turn and go. Your choice."

Is it though? Considering I have no clothes to wear.

I take in his flushed cheeks, the hard tendons of his sculpted neck, the V of his skin exposed by the lapels of his shirt, the smattering of dark hair that arrows down to the part of him that I haven't yet seen.

"I'll stay."

His eyes gleam.

"On one condition," I force out the words.

"You don't get to call the shots."

"You haven't heard what I'm going to say."

"Hmph." He flattens his lips, "What is it?"

"Take off your shirt."

"That's it?"

"And your pants..."

"No."

"What?"

"I don't undress in front of strangers."

"I'm hardly a stranger, you ass," I scowl. "You've had your tongue inside of me."

He smacks his lips, "And you taste so fucking good, Flower."

I redden, then push my thighs together. Why the hell do I find that so hot? I stare at him and he seems to relent.

"Okay, this once." He unbuttons his shirt and the lapels gape in the front. I take in those cut abs, the hollow of his belly, the massive tent over his crotch.

"Happy?" He smirks.

"No," I grouse.

"Too bad." He jerks his chin, "Face forward."

I hesitate.

"Flower," he warns.

I huff, then turn to glance forward.

"So, you're staying?"

His voice is right behind me. The heat of his body envelops me, and the hair on my nape prickles. I know what's coming, and damn him. I don't want him to do it, and yet, I have to find out how it would be to be taken by him.

"Why don't you want to fuck me?" I demand.

"Newsflash," he growls. "I am gonna fuck your arse." Cold liquid pours down the valley between my butt cheeks.

I shiver. My belly knots. "Th...that's not what I mean. Why don't you want to..." I hesitate, "Want to—"

"Tear into your luscious pussy?"

"Jesus," I breathe, "you have a filthy mouth."

"One you love, admit it."

"You have me there," I draw in a breath. "I don't know why those uncouth words from you turn me on."

"Don't beat yourself about it." He leans in, kisses my shoulder.

The tenderness in that gesture. I blink. Wow. I glance at him sideways. "It's not what I am used to," I mumble. "I mean, I've been with men—"

He slaps my arse.

"Hey," I protest.

"Don't fucking talk about anyone else when I'm with you." He glares at me.

"But I mean—"

He wraps his fingers around my neck in a gesture I'm coming to recognize as the hallmark of his dominance. It's hot, I'll admit. It's what sets him apart from anyone else I've been with... Well, not only, but it's the confidence with which he handles my body, how he massages the cold liquid of the conditioner in between my butt cheeks, and works his finger inside my backhole, then follows it up with a second digit...while he holds my gaze, and intensifies the pressure on the back of my neck just enough so I tip up my chin and push out my butt.

"Good girl," he grunts. And my nipples harden; my pussy clenches. The blue of his eyes deepens.

He works a third finger inside of me and I gasp, "Oh, my... Oh wow, Damian... Oh..."

"How does it feel?"

"F-full," I stutter. "It's too much. I can't."

"You can." His lips curl, "I'll make sure."

A shiver runs up my spine. "What if it hurts?" I whine.

"It will," he promises.

"What?" I gape, "If you think you're selling this to me, you're mistaken."

He lowers his head and bites me on the bridge of where my shoulder meets my neck.

"Ow," I yelp. "That hurts, as well."

"Just priming you, babe."

"I'm not a steak."

He chuckles, "You're softer." He curls his finger inside of me and I snap my head back and against his shoulder.

"Not to mention, fucking hot." He does something with his fingers, a jerky circling motion that sets off a burst of sensation that sweeps up my spine. "And tight. So tight." His voice seems to break. Did it? Nah, not possible.

Sparks flare behind my eyes. "Oh, my god," I gasp.

"I'll take that as a compliment," His chuckle rumbles up my spine. My nerve endings seem to pop, all at once, and moisture pools between my legs.

"I'm so empty." I slap my hand over my mouth. *Did I just say that aloud?*

How is it that when he touches me, I lose all of my filters, all of my carefully planned forward momentum mantras, the ones I picked up from self-help books along the way. Clearly, none of the authors of those books had come up against a real-life obstacle like Damian, someone who'd sweep through all the barriers, who'd get under your skin and turn every preconceived notion you had about yourself upside down. "Do it," I snarl.

"You forgot the magic word."

"Are you serious?" I angle my body to steal a glance at him, but he keeps me immobile with that warm hand of his that's still fixed on my nape, like I'm a bloody kitten. Hell, I feel as powerless and as pathetically needy. "Damian," I whine.

"Say the word, Flower."

I lick my lips. "This is stupid."

"Not the word I was looking for."

He withdraws his fingers, and my stomach clenches; my thighs spasm. That feeling of emptiness multiples—no, quadruples—in my belly. "Fine, fine, whatever," I huff. "Please, Damian, fuck my ar—"

The hard crown of his dick nudges my backhole, then he breaches me.

"Ow," I protest. "It hurts. It hurts." I pull away—or rather try to wriggle away from him, try being the operative word, for he wraps a heavy hand around my center, pulls me flush against his hard chest, then coaxes me to turn my chin up and toward him. "Damian—"

He closes his mouth over mine. He stays as is, his hard length throbbing inside of me, allowing me to adjust to his size... As if that's ever going to happen.

He curls his fingers around my neck again, then reaches down to play with my pussy. He dances his fingers down my core then back up to pinch my clit. I gasp, draw in a breath, and he slips further inside my backchannel. A moan wells up, and he swallows it down. He sucks on my tongue, while his fingers play with my core, and his hard cock... OMG... He pulls out, then thrusts back inside, there's a pinch and I gasp.

"Take a deep breath," he commands.

I follow his direction, draw in a breath and release it, then again. My muscles relax. I unclench and he slips in deeper. He thrusts two fingers inside my soaking channel and I shudder.

Goosebumps flare on my skin and a trembling grips my legs.

I throw my arm up and around his shoulders, hold on as he releases my pussy, only to hook his arm under my knee. He pulls up my leg, presses it into the window.

And the angle of my body allows him to slide in further. The fullness is unlike anything I have experienced before. Not that I have that much experience, but still... This... What he's doing to me... It's different, balancing me on the edge of pain and pleasure, that in-between place where all I can do is moan his name, "Damian," I plead, "Please."

I tip up my chin, meet his gaze. He glares down at me, so close that I notice the dot on his left pupil. It's something so intimate, something only a lover would notice... Or an enemy. "What am I to you?"

"You're mine." He growls.

"Damian," I whisper, then reach up to cup his cheek. "Damian."

His features twist and a vein throbs at his temple. "I hate what you do to me," his voice whispers over my skin.

I frown. "Damian, what do you—?"

He thrusts in with enough force that my entire body jolts. At the same time, he tightens the hold around my neck, enough that my oxygen peters out. Darkness closes in on the edges of my vision as he begins to fuck my arse in earnest. In and out of me, again and again. My pussy clenches, heat sears my spine, I curl my toes, dig my fingers into his back, and gasp and moan and cry out. He doesn't stop. He pushes into me, all the way in, filling me in a way that I wouldn't have thought possible. *Oh my God, I'm going to—*

"Come." He releases his hold on my leg, thrusts his fingers inside my pussy. "Come all over my fingers," he insists. "Now," he snaps at the same time that he releases his hold on my neck and the climax crashes over me.

My orgasm sweeps up my legs, my torso, as the oxygen inflates my lungs. I throw back my head and howl as blue sparks flare behind my closed eyes. The climax goes on and on, and I hold onto him. Unable to keep my knee pressed into the window, I lower my leg, tightening the hold on his dick. He lowers his head and bites me on my shoulder and the pain shoots down to my belly. A second orgasm slithers up my spine, this one gentler, more mellow as it shivers over me. I slump and he wraps his big arms around me. Holds me as his dick throbs inside me still. Vibrations grip my back, a humming reaches my ears.

"Damian," I whisper.

"Shh." He kisses the top of my head, then pulls out of me.

I glance up and meet his gaze. "You didn't come," I point out.

"I know." His voice is matter of fact.

"I am beginning to think you are never going to orgasm in my presence."

He tilts his head, "Now that you point it out..."

"What are you afraid of?" I scowl.

"Myself." His features turn bleak, the skin stretching across his cheeks, highlighting the hollows under his eyes.

"Who hurt you?" I burst out. "Who turned you into this..."

"This?"

"Unfeeling monster?"

"That the best you can do?" He turns me, then scoops me up in his arms. I glance up at the jut of his chin, the weeks-old growth of whiskers that he'd trimmed for this occasion.

"The Seven, they are important to you?"

"They are family." He stalks over to the bath tub, lowers me to sit on the

edge. He leans past me, turns on the taps, the hot water runs, and steam fills the room.

"You okay?"

I nod, glance up at his shuttered features.

"Good." He cleans himself up with a paper towel, then tucks himself inside, and zips up. "I'll send Isla with a change of clothes for you."

Turning, he leaves.

20

Damian

What the fuck was that about? Did I actually call her mine? What gives me the right to do so? Not that gut wrenching orgasm where she had come all over my fingers. Not the way she'd called my name as she'd writhed on my dick, and thrust her butt against my pelvis and thrown her head back and orgasmed, and again when I had bitten into her shoulder. I had bitten her... Fuck! Not once, but twice, and both times her body had fallen apart under my ministrations.

As she comes for me

As she begs me

As she struggles under me

As the world outside stops

As my life ignites

As she calls out my name... All I can think is she is Mine. Only mine.

"Fuck that." *She's not.* She doesn't belong to me. She is merely a conduit for my creativity. The siren song for my muse, the inspiration for my next move. Fuck, now I am thinking in lyrics... an abundance of riches—the poetry that pours out of me every time she climaxes. "What the hell am I thinking?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

I stare down at the man who stands at the bottom of the staircase.

"What the fuck do you mean?" I take the steps two at a time, reach the landing, and brush past Arpad.

He grabs my shoulder, "Not so fast."

I turn on him, "Keep your hands to yourself pal."

"What's gotten into you, man?" He holds up his hands, his forehead furrowed.

"Nothing." *Everything*. Especially that dark-haired witch who's clearly cast some kind of a spell on me.

"What were you doing up there?"

"None of your business," I snap. Good thing the walls of the ranch are thick enough that no one had heard her scream. No one but me, that is. I can't stop the smirk that curls my lips.

"So, it's like that, huh?" He chuckles. "And PS, your belt's undone."

I swear aloud, then fasten my belt. "Get off my balls man." I pivot and stalk forward, Arpad on my heels. "Shit, can't you go fly a kite or something?"

"I don't fly kites... Never did, not even when I was a boy. And neither did you, by the way, pal."

"Yeah, yeah." I stalk forward to the door that leads to the patio where the rest of the crowd are still gathered.

Spotting Isla, I head for her, Arpad right behind. "Jesus, man, cut me a break," I snap.

"Trust me, where you're headed, you need a wing man."

"Go fuck yourself."

"Not interested." He chuckles.

"I forget you have a woman you are too much of a pussy to seal the deal with."

He grabs my shoulder, turns me around, "Shut the fuck up."

"You want a fight, you motherfucker?" I growl.

"I want you to take back what you said."

"No," I bare my teeth.

He throws a punch. I duck. "Hold on, I need to first take care of something else."

I stalk toward Isla. "Julia," I jerk my chin in the direction of the house, "she needs your help."

"What happened?" She frowns.

"She's, uh, up in the bathroom."

"What did you do to her?"

"Nothing she didn't want done," I insist.

"I don't believe you." She frowns. "Did you hurt her?"

I stare at her, then look away.

"Motherfucker," she snarls. "Why the hell are you toying with her?"

"I'm not." I slide a finger under my collar. "Look, it's complicated, okay?"

"You bet your ass it is, buddy." She folds her arms over her chest. "I swear, sometimes I can't thank my stars enough that I'm not entangled with a man."

"Is that right?" Liam prowls over to stand next to her. "You sure about that?"

She flinches, then glances at him sideways. "Hello, Mr. Not-one-of-the-Seven."

"Liam," he says through gritted teeth. "My name is Liam."

"Goodbye Mr. Whatever-your-name-is." She flounces off. "And newsflash, I'm not interested."

"What the fuck?" He stares after her.

"What the fuck?" I frown at him. "You sweet on her or something, man?"

"I don't do sweet anything." He turns those cold eyes on me and I bloody believe him. The Seven of us are ruthless and have seen enough to know that life's not easy, and each of us have our ways, albeit unorthodox, to cope with that, but this man...? He was born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth and has had a privileged existence, by all counts, so why the hell do I get the impression that he's as tortured as us, if not more?

"Not that I care," I growl, "Except Isla is Amelie and Summer's friend, both of whom married into the circle, which means she comes under the protection of the Seven, so you better not mess with her, man."

"And Julia?" He scratches his jaw, "What about her?"

"Don't talk about her." I widen my stance, "If I were you, I'd stay the fuck away from her."

He chuckles, "And if I were you, I'd duck."

"Why would I?" The hair on my forearms rises.

I angle away, but not quickly enough, for Arpad's fist connects with my shoulder. Liam steps aside. I grunt, then grab Arpad's arm and throw him over my shoulder.

He hits the ground, lays there winded, then jumps up, and turns to me.

We circle each other, as the rest of the men close in.

"Who's the more frustrated, you think?" Sinner drawls.

"I don't know, man. They both look angry enough to kill each other." Saint chuckles.

"Do you think we should leave them to it?" Weston asks. "They deserve it, considering they disrupted my wedding."

"They make for free entertainment, at least," Edward responds, his voice mild.

Arpad shakes his head, "Can you believe this?"

"We're surrounded by married folk," I roll my shoulders, "all ball-and-chained up and shit."

"Hey," Summer objects.

I wince. "Present company excluded, of course." I raise my hands.

"You women don't count as women anymore," Arpad offers.

"What the hell does that mean?" Victoria frowns. "What are we, if we aren't women?"

"He means you are the wives and fiancées... So—"

"So?" Amelie glowers between me and Arpad, "Are you guys trying to say that the married slash engaged among the Seven are less because of that?"

"You're right, Edward. This is entertaining," Weston quips.

"Umm." I rub the back of my neck.

"Shit, I can't believe that you hesitated." Sinclair chuckles. "Man, even I am not brave enough to take on the might of a woman."

"See." Summer pats his cheek. "He's changed, hasn't he?"

Sinclair shoots me a look over her head, his features wearing an agonized look.

I laugh, then turn it into a cough. I cover my mouth, "Umm, hey, didn't mean no harm, folks. Honest."

"Yeah," Arpad straightens, "just me and Rockstar here, blowing off steam." He nods.

I step toward him, at the same time that he closes the distance between us. I throw an arm around his shoulders. "See, all made up."

"Aww, you guys gonna kiss or something?" Saint taunts.

"Nope, don't want to make Julia jealous," Arpad retorts.

"The fuck you talking about?" I lower my arm and stare at him.

He rolls his shoulders, "Just telling it like it is, brother."

"There's nothing to tell here." I glare at him, "Not unless you count one sorry excuse of a man, who's carried around his feelings for a woman for years and not dared to confess it."

"That's it." Arpad pivots, hooks his leg around mine, tugs at the same time he shoves at my shoulder. The world tilts. The next moment, my back hits the ground. Pain shudders through me. "Fuck," I swear.

"Get up," Arpad growls from above me.

I spring up, shake my head to clear it, then charge him. I head butt him; he grunts, grabs me in a headlock. We struggle, evenly matched, break apart, then circle each other.

"Haven't seen you this upset in a long time," Arpad bares his teeth.

"I'm not the one carrying a torch."

"No, you're simply too scared to grab what's right in front of you."

"Fuck you," I growl.

"No, thank you," he shoots back.

"Shit," I straighten, "this is pointless."

Arpad rolls his shoulders, "It's bloody confounding, is what it is." He drags his fingers through his hair.

"I need a drink," I mutter.

"So do I." He holds out a hand.

"Don't push your luck, man," I growl.

"What happened here?" Amelie glances between us.

"What?" I frown.

"What?" Arpad dusts off the front of his jacket.

"And I thought women were temperamental?" Summer heaves a sigh.

"Just as things were beginning to get interesting, too," Victoria cries.

Saint wraps his arm around her. "Come on, darlin'. You shouldn't get stressed in your condition."

"I'm pregnant, not sick," she protests, but allows Saint to lead her away.

"What now?" I frown.

Arpad glances past me, "If I were you, I'd definitely get out."

"What the fuck do you mean?"

The back of my neck prickles and all of my senses pop. *What the hell? Is she here?*

"Damian, you motherfucker! You stupid-ass, good-for-nothing loser of a Rockstar." A voice that could only belong to the one woman I'd been trying to get away from rings out.

Silence descends on the crowd. I draw in a breath.

"Turn around and face me, you coward."

Julia's voice sounds closer. Guess there's no rest for the wicked huh?

I turn, just as she plants her fist in my side.

21

Julia

"How dare you?" My fist connects with his hard chest, but he barely moves. He doesn't blink, or seem surprised. *What the hell?* Not even his breathing changes.

"You ass." I punch his side again; pain shivers up my arm. I pull back, then aim for his groin this time. My fist connects with his rock-hard abdomen. He draws in a breath. A reaction, finally. I pull back, raise my fist again. He swoops down, grabs my wrist, then turns me around and hauls me against him.

"Calm down," his hard voice sounds near my ear.

"I will bloody not," I growl, trying to kick him.

He sidesteps but I catch him in the shin anyway. He curses under his breath. "The fuck is wrong with you?" he snaps.

"The fuck is wrong with *you*?" I shove the hair out of my eyes. "You left me on my own after...you...you..."

"I?"

"You know." I swallow, then glance around and take in the varying expressions of interest among the assembled faces. Bloody hell. Of course, we were the highlight of the afternoon. Likely, we'd usurped the attention from the bride and groom.

"Sorry," I direct my apologies at Amelie, who shakes her head.

"Don't worry," she mouths at me, then glances up at the man behind me who has me pinned to him. "You okay?" she asks me.

No.

No.

"Yeah," I tell them.

"You sure?" She stares between me and Damian, who pulls me closer.

"What? Don't you trust me with your friend?" He laughs. "Rest assured, I'll make sure she's taken care of."

"Hmm." She narrows her gaze at him, then points a finger in his direction, "I'll hold you to that."

I ensure that my features stay calm as she heads into the house, followed by the rest of the crowd; then I turn on the asshole who restrains me. "Let go," I hiss.

"No."

"I need to get out of here."

"So do I," he agrees.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I snarl.

"You should have thought of that before you made a spectacle of yourself, and PS, what the fuck are you wearing?"

"What did you expect?" I hiss. "You left me there and walked off. And what's wrong with what I'm wearing?" I glance down at the plaid shirt and the too-short jeans and ballet pumps that Amelie had loaned me, courtesy of Tinkerbell.

"I sent your friend to help you, and I like the fit of these jeans against your arse."

"Should I thank you for that?" I scoff, "And stop talking about my butt."

"It would be a start." He lowers his voice, "And I haven't stopped thinking about it, considering I was your first there, after all."

"And yet you left me?" I bite the inside of my cheek.

"What did you expect? A post-coital cuddle, a kiss, a pat on the head."

"How about simple decency...you...you oaf?"

I swallow the thick lump of something that clogs my chest. What the hell had I been thinking rushing out here? When Isla had found me curled up in the bath tub having a good cry, it had been the last straw. Not that I don't appreciate her consoling me...but damn it! I am tired of being taken for granted by the world, by my life, by this obnoxious grumpy-pants rock star who, damn it... I still want to shag. Gah!

"The reason I came out here was to dare you," I snap.

"What?"

"I dare you to pose for me."

"What do you mean 'pose for me'?"

"Let me sculpt you."

"What do you mean? Like, out of clay?"

"No, out of toilet paper, you douche." I shake my head. "Yes, out of clay. I'm a clay artist, remember?"

"Thought you were a potter."

"A sculptor, actually."

"Is it me you're looking for?" he asks.

I still. "Did you paraphrase Hello! By Lionel Richie, in which she sculpts ___"

"His bust," he echoes my words.

I start; so does he.

He studies me for a moment. "So, do you like eighties music videos, or was that a lucky guess?"

"The first," I mumble.

"Hmm."

"So, will you pose for me?" I tilt my head.

"Maybe."

"Why is everything so difficult with you?"

"Because... It's you?" he offers. "You seem to bring out my dark side."

"You're no Luke Skywalker," I scoff.

"Thank God." He laughs. "I prefer a different kind of lightsaber, Flower."

"Eeugh." I make a gagging sound, "That was so, so, so bad."

"It was," he agrees. "If I release you, will you promise not to attack me?"

"Of course."

He releases me, takes a step back. I turn around and throw myself at him. I must surprise him this time, for he stumbles, then catches me by my shoulders.

"Stop," he commands.

"No." I try to kick at his shins.

He throws his arms around me, pulls me close to his chest, where the warmth of his body pours over me, where I can hear his heart hammer against his chest. Is he as aware of me as I am of him?

"Let me go." I strain in his hold and he plants his big palm around the nape of my neck to hold me captive. I am instantly wet.

Damn it, this shouldn't be happening. He's restraining me, he's holding

me back, and I am turned on? What kind of depraved stupidity is it, that I find his ability to rein me in so primitive...so...bloody hot?

No way, am I going to stand for it.

I turn my face into the skin exposed by the 'V' of the lapels of his shirt. I draw in a deep breath, fill my lungs with the musky, cinnamon-laced male essence of his. I lick at the warm skin; he freezes. I bury my teeth in his chest and he laughs. He fucking laughs. I glance up to find his eyes gleaming; color smears his cheeks.

"Shit, that turned you on, didn't it?" I huff.

"Now you're getting to know me better." He grins and his teeth glint against his tanned skin. My belly flutters. Why the hell does he come across as so irresistible, even as he's preparing to take me apart bit by melting bit?

"No," I mumble.

"Yes." He nods. He applies enough pressure on my throat that I gasp.

"What...what are you doing?"

"Making sure that you understand my instructions, and PS, you're welcome."

"For what?"

"For saving you from being bored to death in this terribly august gathering."

"It's not August, you ass."

"You know what I mean," he pauses, "don't you?"

"Of course, I do," I huff. "I can't get over how archaic your prose is though, and I thought I was the only one who loved historicals."

"Hate historicals," he yawns, "but have a weakness for poetry. Comes with the territory. If it weren't for my lyrics, I wouldn't be here, after all, right?"

"Like I care."

"You should, for I hold your future in my hands."

"More like you need me, you bastard. It's why you keep wrenching orgasms out of me, after all."

His features close. "What do you mean?"

"That for some reason you like to... No, you *need* to, see me come. You have this strange compulsion to have me orgasm, to watch me fall apart under your ministrations. Makes me wonder if, in some strange way, it's not fueling your writing."

He glares at me, then releases me so suddenly that I stumble.

"I was right, huh?" I blink. "You really do think that my orgasms help you what—break through your creative deadlock?"

His nostrils flare. "I am not discussing this with you here."

"Then where?"

"You did mention wanting to sculpt me." He scowls.

"I...did."

"So, let's go to your studio."

"I...uh, I don't have one yet. I just flew in from Australia. haven't had time to, uh, set one up..." I bite down on my lower lip. Shit, this sounds like an excuse, but it's true. So why the hell does he narrow his gaze, look me up and down like he doesn't believe a word that I'm saying?

He grabs my upper arm, "Come on." He stalks forward, hauling me behind him.

"Hold on," I hiss. "I am getting tired of being dragged around by you, like I am a sack of potatoes."

"Be grateful I didn't throw you over my shoulder and whip your arse for your impertinence. Oh, wait. I already did that." He chuckles.

I scowl. "Can you get any more abhorrent?"

"Can you get any more cranky?"

"You're calling me cranky?" I yell, "You—"

"Julia, everything okay?" I glance up to find Isla planting herself in our path.

"Yeah, need some help?" Liam prowls up to place an arm around her shoulders.

She shakes it off. "Back off, this is my friend." She sets her jaw.

"And he's not," Liam drawls. "All the more reason I'd be happy to step in, if the situation demands."

"What?" I frown at him. "No, I... I'm good."

"You sure?" Liam glances between us. "Say the word and I—"

"You heard the lady," Damian growls. "Now, piss off."

"OMG," I throw up my hands, "I've had enough of this possessive caveman act."

"I haven't even started." Damian grabs my arm, "We're leaving. Julia's coming with me. End of story. Anyone have a problem with that?"

Silence; the crowd glances at us. Then Arpad scratches his jaw, "Can I borrow your bachelor pad at The Shard, considering you'll be wanting to move to a townhouse in Primrose Hill with the rest of the married folk?"

Damian stiffens, then draws himself up to his full height, "That won't be happening, I'm afraid. This is purely a transactional friends-with-benefits arrangement." He turns to me, "Besides, I've sworn never to marry."

22

Julia

"What the hell was that about?" I mumble into the helmet that the rock star had jammed on my head, along with the boots, gloves and heavy jacket—how the hell did he guess my size with such accuracy?— he'd asked me to don, before shoving me onto the bike that had been parked in the driveway of the ranch. Apparently, when you are stinking rich, you can get the hired help to drive your bike an hour out of the city to where you are, just so you have the pleasure of driving it home.

"What the hell was *what* about?" Damian's low drawl sounds in my ear.

I jump. Yeah, another thing you can buy when you're loaded, these techno-advanced head gear, aka helmets with built-in mics, that you can use to communicate with each other... While the bike purrs between my legs, setting off pin-pricks of lust up my spine.

"Jeez, do you have to go scaring me?" I grumble.

"Scaring you, huh?" He accelerates and the bike shoots forward.

I yelp, clamp my arms even tighter around his lean stomach, which I admit, is no hardship; especially since I am plastered to his broad back, with my thighs spread wide enough to accommodate the tight flanks of said Rockosaurus. He leans into a curve without slowing down, and I tighten my grip around him.

He chuckles.

Jerk.

"What's with that proclamation that you are never going to marry?" I

burst out.

The tires squeal loudly enough that my eardrums reverberate with the vibration and the scent of burning rubber assails me through the protective covering of my helmet. Shit, either he's mad or this is just how he normally drives. "If you don't want to answer a question you only have to say so. I mean, you may have a death wish pal, but I don't. I—"

He slams on the brakes so suddenly that the back of the bike rises up in the air. I scream, hold onto him like he is the last mooring in a world gone mad. The bike rotates on its front wheel, does a complete 360 turn, before the back tire—the one I am positioned above—hits the tarmac, bounces once, then comes to a stop.

My limbs tremble and a bead of sweat runs down my spine. I bury my helmet-covered forehead into his back and stay where I am, not daring to move. I couldn't if I tried—my legs have gone to sleep, my fingers are frozen, despite the gloves, partly from fear, partly from the cold wind that had buffeted me as he'd torn his way up the road.

We stay there a beat, another.

There's not a house in sight, or another car. We'd been driving up a B road, one of those picturesque thoroughfares that run parallel to the highway. If there had been enough light, I would have noticed the vista of rolling hills and storybook cottages. No, strike that; even if it had been earlier in the day, I wouldn't have noticed the scenery, because I had been too busy reveling in the firm expanse of the back which I had been tucked into all this while—the planes of which clenched and unclenched as if there were a fight going on underneath his skin.

"Damian?" I finally venture. "You...you okay?"

He stays still, the motorcycle's engine throbbing underneath us. Then he switches it off and the silence that descends is almost painful to my ears. I swallow and my eardrums pop. That's better. "Damian?"

"How many times have I told you not to talk about dying?"

"I...I'm sorry."

"I'm not."

"Wh...what do you mean?"

"Get off the bike."

"What?"

"Do it," he snaps.

My muscles uncoil and sensations sizzle up my legs. Is it pins and

needles of blood circulation being restored, or the primitive urge to comply with what he wants, when he wants, how...he wants? Holy hell, what's this insane need to comply with his every demand? Even the insane ones... Particularly the insane ones. Like this... I scramble off of the bike, stand next to him. "Give me that." He jerks his head toward my helmet. I take it off. A gust of wind blows my hair about my shoulders. He points at my jacket; I shrug off the protection. Goosebumps immediately shiver over my skin.

He tosses my stuff aside; then removes his helmet and throws it aside as well.

I wince. It's not my gear, but hell, if I don't appreciate the craftsmanship that went into it. "Hope the stuff is unbreakable," I mutter.

He doesn't respond. Instead, he lowers the kickstand of the Harley, leans the bike into it. He looks me up and down, then jerks his chin at my shirt, "Take it off."

I stiffen, "What? Here?"

"Where else?"

"Why would I do that?" I scowl.

"You want the job, remember?"

"And this is another...test I need to pass?" I frown.

"Maybe," he shrugs his shoulders, "maybe not."

Asshole's trying to dare me, huh? Is that what this is? Because I challenged him first? Likely, that's all it is. We'll see who blinks first, buster. I unhook the first button of my shirt, then the next. The cold wind instantly seeps down into the space between the fabric and my skin. My nipples tighten painfully... And it's not because he's following my progress...with those brooding, blue eyes of his.

I undo the last button on my shirt. He holds out his hand as I hand it over.

He takes in my bra—thank God I had worn one under the dress, then drops his gaze to my borrowed jeans. "Off with them."

"What?" I cry in horror. "No."

"Yes."

"Not here."

"There's no one here."

I glance around, don't see a single other person, or bird or insect, for that matter. I can do this. I am not gonna give in to whatever mindfuck thing he has got going on here. I lower the zipper of my jeans, then pause. *Shit.* "I don't have panties on," I gripe.

He tilts his head, and I shake my head, "Are you insane? I'm not going naked out here in the open."

"Thought you wanted to get close to nature and all that crap, which is why you went to Australia in the first place?"

"How do you know that?"

"It wasn't hard to guess." He raises his gaze to my face. "It's what women of a certain age do, when they're single and trying to find themselves. All that *'Eat Pray Love'* shit, ya know?"

"You're a piece of shit, ya' know?" I spit out the words, then swoop my nails toward his face.

He laughs, hooks his fingers around my wrist, and tugs on me. The next second I am looking down at the ground, splayed across his thighs and over the gas tank of his bike, which means I'm forced to thrust out my butt, up closer to his face.

He palms my arse—thank God, I still have the jeans on.

A shiver of desire runs up my spine. Fuck me, but nothing new there, I guess. I mean, I do like it when he touches me...anywhere...everywhere... especially on that part of me which is the fleshiest, something which I've hated, but which he, apparently, has an unhealthy liking for.

"I am beginning to think you have a butt obsession," I huff.

"Only with yours."

I still.

Above me, he ceases stroking my flesh, his big palm covers my backside, and I swear, I can discern every single fingerprint of his through the seat of the fabric that separates us. Damnit, I changed my mind. I should have taken off my pants so he'd have easier access to the melting, aching core of me. I squeeze my thighs together, push my crotch into the still warm fuel tank.

"Did you know your figure was the first thing I noticed about you."

"Wha...what?" I blink.

"You're shaped like a guitar."

"You mean I have a big-ass arse?"

"A curvy, sexy, beautiful backside that I wanted to sink my teeth into." He slides back on the motorbike, then pulls down my jeans. Cool air hits my bare arse.

"What are you—?" I yell as he lowers his head and fastens his mouth on my butt, his sharp teeth digging into the flesh of my arsecheeks. I squirm, wriggle, try to pull away. He merely places his heavy arm across my lower

back, "Hold still, darlin'. Don't want to hurt you, now."

"You already did that, you cock, when you sank your big dick in my arsehole," I snap.

He laughs, then slides his fingers across the valley between my buttcheeks. "Did it sting?"

"What do you think?"

"I think, you want me to fuck you again."

"I... I...do." I blink.

Shit, didn't mean for that to pop out. Here I am, splayed out across the lap of this rock star, in the middle of nowhere, and hell, if I can't stop myself from pushing my aching core into the smooth metal of the road hog under me and wishing it were something else entirely.

"So, you finally decided to come clean, huh?" I turn my head to find he's wearing an amused expression.

"No thanks to your *Jenny from the Block* routine."

His gaze widens, then he throws his head back and laughs, a full blown throaty, from-the-belly chuckle that rolls down my spine and arrows straight to that space which is constantly needy around him...i.e. my stupid pussy.

"You laughing at me?" I scowl.

"Just appreciative of the scenery." He grins. "And of your sense of humor."

"At least you placed the reference, I'll give you that."

"You mean the part where Ben Affleck bites J-Lo's luscious arse in the music video?" His lips kick up, "What's not to like? It's every teenaged boy's fantasy come true." He lowers his gaze down to my curved flesh, "As is this."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, motherfucker."

"Language." He clicks his tongue. "Not that your potty tongue doesn't turn me on, but I have other, better, uses for it."

My center instantly grows wetter, bloody hell. Everything he does and says is like a green signal to my hormones... Not even that... I simply have to think of him and my ovaries sit up and beg. Okay, not a pretty picture, and I'm definitely getting out of here. "Unhand me." I push against his thigh.

He holds me in place. "I'm not done yet, Flower," he drawls.

"But I am."

"Trust me, you're not." He flips me around so I'm peering up at the sky, arms flung out as I try to hold onto something to steady myself.

He yanks my pants down to around my ankles, then pulls them off.

He leans back, rakes his gaze down my naked body. "If only you could see yourself." His voice grows rough.

Heat flushes my skin, my nipples pebble further, and my core clenches.

He lowers his face to my stomach, then drags his unshaven chin across my lower belly.

I shudder as liquid heat blooms between my legs. I grasp at his hair, tug on it, then push it toward the aching emptiness that coils in my pussy.

"What's your hurry?" His lips curve against my stomach.

"I... I'm not in a hurry."

He slaps my pussy.

I cry out, "What the hell?"

"Thought I told you not to lie."

"I... I'm not..."

He slaps my core again. I arch up and into him, "Stop..."

He raises his head, "Do you want me to?"

I hold his gaze, peer into his burning blue gaze. "I don't know," I whisper.

"Good girl." His voice lowers to a hush, "I am going to eat you out, gonna suck on your sweet, swollen center, suck on your clit, and play with your swollen pussy lips, you get me?"

23

Damian

Her pupils dilate, her breathing grows shallow. "What's stopping you?" she tips up her chin and asks.

I bark out a laugh. Can't help it. This sassy little thing is laid out like a delectable meal, and yet, she can't back down. She's gotta go toe-to-toe with me, gotta dare me. Again.

"You, Flower." I peer into her eyes, "I want to watch how you react when I—"

I grip her waist, then raise her up, only to position her so she's straddling my hips.

"Oh," she gasps. "Wow."

"Is that a sound of appreciation, I hear."

"Just of surprise." She swipes her hair over her shoulder revealing the long line of her throat. I lean in and nuzzle her, right there, in the hollow between her clavicles. She shivers; goosebumps pop on her skin.

"Are you cold?"

"I'm naked, at the height of winter, in the middle of nowhere." She snorts, "What do you think?"

"Time to get you warm, huh?" I scoot her up the fuel tank, then press my palm to the middle of her chest. She obeys, beautifully. She stretches out, her head on the handlebars, her hair flowing over and down the headlight. I drag my hand down the valley between her breasts, over the slight curve of her belly to the warmth between her legs. She shudders, tries to close her thighs.

"Don't," I insist, "let me see you open for me, Flower."

She gulps, a flush spreads up her creamy skin, and arousal glints on the inside of her thigh. I scoop up the moisture, suck on it. She gasps.

I slide my finger inside her pussy and her entire body jerks. "Oh, Damian."

And there it is. When she says my name like it's a prayer, when she squints up at me, gaze wide, tits standing up, nipples perky and ready to be pulled and teased and sucked on by me. When I slide a second and third finger inside of her sweet cunt and begin to work my digits in and out of her, and she brings her hands up to cup her breasts and squeeze them together, making an inviting hollow, all thought goes out of my head. I reach down between us, lower the zipper on my pants. A gust of wind blows her hair across her face just then. She reaches for it.

"Don't," I order and she lowers her arm. "Squeeze your nipples."

She locks her forefinger and thumb around each diamond-hard tip and squeezes. A moan ripples up her throat. My dick hardens further as blood rushes to my groin. I grab my dick, take it out and squeeze it from base to crown.

"Damian, please," she groans again.

My shaft goes impossibly hard, my thighs spasm, the blood begins to pump at my temples behind my eyelids, at my wrists, even in my balls. I pull my fingers out of her, replace them with my cock.

She draws in a breath, tips her chin down, "Damian I—"

I thrust forward, breach her in one smooth movement.

She groans, "Oh, my God... Dami-aaan." She tries to wriggle away.

I grip her hips, hold her down "Easy." I glare at her. "Easy now."

"You're...too big."

"Just right for you."

"I... I can't..."

"You can."

I lock my gaze with hers, rub circles with my thumb into her clit, and stay...and stay... Allow her to adjust to my width, as she clenches around my cock. So hot, so tight. I grit my teeth, focus on not moving. Just a little more time, a few more seconds until she's ready.

She swallows, "Damian..." She licks her lips, "More."

My vision tunnels and all of my senses seem to pop. How the hell does she know exactly what to say to me? Something hot stabs at my chest, my

ribcage tightens, and my breath catches in my throat. I slide forward, feed another inch of my length inside of her. "You're so beautiful." The breath rushes out of me. "Flower," I growl.

She wraps her fingers around each of my wrists, her touch sparking off a fresh need that swirls down my skin, lodges at the base of my spine.

"Julia," I growl.

"D... Damian?"

I squeeze my eyes shut... Shit, I'll never get used to her calling out my name... Something primal...primeval about it... Something so wrong...so right... So new and yet so familiar. Shit. Fuck... The tension in my balls grows impossibly big, the blood thuds at my temples, the beat growing louder, more insistent.

"Julia," I draw in a breath, "Julia..."

"I'm here, Damian."

I tighten my hold on her, dig my fingers into her soft skin. She's going to wear my marks there... Good. I want that. I want every part of her body to bear evidence of my possession, of how I made her writhe and throb and yearn and cry out as she begged for more of my cock. "Julia," I growl.

"Look at me, Damian. See how much I need you."

I snap my eyes open, hold onto the hunger in those beautiful green eyes. "I...am going to fuck you now."

"What?" She stares, "Bu...but...you are already—"

"I'm not even half-way in."

"Oh," she whimpers, "oh, God."

"Hold on, Julia."

"No.. Wait..."

I piston my hips forward, bury another inch inside of her and her entire body jerks, the motorcycle shudders, and I dig my heels into the ground to hold us upright. Shit, not the brightest idea, fucking her for the first time astride my bike... But hell, if this isn't another fantasy come true. I lean into her, push the hair from her face, thrust my thumb between her open lips. "Suck me," I command, and she draws my digit inside her hot little mouth as I pull out then pump inside of her, burying myself to the hilt.

She bites down on my digit and holds on, both of her hands wrapped around my forearm, as I begin to fuck her. I thrust into her, filling her, stretching her, feeding my cock inside her hungry pussy. "Fuck, Julia."

She moans deep inside her throat, and my balls draw up, and my groin

tightens. I pull my thumb from her mouth, lean over her, hold my lips close to hers, then thrust forward and into her, as I bottom out, against her pelvic bone.

Her eyes roll back in her head, she wraps her legs around my waist, digs her heels into my back and cries out, "Oh. My. God. Damian."

I hook my arms under her thighs, prop her legs over my shoulders, then pull out, and thrust into her again. I propel my hips forward, slant my body and pump into her again and again. Her back arches off the bike; she grabs onto my arms, digs her fingernails into my skin. I'll be wearing her marks as surely as she wears mine.

"Come with me," I command, and she clamps her pussy around my dick. She thrusts her breasts up, nipples stabbing into my chest." Now," I snap, and she shatters, moisture flooding her core.

Shudders wrack her body, and she throws her head back and screams. I watch her as her shoulders jerk and her breasts tremble. I bend, nip at one nipple; she shivers. I kiss the valley between her breasts, lick her other nipple, and she whimpers. "Damian..."

"Shh." I nibble little kisses up her throat back to her lips, kiss her again and again. Tilt my mouth to hers, slide my tongue inside to play with hers. My cock jumps, my balls beg for release. I begin to move inside of her, thrusting into her hot channel, again and again. She flutters open her eyelids, entangles that soulful green gaze with mine. "You're fucking beautiful," I pull out then plunge inside her in one long, smooth stroke that has me buried inside her completely.

"Oh," she gasps.

"Bloody hell." I grit my teeth, hold her gaze, "I'm going to—"

"Come inside me," she gasps.

That's when I remember, I am not wearing a condom, and no way, am I going to come inside of her unprotected, not even if she's on the pill.

I pull out and come all over her chest, her breasts, across her chin and her face.

Her breath comes in pants, in tandem with mine. My heart thuds so hard in my ribcage, I am sure it's going to jump out. I glance down, then rub the goey mess into her skin, about her breasts, into her nipples, down her curvy waist, and between her legs. I scoop up some of the mix, hold it to her mouth; she licks it off. I lean down, then kiss her, taste myself and her, and our combined cum, interlaced with that honey of her taste, and, fuck, if that isn't

the most erotic thing ever. My dick twitches against her core again. Her gaze widens, "Again?" she croaks.

That's when my phone alarm goes off.

24

Julia

I watch from the window of my apartment as Damian pulls away on his bike. He'd insisted on escorting me to my apartment door, and seeing me in, then kissed me—on the cheek—before he'd left, without any promises or anything to raise any expectations in me in terms of when I was going to see him next. Not that I had expected anything else...

Well, okay, so I had. I mean, hey, a woman is bound to get her expectations up after that crazy scene he orchestrated on his bike. Holy shit, he shagged me on his bike in the middle of nowhere, then rubbed his cum into me. He also pulled out a bandana and wiped me down before helping me back into my clothes.

We hadn't said a word to each other on the trip back—huh. Is that good or bad? It isn't good, but is it bad? I mean, he had orgasmed too, just not inside me. And he hadn't asked to fuck me again... And I hadn't invited him inside the apartment either.

How could I, when the alarm that had gone off on his phone had been a reminder that he needed to get home to take care of his daughter.

Turns out, when you're dating— Is this dating? Or should I call it fucking? Or perhaps it's the 'Damian's 100 Ways to Get Julia to Orgasm' game that we're playing? Well, whatever you want to call it, it's complicated, more than usual, when the guy in question is a famous rock star and a single dad, to boot.

And why the hell is he still holding me at arm's length from his kid?

Doesn't he trust me enough to take care of his child?

I drag my fingers through my hair and encounter a gummy piece of something... I slide it off, glance at it... It's the remnants of when he came all over me... My belly clenches. Why the hell had I found that hot...and filthy...but a turn on? I squeeze my thighs together... I mean, I'd fantasied about kink...but never been part of the kind of escapades the man seems to have in mind every time we meet. Yep, Damian f'ing Savage gets a freaking 1000+ when it comes to being innovative. And he isn't a selfish lover... I mean, he's been entirely focused on my orgasms all through... And when I'd confronted him about it... He hadn't denied that he loves to make me come. He seems to get some perverse pleasure out of it...Maybe more than that.

Why is that? What secrets is this man hiding from me? Why the hell does he come across as all tough and mean on the outside and broken on the inside? Well, shit... The classic combination. The bad boy rock star who's hurting and waiting for the right woman to come along and save him... Ha! I snort. That's one that belongs in romance novels.

In real life, it never works that way.

In real life, the bad boy breaks the heart of any female who dares get close to him. He'll push her away, trample over her feelings, and walk away...

Don't let him push you away.

Shit, that's what Meredith had said. Guess she'd anticipated his reaction—no surprises there. Not that I care... I mean, this entire thing is a transaction, huh? A way for me to make money while I figure out what to do with my life. What do I want to do with my life?

Pursue my non-existent career as a clay artist? Continue as a nanny? Why can't I have both? Why can't I have the career I yearn for and the kids of my own that I'd hoped to have by now. I mean, I am only twenty-six. I'm not old...but hell, if I don't feel my biological clock ticking. Which is crazy. Women have kids into their forties... But me? I'd always hoped to have them early... Only things hadn't worked out that way...yet.

If he'd come inside me earlier... Shit, I'd wanted him to come inside of me. Bloody hell... I hadn't realized, until now, how much I want to be pregnant... And not with just anyone's child. With Damian's child. *No, no, no, don't go there. You stupid idiot, don't fall for him.* Do something else... Anything else... Think of how you're going to spend the money you've already earned. Orgasms in exchange for cash. The deal is crazy, too good to

be true.

And I don't, for one second, buy that all this is a test.

It's more. Something more. But what? Shit, I need to find out. I've got to figure out why he's so frustrating, complex, and gorgeous, yet obnoxious and dominant. And yet, I sense, he harbors such a melting heart, which is never more evident than when he talks about his daughter. Just why is he the way he is? What makes him tick?

What does he want out of this weird set-up? Got to find out. Got to... I pivot, head for the bathroom. First things first: a bath, then a call...

The next day, the sun is already dipping down into the horizon, when I lean across the bar at the top floor of the National Portrait Gallery in Trafalgar Square.

"Thanks for coming." I raise my wine glass at the two women who flank me.

"Of course," the petite woman with flashing eyes replies.

The last time I met her, she'd been all business as she'd ensured the flat I occupied was secure from future break-ins. Yeah, when Amelie lived there, a burglar had surprised her. Thankfully, Weston had been there with her, and according to Amelie, she owed the burglar, because it was thanks to that incident that Weston had confessed his feelings for her. Well, bully for her... If only it were that easy with Daddy Savage, huh?

"So, you want to know about him?" Karina reaches for her glass of sparkling water.

I blink, "Uh, yeah. I mean... I confess, it's refreshing that you come straight to the point, but I need something stronger than wine for this conversation."

I drain my glass of wine, then reach over the counter, "A shot of tequila?"

"Coming right up." The bartender pours out the golden liquid of my faithful lover, the one who's stayed with me through thick and thin, the one who never cuts and runs, who never abandons me when the alarm on his phone goes off... Not that I begrudge Damian that, really. I love that he's devoted to his kid. It turns me on, to be honest... Still, if only there were a way to take up more of his time without feeling guilty about it. Aargh. I reach for the shot glass, drain it, then cough.

Isla pats my back, "There, there." She draws soothing circles on my back.

"Thanks," I swipe my hair over my shoulder. "You didn't have to come."

She frowns, "Of course, I did."

"I didn't mean to drag you away from your job."

"Pfft." She waves a hand in the air, "This is more fun. Seems even I need a break from planning weddings. For once, all that talk of true love and celebrations..." she winces. "It was getting to me."

"Or is the hangover from meeting Liam, yesterday?" I shoot her a sideways glance.

She freezes, then reaches for her own margarita and downs it. "Who?"

"You heard me." I stick my tongue in my cheek. "I'm not the only one with an alphahole-shaped hole in my heart, apparently."

"What does that look like?" Karina places her glass back on the table; the perfect red of her lipstick stains the side of the rim. Damn it, why does this woman ooze sex like she owns it? Why the hell can't some of that confidence rub off on me, huh?

"What?" I frown.

"The alphahole-shaped hole," she elaborates.

"Like sex and chocolate and an incomplete shag fest."

Both women look at me, then Isla bursts out laughing. Karina cracks a smile. Whew, this one's a tough cookie.

"Yeah, well, forget I said that," I mumble.

"No, no, no, no." Isla taps into her phone, "I am absolutely gonna use it."

"Fine," I signal at the bartender for another drink, "just don't attribute it to me."

"So," Karina turns to me once I have my grubby fingers around another filled-to-the-brim shot glass, "you want to know about Damian Savage."

"Yeah."

"You know I can't break client privilege."

"So why are you here?" I snap.

"Hey, hey." Isla waves her hand between us. "Be nice, Julia. You know Karina didn't have to be here at all, considering she takes care of the security for all of the Seven, and she has a vested interest, considering her prior relationship with Arpad."

Karina's fingers tighten around her glass and some of the water spills over the side. "I have had prior dealings with Mr. Beauchamp."

"Ooh, it's Mr. Beauchamp, is it?" I lean forward in my seat, taking in the tightness at the corners of Karina's lips. Apparently, Ms. Hoity Toity successful business woman here has a soft spot, or is it an Arpad-shaped spot,

in her life.

"Asshole," she snaps, then drains her sparkling water like it was champagne.

"Want something stronger?"

"I don't drink," she retorts.

"Fine," I sniff. "Don't take your frustrations out on me, girlfriend. You didn't have to come. You know you could have simply said that you wouldn't help me."

"But I want to," she draws in a breath, "help you." She reaches for a napkin from her designer purse—Jesus how much did that cost, huh? No wait, I can afford that now that I have money in the bank. So what, if I sold my body to line my bank account? And shit... I don't like the sound of that. Not at all.

I slump into my chair. "Thanks," I mumble. "I didn't know who to turn to, and with my best friend now married... Well," I glance between the two women. "Apparently, and despite my having grown up in this city, it's the two of you I know best, at this stage in my life."

My lower lip trembles and pressure builds behind my eyes. No, no, no I am not going to bawl! Nope. I sniffle, reach for my shot glass, which is empty. "Crap." I signal toward the bartender.

"Go slow, babe," Isla cautions. "We're here for you."

Karina watches me from under hooded eyelids.

"I don't care what you think of me," I burst out at her. "Clearly, you have your shit together and I don't. Well, some of us are late starters, and hell, what the hell is wrong with me, yelling at you, huh?"

I reach for the paper napkin, and Karina grips my hand. "It's okay," she says.

I glance up at her.

"I've been there." She holds my gaze.

"You have?"

"Of course, babe, so have I," Isla offers. "I mean, it's definitely not easy when your friends get married one after the other, and you're left bringing up the rear..."

"Literally," I scoff under my breath.

"I don't understand." Isla squints at me.

"It's... nothing." Definitely need that drink now.

Karina folds her arms in her lap.

I signal to the bartender, who tops up my shot glass.

"Did you mean that he...uh..." Isla clears her throat, "you know..."

"If you mean anal? Yeah." I throw back the drink, then smack the glass back on the counter.

"Oh, hell... And wow. I mean... OMG," Isla chokes on her drink. "Not that it's unheard of, but so early in the relationship..." Isla's voice tapers off.

"Yeah." I hunch my shoulders, "Why do you think I was in the bath, and why do you think that asshole sent you to help me out?"

"I thought that perhaps the two of you made out, that he got so passionate that he ripped your dress, and then you decided to take a bath and—"

"You thought wrong," I snap at her.

Isla frowns.

I redden. "Sorry, sorry, sorry! So, he fucked me afterward, the right way, I guess, and this time he came all over me."

"Wait... Where?" Isla

"On his bike, on a deserted country road, in the middle of nowhere, and I let him. I'm not proud okay, and you," I stab my finger at Karina, "seriously, why the hell am I spilling my guts in front of a total stranger?"

"Almost stranger," she offers.

"Whatever." I drag my fingers through my hair, "You'd think I had no filter, considering how I seem to lose it in front of Big Daddy D...but..."

"It's kismet," Isla nods sagely.

"What?" I scowl.

"That's what my mother used to say."

"What's fate got to do with it?"

"When two people can't stop rubbing each other up the wrong way..."

"Oh, trust me, it's more than that. The man clearly hates me. It's why he doesn't allow me anywhere near his kid, even though I am a nanny."

"Nanny, huh?" Karina stares at me. "I didn't realize he had a kid."

"Oh, but didn't you do the security for his home?" I drum my fingers on the table, "Didn't you see Riley, then?"

"Maybe she was away." She raises her shoulders, "Anyway, he didn't let me inside the house. The rich can be eccentric that way." She runs her finger up the side of the glass. "He had me boost the security for the grounds and the front door, especially after his stalker broke into his property. Thankfully, he didn't get inside the house though."

I stare at her in horror. "He had a stalker?"

"One of many." She takes a sip of her drink. "It's one of the reasons he unplugged his social media accounts."

"Right." I stare into my glass. "All that's interesting," and every piece of information helps piece together the enigma that's Damian Savage, "but it doesn't change the fact that he doesn't trust me."

"But he does want to offer you a job as his nanny?" Karina probes.

"First, I have to pass a test, or rather, a series of tests...with an 'sssss'." I hiccup.

"What? You mean the shagging?"

"Uh, not only." I hiccup again, then reach for the water.

"How much is he paying you?" Karina asks.

Isla gasps, "Hold on, don't go accusing her..." She glances at my face, "Oh..." She swallows. "OH!"

"Oh, shut up." I bury my face in my palms. "Shit, I've done it now, haven't I?"

"Don't blame yourself," Karina pats my shoulder. "These Seven, they use money to get their way."

"Including Arpad?"

"Especially Arpad."

"What's the story with the two of you?" I stare at her through the gaps in my fingers.

"No story." She raises her shoulders, "Anyway, that's not why I'm here, right?"

I shake my head.

"What did you want to ask me?"

"Tell me whatever you can about Damian—"

She begins to protest and I hold up my hand, "I know, whatever you are allowed to tell me, client confidentiality, notwithstanding."

She draws in a breath.

"I just need to know what I am dealing with here," I plead. "Everything I've read about him in the media doesn't tell me about the real man."

She nods. "You're going in prepared. That's wise."

I tilt my head.

"And this is for the sisterhood, huh?" She half smiles, and her features soften. "I know how it feels to be alone in a city."

"You do?"

She nods. "I moved to London from LA only a few months ago. It takes

some getting used to."

"Well, you have me and Isla now."

"Of course." Isla nods, "We single women, we need to stick together, huh? Not that I have anything against our married friends... Just, it's different when you're still searching, ya know?"

Am I searching? What if I've found him, but he doesn't want me? What if he's the man, but he's all wrong for me? What if I am not the kind of girl who's right for him? Shit, now I'm tying myself up in knots.

"So, Damian Savage." Karina leans in, "Here's what I can tell you."

25

Damian

"You want to watch Frozen again?" I stare at Riley.

Last evening, I'd rushed home after dropping Julia off. I wanted to make sure I was home in case Riley woke up at any point during the night.

Today being a Sunday, she'd normally have swimming lessons at the gym, followed by ballet, but when she hadn't wanted to go, I hadn't insisted.

Instead, I'd made her pancakes, as promised. Then we'd played in the pool in my backyard, and spent time in the greenhouse, where I'd repotted some of the flowers and she'd been happy to help. I'd also introduced her to online chess which she'd taken to like a champ. (After all whose daughter is she, eh?)

At dinner she'd happily devoured the mac and cheese I'd cooked, and now we're settled on the couch for her Sunday night treat... Which normally means an hour and a half of watching a movie... Which, apparently, means re-re-re-watching the adventures of Elsa—no getting away from that four-letter word—and her sister, whatever her name is.

"Daddy, you promised." She pouts, then thrusts out her jaw, in that expression of stubbornness I am coming to recognize. I should. It matches my own. Once I set my mind on something, I don't give up...

Which is why there is no way I am letting that little minx of a woman get away with the havoc she's creating in my life. I am happy right here with Riley, and once she goes to bed, I'll have time to work on the lyrics which have been buzzing around in my head... Something I have stopped taking for

granted.

Clearly, the double orgasm I had wrenched from Flower yesterday is responsible for this burst of inspiration.

Which means I need to write down the lyrics fast... And that means... Yeah... "Fine, fine," I grumble at Riley, and reach for the remote.

"Yay." She dives down into the sofa, cuddles up against me. "I love you, Papa."

She only calls me that when she's very happy or very sad.

My throat closes as a ball of emotions crowds my chest. This little girl right here, I'll do anything for her. Anything. Ask me to lay down my life for her and I'd not hesitate. If anyone dares hurt her, I'd... I'd... No, don't think about it. She's safe here with me. I wrap my arm around her, tug her close and she snuggles in. I switch over to Frozen and the characteristic tune of the opening credits flows over me. I begin to hum along to it under my breath.

"Daddy," she admonishes, "shh!"

"Okay." I chuckle. I may be a rock star, with fans clamoring to hear me and see me play on stage, but in my own home, I clearly come second to the characters on screen. Trust your family to always take you down a notch, huh?

I settle in to watch the movie. Half an hour later, I glance down to find her yawning. "You tired, sweetheart?"

She rubs her eyes, then sits up, "No, of course, not." She focuses on the screen and ten minutes later I find her fast asleep.

I carry her up to her bedroom, tuck her in. I kiss her forehead, inhale the baby shampoo, then head down to my studio. I check the baby-cam on my phone, to make sure I see her asleep, then pick up my guitar.

*I still remember the outline of your lips,
the warmth of your touch,
the curve of your eyelashes as you raised them to glance at me...*

*And then you were gone;
I ache to caress your neck.*

*If I were to touch you between your thighs
Would you come again—?*

I—

My phone vibrates with an incoming call.

Hell, I should have switched it off, except I don't anymore. Not since my daughter arrived, and with her, that unfamiliar sense of vulnerability, the one

that has me checking around corners, under the bed, around the house, to make sure that she is safe. The one that makes me want to carry a gun and guard her every moment of every day. For now, she is young and I can protect her. As long as she is under my roof, I can take care of her, ensure no harm comes to her. As long as I can keep her close, I will, which also means I don't let anyone—except the most trusted of my inner circle—near her. Doesn't mean I can't take this call from another woman... The only other person who has penetrated the shield I've put up against the world, hmm?

"Hello," I bark into the phone.

Silence, then her voice comes over the phone line. "D... Damian?"

"Who else?"

"Oh... I didn't expect you to answer the call."

"So why did you call?"

"I—" There's the sound of footsteps, then female voices speaking. The noises recede. "Sorry about that," she mumbles.

"Where are you?" I frown.

"Outside."

"So late?"

"It's... 9 p.m."

"It's late."

"For you, Daddy." She laughs lightly.

My cock jerks. Hell, is it because she called me the D word? Or is it simply her laugh. This is crazy. I have a five-year-old who calls me Daddy, so why the hell does Flower calling me by the same title make me want to reach across the phone line and drag her flush against me?

"Go home," I order.

"What?" she says, breathless, "No."

"Don't defy me."

"Don't order me around." I sense her pout, see those pink lips in my head. And I'm instantly hard. This crazy reaction to her; I'll never get used to it.

"I'll do what I bloody want and you'll obey me, you understand?"

Her breathing grows ragged. Hell, is she turned on by my show of dominance? Of course, she is. The woman's the most natural submissive in denial that I have met, and she doesn't even know it yet.

"Hey, baby," a male voice calls out, "who are you talking to there, when all the man you can handle is standing right here in front of you?"

"Who's that? I can only see a jackass," she snaps.

"Julia," I begin to pace... When the hell did I stand up from my seat, huh?
"Julia what the fuck is happening there?"

"Nothing," she hiccups. "Need to teach this guy a lesson."

"Don't," I roar, then dig my fingers in my hair and tug at it. "Don't do anything that will end up with you being hurt."

"Hold on—"

"Don't you dare put me on hold. Don't—"

Crash.

The sound rips through the phone and up my spine. Fuck. Did she drop the phone? I hear the sound of scuffling, "You ass, take that." The sound of someone's palm connecting with a face. Her's? His?

"Hey, you little bitch—" the man howls.

"Julia," I yell into the phone, "Julia, what the hell? Are you all right, babe?"

My heart begins to thud. Why the hell am I not there, taking care of her? Why the hell am I not able to manage everything better? My daughter, my woman... She's not my woman... But hell, if something were to happen to her... Why the hell haven't I done a better job of protecting her? I can't lose another person I am beginning to care about, and when the fuck had that happened? When had I begun to feel some kind of ownership toward her? "Julia?" I roar, "What the fuck—?"

"Damian?"

A woman's voice, not Julia's, comes over the phone.

"Karina?" I draw in a breath. "You're with her?"

"Of course, you told me to keep an eye on her, remember?" Her voice is calm.

Male groans, a woman's chuckle floats over the phone.

"What the fuck is happening there? Is she okay?"

"Your woman's a fighter." She half chuckles, "I think you underestimated her."

"You're telling me," I rake my fingers through my hair, "And she's not my woman—"

"Gotta go."

"Don't fucking hang up on—"

The line goes dead.

She hung up on me.

"What the fuck!" I grab my phone and am about to hurl it. Then stop...

Nope, that won't help. Not when I have the baby-cam on it as an app. I stare at the screen. At least, Riley is safe. But Julia. What the fuck is Julia doing out? How dare she endanger herself?!

The phone vibrates and I accept the call from Karina.

"Is she okay?"

"She's fine." Karina's steady voice comes through. "And she didn't need my help, by the way. She had the situation in hand."

"Stay with her," I snap.

"Of course."

"Don't let her out of your sight."

"I can't do that without making her suspicious."

"I pay you good money to keep my family safe."

"Wasn't aware she was family."

"She isn't—" I swear aloud. "She's an asset. And her safety is priority."

"Noted."

"You're the best security expert that money can buy. Don't fail me."

So, I've put Karina on the task of keeping tabs on her. What's wrong with that? So, it's creepy, maybe stalkerish. Too bad. I've learned my lesson, and while I can't always be there in person to protect Julia, I've ensured she'll be protected.

"I know how to do my job," Karina murmurs. "And that means, while I can look out for her, if you want her protected a 100% of the time, then someone needs to be with her 24/7, and that can't be me."

"What do you mean?"

"It means, why don't you arrange for her to stay with you? That way, you can ensure—"

"No."

Silence.

"I mean, I can't... I mean." I squeeze my eyes shut. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"You okay?" she asks.

"Yes."

No, of course, not. How am I supposed to juggle both? Take care of my daughter while protecting my woman, without hurting either of them?

"Listen, I've gotta go." I hang up the call, ready to hurl the phone again, then stop myself.

Only one way out. I dial Meredith's number.

"Damian," she answers on the second ring, "everything okay?"

"I need your help."

26

Julia

I walk up the sidewalk toward The Shard.

That catch-up with Isla and Karina... It did wonders for my confidence... Oh, wait, maybe that's the alcohol that's running through my bloodstream. The cool night air wakes me up. I'd taken a cab here after Karina had told me what she could about Damian...which was not anything I didn't already know, except for the information about his family.

Seems he has a sister who is married and has a daughter, and he is close with her and her family. His own parents? Not so much. Which isn't unusual. And he dropped out of the public eye about a year ago... And no, she couldn't tell me why... So overall, I am back where I started. Which is why I am here... I mean, no way, am I headed home after what happened today. My own flat, it feels strange... But this apartment—Okay, Damian's apartment, with its view over the city... I feel invincible here. Or closer to him... Okay, that too... And it's past ten pm, and on a Sunday. So what, if he's busy today? I can still come over, right?

Maybe he is waiting here...or not. I snort. Like Big Daddy D would ever wait for anything. God forbid, it might put a dent in that inflated ego of his... Or in other parts of him, which are also inflated... Like his dick. Man, that is gigantic. I've never seen anything like it... And how the hell had he actually shoved that thing inside of me? Gah! Next time, I am going to pay more careful attention to it... That is, if I'm not squirming under him and don't have my eyes shut in ecstasy and in agony and—my sneakers catch in a crack

in the pavement and I tumble forward.

A strong pair of hands grips me, "Whoa, there."

I straighten, lift my head to glance into a pair of bright eyes. Tanned skin, teeth flashing against firm lips.

"Hello?" He tilts his head and his dreadlocks dance around him.

He releases me, steps back, "You okay?"

"Y...yes. Thanks. " I grab my backpack, tuck the strap under my arm. "I must be the only woman in this city who loses her footing despite not wearing heels, huh?"

"You were lost in thought." He raises his shoulders, "It happens."

He retreats, then walks around an upturned hat and sinks down onto a makeshift seat that seems to be made out of newspapers. Huh?

"Next time, keep your eyes on the goal."

"Goal?"

"The task at hand; don't let go of the big picture."

"Big picture?"

"Like I do." He snatches up a board that had been facedown and waves it in my direction.

What care I for the wreaths that can only give glory?

"Byron?" I turn to him, "Why Byron?"

"Why not?"

I scowl, "A privileged full-of-himself, opinionated twat."

"That he was."

"You agree?" I tilt my head.

"Sometimes, you have to separate the words from the man."

I stare, "You've lost me."

"Don't disregard the words because of the man he was. If you separate what someone's saying from what they've made of themselves? Well, the words take on a different meaning." He nods towards the prose, "Get me?"

"I'm not sure." I shuffle my feet, "Why do I get the feeling you're trying to tell me something?"

"Me?" He places the board back on the ground, "Not at all. How is it my place to tell you how to differentiate right from wrong? Truth from fiction?"

"Who else but you can point that out?" I look at him, then at The Shard that towers over us, "With your vantage point of all the comings and goings

around here, who better than you to tell me the things that I can't see from where I am?"

"So, you'll heed my advice?"

I flip my hair over my shoulders, "Why not? I have nothing to lose."

"Make him sweat."

"Huh?"

"Don't make it easy on him."

"Who?"

"Your man."

"How do you know I have a man?"

"Don't you?"

"Yeah." I lower my chin, "I... I am not sure, actually."

"Bet he's thinking the same thing right now."

"Is he?"

"Only one way to find out."

"What do you mean?"

"Test him, force the issue, do something out of character."

"Like what?" I chew the inside of my cheek.

"What's the one thing about him that you want to find out."

I stare at him. "You mean..."

He nods. "Don't take no for an answer."

"And if he still refuses to divulge the truth?"

"Do something unexpected, something that will catch him off guard..."

"Hmm." I frown.

"Meanwhile, you got a cigarette for me?"

"I don't smoke." I shove my hand in my bag, pull out my wallet and rifle through it. Shit, I have Australian dollars, no pounds though. "Hold on."

I glance around, spy an ATM machine. I stalk toward it, insert my card and pull out a few notes. I spin and walk toward him, drop a couple in his hat.

He glances at it, then back at me, "A cigarette... I'd die for one right now."

"Don't say that." I frown.

He chuckles, "Don't like the big 'D' word?"

"Oh, I like 'Big D' all right." I snicker to myself. "It's just, my boyfriend has a thing about my saying that..." I pause. Why the hell did I refer to Damian as my boyfriend? I shake my head. "I know just the thing."

I walk the other way, toward the all-night corner shop I'd passed earlier.

A few minutes later, I drop a pack of cigarettes and a lighter into his hat, on top of the money, which he still hasn't touched. How strange.

His face lights up. He reaches for the pack of cigarettes, tears off the foil and lights up. "Thanks." His lips curl. "He's lucky to have you, you know?"

I blink, processing his words. His accent... Shit, it's definitely not that of a street bum. In fact, it's posh. Not that he couldn't have gone to a private school then dropped out, but still. What are the odds, huh?

"Who are you?" I ask.

"A friend." He grins back, then nods to the side, "Speaking of, isn't that someone you know?"

I glance up the street to find a familiar motorcycle turning onto the road and heading toward me. My heart begins to pound, my pulse thuds, and my throat goes dry. The last thing I want is to be spotted here as if I've been waiting for him. Hold on. I turn to the homeless guy, to find he's not there. Huh? I glance the other way to see him walking up the road, with his sign over his shoulder. His gait is steady, his long legs eating up the distance as he puts more space between us.

"How odd."

The double barrels of the approaching bike cut through my thoughts. I pivot and race toward The Shard.

27

Damian

By the time I park and take the elevator to the apartment, she's nowhere in sight. Not that I'd expected to see her. In fact, I'd been on my way to her apartment, but as I'd turned the corner at the top of road and spotted her outside The Shard, my heart had stuttered. It had bloody stuttered. What the fuck is wrong with me? For that matter, what am I doing here?

I had fully intended not to come, but after hearing her cry out on the phone and knowing that she was in danger... And then, unable to do anything about it. I'd felt so helpless... Fucking helpless. For only the third time in my life—three times too many—this is it!

I am never going to put myself in that position again. I am going to find a way out of this.

I am going to fuck her out of my life, once and for all. I am going to make her orgasm over and over again, create a stockpile of her beautiful climaxes so I have enough inspiration to write all the lyrics I need. Then, I am going to leave her.

I use the keycard to let myself in. The place is quiet; the only light is from a floor lamp at the far end of the room. She stands with her back to me, her back pack on the floor at her side, her jacket placed over it. She's wearing her usual jeans and plaid shirt, dark hair in a cloud around her shoulders, as she stares ahead.

I walk to her. "Julia?"

She doesn't reply.

I reach her, touch her shoulder, and she trembles.

"Why?" she asks. "Why did you do that?"

I follow the direction of her gaze to the potter's wheel, and next to it, a counter that has been set up, complete with all of the tools she'd need for molding clay.

"You said you didn't have a studio."

"So, you set one up for me?"

Her voice is low. I walk past her, switch on the spotlight. The glow bathes both of us.

"How dare you?" She turns on me. "How dare you do this?"

"Hold on." I scowl, "I'm confused. I thought you wanted to work again, that you wanted to sculpt me?"

"I did, but not like this."

"What do you mean?"

"The one thing I want to do on my own, the one thing that's sacred to me, you had to go and spoil it with your money."

"Wait," I hold up hand. "My money's good enough for you to accept in return for sex, but not good enough for me to buy you something to help you pursue your passion?"

"That's exactly right." She curls her fingers into fists at her sides. "This is important to me. It's what makes my life worth living. All this time, people have come and gone from my life, people like you—"

I wince.

"People who I thought cared for me, when actually, they were toying with my feelings. Not even my father cared enough to hang around to find out what kind of a person I'd grow up to be—"

"That's why you became a nanny?"

"What?"

"Is that why you decided to take care of other people's children?"

"Maybe" She frowns. "That's not the point."

"Then, what is?"

"When I work with my hands, when I can dig my fingers into a shapeless form, mold it to my liking, breathe life into it, it satisfies something primal inside of me..." She hesitates, seems to struggle with her words before whispering, "Something that I feel only when I'm with you."

"You do?" My heart begins to beat hard. "What are you trying to say?"

She swallows. "That..." She peers up into my face and peruses my

features. My pulse rate ratchets up. *Say it, say what's on your mind, Flower.*

"That?" I hold her gaze and she glances away.

"That working with clay is the one thing that gives meaning to my life, other than taking care of kids..." She squares her shoulders, "It's what I do for myself, and you had to go and sully it."

I stiffen, "Because I set up a studio for you?"

"Because you're trying to buy me again."

She tips up her chin and I take in her flushed features, her erratic breath, the color that smears her cheekbones. "Why are you upset?"

"Why am I *upset*?" She throws up her hands.

I nod. "You clearly missed having a space of your own where you could create, where you could give form to your dreams."

"Are you hearing yourself?" she snarls.

I scowl, "You have to help me here, Flower. I thought you'd like this."

She stares at me, then chuckles, "You thought you could simply walk in and occupy the one space in my life which is sacred, which I have kept for myself, the space where I can be myself and not worry about being judged... Or have to pretend to be someone else. You thought you could take over even that part of my life, you—"

"I thought you would appreciate it."

"No, you thought I *should* appreciate it, that you could ingratiate yourself to me, maybe make me dependent on you," she draws in a breath, "but you know what?"

I tilt my head.

"You can't buy me anymore."

"No?" Anger thrums against my veins, my balls harden, and fuck me, this is wrong. I shouldn't feel so turned on. I take a step forward and she holds her ground. Bloody hell, this woman, she has the kind of strength and fire that makes me want to consume her. Bury myself in her and allow her to burn the darkness inside, fill the empty spaces and paint my blank canvas, fill my sheet with the kinds of lyrics I haven't been able to create since...forever.

"No." She closes the distance between us, then shoves her index finger in my chest. "The deal is off."

"No, it's not."

She tips her chin up, meets my gaze head on, "You're not hearing me."

"I am," I glare down at her, "and I'm telling you, we're not done yet."

Her green eyes grow stormy and golden flickers dance in their depths. So

real, so vital, so bloody full of the kind of fearlessness that I had forgotten I once had myself. I inch forward until my shoes bump the tips of her sneakers, bend my knees and thrust my face into hers. "Strip."

"What?" She straightens. "No."

"Strip, or I'll do it for you."

"Fuck you."

"Oh, I intend to." I reach for her, she feints to the side, grabs her backpack and races for the door. I pull out my phone and tap the screen. The locks on the door engage with an audible click as she reaches it.

She turns the handle, and the door doesn't open.

She jiggles it, puts her shoulder to it, then straightens, only to kick the door. "Ow," she gasps, then grabs her leg and hops about. Her backpack slips from her shoulder, weighing her down further. "Ouch," she cries out again.

I rush toward her. "Did you hurt yourself?" I reach for her.

"Don't touch me." She stumbles back and her bag hits the floor with a thump. She tumbles over it, then falls on her arse. "Argh," she gasps out a breath, then clutches at her hurt leg. "This is all your fault," she cries.

I can't stop the chuckle that rumbles up my chest.

"Don't you dare laugh at me, you ass."

Me?" I wipe the smile off of my face. "I wouldn't."

"You would." She rubs at her hurt foot, then stares up at me. "Open the door."

"Nope." I hold out my arm.

She stares at me, then up at my face. "You're joking," she snarls.

"Am I?" I tilt my head, "Take my hand, or I'll be forced to pick you up."

"No." She glowers at me.

I stare back at her.

"Fine, whatever." She grabs my hand.

I haul her up to her feet, then tug her so she careens into me.

"Let me go."

I bend my knees, heave her over my shoulder, "Now, where were we?"

28

Julia

"We were... Nowhere." I shake the hair out of my eyes. "You were leaving. No wait, that was me."

"Neither of us is going anywhere." He heads for the bedroom and my stomach trembles; my core clenches. No, no, no, this is not happening. I will not be turned on by him going all hot and dark and caveman on me... Not when he's done something that has completely shaken me... I mean, paying to fuck me is one thing. Not that that is acceptable, in any way... But hell, if it's not a transaction, fair and square, something I can catalogue and put into a tidy box.

But his setting up my studio without telling me about it? It's tantamount to his declaring that he cares for me... Which he doesn't. No way.

I struggle in his grasp, "Put me down."

"No." He increases his pace.

Oh hell, if he places me down on the bed, if he touches me, kisses me... I'll be gone. I won't be able to resist him, damn it. It's not him... It's me, I fear more. I fear the reactions he causes in my body. I fear how I react to him when he holds me, touches me, kisses me... None of it is real. It's simply my body's reaction to his very expert skills, something which I need to put an end to right away.

"Let me go, you...you complete reprobate."

I lock my fingers and bring my fist down on his side and kick out at him, at the same time. He slaps my butt and hell, I'd been expecting it, and yet,

nothing prepares me for the flash of lust that pierces through me. Bloody hell, I can't let this happen. I can't! "Damian, no!" I yell.

"Julia, yes." He mocks me as he steps into the bedroom.

"Don't you dare," I snarl.

"Ooh, I am so afraid." He laughs.

Anger ripples up my spine. My belly twists, moisture leaks between my legs. Jesus, this is wrong. I shouldn't be so turned on. I shouldn't. He bypasses the bedroom and heads for the sliding doors that lead out onto a deck I hadn't noticed before. What the hell? I stare as he reaches out to flick on lights. An infinity pool? I gasp. What the hell is a pool doing here on the 68th floor? And it stretches out as if reaching out to the city. "Wow!"

"Like it?"

"I didn't say that."

"Oh, you'll be saying more than that in a second. I hope you know how to swim, Flower."

He marches toward the edge of the pool and I begin to squirm in earnest, "Don't you dare, Rockstar, don't you fucking—"

The water comes up to embrace me, then pours over me, envelops me as I scream and swallow several mouthfuls of chlorinated water as the shock of being dunked smashes through me. What the hell? I come up choking, my hair sticking to my forehead, covering my eyes. "I hate you," I sputter.

"Finally," he sneers. "You're being honest. How's the water by the way?"

I right myself, and my feet touch bottom. At least, he didn't throw me in at the deep end, and the water isn't all that cold... A heated pool. Of course, it is. I swim toward him, hold onto the rim of the pool and scowl up at him. "Asshole."

"Cooled off yet?" He smirks.

"No, but I will, as soon as—" I hold out my hand and he takes it. I tug and he stumbles forward. I yank more; he tumbles over and into the pool. Water splashes over me, over the edge.

He comes up for air, his hair plastered to his scalp, and outlining the shape of his beautiful face. "You've done it now." His voice is hushed.

My nerve-endings crackle.

"Umm..." I push back and away from him. "I... I didn't mean it."

"Of course, you did." He peels back his lips, showing off those sharp, white teeth. I gulp. Hadn't meant to bring out the predator in him. I should have known I'd never be able to outwit him... Doesn't mean I can't try to

outrun him... I clamber over the side of the pool; my feet slip, I cry out, then right myself.

"Come back, Flower."

"No." I take off for the sliding doors, hear a thud, glance over my shoulder, then gasp when I find he's in hot pursuit. His leather jacket drips water, and what I can see of his shirt outlines those sculpted abs, his jeans molded to every muscle of his powerful thighs. My throat closes. I reach the doors, dive through, then grab the handle, and slide the door closed, only to encounter an obstruction. "No, no, no." I glance down to find he's planted his leg in the opening between the door and the frame. Shit, I tug on the door and he grabs it from the other side. Hell, I am no match for his strength. I release the door, then pivot and race around the bed, only he grabs me around the waist.

I shriek as he hauls me up and over his shoulder again. I yell, swing my fists and brush his side; my hair falls over my eyes, I brush it aside, find he's entering the bathroom. He kicks the door shut, lowers me to the ground.

"Strip," he orders.

I glower at him even as I squeeze my thighs together. "I will, if you will," I retort.

"Oh?" He smirks. "If you don't remove your clothes, I'll have to do it for you."

"Whatever," I snort.

"And I won't stop there."

"No?" My voice trembles and I purse my lips. Why the hell am I so nervous and excited at the same time?

"No." He looks me up and down. "I'll tie you up, blindfold you, and then I'll fuck you so hard, you won't have any choice but to obey me after."

Goosebumps flare over my skin and it's not only because I am wearing wet clothes. His filthy promises... It's decadent and completely wrong.

I tip up my chin, grab the bottom of my blouse and peel it off. His gaze drags to my breasts, down my navel, to my thighs. I toe off my sneakers. I unbutton my jeans, lower the zipper, then drag them down my legs to my ankles. I step out of them, along with my socks, then kick them aside. Goosebumps race across my skin. I straighten to meet that hot, hungry gaze of his. My throat closes and warmth suffuses my chest.

Shit, the way he's looking at me, like I am his favorite rock song and most hated melody, all rolled together.

"Take it all off," he commands.

I reach behind my back to unhook my bra and my breasts spill out. He inhales sharply. A flush steals up my throat. *Don't stop, don't, not now. Show him he doesn't scare you.* I drop the bra, then slide my fingers into the waistband of my panties. I slide them down, and his entire body stiffens. I kick aside my panties, straighten, and cry out to find he's stepped forward, into my space.

"D... Damian."

"Shh." He reaches out to push aside a tendril of hair that's stuck to my cheek. "So beautiful."

My knees tremble. I press them together to stop myself from losing my balance.

He drags his finger down the line of my throat, between my breasts, to my bellybutton. My toes curl. He pauses at the top of my pussy, and I shiver. An aching emptiness claws in my lower belly. It's always like this... Jesus, he only has to touch me and I am sure I am going to come apart or go right over the top, and he hasn't even touched me properly.

"Tell me what you want," he commands.

"No." My voice cracks and I swallow down the ball of nervousness that blocks my throat.

"You sure about that?" He sinks to his knees between my legs, fixes his mouth on my cunt.

I yell out, "Ohmygod!"

He grabs my butt, one large palm on each butt cheek, and squeezes.

A trembling sweeps up my back. "Oh," I gasp. "Oh!"

He plants his shoulders between my thighs so I don't have a choice but to part my legs, then he proceeds to lick me from my backhole to my clit, again and again. My entire body bucks; I dig my fingers into his hair and tug. He growls against my core, the vibration seeping into my center and mixing with the melting hunger inside that ebbs and flows and throbs in tandem to each suck of his mouth as he devours my pussy.

"Jesus," I throw my head back and pant.

He thrusts his tongue inside my channel and I moan.

He slides his finger in between my butt cheeks and fingers my puckered hole, and I whine. It's filthy, damn him. It's the part of me that I'll never get used to him touching, and yet... Oh, my... Shivers of pleasure trickle down my legs, up my spine, radiating out from where he's touching me, kissing me,

biting me.

"Damian," I howl as he tugs on my swollen clit. "Damian."

He rises to his feet, carrying me by the tops of my thighs as he swivels around and backs me into the closed bathroom door. He reaches between us to lower his zipper and I glance down in time to see his cock spring out. Thick, large, with a vein running up the side, the swollen head is angry and throbbing and "Holy crap!" I gasp, "A piercing? You have a P/A! How the hell didn't I notice that earlier?"

"Maybe you were too busy?" I hear the smirk in his voice and know I should retort, but bloody hell... *Not only is Big Daddy D well-endowed, but also the best part of him wears a crown.*

Umm, hello, back up. I snort.

"What are you thinking?" He frowns.

"Umm... Just that..." I reach down and tug on his P/A. He growls and his dick lengthens. I swear, it lengthens further.

"Oh, wow," I gasp, "That's, uh, bigger than I thought."

"But you knew that already."

"There's knowing and, uh, seeing." I swallow, "How the hell did that... that monster cock of yours fit inside of me."

"Only one way to find out." He wraps his massive fingers around his thick dick...which stills does nothing to make it seem less threatening. If anything, it brings home just how large this man is... Everywhere... I steal a glance at his feet, still in his motorcycle boots... Yep, definitely big.

He pumps himself once from base to head and precum oozes from the tip. I swallow, my throat seems to dry up, and my core pulses, warming, throbbing, aching... I groan, "Please, Damian," I beg, "fuck me."

A shudder seems to grip his shoulders, "When you say my name, it fucking ruins me, woman."

He begins to push into me, then groans, "Fucking condom. I don't have one."

"I... I am on birth control."

"And I am clean."

I set my lips "A bit too late to worry about that," I mumble, "considering."

"I want you to know that what we have is different."

"That's what they all say," I scoff.

"Flower," he growls, "look into my eyes."

I peer up into his face, "There, happy?" I tip up my chin.

"Not until you tell me that you believe me."

"What?" I swallow, "What do you want me to believe?"

"That I've never felt like this with anyone before. I've never felt this connected to any woman." He thrusts his face into mine, so I have no choice but to meet his eyes, "Not until you."

"Not even," I lick my lips, "not even Riley's mother?"

"Not even her."

There's no hesitation in his tone, his gaze direct. The expression on his features, one of sincerity. Holy shit, he actually means it.

"Damian," I whisper and his control seems to shatter. His jaw tics and a vein throbs at his temple, then he pushes his hips forward and buries himself inside of me in one single thrust, and I scream again. *Ohmygod*, the thickness, that heaviness between my legs, it's like being impaled.

"Damian," I gasp again.

He grits his teeth; sweat beads his brow. He slams his big palm into the door by my side and I swear the entire barrier shudders. He's bigger, brawnier, than any man I've ever known... Than anyone I've ever met... Likely, he isn't aware of his own strength.

He draws in a breath and his chest expands, his shoulders still clad in his leather jacket seem to grow bigger, if that were possible.

Reaching up, I cup his cheek, "Why the hell do I feel so much for you?"

"The same reason I do?" He glares into my eyes. Anger rolls deep in their depths, and frustration and something else—the same confusion that's haunted me since I set eyes on him. And does that make it worse? Or better? God knows...

Except, something inside of me empathizes with him. "I know," I whisper, "it's not easy."

"Tell me about it." He chuckles, then tilts his hips and slips further inside my channel. A groan rumbles up his chest, "You're so tight, Flower."

"Oh." A trembling shudders out from the point where his massive cock disappears inside my aching pussy. "I thought you like to fuck hard," I mutter.

"I'm trying to be gentle."

"Who said I wanted gentle?"

"I don't want to hurt you," he insists.

"Too late." I slide my palm around his nape and tug until his face is right above mine. "I very much want to hurt you." I bury my teeth in his lower lip.

29

Damian

What the fuck? The coppery taste of blood fills my mouth, pain shivers down my spine, my dick lengthens, and my thigh muscles bunch. "Fuck," I snarl, "you're crazy, woman."

"*You* make me crazy," she replies against my mouth. She licks my wounded lip, swallows down my blood, and all my senses hone in on her.

My vision narrows, and a pulse throbs at my temples, across my eyelids even in my balls. "You've done it now," I grit out through clenched teeth. I shrug out of my jacket, suddenly burning up.

"Ooh," she bats her eyelids, "I'm soooo scared, I'm—" She huffs as I kick my hips forward and drive into her, burying myself to the hilt. She hits her head back against the door, "It's too much, too hard, too large, too everything —"

"Quiet," I order and she presses her lips together.

"Look at me when I fuck you," I growl, and color smears her cheeks. "Shit, you love it when I talk dirty, don't you?"

"What?" she squeaks, then lowers her chin. "Of course, not. What gave you—?"

I pull out, then thrust into her again and she moans, "Ohmygod."

"I'm right here," I answer.

"Jesus, you've got such a big ego."

"You're welcome, sugar."

She peers at me from under hooded eyelashes, "If you weren't so good at

fucking, I'd take exception to your corny dialogue."

"You're welcome, again." I laugh. "And it's not corny, when it's the truth."

"Why you—"

I piston my hips, and sink into her with such force that the entire door shakes. She gasps, digs her heels into my sides, grabs onto my shoulders with such impact that my nerve-endings pop in response. "Shit." The pressure at the base of my spine builds in intensity, my vision tunnels, my cock lengthens... "Fuck," I growl. "Come with me, Flower." I thrust into her, my balls slapping against her inner thighs. "Come all over my dick," I command, and she shatters.

She cries out, arches her back, thrusts her breasts up and into my chest, squeezes her pussy around my cock and shudders as her climax crashes through her.

I watch her face, her flushed features, the beautiful column of her throat, the beads of water that dot her shoulders, the creaminess of her breasts, the swollen tips of her nipples. Leaning down, I suck on one and she shivers. I raise my face to hers. "Julia," I whisper, "open your eyes."

She flutters her eyelids, gazes at me with pupils so dilated that my groin hardens. I plunge into her again and again as my climax crashes over me. I erupt inside of her, shooting long streams of my release. She leans up, presses her lips to mine, offering herself up—her sweetness, her vitality, her life—and I know then, I can't see her again. I need to leave, need to get away from her before this...thing spirals out of control. Before I allow her further into my heart, my soul...my home... Introduce her to my daughter. *No, I can't do that.*

I pull out of her.

"What's wrong?" She scowls.

"I need to leave."

She stares at me, "What? You don't mean it."

I lower her to the floor; her knees seem to give way. I reach for her, then pull back. If I touch her, I am gone. I need to put distance between us. Fast. Reaching down, I grab my jacket and pull it on.

"You can stay here for as long as you want."

"I... I don't understand."

"The arrangement is over."

"So, do I get to meet your daughter?"

I look her up and down, "What makes you think you are worthy of meeting her?"

Her features crumple, "Asshole."

"Yep." I attempt to smirk, but it feels plastic. "That's me. You didn't think that I wanted more than to take your arse and your pussy... Couldn't get to your mouth, but..." I shrug, "not that it's much of a loss, considering you aren't even a great kisser." *What the fuck was that? What is wrong with me?*

She gapes. "Are you..." She shakes her head, "You're a horrible, horrible man."

I swallow the words I want to say and nod. "What-fucking-ever." I jerk my chin, "Would you mind getting out of my way? I need to get home to my daughter."

30

Julia

What the hell happened there? One second, he's inside me; the next, he can't get away from me fast enough. I sink down against the closed bathroom door. He'd fucked me, and I swear, it seemed to mean something to him. He'd said as much. Maybe too much, considering he'd gone and insulted me almost as if it were in self-defense, like he was getting in too deep and wanted a way out.

He'd lashed out at me in that typical Damian fashion, where he was trying his best to hurt me. And he'd succeeded. My lower lip trembles. Bastard had hit me where it hurt. How dare he? I fist my fingers at my sides. How dare he leave without a second glance? Was it that easy for him? Like I was another notch on his bedpost that he could fuck and leave?

But hold on, he said he hadn't felt like this with anyone before. That he'd never felt this connected to any woman as he had with me... Not even Riley's mother. And I believe him when he says that.

Is that why he's running from me?

From what I've pieced together, he'd dropped out of sight after Riley's mother left him— Again, how the hell had he kept that out of the papers? That's what must have prompted him to take a sabbatical, and focus on taking care of his daughter. And that had been a year ago. A year since he'd withdrawn from his gigs, to focus on bringing up his kid, to the extent that he doesn't even want a nanny involved. I chew on my lower lip.

Apparently, he is done with me, and my orgasms too... Hell, now *that*, I

am going to miss. How he'd glare at me and the tingles would start in my belly, how he'd touch me and my nerve-endings would fire in hyperdrive, how he'd kiss me and I'd instantly grow wet, how he'd lick my pussy and... Oh hell. I bury my face in my hands. Why the hell did everything have to turn out to be so, so complicated? Why the hell had I accepted his crazy-ass proposition in the first place? What is wrong with me?

Money is important, all right, but it has never featured high on my priorities... I mean, I could definitely do with that infusion of cash to pay off the debts I racked up while traveling. Not to mention that I wanted the money to ease the retirement years of my mother. But hell!

I'd been swayed by the cash and screwed up the chance I had to really understand this man. Face it... He'd ensured that the money thing stood between us... He'd wanted our relationship to be transactional. I'd proposed a one-night stand; he'd turned it into something more. On the one hand, he'd wanted to spend more time with me, but on the other hand, he'd reduced it to something financial.

In fact, he'd gone to great lengths to ensure that he kept me out of his life, out of his house, out of his head and heart. And despite all that, he'd sensed the deepening connection between us. Damn it, when we fuck, it is more real, more primal, more electric than any experience in my life. And he senses it. He has to. No wonder he is running scared. Coward.

No wonder he'd walked out on me without a second glance. He'd had an escape clause all along—the fucking money. This was all an arrangement after all, something he could pull out of at any time. Just another business decision.

And hell... Those orgasms he'd wrenched from me? I squeeze my thighs together... No one else could give me those. He's spoiled me for any other man. After the complex, growling, broodiness that is Daddy Savage... No way, can I be happy with anyone else. Which means, I am, basically, fucked. Gah! My throat hurts and my head pounds. What the hell am I going to do now, huh? A shiver runs across my skin, and if I stay here naked, I'll freeze to death. I rise to my feet, stagger over to the shower.

Twenty minutes and a whole lot of hot water and tears later, I feel somewhat human. My head still hurts and my nose is stuffy, and my eyes must be swollen, but fine... At least I'm warmer. A chill grips me and I press my fingers together.

Okay, not really. Nothing compares to the warmth that comes off of

Damian's big body. That man is a bloody furnace, and there is so much of him to go around, I could plaster every centimeter of my body to every centimeter of his and there'd be enough of his body left for me to press myself to his body twice over. *OMG, what am I thinking?* I have certifiably gone mad. My imagination is clearly in overdrive, or else I have OD'd on Damian enough that he's gone to my head and lodged himself under my skin, in between my legs, in my heart... *No, not there. Never there.*

I turn off the shower, wrap myself in one of the long, fluffy towels I find on one of the shelves and step out. That's when I catch sight of a bathrobe laid out on the bed. What the—?

So, he left me aching and angry, and yet, he'd stopped to ensure I had something to wear when I came out. How strange? I walk to the bathrobe, push my arms into the sleeves, and his scent teases my nostrils. My toes curl, my belly flip flops, and it feels like I am wrapped up in the man all over again. The pressure builds at the backs of my eyes again. *No, no, no, goddammit, this is not happening. I am not going to cry over him.*

Nope. I march back into the bathroom, notice that my wet clothes are gone. Huh? I head across to the kitchen, find that the washer-dryer is running. What the—? He ran a wash for me? And—the scent of coffee draws my gaze to the percolator, the coffee ready to be poured from the jug. He made coffee so I could have something hot to drink? Next to it is a covered plate, with a note.

Heat and eat this.

I trace the bold cursive and it blurs in front of my eyes. Why are you doing this Damian? You've been such a bastard to me, and yet, you want to take care of me. You don't want to introduce me to your kid, and yet, you treat me like I'm special. In fact, that's what you told me right before you decided to cut and run. You're a complete mystery, Big D... One I am going to solve.

The dryer beeps, and I retrieve my clothes from the washing machine, only to find them entangled with his. Guess he'd changed before he'd left? Of course he wouldn't have wanted to drive back in wet clothes, not to mention he had extra clothes in the closet.

I disentangle my blouse from his jeans, my jeans from his shirt. If only it were that easy to disentangle my life from his? Tears prick my eyes and I brush them away. Damn it, now I am getting sentimental about laundry?

Once dressed, I pour out some of the coffee, and carry it, along with one of the muffins that I'd heated up. I walk toward the worktable with the clay molding tools laid out. I set my coffee down, reach for the armature, the framework on which the sculpture can be molded. It's not what I'd normally use, but it will do. I reach for the ready-made moist clay in the tub on the side. Again, not what I'm accustomed to using, but hell, if it isn't of the finest quality money can buy. The man had certainly not spared any expense.

I walk over, pluck my phone from my bag, and pull up my favorite music mix. The haunting tunes of Damian's first album fill the air. Much better.

I pick up a fistful of the clay, shape it in between my palms, then get to work. I must lose track of time, for the next thing I know, I hear the door opening. I whirl around, to find Karina stepping through. Followed by Isla.

"What the hell?" My voice cracks. Shit, how many hours have I been here? My throat is scratchy, the way it gets when I am too focused on my art. "How did you two get here?"

Karina exchanges a look with Isla, then both walk over to me. "What are you working on?" Karina asks.

"Umm, it's not ready yet." I glance around, then grab the folded burlap cloth, also part of the supplies he provided. Goddamn it, did the man have to be so perfect? Only when it comes to being thoughtful in things outside of sex, that is... Okay, hold on, even during sex, he'd made sure to take care of my needs, made sure that I'd orgasmed... Hell, my life had become one long, hot, sweaty climax since I'd run into him... Except when he had commanded me not to come, of course. *Okay, stop. Don't think of him anymore.*

I place myself between the unfinished sculpture and my friends.

"Well?" I frown. "What are you doing here? How did you find me and—" I scowl at Karina, "How did you get a key to the apartment?"

She stares back at me.

"Right." I blow out a breath, "You're the security expert for the Seven so, of course, you have access to their properties."

"You don't have to sound so upset about it." She half smiles. "I haven't been inside his bedroom."

Right.

I dig my fingers through my now dry hair, then realize I must've gotten the clay in my hair. Crap. I glower at Karina's perfectly coiffed hairstyle. "Do you always have to look so perfect?" I glance out of the window at the pinkening skies, "So early in the morning?"

"I'm far from it." She peers into my face, then holds out the bag she's been carrying. "It's for you."

"What's that?"

"Open it."

I wash my hands in the bowl of water on the table and dry them, then take the bag from her, peek inside. "Oh!" I glance up at her. "You brought me clothes?"

She tilts her head, "He was most insistent and very detailed about what to get you."

"You mean... D... Damian?"

"Who else?"

I glance down at my clay flecked garments. Damn it, Damian, how the hell do you think of everything? No one else has taken such good care of me before. Why the hell do you have to make it so difficult for me to hate you?

Karina's features soften, "Why don't you freshen up and join us? And then we can talk?"

Ten minutes later, after a quick shower and wearing a fresh pair of jeans and a T-shirt that is a perfect fit—I wouldn't have expected less from him—I join the two girls in the kitchen.

Isla adds some chopped herbs to the frying pan.

"You're making breakfast?"

"I found the ingredients for a quick omelet." Isla divides the contents of the pan onto three plates and sets them on the counter. She follows up by placing a fresh croissant on each plate. "We picked these up on the way over, but, the entire kitchen is stocked, enough that if you planned to stay here, well," she glances at me, "you wouldn't need to leave this place for a week... Maybe longer."

"Oh." I slip onto one of the bar stools, reach for the cup of coffee that Karina hands me.

Isla raises her cup, "Salut, babe."

I clink my cup with Karina's, take a sip, and set it down. Then cut into the omelet. The flavors burst on my tongue and I blink. "Wow," I take another bite, "this omelet is—"

"Delicious." Karina nods.

I turn to Isla, and she raises her hands, "Not that I am not a good cook, but it's the ingredients. Everything is farm fresh, organic, top of the line."

"I am sure it is." Everything Damian owns is top-notch and he's choosing

to share it with me. I set down my fork. "This doesn't make sense," I groan.

"What? The omelet?" Karina asks.

"No." I draw in a breath, then lower the glass. "Damian," I exclaim. "He...he's killing me with his consideration."

"Huh?" Isla exchanges a glance with Karina. "So, what's bothering you, babe?"

"Everything." I stab my fork into the omelet and play with it. "Nothing. I don't know." I drop the fork with a clatter.

"Eat first." Karina tucks into her own food. "Bitching about men is best done on a full stomach."

"Yeah." I half smile, then sample the croissant. "This is good," I tell them. "Thank you for bringing this. And thank you for making breakfast, Isla."

"Not a problem at all, when you're cooking in a kitchen that induces an orgasm by just being in the space," she retorts.

I choke, then reach for my coffee, and take a healthy sip.

Karina pats me on my back, "You okay?"

"Yeah."

"Something I said?" Isla watches me with a curious gaze.

"Orgasms," I mumble. "If there's one thing the man got right, it was that."

"I knew it!" Isla giggles. "How many O's have you had since you got together with that panty-melting hunk?"

"Too many to keep track of," I grumble.

"Ooh." Isla fans herself, "That's sooo hot; don't stop. At least, I can live vicariously."

"Get your own." I frown.

"I do, babe." She nods, "Ben keeps me happy."

"Ben?" Karina asks. "You have a boyfriend?"

"My vibrator."

I choke again, this time on the gasp that has me inhaling the spit in my mouth. Jeez. "Sorry," I finally manage to rasp.

"You named your vibrator?" Karina chuckles, "Good move."

"It makes the experience much more intimate, you get me?" Isla laughs.

"Oh, one dick's as good as another. The name only gets in the way," Karina jokes.

"Unless the name is Arpad, huh?"

Karina jerks her head in my direction, her features taking on a stunned expression, then she nods. "You're perceptive."

"You sound surprised." I take in her features. "Ah," I nod, "I see."

"What?" She tilts her head.

"You thought I was the nanny, so clearly, someone who doesn't have much ambition, or an IQ, for that matter. And then, of course, I'm screwing Damian so, well, how could I possibly be anything other than a bimbo, huh?"

Karina winces, sips from her cup, "Guilty."

"You're not denying it?" I blink.

"Why should I?" She glances between me and Isla, "I admit, that's what I thought about both of you, actually."

Isla gapes, "Gee, thanks." She frowns, "Straight talk is okay and all, but thank God, I don't suffer from that affliction."

Karina does a slow blink, then laughs, "I like both of you."

"Thanks," I mutter.

"No, really." She glances between us again. "I admit, I had you girls down as... Well, there's a type who hang around the Seven. You have to understand, in my line of business I see a lot of things—"

"You mean, thanks to the security agency you run?"

She nods. "It's a man's business I am in. I mean, what isn't? But this one, particularly. And then, having to make a success of it... I admit, it's probably increased my testosterone levels to a degree even I am not comfortable with."

I frown at her. *What a weird remark. Why would she say that?* "You... you want a child, don't you?"

Karina's shoulders jerk.

Isla makes a noise in her throat.

"I'm sorry," I mumble. "Guess the events of the last few days have me on edge... It's sent my empathy radar into overdrive, and I'm an artist... And a nanny... Means I sense things..." I shut up. "I didn't mean to pry."

"No, it's okay." Karina's lips twist. "I do want a child, more than anything, but there is no man on the horizon, so..."

"IVF?" Isla ventures.

"Maybe." She shakes her head, "I am trying to work up my courage toward it." She half laughs, "Seems I am more old-fashioned than I thought when it comes to these things."

Tell me about it. I thought I'd be alright with the strange association Damian had proposed. Turns out, I need more. I want to see him more often, spend more time with him, get to know what makes him tick, how he is when he sleeps, when he is composing, when he's taking care of his child.

"I need to get inside Damian's house."

Karina stares at me. "You know I can't help you with that."

"You can." I nod. What has gotten into me? I must have absorbed some of Damian's authoritarian attitude, for I hold Karina's gaze. "You believe in the sisterhood, don't you?"

She frowns. "I wouldn't have come this far if it weren't for my mother, and the women along the way who helped me," she says slowly.

"Take one for the team." I tilt my head.

"I can't put my professional reputation at risk. If word got out..."

"We'd never tell anyone." Isla mimes zipping her mouth and throwing away her key.

Karina folds her arms over her chest. "I can't believe you'd ask me to do that."

"What were Damian's instructions to you?"

"Instructions?"

"Yeah, yeah." I shake my hair from my face, "What did he tell you with respect to me? What is it that forced you to become friendly with me?"

Karina's face flushes. "I admit I befriended you because Damian wanted me to keep an eye on you, but honestly, the more I got to know the two of you, the more I liked both of you."

"We are highly likable." Isla laughs. That woman, she is as friendly as a puppy. She's already forgiven Karina for starting out this relationship with us under false pretexts. Me? I'm not giving in that easily.

"What else did he tell you to do?" I hold Karina's gaze.

She scrutinizes my features, "He told me to watch out for you, protect you —"

I nod, "Either you tell me how to get into his place, or I'll have to break in, and the walls around his place are really high."

"Hmm."

"I may hurt myself." I stab my tongue into my cheek. "And that would make Damian unhappy."

"Very unhappy," she agrees.

"So...?" I hold my breath.

"So," she raises her cup, "at least, let's finish breakfast first?"

I clink my cup against hers, "Done."

Several minutes later, she sets her coffee cup down next to her empty plate and leans forward, "Listen carefully..."

29th Dec
Damian

After leaving Julia, I'd called Meredith and asked her to stay the night. She'd agreed. Then I'd gone on a ride to clear my head. Turns out, that wasn't as easy as expected. My thoughts were filled with Julia, what she had come to mean to me, how I want her in my life... All of which is impossible.

By the time I'd made it home, it was dawn.

I'd jumped into the shower and changed into clean clothes, then walked into the living room to find Meredith waiting for me.

"You can't do this on your own, Damian." She folds her arms across her chest.

"I don't need anyone's help." I scowl at her as I pace the floor. Some of Riley's toys are scattered on the carpet. I pick them up and drop them into the box next to the settee. The pink hairband that she'd worn catches my attention. I pick it up, take in the shiny unicorn on it. "Girl's obsessed with fairytales and rainbows," I mutter. "And that damn Frozen." I shake my head, "I can't get the lyrics of the song out of my mind." I turn to Meredith, "Do you think Riley would enjoy the books as much as the movies?"

"Damian." She frowns.

I hum the tune from the theme song, then drag my fingers through my hair. "See?" I tilt my head. "That goddam tune is burned into my brain."

"Maybe you should try your hand at writing songs for kids."

I study her expression, "You think so?"

"You're a born father, Damian."

I swallow the ball of emotions in my throat. "You're being too kind."

"It's the only time you act human, when you talk about Riley."

I squeeze my eyes shut. "It's the only time I feel human." I shuffle my feet, "That's why, you see, I can't allow anyone else in. I can't let anyone else help me with this...situation I am in."

"You're going to have to give in and get help eventually. You can't go on like this."

"You're right," I thrust out my chest, "but surely, I am allowed to treat her as my little girl for a while longer."

Meredith's forehead wrinkles; she opens her mouth as if to say something then firms her lips. "I'll call later to check, in case you need my help with anything."

"Thanks." I walk toward her and kiss her cheek. "Thanks for everything. I don't know how I could have managed without you."

She pats my shoulder, scrutinizes my face. "Damian." Her forehead furrows, "You know how much I care about you. You know the Seven of you are the closest I have to family?"

I nod.

"If I hadn't come across you kids when you were picking fights on the streets after the incident, I don't know what I'd have done with my life."

"Meredith," I grip her arm, "you've been a quasi-mother to all of us."

"I could never have my own children, but being with all of you has meant I haven't miss that part of my life as much as I would have."

I nod.

"And then there's Peter."

"Peter?" I frown, "Sterling's chauffeur?"

She nods, a gleam in her eyes.

"What does he have to do with...?" I stare. "Jesus, Meredith," I mutter. "You mean, you and Peter?"

"Don't tell me the lot of you didn't guess?"

"Hmm, well." My neck heats. "It's not like we talk about you that way, and besides, Peter...uh..."

"He's protective about you lot, too, huh?"

"Yeah," I nod. "Still, I mean," I shuffle my feet, not knowing what to say. It's a bit like finding out that your parents have sex. I mean, they do and that's how we were born, but somehow you want to pretend that they are these perfect creatures with no wants or passion or— "Hell," I roll my shoulders, "why are you telling me this, now?"

"Just so you know that we all have our secrets, Damian."

"Right." I tip my chin up and glance past her.

"And we all need help with our demons."

I scowl, "Why don't you tell me what's on your mind?"

"Julia." She stares up at me.

I meet her gaze. "Julia?"

"Let her in, Damian. She wants to be part of your life. She can help, if you let her."

"I don't need anyone's help." I step back, "This is something I need to deal with myself."

"Do you, though?" She reaches up and pats my cheek, "Don't delay until

it's too late. Don't let Julia get away."

I blow out a breath. "Thanks for the advice."

"Now, I feel like I've been put in my place."

I stare at her in horror. "Meredith, no. You know you are much more than an assistant to all of us."

"Of course, I do." She chuckles, "And trust me, I won't take any lip from any of you boys, either."

"You're tough," I grumble.

"No shit." She laughs, then turns to leave. I wait in the doorway until she's driven off and the gates have closed behind her, then head inside.

Later that evening, after putting Riley to bed, I make my way toward the study at the far end of the ground floor. I check my phone to make sure my app is open and tuned into Riley's bedroom. Placing my phone upright on the table next to the sofa so I can see the screen as well as access it, I pour myself a whiskey, then sink down into the comfortable settee and grab my guitar.

I begin to strum the guitar, composing the song in my head.

Whisper your kisses in my ear

My lips on yours

As you fall apart all over my cock

As lust swells your eyelids

And your pussy weeps

As you come so prettily, I am sure that I will never feel as alive again...

I draw in a breath. Shit, that's bloody emo, and hot... And what the hell am I writing now? A lust song, an ode dedicated to the woman who's turned my life upside down. Who I need to stop seeing, stop thinking of, before she turns me into a bumbling idiot who'd give up his life for one more touch, one more fuck, one more time to sink my cock inside of her. "Bloody hell." I toss the guitar aside, rise to my feet and head for the snifter of whiskey, when the app on my phone beeps. I top up the liquid in my tumbler, head for the phone and snatch it up. The security app has a notification. I swipe to it and the image of a woman opening the front door and walking in fills the screen.

"What the—?" I take in the familiar tilt of her chin, her slender shoulders, the curved hips, the dark hair piled on top of her head. *What are you doing here, Flower, hmm?*

I track her progress across the living room, and into the hallway. She glances right, before turning the other way. She heads toward the study.

I glance up as she walks in.
"Hello, Damian."

31

Julia

Of course, I expected him to know when I had walked into his house. Just because Karina had given me the passwords to his gates and to his front door didn't mean Damian was going to be unaware of when I'd entered his domain. I fully expected him to be waiting for me... I hadn't expected the impact of how it would be to see Daddy D, in his own surroundings, in a pair of sweats and a thin black T that hugs his torso and clings to his abs and shows off the angle of his beautiful shoulders...

OMFG. A bead of sweat runs down my back. I glance around, taking in the cozy surroundings, the faded leather of the settee, the bookshelves, the drum set in a corner, a piano at the other side, with the thick rug in front of the fire that begs to be used and caressed. Like me...my skin, my heart. I rub the skin over my chest.

"You okay?" He frowns.

No.

No.

I nod, gesture to the space. "This is not what I expected."

"I didn't expect to see you here, either."

"Umm." I shuffle my feet. "Me, neither."

"And yet, here you are."

"You don't seem too surprised."

"I'm not." He frowns. "I suppose it had to happen."

"What?"

"You deciding to take a tour of my place, wanting to see how I live, wanting to get close to me. It's normal."

"It is?" I frown.

"Uh-huh." He rubs his chest and his biceps bulge. The sleeve of his T-shirt pulls tight against his muscles. Whoa! Surely, the cloth's gonna snap any second? I swallow.

"It's my overpowering charisma, my larger-than-life personality, my magnetism." He tilts his head. "Admit it, you had to see me again."

"I... I." I take a step inside, and stare at the rat's-ass of a man, every inch a rock star, with the tattoos that peek over the collar of his T-shirt. How weird. He's been inside me, and I haven't even seen him completely naked.

"What are you hiding?" I frown.

His features freeze, "What do you mean?"

"I've never seen you without your clothes." I take in the inverted triangle of his torso, the tapered waist, the corded thighs that stretch the material of his sweats, his feet...which are naked. My throat dries. His beautiful toes, large feet...and wide, with toenails that are blunt cut. I can't take my gaze off of them... My thighs clench. Jesus. Clearly, I have a foot fetish.

"I began sculpting you from memory."

"Excuse me?"

I jerk my chin up to meet his gaze, "I began working on your bust." *Why am I telling him that? Is it to try to catch him off balance? Is it to try to get my brain, which is stuck in some kind of Damian Savage sex-filled haze, to kickstart and function again?*

"You didn't need me to pose then?"

"Your features are etched in my mind." Heat sears my cheeks, but I don't look away. *What the hell am I trying to do here?* Fessing up like that? Walking in here without a plan seemed all brave, but this, faced with six-foot four-inches of lethal alpha male, in his den... On his turf, where he knows the rules and I don't...? OMG... How stupid can I get? I take a step back; he shakes his head.

I angle my body toward the exit; he holds up his phone. He taps a finger on the screen and the door to the study begins to swing closed.

I yelp, leap toward it...too late. The door shuts with a snick. There's a click. Oh no, he locked it. He did. I know he did. I move forward, more out of habit than anything, intent on testing the handle to check if he did lock it, then stop. I won't give him that satisfaction. I will not repeat the stupid scene

from earlier when I had tried to open the bloody door and had to give up and turned around to— Heat envelops me from behind. I gasp.

He tugs on my backpack and I allow him to lower it to the ground.

"Unbutton your coat," he orders.

I pause.

"Do it," he snaps, and all thoughts drain from my head. I reach for my coat, release the buttons. He reaches around, to pull the lapels aside. He lowers the coat down my arms, then eases it off of me.

I should feel cooler without it. Instead, the heat of his body cocoons me, thrums across my skin.

He pulls on the hair that I'd piled on top of my head, and the strands come loose and slither down and around my shoulders. Goosebumps pop on my skin. How can I be hot and cold at the same time? I curl my fingers into fists so he can't see how much I am trembling.

"Look at me," he whispers.

I shake my head.

"Please," he urges and I freeze. OMG, Damian... Asking me for something? That's a first, and somehow, so apt, in the quietness of this space, with the crackling of the wood fire in the background and the heat of his big body that burns me deeper than any flames ever could. It feels right to turn around, raise my gaze to meet his. Cerulean, bright, blazing brighter than the fire I have seen in any kiln. What a strange thought. I bite the inside of my cheek.

"You're amused about something?" His beautiful lips kick up in a smile that mirrors the rightness I feel inside. Shit, what's wrong with me?

"Your daughter," I venture. "Is she asleep?"

"She's fine where she is."

His features take on that slightly remote expression I am coming to recognize, the one that signals he's put up a barrier between himself and the world, the one which is as clear as a sign that says 'fuck the hell off.' What the hell? Why did I have to go and blurt that out right then?

I glance at the settee and spot a few sheafs of paper with his writing on it. "You've been composing?"

He glances down at the pages, then sweeps them up and sets them aside. "They're not for public consumption."

"I'm hardly a member of the 'public,'" I make air quotes with my fingers. "Please?" I wheedle, "I want to read the lyrics."

"Not happening." He ambles toward the piano.

I reach for the pages on the settee and he clicks his tongue, "Don't even think about it."

I pout. Does he have eyes at the back of his head or what?

"Considering it was my orgasms that fueled the words,"—seriously can you believe this?—"you could at least let me take a peek."

"I explicitly forbid you from looking at the lyrics," he snaps.

And now, I definitely need to read them.

He saunters over to seat himself in front of the piano. That's when I bend down, grab the papers and glance over them quickly. Oh, wow! These are good...different...but so good. Better than anything I've heard him sing before.

He begins to play a few notes, and I place the pages back, then walk over to him. "Is that the tune for the new lyrics?" I ask.

"Maybe." He continues to play the instrument with those long thick fingers which shouldn't seem so at home at the keyboard, but they do. Gah! He can play me anyway, too. I shake my head, and clearly, his influence is rubbing off if I can't stop the word play on my own thoughts. I take in his features, his tense shoulder muscles, his spine which is ramrod straight. I reach him, place my hands on his shoulders and begin to massage. He stops playing. I dig my fingers into the knots, begin to ease them out. He grunts.

I drag my knuckles down either side of his spine, in the hollows between his vertebrae, and he heaves out a sigh. "You're good at this."

"Comes from all the clay I've molded," I say, only half-jokingly.

"Oh, baby, how I'd like to mold you," he smirks.

"Ugh," I frown, "you can't resist the bad puns, can you?"

"Do you blame me?" He chuckles. "When I find an opening, I take it."

Speaking of taking openings... *Nooooo, stop, right there. Just because alphahole here likes to twist meanings out of words where none existed before, doesn't mean I should, huh?*

"I think you use it more as a diversion," I retort.

"Oh?" He lowers this chin, "How's that?"

"You're an asshole, that's for sure, but there's something inside of you, some mystery, something hurt maybe, something that keeps pulling me back even though I try my best to stay away."

"Like the Pied Piper?"

"You calling me a rat?" I bristle.

"In the story, the Pied Piper got all of the children to follow him too. Maybe *you're* the Pied Piper. But I was thinking of you more like a little mouse who has run amuck and turned my life upside down. You know, if you give a mouse a cookie, she'll never leave. No matter what you do to make her."

I slap his shoulder, "Seriously, you're horrible."

He chuckles. "Comes with the territory."

"How is it to be a rock star, with so many people eager to find out everything about you?"

"First," he holds up a finger, "I am a reclusive rock star and second, that's why I am not on social media anymore."

"That's brave of you."

He folds his arms over his chest, "Are you being sarcastic?"

"No, really. How many celebrities would take that step, and risk alienating their followers?"

He drops his arms and rotates his shoulders, "You means the ones I still have left?" He chuckles wryly. "For a while, I felt unconnected to the songs I was creating. I hoped that if I disengaged with the world it would help me to look inward more, connect with my imagination once again." He laughs, "I can't believe I admitted to that aloud."

He rakes his fingers through his hair. "Also, this way, I don't have the incessant pressure to engage with my fans. I don't have to justify what I say or do. I don't have to worry about if I am pleasing people or not."

"And when you are on stage, what then?"

"Then I am ready to entertain, to be that other person. Still me, but different."

"I'd love to see you perform live."

"That's not happening for a while."

"No," I protest, "I've seen videos of your shows and you are incredible."

"It doesn't interest me anymore."

"Then what does?"

He looks over his shoulder, scrutinizes my features. He half turns, pushes back the bench, then wraps an arm around me and pulls me around to stand between his legs.

"You do."

"Oh." I stare at his gorgeous features—the high cheekbones, the hooked nose, that mean upper lip, the fat lower lip that I want to chew on.

"Like what you see?" He smirks.

"Very much." I swallow.

Heat from his big body pours over me, surrounds me, the strength of his dominance pushing down on my shoulders, holding me immobile as he urges me closer, closer.

"Open your mouth," his voice lowers to a hush and goosebumps pop on my skin.

I part my lips. Just like that, he leans up, slides his forefinger over my tongue and I suck on it.

His blue eyes deepen to that cerulean that sends a thrill right up my spine. I bite down on his digit and his lips twist. "Such a hellion."

He pulls his finger from my mouth, drags it down my chin, my throat, the valley between my breasts. He pinches my nipple and I yelp.

"Who does this belong to?"

You, it belongs to you, is what I want to say. Hah! As if I am going to make it that easy for him. "Who do you think?" I ask.

He peels back his lips, slaps my breast.

I jump, "What the—"

"Who do your breasts belong to?"

"Not to—"

He slaps my left breast, then my right, my left again.

I yell, "Stop, stop, you asshole."

"Alphahole," he snaps. "Tired of correcting you, tired of having you challenge me, go toe-to-toe with me. You think you can defy me and win, you thought wrong."

"Fuck off," I choke.

"Wrong answer."

He cups both of his big palms around my breasts and squeezes, like I am a shapeless mass of clay for him to mold, or a bust that he is sculpting. Okay, so it is my bust that he's massaging and kneading and pummeling like he can't keep his hands off of me. And I don't want him to stop touching me. I need him to stop teasing me, and fuck me, only I am not going to ask for it. Ever.

"You don't scare me," I blurt.

"Oh?"

I lower my chin, stare at his beautiful, cruel, mean features. "You can't make me submit."

He bares his teeth and I shiver.

Jesus, what the hell is wrong with me? I'd come here, wanting to push him over the edge... I hadn't realized that it's me that I'm challenging, that I want him to take me, show me how it could be when I'm not thinking too much, simply taking what is in front of me. "Do your worst," I mutter.

He releases my breasts, only to grab my hips, spin around, and hoist me up and onto the wooden top of the piano.

I stare down at him, at his cold features, the stern lips, how he frowns at me as if trying to solve a puzzle. "Why are you here?"

"Why do you think?"

"I think you're trying to provoke me."

"Am I succeeding?"

"Maybe." He tilts his head. "Maybe not." He reaches forward, cups his big palm around my pussy. "Maybe you want to push me until I take you, so you can pretend you didn't really want it."

"I don't."

He laughs, "Your presence here says otherwise."

I swallow. *Can't refute that, can I?*

I glance away and he chuckles, "Thought so. Tell me what you want me to do and I will."

I bite down on the inside of my cheek.

"And if I don't?" I mumble.

"Then," he pushes back the piano bench and rises to his feet, "I am leaving; you can see yourself out."

He angles to go and I swoop down and grab his arm, "Please."

He glances down at my hand then back at me. I release my hold.

He glares at me, and my throat closes. He holds my gaze with his, raises an eyebrow, and I know then, if I let him leave now, he'll never see me again. He'll ignore me, walk away from me, never allow me to get close to him again, and damn it, I want it, just once. I want to feel the full power of his presence, the weight of his body on mine, his tongue dancing over mine, his fingers entwined with mine, his dick inside my pussy as he rams into me over and over again.

"Please," I swallow, "ruin me."

Damian

"You don't mean that."

"I... I do." She tips up her chin.

"You don't know what you're asking for."

"Don't I?" Her lips twist. She begins to unbutton her shirt.

I shake my head. "Stop."

"Make me." She reaches for the next button.

I swoop down and grab her wrist. "Told you not to do it."

"Oh?" She smiles wider. "What are you gonna do about it?"

I draw in a breath. She's teasing me, testing me, and I shouldn't give in to the allure of her body, her scent, the way she peers up at me from under heavy eyelids, then slides her palm between her jeans-clad thighs, "Don't you want this Damian?"

"Don't play with me," I warn.

She throws back her head, laughs in a sultry husky tone.

A ripple of lust pulses down my spine.

She brings her other hand up to cup her breast, "And this...? I know how much you'd like to fuck my tits, Daddy D."

"Daddy D?"

She blinks, "Ignore I...said that."

"No." I lean into her. She pushes her shoulders down into the lid of the piano. Her foot hits one of the piano keys and the sound rings out through the space. The vibrations roll up from the surface against where my thighs meet

the slip of the keyboard. My groin hardens.

Hell, music and this woman. Together, they are a lethal combination. One I can't live without, the other I can't have enough of. One is my livelihood... The other my...life? What am I thinking?

She's only someone I find appealing, someone I need to fuck out of my system, someone whose orgasms unlock the dead place inside of me where I have hidden for so long. She brings me alive, and that's not a bad thing, considering I am finally able to write. She's the key to my muse and I need to keep her in that space. As long as I don't let her intrude into my everyday life, I'll be fine.

"So, you like role play?" I ask.

"I didn't say that."

"Don't lie," I snap at her.

She winces. "I... I'm not lying."

"Yes, you are." I lean over her, until my head is positioned right over hers. "Admit it."

"I... admit nothing," she whispers.

"Hmm." I lick her lips; she winces.

"Am I hurting you?" I peer into her eyes.

"No...no," she shakes her head.

"Then I need to rectify that."

"What—?"

I grab at the half-open fronts of her shirt and tug. The buttons pop off, she gasps, and her shirt gapes open in the front. I glance down at her beautiful tits that spill out from the top of her demi-bra. "So pretty." I pull the shirt apart, on either side of her, over her arms and hold her in place.

"D... Damian," she moans.

I stare down at the dark pink of her nipples visible through the almost transparent cloth. Hell, she's bloody gorgeous, so edible, a fucking sonnet that I need to memorize until I forget everything else. I bend down, close my mouth around one of the pebbled peaks.

She moans, the sound so hot, so needy, blood drains to my groin.

I bite down on her nipple and she yells, "Jesus."

"Not the name I want to hear," I growl, then turn my attention to her other breast. I tug on the nipple and she groans. "Oh..." she murmurs, "ohmygod."

"Try again." I release her shirt only to cup her tits, squeeze them together. I bury my face in the fragrant valley between her flesh, and her scent goes

straight to my head. My cock throbs, my balls hurt... What the hell is Flower doing to me? I've never been this close to losing control, to forgetting why I wanted to make her come in the first place. I raise my head peer into her face. "You're driving me crazy," I mutter. "I need to fuck you out of my system."

"What?"

I nod. "I need to make you come over and over again, store up enough of your orgasms to last me a lifetime, and then I won't need to see you again."

Her forehead scrunches and her gaze narrows, "So, I was right?"

I tilt my head.

"You really have this thing, that my orgasms help you write."

"It's worth a try."

"At least, admit it." Her green eyes blaze. "Give me recognition where it's due."

"Why should I?" I drawl, and it's not because I don't want to acknowledge the role she's begun to play in my creative process, it's just... I have a thing to see her pissed off. It's so much more fun when she sets her jaw, curls her fingers into fists, throws a punch at me. So sweet. As if she'll ever catch me off balance.

"Wanna fight me, huh?" I smirk.

"What I want to do is kick you in your balls." She strains against me, pulls up her knee. I lean down and into the 'V' between her legs, massage her breasts with enough force that she groans, "What the hell?" She draws in a breath, and her chest heaves, more of her tits filling my palms.

My shaft hardens further, as I lean into the hollow between her thighs. Another note from the piano reverberates across the space. That was me, or more precisely, my cock, that rang that particular note.

What the fuck am I thinking? Clearly, she's getting to me, twisting up my thoughts...and my balls. And no way, can I let that happen.

"If you think I am gonna fuck you under the same roof as my daughter, you're wrong."

"Oh." She swallows. Her shoulders droop and her lips turn down, "I understand."

"You do?"

She nods. "I actually think you went up in my estimation when you said that."

"Don't give me too much credit," I release her breasts, take a step back, sink down onto the piano bench, "for it's not going to make me stop from

giving you an orgasm."

"What?"

I grip her waist, pull her forward until she's balanced at the edge of the piano's lid.

Julia

The chords from the keyboard fill my ears; the vibrations roll up my legs, sink into my center. My core clenches. My pussy spasms. OMG, this is insane. I glance down in time to see him lower the zipper of my jeans.

"Damian what—"

He tugs on my jean legs, pulls them down past my knees, then lowers his face to my center. He draws in a breath, and his shoulders seem to swell. "Your scent, it haunts my dreams, laces my every waking moment. I want to write an ode to that sweet cunt of yours, do you know that?"

He hums a tune and the sub vocals ladder up my core, sink into the crevasses between my pussy lips, coil inside my womb. My thighs tremble. I raise my chin, glance up at the ceiling. What the hell is happening to me? I'd come here, hoping to meet his daughter, sure that I'd surprise a reaction out of him, definitely goad him into fucking me... But this...almost worshipful stance of his is...different. It's deeper than what I'd anticipated, more moving, and so, so arousing. I gulp, try to close my legs.

He clicks his tongue, "Don't hide from me, Flower."

He blows on my center, and the heat of his breath crawls into my secret space. A whine bleeds from my lips. I slap the back of my palm to my mouth. How can I sound so needy? So ready, so willing for whatever it is he wants to take from me.

He licks my core through the cloth of my panties and a shudder grips me. "Ohmygod," I moan. "Oh."

"Damian," he growls. "Say my name, Flower."

"Damian," I croak, and he stills.

I look down to find his gaze fixed on me. "You have no idea what you do to me, do you?"

"The same thing you do to me?" I venture.

"Which is?"

I frown. "Is that a trick question?"

"There are no trick answers." His lips curl, he dips his head, closes his

teeth around my swollen nub that's outlined against the cloth, and my back shoots up and off the piano.

"Damian," I screech, "what are you doing?"

"What do you think?" He straightens, then holding my gaze, grips the waistband of my thin nylon knickers. He yanks and they snap; he pulls them off of me. Cool air brushes my lower lips a second before he bends and swipes his tongue from my backhole to my clit, and then again.

"Damian," I gasp.

"Shh!" he admonishes me. "Keep your voice down. You'll wake Riley."

Right. I bite down on my lower lip, curl my fingers into fists and swallow down another moan when he lowers his head between my thighs again. He closes his mouth around my clit and my back shoots up and off of the piano. "Ah!" I can't stop the moan that bleeds from me. He swipes his tongue between my pussy lips, then curls his tongue around the swollen nub of my clit and my eyes cross. I swear, they do. "Ohmygod."

I open my eyes, and he looms over me. He stuffs my panties in my mouth as I gaze at him wide-eyed. He puts a finger to his lips, then drops back into his seat. He forces his shoulders back between my thighs, forcing me to spread even wider apart, then closes his mouth over my pussy again.

A groan boils up, as I grip the edge of the piano and hold on.

Bloody hell, I'll never get used to how he aims for my throbbing core with a single-minded focus. How he slides his fingers around my upper thighs, holds me in place and licks me, and sucks on my pussy and fucks my channel with his tongue, in-and-out and in-and-out.

I slap my fingers against the wooden lid of the piano, dig my heels into the keyboard, and the music rises in a wall of noise that surrounds me, engulfs me, pours over me, as he tears his mouth from my center, replaces it with two-three-four of his thick fingers, all at once, and curves his digits inside, hitting that spot that only he is aware of, while he reaches up to pull the panties from between my lips. He thrusts his thumb inside my open mouth. "Come," he orders. "Come all over my piano."

I don't want to obey him. I don't want to give him what feels like something too personal, too intimate, to shatter right here under his roof, on his musical instrument that he plays with those skilled fingers... Oh, wait, that's me. It's my body he wields like it was contoured for his fingertips, that he can press, and dip into, and strum and spank into a miasma of broken notes and searing prose, his very own composition that he hates...and

loves... And he does, in his own way. He just doesn't know it yet.

"Come for me, Flower." He lowers his voice to a hush and I am gone. The climax encloses me, sheaths me, throws me up high, then releases me, and I plunge down, down, down, back into his waiting arms, his teasing mouth, his wicked lips, that tongue of his that gives and takes from me. I crack open my eyelids and watch him watch me. He lowers his chin, licks the moisture that glistens on my inner thighs. He swallows, then rises to his feet. "Get dressed." He stalks away from the piano and heads for the door.

"Coming?" He glances at me over his shoulder, "I don't have all day."

Of course, not. I lower my feet to the floor, my knees buckle, and I grab at the keyboard. The rich tones of the keys fill the space.

His gaze narrows and he seems on the verge of saying something, then desists.

I shove my panties in my back pocket, zip up my jeans, then head over to where he holds up my coat. I thrust my arms through the sleeves, and he buttons me up, his forehead furrowed in concentration. When he reaches my chest, I step back. "I'll do it."

He glares at me and I subside. Damn it, when he looks at me like that, I can't deny him anything. Not even this small token of my defiance. Bah! What defiance. I had given in to his touch, come apart completely and he... He hadn't even broken a sweat. Had I been wrong to think he was falling for me? Wishful thinking, maybe?

He snatches up my backpack and offers it to me, then steps aside to let me pass. Only to guide me toward the living room. Guess he can't wait to get me out of here. I glance around the space, at the thick rug in front of the fireplace. My foot brushes something. I glance down at a doll which is face down on the carpet; next to it is a worn-out toy dog. I pick it up.

"Benjy." He clears his throat.

I stiffen. *Don't breathe; don't look at him.* Finally, he's revealing a little more about himself. *Let him speak. Don't say a word. Don't.* "Is that her favorite toy?"

"How did you know?" He frowns.

"It has a well-worn look about it. Also," I pat the toy's furry head, "I had one of my own that I held onto, into my teens."

"You didn't want to grow up, huh?"

"You could say that," I toss my hair over my shoulder, then shoot him a sideways glance. "Don't get any ideas, buster."

"Me?" He smirks. "Not likely. I am too busy trying to get my next album out."

"For which you need me as an inspiration, huh?"

"Don't get any ideas." He echoes my earlier words.

"Not likely." I head for the door, "You've made it clear what you want from me."

"And—?"

"And," I twist open the door handle, then turn to face him, "I decline."

"What?" He frowns.

"My orgasms are not for sale anymore."

His jaw tics, "Everyone is for sale."

"Not me; not anymore."

"I paid good money."

"Check your records, I've returned your payments."

He frowns, "And your debts?"

I raise my shoulders, "I'll live with them, pay them off over the next twenty years, like other people."

"You're not other people." He takes a step forward, then stops. "You're different."

"Yeah, that's why you treat me like I'm—"

"Special."

"Expendable." I toss my head.

"I let you into my home."

"I broke in." I set my lips.

"Why do you think Karina gave you the passcodes?"

"You...?" I blink, "You knew?"

"I was the one who encouraged her to share them."

"She deceived me?"

"Not her fault. She didn't know. Not really." He widens his stance. "I told her to do what was needed to ensure your safety. And clearly, giving you the means to enter my home rather than breaking in, was in your interest."

"You...you liar."

"Everything between us was true. Every time I touched you, I meant it. Every orgasm I drew from you was more than real..."

"I don't believe it."

"Don't tell me that you didn't feel it."

"What I feel is manipulated. You used your money, your dominance, to

steer my life the way you wanted."

"I work with what I have."

"So do I." I draw myself up to my full height. "You want to see me come, yet you won't allow me to meet your daughter. What do you call that?"

"I am protecting her... Protecting you..."

"How is treating me like a second-class citizen, who you don't trust, protecting me?"

"I don't want you getting close to her, not when this relationship between us is fake."

"And who's fault is that?" I throw up my hands. "You could have let me in, allowed me to take care of her and do my job."

"Your job..." he smirks, "is to come when I command you to."

"This entire conversation is insane." I glance around. "In fact, why the hell am I here arguing with you, when clearly, you have no intention of doing the right thing."

"The right thing is for you to leave." He jerks his chin at the door. "Good bye, Flower."

A ball of emotions closes my throat. Why the hell does he have to call me by that stupid pet name? "I fucking hate you," I choke out the words. "I wish I had never met you."

"That makes two of us." His gaze sharpens. He glances over his shoulder, then back at me. Huh? Did he hear something I didn't? Was that his daughter calling?

"Have a good life." He turns to leave as I step over the threshold. The door snicks shut behind me. I stand there, stare straight ahead, my heart thudding in my chest.

I should go, should get out of there, should leave the rock star and his manipulations behind and live my own life, find my own way, look for another job as a nanny, as I sculpt on my own time. My life was complete, right? I had found my calling in the two things that spoke to me... A career, unorthodox as it may be, but I was able to follow my passion—both of my passions. How many can say that? And if there's no one special, too bad. I lower my foot to the first step, glance at the gates in front that are swinging open.

I should get into my car and drive away, leave the asshole who sees me less as a person and more as a—a thing to get his creative juices flowing—no pun intended.

I should...turn around, march inside, and confront him. And ask him why the hell did he insist on holding me at arm's length? Why did he never make love to me? Why did he create that damn studio for me? He had to have felt something... So, why did he allow me inside his home, only to turn me out again?

He wants me... He does... So, what stops him from claiming me as his?
I stiffen, stare at the path beyond the gates.

If I leave, this is really it. He'll let me walk away, no questions asked. I'll never see him again... Not even online, considering he isn't on social media anywhere. And he may not release another album again. Not if he's as blocked as he claimed. Which is a pity. The alphahole is bloody talented. He was meant to compose, to sing, to burn up the stage with his presence and dominate his audience, as he'd taken control of me...my reactions...my orgasms. And the truth is, no one can make me come like he does.

I owe it to myself... Well, at least, for the future of my sex life—which he's spoiled completely for me, now that I know how it could be with him. Aargh! I drag my fingers through my hair. What the hell do I do?

I step down, turn to walk away, then hesitate. So, he told me to leave, and what? I am going to obey him? I am going to turn my back on him? When had I ever done as I was told, huh? Not with my parents, and certainly not because a certain rock star has ordered me to. At the very least, he owes me an explanation for why he's turning me out of his life.

Turning, I key my password into the keypad, then push open the door and slip in.

33

Damian

"Fuck this shit." I raise the guitar by its neck then fling it aside. It hits the fire head-first and the flames flicker up its body. The blaze fills its sound hole, leaps up to wrap lovingly around the inlay. "Fuck." I curl my fingers at my sides. I'd let her go. I'd made her come, then hurt her with my words and escorted her out.

A noise reaches me... I jerk my chin toward Riley's room. What the hell is wrong with me? I'd flown into a typical spoiled rock star rage. I'd slipped up and made enough noise to scare my daughter. When will I stop being selfish? Stop thinking solely of myself, and put my daughter's needs first? I race toward her room, come to a stop inside the doorway.

"Angel?"

Riley blinks up at me from the bed.

"Daddy?" She frowns. "I am scared." She sucks on her thumb, and my heart stutters.

"Shh!" I walk toward her. "Daddy's here now; you are safe."

Her chin trembles. "Will you read to me?" She snuffles.

"Of course, baby."

I sink into the chair next to her, "Which story, honey?"

"Alice." She cuddles her kitty cat doll close, "Will you read Alice and the white rabbit?"

"Alice in Wonderland," I correct her.

"Alice in W a n d e l a n d," she pronounces, using the phonetic spelling.

"Good girl," I praise her.

"Story, Daddy," she prompts.

"Last one, Poppet." I take in her features, her pink cheeks, the tousled locks, "Then you have to leave."

"B...but, I don't want to go." Her lower lip trembles.

"I don't want you to leave either," I confess.

"So why are you sending me away?"

"Because," I swallow down the thickness in my throat, "because sometimes we all have to do the things that we hate, because it's the only way to move on. When the time comes, baby, we all have to leave."

"When will my time come, Daddy?" She rubs her cheek into her pillow.

My heart stutters. "Not for a long time, baby."

"Will you stay with me until then?" She smiles at me and a pressure builds behind my eyes.

I reach over and kiss her forehead, "I promise."

She yawns, snuggles into the bed. "Read to me, Daddy," she mumbles. "I love to hear your voice as I'm falling asleep."

I pick up the book and begin.

Alice sighed wearily. "I think you might do something better with the time," she said, "than waste it in asking riddles that have no answers."

The earthy scent of clay mixed with the sweetness of vanilla reaches me. I stiffen, but continue to read out loud.

"If you knew Time as well as I do," said the Hatter, "you wouldn't talk about wasting it. It's him."

I hear the soft sound of her sneakers hit the floor as she takes a step into the room.

"I don't know what you mean," said Alice.

The floorboards creak as she walks toward me. I don't stop. I glance down at the book, the words swirl in front of my eyes, and I continue reciting from

memory.

“Of course you don’t!” the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. “I dare say you never even spoke to Time!”

She draws abreast, pauses, then glances at the bed. "Damian," she gasps, "What’s...what’s happening?"

A tear runs down my cheek, falls onto the page of the book.

“Perhaps not,” Alice cautiously replied: “but I know I have to beat time when I learn music.”

"Damian?" She turns to me, "What is this?"

I place the bookmark in the right place, then close the book. "What do you think it is?"

"You...you’re scaring me, Damian."

"Am I?" I rise to my feet, place the book back on the sideboard. "Why are you here, Julia?"

"I... I heard the noise of something crashing and ran back in. I wanted to make sure you were okay."

I turn to face her, fold my arms over my chest, "I am perfect."

She glances at the bed, then back at me. "You...you’re not."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because." She swallows, angles her head in the direction of the bed, then back at me, "You know why."

"No, I don’t."

"Don’t make me say it, Damian, please," she begs.

"Say what?" I twist my lips, "What is it you want to say to me, Julia?"

"Damian," she shakes her head, "don’t do this."

"Don’t do what?" I roll my shoulders. "Don’t do what, Julia?"

"Make me point out that..."

"That?"

"There’s no one other than us in the room, Damian."

"Isn’t there?" I walk toward the bed, glance down at the shape of the figure under the covers. "You mean this, don’t you?" I rip the sheet off and

Julia screams.

I snatch up the bolster and fling it aside, then grab the cushion from where it's placed on the pillow, and rip the cloth from it. Goose feathers dot the air like snowflakes. They float down over me, stick to my cheeks, cover the fabric of my T-shirt. I see her stuffed kitty on the floor and kick it aside.

"She's dead," I say, the coldness growing in my chest, reaching out, growing faster, harder, until it reaches my extremities. I lower my arms to my sides. "She's gone. My child... I couldn't save her. I wasn't there for her. Her mother took her and left, and I didn't stop her."

"Damian." She touches my shoulder and something inside of me snaps.

I turn on her, grab her by her neck and haul her close, "I was fine, getting along. I was ready to give up everything to spend time with her, take care of her for the rest of my life. I would have given up my career, my songs. I would have sacrificed myself for her, and then you had to do it."

"Wh...what?" She swallows. "What did I do Damian?"

"You swept into my life with your sassy comments, and your perky breasts, and your curves. You forced yourself under my skin."

"F...forced?" She frowns.

"Don't lie to me." I squeeze her neck and her gaze widens.

"Damian, stop." She scratches at my wrist. "Damian, please, you don't mean this."

"I mean it all." I nod. "It's because of you that I kept leaving her alone and coming to you. It's because of you that I realized that—"

I pause and take in her wide-eyed look of confusion.

"That I couldn't live like this."

"Like what, Damian?"

"Alone, trapped in my head. In the past, grieving for what may have been. One look at you, and I wanted more. I wanted a life with you, Julia. And I knew I didn't deserve another chance at happiness, not when my daughter would never see another day. She died and it's my fault. I'll never forgive myself...and now," I take in her beautiful features, her parted lips, her gorgeous tits that heave under her coat, "I am going to do my best to forget you, after..."

"After?"

"After I fuck you." I swivel around and thrust her backward.

34

Julia

"No, you can't do this." The backs of my knees hit the mattress and I tumble backward onto Riley's bed. I try to rise up, and he reaches down and flattens his palm against my chest.

"What's wrong?" he asks. "Don't want me now, Flower? You wanted me to fuck you, you were begging for it earlier. Now, when you know that I think of my dead daughter as still being alive, you don't want anything to do with me?" he growls.

"It's not like that." I push up; he shoves at me and I hit the bed with a thud.

He looks me up and down. "Take off your coat," he snaps.

"Don't do this," I beg him.

His lips curl and his eyes gleam. He rolls his shoulders, plants his fists on his hips. "That's not what you've been saying all these days, sugar."

"Don't call me that," I snarl back.

"Sugar?" He tilts his head, "Why not? You're deceptively sweet, you make people think you are innocent, that a little time in your presence won't hurt anyone. Then when their back is turned, you crawl under their skin, you ensure they grow addicted to you, can't live without you. Is that what you did to your last boyfriend too? Is that why he dropped you?"

"Fuck you," I spit out.

"Thought you'd never ask." He steps forward and I raise my foot and kick out. I catch him in the chest, and the man doesn't even stop. Bloody hell, he

simply chuckles, then advances. I jump up on the bed, throw up my fists, "Don't you dare come closer...you...you twat."

"You have the twat, not me."

"What?"

"Twat," he replies, then stares down at my crotch. "It's another word for pussy."

"Oh?" I knew that. Of course, I did, so why the hell do my cheeks heat? We are past the kissing and touching stage. Hell, he's made me orgasm so many times, and yet he mentions the 'p' word and I am blushing like a virgin on her first date?

He rolls his shoulders, snaps his fingers at me, and damn it, I know then, that if I don't stop myself, he'll fuck me with such force that I'll feel like a virgin all over again. I squeeze my thighs together. Damn it, why am I turned on, when he's acting like a complete bastard?

"Let's fight," I suggest.

"What?"

"Fight," I hold up my fists, "a fair one, and winner gets—"

"Dibs on how to fuck."

I swallow.

"Where to fuck." He stares at my mouth, then at my breasts, before lowering his gaze back to my crotch, and... Jesus, I am completely wet, and this... This is all kinds of fucked up. He's just confessed that he's been babysitting his imaginary—scratch that, *dead*—daughter, in whose room we are, and on whose bed I am... And all I can think of is how I want to shag her father. Aargh, this is...beyond messed up. I keep my fists raised, stay focused on him as he licks his lips.

"How many times," he raises his gaze back to mine, "to fuck."

My nipples harden. Heat flushes my belly, sears up my spine. Sweat pools in my underarms. Shit, it is getting too hot. I definitely need to take off the coat.

"Fine," I snap.

"Fine," he rasps.

I reach for the button of my coat, and he stiffens.

"Relax," I mutter, "you wanted me to take this off, right?"

"Hmm." He watches me from under hooded eyelids as I slip off the buttons, then shrug the coat down one shoulder. I peek up to see his lips parted, his chest heaving as he pays close attention to my every move. Hell,

this...thing between us, it's potent enough that I have his complete focus. Or rather, he's tuned into every move of my body. Well, that's one thing I can use in my favor, right? I slide the coat down over the other shoulder. Then hold it out in front of me.

His gaze latches onto my breasts. His nostrils flare and his breathing grows ragged. He leans forward on the balls of his feet and his fists tremble—no, did they actually tremble? I cup one breast, play with my nipple and he swallows.

Oh, my. Why hadn't I realized before now that I have as much power as he does in this relationship? I mean, I knew he wanted my orgasms, but all along, his money had tilted the scale in his favor—or so I'd thought. Fact is, the money really doesn't matter. When it comes to this—me and him, in this room filled with memories and happiness and sadness... It is just us. A broken asshole of a man and a woman hellbent to make it everything right for him... For me... For what we can have together.

I release the coat, then run my palms down the skin bared between my shirt and the waistband of my jeans. He growls. It literally rumbles in his throat. My heartbeat ratchets up; my pulse begins to pound. I slide my fingers inside my waistband.

His biceps bulge and he takes another step forward, until his knees are flush against the bed frame.

"Take off your T-shirt," I whisper. "Please, Damian."

He reaches behind himself to wrench his T-shirt up and over his head. I take in the broad expanse of his chest, the ripped planes, the eight-pack abs which I've seen online before, but I've only caught glimpses of the real thing. I can hardly count the time he begrudgingly opened his shirt, before taking my arse. "Oh! My God." Heat flushes my skin; my pussy clenches. I rake my gaze across the tattoo written along the inside of his left forearm. "Riley," I read the cursive.

He blinks, brings up his right hand to massage the skin over his heart. "Fight." He shakes his head, then holds up his fists again.

Well, hell, now I've done it. Whatever chance I had of taking him by surprise is gone. I hold up both of my fists. "Let's do this."

I throw a punch; he angles his body and avoids me easily. I raise my other fist and he tilts his head so my fist brushes the air near his neck. Damn it, this won't do. It won't. I take a step back, then another, and lower my fists. "Your turn." I jerk my chin, "Come on, give it your best."

He hesitates. "I don't want to hurt you." He frowns.

"But maybe I do." I race forward, kick out at him.

I'd been so sure that he would duck, and I'd been braced for that, but he doesn't. My foot connects with his chest and the momentum carries me forward. I crash into that hard barrier of him. He takes my full weight, staggers a little, then plants his broad palms on my hips to hold me in place. Only he crashes into the chair he'd been sitting on, which tips back, and he tips with it. The world tilts, and his big body pitches backward as he lands on the chair. He angles his body to take my full weight and the chair splinters. The back of his head connects with the floor with a thwack—and he does have a hard head, but hell, if that wouldn't have hurt.

He stays sprawled on the remnants of the furniture, his arms wrapped around me, my legs around his trim waist. *Thud-thud-thud*. I hear my heart thud in my chest. Or is that his? I turn my nose into the skin of his throat, draw in his scent. My head spins as all of my senses seem to open to absorb as much of him as I can.

"Damian," I whisper. He doesn't move. I raise my head to glance at his features, his closed eyelids, the dark lashes that are too long for a man, but which only enhance the masculinity of his features, the hollows under those spectacular cheekbones, that pouty lower lip, the tendons of his beautiful throat that move as he swallows.

I crawl up to cup his cheek, "Damian?" I rub my thumb under his eye and my finger comes away wet. I swallow. "Babe?" I mutter, "You okay?"

He stays silent. His arms hold me close, his heart beats against my breast, but his eyes remain closed. Another tear rolls down his face.

"Oh, hell." My throat constricts. I frame his face with both of my palms, "Hey, Big D, please..." I bite down on my cheek. *Please what?* Please don't mourn your kid who you lost too early, the mother of your child who's no longer with you? The remnants of your past that you haven't been able to move on from? "Damian, sweetheart."

I watch as he draws in a breath—his shoulders flex, his chest planes rise up and down. The rest of him is still, too still, locked in a place where he is alone with his memories, the sadness, the anger... Which is directed at himself, not at the world, or at me. That mockery, the jabs and digs... Not to mention, the crude puns he loves to lob— All of it comes from a place of self-loathing. And Jesus, I really should have been a shrink.

"D?" I pat his cheek, but he doesn't respond. My pulse begins to race and

my heartbeat ratchets up. What the hell? "Are you hurt?"

I tilt his head one way, then the other. Hmm, his jawline really is spectacular. And his ears? They are perfect! Don't get me started on all that luscious hair of his that curls around his shoulders... *Hold on. Hello? Are you checking him for any possible wounds or are you checking him out? Uh... both? Can't it be both? No, it's wrong.* The man's down. Don't take advantage of him now.

But he's taken advantage of me all along. Besides, I need to pull him out of this funk he's fallen into.

I need to do something...anything, to pull him back to the present... I glance down at those sexy as f lips of his, and my belly trembles. *Don't do it, don't do it...*

Oh, what the hell? I am here, so is he, and he's alive, and I need to do something to comfort him... And I'm just a woman surrounded by a 100% macho male who, for the first time, is at my mercy. So, I do the only thing I possibly can in the circumstance.

I lower my lips to his. Soft and hard, at the same time. How can he be a confluence of so much? I lick his lower lip and he opens his mouth. I ease my tongue inside. Hot, sexy, dark and edgy, and for the first time, there's a hint of something more... Something...vulnerable. The band around my chest tightens. My core clenches.

I tilt my head and deepen the kiss. I hold his chin and press my lips to his, until my nose bumps his, and I draw in his breath, and inhale more of that spicy scent of his and my ovaries go into overdrive. I lean over him, dig my fingers into his hair and proceed to fuck his mouth with mine. My thighs tremble, I hook my knees over his hips for purchase, push my breasts into his naked chest, press as much of myself to him as I can, and lean in even closer. A shudder grips his body, his grip around me tightens, but he doesn't kiss me back. He allows me to assault his face as I press kisses to his mouth, nibble kisses up his cheeks, rain kisses over one closed eyelid, then the other, the salty taste of his tears clinging to my lips. Lick his forehead, bite the tip of his nose. My nipples harden and moisture pools between my legs. I push my pelvis forward, to cradle the tent in his crotch, but there's still no participation. I rub my core into the hard column outlined in his pants, bring my lips back to his, brush my mouth over his. Nothing.

I reach between us, slide my hand under his waistband. My fingers brush the crown of his cock, and two things become clear. One, he's not wearing

boxers. Gulp. And two, the man is very much here and with me—at least the part of him that is under me is. I tug on his P/A and his entire body jerks. I wrap my fingers around his thick length—and OMFG, my digits don't meet around the circumference, and okay, so I have short fingers, but hell!

This...monster dick of his, once more, lives up to its reputation. I gulp again, and my throat closes. I squeeze the base of his dick, and I swear his shaft lengthens further. Oh, wow... That was instantaneous. I swipe my fingers from base to crown and the wetness of his precum greets me. My mouth waters and I groan as I close my eyes and lick my lips. Heat flushes my skin. Will he taste as good as he smells? I open my eyelids, stare into those blue eyes of his, which glare at me. He releases his hold on my waist, only to clamp his palm around my neck.

"You've done it now," he growls. "I am going to fuck your mouth."

35

Damian

What the hell is wrong with me? She's trying to comfort me and I...can't stop myself from lashing out at her, pushing her away. It's second nature. I want to open myself up to her, hold her close, wallow in the sense of rightness that this moment holds...but I can't. I won't. I deserve every second of unhappiness, of restlessness and frustration, of berating myself for not making the time to take care of my daughter when she was alive.

And now, Flower knows my secret. No doubt, she'll hate me for it when she comes to her senses... But for the moment, she is here with me, and I intend to make the most of it. I intend to lose myself in her sweetness, her heat, the warmth of her mouth—yes, I heard her moan, saw her lick her lips, and know that's what she wants—the tight grip of her cunt as she milks me. I want to forget everything that has happened and grab this moment for myself. I tighten my fingers in her hair and her gaze widens.

"Damian," she gasps, then smiles before she slides down my body, until her face is level with my crotch. She pushes down the waistband of my sweats and my dick bobs free. She tightens her hold on me, massages me from crown to base. She squeezes my swollen length and the blood empties to my groin.

"Suck me off," I order.

She holds my gaze, then lowers her head to close her mouth around my cock.

"Bloody fuck," I growl. She licks the crown, wraps her tongue around my

piercing and my cock jumps in response. She tips down her chin, takes me in and down her throat, and I can't stop myself from thrusting forward. She swallows and stars burst behind my eyes. "What the fuck are you doing to me, Flower?"

I shake my head to clear it, glance down to where saliva drips down her chin. "You're killing me, taking everything from me." I scowl. She pulls back leaving a trail of wetness on my cock, and the sight of her lips wrapped around my thick length... It's everything. She bobs her head, takes me in again and heat coils in my belly. My balls tighten and pressure builds at the base of my spine. "Oh, hell." My vision tunnels, my lungs hurt, my thigh muscles bunch, but it's not enough. "I need to do this my way." I glare at her and she pales.

"You understand?" I ask.

She peers up at me, licks her tongue up the underside of my shaft. The hair on the nape of my neck rises.

"Nod your head if you do."

She doesn't respond.

I lower my chin to my chest. "Do it," I draw in a breath, "or walk away. Right now."

Her gaze flickers; she hesitates.

All right, then. I begin to withdraw, but she grips my length, then jerks her chin.

Something hot stabs at my chest. She's not leaving. Not yet. She's staying. For now, at least.

"You sure?" I snap, then curse myself. *Jesus, get a grip, asshole.*

She bobs her head, takes me down her throat again. The tight heat encloses my shaft and the muscles in my belly lock. "I gotta do this. Now." I thread my fingers through her hair, and pull back until only the tip of my cock is positioned between her lips.

"Ready?" I scan her features.

She licks the underside of my swollen head and the blood rushes to my groin. I push her forward until the base of my cock scrapes her lips, then pull her back, again and again. She grips my thigh with her other hand, stares up at me as tears leak from the corners of her eyes. I pull her back, then tug her forward, over and over again. More saliva drips down her chin, her pupils dilate until only a circle of green remains around the black of her irises, and I see myself through her eyes.

Depraved, filthy, selfish, the kind of man she should have never met. The kind she'll, hopefully, never meet again. I pull out of her so suddenly, she gasps. Then grip her under her arms and rise to my feet, bringing her up with me. I kick the chair out of my way, scoop her up and deposit her on my daughter's bed. She stares up at me from her prone position, watches me as I shove my sweats down and out of the way. I reach for my dick and pump it once.

Her gaze drops to my crotch. "Damian," she mumbles, "you're so big."

"I'm exactly what you need," I insist. "Are you ready for me?"

She nods, then reaches down to lower the zipper of her jeans. She pushes them down, along with her panties and sneakers, then parts her legs. "I want you." She holds out her arms, "Come to me."

My heart hammers in my chest. I rake my gaze down her swollen breasts, her slightly rounded stomach to the wet flesh between her legs, and damn it, I can't stop myself. I sink to my knees, and swipe my tongue up her pussy lips.

"OMG," she groans, "Damian, Damian...please... Damian."

I massage my throbbing girth, as I grip her thigh and hold her still and make love to her pussy, her cunt, her clit, that gorgeous hot channel between her legs into which I thrust my tongue—in and out, in and out.

"Damian," she screams, "I can't bear it, please, baby, please."

I rise above her, place one knee on the bed, then the other. I position myself between her legs, then thrust forward.

She screams, "Jesus." Her eyes roll back in her head, as I stay still, allowing her time to adjust. When she lowers her chin and holds out her hand, I twine my fingers with hers. I twist her arm over her head as I lean into her and sink in another inch, and another. She moans, and I kiss her breast, suck on her nipple as I hook my arm under her knee and drape her leg over my shoulder. The angle allows me to breach her further.

She gasps, "You're so deep inside of me, Damian..." She whimpers, "Please."

"I know," I whisper as I press little kisses to the pulse fluttering at the base of her neck, to her chin, her lips. "Take me, baby. Take all of me."

I pull back, then plunge forward so her channel sheaths all of me. Heat sweeps up my spine and my heartbeat ratchets up. The pulse thuds at my temples, my wrists, even in my balls. I tear my lips from hers to gaze into her eyes. "Look at me," I command.

Her breath hitches, she widens her gaze, and I discern the outline of

myself in her eyes as I thrust forward into her with enough force that her entire body moves up the bed. I release her hands only to hook my arm under her other leg and place it over my other shoulder. "Hold on." I reach over to cover her breasts with my palms and squeeze.

She groans, and the sound lodges somewhere deep in my belly. I close my mouth over hers, then thrust into her over and over again. I swallow her every scream, commit her every moan to memory. I drag my mouth from hers, stare into her eyes and whisper, "Come."

36

Julia

I'm coming. I'm coming. I may have screamed that, or simply repeated it to myself over and over again. I curve my back and scream as the climax crashes over me. That blue gaze of his is burned into my head, the curl of his cruel lips etched on my heart as the orgasm slams into me. The aftershocks ripple up my spine; my limbs tremble as I cling to him with my legs wrapped around his neck.

His shoulders seem to swell; his biceps expand as he continues to plunge in and out of me. He impales with a thrust so hard that his balls slap against my arse. His dick seems to extend, his chest planes undulate, and a hoarse groan rips from him as he empties himself into me. "Fuck."

He lowers his forehead to mine and kisses me—slowly, gently, tenderly. He nibbles on my lower lip, licks the corner of my mouth, then buries his nose in my throat and inhales. He curves his palm around my breast, draws circles around my nipple, then the other. He drags his lips down my throat, to the valley between my breasts, smooths his big palms down my stomach, before he touches the part where we are joined. He glances up at me, his expression tortured.

"Damian?" I whisper, "What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry I deceived you," he searches my features.

"You didn't." I reach for him and he pulls back and out of me so suddenly that my pussy clenches on the emptiness where he'd been a millisecond ago.

"Where are you going?" I sit up, panicking, as he pulls up his sweatpants.

"Stay." He stabs a finger at me, then walks to the bathroom.

I hear the sound of the water running. A second later, he appears in the doorway. He walks over to me, then presses a cool washcloth between my legs. "Did I hurt you?"

His voice is bland. I glance at his features to find a mask, devoid of emotion.

"Damian, what's wrong?" I clear my throat, "Please, talk to me."

He cleans off the remnants of our joined cum from my thighs, then flings the cloth aside. He steps back, reaches for my clothes and hands them to me. "Get dressed," he orders.

I stare at him for a moment; he glances away. *What the hell?*

My heart begins to race. This is crazy. We just made love... Okay, we fucked, and it was insanely hot, and the orgasm? Why the hell does each one seem better than the last? And now, why is he turning away from me? I pull on my jeans, tie up my sneakers and straighten my shirt the best I can.

"Sit." He gestures to a chair, then walks around to the other side of the bed. Like that would put enough distance between us?

I watch him as he paces the carpet, Riley's now mussed-up bed between us.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

He pauses mid step. "About what?"

"This." I point at his daughter's bed, "How long has this been going on?"

"Since she died in a car accident, a year ago. Her mother drove her car with the two of them over a bridge."

"Oh, my God," I gasp. "I am so sorry, Damian. I can only imagine—"

He holds up his hand, then turns away. "Save your pity," he throws at me over his shoulder, "I've had enough of it."

I purse my lips, wait as he continues to pace, back-forth-back.

"Meredith—?" I finally venture.

"Is aware that I am in therapy."

"So, when she comes over to help—"

He nods. "It's the only way I can manage to leave the house, if I am confident I have someone at home with—" He squeezes his palms at his sides. "At home."

"I understand," I reply.

"Do you?" He tilts his head.

"Of course, I do." I tip up my chin, "You're in therapy and this is one way

of helping you get through the ordeal. It may sound strange to an outsider, but grief can do the most bizarre things to anyone. I am happy she has been there for you when you've most needed support. I only wish—"

I draw in my inner lip, glance away.

"Tell me." His voice softens, "You know you can say anything that's on your mind to me, Flower."

I release the breath I'd not been aware I was holding. "I wish you'd let me in earlier. I wish you hadn't felt the need to hide the situation from me. I wish it had been me that you'd turned to for help."

His shoulders uncoil, and that's when I realize how nervous he'd been about sharing this part of himself with me.

"I... I do understand, Damian," I say softly.

"Do you?" He laughs. "The delusional rock star who messed up the only thing that was of any worth in his life."

"Don't say that." I frown.

He continues to pace back-forth-back as I track his movements. Finally, he stops, then turns to me. "What?" he barks.

"I didn't say anything," I point out.

"I am getting help for it," he clarifies.

"I don't doubt that." He glares at me and I tip up my chin. *Do not back off, not now. Don't look away.* I hold his gaze as he takes a step forward and comes around to stand in front of me.

"Does anyone else know about what you are going through?"

"The Seven are aware that Riley and her mother died in an accident." He rubs the back of his neck. "They helped me keep the news from the media."

I can only imagine the circus it would have been if they'd found out that, not only did he have a daughter and a girlfriend, but also that they were dead.

"And your...uh—"

"Affliction?" He chuckles without humor. "Only Meredith and Arpad are aware of the true extent to which I haven't been able to let go of her." He hesitates, "And now...you. So you see, in my own way, I have turned to you. Maybe from the moment I saw you... My subconscious has known that I wouldn't have a choice but to let you in."

My heart stutters. What does that mean? The fact that he revealed his secret to me? Okay, to be fair, I had barged in on him, had literally forced him to share this part of himself... But still... He'd trusted me enough to be open about it. He hadn't hidden this from me.

"I have a proposition for you." He turns to face me.

I grimace. "If you're going to offer me money again—"

"No money," he snaps. "I do need your time, though."

"Time?"

"And your orgasms."

"Orgasms?" I frown. "You're out of your mind, you know that?" *Oops.* I wince, then look up to gauge his reaction before continuing, "Sorry, but... It's one thing to believe that giving me orgasms fires up your creative muse, another to—?"

"To?" He folds his big arms across his chest, and of course, I clench my thighs. I take in the breadth of his shoulders, the smattering of hair across his chest that felt so good, so delicious when I was pressed up against him.

"—to live it." I clear my throat.

"Are you complaining about it?"

"No." I fold one leg over the other and he lowers his gaze to my thighs. My pussy clenches and my toes curl. I fold my hands in my lap, wriggle around to relieve the gnawing that's creeping up in my core. "Umm."

"What then?" He frowns. "What do you want in exchange?"

"I want." I lick my lips. *Jeez, can I say it? Can I?*

"Say it." He slaps his hands on each side of the chair and brackets me in. "What is it? What do you need?" he peers into my eyes. "Tell me, I'll do anything."

"Anything?" I tilt my head.

His gaze narrows as he considers what I've said. "Anything," he confirms.

"Marry me."

Julia

"You did what?" Isla shrieks.

I stare at her from over my glass of wine—which she had brought over, because I've barely been in the apartment long enough to order in provisions since arriving from Australia. Not to mention, my time has been taken up by an alphahole of a rock star... The one who's agreed to become my husband.

"Yeah," I nod.

"And he...?" She takes a healthy swig from the wine glass, "He agreed?"

"He set a date and everything," I mutter. "And of course you're helping me organize the wedding."

She hesitates.

"You are, aren't you?" I frown.

"Of course I am." She nods, cautiously, "But you mentioned something about a date?" She swallows, "When...when is it?"

I open my mouth and she raises a hand, "No, don't tell me. Let me guess. It's next week?"

I shake my head.

She pales, "It's in five days?"

I raise my hand, palm face up.

"Four?" She gulps.

I stay silent.

She blinks rapidly. "Three days. Please tell me I have at least three days to organize this event?"

"Afraid not." I purse my lips.

She sinks back in her chair. "It's tomorrow, isn't it?" She wrings her fingers together.

"No." A chuckle wells up, and I swallow it down. I mean, this entire thing would be hysterical, except for the fact that it is my life and this is actually happening.

"It's the day-after-tomorrow."

"What?" She chokes. "You mean it's on New Year's Eve? Do you know what kind of a logistical nightmare this is going to be? Not to mention, having to organize your dress and the venue... How the hell am I supposed to manage everything?"

"About that." I grab my backpack, pull out his credit card and hold it up.

Isla snatches it out of my hand, "Now we're talking. Though I have to warn you, that all the money in the world, may not be enough to pull this off, given the crazy timelines."

"You're telling me," I mutter. "I asked him what the hurry was and he said," I raise my shoulders, "why delay?"

"Maybe he doesn't want to wait, in case you change your mind?" Isla offers.

"Not likely, considering I was the one who proposed." I huff.

"Maybe he doesn't trust himself to not change his mind...?"

I stare up and into Isla's shrewd gaze. "May...be," I concede. "More likely, he thinks money can buy anything." Typical Damian, to throw money at a problem and expect it to resolve itself. I wrap my arms about my waist. "Just like he didn't think twice before he commanded me to move into the apartment in The Shard, because *no fiancée of his is living in a crummy apartment.*" I air-quote his words.

I glance around the tiny one-bedroom, which is small, but comfortable... But it isn't mine. Which is fine. I belong nowhere, remember? It's why I had gone half-way across the world to find a place I could fit into.

I mean, sometimes you need to go full circle before you find where you belong... Which is where? In his arms, in his home, between his thighs as he wraps his massive arms around me and holds me down. *Argh! Stop.*

I bury my face in my glass of vino. "What the hell have I done, Isla?"

"Umm...seems you got yourself a hubby, Julia." She coughs.

I scowl back, "You're laughing at me."

"No," she shakes her head, "not really."

I frown.

She raises a shoulder. "Okay, maybe a little. You've got to admit, the situation is slightly humorous."

"Not from where I am," I purse my lips.

"Tell me what happened. Why don't you start at the top, hmm?" She drops her voice to a soothing tone and I give her a dirty look.

"What?" She throws up her hands, "I am only trying to help."

I drain my glass. "You can help by topping up my wine."

She reaches for the carton of wine, then turns it upside down. "Sorry, that was the last of it, babe."

"You'd think Amelie would have stocked up better, considering she was in the middle of a rollercoaster of a relationship with the doctor," I grumble.

"Maybe that's why there isn't enough wine here," Isla offers. "She probably drank it all as she came to terms with being hitched to an alphahole for life."

As I soon will be.

My heart begins to thud, sweat beads my palms, the wine glass slips from my grasp, and crashes onto the floor. Good thing it's plastic, huh?

I pick it up, then walk over to the garbage can and dump it in. I straighten, then stare out of the window. "Jesus, what a mess!"

"You should have thought of that before associating with one of the Seven."

"Hey, not fair." I pivot to frown at her, "You're the one who encouraged me to go for him."

"I meant that you shag him, not propose to him."

"Yeah." I hunch my shoulders. "Why the hell did I do that? More to the point, why the hell did he accept? Especially after he'd told me that he wasn't going to marry anytime soon!"

"He said that to you?"

"Yeah."

"And yet, when you proposed, he agreed?" She frowns.

"He did."

"Maybe he changed his mind?"

"Ha, that's not something Damian does. That man... Once he makes up his mind, nothing can sway him."

"Maybe this is different...?" she suggests.

"And maybe this is all a dream?" I wrap the strands of my hair around my

hand and tug; the pain squiggles down my neck. Okay, so this isn't all a figment of my imagination. This is really happening. "Help me," I implore her.

"Maybe you could take it back?" She tilts her head, "Tell him it was all a mistake?"

"What was a mistake?" A new voice sounds from the doorway and I scream. So does Isla.

"It's me, girls." Karina holds up both of her hands. "Just me. Sorry, I guess I should have knocked."

"Or something." I frown. "How did you get in?"

She stares at me.

"Right. You did the security for this place, so you have all of the passwords."

She walks over and places a bottle of champagne—expensive by its label, no cheap almost-vinegar type plonks for Madam, here.

"Glasses?" she asks, then glances down at the plastic cups in distaste.

"Surely there's something better here?" She walks over to the shelves, opens and shuts a few, then produces glasses. The kind from which you drink water. "This will have to do."

She walks over as Isla pops the cork of the bottle. "Woo," she squeals, "that's a happy sound."

"Har, har." I slink down into my chair, "I am never going to be happy again."

"Because you're marrying the Rockausarus?" Karina asks.

"You mocking me?" I accept the glass from her.

"Not at all," she raises her glass, "I am here to commiserate."

Hmph, I frown as she throws back the contents of the glass.

"Not bad, but personally, I prefer vodka," she declares.

"You're certainly drinking it like it's vodka." I grimace.

"Old habits." She tips back her chair, fixes me with her gaze, "What the hell were you thinking anyway, proposing to him? If I'd known it would come to this, I'd never have given you the passcodes to the house."

"He wanted you to," I retort.

"Huh?"

"He set you up, coaxed you in the direction of parting with the information."

"So, he knew I'd..." She sits up straight. "Hell, I should have known he

was playing me. These Seven..." She pours out another glass of champagne, then tosses it back. "I should have told you to stay clear of them."

"You've known them longer than us though, right?" Isla chimes in. "You and Arpad—"

Karina glares at Isla with murder in her eyes, but Isla, of course, ignores it. Or doesn't care. Maybe she notices, but continues anyway. That girl has no filter, honestly.

"—I mean, the two of you have that love/hate thing going on, which is hot," she continues.

Karina drains her glass, fills it up again.

I reach for the bottle and top up my own and Isla's. I mean, I want my share of this expensive shit, as well.

"Admit it. The two of you have a thing for each other." Isla chuckles. "What, with those horny looks you trade—"

"My looks are not horny," Karina's tone grows glacial, "and I'd rather shoot myself in the head than spend any time with that asshole."

"Alphahole," I automatically correct her.

"What?" She stares at me.

"He's trained you well, already," Isla murmurs.

"No, he hasn't." I jump up and begin to pace. Yeah, I'm mirroring what said a-hole rock star did earlier, but whatever. I am too agitated and I need to think, to come up with a solution. "And I really need to find a way out of this."

"Why?" Karina's voice rings out.

I stop, turn to stare at her. "What do you mean, why?"

"You took the bull by the balls—"

"It's by the horns," Isla pipes up. Both Karina and I stare at her, and she stares down at her drink. "Never mind. Proceed," she mumbles.

Ha, everyone here is a clown today, for some reason. After all, it's only my life that's going down the shitter.

"Can you explain your bull and balls reference?" I glower at Karina.

"It's bull and horns—" Isla ventures.

"Shut up," both Karina and I echo without looking at Isla, who coughs.

"Yeah, I want to hear your reasoning, too, Karina," she mumbles. "What did you mean by that?"

"Just that, you could do worse." Karina stares at me.

"She could do better," Isla huffs.

"Sure," Karina drags her finger around the rim of the glass, "considering he is famous, rich, handsome—"

"Career on the decline, may not recover after his last flop, has loads of issues—" Isla counts off on her fingers.

"How do you know about his issues?" I scowl.

"Tabloid speculation." She raises her shoulders. "Besides, no one can get to be that successful without some skeletons in their closet... And definitely not, one of the Seven."

"So, he does have issues?" Karina asks.

"Boy, does he," I nod.

"Good, so you can help him resolve them."

"Me?" I frown "How can I help him?"

"He feels something for you."

"She means, he's hung up on you," Isla adds.

"It's true. I'd say he's in love with you, except I don't believe in that emotion."

"Wow." I look her up and down, "Now I see why the Seven trust you with their security. You're pretty cut-throat, aren't you?"

"I do what I have to do to survive." Her features harden. "And I have seen all kinds in this line of work. Which is why I also know that there's something genuine between you and him."

"Is there?"

She nods. "Marriages have been built on worse." She licks the champagne off her finger, then holds up her glass. "You two have a lot more going for you."

"Like what?"

"You want security and he wants..." Karina shoots me a glance from under her eyelashes, "Well, you know what he wants."

"You mean sex?"

"I mean, whatever it is that floats his boat, and which he, clearly, is getting from you."

"What if he gets tired of me?" I wring my fingers together.

"Julia, Julia." Karina shakes her head. "You're a strong, beautiful, intelligent woman, and he's just a man who thinks with his dick. Trust me, you know what you have to do to keep him hungry enough so he keeps coming back for more. Besides, you love him."

I stare at her. "Shit, is it that obvious?"

"To us," Isla mumbles under her breath, "and only because we're your friends..." Her voice trails off. She glances at me, then away. "Sorry, babe, but yeah, it's kind of written all over your face. I mean, that's why you proposed to him, right?"

Because I love him? I gulp down more champagne, then choke again. Bloody hell, I do love him. Only he doesn't... He can't possibly be in love with me. I am just the means to his relaunching his career. So why the hell did he accept? It makes no sense.

I shake my head. "No, no, no, this is all wrong. I should call him and tell him it was all a joke and that it's off."

"But you won't," Karina drawls.

I stare at her again. "How do you know?"

"Because you want him, and you have the courage to fight for him. Question is, will you act on that now?"

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Damian

"This makes no sense." I glance down at my button-down shirt, my tailored slacks, that I'd paired with my sneakers, then up at Arpad. "What the hell are you smirking about, you douche?"

"Me?" Arpad straightens from where he's leaning against the window. "Maybe it's the venue?" He glances out and I know he's seeing the arena of Shakespeare's Globe with the three floors of seating.

"It's too small for the event, don't you think?" he drawls.

I glance up at him, "Ha! Sarcasm, huh?" I glower.

"Can't you take a joke?"

"Not right now." I glance around. "Where's my jacket? Shit have you seen my jacket?"

"It's with me, ol' chap." He thrusts the beaten leather jacket at me.

"Thanks." I slip it on, then smooth my palms over the sleeves. "How do I look?"

"Terrified."

I glare at him, and he chuckles.

"Relax," he takes a step back and looks me up and down, "You look like a rock star about to get married."

"Is that good?" I frown. "Is it too obvious that I didn't opt for something more formal."

"Nah," he scratches his chin, "maybe."

"Which is it?" I growl.

"Both?" He smirks. "Neither."

I scowl at him, "Enjoying yourself, brother?"

"You have no idea." He laughs. "I've waited years... Years, to get back at you."

"You mean for all the times I whipped your arse when we sparred?"

"You mean that I whipped yours, don't you?" He folds his arms over his chest.

"Let's say, we were evenly matched," I reply. "I'll give you that, considering I'm not in a mood to fight today."

"What kind of a mood are you in, huh?" He waggles his eyebrows. "Can't wait to see the wife, then?"

I frown at him, "Wife to-be, and this is all your fault."

"What, you mean for spotting the fact that there was something between the two of you before you realized it, and ensuring that she turned up at your doorstep?"

"I'll never forgive you for that," I growl.

"You're welcome." He nods.

"Oh, fuck off." I drag a finger under my collar. Shit, maybe the button-down was a bad idea. Why the hell hadn't I opted for my normal T-shirt and jeans?

"Don't even think about it." Arpad grabs the bottle of whiskey from the table, along with two glasses, then walks over. He hands me a glass, pours some of the amber liquid into it.

I sniff it. "Macallan's," I nod. Can't fault the man for his taste in whiskey, at least. I take a healthy swig, and the taste of oak fills my senses.

"Limited-edition," he adds. "Had a pal save one for me."

"No doubt." I toss back the rest of the contents, hold out my glass for more. He fills me up and I down that too. "More," I mumble. "Top me up."

"Easy, tiger," he cautions, "you don't want to be drunk for your wedding now."

"Don't I?" I mumble. "She blackmailed me into this."

"Did she?"

"It was either marry her or lose her."

"And you didn't want to let go of her?"

I stare at the contents of the glass; the amber sparkles under the watery

sunlight. "Wonder if it will rain?" I glance up at the overcast sky.

"Now you're deflecting." Arpad shakes his head, "And PS, I thought you had more balls than this."

"What are you talking about?"

"No one's ever coerced you into doing anything you didn't want to do."

"Except the women in my life, huh?"

"Riley," he says softly.

I shoot him a glance, "Be very careful what you say next."

He leans forward on the balls of his feet. "I've never been a father. God knows, I can only imagine how it felt for you to have known her for such a little while, only to lose her, but you need to let go of her, bro."

"Don't talk about her as if she's—" My throat closes and a burning sensation fills the back of my eyes. Shit, what is this? Will I ever reach a stage when I'll be able to think about her without my heart breaking, without my stomach twisting itself up in knots, without every part of me insisting that I was in the wrong?

"She's gone, bro," Arpad says softly. "She's not coming back."

"Don't you fucking think that I know that?" My voice cracks, and I squeeze my fingers around the glass of whiskey. "If only I could turn back the clock... If only I'd taken the threats more seriously... If only I'd taken steps to protect them."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Of course, it was," I snap. "I was too focused on my next album, my career, my image. It was always the next thing. I didn't appreciate what I had in front of me—my daughter, my angel, the light of my life." I squeeze my eyes shut. "It's my fucking fault that she's dead."

I've said it... the dreaded 'D' word that I've never been able to enunciate before. "She's not with me anymore," I choke out the words. "I'll never be able to hold her again, smell that baby scent of hers, or teach her to ride a bike. Or whip her first boyfriend when he comes to pick her up on her first date. Fuck!" I fling the glass and it shatters against the floor. "Bloody fuck, what the hell am I doing here anyway? I should be home, working on my album, taking care of—"

I draw in a breath. I have to stop talking about her as if she is still here... My logical mind knows it. My brain insists on it.... But my heart... My soul... All of it, refuses to accept the irrefutable proof of what I face every day. My daughter, my child, my little girl, will never smile again, will never

look at me, or call me Daddy, will never ask me for her favorite toy, or ask me to read to her again.

"Fuck." I drag my fingers through my hair. "This marriage. It's all wrong. I shouldn't be doing this."

"It's the one thing you should definitely see through," Arpad admonishes me.

"Oh, yeah?"

He nods. "This is your chance to put the past behind you, to finally move on with a woman who—"

"Sees this as, as much of an arrangement as I do?"

"It's a start." He surveys my features, "The attraction between you two is off the charts. It's definitely the right start for building a marriage."

"Since when have you become an advocate for the old ball and chain?"

"Since I saw you struggle and fail to get over your grief; since I saw you become a shadow of your former self; since I saw you begin to self-sabotage your own career."

"Self-sabotage?" I frown. "What do you mean?"

"You've been releasing your worst-ever work since their accident."

"Understandable."

"Is it?" He walks up to stand in front of me. "Or have you been using the grief as an excuse to not create? Maybe you don't want to give it your best shot. Maybe you can't stand the thought of being successful."

"Do you know how crazy you sound?" I chuckle.

"Is it though?"

He steps into my space, and I growl, "Back off, man."

"I won't," he snaps back. "It's time you stop punishing yourself for what happened."

"So, you keep saying."

"So, you lost something very precious to you—"

"You have no idea," I snarl. "No one... No one should have to bury their own child...."

"I know, I know where you're coming from."

He lays a hand on my shoulder and I shake it off. "No, you don't." I step back and begin to pace again, "No one can understand what I am going through."

"Maybe she can."

"Oh?"

"You found something that's very rare."

"What's that?"

"A chance at true love."

"Love?" I bark out a laugh, "Didn't know you believed in that emo shit."

"I don't," he mutters, "but Jesus, man, when I look at you and how you're wasting away your life... Hell, if I don't want it to work for you, if it drags you out of the spiral of self-destruction that you've been stuck in—"

"I was fine where I was."

"Were you now?" he raises an eyebrow, "Going off social media, dropping out of sight, and fueling speculation that you were losing your shit. Not to mention, not hanging out with the Seven like you used to."

"I was there for the others when they needed me. I got on the bloody calls with them and held their hands as they found their women."

"The bare minimum," he sneers, "and only because I didn't give you a choice."

"Get off my balls, man."

"No."

I glance around, curl my fingers at my sides. "I can't do this. This was a bloody stupid idea. Fuck my career, fuck the next album, fuck everything. I'm leaving." I head for the exit.

He plants his body in my way. "I am not letting you sabotage the one good thing that's come your way since the accident."

"You can't stop me," I growl.

"But we can."

I glance past Arpad as Edward walks into the room.

Of course, he's not alone. Sinner, Saint, Weston and Jace follow him. "Bloody hell, the only one missing is that joker Baron showing up, to complete this shit show."

"If that's what it takes," Arpad growls.

"What do you mean?" I frown.

"No one told him yet?" Edward ambles over to the arm chair in the corner and drops into it.

"Do you want to, or should I?" Sinclair drawls.

Weston and Jace take a stance by the door. Clearly, they don't trust my not making a break for it. Obviously, they know me too well. Shit. This is what happens when you have friends you've known since you were teens. They think they can take liberties with your life. Well, it is time to set them

right. No one can make me do what I don't want to do. No one.

I glower at them, "You wankers thought it would be a good idea to stage an intervention?"

"Just returning the favor, ol' chap." Saint smirks.

He's referring to how the rest of us had cornered him when he'd been in the middle of his courtship with Victoria. We'd been his sounding board as he'd explained all the justifications for why he wanted to fake-marry her... We'd goaded him along, steered him onto the right path, which was to put the ring on her finger, and well, hell, look at the two of them now. In happily wedded bliss, with a kid on the way.

"Oh, no, no," I shake my head, "this isn't the same situation as you and Victoria."

"Oh, no?" He folds his arms over his chest. "Pray, tell me, what's different here?"

"You married her to get to the Mafia," I point out.

"I married her because," he shuffles his feet, "because I love her."

"You barely knew her." I scowl at him. "No way, could you have fallen for her so quickly."

"Couldn't I?" He draws in a breath. "I knew from the moment I laid eyes on her that she was the one for me. I kept fooling myself otherwise, but I knew." He slaps his chest, "Deep inside, I knew, brother. It took me long enough to admit it, after I put her and our child in danger. I don't want the same to happen to you. It's why I'm telling you—"

"What?" I growl, "Confess to feelings I don't have and marry her?"

"Marry her because she's the only thing standing between you and complete destruction. Besides," he looks me up and down, "you have feelings for her."

"I don't," I growl. "She's simply a means of accessing my muse."

"Didn't Shakespeare marry his muse?" Arpad pipes up.

"What's that got to do with anything?" I crack my neck, "And what was it that you guys were going to tell me before we were sidetracked?"

Arpad glances at the others, "Shall I?"

Sinclair nods, "Go ahead."

"Baron contacted me." Arpad declares.

"What?" I blink. "Baron? Our Baron? The one we haven't seen in nearly a decade?"

"Know of another?" Edward leans forward in his seat, "Go on, tell him

the rest."

Arpad pulls out a sheet of paper from the pocket of his slacks, "Of course, the douche used snail mail. Not like it's going to stop us from trying to track him down."

"We've tried and failed so far," I point out, "What's new now?"

"What's new is that he's addressed this communication to all of us, sans you." He jerks his chin at me.

"But you're reading it to me?"

"He wants us to share this with you."

"Well, spare me the suspense," I mumble, "not that I am fucking interested or anything in what he has to say."

"So, you don't want to know how his advice to you is to not marry her."

"Hold on," I pause, "I decided to get married two days ago, and he's found out about it and had enough time to send Arpad here a letter stating I shouldn't do so?"

"Seems like it." Arpad nods.

"Something doesn't feel right about this."

"You think?" Sinclair smirks.

"It means he's not far off." I glance around at the faces of my friends, "Likely in this city. Close enough to keep tabs on us."

"So we think," Edward agrees.

"Why would he do that?"

"Who knows why Baron does anything?"

"Isn't he over-dramatizing this entire incident thing, considering it wasn't he who got the worst of the experience?" I glance at Edward, who pales.

He rises to his feet, walks over to me, "You have something to say?" His jaw tics. "Something you want to get off your chest, perhaps. Considering you escaped the incident, more or less intact, only to fall apart at the first sign of a personal tragedy."

"What do you know about personal tragedies, huh? You, who took the easy way out, and decided to leave the world and its day-to-day matters behind, after all? You renounced everything and ran away, Edward. You left it to the rest of us to hold each other up. You weren't here when we went off on the bender, when Saint got into such intense fights it was clear he had a death wish, when Sinclair decided to pursue business success to the detriment of everything else, when Weston fell apart after his father died, when I lost my..." I swallow, "lost my daughter and her mother, and knew it would

change me forever. I needed you then Edward, and where were you? You were off in some monastery somewhere, trying to find yourself."

"I would have been no good to you if I had stayed," Edward mumbles. "Hell, I was so out of my head with pain, I was no good to myself in the state I was."

"So were all of us," I growl. "But we stayed on, we helped each other, we worked through our crises."

"You had each other. You didn't need me." Edward's throat moves as he swallows. He glances around the room, "Isn't that right, fellas? You had the six of you—"

"Five," Arpad cuts in. "Baron cut and ran not long after. He'd have stayed, if you had."

"Wait, so this is all on me?" He stares at the assembled men. "Weston? You're the most level-headed of these tossers. Do you feel the same way?"

Weston snorts, "Me, level-headed?" He scratches his beard, "Maybe in comparison to the rock star hellbent on self-destruction, with his continuous string of failed concerts and the worst-performing Christmas single in history —"

"Hey," I protest, "it wasn't that bad. In fact, it hit number one—"

"In what, the worst Christmas songs of all time?"

"Close," I mumble. "It was called the least festive song ever, I believe. At least, get your facts right. And weren't we talking about how Father, here, did the vanishing act on all of us?"

"You're deflecting, Savage," Weston admonishes. "And for the record, yes. If you'd stayed, Edward, things would have been different."

"Hold on, hold on." Edward throws up his hands, "Why is all of this coming out now? Why have none of you mentioned this to me earlier? And hey! You guys had each other, while I was away dealing with my own shit, alone."

"Your choice," I growl. "If you'd stayed, we could have dealt with it together, as a team, as we always did."

"Except you didn't." A familiar voice rings out. I turn as Julia glides into the room. She's wearing a simple white dress that covers her from throat to wrists, tucked in at the waist, clinging to her thighs as she walks, before flowing down to swirl around her ankles. She looks ethereal and beautiful and completely not what I expected. She's worn her hair piled up on her head and my fingers tingle to pull out the pins and have the strands scattered

around her shoulders, her back, over my pillows. I'd lean down and sink my nose into the glistening locks and draw in that sensuous, exotic scent that is so uniquely Flower.

"What are you doing here?" I growl.

"Have you told them?" She moves closer, her features serene, those green eyes darting between the others, then back to me. "Tell me, Damian, do they know?"

"About what?" My heart begins to thump in my chest. *Why is she here? What is she going to share with the rest?* I allowed her a peek into the part of my life that is a secret from all of them, except Meredith... Hell, not even she knows the extent to which I have been caught up in my grief, unable to move forward... Until Julia had flounced in and shined a spotlight on the dark recesses of my mind. "What are you talking about?" I snap.

"You know." She tips her chin up.

"Do I?" I tilt my head, take in the set of her jaw, the nervous tremble of her fingers as she clenches them together in front of her. "What are you doing here, anyway? It's bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding."

"Thought you didn't want to get married," Arpad coughs into his hand.

"Yeah," Edward nods, "thought you were going to call it off?"

"Call what off?" Julia glances around at them. "What's going on?"

"You tell me, Flower." I drawl, "To what do I owe the unexpected appearance of my fair bride to-be in what, I confess, is a break with tradition that even I find surprising."

"What's surprising is that you haven't revealed your secret to them," she retorts.

"Secret?" I curl my fingers at my sides. A bead of sweat drips down my back. Not that the Seven wouldn't understand why I had to keep the memory of Riley alive a little longer, but hell, some things... Some things are sacred, you know what I mean? And no one...is allowed in. And I had let her peek in where no one else had, and now I am going to pay the price. "My secret?" I glare at her.

"Of course, babe." She pauses in front of me, then places her hand over my chest. "Shall I tell them?"

39

Julia

"What?" He lowers his voice to a hush, "What are you going to tell them, Flower?"

I tip my chin up, gaze into his beautiful features. His jaw tics; a nerve throbs at his forehead. He watches me like the predator he is, a man lost in the darkness that comes to the fore in his stage performances. If I'd wanted to know what troubled him most, what drove him to leave the frantic lifestyle he used to have, only to drop out of sight, I know the reason now. And he thinks I am going to reveal his secret to the world?

"What do you think?" I mutter. "Want to take a guess at what it is?"

"I think," he snaps, "it's time for us to leave." He swoops down to grab my wrist, but I swerve to the side.

"Hold on," I yelp, "I haven't told them yet."

"And you won't, either." He stalks to the door, pulling me in his wake. I dig my heels into the wooden floor, stumble against him.

He turns, rights me by the shoulders. "Hell, you okay?" He scrutinizes my features, his eyes filled with concern that takes my breath away.

"Y...yeah," I stutter. "Let me just complete what I have to say?"

He schools all emotion from his face. "No." He glares at me. "Don't do it."

"I... I have to," I mumble, "I don't have a choice."

"You always have a choice," Damian snarls. "I knew I shouldn't have trusted you." He releases me so quickly that I lose my balance once again.

This time I right myself.

"You're right." I flip my hair over my shoulder. "But it's too late now." I turn, face the rest of the Seven. Saint widens his stance, Sinclair sets his jaw, while Arpad glowers at me. Weston, Edward and Jace, who's lurking in the far corner, survey me with something like confusion.

"You should know—" I draw myself up to my full height. "You should know that—"

Behind me, I sense Damian's body grow rigid. The anger rolls off of him in waves and slams into me. My thighs tremble and my core melts... Jesus, the fact that even his anger turns me on so is depraved. I stare around the room, take in another breath, "You should know that he's writing again, and his lyrics are nothing short of genius."

"Knew it!" Arpad stabs a finger in Damian's direction. "Those words on your phone were yours, weren't they?"

"Who's writing?" Edward rises to his feet. "Is it Damian, you mean?"

"Lyrics?" Weston gasps in mock horror.

"Genius?" Saint's brow furrows.

"We talking about the same person here?" Sinclair finally drawls.

"Totally." I flex my fingers, which tremble. "You should read some of what he's written. It's vintage Damian Savage. The kinds of words which broke hearts and made his early album a cult hit—"

"Hold on," Damian snaps from behind me. "You read what I wrote."

"Oops," I curls my fingers at my sides, "I shouldn't have said that, huh?" I turn to him, "I can explain—"

"You read my work when I specifically told you not to."

"D... Damian... No, it's not like that."

"Then what is it like, huh?" He closes the distance between us and the tips of his boots brush against my stilettos. Yeah, I'd actually decided to pull out all the stops, gone in for the entire bride-in-white look. Not that the man has noticed, apparently, for he hasn't said a word on that. Not that I'd allowed him to, considering I'd pulled this crazy stunt on him.

"Damian," I whisper, "let me explain."

"Oh, you will." He curves his fingers about my shoulders, then lowers his forehead to mine. "Later, when we are alone, you can tell me all about your little spying trip in my space."

"I told you it's not like that," I insist. "I didn't go into your studio."

He frowns down at me. "Still lying to me, I see?" His gaze darkens. He

releases me, then turns me around to face the rest of our very interested audience.

"Well, now that the bride to-be is also here, we may as well as commence the ceremony."

"Hey, hold on, you weren't going to start without us, were you?" Summer marches in, Victoria at her heels.

Isla races inside, "Hey, has anyone seen Julia? I can't find her in the dressing room and—" she steps inside and spots me, "Oh, hell, Jules, what are you doing here?"

I bite the inside of my cheek. What should I say? I did something stupid? I got cold feet, and decided to come in search of my bridegroom—stupid I know, but too late—and found he was getting cold feet too, and that had made me angry. I knew I had to do something, but then the guys had begun to rib him, and well, I had to step in. Damn it, why do I feel so protective about this alphahole, when, clearly, the tenderness is something that is not yet reciprocated?

"She's exactly where she should be," Damian's voice rings out in the silence.

I glance sideways at his countenance. The skin around his lips is stretched tight and that vein at his temple is throbbing with such vehemence, I swear it's going to pop.

"Damian," I whisper, and he tightens his hold on my shoulder.

I wince. "Ouch," I protest, "you're hurting me."

"Good," he hisses under his breath, then glances back at Isla. "Change of plans. We are getting married here."

"What?" I gasp.

"Here?" Isla pales. "B...but the press who've been invited?"

"Fuck the press," Damian growls.

"Now, now, ol' chap." Arpad steps forward. "Let's think this through. You need the press."

"I've done without them for this long," Damian barks back.

"And this is the start of a new chapter in your life. It's why you agreed to invite them here... To witness you taking the first steps to your reformation," Edward adds.

"Says the man who couldn't wait to turn his back on the world," Damian snorts.

"I cannot believe you just said that," I gasp at him. "Honestly, Damian,

you need to apologize."

"What?" He glowers down at me from his superior height, "No."

I tip my chin up, stab a finger into his chest, "You tell him how sorry you are."

He scowls.

"Right now," I hiss at him.

"Fine," he hisses back, "but you're going to pay for this."

"Oh?" I flutter my eyelashes, "I'm counting on it."

His blue eyes blaze with those familiar sparks, his nostrils flare, he lowers his head, and I'm sure he's going to kiss me, or yell at me, or both. Instead, he brushes his nose up the side of my throat, and I shiver. He releases me and steps back.

"I apologize." He nods in Edward's direction, "I was out of line."

Edward seems taken aback, then he glances between us. "Don't say it because your wife-to-be asked you to," he sneers. "I can live without your fake repentance."

"Jesus," Damian swears, "does everything have to be so...so...packed with OTT sentiment with you?"

"That's me," Edward's lips curl, "I'm an OTT kind of guy."

"Huh?" I stare at the Father. And I'd always thought him to be a mellow kind of guy. Guess I thought wrong. Still waters always do run deep, apparently.

Isla's phone rings. She switches it off, then walks over to us, "You guys, if you're sure you don't want the press to be witness—"

"I'm not—"

"I'm sure," Damian snaps at the same time.

I stare up at him; he ignores me.

"Tell the press they'll get to do a short q-and-a with us after the wedding, as man and wife."

As man and wife. Of course, he would say that, rather than husband and wife. Gah! Big picture, Julia. He means to go through with it then. After everything I heard earlier, when I'd been sure that he would back out... He throws me for a loop again. Apparently, my little scene had worked. Too well. Now I am well and truly stuck.

"B...but," I force the words out, "what about the guests?"

"Ohmygod, the guests." Isla digs her fingers into her hair. "What do I do with them?" She stares between us. "Don't tell me you're not going to let

them witness the wedding after they agreed to attend, and at such short notice?"

Damian widens his stance; his muscles tense.

"Let's allow the guests in," I plead with him. "It's not fair that I asked Isla to help organize the wedding, which she pulled off in less than two days—"

"More like twenty-four hours," Isla pouts. "I should have known none of the Seven would do this the normal way. Have any of you all heard of planning things and not getting married on a whim?"

"Uh, I think I am the one to blame this time," I offer.

"You. Him." She scowls at Damian. "Once you women hook up with the Seven, it's like everything changes. All of you expect the world to bow down to you."

"So, what's wrong with that?" Damian frowns down at her, and honestly, he's being serious. Like, totally serious, here.

OMG. I dig my elbow in his side. "Stop," I reprimand him. "You're not helping."

"So?" He turns that blue gaze on me, "What do you recommend?"

"I recommend that we go ahead with the wedding, as planned—"

"No."

"Then we invite the guests up here instead?"

"Hmm. Let me think." He taps a finger against his cheek, gazes into the distance, "Not happening."

"What?" Isla gasps.

"No," I protest. "Don't do this. It will, likely, destroy your career."

"Which I stopped giving a fuck about a long time ago."

And I should too...but apparently, I can't. This man. He's too bloody talented to hide away from the world, and somehow, now that I know his secret... Not that it means I have any power over him... In fact, quite the opposite... I feel like I am responsible, somehow, for making sure he shares his talent again with the world... Hence, when he'd suggested inviting the press and the guests to the wedding, I had gone along...

All of this was his plan, and now he doesn't want to go through with it, settling instead, for a more intimate affair, which honestly, is what I prefer too... But the backlash from the press and the guests who, I am sure, would only be too happy to spread more rumors about Damian's downfall... And which bothers me more... And which—

Hold on! Why the hell am I so upset about it, somehow, while this

man...? He stands there watching me watch Isla have a nervous breakdown?

I lean up on tip-toe and tug at his sleeve. He lowers his head. "Please," I whisper, "for Isla's sake. Let's, at least, invite the guests up."

"For Isla's sake?"

"Yeah."

"So. It's another favor."

"Actually, you're doing yourself a favor by agreeing to have them here
—"

"Then, no." He straightens.

"What?"

"You heard me."

I open and shut my mouth, curl my fists at my sides, then mutter, "Fine, fine, it's a favor to me."

"To be repaid in full, as I want, when I want, how I want...?" He leans in closer, "In whatever form I want?"

I swallow, hesitate.

He turns to me, places his palms on my shoulder.

"Agree now, or forever hold your peace." He meets my gaze, "Well?"

40

Damian

Yes, it's a dick move—me arguing with her when she's trying so hard to save this shamble of a ceremony that I don't give a fuck about... And yes, it had been my idea to invite the press and the guests... Nothing like giving them a ringside view to my downfall, huh? After all, that's what I do best, right? Allow the world to sit centerstage as I detonate before them.

So why the hell is she so hellbent on saving my career? My reputation. As if she cares? Is it the money? The opportunity to rub shoulders with fame? Perhaps the chance to take credit for resurrecting a rock legend... More like a rolling stone that had gathered too much moss, excuse the sorry pun. And while we're at it, also excuse me for not being more trusting for how she begs me to go through with this sham of a wedding. One she'd initiated, by the way, so why the hell should I comply with what she has in mind? Unless... Well... I can use the situation to my own advantage, which you bet I am going to do.

"What is it to be, then?" I rake my gaze over her features. "Tell me, Julia. Yes or no? Are you in or out?"

She draws in a breath and her lips tremble. She glances around the room, no doubt, takes in the expressions of the rest of the Seven—whose opinions matter, of course, but not as much as she thinks. They're my friends, my brothers in arms, but none of them have been through what I have. To have bounced back from the incident only to have my soul shattered all over again? Well, let them try to recover from losing a part of themselves as I had.

I guarantee they wouldn't have made it as far as I have. Which isn't saying a lot, considering I've managed to screw up my life completely. And even now, when I should be thanking my good fortune that she came along, here I am, screwing it all up, all over again, and I can't stop myself.

She glances at Isla, then back at me. "Yes," she mutters, "I'll do as you please."

"Good." I take in her pale face, her huge eyes, the hair piled on top of her head. I reach down and she flinches, as I pull the pins from her hair.

She gasps and I hear a few murmurs from the women as her hair tumbles around her face. I arrange it about her shoulders to my satisfaction, then nod. "That's better." I lean down and kiss her cheek. "You're a good friend," I whisper in her ear before I tug on her earlobe, and she gasps.

"Just don't expect me to be the same," I growl. Her shoulders tremble. I step back, turn to Isla, "You can ask the guests to come in here, and we'll have a meet and greet with the press later."

Her forehead scrunches, then she nods, "Fine." She turns to leave.

Amelie walks up to Julia, "Let's get you freshened up, okay babe?" She hooks her arm through Julia's and leads her out, with Victoria and Summer at her heels.

I glance around the room, take in the expressions of the rest of my friends. They glare at me as if it's my fault. "What?" I rake my fingers through my hair. "I'm doing my best," I growl.

"It's not enough." Edward frowns.

"Do better then," Arpad snaps.

"Now, it's my fault?" I snap

"Always."

"You bet."

I stare at the traitors, "Whose side are you on?"

"Hers," they reply in one voice.

I dig my fingers into my hair and tug, "You guys can't be serious."

"You can't be serious, you complete ass." Arpad stalks forward and grabs my collar.

"Hey," I protest, "What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with you?" he snaps back. "The woman's in love with you, you shithead. She's trying to save your bloody soul—which is a lost cause, if you ask me, but whatever—and this is how you repay her?"

"How?"

"You know how." He drags me up by my collar, "You're being a complete, unreasonable prick—nothing new and I don't care— Hell, none of us cared if you stayed where you were, hiding behind your wall of grief like a coward—"

"I'm not a coward," I argue.

"Oh," he laughs, "that's not what I see."

"Don't say it," I warn him, "don't..."

"It's clear as hell that you want her by your side, even as you do your best to push her away. You want her to help you see the light, yet you do everything possible to drag her down into the darkness with you. Just like you've held the rest of us at arm's length, but here's what you should understand..."

"What?" My heart begins to race. There's a ball of fucking emotions in my throat that won't go away as much as I swallow. "You may as well as complete your little speech," I say through gritted teeth.

"We're not going anywhere," Arpad snaps.

Behind him, Edward chuckles. Sinclair and Saint stare at me with determination in their eyes. Weston folds his arms over his chest and raises one eyebrow. Jace crosses his legs, leans against the wall. "You heard the man," he says.

"That woman is worth ten—"

"A hundred—" Edward chimes in.

"A hundred," Arpad corrects himself, "of you." He nods. "And she cares about your fucking black heart—God knows why—and the rest of us can see what you can't."

"What?"

"That you love her, you prick."

"No."

"You fucking care for her for the first time since..."

I stare at him.

"Since your daughter died."

I squeeze my eyes shut. "It never gets easier," I mutter. "It's fucking killing me, man, that I'll never be able to read to her again, kiss her cheek, smell her baby scent, teach her to ride a bike, buy her a dog, run with her across the heath, buy her makeup, fight off the boys who dare glance at her... F-u-c-k, I'll never get to see her again and it's eating me from the inside! I can't go on."

"You must."

"It's tearing me apart... This... This thing is so real, I can see it, feel it, touch it... This horrible nothingness that's gnawing at me... It's tying me up in knots." I lower my chin to my chest, "It's suffocating me slowly."

"Write it out."

"Eh?" I glare at him, "You think I haven't tried."

"You have your muse with you now."

"Hmm."

"You and she both said you're finally writing."

"It's all crap."

"Not from what she said." Edward moves toward us.

"It is," I insist.

"That's for us to decide," Arpad replies.

"Right." I snort. "The day I show my early ideas to you knob-heads will be when I know I've finally lost it."

"Not us. Share it with her." Weston closes the distance to us. "Trust me, bro, having your woman by your side is like no other feeling on earth. The trust, the selflessness of what she brings to your relationship, how she reacts to your creative output, will be the most honest, the most loving, yet the most critical. You can trust her."

Can I?

"If I, the most cynical mofo on this side of the Atlantic, found my soulmate, I believe there is hope for you." Sinclair stalks toward me. He wraps his arms around me and Arpad. "You gotta believe in her, believe in yourself. You have to get through this."

"The wedding?" I mumble.

"That, too," Edward closes in from the other side to grip my shoulder, "and the grief that you have been holding inside and not sharing with us..."

I frown.

"You don't have to allow us in. I mean, as your priest, I'd love for you to confide in me. But as your friend, hell, if I want to peek into that twisted heart of yours." He chuckles.

"Thanks, man." I grimace.

"But you can open yourself up to her."

"Right." I crack my neck, "Who are you guys and what have you done to the Seven?"

"I can't speak for the others, but personally, the love of a good woman

changed me." Saint's lips twist. He prowls forward and grabs my neck to pull me toward him, then smashes his forehead to mine.

"Ow," I half yell, "What the hell, you dumbfuck? That hurt!"

"Good." He smirks. "Had to find the fastest way to get some sense through that thick skull of yours."

"What-fucking-ever."

Arpad laughs; the others chuckle.

"Now what?" I protest. "What is it you guys are trying to tell me?"

"Something that even that tosser Baron realizes, and he isn't even around." Jace joins us to complete the strange whatever-it-is that is going on here.

"Which is?" I finally ask.

"That you love her."

"You can't live without her."

"You need her and you better not fuck this up."

"You better take this opportunity and run with it and turn your life around or else—"

"Fine, fine," I half yell. "You guys are scaring me, with this weird emo, group hug thing."

"Group hug?" Arpad snorts. "What is a group hug of alphaholes called anyway?"

"A hole in the heart?" Weston offers.

"An alpha pit?" Edward grimaces. "Maybe not."

"Shitholes?"

Arpad laughs, "Forget I asked. The fact is, we may act like we don't give a fuck—which often, arguably, we don't—but in this instance, we're not giving you a choice, man. You're going to embrace this chance and make the fucking most of it."

"Stop yelling in my ear; I can hear you just fine," I grumble.

"It's time." Arpad glances around the group, "Shall we show this chap we mean business?"

My heart begins to race, adrenaline laces my blood, and I sense their intent a second before the tossers haul me up and carry me, up and toward the sliding doors of the room that opens out onto the rooftop where the tables have been laid out for the reception later. Beyond that all of London can be seen; but that's not what interests me as much as the glimmer of blue in the center... A fucking pool.

"Don't you fucking dare, you wankers, you dicks, you...pratholes."
I hear their laughter as I fall through the air.

41

Julia

"You ready?"

Isla straightens from where she's righted the hem of my skirt. My very short skirt that comes up to mid-thigh. I shuffle my feet—now clad in leather boots that come to over my knees. And the heels? Well, let's just say I feel like Wonder Woman right now, or Lady Gaga in her heyday... God knows, I need the confidence of both, rolled up together, to walk into that room. I stare at the double doors that are currently closed, and gulp. My fingers tremble and I clench them together. No flowers... Okay, so no real flowers. Instead, I have a bouquet of flowers made out of long-life clay, the kind that will last a long time, and become a true family heirloom. Something I hope to, one day, pass down to my children... When I have them... Me and Damian and our children. Jesus, will I have his kids? Will this marriage, that came out of nowhere—so what, if I had initiated it?—result in something that will last at least as long as this clay flower bouquet? Or will it wither away like those made of real flowers? Destined to be pressed into the pages of a book and be remembered for its shortness, the intensity with which it took place, only for things to implode? Are we destined to become a fly-by-night headline of the paparazzi? Here today, gone tomorrow? With not even the printed word having recorded our brief encounter? St-o-p right there. Talk about having an overactive imagination, huh? Jesus H, I need to get out of my head.

"Is it too much, you think?" I glance between Isla, who's listening to something on her ear piece, to Summer, who looks me up and down, to

Victoria, who flanks me, serene as always, in her pale green gown. They'd all agreed to be bridesmaids and walk me up the aisle, more out of encouragement than tradition. Not that anything about this wedding is old school. Far from it.

"You look like a rock star's bride." Victoria smiles at me.

"Is that good?" I wonder aloud.

"You look perfect." Summer smiles at me, her pale pink gown molding her slim curves and setting off her dark hair with the pink tips that she recently added. Her eyes gleam and she chuckles as she looks me up and down, "Karma had this couriered to me. Thank God, I got it to you in time."

"Karma?" I frown. "She's—"

"My sister." Summer nods. "She's been holed up with her Italian hunk forever." Summer flicks her hair over her shoulder. "If she doesn't show herself soon, I'm going to have to go to Sicily and find out what she's hiding."

"You think she's hiding something?"

Summer's forehead furrows. "It was a figure of speech, but now that you mention it, I wonder if there isn't a grain of truth to it."

"What are you going to do?" Isla asks her.

Summer wrings her fingers together. "The last time I spoke to her, she sounded odd. I asked her if something was wrong and she dismissed it, saying she was down with the flu." Summer rubs her fingers over her forearm. "As sisters, you know, we've always shared everything, but I simply can't get over this niggling instinct that there's more than she's letting on. Know what I mean?"

No, not really. I am an only child, so I've always wanted the kind of relationship with a sibling that Summer talks about, but I've never had access to it. Which is why, maybe, I love kids and want my own family... And now I'm getting married... And hell, I am starting this chapter of my life on a big fat lie. Shit, shit, shit, I can't stop the sobs that grip me.

"Ohmygod," I hear Isla gasp aloud, then she steps up to wrap her arm around my shoulders. "Babe, what's wrong?"

"N... nothing," I blubber.

"Something is." Summer walks over to rub my back, in slow steady circles, "It's okay, honey, let it all out. So much has happened in the past few days, it must be catching up with you."

"Well, I wish it had caught up with me later. I need to feel stronger, I do,

but damn, if everything doesn't seem...like...like..."

"It's all out of control?" Amelie joins us. She holds out a wad of tissues and I grab them, dab at my eyes. "Yeah," I sniff. "I mean, what if he hates me for what I'm making him do?"

"You did the right thing," Amelie insists.

"I know, but what if he never forgives me for it?"

"He will," Isla replies. "Maybe not immediately. I mean, when did a man recognize when something good happened to him, huh? Not even when it hits him over the head, does he admit that it's the right thing for him."

I blow my nose, then look for a way to discard the tissues. "Here," Isla holds out another tissue and I drop them in there. She wraps them up, then carries them over to the wastebasket. "Look, babe, if you don't feel this is the right thing for you, we can call it off."

"What?" I blink.

Isla glances at Summer, who nods, "Sure, doll, you say the word and we'll take care of the groom. Not to mention, the alphaholes in there. We'll hold them off—"

"And the press and guests," Victoria adds. "We'll take care of them all, if you want to leave."

"Oh," I swallow, then glance around their faces. Do I want to do that? Do I want to get the hell out of here? Out of what could be the biggest mistake of my life, or the biggest opportunity to...to find true love, to find out what makes Damian tick, to figure out how to help him, to help myself by helping him... Yeah... I know, it's warped... But something about this man... Since I'd first seen him in person, I'd known there couldn't be anyone else for me. I need to... Want to hold up a mirror to him, to show him the man I see, the soul he hides from the world... The words that he writes when he's alone, the melodies that bleed from his fingers when he thinks no one hears, the... Tenderness that he has yet to show me with any consistency, but which I know is hidden under that veneer of alphaholiness he likes to draw around himself like a cloak, because I've seen glimpses of it... Unless I am mistaken about him? And my instinct says, no, I'm not. That things will somehow work out... *Will they?*

I drag my gaze across the faces of my friends, "Will it all work out?"

Victoria moves forward and wipes a tear drop from my cheek, "When I married Saint, I thought it was the end of life as I knew it, and I was right."

"You...you were?"

She smiles, a secret uplift of her lips that hints at so many things, I can't put a name to all of the emotions. "Turned it, was the start of my best life, my only life, the dream life I wanted, but thought I'd never have. The Seven, you see... They under-promise and over-deliver."

"You make it sound like a business transaction," I tilt my head.

She chuckles. "Maybe it is. They, together, have interests in one of the biggest financial services companies in the country. Making money is a passion for them, pushing things to the very edge is their specialty, and then there is the non-profit they started together."

"Is that FOK media?" I remember reading about it in the press.

"FOK media," she nods, "the full name of which is, Full of Kindness."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope." She laughs. "It's a nonprofit that identifies and manages upcoming fresh talent. They extend interest-free loans to the most deserving ones, to start their own businesses."

"The Seven instituted that?" I start.

"Yes..." she smiles, "stuff they don't like to talk about, but which you'll find out as you get to know them better."

"O-kay." I scan her features, "What are you trying to say?"

"Give Damian a chance. Get to know him. While this is not a traditional arranged marriage, in some ways, you are marrying a stranger."

"Except he isn't," I say. "Not really."

"Exactly." She pats the space above my heart, "Where it counts, you know."

"Yeah," I swallow, "you're right. I do know him. I know that he's not as self-destructive as he wants me to believe, not as cruel as he tries to portray himself, not as...lacking in heart as he often signals with his actions, not as," I swallow around the lump in my throat, "not as much of an alphahole as the persona he portrays to the world." I stare into her face. "So... You're saying, there's a chance that things will work out?"

She wipes a stray tear off of my cheek, "Only one way to find out, babe. You ready to go in now?"

Damian

I tug on the sleeve of my button down, then glance at Arpad, "How do I look?"

"Your usual sorry self." He grins.

"Jesus, why the hell did I bother to ask?" I glance forward through the now-open doors onto the rippling waters of the pool where I had been unceremoniously dunked and held captive by the rest of my ex-friends... Yep, I've officially disowned them, as of fifteen minutes ago—when they'd not allowed me out of the pool until I'd promised I'd go through with the ceremony... Which, to be honest, I had no intention of skipping. Not after that promise I'd obtained from Flower. And while I had been upset with her having sneaked a peek at my work—How the hell had she come across it, anyway?—it had, more, been surprise at her coming to my defense in the face of the rest of the Seven turning on me. Including that bastard Baron.

Bastard knew exactly what to say in his letter. He'd goaded me, knowing I'd do the exact opposite of what he suggested. I curl my fingers into fists.

How the hell had he found out about my upcoming nuptials anyway?

A mystery that Arpad has taken upon himself to track down, given the letter had been sent to him.

I roll my shoulders in the perfectly-fitted tux—which Edward had produced, along with the rest of this tailored suit that I am wearing. Seems this is his wedding gift to me. He'd had it arranged, right down to the formal shoes. I glance down at my feet. I am actually wearing Italian-fucking-

loafers. When was the last time I put on such formal wear? At Stella and Riley's funeral.

I draw in a breath, waiting for that familiar pain to stab at my chest... And it does, and my guts churn, and my belly coils in knots, and yet... Somehow, I also swallow down the taste of my grief and turn to where the rest of the men are lined up to my left. "I'm going to get back at you guys," I warn.

"Looking forward to it, brother," Arpad chuckles.

"Better make sure it's not an empty threat this time, Savage," Jace laughs, before blowing a kiss across the space to his wife Sienna, who just walked in with their newborn in a sling. The tiny baby looks fucking sweet, I'll admit. How the hell can I even look at the kid without tying myself in knots like I used to, huh? Apparently, sharing my grief, first with Julia, then with Arpad and the rest of this lot, seems to have loosened something inside of me. Maybe there is hope for me? Perhaps I can get past the darkness that has gripped me for so long?

"You okay, Savage?" Saint asks.

"Yes." I shake my head, "No. Shit..." I drag my fingers through my still damp-hair... Yeah, I'd managed to jump into the shower in the changing rooms by the pool, which is where I'd also gotten dressed. My wedding day and I am actually dressed in a formal tux—something which is so far from my own style that, honestly, I have to ask... How the hell did this happen?

"Also, you're welcome," Sinclair drawls.

"For what?" I scowl.

"For making sure you turned up for your own wedding, you shoe stain."

I wince, "Getting creative with your insults, finally, I see?"

"Getting antsy as the time draws closer, I see?" Arpad chuckles. He pulls out his phone and snaps a shot.

"What the fuck?" I mutter. "You're in disgustingly good humor."

"Unlike you." Edward smiles from his place in front of me. "Not long now, Savage." He smirks. "Any last wishes before this last step?"

"Hey," I protest, "you're my priest, for fuck's sake—"

"No swearing," he says mildly.

"And you smirked," I accuse him. "Didn't think you had a mean bone in your body."

"Much you don't know about me." Edward's eyes gleam. For a second, I am sure I glimpse something beyond the affable, if quiet, priest and friend I've known for so long—something darker, more violent... Unpredictable?

Hell, I should know. I was—am—the same.

"Jesus, Ed," I mutter, "you're going to get into so much trouble one of these days."

"Nothing I can't handle." His smile widens as he stares past me.

"Straighten up, Savage," Arpad calls out to me.

"What?" I tug down the lapels of my shirt. "What's wrong?"

"The doors are opening."

"Shit." I curl my fingers into fists at my sides. I've faced a crowd of millions at Wembley Stadium, so compared to that, this should be a moon walk—I mean, cake walk—right? There are, what, fifty handpicked guests, at the most, in the room, all of whom I know, in one capacity or another. So why the hell are my palms damp? My stomach churns; my guts heave. "Fuck, I am going to be sick," I mutter.

"You're not." Arpad laughs

"Wait until it's your turn, you prick," I growl.

"Na-a-ah." He waggles a finger. "Not falling for the oldest trick in the book, my man. Besides, I am going to have my hands full, seeing how you cope."

"Ha-fucking-ha." I widen my stance, push my shoulders back. *Easy now. This is a walk in the park, a simple ceremony. A few minutes and it'll all be over. All you have to do is—* I turn toward the doorway, and that's when my world turns upside down.

What the hell is she wearing?

Julia steps into the room and a hush descends. The guests stop talking, sensing the presence of an angel. A goddess? The epitome of femininity, who is every fantasy I ever had. She takes a step forward and the long sweep of her leg gleams in the sunlight that chooses that moment to stream down from the open window. The ray spotlights her, bounces off the tiny stars in the thin veil that floats above her face, and entwines with her dark hair that cascades about her shoulders. The lace of her bodice encircles her neck and flows down to meet the beading that starts above her breasts; the corset cinches in, showing off her impossibly small waist before flaring over those gorgeous hips and ending at mid-thigh.

Slim thighs, made for being wrapped around my waist, the muscles moving and giving as I haul her up against the nearest door and pin her to it with my cock buried inside of her. "Fuck," I swear aloud and Arpad elbows me in the ribs. *Get your mind out of the gutter this once, will you?* But how

can I stop the lascivious thoughts that run through my mind as she glides closer, closer, her arms encased in that same ivory lace that sets off the creamy skin I'd caressed not so very long ago?

And now she is baring her body to the people here. My muscles tense, my groin hardens, and something primitive coils in my chest. Lust? Jealousy? Possession? How dare she reveal herself in front of the world when the only person who is allowed to see her, feel her, hold her, make love to her, is me? *She's mine. All mine.* And no way, do I want anyone else laying their gaze on her beauty. So what, if they appreciate her? Too bad. *She belongs to me. Only me.* I take a step forward and Arpad grabs my arm.

"What are you doing?" he mutters.

"What?"

"You okay, Romeo?"

"Huh?" I shake my head to clear it. "You can let go of me. I am not going to do anything stupid."

"You sure?" He leans in close then brushes some imaginary dust off of my shoulder. "You're not going to pick her up and run out of here, or something?"

I had considered it. I flex my fingers, feel my pocket. Good. My surprise is still there. "Nah," I wrench my shoulder from his grasp, "I'm done running." I glance up at my bride, who walks past the gathering and toward her future, "Besides there's something I need to complete first."

"You not going to do anything stupid, are you?" There's a note of concern in Arpad's voice.

"Can't promise that," I allow my lips to curl, "but whatever I do, it will make for a great headline." I focus on looking relaxed, lock my gaze with my bride's.

She comes to a stop in front of me, tips up her chin.

I glance down at the green eyes that stare up at me through the barrier of her veil. I take in her flushed features, the quivering lips, the upturned nose.

I glare at her; she trembles. She gulps, tips up her chin. I reach for her veil and raise it over her head. A sigh runs through the audience.

I bend down, press my mouth close to her ear. "Nothin' lasts forever," I whisper, and the bouquet slips from her fingers.

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Julia

The bouquet slips from my nerveless fingers. He swoops down and grabs it before it can hit the floor. A ripple runs through the crowd. Yeah, talk about unorthodox weddings, huh? Other than the fact that I am dressed like Axl Roses' freakin' bride from November Rain, and that Damian has changed into a tux—sans tie—and fitted dress slacks, complete with pointed Italian loafers and a blue handkerchief tucked in his left breast pocket, which means that he looks like James Bond—Daniel Craig not Pierce Brosnan—with that hard jaw, mean lips and piercing blue gaze of his, which had eaten me up from the moment he'd turned and stared straight at me.

For a second there, his entire body had tensed, his features had taken on an expression of... Shock? Lust? Need? Ha, I must have been dreaming. Damian f'ing Savage would never need anything from me. No, he'd demand and simply take; and I'd let him. When it comes to the rock star, I can't say no, and hell, if that isn't the reason I am standing here, even after that cryptic statement of his: *Nothin' lasts forever*. Does he mean us? This marriage, this relationship that never was? I open my mouth to ask, when he shakes his head.

"But—" I protest and he turns and hands the bouquet over to Isla, who steps up to take it. She moves away, and Damian faces forward. I clasp my fingers together, follow his lead to face Edward.

He glances between us, then gestures to the crowd behind us, who subside.

"We are gathered here today to celebrate the union of Damian Savage and Julia Child Andrews.

I cringe. Yep, not making that up. That really is my middle name, and now you know who my mother's hero was—a travesty, considering I can't cook... Unless you count baking clay a form of cooking, which, coming to think of it, it is.

"I believe the couple would prefer to recite their vows to each other directly, instead of having me officiate?"

We would? Eyes wide, I stare at Edward, then shoot a sideways glance at Damian who nods.

"Why didn't you warn me?" I hiss at the rock star, who curls his lips.

"You didn't ask."

"You could have told me," I whisper-scream.

"You're the one with all the answers." He turns to me, "I am sure you'll think of something. Meanwhile..."

"Meanwhile?" I mirror his stance. "What's happening, meanwhile?"

"Meanwhile, I say my vows, of course." He smiles.

"Vows?"

His grin widens. He holds out his hand, palm face up. "Take it," he coaxes me.

I glance down at his hand, then up at his face, "Is this a joke?"

"I've never been more serious." His features grow intense and his gaze narrows. He jerks his chin, and damn it, but I can't refuse him. I place my hand in his.

His warm fingers dwarf mine. He rubs his thumb over the back of my hand and my pulse rate ratchets up. His lips curl and I know he's aware of exactly how his proximity affects me. Jerk. I try to pull my arm away and he curls his fingers around my hand, holding me in place.

Then he pulls out a piece of white ribbon from his pocket.

Huh?

He proceeds to wrap the ribbon around our joined hands, once, twice, thrice, then he raises his gaze back to mine, "You changed my life from the moment I met you. When I look into your eyes, I see my future. All I want is to hold you and protect you through sickness and sorrow, through happiness and life's challenges. I promise to always take care of you, to be there for you when you need me, and when you don't, I promise not to be an ass."

The audience laughs.

"I promise to cherish you and shield you, and walk by your side through life's ups and downs. Say you'll be mine, Julia. Only mine."

I stare up into those piercing blue eyes; the darkness in his irises deepens with an intensity that's so palpable, my knees tremble. The heat of his big body reaches out to me, envelops me in a warm embrace—solid, dependable. In that moment, I believe his words, the honesty that thrums in the space between us. The vibration of something powerful, something bigger than either of us, grips me. I curl my fingers about his hand, or as much as I can reach of his broad palm.

"I will," I whisper, and his features seem to take on an expression of relief. Huh? Did he think I would refuse him and flounce off? If he only knew. "I promise to walk by your side through the good days and the bad, through ups and downs. When things get tough, there's no one else I'd rather turn to than you. When the moments of celebration arrive, there's no one else I'd rather rejoice with than you. When my spirits nose dive, and that happens quite often, I warn you—"

There's a titter from the assembled women.

"—there's no one else I'd rather have to cheer me up than you." I swallow, place my other hand over our joined palms, "for, I love you."

His throat moves as he swallows.

"I have loved you, Damian Savage, from even before I knew who you were, and when I laid my eyes on you, there was no one else."

His face pales.

"There can be no one else."

His features harden.

"But you. Only you, Damian."

Silence descends.

I glance up as he holds my gaze. A vein throbs at his temple. The skin around his eyes tightens. He searches my face with such single-minded concentration, I am sure he's memorizing my features.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife." Edward's voice sounds like it comes from somewhere far away. "You may kiss the bride."

He places his free palm over mine, then tugs. I lean in, raise my chin as he lowers his face to mine. Closer, closer. Not breaking the connection between our eyes, he presses his lips to mine.

Soft, sweet, he holds his mouth in place as he shares my breath, and holds my gaze. He's so close, I can discern the golden dot in the iris of his left eye.

The crease of fine lines that radiate out from the edges of his eyes, the single grey hair at his right temple. And it's the most intimate moment of my life. And the most erotic. More than all the times that he's fucked me... For this time... Something feels different, almost as if he means his vows, as if he's trying to tell me something with his body language.

He wraps his other arm around my waist, pulls me to him. My lips part and he slides his tongue over mine. A shiver runs down my spine and desire flares low in my belly. A moan swells up my throat. An answering groan rumbles from his chest. This... This, I know. This dance is familiar. Whatever our differences, our bodies have always been in sync. I expect him to deepen the kiss, to ravage my mouth and take...and take... And he pulls back.

Huh? I flutter open my eyelids to find him staring down at me with something like wonder and bemusement and heat. I rise up on tip-toe, try to reach his mouth again.

He chuckles, then lowers his lips to mine and kisses me—softly, deeply, nerve-wrackingly, heartbreakingly, genuinely... Oh, I don't have the words to describe how it feels when he coaxes me to open my mouth and swoops his tongue inside to drink from me, suck from me, mold my body to his as he ravages my mouth, and I want him. Oh, how I want him, right there, in front of everyone. I moan, and he brushes his lips over mine again.

"Julia," he whispers against my cheek, "my beautiful bride, I—"

A shot rings through the space.

Damian

I hear the shot a second before she gasps. Her gaze widens.

"Julia?" I frown down at her.

"Damian." She shudders. "Damian, I love you."

"I know," I snap.

Her knees buckle and I twist our joined hands behind her and haul her even closer. She's so damn slim, I can barely feel her weight. "Julia, what's wrong?" I growl. Around me, the scene explodes and I am aware of the rest of the Seven moving to plant their bodies between us and the source of the shot. "Julia?" My heart begins to race and my pulse thuds at my temples. "Julia?" A wetness bleeds into my hand. I raise it, and I know what it is even before I spot the scarlet on my fingers.

"Oh, my fucking god! Julia, you're hurt."

Her eyelids flutter. "Why are you always so angry?" she whispers. "Is it me? Do you hate me Damian?"

"No." I shake my head; my throat closes. I try to yank my hand free of the binding that ties me to her and the goddam ribbon refuses to give. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"Don't swear." She half smiles.

I tug again and manage to pull free. I wrap my arms around her, cradle her against my chest, and she glances up at me. "I love the view from here," she says.

"And I love you," I cry out. "Julia, baby, I love you. You hear me?"

"I know." Her voice is serene. She raises a hand to my face and cups my cheek. "My beautiful man." She closes her eyes and my heart explodes in my chest.

"No!" I howl. "Fucking fuck, Julia, don't you dare die on me! You hear me?" I shake her bodily, and she coughs. She opens her eyes and I draw in a breath. The oxygen rushes to my lungs and for a second the world tilts. I righten to find she's staring up at me.

"Damian?"

"I'm here."

"Don't let go of me," she whispers.

"I won't; I promise."

She closes her eyes again, her black lashes a dark fan against her white skin. *No, no, no.* "I will not let you die. You hear me?" I scream. "Don't you dare leave me. Not after the promises you made, Julia, Flower... Please, baby."

There's a commotion, another shot going off. I gather her close, turn my back on the rest of the audience, blocking out the room... Everything else... The world.

Why didn't I learn my lesson? I lost my daughter and found Julia and refused to acknowledge what she meant to me. I'd waited until the last moment to tell her I love her. I had failed my marriage vows, broken them within seconds of making them. Typical.

"Damian?" There's a touch on my shoulder and I shake it off. "It's Weston, let me take a look at her."

"No." I shake my head, refusing to relinquish my hold on her. If I do, I'll never see her again.

"Rockstar, let me help her. I'm a surgeon, remember?" Weston's words cut through the chaos in my head. I glance over into his calm features. I know him. I can trust him with my Flower.

He nods and I lower Julia to the floor.

I kneel next to her prone body, watch as he pulls off his jacket and presses it to her wound, to stem the bleeding.

"Damian," someone grips my shoulder, "the intruder has been apprehended."

I glance up into Edward's face. "I want to see him."

Edward nods.

"I want to see the face of the motherfucker who dared take away the most precious thing in my life. I want revenge," I state in a voice that's so calm, so precise. *How the hell am I even alive when my darling wife, the love of my life, is gone?*

"I'm not sure that's advisable—"

"I will not stop until I have my revenge. You understand?"

He nods.

"Damian," Arpad squats down next to me, "the ambulance is here."

There is more commotion behind me, then a paramedic looms over us. "We need to look at her, Sir."

"No." I spring to my feet and grab the paramedic's collar, "Don't you fucking touch her."

"Damian," Arpad hauls me back, "they need to help Julia."

"Julia," I swallow, "my Flower, my wife."

"Yes," he grips my shoulder, "let them examine her."

The paramedic reaches for her and I shove away his hand. "No. Please," I beg, "don't take her away from me."

Edward grips my other shoulder, "I promise, they won't."

"No," I growl, "I don't believe you. I don't believe any of you. I need to be with her. She asked me to stay with her. I can't allow her to leave. You understand? She's all I have left, and I love her, and I didn't realize it until now. Do you understand, I—?"

Edward's hand connects with my cheek and the shock of it—not only the physical impact of the slap, but that it's Edward behaving out of character again—is enough for me to loosen my grip.

Arpad and Edward drag me away. Weston steps back and the paramedics move in.

My friends keep ahold of me and I watch as one paramedic takes over trying to stem the bleeding from the wound while the other fits an oxygen mask over her face.

They strap her onto a stretcher, begin to carry her away. Edward coaxes me to follow and I force myself to put one foot in front of the other.

Isla stops us, "The press conference, the reporters..."

"Fuck the reporters," I growl.

"Let's not alienate the press," Arpad cautions.

"Fuck that," I snap, "My wife was just shot and you think I care about the world?"

He grips my neck and forces me to meet his gaze, "Take two hours," he says. "Then, you need to talk to them. Julia would want you to do this."

Right. I draw in a breath, force myself to focus, focus. "At the hospital," I finally mutter, "I'll issue a statement in two hours."

Isla nods and darts off.

I head for the doors, supported by Arpad and Edward on either side, like the fucking loser that I am. I can't even walk on my own, it seems. I twist away from their grasp; they don't protest. I stalk forward, my friends in tow, past the few remaining guests, out the open doors, down the steps, toward where the paramedics are loading in the stretcher with my life, my heart... How am I even breathing right now?

I stumble and Arpad rights me, "You okay?"

No, I never will be again.

I reach the ambulance, grab hold of the handle to pull myself inside, when another woman stops me. "The cops will need to speak with you."

I stare at her, not able to place her features.

"Karina?" Arpad steps forward.

Karina glances at him; her features tighten. "The cops," she repeats. "They need his statement."

"Not now, we need to go to the hospital," I snap.

Arpad shoots me a warning glare.

I hold his gaze for a second, then turn to Karina, "At the hospital, after the press conference."

She nods. "Three hours, no more. Also," she scowls, "the shooter was the same man who broke into your place a few months ago."

A paramedic interrupts, "Sir, we need you to get in so we can close the doors now."

"Motherfucker," I say to Karina as I pull myself into the vehicle. "I am going to make sure he goes down for a long time."

"You do that, Rockstar." She turns and heads toward the waiting cops .

I sink down into the seat next to Julia and hold her hand.

As the doors begin to close, Arpad calls out, "I'll be right behind you."

Julia

The darkness is so soothing, it envelops me, cocoons me. I want to stay here, and yet, something niggles at my subconscious mind. Him. Where is he? I reach for him and find nothing. Panic grips me... I need to go to him. I can't leave, not now, not when he said he loves me. He LOVES me. Of course, he'd said it under duress... On my last breath... Last breath? No, I am not dying, am I? I can't die. I don't want to die. Goddam it. I snap my eyes open and the light blinds me.

"Ow," I protest, "I hate fluorescent lights."

"Julia?" The light cuts out, to be replaced by his face—his hard chin, those high cheekbones, the skin stretched across it, now pale and with hollows under those beautiful eyes. "Julia?" His stern lips form my name and I watch, fascinated at the few grey hairs that thread his stubble.

"You're old." I cough, and my voice sounds strange, even to me.

"You're back, Julia." He turns my palm, the fingers of which are entwined with his, I now realize. He lowers his head and presses his lips to my knuckles. "Thank God, you're back."

"Where did I go?" I frown.

"Nowhere," he places his other palm over mine and presses our joined palms to his cheek, "you were right here with me, all this time."

"Where am I?" I glance around, taking in the fixtures, the clean lines, the fluorescent lights above—I had been right about that—the screen which monitors my heartbeat... Oh. "I'm at the hospital?"

He nods, "Do you remember what happened?"

I turn to him, "I was shot?"

"Left shoulder, the bullet scraped the skin."

I try to raise my left hand and a dull throbbing sensation shoots down my back. I glance down to find my arm is in a cast. "Oh," I swallow. "But I am okay?"

"More than fine." He cups my cheek, turns my face back to his. "You are going to make a complete recovery."

His blue gaze is clear, almost innocent. His hair is disheveled, the wrinkles at his eyes more prominent. The tendons of his throat move as he, once more, presses his lips to my fingers. "Damn it, Flower, I thought...you were... That you were..."

"Dead?"

He winces. "Told you never to say that word."

"And I am telling you now that I am not going to let you go so easily."

"Huh?"

"We just got married! You didn't think I was going to pop off and allow you to walk away a free man?"

He laughs, "I'd forgotten how sassy you can be sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"Okay," he concedes, "most of the time."

"Wow." I blink at him, and he frowns.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me," he coaxes. "What were you thinking?"

"Just that, you've never agreed to my point of view so easily."

He rubs his cheek against my fingers. "Don't get used to it," he mutters.

"Of course, not." I glance at the sleeve of his tux, now ripped over his right shoulder.

"Your jacket is torn."

He glances at it, then back at me, "The same bullet that grazed you—"

"Tore through your sleeve?"

He nods.

"Ohmygod." I grip his fingers with my other hand. "Ohmygod, Damian, it could have hurt you."

"Instead, it's you who took the bullet. Meant for me," he mutters, a strange expression stealing over his face. "If something had happened to

you?" His features contort. "If anything had happened to you, Flower... I'd have... Never recovered from it. I'd have killed myself."

"Hush." I place my fingers over his lips. "Now who's talking about the 'D' word, huh?"

His mouth twists. "I am allowed."

"Not on my watch." I smile.

"About that," he looks to the side, then back at me, "I have something to tell you."

The hair on the nape of my neck rises. I peruse his features, the vein that thuds at his temple, his eyes, which are clear with a decision that he'd made at some point in the last few hours while I was out cold. He strokes my hand with a fervor reserved for near-death experiences which, yeah, I admit, I'd been through. But I am here and alive and so is he, so why does he harden his jaw, lower his forehead to our joined hands as if paying homage, right before he leans over and kisses my brow? His touch—gentle, soft, caring... So not like the Damian I know.

"Baby?" I whisper, "What's wrong?"

He releases me and sits back in his chair. Why is he putting distance between us?

"Damian?" I plead, "Speak to me. Tell me what you're thinking."

"I'm sorry," he says.

"For what?"

"You're going to hate me, but later, when you are happy, and with a family of your own, you'll know that I was right."

"About what?" I try to sit up, but the goddam pillows are all at the wrong angle. "And I want to have a family with you, Damian. You know that."

"I know," he nods, "and so did I, but that was before."

My heart begins to race so fast, I am sure I'm having a cardiac. Good thing I am in a hospital, huh? And no, I am still breathing. No other pains or anything, so not a heart attack. Just this stupid oaf, trying to pull another alphaholish stunt on me, I think. "Stop it," I growl.

He looks at me with so much helplessness, so much anguish, so much regret that tears fill my eyes. "Damian, no," I choke out. "Don't do it."

"It's done." He half smiles. "I am getting the marriage annulled."

"What?"

He nods.

"This was all a mistake."

"But you love me."

"I do." He looks down at his lap, studies his hands. "I've never loved another woman as much as I do you."

"Then?" I stare, "Why... Oh!" I draw in a breath. "Oh. That's why you came to this stupid-ass decision."

The look of bewilderment on his face would be amusing if I didn't want to strangle him right now. "What do you mean?" His jaw tics. "And it's the right decision."

"It's clear that you are running scared. Typical," I snarl. "All you men who talk big and have larger-than-life personas and are fucking dominant and don't hesitate to take what you want, and when it comes to the real stuff, when the rubber hits the pavement—"

"The road," he corrects me, "when the rubber hits the—"

"Whatever!" I yell. "When it's time to face up to your true feelings and make tough decisions, you're the first to blink." I snort. "And who, exactly, is this the right decision for?" I push myself to an upright position, succeed this time, then wince when my shoulder protests.

He reaches for me, and I slap his hand away. "Don't you dare touch me."

He doesn't glare at me, simply folds his hands back in his lap, and damn it. Damian, asshole Damian, being compliant... Bloody hell. My belly knots and the band around my chest tightens. This is not good. Not good at all.

"I made this decision in a cogent frame of mind and it's right for you," he states.

"You mean it's right for *you*," I spit out. "You're so fucking selfish. Why didn't I realize that? You're doing it just to save yourself heartbreak. So you don't have to experience the highs and lows of a relationship. You'd rather not try. You prefer to give up a chance at true love and a marriage and all the experiences you could have because... You. Are. A. Coward."

"I'm not—"

"You are," I snap. "In fact, you are so afraid of heartbreak, that you've been using your daughter as a shield all along. By pretending Riley is alive, you protect yourself not only from the pain of losing her, but also from the pain of losing anyone else."

His features harden. "You don't know what you're talking about."

I shake my head, "That's where you're wrong. I know you better than you know yourself. And, it's only now that I'm realizing why I proposed to you."

"Because you love me?"

"You actually have the audacity to throw that in my face, now?"

He glances away, then back at me. "You love me; that's why you asked me to marry you."

"Not only," I snarl. "I proposed to you, because I knew you didn't have the guts to ask me to marry you. Because I knew if I left it to you, you'd put it off, or never come around to it, or always have an excuse as to why it wasn't right for us. You'd always reduce what we have to a transaction or something where our feelings were irrelevant. It's why I took the opportunity when I saw it. Because I knew you loved me, even before you told me. Before you could even admit it to yourself. Because I *know* we are right for each other. We'd be so amazing together, Damian."

"You're wrong." His jaw firms, "I am completely wrong for you. In fact, I am the last person you should associate with."

I gape at him, then throw up my one good arm, "You're pathetic, Damian Savage, you know that? You're a wuss."

He winces, then straightens his shoulders. "Now you know." His lips twist. "Now you realize why there can't be a future for us, in any form."

I open and close my mouth. "Really?" I stare. "You're doing this now? After everything we've been through, you're backing away?"

"This is the only way."

"It's not." My eyes begin to burn.

"It is."

"Don't do this." I reach for him and he pushes his chair back.

"You promised you wouldn't leave me," I choke out through a throat gone dry.

"And you know, I never keep my promises." He holds my gaze, leaving me in no doubt of his intent. His eyes are clear, his expression vacant.

Asshole. How can he do this? How can he be so calm when my entire world is collapsing around me? "I hate you," I cry. "I wish I'd never met you in person."

"Good." He nods, as if this were his intention all along.

I gape at him. "That's all you have to say to me?" I sputter.

"Not only." He rises to his feet. "You can keep the flat." He pivots and stalks to the door, and damn him, but I can't let him go, not without saying or doing something to hurt him as much as he's hurt me.

"Tell Riley I said goodbye."

He pauses mid-step. His big body jolts as if I'd just whipped him or shot him all over again. He stays there immobile, a beat, another. Then straightens up to his full height.

"Goodbye, Julia." He heads for the doors and walks out.

45

#DamianSavage delivers another flop, this time his joke marriage

#DamianSavage are you coming? Or going? Pun intended...

#DamianSavage he's free girls, but baby daddy material he sure isn't anymore...

Damian

I stare across the garden at the greenhouse. The greenery creeps up the transparent panels of the walls, to crisscross the area. It lends a spider-web kind of appearance to the entire space. A bit like my life right now. Only difference is, I am caught in a web of my own making.

How could I have fucked things up so royally? I had married her, and she had almost died. That... That says it all. If something had happened to her...? I could have never forgiven myself. For a second there, when I'd said my vows, I'd almost believed that I could make a go of it, have a happily ever after. Who the hell had I been kidding? Those kinds of happy endings don't exist for assholes like me who can't put a step forward without getting it all wrong.

There's a noise behind me. I turn to find Arpad leaning against the door of my studio.

"You?" I growl.

"Expecting someone else?"

"You're on the wrong side of the door," I mutter.

"You're on the wrong side of life, you bloody coward," he roars.

"Tell me something I don't know." I cross the floor to the settee in the far corner and sink into it. Then lift my bottle of whiskey in his direction, "Want some?"

He frowns. "Christ, Savage, it's not even noon."

"It's noon somewhere in the world."

He glares at me. "Pull yourself together."

"What does this look like?" I swig from the bottle of liquor.

My stomach protests; I ignore it. I deserve to be stinking drunk, enough that I wipe out the memory of her eyes, her face, how she'd paled when I'd announced that I was getting the marriage annulled. Hell. I raise the bottle of whiskey and swig from it again.

"Are you done destroying what little there is left of you?"

"Done?" I laugh. "I'm barely getting started." I tilt the bottle to my lips, suck on empty air. "Shit." I glance around, then lean over to place it right next to its twin, equally empty, as are all of the others that I have arranged in a line on the coffee table in front of me. "You have to admit I'm at least a tidy drunk," I mumble.

"What you are, is a bloody pussy."

"No argument from me on that." I stagger to my feet and weave my way to the bar, where I reach for another bottle of whiskey. A hand stops me... Not mine... Which means it must belong to that ass, Arpad. I follow the arm attached to it, to the face of my friend, who glowers at me. "What?" I groan. "Can't a man enjoy his liquor in peace, at least?"

He snatches the bottle from me. I reach for another. He pushes that out of my reach and I stumble around the bar toward the bottles placed against the wall.

"Don't do it," he snaps.

I raise my middle finger in the air. "I just did it."

I hear him move; the hair on the nape of my neck rises. I know he's coming for me, and I turn, but hey, guess what? All the liquor I drank has, in fact, slowed down my reflexes. Imagine that? He grabs me by my shoulder and begins to haul me toward the door of the study. "What the fuck man?" I protest, "What the hell are you up to?"

"Thank me for the fact that I still care enough to come here and haul your ass away from the path of self-destruction you are on."

He shoulders open the door and marches me down the hallway.

"So, what's new?" I laugh. "It's what I do best. Destroy everything good that ever comes into my life."

"What the hell, Savage?" He releases me so quickly that I stumble, then right myself.

"Hey, watch it," I mumble.

"No, you watch it," he yells.

My ears begin to ring. "Pipe down, man," I mutter. "If you make too much noise, you'll wake up Ri—" *Shit*. I flatten my lips.

"Riley?" His features take on a stricken look. "Damian... What are you talking about? Riley's gone. Your daughter's dead, Damian."

Of course, I know that, and yet hearing it from his mouth, makes it seem all final and real and I know then that she is never coming back. She's never going to be with me again. She's gone, and so is my love, my Flower, my Julia. She's gone, and it's my fault.

I straighten, "Thanks for letting me know." I brush down the front of my sweatshirt. "You can leave now."

"Damian, don't do this. Let's talk, at least."

"Since when do you believe in talking, huh?" I chuckle. "Thought you preferred to speak with your fists?"

"You're right." He widens his stance. "Let's take this outside, shall we?"

"Fuck that." I raise my fists, throw the first punch. He ducks. I see two of him and I think, maybe, I managed to brush the side of his face... At least, I think I did, then he plants his fist in my side and pain slices through me. I yell, "What the fuck!"

He throws another punch. I swerve, bury my fist in his stomach. He groans, doubles over. I grab his shoulders, double my knee up and into his chin, but he's too fast. He twists his shoulders, breaks free, grabs me around the waist and throws me over his shoulder. I land on my back, my head connects with the floor, and sparks explode behind my eyes. White noise thuds in my ears.

I open my eyes and see her. Green eyes, lush pink lips, that beautiful thick hair of hers flowing down toward me. "Damian?" She smiles, "What are you doing down there?"

"What are *you* doing here?" I ask.

"I belong here." She laughs. "And you belong with me." She holds out her hand. I take it.

"I love you, Damian," she whispers.

"Damian?" Hard fingers grip mine. "Damian, you with me, buddy?"

I snap my eyes open to find Arpad looming over me.

"Where did she go?" I frown.

"Who?" He hauls me to my feet.

My guts churn and my belly twists. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

Fifteen minutes later, I accept the cup of coffee Arpad hands me. I take a sip and wince when the liquid burns my lip. I deserve it, of course. That, and every punch that Arpad got in. Not that I'll ever admit that to the bastard.

"Why the fuck did you come by anyway?" I mutter.

"The cops had a breakthrough with the intruder." He tilts his head.

"Oh?"

He nods, "Turns out..." He stares at me, "You ready for this?"

My heart begins to beat faster. "What is it?" I set my jaw.

"Go on; I can take it."

"He confessed to running Stella's car off the bridge."

"What?" The breath rushes out of me and I clutch the edge of the table as if it's the only thing tethering me to this world. "He caused the accident that killed—" I can't bring myself to complete the statement.

"Seems that way." He reaches over to grip my shoulder, "Sorry buddy, I know it's a lot to take in."

I dig my fingers in my hair and pull, "And all along, I've been thinking it was my fault. That I should have stopped her from leaving after we fought. I thought if I had asked her to stay a while longer, somehow the accident would have been averted." I lower my hands to my lap, suddenly exhausted. "It wasn't me." I stare at him. "But why the hell would he do that? Why would he kill my daughter? My little girl..." "Why?" My voice cracks and I curl my fingers into fists.

Arpad shifts uncomfortably. "I caught up with the other guys, and we think—" He straightens, looks me in the eye, "It's a possibility—nothing's confirmed—but we believe there's a good chance that—"

"The Mafia are involved," I finish for him.

He nods.

"Motherfucker." I slam my fist into the table and the coffee slips over the sides of our mugs. "We need to do something about this. Need to track down whoever is the brains behind this. The asspricks turned our lives upside down

with the incident and now... This?" I crack my neck. "The day I get my hands on whoever is behind this," I take a deep breath then let it out, "I am going to kill the bastard."

He smiles grimly, "Get in line. At any rate, the shooter's going down for a long time for what he did."

"And the link to the Mafia? Are the police aware of it?"

He shakes his head. "Our pact on that stays in place. We keep the cops out of it and go after the Mafia ourselves. I've taken it on myself to spearhead the efforts, and by the way, you're welcome."

"For what?" I crack my knuckles, "It's about time you pulled your weight on this."

He gapes at me, "Seriously? After everything I've done for you, that's all you have to say?"

I laugh. "What else do you want me to do, kiss your feet?"

"A thanks about now would not be remiss, you wanker." He stares at me, then takes a sip of his own coffee. "At least, I can't fault your taste in this stuff." He swallows another mouthful. "You still buying that fancy Colombian coffee?"

"Nope." I stare at him. "This one's Black Ivory. You know, the coffee they make from the beans that Thai elephants shit out?"

He gags, "What the fuck?" He slaps the cup on the island. "You're shitting me."

"That was the elephant shitting, actually," I retort.

He stares at me. I hold his gaze for a full second before I chuckle.

"Asshole," he growls. "Apparently, your sense of humor is still intact." He reaches for his cup of coffee, then thinks better of it. "Now that you've had your fun and games, ol' chap—"

"My fun and games, is it?" I growl. "You're the one who came into my house and proceeded to rough me up." I touch my nose—which had, thankfully, stopped bleeding after the shower and after the icepack I'd applied to it—and wince.

"Someone had to do it." He chuckles.

"No doubt, you were the first in line," I grumble. "What about the rest of the Seven?"

"What about them?" He shrugs, "They know the two of us have a special bond, considering—"

"Considering when we were kidnapped the bastards had us beat the shit

out of each other on every possible occasion, until only one of us was left standing? Yeah." I roll my shoulders. "We survived it, though."

"Did we?" He stares across the table at me. "Sometimes I wonder how we would have turned out if we hadn't been kidnapped."

"And I wonder how it would have been if Riley hadn't died."

He starts, then takes in my features.

"I know... Hell, we all know how tough it's been for you since you lost your daughter, but that's no excuse for what you did to Julia."

I squeeze my eyes shut.

"You need to get your shit together and make it up to her."

"Don't tell me what I have to do to get my woman back," I snap.

"Someone has to. Considering you've got the attention of the entire media. For a man who's not even on social media, you sure manage to grab the headlines."

"Might have something to do with the fact that I recounted an annulment instead of a tête-à-tête with my newly-married bride at the much-delayed press conference that finally took place at the hospital." Yeah, I'd done that.

He laughs. "You have balls. I'll give you that. You faced them, told them the truth, misguided as it was."

"Fuckers wanted a scandal. They got it." I raise my shoulders. Fuck, if I care what the media wrote about me... But since I have their attention... I have them primed for what is going to come next. I am going to use them to get back the one thing that matters to me the most.

"Give Karina my thanks for helping out with the cops." I nod at him.

"Tell her yourself." His jaw hardens.

"Oh?" I take in his features. "What happened? You two not talking?"

"There's nothing between us," he mutters.

"That's not what I asked."

He scowls. "That's all I'm going to say on the matter."

"Hmm." Whatever there is between the two of them, it is going to turn out to be bloody entertaining to watch as it plays out. Meanwhile, I have my own shit to sort out. Namely, one gorgeous, green-eyed, dark-haired, curvy sprite to whom I have a lot to make up. I place my cup on the island, then walk past him toward the door.

"Hey," Arpad calls out, "what are you going to do now?"

"Something I should have done a long time ago."

46

Julia

I drag the needle across the surface of the clay, smoothing away some of the excess material. My hair falls over my face and I shove it out of the way. I need to get this done if it's the last thing I do. After that horrible debacle of a wedding that shouldn't have been. Thankfully, I don't have a ring from it to remember him by. Of course, he hadn't gotten a ring. Why would he? The biggest douchebag rock star in the world, and I had to fall for him. On the other hand, I have nothing to remember him by. Which is good, right? It means I can go on with my life.

Luckily, the press hadn't known who I was. They'd tried to come sniffing around after the press conference Damian had held at the hospital—or so Isla and Karina had informed me. Karina had made sure I had the maximum security possible, and even then, a journalist had been caught snooping in the corridor outside my room. She'd made sure to hustle him away, then helped me disguise myself and leave the hospital. I'd wanted to go to my apartment, but she'd told me it wouldn't be safe. The press had gotten wind of it and had parked outside. So, I'd agreed to return to Damian's apartment at The Shard. Only for the time-being, and only until this entire sordid scandal blows itself out. Oh, and this was only after she'd confirmed to me that the camera in the flat—yeah, the one in the mirror, as I had suspected—had been disabled.

As for the scandal involving me and Damian, the articles which mentioned my name were taken down almost as soon as they went up. That must have cost him a fortune... Good... I hope it cost him a lot more than the

money he'd offered to pay me when we'd first met. The later articles in the media don't mention my name.

Of course, the guests and the press who'd been invited to the wedding know who I am. They know it's me that the media is talking about every time there's mention of 'the woman' Damian had married and broken up with in the space of a few hours. A few very intense hours, during which time, he'd vowed to take care of me, to cherish me, protect me, to love me...

He loves me. He'd confessed that right before he'd walked out. And I know it's true. That ass. My fingers tremble, as the sculpting needle slips from my hand, marking the surface of the likeness I've been working on. Argh! I can't do anything right, can I? I slap the sculpting tool down on the work-surface, then glance around the space. I am in Damian's apartment, surrounded by the memory of how he'd fucked me, working on his bust, and I think I am going to get over him here? Ha! Fat chance. I've set myself up for failure, as always. I cover the piece I am working on.

I head to the bathroom to wash my hands. Then grab my purse, and coat, change into my sneakers, and march out of the apartment. I leave the building and keep going. I need to simply get away from everything that reminds me of him... Need to move out as soon as possible. Need to... Forget how he kissed me, touched me, shared his secrets with me... Told me how he'd loved his daughter... Allowed me a glimpse of how he mourns for her.

Jesus, the man had taken the passing of his daughter to heart when he hadn't been fully over being kidnapped as a child himself. Still, none of that forgives what he did to me. It doesn't. So why the hell am I still thinking of him?

I stalk past the homeless man on the sidewalk who calls out to me. "Hello there, young lady."

"Hello," I mumble back.

"I have something for you."

"Not interested," I snap.

"I promise, it's something you need to see."

"I promise it's not anything I need in my life right now."

"It's from Damian."

"Eh." My feet skid on the pavement, I stumble forward, manage to steady myself, then turn around. "What did you say?"

"It's Damian." He holds out his phone to me. "You should see this."

I stomp back, grab the phone—guess homeless people do own phones,

right? I'm not being judgmental or anything—open my mouth to ask, but he tips his head to the screen. "Don't miss it," he says.

I glance down, catch a glimpse of Damian on the feed of his social media account, huh? When did he reactivate that? He's in what I recognize as his greenhouse. I peer at the screen, taking in the shrubs, the flowers...the yellow daffodils that grow in profusion from the pots, the hanging urns, the trough in the background. It's early in the year for them, so how did he manage to coax them to blossom from almost every available surface?

He stares into the screen and I swear it's as if he's glancing straight at me, into my eyes, my soul.

"This is for you, Riley." He strums his guitar, then begins to sing.

Would you know me
If I saw you from afar?
Would it be the same
If you held my hand again?

I must stay on
And live as if it counts,
Even though nothing matters
Now that you are gone.

For I won't see you run across a field,
Grow up to become a teen,
Smile up at me
As I kiss you goodnight.

I'll move forward,
Through seconds, minutes, days...
'Cause I know I just can't stay
Hidden behind the veil.

Time. Will it heal?
Can it conceal?
Will it allow me to embrace
What you meant to me?

Can I ever forgive myself
For not knowing you better?

He stops playing, stares into the camera. "My name is Damian Savage, and I am a failed rock star. I was also once a father." He swallows, "I lost my daughter, Riley, in a car crash that also killed her mother."

I gasp. Oh, my God, he's sharing his story with the entire world.

"That was a year ago." The tendons of his throat flex. "I have mourned her since. I opted to stay in my grief, unable to let go of her memories and move on. I was on a path to self-implosion until an angel crossed my path."

I clap my palm to my mouth. Oh, wow, what is he saying? What is he doing?

His lips kick up, "She was the most incredible thing that had happened to me in a long time. One look at her and I was gone. I knew she was it for me. The chance to crawl out of the darkness I had spent so long in." He pauses, "But you know me." He raises his arm. "Asshole that I am, I fucked it up." He grips the neck of his guitar. "I hurt her. I allowed my flower to wither without keeping up my promise to protect her from the elements. I failed her."

A ball of emotions chokes my throat.

"I walked away from her. I broke her heart. I failed myself." His jaw tics. "You told me, Flower, that I was a coward, that I could not face up to the reality of my emotions." He draws in a breath, "You're right." He leans forward, the skin around his eyes stretching. "This is me saying that you were absolutely, 100% accurate. About everything." He chuckles. "I suck, babe. I am not worthy of your attention. Not at all... But if you're listening to this, and I hope you are... And if anything in what I said strikes a chord, then come to me." He seems to choke, "I'll be waiting." He swallows. "I love you."

The camera switches off.

I stare at the blank screen. "How dare he?" I scowl. "How dare he do this?"

"Impressive, huh?" The homeless man crows, "A rock star laying out his heart like that on social media?"

"A gimmick. That's what it is," I rage.

"Is it?" He frowns, "The man sounded sincere."

"He's a bloody liar," I growl. "How dare he...he do this?"

"Maybe he wants you back?" The homeless man ventures.

"The bastard left me..." I begin to pace, "and now... Now... He dares go on record, in front of everyone and..."

"Profess his love?"

"Exactly." I grip the phone in my hand. "That...that conniving, full-of-himself, ready to spot a chance to promote himself—"

"Hold on." The homeless man blinks. "It took courage to do that. Maybe he wanted you to know he meant it and this was his way of showing how serious he was?"

"By professing to love me on social media?"

"Considering he hasn't been on social media in over a year, is there a better way he could have shown how important you are to him?"

"He could have called me."

"Would you have taken the call?"

"N...no." I stare down at my shoes. "But d...did you hear him?"

"I did," he nods, "I think he meant every word."

"He asked me to come to him..."

"Right before he said he loves you."

"I never doubted that," I growl.

"So then?" He stares at me.

"So what?"

"What are you still doing here?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Why the hell should I go to him? He should come to me... That... That ass."

"Aha," he exclaims.

"What's that 'aha' for?" I say suspiciously. "I don't like the sound of that 'aha' at all."

"So, you have as much of an ego as him, huh?"

"Of course, not," I counter. "I mean, I do... But not as much as him."

"So, you're going to let your ego get in the way?" He raises an eyebrow, "Everything you want is right there, and you're going to do a 'Damian' and flounce off?"

"He wouldn't flounce," I point out. "And you don't play fair."

"Ha," he chortles, "knew it. I knew you were a better woman than that... douchebag of a rock star."

"Hey" I snap, "Don't call him a douche."

His eyes twinkle.

I flush. "Fine, you've made your point."

"Go on, then." He nods, "Go get your man."

I turn to leave, and he calls out, "My phone."

"Oops! Sorry." I pivot, hand the phone over, then begin to run. Hold on... The phone... It was a top-of-the-line, latest model iPhone. A homeless man couldn't afford that, could he? I stop, turn around and find... He's gone? Hell. I glance around to find he's hurrying up the street. And why the hell had I spilled my guts to a stranger? Why had it been so easy to talk to him? Why the hell had he felt so familiar? And how the hell had he known that Damian had been talking about me, huh?

"Hey," I call out, "who are you?"

He pauses and looks back. "No-one of consequence."

"I don't believe that," I shout back.

"You have a date with a rock star. Don't be late," he admonishes, then turns and continues to walk away.

"Weird." I shake my head, then spot a cab. "Taxi," I hail the driver, who pulls up to the curb. I grab the handle, open the door and slide in. "How fast can you drive?"

Damian

I place my guitar on the settee that I had pulled into the greenhouse with Arpad's help. Before leaving, he'd also helped me arrange the daffodils about the place in such a way that they couldn't be missed. He'd offered to help shoot the video but I'd refused. Somehow it hadn't felt right having anyone else in this space with me as I prepared for the most important performance of my life. Now it is done; the video is out there. My song, that I'd been working on for the past few days—the one I had started writing, not quite sure what it was about... I still don't dare pull apart what the words mean. Being with Julia has given me the courage to push forward, to trust my instincts again. If I could make her come, if I could coax her to fall apart so beautifully under my fingers, then I can trust myself to pour what I feel into words... I can trust the world to understand what I mean... And if they don't... If they hate it... Well, then... I've done my best. I've given myself in the truest way an artist can do, and the rest... Well, it is out of my hands anyway.

I rise to my feet and begin to pace... It has only been ten minutes since the video went live; my phone had begun to buzz almost immediately. No doubt, the media is reaching out.

It looks like I'll need to reach out to Summer and take her help in managing my PR, after all. After years of turning my back on everything career related, while pretending to go on as if I weren't self-sabotaging myself, guess it's time to face the music after all—pun intended.

I glance at the feed of the security camera pointed at my gate. Where is she? Why hasn't she come yet? A car drives up to the gate, an unknown car, and a man—a reporter?—gets out. I watch as the guards that Karina posted at my gates ask him to leave. At least, I won't be bothered here. I'd known once the video went live that the press would be all over me. It's why I'd ensured there was extra security. It's also why this is the safest place for me to be now... And I had asked her to come—I stiffen.

I had asked her to come to me. After I'd walked out on her, I'd still demanded that she return, that she take the initiative. Shit, I really am a complete prick. A wanker of the first order. Why the hell should I expect her to come? Am I hiding again, in my fortress, trying to avoid the real world? No, that's not it. I had gone live to the world for the first time... Hell, I had set up my social media profiles again, just for that. I am going to face the fallout from this, one way or the other...so. No, it's not...that...but clearly, I hadn't been thinking right... I have to make amends for what I did. I have to go to her. I stalk out of the greenhouse to the garage, where I climb onto my motorcycle. Kicking it to life, I gun it down the driveway, through the space between the still-opening gates. I spot one of the security guards racing for his car to follow me as I drive past the cars pulling up. More media, no doubt. I race toward Julia.

Half an hour later, I pull into the parking garage of The Shard. I park my bike, wrench my helmet from my head, and race for the elevators, bursting into the apartment a few minutes later. Even before I cross the floor of the living room, I know it's empty. "Fuck!"

I walk over to the bedroom, check the closets; they're empty. I check the bathroom—there is no sign of her toiletries. I stalk over to the terrace by the pool—also empty. I walk back to the living room, glance about the space. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

I missed her. Again. I should have come earlier. Should have not walked out on her at the hospital. Should have held her close and never let go, and now... It is too late. "F-u-c-k!" I fling my helmet on the floor, where it bounces once before rolling to the side. I tear off my gloves, then dig my fingers in my hair and tug; pain lances across my scalp. My knuckles hurt and my face still hurts from the earlier altercation with Arpad. My chest hurts.

I stare about the room, wanting, needing, something to vent my anger on. I stalk toward her worktable, where she's covered something with a burlap cloth and pull it off.

"What the—?" I stare at the likeness of myself.

I'd known that she was working on it... and while it is me... There's no mistaking those familiar features, the hair, the mouth, those ears... Yet, it is not. I look larger than life. A dominant male, one with intent writ in every nook and crevasse on his face, and yet, those eyes... There's something in them I don't see often. Something I don't allow myself to feel...

Hope. A light in the darkness, a simple optimism that things will get better, there will be a tomorrow and things are always meant to be as they are now. I can't take my gaze off of the sculpture, which she created from memory, and her bare fingers.

I gulp. A hot sensation stabs at my chest. Jesus, I've been such a fucking fool. A complete and utter wanker. I reach out a finger to touch the sculpture when I hear her voice.

"It's not that great, I know... I've been working on it. I'm just not that good yet—" I turn on her and she stops.

"You're right; it's not great." I stare at her and she tips her chin up.

"I... I hope you don't mind that I worked on it." She swallows. "I did ask you to pose but then... Things happened and—"

"I do mind," I snap.

She freezes. "I didn't realize it was such a big deal to you that I captured your likeness."

"It is though." I stalk toward her, and she takes a step back. "It's a very, very big deal that you spent your time molding a piece of lifeless clay into my features."

"Fine," she says stiffly, "I'll throw it away."

"You will not," I growl.

"No?" She scowls. "You're confusing me now."

"Good," I come to a stop in front of her, "because you've confused me from the moment I set eyes on you."

She draws in a breath then surveys my features. "Why are you here, Damian?"

"Why do you think?"

She walks past me, heads for the bust, "I... I don't know." She drops her backpack on the ground next to her, shrugs out of her coat and flings it aside. "Either way, I am done here."

"Are you now?"

She nods. "You made it very clear to me in the hospital that you didn't

want anything to do with me."

"Did you see the video that I recorded?" I glare at her.

"What if I did?" Ignoring the bust, she walks over to the potter's wheel that I had set up for her, in my apartment, where she still is. She flips the switch so it begins to turn, then grabs a lump of clay and places it in the center of the wheel.

"You have nothing to say about it?" I frown.

"It was a beautiful song, if that's what you want to know. The lyrics made me cry. It brought out all of your pent-up grief over Riley in a way that is deeply moving," she replies, her tone sincere. "I think it's your best work so far."

"Thanks to you," I reply. "You showed me how to dig deep inside and channel my emotions into words. If it hadn't been for you, I couldn't have written that."

Her shoulders freeze. She leans forward, dips her fingers into the bowl of water and cups it around the clay. The thrum of the wheel fills the space; the slurp of her flesh against the clay reaches me. I prowl over to her, watch over her shoulder as she bends in concentration, her gaze focused on the beauty taking shape under her fingertips. She scoops up some water, dribbles it on the clay again.

I reach past her, dip my fingers in the bowl of water, then splash it in her face.

"Hey," she protests, "don't do that."

I cup more water in my palm, hold it over her hair. It drips down her face, splatters on her shirt, molding the fabric to the curve of her breasts.

"What the—" She glances down at herself, then flicks her hand and clay splatters across the front of my jacket.

"Stop that," I admonish her; just as the clay instantly droops in the center of the wheel.

"Look what you did now!" she cries.

"Hmm." I glance down at the wheel, then back at her, "Maybe I should rectify it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Scoot forward."

"What?"

"Do it," I order.

She scowls, then moves closer to the worktable.

I shrug off my jacket and toss it aside, then swing my leg over the seat.

Julia

He fits his big body behind mine in that narrow seat and the heat of his body instantly envelops me. His powerful thighs bracket me from either side. He has to bend his knees to fit into the space, and the result is that he squeezes me even tighter in the 'V' between his legs.

"Wh...what are you doing?" I gulp.

"Nothing." He leans forward and the planes of his chest mold against my back and the hardness at his crotch throbs against my hips. I'm instantly wet.

"Damian," I protest, "I...need to continue with my—"

His warm breath whispers against my ear and I shudder.

"Continue with your—?" he prompts.

"With, uh—" I glance down at the now-shapeless piece of clay. What was I going to do? Oh, yeah, I was going to pretend to work on my next piece, in the hope that he'd leave, but clearly, he's not. "With my work," I respond.

"You go right ahead, Flower," he murmurs, "I am going to be an innocent spectator."

"Innocent, my ass." I swipe up the clay, mash it up, then smack down the ball as close to the center of the wheel's base as I can. With the weight of my body acting as a brace, I begin to mold the clay.

He watches from over my shoulder for a few seconds, then reaches out to align his arms over mine. The skin of the insides of his arms slides over mine; I shiver. He wraps his big palms over each of mine, that are wrapped around the clay. A ripple of sensations bursts from the contact and travels up

my arm. My nipples harden; my inner thighs flex. "Damian," I whisper.

"When you say my name like that," he swallows, "I'd do anything for you. I'd tear the world down to protect you.... I'll never forgive myself for putting you in a position where someone could hurt you."

The intensity of his tone whispers across my nerve endings. All of my senses seem to pop at once. "That wasn't your fault," I reply.

"If I hadn't agreed to marry you, if I hadn't decided to turn the entire ceremony into a media circus, you wouldn't have been shot."

"It was barely a scratch." I can't stop the faint smile from curving my lips. There—this is the Damian I've come to know. The sensitive, caring man under all that bluster he wears for the outside world. The part of himself that he's revealed to me over and over again, only to retreat. "Besides, you forget something."

"What's that?" He crowds me further, if that were possible, so his front is plastered to me from chest to crotch, his thighs molded to mine, his arms and fingers flattened to mine...

I am surrounded by him, drowning in that edgy masculine scent of his. My mouth waters, and I swear, if I turn my head and offer him my lips, he'll take them at once... But not yet. First, I need to tell him something. "You didn't have a choice," I declare.

I sense him scowl. "About what?" he asks.

"I wouldn't have taken no for an answer," I retort.

The muscles of his thighs flex, his shoulders inch forward and his entire body seems to curve around me, protectively, half-threateningly... In that way that is overpowering and dominant and oh-so sexy.

"Is that right?" he purrs.

I nod. "I would have married you, one way or another."

There's silence, filled only with the smooth clatter of the wheel.

Then he laughs. A glorious, easy, mirth-filled laugh that rolls across my body, and arrows straight to my core.

"I have no doubt." He places his chin on top of my head. "I knew you were going to be trouble. I just hadn't realized how persistent you were going to turn out to be."

"Someone had to be," I mutter, "considering you refused to acknowledge what was there right in front of you all this time."

He places his mouth close to my ear, "And what was that?"

"That you can't live without me."

"Oh?"

"That you need me."

"Hmm."

"That you're the only one for me."

His fingers squeeze mine and the clay tumbles over again. "Now look what you've done," I huff. "I'll have to start all over again."

"Will you let me do the same?"

I freeze, stare at the shapeless lump of clay on the wheel that swirls in front of me. "What do you mean?" I whisper.

"I mean, can we start over again, you and me?"

There it is. The words I wanted to hear, and it's a start, but I want more.

"When you said your wedding vows, did you mean them?"

"You know I did." He reaches past me and throws the switch that shuts down the momentum of the wheel.

In the silence that descends, I can hear my heartbeat. Or is that his? "And yet, you walked away from me. You left me when I needed you most."

"I had to," he insists. "Don't you see? If I had let you stay, I would have only hurt you more. The way I hurt my daughter. Hell, even the mother of my child, who I should have treated better."

My belly clenches and a burning sensation fills my chest. Shit, why am I jealous of a woman who is already dead?

"None of that was your fault."

He laughs, the sound hard. "My rational mind realizes that, but tell that to my heart, Flower. The thought of being without you, of living with the guilt of something happening to you is a powerful motivator. It makes me want to spirit you away somewhere, away from the eyes of the world, where nothing and no one can harm you."

I close my eyes; my pulse thuds at my temples. This man. Only he can string together words to form a sentence that punches me straight in the gut. I turn my face, so my lips are next to his. "Then do it," I say. "Hide me away where no one else can see me but you, no one else can touch me but you, no one else can make love to me but—"

He closes his lips over mine.

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Damian

I'd raced to her with the intent of talking to her, making sure she knows how I feel, but one glance at her gorgeous features, a whiff of that delectable feminine scent of hers, a single touch of her skin, and I am a goner. I need to hold her close, kiss her lips, nibble my way down her body and lick my way up every single curve to reassure myself that she is still with me. I slide my tongue inside her mouth, suck on her essence and kiss her, drawing her breath into every part of me. The blood rushes to my groin, the pulse pounding in my balls. I cup her cheek, hold her in place as I kiss her. She moans low in her throat, strains against my chest. I fold my arms over hers and wrap them around her body, holding her immobile. She wriggles her hips, thrusting back and into the cradle of my hips. I can't stop the growl that rips from me. "Jesus, Flower, you're so damn responsive."

She arches her spine back, rolls her head into my shoulder. I release her arm, only to cup her breast and squeeze.

She whimpers and the sound goes straight to my head. I pinch her nipple through the wet cloth that clings to her curves and she cries out.

"Who does this belong to?" I ask.

"You, Damian," she mumbles.

I drag my hand down to cup the flesh between her legs. "Who does your pussy belong to, Flower?"

"You," she gasps. "Only you."

"You drive me crazy, you know that?" I growl.

She moans again, turns her head, reaches for my mouth with hers, but I pull back. I reach over, scoop up some of the slip and smear it across her chest, around her breasts, outlining her nipples. I survey the results, then nod. "Now that's my idea of a bust."

She glances down, then chuckles. "Not very artistic, but it'll do."

"I've been dying to do that since you first told me that you were a clay artist."

"So, I'm an artist now, huh?"

"You were always one to me," I say. "You were always more creative than me," I correct myself.

She turns around, takes in my features, "You don't mean that." She frowns. "Your songs, your words..."

"Are meaningless without you." I hold her gaze. "I began a band out of some twisted sense of rebelling against the world, and what it had done to me."

"The incident?" she ventures.

"I was older than the rest of the Seven, when we were kidnapped. Not as susceptible to the mind games, and physically, in better shape."

"That's why they made you fight?"

"For their pleasure." I stare out of the window. "Initially, they pitted me against Arpad. We had to fight until one or both of us lost consciousness. It became a game for the two of us, how to keep hitting each other, without hurting the other too much, but making it believable enough for our kidnappers to buy it. When they caught on, I took the blame for it."

"You?" She swallows.

"Arpad was much smaller than me at that time. No way, would he have survived whatever twisted plan they had in mind."

"What...what did they do next?" she whispers.

"They blindfolded me, took me to an underground fighting ring, where they pitted me against men stronger than me. I fought them, of course. I wouldn't back down. I wasn't going to die there, that much I knew."

"Then you were found?"

I nod. "The cops got a lead, tracked us down, sprung us, we went home, end of story."

"Or the beginning?"

I draw in a breath, glance down at her. "The rest of the Seven went through a lot more mind games than me. No wonder it warped them

completely."

"But the experience changed you too..."

"Of course." I wipe my hand across my face, "I came out full of anger and with a taste for sparring, which you already know."

"But it hurt you in ways you didn't realize..." She presses her palm to my cheek and I turn into her touch.

"Not until much later. Apparently, the shock of what had happened to me manifested with another trigger."

"Riley," she replies.

"My daughter," I nod. "When I confirmed that Stella was pregnant with my child, it was a complete shock." I rub the back of my neck. "I wasn't ready for a family, or for a relationship with her, but I knew I had to do what was right. I wanted my daughter to have a stable home, but I knew I couldn't be around to provide it. So, I found an apartment for the two of them and I paid for whatever they might need so that Stella could take care of Riley."

"So, did you see Riley on weekends?" She tilts her head, "Or on certain days of the week, maybe?"

I shuffle my feet. "We didn't have a formal arrangement, as such. My career was just taking off. I spent more time away than at home. Whenever I was in town, I made it a point to see both of them, but with the schedule of tours I had, it became more and more infrequent." I rub the back of my neck. *Bloody hell, I'd been such an ass.* I could have gotten to know my daughter better; instead, I'd run from my responsibilities.

"Stella became increasingly frustrated. It wasn't enough for her that I provided all the material requirements for her and Riley."

"She wanted more?"

"Understandably," I reply. "I thought I had been clear from the beginning. I wasn't interested in a serious relationship with her, but I can see where she might have started to believe I might come around to the idea. She was the mother of my child, so we functioned as co-parents, but only insofar as I paid for everything and she took care of Riley."

She stares at me and I wince, "I know, I know." I rub the back of my neck, "I thought if I threw enough money at the problem it would suffice, that I could buy my way into my daughter's life." I raise my hands, "It was a mistake." *One I have regretted every day since.*

"We began fighting more. I barely saw Riley, even when I was in town, preferring to conform to my rock star image by carousing about town."

"I saw the headlines," she remarks.

I grimace. "It wasn't pretty. Then, after one particularly vicious argument, during which she told me exactly what she thought of my fathering skills, she took Riley and walked out. I think she had planned to leave Riley with me for the night, but I was such a jerk... She accused me of being insensitive. She told me that paying for everything wasn't enough. I needed to be more present in my daughter's life."

I press the heels of my palms to my eyes.

"She threatened to take Riley and leave me. Told me I probably wouldn't even notice. The worst thing is, she was probably right. I was furious. I knew she was upset and I shouldn't have let her drive. But I was so angry." I squeeze my eyes shut. The ball of hurt in my chest grows bigger, wider, until it seems to consume all of me and I shudder. Tears prick the backs of my eyes. "I should have stopped her. I should have been the father Riley needed me to be. Instead, on her sixth birthday, I stood over a rock with her name engraved on it, and cried."

She makes a sound deep in her throat. "Oh, Damian." She wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me close until our lips meet. She kisses my mouth, my cheeks, reaches up to kiss me across my closed eyelids.

"The memories of those we love don't fade; they become a part of us. They're imprinted in our cells, in everything we do, and as time passes, everything you do, they do with you," she whispers against my skin. "You did the best you could at the time; it does no good to look at the past and berate yourself. You need to forgive yourself for what happened, Damian."

"I'm sorry I tried to make our relationship transactional, sorry I tried to turn what was between us into a business arrangement. Can you ever forgive me for that, Flower?"

"Shh!" She presses her fingers across my lips, "It's forgiven. You are a good man Damian, and you tried your best to be a good father. We can only work in the moment with the information we have. The rest is not really in our hands, is it?" She cups my cheek, "Behind that alphasolic persona is a sensitive man who feels deeply, who cares a lot about those in his life. It's what makes you the kind of artiste whose words resonate with millions. Don't ever lose that, Damian."

I glance down into her serious green eyes, "When did you become so wise?"

"Just the life I've lived, I guess." She laughs lightly. "I ran away to

broaden my horizons, and came back with the realization that everything I needed was right here." She takes my hand and places it over her heart, "Know what I mean?"

"I do." I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "Will you ever forgive me, for everything I put you through?"

"On one condition." Her lips kick up. "Make love to me."

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Julia

His gaze intensifies. He lowers his head and kisses me—softly, sweetly, then with increasing urgency. The world tilts and I open my eyes to find he's on his feet. He lifts me up, then walks inside to the bedroom. He lowers me to my feet in front of the bed, then whips off his T-shirt.

I rake my gaze down his ripped eight-pack and gasp. "What's that?"

His lips quirk, "What do you think it is?"

I close the distance to him, then run my fingers across the cursive tattooed over his heart.

The font is the same as the one he'd used to ink Riley's name on his forearm.

"You inked my name on your chest?" I finally ask.

"I got it before the wedding and never got to show it to you. Every time I saw it, it only made me feel worse about walking out on you the way I did."

"Oh." My heart flips in my chest.

"I didn't realize what I was going to do, not until I'd walked into the tattoo parlor and found myself under the needle. I knew then, what I wanted inked into my skin. I hadn't even told you how I felt yet, but somehow, it felt right, you get me?" He tilts his head, "I had to do something to show you that you are part of me. Then," he squeezes his eyes shut, "I walked out on you at the hospital." The tendons of his throat move as he swallows. "When I realized what a fool I'd been, how I'd hurt you, even that gesture didn't seem enough."

"That's why you declared your feelings on social media?" I raise my gaze

to his.

He cracks open his eyelids and that fiery blue gaze of his fills my line of sight. "I had to do something to make up for the anguish I caused you."

"What you did," I swallow, "it was incredibly brave of you. And moving... No one's ever done something like that for me," I glance back down at my name written across his chest, "or like this."

"And no one else ever will."

I lean up on tip-toe and kiss him. "You're crazy, you know that?"

"Crazy in love with you." He deepens the kiss, then bends his knees and grips the backs of my thighs. I climb him, wrap my legs around him, throw my arms around his shoulders and open my mouth to him.

He reaches the bed, lowers me onto the mattress then follows me down and covers my body with his. I cling to him, dig my heels into his back, drag my fingers down his thick neck.

He leans back, then reaches between us to grip the lapels of my shirt. He rips it and I gasp.

"Old habits." His lips kick up. "I'd apologize for it, but I happen to know that it turns you on."

I chuckle, "So bloody cocky! Even when you're apologizing to me, you're full of yourself."

"And you love it." He lowers his head and kisses me deeply.

I reach down between us, unzip his pants. "Take them off," I demand, "I want to have you naked on me."

He raises one eyebrow, but complies.

I release him long enough for him to straighten. He toes off his boots, then shoves down his jeans and his boxer briefs. He stands still, allowing me to appreciate the full expanse of his chest, his narrow abdomen, the thickness of his cock that juts up against his lower belly, those powerful thighs, peppered with hair, the thick calves, and those beautiful feet that move toward me as he takes a step forward. He reaches down, pulls off my sneakers and socks, then unzips my jeans and pulls them off. I pull off the remains of my shirt and toss it away then lie back as he looks his fill. He rakes his gaze down my breasts, to the hollow between my legs. His nostrils flare. He curls his fingers around his thick shaft and pumps it once. The piercing glints against the almost-purple flesh. Moisture glistens at the tip and an answering dampness pools between my thighs. I part my legs, hold out my arms. "Come to me, baby, please."

He swoops down, covers my body with his. Oh, that solid weight of his. I've missed it. I draw in a breath and my senses explode with his scent. My core clenches and I can't stop the groan that bleeds from my lips. He pushes up on his elbow, reaches between us to grip himself, and positions his dick against my entrance. He peers into my face, holds my gaze. "I love you," he whispers, then pistons his hips forward, impaling me.

A jolt runs up my spine as the width of his hips forces me to widen my stance even more. "Ohmygod," I gasp, "Damian."

He grips the back of my thigh, loops my knee over his arm, and folds my leg up and to the side.

The new position allows him to slide in even deeper, until he bottoms out against my pelvic bone. Ripples of heat, sensations of pleasure, coil in my core and I swear more moisture fills my channel.

"I can't," he says through clenched teeth, "can't hold on Flower. You're too tight, too much."

I take in the gleam of sweat on his forehead, the color that smears his cheeks, the tendons of his throat that strain, as he holds himself immobile.

I flex my inner muscles around him and a growl rumbles up his chest. "Julia," he warns, "if you do that again, I—"

I clench around his cock and a shudder grips him. His shoulder muscles bunch and his lips twist, "I am going to fuck you now, babe." He pulls out, then thrusts forward with such force that my entire body moves up the bed. He plunges into me again and again, and the bed slams into the wall.

"Damian." I lock my arms around him, strain against his massive chest, as he pounds into me.

He lowers his forehead to mine, stares into my eyes. "Come with me," he commands as he buries himself inside me with a powerful thrust that sends a jolt of pleasure twisting up my spine. I throw my head back, tip my chin up and can't stop the scream that boils up. He closes his mouth over mine, absorbs it as I shatter completely.

He pumps into me again and again. His muscles tense, his shoulders bunch under my arms, then with a hoarse cry, he empties himself inside of me. His climax seems to go on and on, as my body trembles in the aftermath of my own orgasm. I hold him close as he buries his face in the crook of my neck. His big body covers mine as his muscles twitch with the aftershocks.

Finally, he flips onto his back, and takes me with him so I am positioned on his chest.

I press my cheek into the hard planes, count the beats of his thundering heart, as he folds his arms about me, enclosing me in his heat.

"Thank you," he whispers, and twines his fingers with mine.

"For what?" I turn to stare up at his face. This view... I'll never get used to it.

"For being yourself," he replies. "For putting up with me. For taking me back."

I chuckle. "OMG, the alphahole being this polite?" I shake my head, "I bet it's going to be sunny today."

As if in response, sunlight slants in through the windows and lights up the space with a bright yellow glow.

"The bust?" he asks after some time has passed. "I want it."

"It's terrible," I tell him. "I can do better than that."

"It's perfect." He smirks, "You didn't think I was going to allow you to throw away my likeness, did you?"

I slap his shoulder.

"No, seriously." He opens one eye. "You cut through all of the macho bullshit and revealed a part of me that I have never acknowledged."

"It's your strength," I say quietly, "that you feel things so deeply. It's what makes your work so different."

"Only as long as you are with me." He cups my cheek, "Say you'll be by my side, wife?"

"Wife?" I blink. "The marriage?"

"I didn't annul it." He swallows.

"You didn't?" I sit up. "But the headlines?" I ask.

"All speculation. You know how the journalists are." He pulls me back to his chest.

"And you encouraged the conjecture?"

"I didn't do anything to stop it. I was too busy beating myself up for not being able to protect you."

"But you told me..." I frown.

He shakes his head.

"But—"

He presses his finger to my lips, "I tried... God help me, I truly wanted to, but I couldn't bring myself to do it." His tone dips. "You belong to me, and while logic told me that I had to let you go, my heart... My heart insisted I shouldn't." He frames my face, and gazes into my eyes. "My soul was already

yours. You're my muse, Flower. You are inside of me, imprinted in my every cell, you are the reason for my existence."

Warmth fills my chest. I stare up, knowing that he's speaking the truth, that he's never been this open, this completely bare as he is in this moment.

"I belong to you and there is no way I could knowingly sever the bond between us." His lips kick up in a smile that illuminates his features. "Besides, you don't think I'd let you go, not after I have you where I want you, do you?"

"And where is that?"

"By my side; always mine."

CHAPTER 51

Epilogue

Julia

*For Riley Alice Savage who loved this park
Forever in my heart*

"It's beautiful." I glance from the epitaph on the bench in Waterlow Park to the stern profile of the man at my side. Damian stares down at the bench, his features reflecting complete focus. His gaze is trained on the bench, yet his eyes are unfocused. Is he recalling her as he last saw her, the day her mother took Riley from him and left? Or is he remembering the happier times when he read to her, played with her in this park, watched movies with her? He's told me that those were the best times they had together as father and daughter, when he'd put her to bed and read to her.

"She was beautiful." He exhales, then turns to me, "You're beautiful." His lips tip up. "Riley will always be with me." He wipes the tear that slides down my cheek, "But you Flower, you are my present and my future."

"Oh, Damian." I rise up to my tip-toes and press my lips to his throat. I wrap my arms around his neck, bury my face in his chest. His heartbeats mirror mine as he folds me in his arms. He kisses the top of my head. "I mean it Julia. I am never letting you go."

I tip my chin up, peer into his gaze. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be than right here by your side."

He presses his lips to my forehead, "I love you Julia Child Andrews." He peruses my features, an intent look in his eyes.

My heart begins to race and my pulse rate ratchets up.

He releases me, only to slide his hand into his pocket. Then he bends his knee into the ground, holds up a ring, "Be mine."

"Oh." Sensations course through my veins and my stomach trembles. I glance down at the platinum ring with the emerald in the center, surrounded by tiny pink stones. It is simple, joyous, gorgeous, and so utterly charming and so...so perfect.

He holds out his palm and I place my hand in his. He slips the ring onto my finger. "The green is for your eyes, the pink..." he swallows, "the pink is for—"

"Riley," I whisper.

He nods. "She'd have loved to meet you. She'd have loved you."

"I would have loved her. And I love you, Damian." I swallow the ball of emotions in my throat. "You think she'd have approved of us?"

He rises to his feet and pulls me to him. "She'd have enjoyed getting to know you better." He presses another kiss to the top of my head. More tears prick the backs of my eyes. Oh, hell, the last thing I want to do is to blubber. I wind my arms around his lean waist and press myself closer.

We stay that way for a few seconds...maybe minutes. Around us, the wind whistles through the leaves. The screams of boys playing ball reach us, then the barking of a dog, which fades away. Silence a beat, another.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you about her earlier," he says. The vibrations of his deep voice, rumble up his chest. "I wanted to... Many times, I wanted to share everything about my life with you... But it felt too early, and I didn't want to scare you off... God knows, I was trying to figure out what I felt toward you myself."

"I think... I may have subconsciously guessed," I finally breathe out.

He stills, then pulls back enough to glance down at me. "You did...?" He frowns.

I tip my head back, "Not consciously. I mean, I wanted to meet Riley, but every time I asked about her, you kept deflecting, and that only made me more curious."

"Of course, it did." He chuckles, "I should have known that a sassy little thing like you would not have stopped until you'd uncovered the truth."

"I am sorry I burst into her bedroom like that... I shouldn't have invaded

your privacy but—"

"I'm glad you did." He smirks, "You can invade my privacy anytime you want, baby."

"Argh." I shake my head. "Guess that's a sign that you're feeling yourself again, huh?"

"When I'm with you, I always feel like I have everything."

"But I want more," I whisper.

"You do?"

I nod, then reach up and whisper into his ear, "I want your child, Damian."

His shoulders bunch and his features take on a strange look, one I can't decipher. "Damian," I mumble, "I... I'm sorry if I hurt you. If it's too soon, I understand. It's just, I've always wanted a big family and—"

"Yes." He nods.

"Yes?"

"I want you to have my child... My children, Flower." He cups my cheek, "I've never wanted it with anyone else, but with you...it feels right. You're the woman I've been waiting for my entire life."

"And Riley's mother?" Shit, why did I ask that? I shouldn't have, but when it comes to Damian, I have no filter. I seem to blurt out whatever's floating around in my subconscious with him, which is probably a sign that I trust him... Which is good, right?

"She wasn't you." He peers down into my eyes, "I never missed her when I was away from her, never wanted to spend every night with her, never feel like a part of me was missing when she wasn't in the same room as me." The skin at the edges of his eyes crinkles, "But you... You, my Flower, are the most important thing in the world to me. I can't live without you. When I thought I had lost you, it felt like I had cut out a part of myself. No worse, it felt like I was dying inside, like I was—"

I slap my palm over his mouth, "Shh, no D word, remember?"

He kisses my fingers and all of my nerve endings seem to come to life. He wraps his fingers around my wrist and lowers my palm to his chest.

"Say you'll never leave me."

"Never."

"Say, you'll always be mine," he demands.

"Yours," I whisper. "Always yours." I tip up my chin, meet his searing gaze. "You sure do have a way with words, Mr. Savage."

"It's because of my muse, Mrs. Savage."

I shiver... That's me. He's referring to me. OMG, I am married to a rock star. The man who half the world's female population covets, and the other half, well... They are, clearly, blind.

"Do I know this muse?" I giggle.

"Want to meet her?" He waggles his eyebrows, "She inspires me most when she's naked and spread over my lap, so I can spank her until she's wet, right before I turn her over and make sweet love to her."

Heat blooms between my thighs. "What if she wants to be fucked instead?" I squeeze my legs together.

His grin widens. "That can be arranged too." He leans down and kisses me again, hard, then turns and leads me down the hill. "To think, I have Arpad to thank for you showing up at my door," he mutters.

"Wait, what?" I gasp, and turn to him, "What's Arpad got to do with anything?"

"Asshole called up your agency and asked for you to take on the assignment as my nanny."

"What?" I gape, "So it was him—?"

"Yep," he nods. "In a way, I am grateful to him. If he hadn't sprung that on me, we wouldn't be here today."

"He's a good friend." I reach up and he dips his chin, closing the height-gap between us enough that I can touch his face. This casual gesture of affection, this ability to touch him anytime I want... Wow, it's something I'll never take for granted. "He knew you were hurting, that you needed a reason to come out of the dark place you were in. He saw the opportunity and took it."

"Hmm. Perhaps you are right." He rolls his shoulders.

"I am," I say with a smug smile. "Thanks to him, your video went viral; with your song already making it to the top of the charts in the country."

Yep, the notoriety of the supposed annulment, within hours of being married, followed by his from-the-heart song and declaration of love, had broken the internet.

"I am not complaining, though that's not why I did it," he replies. "And the song was all you. You inspired me, Flower."

My heart feels like it's going to burst. As closed off as he'd been earlier, he doesn't hold back now. He cuts out his heart and offers it to me every opportunity he gets. My hard-ass, sensitive artist of a rockstar. There are so

many layers to him that not even a lifetime will be enough to get to know him. He'll always manage to surprise me at every turn, and God, I can't wait to experience this beautiful life of ours together.

Stupid tears fill my eyes and I blink them away,

"The song..." I glance up at the view of his hard jaw. "It was more than beautiful... it was—

"It was probably the first completely honest piece I ever wrote." He pauses, turns to me. "Was it cathartic? Yes. Could I have done it without you? No. Every time I saw you come apart under me, Flower... It healed something inside of me. The honesty of your response to me, the way you looked at me, how you held on to me and allowed me a glimpse of your soul as you shattered... It loosened the walls I had built between me and myself..." He laughs, "Am I making sense?"

"Yes," I whisper, "more than you know." I flatten my palm against his chest, "It's the same for me. When I am with you, I feel free. I feel supported enough to be able to explore my own creativity."

"We're good for each other." His grin widens.

"Told you so." I chuckle.

"Remind me never to get on your bad side, babe."

"As long as you don't forget to bring your mean side to bed."

He slaps my arse and I jump. "Hey, what was that for?" I protest.

"Enough dallying, woman. Let's get going. We need to make an appearance at Sinclair's place before I can drag you back home and ravish you."

"Do we?" I pout, "Couldn't we give it a miss?"

"We'll put in a quick appearance." He pulls me into his side. "I promised the guys I'd be there. Besides, I need to pay back Arpad for what he did to me, and I promise, you'll want a front seat for what's going to happen next."

CHAPTER 52

Epilogue 2

Karina

Why the hell had I accepted the invitation to this New Year's Eve party? Technically it's past the New Year, but the Seven, minus Baron, had spent New Year's Eve first at the hospital in solidarity with Damian; and later, trying to console the rock star, who'd shut himself off, before emerging with the track that had changed everything. So, today is the official party, to stand in for the New Year's bash.

I ring the doorbell of the townhouse on Primrose Hill. This isn't my scene, at all. So what if the Seven are my best—read: only—clients right now in London. It is because their business is too important to lose, that I had moved half-way across the world from LA. It is thanks to their security concerns for themselves and their growing circle of friends and family that I am making enough money to be able to grow my business. So yeah, that is my answer. That's why, when Sinclair Sterling, business man extraordinaire, who, together with the Seven, owns one of the biggest financial services companies in this country, had asked me to attend this event, I couldn't refuse.

I blow out a breath, then straighten when the door is flung open.

Light spills out, along with laughter and the clinking of glasses. The hum of conversation envelops me with almost as much warmth as the wide smile on the face of the woman who stands in the doorway. "Karina." Summer

Sterling grins up at me, her impish smile lighting up her face. "You came."

"I could hardly refuse your husband," I mutter.

She laughs, "Sinclair can be persuasive."

"That's putting it mildly."

She chuckles, then pulls me into a hug, "Happy New Year. It's wonderful to have you here with us today."

"Ah." I pat her shoulder. Awkward... That's me...with any kind of demonstration of affection. Comes from being the daughter of a single parent, who also happened to be a career military man.

Summer steps back, then links her arm through mine. A liveried man darts forward to shut the door, "Sorry I didn't get here in time, Madam." His rich, plummy accent has me staring at him.

"It's alright, Jeeves," Summer sings out, "I prefer to get the door for my friends anyway."

"Very good, Madam." He stands to attention as we walk past him.

"Is his name really Jeeves?" I whisper to Summer.

"No, but that's what I call him," she whispers back.

"Honestly, Summer." I stare down at her.

"What?" She raises her shoulders. "It suits him. Besides, it gives me the perfect excuse to practice all of my Bertie Wooster trivia questions on Sin."

"You mean Sinclair Sterling unbends enough to answer them?"

"He's still in training." She nods, "But he'll get there."

I laugh, "You're good for him, you know that?"

"Those of the Seven who've gotten hitched have been lucky in finding the right women."

"And who is that?" I ask, "The right kind of woman for one of the Seven?"

"Someone who can hold her own, who doesn't hesitate to go toe to toe with them and challenge them, who doesn't back down when they go—"

"All alphahole on you." I nod.

"See, you know what to do. So, what's stopping you?"

"What do you mean?" I frown down at her.

"I mean you and Arpad. What's stopping the two of you from—?"

"Kar-e-e-na." I look up to find Julia walking toward me.

"Hey," I wave back. "How are you?"

"I'm very good." She beams, "Also, I have news for you."

"I knew it!" Summer squeals. She grabs Julia's hand, "OMG, he did it?"

You guys are back together?"

Julia's face breaks into a wide grin, "Yes... Yes, we are."

"Congratulations!" Summer exclaims. "About time Damian did the right thing."

"This is amazing news." I smile, "I am so happy for you, Jules."

"I couldn't have done it without your help." She grips my shoulder, "Thank you, Karina."

"I didn't do anything," I mutter.

"You put your job on the line when you gave me the access codes to his house."

"Nothing that he didn't want happening." I stare past the women to the congregation of men at the bar. Weston's behind the counter serving, Damian's typing out something on his phone, while Sinclair and Saint, are engrossed in discussion.

"Where are the rest of the Seven?" I ask

"You mean Arpad?" Julia's lips quirk.

"I mean—" My phone buzzes and I pull it out of my handbag.

Arpad Ahole: The security camera on my yacht is not working. You need to check it out right away.

Me: I'm at a party

Arpad: I don't pay you to drink on my time. I need this fixed ASAP.

"What the hell?" I huff

"What's wrong?" Julia turns to me.

"Nothing." I grouse. I drop the phone in my bag, then reach over to grab a glass of champagne from a passing waiter.

"Wait... What did I miss?" Isla walks over to join us. "Who's engaged? Whose wedding do I need to plan next?"

"Not mine, thank you very much," I assure her.

"That's what you say now." She looks me up and down, "Speaking of, you look awesome, girl. I don't think I've ever seen you in a dress before."

"It's not an attire that's suited to my line of work exactly," I reply. Running a security agency means being on call 24/7, and the physical nature of the work involved means pants are more practical outfits.

"Just take the compliment, already," Isla teases.

"You're right." I nod, "Thanks." I run my fingers down the fabric that

clings to my figure, "I quite like the results, actually."

"Has Arpad seen you in this outfit yet?"

I blow out a breath, "Okay, stop. He's my employer, and he hates my guts."

"Maybe he's secretly in love with you," Isla counters.

"No, thank you." I hitch my handbag over my shoulder. "I want nothing to do with him or the Seven."

"And us?" Summer grins. "What about us?"

"You girls are the best," I say sincerely. "These alphaholes don't deserve you."

"Hear, hear." Victoria walks over and embraces me warmly. "Shall we toast?" She raises her glass of water, "To girlfriends."

"To women who know what they want," I raise my glass.

"To alphaholes who know what we want." Julia chuckles.

"To us." Isla raises her glass and we clink.

"Am I too late for the toast?" Meredith walks over, champagne glass in hand.

"How are you?" Julia cries.

"Much better, now that I know Damian came to his senses and made things right with you." She chuckles, then nods at Julia's ring, "Told ya, you'd get your HEA."

"You did." Julia laughs, "Thank you for all of your help."

Something passes between the two of them, then Meredith leans over and hugs Julia, who returns the embrace. The two women hold onto each other for a few seconds.

Finally, Meredith, pulls back, and wipes a tear from her cheek. "I am truly happy for you and Damian." She raises her glass. "A toast," she declares, "to the bad boy rock star and the woman who brought him to heel."

"Hear, hear." Summer raises her glass, "To Julia." She glances between us, "Let's down this in one, ladies."

"To Julia." The others raise their glasses. That's when my phone buzzes again. I pull it out.

Arpad Ahole: I trust you are en-route to my yacht to fix the camera? Else...

Me: Are you threatening me?

Arpad Ahole: Call this your first and last warning. I set off at dawn. The work had better be complete before that.

What the hell? What's wrong with this guy. I grip the phone, contemplate dropping it on the ground and smashing my heel into it—but that's not going to solve anything. Bet the bastard would find another way of reaching me. Instead I drop my phone in my bag. "I've got to go."

"No." The women look at me with varying expression of disappointment.

"Sorry, apparently, the a-hole has found a new way to make my life miserable."

I glance around for a place to put the glass. Isla takes it from me.

"Thanks," I flip my hair over my shoulder. "This shouldn't take too long..."

TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT TURN THE PAGE TO READ ARPAD AND KARINA'S STORY IN THE BILLIONAIRE'S BABY

THE BILLIONAIRE'S BABY

1

Karina

"Gah, you're a frustrating man, Wolfgang." The radio announcer groans. "You know that?"

"Exactly why you like me." Wolfgang chuckles. "And Ivy?" There's a pause when, I swear, I can imagine him leaning in closer to her. "The name's Wolfe."

"Errm," Ivy clears her throat over the airwaves, "so that's our favorite TV trope, brought to life by Wolfe and me...which sounds like something out of Red Riding Wood."

"Hood." Wolfe chuckles.

"That's what I said." Ivy huffs. "Red Riding Hood. So, as I was saying, that's our favorite TV trope. Can you guess what it is? This is Ivy—"

"—And Wolfe," the male announcer interjects.

"And we are so very pleased to be guest hosting the Evening Show on your fave, Smile London FM. Email us, call us...and let us know—"

I lean forward and shut off the car radio. What a couple of twerps those two are. Firstly, the attraction between them is off the charts. Secondly, they have no idea about it and are clearly dancing around it, all but punching each other in the face with the force of the tension building between them. Thirdly...well...if they don't sort it out, they are going to blow up on the show in front of everyone. No doubt, smack each other in the face before smacking each other on the lips. Ha! I snort aloud. Good to know my sense of humor is somewhat alive... Especially considering I have to spend the

evening evaluating and repairing security on the boat of Mr. Full-of-Himself-Douchecanoe, aka Arpad f'ing Beauchamp.

A man whose demeanor is every bit as pompous as his name. Yeah, he comes from old money, la-dee-dah. Like I care. But to see him stomp around with that giant stick up his ass, you'd think he's conscious of his status every single second of his life. Which, he probably is. Which is why he'd ordered me to get to his boat and fix the security camera on it that he claims has stopped working before he sets off to whichever island it is he is sailing off to next.

A camera, which had been set up by someone else before I came on board as his security consultant.

Some of us have to spend the evening working; others party till dawn, then sail off into the sunrise. Of course. Admittedly, he and the rest of the Seven pay me a lot... Like a l-o-t; enough for me to leave my life in LA and move to London to ensure that their security detail is top notch.

The Seven had been kidnapped as pre-teens by the Mafia. They had been rescued, but not before it had left them with a burning need to get even with the perpetrators of the incident. It also means that the men are ever vigilant about the Mafia attacking them or their loved ones. That's why they had asked me to increase the security on them and their families. Add to that, the fact that most of the Seven had recently met and married the women of their dreams... And it means I have a shitload of people to protect, from a security standpoint.

Which means... Yeah, I have never been busier. From finding the right talent to add to my team, to constantly upgrading the security details for the ceremonies when any of them decide to get married—the latest being Damian, the rock star who married his almost-nanny and produced a single that knocked the socks off of every single critic and countdown chart.

So, I can't complain. My bank account is happy...which means I should be happy. Only I am not.

I am not one to rest on my laurels, not one to bask in my success... I know what I want next—a family of my own. Good news is, I am already working on it.

In fact, I have a date tomorrow night to fire the first salvo in that direction. No pun intended. I snort aloud. I just have to get through this last chore on my list and then I can get some rest—and god knows, I need it—and be ready to get started on this latest project.

I ease the car into the parking lot of St. Katherine Docks, then grab my bag—which, while being stylish enough to take to a party, is also spacious enough to hold my emergency tools—and head down the line of gleaming vessels. Trust London’s wealthiest to bag a spot in the center of London to park their toys. I search for one yacht in particular... What had he called it?

Heartbeat. A weirdly sentimental name for someone who is known as Killer... Not because he kills in real life, but for the killing he makes as an Angel Investor in Silicon Valley. Yep, that’s how Arpad f’ing Beauchamp makes his money.

Investing in those who have the ideas but not the financial wherewithal to bring them to fruition. He has a knack for spotting talent, I’ll give him that.... And that’s all I’ll ever concede, and definitely not to his face.

The man has a mean streak a mile wide, if any of our brief interactions are any indication. Rumor has it, he doesn’t even spare the women he dates... But then, the kind of women he prefers are known for their taste in men who take charge in the bedroom... And push things beyond the point of comfort. Good thing I am not one of them.

I prefer my men amenable and my food spicy. See, the thing with food? It never lets you down. Finding the best restaurants in town and eating out is a particular fancy of mine. Table for one, please. Oh yeah, nothing like the silence of my own company to unwind in the evenings. I am not lonely, just alone. And there is a difference between those two words, right?

I reach *Heartbeat* and clamber overboard, then walk over to the cabin and key in the password. Letting myself in, I glance around and press what I think is the light switch. Bingo. The door clicks shut behind me as I glance around the space. Whoa, this is a yacht? More like a floating mansion. It had seemed reasonably sized from the outside, but in here... Wow! I walk down the steps to the sunken living room. Plush leather seats span one entire side, with a coffee table in the center, and a flat screen on the opposite wall. I walk through to a galley that has an island table, but only one chair. Huh? That’s weird. Doesn’t he entertain on the boat? Bet he does, so what’s with the lone chair?

On the other hand, the gleaming kitchen equipment is more what I expected. It’s top-of-the-line and would rival any five-star hotel, I am sure. Not that Mr. Alphahole, here, would ever deign to step into a kitchen. He probably travels with an entire crew to fetch and carry for him. Bet he spends his time jerking off to porno that he watches on that screen as he shoves his

hand down his pants and... Please... Argh! Don't go there.

I walk past the kitchen and push the sliding doors apart to find—OMG! A complete, fully-furnished, massive bedroom. Complete with a super king-size bed that takes up almost all of the center of the room. On the far end is a door that, I assume, leads to the bathroom. There's a set of mirrored doors beside it that must lead to a walk-in closet? Clearly, he's spared no expense in doing up this space. Everything is gorgeously designed, if space efficient.

On the other side of the cabin is a narrow freestanding table, and on it, a neat coil of what looks like... A rope? How weird. I move closer, then reach out and brush my fingers across the cord. It's soft to the touch, almost sensual, the material reddish in color, with sparks of gold flecked through it. I bring it to my nose and sniff. An edgy, almost nutty scent tugs at my nostrils. My core clenches. Wow, what the hell does he use this for anyway?

I step back, glance around the room, take in the massive, sliding glass doors. Beyond them is the view of the now-darkening water, rays of sunlight from the setting sun painting the sky a smoldering red and orange.

I stare at the bed again... *Leave, turn and leave, right now.* Come on, surely, a sniff won't hurt? Besides, there are no cameras in the bedroom. At least, there were none indicated on the security detail for this boat I'd inherited from the previous agency... So he'll never find out, right?

I cross the floor, walk around the bed and run my hands across the pillow. Soft... Egyptian cotton, thread count innumerable, no doubt. Only the best for the asshole, after all. I lean over, bury my nose in the pillow... Don't judge.

Notes of bergamot and cloves, and something dark, musky, edgy—something dangerous—envelops me. I'm instantly wet. *What the hell?*

How can his scent turn me on so? And when I loathe the man? And his attitude, and the way he thinks he can boss me around, and expect me to drop everything and prioritize him above everything else. A shiver runs down my spine. Only my sense of hate getting the better of me, of course.

That's why my stomach flutters. That is the *only* reason my heart beats so fast in my chest. Shit, now I am turning myself on, and that will not do. Not when I have work to do. I pivot, then retrace my steps toward the cabin, and head for the captain's area. There, at the extreme right, I pull up the controls for the security cameras.

I get to work fixing the controls...and am done in fifteen minutes. There, that was easy. It took more time to drive here through the late evening traffic.

I stretch and yawn, suddenly overwhelmingly tired. It's been a long day, long week, long year, actually, setting up business in this city. But I am in a good place, confident my business is going to do well. I pack up my tools, head for the door, then hesitate.

Should I? Why not? It shouldn't matter. I pivot and head back toward the bedroom, then glance out the large window and admire the spectacle. So damn beautiful. If only I had someone to hold my hand while I enjoy it. Nah, doesn't matter. I have me...don't I? And my love for yoga. The only way I know how to unwind. I roll my shoulders, and my muscles protest. Shit, I am too tense.

I place my handbag on the bed stand, then raise my arms high above me. The skirt of my dress pulls tight against my thighs. This won't do. It's why I hate wearing dresses. Damn. I pull off the dress, drape it over the foot of the bed, then kick off my heels and walk over to the center of the room.

I face the window of the yacht, then raise my hands again, bring them down, flow down onto my hands and the tips of my feet, then push up into a downward facing dog. I hold the pose for a few seconds, until my hamstrings burn, my biceps stretch, give. I rock back and forth, then swoop up, back to downward facing dog, then jump forward, straighten. Take a breath in and out, then repeat the process.

By the time I'm done with my routine, my muscles are limber, sweat beads my forehead. I wipe it off, then stretch and yawn. A pleasant tiredness buzzes in my blood.

Yeah, I could rest for a little while, then get out of here.

Hold on, bad idea. *Honestly, are you actually thinking of staying on here for more time than is absolutely essential?*

I reach for my dress then stop, glance at the bed. It looks so comfortable. I yawn again. Coming down from a yoga routine always relaxes me so much. My limbs grow heavy, my eyelids seem to be weighted down, and I can barely keep them open. I could nap in the car, of course...but it's almost dark and that doesn't sound safe. And I know it's not safe to drive home without catching a few minutes of shut-eye.... I sneak a peek at the bed again; it looks so comfortable.

Just a short nap. That can't hurt... Can it? It'll rejuvenate me enough for the ride home which, again, I am in no condition to navigate when I am this exhausted.

I slip into the bed and draw the covers up to my chin. His dark scent

wraps around me. Goosebumps flare on my skin. It's as if I am surrounded by him, as if he's cocooned me with his body, and he's all around me, with me, in this bed. Should I set an alarm on my phone to wake up? Nah, I'll be fine. It's only a quick nap, after all.

Besides Arpad a-hole isn't going to come back before the morning, and I'll be long gone by then...

A delicious warmth envelops me and I close my eyes.

A rumbling creeps into my consciousness and I push it away. I press my cheek into the soft pillow, draw in that scent of bergamot and cloves. His scent. Mmm. A languid heaviness tugs at my limbs. My muscles relax and I drift off again. Until a loud creak tears through the silence in my mind. I jackknife up to sitting position, my heart pounding in my chest. My pulse rate ratchets up. I strain to see through the darkness. Where the hell am I?

That's when the entire room seems to tilt. I scream and slide off the bed. I hit the ground on my ass, roll over to hit the glass wall of the cabin. I turn and press my nose into the transparent barrier and stare out. Darkness, broken only by the white-tipped foam that crashes against the side. I gasp, then scramble back until I hit the bed. The boat! I am on the boat, which is no longer harbored. It's at sea, with me on it.

The entire yacht creaks again, the walls seem to groan, the boat lurches up, and I hold onto the edge of the bed, anchor myself, as it seems to grunt and screech like it's possessed, then straightens. Silence, for a second. The hair on the back of my neck rises, I smell the ozone in the air, then the boat groans, and hurtles down.

The momentum carries me forward toward the wall of the cabin.

I throw out my hand, manage to grab the edge of the bed, hold on as the boat seems suspended in space, before it hits something—the water I presume?—with a crash. The sound echoes in my ears, reverberates down my spine. Then the vessel tilts in the opposite direction. I glance out the glass wall and scream again. Water. So much water, I am surrounded by a wall of water. What the hell is happening? How did the boat get here? I hit the ground on all fours, crawling my way up to the door. Grabbing the handle, I pull myself up, then twist the knob open. I lurch forward as the entire boat goes into another incline. Damn it. I race forward, throw myself onto the couch in the living room and hold on until the boat rightens again. Then cross the living room, up the steps toward the captain's cabin.

That's when I see the man silhouetted against the wheel. He's wearing shorts that cling to his tight ass. And what an ass it is. The fabric outlines the indentation on each side, only to stretch across the girth. The waistband shows off his inverted V figure and his back... I gulp. The planes of his back flex and buck as he grips the wheel of the boat, widens his stance, and leans into the next wave. The next wave... What the—? It's a huge, huge wave. A behemoth of a WAVE. I glance up and cry out, for he's driving the boat straight up the crest of a monster of a wall of water. There's a crash of thunder, then lightning flickers beyond the boat and I gasp again. An entire sea of darkness, capped by furious white tips, and in the foreground, his massive shoulders that bunch and knot as he grapples with the wheel, holds the boat on course.

Another clap of thunder in the distance, and the alphahole—for it is him, Arpad f'ing A'hole, the bloody owner of this boat, my crazy-ass employer, my frigging boss, who's driving this boat straight into the storm.

He throws back his head and laughs. What the hell? Is he crazy? Does he have a death wish or something? I stomp forward to ask him just that, when the boat groans and begins to slide back, taking me with it. My legs seem to go out from under me. I scream as I hit the decking and roll back. The boat pitches and I am thrown against the wall. Darkness envelops me.

When I open my eyes again, I am back in the bed, in the bedroom of the boat, the sheets pulled up to my chin. Huh? Was it all a dream? I sit up and pain slices through my forehead. I groan, fall back against the pillows.

"Take it easy." A low voice rumbles across the space. I glance over to meet familiar grey-blue eyes.

"You?" I cough. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"It's my boat?" He leans forward and my gaze takes in his bare chest, the sculpted six-...no, eight-pack? Nah...not possible. No one has an eight-pack, do they?

"Enjoying the view?"

I tip my chin up, meet his gaze.

"I've seen better," I lie.

He chuckles. "You must be feeling better. Though, I admit, I preferred it when you were flat on your back in my bed, naked."

I peek under the sheet. "What the hell?" I gasp, "Where are my underclothes?"

"Had to take them off, since you bled all over them from your head wound."

I touch my forehead, and the pain flashes behind my eyes. "Ow," I moan.

"Let me see that." He leans over me and his scent intensifies. His chest planes ripple and his biceps bunch as he reaches across.

I pull away. "It's fine," I grumble, "it's just a bump. It's not bleeding."

"I won't hurt you," he rumbles.

Why don't I believe you?

"Unless you want me to..." His lips twist, "Do you want me to, hurt you, my little stowaway?"

"What?" I scowl, "Of course, not."

"Then why are you here?"

2

Arpad

"Not by choice." She tips her chin up. "Trust me, I'd rather be a million miles away."

I grin. "And yet, here you are."

"I came in to check the security cameras—which are working now, by the way. The next thing I know, I am waking up to the apocalypse." She scowls. "What the hell were you doing driving the yacht into a storm?"

"What the hell are you doing on my boat?"

She reddens. "I checked the camera—which is functional, by the way—you can thank me later—" She tosses her hair and winces. "After which, uh, I guess I was too tired, and decided to work out?"

"Work out?" I drum my fingers on my bicep. "Exactly how did you decide you were going to work out?"

"I was tense, and decided I need to do a quick yoga session."

"Hmm." I rub my chin, trying to understand this. "So, you decided to do a quick yoga workout, dressed in..." I glance at her dress laid out at the bottom of the bed.

"No, I took off the dress," she mutters.

I tilt my head. "Good thing. I don't like that color on you anyway."

She gapes, "You don't?"

I shake my head. "Black doesn't do you justice. You're such a fiery personality, you need to wear red."

"Red?" she murmurs.

"Yep," I bend over her and lean in enough to share my breath with hers, "it brings out the highlights in your hair."

"Oh." Her pupils dilate and her breathing goes ragged. She inches closer, close enough for her breasts to graze my chest. And damn it, I'm instantly hard.

I straighten and she blinks, as if coming out of a trance. I can't stop the smirk that curls my lips. "Your heels," I murmur, "you took them off as well?"

"What?" She straightens, then glances around her, "Sorry, what did you say?"

"Your stilettos," I point to where I'd placed her footwear by the side.

"Right," she swallows, "of course, I took them off."

"And then you proceeded to work out in my cabin?"

"It was just a basic routine with few stretching poses." She blinks rapidly, "You know, like downward facing dog?"

Oh baby, I'd love to downward dog you. The thought of having her balanced on her hands and toes, butt in the air...tits thrust out as she arches into the pose... I clear my throat. *Jesus, is it hot in here or what?* I widen my stance. "So, you came into my cabin, where you shouldn't have been in the first place, did a quick workout, then crawled into my bed?"

She wrings her fingers together in front of her.

I stare at her.

She flushes. "In my defense, I wanted to find out if the living quarters were secure or if you needed a camera or something here as well so—"

I hold up my hand, "Hold on, back up. So, you came into my bedroom to check if there were cameras...and then what? You decided to stay on?"

"Not really." She hunches her shoulders. "I came in here and it was so calm, I decided to do my yoga routine. Then, the bed was so inviting, and I was so tired, and I might have uh, decided to take a nap..."

"A nap?"

She nods. "Yeah, stupid idea, but I was exhausted and I didn't think you'd be back for a while," she mumbles, "and besides, you owe me for coming in and fixing your security camera, on what should have been an evening off."

"Had plans, huh?"

"Kind of." She sits up. "Shit, what time is it?"

I raise my shoulder, "Beats me."

"Where's my phone?" She glances round the space. "Please, please I need my phone."

"Phone?"

"So, I can check the time." She spots her bag on the table, and her features light up. "Can you get me my bag?"

"Why?"

She scowls at me, "So I can get my phone from it, you ass."

"Get it yourself," I drawl, then drop into the chair and lean back for good measure.

"I don't have any clothes on."

"So?"

She gapes. "You're a complete alphahole, you know that?"

"I'll take that as a compliment." I smirk.

"Oh, F off." She pulls the sheet up and around her shoulders, then swings her legs over, and hitching up the sheet, walks over to the table. Still holding the cover, she manages to grab her bag, unzip it and pull out her phone.

"What the hell?" she yelps. "It's almost 10 am."

"It is." I tip back my chair, watch her as she waves her phone in the air.

"Turn this boat around."

"No."

"I have to get back."

"Too late."

"You don't understand," she snarls. "I have somewhere I need to be."

"So do I." I scratch my chest and her gaze drops there. She swallows. I drag my hand down to my waist and her breathing grows shallow. Hmm, interesting. Apparently, little Miss Perfect here is not as impervious to my presence as she'd like me to believe.

"Don't do that," she mutters.

"What?"

"That entire showing-off-your-torso thing."

"Was I?"

"You were, and you know it." She tips her chin up. "I demand that you get back to land right now."

"It's that important, huh?" I frown at her.

She tosses her hair back from her face. "Of course, it is. That's what I've been trying to tell you all this while."

"Why don't you tell me what made you get that tattoo, first?"

She scowls, "What tattoo?"

"How many tattoos do you have?" I smirk.

She opens her mouth, and I raise my hand. "Yes, I saw it, when I took off your underwear. Deal with it."

Color smears her cheeks.

"You're a piece of work, you know that?"

I chuckle, "That's not the answer to my question."

She tugs up the sheet then, purses her lips. I wait as she seems to consider her options. "So, if I tell you the rationale behind the tattoo, you'll take me back to land?"

I shrug.

She glowers at me, then snaps back her shoulders. "The line you saw that I had tattooed... It's from my favorite poet."

If you but knew the flames that burn in me which I attempt to beat down with my reason.

I recite it at the same time as her.

"You know the poem?" She frowns.

"Pushkin." I nod. "I know who wrote it. I want to know why you have it tattooed on your back." I hadn't missed the cursive written on one side of her spine; it was beautiful, evocative and unexpected... And yet, exactly the kind of verse I'd expect her to love. Deep, intense, yet fiery and passionate. It is so much Karina, that I have to find out more about it. "Well?" I lift one eyebrow. "Why did you get it?"

She draws in a breath, then glances away. "Because I was so rebellious as a kid and it got me into so much trouble. I got it to remind myself that it's okay to pick my battles. I don't have to win everything. Just the important ones, you know?"

I stare at her. "You don't like to lose," I mutter, and she tips up her chin.

"Neither do you," she states.

"Which leaves us at a stalemate."

"Which leaves you on the yacht, and me back on land," she insists.

"No," I drawl.

"What?" Her features tighten. "You promised to take me back."

"I did no such thing."

"B... but..." she stutters, "you said...."

"No, I didn't." I waggle my finger at her.

"You...you liar," she chokes out.

"Wrong—" I swallow down the chuckle that bubbles up. Karina—angry, all flashing eyes, and glowing skin. My god, the adrenaline from the chance to spar with her is better than the thrill of closing a killer deal in Silicon Valley. "I didn't say anything. You asked if I would take you back if you told me about the tattoo. I shrugged and you assumed that meant yes." I pretend to yawn. "You need to pay more attention to the details, doll."

She walks over to the side-table near the bed, places her phone on it, then swivels to stand over me. "What the hell is wrong with you?" she demands.

"What's wrong is that you are naked in my bedroom and I haven't touched you yet."

She frowns. "Don't try to intimidate me, you ass."

"Oh, you'll know when I'm trying to intimidate you, Stowie."

"Stowie?" She blinks. "I have a name, you know."

I look her up and down, "I'm not in the habit of remembering the names of my hired help."

"Hired help?" she splutters. "How dare you?" She launches herself at me, and hits my chest with such force that the impact knocks me and the chair over.

I land on my back; my head connects with the hard floor and her knee connects with my stomach. "Uff," the breath rushes out of me. She scrambles to get away, and I grab her around the waist, flip her over onto the ground and lean over her. "There... Much better," I mutter.

"Let me go." She makes that little snarling sound at the back of her throat again. How cute.

"Now, now, is that any way to thank your savior?"

"Savior?" She huffs, "More like a kidnapper."

"If the title fits." I raise my shoulders. "I did patch you up, and put you to bed."

"So?" She snorts.

"And saved you from being lost at sea in a storm."

"You were saving your own hide, you... You complete tosser."

"Apparently, living in London has improved your insults, at least."

"It's done nothing for your attitude, you bastard."

I click my tongue, "I think I need to wash out your mouth." I stare at her lips. "Or maybe I should shut you up another way, hmm?"

"Don't you dare." Her golden eyes blaze at me.

"You have no idea what I am going to do."

"Don't I?" she mutters. "You were thinking of kissing me."

"Hmm." I lower my face until my nose bumps hers, "Now that you mention it..." I hold her gaze and the gold of her irises deepen to a burnt amber. "Fucking beautiful," I mutter.

She blinks. "You don't have to flatter me."

I take in her features, the slope of her creamy shoulder, the shape of her curves so soft and under me. "The first thing you should know about me," I growl, "is that I never lie."

"What's the second?"

"I never back away from a challenge."

She purses her lips. "I am not challenging you."

"Hmm, I could have sworn that's what your earlier words sounded like."

"I was simply asking you to turn the yacht back and drop me off."

"Can't, babe."

Her gaze narrows. "You don't understand. I need to be back by 5 pm."

"Hot date?"

She glances away, then back at me. "Something like that," she mutters. "It's just...someone I have to see."

My gut twists and something hot stabs at my chest. "Drop him," I command.

"What?"

"Whoever it is, you're not meeting him again."

She opens and shuts her mouth, "You're completely off your rocker."

Tell me about it. Why the hell do I care who she's going to see? It's not like I have a claim on her. Still, when I'd tucked her into my bed, something had felt right about it. And not just that she had her eyes closed, and wasn't glaring at me like she wanted to rip my head off, which is her natural response whenever she sees me. So why the hell am I still holding her down, with my hips between her legs, my groin flush against hers, my chest wearing the imprint of those beautiful breasts? "Stay with me, for the next thirty days," I snap.

"What?"

"That's how long this trip is for."

"You're joking."

"Told you, I never joke."

"Get off of me." She slaps at my shoulder.

"Not until you give me your answer."

"Then my answer is no."

"Refuse me and I'll strip the contract for the security details for the Seven from your company."

"You can't do that." Her features twist, "You wouldn't dare do that. I'll take you to court."

"Don't dare me, Stowie."

"Don't call me that."

"What would you prefer?"

"My name, for one, you ass. You can call me Karina. On the other hand," she pushes up against me, "don't call me at all."

"I prefer Stowie." I take in her flushed features, the pulse beating at her throat. "So what do you say? Do we have a deal?"

"No."

"I am not letting you up unless you agree."

"What is this? Compulsion?"

"Coercion." I allow my lips to kick up in a smirk. "Or would you prefer seduction?" I lower my gaze to her lips. "Will you taste as sweet as you smell or will you be as prickly as your demeanor, hmm?"

"You'll never find that out." She makes a noise deep in her throat, and the sound travels straight down my spine. My groin hardens. Bet if I look down, I'll see the crotch of my pants tented. She must sense it, or rather, feel the thick length jab into her stomach, for her gaze widens. She gulps, the sound audible in the silence.

"Thirty days," I stare at her parted lips, "during which we explore this chemistry between us. Then we can go back to our individual lives as if nothing happened."

"Thirty days." Her tongue darts out. "That's it? And we both walk away?"

"Seven-hundred and twenty hours to explore each other." I peer into her face. "That's forty-three-thousand two-hundred minutes to give into the attraction between us and find out exactly what it holds."

She blinks, then shakes her head. "You mean we shag each other, don't you?"

"Not giving it names, babe. Why don't we let nature take its course?" I glance up into her eyes. "With a little help from us, of course."

Something passes across her face, an expression I can't quite discern.

"What?" I scowl, "What is it?"

"Thirty days." She nods. "I'll agree, but I have a condition of my own."

3

Karina

"You're not exactly in a position to add stipulations," he rumbles.

His big body holds me down, the weight of his hips on mine not altogether unpleasant... Okay, so it's delicious, actually, having him pin me down like this. The heat from his big body surrounds me in a cocoon of intimacy. The strength of his dominance slams into my chest, holds me in place. A moan tumbles from my lips and his gaze drops to my mouth again. "Where were we?" he asks.

"I have a condition," I insist.

He frowns, "I don't take kindly to negotiations."

"Not a negotiation. It's a..." I bite the inside of my cheek, "a way to leverage the situation for the benefit of both of us."

"Oh?" He tilts his head. "Now you're talking."

Of course, the a-hole billionaire businessman needs to be spoken to in the language he understands. No problem. I got this then.

"I want something out of this, uh, association."

"You're getting your company."

"I already have that," I point out.

"You're ensuring the survival of your enterprise and your employees."

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. "I want more," I press. "Surely, you understand that, don't you—capitalizing on any given situation to ensure you optimize your return?"

"Hmm." He swipes back a strand of hair that's stuck to my cheek. "What

is it you want?"

"A child."

He stares. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," I retort. "Thanks to you, I am going to miss a crucial appointment this evening, where I was going to have an intrauterine insemination."

"A what?" He blinks.

"An IUI," I explain, "where I would have been inseminated artificially with sperm from a donor."

"A donor?"

I nod. "I've been on fertility medication to stimulate my egg production. My peak ovulation window is this evening, and if I don't get there in time, all of my work will go to waste."

"Hold on." He shakes his head. "You had an appointment this evening, to inseminate yourself with some man's sperm—"

"Not some man, someone I chose after careful screening."

"Right." He nods. "And now, since you can't do that, you want me to—" He seems at a loss for words, and honestly, the spectacle of this confident alphahole at a loss for words, is more than funny. I can't stop the chuckle that escapes me.

"Weren't expecting that, huh?" I mutter. "Surprise," I sing out.

"So, you want me to stand in for your sperm donor?"

"Damn, you're bright." I widen my gaze in mock surprise. "So, what do you say?"

"To what?" He scowls.

"To donating your sperm to my cause, of course... Only, you'd do it the old-fashioned way."

"So unprotected sex, huh?" he rumbles. "Resulting in possible offspring?"

"It's known to happen," I deadpan. "So, what do you say?"

"Huh." He glances down at our position, then springs up to his feet, as if he can't wait to put distance between us.

Ha, knew it. Nothing like talking about real stuff like family or kids or, god forbid, the L word to have an alphahole backtrack and give you a wide berth. Jeez, I should have used this conversation earlier. It would have saved me so much time.

I wrap the sheet more securely around me, then try to stand up. My feet entangle with the bloody sheet, and I fall back. "Bugger." I huff. Yep, I'm

American, but damn, if I don't love using the British insults. They have a certain *Je ne sais quoi* about them, don't you think?

"Let me." He holds out a hand, and I stare at it.

"Take it," he mutters. "After what you told me, I am not likely to jump on you—not that I would have earlier either—but trust me, until this...whatever this insane conversation between us is sorted out, I am not likely to...you know..." He frowns down at me as if still not comprehending what we'd discussed thus far. Typical male attitude. Instead of trying to talk it out, pretend the problem doesn't exist in the first place.

I grab his hand and he hauls me to my feet, then abruptly releases me. He retreats and it's as if he's sucked out all of the heat in the room with him. I tug the covers under my arms, then fix my gaze on him. "So? What do you think?"

"What do I think?" He drags his fingers through his hair. "I am not ready to have children."

"You don't need to take responsibility for the kid."

He turns on me. "It's my sperm," he points out. "That's *if* I decide to donate sperm the old-fashioned way and shag you, which I haven't agreed to yet."

"Thought that's what you suggested?"

"That was before." He draws in a breath. "Look, this is all a bit sudden."

He pats the pockets of his shorts, then frowns. He glances around the room, walks over to the bedstand, snatches up a pack of cigarettes from the drawer. He pulls out a cigarette, places it in between his lips, but doesn't light it.

"You smoke?"

He drops the pack back on the bedstand. "I'm trying to quit."

"You'd have to if you wanted anything to do with the child."

He levels a dirty look at me and I raise my hands. "I mean, that's the point I'm trying to make. You wouldn't have to change anything if you didn't have anything to do with the kid. I'd take care of him or her. In fact, I'd insist you don't have any relationship with them."

"Hey," he protests, "you're acting as if I would be a bad influence on the kid."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Of course, not." He draws himself up to his full height. "I'd be a bloody good father."

"Of course, you would," I say in a soothing voice. "In this instance, though, I would have sole custody of the child, since this is all my idea. You'd sign away your rights to the child after conception, so your only role would be limited to that of—"

"The sperm donor."

"Exactly." I nod, "You only have to show up, uh, do the deed during the time we are together. Then we part, and hopefully, by then, I am pregnant."

"With my child," he snaps in a low voice. "My. Child."

The hair on the back of my neck rises. Okay, this isn't going as I'd intended. I'd broached the conversation because I really didn't want to miss the opportunity when my eggs are ripe for fertilizing, and I had thought he wouldn't have a problem with it. After all, I am still offering him what he wanted in the bargain—the chance to sleep with me. Only it isn't completely without strings— Okay so maybe it is a bit of a surprise to spring on the man, but still, come on. Surely it isn't a big deal to him. Is it?

"Well, technically," I venture, "it would be my child once you sign the rights over."

He frowns.

"See? There'd be no responsibility, no ties to bind you. You'd have fun in the creation process and then you'd walk away."

He moves the unlit cigarette to the other corner of his mouth.

"Just how you like it, right?" I tilt my head, "You can continue to play the field, continue with your merry lifestyle, piloting this yacht around the world, whenever you want, wherever you want, at the drop of a hat."

He growls low in his throat, and the sound chafes across my skin. All of my nerve endings seem to fire at once.

"Do I, uh, take that as a yes?"

"Yes." He folds his hands over his chest, then glares at me. "On one condition."

"What's that?" I frown. "What other condition could you possibly have for this situation?"

"Marry me."

Arpad

"What?" She gapes. "Marry you? Why the hell would I do that?"

"Hold on," I protest. "Marrying me wouldn't be as bad as you're making

it out to be."

"It would be worse," she mumbles under her breath. "And why would I do that, anyway?"

"Ah, why wouldn't you do that?" I stare at her. *What's wrong with this woman?* "There are many women out there who would have loved to hear that proposal from me, I'll have you know."

"Well, then marry them."

"I want to marry you," I insist.

Her cheeks flush. "No way." She shakes her head. "This is not happening."

"Relax, it would be a fake marriage," I assure her. "We'd just pretend to be married for the time it takes to meet my family."

"Meet your family?" Her gaze widens. In surprise? Horror? "I'd rather dive off this boat right now."

"Hey," I scowl, "they aren't that bad." I draw in a breath, "Okay, so they aren't the easiest either... Hell, what family is? Which is precisely why I need you with me when I go to visit them."

"Why the hell do you need backup?" She looks me up and down. "You seem like you could manage almost anything and anyone on your own."

"You haven't met my family." I roll my shoulders. "They are, shall we say, quite full-on."

"All the more reason that I am not the right person for this. I am no good with situations of the, uh, emotional kind. Why do you think I opted for artificial insemination?"

"Because you couldn't find a man who wanted you enough to start a family with you?"

She pales; her breath hitches. "You know what? Forget it. This entire thing is a bad idea. It's best we keep our distance from each other for the time that we are on this boat." She marches past me. Something glimmers on her cheek.

Aw, hell, is she crying? Something hot stabs at my chest. I swoop down and grip her arm, "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Of course, you did." She stares down at where I've locked my fingers around her. "Let me go."

"No."

"You don't want to fight me," she says in a low voice. "I run my own security agency. I have learned more than my share of self-defense skills,

enough to take on men far more dangerous than you."

"Now, you're daring me, and you know I can never back down from a challenge."

"Is that right?" She lifts her gaze to my face. "We'll see, shall we?" She yanks on my grasp; I tighten my hold. She feints, locks her leg around mine in a seamless move and tugs. I throw my arms around her, press her close as she kicks my legs out from under me.

The world tilts and I hit the floor of the cabin with a resounding thud as the back of my head connects with the hardboard. The breath whooshes out of me; pain slices down my spine.

"Let go of me, you oaf." She struggles in my hold. The covers slip down to bare her luscious breasts.

I take in the pink areolae, the beaded nipples that seem to pebble further under my scrutiny.

"Avert your eyes, you mofo." She smacks my head.

"Ow," I gasp out a pained breath even as I squeeze my arms around her, and haul her to my chest.

"Dammit, unhand me." She pushes her knee into my groin and I groan.

"What the hell? If you keep that up, I won't be able to father any children, Stowie."

"Aargh." She punches my shoulder. "I," she punches the side of my face, "hate," punch, "that," punch, "name."

"What the fuck?" I growl, then scissor my legs around her, flip her over so she's once more on her back. The sheet she's draped around herself tightens further. She wriggles about, tries to free herself, and I lean more of my weight on her, imprisoning her under me.

"You big bully," she fumes, then lashes out with her arm. I duck, only to grab her arm and twist it above her head. She throws a punch with the other, and I catch her wrist and pull it up, then shackle both her wrists with my palm.

"Much better." I take in her flushed features. At least, the color has returned to her face. "Now where were we?"

"Nowhere," she growls. Her eyes flare; her dark hair falls across her forehead. She's fucking gorgeous and beautiful and so vital. I want a piece of that; something... Someone so alive that she could fire up the dark corners of my life.

"Wrong answer," I retort. "Care to try again?"

"Oh, sod off." She blows the hair off of her face. "So easy for you to use your strength to overpower me, huh?"

"I use everything I have at my disposal." I hold her gaze, "Including you."

She makes that sound of anger deep in her throat that fucking cuts me off at the knees.

"Jesus," I growl. "Why the hell did you have to be so... so irresistible?"

"Speak for yourself," she mutters. "Let me off this boat."

"No."

"I need to get back," she insists.

"There's no need for that, considering everything is settled."

"Nothing is settled." She yanks at her hands and I tighten my grip. "Except that you are officially out of your friggin' mind."

"Maybe," I whisper. "Maybe not. All this off-the-charts chemistry between us, you gotta admit, it's best put to good use."

"And I told you what I want out of it." She glowers.

"So did I."

"It's unacceptable to me," she snaps. "I am not marrying you."

"It's a pretend marriage."

"Oh." She blinks, then firms her lips. "I'd still have to put up with your presence."

"You'll have to do more than that if you want to get pregnant by me." I stare into her eyes and she swallows.

"*That...* would be different."

"How?"

"It would be working toward a bigger goal."

I can't stop myself from leaning into her further. My hardness stabs into her belly. "You have no idea how true that is."

"Argh," she makes a gagging sound, "you're so full of yourself."

"And you can be full of me too."

Her cheeks redden. "Jesus, that's a terrible pun."

"Welcome to my part of the woods, Sparks." Okay, now that... nickname... That wasn't intentional...but I have to admit, it does fit her better.

Her golden eyes flare. She opens her mouth and I click my tongue. "No more arguing. You pose as my pretend, newly-wedded wife on my annual trip home to visit my family, and I'll be more than happy to impregnate you."

"It's not that simple. It's not like I can get pregnant in one shot." She

snorts. "Pun intended."

"Oh, I intend to keep trying as many times as needed, and a few times more for good measure," I promise.

"For the duration of this trip, you mean?" she corrects me.

I frown. "Yes, that's what I mean. Next thirty days, you and me, Sparks, and as much of my semen as you can hold. What do you say?"

"Fine," she mutters, "but it doesn't mean I have to like you."

"Fine," I reply, "but it does mean that I get to kiss you, and do with you as I please."

"Wait, what?" She opens her mouth. "What do you mean?" She begins to struggle under me. "You bastard, I should have known you'd have something filthy and underhanded hidden up your sleeve."

"So, are you turning down this offer?"

She balls her fists. "Don't tempt me."

"So, you're accepting this agreement?"

"I don't really have a choice, do I?"

"That's not an answer." I peer into her face. "Yes or no, Sparks?"

She draws in a breath, glances around the space. Then she exhales heavily and says, "Fine, you have me. Okay, I need this—"

I lower my head to hers.

4

Karina

He holds his lips close to mine, so close that I breathe in his air. So close that the heat of his body surrounds me, cocoons me. So close that I can hear his heart thud in his chest. Smell the salt of the sea mixed with that primal, dark maleness of him, the thing that had attracted me from the moment I'd seen him, a year ago in LA.

I'd walked into the conference room of my office, the sun had poured in through the windows, too bright, as always, in LA. The rays had framed this tall figure that had seemed to fill my entire line of sight. The light behind him had thrown his face into shadow while highlighting the rest of his magnificent physique.

The fitted formal shirt had stretched across his chest, only to be tucked into the waistband of his slacks that had molded to his thighs. He'd taken a step forward and the muscles of his legs had uncoiled. A primitive fear had gripped me then. This man—he was trouble. If he came closer, I'd be sucked into his presence, his larger-than-life persona that dominated the room and sucked the oxygen from the space. Then he'd walked out of the light and the full impact of his blue-grey gaze had smashed into my chest. I swear, I'd forgotten how to breathe... My lungs had burned; my stomach had bottomed out. My knees had buckled under me and I'd had to hold onto the back of the chair in front of me to keep myself upright. He'd stared at me, no hint of any emotion on his face. He'd looked me up and down with an expression I can only describe as cold and calculating.

"Karina?" He'd spoken my name and the deep timber of his voice had rolled down my spine, coiled in my belly, and heat had pooled between my legs. That's when I'd known that I had to stay away from him. Keep as much distance as possible between me and his overpowering presence, the way he'd eaten me up with his gaze, had glared at me and peered into my soul as if he'd gleaned my secrets.

"Karina..." he whispers my name against my mouth and all of my senses pop to life; my pulse begins to race. I shove at his shoulders, and this time, he rolls off of me. Then rises to his feet. He holds out his hand to help me up; I ignore it.

I secure the sheet under my arms, then push myself up to standing position.

He peruses my features, his gaze intense. Heat sears my skin; my pulse pounds at my temples. There's no denying there's something between us. Shit, is that going to complicate the situation? Only if I let it. Which I am not going to do. Of course, not. I have more sense than to let that happen... Right?

I clear my throat, "you mentioned you could do anything you like with me?"

"Does that bother you?"

Yes.

Yes.

No. I scoff. "Nothing you do could possibly shock me."

"No?"

"It's what I'd expect from you, needing props to enhance your performance in bed."

"Is that what you think?" He laughs and his entire face lights up. His grey-blue eyes seem to glow with some kind of inner joke, one I am obviously not privy to.

"Why don't you enlighten me then?"

He shakes his head. "What would be the fun in that? Why can't you simply let the events unfold, take things as they come?"

"Is that what you do?" I frown. "Let things come to you?"

He looks me up and down. "After all, you did come to me."

"After you insisted that I check the camera on your yacht."

"Were you doing anything better?"

"Anything else would have been better than having to be here."

He clicks his tongue. "That's why you decided to stow away and fall asleep in my bed?"

I redden, then jut out my chin. "I was tired," I snap.

"So am I." He drags his fingers through his hair. "I don't want to fight with you, Sparks, much as it is refreshing as a form of foreplay—"

"Hold on." I fold my arms across my chest. "Is that what you think this is?"

"Are you denying that the attraction between us makes you antsy? That it doesn't make you want to throw yourself at me, and tear my clothes off, and jump me right now? That, as we speak, you're not undressing me, wondering what I have on below these?" He hooks his finger in the waistband of his shorts, and of course, my gaze darts to his crotch, at the trail of hair that disappears, at the tent in his crotch that he makes no pretense of hiding.

"I am not admitting to anything," I mutter.

"You will; it's only a matter of time." He smirks.

"Keep dreaming," I scoff.

"What makes you think I haven't been?"

"Huh?" I stare at him. "What do you mean?"

"Unlike you, I don't fight my instincts. Since the moment I laid eyes on you, I knew this day would arrive, when I'd have you with me, on my boat, in my bedroom..." he leans in close enough for his nose to bump mine, "at my mercy."

"Everything I'm doing is of my mercy." I tip up my chin.

"That's what I like about you." He chuckles. "That's what attracted me to you in the first place. The fact that you want to come out the winner in any situation. In that sense, we are very alike."

"I am nothing like you." I swipe my hair over my shoulder. "I am not the one taking unfair advantage of the situation I find myself in."

"Is that right?" He raises his arm and I flinch. He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, "Keep telling yourself so and you'll still not believe it."

He peers into my eyes and I hold his gaze, stare into those deep fathomless eyes of his. "On the other hand, I agree that I need to make the most of this situation I find myself in. I want a child, the timing is right, and I could do worse for a father."

"Are you admitting that your genes and mine together could make for an extraordinary offspring?" He smirks.

"Any child of mine would be incredible," I glance up at the ceiling, "and

yeah, you'll do for a father."

He laughs, then cups my cheek. "And I changed my mind. I want some rights."

"What?" I blink. "What do you mean?"

"Visitation rights, babe."

"I already told you I get sole custody of the child."

"And I am telling you now that I want visitation rights."

My heart begins to thud. This is going completely wrong. This isn't what I wanted. My child...belongs only to me. I am going to bring him or her up on my own.

"No," I snarl. "No way."

"Think about it." He raises his hand. "Don't turn it down so quickly."

"I don't want you in my child's life." I flatten my lips. "I don't need to think about it."

"You sure that you want to waste the opportunity you've been given of actually becoming pregnant? And all because of your own ego."

"My ego?" I gape. "Look who's talking. Only the most full-of-himself asshole that I've ever met."

"At your service." He straightens. "I don't make any pretenses about who I am. I like control, I like challenges, and I never turn down a dare."

"Is that why you like to chase storms?"

He straightens and I have to tilt my head further back to meet his gaze.

"Clearly, you have a death wish," I allow my lips to twist. "or maybe you like to challenge the elements?"

His gaze intensifies, his nostrils flare, and he clenches his fists at his sides. "What's it to you?" he finally growls. "You're still here, and so is this boat."

"Is that what you do when you disappear on one of your sailing trips?"
Shut up, already. What are you trying to do, push him? Goad him into losing his temper? Why can't you simply walk away from this entire deal anyway, huh?

"You have no idea what you're talking about," he barks.

"Oh?" I swallow down the dryness in my throat. "Enlighten me then."

"You haven't earned the right to that yet." He steps back and the heat of his body recedes. A chill grips me. I rub my fingers down my arm. Shit, why the hell do I already miss his proximity?

"Make up your mind about what you want. It's in your hands now." He

looks me up and down. "Meanwhile, I'm going to take a shower."
Turning, he heads for the bath.

5

Arpad

I shove down my shorts and toss them aside. What the hell was I thinking, asking for visitation rights? And the kid is not even here. I mean, she isn't even pregnant and I am planning out some kind of future for us. Is that why I'd proposed the mock marriage, as a way to keep her close?

No... That much was true... I need to get my grandmother off my back about my family life, or lack of... And this is too good an opportunity to squander. Besides, what could be better than spending 30 days with the woman who's intrigued me since I'd first laid eyes on her. Fuck her, get her out of my system, and use her to divert my family's attentions. It's a perfect plan.

So why the hell are the visitation rights so important? The thought of her pregnant with my child, having one of my own... Something that had never occurred to me, not until she'd raised the topic. And no way, would I walk away from her if she became pregnant as a result of our possible liaison. Hold on...

A child? A fake marriage? Actually tying myself down to another in some form? Holy hell, how the fuck had my thinking changed so completely, and in a matter of minutes? I should have left her in my bed and walked away, but of course, I hadn't been able to resist watching her sleep. And when I'd undressed her earlier... Not that I would have taken advantage of her when she was asleep, but hell, I am man enough to appreciate the creamy flesh of her tits, the impossibly small waist, the rounded hips, the smooth

thighs, and the sweet flesh between them.

The blood rushes to my groin. I can't stop the groan that grumbles up my chest. I've been sporting a hard-on since. Oh, I'd covered her up and walked away, but I hadn't been able to leave the room after that. And then I had to complicate it all. I flick on the shower and step under the spray. The steam from the shower rises up and I drag my fingers through my hair, pull it back from my face.

What the hell am I doing, even considering some kind of future between us? And why am I not repulsed by it? In fact, it feels... Different, new... Something to look forward to. Is that how bored I've grown with my life? Not even setting out on my yacht to sail off on another adventure holds the same appeal.

Just a phase. That's all it is. Just until I find the next takeover to occupy myself. Another storm to chase and conquer. She had been right about that, as well. How had she guessed my motivations so quickly?

Only the Seven know of my penchant of challenging the elements. I plot my trips carefully, to ensure I run through the eye of at least one storm; though the one last night had been just a spot of heavy weather. The real storm is still a few days off and that's where I am headed. With her on board, though, I need to change my route fast. Putting myself at risk is one thing... but her... No... I can't put her in jeopardy. Not in that way.

I reach forward to turn off the shower, when cool air touches my back. The door to the shower cubicle opens behind me, and before I can turn, she's slipped in front of me, straight in the path of the shower.

I stiffen. "What are you—"

"Shh." She reaches up to place a finger on my lips. "You get one hour per week in visitation rights."

I take in her bare shoulders, the curves of her gorgeous breasts, the flare of her bare hips. The water flows between her legs and droplets glisten above the cleft of her pussy.

My mouth dries; my fingers tingle to touch her.

I reach for her and she prompts me, "What do you say?"

I drag my gaze up to peer into her features. "It's not enough." I frown. "One day per week." I drag my fingers across my chest and her gaze drops there; her pupils dilate.

"Two hours," she whispers. "Please." She opens her mouth to speak and I shake my head. I squeeze her shoulders so she drops to her knees in front of

me.

"Show me how much you want this deal."

She stares up at me, her eyelashes spiked from the water. Her dark hair sticks to her forehead, and ripples down her back. She draws in a breath and the tops of her tits tremble. Fuck me, but I want to grab those sweet globes and squeeze them. "Do it, Sparks," I order.

She sets her jaw, curves her fingers into fists at her sides. Her gaze narrows and color smears her cheeks. My cock instantly lengthens... This woman—her fire will be my undoing.

"Don't keep me waiting," I growl.

"Don't talk to me like that."

"I'll do anything I want to you for the next thirty days, and you'll take it."

"No." She rises up and I push her down again, and hold there. "Tick-tock, babe. You only have a few more hours when you are at your most fertile. You need this more than me."

"*This* isn't going to help me get pregnant, asshole," she growls.

"Alphahole." I peel back my lips and she glowers back.

"Last chance," I snap. "Take me in your mouth or—"

She reaches up, curls her fingers around the base of my cock and wraps her lips around the head.

She holds my gaze as she licks around the rim. My stomach muscles clench. She presses her other palm to my thigh for balance and her touch sets off flickers of lust in my groin. She squeezes the fingers of her other hand around the base of my shaft and I widen my stance to support myself better.

She bobs her head, takes me in further, and I can't stop the groan that rips from me. I dig my fingers into her hair, watch as more of the length of my cock disappears inside her mouth. She swallows and heat sears up my spine.

"Bloody hell." I cup the back of her head, pull her back, until I am balanced at the edge of her mouth. She stares up at me, her golden eyes daring me. She licks around the head of my dick, then releases the base of my dick to cup my balls. She squeezes and my adrenaline spikes. Fire laces my nerves and my groin tightens. I pull her forward so my cock slides down her throat. She gags; saliva drools from her lips and combines with the water from her shower.

"You're so bloody hot, Sparks," I growl. "I am going to take your mouth."

6

Karina

Blowjob, huh? I am going to suck his soul through his cock. I am going to blow him so hard he's going to see stars for days. At least, that had been my intention... Until he takes control. With him, there's no giving... Arpad f'ing Beauchamp always takes and takes... He tugs on my hair and pulls me away, "Breathe through your nose," he orders.

I draw in a breath, then another. He nods, then thrusts me forward so his cock hits the back of my throat again. He pulls back, then forward, again and again. His cock fills my mouth, my throat, the soft skin curved around the steel of his shaft. He digs his fingers into my hair and tugs. Pinpricks of pleasure sear my scalp.

Moisture pools between my legs and it's not from the shower. I reach down to touch myself and he snaps, "Not until I let you."

I stare up at him, at the water that clings to his shoulders, the marks of some kind of friction burns now faded against his skin, the tendons of his throat that stand out in relief under his skin. His jaw tics, as he continues to tug me forward and back, and forward. My teeth graze across his shaft and he hisses. "Fuck." He slaps his other hand against the shower wall as if to keep his balance. He widens his stance, looms over me as I dig my fingertips into his thigh, continue to massage his balls with the other. "Bloody hell." His thighs twitch, his upper body shudders as his chest rises and falls. "I'm going to come," he growls, right before his balls contract and he shoots his load. The salty taste of his cum fills my palate, overflows down my chin as he

seems to come and come. I swallow and his entire body shudders. He pulls out, only to haul me up to my toes. He closes his mouth around mine, drinks from me, sucks on my tongue and ravishes my mouth. My core clenches and my knees threaten to give way. Without breaking the kiss, he bends, grabs me under my thighs and hauls me up and against the wall.

He nudges his dick against my opening and I shiver. He pulls me to him and thrusts into me in one smooth move. Too much, too full, he stretches my channel, crammed into me with such precision that it feels like we are two halves of a puzzle. There's so much of him, surely, he'll consume me. He'll split me open and I won't be able to resist him. I want him, want this... This...crazy hunger that tears at my gut, that crawls inside me, urging me to thrust my breasts up and into his chest. I lock my ankles around him, fold my arms around his neck and try to hold on as he begins to fuck me in earnest. The planes of his back flex; his hips contract as he pulls out, then plunges deep into me. I can't stop the howl that rips up my chest, but he swallows it. He cradles my head with his big palm, then he continues to plow into me again and again. My entire body jolts with the momentum. My tailbone smacks into the wall and pain sweeps up my spine. I moan and the sound coils in my core. His length throbs inside as he holds me pinned to the wall. "Arpad," I groan, "Goddam you."

He pulls out once more, then tips his hips forward and nails me with such force that my entire body jerks. Tendrils of pleasure curl in my core, I throw back my head and groan, "Ohmygod." My eyelids flutter down.

"Look at me, Sparks."

I snap my eyes open and stare into the depths of those grey-blue eyes.

"I am going to fuck you now."

"Wh... what?" I stutter.

He bares his teeth, in that primal look I am coming to classify as an *Arpad special*. He brings his fingers down and rubs his thumb into my swollen nub. Shockwaves course through me. My pulse rate ratchets up and my blood pounds so hard in my chest that I am sure I am going to black out any moment.

"Don't you dare," he growls. "Stay with me."

He holds my gaze, then he tilts his hips and drills into me again. He sinks so deep inside me that I am sure he's cleaved me in half. "Ah!" I throw back my head and connect with his palm.

"Eyes on me, Sparks."

I crack open my eyes, stare into his blue-grey ones which seem to have turned almost colorless. A nerve throbs at his temple.

He lowers his hand to curve his fingers around the nape of my neck. "Come," he growls, and the orgasm sweeps up my spine, shatters behind my eyes. Flashes of light consume me as I scream. He fits his lips to mine, absorbs every last sound. The climax fades away and I slump into him. He pulls out of me, then reaches behind me to shut off the shower. He carries me out of the cubicle, and lowers me to my feet.

I press into him and he holds me with one big arm around my waist. He reaches for a towel, wipes me down, slides it about his big body then throws it in the direction of the laundry basket. He swoops me up in his arms, carries me back to the bed, and tucks me in.

I crack my eyes open, drag my gaze down to his semi-erect cock. How the hell had he come so much and still not gone flaccid? "You didn't come inside me?" I mumble. "Why didn't you? It would have been the perfect time."

"Not yet." He circles his thumb across the edge of my lips. "I need you to be completely rested for what I have in mind."

He straightens and I am about to ask him what he's talking about. That's when he turns to go and I see the marks on his back. Had he been whipped? The lines crisscross his skin, turning his back into a patchwork of scars. My guts twist. Shit, that must have hurt a lot.

"Ari," I call out, "what happened to you?"

He pauses at the door, then glances over his shoulder. "You haven't earned the right to find out about that yet."

I open my mouth again and he shakes his head. "Sleep. You are going to need it."

Turning, he leaves.

How annoying. He could share a little more of himself. Not that I had done anything of that sort, or intend to let him closer. Still, he could open himself a little more about what had happened. After all, he could well be the father of my child... Not yet, considering he hasn't come inside of me. Why didn't he, though? How the hell had he restrained himself so? Why the hell is he holding back? I have to find out... Right after this nap. Darkness engulfs me and I close my eyes.

When I awake, the light radiates through the sliding doors. I grab my phone, check the time, then blow out a breath. It's only noon.

There's still time for him to shag me. In actual fact, I'll still be fertile in the next few days... Now, if only I can figure out why he didn't come inside me earlier.

I sit up and glance about the space. I spot the glass of water on the bedstand and down it. The muted thrum of the boat's engines rolls through the space as I swing my legs over and stand. My thighs protest. A sensation of him between my legs... Of how he'd pounded into me, how he'd kissed me. I touch my lips and wince. Hell, I feel raw all over. Like he fucked me hard... Which he did and didn't, and damnit, where is that jerk anyway? I need some answers. I glance around and find my handbag on the table. The coil of rope on the table is gone. Huh? Was it displaced when the boat hit the storm?

Where the hell are my clothes?

I glance around, then stalk over to the closet, pull it open. There are a few T-shirts, jeans, one set of formal wear, hung in one corner. I search for a pair of sweats, but can't find any. How strange.

I settle for a pair of his jeans, tying them at the waist with a belt—because that's the only way they'd stay up—then shrug into a sweatshirt. Of course, I am swimming in the clothes, but at least, I am covered. I roll up the sleeves of the sweatshirt, then pulling on a pair of thick socks, head out and into the living room. I walk up the small flight of steps to the captain's cabin and find him at the wheel.

He's changed into a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt that defines the breadth of his shoulders. He's so big that he blocks out the light that pours in from the windshield in front. His hair curls around his collar. His feet, clad in worn boots, are planted firmly on the floor. He seems at peace, more so than any other time I've seen him.

"You like being at sea."

"It's the only place where I feel free."

"Were you restrained a lot as a child?"

He freezes, doesn't reply for a few seconds. "What do you mean?" he finally asks.

"Were you disciplined a lot? Maybe you were sent to boarding school and found it stifling—?"

"I went to a day school with the rest of the Seven."

"Oh." I swallow. "Was that where you guys were—" I hesitate.

"Kidnapped from?" he drawls. "You can say it. We survived the ordeal. It

made us who we are today."

"And what's that?" I scoff, "Ruthless, obnoxious, too confident..."

"Focused, goal-oriented, not hesitant to go after what we want..." He looks me up and down. "I rest my case."

"You didn't come after me," I protest.

"No, you came to me." He nods.

I stare at him. I mean, he is right, in a way. "It was a mistake, my being aboard this boat when you left the dock. You know that, right?"

"Or maybe a Freudian slip?" He curls his lip. "Maybe you wanted to stow away, maybe you wanted to be found out by me, and maybe you wanted to spend time with me."

"Maybe I did want you to be my sperm donor..."

"Did you?"

"I admit, there is something here," I wave at the space between us, "but most of the time, I want to slap your face."

"Getting kinky, are we?"

I scoff, "Only you would enjoy that."

"Don't be so sure you wouldn't."

"Don't you dare." I fold my fingers at my side.

"Don't challenge me." His features harden. "For the next thirty days, you do what I ask, no questions."

"Yeah, yeah," I mutter. "So, what's next? You going to throw me down and fuck me?"

"Don't be crude." He smirks. "And by the way, my clothes look good on you."

I shiver. His clothes. I am wearing them, and while it is out of necessity, it seems more intimate than I care for the situation to be. "It's temporary," I mutter. "What did you do with my clothes?"

"You won't need them anymore."

"Wait, what?" I blink. "What do you mean?"

"You wear what I allow you to, for the next—"

"Thirty days, yeah, yeah." I throw up my hands. "You sound like a broken record."

"Calm down." He presses a few buttons on the dash, then slaps a lever in place. "There, that should do to keep the boat on course for a while."

Which is more than I can say about my life right now.

He turns to face me, "Are you hungry?"

7

Karina

Twenty minutes later he places a plate of French Toast on the table in the galley.

"Breakfast for lunch?" I ask.

"Are you complaining?"

"No, actually, this is my favorite dish." I glance up at him, "I could eat it all day."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Alphahole being nice to me? I scan his features but his expression seems sincere enough. Hmph. I stare down, take in the perfectly presented plate.

Damn, he's even dusted powdered sugar on the French Toast. For someone who's an obnoxious grumpy-pants, he's gone to great efforts to prepare this meal for me. Fine, fine, so he can cook. So what? Doesn't make him more appealing. Of course, not.

He seats himself at the lone chair, then proceeds to uncork a bottle of champagne. The liquid fizzes out.

"What are we celebrating?"

"You, us... The start of a beautiful relationship?"

"Nothing beautiful about it so far," I snort, before turning it into a cough.

"What's that?" He smirks. "You say something?"

"Me?" I widen my gaze, "Of course, not. Just admiring your presentation of the food. I had no idea you could cook."

"I had no idea you couldn't."

I frown, "How do you know that?"

"Lucky guess?" He pours out a glass of champagne, then holds it up to me. "To us."

I don't respond. I watch as he takes a sip, then nods in approval. "Want a taste?"

I shake my head. "I am not...drinking."

He blinks, then comprehension fills his face, "Because you're uh..."

I nod, "Yeah, because I'm readying my body for a possible pregnancy."

He takes one more sip, then places the glass aside. "I won't either, then."

Huh? I stare. "You don't have to... I mean, you can..." I shake my head. "Why would you do something like that?"

He frowns down at the plate of food, then back up at me, "Seems the right thing to do. After all, I am one-half of the equation here... At least, for the next—" he stops and chuckles, "few days."

"Good save," I mutter. "Is that food for me?" I jerk my chin toward the plate.

"It's for us."

"I don't see a chair for me."

"I never have company on this boat."

"You mean you've never..."

"Never had a woman on board," he confirms. "You are the first."

"Not sure how I feel about that." I walk over to the table, reach for the sole fork and knife he's placed there. He slaps away my hand.

"Ouch." I shake out my fingers. "What was that for?"

"No eating until I feed you."

"What?" I exclaim. "This is complete bullshit. Don't tell me you have no other cutlery."

"This is it," he confirms to me. "I don't carry any extra weight aboard this ship."

Except for me, apparently.

He pats his lap, "Come here, Sparks."

I stare at him. "And if I won't?"

"Where will you go?" He glances about the space. "We are at sea, in case you've forgotten."

Not likely.

"Come on," he lowers his voice to a hush, "be a good girl now."

I set my jaw. Hate being called that. Good girl, huh?

He cuts himself a piece of the French Toast and eats it. "Mmm." He licks his lips. "Sure you don't want to share?"

My stomach rumbles. He cuts another slice, then forks it up, and offers it to me. "Go on, you know you want to."

"Only if I can feed myself."

"Not happening."

I fold my hands about my waist.

"If not for yourself, then think of the child you want to conceive. You need all the nutrients you can get for that, don't you?"

I pale. "Bastard."

He blows out a breath. "This is getting tiresome. Apparently, you still haven't committed to our agreement."

I have and I haven't. I mean he's definitely the best candidate for my plan to have a child of my own. If only I weren't this attracted to him. Or if I weren't actually looking forward to sleeping with him...

Hell... This isn't supposed to be remotely enjoyable. Not something I should be looking forward to... But the thought of those fingers on my skin again, those lips on mine, the rasp of his whiskers across my inner thighs as he swipes his tongue up toward my core... A shiver runs down my spine. My toes curl. No doubt, he is virile enough that I'll be pregnant by the end of the week... But what will I have given up by then? And it isn't about the fact that I'll see him afterward, accompany him when he visits his parents, or the possible visitation rights that he wants... Which, by the way, I have no intention of granting him...

It is...the fact that I will not come out of this entire encounter unscathed. Our interaction in the shower had confirmed to me what I already knew... The man will seduce me, bulldoze through any barriers I may have built, and imprint himself on my body, my soul...my emotions... No way, am I going to let him do that. I need to find a way to protect myself. I need to...be compliant to what he wants, pretend to give in, while I guard that part of me deep inside that belongs only to me. If he thinks I am giving him anything more than my body, he is so wrong. The only way out is to beat him at his own game.

"Fine," I mutter, "have it your way." I brush past the table and plonk myself on his lap.

He frowns at me, then reaches down to scoop up some of the food. "Open," he holds the fork to my mouth. I part my lips and he feeds me. I curl

my tongue around the tines and lick up every last remnant of the morsel.

His eyelids grow heavy as he watches me chew, then swallow.

He holds up another forkful to me, and another, follows my every move closely. I wriggle around to make myself more comfortable in his lap, and my thigh brushes the hard column at the crotch of his jeans.

"Oh." I freeze.

"Surprised?" He holds out another forkful to me.

"I'm more unsure why you didn't allow yourself to come inside me earlier," I mumble.

"Patience, Sparks." His lips curl. "I plan to take my time with you, savor your every curve, lick your skin, taste your cunt, spank your butt and suck on your nipples, until you come from the sensations."

I swallow.

"That...uh, that sounds uncomfortable."

"Oh, trust me, I am going to make you very uncomfortable."

"You...you are?"

He nods.

"Make no mistake, I am going to worship you. I am going to dominate you. I want more than sex with you." He leans in closer until his eyelashes brush mine. "I am going to make art with you—dirty, filthy, impossibly screwed-up, emotionally moving art, that's going to consume you and me, and by the end, you won't know where you begin and where I end."

Heat blooms between my legs; I squeeze my thighs together.

"And what happened earlier in the shower?" I force out the words through cracked lips.

"Just an appetizer." His smile widens, "I am going to swallow all of you, Sparks. And by the time you realize it, it will be too late. I won't stop until you're a part of me, until I am imprinted in every cell of your body. That's what you agreed to and I intend for you to honor this understanding."

My throat closes and my nipples harden to pinpoints of pain. Bloody hell, if he can turn me on with just his words, how will it feel when he goes through with what he has in his mind?

"That's only for the duration of our arrangement, isn't it?"

His forehead creases.

"Tick-tock, Alphahole." I curve my lips. "You are wasting time already. Or maybe you are better at threats than actual action, huh? Maybe..." I close the distance even further until my lips almost touch his, "maybe your threats

don't measure up to what you can actually deliver, huh?"

Arpad

What the hell? Why is she provoking me? Her pupils dilate, her breath hitches, and if I glance down, I have no doubt that I'll see her nipples outlined against the fabric of my sweatshirt.

"It won't work," I drawl.

"What?"

"Your less-than-effective attempt at getting a reaction from me. No one forces me, of course. Least of all, you, Sparks."

"Is that your opinion?"

"It's my experience." I grab her waist, then lift her up and plant her on her feet. She squeaks.

"Take it off," I growl.

"What?" She frowns.

I jerk my chin at her clothes, "Those are mine."

"I don't have anything else to wear."

I glare at her.

"You expect me to be naked?"

"You challenged me. You lost the right to wear clothes."

"Have you lost your mind?" She gapes. "This is the twenty-first century. You don't get to treat me like...like..."

"My possession?" I kick up my lips. "Oh, but you are sweetheart. You're on my yacht, where my word is final."

She opens and closes her mouth. "This is ridiculous."

"Is it?" I fold my arms across my chest. "Strip," I snap, "or I'll make you do it."

Her cheeks tinge red, and the pulse at the base of her neck speeds up. She reaches down, grabs the hem of the sweatshirt and pulls it up and off of her. Her breasts capture my gaze instantly. Creamy with pink areolas and dark nipples that stick up at me. My fingers tingle and the blood rushes to my groin. I stare down at the jeans that hang low on her waist. "Take them off, but first your socks."

She bends to slip off her socks, then unknits the belt. She slips her fingers under the waistband and pushes them down to reveal the length of her thighs; her tiny waist, the flare of those beautiful hips that I'd had under my

fingers not too long ago. I draw in a breath, can't take my gaze off that gorgeous smooth-shaven pussy that I want to suck on; right before I thrust my tongue inside her and eat her out until she comes again. My groin hardens. A bead of sweat drips down my temple.

I ball my fingers at my sides, watch as she kicks off her jeans.

She plants her hands on her hips, tips up her chin and meets my gaze. "Enough?"

"Not really."

I circle the air with my fingers and her nostrils flare. Her golden eyes blaze at me. She draws in a breath and I shake my head. "You need me more than I need you, babe. Remember, you need me to pump you up with my cum before the end of the day.

"You're so damn crude," she splutters.

"It's the truth."

"Fine. Fine." She spins around on her heels, then faces me. "Happy?"

"Once more, and slowly."

She grits her teeth. A chuckle boils up and I press my lips closed. Wouldn't do to tell her just how adorable I find her right about now.

"Do it," I snap instead. She stares at me then pivots on her heel. By the time she's done a full circle, goosebumps pepper her skin.

"You're cold."

"Of course, I'm cold, you ass. I'm naked and it's the middle of winter, and we are out on the godforsaken sea."

"That won't do." I click my tongue. "I think it's best I warm you up."

I step forward and she skitters back.

"Do I scare you?"

"Of course, not," she scoffs. "In my line of work, I've seen all kinds. Especially egomaniacs, who think they own the world, are a dime a dozen.'

"You've never met someone like me, I promise."

"Oh?"

"I don't think... I actually *do* own everything I see right now, including you."

"So you keep saying." She purses her lips. "Except, you haven't delivered on your promise yet."

"Eager to have me inside you? Do you want me to fuck you right here on the table, Sparks?"

She swallows; her gaze darts to the table then back to my face.

"Is that what you're going to do?"

I tilt my head, pretend to consider it. "No."

"Then what?"

"I am going to tie you up, first."

"What?"

I bend my knees, thrust my face into hers, "Run, Sparks. The longer you evade me, the easier I'll go on you."

"Are you serious?"

"Go," I snap.

She turns, then dashes out of the galley. I follow her at a leisurely pace, as she races down the steps, across the living room, to the door that leads out to the upper deck.

"What the fuck?" My heart slams into my ribcage. I race forward, reach the door to the deck in time to see her disappear under the waves.

"No fucking way," I roar. "What have you done?"

I run back to the cabin, drop the sea anchor to limit the progress of the yacht; then race back to the deck, toe off my sneakers, and dive in after her.

I hit the water and the impact shudders through me. The cold overpowers me, flash-freezes me from head to toe for a second. I dive down into the depths, then open my eyes. Where the hell is she? Why the hell did she do this? This woman... Wait until I get my hands on her.

I catch a glimpse of white from the corner of my eye. I swim through the darkened water toward it, when something grabs my ankle. My pulse rate ratchets up. I glance down to find it's her. She yanks me down. I reach for her. She evades me, pulls me down with a sharp tug. I lose my equilibrium, descend further. By the time I find my balance and swim upward, she's far above me. Of course, the woman swims like a fish and when I get ahold of her... Adrenaline laces my blood. I kick my legs, propel forward, up through the depths. I reach her as she breaks the surface. I swim after her, swoop forward to grab her, miss. She pulls forward. I put on a burst of speed and grab her ankle as she reaches the yacht.

"Let me go," she pants. She kicks out at me.

I duck to avoid her, then yank her to me, "What the hell were you thinking?" I yell.

"I wanted to get away from you," she gasps.

"So you jump overboard?"

"Seemed like the thing to do." She tosses her head.

"You're in so much trouble." I thrust my face into hers. "Get on the boat."

"Oh, fuck you."

"Oh, I'm going to do that too," I growl. "But first, I am going to whip your arse for what you did."

8

Karina

"Ow, you asshole, let go of me." I strain from my position where I am sprawled across the bastard's lap.

He'd shoved me onto the boat, climbed on after me, then dragged me inside the yacht. He'd held onto me as I'd shivered in his grasp, while he hauled anchor, and pressed a few buttons. The boat had restarted, he'd pulled a lever, then he'd turned me over on his knee.

"W...wait," I stutter through the trembling that grips me, and it's because I am chilled to the bone. Honestly, that's all it is. "Don't you... n...n...eed to steer the boat or something?"

"Auto-pilot," he bites out.

"I... I'm...cold." I try to pull away from him. "I think I need a hot shower.

"I have a better way to warm you up." He drags me back onto his lap, before his palm connects with my left asscheek.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yell.

"I've gone easy on you so far. I should have known you'd take advantage of my good nature."

"Good nature?" I shove the hair back from my face, "You don't have a bloody good-natured bone in your entire body."

"If that were true, I would have let you drown. Instead, here I am, trying to pound some sense into you."

He spans my right butt cheek, then the left again.

"Ow, that hurts, you bastard."

"Say you're sorry for what you did," he demands.

"No," I snap. "You told me you'd go easier on me the longer I could evade you."

"So you decided to put yourself at risk?"

"It's my life, you...you...complete cock. I'll do with it what I want."

"Wrong answer. Your life belongs to me, for the duration of the arrangement, and I forbid you to do anything that will jeopardize it. You understand?"

He spans me with such force that my entire body jerks.

"Say you understand."

"I do," I howl. "Okay, I understand."

"Good."

He smacks me once more across my butt and I scream.

"What the fuck? Why did you do that?"

"Just insurance."

"Stop," I beg. "No more, please."

Tears prick the backs of my eyes. Seriously? I can't be crying. Not now. I'd refused to bend to him; I'd been right in that... Though diving into the water? That had been spur of the moment, and probably stupid, to say the least.

"It's all your fault," I huff. "You are so bloody high-handed, it makes me want to defy you."

He cups my burning asscheek, massages the pain into my skin. I shiver. Only because I'm cold. It's nothing to do with how warm his palm feels against my skin. Nothing to do with how wet I am between my legs. And no, it's not due to the dunking I just took.

Another shudder grips my shoulders.

He pauses, then straightens to his feet and throws me over his shoulder.

"Hey," I protest, staring at his very hard, very hot backside. Jesus, why the hell does he have to be in such good shape? I reach down to pinch his ass, and he clicks his tongue.

"Don't," he growls, "not unless you want the favor returned."

The skin on my backside twinges in reaction. Nope, no way, can I deal with any more of his attentions on my posterior. Not right now.

He hauls me into the bathroom, turns on the shower and dumps me under it. I turn into the hot water, then wince when my backside protests.

The cubicle door shuts, and he steps in behind me. "Don't hog all the

water," he commands.

He pours shampoo into his hand, washes the sea water out of my hair, then turns me around and begins to soap me.

"Hey," I grab his wrist, "what the hell are you doing?"

"Taking care of my property." He glares at me, and I shiver. "Lower your hands to your sides," he orders.

Only when my fingers touch my thighs do I realize I've obeyed him. *Jerk.*

He washes every part of my body—my hips, my thighs, between my legs—with clinical precision. He squats down, then raises one foot onto his thigh. I hold onto his shoulder for support as he cleans between my toes, brushes across the underside of my feet.

A giggle bursts from my throat.

He glances up at me. "Ticklish, huh?"

I purse my lips.

He repeats the action with my other foot, as I try desperately not to laugh, then rises up and begins to wash his hair with the motions of a man who's done so almost every day of his life.

I pour out some of the liquid soap, then rub it across his pecs, down his cut abs, across his thighs. I soap between his legs and his shaft throbs in my grasp.

I glance up to find him staring down at me.

I hold his gaze, move aside to allow the water to wash off the soap from his groin. Then I sink to my knees. Without breaking eye contact, I take him inside my mouth.

"Hell." His knees seem to buckle; he digs his fingers into my hair and tugs. Goosebumps rise on my skin. I bob my head, take him in and his cock hits the back of my throat.

His gaze intensifies. His nostrils flare. He pulls out, then hauls me to my feet, reaches behind me to shut off the shower.

"I wanted to—"

"You'll do as I say—no more, no less. You get me?"

"Yes..." For some reason I want to say 'master,' but no way, am I going to give him the satisfaction of that.

He walks out of the shower cubicle, holds out a towel. I step into it and he rubs me down. Once more, he takes his time and pays special attention to my breasts, my hips, my thighs. He pats down the flesh between my legs and I shudder.

He tosses the towel aside, grabs a fresh one and dries himself off. Then he hauls me up in his arms.

"I can walk," I protest.

"Something I intend to remedy."

"Wh...what do you mean?" My belly flutters and moisture laces my core.

He smirks down at me. "You'll see."

He stalks outside, lowers me to the floor half-way between the bed and the door. "Stay," he commands, then walks over to the bed and seats himself. Legs wide, his already hard cock juts up against his stomach.

He jerks his chin, "Crawl to me."

"What?" I stare at him. "No."

"Look outside," he orders.

I glance through the glass windows to find the sunrays lengthening. It's approaching 5pm. I know because I'd checked my phone earlier.

"How many hours do you have left in your ovulation window?"

Bastard. So that's why he hasn't put his dick inside me yet? He wants to wait until he makes me submit? We'll see.

I glare at him and he glances down at the floor, then back at me.

"Do it," he says.

I sink to my knees, then lower my palms to the floor and crawl across the floor. When I reach him, I pause, then tip my head up.

"Good girl."

I flush. Why the hell do his compliments mean so much?

He reaches for the first aid kit I only now notice on the bed-stand. He pulls out some cotton, dabs on some antiseptic, then proceeds to dab at the bump on my forehead which, honestly, I'd forgotten all about until he'd brought my attention back to it.

I try to pull away and he grunts, "Hold still."

He pinches my chin so I don't have a choice but to obey. He cleans the wound, pastes on a fresh plaster, then leans back to survey his handiwork.

"Not so hard, was it?" he grunts.

"Why are you doing this?" I mutter.

"Shh," he notches his knuckle under my chin, leans down and brushes his lips over mine. "You don't get to talk, Sparks. Not until I give you permission."

I scowl. "I am not so sure I like this agreement."

He peers into my eyes. "Want to cancel it, then?"

I swallow, stare at him.

"Giving up so soon?" He curls his lips. "Didn't take you for a quitter."

I'm not. I firm my lips. Besides, I've come this far, and I am so close to my goal. So close to getting what I want—a chance at a baby of my own.

"Want to call it off?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"So, you'll do as I say?"

I nod.

"Good, close your eyes."

9

Karina

I close my eyes, and instantly, all of my other senses come into focus. That dark masculine scent of his magnifies; the force of his dominance crashes into my chest, pins me down and holds me in place. My nerve endings thrum. Every part of me is focused on him...The slide of his feet on the wooden floor, the warmth from his body as it envelopes me.

I sense his gaze raking over my features, my breasts, the flesh between my legs. Can't stop the blush that rises to my cheeks.

"You're beautiful," he rumbles.

That hard voice rolls down my front, coils low in my belly as he, no doubt, intended.

I sense him rise to his feet, turn my head to follow as he steps past me.

I must have made a sound or he must sense my discomfort, for he presses his hand into my shoulder. "I'll be right back."

And damn, if his touch isn't reassuring?

I track his footsteps across the floor, then the sound of the closet door opening. The rustle of fabric, the whisper of something else... Something soft that slithers against his skin. The hair on the nape of my neck rises.

His footsteps approach; he pauses behind me. I shiver. Somehow, even with my eyes closed, I am aware of how he must tower over me, how he must glance down at me, how at his mercy I am right now.

A soft cloth wraps over my eyes.

I whimper.

"Shh," his warm breath grazes my ear, "I'll take good care of you."

That's what I'm afraid of.

He knots the cloth behind my head, then places his palm on the flat of my back. He urges me to place my cheek onto the mattress.

I sense rather than hear the slither of something. A rope, maybe?

"What are you doing?" I stutter.

"I won't hurt you."

Won't you?

His breathing is steady as he slides what I assume to be a knot up each of my arms and around my shoulder. He cinches the rope at my back over my spine, then slides it up and round my biceps.

"You alright?"

I swallow.

"Nod, if you are."

I nod.

"Does it feel okay?"

I draw in a breath. It feels strange. It feels...not bad. It feels restrictive, but not in a bad way. I nod.

His actions seem to speed up as he knots the rope again at my back, then slides two more knots up my arms to above my elbows.

He leans in and presses a kiss to the back of my neck, "Okay?"

I nod.

"How does that feel?"

Strange, but not as much as I would have expected. It's actually freeing... Like I don't have to do anything but follow the sensations as he ties me up. *OMG, he's tying me up! What the hell is he going to do to me after?* My heart begins to thud and my pulse quickens. I draw in a breath, but I can't seem to get enough air.

"Hey." He wraps his arms around me, and pulls me up against his chest. "You okay?"

I shake my head vigorously. *No, no... Jeez, this isn't what I signed up for.* Give me the cold impersonal touch of the technician who slides the sperm into my uterus.

He tucks my head under his chin, tightens his hold about my body. The hard warmth of him sinks into my blood. The planes of his chest dig into my back. The pain is almost a comfort.

"Shh." He lowers his head, presses his cheek into mine. "You're safe, I

promise. I'll never let anyone harm you."

But who will keep me safe from you?

Bloody hell, stop with that line of thought. Alphahole, here, is simply screwing with my head. Mean one moment, soft the next, and this entire tying me up thing... Bet it's simply to signal to me that he is the dominant one in this relationship. To flout his ownership, no doubt. Doesn't mean anything. A shudder grips me. I set my jaw, take a fortifying breath.

"Ready to resume?" he asks.

I straighten my shoulders. I can do this. I can match him step for step. I nod.

"You're fucking perfect." He presses a hard kiss to the corner of my mouth. A flush ripples over my skin. He moves away and I lean in his direction.

He chuckles. "Soon. First I want to ensure you're relaxed."

Relaxed? He's kidding right? How am I supposed to relax when I'm all bound up?

He continues to knot the rope at my back, then slide the knots—

"They're called wings." He says as he tugs on the ropes that slide up each arm.

He tugs the center of the binding that sits in a heavy chain down my spine.

"How does it feel now?"

I tilt my head. *Not sure really.*

"Would you like it tighter?"

Yes.

Yes.

No. I shake my head.

"Okay, maybe next time?"

Keep dreaming.

He continues placing the knots against my spine, then finally, pulls my wrists together at my back. He places my palms together and whispers the top around my palms. He knots and tugs, then sits back. "Beautiful."

The reverence in his voice makes me blink behind my blindfold.

He guides me up to my feet, then hoists me up onto the bed, on my knees. He presses down on my upper back and I bend over and press my cheek into the mattress. He grips my thighs and pries them apart. Cool air hits my center. I shudder. My breathing grows more shallow. I am painfully

conscious of where I am—on his yacht, in the middle of nowhere, away from anyone I could reach for help, and bound and blindfolded with my ass up in the air. My core clenches, moisture pools between my legs. I swallow and wait... Wait.

"You're gorgeous." His low voice shudders up my spine. I press my palms together, and damnit, if he hasn't orchestrated it so that I seem to be praying to him... Begging him... Pleading to him... For what?

He grips my hips on either side, his palms so big, so warm that surely, each fingerprint is burned into my flesh.

Something nudges at the opening of my slit and I stiffen.

"Shh." He massages the curve of my waist. "Relax." He stays right there, with the head of his cock teasing the opening of my entrance. I draw in a breath, another, force my shoulder muscles to unwind. I am not giving in to this man, not that easily. I will not allow him to overwhelm me. I push my cheek further into the mattress, widen my knees further.

He slips inside me, and a shudder of heat ripples up my spine.

He pulls out, then rubs his dick across my pussy, and again. My belly flip-flops. My thigh muscles shudder. He drags his cock up the valley between my butt cheeks, teases my back hole. I clench my butt. *No*. I shake my head. *Don't you dare*.

"You're going to ask me to take you there one day. You know that, right?"

I snort, then cry out when he thrusts into my melting channel in one smooth move. Goddamn him, how does he always find a way to surprise me?

He stays there, his throbbing length buried inside of me, stretching me, allowing me to adjust. As if that were possible? How can he fill me up so? How can he be so bloody big?

He bends over, and the warmth of him sears my back. He wraps my hair around his palm, tugs my head up and toward him. He presses his mouth to mine. "Give in to me," he whispers.

No! I shake my head.

He straightens and pulls out in one smooth move, only to thrust into me with such force that my entire body jolts. The bed frame protests. He plunges in and out of me, in and out.

He releases his hold on my hair, only to squeeze my butt with just enough force that I squeeze my inner muscles around him

A groan rumbles from him. "You're so hot, so tight. You feel incredible,

Sparks."

He propels his hips forward and impales me, hits that spot deep inside me again and again with such precision that I gasp. The climax sweeps up my thighs, my spine... Explodes behind my eyes with enough force that I throw my head back and scream as I fall apart. He continues to thrust in and out, then wraps his fingers around my neck. He bends over me, kisses me on my lips once, then whispers, "I am going to fuck you now."

Wait, what? What the hell is he talking about?

He pulls out, then impales me in one long, smooth stroke that fills me up completely. I can't stop the moan that spills from my lips. He begins to pound into me, fucking me as he'd promised. With every stroke his balls hit my sensitized clit. Each time he sinks into me, ripples of heat shoot up my spine. My knees tremble and my toes curl. I can't come again, not so soon, surely not.

He tightens his grip around my neck, enough that my lungs begin to burn. Spots of darkness creep in along the sides of my vision. He tilts his hips and buries himself inside me with such force that I can feel every ridge and bump of his shaft.

A trembling grips me. He releases his hold around my neck, allowing the oxygen to rush to my lungs. He leans over, and commands, "Come," and I shatter as he comes inside me.

10

Arpad

I watch her sleep, her eyelashes dark against her cheeks. Her lips are parted. Her hair in tangles from how I'd wrapped it around my palm and tugged. She'd climaxed again, and watching her fall apart on my cock had been the sweetest thing ever. I'd unbound her right after, pulled her up the bed and into my arms. She'd fallen asleep with her head on my chest, her arm flung around my waist. I'd wanted to drift with her, but the thought that she could possibly, very soon, carry my child... A hot sensation stabs at my chest. Somehow, this is not what I had bargained for when I had set out on this trip. Or when I had proposed that she accompany me on my trip home as my pretend wife. I hadn't expected to feel...this pull...this need to take care of her. This need to push her away, yet make her climax again.

I slide out from under her, pick up the rope from the floor and fold it into a figure eight. I place it on the coffee table, slip on my jeans, and walk to the cabin of the ship.

I pick up the satellite phone and dial.

"Mr. Beauchamp?" Edward answers the phone. "Where are you calling from this time?"

"I'm on my way to Lille in France to see my family."

"Don't you like your alone time on these trips? To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Considering four of the Seven have seen fit to tie the knot and Baron's unreachable...well..."

"You mean I was your last option?"

"Currently, my only option."

"Don't tell me," his sigh is loud over the waves, "woman trouble, huh?"

"What makes you say that?"

"It's the only time you Seven want a sounding board... That, or when you want to get married."

"About that," I cough.

"No," Edward begins to laugh, "don't tell me. Not you too, Arpad? What the hell is happening to you guys?"

"There's nothing like that," I assure him.

He only laughs harder.

I pull the phone away from my ear and stare at it. What the fuck is wrong with him?

"Come on, man," I bark down the receiver, "get a grip."

"Fine." He chokes down a chuckle, then seems to compose himself. "So, what's up with you and Karina?"

"What the fuck do you mean by me and Karina?"

"Aw, come on. You don't think the sparks between you two have gone unnoticed by the rest of us, do you?"

"What sparks?"

"Really?" He scoffs, "You're going to deny that there's something between the two of you."

"I would have if you'd asked me a few hours ago."

"What do you mean?"

"She's with me."

"What?" he exclaims. "On the boat?"

"It's a bloody expensive yacht," I growl.

"Hmm."

"What do you mean by that?" I frown.

"You could always turn around and drop her off, couldn't you?"

"I was too far from shore by the time I found out about her presence."

"So, you're taking her along for this trip?"

"Taking her to meet the family."

"A bit premature, isn't it?" He chuckles again.

"Stop cackling," I mutter, then rub the back of my neck. "She's agreed to pose as my wife."

"Wife?"

"Fake wife."

"Right."

"Why do you sound like you don't believe this?" I complain.

"If you only knew the number of conversations I've had with each of the four who got hitched." He pauses and I can sense him shaking his head. "They each insisted there was nothing to it, yet they all ended up married. Not that I am complaining. I, for one, happen to think marriage is a gift from God."

"Right."

"You don't believe me?"

"Not here to debate the merits and demerits of the institution." I scowl. "And I called to speak to Edward my friend, not Edward the priest."

There's silence, then Edward replies, "Not that the two can be differentiated from each other."

"Come on, man, I could do with a second opinion."

"None needed, you're in love," he declares.

I swear, "Thought you, at least, were beyond that childish stuff."

"Think what the others found with their women is childish?"

I blink. "They were exceptions. Lucky bastards, who connected with the right woman at the right time."

"And here you are, on a boat, with the woman you've worshiped from afar—"

"Worshipped?"

"—but never had the balls to tell her how you feel about her."

"Now, hold on." I plant my phone on my other ear. "That's a bit harsh, don't you think? Considering she's been a thorn in my side all this time."

"No kidding. You guys have had it bad for each other since you first met."

"Yeah, we can't stand the sight of each other."

"And yet, you didn't throw her off your boat."

"Not like I could have dumped her out in the middle of nowhere."

"Instead, you're passing the time how?"

"Uh, she wants me to father a child with her."

"What—?" he shouts. "And you're telling this to me... A priest?"

"And my friend."

"You know what I'm going to advise you then?"

"To marry her?" I venture

"Or walk away from her."

"I don't know..." I ponder my choices.

He blows out a breath. "So how can I help you then?"

"Is it wrong for me to want to be a part of this child's life?"

"Assuming a child does result from your relationship, you mean?" he reminds me.

How strange, I've been so very sure that I'll have her pregnant very soon. I shake my head, "Yes, exactly."

"I'd expect no less from you."

"Hmm." I squeeze the bridge of my nose.

"You don't sound convinced."

"I am a bit confused," I mutter. "And don't ever tell the rest of the Seven I admitted to that."

"Your secrets are safe with me."

"Did Baron confide in you too?"

"Huh?" I hear his surprise across the phone line. "Why do you ask that?"

"Only because all of us tend to confide in you."

"It's natural, since I am a priest."

"And a billionaire."

"My money's in a trust, which supports various charities."

"That's noble of you, Father."

"We're not talking about me, though," he reminds me.

"True." I rub the back of my neck. "So, what should I do?"

"Nothing."

"That's your advice?" I growl. "To stay put—"

"And let nature take its course."

"Meaning?"

"Even when you think you're doing nothing, forces beyond your control are at work."

"Is that your belief?"

"It's the way life is."

"Damn, I hate how fatalistic you sound."

"All I'm asking is that you trust the process."

"You mean trust in God?" I mutter.

"You said it," he says lightly.

"Hmm." I roll my shoulders. "So, go ahead with this plan, take her home to see the family?"

"If your instinct says that's right."

"Thanks, Father," I grumble. "Good talk."

"You did all the talking." He laughs.

"Yeah, that's what I mean. How is it that you manage to say so much without saying much at all?"

"It's an art. One I've had time to perfect."

"Of all of us, you were always the most slippery."

"Why, because I forged my own path?"

"Because—" The screen in front of me beeps with an incoming weather forecast. I glance at it, then speak into the phone. "It's because you were the most courageous of all of us."

"You mean the weakest, right?" he replies. "After all, I'm the one who renounced the world and took the easy way out."

"What you did was no mean feat. You dug into yourself, found what your conscience demanded of you and pursued it. Only question is, did it work?"

His sigh is heavy. "I'll let you know when I know."

The computer screen in front of me beeps again, "Before I go, there's one more thing. Can you call Karina's second-in-command and let her know that she's taking a few days off and can't be reached? Meredith—" I refer to our assistant, "has all the information you need."

"Okay." I sense Edward nod down the phone. "Remember what I said? Follow your instinct."

I disconnect the phone call, glance down at the weather report again. "Fuck me."

A sound behind me has me swinging around.

I scowl, "What are you doing here?"

11

Karina

"Jesus, you're touchy today." I hold up my hands, "See, no weapons. I am no threat."

"Snooping on me, huh?" He smirks, "Did you miss me?" He looks me up and down, takes in the T-shirt—*his* T-shirt—I'd pulled on before I'd wandered over.

"Of course, not." I scowl back. "I was simply curious."

I nod toward the computer screen he'd been looking at, "Everything okay there?"

He glances back at the screen, "It will be."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I walk over and peer around him at the screen. "What's that?" I point to the concentric circles splayed over blotches of red and green.

"The weather forecast."

"Huh." The images on the screen blip and change. "It's like no forecast I have seen before."

He chuckles. "I'd be surprised if it were. These here are files from the Numerical Weather Prediction programs."

"What does that mean?"

"It's raw weather forecast data, that helps me plan ahead."

"How's that?"

"It allows me to look at the overall pattern being shown by the files, rather than the wind at points." He scans my features, "Does that make

sense?"

"It gives you the big picture?"

He nods. "It's the raw prediction with nothing added and nothing taken away, which allows me to be in control of what factors I should consider on top of this standard information."

"What other factors would you consider?"

"I tend to use this app," he nods toward another screen, "to share how the fronts and wind systems are developing over time. It's a three-step approach, effectively." He gestures with his hand, "You have the coastal waters on the English side first. So, I would look at what sort of acceleration I'll be getting there and consider the tide. Then I'll look at some other coast-specific forecasts to see if that is predicting any sort of thermal enhancement. Then, the further offshore you get, the more the accuracy of these files," he taps at the screen I'd first seen, "increases. So, I'd be focusing on them and what I expect to come in, based on what has been developing out there. When I get to the other side of the Channel, I would, once again, look at high-resolution files, compare them with a coastal waters forecast, or something similar for that side, to see if they are matching what the weather prediction files suggest and what I expect."

I stare at his face.

"What?" He scowls.

"It's the first time I've seen you this excited about something other than ___"

"You?" He smirks.

"Making money?"

"That ol' chestnut." He studies me. "You shouldn't always go by appearances."

"I could say the same."

"Touché" He tilts his head. "No mistaking you for what you are."

"Which is?"

"A strong, confident woman, who knows what she wants and doesn't hesitate to go after it."

"And yet, here I am."

"Exactly," he agrees. "You saw a good deal and grabbed it with both hands."

"Hmm." Is it though? Is it what it appears to be on the face of it? What happens if... When I get pregnant? Can I do this on my own? Will he stick to

his end of the bargain? Do I want him to?

"You're overthinking this." He says this while glancing, once more, at the screen. "Take each day as it comes, Sparks. Don't jump ahead."

"Is that what you're doing?"

He straightens, then turns to me, takes in my appearance. His eyelids grow heavy. "I'm deciding what to do to you next."

A shiver runs down my spine and my thighs clench. "About that," I clear my throat, "you could have warned me."

"What would the fun be in that."

"When you practice Shibari—"

"Kinbaku."

"What?" I scowl.

"Shibari in Japanese means to tie."

"Isn't that what you did?"

"While Kinbaku translates to tying tightly or tying deeply." He raises one eyebrow. "It describes a practice where connection between the *nawashi*, that is the rope artist, and the *dorei*, i.e. the slave or rope bottom, are important."

"Are you calling me your slave?" I mutter. "I'm not sure I like that—"

"—Yet." He grabs my waist and hoists me up.

I squeak, then wrap my arms around his waist. "What are you doing?"

"How long does your fertile phase last, you said?"

"Umm," I swallow, "technically, the peak was a few hours before my appointment yesterday, but I am sure the days following would count too."

"Let's feed you first."

He carries me across to the galley, lowers me onto the chair, then pours me some orange juice from the open pack.

"How much have you got stocked away?"

"Enough for one person on this trip."

He walks over to the stove and busies himself, chopping vegetables.

"What do you do when you're not sailing?"

"What do you do when you're not running your security business?" he retorts.

My company. My employees. Shit, I haven't thought of them since I got on the boat. When was the last time I went through an entire twenty-four hours without stressing about my responsibilities? When was the last time I took my eyes off my goals, huh?

He adds butter to the skillet, then casts me a sideways glance, "Where did

you go to?"

"Nowhere."

"I must not be doing a good job if your mind is elsewhere." He smirks.

"You're full of shit," I mumble.

"And you need to submit to me," he declares.

I spit out the orange juice and he chuckles.

"Some warning please?" I choke out. "I haven't had my breakfast."

"So, it's fine to get kinky with you after you've eaten?" He shoots me a glance over his shoulder.

"The rope play was all well and good," I glower at him, "but I'm not doing it again."

"Oh?" He peruses my features. "Not only will you be my rope bottom, but you are going to enjoy it."

"Says who?" I frown.

He turns off the flame on the stove then turns and glares at me, and my pulse flutters. Moisture laces my core. Oh, hell, what is it about his dominant ways that gets me all hot and bothered inside?

I tip up my chin, and he jerks his chin to the ground. "On your knees," he orders.

"What the hell?" I gape. "Is this one of your stupid mind games?"

"Do it," he commands.

"And if I don't?"

"You don't want to know."

"Try me." I sniff. "You and your stupid threats."

He moves so quickly, I gasp. The next second he's seated on the chair and I am bent over his knee... Again. For a man his size, how the hell does he move that fast?

"Count to ten—" His gravelly voice shudders down my spine.

"What?"

He pulls up the T-shirt so it's bunched around my neck, and his palm connects with my naked backside.

I squeal. "What the—?"

He spansks me again. "Wrong response."

"Wait—"

He slaps my ass a third time. I shudder, dig my core into his thighs. His palm connects with my ass again and I wheeze. "Why are you—?"

"The more you delay starting the count, the more I get to spank you,

Sparks."

"This is so not fair," I burst out, and he flattens his palm across my butt. He massages my skin and the pain sinks into my blood. My core clenches again. "Arpad, what the hell are you doing?"

He drags his fingers across the flesh between my legs and I groan.

"Start counting."

He squeezes my ass with enough force that I yelp, "Fine, fine."

He slaps the curve of my flesh and I squeak, "One."

He spanks me again.

"Two," I huff.

Slap.

"Three."

Slap.

"Four."

Slap.

"Five," I wail.

He doesn't stop after that until he's reached nine, each of his slaps punctuated by my counting. By the time he's done, I'm shaking, tears running down my face. I blink them away. At least, I didn't give him the satisfaction of yelling or protesting. If he thought he was going to make me submit this way, he has another think coming.

He swipes his fingers between my legs and a shiver runs up my spine.

"You're wet already," there's a note of wonder in his voice, "and I haven't even begun."

"I am done here." I strain against his hold and he leans his weight across my back, effectively holding me in place.

"We're not done until I say we are."

I turn my head to stare at him, "You're so...so..."

"Irresistible?"

"Full of yourself."

"And you like me that way."

"Ha." I shake the hair out of my eyes. "Keep deluding yourself."

"You're the one denying your need to give in to me."

"Keep dreaming, buster," I growl.

"Oh, I'm gonna do more than that." He raises his hand again. "I'm going to withhold your orgasms until you behave."

His palm connects with my ass with such force that my entire body jerks

forward.

"Ten," I snarl, then clamp my lips together. I will not cry out. Will not allow him the satisfaction of finding out how much he's hurting me and turning me on. *No, no, no.* I squeeze my thighs together. Curl my fingers into fists and squeeze my eyes as he slaps me again.

"Give in to me, Sparks," he rubs his palm across the burning skin of my arse, "and everything will be okay."

"Nothing will be okay," I grit out through clenched teeth, "and I am not going to—" He presses his lips to the curve of my butt and I shiver. He licks the abraded skin he'd just smacked and a groan spills from my lips. Damn it... The contrast between the pain and this tenderness... It's too much.

"Arpad," I breathe.

"Hmm." He presses little kisses up the curve of my spine, while he slides his fingers between my legs again. He slides one finger inside of me and I gasp. He adds a second and a third, then begins to work them in and out of me.

I shudder and he pushes aside my hair, then tugs down the T-shirt to kiss the nape of my neck. Goosebumps pop on my skin. Oh, my goodness, how can the touch of his lips on my skin be so...everything? He licks around the shell of my ear, then sucks on my earlobe. My toes curl. I clench down on his fingers and a groan sounds from above me. "You're so hot, so wet, Sparks."

He presses his lips against the side of my neck, then bites down gently. I buck in his hold and he straightens, then folds his fingers around my nape. I shiver. His grasp is both dominating and soothing...somehow. He slides his hand down, presses his palm to the small of my back, and warmth pools between my legs. He scissors his fingers inside of me, then twists, and I gasp. Tremors begin at my toes then spiral up my legs.

That's when he pulls his fingers out.

12

Arpad

Her shoulders bunch, her thighs spasm, the sweet scent of her arousal fills the air, and damn it, but I don't want to stop. I want to turn her over, bury my face in her pussy and suck on her clit, lick her lower lips and bite on that swollen flesh until she comes all over my face. But... I will not. The hard column between my legs protests. That's when I know I need to get her off of me, need to put distance between us for a little while... Just until she's learned her lesson. I lick her cum off my fingers then swing her off my lap to place her in front of me.

Her knees buckle and I hold her until she finds her balance.

"What are you doing?" She gasps as I tug the T-shirt, *my* T-shirt, down about her knees.

"This looks better on you; you should keep it."

"What?" She gapes as I straighten and brush past her to the stove. I flick on the flame under the skillet.

"Arpad," she snarls, "what the hell are you playing at?"

"Not playing, just teaching you how to behave." I add the vegetables to the skillet, then crack the eggs into the bowl and whisk them.

"I'm not a bloody pet," she snaps.

Adorable. I can't stop the smile that tugs at my lips. "No, you're more than that." I pour the egg mixture into the skillet.

"You could have fooled me," she mutters.

"Doesn't mean I don't need to tame you." I glance over my shoulder.

She folds her arms around her waist, draws herself up to her full height. "I need to call my office and make sure everything is okay."

"It is."

She gapes at me. "How do you know? Did you—" she pauses, scans my face. "You didn't." Her cheeks redden. "You did not get in touch with my team and tell them where I am."

"Someone had to do it, so they wouldn't get alarmed, considering you were," I look her up and down, "otherwise occupied." I smirk.

Her cheeks grow fiery, then she curls her fingers into fists. "So help me, Arpad, if you messed with my company and my employees—"

"Relax, Sparks," I drawl, "I had Edward pass on the message to your second in command that you were taking a few days off and couldn't be reached."

"Right." Her shoulders sag, then she tosses her head. "I'm never not reachable." She sniffs.

"You need some time off. Isn't too much stress a deterrent to conceiving?"

Her features freeze. "You bastard," she snarls.

"It's true, isn't it?" I tilt my head, "You want to get pregnant. I am happy to oblige. In fact, I am doing everything in my power to ensure that our joined mission is successful."

"You sound so sincere," she stares at my face, "I almost believe you."

"That's because I am." I turn back and pop the bread into the toaster. "I have your best interests at heart, Sparks."

She scoffs, "Sure, you do. That's why you tied me up, huh?"

"It's part of our agreement." I turn to glare at her.

"It's not what I agreed to."

"You agreed to submit to anything I want," I point out.

"This," she waves her hand in the air, "this isn't what I expected."

"You concurred." I tilt my head.

"You could have warned me." She holds my gaze.

I survey her flushed features. "Fair enough." I place the spatula to the side, turn off the flame under the skillet and cover it. "I won't tie you again until you ask." I prowl over to her. "And ask, you will, I promise."

Her pupils dilate.

She bites down on her lower lip and my gaze drops to her mouth. Pink lips, swollen from where she's been worrying it between her teeth.

I reach out, drag my thumb across the puffy flesh.

She shivers, then steps back, "Stop that."

"You don't get to dictate this arrangement."

She throws up her hands, "Hello, this is about me getting pregnant, isn't it? So clearly, I need to get a say. Besides, left to you, I'm not even sure you're going to copulate with me."

"Copulate?" I blink. "Did you say copulate?"

"It seems more official than using the F word," she mutters. "In this situation, I mean. After all, we have an arrangement, right?"

I stare at her, and she folds her arms across her chest. "Look," she draws in a breath, "I'm trying to figure out what the hell you want from me, okay?"

"That's where you are going wrong." I tuck a strand of hair behind her ears. "You don't need to overthink this. Just surrender yourself to me for the next few days."

"Surrender?" She stares up at me. "You're asking me to put myself in your hands."

"What do you have to lose, hmm?"

"My control?" she snaps back.

"Would that be so bad?"

"You don't understand." She rubs her fingers across her arms. "I've never gone a day without working. Not in a long time. I've devoted every second of my working time to building my business, and now, out of the blue, you tell me to switch off."

"It's good for you to occasionally pull back."

"You mean slack off?"

"I mean gain perspective." I take in her agitated features, the way she shuffles her feet, then twists her fingers together in front of her. "Something you could do with," I add.

"Now you're accusing me of what? Being too close to my business?"

"All I am saying," I shove my hands into the pockets of my jeans, "is that you need to take some time to breathe, to recalibrate, and give your body and emotions a chance to readjust to this new reality you want."

"Which is?" She frowns.

"A child."

"Yes, of course. I know that." She huffs. "All of this is about me having a kid, isn't it?"

"I get that." I peer into her face. "Your wanting a child? I get that, loud

and clear. What I don't understand is how, if you are so career-oriented, you are going to have time to bring one up?"

"I'd, uh, I'd prioritize the baby, of course," she purses her lips, "if I get pregnant."

"*When* you get pregnant," I correct her, "you'll have to rearrange your entire life around the child. You can't be this focused on your career. If all you think about is your job, how will you make the space in your life for a kid?"

She rakes her fingers through her hair, "I'd, uh, I'd manage."

"Will you?" I fold my arms across my chest. "It seems to me, you haven't really thought through the dynamics of how you're going to raise a child."

"Oh?" She draws herself up to her full height. "And you know everything about childcare, huh?"

I do, because I wasn't prioritized when I was young, but she doesn't need to know that.

"Are you going to elaborate on the details for me?" She huffs.

"No, I am giving you the space you need to think things through." I lean forward on the balls of my feet. "Being away from your job and your daily life is the perfect opportunity for you to process the issues. You'll be surprised how much clarity you get with distance."

"Is that what you're doing?" She glances around the space. "Putting distance?"

I chuckle, "Now you're reading too much into my statement."

"But that is what you're doing, aren't you?" She searches my features. "You're running."

"Next, you'll tell me it's because of the incident, where I was kidnapped as a kid, that I like to spend time away from the world and on my own, sailing around the world."

"Don't you?"

I roll my shoulders. "No."

"No?" Her forehead wrinkles. "Then why do you—?"

"Prefer the company of the waves to the city?"

"And your friends."

"The Seven." I nod. "I keep in touch with them via regular calls. Besides, the frequency with which they have been getting married, I've seen them more in the past few months than I have since right after the incident."

"You guys supported each other a lot during that time?"

I rub the back of my neck. "More like, used each other as punching bags."
"You mean sounding boards?"

"Punching bags." I widen my stance. "Put seven boys who've been through an emotional and physical rollercoaster, not to mention impending puberty which has all of us in a tizzy, and the last thing we want to do is talk."

"Ah," she nods, "and how did your families react to what happened?"

I set my jaw. "The incident was hard on mine. But they supported me. They were there for me, when I needed them most."

"You're close to them?" Her eyes brighten with interest.

"Close enough," I mutter. "It was a relief, in a way, when my father moved back to Lille. Not that I didn't enjoy having him in London, but it put too much pressure on me to stay in touch, visit him. This way, I have my space, and whenever I need to see him or my grandmother, I just hop across the pond."

"You're lucky to have them so close." She drops into the chair, then crosses her legs. The slim line of her thigh beckons. My fingers tingle. Only when my thigh grazes the chair, do I realize that I've followed her.

I bend down, tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

Her breath catches. She parts her lips.

Something electric springs between us and the hair on the nape of my neck rises. Bloody hell. This chemistry between us has been there from day one, when she'd spilled her chai tea latte all over my slacks. One side of my lips kicks up and she frowns.

"What's so funny?"

"Just thinking about how we met."

"You were an obnoxious, self-obsessed businessman, intent on having his own way."

I smirk.

"And only you'd take that as a compliment." She sighs.

"Only you'd go toe-to-toe with me, from the moment we set eyes on each other.

"Doesn't happen often, huh?"

"Never," I confess.

"I'm glad I didn't make it easy for you." Her lips curve.

"Oh, but by the time I'm done, you'll be on your back, on your front, on your hands and knees, upside down with your mouth open," I lower my face

to hers, until her scent sinks into my blood, "ready and willing and waiting to service me. Asking me to tie you up and take you any way, every way I want, begging for the orgasm that I, and only I, can grant you, you feel me?"

Her breath hitches, her pupils dilate until there's only a circle of color around the outside, then she slaps me.

13

Karina

His head snaps back with the impact. His gaze narrows, his nostrils flare, his hand swoops out, and I squeak when he wraps his fingers around my neck. "You know what attracted me the first time I saw you?"

"Wh...what?"

"Your fire. Your attitude that you didn't give a toss about anything, that you could take on the strongest challenge and overcome it."

"And...now?" I swallow.

"Now, I think it's that very outlook that's going to get you into so much trouble."

I flick out my tongue to lick my lips and his gaze drops to my mouth.

"Do that again and all bets are off." He releases me so suddenly that I crash into the back of the chair.

"I won't forget this, Sparks," he adds. "I am going to repay it with interest. That, I promise you."

The ding of the toaster interrupts the silence. I jump and his lips curl. He straightens, then walks over to rescue the toast. He slides them onto the plate with the omelet, then walks over to place it on the table in front of me.

He jerks his chin and I frown. He tilts his head and I rise to my feet. He sinks down, then pulls me onto his lap.

"What the hell?" I protest. "What are you doing?"

"Feeding you before I fuck you."

My skin tingles. Jesus, this man has a filthy tongue...and a filthier mouth.

The things he'd done to me with that mouth earlier. I wriggle around in his lap and the hard column in his pants jabs in between my asscheeks.

"Keep that up and I'll lay you out on the table and eat you instead."

Moisture laces my core and I squeeze my thighs together. "That was a terrible line," I scoff.

"So why are you turned on?" He leans over to scoop up some of the food then holds it to my mouth, "Open."

I flatten my lips together, and he chuckles. "You're cute when you're annoyed."

"I'm not annoyed, I—"

He slides the food inside my mouth. I lick the food off the fork tines and his gaze intensifies. "Careful," his voice rumbles up his chest, "you're testing my patience."

"Wasn't aware you had any." I chew the food and swallow. The flavors linger in my mouth. "This is good." I frown at the food, then up at him.

"Why are you surprised?"

"Just thought you, with your billionaire lifestyle...."

"Billionaire lifestyle—?" He forks up more of the food, offers it to me. I wrap my lips around the fork, and once more, the buttery taste of the eggs underlined with the fragrant notes of basil, seeps into my consciousness. "It's really good." I say with my mouth half-full.

"I cook better than most people."

I blink, then laugh, "Of course, you do."

"It's the truth." He feeds me a few more mouthfuls of the omelet along with the toast.

I open my mouth, and he bypasses me. Instead, he wraps his succulent lips around the fork tines and licks it clean.

My belly flutters, my mouth waters, and trust me, it's not only for the food.

He reaches for the food, offers it to me again. I lean forward, and this time, he brings it to his mouth.

"Hey," I protest as he repeats the previous action; this time he seems to curl his tongue around the fork even longer.

I should look away, should get up and walk out and... Go where? It's a freakin' boat. And I'm trapped here with him. And we have a deal, for better or worse. He's promised to give me what I need most. The price I have to pay for it is not that much, in the larger scheme of things. If anyone can get me

pregnant quickly, surely it is this very virile a-hole of a man, right?

He reaches for the remaining food on the plate and I wrap my fingers around his wrist.

He freezes.

I trail my fingers across his knuckles and goosebumps dot his skin.

Huh. Imagine that. Apparently, alphahole, here, isn't impervious to my charms, either. I slide the fork from his grasp, scoop up the last piece of food from the plate. I turn and hold it up to his mouth. "Open," I murmur.

He parts his lips and I slide the fork between them. He swirls his tongue around the tines and my core clenches. He curls his fingers around my wrist, moves my hand down. He squeezes and the fork slips from my fingers to clatter onto the table.

The sound ricochets between us as he leans in closer, closer. He places his lips right in front of mine. The heat from his big body enfolds me, sinks into my blood. The scent of him—bergamot and edgy darkness goes straight to my head.

His gaze holds mine. Those blue irises lighten until they seem almost transparent. A mirror that reflects back some of the sensations I am feeling right now. Lust, need, a gnawing emptiness that spills from my core.

"I am going to kiss you now." His breath sears my mouth.

I lean in closer, until my lips almost touch his. Until there's only a hair's breadth of space between us. No, not even that. Less than that, actually.

He stays that way for a beat, another. My hairline prickles; my toes curl. This anticipation... It's w-a-a-y sexier than anything I've ever experienced. My throat closes and my breath comes in small pants.

"Ari," I whisper, and his gaze intensifies.

"Say that again."

"Arpad."

"No what you called me earlier."

"Ari?"

His lips kick up, "I like the sound of my name from your lips."

"Does anyone else call you that?"

He shakes his head.

"That'll be our secret, huh?"

"Here's another." His smile broadens. "I've fancied you since I first laid eyes on you."

I chuckle, "I thought you were angry with me."

"I was."

I wrinkle my forehead. "I don't understand."

"Somehow, you got under my skin. You made me want to haul you close and ravish you. And this feeling of being so near the edge, of not knowing why I felt what I did, of not wanting to let you go until I found out why I was having this reaction to you... It made me feel—"

"Uncomfortable?"

"Out of control." He says simultaneously. "It made me want to push you away and keep you close at the same time."

I take in the sincerity of his gaze, the depths in those grey-blue eyes of his which invite me to trust him, to drown in them. "It's why you had the Seven offer me the contract for the security of your businesses?"

He doesn't blink, and if I hadn't been looking for it, I might have missed the twitch in his left eye.

"That's it, isn't it?" I lean back to put distance between us. I am still in the circle of his arms, but whatever. "It was you who was behind my getting this contract. You did it, knowing if I accepted it, I'd have to move to London."

His jaw tics, "Are you accusing me of wanting you near me?"

"I am saying that you manipulated my career, so you could have me in a place where you could control me."

"You're getting ahead of yourself."

"And you're delusional if you think your over-the-top, interfering ways are going to win you any favors with me." I jump up and he drags me right back down into his lap.

"I'm not done with you."

"Oh, but I'm done with you."

"We're just getting started, Sparks. Remember, you need my cum inside you."

"Maybe I don't care anymore. Maybe I'll simply miss this window, then inseminate myself with the sperm of another man."

His jaw hardens. A nerve throbs at his temple. He glares at me and that hint of meanness that I've become so familiar with reveals itself in his eyes.

I swallow and my nerve-endings jangle. *Don't poke the beast. What the hell do you think you're doing?* And when have I ever backed down from a challenge, huh?

"Actually, I think I need to find another man. Someone who doesn't impose stupid conditions and who'd be more than happy to fuck me and—"

He swoops out his hand and curls his fingers around my throat. "What did you say?"

"I said I need to find someone else to sleep with—"

His grasp tightens. I try to draw in a breath and my lungs burn.

"What are you doing?" I cough, grab at his wrist as he thrusts his face into mine, then licks his tongue up my cheek.

"Don't talk about another man when you're with me," he growls against my skin. The vibrations sink into my blood, span my chest, then dip straight down to the flesh between my legs. I can't stop the panting sound that spills from my throat.

"Nod, if you understand."

Yes.

Yes.

I shake my head.

"What a little liar you are. And just when I thought we were getting along so well."

"Oh, bugger off," I choke out the words and his eyes gleam.

He loosens his grasp only to lower his head. He bites down on my lower lip and my breath catches. He presses little kisses down my chin, my neck, then fastens his mouth over the fabric surrounding my nipple, and bites down. I feel the tug all the way down to my core.

"Stop," I gasp. "Stop that."

He brings his other hand up to massage my other breast and, honestly, my insides liquify. The warmth of his fingers on my flesh, the scent of him lapping at my nostrils, the heat from his big body that surrounds me, and presses down on my chest, to pin me in place. He raises his head to nuzzle at the curve of where my shoulder meets my neck. I shiver and pinpricks of pleasure dance across my skin. He's not even trying really hard and I am turned on. When it comes to him, I can't resist the allure of how my body responds to his touch.

He releases his hold on my nape, only to bury his fingers in my hair. He tugs and I bare my neck. "Look at you, all ready for the taking."

"I'm not," I grit out through clenched teeth.

"So, you don't want your orgasm?"

That's not what I said. I clamp my lips together, refuse to groan when he buries his nose at the base of my throat and draws in a long breath. The hard column in his pants throbs against the curve of my butt, and my stomach flip-

flops. Jesus, how can I resist him when I am completely engulfed by his presence?

He licks the skin between my clavicles and a moan spills from my lips. He presses little kisses down to the valley between my breasts and heat flushes my skin. He tugs down the collar of the T-shirt, then laves my nipple with his tongue. Moisture pools between my legs. My eyelids flutter shut. Oh, my god, this is crazy. How can he make me come apart, so quickly?

"You're more responsive than any ship has ever been to my touch."

I snap open my eyelids. "Did you just compare me to a boat?"

"It was a compliment." He turns his attention back to my other breast, then curls his tongue around my nipple. He sucks on it and my fingers tremble. Jesus, it's as if all my erogenous zones are connected to parts of me in a way I didn't think was possible at all.

"Only you," I gasp out, "would turn around the meaning of the words to suit your needs."

"And I thought this was all about fulfilling your needs."

He slides his hand between my thighs and I tremble.

"Thought so." He raises his head and smirks. "You're ready for me. Admit it."

"No."

He peels back his lips and his teeth glint against his tanned skin. He releases his hold on me, only to shove the utensils on the table aside. Then he grabs my waist and hoists me onto the table.

"Hey," I squeak.

He plants his big palm in the center of my chest and applies pressure. The world tilts. The next moment I am on my back, on the flat surface, staring up at the ceiling of the boat.

He wedges his shoulder between my legs, forcing them apart. Cool air hits my exposed skin a second before he grips my ankles and places them over each of his shoulders.

I glance down to find him peering up with a wicked look on his face.

"Wha—" I clear my throat, "what are you doing?"

"Eating the rest of my lunch."

14

Arpad

I swipe my tongue up her pussy lips and she moans. I slide my tongue inside her channel, grip her thighs and spread them apart even further. She thrusts her hips up and into my face, and that sweet scent of her arousal goes to my head. I weave my tongue in and out of her, then slip my fingers in between her arsecheeks. She freezes, and I lick her clit, circle the swollen nub with my tongue. Her thighs tremble. She buries her fingers in my hair and tugs. The pain heads straight to my groin. Hell. My cock lengthens in my pants. I slide my other hand up her smooth skin and squeeze her nipple. She shudders, then locks her thighs around my head as I suck on her pussy, then close my mouth around her clit and draw it in between my lips. Her entire body bucks. A groan bleeds from her, and my balls harden. I raise my head, then rise over her, to fasten my lips to her mouth. The taste of her lips combined with that of her cum, sends the blood rushing to my groin. I pull back, stare into her flushed features, her wide eyes, the tendrils of hair stuck to her brow.

"Jesus, you're gorgeous." Something hot coils in my chest. I plant my elbows on the table and bracket her in. "Why the hell did it have to be you?" I frown at her.

She stares back at me, her golden eyes wide, beseeching.

I reach down, release my cock, then position it against her entrance. I thrust into her and she gasps. Her mouth opens and closes. I bend, fit my lips to hers, slide my tongue inside her mouth at the same time that I pull back and impale her in one long, smooth move. Her entire body jerks. The table

creaks. I begin to fuck her in earnest, plunging up and into her. A groan trembles up her throat; I swallow it, dig my fingers into the curve of her hip and hold her as I continue to move in and out of her. In and out. I wind the strands of her hair around my palm and tug. She moans, then flings her arms around my shoulders, digs her fingernails into my back with enough force that pain shivers down my spine. My balls tighten and my shaft thickens inside of her. I pull all the way out, stay poised at the rim of her channel. She pushes her pelvis up, and I tear my lips from hers. "Tell me you want me."

She firms her lips.

"Say it," I order.

She pouts, then reaches down between us. I slap her hand away. "You don't get to touch." I snap. "Not unless I allow you."

"And when is that?"

"When you admit that it wasn't an accident that you stowed away on my boat."

She stares. "You're crazy."

"I am only just beginning to understand what's between us."

"What's that?"

"You're infatuated with me."

"What?" She gapes.

"It's true. Don't deny it. In fact, your subconscious had picked me out as the father of your to-be child, even before you realized it."

Her gaze narrows. "You're doing this purposely, aren't you?"

"What?"

"Trying to make me angry?"

"I won't deny that having you livid at me is a turn on."

"That's why you're accusing me of some utter bullshit?"

"Is it?" I drag the crown of my cock up her pussy lips and her eyes dilate. "Tell me you need this. Tell me you can't wait for me to fuck you, to bury myself inside your hungry, melting pussy and shag you so hard that you'll feel me inside of you for days."

Her breathing grows ragged and she moans, "Fuck you, Ari."

"I will. All you have to do is give me what I want." I reach down, sink my thumb inside her asshole and her back bows off the table.

"Jesus," she pants. Sweat beads on her upper lip. She digs her fingers into my hair and yanks me close to her. "Damn you," she snarls. "Damn the day I set eyes on you."

"Say it," I growl.

"Fine." She heaves out a breath. "I want you," she swallows, "I want you to make me orgasm. I want you to fuck me until—"

I propel my hips forward and impale her in one long, smooth stroke. Her eyes roll back in her head and she tightens her grip on my hair. Fire sizzles down my spine, warming my blood. My pulse begins to thud at my temples. "Look at me," I growl.

She mumbles under her breath.

"Eyes on me, Sparks."

She opens her heavy eyelids, then holds my gaze as I pull back then sink into her, burying myself to the hilt. She parts her lips and a tear runs down from the corner of her eye. I bend my head and slurp it up. Then without taking my eyes off of her, I thrust in and out, in and out. She holds onto me, moving with me, holding herself open to the battering I am subjecting her to. She meets me thrust for thrust, pushing up to accept me, as I plunge into her, again and again.

A shudder grips her and color smears her cheeks. "I am going to—"

"Come with me," I command as I pull out, all the way out, then lunge forward until my balls slap against her arse.

She throws her head back, and shatters. The ripples of her climax shudder up her body, her pussy clenches around my dick, and that's when I come deep inside her. My orgasm seems to go on and on, until I slump over her body.

We stay that way, skin slick with sweat, her fingers entangled in my hair. Her body shakes under me and warmth spreads against my shoulder. I pull back, then glance down to find her crying.

My heart stutters and my skin suddenly feels too tight for the rest of me, "What's wrong?" I pat at her hair, not sure what to do. Jesus, bringing a woman to fulfillment? That I can do, but a weeping woman...? How the hell am I going to calm her down? "Sparks?" I cup her face, "Did I hurt you?"

She only cries harder.

I pull out of her and straighten. She throws her arm over her eyes. Why is she trying to hide from me? I scoop her up and into my lap. She buries her head in my shoulder and continues to sob. Shit, this isn't good. Why the hell is she still weeping? I rock her, run my fingers through her hair, try to calm her. We stay that way for a few more seconds until her crying slows down.

"Feeling better? I ask.

She snuffles, then rubs her hand across her face. "Let me go," she hisses.

"What?" I glance down at her in confusion.

She pushes against me and I raise my arms. She slips off my lap, almost falls on her arse, then straightens. She heads out of the galley area and toward the bedroom.

"Karina, stop." I jump up to my feet and follow her, through the bedroom and into the bathroom. She closes the door and I hear the snick of the lock.

"Karina," I bang on the door, "let me in."

"Go away." Her voice reaches me—brittle, angry, hurting. Why is she hurting?

"What is it? What happened?" I place my ear against the door. "At least, tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing's wrong, I..." She turns on the shower, which drowns out the rest of her statement. *Aargh!* I dig my fingers into my hair and pull on it. "Open the damn door." I slam my fist into the wooden barrier. "Open, right the fuck now, or I swear, when I get my hands on you, I'll make you pay."

The shower shuts off. There's silence, a beat. Another.

Then, her voice barely audible through the door, she asks, "How?"

Huh? "What do you mean?"

"How will you make me pay?"

15

Karina

Is that all you've got to say for yourself after falling apart in his arms? Jesus, that orgasm... It was more than that... It was a seismic wave of epic proportions that carried me higher and higher, then fell away, leaving me to crash to earth. Had I blacked out for a second there? Maybe. I'd never come this hard before. In fact, I'd come with more vengeance than the last time when he'd tied me up; and I'd thought that first time had been intense. Ha, I should have known better.

Every time he fucks me, it will only solidify the connection between us. It is going to tie me to him, going to churn my guts inside out and spit me out, and I won't be able to do anything about it. Hell, I don't want to stop it. As soon as he glances at me, I'm all but ready to throw myself at his feet and beg him to take me.

This...is not how I'd envisioned this association of ours progressing. I am not the kind of person who loses control... Not when my father had treated me like one of the boys and forced me to run ten miles every morning.

Not when I'd stood up to him and proven that I could successfully run my own business. I'd proven to the world that I could take care of myself without anyone's help.

So, why the hell had I fallen apart when this bastard of a man, who has no idea about me or where I come from or what I've been through, had put his hands on me—and his cock inside of me?

I wipe my arm across my face. It was only sex—until it wasn't. Every

encounter with that man is turning out to be far more intense than I'd expected. At this rate, I am going to walk away with a child... But without my heart. I cannot fall for this guy, no way.

"What did you say?" He raps on the door again.

I unlock it and swing it open. "I said," I tip up my chin, "how do you plan to make me pay?"

He peruses my features, then frowns. "What was that about?"

"You first." I fold my arms over my chest.

"I don't answer to anyone."

I snort. "With that attitude, it's a wonder you've had any success in business."

"Or maybe it's because of this very attitude, that I am willing to take the kinds of risks no one else will."

"Is that what I am? A risk?"

"You're an investment, an asset, make no mistake about that, Sparks. An easy way for me to get my family off my back about my bachelor status. And if I get a few free fucks along the way—"

Only when my hand connects with his face again, do I realize I've closed the distance between us. For the second time, his head snaps back, and the imprints of my fingers stand out against his face.

His eyes gleam and his nostrils flare. He cracks his neck and a thrill of fear slithers down my spine.

He takes a step forward.

I skitter back. "I... I'm sorry." My voice wavers. Hell, that won't do. I can't allow him to see how this mean angry side of him scares me, and turns me on. Shit, why am I behaving in such a stereotypical manner? Just because he is a dominant son of a bitch, doesn't mean I have to connect with my inner submissive, right? Wait... What? Inner submissive? What the hell? I am used to being in charge—at home, at work... And no rich, prick alphahole is going to take that from me.

He prowls toward me and I dig my heels into the ground. *Don't give in. Don't allow him to overpower me.* "You... You deserved it, though. How dare you insult me that way? How dare you act like...like I am your property, like you own me, like you can command me to do anything you want."

"Oh?" His lips twitch. He drums his fingers on his chest, as he looks me up and down. "Are you telling me you didn't give me that right once you agreed to this partnership?"

"Partnership?" I scoff. "More like a one-way street, where your word is law."

"See?" He drags his thumb across that plump lower lip of his, "You do get it, after all. I knew you were clever, Sparks. Knew I'd made the right choice all along."

"You..." I gape at him, then snap my jaws shut. "You made the choice? I was the one who proposed that you father my child."

He grins and I stiffen. Damn it, I walked into that. Somehow, everything I tell him gets twisted around to suit his own needs. No way, am I going to let him get away with it this time. I am going to show him that I am not like his other women. He cannot simply walk all over me.

I grab the hem of my—okay technically *his*—shirt then pull it up and off.

His chest muscles go solid. He freezes in place. The twin orbs of fire that are his eyes seem to blaze, a blue flame, the hottest of all. He rakes his gaze down my breasts, down my stomach to my smoothly shaved pussy—I did it for myself, just so you know. I like to feel good in my skin and taking care of my body is an essential part of my regimen.

I jut out my hip, prop my hand on it, then watch as he approaches me.

He sinks to his knees, stares straight at my core. And my thighs tremble. "Jesus." His hot breath sears my center.

Goosebumps pepper my skin. He pushes his face into my core, and inhales. And the sheer intimacy of the moment, the animalistic way that he hums under his breath, that he stares at my center with adoration, is more than I can bear. Sweat beads my upper lip and my thigh muscles tremble. I fold my fingers at my sides, don't move as he blows on my heated, throbbing pussy.

"Damn it," I swear aloud, and his lips kick up.

"Want me to make you come again, huh?" He smirks.

"How about I make you come instead?"

He glances up at me, then shakes his head, "You don't get to call the shots, sweetheart. Have you forgotten that?"

"It was simply a suggestion." I flutter my eyelashes at him, and his breathing speeds up. Oh, this could be fun, after all. I slide my fingers down to strum my pussy lips and he tracks my movements. I part my legs, slide my fingers inside my cunt and a fat drop of cum trickles down my inner thigh. He licks his lips, lowers his head and slurps it up.

Goosebumps pop on my skin. Bloody hell, did he just do that? The carnal

nature of this man overpowers all other aspects of him. Perhaps, I had underestimated him, huh? Perhaps he's not as easy to control as I'd thought, after all? Had I been wrong in that spontaneous suggestion that he become my sperm donor? I try to slide back, but he places his big palms on either side of my hips and holds me in place.

"Don't move," he commands.

And simply because he said that, because he asked me to obey him, again, I shuffle back. His grasp tightens, his fingertips digging into my hipbones with enough pressure that I yelp.

He glances up. "Shh," he admonishes me. "Watch me as I eat out your pussy."

That's when a loud beeping sound cuts through the silence.

16

Arpad

The beeping sound cuts through the lust-filled haze in my head. I freeze.

Her gaze widens. "What's that?" she asks as it dies out.

I rise to my feet. My heart begins to race, but I school all emotion from my face. "Get dressed," I order.

"What?" She folds her arms in front of her. Her beautiful tits thrust out as she draws herself up to her full height... Which still means she only comes to the level of my chest. "Don't tell me what to do."

"This is not a drill, babe," I growl. "Wear your clothes, and your boots."

"I don't have any, remember?"

Well, crap. Of course, she doesn't. "Follow me." I turn around and stalk to the door. I pause and glare at her over my shoulder, "You coming, or what?"

The beeping starts again. "Suit yourself, but don't blame me if you're caught out in the open sea without any clothes on."

"What?" The color drains from her face. "What do you mean?"

I draw in a breath, force myself to calm down. "Nothing." I jerk my chin, "Just put on some clothes and come to the cabin."

"No," she crosses over to me, and grabs my arm, "don't treat me like a stupid female who needs to be mollycoddled. I've been running my company since I was eighteen. I've seen lots of hostile takeovers, employees who tried to ruin my company by stealing from me... You name it, I've faced it and emerged unscathed—"

"But have you faced the fury of Mother Nature?"

She blinks. "What?"

"That's a storm warning." The beeping ratchets up in intensity. "Shit." I turn and hurry into the room. Pulling on boots, and a sweatshirt, I head for the closet door at the far end. I grab hold of a handful of clothes, then a pair of shoes and throw it on the bed. "Help yourself," I tell her.

She walks over to the clothes, picks up the jeans and the sweatshirt. "They're your size," she says accusingly.

"That's because they're my clothes. Sorry they don't fit your sense of style," I growl.

She hesitates.

"It's either that or you go without clothes," I point out.

The beeping increases in pitch, and she jumps. I head out the door, and to the closet in the living room with the survival gear. I grab a life jacket shrug into it, then turn to find she's right behind me. She's rolled up the legs of the jeans almost in half so I can see the over-sized boots, and the sweatshirt cloaks her like a tent, but at least, she's covered—in my clothes. A hot sensation coils in my stomach.

I slap the other life jacket to her chest. "Wear it," I command.

She sets her jaw, but shrugs into it. Good.

I head for the cabin, shut off the beeping instrument, then check my weather coordinates, and swear aloud.

"What's wrong?" Her voice sounds right behind and I want to tell her to leave, but hell, if there is no time for that.

"Storm's headed for us," I grit out through clenched teeth.

"But we just passed one last night."

"That, sweetheart, was a rainstorm."

"A... rainstorm?" She gulps.

"Idle sport, the kind I wouldn't hesitate to take on with my eyes closed."

"And this...this is—"

"A category 3 which, if you weren't on board, I wouldn't hesitate to face head on, but since I do care about your sweet little ass, I am going to have to find a way to steer around it."

"So, I was right then, you like to drive your boat straight into rough weather?"

"You could say it's a specialization of mine."

I take in the progression of the storm...which is too rapid for me to

outrun. Even at top speed, there is no way we can beat it. I can only think of one way out... But I have to be sure. I begin to plot out the coordinates on the map as she leans around me to peer at the screen.

"You do realize how crazy that sounds, right?" She moves closer and her scent intensifies. My cock twitches in response, and damn it, why is it, that even trying to figure out how to save our lives, I am so aware of how completely edible she is?

"What's crazy, is that you are still here trying to distract me while I plot a course to get us to safety."

"What are you going to do?"

"Find a place to take shelter until the storm blows over."

"And how long will that take?"

"Hours, days..."

"Days?" She scowls, "I'm assuming those days are part of the thirty days I have to spend with you?"

"No."

"No?" Her eyes widen.

A chuckle breaks free and I turn it into a cough.

"It's not part of the deal," I reiterate. "You'll simply have to put it down to time invested in your attempts to have a baby. Not to mention, time invested in saving your life."

"Aargh," she makes a noise deep in her throat, "this cannot be happening. As it is, I'm regretting having made this deal with you, and now you're telling me I'm going to have to spend more time with you?"

"More time to ensure that you get pregnant...unless," I jerk my head in her direction "you're already with child?"

A strange sensation flutters in my chest. A child. My child. With Karina—the woman who'd entranced me from the first day I'd laid eyes on her; the sassy spitfire who'd never hesitated to go up against me. How would a baby we created look? Would she have her golden eyes, my dark hair, her pert nose, my stubborn jaw? A little girl...or boy... Either is good... Ideally, twins. Shit, that means we'd have multiplied by two overnight. We? Did I just think of myself in the plural there?

She pales, "You...you don't think I'm already...?"

"Well, if the right sperm found its way up your Fallopian tube and fertilized an egg, then—"

"Stop," she holds up her hand, "I know how it works, you ass."

"So why do you look like you're going to faint?"

"Just... It's too sudden."

"What were you expecting, anyway?" I frown, as she sways. "You okay?"

"Yes." She shakes her head.

"Is that a 'no' or a 'yes'?"

"Don't you have to focus on taking shelter from the storm?" She folds her arms around her waist, then stares past me at the sea ahead. The waves seem calm, nothing out of the ordinary, but I am not fooled. I know how quickly the weather can change. I glance at the weather data, then consult the map.

"Well," she insists, "what are you going to do?"

"Why don't you leave that to me, huh?"

"What, so you can play the big macho male who can shelter the woman —"

"His woman."

"I'm not yours."

"And yet, you may be carrying my child."

"Don't go getting all possessive on me now. We had a deal remember? I get custody of the child, if there is a child at all, and you get visitation rights."

"For the next 30 days you are mine."

"I don't recall agreeing to anything of the sort."

"Are you denying that you willingly acquiesced to pose as my wife, for the duration of this time?"

She throws up her hand, "Yes, but that doesn't mean—"

That's when the first wave hits the yacht.

17

Karina

One second, the water is serene. The next, a swell hits the boat. The vessel pitches to the side and I scream. My feet seem to go out from under me and I stagger. My heart races and my pulse pounds. The ground comes up to meet me; the next instant, I am pulled up and against his hard chest. His scent, bergamot laced with the salt of the sea, fills my nostrils. His heart thuds against my cheek, or more likely, it's mine, since he's wearing a vest.

"You okay?" His voice rumbles and the vibrations surround me, cocoon me. I turn my nose into the material of the life jacket across his chest. I stay there for a beat, another. I don't want to let go. I wrap my arms around his waist, and he blows out a breath. He pulls me into his side, then behind him. "Hold on." His voice sounds from somewhere above me, "I need to steer us out of the way of the rough weather and toward our hurricane hole."

I turn my cheek into his back, and I am not ashamed to say that I follow his instructions, for once. I lock my arms around him.

"Hurricane hole?" I clear my throat, "What's that?"

"We need to find port, but not just any port will do. It needs to have high cliffs or mountains surrounding it.

"To shelter from the storm?"

"That's right." He turns the boat a steep right. "And I know just the place."

I close my eyes, not because I am tired, not even because I am afraid—okay, maybe I am, a tiny bit apprehensive. Okay, a little more than that. I am

a city girl. I've lived in crowded metropolises all my life, and I enjoy the rush, the traffic, the ability to drive my car wherever I want. It means I am in control. I can steer my way. I can see where I am going, get my bearings. But this... Surrounded by waves that seem to get bigger with every passing second, this...pitching of the boat as it climbs up yet another wave, only to slide down the other side, then scale the next swell... My stomach churns and my breath catches in my throat. *I am not afraid. I am not.* I squeeze my eyes tightly.

He squeezes my hand, the one which has a death-grip on his life jacket, as we speak.

"Not long now," he reassures me.

I nod, want to say something in reply, but honestly, my throat is dry. The boat climbs up a wave, slowly...slowly...like the ascent up a rollercoaster—that first part, when you know they are simply setting you up, taking you higher and higher—then a pause, and the boat seems to hurtle down. Another scream boils up, and I bite the inside of my cheek to contain it. I am a strong, career-driven woman, who has built my life to be exactly the way I want—that's why I am still single at thirty.

Gah. Stop that. Now's not the time to think about the mistakes of the past. As my life coach had mentioned, you do what is right for you in the moment and it is the right decision, always. And yes, I have a life coach. Cliché, I know, but it seemed the best way to visualize the kind of life I want—a career, a family, and a man... Okay, I had hoped for a man, but honestly, after the kinds I'd met in my twenties... Not that there was anything wrong with them, but none of them had what I was looking for—that kind of animalistic attraction combined with sensitivity; a mixture of dominance and the ability to give me enough space to find myself... Know what I mean? Well, that was until Arpad... And he... Well, our very first encounter had been enough to convince me that I certainly didn't want him in my life.

I have no time for men who think they own the world and any woman they meet, and insist on taking charge. A car can't have two drivers, right? And I am the driver in my life. So, what the hell am I doing clinging to his broad back while he steers the yacht?

I loosen my grip, just as a screeching sound fills my ears and the boat seems to go into freefall. My heart pounds in my throat and a low moan escapes my lips. I lock my arms more tightly around his waist, squeeze my eyes shut as the boat hits the bottom of the wave-valley with a thump, then

begins the journey all over again, and again. I lose count of the number of times the boat rises and falls. With each descent, my stomach plummets. With each ascent, my heartbeat seems to fill my ears. Sweat beads my palms while a ball of panic bubbles in my chest, and grows bigger, wider, until it seems to fill all of me. I plaster myself to him, squeeze my eyes shut, draw in one breath, then another, then block out the sound of the wind, the waves that scream and try to get to us, the creak of the boat, the groan of the various components of the vessel as they resist the elements, and try to hold on. I cling to him with all of my strength.

Hours pass... Or maybe they are just minutes. I must have dozed off... How could I? In the middle of that storm? Is it because I'd felt so safe with him? Because I knew he wouldn't let anything happen to me? That I could be in the middle of a world gone crazy and he'd still protect me? My protector. My savior. Mine.

"Karina?" His voice reaches me and I shrug it off.

"Sparks?" Warmth seeps up my arm from where he's dragging his knuckles up the side of my forearm. He grips both of my hands in his and squeezes. "Time to wake up."

"Wh...what?" I flicker open my eyelids and stare at the scene through the large windshield in front of me. We seem to have docked at a wooden jetty that juts out on a calm sea. On either side, we are surrounded by mountains. Clearly, we are in some kind of inlet shelter. Exactly the kind that would protect us from the elements.

Beyond that, a pebbled beach stretches up to a line of trees. "Where... where are we?"

"We have to go." He tugs on my wrists and I lower my hands. When I step back, my knees buckle. He turns and grasps my shoulders. "You all right?" His blue gaze takes in my features. My stomach flip-flops again. A warmth spans my chest, then slides down to my core.

"Karina?" His voice is impatient. "How many do you see?" He holds up two fingers.

"Two," I mutter, "and yeah, I am fine. Just a little shaky."

"Understandable." His forehead furrows. "We were lucky we managed to get here before the storm hit, but we need to get off the boat."

He walks out of the cockpit and into the living area, heading to the closet at the far end. He pulls out a backpack—already packed, by the look of it—and heaves it over his shoulder. Then he swings the strap of a gun—a gun?—

over his other shoulder.

"What's that for?" I nod toward it as he walks back and grabs his mobile phone and charger from the counter.

"It's a flare gun." He grips my hand and pulls me out of the door of the cockpit and onto the deck. He bends, grabs the bowline and swings it out and onto the pillar that protrudes from the jetty. With a tug, he secures it, his movements smooth.

I watch as he steps off the boat and onto the jetty. He holds out his hand, "Come on."

I hesitate.

A gust of wind blows over me and whips my hair back from my face. "Karina, come on," he orders. "Jump, I'll catch you."

I glance down at his outstretched palms, then up to his face.

I swallow, not sure why my heart is racing, why it feels like if I take this step, I'll lose myself forever. Why the hell am I being so fanciful, huh? I measure the distance between the boat and the jetty, then spring forward. He plucks me from the air, his hands warm and solid against my waist. Placing me on the ground, he grabs my hand, then turns and sets a brisk pace up the jetty with me in tow. The flare gun is hooked over his other shoulder as we head across the sand.

"The gun," I clear my throat, "do you think you'll need it?"

"Probably not." He forges forward through the gathering darkness. "But it's best to be prepared."

"Ah."

He casts me a sideways glance. "You don't have to worry. I'll take care of you."

That's exactly what I'm worried about. I am not used to feeling this helpless, this dependent on another person. And somehow, we've ended up here on an island, just the two of us...and... "Where are we anyway?" I take in my surroundings—the pebbled beach beneath our feet, the waves crashing on the shore behind us. The wind picks up and buffets us. I lean into it, trying to push my way forward. His grip firms and he pulls me along. Clearly, the breeze is no deterrent for him. "How did you find this island?"

"I own it."

Of course, he does. Considering I am the security consultant for his business, you'd have thought I'd know about it. Apparently, not. How many other secrets does this man have, huh? I take another step, stumble—because,

of course, the shoes are too big for me—and he rights me. Then, the first drops of rain hit me. He speeds up. "Come on, let's get inside before we get drenched."

I allow him to haul me away from the beach, up the flat grassy slope and through the tree line. We walk fast until we reach a clearing. There, in the middle of the space, is a single-story structure with sloping roofs and large windows.

We walk up the pebbled path to the door. He releases my hand, then places his palm on a flattened board next to the doorway. Nothing happens for a second, then the door swings open.

18

Arpad

I step in through the doorway, then feel around for the switch on the wall. My fingers hit it and light floods the space.

I walk through the living room, past the circular settee that faces the fireplace, and to the table pushed up against the big window.

Behind me, I hear the door snick shut. I place my bag on the table, turn to find her standing on the rug in the middle of the room.

"It's a little bare, huh?" She sweeps her gaze about the place.

"I like it that way. It's my place to get away from the rest of the world and be myself, a kind of hideaway. Besides, as long as the water and electricity work, we should be fine." I shift my weight between my feet, "Of course, it's not like we had a choice. Better to be stuck here out of the path of the storm—"

She snickers, "Relax, Ari, I was kidding."

Right.

She holds out both of her hands, "This is pretty luxurious for an out-of-the-way getaway cabin."

"Chalet." I correct her.

She turns to me, "Chalet?"

"That—" I gesture behind me, "the kind of space you find on a yacht is a cabin. I prefer to call this," I jerk my chin toward the structure in front of us, "a chalet."

"Of course, you do." She takes in the space, "Nothing rustic about it,

huh?"

"I don't stint on creature comforts."

"I'm with you there." She half smiles. "I mean, life is short. Why not enjoy the best of everything it can offer along the way?"

"Apparently, we agree on something." I grin.

"What a shocker." She rolls her eyes. "Speaking of, how many rooms do you have here?"

"Why don't you explore, while I start a fire?"

"Fire?" She glances at the fireplace. "How are you going to do that?"

"Umm, with wood?"

"Where are you going to get the wood from?"

I flex my biceps. "I'm going to chop it of course."

Her jaw drops. "Really?"

I snort, "Of course, not. I have a caretaker from the mainland who comes by every few weeks to make sure everything is in working order. He also stocks the wood in the shed adjacent to the house."

"Oh."

"You almost look disappointed." I chuckle.

"Kind of." She rubs her nose. "The image of you stripped to the waist, chopping wood as you sweat, had a kind of appeal..."

I raise my eyebrow.

"—for all of one second," she adds hastily.

I smirk. "It's fine to share your fantasies. In fact," I tilt my head, "I very much want you to share your fantasies."

"No fantasies."

"Aww, come on, don't hold out on me now, especially since we were finally having a real conversation—"

"Not." She tips up her chin, and walks toward the open plan kitchen that adjoins the room. She takes in the oven, the coffee maker, the counter that separates it from the living room. She opens the refrigerator and whistles, "You weren't kidding about the caretaker. This place is stocked. If I didn't know better, I'd think you had anticipated coming here..." Her voice trails off. She closes the refrigerator and turns to me. "You hadn't, right?" She tilts her head.

"What are you asking?"

"You didn't engineer all this to get me here on an island away from everybody and—"

"At my mercy?"

She swallows.

"And if I had?"

She twirls a lock of hair around her finger. "Then I'd have to wonder why you went to all the effort." She frowns. "Although, not even you could have anticipated the storm," she laughs nervously, "right?"

"Right."

I shrug out of the lifejacket, then walk over to the closet by the doorway and hang it there. I proceed to remove my shoes and put them aside. When I straighten, she's still watching me. "Your shoes." I point toward them, "You're tracking mud across the place."

"Oh." She clomps over to me, then toes off her shoes. The wind bangs against the door and she shivers.

"You cold? Want to take a shower?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Straight through to the bedroom."

She nods, then walks inside.

I head to my backpack, and pull out the things I'd managed to pack before our hasty departure. Spare clothes, extra flares, a torch, a rope... I lay them on the table.

"What's the rope for?"

I turn to see her eyeing me from the doorway.

"What do you think it's for?" I ask.

She juts out her hip and props her hand on it. "You seriously weren't thinking about..."

I tilt my head, "About—?"

"Never mind." She walks back inside. I hear the bathroom door close, then open again.

Wait for it.

Wait for it.

She flounces out and into the living room. "There's no latch on the bathroom."

My lips begin to quirk, and I turn away to hide my smile. "I tend to be alone when I am here," I reply, then walk over to the kitchen, top off the coffee maker and switch it on.

The sound of the percolator fills the empty space.

"Still." She huffs, "Whoever doesn't have a latch on the bathroom door?"

"Be thankful I am allowing you to keep your clothes on," I drawl.

"What's that supposed to mean?" She throws up her hands, "Jesus, Arpad. Can you stop with the riddle-like answers and tell me what the hell your game is?"

"Game?" I turn, then lean a hip against the work top. "No game, babe. We ran into a storm. I made sure we got to shelter before it caught us."

"Somehow, I don't believe you."

"Somehow, I don't care."

"Somehow..." she shuffles her feet, "I can't get past the idea that you orchestrated all this."

"So you've said before."

"I mean, if you wanted to shag me, all you had to do is ask."

"And you'd have agreed?"

She shakes her head.

"I rest my case." I tilt my head, "I suggest you better get that shower in before it's time."

"Time?" She frowns. "Time for what?"

"Time for me to fuck you, of course."

"What the—?" she blinks. "You didn't just—" She shakes her head. "You can't just throw those words out like that."

"You mean, I can't declare my intent? After all, isn't that what you want? For me to fill you with my cum?"

Her cheeks redden. "You're being filthy just to upset me."

"You have it all wrong."

"I do?"

I nod, "I am being filthy because I know it turns you on."

"Oh, bugger off." She twirls a strand of her hair around her finger, a sure sign that she's nervous. Funny, how I know her gestures so well.

"Are you denying you like my talking dirty to you?"

"That's exactly what I am saying," she states.

"So, if I come over there and pull off your pants, and stuff my fingers inside your cunt, you won't be wet?"

She shudders, her pupils dilate and she twists her fingers together in front of her. "You wouldn't dare."

I tilt my head.

"Shit, I didn't mean it that way."

I take a step forward and she backs away. "I mean, yeah, I am turned on,

but it doesn't have anything to do with you."

"No?" I prowl toward her and she stumbles back, until her hip brushes against the settee.

"No," she mumbles, "it's my hormones. It's, uh, what I have been taking to amp up my egg production. It makes me more sensitive, you know, and moody and edgy and—" I reach her, and she flinches.

I bend my knees, peer into her flushed features. "It's not good for you, whatever drugs you are on to stimulate egg production."

"And you know that how?"

"Anything artificial that forces your body to go against its natural rhythm can't be healthy."

"Let me be the judge of that."

"In fact, you are going to stop taking these drugs."

"No."

"Yes." I whisper my knuckles across her cheek. "At least, for the time we are together. I want you to be as nature intended you to be."

"And what's that?" she chokes out. "A woman whose biological clock is ticking down? Someone who's older than any of the girls you've dated before?"

"What are you talking about? You are far more beautiful, inside and out, than any woman I have met before. As for your biological clock, you're what, twenty-two?"

"Thanks for humoring me. I'm twenty-nine."

"I'm thirty-one." I raise my shoulder, "Age is just a number."

"Spoken like a man," she mutters. "Anyway, I can't believe I let that slip." She flattens her lips, "What the hell is wrong with me?" She squeezes her eyes shut. "How could I blurt that out? Why is it that when I am with you, I am not able to control what I say?"

"Maybe because I make you nervous?"

"Maybe it's because I loathe your presence."

"Do you?" I wrap my fingers around the nape of her neck. "Do you hate me, Sparks?"

She tips up her chin and stares into my eyes. "No," she holds my gaze, "I don't have any feelings for you."

"I, on the other hand, can't wait to show you how it can be when you put your trust in me."

"Trust?" She frowns.

"We may have fucked a few times, but you weren't there with me, Sparks."

"Of course, I was."

"You resisted me every step of the way."

"That's how I am." She raises her shoulders. "I am not a shrinking violet. I don't need to be protected and coddled. I stand up for myself, don't hesitate to go head-to-head with people who cross my path."

"Thank god for that." I pinch her chin, then press my thumb to her lower lip. "It's why I want you, Sparks. I know I can be myself with you, and while it may surprise you, you won't back down. I know you'll meet me every step of the way. You'll challenge me, annoy me, question my commands. It's what makes you so...attractive."

"Because I am a challenge?"

"Because I can't wait to have you fall apart over and over again. Because I can only hope to piece you back together in a way that makes sense for both of us. Because," I lean in close enough for my lips to ghost hers, "I want to be there when you subsume yourself in me and find out exactly what you've been missing all these years."

"You want to tame me?"

"I want to give you a chance to forget about the outside world. I want you to trust me to take you to the kind of heights where you won't remember anything else outside of you, me, our joined cum, our wet skin slapping against each other, your breathless sighs, your moans, your pants, your sweat-drenched tits, your reddened arse after I've spanked you enough times that even a gentle touch on your behind sends spirals of delight through your pussy."

She draws in a breath.

"Will you allow me that?"

Her pupils dilate, she licks her lips, lowers her gaze to my mouth and stares for a long second. Then she firms her lips. "No," she mumbles, "I don't think so. The deal was for you to impregnate me and me to pose as your wife. Doesn't mean I have to enjoy it."

"Too bad." I straighten. "I intend to wring pleasure from you anyway."

Karina

With that pronouncement, he'd turned back to the table and whatever it was

he'd been doing earlier. I'd flounced back into the bathroom, shut the door behind me, and stood under the hot shower for a long time. What the hell is he up to? Why do I get the feeling I am in over my head?

Have I been played? Surely, not. I've known Arpad since LA. We have friends in common—Jace, for one, who is a friend of the Seven. It was Jace who'd first suggested that I take on the security for the Seven, and Arpad had backed him up. So why do I get the feeling that it had been Arpad's idea all along? It would be just like him to manipulate the events so it felt like the suggestion hadn't been his. And then, the messages to my phone, and getting me on the boat... There is no way he could have envisaged my falling asleep on his boat... And yet, here I am... Marooned with him, on a bloody island.

It seems like something out of a movie, except this is my life. My future he is playing with. And for what? Because he had an itch he needed to scratch? Men like him always think they can get what they want. Well, too bad. He has gone up against the wrong woman this time. I am going to keep up my side of the bargain and ensure that he delivers on his. But more than that... No way, am I giving him anything more. Definitely not my trust... Absolutely not my heart. No way, am I going to allow myself to fall for him.

I switch off the shower, step out and dry myself. I stare at the clothes I'd been wearing in disgust. No way, am I going to wear those again. I step out to find a bathrobe laid out for me. Huh? I glance at the bedroom door, then turn my back on it and manage to slip on the bathrobe before I pull off the towel.

I gather my soiled clothes and walk out to find him in the kitchen. He's changed into another pair of jeans and a T-shirt. His hair is mussed up like he's been running his hands through it. Of course, he has an extra set of clothes here. How often does he come here anyway?

The scent of something cooking fills the air. My stomach grumbles, loudly. He looks around at me, then points to a door on the other side of the kitchen. "Washing machine's through there."

I walk through, add my clothes to the ones already in there, and run the machine. By the time I step back into the kitchen, he's laid the table for two. He places a bowl of stew in front of each of the two seats. He pulls out a chair for me to sit, then walks around to the other chair where he sits facing me. He gestures to the food, "Eat."

I dig into it and the hearty taste of potatoes and onions laced with rosemary explodes on my tongue. "It's good." I lick my lips. "Did you put this together from scratch?"

He chuckles. "Not even my talents stretch that far." He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, "I had my favorite chef cook it then freeze it and send it over."

I chew, swallow, then stare up at him, "You don't compromise when it comes to food."

"Why would I?" He shoves the stew into his mouth, chews as he holds my gaze.

"Just because you have money doesn't mean you have taste, and when it comes to food, you'd be surprised how many people compromise on ingredients. Not because they can't afford it... Or okay, sometimes it's also that, but more often, because they don't care enough about what they put in their bodies. I mean, we are what we eat, right?"

"And that's why I don't want you taking the fertility drugs." He arches an eyebrow at me, and I flush.

"Fine, fine," I grumble, "but we're not talking about the same thing here."

"Aren't we?" He stares at me.

I blow out a breath. "Deciding what food you put in your mouth is a choice."

"So is deciding what drugs you subject your body to."

I throw up my hands, "I had no other option. I wanted a kid, and I had no time to find a man. All of my waking moments were spent building up the company."

"That's something you care about a lot?"

I nod. "My father started the firm, and when I took over from him, I was determined to make it a success."

"You're close to your family?"

I purse my lips. "As much as my father would tolerate it."

He frowns. "What do you mean?"

"He was in the military when I was a kid. He left when I was ten but the ways of the army stuck with him. He was very strict, very firm... And brought me up the same way as my brothers."

"How many siblings do you have?"

I hold up my hand.

"Five?" he asks.

I nod.

"Five brothers?"

I nod again.

"All older than you?"

"Yep."

He raises an eyebrow, "Should I be worried about them landing on my door ready to beat me up or something?"

I stare at him, then glance away. If he only knew. "No," I shake my head. "When I turned eighteen, I had a choice. Join the very lucrative family enterprise that my father started after he left the army; or use the money my mother left me to grow my own business."

"You opted for the latter?"

I nod. "I took over the security agency which was part of the family business but which I could run independent of them. I had no wish to be associated with the family venture."

"Why is that?"

I glance at him, then away. "It wasn't to my liking."

"Why?" He frowns. "What is it they do?"

"Oh, you know," I raise my shoulders, "import, export, that kind of thing."

"But you weren't interested in it?" There's a strange look in his eyes.

"No," I stare down at my plate, "I didn't want to be involved in it."

"You didn't?" His jaw firms and his features grow hard. How weird. What is he upset about now?

I shake my head. "I wanted to do something of my own, get out from under the protective gaze of my family. You know what I mean?"

He stares at me, then finally nods.

"I wanted to branch out on my own," I explain.

"Why a security company?"

"Why not?" I raise my shoulders. "I'd heard so much about my father's experiences in the army, and much of it stayed with me. And unlike other girls, I wasn't drawn to the more feminine things in life. I didn't want to become a dancer or a singer or..."

"Yoga instructor?" He tilts his head.

"Now that?" I half smile, "I could see myself doing that. But I love yoga too much... It's too personal to turn it into a job, if you know what I mean."

"It's like sailing for me." He glances about the space. "It's in my blood; it's my passion. I'd never want to make it a livelihood for me."

I blink. Wow, we are talking. Like, really talking. And damn, if I don't like the man under the alphaholish exterior.

"How's the head wound?" He points to my forehead.

I'd taken off the plaster earlier and the wound had already scabbed over.

"It doesn't hurt anymore," I say truthfully.

He reaches over, touches the site of the wound, and I flinch.

"You said it doesn't hurt."

"It doesn't," I mumble. "You surprised me, is all."

I pick up my spoon and dip it into the stew again. "My mother died when I was eighteen." I stare into the mixture in my bowl. "That's when my father had a heart attack. My eldest brother took on a leading role in the family business, and I decided to branch out on my own."

"I'm sorry about your mother." His voice is earnest.

"Thank you." I place my hands in my lap. Even after all these years, it isn't easy to talk about her passing. I hadn't considered how much of a rock she was in my life until I realized that I'd never see her again. I tug on my hair, then wrap a strand around my finger.

"Mine died not long after the incident." He glances down at his bowl, then back at me, "But you knew that already."

I nod. As their security consultant, I was privy to the details of the personal lives of all of the Seven. Still, Arpad sharing that part of his past with me? It means something.

"You miss her?" I ask softly.

"Every single day." His expression grows bleak. "I often wonder how the seven of us would have turned out if the incident hadn't marred us."

"It also united the lot of you, made you all friends for life."

He grimaces, "More like uneasy passengers on a boat where each of us has to pull our weight behind the paddles to keep afloat."

"I can't figure you guys out." I frown. "Sometimes I am sure you can't live without each other. Other times it seems you hate each other."

"More often, it's a little of both." He smirks, "And you? So, you weren't tempted to join the family business at all?"

Something in his voice makes me peruse his features. "No," I shake my head, "I want nothing to do with it."

His gaze narrows. "You sure about that?"

"Of course, I am." I frown at him. "Why do you ask?"

"Relax." He laughs. "All I meant was, it must have been difficult for your family to let you go, and then, it wouldn't have been easy to run a company on your own. But you didn't stop until you made it a success."

My cheeks flush. "Thanks." I busy myself looking into the depths of my stew... Or what is left of it. It really had tasted yummy, or maybe, I'd just been hungry.

"And you?" I ask. "Is this your life then?" I wave my hand in the air. "Footloose, fancy free, and able to do what you want, when you want?"

"That's the power of passive income." His lips curl. "My money's busy earning more money for me, while I am here with you, sheltering from a storm."

"You're deflecting."

"What was your question?"

"Doesn't matter." I scoop up the last of the stew and finish it off. "I was simply trying to have a conversation. If you'd rather I not speak, you simply have to say so."

There's silence. He blows out a breath, "The incident," he says. "You know about it, obviously?"

"You asked me to investigate the perpetrators, remember?" I point out.

He nods, then takes a bite of his stew before glancing up at me. "It's what brought the Seven of us together. We'd known each other before that...but that occurrence ensured we'd have a common background, unique to just us." He leans back in his chair. "It changed our lives forever. One second, we were average—well, as average as you could get with the kind of money most of our parents had—but still, we'd been preteens with the usual problems—football practice, videogames, and sneaking off to use our remote-controlled planes to spy on girls... The next... We'd been imprisoned in a basement without knowing if we could make it out alive."

"It affected all of you in different ways. I get it."

"Do you, though?" He holds my gaze. "You were eighteen when you had to grow up. We were preteens... All except Damian, who, at sixteen, was the oldest..."

A chill runs down my spine. "You were all very young."

He nods. "And then we weren't." He places his elbows on the table, then joins the tips of his fingers together. "Isn't it strange that, despite your best efforts, we've never managed to track down the brains behind the operation?"

I stiffen. "Are you faulting my capabilities?"

He tilts his head. "It was merely an observation; one professional to another."

I take in the earnest look on his face. Should I believe him? No reason not

to, right? I nod, "Fine." I blow out a breath, then rise to my feet and begin to pace. "It's not for lack of trying. But every lead I've followed has turned out to be wrong, every clue I've unearthed seems to lead to a dead end. I've had my best operatives on the job, but nothing has come to light."

"Whoever they were, they are too well-hidden, probably in broad daylight, where you can't tell them apart from an average person."

"Exactly." I turn to him, "That's the point. They are probably not hiding at all, which makes it even more difficult to find out who they were."

"You wouldn't think the Mafia would be that clever."

I chuckle, "You'd be surprised. The Mafia no longer conforms to the stereotypes of men you see on screen. Their businesses are no longer limited to those that are illegal. In fact, many of them run their corporations like any average CEO would, employ people who probably don't even know the background of their employers, or that the work they do helps hide the illegal origins of the capital that built the company, and oftentimes, continues to build the company."

"You have a thorough knowledge, then, of the inner workings of their organization."

"They happen to be a peculiar fascination of mine," I prop my hands on my hips, "especially after—"

His eyebrows draw down, "After?"

"After the Seven contracted me to find out everything possible about the men behind the incident, of course."

"Of course." His lips firm. "Not that you've made much progress—"

I open my mouth and he raises his hand. "Not that I fault you for that, either. It's a tough case to crack. I get it. Not something that's easy for someone like you to handle."

"What the—?" I open and shut my mouth. "You're joking, right?"

He yawns, then gets to his feet. "Just calling it as it is, babe. It's understandable though."

"It is?"

He nods. "You being a woman and this being a man's business, after all. It can be a little too complex, not to mention, dangerous, for you to track down the Mafia."

"Of all the chauvinistic things to say—"

"Save it." He scratches his jaw. "In fact, it's probably good you haven't managed to find them."

My heart begins to race; adrenaline laces my blood. Just when I thought we were actually having a proper conversation, he had to go and say something that completely wrecked whatever truce we had found. "And why is that?" I ask.

"You'd have only gotten yourself into trouble, and then guess who'd have needed to come after you and save you?"

"Not you." I draw myself up to my full height. "In fact, let's forget we ever had a deal. After what you just said, you'd be the last person I'd choose to be the father of my child."

He clicks his tongue, "Not so fast. You are posing as my fake wife when we head over to meet my family, and I am holding you to that."

"And what if I didn't want to do that? What if... I refuse?"

He closes the distance between us, and the heat of his body thrums around me, and coils between my legs. He glares down at me with those burning blue eyes of his and I shiver. "I don't take kindly to a people reneging on their agreements." He peels back his lips and his teeth glint against his dark skin. For the first time, a sliver of fear licks at my nerves. I am alone with him, on his island, and no one knows we are together. Even my employees think I am away on vacation. As do my friends. I wouldn't be missed for a long time. By the time anyone got concerned, it would be too late. By then, he'd have, no doubt, carried out whatever plan it is he has in mind.

"What are you planning to do?" My voice cracks, and I clear my throat. *Don't show him how afraid you are. Don't.* I tip up my chin and his lips kick up.

"Isn't that clear?"

"No."

"Before we leave here, I am going to have you begging me to bury my dick in your pretty little pussy, to bring you to fulfillment and put you out of your misery. You are going to plead with me to fill you up with my cum, to ensure that I've impregnated you with my child. You are going to beseech me to complete what I started."

"No." I firm my lips.

"Yup." He reaches out, scoops up something from my chin and sucks on his finger. A thrill suffuses my skin. Damn it, and after he'd insulted me... Why the hell do I find his filthy words and his actions meant to subjugate me, so...so...much of a turn on?

"I don't give in easily," I warn.

His grin widens. "Neither do I."

"So, this is it, then? A stalemate?"

"Call it a challenge." He draws himself up to his full height and his wide shoulders seem to block out the rest of the room, "One I don't intend to lose."

19

Arpad

What the hell had I been thinking, throwing all those clues out at her? The last thing I need is for her to be suspicious about my intentions.

I turn over on my side in the bed... The big bed, in which I am sleeping alone. She'd opted to take the couch in the living room...and I hadn't offered her the bed. Damn it, I should have, but she'd made me so mad, I'd stalked out of the kitchen and headed here. And she hadn't followed. I'd heard her retreat to the living room, then the light had gone out a little later.

And she hadn't taken any covers or pillows, either. How the hell is she sleeping without something to keep her warm?

The wind slams into the windows and the panes rattle. It hadn't rained much yet...but clearly, the storm had hit not far off. Another gust hits the chalet and the entire structure seems to rock. I sit up, shove off my covers, then swing my legs onto the floor and stand up. I stalk into the living room. The fire I'd started earlier has died down and the room is freezing. I cross over to her huddled form on the couch.

She's in a fetal position, her arms around a cushion, another cushion under her head. She pulled on her now-dry clothes from the wash, including her socks, and it looks like she tried to use the robe as a blanket, so there's that. As I watch, she shivers, then pulls her knees closer to her chest.

The wind howls outside and she mutters something under her breath. I freeze, hold my breath as she subsides into slumber again. The light from the window dances across her face, highlighting the hollows under her

cheekbones. She really is skinny, except for her tits, of course. My fingers tingle. As if she senses my gaze, she moves onto her back and the cushion falls from her grasp.

There's a flash of lightning, then the roll of thunder in the distance. Rain begins to pelt the windows, contrasting with the silence in the room. The fact that I've been standing here in my underwear staring down at her...for at least ten minutes now. Shit. I drag my fingers through my hair. *What the hell is wrong with me?* Why can't I seem to keep away from her? Awake or asleep, she holds so much power over me... If she only knew.

Her chest rises and falls, and her body twitches. Her breathing deepens. I turn to leave, then turn back to her. My feet thud on the wooden floor and cold seeps into my skin. Fuck this. No way, can I leave her here in this unheated room, and without anything to keep her warm. I place my arms under her and scoop her up. She stirs, murmurs something I don't catch, then curls into my chest and falls asleep again. Warmth pools in my chest. My belly tightens. She's so damn light...so tiny... When she's awake, her persona is so prickly, so full of fire, I often forget she's half my size in weight...and barely comes to the level of my chest.

To think, she's been on her own since she turned eighteen... And forged her success in a business that is notoriously dominated by men... And macho men, at that. I shake my head. The woman has a spine of steel. Something like pride grips me. Hell, she is a fighter, a worthy opponent, the possible mother of my child.

I stumble, then right myself, glance down at her features. She doesn't stir.

Why the hell do my thoughts always head in the direction of her possible pregnancy? Why does the thought of having a family not seem like such a stretch suddenly? Everything I want is here in my arms... All I have to do is reach out and grasp it. Except, she wouldn't see it that way, would she?

She is hellbent on having this kid by herself. What is that about anyway? She is only twenty-nine... There is more than enough time for her to meet someone and— I tighten my grasp on her, and she stirs. I pause, wait until she settles, then walk with her in my arms into the bedroom. I place her on my side of the bed, then slip in beside her and pull the covers up over both of us.

The sweet scent of her crowds me and my cock throbs. I glance toward her, take in her parted lips, her flushed features and know this was a bad idea. Hell, I'm the one who threw down the gauntlet, and told her I'd wait until she

begged me before I took her. I intend to stick to my promise. Doesn't mean I have to keep away from her though, right?

I apply enough pressure on her shoulder to turn her over to her side, then I tug her close and spoon her.

20

Karina

Heat curls around me, sinks into my skin. I curve my back, thrust closer into the warmth. Mmm. So comfortable. I rub my cheek against the pillow, twine my fingers around his...his? I snap my eyes open, and find that, indeed, I have my fingers entangled with thicker, longer, darker digits... Which are attached to an arm that's thick and veiny, with dark hair that peppers the skin. I gulp, angle my body, only to realize the heat at my back is courtesy of the long, broad body that presses flush into me. I wiggle my butt and something stabs between my asscheeks. I swallow. I know that length. Am intimately acquainted with the girth, the thickness, the way that width of his had impaled me and brought me to fulfillment. My core clenches and moisture trickles down from between my thighs. Gah, I only have to think about how he'd taken me and I am melting...melting.

I try to move and find I'm pinned down by his thick arm that rests on the curve of my hip. His fingers are splayed across my stomach...across my naked stomach, for my shirt has helpfully ridden up to give him access. Just as my channel had expanded to sheath his cock.

Gah, get your mind out of the gutter, woman. Though you can't blame me for where my thoughts are straying, considering alphahole, here, is wrapped around me tighter than a boa constrictor around its prey. Not that I am prey, or that he is a snake. Okay, maybe he is... Especially that thing between his legs, which is one massive python. Ugh... That's it. I need to get out of this bed. I thrust one foot out of the blanket and the cold instantly grabs me. I

shiver, push another foot out, try to slide out from under his arm, when his grasp tightens about me.

"Where are you going?"

His voice rumbles across my back.

I shiver... This time, from that chafing, gnawing sensation that curls in my belly.

"I...ah...have to pee."

"Liar." He hauls me against his large chest, settles me with my head tucked under his chin, his arms wrapped around me again. The contours of his body follow my curves, with his knees folded up against the back of mine. If there is heaven on this earth, surely, it is here, next to him, surrounded by his scent, wrapped up in his presence, which pins me down, and against him— No, that's his massive forearms, which he's wrapped around me. I wiggle my butt and am rewarded by the throb of the part of him that's very much awake and happy to be nestled in the valley between my butt cheeks.

"Umm, Ari?"

"Hmm?"

"I think... I really need to get out of bed."

"I can control myself, if you can."

"What?"

"I know that you sense this," he angles his hips just right, and his thickness slides up against me, "but it's just morning wood."

"Then why do you have your arms wrapped around me like it is going out of fashion."

"Keeping you warm, babe."

I shiver at the endearment. Bet the a-hole is half asleep. That's the only reason he sounds so warm and cuddly... Correction, he is very warm.... And most definitely, massively cuddly, emphasis on the 'massive.' I squeeze my eyes shut. Can't stop myself from heading down that path of thinking, huh?

"Surely you can think of a better excuse," I grumble.

"Is that what you think?"

"Isn't it?" I toss my head, or try to, because I can't move... I literally can't budge with how the alphahole is wrapped around me.

"Okay then." He releases me, pulls away, and the cold instantly seeps in. What the—? How is that possible? Did I get used to the proximity of his body heat so very quickly? I mean, we've barely spent the night together, and

already, I miss being held by him.

"On the other hand," I mutter, "maybe there's no hurry for me to leave here."

"What's that?" he drawls.

"I mean, you can go back to doing uh—whatever it was—"

"Can't hear you, babe."

I hear the laughter in his voice, and I pout.

"I know you do, you ass. Just get back here and assume the position of, uh... You know—"

"Spooning," he rumbles from above me. "That's the technical term you're looking for, I believe?"

My toes curl. Just the thought of him fitting his body to mine again... OMG. My throat closes. I slide my arms down between my legs, both to keep warm, but also so I can push up against my empty core.

"Say the word, darlin'.

I sigh.

"Go on. How difficult can it be, hmm?"

His tone dips to a hush—the honey to my chai tea, the cream to my coffee, the ice to my vodka... You get the picture?

I blow out a breath, then mumble, "Please."

"Couldn't hear you."

What the hell? Why is he drawing this out in such an agonizing manner? "Fine." I turn to face him. "Spoon me."

My gaze clashes with his, holds.

His chest rises and falls.

His arm is folded under his head, and his biceps bulge... And damn it, why does that look so bloody hot? It's not like I haven't seen naked men before... But somehow, the beauty of his angular face, the puffy lips, the square jaw, the skin of his cheeks, still flushed from his nights' sleep, the tousled hair... Jesus, it's too much.

I lower my gaze, take in the planes of his chest, the sheet that dips low down on his hips, the hair that arrows down to his happy place... Okay, my happy place. *No, no, no. What am I thinking?*

"What are you thinking?" His voice is low and oh, so sexy, with that just-woken-up rasp, combined with that authoritative edge that's inherent in everything he says and does.

My toes curl and my core trembles, I open my mouth and close it again.

Do I dare tell him? Do I? And hand the power over to him?

"What do you want?" His tone is steady as he stares into my eyes, and oh my, that's hot.

"I... I," I stutter, "I..."

"Say it," he snaps.

"I want you to shag me."

21

Arpad

"Shag you or spoon you?" My lips twist. I don't stop the satisfied smile that curls my mouth.

"Can you...uh, do both?"

"I aim to oblige."

I swoop down and gather her close. Her pupils dilate. I press my lips to her forehead, to her upturned nose, to those rosebud lips. She opens her mouth and I deepen the kiss. I sweep my tongue over hers, suck on it. She moans deep inside, thrusts her breasts into my chest. I draw her hips flush against mine. My cock nestles in the warmth between her legs and she gasps. I kiss her again, once, twice, then lean back. I lower the zipper of the jeans she's wearing, tug it off, then pull the sweatshirt up and over her head.

"Turn over," I rasp.

She blinks once, then rolls over onto her side.

I shove down my boxers, kick them aside then grasp my dick and pump it once. I tug her close, until my shaft is once more nestled along the dent between her butt cheeks, then bring my hand up to cup her breast. I squeeze her nipple and she shudders. I slide my other hand under her, then palm her other breast. She wriggles her hips against me, pushes back. "Ari," she whines.

"Shh." I bring my palm up to her mouth, slide my thumb in between her lips. She sucks on it and I feel the pull all the way down to the tip of my cock.

I trail my fingers down to her core, strum her pussy lips, and she arches

back, and into me, chasing that release that only I can give her. I slide my fingers inside her sopping wet channel, and she moans deep in her throat. I add a third finger, then a fourth, then curl them inside her. Her entire body jerks. She turns her head toward me, reaches up to kiss my mouth. I pull back.

I hold her heavy-lidded gaze as I begin to fuck her with my fingers. Her shoulders shudder, as her breasts heave, the pulse at the base of her throat beating in a rapid tempo. I lower my mouth to her throat and suck on her skin. She shivers, digs her fingers in my hair and coaxes me lower.

"What do you need?" I ask, "Tell me, Sparks."

"My tits," she gasps, "squeeze my nipples plea—"

I bring my hand up and twist her nipple between my thumb and forefinger. She gasps, then wriggles her hips and pushes her entire body back and into mine. "Shh," I bring my face up to hers, "I know what you want."

"You...you do?"

I nod. "And I'm going to give it to you."

I pull my fingers out of her, then slide my cum-soaked digit inside her arsehole.

She freezes. "Ari." Her gaze widens. "Wha...what are you doing?"

"Making sure you are ready for me."

"Not there."

"There." I nod.

"I... I'm not..." she swallows, "I mean, I can't. I don't want to."

"You will."

"But—"

I lower my head to hers, close my mouth around hers and kiss her. She hesitates, then opens her lips, allows me to sweep my tongue inside as I slide another cum-coated finger inside her.

She stiffens again and I continue to kiss her. "Open for me, babe." I share my breath with her, suck on her tongue as I bring down my other hand to play with her core. I grind my heel into her clit and a groan tumbles up her throat. I swallow it down, tilt my head to kiss her deeper, then slide a third finger inside her ass.

She shudders, her body tautens, and I cup her pussy, then guide two fingers inside her wet channel. "Oh," she sighs as I begin to work my fingers in and out of her. In and out. She lowers her hand to curl her fingers around my wrist. I pull my fingers out of her backhole, then grab my dick and

position it at her back channel.

"Look at me," I command, and she raises her gaze to mine.

I nudge my dick into her back entrance and she stiffens.

I work my fingers in and out of her pussy, add a third finger then curl my digits. Her eyes roll back in her head and that's when I ease inside her puckered hole.

She moans. Digs her fingers into my wrist, brings her other arm up and curls it around my shoulder. "Ohmygod, it's...it's too much, too full. It's—"

"Not enough."

I bend and close my mouth around the curve of where her shoulder meets her neck. She gasps, then clenches around my dick. A growl rips from me. I lick the reddened flesh, then bring my hand up to cup her breast again. I weave my fingers in and out of her pussy, in and out. I thrust my fingers deep inside her and she throws her head back. "Oh, my god." Her body bucks, a trembling starts up her legs, her stomach, flows up her breasts and her shoulders. She gasps, "I'm going to—"

"Come." I command, and she shatters all over my fingers. Her body slumps, and I ease my dick in further.

She draws in a breath. "Oh, Ari—" she moans under her breath.

"Tell me how it feels," I order.

"It feels...full...like weirdly full, and yet...it's not..." she swallows, "not as unpleasant as I thought."

I cup my fingers around her swollen pussy, bring my other hand up to toy with her nipple. "Your tits, Sparks, they're beautiful, and your sweet little cunt, it's the prettiest little hole I have ever seen." She moans, relaxes further and I slip inside her fully.

She groans; so do I.

"Bloody hell, you're so damn tight, darlin'." I grit my teeth, and stay... stay where I am, allow her to adjust to my presence. "I never did think I was an arse kind of guy, but with you, it seems I can't let any hole of yours go unoccupied."

A whine tumbles from her lips, she clenches down on my cock, and goosebumps rise on my skin. I bring my hand up and wrap my fingers around her neck. "Look at me, babe."

Her eyelids flutter, then she focusses her dilated gaze on mine. "Ari," she whispers, "please..."

"I know." I begin to move in and out of her, as sweat slides down my

back. I pull out, then ease inside her again and again. She curves her back, thrusts her hips up and takes all of me inside.

"Babe," I swallow, "you're killing me. This...this.. It's fuckin' hot." I ease my digits inside her pussy and she parts her legs, holding herself open at an angle that allows me to sink inside her. She arches up and into me, "Oh, Ari, that's too much, that's...soo good."

You're telling me? "Don't take your gaze off of me," I snap.

She flutters her eyelids as I keep the tempo—in and out, in and out. I thrust into her with enough force that my balls slap against the back of her arse.

I guide my fingers inside her melting pussy, then propel my hips forward and thrust into her once more. Her shoulders shudder, her entire body jolts. "Please, I need to, I have to—"

"Come for me, Sparks," I growl, and she cries out as she shatters.

22

Karina

Yes, that's me. I had come not once, but twice, in quick succession, and one of those times had been with him in my ass. OMFG! What the hell is that about? How had I allowed him there...where no one else had gone before? Stop with that. Now I am quoting *Star Trek*? Clearly, I am delirious. Or close to it. Yeah, a couple of well-timed orgasms can do that to a girl.

I float down to earth and become aware that he's still inside me, and he hasn't come. He's hard, like really thick and throbbing inside of me. "Ari?" I whisper, and he pulls out of me, slides his fingers from me at the same time. I'm suddenly empty. My pussy clenches down, on where his digits had been and I feel empty, strangely bereft, as he sits up, throws the cover off and slips out of bed.

He turns and stalks over to the ensuite. I take in the powerful thigh muscles that contract with each step. The tight glutes, the scars of what had to be some kind of burns...or chafing that crisscross his back.

"Arpad," I gasp, then sit up as he prowls into the bathroom and shuts the door behind him. What the hell? I walk over, hear him moving around, then the sound of grunting, the wet slap of flesh against flesh. What the hell? Is he jerking off in there? And after he fucked me in the ass? What the hell is that all about?

I shove open the door and walk in to find him in the shower cubicle, dick in one hand, the other slapped against the wall. I watch his face in profile as he grunts, as he screws up his features, the tendons of his throat stretching as

he swipes his hand from the base of his dick to the crown again and again. His movements are hard, brisk, unlike how I would have grasped him. No way would I have the strength, the almost cruel grip he has on his shaft as he continues to pump, up and down, and again.

I should look away, give the man his privacy... But what the hell? He'd been inside of me, and for some reason, he hadn't wanted to come... Which still doesn't make any sense to me. His shoulders heave and his chest planes flex as he drags his fist up his cock.

And somehow, I find myself moving toward him.

I step into the space between him and the shower wall, slip my hand around his, tip my chin up to meet his gaze, and stroke him with my fingers about his. His breathing grows ragged, color smears his cheeks, then with a low groan he comes, all over my breasts, my chest.

He continues to stroke himself, emptying out the rest of his cum on me. Then, still holding his dick in one hand, he rubs his cum into my skin, around my nipples, down my belly, in between my legs. And somehow, it's as if he's marking his territory. His actions are both crude and a turn-on, at the same time. Why is it that every filthy thing he does is so...primal, so sexy? It's as if the mask he's worn to face the world has been stripped off here, in a cabin in the middle of the sea. And we are only a man and a woman, trapped in a fight to survive... Not just the elements, but also each other.

He lowers his hands to his sides, then reaches behind me to turn on the shower. He turns me around, so the water pours over me. He scoops up some soap and washes me. His movements are quick and thorough. He washes my hair as well, then himself, before rinsing off the soap.

When he's done, he flicks off the shower. Then steps out to wrap a towel around himself. He hands one over to me, then turns and leaves the bathroom. Huh. What happened? Why did he go all silent?

And after he'd taken my ass... And honestly, while it'd hurt... It had been intense. I could have sworn it had brought the two of us closer together... At least, so I'd thought. But apparently, it'd had a completely different effect on him.

I dry myself off, wrap the towel and walk out to find he's gone. Instead, he's laid out another sweatshirt and a fresh pair of his jeans. I slip into the clothes, then glance around. I need something to cinch around my waist so the jeans won't fall down, but what? I open the closet and aha! I find what I'm looking for.

I grab the rope from the shelf, tie it around my middle and over my sweatshirt. It nips in at my waist and holds up the boxers.

Awesome. There's no mirror to see how I look, but doesn't matter. At least, I don't feel naked. I pull on the socks he's laid out. So, not the most glamorous of get-ups, but at least I am warm. Besides, the sweatshirt smells of detergent and is laced with that dark, edgy scent which is unmistakably his. It feels like I am wearing him... Not. Well, not quite, considering how quickly he'd pulled out of me and left.

I walk out and into the living room to find the space warm. A fire crackles in the hearth. Outside, it's still raining, but in here, it's warm and cozy. Only, I am not fooled. Whatever had taken place between us...is far from comfortable. And I don't mean the sex...which was mind-blowing, despite the surprise of what he'd pulled on me. But hey, I'm no prude. I'd been curious to try anal... I wince as my butt spasms in response to the thought. Okay, so maybe not that soon again... But the experience had been mind-blowing, to say the least. And if the opportunity arises to do it again with this alphahole... I confess that I am game.

I head to the kitchen, and find him, once again, by the cooking range. He's pulled on a sweatshirt, and pair of jeans; his feet are bare. Apparently, he doesn't feel the cold. How could he, when the man radiates warmth like he has an built-in furnace or something? Besides, bare feet on this hot-as-F asshole... Uh, not complaining. They are strangely sexy, I'll readily admit.

He stirs the contents of a pan as I close the distance toward him.

When he doesn't acknowledge me, I sit down at the table. He pours out the mixture into two bowls, adds a dash of cinnamon, then places the oatmeal in front of me. He brings his bowl to the table, along with a container of sugar, which he places between us.

He spoons up his oatmeal, slides it into his mouth. He curls his tongue around the spoon and my core spasms. Moisture pools between my legs. What the hell? Why does the act of watching him eat, turn me on? Every muscle in my body is tense. All of my senses are honed in on him, all of my pores open and ready and willing to be touched by him.

"So that's your game?" I burst out.

"Game?" He raises his gaze and the heat in his blue-grey eyes blazes.

"There's no game, here, Sparks."

"Then what was that?"

"What?"

I gape at him. Does he want me to spell it out? Seriously? Is that the kind of man he is? I frown. Not possible. My impression of him can't be that far off. Not when my instincts say otherwise. And well... I make a living with my instincts. They're the one thing I can depend on when nothing else makes sense. "Why are you so angry?" I cup my chin in my hand. "Why did you leave me like that on the bed?"

"Why not?" He spoons up more of the oatmeal, swallows. "You should eat yours before it grows cold."

I glance down at my bowl, then wince, "I don't like oatmeal, I'm afraid."

He jerks his chin, "Taste it, at least."

I blow out a breath, then dip my spoon into the creamy mixture, and bring it to my mouth. The scent of cinnamon fills my nostrils. I taste it and the nutty taste of oats pop on my palate.

I must have made a noise of appreciation for his lips kick up. "Good huh?"

"How the hell do you turn an ordinary meal into such an..."

"Foodgasm?"

I frown, "I was going to say experience."

His grin broadens. "I'll let this one go."

"Wasn't aware we were keeping score?"

"There's no score, sugar, because you are no match for me."

"What?" I snap my lips together. "Say that again?"

He dips his spoon back into the mixture, then brings it up to his mouth, chews, swallows. Then trains his gaze on me, "You are not in my league, babe. Why don't you just drop it."

I stare at him. "If by that you mean, I couldn't possibly be as much of an ass as you, you're right.""

He shrugs.

"I don't understand why you have to be this uncouth, so rude... so..."

"Impolite?" he helpfully supplies.

"That too. I was going more for plebeian."

He winces, "Not that word; anything but that." He places his spoon back in his bowl. "But the rest? It comes naturally to me."

"I think it's all an act."

"Oh?"

I nod, then drop my spoon back in my bowl with a clatter, "I think you felt something when you were, uh..."

"Fucking your arse?" he offers.

"Exactly," I stab my finger at him, "and you said that just for effect, knowing it would sound filthy enough to make me blush."

"Whatever." He stretches, then yawns. "Your theories don't interest me, babe."

"Stop that." I slap my palm on the table and the bowls jump. The sugar spills over the side of the container. I stare at the mess, then up at him, "Don't hide what you're feeling, Arpad."

He scratches his jaw, schools his features into that expression of lazy disinterest which is so much a part of him, and which I hate, and which I want to tear off to expose the man I'd sensed earlier, when he'd made love to me. And it had been that, no matter how much he wants to call it something else. There had been a depth of connection between us that I hadn't expected. "Why are you hellbent on reducing everything between us to something without emotion? Something contractual?"

"Because it is." He rises to his feet, then leans across the table until he looms over me. "That's all this is, babe, an arrangement. Don't you forget it. Don't go looking for meaning in what was simply a fuck... An above-average fuck, I'll give you that, but when this is over, we'll both walk away, having gotten what we want."

"You sure?"

He jerks his chin.

"That's all you want this to be, an exchange of what the other needs?"

That's all it is," he affirms.

"Fine." I jump up to my feet.

"Fine." He straightens to his full height, so I have to tilt my head back, then further back, to meet that blazing blue gaze. In their depths, something flickers, then fades away.

"Make yourself comfortable, I'm going to get more wood for the fire." Turning, he stalks off.

23

Arpad

That's me, walking away from a woman when I could have been inside of her, taking her, fucking her, loving her... Not loving her... What the hell am I thinking?

This is Karina, the woman I have been attracted to from the moment I saw her... It's the reason I am here with her, after all. Hell, I'd give her anything she wants.

Including a child? Shit. I drag my fingers through my hair... Now, that is something I had not factored in. A kid? A family? The kind of life I know I am not meant for. And yet, when she'd asked me to impregnate her... No way, could I have refused her. If she is going to carry anyone's child, it will be mine. As for walking away from her... Well, if...when she gets pregnant... We'll cross that bridge when we get to it.

I pull on my socks and boots. I grab additional ropes and head out of the chalet. The wind buffets me and I lean into the breeze as I walk down toward the jetty. I check on the yacht, making sure the dock lines are secure.

Once I am satisfied, I walk uphill, turning away from the chalet toward the building at the edge of the slope.

I shut the door and the wind instantly cuts out. Wiping my boots on the mat inside the door, I pull the satellite phone from my pocket and dial.

"Mr. Beauchamp?" Edward comes on the line, "Where are you?"

"In a chalet, on an island, somewhere between the UK and France."

"Ah, your favorite place to go when you want to run away from the

world."

"What makes you say that?" I frown.

"Because that's where you went the last time the memories got too much for you."

"Fucking memories." I roll my shoulders. "You'd think as time passes, it would get easier, but it doesn't."

"Not all hurt fades with time," Edward replies. "Some of them burrow under your skin and make themselves at home, and then they become a part of you, something you don't want to let go anymore, because you're dependent on them. In a way, your identity is linked with the story and if you let go of it, you don't know who you are anymore."

"Is that your personal experience?"

"It's my...observation."

"Is that how it is for you?" I push the point.

Edward blows out a breath. "It hasn't been easy to move on from what happened. In some ways, I never will. After all, it's an experience that's shaped what I've become. But," he pauses, considering, "but I've come to realize that freedom is what you do with what's been done to you. Know what I mean?"

"Is that what you're doing, Ed? Finding yourself in what you have now become?"

Silence, a beat, then he says, "Maybe I didn't have a choice."

"What do you mean?" I frown. "All of us had choices... Maybe not in what happened to us, but whatever we did afterwards. We each took our lives in our own hands, remember? The one thing we swore to each other was that we'd never hesitate in going after what we wanted."

"Maybe this is what I wanted." He lowers his tone, "And what about you, Arpad. Is this what you want?"

"What are you talking about?"

"There's a reason you planned it this way."

"Planned it?" I frown.

"Having Karina on the boat when the storm hit so you could have time alone with her, away from the world. In fact, the way I see it," Edward continues, "you created your own liminal space."

"Sorry, you'll have to explain that to me, Father."

"You know what it is, Beauchamp." Edward's voice is impatient. "I'm talking about a space that is on a threshold of many possibilities. You ensured

that the two of you are in a position to let go of the past for a period of time. You freed up all notions of space and time, allowing yourself the eventuality of a future together."

"You drunk, Father?"

"Now, now." He clicks his tongue, "Clearly, I touched a nerve, which is why you are resorting to personal insults."

"You're right." I begin to pace. "I honestly had no idea what I was getting into when I asked her to get on the boat and fix the security cameras. Maybe my subconscious had hoped she'd stay on for the duration of my trip... But hell, if I planned all of this... Well, not fully..."

"Aha," Edward snorts, "so you do admit that you wanted time with her."

"It may have crossed my mind, yes." I rub my jaw. "And okay, I did prepare for the eventuality that she'd one day be on the boat with me, but the storm and being holed up here... Nope, not that."

"Your mind is a powerful tool. When you truly want something, it can manifest it for you."

"And how's that working for you? What have you manifested lately, Father?"

"A reality that I'll have to live with for the rest of my life."

"You could change it," I point out.

"Could I?" he mutters. "The only way to avoid regret is to say yes to opportunity, after all, so yeah, you may be right."

"You talk in riddles, Ed." I bark out a laugh. "And yet, you often make more sense than anyone else I know."

"That's me," Edward's voice is bitter, "I can help others see the way, but my own way is not that simple to spot."

"Isn't that the truth?" I roll my neck. "And by the way, that entire regret versus opportunity thing... I hope you meant it for yourself."

"Maybe..." I sense him shrug over the waves, "maybe not. But this conversation is about you. So, what are you going to do next?"

"I...—" I hear a noise behind me, see her standing inside the door, "I have to go." I disconnect, and turn as she makes her way over.

"What are you wearing?" I take in the sweatshirt, the rope tied around her waist that outlines her hourglass figure, a reminder of how good she'd looked when I'd bound her, how beautiful she'd look if I were to tear her clothes off, then tie her up and suspend her, with her legs wide open before I take her.

"These are the clothes you left out for me."

"No, I didn't." I gesture to the rope about her waist.

"You mean this?" She dances her fingers over the rope. "I found it in the closet. I needed to find a way to hold up your jeans."

She blinks rapidly at me, "You don't mind, do you?"

My fingers tingle to reach out and yank the rope off of her, then tear off the rest of her clothes, before I bind her again and... *Stop with that. You bind her one more time, and you won't be able to walk away from her.* Weird, where are these thoughts coming from? I've never had such an emotional reaction to any woman before. Hell.

"Who were you talking to?"

"Edward."

She glances at my phone, "Think I can use it to call my team?"

"Do you want to call your team?"

She rolls a strand of her hair around her fingers. "No, strangely not." She shakes her hair back from her shoulders. "I don't miss the daily routine as much as I thought I would."

"Perhaps you were ready for a break?"

She glances around the small shed, "What's this place?"

I watch as she takes in the hard point in the ceiling, the mat below it, the ropes folded into figure eights that line up one wall, the other paraphernalia I use in my art on the table that stands against the opposite wall.

"Oh," she gulps, "so this is where you bring your women?"

I fold my arms over my chest and widen my stance. "There's only ever been one woman here, and that's you."

24

Karina

My heart begins to race, my pulse pounds, and my throat closes. I stare at him, trying to understand what he's saying. "So, no one else has been here before me?"

"Only me."

"And you've never brought anyone else to this island?"

"Told you I haven't." He tilts his head. "This is my personal space, where I go when I need a place to retreat and think."

"And you practice your rope tricks while you are...contemplating, the meaning of life and the universe?" I walk toward the wall, drag my fingers across the edge of a rope—which is strangely soft to the touch. "What is this made of?"

"Hemp." His voice is so close that I stiffen. How had I not heard him approach? "It holds knots well and is pliant against the skin."

"Oh." My stomach clenches. He hadn't said a word of anything that was faintly erotic and yet my mind had interpreted it as such.

"And this one." He reaches toward another folded pile, and strokes his fingers over it. "This one is stronger. I use it for the uplines."

"Uplines?"

"The ropes that I run through the harness on the person I am tying and then use it to suspend her from the hard point." He jerks his chin toward the ceiling.

"Her?" I turn to him. "Do you have someone you, uh—work with when

you practice?"

"A few." He turns to me. "Why?" He scans my features. "You jealous?"

Yes.

Yes.

"Of course, not." I rub my hands down my forearms. "So, if you don't bring anyone here, how do you practice?"

"I have a space in my apartment in London that I use specifically for this."

"So why do you have this set-up here?" I jerk my chin toward the ropes.

"Why do you think?"

I scowl, "Because..."

He tilts his head.

"Because, uh, you believe in being prepared?"

His lips curl.

"Of course, you do." I draw myself up to my full height. "Fascinating as this conversation has been, I guess I'd better return to the chalet." I walk toward the door and open it, only for a gust of wind to blow me back. Rain whips over me and my fingers slip on the door handle, which is wrenched out of my grasp. The door slams shut. I stumble back, certain to fall, except warm hands grip my shoulders and righten me.

"You okay?"

I nod, a little too shaken for my own liking. I am not someone who leans on others. I've never allowed myself to slow down, not even after I decided to go it alone to have a child. The one constant in my life has been my career, the company I've worked so hard at building. Somewhere along the way, my identity had gotten fused with that of my work.

But just a day with this guy, and it's as if my feminine side has awakened in full force. Something about his strength makes me want to rely on him. He makes me secure in a way no one else ever has, and isn't that a laugh? This grumpy billionaire, with a penchant for tying up his women, is the one man I can't stop thinking of.

"I'm fine." I twist my shoulders and he releases me. "Guess the storm finally hit." I walk toward the window and stare outside. Rain whips across the pane and I can barely see through to the sea that I know is not far away.

"Is the yacht safe?"

"It's shielded from the worst of the winds by the hills that surround us and I went down to check on it earlier."

"Right." I shuffle my feet. Heat sears my back and I know he's come up to stand behind me now. "Sure is coming down outside." My voice shakes and I fold my fingers together in front of me. *Get it together, what's wrong with you?* He's just a man. So what, if he has a kinky streak a mile wide and I am standing in what is clearly his dungeon of pain... Or pleasure... Or both. "Maybe... Maybe, we should try and make a run for it to the main house?"

"Why? Do I make you nervous?" His voice rumbles from somewhere above me and I shiver.

"N...no. It's just... I'm cold." A shiver runs down my spine, to back up my words.

"I can keep you warm."

"Not why I came here," I protest.

"Why did you come, then?"

I stiffen.

"Why are you here, Karina?"

No more Sparks, then? Why the hell do I already miss his nickname for me? And, I still don't understand what happened earlier. Why did he walk away from me? His retreat is written in bold print, reflected in every nuance of his.

"I... I'm not sure," I answer honestly. "I guess I didn't want to be alone."

"Is that all it is?" His voice sounds almost disappointed.

I turn and glance at him from the corner of my eyes, "Yes... That's all."

"Guess we'd better get back then."

Oh, okay, so that's how it's going to be? I mean, what had I expected? That he'd jump me again? Because I'd stumbled upon his den of sin? When he'd made it abundantly clear that there could be no real connection between us.

"Guess we should." I fold my arms around my waist.

He turns, heads for the door.

"Wait," I call out, and he pauses. "There was something else, actually."

"Oh?"

"You didn't come inside me this morning. I think you need to rectify it."

He freezes. "Excuse me?"

"Part of the deal is for you to get me pregnant." I glance away, then back at him, "Afraid you're not doing a great job of it, considering I am still in my fertile phase and you didn't fuck me last night."

His muscles tense and his jaw tics. He curls his fingers into fists and

glares at me. "You want me to fuck you?"

I nod.

"Here?"

I look around, pretend I don't understand. "What's wrong with this space?"

He peruses my features, then turns around to face me completely. "Why don't you come out and say what's on your mind?"

"I already did."

"But you haven't told me everything, have you?" He takes a step forward and I draw myself up to my full height.

"I... I'm not sure what you mean."

"You followed me here because you were curious about what I was up to. You want to find out more about my penchant for tying up my women." He closes the distance between us and my belly ties itself up in knots—okay not knots... Bad comparison... My palms begin to sweat, despite the fact that it's freezing in here. "In fact, you wondered how it would be if you were to find yourself at my mercy again... My fingers on your skin, my breath on your cheek... As I truss you up, then string you up... Ready and open and willing for me," he bends his knees and thrusts his face into mine, "as I give you the chance to become one with the rope, to retreat from the world and all of its responsibilities. A safe space, where you can let go of all of your inhibitions, and connect with your feminine self."

Moisture pools in my core, and I chafe my thighs together. "I didn't think anything of the sort," I insist.

"You sure?"

No.

No.

"Yes," I nod.

"So, you want me to simply turn you around and push you up against the window and take you with no preparation, then?"

My throat closes and my pussy clenches. *Jesus, what's wrong with me?* Why does his uncompromising stance, his complete dominance, his lack of finesse when it comes to talking about us... Why does it sound so bloody appealing?"

"If I said yes...?" I swallow.

"Then I am sorry to say, the answer is no."

"What?"

"I have another idea on how to pass the time."

25

Arpad

"This is your big idea?"

She stares down at the board between us on the table in the living room.

I've lit the fire, thanks to the wood I'd hauled in from the pile in the small shed on the other side of the house. Not that I am lacking in space or anything. After all, the entire island is mine. Which is why it always feels bizarre to talk about geographical boundaries in relation to this structure, know what I mean?

But I digress... I'd built the fire, then decided the best course of action would be to keep my hands to myself and away from her. Not that I don't want her. On the contrary, clearly, I am fast becoming obsessed with her, and if I allow myself to take her one more time... It will be very difficult to walk away from her. Which is a bloody inconvenience, considering I promised her I would impregnate her. I needed a little time to think this through, hence... I reach for the letters on the rack, then lay them out on the board.

FOOL

Yep, that's me, all right. I'd thought I would trap her into an arrangement and use it to, somehow, get to the truth of who was behind the incident... But, somehow, all that has become secondary to this connection that has sprung up between us. Something I need time to process—Ha! Me—the man who doesn't think twice about navigating headlong into a storm... I need to

evaluate my options here.

Falling for her is out of the question. So how am I going to fuck her, fulfill my end of the contract, and still, walk away without being trapped further? See what's happening here? I am the one being lured into an ambush, thanks to this green-eyed sprite who chews on her fingernail while she contemplates the letters in front of her.

"Your turn," I prompt.

She huffs, "Fine, fine. Give me a moment here."

"Do you want me to help?" I reach over and she holds her rack of letters away.

"Hey, stop that."

"Hey, just trying to help." I hold my hands up in front of me.

She scowls, then places the rack carefully in front of her on the table, "How old is this board anyway? I mean, who plays scrabble anymore?"

"I did, with my parents."

"Hmm."

She contemplates her letters, some more. "Tell me about them."

I stare at her.

"What?" she says without raising her gaze. "We're going to meet your family. Surely, I should know something about my fake future in-laws?"

"Right." I drag my fingers across my chin. My whiskers are getting itchy. Damn, if I don't need a shave. But for some reason I couldn't find my razor. Apparently the place wasn't as well stocked as I'd thought.

"You mentioned that your father moved back to Lille?" She raises her gaze to mine. "But you and your family lived in London?"

"Yeah, that's where my brother and I grew up. My father worked in the city."

"And you followed in his footsteps?"

"Not directly." I scowl down at the board. What the hell is taking her so long? Is she one of those people who analyzes every move before they make it?

I drum my fingers on the table, "Why don't you play as we speak?"

"Why don't you speak as we play?"

"I'll tell you more after you play."

"I'll play if you tell me more."

I lean back in my chair. "This is not a negotiation, sugar."

"Isn't it? Sure seems that way, considering you're not coming through on

your side of the bargain."

"We still have time, don't we?" I glance toward the window where the rain is coming down in sheets outside. "After all, how long does your fertility window last?"

"Forty-eight hours," she snaps. "That's the most I am probably fertile post ovulation."

"That gives us...until, the end of tonight?"

"Exactly. So, if I were you, I'd get with the program." She lays out her words on the board between us.

C

H

I

F O O L

D

"You're kidding me," I growl.

"More like, you're the one who's been kidding me."

"Is that right?" I glare at her and she pales. She flips her hair over her shoulder, then begins to play with one of her locks.

"I mean, how hard can it be to, as you said earlier, turn me over and take me without—"

I hold up my hand, "Think very carefully about what you're going to say next."

"Without..." she hesitates, "Uh, without..."

"Hold on a second, doll. Let me play my word." I place my letters on the board.

C

H

I

F O O L

D I R T Y

Her gaze widens, "How the hell did you manage that?"

"Now, your turn."

I replenish my letters as she contemplates her move.

"So, you were saying...?" I prompt.

"What?"

"Complete your statement, Sparks."

"I was going to say, how hard can it be to turn me over and take me without—" she raises her gaze to mine, "preparation?"

I rise to my feet so quickly that she blinks. I prowl around to stand behind her chair.

"What...what are you doing?" She shudders.

"Go on, mull over your move, sweetheart."

She turns her head to glance at me, and I jerk my chin, "Get up."

"What?"

"Stand up, babe," I urge her.

She rises to her feet, gaze still on me, and I click my tongue. "Eyes forward."

"You like to hear your own voice, don't you? I should get you a T-shirt with those words printed on it: eyes—" I spank her butt and she squeaks, "forward."

"Exactly."

I palm the curve of her arse and she shudders.

"Does everything have to be a kinky maneuver with you?" She huffs.

"Why? Are you complaining? It's not like you prefer vanilla, yourself."

"How do you know?" She half turns to frown at me.

"Don't," I warn her and she frowns.

I squeeze her butt cheek and she swallows. I jerk my chin toward the front and she faces forward again.

Unable to help herself, she asks, "Did you have me watched? Is that how you know so much about my preferences?"

Actually, no, but it's not a bad idea. It's something I should have done, something I am going to rectify right away, given how, despite my best efforts, I can't keep my hands off of her.

"Just a lucky guess." I plant both of my palms on either side of her butt then pull her back so she connects with my crotch.

"Oh," she lowers her head, "how can you be so hard, so quickly?"

"How could I not be hard?" I counter. "I've been sporting a boner since you walked in on me in the shed, wrapped up in my rope."

She wriggles her butt, moves back further, and my cock stabs in between

her arsecheeks. Why the hell is she still wearing so many clothes?

I glance around for something—anything—to help me in my quest. There. "Don't move." I tap her shoulder, then prowl around and over to the kitchen counter. I grab a knife and turn.

She pales. "What are you going to do with that?"

I tilt my head, then stalk back to her. She turns her head and I curve my fingers around her neck, "Told you to stay with your gaze forward, didn't I?"

"But—"

I slide the knife under the coils of rope, then flick my wrist. The blade slices through the strands, and the cord falls away.

I raise her sweatshirt, tug down the jeans, then stare at the curve of her creamy butt. "Bloody hell," I growl, "how could I have missed looking at this sight in such a short period of time?"

"Ar...Arpad?" Her voice wavers. "What are you going to do?"

"I am going to fuck you now."

26

Karina

That's what I want, isn't it? For him to lose control and take me, despite the fact that I know he wants to bind me first. Isn't that why I had used the rope to bind myself? Yes, so it had also been functional, but subconsciously it was about taunting him, teasing him, trying to get a rise out of him, and damn, if I haven't succeeded.

He nudges my hair over one shoulder and cool air hits my nape. I shiver, grip the edge of the table and wait... Wait for his next move.

"It's your turn."

"What?"

"You're up next to play, Sparks."

"Fuck that," I swear aloud.

"Now, now," he chuckles, "don't be rude."

"Fuck you," I swear under my breath, and he laughs. The asshole actually laughs. I turn, and once more, he wraps his fingers around my nape, coercing me to stay facing forward.

"Focus, babe," he drawls. "Play your word, or do I need to help you with that?"

"Oh, bugger off."

He spans my butt and my body jolts. The table shakes and a letter falls off the rack in front of me.

"Pick that up," he growls. I hesitate, and he snaps, "Don't disobey me."

"Fine, fine." I straighten the letter, stare at the board. "What's this,

disciplining through Scrabble? Are words your kink or something?"

He chuckles, "Or something."

He slides his hand around to cup my pussy and my entire body goes on alert. My stomach clenches and my thighs spasm. I force myself to stay calm... *Don't move...* Don't say or do anything that's going to make him draw out this crazy touchy-feely approach he has going.

He kicks my legs apart and I shiver, dig my heels into the ground, with my feet wide apart and wait... wait...

He slips a finger inside my channel. I shiver.

He adds a second, then a third, and does that thing he does so well. He curves his fingers, grazing the walls of my sensitive core, and a groan bleeds out of me.

I hear the rasp of a zipper being lowered, then he pulls his fingers out of me, only to grab my hips and pull me back, positioning me, ready to impale me. Moisture beads my center. Ugh, I'm so empty, so ready... What the hell is wrong with me? I've never been this...needy for someone... No, not someone... For him. It's Arpad... The alphahole who is going to turn my world upside down.

He is going to impregnate me and then I'll have a miniature image of him to look at every day and I'll never forget him. I'll spend the rest of my life wondering how the hell it would have been if there had been something real between us, if I had acknowledged my attraction for him, if I had thrown caution to the wind for the first time and grabbed at the chance of a future with him.

The crown of his dick nudges against the opening of my slit and I gasp.

"Your play, sugar."

I stare at the board, the letters that fade in and out in front of my eyes.

Then place the letters on the table.

C M

H A

I R

F O O L R

D I R T Y

M

E

The muscles of his thighs go rock hard, as he tilts his hips forward and breaches me. My body jolts and the table shudders. The letters, though, stay where they are.

"What's that?" he growls. "What do you mean?"

"I mean..." I shudder as he pulls out of me, and stays poised at my entrance again, "let's do it for re—"

He plunges inside me with enough force that his balls slap against the backs of my thighs.

"—al," I scream.

The letters move on the board, displaced, disoriented, words blown to their components, like I've been, since I met him.

I groan as he bottoms out inside me. "Arpad," I gasp, "please...please... don't stop."

He presses his palm into the small of my back and applies just enough pressure. I lower my cheek down to the board, grip the edge of the table with my fingers.

"Fucking gorgeous."

He grabs my hips and begins to fuck me in earnest. In and out, with long, smooth strokes that have his length embedded in me, hitting that spot deep inside that he always seems to find with unerring precision.

I've got to say, getting pregnant this way beats the cold sterile procedure I had planned. I mean, this is, by far, the best sex I've had in my life... I'm not going to get this from anyone else... Not the expert way he maneuvers my body to just the right angle so he can, once more, sink inside of me, fill me, stretch me, cram me with his length that is so delicious, so beautiful, a work of art...

And I am, clearly, having an out-of-body experience. I've never had such an inherently spiritual episode before, not even with all of the yoga I've practiced. Hell, I'd happily hold any position he places me in... Just as long as he continues to fuck me, shag me, wring that next orgasm from me, which is approaching with the kind of rush that resembles when I do a headstand and the blood flows to my head...

"Ah!" He slams into me once more and my climax sweeps over me. It explodes behind my eyes, and I shudder, grip the table so tightly that my fingers hurt, my thighs tremble, my toes curl, every muscle in my body tenses... Then the orgasm ebbs away and I collapse.

Above me, he continues to pound into me again and again. Then finally,

he growls out, his body tenses, and with a jerk of his cock, he comes inside me. He stays that way, entrenched in me. Aftershocks grip me, my pussy clenches around his dick, which I swear is still semi-erect. How the hell is that possible? He lowers his head and I feel the whisper of something against the top of my head.

He presses little kisses down my eyebrow, my cheek, the edge of my lips. I shiver. This... This habit of his, this half-kiss, is surely my undoing?

He licks my lips, then whispers, "Yes."

I peer up at him, "What...? What do you mean?"

"Yes," his lips curve up, "yes, I'll marry you, for real."

27

Arpad

"Et tu, Brutus?" Edward drawls across the phone line.

Yep. After I'd agreed to marry her... Fucking hell, I'd agreed to marry her... Yeah, take a breath, ol' chap. Get it together. So, after I'd agreed to marry her for real, I'd pulled out of her, then dressed, and made a quick exit. Not caring that it was raining outside, I'd pulled on my jacket and beat a hasty retreat to the shed.

Me... The man known for his cut-throat maneuvers when it comes to snapping up the best bets in Silicon Valley, I had raced out of that chalet like my tail was on fire... Not literally, but metaphorically. Jesus, I am in so much trouble. I need to talk to someone... Yep, like a fucking pussy, I call Edward tell him what happened. Not all of the details, of course. Just that I had agreed to her proposal.

"Now, that's not very charitable of you, Father," I grumble. "I swear, I didn't mean for it to end up this way."

"You mean with you ready to take a trip down to the altar?" He snickers.

"Hey, aren't you supposed to be happy for me, in your professional capacity?" I frown.

"In my professional capacity, I will not dissuade you from what you think is right for you... Just as long as it is right for you."

"You're speaking in riddles again, Father."

"Come now, that's my forte." A new voice cuts in.

"Saint?" I grimace. "What the hell are you doing there?"

"Not just him," Damian's voice sounds across the line.

"You too?" I glower.

"Oh, did I forget to tell you, that I patched in the others while you were sharing your saga with us?" Edward chimes in.

"Saga?" I snap. "What the hell, Father? Sorry, didn't mean to swear there. No wait..." I shake my head, "actually, I did mean to swear. Considering I trusted you enough to call you for your advice—"

"A bit for that isn't it, considering you decided to get married to her?"

"Hey," I protest, "Saint did the same, didn't he—?"

"Bloody hell," Saint swears aloud, "will you guys stop holding me up as a shining example of everything done right? Not that things didn't work out for me, but there's a crucial difference between my situation and yours."

"What's that?"

"I fell in love with Victoria as soon as I saw her."

"And as soon as I saw Julia, I knew she was the one," Damian declares.

"You mean I'm not in love with Karina?"

"You're fixated on her," Weston drawls, "but you sure you're in love with her?"

"Anyone else want to venture their opinion?" I growl. "Or have you jokers had your say?"

The barking of a dog sounds, then Sinclair comes on the line, "Sorry, chaps, Max insisted he add his thoughts on the matter."

"Brilliant, that's all I need—Sterling's mutt's point of view." I crack my neck. "I suppose you'll want to give your two bits worth on my love life, or lack thereof?"

"I don't know man," Sinclair muses, "from where I am, it's all clear."

"It is?"

I sense him nod at the other end of the line. "Sure," he replies. "You decided to lay this elaborate plan so you could keep her close. Then, you decided to get her onto your boat, which is more home to you than anything on land. Then you pushed it further by shoving your boat into the path of a storm, decided to take shelter, and then the inevitable happens and you realize you are losing control, so when she throws you a lifeline, you take it. You say yes to marrying her, and all because you've been a pussy all along. You tie it up all in bloody knots, because underneath it all, you feel something for her. But you don't want to admit it to yourself, let alone to her."

I squeeze the bridge of my nose. "That's some crazy shit theory you've come up with," I mutter. "In fact, I am not sure about what you say half the time."

"That's such a lame excuse, Beauchamp." Saint barks out a laugh.

"And what makes you such an expert on the topic?"

"Oh, let's see. It's because I married the woman of my dreams, and I have a kid on the way, and let's face it, I still haven't lost my edge when it comes to making tough decisions."

"Which is what?" I frown.

"That you need to tell her the truth."

"Which is."

"That you love her, which is why you manipulated her to move across the pond, then gave her the business of the Seven so you could keep her close. Now you're carrying out the ultimate in possessive acts by marrying her."

I wince. "And when I tell her... How do you think that's going to go down with her?"

"I don't know," Saint chuckles, "best case, she'll be pissed off at you."

My palms begin to sweat. "And the worst?" I clear my throat. "What would be the worst case?"

There's silence, then Saint says, "She'd leave you?"

I grimace. That's what I am afraid of. And it's not just my ego which would be hurt by that... Which, face it, it would, but that's not the only thing stopping me from telling her everything. *If she leaves me, I won't be able to protect her.*

My heart begins to race; my pulse rate ratchets up. Of course, what he's saying is true, although he doesn't know the half of it. I should let her know that I know about her background. That I know that she's connected to the Bratva. But a part of me wants her to trust me enough for her to confide in me. But then, I haven't told her all of my secrets either.

"You're right." I clench and unclench my fist. "I need to be upfront with her. Without that, whatever connection is between us, it doesn't stand a chance."

"Bloody hell," Damian barks out a laugh, "is that Mr. Take-risks-and-play-with-his-life Beauchamp actually agreeing to a rational approach?"

Fuck, if it isn't.

"Don't get your panties in a twist," I growl.

"Don't put your horses in front of the cart, Arpad," Edward warns me.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, take it easy. Don't force the topic. Lead with your instinct on this one."

"You're telling me, Father." I rise to my feet. "I am the king of instinct. It's thanks to this very instinct that I have been able to sniff out and fund enough startups, thanks to which, I have enough passive income to not have to work for the rest of my life."

"All of which were ultimately decisions you made with your head. When it comes to your heart, though...it's another matter altogether."

"Not that you'll ever have to deal with that," I retort.

Silence for a beat, another, then I swear aloud. "Bloody hell, I didn't mean it that way, Father."

"Sure, you did." Edward's voice is tight.

"That was low," I insist. "Didn't mean to hit you where it would hurt the most."

"You were being honest." Edward's voice is low, "And it's true. Matters of the heart are out of my purview. There's space for love for only one in my heart...and that's the Lord above."

"Right." I drag my fingers through my hair. "Guess there's no other way but for me to face this...head-on, huh?"

"You got this," Weston exclaims. "Just rip it off like a band aid, you know?"

"Face this like a man, you dickwad," Sterling drawls.

"Eyes on the prize, you shitstain," Damian adds.

"Don't all of you get complimentary all at once." Why is it that when we get together, we somehow, lapse right back to being twelve and pre-pubescent wankers again?

"You don't have anything to lose, do you?" Saint, that asswipe, adds his two pennies' worth.

Yeah, I have nothing to lose... Except for my sanity, and my balls... God help me. Not only has she ensured that I'll never want to fuck another woman, but hell, if I don't want to be inside her already again. This entire thing is turning out to be a nightmare. Perhaps I should have turned the yacht around after all, and dropped her off at port, huh?

And then what? I'd have always wondered how it could have been. Hell, it's not like me to overthink my actions... Not when it comes to business, and certainly not when it came to facing down storms.

"What-bloody-ever," I growl. "Thanks for nothing, you guys." I disconnect, then head toward the chalet.

I am used to living life on the edge. Surely, I can manage one tiny woman with attitude, huh?

28

Karina

What the hell? He did it again. He'd accepted my proposal. He'd agreed to marry me. This time, I'm sure he'll cut and run. I mean, why the hell would he agree to something like that? Surely, he is going to back out, right? Except, I don't think so. Shit, why did I propose that? Clearly, when I am with him, I can't think straight.

After the asshole had pulled out and left... I'd straightened my clothes, then the scrabble board. Then put away the stupid board game. I'd hyperventilated on what had just taken place, had been glad that he'd decided to head out and give me a chance to compose myself. And clearly, the only thing that's going to help me when I get so stressed is yoga.

So here I am, flowing into the most basic, yet most challenging pose of all.

On my hands and knees, I position my wrists under my shoulders and my knees under my hips. Stretch my elbows and relax my upper back. Spread my fingers wide and press firmly through my palms, exhale as I tuck my toes and lift my knees off the floor.

Reach my pelvis up toward the ceiling, then draw in my tailbone, and gently begin to straighten my legs, bring my body into the shape of an "A."

Press down and lift through my pelvis. As I lengthen my spine, I lift my tail bone up toward the ceiling. Then press down equally through my heels and the palms of my hands.

Engage my quadriceps.

Align my ears with my upper arms. Relax my head, gaze toward my navel.

Hold... Hold... Hold for one, two, three... My hamstrings elongate, my biceps tremble... *Shit. Focus, on how your palms dig into the rug*—Yeah, I chose the place before the fire because it's the warmest spot in the room, not to mention, the rug is thick enough to shield my knees when I need to push down on them to rise up... And continue to count, four, five, six. *Stop grimacing. That's not the point of yoga. Don't forget to breathe, in-out-in.*

I exhale as I gently bend my knees and come back to my hands and knees. A bead of sweat trickles down my spine. The hair on the back of my neck rises. I glance up to find him at the breakfast counter. He leans a hip against the edge, then crosses one leg over the other.

"Why did you stop?" he rumbles.

I scowl, then shift to a kneeling position.

"Why don't you join me?"

"No thanks."

"Worried you can't replicate the position?"

"Baby, the only position I want to replicate is you under me, over me, reverse-cowgirl me, face-off with me—"

"Stop," I plead.

"—as I corkscrew you. Hell, I could even do the Om with you, or we could snow-angel together—"

"Enough," I scowl at him, "so you know your sexual positions."

"We don't need to go that far." He prowls over to me, "Why don't you do the plow, or the cobra or hell, the bridge position?"

"You know about them?"

"I know they are yoga positions that make for very gratifying sex." He smirks.

"Fine, fine," I huff, "you've made your point. And by the way, you're evading the topic."

"What topic?"

"The yoga poses." I tilt up my chin. "Bet you can't keep up with me."

"Is that a dare?"

He walks over to stand in front of me, and since I am still on my knees, it means I am at eye level with his crotch... Which is tented, and the shape of his length is clearly outlined by the fabric of his jeans.

"Don't you ever wear sweats?"

"Sweats?" His lips curl as if it's a dirty word.

I lean my head back to meet his gaze. "Yeah, you know, the loose pants with an elastic drawstring that men wear at home, because they're comfortable?"

He stares back at me.

"Right. Of course, not. It doesn't go with your image, now does it?"

"And what image would that be?"

"That tight-assed, stick-up-your-butt, grumpy-pants, alphahole who hates everything about the world around him."

"That's accurate." He folds his arms over his chest. "And for your information, I prefer jeans to sweats." He tilts his head. "Of course, if you want to see me in them, I'd be happy to oblige, especially since it allows for easy access." His grin widens. "Is that why you asked me about my preference in clothes? You want to make it easy for you to cop a feel, huh?"

"Argh." I make a gagging sound. "Why does our every conversation lead back to sex?"

"Because, you want to get pregnant?" he reminds me.

I sniff, then lower myself to plank position. "Stop trying to distract me and join in."

"I could beat you at yoga, any day."

"Really?" I bite the inside of my cheek. "Let's see you keep up, Romeo."

He drops down into plank position next to me. His movements are fluid; his biceps bulge and his shoulders flex. My throat dries and I almost lose my balance. *Shit, get your head back in the game. Focus, focus.*

I rise up to side plank. He follows, his breathing not even speeding up. *Bloody ballache, need to up the ante now.*

I move to all fours in the tabletop position. He follows. Then I place my knees under my hips and my hands under my shoulders.

I draw my shoulder blades together. Raise my right arm and left leg, keeping my shoulders and hips parallel to the floor. I tuck my chin into my chest to gaze down at the floor.

He follows, manages to get into position, only to fall over. He tries again, fails. Growls aloud, glances at me, and copies my position. Manages to hold it for a few seconds, then collapses, sweat gleaming on his forehead. "Bloody hell," he swears, "how the hell could it be that difficult?"

I hold the position for a few seconds more, then lower back down to the starting position. "Not as easy as it looks, huh?" I curve my lips and smile

sweetly at him. "Want to try again?" I sit back on my heels.

"Yes," he nods, "but not yoga." He waggles his eyebrows, as he rises to his feet. "How about you continue your practice while I watch?"

"How about you sod off?" I rise to my feet and turn toward the bedroom, then squeak when his fingers tighten around my wrist.

"Not so fast, babe."

I turn to stare at him. "Yes?" I school all expression from my face.

"I told you to continue your practice, didn't I?"

"What if I don't want to?"

"Too bad." He raises a shoulder. "You will do as I say."

"A-n-d, there he is." I sniff. "The man who must have his way in all things."

"Yep," he nods, "you've definitely sussed me out, babe."

"Oh, go to hell." I tug my arm, which he still has a hold of, and his grasp tightens.

"Don't challenge me babe."

"Or what?" I retort. "You've already fucked me, and spanked me. Hell, you've already agreed to marry me, so what else can you do to me?"

He bends his knees, then pushes his face into mine, "Want to find out?"

No.

No.

"Y...yes." Argh, why is my voice so shaky. I clear my throat, "Bring it on."

He releases me, "Run."

"What?"

"Five." He holds up five fingers.

"What are you doing? Is it a countdown?"

His lip curls.

Of course, it's a countdown. *Why the hell are you asking dumb questions of this asshole? Why the hell should I run anyway, huh?* I purse my lips, stare at him.

"Four." He folds his thumb.

My heart hammers in my throat, my fingers tremble, and I curl them into fists at my sides. "This is not funny," I gripe.

"Three." Only three of his digits remain upright.

I gulp.

"This your kind of kink, then? It's not enough to tie up women, you

prefer to chase them first?"

His smile widens, and damn him, but it's not nice. No, it's downright predatory of him to do so. My stomach flip-flops and my core clenches. So why the hell am I turned on?

"Two." He wiggles his two fingers.

Bastard.

"One." Only one finger is now upright, his middle finger.

"Time's up." He lunges forward.

I shriek, then swerve around him and race to the door. My pulse pounds at my wrists, at my temples; adrenaline laces my blood. I twist the handle of the door, tear it open and race out into the rain.

"Stop." I hear his voice a second before the wind swoops over me. I stumble, then brace myself and run in the opposite direction of the shed. Oh, no way, am I going to his torture chamber, where, no doubt, he can't wait to practice his craft on me. Only saving grace?

He hasn't brought another woman to the island and tied her up there. How many others has he tied up before me? It would have to be a significant number for him to reach the level of expertise he's at now. Something hot stabs at my chest... Not jealousy. No way. What the hell do I care who he practices his kink with? And will it stop once we were married? Was he serious when he agreed? And honestly, what had possessed me to ask the question?

I run uphill, not able to see more than a couple of feet in front of me. Shit, it really is bucketing down. Maybe this wasn't a good idea. But what the hell? He'd pissed me off with his stupid challenge, and of course, I had fallen for it and taken off. Not that I could have stayed there and allowed him to jump me either. My thighs spasm... And it's not from the thought of him throwing me down and spreading my legs and burying himself inside of me either. Nope. Get a grip, woman. This is the man who's chasing you through a storm on an island in the middle of nowhere. Do you realize how crazy that sounds?

I hear something above the sound of the wind and the rain. I shake my hair out of my eyes, risk a quick glance over my shoulder. Of course, I can't see anything, considering the rain seems to have just notched up in intensity. My clothes are plastered to my body, a gust of wind slams into me, and I am almost blown back. I dig my heels into the ground for purchase, then lean into the breeze and force myself to take another step. And another.

"Karina!"

I hear his voice call out before the wind drowns it out again.

I increase my pace, cover more ground. More rain lashes against my face. Damn it. I wipe the water from my eyes, put one leg in front of the other. *Keep moving. Don't stop.* Somehow it seems imperative that I win this round. When did it become a competition, huh? This was supposed to have been easy, him rolling on top and thrusting into me and impregnating me... None of which has gone according to plan. I should have known better than to engage with him... Why the hell did I have to fall asleep in his bed in the first place, huh?

"Karina, stop."

I snort under my breath. There he is again, telling me what to do. Damn him and his dominant ways. I power through the wall of water which seems to have sprung up in front of me.

"Karina! Look out! There's a—"

I place my foot forward, encounter emptiness. I pitch forward.

29

Arpad

Her scream rips through my eardrums. My heart stutters. My pulse begins to race. Adrenaline pours into my blood. I lunge forward through the rain, up the slope and throw myself forward. I hit the edge of the slope, arm flung out, fingers grasping against emptiness. My throat dries. Where the hell is she? "Karina!"

The wind rips my voice into shreds. I swallow and peer through the wall of water. The ground gives under me and I scramble back. "Fuck!" I swear aloud, grip the edge of the crumbling slope, stare through the gathering darkness. "Karina, where are you?"

There's a sound... Is that her? Did I hear something?

"Karina, is that you? Answer me," I command.

"Ari?" Her voice is weak, and so low that I'm sure I must be mistaken.

"Karina?" I yell out, "Where the fuck are you?"

"Can't you stop swearing for one second?" She coughs, and this time I hear her clearly. Fuck, she's close. Why can't I see her?

I crawl forward on my stomach, and the edge of the slope crumbles again. "Fuck." I need to brace myself against something, but what? I glance around, spot a tree a few feet away. "Fuckin' fuck." I am going to have to go back to get something to help me with this.

"Karina?"

"Yeah?" She answers promptly, so that's something.

"You hurt? Are you okay?"

"My ankle's sprained." She coughs again. "I am just cold and wet."

"That's an understatement," I grumble.

"Wow," she gasps, "so you and I agree on something, huh?"

"The only thing we are in agreement on is that I am going to tan your hide when I finally get to you."

"It's all your fault anyway," she calls out. "If you hadn't initiated your stupid sex games—"

"It wasn't a sex game... It was just a way of keeping you on your toes."

"And why would you need to do that?"

"Do you really want to have this conversation now?"

"Is there a better time?"

"You stealing my dialogue?" I frown as I stare down in the direction of her voice and make out a ledge. The breath rushes out of me. Okay, fine, so at least, she's not far away.

"You alphaholes don't have the prerogative for always being in the lead," she yells back.

"Ha, when it comes to you, woman, I doubt I can stay ahead for too long," I reply.

"OMG, I can't believe you are being nice to me." She coughs again and my stomach twists. She can't stay out here for too long.

Thunder crashes in the distance, then lightning flickers and I see her on the ground, not six feet below, not too far... But not very close either.

"I am going to have to go back and get a hold of some rope so I can haul you up." I project my voice in her direction.

"Ha," she scoffs, "any excuse to truss me up, eh?"

"We could have skipped all this if you had asked me to tie you up when you came to the shed."

"You mean your room of pain?"

"Was it painful when I tied you up the first time?" I frown.

She hesitates.

"Tell me, Sparks, did I hurt you then?"

"No," I sense her shake her head, "it was different, that's all."

"Good different or bad different?"

"It wasn't bad. Actually, I think I liked it."

"You did?"

"Yeah." She coughs again and I frown. "Hold that thought, will you? I'll head out and be right back in a few minutes."

She doesn't reply.

"Karina? You okay?"

Silence, for a beat, another. "Yeah," she finally replies and her voice sounds weaker.

"Hang in there, Sparks. I promise, I won't take too long."

"If I'd known it only takes my falling off a cliff for you to go all sensitive and protective..."

"I've always been protective of you, Karina. You know that."

She doesn't reply.

"I'll be back before you know it."

I turn to leave when she calls out, "Ari?"

I pause. "Yeah, babe?"

"Get the rope that you'd have used to tie me anyway."

"You got it, babe." I lower my head, shield my face against the elements, then continue down the slope.

The same rope? She wants me to use the rope that I already picked out for her. How the hell could she know that? Is she that perceptive, that she'd clocked my peculiarities already? Or was it a lucky guess?

What a woman she is. I'd been sure she was going to tell me to hurry back, or that she was too cold, or that she couldn't last out there much longer, but hell, if she hadn't surprised me again. She's so tiny, so delicate, I often forget her looks are misleading. My woman has a spine of steel. She's a survivor. She's had to be, to have gotten this far on her own. But never again, will she need to do everything on her own. At least, for as long as I am with her, I am going to make sure she never has to do anything by herself. She'll have me as her back up and...

Hold on a bloody second. What the hell am I doing, building these plans with her...knowing that...she isn't being honest with me, that she is hiding her true identity? I shake my head. There are too many conflicting threads of thought here. I need to prioritize. Focus on one thing at a time. And for now, that is getting her back to safety.

I reach the chalet, tear open the door, then pound through the living room and into the bedroom. I open the closet, grab the rope that I had set aside for her, then snatch up two more of my strongest ones, just in case.

I am out and racing up the hill in minutes. The wind slams into me, pushing me back, and I have to double over to make progress. By the time I reach the top of the slope, I am panting. I loop the ropes around my arm, then

drop down and crawl to the edge on my stomach.

"Karina?" I call out, and the wind once more tears the words out of my mouth. "Babe, you there?"

No reply.

Shit, shit, shit. Am I too late? Where the hell is she? "Sparks, where the fuck are you? If you don't reply in another second, I swear, I am coming down there, and when I do, I am going to spank your arse so hard that—"

"Yeah, yeah." Her voice reaches me. She coughs, then seems to gather herself together. "I know how much you like my ass, but if you don't pull me up first, I'm afraid it's going to have frozen and fallen off."

My shoulders slump. Whew, she's still there. Of course, she is. Where the hell would she have gone?

"Watch out for the rope, okay?"

I pull out the first coil of rope, make a lasso out of it, then throw it in her direction.

"Did you get it?"

"What?"

"The rope."

"Did you throw it?"

Fuck. I retrieve the rope, then aim the lasso in the direction of her voice and spring it at her.

"Did you see that?"

"Nope."

"Bloody fuck."

"Don't you know any other swear words? The F bomb is sooo passé."

"Ah, but nothing else quite encapsulates how I am feeling right now."

She chuckles, "Don't tell me that Arpad Alphahole is short of swear words?"

I pull back the rope, wipe my face on my sleeve. *Focus, focus.* "Sure, if swear words are what you want to hear right now, then how about... Wanker, twat, bollocks, arsebadger, jizzcock,"

She laughs, "You're taking the piss now."

"That too."

I throw the lasso at her, and feel it tauten. "Did you catch it?"

"Yes," she gasps, "OMG, I have it."

"Hold onto it, walk toward my voice."

There's a pause before I hear her swear loudly.

"Careful," I caution, "don't hurt yourself, babe."

My heart begins to thud and my throat closes. I tie the end of the rope to the other hank of rope I brought. Then I wind it around my middle, fasten it with enough knots. There, that should hold now. I lower myself to the ground and stretch-out with my head hanging over the edge.

I peer through the pouring rain. Where the hell is she?

"Can you see the edge of the cliff?"

"Not yet."

"Stretch out your hand, slowly... Tell me when you can feel the edge."

The rope vibrates as she moves forward. "Oh, I am there now."

"Okay, wind the rope around your middle. Let me know when you have secured it."

There's silence, except for the wind and the pelting rain, as she does so. The rope dances as some of the slack is taken up, then the length tautens again. "I'm ready."

"I'm going to haul you up."

"Okay."

"Are you able to use your good leg to balance against the wall, if needed?"

"Yes," she calls back, "I... I think so. I'll try."

"Good girl."

I begin to haul her up. My biceps feel it, my shoulders protest, I'm pulled forward by the weight of her body, and she screams out, "Ari!"

"It's fine." I blow out a breath. Still stretched out on my front I dig my toes into the ground for purchase. I tighten my muscles, wind the rope around my palms and haul.

My entire body tenses and my shoulders feel like they are being pulled out their sockets. Pain grips my chest and my back. I grit my teeth, continue to pull her up, slowly, slowly. "You... okay?" I huff out.

"Yes..." her voice is closer. She sounds weak, but at least, she is not panicking.

"You're doing so well, darling. I swear, it will all be over before you know it. Just a few more seconds, baby. That's all; hold on..." I continue to haul her up toward me. The rope abrades my skin, the rain drips down my forehead and I blink it out of my eyes.

The wind blows and the rope sways.

"Ari," she screams, and she's so close now.

"I have you, babe." I firm my lips, draw in another breath and yank upward; her head appears above the edge of the precipice. Finally. Fuck. It's as if I am seeing a newborn enter the world for a first time.

Warmth flushes my chest. Adrenaline pumps through my veins and I draw on every single reserve of strength left inside of me. I flex my muscles, then dig my feet into the ground and heave. Her entire body slides up and over the precipice. I wrap my arms about her, haul her close, and collapse with her on top of me.

30

Karina

Heat cocoons me, his arms shelter me, the scent of his maleness—the essence of pheromones and dark edginess that is so Arpad—envelops me. The breath rushes out of me, and only then, do I realize how tense I've been all along. My legs tremble, I raise my arm—or at least try to, for I find I can't move. My fingers tremble, my muscles turn to jelly. A shudder wracks me, and another. Pressure builds behind my eyes, moisture clings to my cheeks, and it's not just from the rain. My shoulders heave and I press my face into his hard chest and allow the tears to flow.

"Shh." He rocks me, runs his fingers down my hair, winds his arm around me, holds me close. "I got you, babe. I got you, and I'm never letting you go again."

I only cry harder, the pent-up pressure from finding myself on his boat, and then trying to resist him and failing, wanting to be tied up by him and not wanting him to know, the sheer intense connection between us, which had made the times we'd come together so much more potent; all of it seems to come to a head, there in his arms, on the top of a peak, on an island in the middle of the English Channel.

"Jesus, Sparks, you're breaking my heart," his voice whispers in my ear.

I lean back, tilt my chin up. "Kiss me," I sob. "Please Ari, kiss m—"

He lowers his head and closes his mouth over mine. And the kiss is anything but gentle. He thrusts his tongue inside my mouth and takes and takes, and shares his breath. I press myself closer to him, push my breasts

into his chest. I lean into him and part my lips and allow him to fuck my mouth with his tongue.

The kiss seems to go on and on. I lose myself in the softness of his lips, the hard demand of his tongue as he swipes it across my teeth. He winds his fingers around my knotted hair and tugs. Pain slithers down my scalp. I moan deep in my throat. I am alive. I am here in his arms, with him. I tear my mouth from his, stare into his face, "Tie me up again and fuck me."

He stares into my eyes as if taken aback, then chuckles. "This is why I can't resist you. You always surprise me, Sparks."

"I...do?"

He nods.

The sun filters through the clouds and I blink.

"Well look at that." He glances up at the sky. "The storm blew over."

I stare about me, and sure enough, the rain has faded away as quickly as it had started. The pale orb of the sun lights up the bottom of the clouds with a silvery lining.

He rises to his feet with me in his arms. I glance down to find that the rope which winds around me is also wrapped around his waist. "We're connected," I mutter.

"Eh?" He strides down the slope, his long legs eating up the distance.

"The rope," I swallow, "I am wearing it and so are you."

"Imagine that." He shakes his head. "Never thought I'd see the day when I'd be entangled in my own rope."

"I'm also very muddy."

"I prefer you dirtied up, Sparks." He chuckles.

It's a strange feeling... To be carried. It makes me feel cherished, cared for, like I could lean on him. Something I haven't done since...

I had been a small child and my father had wiped my tears after I had engaged in a particularly bad fight with the school bully...who had been much bigger than me. He had been called to school that day and my principal had had a word with him. My father had been disappointed in my behavior, yet he'd also comforted me.

He'd told me that I need to choose my battles wisely, for I could never hope to win all of them, but I could minimize the risk of failure by deciding which challenges to go after.

And since meeting Arpad... My subconscious has decided that he is the biggest challenge of them all. I haven't known what to make of it... Clearly,

the disagreements between us, resulting mainly because of his heavy-handedness, have made me think that I hate him... But all along, it has been a precursor for the attraction between us. And something more... This sense that we, somehow, fit together. Two parts of a puzzle, whose big picture I still can't see... But there is this need to find out what it might turn out to be.

So, I press myself as close to him as I can, allow myself the decadence of luxuriating in his strength, his solidity, the utter masculinity that resides in every angle of his body, the thud-thud-thud of his heart against my cheek as I close my eyes and drift off.

"Sparks?"

"Hmm."

"I need to get you out of these wet clothes." His voice rumbles around me, the heat of his body a siren's call. I turn, lean toward the source of the warmth and he chuckles.

"Just need to ease this shirt off you, okay?"

I crack open my eyes to find he's doing just that. He slides the shirt off one shoulder, then the other. Goosebumps erupt across my skin. The world tilts and I turn my head to find he's carrying me into the shower cubicle. He lowers my feet to the ground, then supports me as he turns the shower on. The hot water is a shock and I sneeze once, twice.

"Shit, hope you're not going to catch a cold, sweetheart."

Sweetheart," I mumble, my eyelids so heavy I can barely keep them open. "You called me darling earlier, then baby..." I murmur under my breath.

"You have a preference?"

"All of them... All the time." I close my eyes and relax against his big body as the hot water soothes me.

I must have dozed off again, for when I come to next, it's dark. I rub my cheek into the soft pillow, glance around the bedroom. The rugs on the floor, the door to the closet in the corner, the table with the two chairs pushed up against the window.... Right, guess I must have fallen asleep during the shower and Arpad had put me to bed again. I glance down and find I'm wearing another of his T-shirts. The material is soft. Not because of being washed too often; it's just the quality of what he wears. I bring my arm to my nose and sniff. The scent of detergent and Arpad fills my senses. My stomach rumbles and I realize I am hungry. Guess I must have recovered if my body wants to be fed so insistently. I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, and

stand. My ankle protests. I lean my weight on it and find it holds. Okay. Good. I limp to the door, open it and walk through into the kitchen.

His back is to me. Once again, he's wearing a new pair of jeans with a sweatshirt. Over one shoulder is a kitchen towel. As I watch, he bends over the skillet where he's stirring something, then raises the wooden spoon to his mouth and tastes something. The biceps of his arm bulge, the planes of his back bend and dip in an all too familiar symmetry. My toes curl. I drink in the sight of his narrow waist, the tight arse, the powerful corded thighs that flow down to meet strong hamstrings and his feet... His gorgeous feet are bare again.

"You don't like wearing socks?" My voice comes out rusty and I clear my throat.

He turns and surveys me from head to toe. "What are you doing out of bed?" He scowls.

"I was hungry..."

"Get back under the covers. I'll bring you food."

"But," I frown, "I feel fine."

"You look wrecked."

"Oh," I pat my cheeks, smooth the hair from my face, "thanks for that."

I purse my lips, and he sighs, "You always look beautiful, no matter what time of the day or night... You know that, right?"

Blood rushes to my face. "Right."

He jerks his chin toward the bedroom, "Go on, get back under the covers. I'll bring you something to eat."

I hesitate and he glares at me. "Don't disobey me."

"A-n-d he's back," I blow out a breath, "alphahole of the fucking century."

His gaze intensifies. "Don't fuck with me, Sparks."

"What happened to all the endearments?" I fold my arms around my waist, "You were going all baby this and honey that with me..."

"Honey?" He frowns. "How bourgeois do you think I am? Besides, you're fine now, aren't you?"

"So, you said those things because you thought I was in danger?" I scowl.

"Obviously." He raises a shoulder. "You didn't think I actually meant them, did you?"

My mouth drops open. "Jesus, you're a piece of work, you know that?"

"I don't care what you think about me, as long as you get back to bed."

"And if I don't?" I set my jaw.

He turns off the flame under the skillet, places the wooden spoon aside and covers the dish. Then he flicks the dish cloth from his shoulder and turns to face me, "Do you want me to come there?"

I swallow and my stomach twists. Pinpricks of heat flicker down my spine. Damn it, why does the threat from him turn me on so?

"And if I said yes?"

"Are you saying yes?" He takes a step forward and I shuffle back.

He moves toward me and I hold up my hand, "N...no... I mean, yes. I mean, forget it, I am heading back."

I limp my way to the bedroom. Why do I let him get under my skin so? Why can't I simply stay out of his way? Why do I keep giving him the opportunity to put me in my place? And why the hell does he have to be so rude to me? Especially after showing me his tender side? I am not going to cry now, no way. I sidle into bed, pull up the covers, then glance up when he walks into the room. He has a tray with a bowl of something that smells absolutely delicious. He places the tray on the table by the window, then comes over to me. "Sit up," he growls.

I stare at him, and he tilts his head. "Do it."

"Yeah, yeah. What's got your goat?"

"Who's got your goat?" He corrects me.

"That's what I meant."

"Not the same thing."

"Stupid semantics."

"You need to be precise in what you say and do, else it leaves room for error," he retorts.

"You need to decide whether you like me or hate me because this seesaw mood of yours is giving me whiplash."

He leans around to prop up the pillows at my back, then touches the side of my neck. "You don't have whiplash, do you?"

I shiver, then cringe away from his touch. "I am fine, as long as you don't touch me," I choke out the words, and he stiffens. He pulls away and I instantly miss his proximity. Damn it, this is crazy. This push, pull between us... It is doing my head in.

He walks over to the table, picks up the tray, then returns to place it across my thighs.

He pulls up a chair, sinks into it, then picks up the spoon and dips it in the

soup. He holds it up to my mouth and I purse my lips.

He blows out a breath. "Eat," he growls.

I feel about ten. Hell, I want to throw a tantrum like I am ten and refuse to touch my food. I fold my arms across my chest and stare at him.

He meets my gaze, and his own softens. "Please," he murmurs. "Eat; the food will warm you up."

And there he goes again, revealing his caring side which, to be fair, disarms me more than his dominance.

I open my mouth and he slides the spoon in between my lips. The taste of tomatoes and peppers explodes on my tongue. "It's good," I say.

"Of course, it is," He smirks.

"Modesty, thy name is not Arpad f'ing Beauchamp," I grumble under my breath.

He chuckles and scoops up more of the broth and holds it up for me. I eat my way through the rest of the soup and soon the bowl is empty.

He sets the spoon back on the tray, then uses his sleeve to dab at my mouth.

I blink up at him. "You seem to feed me an awful lot."

"Need you strong so I can feed you something other than food."

Heat flushes my face. I glower at him and he laughs. "Couldn't resist that."

"Right." I yawn so hugely that my jaw cracks.

"You should get some more rest." He picks up the tray and rises to his feet. He turns to leave and, somehow, I can't let him go. Not yet.

"Will you be back?"

He turns to glance at me. "Do you want me to return?"

I nod.

"Then I will."

He heads out of the room. I switch off the lamp next to me, snuggle in. I must have passed out again. When I wake up its dawn and the bed next to me is cold.

I push the covers aside, slide out of bed, and stretch. I walk out into the living room and come to a stand-still. "What are you up to?"

31

Arpad

"What does it look like?"

I look up from the doorway where I've slipped on my jacket.

"Looks to me like you are leaving?"

"So are you."

She rubs one bare foot over the other, and of course, my gaze is instantly drawn to the length of her legs. The T-shirt she wears—*my* T-shirt, reaches the tops of her knees. She folds her fingers together in front of her, then tips up her chin. "We're leaving?" she asks.

I jerk my chin toward the window where sunshine streams in.

"I've been up since dawn making sure the yacht is ready to sail.

"Oh." She swallows, then folds her arms in front of her. "So that's it, then?"

"That's it." I nod.

"You said you'd come back to bed last night." She squeezes her eyes closed. "No, wait. What am I saying? Forget I said it... I mean..." She rakes her fingers through her hair, messing it up some more.

My fingers tingle and I want to move toward her and smooth down the errant strands. Instead, I stay where I am. "I did come to bed. You were asleep by then, and when I woke up this morning, you were still sleeping."

"Right," she swallows, "give me a few minutes to jump into the shower." She turns to leave, then winces, and glances down at her ankle.

I take a step forward. "You okay?"

"Yes, of course." She heads off to the bedroom.

I call after her, "I'm sorry."

She pauses, then turns to face me, "For what?"

"For allowing you to leave the house yesterday. If I hadn't, you wouldn't have run through the rain or fallen over the side and—"

"Hold on... You allowed me to leave the house? *You allowed me?*"

I narrow my gaze. "I should have stopped you."

"You didn't make me do anything," she snarls. "I ran out because it was the only way I had a chance of outrunning you."

"That's what I mean, I shouldn't have let you out of the house."

I take a step forward and so does she.

"I should have tied you to the bed when I had the chance and fucked you until you couldn't walk again."

Her chest rises and falls; her pupils dilate. "Think again, buster." She hobbles over to me, then stabs a finger in my chest, "You can't make me do anything I don't want to do. You are not the master of me, asshole."

"Don't tempt me to prove otherwise."

"What are you going to do? Use your stupid ego, and over-the-top possessiveness to put me in my place?"

"That might be a start." I don't stop the sneer that curls my lips. "Better still, I might throw you down on the floor right here and bury my cock inside you all over again."

"So why don't you do it?"

She digs her finger into my chest and I snarl, "Don't tempt me."

"I am challenging you to do it, you asshole."

"Alphahole, remember?" I step back and her hands fall away. "And no, thank you. I do believe I've done my duty toward you. I shagged for nearly 48 hours past your ovulation window. Realistically, I do believe the chances of you conceiving are slim now, so..." I raise a shoulder, "I think I'll pass on the offer, babe."

She lets loose with her hand and I catch her wrist. "Watch it," I growl. "I am going to overlook your error this time because you're still recovering from your fall yesterday."

"Oh, sod off," she snarls. "This contract, or whatever it is that we had, is over now."

"No, it isn't." I click my tongue, "I pumped you up with my cum, the results of which are still unknown. In return, you're going to come with me to

see my family, and we have another 29 days within which to try again. Besides, we are getting married, aren't we?"

"You're crazy." She tosses her hair over her shoulder, "You only came once where it would be useful. The rest of the time you were just playing around, using all sorts of other ways to get you and me off, but not in a way that would impregnate me."

"Are you denying that I came inside you and that you could be pregnant as we speak?"

She sets her lips.

"That's what I thought." I look her up and down, "Suddenly, everything is clear to me, Sparks."

"Don't call me that."

"Sparks." I smirk and she makes a sound deep in her throat.

My dick instantly twitches. Why is it that the more I annoy her, the more I seem to like her? That spirit inside of her... My God... It seduces me like nothing else ever has.

"As I was saying, after yesterday's escapade, it's clear to me that you need a keeper."

"What I need is to have my head examined that I was ever attracted to you."

"So, you admit it then?"

"What?"

"That you find me attractive."

"I find gorillas attractive." She tosses her head. "Doesn't mean anything."

"It means something that you proposed to me."

"I'll never live that down, will I?" She flicks her hair over her shoulder. "Put it down to temporary insanity."

"Or clarity? Maybe that's the only time you were thinking straight?"

She lowers her hands to her sides, fixes me with her gaze, "What do you want me to say? That yes, I did think we had a connection? In fact, yesterday when I was alone on that ledge and waiting for you to return, I promised myself that if I made it back in one piece, I'd tell you the truth about what I felt. And then, when you rescued me and carried me back in your arms and took care of me, I was sure that the connection between us was more than sex. But then, you have to go and make a complete wreck of everything with your over-the-top dominance."

"That's me, sweetheart. I can't apologize for what I am."

She throws up her hands, "Jesus, you take my breath away, you know that?"

"I'd always suspected it. Thank you for confirming it." I widen my smile and she curls the fingers of her palms into fists at her sides.

I click my tongue, "Don't even think about it."

"Argh." She throws up her hands. "Let's just agree to disagree, shall we?"

"What-bloody-ever." I yawn. "Get dressed, will you? I don't want to be late for lunch."

32

Karina

Half an hour later, we're on his yacht, which honestly, doesn't look much worse for wear. Apparently, it's sturdier than I had assumed.

On the other hand, I had given the asshole steering this vessel too much credit, and for all the wrong things. For some reason, I'd thought that behind that callous exterior of his, beats a heart that is much more sensitive. Surely, those little glimpses of affection he'd shown me, that tenderness and caring that he sometimes revealed... There's more of that where it came from, right?

I bite into the sandwich that he'd handed over to me, along with the bottle of orange juice that he'd carried with him. When I'd refused to take it, he'd simply reminded me to think of the possible life I may carry.

I flatten my palm to my stomach. Bloody hell, I couldn't be pregnant, could I? I don't feel any different, but then, how is one supposed to feel in the days following conception?

And if I am? What then? Would the sham marriage we are pursuing turn out to be real? Why the hell does he still want to go through with it, anyway?

I stare at the man who stands on the deck. He's wearing his jacket and boots, with a cap perched on his unruly hair. He steers the boat with a firm hand... Just as he had pulled me up the cliff-side without hesitation. And those terms of endearment he had used after that? No, I hadn't imagined that. He feels something for me, but he is fighting it. What is it that holds him back from sharing the real reason for his bad mood, anyway?

I walk up the steps from the cabin and onto the deck. As I draw abreast of

him, I smooth my hands down my jeans... A pair borrowed from him which, despite having been cinched in at the waist with a piece of rope that he'd loaned me, is perched precariously low on my hips. I also had to roll up the legs to almost half the normal length. And the shirt is so big, it swallows me. I'm not fit for company. When I'd told him, he'd said that his family wouldn't care.

Men. Honestly. No way, am I going anywhere without the proper attire.

When I'd insisted, he'd relented. He'd said that we would stop at a shop on the way to his family's place, where I could pick up some new clothes.

That's something, I suppose. A minor victory, but still, he'd ceded to me. One step at a time.

I stop next to him, peer through the windshield at the stretch of water ahead of us. "How much longer?" I ask.

"We should be docking in half an hour," he replies.

"Does your family know that we are coming?"

"They know that *I* am coming."

"Of course." I snort. "Thanks for the heads-up."

"Anytime." His lips twist. "You don't have to worry yourself about the visit."

"Yeah, it's only every day that I go to meet the family of my fake husband, soon to be my real husband—which would make them my fake-real to-be in-laws, so yeah, and by the way, I could already be pregnant with his child...or not..."

I draw in a breath, and he chuckles. "That's some twisted shit, right there, you've got yourself into, Sparks."

"You're telling me." I turn to him, when my phone begins to ping with incoming messages. Guess we are back within reach of the non-satellite networks then?

Not that he'd have refused to let me use the satellite phone if I'd asked. Except, that would have meant that he'd listen in on my conversations, which is not what I wanted.

"Umm, I need to make a call," I venture.

"Not stopping you," he replies, his voice preoccupied.

"I'm going to step out."

"Suit yourself." He turns to fiddle with the dials on his dash.

Jerk, could've pretended that he wanted my company for a little longer, right?

I flounce out and back into the bedroom on the far end of the boat, then close the door and lock it behind me for good measure.

I call up Samuel, my right-hand person, who confirms to me that everything is fine. Clients are all happy, there's nothing pending, no fires to put out, or if there were, they've already been resolved. Huh? So, guess I wasn't missed at all? A heavy feeling invades my stomach. Yeah, this is what I've been dedicating my days and nights to; for building my business and my team. Apparently, I've done a thorough job of it, because my company can run itself without my direct involvement for a few days. I draw in a breath. No one is indispensable; I know that. But this is my enterprise; so, you'd think things could have, at least, collapsed a *little* when I wasn't there to directly steer things along, right?

I bite the inside of my cheek. Now, I am being childish. It's a good thing that my business is on track. When I have kids, if I need to work remotely or go part-time for a while, it means I'll be able to do that without the work suffering. I bid him goodbye and hang up before he can ask me about my holiday—or lack thereof.

Then I dial Isla's number.

"Heyyy youuu!" She comes on the line breathless, "Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you, but I kept getting an out-of-range message."

"That's because I was."

"Oh?" Her voice comes through clearer. "Just took you off the speaker."

I hear voices in the background, which recede.

"Where are you?"

"At a wedding rehearsal, and OMG, this bridezilla is so annoying. She just found out that her friend got engaged as well and is planning to get married this year."

"So, what's the problem?"

"Apparently, it's her special year, and not just a day. The woman's convinced that her friend is getting married to steal her thunder." Isla snorts. "Because no one else can have a life at the same time as her, right?"

I hear the sound of something crashing.

"What was that?"

"She just yanked the table cloth from the table and all the crockery was on it," Isla says, her voice calm.

"At least, there was no food on the table, or as Ari would say, that would

be a travesty."

"Ari?"

"I mean Arpad."

"So, it's like that, hmm?"

"That's not why I called you."

"Are you with him now?"

"What if I am?"

"You're definitely with him," she crows. "Give it up, girlfriend. So, you finally did it, didn't you?"

"Did what?"

"Want me to spell it out for you?" She laughs. "Give it up, babe. You know I won't stop asking you about it until you do."

I blow out a breath, "Fine, fine," I grouse, "I'm with the asshole aboard his yacht."

"I knew it," she yells. "Fist bump, fist bump."

"It's nothing to celebrate, though."

"Of course, it is," she sings out. "Ari and Kari making out on a yacht."

"Yachty?" I wince. "Really? What are you? Ten?"

"Just soooo happy that you two finally decided to do it."

"And how," I mutter under my breath, but she catches it.

"That's what I want to know. Details, girlfriend."

"No way," I reply, horrified. "I am not going to share details about my sex life with you."

"Aww, party pooper."

"That's me." I shuffle my feet, then walk over to the large window of the cabin and glance outside.

"At least, tell me if it was everything you expected?"

"It was...." I stare at the shore that I can now see in the distance, "different."

"Different?" she yells. "That's all you're going to give me? Come on, take pity on someone who's been living vicariously through the exploits of all you women who've been hooking up with the Seven."

"Why don't you get one of them for yourself?"

"Nope, no way, nada," she protests. "Those a-holes are way too possessive for me. I like someone who gives me my space, you know?"

"That's why you've been eyeing up the only man who'd possibly beat the Seven at their own game?"

There's silence, then she groans, "Not you as well?"

"So, you know who I am talking about?" I chuckle.

"Erm..." she clears her throat, "who were you talking about?"

"First you," I insist. It's delightful how quickly I've managed to distract her. Whew.

"Yeah, okay, Liam...the fierce-as-fuck, sexy as-a-delicious-groomsman, mean-as-a-bride-to-be-before-her-wedding, Kincaid."

I laugh. "Those are some interesting comparisons you have there."

"That's what comes of organizing weddings for a living." She continues, "I have the caricatures of those I've encountered on my brain. I'm afraid it's turning me into a cynic."

"Cynical, and you?" I shake my head. "Nah, you're the most optimistic woman I have ever met. I mean, come on, you have to be, to put together as many weddings as you have and still keep your sense of humor, not to mention your energy levels."

"Hmm," she grunts, "why are you buttering me up like I am a three-tiered wedding cake?"

"Aww, come on. Can't I compliment a friend?"

"You don't do compliments, Karina." I sense the smile in her words.

"What do you mean?" I twirl a strand of hair around my fingers. "Haven't I been complimentary of you in the past? Or Julia? Or Summer?"

"Umm, no?"

"Hold on," I stiffen, "are you saying that I am unfeeling?"

"No, no," she protests. "On the contrary, it's clear to us that you feel a lot. You tend to have it all bottled inside, which is fine. It's the way you are you. It's why, when you say something, we all end up listening. We know it's significant."

"You make me sound..." I chew on my lower lip, "like a reserved, stuck-up bitch."

"You don't come across as reserved or stuck up. More like cautious, like you take your time getting to know people before you open up to them."

"Hmm." I hunch my shoulders, not sure what to make of it. I do take my time getting to know people before I trust them. Which is why my reaction to Mr. Grumpy pants is a complete mystery. I thought I hated him... And then, at the first opportunity, I'd pretty much agreed to sleep with him...and... and... "I proposed to him."

"Wait...? What?" There's the sound of something crashing.

"Isla?" I frown. "Isla? You there?"

I hear the sound of footsteps then more thumps. "I... I'm here," she finally says.

"You okay?"

"More to the point, are you okay?"

"I'm not sure." I walk over to the bed... The bed where he fucked me. The covers are still a mess, with dents in the middle of each pillow, indicating that, clearly, it had been a couple who had shared this space not too long ago. I sink down onto the mattress. "It's why I called you."

"And here I thought you were calling to say 'hi' to me and check in how my day was going."

"Of course," I swallow, "that too... I mean... I... Ah." Tears knock at the backs of my eyes. Fuck. The hormones I'd been injecting myself with in advance of the IUI are clearly messing me up.

"And...and...before that, I asked him to father my child."

"You did what?" Her voice rises in pitch.

"Yeah..." I nod, "I was scheduled to get artificially inseminated, only instead of making it to my appointment, I ended up being stuck on the yacht with Arpad."

"So, you asked him to step in?"

"Pretty much."

"And... uh... How did your proxy jizz maker perform?" There's a hint of laughter in her voice.

"Can't complain," I mumble. "And now you're having fun at my expense?"

"No, babe. Of course, not. It's just, you have to admit, as stories go...and trust me, I've heard some pretty crazy shit from each of the other women as they got together with one of the Seven... But your story—" She blows out a low whistle.

I press the heel of my palm into my forehead. "That bad, huh?"

"It's...up there with how Harry met Sally or Ennis and Jack in *Brokeback Mountain* or Blake and Dan in *Gossip Girl* or..."

"I get the picture," I say hastily. "So," I jump up and begin to pace, "what do you think I should do?"

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know what I want to do; that's why I'm asking you."

"Bullshit," she snaps, "of course, you do."

"No, I don't." I pull the phone away from my ear then speak into the mouthpiece, "Are you going to give me the benefit of your advice or what?"

I hold the phone to my ear again, and she blows out a breath.

"Do you want to walk away from him?"

"I'm not sure."

"Do you want to stay with him?"

"Not sure either."

"Maybe you should give it some time. Perhaps you're not ready to make the decision yet?"

"May...be." I stop again by the window. "There are times I want to punch his face, other times I want to kiss it... But most of the time I want to—"

"—Be close to him?"

"Not quite..." I bite the inside of my cheek. "I admit, I don't want to give up this chance of getting pregnant, you know? It's the one thing I have always wanted, a kid of my own."

"You're brave, wanting to do this by yourself."

"Or a coward?" I raise a shoulder. "It seems less stressful if I don't have a man to deal with. Besides, this way, I get to do what's right for the kid without always having to fight it out with the father."

"Or maybe, you and the father would discuss it and arrive at a decision that would benefit the child the most?"

"Are you trying to push me in his direction?"

"Hey," she protests, "you asked me for my opinion."

"You're not in favor of my bringing up a child on my own?"

"You're strong enough to do anything, including having a family by yourself without a man." Isla hesitates, "I guess, me personally, though... I can't see myself doing it without a partner. Maybe I am old-fashioned that way. I want security, and the man I marry needs to be able to provide that, above everything else."

"And love?" I chew on my lower lip. "What about finding love? Don't you want that?"

She laughs, "I knew you were a closet romantic."

"I'm not."

"Of course, you are." She snickers. "The tougher career-minded ones are always the ones who fall the hardest."

"Hey," I protest, "I thought you were on my side."

"I am, babe. It's why I am telling you to follow your heart."

"Like that's going to help me?" I huff.

"Why don't you bide your time? Go with the flow, see how things turn out, you'll know when you'll know."

"Right." I hang up, then turn toward the door. Guess I've put this off long enough. It's time to go out there and face the sullen beast.

I square my shoulders and head for the door.

Arpad

"Would you like something to drink, Sir?"

I glance up from where I've been tracking my investments on my phone. We are in the most exclusive boutique in Lille. One that showcases British designers—something unusual when you're on French soil—and which is why my grandmother loves to come here.

"A hot chocolate, maybe, Sir?" she prompts.

I glare at the saleswoman, "Do I look like the type who drinks hot chocolate?"

"Yes, Sir. I mean, no, Sir." She blinks rapidly. "I mean—"

"Whiskey," I snap, "hold the ice."

"Of course, Sir." She turns and scampers out.

"Still frightening the hired help, I see?" Karina drawls. "Why don't you pick on someone your own size?"

"You mean like..." I take in her outfit and stare and stare, "like you?"

"Like the dress?" She juts out a hip, then props her hand on it.

"Like it?" I drag my gaze down the modest neckline that hints at cleavage, though I know that the fabric covers the most luscious tits I have ever laid eyes on. The belt that's cinched in at the waist, except I know that underneath it is the smoothest belly, with the delicate nip of her belly button. The flare of her hips, that no dress in the world can hide. Stocking clad legs, and on her feet, she wears delicate ankle-length boots.

I frown and she straightens. "What's wrong with it?" She looks down at

herself.

"You're showing too much flesh."

"What?" She gapes. "This is a long-sleeved dress."

"It's too short."

"It goes to my knees."

"Ankle length," I nod, "Get an ankle length one."

She stares, "Are you serious?"

"No, actually," I snap my fingers, "something that comes to your toes." Yes, that's better. That way, no one can catch a glimpse of her gorgeous ankles either

"You've lost it." She turns and walks into the changing room. I jump up and follow her, close the door to the space and lock it.

She freezes, turns around. "What are you doing here?"

"What do you think?" I take a step forward, "I think we should continue with our original plan of getting you pregnant."

She glances around the space, "Here?"

I nod, "Right, here."

She stiffens, "We don't have time."

"Ordinarily, I'd say I need more time, but in this instance, considering how luscious you look in that dress—" I close the distance between us and she puts up her palms.

"This is just a simple, everyday wear outfit, you know?"

"But on you," I stare down at her chest, "it looks fucking incredible."

"Why don't you say that to my face," she grumbles.

I tip my chin up, "Sorry, babe. Your tits are just the most gorgeous things I've seen, since the money from my first £1 million pound deal hit my bottom line."

"Are you comparing me to a transaction?"

"I know right?" I shake my head. "What could be more flattering?"

She scowls up at me. "Maybe just appreciating me for what I am?"

"But I do." I stare. "Come on, babe. You're a business woman. You understand the value of money and how important it is, and especially your first big win... There's nothing sweeter than the taste of it, so the very fact that I compared you to that shows how much respect I have for you."

"Respect?" She purses her lips. "Sounds more like you think money can buy anything."

"Can't it?"

"Not me." She tips up her chin. "I have enough of my own; I don't need your cash."

"Only my sperm." I tilt my head. "That's still something I have which you want, and I am ready to give it to you now."

Her cheeks smear. Interesting. The hardnosed business woman I'd first met in LA wouldn't have flinched or blushed at anything. Somehow, the last few days have softened her... There is a glow about her which, surely, has to have come from all the ways I've fucked her, and yet, I want more of her.

I whisper my knuckles down her cheek. "What do you say, Sparks? One for the road?"

She glances past me at the door. "What if someone knocks?"

"They won't."

"How can you be sure?"

I stare at her and she grimaces. "Right, of course, you know the owners."

"That too." I smirk. "Trust me, they'll know when I am in here, I am busy."

"Have you brought other women here?"

I frown. "Only my grandmother, and I've never been inside this changing room before."

She frowns. "How do I know you're not lying?"

"One thing you can be sure of, I'll never lie to you. I'll always tell you what I want from you upfront." Only I haven't been able to confess the part I'd played in changing the course of her life thus far.

She tips up her chin. "Promise you won't be with another woman for as long as we are together."

"I haven't been with another woman since I saw you in LA."

"But that was...was...a year ago?"

I nod. "Why do you think I couldn't wait to get inside your pants? Speaking of—" I reach forward and tug on the belt of her wraparound dress. It unravels—thank you God for fashion trends. The ends part to reveal the creamy skin of her breasts, the curve of her stomach, the sleek thighs and between them black panties that hint at the flesh within.

"Jesus," I growl, "you're too fucking beautiful."

She raises her hands to my shirt and I shake my head. "Hold them behind your back."

"What?"

"Do it," I snap.

She swallows, then complies. The movement makes her breasts thrust out further. I lower my head to kiss the top of one of her creamy mounds and she shivers. I curl a finger under the waistband of her panties and tug. The fabric snaps and she draws in a breath. I tear off the material, then pocket it, before reaching down to lower the zipper of my jeans.

She glances down, then swallows. "No briefs?"

"I came prepared."

"You mean you planned this when you brought me here—?" She squeaks, for I've hoisted her up so she has no choice but to wrap her legs around my waist. I walk forward until her back is flush with the wall.

Then, cupping her butt, I balance her, before reaching down to position my dick at her entrance.

She tips up her chin, her pupils dilated, her breath coming in short pants.

"Shit, this excites you, doesn't it? The thought of doing it in a place which is only semi-private, where it will be clear to anyone outside that we are here, fucking?"

"Of course, not." She huffs, but her chin trembles. She licks her lower lip and the blood engorges my shaft.

"I need to be inside you, Sparks," I growl. "Now."

She tilts her hips forward and the crown of my cock breaches her. So fucking soft, so hot. A groan tears out of me. Her chest rises and falls, her tits spilling out from her bra.

"Touch your breasts," I urge her.

One arm still about my shoulders, she reaches up with the other to cup her breast, then pinches her nipple. That's when I plunge inside her. She gasps, her hips flattening against the wall as I thrust into her again and again.

"Ari," she moans and my cock lengthens further.

Every time I pound her, her tits jiggle, and fuck me, if it isn't the most erotic sight I've seen.

"Pinch your other nipple," I command.

She obliges instantly. Perhaps because she's caught up in this combined lust that we share? The one time that we don't need to negotiate or jostle for power. When I can give her pleasure and she can take. When the only thing separating us is the skin between us. Nothing else.

She tweaks the other pebbled nub, and a groan tumbles from her lips.

"Harder," I snap. "Pretend it's my hands doing the job."

Her knuckles whiten and she increases the pressure on the hardened

nipple just as I tilt my hips and impale her. Her body bucks and she digs her heels into the curve of my butt. I squeeze the backs of her thighs, yank her forward as I tilt my hips and thrust into her again and again.

She shudders, color smears her cheeks, and a bead of sweat trickles down her throat. I lean down and lick it up. "Oh, Arpad," she moans. "Please... please..."

"What is it?" I raise my head, and peer into her eyes, "What do you want?"

"I want to—"

I plunge into her with enough force that the ridge of my pelvis grinds down on her clit.

"Oh..." she gasps, "oh, I'm going to—"

"Come with me," I hold her gaze, "only me."

I thrust into her as her back curves, her eyes roll back in her head and she opens her mouth to scream. I close my mouth over hers, absorb the sound as I come inside her.

I hold up her weight, thrust into her a few more times as aftershocks grip her.

Her body slumps and I widen my stance to support her. My shoulders burn and my thigh muscles tense under our combined weight. It reminds me of how I'd pulled her up from the ledge at the side of the hill. How I'd almost lost her. Never again. I bend down and press my lips to her forehead. "It's time to go, Sparks."

She mumbles under her breath, and I kiss her upturned nose. "Yeah, nothing I'd rather do than curl up with you in bed, but I'm afraid we've got to see this through."

I lower her legs to the ground, then pull out of her and step back. Our joined cum slides down her inner thigh. I glance around, then grab a scarf from a peg on the wall and press it to her pussy. I clean her up and she stirs. She looks down, then gasps, "That...that's a Hermes scarf."

"So?"

"It's expensive."

"I can afford it."

I drop the scarf on the ground then hold out my hand to her, "Come on, let's get you dressed."

34

Karina

I run my fingers down the soft fabric of my dress—my shoulder-to-toe, knit, wool dress, which he'd picked out for me. I'd refused; he'd insisted. I'd begun to protest and he'd asked me to try it on first. I had, and you know what? When I looked at myself in the mirror, I liked it. The long length highlights my figure, brings out the curve of my hips, and that, combined with the long sleeves and high neck, showcases my breasts in a way which is demure yet alluring.

I'd also managed to refresh my make up—making sure to cover all remaining evidence of the headwound—just as he'd appeared behind me in the mirror, a tumbler of whiskey in one hand. The other, he'd placed on my hip possessively.

"Well?" He'd smirked at my reflection in the mirror.

"It's not bad," I'd finally offered, and he'd laughed.

"You look magnificent, Sparks."

"And I'm covered from head to toe," I'd grumbled.

"Good," he'd met my gaze in the mirror, "your body is only for my delectation."

A thrill of lust had swept down my spine, and something else... A sensation of warmth had suffused me.

It feels good to be the object of his possessiveness, this single-minded focus of his, a tractor beam that bathes me in its spotlight and highlights me to myself in a way nothing ever has before. How strange. Did I actually need

to be measured by someone else's gaze? Isn't my opinion of myself enough anymore? That I'd once dressed to feel good, had groomed for my comfort, and carved a path through the world for my self-confidence... Why does all of that seem unimportant compared to being at the cynosure of his attention?

I'd pulled away, then brushed past him and headed for the door. "We're getting late." I'd pointed out, and he hadn't protested.

I'd pulled out my wallet and handed over my credit card, but the sales woman had simply said that it had all been taken care of.

Of course, it had.

I'd snorted and his grin had widened as the sales woman had walked away. "You didn't think I was going to let you pay for it, did you?"

"I can afford it," I'd huffed.

"So can I, and I much prefer if I bought it for you."

"Why, so you can make me a kept woman?"

"Can't I buy you something because I want to?"

"A generous thought from you?" I widen my gaze. "Why don't I believe it?"

"Better believe it, babe. Where you're concerned, my thoughts run the entire spectrum from lust to anticipation to dominance to—" he'd leaned in close enough for our eyelashes to touch, "your submission."

"Which you'll never have. That, I promise."

"We'll see." He'd straightened, taken my arm, and I'd allowed him to lead me out and into the waiting car—a Porsche, which he'd had waiting for him at the marina... Apparently, he'd called ahead and had it readied for him.

Oh, and did I mention that he'd bought out half the shop? Or so it seems, given the number of bags they'd loaded into the back of the car. I had protested, but he'd simply countered that since I'm playing the role of his wife, I need the clothes to look the part. I have no argument for that.

Also, yeah, I have a weakness for designer wear. Although I do prefer to buy them for myself... Besides, this is an entire freakin' wardrobe. WTF? The mind boggles. So, this is what unlimited money can get you? Not that I am lacking for anything; but in comparison to Mr. A'hole here, I may as well as be as poor as...a crow; and I am not talking about the yoga pose by the same name, either.

I shoot him a sideways glance, take in that stern profile, the hooked nose, that square jaw that should have warned me of his imperious nature. "Were you always like this?"

"Like what?"

"Always confident that you'd get your own way.

His lips kick up. "Especially when I'm with you, Sparks."

"No, seriously," I huff, "have you always commanded people, confident that they'd do your bidding?"

"After the incident," he stares through the windshield, "the Seven of us fought a lot. Damian and me, in particular. We'd been locked up together by our captors, who liked to pit us against each other. We had to fight until one or both of us lost consciousness. It became a game for the two of us, how to keep hitting each other, without hurting the other too much, but making it believable enough for our kidnappers to buy it. When they caught on, Damian took the blame for it, only they didn't spare me."

My heart begins to race. Finally, finally he's beginning to share more about what happened to him.

"What did they do to you?"

"They whipped me."

I draw in a breath.

"Wh...whipped you?"

"They took turns, went at it day and night. They tied me up, strung me up from the ceiling, and whipped me until I'd lose consciousness. Then, when I had recovered, another man would start the process all over again."

"H...how long did that go on for?"

"Days..." he swallows, "weeks maybe... Or so I thought. I found out later it had been closer to ten days."

"Ten days?" I burst out. "Oh my god, Arpad."

He stares straight ahead, "My injuries were only physical, compared to what was done to some of the others."

"What...did they do?"

"That's for them to share."

"Of course," I swallow, "from where I am, though, I wouldn't say that you got off lightly."

He glares at me, "I don't want your pity."

"Oh, I am not pitying you." I swipe my hair over my shoulder. "All I'm saying is that a physical beating like that when you are a child—"

"I was almost a teenager."

"A child," I say firmly. "Something like that scars you for life, and not just physically." I twist my fingers together. "No wonder you need to tie up a

woman to get off."

"See, that's where you are mistaken." He turns off the highway. "I was born this way, Sparks. This cruel streak is a part of me. It's what made me resilient enough to withstand what those bastards put me through."

"So, you're saying the very trait that makes you an asshole is the one that's helped you survive thus far?"

He tilts his head.

"So, you don't think your need to tie women up before you fuck them is...unusual?"

"Oh, it's different, all right. And it doesn't take a psychologist to tell me that, clearly, my losing control because of being tied up, is the reason I like to tie up my partners."

"It helps you feel in control?"

"It's the only way I can let go." He slows down at a crossing, then turns right. "I have no doubt that my experience drew me to Kinbaku. It's very tactile, very sensual, more so than other forms of foreplay."

"And here I thought you'd do anything to avoid intimacy." I mutter.

"Who said anything about intimacy?" He smirks, "It's how I prefer to experience pleasure." His eyelids grow hooded, "when I have a woman tied up and splayed open for my delectation, when I know that I am in charge and all it takes is a look," his lips part, "a flick of my fingers on her nipple," his lowers his gaze to my breasts, "the swipe of my tongue up her cunt, to have her writhing and groaning and falling apart under me and asking for more."

"Right." I squeeze my thighs together. Why am I wet again? Because he's revealed the rationale behind his choice of kink...because he's finally shared some of his secrets with me? Or is it because I want him to tie me up again? Heat suffuses my cheeks and I glance out of the window.

We turn into a driveway and I take in the well-maintained lawn, the profusion of flowers that line the flower-beds. My heart begins to thud again. I wipe my damp palms on my thighs. I can do this. I don't need to be nervous. It's only fulfilling my part of the bargain, meeting up with the family of my currently-fake-but-soon-to-be-real husband. I swallow as he eases the car to a stop.

My pulse rate ratchets up. I clutch at my handbag, then glance straight ahead through the windshield.

He reaches over and takes my left palm in between his large hands. "Hey, it's going to be okay."

"You're so clueless, you know that?" I snarl under my breath. "Of course, it will be okay. After I've been given the third degree, no doubt."

"It's not going to be that bad."

"Right," I draw in a breath, "speaking of, what story are we going to give them about us?"

"How about the truth?" He quirks an eyebrow.

"You're joking, right?"

"Why not?" He raises his shoulders, "We met a year ago, in LA, before you came to London and we reconnected. Why would that not be okay?"

I frown, "You know that's not what I am referring to."

"If it's our agreement you're worried about, then relax, we don't have to bring it up at all."

"Fine, easy for you to say." I mutter, "It's not your in-laws that you are going to visit."

He rubs his thumb across my wrist and goosebumps pop on my skin. "I'm sure you'll do great."

I swallow; my throat dries. *Christ, pull it together. You are about to meet his family.* It won't do to entertain carnal thoughts about the man while you do so, right?

He peers into my face, "I promise, it will be fine."

"Fine." I blink at him.

"Fine?" He tilts his head.

"Fine." I nod.

He pulls back his hand and I reach over to open the door. That's when I notice the band on my ring finger.

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Arpad

Her gaze widens, "Wh...what's this?"

"What does it look like?"

"A ring?" She holds up her fingers. "You placed a ring on my finger?"

"It's been known to happen."

"But why?" She frowns at me. "Not everyone who's married wears a ring."

"It's more convincing this way."

She glances at my hand, "And what about your ring?"

"I don't need one."

She firms her lips. "So as your wife, I am supposed to wear a ring, but as my husband, you don't need to wear one?"

I scratch my jaw and pretend to think, "Sounds about right."

She stares at me. "Only you could take a gesture that could have meant so much, and turn it into something so...so..."

"Real?"

"So dominating," she snaps.

"That's me, babe, and don't forget it."

"Stop it," she snarls. "Why do you insist on being so offensive?"

I tilt my head. "This is me, being myself."

"You don't say." She fingers the ring on her finger, "Don't you think you're taking this charade too far?"

"Not far enough." I get out of the car, walk around to open her door, but

she's already out and standing.

I hold out my hand, "Shall we?"

She brushes past me and I let her lead the way... This once. We head for the door as it swings open.

"Arpad." My father stands in the doorway. His full head of hair, is more flecked with grey than when I last saw it. His frame seems to be leaner than before, like he's lost weight, or is that my imagination? He glances from me to Karina and his forehead furrows. "And you are...?"

"I am his..." she hesitates.

"This is Karina, my wife." I pull abreast with her, and wrap my arm around her shoulders.

"Ah." His gaze widens. "Wife?" He glances to me. "A little bit of advance notice would have been welcome."

I tilt my head.

He nods toward Karina, "I'm Philippe, Arpad's father. I'm happy to welcome you into my family." He turns to me, "And you? Why are you here?"

"It's nice to see you," I snap.

Karina draws in a sharp breath. I ignore her. So perhaps I should have warned her a little about our family dynamics, but if I had, she'd have never agreed to this arrangement. Besides, nothing like full immersion, all at once, right? Get thrown off the deep end and you have no choice but to swim.

Footsteps approach, then my younger brother appears at my father's shoulder, "You made it," he drawls, then he glances at Karina, "and this is..."

"Karina," my father replies, "his wife."

"Wife?" He blinks, then turns to her. "You actually agreed to marry him?" His lips curl. "Will wonders never cease? My brother, the asshole, confirmed bachelor, finally meets his match, then?"

"The obnoxiousness is a family trait, then?" Karina scowls at him.

My brother seems surprised, then he chuckles. His features split into a grin.

"You're Declan Beauchamp, the film actor," she states.

He tilts his head, "Guilty as charged."

He holds out his hand and Karina takes it. He turns her palm over then presses his lips to her knuckles, "Welcome to our dysfunctional family. I promise you'll never find things boring here."

I stiffen at that little gesture, then place my arm around Karina. Declan

straightens. He stares between us and his grin grows wider. I glare down at where he still holds Karina's hand in his, then at his face. He laughs, but releases her hand.

"I assume you just got married?" He straightens. "Shouldn't you be on your honeymoon, or," he turns to me, "did you decide it was best to get the family drama out of the way upfront before you head off?"

"Family drama?" She squints at him.

My father shoots him a sideways glance. "That's enough, Declan." He steps aside. "I suppose you had better come in."

I purse my lips. "Never let it be said that you were lacking in manners, Father."

Karina hesitates, and I guide her forward with a hand on the small of the back. She glances over her shoulder, "The luggage—"

"The staff will get it," I reply.

She nods, follows my brother as he leads the way into the spacious living room. The sliding doors at the far end open onto the garden. In front of it, in an armchair, is the woman who's the primary reason for this charade.

Karina's steps slow, and I walk past her to reach the other woman. I sink down to my knee in front of her, take her slim hand in mine, "Grandmama," I say, "how are you?"

Her face splits in a huge smile. "Arpad, my boy." She frames my face with her palms, then leans forward and kisses my forehead. "It's wonderful to see you." She leans back and peers into my features, "You look good." Her forehead wrinkles. "Something's different about you."

"It is?"

She nods, "I can't put my finger on it, but you seem... Happier? More content?"

"Maybe it's because he's gotten married since we last saw him?" Declan's voice sounds from behind me.

"Married?" Grandmama gasps at the same time that I shoot him a dirty look over my shoulder.

"Thanks for nothing," I growl.

Declan chuckles, "I aim to please, bro."

Karina walks up to stand next to me. "I'm Karina," she says, "I'm his—"

"Wife." Grandmama holds out her hand and Karina takes it. "Help me up," Grandmama commands.

I straighten to help her and she waves me away. "Karina will help me,"

she declares.

Right.

I step back and Karina helps Grandmama to her feet. The older woman hooks her arm in the nook of Karina's. "Come, my girl, walk with me to the dining room."

The two women move forward.

Karina shoots me a sideways glance and I nod at her.

"I won't bite," Grandmama chuckles, "and your husband will be right behind us."

"Not my—"

I stiffen, and Karina flinches. "I mean, of course, I would only be too happy to accompany you."

Grandmama's forehead furrows and she glances between us. "Not used to calling him your husband yet?" She laughs lightly. "It took me a little while after I married Francis to get used to my new status, too." She pats Karina's hand, "Come dear, why don't you tell me about yourself?"

The women walk ahead and I blow out a breath. I am sure Karina can handle herself. She is smart and can think on her feet, one of the qualities that had attracted me to her right away. So why am I so concerned about her right now? I take a step forward and Declan snickers, "Can't let the woman out of your sight, eh?"

"Nothing of the sort," I mutter.

"You could have fooled me." He chuckles. "When did you get married anyway?"

"None of your business."

"Didn't realize you were serious about anyone," he persists.

"Lots of things you don't know about me," I snap back.

"Likewise, bro, likewise." He brushes past me and follows in the wake of the women.

I take a step forward when. "Arpad?" My father calls.

Oh, fuck. I know that tone of his voice. It normally means I am in trouble, only this time, he doesn't know just how deep I am.

I slow my steps and he catches up with me. "Hold on a second, my boy, what's the rush?"

I glance in the direction the women have gone.

"Can't stay away from the wife, huh?"

"Something like that," I mutter.

"I don't recall you being involved with anyone."

"It was sudden."

"Like all of your decisions in life, huh?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" I turn to him. "If you want to tell me something, why don't you come out and say it?"

He stares up at me, and his gaze intensifies. He draws in a breath then grips my shoulder, "All I'm saying, is that some advance notice, a phone call that you'd decided to get married, would not have been amiss."

"I'm here now, aren't I?" I declare, my tone belligerent. Jesus, a few seconds back under the roof of my family; and I am already relapsing to my younger self. "Look," I drag my fingers through my hair, "everything happened quickly. It was one of those things where my instinct seemed to get away from me, and I followed. But I came as soon as I could."

"And I'm glad you did." He grips my shoulder. "I'm glad you've finally decided to settle down. If your mother were here... She'd have been thrilled to welcome your bride." He steps back, slides his hand into his pocket. "Not a day goes by when I don't miss her." He glances somewhere beyond my shoulder. "Every day, I regret the opportunities I lost to tell her that I loved her. If I could only turn back the clock, I'd have never spent the time away from her that I did to grow my business."

I hunch my shoulders. It's another reason I'll never forgive those behind the incident. The shock of those few days when I'd been kidnapped and she'd feared I was dead, had brought on a heart attack. By the time I'd been rescued and returned home, it had been too late. I never got to see my mother again. The fucking bastards who were behind my kidnapping also took her from me. When I finally track them down, I am going to make sure they pay.

"You were a good husband," I mutter. "You have your faults, and while I wouldn't say you were the best father, when it came to her, you did your best by her."

My father winces. "Thanks for the backhanded compliment... I guess."

"You're welcome." I raise my shoulders. "Why are you telling me all this now?"

"Because," he widens his stance, "I don't want you to make the same mistakes I did. I want you to understand what's most important in life and when you find out, I want you to hold onto it. I want to make sure you use every moment you have to its utmost."

"You mean her?" I jerk my head in the direction of the dining room

"Your wife." He nods. "If you do love her, and I believe you do," he peers into my eyes, "then you'll try to make her happy the way I tried with your mother. It takes the love of a good woman to ground a man, and not everyone is lucky enough to have that."

I shuffle my feet. "Right."

"If you've found the love of your life, then I hope you'll grab this opportunity with both hands and not let go of it. It's your one chance to become a decent human being."

"You mean, it's a chance to undo all the years of harm your neglect caused us?"

He pales, then raises his hand. "You hate me. I understand where you are coming from."

"Do you?" I peer into his eyes. "Do you understand how it is for a boy of twelve to return from an ordeal that turned his life upside down, only to find that his mother is dead? Then, his father decides to withdraw from the world instead of trying to be there for his children?"

"I was there," he grinds out, "I provided for the both of you, ensured you had the best education, that you didn't want for anything."

"A-n-d that's the problem. You assumed money would compensate for the lack of family."

"Is that what you're doing now? Using your money to buy yourself the family you never had."

Anger pumps through my veins. I raise my hand, take a step forward, when, "Arpad," my brother's voice calls out from the doorway, "Grandmama's asking for you."

Karina

Arpad walks in, his features stonier than usual. He takes the chair next to me. His father moves to the other side of the table and sits down in a chair the farthest from Arpad. Tension between the two of them stretches. The hair on the back of my neck prickles. I glance between them. What had they been talking about? Is this kind of fighting between the two of them normal? It certainly feels that way. Declan quirks an eyebrow at me from next to Philippe.

As security consultant to the Seven, I know about their families too. So, I'd been aware of Declan's status as the most promising upcoming star in the

world. Since his lead role in a series which had launched over Christmas, he is the epitome of many a girl's dream. The internet is abuzz with speculation about his next movie, his personal life, what he had for lunch, his workout routine, you name it. I'd known all this, yet not been prepared to meet him face to face. Guess fame can do that. It turns ordinary men into superstars, so when you meet them in real life, you're convinced there's something different about them.

I take a sideways glance at my not-yet-but-soon-to-be-husband... To be honest, there's no resemblance between Declan and Arpad. If anything, Arpad seems more handsome to me, with that brooding gaze, thick eyebrows, the pouty lips of his that I'd do anything to feel against mine. Arpad glances up, holds my gaze. I flush, look back to Declan.

"So how is it to be famous overnight?" I ask

Declan chokes on the water he'd been drinking. He swallows, "I am getting used to it. You know...struggling for ten years to be recognized, going to countless auditions, then boom..." He chuckles. "All of a sudden, one of your TV series is a hit, and suddenly everyone wants a slice of you."

"Isn't that good? I mean, isn't that what most actors want—fame?"

He grimaces. "It comes with the territory, but that's not why I got into acting."

"No, it was to get women throwing themselves at you, no doubt." Arpad snorts.

Declan grins. "You are just envious because I am better looking than you."

"And you're so full of shit." He glowers at his brother.

"Why don't we let Karina decide?"

"Me?" I pause, "Oh no, I am not being dragged into this."

"Come on," Declan prompts, "look at him." He jerks his chin at the alpha-hole. "Now me," he gestures to his face. "Who do you think is better looking, huh?"

I stare between them. "Hmm." I chew on my lower lip. "If I had to pick one person," I glance from Arpad's face to Declan's then back to Arpad's, "it would have to be—"

Arpad's face grows thunderous.

"I think," I bite down on the inside of my cheek, "I think you're better looking." I nod at Declan.

"Aha!" Declan crows.

Every muscle in Arpad's body stiffens. He glares down at me.

"But," I glance up at him and his gaze intensifies, "but my husband has more presence and more charisma. He'd beat you outright when it comes to personality and magnetism."

Arpad's eyes gleam. The skin around his eyes tightens, then he reaches up to touch my cheek. "Thank you," he whispers.

"You're welcome," I half smile back.

"Aww...come on, Karina," Declan protests, "that's not fair."

"Life's not fair." I turn to face him. "Not that you have anything to complain about, Mr. Flavor-of-the-month-hot-shot-film star."

"Flavor of the month?" He chokes. "You sure do know how to come to the point, don't you?"

"It's the trait I like most about her." Arpad wraps his arm about my chair and pulls me closer.

Heat flushes my cheeks. I stay frozen, trying not to lean back further. If I do, I am sure to brush against his arm, and that's only going to turn me on. Something I definitely don't want happening here in front of his family.

"Do you now?" Declan stares at Arpad. "It's certainly a change from your other girlfriends."

I gape. Did he actually say that?

Arpad's muscles tense and he leans forward in his seat. "That was unnecessary and disrespectful. Apologize to Karina," he growls.

"Declan Beauchamp," Grandmama snaps, "I raised you better than to insult a lady."

The brothers stare at each other, then Declan blows out a breath, "I'm sorry." He clears his throat and turns to me, "I didn't mean to come across as so rude." He drums his fingers on the table. "I am afraid your husband rubs me the wrong way."

Arpad scoffs, "At least, find a better excuse."

"Yeah, no." Declan chuckles. "You know we bring out the worst in each other, brother."

"And the best too," Grandmama interrupts from the head of the table. "When you are family, you are bound to fight and then have each other's backs when the going gets tough. Remember that, boys. When things get hairy, it's your family—made or blood—that will be there for you."

"Like the Seven?" I pipe up.

Grandmama's eyes gleam. "The Seven." She takes a sip of water "A

kinship that can only grow more solid with age." She turns to Arpad. "They'll also be there for you, when you most need them," she says. "Along with Declan, of course."

"Like I have a choice," Declan quips.

"You always have a choice," Grandmama raises a small bell next to her and rings it, "but your bark is worse than your bite." She turns to Arpad. "When you need him most, he'll be there to help. That's what family does."

The door to the dining room opens and two members of the staff walk in. They're dressed in uniform—of course they are, how had I forgotten just how rich Arpad's family is?—and place plates in front of Philippe and Grandmama. Once we are all served, I dip my spoon into the soup, a bacon and mint combination I've never had before. "This is delicious." I scoop up some more.

"You should tell our chef that; she'd be very happy. She's the one who taught Arpad to cook," Grandmama replies.

I shoot a sideways glance at Arpad, trying to imagine him learning anything from anyone. I mean, of course, he'd gone to school and had teachers, but somehow, it's easier to think of him as having arrived fully formed and growling at everyone he sets eyes on. I snicker to myself, then turn it into a cough.

Arpad meets my gaze, and frowns. He pours a small amount of wine into a glass for me, then fills his own.

Grandmama raises her glass, "To Arpad and Karina."

Philippe raises his without comment.

"To the woman who turned my brother into an adoring lovesick Romeo," Declan jokes.

Arpad makes a snarling sound low in his throat. I touch his arm, "He's only trying to wind you up."

Arpad turns to me, "You sounded so British when you said that." He smirks.

"Maybe your influence is rubbing off on me."

"Is it?" He holds my gaze and the air between us thickens. My core clenches. I shift about in the seat to make myself more comfortable.

"So, Karina," Grandmama asks, "your name... Is it... Slavic, in origin?"

"Russian." I turn back to my soup. "Both sets of my grandparents immigrated to the US. My parents were born in the US, so I am American." I raise a shoulder.

"But you're in touch with your roots?"

She raises her soup spoon and drinks from it.

"I guess." I stare down into the depths of the liquid in my bowl. "My father holds onto his culture. He instilled a...respect for his homeland in us."

"Sounds like he was a good father."

"The best." I reach for my wine glass. "He was strict, but a fair parent." I glance sideways in time to see Arpad scowl. What's his problem? He seems like he wants to say something, then changes his mind and goes back to eating.

I bring the wine glass to my nose and sniff it—I'm still not drinking, but I don't want to turn down the wine and raise his family's suspicions that I may be pregnant or trying to get pregnant. I'd even taken a sip when Grandmama had made the toast. Now I indulge in another cautious sip.

The rich flavor coats my tongue. "This is excellent." I stare at the glass, then at the bottle. "Where is it from?"

"My vineyard," Arpad replies.

"You own a vineyard?" I stare at Arpad.

"A few," his lips kick up, "in Napa, in the UK, in Australia, in Argentina —"

"Stop," I frown down at the wine, "I could have sworn this tasted French."

"It is; it's from Burgundy."

"Of course, it is." I set down my glass. "So, do you all meet often for a family lunch?"

Philippe and Arpad stiffen. Declan chuckles. Only Grandmama's features don't change expression. She rings the bell again, then turns to me. "We don't get to dine as a family as often as I would like." She glances around the place, "Hopefully, in the time I have left to live, we'll have a few more such occasions."

"Now, Grandmama," Arpad admonishes, "you're not going anywhere soon."

"You'll outlive all of us," Philippe declares.

"You're healthier than most people in their twenties," Declan bumps his fist into his chest, "me included."

She stares around the table. "You know, my doctor doesn't agree with that prognosis."

There's silence for a beat, then another.

"Now, come on boys, I am not dying that soon either." She chuckles. "Not before I've seen my grandchild." She looks at me.

I swallow. "Right. Of course." I stare down at my plate of food. Is this why he'd agreed to my proposal of his impregnating me so quickly? Had he wanted to use this entire set-up to his own benefit? Of course, he had, and who am I to blame him, when I had done the same? Only, he could have told me up front that there is a bigger reason for his ready acquiescence. After all, if he is doing so because he wants his grandmother to be happy... Well, I could hardly fault him for that, right? But, typical Arpad, he couldn't come out and tell me his motives clearly. Or he'd simply assumed that it didn't matter if I knew or not. Likely, that was the reason.

The door to the dining room opens again. The same staff comes in, remove our soup bowls, then bring in plates of food covered with stainless steel domes, the kind I've only ever seen in fancy restaurants. Not that this is any less. The food here is better than at many of the Michelin-starred restaurants where I've dined.

They remove the covers with a flourish.

"Roasted Cod in a cream sauce with parsnip puree, shrimp, brown butter, and capers," one of the servers declares.

"Thank you, Hugo." Grandmama beams at him.

"My pleasure." Hugo half bows and departs.

I tuck into my food with gusto, not stopping until my plate is empty. I glance up to find the rest looking at me. "What?"

Arpad grins, glances down at his own plate, which is still almost full.

"Guess I was hungry... And the food is incredible," I say sincerely. "Besides, it's nice to be eating with family, isn't it?"

"It is," Grandmama nods, "and it's refreshing to see a woman eat well."

I laugh. "My father would never let me leave anything on my plate. His military training wouldn't allow him, and besides, he was very careful of any waste."

"And your mother?" Philippe asks.

"She died when I was eighteen." I fold my arms in my lap.

"I am so sorry for your loss, my dear." Grandmama places her fork on her plate.

"Thank you." I murmur.

"Let's have dessert." Grandmama leans toward me, "Then, why don't you and I take a short walk?"

Ten minutes later, I trail behind the older woman as we walk through the fading sunshine. She waits for me to catch up, then hooks her arm through mine. We proceed in silence along the garden path. The grass is mowed while evergreen shrubs line either side of the path. We reach a circular conservatory; she pushes open the door and I step in after her. The heat instantly warms my ankles. I follow her until she reaches a wooden swing in the center. She sinks down, then pats the space next to her. I reach her, unbutton my coat, then sit down next to her. The swing moves back and forth as we push back with our legs.

"So, you and Arpad," she finally says, and I brace for the inevitable questioning. This is the lady of the house and someone who Arpad regards very highly. She is the matriarch of the family, and surely, she wants to protect her family.

She turns to me, fixes that blue-grey gaze, so like his—on me.

"How long has this charade been in progress?"

CHAPTER 36

Karina

"Excuse me?" I blink.

She tilts her head and stares down her patrician nose. "Arpad is smart and he thinks he can humor me. And bless him, his intentions are all in the right place, I am sure, but I am not that easy to fool."

I blink rapidly, not sure what to say.

"Not that the two of you are not in love—"

"We're—" I bite down on my lip. Shit, what's wrong with me? I am almost blowing our cover here. Why the hell can't I get my story right? It's Arpad, that asshole's, fault. We could have rehearsed before coming here. He could have apprised me about the situation, that his grandmother was unwell. A detail which hadn't come to light in all the information I'd had access to so far.

"You were saying?" Grandmama holds my gaze, and those blue-grey eyes of her seem to read all of my secrets.

I glance away, "N...nothing." I swallow. "You were talking about me and Arpad..." my voice trails off.

"And the elaborate front the two of you have constructed for me."

I bite the inside of my cheek. What the hell am I supposed to do? Why had we never discussed this possibility—that our story could have been found out? I glance about the space, taking in the foliage, the flowers—amaryllis, pansies, snapdragons... And orchids, so many orchids. I drag in the sweet scent of the flowers and it's as if I've been transported into an English garden

in the middle of summer.

"You're English?"

"British," she replies. "I married a French man, and brought up my children in this house. I've lived here since I got married fifty years ago.

Fifty years. Wow. I glance toward the house we'd just left, then back at her.

"I know what you're thinking." She curves her fingers around the thick rope that connects the swing to the ceiling. "It's such a long time, a lifetime of living, of memories, decades of the world changing and you changing with it, and yet, some things inside stay the same. All gone by in the blink of an eye, a snap of a finger, a flutter of butterflies' wings somewhere in the Amazon, and everything changes. You're no longer a bride of twenty, stepping across the threshold, but a woman at death's door."

"Grandmama—"

She raises her hand. "You don't need to coddle me like the men in there." She jerks her chin toward the house again. "They know the truth, but they avoid it, thinking if they don't acknowledge it, it ceases to be real. But you and I... We know better, don't we? We know that life is short, and we need to make the most of what we have right now in the moment." She peers into my features. "We do, right?"

I hold her gaze and my throat goes dry. This woman... She's way too sharp, more than anyone I've ever met. There's no pulling the wool over her eyes.

Damn Arpad, he should have known there was no way that we could fool her into buying our story. But of course, he wouldn't give anyone credit for being as smart as him. He'd seen an opportunity and taken it, and so had I. And here I am, faced with a dying woman whom I had deceived, straight to her face. Damn. I fill my lungs with the scent of the flowers, then turn to her. "You're right. Arpad and I... We...have ... This is an arrangement."

"What kind of an arrangement?"

A hot sensation stabs at my chest. Why the hell is it so difficult to tell her the truth? She's guessed most of it already, so why does it feel like I am, somehow, betraying her and Arpad and myself? Gah! I jump up to my feet and begin to pace. "We, uh, decided that I'd pose as his wife for thirty days, including the duration of this trip, after which, we are getting married for real."

"But you're not sure about it?"

I stare at her features. How did she guess? Am I that bad an actress or is she simply that perceptive?

I play with the ring on my finger. "We've gotten to know each other better over the last few days," I hesitate, "but—"

"You're still not sure about your feelings for him?"

"No...it's not that."

"So, you're not sure if he loves you?"

I open and shut my mouth. How do I explain? That he does feel something for me, somewhere deep down, under the alphahole exterior of his, but... That he's not going to say it.

"Or you know he does, but he hasn't told you so yet?"

I stare at her. Jesus, this woman is frightening. The way she reads my mind, it's as if she knows what I am thinking.

She kicks off again, the swing creaks on its hinges, and her silver hair flies back from her face. For a second, I can imagine her as a young woman, her eyes huge in her unlined face with, her dark hair falling in a cloud about her shoulders. I blink and the mirage disappears. She smiles at me. "I need to share a secret with you."

"You do?"

She nods. "Come," she pats the seat next to her, "sit down with me for a few more minutes."

I retrace my steps, sink down onto the swing.

"You see, men... They are simple creatures."

"They are?" I swallow.

She nods, "They like to eat, to get pissed, then indulge in pissing contests, and to fuck."

My jaw drops.

"What?" She chuckles. "I am old, so I can't use the F word, is that it?"

"No," I twist my fingers together, "of course, not."

"You have to lure them in, you know?"

"O-kay." Where the hell is she going with this?

"You have to show them what they are missing out on, appeal to the caveman in them. Know what I mean?"

I bite down on the inside of the cheek, "Is that what you did? With uh, Mr. Grandmama?"

She laughs. "Absolutely. Given a choice, my Francis would have happily continued his single existence without ever committing. It's just, I knew

better."

"You did?"

"Of course. It's why I left him."

Huh? "Then what happened?"

"He came after me, of course, wanted me back. I told him only if he committed to me.

"And he did?"

She swipes her hair over her shoulder. "We were married within the week."

"Wow."

She holds up the ring with the single diamond that graces her ring finger, "I've never taken this off, since that day."

I draw in a breath. "So, you're saying I need to, somehow, play hard to get, show him what he could be missing out on?"

"Now, now, don't go putting words in my mouth. You're a smart woman, aren't you? Surely, you'll figure something out?"

Arpad

I slide my razor down my cheek, then shake it off under the tap. It's an odd time to shave but my whiskers had begun to bother me, and I wanted to shave before we headed out again.

The bathroom door opens and she walks in. She meets my gaze in the mirror, then heads over to the commode at the far end. She pushes down her panties, perches on the ceramic bowl and her piss tinkles down the sides.

What the—? I blink. Did she just do that? The audacity of the woman... The complete comfort she has in her own skin, the way she tilts up her chin and watches me watch her as I stand there with the razor poised half-way to my face. Why the hell do I find this everyday act of hers so erotic... Not to mention, the domesticity of this scene... It's mind-blowing, and real, and so natural, so easy. Is this how it would be if I had her in my life always?

I watch as she tears off a piece of tissue paper, slides her hand under the skirt of her dress to wipe herself. Then rises to her feet, pulls up her panties and straightens her dress about her hips. She flushes, then heads to the sink and washes her hands, before drying them. She turns to leave and I call out, "Hold on."

She ignores me, and I scowl. As she brushes past me, I grab her arm and

stop her.

"What?" she snaps.

"Don't ignore me."

"And what if I do?"

"Try it and find out."

She peers into my face, then huffs, "Fine, I'm here, aren't I? What do you want from me?"

"What did you and Grandmama talk about?"

"Let go of my arm first."

"Tell me first."

"No."

"Yes."

"You're such a bully."

"And your husband, for as long as we are under this roof."

She throws up her free hand. "Why do you always have all the answers? It's so annoying."

"It is." I nod, "Being perfect can sometimes get to be too much for me as well."

She gapes, "Whoa, have you ever heard yourself?"

"All the time, babe." I place my razor on the counter, then turn and haul her to me. Her gaze widens, her breasts brush up against my chest, and color smears her cheeks. Good. I like her off balance, a little surprised, a little breathless. "Now, tell me what you two spoke about."

"It's a secret."

"A secret?"

She nods. "It's a woman thing, you know?"

"Is that right?" I scowl.

"Yep." Her eyes gleam, "Not something I can share with you."

I take in her flushed features, the satisfied look in her eyes, then release her. "Fine." I turn back, pick up my razor and begin to shave.

"Fine?" She blinks at me rapidly in the mirror. "What do you mean fine?"

"If she told you something in confidence, then I guess you'd better keep it that way, right?"

"So, you don't mind that your grandmother told me something that she may have not mentioned to you?"

Her tone is shocked. I set down my razor, then turn to her. "You're my wife."

"Fake wife."

"Wife," I insist, "for as long as we are under this roof, remember? And if my grandmother took to you so quickly—which I had no doubt she would—if she trusts you enough to share with you, then I am more than pleased about it."

"You...you are?" She frowns.

"Why wouldn't I be?" I cup her cheek. "It's the reason for this entire arrangement, after all. She wanted to see me married and settled, and now she knows I am."

"It's wrong," she says. "You shouldn't try to tell her an outright lie."

I grasp her left hand and hold it up, "It's not an outright lie. You wear my ring and we will be married at the end of the thirty-day period."

"Something I still don't understand." She bites down on her plump lower lip, and damn, if the blood doesn't rush to my cock instantly.

"What don't you understand?"

"Why do you still want to marry me?"

"Maybe you're growing on me... Maybe it's easier to pretend than to want the real thing... Maybe this is the real thing..."

"No, it's not." She tugs her hand and I release it. "This is one big ego trip for you; that's all it is."

"Is that what you think?"

"Isn't it?" She drags her fingers through her hair. "Honestly, right now, I don't know what to think."

I grab the towel and wipe my face, "Why don't you give me a minute to get dressed? I have something to show you."

Half an hour later, we are on the highway.

"Where are we going?"

I don't reply, stare ahead through the windshield.

"You can, at least, tell me," she complains. "Is this another surprise?"

"Something like that."

I hadn't wanted to do this. I'd wanted to make sure I spent the thirty days with her before arriving at a decision, but something about that scene earlier, the comfortable routine we had fallen into, had shaken me. If I stay on in this fake relationship... Well, it won't stay fake for much longer. I'd always wanted her body...but somewhere along the way, I had started hankering for more. A real relationship, a real wife... A real mother to my child. The child

she may already be carrying. Shit. I tighten my fingers on the steering wheel. I shouldn't have embarked on this relationship. I should have turned her down upfront. But I hadn't and now here I am.

We drive for another half an hour in silence. Then I turn off onto a sideroad. Another ten minutes, another turn off, this time onto a narrow unpaved road. Five minutes later, she gets restless. Ten minutes later, she's peering out through the window at the foliage that grows wilder, thicker. Another few minutes and she turns to me, "Do you know where you are headed?"

"Do you?" I ask her.

"Obviously, not," she snipes. She turns away from me to look out the window.

I guide the car to the very end of the road as it opens out onto a driveway. One overgrown with weeds and trees whose limbs reach out to each other to form a canopy overhead.

The sunlight seems to dim as I pull up next to a two-story bungalow.

I come to a stop in front of the steps that lead up to the house, then shut off the car engine.

Silence descends.

I push open the door, come around to find she's already stepped out. Good. No use delaying this further.

I begin to climb the steps, then turn to find she hasn't moved.

"Are you coming?"

"Are you going to tell me where we are headed?"

"You're about to find out."

"I don't like being surprised." She folds her arms around her waist.

"Too bad; you don't have a choice in this."

She stands there for a second, then pulls up to her full height. "Fine, have it your way."

You bet I will.

She walks up the steps, brushes past me and bangs on the door.

It swings open and a man's shoulders fill the doorway. He's dressed in a dark suit, dark hair cut close to this scalp. He jerks his chin at me, then his gaze lowers to the woman at my side.

Karina's muscles freeze.

"Victor?" She stutters, "Wh...what are you doing here?"

CHAPTER 37

Karina

"Kaykay," My middle brother addresses me by the name that only my siblings call me.

"Why are you here, V?" I frown.

He exchanges glances with Arpad, "You haven't told her yet?" Victor scowls.

"I didn't have time." Arpad grimaces.

"What is it?" I stare between them, "Tell me what?" I turn to Arpad. "What's happening here?"

"Why don't you go inside, and I'll explain?" Arpad tilts his head.

"I have a better idea," I snap. "Why don't I leave instead?"

I turn to go, but Arpad plants his body in my path. "Not so fast, Sparks. We have unfinished business."

No. I shake my head. I tip my head up to meet his gaze. His eyes narrow and there's a harsh set to his features. He glares at me and I swallow.

"Don't do this," I whisper.

"Too late." His emotionless expression seems carved in stone. "It's happening; you don't have a choice now but to comply."

"You'll regret this." I search his features, trying to catch a glimpse of the man who had kissed me, fucked me, who'd put his ring on my finger. I hold up my hand, turn it around so he can see the ring on my finger.

"I already am," he growls.

I swallow, then pull myself up to my full height.

I pivot and Victor steps aside. I walk into the house. The remnants of sunshine disappear and the cold instantly seems to wrap itself around me.

I shiver, hunch my shoulders, then warmth sears my back. It's Arpad, and for a second, I want to lean back, wallow in his comfort. Instead, I take a step forward.

I glance around.

Victor beckons me, "This way."

I follow, Arpad on my heels.

I cross the hallway, walk inside a room. There's a rectangular table in the center, chairs around it; on the wall behind is an insignia with which I am well familiar. A single white rose, with a drop of blood marring the perfection of its petals... Or adding to it, as I'd often thought.

I walk over to a chair in the middle of the table and drop into it. "Let's just get this over with."

Footsteps sound, then my chair is spun around with such force that a cry bursts out from me, "What the hell?"

"Shouldn't that be my dialogue, Sparks?" Arpad snaps.

"You're the one who brought me here. Why don't you tell me?"

"That's all you have to say for yourself?" He scowls.

"Hey," I protest, "you're the one who brought me here, and now for some reason you seem to be pissed with me? What's your bloody problem, Arpad?"

His scowl deepens. He seems on the verge of saying something, when a familiar voice rings out from behind me, "Karina."

I stiffen, then turn to face the new arrival. He's tall, broad-shouldered, dressed in a slate grey suit that I know costs more than the economy of a third-world country. Nothing but the best for Gregory Solonik, as befits his status as the head of the Bratva.

"Hello, Papa." I blow out a breath.

My father narrows his gaze on me, "I told you to keep out of trouble."

"And I told you I could manage on my own."

"This—" he jerks his chin toward the glowering Arpad, "this is what you mean by managing?"

"This..." I fold my arms about my waist, "this is not what it seems."

"Why don't we all sit down?" Victor glances between us.

Arpad's jaw tics. A nerve throbs at his temple. He releases me so suddenly that I crash back into the chair. He backs away, and instantly, the cold closes in on me. I turn my chair around just as my father walks over to

take his seat at the head of the table.

"So?" My father digs his elbows into the table, then places the tips of his fingers together. "You leave the country and sever all family relationships because you want to build your career on your own steam, then you turn up married? When were you going to tell your family about it?" He scowls at me and I shuffle my feet.

Shit, why does it feel like I am five again and sneaking off behind his back to do something I shouldn't?

"There's nothing to tell, because we are not married...yet."

"And the ring?" My father scowls at my hand, "What's that about?"

"That...uh..." I toy with the band but don't take it off, "that was for the benefit of Arpad's family. We were trying to convince his grandmother that we were married, because she's unwell and may not have much longer to live and—"

My father's gaze narrows. "So, you lied to her?"

I flush. "Uh, yeah, that was the general idea," I mumble.

"And the marriage? Whose idea was that?"

"It...uh, it was his idea."

I jerk my chin toward Arpad, at the same time that he says, "It was her idea."

My father glances between us.

"So, both of yours?"

"No," I say.

"Yes," Arpad snaps.

My father's gaze widens.

"So, did both of you come up with the idea?"

"He suggested a pretend marriage first," I nod toward Arpad. Not that I am going to tell my father why. If he finds out that I'd been trying to get pregnant through artificial insemination he'll have a cardiac, and I definitely don't want that to happen. "Then," I swallow, "I proposed to him."

My father turns to Arpad, "And you accepted."

"Yes." Arpad glowers at me.

"Hmm." My father scowls, "Unconventional." He rises to his feet, walks over to where Arpad stands over me. My dad looks him up and down. "So, you want to marry her?"

Arpad holds his gaze, "Yes, Sir."

"And you promise to take care of her, for the rest of her life?"

Arpad opens his mouth to reply and I throw up my hands.

"Hold on, him taking care of me? I can take care of myself."

"I'm not talking to you," my father informs me.

"But both of you are talking about me."

"Don't talk back to me," my father snaps, and I wince.

"Why is it that all of the men in my life think it's their right to tell me what to do?"

"Because I'm your father."

"And I'm your husband," Arpad growls.

I gape. What the hell? Now they are uniting against me? At least, on this issue. Speaking of, I scowl up at my father. "Why is it that you are not more upset about him marrying me?"

My father glances down at me, then back at Arpad. "Of course, I'm upset." He shuffles his feet. "But, you could do much worse than him..." He tugs on his shirt sleeve.

"Bullshit." I stare at him. "You used to lose your temper if I so much as mentioned dating a boy. You'd put them through the wringer with your questions. You'd show them your collection of guns to throw a fright into them. You made sure you scared away any boy who dared look at me, something you didn't stop doing even after I grew older and began dating men. No one was good for me and now... You...you...just accept this guy... This complete stranger... As my possible future husband. You..."

I blink, glance between them again.

Arpad's staring at my father, who's looking back at him. Something passes between them.

"Oh." I gulp. "Oh." I grip the arms of my chair. "Unless," I blink rapidly. "unless you are not strangers?"

Neither of them replies.

"I mean, Arpad interrupts his trip to visit his family... To bring me here and meet mine. The family I've tried to keep my distance from..."

My voice trails off. I swallow. My heart begins to beat faster. "No." I turn to Arpad. "It can't be."

"Stop." Arpad frowns. "Don't let your imagination run away with you."

"Oh, you have no idea what I'm thinking right now." I try to rise to my feet and Arpad presses down on my shoulder.

"Sparks, stay for a while longer."

"Are you threatening me now?" I scowl at him, then turn to my father,

"And you... Why aren't you telling him off for manhandling me?"

My father's jaw hardens, he opens his mouth, then closes it again. What the hell? Since when has my father stayed quiet before anyone? I glance between them, then shake my head again. *Shit, shit, shit. This can't be happening.* Whatever I'm thinking, it can't be true, can it?

"Sparks," Arpad's voice grows urgent, "don't work yourself into a panic. I'll explain everything, in just a few more minutes."

"Why?" I glower at him, "What are we waiting for?"

That's when the door opens and two guys stride in—tall, broad-shouldered, wearing suits in a different shade of, you guessed it—black. Of course, it had to be them. Somebody really needs to tell my family to tone down this entire over-the-top villain-in-a-Bond-flick thing they have going.

The slimmer of them, my second brother Roman, pulls up a chair at the far end.

My oldest brother, Nikolai, prowls over to Arpad. The two men size each other up. Arpad's shoulders seem to bulge and grow bigger, his entire demeanor taking on that of a man who's had his favorite plaything threatened. Or rather, a dog who's about to have his bone snatched from between his jaws.

Soon, they'll indulge in a pissing contest, which is par for the course amongst my family and others with whom my brothers associate. But Arpad? He's a billionaire investor, for hells' sake. Sure, he's alpha, but he hasn't seen the kind of violence these guys have... Or the bloodshed. Arpad widens his stance. "You have something to say to me?" he growls.

Niko cracks his knuckles and Arpad laughs. Outright. In his face. I wince. *Shit, that was a bad move.*

Arpad raises his fist, draws it back. So does Niko. I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting... Waiting...for the inevitable clash between them.

"Niko fucking Solonik."

"Arpad motherfucking Beauchamp."

What the—? I snap open my eyes to find my brother and my husband bumping their fists, then doing that half-hug thing that men do, when they like each other, but don't really want to show how much, but still want to acknowledge the bond between them.

I blink, once, twice. My pulse rate ratchets up. Sweat beads my palms. "What the hell is happening here?"

CHAPTER 38

Karina

"Seems you're not the only one with secrets, my darling *wife*." Arpad releases my brother and turns to me. His features wear that smirk that is hot and sexy and so bloody annoying.

I grip the edge of the table and lean forward. "How do you two know each other?" I snap.

"We went to school together," Niko replies.

"No. You didn't."

Arpad's grin widens, "Oh, it's not the kind of school that you're thinking."

"Oh, yeah?" I firm my lips. What the hell is this man up to now? Just when I think I have things under control, he pulls the rug out from under my feet.

Niko nods. "We met, shall we say, in the kind of academy to which only a certain few have access."

"The Seven included," Arpad drawls.

"And what kinds of things were you taught there?"

"Do you want to know?" Arpad's eyes gleam. He leans forward on the balls of his feet, and his gaze bores into mine. Damn him, he knows how curious I am, that I'll do anything to find out how he knows my family.

"No," I snap my lips closed.

"No?" He blinks.

"What do I care?" I lean back in my chair and pretend to yawn. "Clearly,

you're in cahoots with them. Perhaps you've been planning this all along. If you think you've surprised me, forget it, buster. I've known worse."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," I draw in a breath, then turn toward my father, "I am not sure what game is being played here, but you know how I feel about my involvement in matters of the Bratva. Suffice to say, I want no part of it." I rise to my feet.

My father's gaze grows stormy. The tips of his ears grow red. Shit, never a good sign. Now you know where I get my temper. My stomach twists. I think I am going to throw up now. That's all I need to embarrass myself. I swallow down the bile that rises to my throat.

"You okay, Sparks?" Arpad asks.

"Water," I croak.

He reaches over, grabs a bottle of water from the table, twists off the cap, and offers it to me.

I snatch it from him, tilt it to my lips and chug down a few mouthfuls. My stomach seems to settle. Thank god. I place the bottle down on the table, sit back in my seat.

"I'm sorry I surprised you like this." He squats down, takes my hand in his. His palms, wide and warm, make me aware of just how cold and clammy I've gone. Shit, it's okay. No big deal. Just my family pulling a fast one on me... As they've been prone to do in the past. Which is why I'd decided to go my own way. Then, of course, I had to meet Arpad and fall for him and screw it all up. I yank my fingers from him.

"I'm not sorry for anything," I snap.

His jaw tightens. He rises to his feet, then turns to my father, "Gregory, let's get to the business at hand, shall we?"

My father glances between us, then nods. "Why don't you sit down?" he asks Arpad, who slips into the chair next to me. The warmth of his body calls to me, and damn it, but I want to lean toward him. I grip the side of my chair, and turn toward my father.

"I have nothing to do with what's happening in this room."

"On the contrary, Karishcka, you are at the center of the discussion that's about to take place."

"I am?" The blood drains from my face. I lean back in my chair, twist my fingers together. "Don't tell me. Let me guess," my voice breaks and I clear my throat, "you're going to tell me that I need to marry this man for real

because it's the only way for you to get power on this side of the pond, something you've been wanting for a long time."

My father gazes at me steadily, "You always were a clever girl. If only you had agreed to join us."

"And you know my answer to that. I don't want anything to do with the family business."

"And yet, you had no qualms taking on the security agency and growing it." Nikolai leans forward in his seat.

"That was...legal."

"That was..." Niko puts his fingertips together, "naïve of you."

"Naïve?" I snap, "I was naïve?"

He regards me with a steady gaze. "If you thought you could just run part of the family business and not be involved..." He raises his shoulders.

"What do you mean?" I scowl. "I made sure to keep my distance from any of your illegal activities. Besides the security agency had always been run independent of the other companies."

"On the contrary, it was the best cover you could provide for our activities," Niko replies.

"What?" I stare. "How is that possible?"

"Technology, and the best hackers money can buy." He tilts his head, "It's amazing how it helps get through the most secure of firewalls."

I pale, "Do you...do you mean to say you have been using my company as a front all along for whatever activities it is you guys get up to?"

He flattens his lips and that's reply enough. Anger thrums at my nerve endings. "So all this time, I thought I was building my career and my company in as honest a way as possible and you were using it as a front? Do you even realize what a breach of confidence that is to my clients?"

"We made sure never to compromise them in any way." Niko raises his hands. "We simply used the information you turned up, on a strictly need-to basis."

"Need-to basis?" I curl my fingers into fists.

"We made sure we didn't undermine your company in any form," Niko adds.

"Is that what you think?" I swallow. Everything I'd built thus far was a lie. Anger thuds at my temples. My fingers tremble and I press them together to stop myself from doing something I'll regret later.

"Besides, Karina," Roman, who's been silent so far, speaks up, "you

know the work we do benefits the thousands we employ around the world."

"And they have no idea of the kind of people they are working for. Sure, it's one big deception, but hey, if you don't want to see the truth, what can I do about it?"

"I had no idea you were so against us." Niko frowns. "I knew you didn't particularly care for what we did, but you never told us how much you were vehemently against our family business."

"That's the problem." I square my shoulders. "None of you ever bothered to listen to what I was trying to say."

Silence, then I glance around the table, "I demand that you stop using my business for your interests unless you want me to quit."

The silence stretches, then Nikolai finally replies, "I'm afraid that won't be possible."

"Of course not. Why does it matter that it's my business? One I've poured my life into. One I've nurtured and built up from the ground up." I stare at Niko, then turn to my father, "If mama was alive, she'd understand. She's the only one who was ever there for me." Tears trickle from my eyes and I swipe them away from my cheeks. "And she'd still be if it weren't for the 'family business.'" I make air-quotes with my fingers. "It's the reason she was killed, and yet, all of you refused to walk away." My chest hurts and my head begins to pound. "It's your fault she's not here with us. You are responsible for her death. You murdered her."

"Enough." My father's palm strikes the table again and I flinch. Jesus, why the hell can't I shut my mouth? What's wrong with me?

I clearly have a death wish. Nothing else can explain why I've decided to dump all the dirty family laundry on the table, and in front of the man who... is likely the one person who can actually understand what I am going through now. Shit, why do I have to think that? Because it's true. Because he'd get why I hate this entire business so much. After all, he too, had been a victim of the Mafia. And sure, his methods of hunting them aren't all that orthodox, but he hates the organized crime syndicates with almost as much of a passion as I do.

"Is that what you believe?" my father asks. "All these years, is that what you thought of me?"

I draw in a breath, then shake my head. "I'm sorry," I mumble. "That was uncalled for."

"But you hold me responsible for her death?"

I wring my hands together. "No," I bite the inside of my cheek, "Yes. I don't know." I hunch my shoulders. "Nothing changes the fact that she was shot because of the enemies you made, and yet, you refused to leave this life."

"Because... I can't," my father thunders. "You can't leave the Bratva once you're in. And your brothers... They made their choices when they came of age."

"And I made mine." I set my jaw.

"And I don't want what happened to her to happen to you."

My father glares at me with the kind of look that has quelled many in his organization. The kind he's only used a few times with me—notably, when I had broken into his study and stolen his cigars and his favorite whiskey and managed to get really drunk and sick. My stomach churns again. I grab the bottle of water and swig some more of it.

"I know how much you miss her." My father's voice lowers, "We all do."

"I know." I hang my head. I had lost a mother, but he had lost his wife, his other half. He'd sworn he'd never marry again. He'd devoted his life to being a good father to all of us. He'd tried his best... In the only way he knew how, and here I am, throwing it back in his face.

"I am sorry, Papa." I hang my head. "I shouldn't have said that. I am really upset that, despite trying to leave my past behind, here I am, slap bang in the middle of it again."

"The more you try to run, the more your issues are going to follow you. The only way out is to turn around and face them."

"And here I am." I blow out a breath, "So, are you going to finally tell me what this is all about?"

"May I?" Arpad asks from next to me.

My father frowns at him. The two lock gazes, something passes between them, then my father leans back. Huh? The *Pakhan* of the Bratva never allows anyone else to take over his meeting. Certainly, not an outsider.

But then, Arpad is no longer an outsider, is he? How long has he been in touch with my family?

Arpad leans forward. "Karina, there's something you should know."

Now what? My heart begins to thud, my throat closes, sweat beads my palms and I squeeze them together. I sit upright, tilt my head in his direction. "What is it?" I ask.

"You see, this is not the first time I've been in touch with your family."

"No shit," I snort.

"No," he shakes his head, "you don't understand."

"You're the hotshot financial wiz, so why don't you explain it to me?"

"That's the thing." He reaches for my hand and I pull it away.

"Say it." I scowl. "Just do it already."

He draws in a breath, glances up at my father, then back at me. "I am not who you think I am."

"I could have told you that for free." I chuckle, then wriggle around in my seat. "Well, go on then, what is it?"

He reaches down, and closes his hand around mine. I try to pull away and his grasp tightens.

"I am one of you."

"What?"

"I am one of the Bratva."

CHAPTER 39

Karina

I throw back my head and peals of laughter spill from my lips. If I sound hysterical, it's because that's not far from the truth.

"Sparks, you okay?" Arpad scowls.

I wipe the tears from my cheeks, then sit back in my chair. "Why shouldn't I be? I mean, just because you can say any damn thing that comes into your mind, doesn't mean I am going to believe it, right?"

Arpad glances between my father and brothers, then turns to me. "Sparks, I—"

I hold up my hand, "You...you can't be part of the Bratva. You don't have the tattoos—"

"If I may?" Niko asks Arpad, who nods.

Niko taps his fingers on the table, "If you'd bothered to keep in touch with us, you'd have known that, along with the times, we too, have changed. From a business standpoint, we understand how important it is for the brotherhood to blend in with the mainstream. So, the tattoos are not compulsory anymore."

I frown.

"Besides, tattoos don't buy loyalty," he adds. "It's actions that do."

"And clearly his actions," I nod toward Arpad, "have confirmed his loyalty to you?"

Niko tilts his head.

"Even if I buy that, which somehow, I am finding it difficult to believe," I

turn to Arpad. "I am a security consultant, remember? I checked out all seven of you before I took you on as clients."

"You looked into our background?" He draws himself up to his full height. "You had us investigated?"

"Of course, I did. I wouldn't have accepted the lot of you as clients without doing it."

His jaw tics; a nerve throbs at his temple. Then, he nods. "Smart." He rubs his jaw. "I'm glad you did."

"I am not looking for your approval." I grimace. "All I'm trying to do is make a point that what you told me can't be possibly true."

He firms his lips. "I'm afraid it is."

"So, your job... All the investments in startups that you make—"

"I have staff to oversee them." Arpad scowls.

"And your past... You lived in LA. You used to be a full-time angel investor, you were known for finding and launching new ventures."

Niko turns to me, "You need to get over the outdated concept you have of the Bratva. Someone like Arpad is part of the new generation of the Brotherhood. We look, sound, walk like anyone else in the real world. But when tested, our loyalties and interests lie with 'the family.' It doesn't mean he's out killing—"

I wince.

"—or committing illegal acts. His financial and tech expertise are what makes him an invaluable asset to us," Niko adds.

"So, financial and cyber frauds?" I venture. "That's what you are talking about?"

Niko's features stay impassive. I know that look. It means he won't say anything more. He won't confirm or deny the statement, which means it's more true than not. Normally. Which doesn't mean it is fact. It's what I am used to from my family. As the youngest and the only girl, they'd done their best to protect me from the details of what the Bratva were associated with. And then, they wonder why I am so against the family business.

I turn to Arpad, "Tell me it's not true," I plead. "Tell me you are saying all this just to get a rise out of me."

"Sparks," he squats down so he's eyelevel with me, "all I can say is that I am not involved in anything illegal."

"How can you say that?" I laugh. "You are part of the Bratva."

"Haven't you listened to anything I have been saying?" Niko explodes.

Arpad holds up a hand. "Let me handle this from here," he snaps at Niko, whose face grows thunderous. But he tightens his lips, then nods at Arpad.

Whoa. My oldest brother, who in some ways, I've feared more than my father, who is known for his ruthlessness, just backed down?

I turn back to Arpad, who scrutinizes my features. "Niko and I have a bond that is almost as strong as what I share with the Seven. When he asked me to help him out, I couldn't say no."

"So, you became one of them?"

"I only deal with Niko, and only when it's absolutely essential. I help him by steering things along in the business world. A carefully placed word here, a play on the stock market there, snapping up a startup that could send more business his way."

"You're his Ace," I conclude. "He plays you when he needs that extra edge."

Arpad nods.

I stare into his features, take in his clear gaze, the set of his shoulders. That half-pleading, half-defiant look on his face. It's true. Everything he's said so far is true. My throat closes. The band around my chest tightens.

"Karina," He moves closer.

I lean back, trying to put as much distance as possible between us as my seated position will allow.

"Stay away from me."

The skin around his eyes tightens. "Let me explain."

"Too late." I swallow. "All this time we spent together, and you couldn't have mentioned this to me?"

"You didn't mention your connection with the Bratva either," he points out.

"Oh, don't put this on me. I'm not the one who has an entire other life that I just failed to bring up."

"But you do, babe." He firms his lips. "You, too, have another, undisclosed life, even if it's in your past."

"It's different for me."

"Oh?" He growls, "How's that?"

"I was born into the Bratva and decided to cut ties with them. You weren't part of them, but decided to join them."

His jaw tics.

"So your deception is greater because you made the choice."

A nerve pops at his temple.

"My silence was a necessary part of changing who I was." I insist.

"Was it?" His lips twist.

"How can you even ask me that?" I snap back. "You know what? Sod this." I push back my chair, and rise to my feet, or try to, because he's still holding my hand and I find I can't shake him off. So, I half hunch and try to free my hand, but of course, the asshole doesn't let me go.

"Please, Sparks, listen to me."

"No."

"This once."

"No fucking way."

"Karina," my father admonishes me.

Arpad peers into my features. His gaze intensifies; he seems to be pleading with me, and at the same time, trying to coerce me and dominate me. The skin around his eyes tightens. "Please," he reiterates, "give me just a few more minutes of your time to explain."

"A few more minutes?"

"Five minutes." He holds up his hand. "That's all I need, I promise."

"Five minutes."

"Just five."

I gaze into his features—those gorgeous blue-grey eyes, those lips I want to kiss and suck on. *Ugh, stop thinking about his sex appeal in front of your father.* "Fine," I mumble.

"Fine." He lessens the pressure on my hand, but doesn't let go.

"After the incident, you know how the Seven of us took to the streets? A bunch of posh prats like us, and we felt unhinged. We didn't belong in school, couldn't fit in at home, since our families, when they tried to help, didn't have a clue as to the kind of emotional toll it had taken on us. I was spiraling out of control when, I met... Niko." He jerks his chin at my brother. "I was itching to fight and your brother was already running an underground fighting ring in London."

"So that's what your frequent trips to the UK were for?" I scowl at my brother. "And here I thought, you had a woman."

"That too." Niko's features harden. Of course, my oldest brother is every bit as much of an a-hole as my previously soon-to-be but no longer to-be real husband here... No, probably worse, in some ways, given he's been groomed to take over as the scion of the most powerful organized crime syndicate on

the West coast... And likely soon, this side of the pond as well.

"So, you two met, found kindred spirits in each other, likely fought each other, I am guessing, and that was the beginning of a beautiful relationship?"

"Relationship?" Arpad and Niko glare at each other with something like distaste.

"I can assure you there's no relationship between us..." Arpad retorts.

"Unless you count the fact that both of you are part of the Bratva?" I snarl

Arpad winces, "There is... That..."

"You're right," Niko adds, "but we wanted something more binding."

"So, you asked him to seduce me?"

Niko draws in a breath.

Roman's face hardens.

Victor shifts in his seat and my father explodes. "Your brother asked his friend to take care of you."

"How?" I jut out my chin. "By marrying me?"

"Yes," my father snaps.

"Do you see how insane this is?" I throw up my hands. "My family goes behind my back, and asks someone who is a complete stranger to wed me?"

"He wasn't a stranger to us," my father points out. "Also, the war between the Bratva and our enemies was escalating in LA. We needed you out of there."

"You could have asked me to leave."

"Would you have left the country if we'd asked you to?"

I bite my lips.

"I thought not." My father nods, "We knew him and trusted him to keep you safe."

"He was one of us, yet part of the mainstream," Niko interjects. "The kind of man who could protect you. The kind we hoped you'd fall for."

"So, you asked him to contrive an excuse to make me move to London and then get me to marry him?"

"It would've worked out for everyone."

"Everyone but me." I twist my lips. "This..." I point my finger at him, "these meddling ways of you guys is exactly why I chose to leave."

"You can't blame your family for trying to protect you," Arpad interjects.

"Was that the only reason you agreed to this...this deal?" I turn on him. "What else did they promise you in return for marrying me? Did they promise to help you track down whoever was responsible for you and the Seven being

kidnapped?"

Silence around the table.

Arpad stares at me with something like pride in his gaze.

"Oh, no," I shake my head, "no, no, no." I groan. "This isn't happening." I left my country, tried to forge a path of my own. I'd been so sure I'd be able to shake off the grasp that the Bratva had on me. I'd been so clear that I'd avoid the kind of arranged marriages that are common among the children of the Bratva, and all along, I had been manipulated by my family. I am being coerced into the exact kind of arrangement that I had sworn I'd never fall into, and... By the man for whom I have developed feelings. He's been hiding things from me all along. If that isn't the start of the makings of a disaster, I don't know what is.

My stomach protests again and bile rushes up my throat. "Excuse me," I gasp, "I think I am going to be sick."

"What?"

"I need to puke." I yank my hand from his hold, jump up to my feet and race to the doorway

I wrench open the door, race out and stare about me. Oh, shit, where do I need to go? Where's the bathroom? Arpad reaches me. He scoops me up in his arms, races down the corridor, shoulders open a door and darts in, then deposits me near the commode. I drop to my knees, and hurl. Ugh.

I retch and retch, emptying the contents of my stomach. My hair is pulled back and held. Bloody hell. How romantic. The man I'd fucked... Who I'd fallen for, who had tricked me into the kind of arrangement I'd wanted to avoid my entire life... When I finally stop, he reaches over and tears off a sheet of tissue paper for me. I wipe my face with it, while he reaches over and flushes.

I slump back against the wall, too exhausted to move. He scoops me up in his arms again.

"Don't touch me." I whisper, but he doesn't acknowledge me. He walks over to the counter, lowers me to the ground, then turns on the tap. I reach over, rinse out my mouth, then splash water over my face. He hands me a paper towel. I turn away, snatch up a different tissue and pat my face dry.

"Better?" he asks. "Is it something you ate? Do you want to lie down?"

"It's the bloody company I am keeping right now that's making me want to throw up," I snap.

He stiffens, reaches for me. I evade him, drop the tissue in the waste-

paper basket and walk out.

"Sparks?" He draws abreast. I speed up my pace. The last thing I want to do is talk to him.

"Karina." He grips my shoulder.

I angle my body and pull away from him.

"Karina, please listen to me."

"No," I yell, "you lost the right to ask anything of me."

His features tighten and a nerve throbs at his temple. "Don't talk to me like that."

"Oh yeah?" I stab a finger into his chest. "How about, I don't talk to you at all? You dare dictate to me about how to converse with you? When you are the one who's pulled a fast one on me all this time?"

"It's not what it seems."

"Ha!" I blow out a breath and the hair on my forehead rises. "That's what they all say. Pray, tell me, what it is then? You are in cahoots with my family, you know how much I hate their profession, how I've tried to keep away from anything related to them, personally—"

"Even as you helped us investigate the Mafia who are behind our kidnapping?"

"The Mafia are Sicilians; they are different from the Bratva, who are Russian in origin." Why the hell do I feel the need to point that out. Apparently, even though I'd tried to keep myself aloof from my family, their biases and opinions had rubbed off on me.

"Besides, that was professional," I mutter.

"So is this."

I gape at him.

"Bloody hell." He sets his jaw. "I didn't mean it that way."

"You're the one who's always said that he never says anything he doesn't mean."

"No, I said I wouldn't lie to you."

"And isn't this a lie of omission?"

He drags his fingers through his hair and I stare. Jesus, this man... I've only seen him as authoritative and confident, but this... The way he stares at me with an unreadable expression in his gaze... It's not something I would have expected.

"I admit my interest in you started off as a way to get in your pants." He shifts his weight from foot to foot. "Then when your father and brothers

approached me with the proposal of marrying you—"

I snort, his gaze narrows, and he shoves his hands into his pocket, "—that's when I decided to offer you the contract to run security for the Seven," he says.

"You offered me the contract?" I explode, "I got it because I am the best in the business."

"You are, and that's why you did," I agree, "but I also had a vested interest in making sure that the contract went to you."

"Wait. Hold on." I raise my hand, "So, you're saying that you influenced the Seven into ensuring that I was the preferred contractor for the job?"

"Because you're the best." he reminds me.

"But you influenced the outcome?"

He raises his shoulders, "I may have hinted that you had my vote and that I trusted you."

"Too bad I can't say the same about you anymore."

He sets his jaw.

"You made sure that I won such a lucrative contract that I had no choice but to move countries." I stab my finger at him. "You made me upturn my entire life, and why? So you could benefit from the deal that you struck with my family?"

"I did it to keep you safe."

"I can take care of myself," I yell.

He sets his jaw. "Do you have any idea of how many people bear a grudge against your family? The kind of enemies one makes in the line of business they are in?"

"You mean the line of business you are in?"

"No. No one knows of my affiliation with your family. That means that I can protect you."

"Oh yeah?" I snort, "And how do you plan on doing that? By manipulating my life? By arranging for me to stowaway on the yacht?"

"I didn't arrange for you to stowaway on the yacht. That was all you, and you know it."

I toss my hair over my head, "But you do admit to controlling my life?"

"If you mean, did I seduce you into falling for me?" He smirks. "Then it's natural that you feel cut up about it. After all, you didn't have a chance."

I fold my hands over my chest. "Excuse me?"

"I mean, it's only natural that you'd want to be with me after I shagged

you."

I gape at him. "Is that an apology? Because it's certainly not sounding like one to me."

He cracks his neck. "You're right, I totally suck at this."

"Finally," I raise my eyes skywards, "something you're not good at."

"I'm also not good at this." He gets down on one knee, takes my left hand in this.

"Oh, no, no, no." I try to pull my hand but he holds on.

"Karina Solonik, will you marry me?"

CHAPTER 40

Arpad

"No." She stares down into my face.

"What?" I blink. "What did you say?"

"You heard me." She tugs on her hand and I release it. "I said no. No, I will not marry you. No, I don't want to be with you. In fact, I hate you as much as I hate myself for ever allowing myself to feel anything for you."

She turns to leave.

I spring to my feet and grab her wrist. "You don't mean it."

She turns on me and stares down at where my fingers encircle her wrist.

I release her and she folds her arms in front of her. "I've never been more serious about anything in my life."

She heads toward the doorway, then stops. "I'll leave it to you to make excuses to my family."

"Stop, Karina, don't leave like this." I walk toward her.

"I don't want to stay a minute longer with you." Her back is stiff, her shoulders straight. Her dark hair swishes about her shoulders as she yanks open the front door.

"At least, wait a minute. I'll drive you back to my place."

"If you think I am coming back with you to see your family again, you have another think coming."

"Fine, so don't come back to my place. At least, let me take you to...to wherever you are going." I reach the front door as she heads outside.

"No, thanks." She walks down the steps.

"Karina, come on. Let me make sure you reach your destination safely."

"Ha," she snorts, "I'll be safe as long as I am away from you. Besides, you lost the right to care about my wellbeing. No," she holds up a finger, "let me rephrase that. You never earned the right to worry about my happiness, and now," she peruses my features, "now you never will."

She reaches the bottom of the steps. Hell, I need to stop her. I need to figure out how the hell I am going to get her back. "What if you're pregnant?"

She pauses.

I take the steps two at a time and reach her. "You were sick all of a sudden, weren't you?"

Her shoulders shake.

What the—? "Karina, you okay?" I touch her shoulder. She shakes it off and turns to me.

Her mouth is open, tears run down her cheeks.

"Why are you laughing?" I growl.

"OMG." She wipes the moisture from her face. "I puke and you think I am pregnant? It's less than a week since we had sex, and you think I am already carrying your child?"

"It's possible, isn't it?"

"It is," she admits, "but no way, would I be feeling the effects of pregnancy so quickly that I'd be vomiting as a result."

My neck heats. Of course, she is right. And I knew that, I swear, I did; I just wasn't thinking straight. When I am near her, my thoughts seem to get all twisted up inside until I am a mess. Why the hell does she screw me up so?

"So, what is it then? Was it something you ate? Should you be traveling in this condition?"

She snorts. "It was your proximity that resulted in my being physically sick. Now that I am leaving you—" She takes a step away from me, "See, I already feel better."

She holds out her hand.

I stare at it, then back at her face.

"The keys," she says impatiently, "the car keys."

"If you think I'm going to give you—"

She stares at me.

I glare back.

She purses her lips, and fuck me, but she has me where it hurts the most.

If I stop her, then clearly, I don't have a chance of winning her over. If I let her go—? *Not happening*, but I have to, at least, comply with her wishes—or be seen to. It's the only way I stand a chance of showing that I am serious about winning her back. Winning her back? This woman has me by the balls. Does she even realize it?

She tilts her head.

I dig the keys out of my pocket and place them in her palm. Before she can pull her hand away, I've gripped her wrist and hauled her to me. I lower my head and press my lips to hers.

She stays unmoving in my embrace and I deepen the pressure of my mouth on hers. I tilt my head, nibble on her lower lip. She sighs, then melts against me. She opens her mouth and I sweep my tongue in between her lips. I bend her over, kiss her, suck on her tongue and—

Pain explodes between my legs.

"What the—" I release her, stagger back. "Did you knee me?" I growl.

She squares her shoulders. "Bye, Mr. Beauchamp. Don't bother coming to grovel; I am not going to give in to you anytime soon."

I straighten, track her as she marches over to my car. The lights flash as she unlocks the car. She pulls open the car door, then turns to face me, "By the way, I'll be billing you for the time we spent together."

She slams the door shut.

Wait, what? I stalk toward the vehicle, when she turns the car around and drives off.

I stare after her. I can't believe she just did that. Left me, literally, eating her dust and driven off. More to the point, I can't believe I allowed her to do that.

"Arpad," Niko calls out, "you'd better come inside. Gregory needs a word with you."

Of course, he does. I pivot and march up the steps. I brush past my one-time friend and now collaborator, then march inside the house.

I stalk into the room, drop into the chair vacated by her. The warmth of her body clings to the chair; the soft feminine scent of her clings to my nostrils. Jesus, fuck, why the hell can't I get her out of my mind?

"Karina."

I raise my head, stare at her father, "What about her?"

"You're going to marry her."

"I am."

Niko bursts out laughing and I stare at him. "What's so funny?"

"You are."

"Explain your motherfucking self."

"My sister just walked out on you, left you in a cloud of dust, and you think you're going to convince her to marry you?"

"Consider it done," I snap with more confidence than I feel.

Ivan snorts from his position near the door. Niko and Roman chuckle at me.

"Still don't see what's funny."

"You are." Gregory's eyes twinkle for a second. "My daughter is stubborn."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"She is very stubborn," he reiterates. "When she makes up her mind about something, it's very hard to sway her."

"And you're telling me this...because?"

"Clearly, she's angry with you."

I raise one eyebrow, challenging him to continue.

"You're going to have to woo her."

"Woo her?" I stare at Gregory.

"You know, the thing that men who've lost their balls do, when they've set their sights on a woman?" Niko interjects.

I firm my lips, "I didn't lose my heart—"

Now it's Gregory's turn to stare at me.

"—my balls," I say. "I'll keep them, thank you very much."

"You do love her, don't you?" He frowns.

I hesitate.

"You finally agreed to marry her," Niko points out.

Shit, what do you tell your future father-in-law and brother-in-law, both of whom are staring at you, like they would have the aforementioned balls for breakfast if you say something to displease them? Not that I'd hesitate to take them on. Those years of fighting, first on the streets, then in Niko's cage fights, have left me with a trick or two up my sleeve. But they are going to be family... And picking a fight with them is not the way to get back in Sparks' good graces.

"I will marry her." I look between them. "This, I promise you."

"I am counting on you to take care of her." Gregory fixes me with those piercing brown eyes, so like hers.

"I give you my word." I knock my knuckles on the wood. "I'll marry her, give you access to all of my contacts, and introduce you to the Seven so you can expand your reach in the UK. In return, you'll help us track down the perpetrators of our kidnapping."

"It's a deal," Gregory leans forward, "assuming you are able to woo her back."

CHAPTER 41

Karina

"You did what?" Isla stares back at me from the phone screen.

"I left him." I hunch my shoulders.

More precisely, I had driven away from him and all the way back to London. Then I had headed back home and crept under the covers. I had since taken to ordering my groceries online, binge watching my favorite series, and except for one call to my team to make sure that things were on track—they were—I had holed up in my apartment for the last week.

"And you didn't pick up my calls all these days?" She frowns at me.

"Uh, yeah." I see myself on screen and wince. My hair is unbrushed, my complexion pale, and the black circles under my eyes are so pronounced, I swear, I look like a sleepwalking raccoon. "Sorry, I didn't feel up for company."

"Company?" She stares at me. "You're calling me company? Me, the woman who held your hand while you dithered over Arpad."

"You mean Arpad the douchehole, don't you?" I retort. "Arpad A-hole Dickasaurus."

"Very creative."

"I've had time to think up a few names," I admit.

"So, you've been hiding away in your apartment all this time?"

"Call it a vacation." Yeah, so I am using his words. Big deal, doesn't mean that his voice is stuck in my head or anything.

"You mean staycation."

"Yeah, yeah." I purse my lips. I love Isla, honestly, but right now, I just want to be left alone with my thoughts, preferably with a big carton of Cherry Garcia, my fave ice-cream, and a romantic comedy to watch and cry over. Yeah, I cry over rom-coms, because they remind me of what I can't have. What I set out to find and got hoodwinked by that scoundrel. That rake. Gah! I wind a strand of hair around my finger, and tug on it. "Same thing."

"No, it isn't. If you were on vacation, you'd be on a yacht, sunbathing, sipping margaritas and making out with a hot stud."

"Remember, I did the first and the last?" I point out.

"And how was it?"

"Underwhelming," I lie.

"At least, did he fuck well?"

I make a motion of zipping my lips.

"Aww, come on, give me something," she whines.

"Nope, not going to kiss and tell, babe."

"So, it was good then?" She waggles her eyebrows.

"It wasn't not good."

"Whoa." Her eyes widen. "That good?"

"You're not listening to me."

"Oh, I totally am." She nods. "Bet it was scorching hot."

"No, it wasn't."

"And lascivious."

"Of course, not."

"Blistering, intimate, brazen, amorous?" She snickers.

"Are you consulting a thesaurus?"

"Close," she chuckles, "I made a list of excitable words from the last few romance novels I read."

"Why in the world would you do that?"

"It helps me when I'm pitching for my next wedding, to drop in the right word at the right time."

"Really?" I frown. "Do your customers actually fall for that?"

"You'd be surprised." She changes position on the sofa where she's stretched out, "So what happened, that you came rushing back home and decided to shut him out."

"It's not going to work out."

"What are you not telling me?"

"Nothing."

"And the baby?"

"What about it?"

"What if you are pregnant?"

"I'm not," I snap.

"Are you sure?"

I shake my head. "Even if I am, I plan to bring him or her up alone."

"Do you want to do that?" She scowls.

"Yeah."

"Are you really sure?"

"No, but it has to be enough." The small of my back hurts. Shit, this is what comes from being cooped up in one position for too long. I spring up to my feet, begin to pace the living room of my cozy two-bedroom apartment off Regent's Park. It's not a small space, by London standards. Also, not as luxurious as the kind of real estate that the Seven tend to frequent. "To be honest, I don't know what I want," I muse.

"You want him," she retorts.

"Well, too bad. I am not going to have him. That lying, conniving, bastard," I burst out.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," she holds up a hand, "what's going on there? What are you not telling me?"

I lower my phone and hang my head. Nothing; everything. Shit, where do I even begin without giving away the truth about who I am? Something I've been hiding from everyone, including the Seven. If they found out about it... Clearly, I'd lose their account and much more. I think. I'd probably lose my friends too... Or not. Arpad knows about it, of course, but considering he is in on this with me, I don't think he would tell the rest of the Seven.

Strange, somehow, he's the only one who knows everything about me... Apparently, he and I have more in common than I thought. Is that what had attracted me to him? The fact that, under that sophisticated, billionaire exterior, he is so similar to my father and brothers... Cut from the same cloth.

Hell, even his experiences are similar to theirs. And he knows them. What are the chances? So, not only had he manipulated my life over the last year, but he'd also been luring me toward this possible marriage. Wow. I shake my head. The one man I'd been attracted to... Turns out, he is exactly the person I should have avoided at all costs. And, of course, he has to be the person with whom I'd chosen to have a child.

"Karina? Kaaareeeena? You there?" Isla's voice reaches me. Shit, I'd

forgotten I was still on a call with her.

I raise the phone and peer into her angry features on the screen. "I'm here."

I rub the small of my back again.

"You okay?"

"Of course, I am." A twang tugs on my lower belly. I pale.

"Karina?" She frowns. "What's wrong?"

"N...nothing."

Another jolt of pain hits me. I press my palm to my stomach.

"Karina, you're worrying me. Do you want me to come over?"

"No...no, I'll be okay."

"Karina, don't—"

I disconnect, toss the phone on the bed, then head to the bathroom. Tears prick the backs of my eyes. Shit, don't cry. It's okay. Why the hell am I so upset?

Something hot stabs at my chest and waves of pain coil low in my belly. "Ah!" I stagger over to the bathroom cabinet and open it. Of course, I can't find what I need. Damn it, I should have been better prepared. I'd known it was possible that I might not conceive the first time I tried, but somehow, I had refused to consider that option. I had been so sure that it would work, that I would get pregnant. Is that why I had neglected all the signs of my impending period over the last few days? Tender breasts, the discomfort at the small of my back, my feet, which ache more than usual? No choice. I have to head over to the shop and get what I need now.

As I turn, another wave of pain slices through my middle. Damn it, it bloody hurts; it hurts. I double over, draw in a breath, then another.

Shit, this can't be happening; it can't be.

The doorbell rings just then and I jump. I should go get it, but fuck that. I am not in any mood for company.

The doorbell sounds again, and again. "Go away," I yell. Then head inside the bedroom to reach for my bag, when the sound of the door opening reaches me. What the ever lovin' hell?

I turn to the door as footsteps near. Arpad bursts into the room.

CHAPTER 42

Arpad

"Sparks, what's wrong." I spring forward, covering the distance between us.

She straightens, then moves to the side. "Don't touch me," she warns.

"Fuck that," I growl. "Are you okay? Are you in pain?"

"No, I'm dancing around, getting ready to go on a date."

I frown. "Are you?" I look her up and down. "Is that what you're doing?"

"No, of course, not." She clutches her middle, then hobbles toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To the shops, you ass."

"Wait, what? You're going like this?"

She turns, "Of course, like this. What's wrong with you?"

"What do you need? I can get it for you."

"Oh, no. No way. I don't want to be beholden to you." She stiffens, then groans again and grabs at her stomach.

My heart begins to race. Sweat beads my palms. Shit, it can't be... Is it? She can't be pregnant this soon, let alone having a miscarriage. "Sparks." I reach for her and she slaps away my hand.

"I said... Don't touch me," she snarls.

"Fine," I hold up my hands, "at least, let me help you."

"You've done enough so far, haven't you?"

I wince. "Look, I'm sorry about what I did, but honestly, now is not the time to talk about it."

"Oh yeah?" She staggers back, until she reaches the wall, then leans against it. "Now is exactly the time to talk about it."

"Not when you are in pain, and bleeding out."

"Exactly now, because I am in pain and bleeding out." She wraps her arms around her middle, bites down on her lower lip. "Shit, this is all a mess." Tears stream down her cheeks. "Why did it have to happen like this?" Her face crumbles and she sinks down to the floor. "Why the hell couldn't it work out? I'd thought it wouldn't matter either way, but clearly, I had allowed myself to believe it was possible. I mean, damn it. I'd really thought I was pregnant, and now I'm not."

"You're not?" I frown.

"Of course, not. I just got my period, you ass."

"Ah," my shoulders sag, "it's only your period."

She shoots me a look from under her eyelashes. "Spoken like a man," she snaps. "Like you'd know how it is to be struck with tender breasts, mood swings, upset stomach, headaches, cramps, aching hamstrings, swollen feet —"

I pale.

"—not to mention that you have to walk around with a wad of cotton stuck up your cunt."

I grimace.

"And take painkillers that make you woozy, so all you want to do is curl up under the covers and sleep. But instead, you are curled up on the floor of the bloody bedroom, watching as the man you thought you loved, the bastard who did a number on you by going behind your back to gang up on you with your family, is watching as you slowly bleed from between your legs like a pig stuck in a hole."

The blood drains from my face. Shit I really hurt her. I'd told myself to stay away after she'd left, to give her time, but hell, if I haven't reached the end of my patience as well. I have to find a way to make her believe in me again. But how? Gregory had said woo her, but hell, if I am going down the tried and tested flowers and candles and dates route... Not that there is anything wrong in that, but seriously, this is Karina, a princess for whom nothing less than the very best will suffice.

I swallow, force myself to meet her gaze. "You're not a pig." I scan her face. "Nope, definitely no resemblance."

She half snorts, then clears her throat. "Is that all you caught from

everything I just said?" She sighs.

"The list of symptoms was impressive." I swallow, "Clearly, I'll never know what it is to be on my period, but I can empathize."

"Oh yeah?"

"Sure, I mean, it's like breaking your arm?"

"Arm *and* a leg," she mutters.

"Arm and a leg," I agree, then take a step forward.

"And stubbing the big toe of the foot of your uninjured leg."

"That too," I nod, and move closer to her.

"And...then banging your elbow into the edge of a doorjamb."

"Totally." I reach her.

"And.. And..." her features scrunch up, "and like...losing the chance at having a child." She bursts into tears.

I swoop down and pull her onto my lap. "Shh! Baby, shh!"

She buries her face in my throat and weeps. Her shoulders shudder, her entire body shakes with the outpouring of her disappointment. A lump sticks in my throat. "Oh, sweetheart, I am so sorry."

She only cries harder.

I drag my fingers down her thick soft hair.

"Why did it have to turn out like this? Why?" She curls her fingers into fists and beats against my chest. "I wanted one thing...one thing. To have a child, someone of my own, to bring up without the shadow of my family and my past sullyng it. I wanted this child, I really...really wanted it. I... I.."

Her breath hitches and more tears flow down her cheeks.

"I am so sorry, Sparks. I understand how you feel right now."

"You don't." She hiccups. "You have no idea how it feels to be convinced that you're pregnant and then have your bloody period arrive."

"Periods are meant to be bloody aren't they?"

She pauses, stares up at me, then bursts out crying again.

"Shh, baby, please don't cry." I hold her close and rock her. "I'm so sorry, Sparks, truly I am."

"Are you?" she blubbers. "Are you really sorry? Surely, you must be happy that you don't have to contend with a child, considering we broke up."

My heart stutters. My blood pounds at my temples. We may not be together now, but hell if I am not going to do my best to rectify it. "I didn't realize how much I wanted you to have a child until I walked in and found you doubled over in pain and thought you were having a miscarriage."

"Miscarriage?" She stills. "It's too soon for that."

I wipe the moisture from her cheek, "I know... Stupid of me, but I was concerned and besides, it's all your fault."

"What?" She scowls. "Why?"

"Because of you, I have babies on my brain, and when I saw you in pain, and clutching your middle... Well, come on. It was a logical conclusion. And then, when I thought you'd lost the child... I..." I set my jaw, "I only, then, realized how much I wanted to give you the baby you long for."

"Something which is never going to happen now. She pushes away from me, and jumps to her feet. "What are you doing here anyway?" She flicks her hair over her shoulder, "How dare you barge in here and put your hands on me as if you are...?"

"Mine," I say simply. "You are, Sparks, and I am not letting you forget it that quickly."

"You did a damn good job of it this past week."

"I was trying to give you space. I didn't want to crowd you."

"Well, you're crowding me now."

I rise to my feet, drag my fingers through my hair. "Look why don't I go get whatever you need from the shops, and then we can talk?"

"You can get me what I need, and hand it to the porter downstairs to bring it up. Speaking of," she glances at me with suspicion, "how did you get past him and get inside?"

"Uh..." I shove my hands in the pockets of my jeans. "I have my ways."

"Oh." She stares at me, then the wrinkles on her forehead clear. "Ohhh! I see."

"What?" I take a step forward and she throws up a hand, "Don't come any closer, you...you... Conniving ass."

I stiffen. "Now look here a minute—"

"No, you look here." She draws herself up to her full height. "I thoroughly investigated the ownership of this building, and it hadn't revealed any connection to you," she says slowly, "but you do have a connection, don't you? You own this building."

"Through a company that acts as an interface," I admit.

"Which means the porter is your employee, of course," she snarls, then stiffens. "But I checked out the apartment. There were no cameras in the apartment, so how did you know when to rush in?"

"I waited until you'd completed all of your checks and were all moved

in."

"So, every time I was in any of the rooms, you spied on me?" She glances around the space wildly. "And the bathroom? Did you also bug the bathroom?"

"No." I scowl. "Of course, not. I don't have cameras in the bathroom. I am not some creepy-ass stalker."

She bursts out laughing. "You're not, huh? I can't think of another way to define your stalkerish behavior."

"Hey," I hold up a hand, "Cut me a break, will you? I wanted to give you your space, but I wanted to be sure you were safe."

"So what? You jerked off to watching me crying into my ice-cream?"

"Uh... Not exactly." I shuffle my feet.

"So, you did jerk off?" she asks carefully.

"I...uh, I may have." It's one thing to do it, another to admit to it, and to the woman I'm trying to make a good impression on. Shit. "I mean, you're so fucking beautiful when you sleep."

"You watched me as I slept?" She opens and shuts her mouth. Then her cheeks redden, "So, you saw me when I... I..."

I nod, "I saw you shove your toys inside yourself and bring yourself to orgasm. That's when I almost came over and—"

"Hold on," she tilts her head, "you almost came over then?" She stiffens, "And this time when you saw me in pain... How did you get to me so quickly?"

I am not going to lie to her, not after everything we've been through. If I have a chance in hell of winning back her trust, I need to be up front with her. She needs to accept me, faults and all, as I want her in my life. Completely unvarnished, without any masks. That's how I want us to be able to see each other. I square my shoulders, "I am in the apartment down the hallway, actually—"

"What the hell?" Her cheeks redden, but it's anger, not embarrassment. "All this time, I have been crying over you and you've been watching me and enjoying yourself at my expense."

"No, no, no. It's not like that." My throat closes. Shit. This isn't going how I'd imagined it would. "I had to make sure you were okay."

"I was fine, until I met you."

"I promised your family that I'd look out for you."

"Oh, yeah?" She tips up her chin. Her gaze narrows, "If this is what you

mean by 'looking out'" she makes air quotes with her finger, "then I am sorry, but clearly, you and I have a different definition of what that means."

She clutches her stomach again, and something hot stabs at my chest.

"You're in pain. You shouldn't be exerting yourself emotionally, physically—"

"It's only my period, you blundering neanderthal," she yells. "It's not like I am pregnant." Her face crumples again, but she takes a few deep breaths and composes herself. "Shit, I am not pregnant. Not pregnant." She holds herself and begins to rock.

A ball of emotion lodges in my chest.

I take a step forward, and she snarls, "Don't you dare come near me."

"But—"

"Are you happy now? Clearly, you didn't want me to be pregnant. Your plan worked."

"What do you mean?" I frown. "You know I wanted you to have my child."

"Did you?" Her gaze narrows. "The number of times you could have come inside me and you didn't. You pulled out, you came on me, you fucked me in the ass, but you held off coming inside me until—"

"Until I was sure you were ready to submit to me."

She stares at me, "So you admit it? You admit that you were playing with me, even though we had an agreement?"

"I kept up my part of the deal," I insist.

"You were supposed to get me pregnant. Instead, you were too busy playing your mind games. You were more concerned with holding onto your power. You wanted me to give in to you, you wanted me to beg, before you delivered on your part of the bargain."

Her jaw firms.

"If you hadn't been so hung up on the powerplay, if you hadn't been so obsessed with dominating... If you had been less selfish, you'd have focused on our deal. You wouldn't have held back on me. You'd have tried to get me pregnant every opportunity you had. In fact," her chin wobbles, "if you had, for one second, thought about anyone else but yourself, I'd probably have conceived by now."

My heart begins to race and the band around my chest tightens. I move toward her and she holds up her hand. "Please," her voice wavers then she draws in a sharp breath, "please don't come near me. In fact, it's best you

stay away from me from now on."

"Let me help." I close my fingers into fists. What can I do? How can I help her? Is everything she said true? Had I been so engrossed with staying in control, had I been so wrapped up in my own emotions, so preoccupied with what I wanted from her, that I had forgotten about why I had entered into the agreement with her in the first place?

My throat closes; a bead of sweat runs down my spine.

Damnit! I have faced down the Bratva, sat across from the sharpest of investors in Silicon Valley, but none of it has prepared me for the absolute helplessness I feel as I watch her grapple with her pain, her anguish.

"Let me at least hold you," I plead.

"No." She wipes the tears off her face. "You lost that right with how you've treated me."

"I treated you like you are my—"

"Like your possession," she spits out. "Like you...you could manipulate my life to suit your needs. Like you could arrange the trajectory of events to your convenience. Well, I have news for you Arpad f'ing Beauchamp. I am Karina motherfucking Solenik, and I am going to make you sorry for the moment you set eyes on me."

CHAPTER 43

Karina

"He spied on you?" Isla scowls at me from across the table.

We're at the bar above the National Portrait Gallery, my favorite drinking spot. Also, the second favorite place I like to go to when I want to think. Normally, I'd have gone for an Ashtanga yoga class, but my bloody period means that's out. Not that I haven't tried to fit in yoga sessions when I have my period, but given the kind of cramps I have during this time, I find it uncomfortable to take part in any overt physical activity. For all of my best intentions, my body has a will of its own, apparently. Just like my wanting to get pregnant and my body declaring otherwise.

It's been forty-eight hours since I told off that asshole. Forty-eight hours since I found out I hadn't conceived. Which means I can drink all I want, right? Bonus: it will help with the cramps. I raise the shot of vodka, and toss back the remnants.

Isla's eyebrows rise. "You okay?"

"What do you think?"

"Considering how you're tossing back the alcohol, I'd say you're upset."

"Understatement of the year." I gesture to the bartender for a refill. "And just so we are clear—he didn't spy on me; he stalked me."

"Stalked you?" She frowns.

"Asshole had cameras in my house." My fingers tighten around my glass of wine. "The bastard rented the apartment down the hall from me so he could keep an eye on me."

"Whoa." She leans back on the barstool. "That's some crazy shit."

"Exactly."

The bartender tops up my vodka and I nod my thanks.

"How do you think Sinclair, Saint, Weston and Damian found out everything they wanted about their women?"

She frowns, "Are you saying they stalked their now-wives and girlfriends?"

I stare at her. "I can't reveal client confidences."

"So, they did stalk the girls?"

I raise my shoulders. And now I know how it feels to be on the other side. I lower my face, stare down into the depths of my shot glass.

She sighs. "The Seven are complicated men. Alphaholes to the extreme, and yet, when they set their hearts on something—or someone, they don't stop until they possess the object of their obsession."

"Tell me about it." I snort. "I've seen it all unfold in front of me."

"You have to admit, there's something hot about being the focus of all that intensity."

I stare at her in disbelief. "It's more like an invasion of my privacy."

She nods. "Shows how much he wants you—that he'll go to any lengths to get you."

"Well, he can fuck right off if he thinks that's the way to woo me," I snarl. "And I can't believe you're saying this. This is real life, Isla. It's not one of those romance novels you like to read so much."

"Hey," she protests, "don't mock my kink, and I won't mock yours."

"Kink, what kink are you two talking about?" A new voice asks from behind me. I turn to find a young girl...dressed in skinny jeans, chucks, a purple blouse that matches the highlights in her hair.

"Ava," Isla exclaims, "what are you doing here?"

"I came to the gallery to complete a project, then my friends and I decided to come up here for a drink." She laughs.

"Are you of legal age?" I huff.

"You can order your own drinks if you are over eighteen, which I am." She tilts her head and furrows her brow. "After all, this is England."

Of course, it is. And I am here, why? Because the asshole manipulated my life so he could ensure that I was close enough for him to keep tabs on me.

I raise my glass and throw back more of the vodka.

"Have you two met?" Isla looks between us. "This is my friend Ava, and this," she turns to me, "is Karina—"

Ava's face brightens. "You are Arpad's—?"

"Not Arpad's," I growl.

She blinks, then her cheeks redden. "Sorry, didn't mean to imply something where there isn't anything."

"There was, but now there isn't." I toss back the vodka so quickly that my stomach protests. A numb feeling grips my hands and legs. Good. Not that I like getting drunk... In fact, I can't remember the last time I did. But nothing like starting in the present moment, right?

"Oh," her lips tilt down, "I'm sorry."

She turns her body away from me, and I know I'm being mean. Isla glowers at me. I frown back. I am not really ready for company. But I couldn't bear to be inside the apartment, even though he'd promised me that he was disconnecting the cameras. Not that I trust him.

I had dumped my phone, gone through the space to ensure I had found and destroyed each of the cameras—all of it expensive, top notch equipment, that I had taken great pleasure in wrecking under the heels of my favorite pair of designer shoes.

I nod at the bartender and he refills my shot glass again.

Isla grabs my hand. "You're going too fast," she protests.

"Not fast enough," I grumble.

Ava pulls out her phone and taps out a message, then she slides onto the barstool on my other side.

"I'll have what she's having," she beckons to the bartender.

"You will?"

She nods.

"What about your friends?" I scowl.

"I just messaged them to say I'll catch them later. It's more important that I am here to keep you company while you get over your heartbreak."

Heartbreak? Is my heart broken? I thought it was more the disappointment that I hadn't conceived. Hell, this was only my first time trying. The band around my chest tightens and I feel a hot, stabbing sensation. How do the women who try for children for months, years, decades sometimes, manage to keep going? Do they have more self-confidence than me? Are they simply luckier than me? Maybe it isn't meant to be for me? *Oh, stop that.*

Ava raises her shot glass of vodka to me. "*Salut.*"

"*Nostrovia.*" I clink my shot glass with hers. We down it at the same time.

The alcohol slides down my throat, leaving a trail of heat in its wake. The lack of sensation that follows is totally awesome. My head spins, then everything in my vision seems to pop and sparkle. Jeez, it's like I finally took off the blinkers I've been wearing so far.

"I am sorry for my mean girl attitude earlier," I mutter. "It's just... Well... You know..." I stare at her face, the trusting features, as she watches me, unblinking. Bloody hell, this girl really is so young. "Forget it." I wave a hand. "It's not worth discussing. Just please know, I am not normally this horrible."

"Yeah, normally she wouldn't have spoken to you at all," Isla chimes in.

"What?" I gape at her, "Are you telling me I'm normally a nose-stuck-in-the-air—"

"Haughty, condescending, bitch?" She nods.

I open and shut my mouth, and she chuckles. "I was only joking, silly."

"No, you weren't." I swallow. Shit, is this what the few friends I have think of me? Why the hell do I have so much trouble hanging onto the people who mean something to me? Like him? Why did everything have to go so pear-shaped with him? It could have been different, couldn't it? He could have meant everything he'd said to me. He could have actually wanted me. He could have married me for real and I could have gotten pregnant in my first try and we could've lived happily after, raising little Solonik-Beauchamp babies... In a suburban neighborhood with white picket fences... Not. I can't stop myself from snorting. As if we'd ever be something so...bourgeois? Shit, now I was even thinking like him.

I turn to Ava, then reach for her hand and squeeze it. "I am sorry for being such a bitch," I swallow, "I really didn't mean to come across so... so..."

"Preoccupied?" she helpfully offers.

"You really are too kind to be real." I half laugh.

"Yeah," her forehead creases, "I get told that a lot. My friends think I am too trusting. I prefer to think I am an optimist."

"I'd settle for being a realist," I mutter.

"You do realize realists are secretly much more romantic than the rest of us?"

I scowl and she bursts out laughing. "That was a joke, but honestly, I

believe there's a grain of truth in it."

Hmph. "God, I hope not. I am as far from a romantic as you can get."

"That's what they all say." She flashes me a huge smile. "It's only until you meet the one, you know, and when you do, all these preconceived notions will fall by the wayside."

"So, have you met the one?"

"Not yet, but I am confident he's not far off now either." Her grin widens, if that is at all possible. Her eyes sparkle.

Wow, she actually does believe that. If only I had half the hopefulness she has. When had I turned into such a cynical woman that I can't believe in a happily-ever-after for myself?

On impulse, I rise to my feet and hug her. "I hope we'll get to know each other better."

She hugs me back. "I am sure we will."

I step back and she slides off her stool, then turns to Isla. "Sienna mentioned that you have a big wedding coming up, that you might need some help with the planning?"

Isla's jaw hardens. "I do." She doesn't elaborate, which is strange. Isla's the kind who loves her job so much, she only needs an excuse to run her mouth off about it.

"Whose wedding is it?" I peer into her features. "Anyone I know?"

"Yeah," she blows out a breath, "Liam's."

"Liam?" I frown, "Weston's older brother? But I thought..."

She glowers at me. "What? What did you think?"

"That you and he..."

Her glare deepens. "That he and I...?" she prompts, and I cough.

"Nope. Nothing. Forget I said anything."

"Honestly, all of you'll going on about Liam and me... How many times do I have to say, there's nothing there?"

Right. "So why do you look so pissed off?"

"Probably because I'm not pissed enough."

She turns around to the bartender. "I'll have what they're having," she snaps, "and make sure you top up their glasses too."

I exchange glances with Ava, who's watching Isla with a look of concern. "You okay, Iz?"

"Of course, I am." She flashes us a too-bright smile that's patently false.

"Have you spoken to Liam?" I prod. "Maybe if you told him how you felt

about him—?"

"Feel?" She scoffs, "I have no feelings for him. Hell, I barely know the man."

I frown. "But I thought—"

"That I had a crush on him or something?" She tosses her hair over her shoulder. "I have spoken to the man... Twice... Maybe."

"One look is all it takes," Ava interjects. "When you know, you know."

Isla shoots her a sideways glance. "What I know is that he's all wrong for me. I've sworn off the Seven..."

"He's not one of the Seven," I remind her.

"And their friends," she snaps.

"But not us, I hope?"

"The girls don't count. If it weren't for their women, the Seven would have burned in hell by now."

"True that." I push the shot glass of vodka over to her. "It's the women who've saved the Seven from themselves."

"Maybe that's why Arpad wants to pursue you," Isla runs her fingers around the rim of the shot glass, "because he knows you are his last hope at redemption."

"Or maybe he simply wants to show how easy it is to control me?" I snarl.

"I don't mind being controlled."

Both Isla and I turn to Ava.

"Woman, do you even know what you are saying?" Isla huffs.

"I may be younger than you all, but trust me when I say that the control goes both ways. The person who thinks he or she is in control isn't really, and the one being controlled? Let's just say, that's the person who has the power."

I blink. "Wow, so not only are you perfect, you're also wise?"

She laughs. "I know, I was born with an old soul. That's what my sister says too."

"I guess I wouldn't mind ceding control to a man," Isla retorts.

"What the—?" I stare at her. "Really? You had to say that now?"

"On one condition..." She raises her finger. "If he wanted to wield power over me, he'd better damn well make it worth my time."

Ava reaches for her shot glass. "Money isn't everything. You realize that, right?"

Both Isla and I stare at her again.

"What?" She scowls. "Did I say something wrong?"

"How many eighteen—?"

"Nineteen-year-olds," she corrects me.

"Nineteen-year-olds today, would say that, you think?"

"Why, don't you feel the same?" She takes in my features. "Go on, you can tell me."

I rub my temple, feeling a headache coming on. Or maybe I just haven't had enough alcohol. I reach for my shot glass, when she says, "Surely, you don't believe money is the be-all and end-all of everything?"

If she only knew my background and my family's view on that.

"Of course, not," I mutter. "Money isn't everything, but it's definitely important."

"Not as important as love," Ava insists.

"Love," I snort, "that stupid thing that doesn't really exist, and even if it did, I don't believe in it."

"Of course, you do." She nods her head. "You only need to adjust your expectations."

"Expectations?" I blink rapidly. "Whatever do you mean by that?"

"That maybe, falling in love means you need to give first, before you get back."

The headache behind my eyes intensifies. "But what if the other person did something that hurt you so much, you can't forgive him?"

"Can't forgive him, or don't want to forgive him?"

I hunch my shoulders. "I'm still trying to figure that out."

Ava's gaze softens. "Maybe you need to give this time before arriving at any conclusions?"

"I'm with young Ava here." Isla nods. "It seems whatever Arpad did was because it was the only way he knew how to express what he was feeling."

I snort, "You mean being a neanderthal is all that any of the Seven know?"

"You've worked with them; you should know," Isla replies. "Either way, just take SOME time to reflect on how you actually feel about him."

"Right." I do know what I feel about him. Problem is, I don't like it very much. But there's no need to reveal that here, is there?

"Meanwhile," Isla adds, "focus on moving forward, you know? Concentrate on your job, your life—"

"Shit, my job." I blow out a breath. "The Seven are my biggest clients at

the moment. If they decide to take their business elsewhere—"

"They won't." Isla frowns. "Will they?"

"I hope not." I square my shoulders. "Either way, I'm going to use this opportunity to expand, look for new clients. Something I should have done a long time ago." I've become complacent, happy with the easy business the Seven send my way. No more. I am going to take things into my own hands, forge my own way out of this mess.

I raise my shot glass. Ava and Isla clink their glasses with mine. I toss the drink back and it explodes in my stomach. A fire sizzles down my spine, and I slap my glass upside down on the bar counter.

"Right then," I laugh, "who's ready to party?"

CHAPTER 44

Arpad

I watch from the edge of the dancefloor as she sways her hips to the music. I'd tracked her to the bar earlier. Yeah, yeah, I'd said I'd leave her alone. Doesn't mean I can't look out for her, right? From a safe distance. That is, until the evening had worn on, and she still hadn't come out. So I had taken things into my own hands and walked in to find her dancing.

The vibrations pulse out across the bar, the beat picks up, and she raises her arms in the air. She closes her eyes, throws her head back as she grinds her hips, once, twice, thrice.

She sinks down until she's almost squatting, then bumps her way up to standing again.

Eyes still closed, she places her palms flat across her stomach, rotates her hips again, moves her shoulders in a sinuous shimmy. The blood rushes to my groin. My pulse begins to thud.

A man steps in front of her—tall, broad shouldered, asshole has a mohawk which, no doubt, he thinks is cool. He mirrors her moves, moving to the right, then the left. Drops down with her, then rises to his feet. He leans in, touches her shoulder and I see her jerk visibly.

What the hell?

He moves with her and she smiles up at him. Eyes gleaming, she increases the pace of her rhythm, swivels her hips, thrusts out her breasts, and his gaze lowers to her chest. He plants his hands on her waist and my anger pumps through my veins. How dare he touch her? How dare he dance with

her? She's mine. Only mine.

I shoulder my way through the crowd on the floor. A couple gets in the way and I growl at them. The man and woman glance at me. Their gazes widen and they skitter away. Good. I plough forward and a man steps in my path, jumping up and down in tempo with the rhythm of whatever godawful song they are playing over the sound system. I glare at him. He pales and leaps aside. Wanker of the first order. I stomp across the remaining distance, reach the bastard who's dancing with my woman.

I plant myself in front of them, fold my arms across my chest. They keep moving, don't even glance at me. What the bloody hell? I tap his shoulder, and he swivels his head to stare at me. "Move," I jerk my chin.

He frowns, then mouths, "Fuck off."

I bare my teeth, raise my fist and plant it in his grinning countenance. He staggers back, then rights himself and comes at me. I move aside and he charges past me. I kick his legs out from under him and he hits the floor face down. The entire floor seems to shake with the impact. The music pumps up another notch, the laser lights swiveling across our faces. The asshole on the ground stirs, and I move toward him, when a hand grabs at me and tugs. I turn and her green gaze collides with mine. "Don't," she mouths, shaking her head frantically, "he's not worth it."

"He touched you," I yell back at her. The music drowns out my voice but she must lip read me, for her grasp on me tightens.

"Don't." Her chest rises and falls; her eyes widen with apprehension. "Please don't, Ari."

"How dare he get close to you?" I growl. "I am going to kill him." I turn my attention back to the tosser on the floor.

She steps in between us, throws her arms around my waist. She tips up her chin, holds my gaze, "Dance with me."

I stare past her at the bastard on the floor. He stirs, then lurches up to his feet. I strain forward and she begins to move against me, thrusts her pelvis into mine, then rubs her gorgeous tits into my chest. The little tease. I watch her as she rotates her hips, grinding her core against the growing bulge in my jeans. She licks her lips, and fuck, if I don't come right then.

A movement catches my attention. I look up to find the asshole staggering away.

She cups my cheek, forcing me to look away and at her. She goes up to tip-toes, lifts her head, and my gaze drops to the gleaming flesh of her lips.

My throat closes.

She continues her exaggerated hip movements, and I take in the swell of her breasts, the slim waist that flares out to the curve of her arse that she wiggles as she undulates her body against mine.

My cock thickens, my balls harden, and damn, if I don't want her right now.

I lower my head, try to kiss her, but she evades me. She steps away, pivots so her back is to me, then continues her bump and grind routine. She juts out her butt, wiggles it, all the while moving, shaking that gorgeous body of hers in a way that's sure to have every man and woman here salivating after her. I glance around to find that, sure enough, we have an audience. People closest to us have stopped dancing, formed a circle as she gyrates, trails her fingers about her neck, sweeps it over her breasts, down to the flat of her stomach as she circles her hips again. She turns to throw me a coquettish glance, her eyes gleaming.

I quirk my finger at her; she shakes her head.

I frown and she chuckles. She turns to face me again, digs her fingers into her hair and piles it above her head in a move that's meant to seduce. She moves in again, presses herself to my front, from breast to pelvis to thigh, and that's when something inside of me snaps. I am going to have her all to myself. End of story. I bend my knees, grab her around the back of her thighs and throw her over my shoulder.

Instantly, she twists in my grasp, almost pulling free. Sneaky. But nothing less than I expected. After all, she is a security consultant. Surely, she's trained in martial arts. But hell, if I am not a match for her. I tighten my hold around her and she only wriggles harder.

She pushes her breasts into my back, and I am sure she must be hurling insults at me. Good thing I can't hear her above the music, eh? She buries her fists in the small of my back, and I feel it all the way to the tip of my cock. Yep, definitely needs to be taught a lesson. I bring my palm down on her butt and she stills. Then begins to squirm and writhe against me, and that only makes me harder. Damn it. I walk off the dance floor, out of the room, and down the corridor.

Reaching the door at the far end, I twist it open. A snogging couple breaks apart. "Out," I growl. They break apart, careen out. I step in, slam the door shut and the noise cuts out.

"Let me the fuck go, you swine," her scream almost takes my ear off.

"Your wish is my command."

I pull my arms away and she topples to the floor.

CHAPTER 45

Karina

"What in the ever lovin' hell?" My back connects with the floor of the restroom. The godawful bathroom of the bloody bar, where god knows how many people have been today? "Argh!" I shake the hair out of my eyes, then spring up to my feet, rubbing my ass. "Why did you drop me like that?" I yell.

"How dare you dance with another man?" he growls back.

"It's a free country, you ass. Besides, I thought I told you to stay away from me."

His jaw firms. "I tried," he rotates his shoulders, "but it's your fault that I can't keep away."

"My fault?" I gape. "What the hell do you mean?"

"You were all over that man—"

"I wasn't."

"You were shoving your tits at him—"

"It's called dancing, you bastard."

"You gyrated your hips and all but plastered yourself to him—"

"There was space between us the whole time we danced, you prick."

"Language," he growls, "And what the hell are you wearing?" He looks me up and down.

"What does it look like?" I tug on the hem of my dress, which I confess, is shorter than what I would normally wear, but hell, if it doesn't look good. "It's a designer dress, I'll have you know. The latest of the season, and yet, a

classic." I pull back my shoulders, thrust out my hip and prop my hand on it. "What the hell are you doing here, anyway?" I scowl.

"What are *you* doing here?" he demands.

My jaw drops, "I am a single woman, living my life, out on the town—"

His gaze narrows.

"—ready to take the first eligible man I meet home for a shag."

Color smears his cheeks and his nostrils flare. Ooh, this is more fun than I would have anticipated.

"I was doing so well too, until some tosser—" I tip my chin up, "showed up."

His jaw tics. "Don't talk to me like that."

I blink, then burst out laughing. "You're asking me to be polite? After everything you did?"

"What did I do? Except try to give you what you wanted?"

"And yet, you failed."

The color leaches from his face, and for a second, a tiny second, I am almost sorry that I've hurt him. Sure, I'd found I wasn't pregnant but had he...also been disappointed by the outcome?

Nah, not possible. This man? He's too selfish. He only thinks of himself, after all.

He balls his fists at his side, "I can't tell you how sorry I am that you aren't pregnant."

"Not as much as me." I drag the back of my hand across my face. The light from the overhead bulb seems to burn into my brain. Shit, how much have I had to drink? What am I even doing here, with him? "Let me go, Arpad." I wrap my arms about myself. "Just let me out of here."

"No." He widens his stance, seems to draw himself to his full height. "You're not leaving until you listen to me."

"I don't care about what you have to say."

"Just a minute of your time, Sparks."

"What? No commanding me to stay?" I snarl. "No tying me up so I can't leave?"

He drags his fingers through his hair. "Will you just listen to what I have to say?" He lowers his voice to a hush, "Please." And there's that word again. Damn it, alphahole Arpad f'ing Beauchamp, trying to be polite and failing spectacularly. *But he's trying, isn't he? Gah. Tell him to go to hell. Do it.* I draw in a breath. Instead, I find myself complying. "Fine," I mutter, "you

have sixty seconds."

He nods, then pinches the bridge of his nose, "I'm sorry that you didn't get pregnant, but I won't apologize for manipulating your life."

I open and shut my mouth, "You won't?"

He lowers his hands to his sides then thrusts his chest out. "I saw you and I wanted you. I've learned that life is short, and when you see something that resonates with you, you have to go after it, so that's why I did."

I shake my head, try to speak, fail. I simply stare at him.

"Look, Sparks," he steps forward and takes my hand in his, "I know how much you hate me now, and I can only imagine how disappointed you are that you didn't get pregnant. I can't tell you how much I wanted to give you a child."

I glance down at where his large palm engulfs mine.

"If only things had worked out otherwise, but they didn't, and I am sorry. But that was just one time, right?" He rubs his thumb across my wrist and my pulse skitters.

"We can try again." His voice takes on a cajoling tone.

I tip up my chin. "We can, huh?"

He nods, his features taking on an earnest expression. "Let me give you what you want. Let me take you away from the city to a place where there is no stress, where you don't need to worry about anything, but can focus on yourself. After all, if you are less tense, it helps to conceive right?"

"You've been reading up?"

He smiles and his features light up. "I confess that I may have researched it." He lowers his head and kisses the back of my palm. "Let's do it right this time. Let me marry you, make you my wife, and then we can try for a child."

"Is that your command?" I stare at him.

He rakes his gaze across my face. "And if it is?"

"Well then..." I flutter my eyelashes at him, "it's a 'no' from me."

"What?" His gaze widens. "You don't mean it."

"Better believe it." I flick my hair across my shoulders. "I thought you were going to apologize—"

"I already did, didn't I?" He scowls.

"Did you?" I look him up and down. "Clearly, you and I are not talking about the same thing if I have to remind you about what you have to apologize to me for."

I turn to leave and he grabs my wrist, "Don't leave." He growls, "Don't

you dare turn away from me, Sparks."

"Oh, I am going to do more than that." I smile grimly. "Let go of me, Arpad."

"No."

"See, this is your problem." I shake my head. "On the one hand, you want to convince me to marry you. On the other, you're still trying to control me into doing what you think is right for me, and that's only going to push me away. You know that, right?"

He glares at me and his grip tightens. His jaw tics and his muscles coil. Then he squares his shoulders, and releases me. "See," he growls, "I am doing what you want, aren't I?"

"It's a start." I tuck my elbows into my sides. "Now, you can stay the hell away from me."

"Don't ask me to do that." He bunches his fingers into fists. "Anything but that."

"That," I tilt my head, "is the price."

"For what?"

"For a chance at convincing me that you're the man for me."

"I am the only one for you. You know that already."

"Do I though?" I scan his features. "All I see is a man who wants to control me into doing what he wants."

"Because it's right for you."

"Let me be the judge of that." I draw myself up to my full height. "Promise me, you won't interfere in my life."

His chest rises and falls. Anger rolls off of him in a dense cloud and his shoulders seem to grow even bigger. He takes a step forward and the strength of his dominance crashes into my chest. I throw up my hand. "Promise me," I force out the words through a throat gone dry. "Do it Arpad, if you want a chance at us being together."

"Will you come back to me if I do?"

"I don't know."

"What?" He blinks. "You expect me to let you go, not knowing if you will return to me?"

"That's the whole point. It's called taking a risk." I twist my lips. "Do you have the guts to take this chance on us? Do you, Arpad?"

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you've lost me anyway."

He squeezes the bridge of his nose, then mutters, "Fine."

"What?" I stare. "What did you say?"

He lowers his hand to his side, stares at me, "I give you your freedom," he snaps, "for now."

"And you promise that you won't come after me."

"I," his jaw tics, the skin around his mouth tightens, then he nods, "I promise."

"No matter what you see, you won't interfere in my life?"

His lips firm and he looks like he's about to refuse, then he nods again. "I won't interfere, no matter what."

"Promise." I hold out my hand, palm face up.

"I promise." He stares down at my palm. "If I touch you, I'll never let you go."

His shoulder muscles bunch, his chest planes ripple, and anger rolls off of him in waves. A drop of sweat slides down his throat, drawing attention to his sculpted torso. Jesus, why does he have to be so hot?

I hesitate, and he jerks his chin to the door. "Leave," he growls.

I blink at him.

"Now," he snaps. "Get out while you can, Sparks."

CHAPTER 46

Arpad

"You agreed to let her go?" Edward frowns at me from across my cabin on the *Heartbeat*.

"I told her to leave while she still could." I raise the bottle of vodka to my lips and chug it down. The alcohol slides down cold, only to hit my stomach, and heat explodes up my spine. Even the bloomin' alcohol from her country of origin is full of contradictions. Just like her. Hot and cold. Giggling one second, all flashing eyes and heaving breasts the next. And why the hell am I still thinking about her?

Perhaps it's because I'm still on the yacht? I couldn't bring myself to leave here though. After all, I'd first made love to her here. When I am here, I feel closer to her; yet the ghosts of our coupling make me miss her more intensely. The pain is a dull throbbing ache somewhere behind my rib cage. Good, I deserve it. A reminder of how I'd screwed up. Edward had tried calling me, and when I hadn't answered he'd tracked me down here.

"Vodka?" He eyes the drink in my hand, "Since when did you start drinking vodka?"

I glare at him and he chuckles. "Is it because it's her favorite drink?" he asks.

"Who's favorite drink?" I grumble, then drink more of the liquor.

"Are we going to pretend that you're not heartbroken because of how you acted toward her?"

"No," I polish off the remaining alcohol, then slam the bottle down on the

bar counter, "we are going to pretend that you never said that." I point a finger at him, then blink when his image splits into two.

Shit, maybe I drank too much. On the other hand, I'm still standing, so perhaps it's not nearly enough.

I pull out the pack of cigarettes from my pocket, toss one between my lips. I light the cigarette. The flames lick my fingertips and I hiss, before dropping the lighter on the counter.

I take a healthy drag, then cough. What the hell? Have I become so pussy-whipped that I've forgotten how to smoke?

My head spins. I pull the cigarette out from between my lips, stare at it.

"Thought you were trying to quit?"

"Trying." I growl. "The operative word is trying."

Like I'm trying to quit her. And succeeding at neither. No, strike that. The withdrawal pangs for nicotine cannot compare to the withdrawal symptoms I am facing at the thought of moving on from her. Shit, and I clearly have lost all my balls. I stub out the cigarette in the ash tray, then reach across the counter, and grab a fresh bottle from the inside shelf.

I straighten and the blood rushes from my head. The world tilts, I grab at the counter, and steady myself. Shit, guess I am more drunk than I thought?

I place the bottle on the bar, slowly, slowly, then try to unscrew the cap. My fingers slip and the bottle tips over. It hits the ground, then rolls toward Edward, who stops it with his foot.

He picks it up, then holds it behind his back.

"Aww, come on," I huff, "don't be such a spoilsport."

He walks over to the couch, then points to the one on the other side of the coffee table, "Take a seat."

I scowl, "Not particularly in the mood to confess anything, Father."

He sighs, "Sit down, will ya?" He stares at me with his patient all-knowing eyes.

"Don't you ever lose your shit?"

He arches an eyebrow. "Typical defensive mechanism," he drawls. "When you don't like what you see, you point the mirror at the other person."

"Is that an euphemism?"

"A metaphor. It's my way of saying you need to face the problem at hand, instead of running from it."

"And haven't you ever run from your issues? Have you always been so perfect that you've faced your fears head on?"

"If you only knew what goes on in the recesses of my mind." He purses his lips.

"Ooh, do tell." I reach over, grab another bottle of vodka, then amble over to drop into the seat he'd pointed to earlier.

I tilt the bottle to my lips, take a healthy swig. The liquid goes down smoothly. It hits my stomach and a low heat creeps up my spine. At least, this shit is good. Worth the odd million I'd paid for it.

Edward raises his own bottle and unscrews the cap.

I stare. "You're joining me, Father?"

He chuckles. "I do drink, you know. I simply try to do so in moderation."

"Booorinnng," I mutter, then drink some more. "So, are you going to tell me why you've made me sit here? For that matter," I lean forward, "why the hell did you come here anyway?"

"I'm not here alone, actually." He tilts his head, as if listening intently.

"No shit, I am here with you," I guffaw.

He holds his palm behind his ear.

"The hell you up to, Father?" I scowl.

"Wait for it; wait for it." His lips turn up in a smirk. And Edward never smirks. Which means this must be bad. Like really b-a-d.

I hear the sound of footsteps hitting the deck of the yacht, which rocks under the combined weight of whatever... Or whoever is headed for us.

"Oh, bollocks," I purse my lips, "don't tell me the rest of the Seven are—"

The door to the cabin is flung open and Saint marches in.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." I raise the bottle, chug down more of the drink.

It doesn't help dispel the nightmarish scenario that's forming in front of my eyes.

Sinner saunters in, followed by Damian, and Weston. "Bugger." I slouch down deeper into the sofa. The guys walk to the bar. Damian circles the counter, then pulls out a bottle of whiskey. "So, this is where you've been hiding the good stuff?" He holds up the MacAllan's 72-year-old whiskey... Which I admit, is something I'd bought on a whim.

Weston turns to me, "You mean you've been storm chasing with this expensive shit on board?"

"It's bolted in when I'm at sea, you twat." I swig back more of the vodka, then wipe the back of my palm across my mouth.

"He means he's not drinking whiskey anymore," Edward pipes up.

"What do you mean?" Saint looks between us. "The bastard's whiskey

collection rival's only Sinner's." He glances around at the others, "No offense to the rest of you tossers."

"None taken." Damian chuckles, Weston laughs, and Edward watches the proceedings with his steady gaze. Damn it, doesn't the man ever take a day off from being a serious priest to simply, being...?

"I should be the one offended," Sinner drawls, "considering Beauchamp, here, wouldn't know taste if it bit him in the arse. Except when it comes to his choice of woman, of course."

"Don't talk about her, you bastard," I mutter.

Sinner arches an eyebrow. "This is not looking good."

"Nope, it isn't," Damian agrees.

Weston holds out his hand and Saint slaps a note on his outstretched palm.

"You guys bet on me?" I scowl at them, wondering why I don't feel angrier toward them. I should be livid, should toss them out of the only space where I feel at home, but hell, when you hang out with boys who've turned to men in front of your eyes, and who sometimes you hate almost as much as you love them like brothers... Then it's a little difficult to take offense at their shenanigans.

Edward jerks his chin toward me, "The man's taken to vodka like a mermaid to dry land."

"Uh?" Weston frowns at Edward, "Aren't mermaids supposed to find dry land difficult to navigate?"

He lowers his chin, "Keep up, Doc."

Weston rubs his chin. "So you mean he hasn't really taken to vodka?"

Edward winds his finger in the air.

"So, you mean he actually hates vodka but he's drinking it because..." Saint's voice trails off. "I see." He looks me up and down, then glowers, "Jesus, Arpad, couldn't you have held out just a little longer?" He pulls out his credit card and hands it over to Weston, who pockets it.

"The way Mr. No-strings-attached is going, it's best I keep it, don't you think?" He smirks.

"Whatever." Saint rocks back on his heels. "If the fucker's spirits sink any lower, he'll be drowning without water."

"Har, har." I lift the bottle of vodka and toast them, "Aren't all of you the soul of wit today?"

"Someone has to be, considering you've lost your mojo." Weston grabs

his glass, then prowls over and drops into the seat on my right. Damian follows, drink in hand, and sits down on my left.

Saint and Sinner position themselves on either side of the sofa and Edward completes the hexagon from where he's seated opposite me.

I recognize it for what it is—an intervention. Hell, I was there for the ones we'd staged when each of the other men had met their match in their woman. Except Edward, that is, and soon he is going to be left alone... Hold on, what am I thinking? I don't have my woman yet. Far from it. In fact, the way things are headed, I am likely to remain a bachelor for a long time. Which is good. Which is what I had wanted not that long ago. So, what changed in the little time I've known her? How has she managed to turn my world upside down in such a short time?

"I proposed to her," I reply. "She agreed, at first, until she found out about my arrangement with the Bratva."

Silence descends on the room, then Saint explodes.

"The Bratva?"

Damian scowls. "Let me get this right. You decided to align with the Russian mafia. Why the hell would you do that?"

"The Bratva? You're taking the piss, right brother?" Weston drawls.

When I don't reply, the rest stare at me.

"Now, why would you do that?" Saint rubs the back of his neck, "It's not for the money, so I can only assume this has something to do with the bastards who kidnapped us?"

"When were you going to tell us?" Sinner's voice is hard.

I set the bottle on the floor, then rise to my feet. Lose my balance, right myself, then fold my arms across my chest. "It's not how it seems." Shit, why does this have to be so hard? These guys have had my back for so long. Surely, they'll understand why I had to do it, right?

"Hold on, chaps, let's give him a chance to explain." Edward turns to me. "I assume you have an explanation?" Edward's gaze narrows, "You do, don't you?"

I turn to face them, "You know how when we were kidnapped, our captors made me and Damian fight?"

The men nod.

"Well, it didn't stop there."

"It didn't? Edward's face pales. "What..." he swallows, "what else did they have you do?"

I take in his pinched features, his tense body. Shit, what else had they done to *him*? I frown at him, open my mouth to ask, when he shakes his head. Fine, so he doesn't want to talk about it, then? That's okay. There's a time and place for each of us to confess the extent to which the incident had ripped through our minds and ravaged our emotions. Perhaps if I come out with mine, it will help Edward open up about his experiences too? It's another reason to finally come clean to them.

"They," I square my shoulders, "they... made me fight in underground fighting clubs."

"Wait," Damian scowls, "the kidnappers pitted us against each other. They made us fight until one or both of us lost consciousness. It became a game for the two of us, how to keep hitting each other, without hurting the other too much? Remember? And when the kidnappers caught on, I took the blame for it." Damian curls his fingers into fists. "They blindfolded me, took me to an underground fighting ring, where they pitted me against men stronger than me. I fought them, and survived." He rubs the back of his neck. "Hell, it put me off fighting in any form after that... It's also why I turned to music." He shakes his head. "But I put myself forward so you wouldn't have to do it."

"Only," I draw in a breath, "they didn't spare me either."

"Motherfuckers." Damian's jaw tics.

"I don't understand." Saint scowls. "You were the smallest among us."

"Until I outgrew you lot," I snap.

"But at that time, you were smaller than most boys your age," Sinner reminds me. "Why the hell did they make you fight?"

"Because it made for bloodthirsty sport? Because they were perverted mofos?" I roll my shoulders. "Because they were sure that, unlike Damian, I would fail?"

"Only, you didn't," Edward says slowly.

I curl my fingers into fists.

"I still don't understand." Damian purses his lips. "You were a preteen. Hell, you couldn't hold your own against me, in our mock fights—"

"Until I had to fight for my life."

"So..." Edward clears his throat, "even after Damian offered to fight in your place, they made you face opponents in the underground fighting cages and you never told us?"

I hunch my shoulders. "Have you told us everything they did to you?"

Edward pales.

"That's what I thought." I curl my lips.

"But this isn't about me." He squares his shoulders. "It doesn't change that you took on grown men when you were not even thirteen and managed to defeat them with your bare hands." He leans back in his seat and some of the color filters back into his cheeks.

I straighten my back. "Who said I fought with bare hands?"

"You didn't?" Weston frowns.

"I was given a piece of rope to defend myself, considering I was much younger than my opponents." I glance around the room, "It was their way of giving me a slight advantage... Or so they said."

"The bastards," Sinner growls.

There's silence, then Edward exhales, "So you used the rope to defeat them?" All emotion is schooled from his face. That's the thing with him... Except for the few moments when he lets the mask slip, you can never tell what is going on in that razor sharp mind of his. And the Father has an astute mind... I remember enough of him as a boy to recollect how highly perceptive he'd been. He has a head for numbers and had displayed an early sense of business acumen, which is why all of us had been shocked by his decision to join the seminary. Guess the Lord really does work in mysterious ways... Or he'd simply ordained that the incident turn our lives upside down so we'd each have to reinvent ourselves. Me turning to the Bratva and him becoming a man of God.

"Yes." I take in Edward's stoic features then turn my attention to each of the others in the room. "Turns out, I'm good with my hands." I raise my palms and stare at them. "I didn't have a choice; I had to figure out how to use the single piece of rope to defend myself."

"And you did?"

"Yeah," I crack my neck. "I quickly learned how to tie it around the neck of my opponent and threaten to choke him, until he let me go."

"So, your reputation preceded you?" Damian exhales. "Didn't realize when we nicknamed you Killer, we were only confirming the role you'd already played in the ring."

"Except I didn't kill anyone."

"You didn't?" Edward frowns.

"Nope." I shake my head. "If I spared their lives, they owed me."

"And that's how you built your circle of influence in the underground?"

Saint interjects.

I nod, "It's also how I struck up a friendship with Nikolai, the scion of the Bratva."

"Nikolai?" Sinner scowls. "The asshole who first told us that the Mafia were behind our kidnapping?"

"You kept in touch with him?" Edward's jaw hardens.

I draw in a breath, "If you recall, in exchange for the lead, Niko had wanted Damian to face his guy in an underground fight club." I refer back to how the Seven of us had met Nikolai.

"Only, Baron took Damian's place, and lost the fight," Saint says slowly.

"Then you stepped in and defeated the man the Bratva fielded that day," Sinclair recalls.

Saint tilts his head, "That was what, ten years ago?"

"Almost thirteen." I rub the back of my neck. "That day, Niko and I struck up a friendship. We've kept in touch since."

"And you didn't think to tell any of us?" Sinner growls.

I widen my stance. "It didn't seem like a big deal. We simply hung out, kept in touch. Over a period of time, I grew to trust the man. Enough that when he called me with a proposition, I agreed."

"A proposition?"

"What the hell did you agree to?"

"Niko's sister—" I blow out a breath, "She had taken over the family business, the legitimate arm of it. Tensions were escalating between the Bratva and their rival gang. They wanted me to marry her and get her out of LA to keep her safe."

"Hold on." Sinner straightens, "LA? Niko's sister? You aren't talking about Karina, are you?"

I nod, "I agreed to lure her to London, but I stopped short of committing to marrying her. I told them I'd give it some thought. Getting her out of LA was the priority."

"So you made sure that we offered her the gig to take on the security for us Seven?" Edward interjects.

Of course, the Father is the first to put it all together. The man is so intuitive sometimes it's scary.

"Hang on. Something doesn't make sense. You were keeping an eye on her," Saint drums his fingers on his chest, "while she was the one we charged with gathering intelligence on the men who kidnapped us?"

"With her background with the Bratva, she was the right person to suss out any possible gangsters wherever they were."

"This entire picture is one hell of a mess." Edward places the tips of his fingers together.

"You're telling me?" I glance around at their faces. "So, what do I do now?"

They stare back at me. My five best friends, the most feared businessmen in the country, meet my gaze with varying expressions of disbelief.

"If I didn't see it myself, I'd have thought you guys were in shock." I snicker.

"I'm not shocked," Edward finally says. "You guys shocked?"

"Nope."

"Nah."

"No way."

"It's what we expected of you," Damian draws.

"You did?"

"Sure," Saint scratches his jaw, "fuck up your life royally, more than any of us have done in the past? Of course, it had to be you, Arpad."

I scowl, "Come on, guys, that's not fair."

"You should've thought about that before you manipulated her into your life," Sinner draws.

I stare at him, "Hello, pot; meet kettle?" I glower at him.

"Hey, sure. I may have steered things so they went my way—"

"Steered, my arse." I snort. "You were gunning for revenge, and decided to marry Summer so you could keep an eye on her."

"The ends justify the means." Sinner shrugs, "I may have gone about it unconventionally, but I was already in love with her."

"And I'm not?" I glare at him, "Now, I want to marry that obstinate woman but she won't hear of it. She told me to stay away from her."

"So, of course, you're keeping an eye on her?" Edward narrows that all-seeing gaze on me.

"Umm. Yes?" I offer.

"You're going to continue to stalk her and get all up in her business, aren't you?" he asks.

I frown. "Is that a trick question, because you know I can't keep away."

He leans forward in his chair. "She asked you to give her space, I assume?"

I nod.

"Yet, you are flagrantly contradicting her request?"

I drag my fingers through my hair. "She's upset, not thinking clearly. I understand—"

"Do you?" Edward glares at me. I blink. Shit, today is a first. The usually placid Father has unbent enough to reveal how displeased he is with me? Well, let's just say, that has never happened before. Hell, the last time we'd seen Edward this worked up was when... We'd intervened on Damian's behalf. I frown. Is the fact that the rest of the Seven are finding their partners getting to him? Nah, not possible. Edward had chosen his path, and he's the kind of guy who'll stay committed to the promises he's made, no matter the price he has to pay.

"Look," I hold up my hands, "given the fact that we're no closer to finding who instigated our kidnapping, and considering her ties with the Bratva, no way, can I go without checking in on her."

Edward rises to his feet. "Given you are in love with her and you want her to come around to marrying you, no way, can you afford to piss her off further."

"Fuck," I swear aloud.

He nods. "My sentiments exactly."

"So, you expect me to simply... What? Stay away from her?"

He nods again.

"And what if she gets into some trouble, and needs saving?"

"Has she needed saving so far?"

"We—ll." I scratch my chin. She needed my sperm. No, not really. She'd had a sperm donor all lined up, until I'd messed up her plans, and then when I told her to pretend to be married to me, so I could take her to see Grandmama, she'd traded that for my impregnating her. And then, every step of the way, she'd matched me. Even when I'd pulled the Bratva surprise on her—asshole that I am—she hadn't flinched. She'd simply broken our arrangement and stormed out of there... Something no one else had done before.

"She's bloody capable of taking care of herself," I finally admit.

Edward nods.

"And feisty." I can't stop the smile that curves my lips.

Saint smirks. "Keep going."

"And gorgeous and full of sass, and boy, when we do yoga together—"

"Hold on," Sinclair chokes, "she's got you to do fuckin' yoga with her?"
I redden. "Uh, it was kind of foreplay," I rush to explain, "but I gotta tell you, those positions, they look easy, but they are not."

"No?" Weston chuckles.

"Nope." I shake my head. Shit, if I am not digging myself in deeper. "I have a whole lotta respect for all those yoga bunnies now."

Damian spits out his whiskey, "Did he just say yoga bunny?"

"He said yoga bunnies." Weston holds out his hand and Saint pulls out another credit card from his wallet and hands it over. "That will pay for our second honeymoon, thank you very much."

"Just try not to come back too soon." Saint grimaces.

"What? Did you guys just have another bet going?" I growl.

"The same one." Weston grins. "Anything else you want to tell us?"

"Nothing that you can profit from." I firm my lips.

"Aww don't be like that," Weston laughs, "you'll get used to it soon."

"What?" I frown.

"This sensation of being unmoored and helpless, and basically, feeling like she has you by the balls."

"You forget one thing," I dig my finger into my hair and tug, "she does have me by the balls."

"Good." Edward looks me up and down, "So whatever happens, you won't intrude?"

"Within limits."

"What does that mean?"

"I won't stalk her, or spy on her. Whatever I do, it will be in the open."

"Don't do anything that'll get you into trouble." Edward walks over and slaps me on my shoulder, "You get me, Arpad? Don't fucking screw this up?"

"Why the hell does it feel like you're warning me, Father?"

"We were put on this earth to learn our lessons, and this, I fear, is the biggest test for you yet."

"And you, Father?" I tilt my head, "What's the lesson you are supposed to be learning this life time?"

He flattens his lips, "Wouldn't you like to find out?"

CHAPTER 47

Karina

I walk out of the apartment which I had shifted into a few days ago.

I'd moved out of my earlier place, which maybe had been stupid, considering how much I had liked the place. After all, I'd have been able to clean up the place and spot any cameras or bugs he'd left behind... But somehow, when it comes to that asshole, I don't trust myself. Or rather, I don't put it past him to pull a fast one on me.

So, I had called around to the girls and they'd come to my rescue.

Julia had moved in with Damian, so her place, which was previously Amelie's until she'd married Weston, was free. But considering that apartment block is also owned by one of the Seven, I wouldn't put it past them to find a way to bug that place, as well. So, I had moved into a hotel for a few days, then found this new apartment, which had been a stroke of luck, considering the best apartments seem to be snapped up so quickly.

The place is a two-bedroom apartment on a quiet side street, in a residential area. All of which suits me fine. I had also taken ample precautions, to ensure the space wasn't bugged. Not that I expected it to be, but after what Arpad had done, I couldn't leave anything up to chance.

As is habit, I glance up and down the road as I approach my car. Nothing seems amiss. I scowl. Is that good? That everything looks fine? Has Arpad asshole actually decided to stick to his promise and leave me alone? Would he not even watch me from afar? Or have people follow me and report back to him? I glance about again. A couple walks up the street; a mother, with a

stroller and another child, a girl trailing behind her, passes me. I glance down at the baby in the stroller and my stomach flip-flops.

I could have been pregnant with his child. Good thing the alphahole didn't manage to impregnate me then. Who'd have thought he'd turn out to be a lying, manipulative, bastard? Hell, he's a billionaire and a venture capitalist, so I hadn't expected him to be completely sinless... But honestly? Colluding with the Bratva... With my own family. The one thing I had tried to steer clear of, and he'd pulled me right back into the heart of everything I had tried to avoid. *Stop it, stop thinking of him.* He's gone from my life, and that has to be good, right?

I smile at the baby, who gurgles back and points at me. The kid warbles something and the mother laughs. "It's your beanie." She smiles at me. "She likes the color."

"Me too, mommy," exclaims the older child. "I like red too."

"Oh." I laugh as I touch my hat. It's not a color I'd normally wear, but after alphahole had pointed out how much he liked me in it—No, that is not the reason I am wearing it. Is it?

I turn away, whip off the beanie and stuff it in my pocket, then head for my car. My foot connects with an upside-down hat that skitters to the side. Change falls out of it. "Shit." I reach down, and gather up the coins and dump them back in the upturned hat.

"Got a cigarette?" A gruff voice asks.

I glance up into the bright, shining eyes of a homeless man. His hair flows down to his shoulders while an overgrown beard covers the lower half of his face. He's wearing a shirt that's ragged but clean; his pants are a color that must once have been black, but now edges toward grey.

"I don't smoke." I reply.

"Cigars then?" He asks.

I huff out a laugh, "Do I look like I carry cigars with me?"

"You look like a woman who knows what she wants."

"If only." I let out a sigh. "I thought I did, but I don't anymore, know what I mean?"

"Confusion." He nods. "It's a good sign."

"It is?" I scowl.

"It's the first step to getting clarity."

Hmm. "And you know that how?"

"It's the natural progression of things. First, the experimentation. Then

the deconstruction. Followed by rationalization. Finally, the reconstruction."

I laugh. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Sure, you do." He chuckles. "You just don't want to admit it to yourself."

"Gee, thanks for the words of wisdom," I mutter, "but no, thanks."

I rummage around in my purse, pull out a few notes, then drop them into his hat. He doesn't even look at it. Weird.

"Now, a cigarette, pretty lady? I wouldn't say 'no' to that."

I glance up and down the street. There's no shop in sight. "Why don't you take the money and buy the cigarettes?"

He stares at me and I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "Fine, fine. I'll get some for you on my way back."

"I may not be here then."

"Oh?" I frown. "Where will you be?"

"Here today, gone tomorrow, unlike the love in your eyes, for him."

"Love?" I gape at him. "I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's what he said too." He gestures to the signboard he's holding up.

When we two parted

In silence and tears,

Truly that hour foretold

Sorrow to this.

"Cheerful," I grimace. "Personally, I prefer Pushkin."

"I loved you, and I probably still do..." he recites.

"And for a while the feeling may remain." I smile.

"But let my love no longer trouble you," he tilts his head.

"I do not wish to cause you any pain." I toss my hair over my shoulder. Shit, why does that feel...so evocative...so telling, about my current circumstances? Why the hell does the romance in the words remind me of the douchebag I'd decided to break up with? Now wait, I'd never been with him, so we hadn't broken up. Besides, we're just taking a break from each other. That's all, right? I mean, I'd told him to back off... Okay, I'd made him promise to stay away, and apparently, he is doing so.

Bastard. When has he ever listened to what I've asked of him? Never. That's the correct answer. And this time he had turned and left... Okay,

technically, he'd told me to leave... Still, I hadn't thought he'd adhere to his promise, considering he hadn't told me outright that he would. And if he hadn't, I'd be mad at him for not leaving me alone. Classic case of, damned if you do, damned if you don't. And now, I am making excuses on his behalf. I really needed to have my head examined.

"Aren't you getting late?" homeless guy asks.

I glance down at him, then back to my car. "Yeah," I huff out a breath, "I am."

"Best be getting along then."

I glance at my watch and wince. I am running late. I head for the car, then turn to him, "Will you be here when I return?"

"Take your chances; live dangerously."

I blink. Why do his words remind me of how the rest of the Seven converse with each other? All the talk about pregnancy and babies, must be getting to me. It's the only reason I'd stopped long enough to have a stream of consciousness conversation with a complete stranger.

I close the distance to my car, get into it and pull away from the curb. I make it to Soho and manage to find a parking spot. Hallelujah. I can see why Londoners prefer the Tube, but hell, if I am going to commute packed into the underground. And no, I don't like being driven around either. Why should I, when I love driving my car? I park and head for the restaurant for my lunch date.

I walk through the buzzing tables toward the back. Niko glances at me from his seat at the corner table. Of course, he has the best seat in the house. Nothing but the best for my family, and I admit, I get my good taste in food, in clothes... In men...? Not that...but everything else, going for the top-of-the-line expensive shit. Yeah, that's my father and brothers for you.

I stomp over and sink into the chair opposite him.

A waitress immediately materializes. Of course, she does. Niko has that way with the women. Somehow, they sense the mean, grade-A asshole that he is; combined with the scent of money that wraps around him like a lover, not to mention, the dark edge of danger that clings to him like a second skin... Yeah, they pretty much come in their panties when they see him.

Niko nods at her, "Two lunch specials."

I frown. "Niko, what the hell? You know how much I hate it when you order for me."

He frowns, then nods toward the menu in front of me, "See anything you

want, *Malyshka*?"

"Don't call me that." I frown.

He blows out an exaggerated breath. "What will you have your highness?"

"That's better." I turn up my chin to glance at the waitress who, of course, is staring at Niko like he'll disappear from in front of her any moment.

"The lunch special, please."

She doesn't reply.

"Miss?" I touch her arm and she jerks.

"Oh," she turns to me, "of course, and to drink?"

"Vodka. The best you have," Niko replies, and the woman's gaze widens. Her lips part, and I swear, I can see little hearts in her eyes and more circling around her head.

"Still water for me," I reply.

Niko arches his eyebrows. "Since when do you not want to drink alcohol?"

Since I decided I want to have a child, which clearly, isn't happening anytime soon. So why the hell don't I feel like having alcohol? Especially since I had fallen off the wagon so spectacularly that evening at the bar... That evening when he'd stalked over to me and confessed how much he'd wanted to give me a child... When he'd asked me to marry him so we could start afresh... And I had said no... Shit, why the hell am I thinking about that obnoxious prat again?

"Karina?" Niko frowns. "You okay?"

I cough. "Yes," I nod, "of course, I am. Just parched, that's all."

"Hmm." Niko rakes his gaze across my features.

"So," I fold my arms in my lap, "Why did you want to see me?"

"To apologize."

"Oh?" I glance at him with suspicion. My oldest brother does not apologize to anyone... ever.

"Indeed." He nods. "I am sorry that we used your company as a front for the Bratva's activities. It's not fair given the effort you've put into building it up. We'll withdraw our interests from it."

I blink, "You will?"

He nods.

"Why are you doing this?" I scowl at him.

"Because you're my sister." He half smiles, and his features soften, "my

only sister."

I purse my lips. "Why is it that I don't trust where this is coming from?"

He chuckles, "I only have your best interests at heart."

"Not that I don't believe it. Only," I stab a finger at him, "You use that as an excuse... for interfering in my life. You and... and... Papa, both of you."

"You still pissed at us for asking Arpad to watch out for you?"

A-n-d, of course, he'd have to bring up the one person I am trying not to think about.

"What do you think?" I grouse.

"I think you need to look at it from our point of view."

"Which is?"

"You are a weak link for us."

I gape at him. "Weak link? Honestly, Niko, if that's why you called me here... To insult me—" I rise to my feet and he reaches forward and grabs my hand, "Come on, Kaykay, you know it's not like that."

Jeez, why does he have to use the name he called me when we were kids. It takes me right back to our childhood, when I had five brothers doting on me and could pretty much get my way on anything. After all, I was the youngest, and the only girl in the family.

I sink back into the chair and blow out a breath, "Then, what is it like? Explain it to me, Niko, because honestly, all I can see is my family ganging up with that...that bastard, to tie me down in a marriage, and—"

He releases my hand but continues to hold my gaze. "Did he hurt you?"

"Who?"

"Beauchamp, did he fucking do anything to you?"

Nothing I didn't want.

"Answer me," Niko snaps, and I blink.

"N...no, of course, not. He didn't. Arpad's not that kind of man." And now I am defending him? To my own brother? What the hell is wrong with me?

"But he did manipulate me. He tried to control my life, without my realizing it. He tricked me onto his boat and—"

"And—?" Niko leans forward, "What did he do?"

"He proposed to me, you ass. Just like you guys wanted. Honestly, I can't believe you and Papa came up with this crazy scheme. It's not like I can't look after myself."

"Oh course, you can. You grew up with us. You know how to take care of

yourself, but our enemies are out to get us, and trust me when I say that you don't want to be caught in the cross fire. And if you are, at all, you want someone to have your back."

I stare at him. "Are things that bad between the Bratva and the Sicilians?"

His jaw hardens, he sits up straight and his gaze grows cold. "It's not good," he replies.

Oh, hell. That means shit is about to go down, and I've eavesdropped on enough meetings that my father and brothers have had without me to know that things will get worse before they get better.

"It's why we wanted to make sure you were safe."

"By ensuring that I left LA?"

"For one."

"And by getting me married?" I burst out.

He stares at me, "If you're married to someone in the brotherhood, you will be safe *and* taken care of. It would put Dad at peace—"

I open my mouth, and he holds up his hand.

"Let me finish, Karina." My brother's tone brooks no argument. In that moment, he sounds so like my father—no, even more scary than my father—that I blink. Good grief. He is already turning into the *Pakhan*, without officially inheriting the title.

"We know you are an independent, modern woman, and you have your views and opinions, and we respect them."

I snort, "If that were true, you wouldn't be here telling me why you thought it was a good idea to arrange for me to marry a man you guys thought was the right choice for me."

"He is, though—the right choice." Niko's gaze moves past me. "Too bad, he seems to have moved on."

"What?"

I angle my head to glance over my shoulder and see him. What the—? It's him, the jackass who's occupied my every waking moment, and he's with another woman?

Arpad f'ing Beauchamp looks tanned and relaxed. His dark hair is in that unruly mess I want to run my fingers through. He's wearing a white button down, open at the chest. His shoulders seem even bigger than when I last saw them. Has he been working out? Probably been lifting that blonde bimbo who's sitting next to him... Not opposite him, but in the chair next to him. Bet their knees are brushing right now as he raises his shot glass and holds it

up to his date. She lowers her head, puts her mouth to the glass—to his glass, the one he'd touched with his lips—and takes a sip.

She coughs, reaches for her water and the bastard grins. He toasts her with the shot glass then downs it. Bet there's vodka in there too. Asshole is sharing the drink I introduced him to? With her?

"Karina?" Niko's voice reaches me, but I can't glance away from the tableau unfolding in front of my eyes. How dare he do this to me? How dare he flaunt that...that floozy in front of me? No wonder I haven't seen him in a while. He's been too busy getting his share of vagina from her, no doubt. Gah! Anger sizzles up my spine. I jump up, turn to go, when Niko grabs my arm again. "Sit down," he growls.

"B...but..." I sputter, "he's with someone else."

"You walked away from him."

"Of course, I did," I spit out. "That *mudak* had the gall to try to manipulate my life; he tried to get me to comply with his wishes without giving me the full picture."

"And if he had, would you have listened to him?"

I guess not.

A peal of laughter rings out behind me, a feminine one. *Don't look back, don't.* I glance behind, just as he feeds her some food from his spoon, before scooping up some food and bringing it to his mouth. He wraps his lips around the spoon, licks it clean, and my belly trembles. Moisture laces my core. Bloody hell, how can I be so turned on by him?

He lowers his spoon to his plate, then reaches over and whispers a strand of hair back from her cheek.

That's when something inside of me snaps. I jump to my feet and stalk over to him.

CHAPTER 48

Arpad

"What the hell are you doing?" She slaps her hand on the table with such force that the cutlery jumps, the vodka bottle tilts, and I reach out and grab it.

"Would you like some?" I pour some into a shot glass and offer it to her.

"I'm not drinking."

"Funny," I twist my lips, "that's not how it seemed to me the other day."

"That was a...mistake," she mutters, "I, uh, am not drinking again."

I stiffen, then peer into her features. "Are you uh," I clear my throat. Why the hell is this so hard to say? "I mean, are you... You know, trying to—"

She glares at me, then shakes her head.

I firm my lips. Okay so I can be a class-A dickass... You know what I mean, but even I know not to blurt out the question I have uppermost on my mind... Not in front of a third party.

"Have you met Diana?" I jerk my hand toward the other woman, without taking my gaze off Sparks' sweet face. Shit, the way she narrows her gaze, the sparks in those eyes. Jesus, she's gonna kill me and she's not even aware of it. I part my legs wider to accommodate the arousal that already tents my pants. One glance at her, a whiff of her sweet feminine scent, and damn, if I don't want to simply swing her over my shoulder and carry her out of here. Down, boy. Not yet.

I tear my gaze from her gorgeous features to turn to the other woman. "Diana this is Karina, my...uh..."

"His security consultant," she snaps.

"Ah," Diana glances between us, a frown on her face. "Would you like to join us?"

"Nope." She makes a popping sound at the end of the word. "I wouldn't dream of disturbing your date."

She stares at Diana then back at me.

"However, since I am already here," she juts out her hip and plants her hand on it, "maybe we can talk about the emergency that you called me about earlier?"

"Emergency?" I frown. "I don't think there's an emergency."

She snaps back her shoulders, then schools her features into a pleasant expression. All along, she glares at me. A chuckle rumbles up and I, wisely, swallow it. Not even I am foolish enough to toy with a woman who's working herself up into a temper, the way Sparks is right now.

"You were saying?" I prompt her.

"No, you were." She scowls at me. "I distinctly remember you calling me earlier and telling me you had an emergency." She draws herself up to her full height. "On the other hand, if you don't recall..." She turns away, and damn her, but I can't stop myself from jumping to my feet.

"Oh, *that* emergency," I drawl.

She pauses.

"I remember now."

She stares at me over her shoulder, "Perhaps you'd care to step this way to discuss it then?"

"Of course." I drop my napkin on my chair, then turn to my employee, whom I had enlisted to go along with me on this charade, "You don't mind, do you, Diana?"

She glances at me, then at the retreating back of my woman.

"Good luck," she half smiles, before rising to her feet, "you are going to need it with that one."

Isn't that the truth?

I follow Sparks as she skirts the tables and walks to the door that leads to a hallway at the back.

I step inside and she turns to me.

"How dare you?" she snarls. "How dare you...you flaunt her in my face like that?"

"I was sitting there, minding my own business, and you come along."

"And you happen to show up in the same restaurant where I am eating

lunch?" She fumes.

"Heard about coincidences?"

She scoffs, "It's as much of a coincidence as...being able to touch your feet the very first time you attempt a sun salutation."

I blink. "Uh, is that a yoga reference?"

"Of course, it is, you moron." She tips up her chin, then purses her lips. "I thought I told you to stay away from me?"

"I was at the restaurant before you arrived," I point out.

"So, you did notice when I walked in?"

Clever woman. She's got me there. I draw myself up to my full height. "I'm always aware of my surroundings and everyone in my vicinity," I mutter. "It comes with the territory."

"You mean of being part of the Bratva?"

"I'm not with them, Sparks." I scowl. "I told you. I merely did Niko a favor—"

"Favor?" she bursts out. "So...so you asked me to marry you as a favor to him?"

"You know that's not true!"

"So, it started out that way, though?"

I fold my arms across my chest. I am not going to lie to her. Not now; not ever again. From now on, I need to be upfront with her if...there is any hope of my winning her over.

"Yes." I hold her gaze. "Yes, it did play a factor in my asking you to accompany me to see my family, but not only. From the first time I saw you, I was attracted to you, you know that."

"What I know," she twirls a lock of her hair around her finger, "is that, since you first saw me, you've been manipulating my life."

"And I told you, that's who I am. I need to be in control, Sparks. You understand that, don't you?"

"No," she shakes her head, "no, I don't. And what you did was not just about control... It was—"

"Over the top?"

"Underhanded," she snarls.

"Passionate?"

"Calculating." She firms her lips.

"Intense?"

"Conniving." Her chest rises and falls.

"See? That is where we disagree." I lower my knees, so I am at eye-level with her. "What you think of as being deceitful is what I term as my killer instinct. It's going that extra inch to ensure that I get what I want. And what I want is you, Sparks."

"Well, you don't have me."

"I will have you, make no mistake about that."

"See, *that's* where we disagree." She narrows her gaze. "Holding too tightly brings nothing but pain. Surrender is freedom."

"That's what I've been telling you, babe." I straighten, "Surrender to me, and enjoy what only I can give you."

"And what is that?" she says in a low voice. "Allowing you to pleasure my body while you don't have any idea what's going on in my head?"

"Ah, now *that's* where we disagree." I allow my lips to kick up at the sides. "There is no pleasure without pain, no gain without torment, no giving in until your mind and body are in sync. And that's what I specialize in."

"I am not a toy, you...you... Wanker."

"Don't talk to me like that," I snap.

"Oh, but I can, and I will. In fact, I am going to make sure you're going to listen to every word I say."

"Is that right?"

She nods, "Read my lips, Arpad Beauchamp. You've fired the opening round; the next move is mine. I am going to do what I think is right for me, and you will have no choice but to watch."

CHAPTER 49

Karina

"How dare he follow me, and after he promised he'd step back and let me live my life?" I pace back and forth in the living room of my new apartment. What is happening to me? A month ago, my life was where I wanted it to be, business had been going well and I had been all set and ready to have a baby, and now... Now it's falling apart, and all because of that jackass.

"Are you sure he was following you?" Isla chews on her lower lip. "Maybe it really was a coincidence?"

"Right," I toss my hair over my shoulder, "and everyone who tries to meditate is able to calm their mind."

"Whoa, lady." Isla stares at me. "That's some deep shit you're coming up with."

"It is, right?" I twist my fingers together. "I think my brain cells have melted together. I mean, look at me." I gesture to myself. "I used to love wearing designer clothes. I'd walk into a meeting full of men and enjoy the power I held over them, but now—"

"Now you find all that hot girl shit exhausting?" She nods. "Instead, you want to do the old lady shit, like a puzzle, knit a sweater, sit in a chair while you shower...?"

I glower at her and she chuckles.

"Did you get your knickers in a twist because you saw him?"

I blink. "Not exactly. I'm just going crazy trying to come up with a way to get back at him."

"And that's important?" Isla tilts her head. "That you have your revenge for something he supposedly did?"

"Supposedly?" I huff. "He totally maneuvered me to where he wanted me to be."

"Maybe that's what you wanted, too?"

I turn on her, "What do you mean?"

"Look, Karina," she leans back in the sofa, "you're so strong willed... It's one of the things I love about you. If I had half the backbone you have—"

"Oh, but you do, Isla. You run a successful wedding planning business, which is no mean feat."

She smiles, then shakes a finger at me, "Oh, no, we're not talking about me here."

"But—"

She shakes her head. "Let me finish, babe."

I sigh, "Sorry, that was impolite of me, please continue."

She folds her legs under her, makes herself comfortable. "That's what I mean. You are so clear-headed, doll. There really isn't much anyone can force you into doing."

"Except, he did..." I say slowly.

She nods, "So maybe somewhere inside, you wanted it, too?"

"What?" I frown. "You think I subconsciously knew what was happening, but I went along with it anyway?"

She purses her lips. "All I'm saying is, he's not the only guilty party here."

"Hey," I protest, "who's side are you on?"

"Yours, honey, always yours." She smiles. "I've seen each of the other women go through their own journey before they got one of the Seven."

"Which is why you've sworn never to be entangled with one of them?"

She scowls.

"Yeah, yeah, okay, we're not talking about you." I make the motion of zipping my lips with my fingers.

"Good." She props her elbow on the armrest and supports her chin on her palm. "Each of the other women found a way to strip away the masks the Seven wear to the world, so their true natures were exposed."

"You mean, they found a way to see them at their most vulnerable?"

She nods. "What bothers you the most about what happened with Arpad?"

"That he used false pretenses to first lure me to London, then to make me

accompany him to see his family."

"So do the same to him."

"What?" I stare. "What do you mean?"

"You pull a fast one on him... Even the playing field."

"Right," I say slowly. "What do you suggest I should do?"

"What would hurt him as much as he hurt you?"

"I don't want to hurt him."

She frowns.

"I mean, I do...but only in a way that ensures that he apologizes to me." I drag my fingers through my hair. "I just want him to say he's sorry for what he did, you know? Is that too much to ask?"

"No, of course not." Isla presses a finger to her cheek. "He colluded with your family; you should do the same."

"What do you mean?"

"Collude with the rest of the women to put a plan in place. Then spring a surprise on him which he doesn't see coming."

"But," I stare, "why would the others help me? I mean, they are married to men who are part of the Seven, and the Seven are friends with Arpad, so wouldn't they technically want to side with him?"

"Unless they see it as helping him. Why don't you ask them?"

I open my mouth, when the doorbell rings.

"Yay, the troops are here." Isla jumps up and races to open the door. A second later, Summer flounces in, followed by Victoria, now sporting a baby bump, Julia, and Amelie.

"Heyyy!" Summer throws her arms around me. "How are you, Karina? I am so excited to help you in operation Alphaprank."

"Alphaprank?" I blink rapidly. "What's that?"

"It's the plan you're going to come up with to bring Arpad to his knees." Victoria beams at me, then rubs her belly, in the way many pregnant women do when they're adjusting to the new life they are carrying in their body.

I walk up to her. "May I?" I ask.

"Of course." She takes my hand and places it on her belly.

"Oh," I gulp, "it's harder than I thought it would be."

"I know, right?" Her smile widens further. "I'm still getting used to it myself."

I keep my palm pressed to her stomach. "Has he or she started moving yet?"

She shakes her head. "Because it's my first, the doctor says it may be twenty weeks before I feel the little thing move, but I am hoping it will be much sooner."

A soft sensation invades my chest. My throat closes and a pressure builds behind my eyes. Shit, what's wrong with me? I haven't even gone back to taking the hormone shots for anything since I found out I wasn't pregnant. So why is this...affecting me so much?

"You okay?" Victoria peers into my face.

I nod. "Yes," I clear my throat, "I'm so happy for you." I blink back the moisture that threatens to leak from my eyes. I will not let myself cry. Really, in the bigger scheme of things, it doesn't mean anything that I couldn't get pregnant on the first try, right?

So many women have been through so much more when they tried to conceive. I have barely started my journey, so why the hell does my chest feel so heavy?

Victoria releases my hand and I lower my arm to my side. "Come on, you should sit down."

She laughs, but allows me to guide her to the sofa. I place a cushion at her back and she smiles her thanks. "It's a nice place." She beams, "You're going to miss it when you move in with Arpad."

"Or maybe he could move in with me?"

She stares at me, then bursts out laughing. "Why not? It's time the alphaholes realize they can't have their way in everything."

"Damn right," I mutter.

Behind me, Isla claps her hands. "Ladies, who wants a glass of wine? Other than Victoria and Karina, that is."

The women stare at me.

"You're not drinking?" Julia asks.

"Umm." I twist my fingers together. "Just doing a detox thing," I mutter.

"Ah," Amelie nods, "that's wise. Just as long as you are not on a food diet of any kind, because," she places the bag she's carrying on the coffee table, then rummages around in it before producing a container and pulling off the lid. "Tada," she crows, "homemade chocolate chip cookies."

"OMG." Julia jumps toward it and grabs one from the tin. "I am starving." She chomps her way through half of it, then rolls her eyes, "Ohh.... It's almost as good as an orgasm."

"Nothing's as good as an orgasm." Summer smirks, reaching for a cookie

as well.

"Especially not when you have an alphahole on hand, ready to use his... uh...hand, and other parts of his anatomy, to provide one on demand." Amelie cackles.

"Pleaaaaase, you girls." Isla claps her hands on her ears. "Can you spare me the details? Especially since I know your husbands. Speaking of, can we get back to the topic at hand," she smirks, "i.e. Project Alphaprank?"

All of their faces swivel toward me. I reach for a cookie, then walk back to my seat. "Yeah, tell me more." I bite into the pastry and the chewy chocolate chunks coat my tongue. "Oh." My eyes roll back in my head, "This is incredible." I turn to Amelie, "That's some baking skills you have there."

She giggles, "That's what Weston also says. Although," her forehead creases, "he may have been referring to something more than baking."

The girls laugh and Isla groans. I glance between them and polish off the rest of the cookie.

"So...whatever you have in mind," I address my question to the group in general, "wouldn't the men object to it?"

"Why would they?" Summer raises her shoulders. "Besides, we're not involving the men in this, are we?"

"Nope." Julia touches her earlobe.

"Nah." Amelie shakes her head.

"What we come up with in this room, stays in this room," Victoria says, her tone serious.

"Oh." A warm sensation fills my chest. "You ladies sure about this?" I chuckle. "I don't want your husbands finding out and then being upset with you all."

"Oh, pfft," Summer waves her hand in the air, "our alphaholes are actually tabby cats in disguise."

"Fierce, but all they need is a rub on the tummy, or uh, on other parts of their anatomy, for them to behave." Julia chuckles.

"Ugh!" Isla makes a face. "Stop already."

"I don't want you guys getting into trouble," I mumble, "I mean, isn't it a rule or something that you have to share everything with your husbands?"

Silence for a beat, then another. Then Amelie turns to me, "Umm... excuse me, but where's the mystery in the marriage if you tell them everything? I mean, there are certain things that you're absolutely never going to share with your other half, come what may. Feminine mystique is

still a thing, and even more important, once you're married."

"True that," Julia pipes up, as the others nod in assent. "Of course, there's always the chance they'd want to help if we told them."

"Okay, but let's wait on that," I blow out a breath, "if you all are sure about this."

"We are," Summer replies.

"Question is, are you?" Isla fixes her gaze on me.

I twirl a strand of hair around my finger. "I... I don't want to hurt him." I jump up and begin to pace again. "I mean, I want to show him that he can't take me for granted, but really, that's all." I turn to them, "Know what I mean?"

The girls stare at me and my stomach ties itself up in knots. Why the hell do I feel so protective of that ass? After everything he's done to me, I still don't want to do something that would cause him pain... At least, not in a vindictive way... Apparently, I still feel something for him. Okay, face it, I want him, especially the things he can do to my body—the way he seems to make me come alive with just a glare, how he'd said he wanted to give me a child. A child... Hell, I still want to get pregnant, but not by any man. I want his baby. A child who will be the best of both him and me. I squeeze my eyes shut. This is hopeless. Why can't I go even a few minutes without thinking about the a-hole?

She raises her eyebrows, "You worried about him?"

"Of course, not." I snort. "That obnoxious grumpy pants can take care of himself."

"So, you're in?" Isla tilts her head.

I heave out a breath, "I'm in. What do you have in mind?"

CHAPTER 50

Arpad

I drive slowly up High Street Kensington, keeping her sporty Mercedes in sight. Where the hell is that woman headed? It's as if she knows I'm on her trail...

Okay, okay, I know I said I'd leave her alone, and I had. For two full weeks, I'd only had my man—someone whom I pay a lot of money, by the way—follow her, because all the other agencies I'd approached had turned me down. Something about professional etiquette... What jerks. More like, they are afraid my little spitfire would give them hell if she found out that they'd helped me keep tabs on her. Unfortunately, as it turned out, the geezer I'd managed to engage to track her had been completely inept. He'd lost her repeatedly. He'd insisted that it hadn't been his fault because the woman is simply really good at covering her tracks. The wanker—the detective I'd employed, I mean—had insisted she was way too good and taking measures to ensure that she wasn't being followed.

Which, I have to admit, sounds like my woman. And she'd called me canny? Sparks is a woman on a mission, and damn, if I am not going to unearth what she is up to. It is my pride on the line. Know what I mean? She threw down the challenge, and there is nothing I enjoy as much as sparring with someone who is gunning for me. And she is. And I am going to do my best to stop her. Hell, thanks to her, I haven't thought of taking my yacht out to sea, or chasing another storm... Because chasing Sparks around London gives me all the adrenaline rush I need.

What would it be like to live in this perpetual state of high for the rest of my life? To have her go toe-to-toe with me, constantly coming at me with her sass, defying me and questioning me... Until I'd have no choice, but to tie her down and make her submit to me. And submit she will... It is only a matter of time.

I watch as she pulls off onto a side road, then parks and hops out. She's wearing a pant suit that shows off her curvy figure; and those legs, bloody fuck. I can't wait to have them wrapped around me again. I park at enough of a distance so there's no chance of her spotting me. Then jump out and walk toward the boutique she's gone into. I stare at the window display of the understated, elegant shop—What the fuck? It shows wedding dresses. Why the hell is she here? I stare through the display window at the rows of dresses lining the wall on one side. At the far end, Karina speaks to another woman. They laugh, then the woman guides Karina further inside. Why the hell is she here? Is she trying on dresses? Why would she do that? She can't be getting married, can she?

To whom?

Why would she do that?

Maybe because I've been bloody stupid with her...? But I'd asked her to marry me, and she'd refused. Fuck. Bloody. Fuck. I dig my fingers in my hair and tug, then begin to pace the sidewalk. Twenty minutes pass... I know, I counted, as I stared at my watch, then back at the shop window, all the while walking back-forth-back like a douchebag—which admittedly, I am. But seriously, can you believe this? She's thinking of getting married. But to whom? What loser dares move in on my woman, while I... I...pace the pavement outside the shop like a—yeah, a blooming' moron. I fist my fingers at my sides, turn and peer inside the shop. She comes out of the fitting room holding a long white dress in her hand. She beams at the woman behind the counter, then hands over the dress. They speak, then the saleswoman hands over a bag which I assume has the same dress.

Motherfucker! Is that a wedding dress? Did she buy a wedding dress? Who is she marrying?

Karina turns to leave. I glance around, then pivot and race into the adjoining street. I peer around to find her walking to her car. She gets in, then drives off.

I wait a few more minutes to make sure she's turned the corner, then straighten and head for the main road. I am about to turn the corner when a

voice asks me, "Have a cigarette, ol' chap?"

I glance sideways to find a homeless man leaning against the wall.

"Sorry," I raise my shoulders, "I quit."

"That's a shame." He looks me up and down, "You look like you need it."

"You're telling me." I blow out a breath.

"Woman trouble, huh?"

"Something like that." I frown. What the hell am I doing talking to him anyway? I shake my head. "Have a good day."

I turn to leave, when he says,

"I loved you so sincerely, so fondly

Likewise may someone love you next."

I pause, then pivot and stalk up to him, "The hell did you say?"

"I loved you so—"

"I heard you," I growl. "Why the hell are you quoting Pushkin?"

"You recognized the poet?" His chuckles. "Funny, could have sworn you were more of a Byron fan."

"I was..." I frown, "I mean, I am." I stare down at his upturned features, the hair matted about his shoulders, the hat pulled down low over his forehead so I can't make out the color of his eyes. The hair on the nape of my neck prickles.

"Do I know you?" I snap.

"Don't think we run in the same circles, ol' sport." He cackles.

Hmm. I frown down at his features. He doesn't seem familiar. So why are all of my senses on high alert?

"Why the hell did you choose that particular line?" I growl.

"Quite evocative, isn't it?" His lips curve. "Do you think he was talking about letting a woman go so she can find a love more suited to her needs?"

My guts twist. I swoop down, grab him by his collar and haul him up. The scent of alcohol and unwashed skin envelops me. I wince. "What the hell do you mean by that? Have you been spying on me? Who are you working for?" I demand.

"No one," he sputters, "just having a conversation, man. If you don't have a cigarette, you only have to tell me. No need to get so worked up."

My grip tightens, and he coughs. He paws at my hand. "Let go, asshole," he chokes out. "The fuck's wrong with you, man?"

I release him and he drops to the ground, then turns and scrambles off.

"Hey," I call out, but he breaks into a run. "What the hell?" I chase after

him, but he speeds up. I increase my pace, try to keep up. But the tosser's, clearly, in better shape than he smelled. He turns a corner, and by the time I reach it, he's vanished. Bloody hell. I glance up and down the street, then walk to my car. Once inside, I pour sanitizer onto my palms, disinfect thoroughly, then message the rest of the Seven.

"Meeting. My place. Half hour."

Forty-five minutes later, I glance around at the faces of the rest of the guys. They're sprawled around the living room of the suite I've rented at the Dorchester. It's one of Saint's hotels, so I'd gotten a booking, no problem. Except, the asshole is charging me a premium. Of course, he is. Not that I begrudge him. I'd have done the same in his place. When it comes to money, it's an unspoken rule amongst us to keep the transactions fair for all concerned. Helps preserve the spirit of our friendship. The fact that all of them had dropped what they were doing and rushed here when I'd messaged them is testament to that.

"Whassup?" Sinner drawls from the chair he's sprawled in. "Something got your panties in a twist, Beauchamp?"

"Maybe." I lean forward on the balls of my feet. No way, can I sit down at the moment. First, seeing Karina trying on a wedding gown. Then, the encounter with the bum who quoted poetry? Fuck, what the hell is wrong with this city? Could someone who is clearly educated and well-spoken actually end up on the streets? Or does he simply prefer that lifestyle? If he does, well sure, I'm not going to judge. Still, it's peculiar, to say the least.

"Arpad?" Edward prompts, from where he's seated in the chair across from me. The only straight-backed chair in the room and he'd chosen it. Given a choice, the Father prefers to avoid material comfort of any kind. Sometimes, I think he does it simply to punish himself.

"What's on your mind, Beauchamp?" Damian frowns from where he's perched on the writing desk in the corner. "Your text sounded like you needed to talk things out?"

"Yeah," I roll my shoulders, "I, uh, saw Karina today."

"What the hell—?" Edward frowns. "Thought we'd agreed that you'd give her space."

I glower back at him. "My exact words, as I recall, were that I wouldn't stalk her, or spy on her; whatever I did, it would be in the open."

"So, you didn't stalk her?" he growls.

"I may have followed her from a distance."

"You didn't spy on her?" He purses his lips.

"I, uh, may have peered into a shop that she went into."

"What the hell?" Edward's jaw firms. "You complete moron. You realize you're acting like a complete twat, don't you?"

"Wait, hold on," I raise my hands, "I had a good reason."

"Can't wait to hear it." Saint blows out a breath. He exchanges glances with Weston, who shakes his head.

"And if you two exchange more money and go on about that bet, I swear, I am going to cut you out of the next round of very lucrative investments I have lined up."

"Easy, ol' chap," Saint mutters, "we're simply concerned about you. All that stress? It's not good for the ticker." He taps his chest. "On the other hand, it's a sign that you're invested in this relationship, which I believe is a positive."

"Positive?" I snort, "Fuck that. There's no positive outcome here, considering she's getting married."

"She is. Of course, she is," Weston murmurs in a soothing voice, "to you."

"You're not listening." I dig my fingers in my hair and tug. "She's marrying someone else."

"You sure?" Edward scowls.

"I saw her trying on a wedding dress, so yeah."

"You spoke to her?" he asks.

I glare at him. "I'm not dumb, Father. I sneaked a peek in the window, paced back and forth like a jackass while she was trying it on... " I flash back to the last time she went clothes shopping. With me. *Don't go there, asshole. Don't conjure up scenarios in your head. Focus, focus on finding a solution to the problem at hand.* I ball my fingers into fists. If only I had some rope right now. I could use it to alleviate this pressure that is building in my head, in my chest, my balls. Except, the only person I want to tie up is her. And she is getting ready to tie the knot with someone else. "Fuck!" I crack my neck. "What the bloody fuck am I going to do?"

There's silence in the room.

I glance at the faces of my friends, who seem to be digesting what I told them.

"Have you thought about approaching her, and asking her about it?" Damian ventures.

"I promised I'd stay away from her," I growl.

"Not that you're doing a good job of it," Weston snorts, "but seriously, the only way to clarify this situation is if you ask her."

"Have you all heard anything from your women?"

Sinner straightens. "You do realize I have other things to discuss with my wife, apart from your love life, or lack thereof?" His gaze narrows.

"Yeah, yeah." I crack my neck. "It was a thought." Fuck, if I'm not grasping at straws. Seriously? I'm asking my friends if they've heard of any gossip from their wives and girlfriends. Not that there isn't merit in gossip. After all, a whisper of a scandal could bring down a politician, but still, this is the absolute arse-end of things.

"Forget it," I snap.

He scowls, "And no, Summer hasn't mentioned anything to me. You're welcome."

I show him the bird.

He smirks. "You're definitely rattled, Beauchamp. You wouldn't resort to childish insults otherwise."

"Bugger off to whatever hole you came from," I mumble.

Sinner's smile grows wider. "Seems it's your turn to discover that tiny little thing inside of you—"

"You mean in his pants?" Damian smirks.

"Piss off," I snarl, and Damian laughs.

"As I was saying," Sinner quirks an eyebrow, "apparently, you don't have a choice but to strip yourself naked to the world."

"What, you mean literally?"

A few of the guys visibly shudder.

"No, you ass," Weston crows, "he means, we've all been there... Except for Father, here—" he nods at Edward, "we've had to face up to our deepest fears and come out the other side, before we could claim our women."

"Yeah, no idea what you're talking about," I growl.

"But you will," Sinner drawls.

I glance around the room as each of my dickwad friends nods sagely.

"Shit, this was a bad idea, calling you all here," I grumble. "Clearly, you have no constructive advice to offer."

"I do." Damian jerks his chin. "You need to talk this through with her."

"Hmm." I lean forward on the balls of my feet. "What do you think, Father?" I turn to Edward, "Should I speak with her?"

He drums his fingers on his thigh. "Loathe as I am to say this, you don't have a choice." He tilts his head. "The question is, will she hear you out long enough to have a conversation with you?"

CHAPTER 51

Arpad

After that little huddle, the guys had taken off and I had drunk myself to sleep and woken up with a hangover which still knocks behind my eyes. Bloody hell. Gone are the days when I could drink an entire bottle of the hard stuff and bounce out of bed with a spring in my step. Time... It always catches up.

And apparently, so do my sins... It has to be the reason I am skulking up the sidewalk, ensuring I'm not too close to Karina.

She'd left her apartment, taken her car to King's Road and parked. Now, she's going in and out of shops, the number of bags she's carrying in her hands multiplying with each outlet she visits. Is she shopping for Christmas already? More likely, a wedding—her wedding. Fuck, what the hell am I thinking? She walks out of yet another shop, turns and the handbag under her arm slips from her grasp.

Only when my feet hit the ground do I realize that I am moving. I reach her, snatch up the bag from the pavement.

I hold it out to her, and she stares at me, oversized sunglasses perched on her nose. Her gorgeous hair flows around her shoulders. And in her knee-length dress, she resembles a celebrity, all grace and poise.

She glances down at my hand, then back up at my face.

I raise the bag, move it closer to her, so she has no choice but to accept it.

"Thank you," she murmurs.

"You're welcome." I tilt my head.

Bloody hell, so this is what we've been reduced to—polite conversation?

She pivots and begins to slide up the street, her gait haughty, back straight, and that beautiful butt of hers wiggling in sultry promise with every step she takes in those fuck-me stilettos. Why do women dress up to go shopping, and in the most uncomfortable shoes ever? Don't most people shop online nowadays? Apparently, not her... Nope, Sparks always has that old world, don't-touch-me air about her, which is what had made me want to mess her up, right from the very start.

She pauses in front of a café, then walks inside. I follow.

The hostess leads her to a table by the window.

I step toward her, when the hostess stops me. "Good evening, Sir. Would you like a table?"

I glance past her at Karina. "I'm with her," I say.

The hostess looks between us, steps aside. I prowl over to Karina, then sink down onto the seat opposite her.

She stares at me through her oversized sunglasses. My fingers tingle to reach over and pluck them off her nose, but I resist. Instead, I reach for the bottle of water on the table and tip it into her glass.

"Drink," I mutter, "you need to stay hydrated."

"And you're supposed to stay away from me." She picks up the glass and raises it to her mouth. Her lips purse around the rim as she takes a sip. My cock instantly twitches. What the hell is wrong with me? I set my jaw, glare down at her. She swallows, then lowers the glass back to the table.

"And you and I both know you don't want that, Sparks."

She stiffens, then folds her hands in her lap. "What I want is moot right now."

"And why is that?"

"Your actions so far have convinced me you are not the one for me."

"And you know that's not true."

"It is," she tips up her chin, "that's why I am getting married."

"You're not serious." My heart begins to thud, my throat closes, and I lean forward in my chair. "You can't marry someone else."

"Is that your command?"

"And if it is?"

Her lips purse. "That's where you always go wrong, Ari. You think you can tell me what to do, and I'll obey?"

"You will," I snap. "You must. You know you want to, Sparks."

Her chin wobbles, then she glances away. "I've spent my life being torn

apart by my heritage. I knew my family were part of the Bratva. I wanted no part of it, yet everywhere I turned, they were there. There was no escaping their influence, you know?"

"Is that why you didn't protest when I asked you to move to London?"

"That was part of it," she nods, "but not only."

My pulse rate speeds up. "What else?" I clear my throat, "What else prompted you to accept?"

"You mean, other than the fact that you and the rest of the Seven were clearly my biggest clients?" She pulls off her sunglasses and places them on the table. When she finally meets my gaze, the full impact of those golden eyes hits me in the chest.

Shit, what is wrong with me. Why hadn't I been up front with her about my affiliation with her family? What had I been worried about? My ego? Her judgement? Had I actually thought that I could coerce her into becoming my wife? This sassy, gorgeous, full-of-spirit woman who is my other half.

The breath whooshes out of me. Shit, that's what it is. I'd always known it and yet I hadn't accepted it... Not really. Not until this moment, when she holds my gaze and says, "I was falling for you, Ari. I'd felt the chemistry between us, you know that. Hell, then I got to know you, your past, your fetishes, and all of it cemented what I felt for you. But you spoiled it all."

My heart stutters. I want to open my mouth and talk to her, but I can't. All I can do is stare as she tips up her chin and says, "I can't forgive you or my family, for colluding against me."

"And I won't apologize for what I did." *What the hell are you saying? Why can't you simply swallow your bloody ego and tell her how you really feel, you wanker?*

She pales, then nods, "And I wouldn't have expected anything else from you."

"Fine," I growl.

"Fine." She grabs her sunglasses and plonks them back on her nose. She rises to her feet, reaches for her handbag, only to knock it off the table. I swoop down, grab it at the same time she does. Our fingertips brush and a shudder runs up my spine.

There's still time. Stop her. Stop her from leaving. Just apologize, you asshole.

She tugs on her bag and I release it.

She rises to her feet, tugs the strap over her shoulder, then grabs her

shopping bags and brushes past me.

"Sparks." I call out to her, and she pauses.

She glances over her shoulder and through the lenses of her sunglasses her gaze widens. "What?" She swallows. "What is it."

"You'll make a wonderful bride."

Her lips firm, "Is that all you have to say to me?"

I blink. "Is there something else?"

"Yes," she snaps, "yes there is." She flounces over to me, plops her bags on the chair she vacated, then looks me up and down while shaking her head. In disgust? In disbelief? Before I can figure it out, she leans over, grabs the jug of water and upturns it on my head.

Around me, I hear gasps from the other tables.

"What the—?" I growl. "The hell is wrong with you?"

"The hell is wrong with you?" she hisses back. "You completely blind, neanderthal of a bastard."

"What—?" I gape. "What the hell did I do now?"

"Nothing. Everything." She stomps her foot, then slams the jug on the table, snatches her bags from the chair and stalks out.

CHAPTER 52

Karina

That ass, that absolute wanker. That...that...jerkenstein. "Aargh." I grab the bag of shopping and throw it across the room. It hits the wall, bounces off, and the shoes I'd purchased burst out of their tissue wrapping. Shit, no man is worth damaging an expensive pair of stilettos. Not even if he is the hottest, most desirable, six-foot five-inches, ripped like Adonis, alphahole... Are they?

I'd been so sure that he would apologize. Five syllables. Three, if he'd just say, "I'm sorry." Is that so hard for him? Am I wrong in holding out until he says so? I twist my fingers together. Maybe it's stupid that I'm holding out until he says so. I mean, what's the point of going into a relationship with a man who doesn't realize what he's done wrong? Things could only go downhill from there. If we are to enter into any kind of relationship, it needs to be on an equal footing, with no lies between us. Nothing to obscure how we feel for each other. And he does feel...a lot for me... If only he'd, just once, come clean and admit it to me.

I wrap the strands of my hair around my fingers. Guess there's no choice then. I have to put the rest of the plan into action. Damn him, for forcing my hand. I'd hoped the hint that I was getting married would be enough. That he'd see me through the shop window of the wedding boutique—of course, I knew he was there. I mean, just because I told the man back off... As if he would? As if he could! I would have been disappointed if he had. It's not in Arpad F'ing Beauchamp's nature to give up. And neither is it in mine.

I straighten, then walk over to the pair of shoes and lift them up. I pull them out of the wrapping, kick off the heels I am wearing, and slip into them. Instantly, I feel taller, more confident. Give a girl the right pair of shoes and she can conquer the world. Isn't it Marilyn Monroe who'd said that? And I am going to need every bit of faking it until I make it bravado to get through what I have planned. The girls are behind me. They'll help me out, for sure.

I only have to get through the wedding. That's all. I mean, two can play this game, right? I have to show him that he can't take me for granted. I have tried everything else possible, and now I have no choice but to take the final step.

The only way to tame an alphahole is to show him I'm not for sale. The only way to get him to take action is to show him I'm not available anymore. If he sees me on the arm of another man, surely, he'll drop all pretenses? I have to appeal to the caveman in him to come out and stake his claim. Damn him, but he hasn't left me any choice.

Isla is going to help me organize the wedding at the local city hall. The rest of the women are going to take their husbands into their confidence, and fingers crossed, they will be able to play along enough for Arpad to believe the story.

Now, the only thing left to do is to tell my family.

I pick up the phone and dial my father's number.

CHAPTER 53

Arpad

I've screwed this up. Clearly, I have. I begin to pace back and forth in the hotel room. Damn, why are the rooms so small? Despite this being the top hotel in the city, it feels like there isn't enough room to breathe here. I march to the window and try to pry open the pane. Of course, it's sealed tight, goddam it. I raise my fist, ready to punch my way through it, then stop. Fuck that.

I shrug out of my shirt, head toward the closet. I open the door, pull out the rope I'd folded into in a figure eight. I shake it out, then loop it around my palm, so it's fashioned into a whip. I raise my arm and that's when my phone rings. I glance from the rope to the phone, raise the whip again, and the phone rings once more. Ah, hell. I stalk to the side table, answer it.

"What?" I snap.

"Beauchamp?" Edward's voice echoes over the line, "You sound terrible."

"Wonder what gave you that impression?" I snort.

"Perhaps it's because you sound like someone destroyed your yacht."

"That would have been easier to stomach than—" I clamp my lips shut.

"Than?" He prompts me, "Go on, don't hold out now."

"Than finding out that she's definitely getting married."

He blows out a breath, "That's what I wanted to talk to you about." I hear the sounds of vehicles in the background.

"Where are you?" I frown.

"On the road," he replies. "I'm going to dial in the other guys."

"Wait, don't," I growl.

"Too late." Saint's voice comes over the line. "Why the fuck aren't you on video man?"

"Because I don't want to see your ugly mugs?"

"You don't have a fucking choice." Damian comes on the line.

"Beauchamp, you pussy," Weston snorts across the phone line. "Activate your video, you tosser. Not that I want to see your pussy-whipped profile."

"Look who's talking." I growl, "The one who won't do a thing without consulting his wife."

There's silence, then Weston laughs, "Keep fooling yourself, you mofo. You are in the same boat as us, and by the way, it's called being collaborative, which is what you do in a partnership. As you are about to find out."

I activate my video and five different faces stare back from five different squares.

I groan, "Not again. I don't need an intervention. I don't."

"The man doth protest too much," Sinner drawls. "Gentlemen, one of you going to break the news to him?"

"I will," Edward offers. "She's getting married."

"I know that, Father."

"Tomorrow."

"What?" My jaw drops. A hot sensation stabs my chest. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, man." Weston's voice sobers. "Amelie confirmed it."

"So did Julia," Damian interjects.

"And Victoria," Saint adds.

"Summer too." Sinner nods.

"Shit." I sit down on the bed with a thump, stare at the rope in my hand. It's true then. Of course, she'd told me, but honestly, I didn't think she would go through with it. How could she? How dare she do this?

"Where?" My voice cracks. I clear my throat. "Where is it taking place?"

"Islington City Hall, tomorrow, 9 am."

Shit. Fuck. What the hell am I going to do now? I stare at the rope in my hand.

"What are you going to do now?" Edward asks.

I disconnect the phone and toss it aside. It rings again, I pick it up and throw it against the wall. It bounces off and crashes to the floor. I jump up, then walk across the room and bring my heel down on it again and again.

Fuck that.

I raise the rope fashioned into a whip and bring it down on my back. The pain slices up my spine, lights up my brain. *Focus, focus*. Some of the noise in my mind fades. I whip myself again and again. The tongue of the whip curls around me, hits my stomach, rips the flesh. Goosebumps pop on my skin. The blood rushes to my brain. Silence descends between my ears. My gaze narrows. I whip myself a fourth, a fifth time... I lose count of the number of times the rope assails my back. Sweat drips down my forehead, trails down my spine. The grooves etched on my back burn. Only when my shoulder screams in protest, do I stop. That's when I hear the hammering at the door.

"Arpad? Open up." Is that...? I recognize Edward's voice.

"If you don't open up, I'm going to call the concierge and get this door unlocked."

I blow out a breath, then fold the rope into an eight and place it in the closet. I pick up my shirt and shrug it on, then head for the door, just as it swings open.

A bellboy looks between us.

"Leave," I snap.

He pales, then backs away.

Edward frowns. "Still scaring the hired help, I see?"

"Still trying to play the empathy card, I see?"

Color flushes the Father's face. He firms his lips, then marches past me and into the room. He glances about the space. "What the fuck took you so long to get to the door."

I blink. Whoa, hold on. The Father used the F word?

When I don't answer, he turns on me, "What?"

"Um...you swore?"

"It happens," he grumbles, "I'll have to atone for it, of course, but fine."

I shake my head, "You okay, Ed?"

"Question is, are you?"

"I'm in stupendous shape." I snort. "Can't you see?"

"You look like you haven't slept in a few nights."

Welcome to my world.

"So?" I thrust out my jaw. "You here to preach?"

"No," he holds up his hands, "aren't I allowed to drop by to see my friend?"

"Who's that?" I glance around the space. "I don't see anyone here."
He groans, "Really? You going to play that card now?"
I blow out a breath. "You're right," I jerk my chin at the door, "I'd prefer it if you leave."

"I'm not going anywhere." Edward smiles.

"In which case..." I head for the door.

Edward draws in a breath.

I pause, turn to glare at him over my shoulder. "What?" I frown, "What is it."

"You been whipping yourself again?"

"You're not the only one who gets to indulge in his nightmares."

A nerve throbs at Edward's temple, then his expression relaxes. "I'll let that pass, for now."

He walks over and seats himself in a chair.

"The fuck are you doing, Father?" I growl over my shoulder.

"Making sure you don't hurt yourself."

"Too late." I'd already had my legs cut out from under me. My heart had been carved out too, but whatever.

"So, you're giving in to self-pity, I see?" He quirks an eyebrow.

I pause, then swivel around to face him. "The hell are you talking about?"

He looks me up and down. "You, my man. I'm talking about you."

"Don't put me in the same box as you, Father."

Color smears his cheeks. The skin around his lips tightens. Edward curls his fingers into fists, then draws in a breath. He rolls his shoulders, then seems to get control of his emotions. "I'll forgive you, again." He adds in a low voice, "I know how distraught you are."

"And how would you?" I glare at him. "You, who decided to divorce yourself from all emotions, while the rest of us battle our demons on a daily basis?"

"Is that what you think I did?" He tilts his head. "That I turned my back on all worldly matters?"

"Didn't you?"

"Being a priest is the hardest thing I've ever done." His lips twist. "Anything else would have been the easy way out for me, don't you see?"

"No," I frown, "I'm afraid, I don't."

"No matter." He draws in a breath. "Forget I said that."

"But—" I protest. It's rare for the Father to open up. Aside from that

fucker Baron, he's the only one of us Seven, who, despite being with us, has rarely shared anything of his personal struggles with us. Which really makes it all worse, in a way. After all, he's been right here with us all these years, and yet, he's been closed off.

He folds his arms together, "Enough about me." He schools all emotion from his face. "What are you going to do now?"

"We were talking about you," I persist. "Why was becoming a priest the toughest decision you've ever made?"

"Now's not the time to discuss it."

"Then when?" I frown.

"When, the time is right."

"Which is?"

"Not now."

I blow out a breath, "You're bloody frustrating. You know that?"

"Says the man who's working himself into a tizzy over his future bride."

"She's not..." *Mine*, is what I want to say, but I can't. What the fuck is wrong with me? When did everything around me collapse to the point that I can't differentiate right from wrong and truth from fiction anymore?

I rub the back of my neck. "The hell am I going to do now?"

"We...are going to talk—"

I pale. "What? No, I am not in the mood for a sermon."

"Man to man." Edward scowls.

"Nor am I going to confess," I say in alarm.

He huffs, "As friends." He squeezes the bridge of his nose. "Why are the five of you so immature?"

"And Baron?"

He lowers his hand. "What about Baron?"

"I notice you didn't include him?"

"There's nothing to talk about. He escaped; good for him. The end."

"Hmm," I frown, "if you say so."

"I do." He firms his lips.

I open my mouth, and he holds up his finger.

I sigh, then hunch my shoulder. "Fine, fine," I grumble. "Have it your way."

"So..." he pivots and walks through to the living room of the suite. "What are you drinking?"

"We," I snap, "we are drinking."

"I don't indulge." He turns to face me over his shoulder. "You realize that, right?"

"Surely, a glass of whiskey is allowed?"

He nods, then pours amber liquid into two glasses. He turns and offers one to me.

I raise my glass, "Salut." I down it, top myself up again, throw that back as well.

"You trying to get drunk?"

"What do you think?" I chuckle.

"I think it's a bad idea. Not that it's going to stop you, but if you're going to do something tomorrow—"

"I'm not."

"You mean you're going to stand by and watch her get married to someone else?"

"She made her choice." I glance down into the depths of my glass. "I'm fine with it."

"Are you?"

I nod.

"So why are the knuckles of your hand white?"

I glance down, force myself to unclench my hands. I place the glass back on the bar. "There," I growl, "happy?"

"You're not thinking straight."

"And you are?"

He nods, "Most assuredly, I'm seeing clearer than you."

"So, what would you have me do? March in there and throw her over my shoulder and get her out of there?"

Silence.

I glance up to find his gaze boring into me.

"What?" I grumble. "You going to tell me what you are thinking?"

"You know what I'm going to say." A smile ghosts his lips.

"I can't read your mind, Father," I mutter. "You may as well spit out what you're thinking."

"You need to do what's right for you."

I stare at him. "That's all you have to tell me?"

He tilts his head. "That's all you need."

"What the hell?" I rub the back of my neck. "You are no help, at all."

"God helps those who help themselves."

I slow blink. "Right, then," I roll my shoulders, "guess the only thing that's going to help me get through the night is drinking heavily."

CHAPTER 54

Karina

"How do I look?" I glance at my reflection in the mirror. The simply-cut dress has a high lace neck, the pattern continuing down my arms to end just above my wrists. The front dips in a sweetheart neckline, only to cinch in at the waist, before flowing down to my feet. It's understated and elegant. Demure and sexy. While it's clearly a wedding gown, it's tasteful enough that I could wear it to a party. Not that I have any intention of doing so. I am getting married only once. At least, I have to believe that. He will come for me. He has to, right?

"Well?" I meet Isla's gaze in the mirror. "Why are you so quiet?"

"You look," she shakes her head, "you look—"

I twist my fingers in front of me. "Say it, already. It's all wrong, isn't it? Maybe I should have chosen another color?"

"You look incredible."

"Oh." I swallow, then stare at my flushed face in the mirror. Why the hell am I so nervous? "You sure?"

"If he doesn't lose his composure and sweep you off your feet when he sees you, I swear, I'll throttle him myself."

I laugh. "Join the queue. He can be such a stubborn dickhead, you know?" I draw in a breath. "That's assuming he shows up today."

"Of course, he will."

"I wish I could be that confident," I mutter.

"Since when have you, Ms. Self-assurance, herself, turned this doubtful?"

"Since..." Mr. Arpad f'ing Beauchamp came into my life. It's weird to think that, before him, I was ready to live life on my own terms, to have a child by myself, to think I didn't need anything or anyone else to complete me. Until I really got to know him. Does that make me any less independent? No.

Does it mean I am giving up all of my notions of making it on my own? No.

Does it mean I become less because I want him, want to lean on him? No.

For the first time in my life, I want someone to take care of me... I want to be with him, want him to be mine, want to have his child. My cheeks heat. Jesus, I've never felt like this about anyone else.

Is that why I'm here? Wearing a wedding gown, headed to City Hall, to get married, confident—or rather, not at all confident, right now—that he'll turn up. And if he doesn't? Well, then I'll know that he never did want me the way I want a man to want me. The way I want Arpad alphahole to want me. OMFG, I am doing my head in right now.

I squeeze my eyes shut. There's a touch on my shoulder, "You okay, doll?" Isla asks.

Yeah.

I'd called up my father and told him that I was marrying Arpad. Surprisingly, he'd told me I didn't have to do it. That they wouldn't cajole me into getting married again. But knowing my father... It's only a matter of time before he thrusts another man of his choosing at me.

I'd told him this is my decision, that I am going through with it. I'd invited him down to City Hall for the wedding, and though he'd disconnected the phone without confirming, I hope that he'll be there, along with my brother.

Everything is set. Now I just have to go through with this.

I blow out a breath, then turn to her and paste a smile on my face. "Let's do this."

Half an hour later, our car pulls up in front of City Hall. Sinclair and Summer loaned me their car and chauffeur, for which I am grateful. Not to mention, Isla has pulled through, as always, orchestrating this wedding and the reception afterwards for me, in double quick time. Yeah, she is getting really good at it. What the hell is she going to do now that five of the Seven will be married? Hopefully.

I see the short flight of steps leading up to the imposing neo-classical façade of the building.

Isla turns to me, "I need to go ahead and see to the arrangements but Peter," she gestures to our driver, "he'll help you out." She gets out of the car.

I stay there, unable to move. What if he doesn't come? What if he doesn't show up?

Oh, god, this had been a bad idea... A very bad idea.

"Miss, are you okay?" Peter, asks.

"Yes," I clear my throat, "I think so."

"He'll be there, you know."

I blink, then turn to him. "Who are you talking about?"

"The man you are looking out for."

"Of course, he is." I square my shoulders. "He's waiting inside to marry me."

"I'm not talking about him."

"No?"

He shakes his head. "Mr. Sterling was seven when I came to work for him. I've seen him and the rest of the Seven grow up and turn into men who were lost until, one by one, they began to find their women. Each of them deserves a happy ending, as do you."

"Why are you telling me this?" I ask. "My happy ending is waiting in there for me."

"He'll come for you."

I laugh. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Mr. Beauchamp," His smile grows. "He's the most stubborn of the lot. Comes from the French blood in him. He thinks he doesn't need anyone, that he can do this on his own. But he can't."

And neither can I, but I don't say that aloud.

"Like the others, he doesn't like admitting when he is wrong. Not unless he's about to lose the thing most important to him."

I stare at him. "You know of the plan?"

"Summer took me into her confidence."

I hunch my shoulders. "This was a stupid thing to do. What was I thinking? Or rather, not thinking. I had hoped he'd come to his senses and apologize to me... but he hasn't. And damn it, I guess I am as stubborn as him. God, we are match made in hell, the two of us. We'll never see eye to eye."

"You will. And when you finally do, it will be like no one and nothing else exists, just the two of you."

I blink away the sudden rush of tears. Shit, what is wrong with me? And I'm not even on any hormone injections.

"Thanks Peter," I mutter.

He nods, then gets out and comes around to open my door.

He offers me his hand and I allow him to help me out of the car.

I hear footsteps behind me. "There you are." Niko's voice reaches me.

I glance at him, "You came?"

"Of course, I came. My only sister is getting married, and you thought I wouldn't be here?"

More tears knock at the backs of my eyes. Shit, soon I am going to be blubbering, which is not good. I definitely don't want my mascara to run.

Peter places my hand in Niko's, then steps aside. Isla exits the building and walks toward us. "They're ready for you."

I take a deep breath, compose myself.

Niko turns to me. "You look beautiful," he bends down and kisses my cheek. "and I've never been prouder of you."

I swallow and he straightens to his full height.

"Shall we?" Niko asks.

CHAPTER 55

Arpad

I wake up with a start, glance around, and find the room empty. Guess Edward must have left at some point. I'd been drinking; he hadn't. He'd had a glass of whiskey and nursed it through much of the evening. I must have passed out on the couch at some point. A thumping behind my eyes makes me groan.

I sit up and my stomach lurches. Shit, I can't be hungover. Am I hungover? I am never hungover. I rise to my feet and the world tilts. Sweat beads my palms. Bloody hell. I stumble toward the sink in the bathroom, grab a glass and hold it under the tap. I glug down the water, and my guts clench. I will not be sick, will not. I slap the glass back on the counter, take a breath, another.

I open the cabinet over the sink, grab the aspirin—yeah, it's the kind of hotel which caters to every need of its guests. I swallow two of the pills with water, then lurch back into the bedroom.

Sunlight filters in through the window.

Shit, what time is it? I check the watch on my wrist. It's 8.00 am. My heartbeat ratchets up.

In an hour, she'll be married. She'll belong to someone else. Someone who will love her, who'll take care of her. Who'll never tie her up with ropes and fuck her. Someone who doesn't go chasing storms, putting his life at risk. Someone who'll have a nine-to-five job, come back to her every night, and give her the children she so badly wants. Shit. She's going to be someone

else's wife, carry someone else's child.

Hell. I drag my fingers through my hair. How dare she do this? How dare she walk out on me without giving me another chance at...this, at being with her? At being the father of her child. I am the one who offered first, and she turned me down. What the hell is wrong with her?

I march into the bathroom, shower and get dressed. I grab my phone and check the time. 8.10 am. Shit, shit, shit.

I pocket the phone, grab my wallet and car claim ticket, and walk out. I am only going to drive by City Hall. It is enroute to St Katherine Docks where my yacht is moored. I am going to get on my boat, and get the hell out of here, and then not look back. I am going to find the next storm and sail my yacht straight through it. I'll get off on the adrenaline high, then come back to port and get laid. I'll do all that, then I'll get the hell out of this city. I'll return to LA, find the next hottest start-up to invest in. I'll do all that, and I'll be happy.

My stomach bottoms out.

Of course, I'll be bloody ecstatic to go back to my single ways.

No more stalking a sassy, curvy brunette who makes my cock hard, every time I think of her. More importantly, no more driving myself crazy every time she looks at another man. Or having a heart attack when she tries on a wedding dress after turning me down. Shit. I drag my fingers through my hair. I am losing it. Clearly, I'd been on my way to being pussy-whipped. Good thing she'd decided to marry someone else. She'd saved me from being ball-and-chained-up like those of the Seven who had tied the knot. Yeah, she'd done me a solid by deciding not to marry me. She'd saved me from turning into a boring, one-woman man—from turning into someone content with his life, his wife, his family... None of which I want, right? Shit... Shit... Sweat beads my forehead.

Why the hell is it so hot in here? Clearly, I have been on land for too long. I need to get out of here and back onto my yacht. Hell, this time I'll sail to the Caribbean, to the island I'd bought there and never been to... Because I'd been planning on taking her there for our honeymoon. Jesus H, get a grip, man.

Time to put the plan into action, and get the hell out of here. I'd had a lucky escape. Time to get out, while I still can.

I head down the corridor, then take the elevator to the reception of the hotel. I walk out the front door, toss my claim card over to the valet. He

scampers off to get my car and I begin to pace up and down the sidewalk.

What the hell is wrong with me? Why can't I relax? *Do not look at your watch. Don't do it.* I glance at the dial of my wristwatch.

"What time is it?" a voice calls out.

I glance about and spot the homeless guy on the sidewalk. The same guy I'd seen in the alleyway near the boutique where she'd tried on her wedding dress.

I stalk toward him, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"It's a free country, last I checked, man." He smiles and his teeth gleam. Who the hell is this guy, who could afford such dental work?

"You following me, asshole?" I growl.

He chuckles. "Now, now, don't get ahead of yourself. I like to move around, that's all. Besides, I wanted to make sure you saw this."

"What?"

He holds up his phone, the screen face-up.

"Fuck that," I snort, "I don't want to see any of your porn."

"This is much more important." He waves his phone in my face.

I stare at the video playing on the screen and my heart twists. My guts knot. I see a vision in red. Damn it, she's wearing red. Is it because I'd told her that's the color that suits her the best? Of course, it is. She's wearing it to taunt me.

But hadn't she bought a white dress earlier at the boutique? No matter. She has her hair piled on top of her head and I take in the curve of her neck, the arch of her shoulders, the bouquet of white and pink flowers she holds between her fingers. I run my gaze down the curves of her body shown off by the dress, how the hem rises to show a flash of her legs as she steps inside a town car.

Peter, Summer and Sinclair's chauffeur, shuts the door behind her, then walks around to the driver's side.

Shit. My mouth dries. It's her, on the way to her wedding. She's about to get married and I am here holding my cock in my hands. Not literally, but you know what I mean.

"Hey, ol' chap. You okay?"

His voice seems to come from far away.

"You're not gonna faint or something, are you?"

"What?" I blink, then draw myself up to my full height, "You think I'm a pussy?"

"Yes."

I stare, "The fuck do you mean, asshole?"

"You're the one waiting for your valet to get your car while your girl walks away with another man."

"She's not..." Fuck, the word sticks in my throat. I force myself to say it. "Mine," I snarl. "She's fucking mine."

"Damn right," he nods, "you going to get her, or what?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. Fuck, fuck, fuck. How could I have messed this up so badly? How could I have not seen what was in front of me all this time?

I'd wanted her, decided she was for me. She is it for me. And yet, I'd let my ego come between us. I'd thought I was right all along, that I could get my way, no matter what. I'd forgotten how it is that a man treats a woman when he loves her. And fuck, if I don't love her. I love her more than I love myself, and fuck, if that isn't something.

And... holdonabloody second. How the hell did this guy get ahold of that video of my woman?

I snap my eyes open to find the space in front of me is empty. Huh? I glance about me and find the homeless guy hurrying away. The hair on the back of my neck rises.

Why the hell hadn't I thought of asking the question earlier? Had I been so shaken by what I'd seen that I'd forgotten basic common sense?

All of which doesn't answer the question: what the hell had he been doing watching her?

Why had he filmed her? How did he know I had checked into this hotel? Only the Seven know I'm here. How the hell had he found out? No way, would any of the Seven have told anyone else. So, who the hell is he? "Wait," I call out. He breaks into a run.

I spring forward, when the valet calls out, "Sir, your car is here."

I pause so suddenly that I almost stumble. Shit. I glance at my watch, 8.35am. Shit, no way, am I making it in time to stop the wedding, but I have to try. I glance up the sidewalk and spot the guy turning the corner. That will have to wait. For now, I have to go get my girl.

Turning, I race to my car and hop in.

I pull away from the curb, press down on the accelerator with such intensity that my Jag jumps forward. I tear around the corner, hit Oxford Street and the inevitable traffic. I press down on my horn, swerve around the vehicle in front of me. The driver shows me the bird; I don't even bother to

respond. I focus on finding breaks in the traffic, hit the next streetlight which, of course, turns red as I pull up. I hit the brakes, wait for the pedestrians to cross. Glance at my watch.

8.45am.

Hell. I am never going to make it in time. Sweat beads my brow and adrenaline laces my blood. As soon as the light changes, I hit the accelerator and the car jumps forward.

For the next ten minutes, I race through the streets of London. If I am too late, I will never forgive myself. If I allow her to become someone else's wife I... I will never be able to live through it. No, I have to get to her in time. I never lose, remember? I am going to reach her in time. I have to.

I navigate the roads, head closer to Islington City Hall. When I am only a few blocks away I hit a traffic jam. Bloody hell. Sweat trickles down my spine. I clutch the steering wheel with such force that my knuckles turn white. Come on, I am so close. I pound my fist on the steering wheel, peer through the windshield. Nothing seems to be moving. Shit, this isn't good. I am not going to make it. I shove the door open, spring out, then dodge around the vehicles.

The car in front rolls forward and a cacophony of horns sounds. Shit, I am going to get into so much trouble. But what-bloody-ever. Nothing is more important than getting to my woman in time. My heart begins to race. My pulse rate ratchets up. I increase my pace, reach the sidewalk and sprint forward. I reach the steps of City Hall, which is when I spot Sterling.

"Come to your senses finally?" He smirks.

I show him the bird, then race up the steps two at a time. What the hell is he doing out here, anyway?

I reach the top of the steps, when Saint shoves open the door for me. "About time," he grunts as I race past him.

Of course, all the Seven—except Baron—would be here to witness me being brought to my knees, but what the hell do I care? All that matters is that I get to her in time.

I race up the winding staircase inside, reach the first landing, where Weston smirks. "That way, ol' chap," he jerks his chin to the left. I race up the next flight of steps, then pause. Which way? Which way should I go?

Damian pushes away from the wall, heads to me, "You seem lost, my man."

"Shut your bloody trap," I pant. My chest heaves. Sweat trickles into my

eyes and I wipe it away. "Which way?" I growl.

"Told ya, you'd come to your senses."

"Tell me, you tosser, or else."

He stabs his thumb to his right, and I take off. I race down the corridor, past the line of couples waiting, to the closed door at the end.

Nikolai stands at the doorway, folds his arms over his chest, "You can't go in."

"I have to," I choke out. "My...my...woman... My heart... My... Karina." I can barely get the words out. "She's inside."

His jaw firms. "If you think I am going to let you interrupt my sister's wedding, you are mistaken."

I glance at my watch. "Look," I show him the face of my watch, "it's only 8.57 am. It's not too late. She's not married yet. There's still time for me to stop this."

He shakes his head. "I can't let you in."

Anger thuds at my temples and adrenaline laces my blood,

"Get out of the way," I glare at him, "NOW."

The skin around his lips tightens. "You need to leave," he demands, "NOW."

"I'm not going anywhere." I raise my fist. "But if you don't move, things are about to become very ugly."

CHAPTER 56

Karina

"What time is it?" I ask.

"The same as when you asked me two minutes ago," Isla mutters.

"That's two minutes since our last conversation." I scowl. "So, it's not the same time as when we last spoke, is it?"

"Fine, fine." She throws up her hands, then stares at the watch on her wrist. "It's 8.58 am."

"Shit." I hunch my shoulders. *He's not coming. He's not coming. I thought, for sure, he'd come. How am I going to face these people? How am I going to live my life without him?* I chew on my nail, and Isla leans forward and slaps my hand.

"Ow," I grimace. "What was that for?"

"You don't want to get married with bitten down nails, do you?"

"I don't want to get married, period," I mumble as I stare down at my hands. We're in a small room next to the registrar's office, and just off the hallway where the other couples are lining up for their turn. Don't ask me how, but Isla has arranged this private space for me. That woman is a genius when it comes to organizing events. Not that this is anywhere close to the weddings she's organized for the rest of the Seven. But then, nothing about this situation is ordinary, is it?

Not the fact that the women are here in the room—Summer, Julia, Amelie, Victoria and her bump, Sienna with her baby, even Ava, had turned up to lend me support. Well, I am going to need all of it, and more,

considering the asshole still hasn't showed up.

I glance away from the window; it isn't going to help if I surgically attach myself to the frame and look out. Mr. Grumpy Pants isn't going to show up. I'd been stupid to think of this as a way to get him to recognize what he truly wants. Had I actually thought that I could get through to him? To strip away at his conceit, the barriers he'd thrown up against the world, and reveal himself to me—had I thought that I could accomplish that? I snort, I must have been dreaming.

I walk over to the mirror in the corner of the room, then begin to pull out the pins from my hair.

"What are you doing?" Isla asks in alarm. Behind me, I see the expressions on the faces of the other women, mirroring her concern. Shit, will I have to go through life remembering how he stood me up at the altar—? Well, technically, I had stood myself up, since this entire plan had been my grand idea. Bloody hell. "He's not coming," I growl, "no reason for me to put myself through this torture." I slap the pins down on the table in front of the mirror and my hair flows down to my shoulders. There, that's much better. I dig my fingers into my scalp and massage. A headache throbs at my temples. "This is all that asshole's doing," I mutter. "I should have cut my losses and left him. What is wrong with me, that I decided to come up with this grand idea?"

"Love?" Her lips curve up. "You're a romantic at heart, Karina."

"Tell that to my head, which insists that this is the craziest idea I've had since..." Since practicing my yoga stretches in his cabin and then falling asleep in his bed. I shake my head. I'd done that, all right. Stupid me... Why had I not wanted to leave his bedroom that day? Had something inside me wanted to stow away on his boat? Had my subconscious already chosen him to be the father of my child? Shit. I press my palm into my stomach. Speaking of, I'd gone into this hoping to get pregnant, only somewhere along the way, the dream had changed to being pregnant with his child, to having him in my life. I'd had to try one last time, didn't I? I'd had to give him one last chance to redeem himself.

"Since?" Her eyebrows quirk.

"Since... Nothing." I press my fingers together. "Was I wrong in what I did? Should I have accepted his proposal and fallen into his arms? That would have made everything so much simpler."

"And allowed him to think he could take you for granted?" Summer

walks up to stand next to me. "With the Seven, you need to stand your ground. They need to know that you won't hesitate to go toe-to-toe with them, that you are the kind of woman who'll rise to the challenge, every single time."

"You think so?" I bite down on my lower lip.

"I know so." Victoria walks up to stand behind me. "Do you think if I had simply given in to Saint, we'd have survived and made it this far?"

I meet her gaze in the mirror.

"It's only because I found it in me to stand up to him, that he took me seriously. It's only because I gave it back to him every time he decided to pull an alphahole stunt on me, that I got the man of my dreams."

"We make them better men." Julia draws abreast, next to Summer.

"They depend on us to bring out the empathetic side of them." Amelie glides over to join us. "Don't let their bluster fool you. These men have the softest of hearts, only they don't dare show it to the world. It's almost as if they want us in their lives so they have the permission to show their mushy side."

"Mushy side?" I twist my lips. "I don't think Arpad A'hole has anything soft about him."

"Oh, we know he's hard where it counts." Summer raises her eyebrows, as I choke.

"There, there," Isla slaps me on my back.

I cough, accept the glass of water that Julia hands me, then sip from it.

"It's what all that hardness is hiding from you that we want you to recognize," Summer adds.

"I am not sure I understand what you are trying to say?" I place the glass of water back on the counter.

"Don't give up yet," Summer urges.

"Yeah, about that. How long do I have left?"

Isla glances at her watch. "It's nine am."

My throat closes. "Clearly, if he hasn't come by now, then what's the point? He knows I'm getting married at nine... If he had wanted me at all, he'd have been here by now."

That's when I hear a commotion outside the door.

CHAPTER 57

Arpad

I raise my fist, when my shoulder is gripped from behind. "What the hell?" I swing around and come face to face with Edward.

The Father's eyebrows are drawn down. "Calm down," he cautions, "it's not over yet."

"Of course, it is," I growl. "She's in there getting married, and you're asking me to calm down?"

I twist my torso to get away, and the Father tightens his grip. Anger flares at my nerve-endings and my vision narrows. "Let go of me, Edward."

"Will you listen to me?"

"Back the hell away from me."

"I will, if you calm down and listen to me first."

"Why the hell should I?" I snap. "When everything I want is in there and you're preventing me from going in."

"For once in your fucking life, will you stop to think before rushing into yet another storm?" Edward's voice thunders around the place.

Silence descends. A beat. Another. I firm my lips, glare at Edward, who glares right back. And that cuts through the noise in my head. The Father, angry, on the verge of losing his temper. Whoa, okay. I've never seen that happen before. At least, not since Edward returned from his stint to wherever he'd gone, and declared that he was going to become a priest.

Then, Edward jerks his chin, "Breathe, Arpad."

He releases me and I stumble back. "Why the hell should I?" I swallow.

"When my heart, my love..." A ball of emotion blocks my throat. "My life..." Something hot stabs at my chest. Jesus, what the hell is wrong with me? Am I actually going to lose my composure, here in front of everyone?

"She's...everything to me," I whisper, "you understand that, don't you?"

He nods, "I do, but does she? Have you told her what you just told me?"

"It's too late... Too late now."

"It isn't." A ghost of a smile kicks up his lips.

"What the hell do you mean?"

That's when the door to the side flies open. A vision in red stands silhouetted against the light. I blink. She takes a step forward and out of the light. Her dark hair flows about her shoulders, her color is high on her cheeks, and her eyes are bright with emotion—with unshed tears? She stands there, chest heaving.

My beauty, my heart, my love.

"Karina?" I whisper, as Edward steps aside.

She stares at me as if she can't believe what she's seeing. In truth, neither can I. "Aren't you supposed to be—" I stab my thumb over my shoulder, at the closed double doors behind me, "in there."

"And you're supposed to have been here by nine am."

Warmth flushes my face. Shit. What, now I'm embarrassed? The next thing you know, I'll be saying please and thank you in every sentence.

"I'm... I'm sorry?" My neck heats. Did I just say that? I said that.

"About time," she murmurs, then walks forward and links her hand through mine.

I glance down at our joined hands, then at her face.

She tilts her head. "They're waiting for us."

"Who's waiting for us?" My heart begins to hammer; my pulse rate ratchets up.

She jerks her chin toward the double doors. I turn as they open. Inside, I see chairs set up on either side of an aisle, at the end of which, a man in a suit stands beaming at us, with his hands folded in front of him.

"Huh?" I blink. "Is that the registrar who is going to conduct the marriage ceremony? Are we..." I turn to her, "but weren't you...?"

"Going to marry someone else?"

I nod.

"You actually believed I could do that?"

"No," I shake my head, "I didn't want to... But I knew I'd behaved like a

complete ass—"

"—a wanker," she interrupts me. "You behaved like a complete tosser."

"That too," I agree. "I deserve all the names you called me."

"Is that an apology?" She frowns. "Because it's a pretty shitty one."

I can't stop the chuckle that bubbles up. This woman... She is going to make my life really bloody interesting as hell. I sink down onto one knee, place her hand between both of mine.

"I'm sorry, Karina. Sorry I took you for granted. Sorry I manipulated your life so you could be near me. Sorry I colluded with your family behind your back. Sorry that I...didn't come right out and tell you that I love you, that I want to be with you, that you are the only woman I want to spend my life with, the only one I want to wake up next to every morning, the only one I want to hold in my arms, and say I do to. You are the only one, Sparks, who means more to me than anything in the world, even myself. If I'd lost you, I wouldn't have been able to live anymore, I—"

She places her finger on my lips. "Don't," she swallows, "don't say that. If anything had happened to you, I wouldn't have been able to live with myself."

"Live with me instead. Be my wife. Marry me, Sparks."

Her face splits apart in a wide smile, "Yes."

Claps break out; there's cheering. I glance around to see Isla and the rest of the women crowding at the doorway. The men, cluster behind them.

A younger girl I don't recognize joins the women. "Oh, your babies are going to be soo beautiful."

Next to me, Edward stiffens. I shoot him a sideways glance to find him staring at her. Interesting.

Summer wraps her arm around the girl and pulls her close. "Never change, Ava," she grins, "your romantic heart is what sets you apart from the rest."

Niko guides me and Karina, to the side as the rest of the group file into the room. Saint wraps his arm around Victoria, Sinner pulls Summer to his side, Weston hugs Amelie, and Damian bends down to kiss Julia's cheek. Ava takes a seat in front. Edward stays by the door, his gaze still on her.

Niko turns to me, "You passed my earlier test, doesn't mean you're off the hook. You'd better take care of her, or I'll blow your brains out." He jerks his chin at me, then retreats to the side.

I take both of Karina's hands in mine as I peruse her features, "What do

you say, Sparks? You ready to get started on that baby making plan?"

CHAPTER 58

Karina

"I thought you'd never ask," I whisper.

He rises to his feet and I tilt my head back, all the way back, as he towers over me. Shit, has he always been this big, this tall, this huge? Enough for his shoulders to block out the sight of everything else.

He rakes his gaze over my face and a flash of heat trails down my spine. He leans in close enough for the tips of his shoes to brush my stilettos, then bends his head until his face is right above mine. "There's still a chance for you to leave," he mutters. "Still a chance for you to save yourself from me."

"And if I don't?" I whisper. "What if I don't want that? What if I want everything you can give me?"

"What if you can't take it?" His gaze narrows. "What if I hurt you?"

"Promise me you will?" I allow my lips to curl into a smile and his nostrils flare.

His shoulders flex, and he tucks my hand into his. "I should have known you'll always have an answer." His mouth twists. "What am I going to do with you, Sparks?"

"The same thing that I am going to do with you?" I smile at him. "Love me, hold me, touch me, caress me, fight with me, make up with me, take care of me, never let me go."

"Never." He brings my palm to his lips and kisses my knuckles. "You're stuck with me, Sparks."

"Hey, you guys, shouldn't you get a move on?" Edward jerks his chin

toward the room in front of us. "The registrar's waiting."

"I'd rather you marry us." Arpad holds my hand as we approach him. "It's tradition, after all."

"Maybe some traditions are meant to be broken?" Edward's features take on an odd look. "Perhaps, the more things change, the more they remain the same, know what I mean?"

"No," I shake my head, "not really."

"Edward means, why not have the registrar marry us, so he has a chance to enjoy the wedding? Not that he doesn't enjoy it when he's conducting the ceremony," Arpad adds. "Am I right, Father?"

Edward nods, "Also, and not that this would matter, but just so you are aware, it's your name that's on the license."

"It is?" Arpad scowls then turns to me, "So you were sure all along that I'd turn up?"

"I'd hoped." I half smile at him. "I had nothing to lose right?"

"And the white dress at the boutique?" He rubs his jaw, "I could have sworn I saw you purchase a white wedding dress."

"White huh?" I can't stop the smile from curving my lips, "How did you know that?"

He presses his lips together. "You knew I was keeping an eye on you?"

I nod.

"You knew that I couldn't keep away from you?"

I smile wider.

He scowls and I can't stop the giggle that wells up from my throat.

"Bloody hell, Sparks," He rubs the back of his neck, "you really were one step ahead of me all this time."

"I tried." I say trying and failing to sound gleeful.

His gaze intensifies. He peruses my features, "What would you have done if I hadn't turned up?"

"But you did." I peer up at him from under my eyelashes.

"Were you that confident that I'd show?" he murmurs.

"Yes." I glance down, then back at him, "No, I wasn't. But I had nothing to lose, right? I had to put things in motion, then pray everything worked out."

"You have a devious mind, almost wife."

"I learned from the best, almost husband."

I lick my lips and he lowers his head to mine, the intent to kiss me clear.

Edward clears his throat just then, and I frown up at him.

"You'll have plenty of time for that later." He chuckles, "Besides the registrar is waiting."

He moves to the side as Nikolai steps up. "I'm walking my sister down the aisle."

He glares at Niko, "If you think I'm letting go of her for one minute now that I've found her again—"

"Ari," I nudge him, "behave."

He glances down at me. "You want him to walk you down the aisle?"

"He's my brother."

Arpad searches my features, then nods. He places my hand in Niko's outstretched one, then turns to me again. "I'll see you soon, babe."

After Arpad walks into the room, Edward shuts the doors behind them.

Isla hands my bridal bouquet over to me. She walks around to stand between us and the door, then turns, "You ready, Karina?"

I nod, grip my brother's arm. This is it. I am doing it now.

She pushes open the door and walks forward. We wait until she reaches the end of the short aisle. She slips into a chair by the front row, then it's our turn.

Niko places his wide palm over mine. "You look beautiful, Kaykay." He smiles down at me. "You know Dad would have made it, except it's too risky for him to be seen in the open."

I nod. "I am glad you are here."

Then we're walking forward, down the aisle. I glance around at the faces of my friends, my made family, who are as important, if not more so, than my blood family. A tingle runs up my back. I glance up and my gaze connects with his blue-grey ones, and the rest of the room fades. I am aware of putting one foot in front of the other, of covering the distance between us, of stopping in front of him, of Niko placing my hand back where it belongs, in his wide warm one.

He twines his fingers with mine, the warmth in his eyes setting shivers of anticipation, of something else, excitement, contentment, all of it intertwined into a ball of happiness; of being exactly where I want to be in that moment; of seeing my entire future stretched out in front of me; of reaching forward and grabbing it and holding on and allowing it to sweep me away until there is no me, no him... There is only us.

"I do." His lips form the words. His eyes crinkle. He slips his hand into

his pocket and pulls out a ring.

He reaches for my left hand when I realize I am still clutching the bouquet. Oh! I glance around, and Ava jumps up. "Here, I'll take it." She closes the distance between us and I hand the bouquet over to her before turning back to my bridegroom.

Arpad takes my left hand and slides the ring onto my finger—a band of plain gold, with a single blue sapphire embedded in it. The metal is worn and instantly warms my skin.

"It's grandmama's," he says, "she wanted you to have it."

Tears prick my eyes as I hold onto his hands. Then I'm raising my gaze to his.

"I do too," I whisper, as a teardrop slides down my cheek.

"You may now kiss the bride." Barely has the registrar spoken, when we both move. I raise my head, he swoops down, and we meet somewhere in the middle.

EPILOGUE

Karina

I glance across the bedroom of Arpad's yacht. After the wedding, we'd spent the rest of the morning at a very boozy brunch with the Seven and their women at the Michelin starred restaurant of the Dorchester Hotel. It is the hottest restaurant in London and Saint had shut it down for our wedding reception. Imagine that.

Nothing should surprise me. Not after the life I've led so far. Not after the excesses that I've known the Bratva to indulge in... But the Seven... They are so matter-of-fact about the position they occupy on the food chain... Sometimes it takes my breath away; and that's saying something. And... Okay, it isn't about the money.

When I'd left my family behind in LA, I'd turned my back on the kind of extremes that money brings with it... I'd wanted to carve out my own life, create my own career, my own family. I'd been ready to go so far as to have a child on my own and bring him or her up by myself so I didn't have to depend on anyone else. Then Arpad happened.

It's not just his good looks, or his more dominant than anyone else personality, or the fact that he'd do anything for the Seven, or how he'd been with his grandmother, caring and protective and so authentic...that had appealed to me.

Okay, maybe it was all of that... And that space inside of him... That hurt, that anger against the world he carries inside and which resonates with the part of me that still blames the universe for taking my mother away from me

when I was barely an adult.

Maybe I see him as much of a challenge as he sees me as a provocation.

Maybe, on some level, I see him as someone who is strong enough to dominate me; someone who can claim me and rule over me with a firm hand; someone who will take away the onus to choose, the anxiety of making decisions... Something I'd never known I craved until I met him.

My husband who prowls over to where I stand.

The boozy brunch had gotten progressively boozier and noisier, with the rest of the Seven and their women not able to keep their hands off each other as well.

In the middle of it all, Ari had grabbed my hand, and pulled me to my feet. Good thing I'd had the foresight to change out of my wedding dress at some point during the morning, for he'd literally whisked me off to his car and driven us over to his yacht, where he intended to consummate our marriage. He'd also told me that we were setting sail for Malta and then Greece for our honeymoon. As for clothes and my things? He'd produced our packed suitcases from the boot of the car. Someone had been busy shooting off text messages to get everything organized during the course of the morning. Something I swear I hadn't noticed.

Now he pauses in front of me and peers into my face. "There's one more thing I need to do." He slips his hand into his pocket, brings out a short piece of rope.

He presses the rope into the palm of my hand. "I want you to have it," he says. "I want you to have it when you think you're ready to use it on me."

"On you?" I blink. "You want me to use it on you?"

He nods.

"But..." I swallow, "you hate being tied up."

He glances down at the rope, then back at me, "Apparently, it depends on the person who's doing it."

"Oh." I wrap the length of rope around my palm, allowing the rest of it to trail to the floor.

It's the same rope that he'd used that first time he'd restrained me. The late afternoon sunlight slants through the window of the cabin, and highlights the reddish gold sparks woven through the cord.

He backs away and I follow his progress as he saunters over to the bed. He sits down, kicks his legs out in front of him. His thighs are powerful columns of strength and his stance is wide enough for my attention to stray

right to his crotch. The fabric of his pants tented there indicates that he's already aroused. It's something I have yet to get used to, for the man has the stamina of someone who can push himself to the limits and recover quickly enough to start all over again.

I lick my lips and his gaze narrows. I walk over to stand in front of him, weave the piece of rope about my palm. He tips his chin up, trains those flinty grey-blue eyes on me. My stomach trembles and my heart begins to race. Oh, hell, one glance from him and I'm already a goner. How the hell am I going to do this?

I let the rope slither to the ground, then reach forward and push the jacket down his shoulders. He shrugs it off, holds my gaze as I unbutton his shirt. My fingers graze his skin and he hisses. His blue gaze deepens, until his irises seem almost black. Oh, wow, that's never happened before. Is he turned on? His jaw tics and a vein throbs at his temple... Ah, okay, he's more frustrated. "Is it tough to hand over control, for even this small amount of time?"

He bares his teeth, "What do you think, wife?"

I swallow. *Wife*. Jesus, will I ever get used to him calling me wife?

"I think..." I finish the task of unbuttoning his shirt, then shove it down his shoulders. The material catches around the tense bulge of his biceps, and I tug it down. He flicks the shirt away, places his hands on his thighs.

His shoulder muscles knot, his chest planes ripple, and the tendons of his neck stand out in relief. I rake my gaze down the expanse of his beautiful torso, the concave stomach, the pants that ride low on his hips. My pulse begins to thud and my heartbeat ratchets up. I am this close to throwing myself at him, wrapping myself around him, and straddling him, and riding against the rough fabric of his jeans until I come.

"You were saying?" The alphahole smirks, knowing full-well that I can barely string together a complete sentence right now.

"I think..." I mumble, "that I should bind you up while I still have my faculties about me.

He holds up his hands, his expression innocent, and damn, if that doesn't make me suspicious. Arpad f'ing Beauchamp, offering himself up, all meek and tame... Nah, he's up to something. But what?

"Put your hands behind you," I order.

His smile widens.

"I mean it." I scowl, "Come on, Arpad, you promised you'd comply."

He hesitates, then obliges. He folds his arms behind his back, thrusts out his chest. Corrugated ripples of muscles stretch his torso, and my fingers itch to rake my nails down that gleaming expanse. Sweat beads my brow and my toes curl. Damn it, why am I holding back? I lean down, run my tongue around one erect male nipple.

A groan rumbles up his chest. I drag my nails across the hardened nub of his other nipple and his body jolts.

"Fuck me, what the hell are you trying to do, Sparks?"

"I'm getting to know my husband's body, you mind?"

He stiffens, then a chuckle rolls up his throat. "I don't mind at all, darling. In fact," he leans back, allowing me more space, "I insist you not stop until you get to know every part of me as well as yourself."

My heart thuds against my ribcage and a melting sensation coils in my chest. Suddenly, I want to feel myself naked and plastered to every inch of him.

I reach down, lower the zipper of his pants, and there's only Arpad. Hell. I stare at his engorged length that springs free and stands upright against his stomach.

"Fuck me."

"If you don't get on with it, that's exactly what I'm going to do," he growls.

I swallow, and tug on his pants. He lifts his hips, allows me to pull off his pants. I straighten, unable to take my gaze off his thick cock. Its head almost purple with the intensity of his arousal, beads of precum lace the slit on the crown. My mouth waters and my chest hurts. The flesh between my legs aches with so much need that my legs tremble. I bend, grab the rope, then straddle him, one knee on each side of his waist. He tips up his head, his blue eyes stalking my every move as I reach around and begin to wind the rope around the arms he still has folded behind him. With every move, my still clothed breasts brush his chest. The heat of his body seems to intensify; the strength of his dominance pushes into my chest, pins me down as I manage to loop around his wrists, once, twice, a few more times. I knot the rope, tug to secure it again and again. My twists are nowhere as neat as how he'd bound me—I can't even see what I'm doing—but it will have to do.

I lean back, perch on his lap, then glance up into his face.

"Done?" He lifts an eyebrow.

"I'm just getting started." I push back a little more, then reach between us

to grip his pulsing shaft.

His breath catches and a shudder rolls under his skin as I massage him from base to tip, and again. I don't take my gaze off of his face as his features twist, as his breathing grows heavier, and as his chest muscles ripple and flex, like there's an animal somewhere inside waiting to break loose.

I slide one hand lower to cup his heavy balls and he throws his head back and growls. The sound is so primitive, so feral, liquid heat slides from between my legs.

Sweat beads his forehead; his jaw hardens as he lowers his head. "You're fuckin' killing me, Sparks."

A vein throbs at his temples and the skin around his eyes tightens. Color smears his cheeks and my nipples tighten until they are almost painful to bear.

I rise up on my knees, reach under my dress to push my panties aside, then I position myself over his swollen dick and sink down.

Arpad

She impales herself on my cock, and fuck me, but the sensation of her pussy clenching my length as she sinks down on me, until I am completely wrapped in her melting heat, is the single most perfect moment of my life. I am not a spiritual person, but surely, the white light that flashes behind my eyes right now is as close to oneness as I'm going to get, right?

I gaze into her upturned face and the sight of her flushed features, her parted lips, her tits bouncing under her dress as she begins to ride me...is an image that will be etched into my memory forever.

She digs her fingers into my shoulders, clenches her inner muscles around my thickness. She squeezes her thighs around the outside of mine and rotates her hips.

Heat blasts up my spine. My groin hardens, my cock lengthens inside her, and damn it, but I've had enough. I piston my hips upward, and slam into her, even as I begin to work at the rope she's bound around my wrists.

She gasps aloud, lowers her chin and stares at me from under heavy eyelids. "Ohmigod," she moans, "oh, Ari, oh my—"

I chuckle, "Love it when I render you speechless, baby."

She leans in close enough for our eyelashes to tangle. "You said you'd let me take the lead," she pouts.

"I said," I thrust up and into her with enough force for her entire body to jolt, "that I'd let you restrain me, and I have. And now I'm going to fuck you with my hands tied behind my back. I'm going to tear into your pretty little pussy until your clothes tear."

"Oh my." Her pupils dilate, her lips tremble, she clamps her melting core around my length, and goosebumps rise on my skin. My vision narrows, my pores pop, and all of my senses hone in on her.

"Hold on, baby."

She digs her fingernails into my skin with enough pressure to draw blood, and hell, if that doesn't turn me on further.

I pump up and into her, again and again. With every impact she moans, whimpers, then throws her head back and wheezes, "I'm going to—"

"Come all over my dick, Sparks. Come for me."

With a low, keening cry, she arches her spine back and shatters.

She slumps into me, and instantly, I move. I yank free of my restraints, flip her over on her back and peer down at her. I reach for her panties, tear them off of her, and she gasps. She opens her eyelids, holds my gaze as I hook my fingers into the neckline of her dress and tug. The fabric tears down the center and she half screams, "Ari, what the fuck? I love this dress."

"And I love you more than anything else. I'll buy you enough dresses to fill up this yacht, hell, to fill up an entire apartment, if you want."

"I don't need that, you crazy man." She reaches up to wind her arms around my neck. "I only want you in my arms, your dick inside me, your tongue worshipping me, your legs entwined with mine as you bring me to orgasm."

"I knew it," I shake my head, "I've created a sex maniac."

"Only for your body, your lips, your mouth, your beautiful cock which, if you don't put it inside me right this moment, I'll—"

I surge forward and enter her in one long, smooth stroke.

"A...Ah..." she stutters. Her eyes roll back in her head.

"You were saying?" I chuckle.

"Hmm, what?" She clenches her inner muscles around my shaft, and bloody hell, my thighs spasm and my groin hardens. I bring her leg up and around my waist, then plant my elbows on each side of her shoulders. I piston my hips forward and plunge into her with enough force that her body moves up the bed.

I swipe my palm up her other leg and coax her to wind it around me, then

grip her hips, to pin her in place.

Bending my face close to hers, I close my mouth over hers. I slide my tongue in between her lips, suck on her mouth, coax her to open herself to me completely. Then I propel my hips forward and slide into her, again and again, until the tension at the base of my spine tightens.

Under me, her body shudders. She wraps her arms and legs around me, plasters those beautiful breasts against me, then rocks up and into me, receiving all of me, finally arching against me.

I tear my mouth from hers, stare into her face, "Look at me, baby."

She cracks open her lids and her golden eyes blaze at me. This woman... She owns me, possesses me. Nothing I do will ever be enough to show her what she means to me.

"Sparks." I swallow, then brush my lips against hers, "Come with me, darling."

I pull back, then slide into her, bottoming out, hitting that spot inside of her which I know drives her wild.

Her entire body seems to hum, then she bends her spine and shatters against me. Her tight core clamps around my length and the tautness in my groin vibrates out, growing bigger, wider. The reverberations engulf me, rock me, my balls draw up, and with a groan, I empty myself inside of her. I slump down onto my elbows, lower my head and nuzzle that spot at the side of her throat where her scent is the most concentrated.

"You okay, baby?" I kiss her soft, dewy skin.

She hums.

"You sure?"

She nods her head.

Her shoulders shudder, she bites down on her lower lip, and a tear runs down from the corner of her eyes.

My heart stutters and a hot sensation stabs at my ribcage. "Sparks?" I roll over, pull her onto my chest, and cradle her. "Shh, what's wrong, sweetheart?"

"You," she hiccups, "you are what's wrong."

I stiffen, caress her spine, rub soothing circles across her back, down the curve of her hips. "Explain that to me, darling."

"You, with all of your endearments and your perfect cock, and your ability to fuck me until I come, every time. Do you know how wrong that is?"

"Huh?" I frown. "You'll have to explain that further, babe."

She pulls back in the circle of my arms and I loosen my grip, enough for her to crawl up until her face is directly over mine.

She gazes into my eyes with such intensity that heat sears the back of my neck. "What is it?" I mutter. "You can tell me anything, you know?"

She nods.

"Anything at all," I prompt, "I'll set the world on fire. Hell, I'll give up sailing if you ask." I wince. "Okay, maybe not that."

She chuckles, then bumps her fist against my shoulder, "A child," she mumbles, "I want you to get me pregnant, Ari. I want your child, our child, a child that has the best of you and me, and maybe some of the not good parts too. Sometimes, I want to hold a baby in my arms so much that it feels real, it feels as if I can see her, hold her, sense her, smell her fresh innocence. I can visualize her, imagine her, see her grow up to be the most amazing person in the world ever. Know what I mean?"

I swallow down the ball of emotion that blocks my throat. I bring her close, curl her into me, "I know, babe, I want that too."

She buries her nose in my chest and inhales. I can't stop the smile that curves my lips. "I'm so sorry for not trying my best to impregnate you the first time around. I didn't stick to my end of the bargain. I may have a small problem with letting go of control."

"You don't say," she snorts. "You're just a dominant, obnoxious asshole, you know that?"

"I can't make excuses for that; it's what I am." I lower my head and press a kiss to the top of her head. "It's also why you can't resist me."

"Oh?"

"Yep," I hook my finger under her chin, raise her head so she meets my gaze, "But I'm going to do everything in my power to make you happy, starting with getting you pregnant."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

*TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT TURN THE PAGE TO READ
BILLIONAIRE'S SINS*

BILLIONAIRE'S SINS

1

"The fact that I am going to die one day and everyone around me is going to die, and eventually, no one will remember me makes me feel so weird..."

-From Ava's diary

Ava

"Were you with her when you were married to Mom?"

My father's face pales. Raisa gasps from her seat on the other side of the settee.

"That's not fair, Ava," he admonishes me without raising his voice. "You know I loved your mother."

"And she loved you."

"She'd have wanted me to be happy," he murmurs.

"She wouldn't've wanted you to marry her best friend," I snap. "Not so soon after her death."

"Actually," his lips twist, "this was her idea."

"What?" I blink. "I don't believe it."

"When your mother found out that she was suffering from cancer and had only months to live, she swung into action. She asked Lina to move in with us so we could spend time together, to get comfortable."

"She asked Auntie Lina to move in so she could take care of her," I protest.

"And...so she could ensure that the two of us would give our relationship a chance to work."

"I..." I swallow and my heart begins to drum so hard in my chest that I am sure it's going to burst out of my rib cage. "It's not possible."

My father gives me a sad smile. "Why would I lie to you?"

"Because..." the words choke in my throat, "because you want to paint your relationship in a favorable light with me and Raisa? Because you want us to not hate you for marrying another woman?"

"You're upset about your mother leaving us. You miss her—"

"Don't you?" I frown at him.

"Every single moment of my life. After she died, I wanted to kill myself."

"Dad," I say, shocked.

"It's true." He looks at Raisa, then back at me. "I never wanted to admit it, because what father wants to be seen as weak in front of his children?"

"We aren't kids anymore. We could have handled it if you had shared some of your grief with us. Maybe we could have helped you."

"You were busy trying to get your degree and you—" he turned to Raisa, "you were building your career."

"We'd have made time for you; we'd have found a way," I insist.

"I wouldn't have wanted to take more out of that crucial time in your lives." He shakes his head. "No, your mother was right. She knew I wouldn't be able to go on alone. Even from beyond the grave, that woman made sure I was taken care of. And she chose Lina for it."

"You turned to Lina," I say quietly. "You found comfort in her arms. How long did you wait before Mother was gone before you shagged her?"

"Ava," Raisa snaps, "enough."

"Enough?" I gesture to my father, "Look at him. He doesn't even deny it. Tell me, Dad, how long did you wait after Mum was gone before you turned to her?"

"The truth is, I was in a relationship with Lina before I met your mother."

"What?" Raisa and I exclaim at the same time.

"Then, I met your mother and... I fell headlong in love."

"No." I gape. "This can't be true."

"I loved them both," he holds my gaze, "but I chose your mother."

"And mum knew about your relationship with Lina?"

"They were best friends," he mutters. "They told each other everything. Did everything together, those two." His lips quirk, "I always joked there were three of us in that relationship."

His features brighten, and for a few seconds, he seems younger than his

fifty-five years. God, he's so young. My mother was only fifty-three, too young to die. They had deserved so much more time together. But apparently, the universe had other plans for both of them. Now, she is in a grave and my father... He is getting ready to marry again. To a woman I've known my entire life. Who'd been with us on so many family holidays. Who was always a welcome guest in our house. I crinkle my eyebrows. Yeah, she'd always been there for us... She'd baby sat us, spent enough time at home to help us with our homework while my mother was busy painting and my father away traveling on work. She'd been here for all my big milestones.

"Oh, my god," I gasp aloud. "That's it."

"What?" Raisa scowls. "What are you thinking?"

I turn to my father, "Lina's always been in love with you too, hasn't she?"

Raisa stares at me. "What are you talking about?"

"Aunty Lina," I snap. "She never got over you. It's why she never married. Why she hung around us all the time. Hell, I bet she was very happy when Mum finally passed so she could finally move in. Did the two of you have an affair behind her back even before she fell sick? Did you—?"

My father holds up his hand. "Stop," his voice rises, "stop that right now."

"Wow." I shake my head. "Look at you, all defending her now."

"I will not allow you to speak like that of a woman who's wished nothing but the best for us."

"You're not denying it, though. She did carry a torch for you all this time."

My father rubs the back of his neck. "Like I said, we dated. But after I met your mother, it was only her and no one else. I couldn't see myself living my life with anyone but her."

"So, the two of you didn't sleep together while you were married to Mother, before she fell sick?"

Raisa gasps again, "Really, Ava, what's wrong with you?"

"It's fine, Raisa. Best to clear this up right now." My father gazes at me steadily. "I never slept with anyone else except your mother until," he swallows, "until your mother asked me to sleep with Lina."

I gape, "You mean, she asked you two to..."

My father nods, "Your mother wanted us to share a bed while she was alive."

"What?"

My father rises to his feet and walks to the window. He stares out for a

few seconds, then turns to me. "She insisted. She did everything in her power to bring us together."

"Oh, and you happily obliged?" My heart begins to race and my pulse pounds at my temples. Adrenaline laces my blood and I jump to my feet. "Mum was on medication, half out of her mind with pain. She likely didn't know what she was asking for—"

"Don't dishonor your mother's memory." He turns on me. "You know she was cogent right until the end. The cancer may have eaten away at her body, but her mind was sharp until the last moment."

I swallow down the tears that threaten. Damn it, my beautiful, proud mother, the glorious woman who had been my role model until the end, the gentle soul who could soothe my fears away with a single word... She had been the most intelligent woman I'd ever known, the most talented artist—who had never had the kind of success she'd deserved. It's why she'd never wanted me to pursue a creative profession, had wanted me to become a doctor. She was the reason that I had tried, until I couldn't keep up the charade. I had left medical school and she had been heartbroken. Sometimes, I wonder if it wasn't the shock of that which had brought on the cancer. *Don't go there. Not now. Not when you're trying to hold it together for the sake of protecting her memory, her legacy. Everything that she had built her entire life.*

"If you expect me to stay quiet just because Mum signed off on this marriage, then you are mistaken." *Shit, what are you saying? You are going to hurt him; you know that.* But I can't stop speaking, can't stop the horrible words from pouring out. "If you marry...that...that woman," I swallow, "I'll... I'll never forgive you, Dad."

My father's gaze intensifies. "You're so adamant, so focused on what only you can see. You're so like her."

The tears I've been keeping down well up and spill from the corners of my eyes. I wipe them away, swallowing down the ball of emotion that clogs my throat. "If I were anything like her, I'd be able to stop you from marrying again, so soon after she's gone."

"It's been six months, Ava," my father says in a low voice. "I'm tired and lonely. You girls have your lives, your careers—"

"One which you still don't approve of, by the way," I mutter.

"Your mother and I wanted the best for you. And it's true, when you said that you couldn't pursue the medical profession, we were shattered. But that's

only because we wanted you to have a secure career."

"I have a secure career now." *As a belly dancer, whose dance studio is struggling for funds.* But I don't say that aloud.

"I am proud of you, Ava."

"Are you?"

He nods. "You persisted in your dreams, never backed down. You went after what you wanted and made it happen."

"And me?" Raisa scowls at both of us. "What about me?"

"You're the one I can always rely on to smooth over the cracks in the family."

"Don't do it, Dad." I plead, "Please, just because she asked you to do it, doesn't mean you have to marry Lina. The least you can do is honor her memory by not replacing her in your life."

"I am honoring your mother's memory. By living." He fixes his gaze on me. "Can't you see that?"

"Oh Dad." I bite down on the inside of my cheek, "I know you have a right to be happy, and I want that for you, I do. But replacing Mum..."

"I am not replacing her, Ava." He walks over to me. "No one can. I am simply doing my best to keep going."

"I see." And I do, I really do. It's just, I can't get my head around another woman taking my mother's place in his life. And I don't know if it's better that it's her best friend, or if that makes it worse. "It's just, I need some time to get my head around that. Is that okay?"

He peers into my eyes, then nods. "Okay." His lips quirk. "Okay, Ava."

I turn to leave and Dad calls out, "Wait. You'll come to the wedding, won't you?"

"I... I am not sure," I say without turning around. Then I walk out the door.

2

Two days later

"Each blossom still blooms in its field; each child still clutches your hand; each friend still lingers in your heart. And that...is where time goes."

I glance at the words I've scrawled out in my diary.

My heart stutters. The hair on my forearms rises. Time. Why am I so obsessed with time? I am only nineteen; I have my entire life in front of me. So why do I often ponder how fast time goes by? How it can all be over in a matter of minutes... Blink, and it's gone. A mother playing with her son as an infant one second; the next, he's all grown up and she's shooting a movie with him as her subject. The son, who is the mirror image of her first and only love, the man she fell for, her soulmate...who turned out not to be. And now she has him... The son, who is the image of the father. *Stop it...* All these thoughts that meld and flow and turn my brain to mush. Even *Twilight* was more cheerful than this.

I hear a splash from the pool, and glance around from my perch on the chair in the far corner of the pool area. I am at my friend Summer's townhouse in Primrose Hill. It's February and freezing in London. Which is why I had grabbed my book and my blanket, then crawled over to the far end of the pool area. I'd hidden behind the wide trunk of the oak-tree, then settled down to write.

People hate the cold. Me? I thrive on it. Darkness is my friend, my companion. It clothes me, hides me from the sight of the world, like this

blanket that I've wrapped around myself. If I look down, I can see the slope of Primrose Hill fall away below, the grass an undulating carpet that stretches down to the canal. This early in the day, it is quiet, except for a few joggers... And the man who'd dived into the pool and is now swimming laps.

From my hiding place, I can see his massive shoulders flex as he cuts through the water. He propels forward, leaving ripples in his wake. He's moving so fast, he's almost a blur as his powerful arms slice through the water. He hits one end of the swimming pool, then pushes away and begins to swim toward the other side. He zips forward, flings out an arm, thrusts the other back so his body shoots ahead. He lunges onward, keeps going until he hits the other edge of the pool, then turns back. I watch as he does five more laps of the pool... Hell, is he training for a triathlon or something? My entire body hurts, thinking of the punishment he's putting himself through. What the hell is he trying to prove anyway?

He hits the edge of the pool, throws his arms over the rim and holds on. Then he presses his hands down on the ground, hauls himself up. He pitches his leg up and over. The corded muscles of his thigh tauten as he raises himself up and over the side. Water streams down from his sculpted chest, the cut planes of his back, and pours down the sides of his thighs. He raises his arms, throws back his head and stretches. For a second, he stands poised. The first rays of the sun hit his skin, and he seems to sparkle. My throat dries. All of my nerve endings pop. Moisture pools in my core. A shiver runs down my spine.

He turns, giving me a full-frontal view and I draw in a breath. I saw him at my friend Karina's wedding, a few weeks ago. Only difference, he had more clothes on...and he wasn't this wet. *Nor was I—ha!* Nor did he have his thick hair slicked back to outline the contours of his scalp. Nor did the hollows under his cheekbones seem this prominent. I trace my gaze down his hooked nose to his thin upper lip, made all the more pronounced by his full lower lip, which seems soft, pouty enough for me to sink my teeth into and suck. My belly clenches. My core softens. I squeeze my thighs together, watch as he moves toward the deckchair and picks up a towel. He drags it down his massive chest, across that ripped stomach, down the crotch of his black swimsuit, which outline what he's packing. I bite down on the inside of my cheek. Is that man packing or what?

Is he some kind of athlete? He has that strength and confidence that comes with someone who works a physical profession. Or else, he trains a

lot. As evidenced by this morning's work out.

He loops the towel around his neck, straightens, then meets my gaze.

I pull back. "Shit, shit, shit." *Did he see me? Of course, he spotted me.* He seems like the kind of man who wouldn't miss a thing in his surroundings.

Go on, get out there and wave at him or something. Tell him 'Hi.'

"Hi." I wiggle my fingers in the air in his general direction, too embarrassed to look that way again.

"Hello, there." A gruff voice sounds above me and I yelp. My heart pounds in my chest as I glance up, straight at eye-level with his gorgeous crotch—now covered by his pants. He'd managed to pull those on before heading over, apparently. Not that it does anything to hide, but rather, reveals the gargantuan proportions of whatever it is that it encloses.

Jeez, get your mind out of the gutter, bitch.

I raise my gaze, and hell, if the view doesn't get even more serious. Dense muscles, packed one on top of the other, moving, slipping, sliding as he draws in a breath. An intricate design inches over one shoulder, and damn, if I don't want to jump up and peek around to find out how it continues across his back.

He folds his arms across his chest and his biceps bulge.

Heat sears my blood. My thighs clench.

I tilt my head back, and further back. The sun chooses that moment to shine on him again, shadowing his features. This guy is a sun trap; that's for sure. The golden glow folds about him, caresses him, so sparks of amber flare in the air around him. I blink, and his face comes into view. Dark close-cropped hair slicked back from the water. His eyes are golden...amber with a hint of black in their depths. Like he has secrets which he holds close to his chest. Thick eyelashes that sweep down over high cheekbones you could cut yourself on. I curl my fingers into fists and my nails dig into my flesh.

A scar mars the expanse of his left cheek, and somehow that only heightens how perfect the rest of his face is.

"You okay?" He tilts his head.

"Of course." My voice cracks and I clear my throat. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"You seem like you saw something...unexpected?"

"Uh, you're not a vampire, are you?"

He blinks, then chuckles. A full-throated, deep reverberation that sucker-punches me in the gut. My thighs tremble. My toes curl. I watch as those full

lips of his quirk.

"I'm Edward." He holds out his hand.

"Wha—" I gape, "you're kidding me, right?"

He frowns. "Excuse me?"

"Your...your name," I choke out. "It can't be Edward."

"I am not following..." His cultured tone carries a note of warning, which I ignore.

"I mean, you can't be called Edward. Who put you up to this? Was it Isla?" Only she knows about my slightly stalkerish obsession with Edward, from Twilight, and surely, she wouldn't tell the others, right?

"Ah." The wrinkles on his forehead dissipate. "You're Isla's friend?"

I hold out my hand, "Ava."

"Ava?" He frowns.

He touches my hand and the rest of the words dry in my throat. Goosebumps flare on my skin. His gaze widens and the planes of his chest twitch. Did he feel that shock of the impact as well? I try to pull back my hand but he holds onto it.

"Why are you hiding, Eve?"

"I'm not," I scowl. "and that's not my name."

"It suits you better," he tilts his head, "and you haven't answered my question yet."

"Which one?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I came here to write," I bite the inside of my cheek, "only... I heard the splashing in the pool and I turned around and spotted you swimming.

"And you watched?" His lips curl in a hint of a smirk.

I glance away. "I, uh, may have peeked a bit."

"Did you like what you saw?"

I jerk my head in his direction, to find him watching me closely. His expression is one of curiosity, like I am some kind of lab specimen whose responses he is clocking in a clinical way. The hair on the back of my neck rises. I want to glance away, break the connection with this man, but I can't. My pulse rate ratchets up. Despite the chill in the morning, my palms begin to sweat. I clear my gaze, force the words out, "Wh...why Eve?"

"You know why." He peruses my features. "And you haven't answered the question."

"Do I?" My heart begins to race. "And what question?"

"You know the answer to both." He folds his arms across his chest and his impressive biceps bulge. Heat blooms between my legs and I resist the urge to rub my thighs together.

"I'm not sure what you're referring to," I say stiffly, "and no, I don't find you attractive."

His grin widens, and the impact of that smile... Oh, my. His teeth sparkle against the tan of his skin, his features brighten, the charisma pours off of him, and honestly, I can't glance away. I take in the gleam in his eyes, the hair on his forehead drying and already curling a little.

I blink. "Aren't you cold?"

The breeze picks up, and a strand of hair whips across my face.

He releases my hand, only to lean down and push the hair aside. Goosebumps pop on my skin. My stomach trembles and my heart begins to race. I watch as his gaze holds mine, as the pupils of his eyes dilate. His nostrils flare, and he straightens. "I'd better be going. Sinclair's expecting me for breakfast."

"Oh, that's right. Me too." I'd promised Summer I'd join them for breakfast. I jump up, and the movement brings me close to him. The heat of his body slams into my chest and my throat dries. I stare up at him, as he glares down his nose. Something like anger steals across his features, before he schools all expression from his face. A strange sensation grips my chest. I draw in a breath and the oxygen rushes to my head. Shit, when had I forgotten to breathe? He steps back, and the cold air rushes in. I shiver.

He pivots, walking toward the pool house. I take in the tattoo of the snake that crawls diagonally across his back. Whoa! That's one mean-ass tattoo. It's as spectacular as it is unexpected against the much paler skin of his back. The forked tongue of the snake is thick in girth, and within it are etched tribal signs that I can't decipher. The edge of it flows over his shoulder, which is what I must have seen earlier. The scales on the snake are patterned in color and the triangular head has slitted eyes which seem to follow me as I jump to my feet, then tug the blanket around me, hold my book close and follow.

"Hold on," I protest, "your legs are too long."

He slows his pace and I catch up.

"So, you are a friend of Sinclair's?"

He nods.

"You're one of the Seven, aren't you?" I peer up into his face, "I saw you at Arpad and Karina's wedding."

His jaw hardens. Now what did I say for him to seem angry?

"Surely, you remember?" I mutter. "Didn't you notice me?"

"I don't notice every girl who crosses my path."

I blink, then pause my steps, "Now, that's not fair. I could have sworn that you saw me there. Besides, I am not a girl."

He pulls forward, and I run to catch up. "Did you hear what I said?" I demand. "I am not a—"

"Girl." He stops so quickly that I bump into him. The scent of chlorine, and under that, the fresh-cut grass scent of him teases my nostrils. I draw in a breath, filling my lungs with his earthy essence. Moisture pools in my center and my nerve-endings seem to fire all at once. Why the hell does he have to smell so utterly delectable?

He pivots to face me and the heat of his body seems to turn up a notch. Does this man have a furnace under his skin, or what?

He looks me up and down. "What are you then?" he asks.

"What—" I blink.

"You said you are not a girl, so what are you?"

I tip up my chin. "A woman." I square my shoulders. "I am a woman."

"And I..." He squares his shoulders, "I am sworn to celibacy."

3

Edward

"Excuse me?" She gapes. "What...what did you say?"

Shit, what the hell had I been thinking? Why had I blurted that out? Because I am attracted to her... There, the simple truth. I've never been so affected by a woman as I have been since I first saw her at City Hall when she'd appeared next to the bride...and my world had reduced, shrunk down to her eyes, her mouth... That aura of her which shines so brightly, so purely. So innocent. How old is she anyway?

How could I have known then, that she would be trouble? That every single thing I'd sworn off, every vow I had taken... All of it would culminate in this test. This...trial that God has selected for me. And I cannot give in. No way. Not by all that I hold dear to me. There is space for only one attraction, one relationship, one complete obsession. To the One Above.

So, I had taken the easy way out. The cowardly way, you say? Maybe, but it is better to be upfront about what I am. I need to be clear that there can never be anything between us...

Hell, why am I even thinking along those lines? Not that she seems unduly affected by me, but that spark of awareness between us... I hadn't imagined that. Or the way her pupils had dilated, or how she had leaned in to me, how she'd sniffed me. She says she's not a girl anymore... but I beg to differ. She's all female, all coltish limbs and a translucent skin that reflects whatever she is feeling.

"I have taken a vow." I step back from her. "I have promised to live a

celibate life. I have completely given my life to Christ and the people I have been called to serve."

I turn away from her, head for the clothes that I'd placed on the pool-chair.

The hair on the nape of my neck prickles.

I glance over my shoulder to find her staring at me. Her gaze runs down my back, then back to my face, as I snatch up my shirt and shrug into it.

"I... I don't understand."

"Me neither." I grab my towel, then head for the guesthouse that I occupy whenever I stay over at the Sterlings', which isn't often. But when I'd wanted to leave yesterday, the rest of the Seven wouldn't hear of it. With Arpad getting married, it means all of us are now hitched... Well, except me... And Baron. I stiffen. *Why the hell am I thinking of him?* The friend who'd turned his back on us and left. Not that he hasn't been in touch. He's communicated through snail mail, writing on occasion, like when Damian was hesitant about getting married to Julia. Or when there is a specific investment that Sinner or Saint aren't sure about, though how he knows this is beyond me. The two of them run 7A Investments, one of the leading financial services firms in the country. Between them, they've managed to invest our money such that we'll be living off the wealth created for this entire lifetime. Not that I am going to touch a penny of it.

My investments go toward FOK Media, aka Full of Kindness Media, the non-profit that the Seven set up to finance upcoming talent in return for a portion of their earnings. I'd also put money toward my own trust that supports the most vulnerable and those in need.

As for myself, I stay in a small two-bedroom home, owned by the parish I am devoted to serving. The place where I need to return before things get further out of hand. It had been wrong to approach her in the first place. I'd seen her watching me, had recognized her— Of course, I had. I couldn't have missed her—and then I had approached her. I should have walked away, but I couldn't resist. I had to see her once more. And now I have to atone for the sinful thoughts I entertained.

I clench my fists at my sides.

"Wait." Her footsteps approach me, and I increase my pace.

I cannot be alone with her, not for one more second.

"What are you trying to tell me, Edward?"

I reach the guesthouse, twist open the door and step in. I turn to find her

hesitating at the entrance and beckon her in.

She hesitates and I tilt my head. "Come on, I have something to show you."

"You do?" Her forehead furrows.

"You need to see this."

She blows out a breath and follows me. I head inside, to the bedroom, take my collar from where I'd placed it on the bedstead. I slip it on, then turn to find her poised at the doorway.

Her face pales; her jaw drops.

"You're a...a—"

"Priest." I nod.

"B...but," she opens and shuts her mouth, "you weren't wearing a collar at the wedding yesterday."

"I'm a diocesan priest. I wear the collar when I have anything pastoral to do. I don't usually wear it when out with friends."

"I see." She shrugs off her blanket, folds it over her arm. Her gaze skitters away. "I knew it was too good to be true. Of course, it is." She retreats into the living room, drops the blanket and her book on the couch and begins to pace. "I mean, just once, things couldn't be easy for me, right? Everything has to be complicated. Just this once, couldn't things have worked out the way they do for everyone else? Of course, not." She throws up her hands. "This is not fair, not fair at all."

"Are you..." I follow her as she stomps back-forth-back, across the length of the floor of the living room. "Are you talking to yourself?"

"Shh." She turns to me and frowns. "I'm trying to figure this out."

"By talking aloud?"

"Hey, don't mock it until you try it. Did you know talking to yourself helps you organize your thoughts?" She shoves her purple-tipped hair back from her face.

Who dyes their hair purple? Ava does, that's who.

"According to psychologists, talking out loud to yourself helps you clarify your thoughts," she mumbles. "It helps to figure out what's important, and firm up any decisions you're contemplating."

"Ah," I allow my lips to tip up, "and what decision are you contemplating right now?"

She flushes. "I am not sure you want to know."

"Don't I?"

She shakes her head. "I don't think it's right for me to share what I am thinking with a priest... Not unless I was in confession, but then, wouldn't you have to keep it secret? I mean, aren't you bound by a code of conduct of some kind? And damn, but I admit, I may have eyed you up a little out there earlier. Does that even count as sin? Is it made worse by the fact that you are priest? Is it—"

"Stop." I hold up my hand.

She purses her lips together, then draws in a breath. "Sorry," she mutters, "I tend to babble when I'm nervous."

"I didn't notice." I allow my smile to widen. This girl—she's adorable. She twists her fingers together, hunches her shoulders, then snaps them back. "Uh, guess I should...go then?"

She turns to leave, and something hot stabs at my chest. Okay, so I can't have any kind of relationship with her... What the—? How had I even allowed myself to think that? Since becoming an ordained priest eight years ago, I've focused on my role, the routine, the discipline. The simplicity of my existence means everything to me. It helps me ground my thoughts, allows me to focus on what is important: serving others, helping them, listening to them, and helping to alleviate their worries.

In their comfort, I draw comfort. By easing their pain, I breathe easier. When I help a soul cross over, a part of me opens up to possibilities, and when I baptize a newborn, look into their clear eyes and welcome them to the house of the Lord, I redeem myself.

That... The regiment of how I live my life, gives me the framework upon which to anchor myself. When I am in that space, I don't have to worry about what happened to me, how the incident affected me, how I had fallen apart after the kidnapping, when the Seven and I had been taken and held in captivity for a month; how I had pulled myself together, only to fall apart again.

Boys join the army to learn discipline... For me, it had been the calling from God that had saved me. And surely, it is God who sent this girl, this absolutely stunning, untainted-by-life soul to me.

Or is it the devil trying to lure me away from Him?

No, not possible. I shake my head. This... It doesn't feel wrong. There's nothing unnatural about what I feel for her. Surely, it has to be the Lord wanting me to learn something from her? That's why he sent her.

What is this test that I am facing? And do I have the courage to go

through with it?

Can I rise to the occasion; face the fears that her proximity evokes in me?

And if I don't—if I chose *not* to accept this ultimate trial... Would that not mean that I have learned nothing from all the time I have spent in serving the Lord?

If this is his way of testing me... And surely, it has to be. There could be no other explanation for why, out of everything I've encountered thus far, she stands out like a beacon...

The air around her crackles with a vitality, a strange sensation... Almost one of hope, of life, of joy... Emotions I've seen amongst my parishioners, that I have studied from afar, even joined them in celebrating... But never once, experienced personally. Not until now.

Is this why you sent her my way, my Lord? Is it a sign that I need to open myself further, allow the emotions in, sense their sting, revel in how they torture me with everything that I cannot and will not allow myself to feel? So be it, then. I follow your command.

"Ava," I call out as she opens the door, "wait."

4

Ava

His voice stops me. I pause at the threshold.

"Ava."

I turn, wait for him to speak.

"I ..." He shoves his hands inside his pockets. "I'm sorry," he finally says.

"For what?"

"For giving you the wrong impression earlier." He stares at me. "Perhaps some of the fault is with me too."

"Oh?" I stare. Is he going to apologize to me? Why? Because I was drawn to him? *Please, don't... Please, please, don't.* My cheeks heat, and I glance away, "I mean, seriously, it was nothing." I hold my blanket in front of me. Can I hide under it, maybe? No, that would only look silly... As if anything could be worse than our earlier encounter? Gosh, how could I have been attracted to him? He's a priest... Someone sworn to not sleep with anyone, and I can't stop staring at his perfect features. Those high cheekbones, his dark hair cut short at the sides, long on top, that hooked nose, the mean upper lip...that gorgeous throat I want to lick, the width of his shoulders that fills the doorway, cutting out the sight of the room behind him. He draws in a breath and the sculpted planes of his chest stretch the fabric of his shirt. Not that I am staring or anything. Of course, not.

I clear my throat, then glance away.

"I should be the one apologizing." I clutch at my blanket with palms that

are slippery with sweat. *Dear God... What's wrong with me? And by the way, I need to have words with You. It's not fair that You dangle someone as luscious as this man in front of me only to claim him and tell me that I can't have him.* OMFG. I am seriously losing it, if I am having conversations with the Power Above in my head. "I shouldn't have sneaked looking at you earlier, and well... It's just, you're so damn gorgeous to look at, and well, I couldn't help it."

"Did you just tell me that I'm gorgeous to look at?"

I glance up to find him staring at me with surprise and bemusement.

"Yes," I shuffle my feet, "I guess I did."

"Do you always say everything that comes into your head?"

"Kind of," I hunch my shoulder, "though honestly, I seem to have even less of a filter when you're around."

"Do I make you nervous?" One corner of his lip curls...just a tad. Holy hell, he smirked. No, he totally did. And damn, if that isn't the hottest thing I have seen. Right after the Edward I'd read about in *Twilight* and imagined myself as Bella.

And here I am as Ava, and this is my Edward right here. Except, this scenario is all wrong. Shit. I'm tying myself in knots. I stare at him. "Are you sure you're a priest?"

He chuckles, "The last time I checked." He glances down at me, something like amusement and regret lacing his features. "Are you a...?" He tilts his head, "What do you do, Ava?"

"I'm a, uh, dancer."

"A dancer?" He frowns.

"Not ballet," I add quickly because that's what most people assume automatically, "more like, the exotic kind."

"Exotic kind?"

"A belly dancer." I twitch my hips, more out of habit than anything else. Okay, so maybe not completely... Maybe it's to take in how his nostrils flare as he lowers his gaze to my hips and stays there, as if fascinated by what he sees.

"A belly dancer, huh?" He finally raises his gaze to meet mine and those gorgeous golden-brown eyes of his blaze at me. Then he lowers his eye lashes, and when he raises them, all emotion is shorn from his features.

"I, uh, dropped out of university. I'd joined to study medicine, but somehow...half-way through my first year, I lost interest. Turns out,

becoming a doctor requires a strong stomach. The first time I saw a cadaver, I fainted and then had nightmares for days. I couldn't enter the laboratory after that. Also, the smell of formaldehyde—the solution they use to preserve specimens? Turns out, I am allergic to it... So..."

I swallow.

"Shit. Uh... Shoot, I am sorry. I'm blabbing." I shuffle my feet. "All that untapped energy, you know, it needs an outlet. It's why I turned to dancing, and then started my own studio teaching belly dancing. It makes me happy, you know—dancing?" *Stop it, what the hell are you doing? Pouring out your thoughts in a stream of consciousness?* "In fact, my dream is to one day to have a home big enough to have a studio in it so whenever I want to dance, I'll have my own space. A place where I can just be myself... You know?" I bite the inside of my cheek. So much for trying to appear calm and composed. OMG, what's wrong with me? I wipe my clammy palms against the fabric of my dress.

"So, I make you nervous?" He quirks an eyebrow, curls his fists at his sides, and whoa, his knuckles are white. I tilt my head, take in the nerve that throbs at his temple, the way his chest rises and falls. Maybe... I'm not the only one affected. Maybe, he feels it too—the connection, this strange chemistry between us that's crackled since his gaze met mine. Only... It means nothing. It can't... He's a priest...and I? I'm a hot mess.

"You do." I step back. "You make me very unsure of myself, Ed—" I bite down on the inside of my cheek. Should I call him Edward? Father? Damn, this is not cool, not at all. "I really should go."

He lowers his chin, "Guess I'll see you for breakfast at the main house then?"

"Breakfast?"

"You are going to eat breakfast with Sinclair and Summer, I assume?"

"Ah," I swallow, "yes, of course."

He nods, then holds out his hand, "It's nice to meet you, Ava."

Nice? Okay, not the word I would have used, but if he wants to play it that way, well, so can I.

I tilt my head, "And you, Father."

His jaw tics. A mask seems to form from his features as he draws himself up to his full height. He's so tall that I have to tip my head all the way back to see his face. How can someone so big, so vital, someone whose every inch of his body is packed with sex appeal... How the hell could he have dedicated

himself to a life where he'll never experience pleasures the likes of which I want to share with him?

And then, there's his personality... The intensity of his gaze, the depth I sense underneath that tightly controlled exterior. The strength of his dominance that he wears about himself, tightly cloaked, held back, as if he doesn't dare give in to the power of his complete self...because it would be too much for everyone around him. For the man he is, and make no mistake, he is one-hundred percent alpha male, would outshine anyone around him. Is that the depth of his sacrifice? The depth of what he'd given up to pursue his calling?

He holds my gaze, then nods. "Goodbye, Ava."

I clutch my blanket and book to my chest, then turn and head toward the main house. The hair on the nape of my neck rises and I know he's watching me as I put distance between us. My stomach clenches; my guts twist. *Don't look back. Don't.* My heart begins to hammer in my chest. This is just silly. Why the hell do I feel like I'm leaving a part of myself behind? I pause, glancing over my shoulder to find he's still there in the doorway. Our gazes connect; a thrill runs up my spine. My pores pop. Even across that distance I can make out the tension that coils those massive shoulders, those cut abs of his that are outlined by the fabric of the shirt he wears, the trim waist, the powerful thighs clad in pants that cling to his every groove, every ridge, every muscle that cords his legs.

I gulp. My throat closes. All the moisture in my body drains to my core. *No, no, no, you can't think of him that way, remember.* I avert my gaze, turn and half-run until I reach the main house. I let myself inside, then race up the stairs. I reach the landing of the first floor, and bump into someone.

"Hey, where's the fire?" Isla, one of my closest friends, asks.

It's inside me, all around me, is what I want to stay. I firm my lips, peer up into her face.

"You, okay?" she asks. "You look like you've seen a ghost.

No, just a man I want... Who is the last man on this earth I can have. Shit, why can't my life be more like one of those romance novels I love to read? Where the only thing standing between me and the hero is a string of inconsequential misunderstandings?

"Ava?" Isla touches my shoulders. "Say something."

"Something," I mutter.

She chuckles, "You want some coffee?" She grips my hand. "You seem

chilled."

"I am," I admit, "I was out, uh, writing in my journal."

"You went out dressed like that?" She stares at my dress. "You didn't wear a jacket?"

"I had this." I nod to the blanket.

"You still seem frozen."

Maybe that's because of the surprise I just had? A cold sensation invades me. Shit, how could he be a priest? Seriously, a man who looks like that, who's vital, and hot and so sexy. How had he renounced the world? Or maybe, only monks do that. I have no idea what it means to devote oneself to the service of the church. How could I? My parents had been agnostic. I've never been drawn to any religion.

Then my mother had passed away and I'd been convinced that there definitely isn't a God. If there were, why had he taken my mother away from me?

"Ava?" Isla tugs on my arm, "Come on, let's get some coffee and breakfast, and you can tell me all about your adventures this morning."

"What adventures?" I frown, but allow her to lead me back the way I came. We walk into the large kitchen that looks out on the backyard— correction— that looks out on the entire freakin' slope of Primrose Hill. The money has its benefits, no doubt, but surely, too much of it can't be healthy. It blinds you to the real stuff—feelings, emotions, relationships... Hell, the only thing I know about myself is that I want to live as close to my true self as possible. Which means identifying what I want for myself in the first place.

She places two cups on the counter, then scoops coffee into the cafetière, before switching on the kettle to boil the water.

"The adventures that have put that dazed look on your face." She stabs a finger in my direction, "Fess up. Did you crawl out to meet someone?"

"What?" I blink, "No."

"You can tell me." She waggles her eyebrows. "You have a boyfriend hidden away you don't want the rest of us to meet?"

"Nothing like that." The kettle switches off, she turns, pours water over the coffee grounds, then stirs it, before lowering the plunger.

The scent of coffee wafts around me and I blink as if coming out of a mirage. I place my blanket and book on the island as she pours out the coffee, then offers me a mug. I top it up with cream and three spoonfuls of sugar,

then take a sip.

"So," she asks, "what happened to send you tearing through the corridor like you were trying to get away from a shark."

"Do you believe in fate?" I query.

She blinks, then blows on the liquid in her mug. She takes a sip, sighs, then leads the way to one of the barstools.

I slip onto the one next to her, place my mug on the counter. "Well?" I ask. "Do you?"

"Of course." She gazes into the depths of the dark liquid in her mug. "And being as how so many of the Seven have found their match... When honestly, it's hard to believe any of them would ever end up together with someone else, based on the journeys that each of them has gone through..." She rubs her cheek. "It has to be fate...or destiny, or whatever you want to call it, guiding them to get together."

"But what if fate gives you mixed signals?" I rub my hand across my face.

"Mixed signals?"

I nod, "You know, like telling you to move forward yet holding you back, for some reason."

"I don't understand." She scowls. "Are you telling me you met someone, and you are sure you were destined to meet him, only now you think he can't be the one for you?"

"Kind of." I twist my fingers together. "It's more like, I shouldn't have been attracted to him in the first place, because he's unavailable."

"He's married?"

"No." I shake my head. "Kind of. He's in a relationship with someone else."

She gives me a hard look. "So, he's involved with someone else, and yet, he encouraged you?"

"Not knowingly." I wriggle around to find a more comfortable stance. "I mean, he didn't do anything to encourage me. It was me, making assumptions about him."

"But he told you he is with someone else?"

"That's the thing. He's not with someone else."

"So, he's available?" She frowns.

"No." I hunch my shoulders.

"So," she purses her lips, "he's not with someone else, but he's not

available?"

I jut out my lower lip.

"What, is he a priest or something?" She chuckles.

I stare at her and my cheeks flame.

"Omigod." She opens and shuts her mouth, "No way, don't tell me."

I bury my head in my hands, "Oh...this is soooo embarrassing."

"Don't tell me." She grips my arm. "You're talking about Edward, aren't you?"

I nod, still not meeting her eyes. Jeez, does everyone know that he's a priest? How had I missed that memo? But then, I hadn't spent any time with the Seven. I'd seen Edward at Karina and Arpad's wedding, but he hadn't been wearing his priest's collar, so I could be forgiven for making that mistake, right?

"So, you had no idea he was a priest?" Her voice is filled with sympathy.

"I must be the only one who didn't know." I lower my hands, raise my gaze to hers. "I mean, look at the guy... He's...so hot, has so much presence. He's a walking orgasm, for hell's sake."

"Who's a walking orgasm?" Summer ambles over to us. She plucks the cup of coffee in front of me on the counter and takes a long satisfying sip. "Mmmm." She swallows, then glances between us, "So who were you talking about?"

"Edward," Isla blurts out, before I have a chance to tell her to shut up.

I glare at her and she raises her shoulders.

"The hot priest?" Summer places the cup of java back on the counter top, then walks over to a shelf near the refrigerator. She pulls out two boxes of cereal, pivots and takes a seat at the island. "Can't talk about sexual frustration without sugar."

She slides the box of Froot Loops to me, then dips into the box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch. Crunching down a mouthful, she leans forward, "So give."

I push away the cereal, pick up my cup of coffee. "Nothing to give."

"She's attracted to Edward," Isla adds.

"Argh," I groan, "now I feel like a fool."

"Because he's a priest?" Summer tilts her head.

"Umm, yeah?" I bury my nose in my cup. "Surely, it must be blasphemy or something to entertain thoughts of the sexual kind about a man dedicated to the Church?"

"I don't blame you." Summer's lips kick up at the corners. "That man makes me wanna go back to church."

"I bet there's a line of women lining up to go to mass when he preaches." Isla chuckles.

"I'm first in line for communion." Summer nods.

"You'll have to battle it out with me." Isla snorts.

"I'll simply get in line twice." Summer laughs.

"I'll be an altar server with nothing under my robes," Isla retorts.

"Wait... what?" My cheeks heat. "What the hell are you two going on about. Seriously?" I scowl at Isla. "Don't talk about him that way, okay?"

"Ooh." Isla bats her eyelids. "Woman's already getting possessive."

"I am not getting possessive." I grit my teeth. "I am simply stating that it's wrong to talk about a priest in those terms."

"Oh, dear." Isla blinks. "Oh, dear."

"What?" I frown.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, oh, dear." Isla shakes her head.

"What, what?" I stare at her. "What the hell is wrong with you? Why do you suddenly sound like someone from a Jane Austen novel?"

"Because you're acting like one of the shy women who often appears in her stories?"

"I am not shy, and Jane Austen's women were feisty heroines who could hold their own." I hunch my shoulders. "Also, it's not all physical with him, okay? There's something else going on here... Something I can't put a finger on."

"You sense a connection with him," Summer scoops up more of her cereal. "And I'd be the first to say that's not something you should dismiss."

"What do you mean?"

"How many men do you think you are going to meet in life with whom you have that kind of instant link?"

"I don't know."

"Not many," she replies. "So, when you sense that kind of bond, you don't let it go. Only—"

"Only he's a priest?"

"There is that. And it's Edward we're talking about here. Everything I've heard about him from Sin, confirms to me that he's focused on the Church and his path. I've heard the rest of the Seven talk about how he'd never turn from it."

"Shit." I squeeze my eyes shut. I knew it. I mean, of course, I did. After all, I am attracted to him. And what I know about him, so far, has confirmed to me that he doesn't do anything by half measures. He is dedicated to the Church. No way, is he going to walk away. In fact, I shouldn't even be thinking about him in this fashion.

Summer grips my shoulder and I snap open my eyes.

"So, what are you going to do about it?" Her forehead is furrowed.

"What can I do?" I slink down further into my seat, "He's a priest, end of..."

"Is it?" Isla frowns. "Do you actually believe that?"

"Yes...No." I slide off the stool and begin to pace. "I don't know. I mean, a part of me wants to walk away. The other part insists that there's a reason that he's called Edward, right?"

There's silence, then the two of them look at each other. "You're talking about *Twilight*?" Isla leans back in her seat. "Tell me you're not... Not that I don't have a thing for Edward."

I shoot her a dirty look, and she holds up her hands. "I meant the character, not your Edward."

"He's not my Edward." I fold my arms about my waist. "And he probably never will be." I turn on them, "But...the fact that he's named after my favorite character ever; that has to be the only reason I am so strongly attracted to him... Right? And yet... There's this barrier between us, one which can't be overcome."

"Why can't it be overcome?" Isla scowls, "I know he's a priest, but men have given up a lot more for true love."

True love. Is it love? Or just lust? I wrap my arms about my waist, "I only just met the man."

"I wish I could tell you to walk away, but when you feel that connection," Summer thumps her chest, "it's not something you can easily ignore."

"What would you have me do?" I lean a hip against the island. "It's not like the challenge is easy to surmount." *Although I'd certainly like to try to mount him*, I think with a smirk.

"It never is," Isla retorts.

"I know... I know, but this situation... It's crazy. I mean, am I supposed to seduce him away from his calling?"

"Maybe," Isla concedes, "maybe not."

"What do you mean?"

"I understand your reticence in not doing anything to sway him from his path... It takes a special kind of person to follow his calling," she says slowly.

"That's what I mean. Who am I to stand between him...and...his..." I bite the inside of my cheek, "his loyalty, his devotion to the path he's decided on? I just met him... Hell, I don't even know how he feels about me... except..."

"Except?" Isla prompts me.

"He did apologize to me, in case he'd given me the wrong impression."

"Ah," Summer cups her chin in her hand, "so he's aware of the chemistry between the two of you."

I wince, "Should we even be using adjectives like chemistry? Somehow, it seems so wrong, given the context, you know?"

Isla pushes back from the table. "Woman, you are making my head ache, the way you are over analyzing this. I think you are putting too much emphasis on the fact that he's called Edward. Not that I have anything against the story, but this is real life, and it doesn't always follow a predictable storyline, know what I mean?"

"You're telling me?" I snort. "So what? I should ignore it completely?"

"Or just give it time, let it breathe, see how things develop," Isla offers. "Maybe the attraction will fizzle out—?"

Umm, I don't think so, but okay, I am willing to wait and see.

"Maybe he'll decide you're worth it?" Summer points out. "If his feelings develop further, maybe he'll do something about it?"

"Is that what you told Karma as well?" Karma, Summer's sister has been holed up in Sicily with her new hottie and Summer hasn't heard from her in a few months, except for text messages.

Summer's brow furrows, "I never did get a chance to share that advice with Karma. She just up and left one day, which is out of character for her. And I confess, I am worried about what she's up to, but each time I tell her that I am coming to Sicily to hunt her down, she insists that it won't be long before she returns."

"Has she kept in touch with you?"

"We text every weekend. Every time I message her, she replies instantly." Summer chews on her lower lip.

"But you are still worried about her?"

"I am, and yet," Summer hesitates, "I don't want to stifle her, you know?"

I trust my sister, and while I want to protect her, I also know that we have to make our own mistakes to learn from them too."

"Mistakes," I muse. "Wonder if I am mistaken about the chemistry between me and Edward." I shuffle my feet, "I'd never want him to give up his calling, his profession...for me, you know?"

"And you know the Seven are complicated. If it weren't for the incident, he might never have become a priest."

"What happened to Edward?" I lean forward. "Is that what prompted him to follow this path?"

Summer's forehead creases. "I don't think even the guys know the full story, but what I do know? It's not my story to tell. It's best he tells you himself."

"Of course." My shoulders slump. "So then, what? I wait and watch? That's what you two recommend?"

"Or maybe we could just be friends?" A new voice sounds from behind me. I turn and heat floods my cheek.

"Y-you," I stutter. "What are you doing here?"

5

Edward

I stride into the kitchen and the girls glance at each other. The silence stretches and Ava hops from foot to foot. Her face is fiery and she looks like she's about to throw up.

I glance between them and Summer nods. "Uh, Isla and I need to see someone about something."

"What thing?" Isla frowns and Summer nudges her.

Isla blinks rapidly, then straightens, "Oh, yeah, that thing."

Summer begins to haul Isla out of there. Ava watches them leave with a stricken expression. "Uh, I guess I should go too." She turns to follow them.

"Stop, Eve." I hear the authority in my voice and frown. When had I decided it was appropriate to command her to do my bidding? More to the point, why does she respond to my order?

She pauses, but doesn't turn around. Her shoulders are squared, her spine erect.

"Turn around." I force my voice to assume a more normal tone. This is just a discussion; that's all it is. A conversation. Something I do every day with the people in my parish, so there is nothing different about this. Except there is. None of them resemble this beautiful, innocent creature who was sent my way to tempt me, to show me that I am fallible. To show me that the more I try to resist, the more I will fail. That all this time, while I've taken so much pride in being able to resist any enticement... Apparently, I still have a long way to go. Yeah, that's all this is. A test. Of my morals. My principals.

The way of life I have chosen for myself, and I intend to make sure that I pass this. With flying colors.

She slowly turns to face me and the breath rushes out of me.

Without the shield of the blanket that she'd clutched to herself, I see her in the morning light, her Titian hair flowing about her shoulders. Her pale skin gleams in the sunlight that pours over her and haloes her. Her green gaze widens as she takes me in. Color flushes her cheeks, her lips part, and I can't look away. The pink of her lower lip, so soft, it would be so sweet. If I could only taste it once. My foot hits the ground and I realize I've taken a step toward her.

Her gaze widens, she bites down on her lower lip, and the blood rushes to my groin. This can't be happening. And no, no way, am I going to use swear words to give vent to the frustration that wells in my chest. I thrust out my chest, widen my stance. "I heard you, earlier." I fix my gaze on her, and she blushes.

"How...how much of the conversation?" she mumbles.

I tilt my head and her blush deepens.

"Oh, hell." She squeezes her eyes shut. "This is soooo embarrassing." She hunches her shoulders. "I didn't mean to talk about you. I mean, I did, but I was hoping for some clarity, you know? And I can only figure things out if I discuss them."

"You mean, when you are not talking to yourself?"

"Exactly." She snaps her eyes open. "But I swear, you have nothing to worry about."

"No?"

"No." She moves toward me. "Trust me, I have come to a decision."

"Oh?" I lower my chin, "And what would that be?"

She holds out her hand, "Friends."

"Friends?"

"Yeah, you know like the TV series?"

I stare at her and the line between her eyebrows deepens. "You do watch TV, right? I mean, surely, you do know Friends? You know, Rachel and Joey and—"

"I'm a priest, not an ascetic. I haven't renounced the world." *Not completely, that is.*

Her breath hitches, "Sorry. I mean, of course, you know what Friends is. Silly me, why would I think you didn't? Not that I watch it or anything. It's a

bit too classic for me. I mean, my older sister loved it and I loved watching it with her, but I tried watching it again recently and it seemed like it hadn't aged well. Unlike you."

"Unlike me?"

She slaps a hand to her forehead, "Did I just say that out loud? How the hell did I let that slip?" She gasps. "Oh, no. I can't believe I just said that." She shakes her head, "Forget it." She swipes her hair over her shoulder. "Can you forget I said that?"

"Not a chance." I draw myself up to my full height. "I take it, you think of me as old?"

She winces. "Not old, but old-er."

"How old do you think I am, exactly?"

"Really, I didn't mean anything by that statement."

"How old, Ava?" I infuse enough command in my voice for her to pale. "Tell me."

"Um..." She holds up four fingers, then signals three with her other hand.

"What the—" I explode, "You really think I'm—"

She folds one finger of the first hand, leaving three upright.

"Thirty-three?" I growl, "You think I'm thirty-three?"

"Are you?"

I shake my head, then reach over and fold two fingers of her second hand, leaving only her little finger upright.

Goosebumps pop on her skin, mirroring the ones on mine. I blow out a breath. *Don't swear, don't swear. In fact, don't stay here anymore. Don't look at her. Don't go closer to her again. Turn and leave, if you know what's good for you. And for her. Think about her. Why are you leading her on, when you know there can be no future for either of you together?*

"Thirty-one?" She swallows, "You're thirty-one?"

I nod.

"I'm nineteen." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear.

I blow out a breath. Of course, I'd sort of guessed that she was young, but I hadn't...couldn't let myself think about it. The proof's right here in front of my eyes though. She's nineteen. *Only nineteen.*

"I know you think that I'm too young, but you are wrong," she declares.

"I am?"

She nods. "I was born an old soul, and I promise you, I am tougher than I look. I'm more persistent than people give me credit for."

"Is that right?"

"Don't you believe me?" She draws herself up to her full height, which still means she barely reaches my chest. So young, so delicate, so tiny. A gift from the heavens to coax me along the right path. *Which is what?* Return to my duties, stay true to my chosen route. Don't let anything distract me from my obligations, my responsibilities to my flock. Yes, that's why she's come into my life. To show me how unsuited I am to a world where temptations lurk around every corner... I'd never be able to resist them. I'd lose myself in them again, I'd lose my clarity of thinking, my soul...and that, I cannot bear. Not again.

"It's not you I doubt; it's me."

She blinks.

"It's not your words I'm unsure of; it's my thoughts."

She swallows.

I take a step forward and the scent of jasmine clouds my senses. The band around my chest tightens. I raise my hand toward her and her breathing grows harsher.

"It's not your persistence that I question; it's my ability to stay true to myself that I have reservations about."

I make the sign of the cross, then walk past her. I head for the exit, when she calls out, "Edward."

The sound of my name from her lips sends my pulse racing. I fist my fingers at my sides, then pause.

Footsteps thud, she draws abreast, then plants herself in my path.

"You believe in a higher power, don't you? So, do I. I believe there's a reason we are drawn to each other. And while I can't claim to understand why, I am willing to be patient to find out. Meanwhile, I really do want us to be friends." She holds out her hand, "Please, Edward."

I glance down at her hand, then at her face.

"We can never be friends."

Brushing past her, I walk out.

6

Ava

I stare at my reflection in the mirror of the dressing room allocated to me. My first gig. My FIRST gig. Whoa. It's for a destination wedding Isla is organizing. The entire theme is a mix of exotica drawing on different influences from the East. They'd wanted a performance to kick off the evening's festivities, which is where I come in. Isla had asked me and I'd jumped at the opportunity. Finally, I am moving forward in the direction of my dreams.

I take in the beaded appliqué work of my blouse, the tiny mirrors sewn into it reflecting the light from the bulbs that frame the mirror. My hips are encased in a pair of shorts, attached to long panels of light, gossamer fabric that falls to my ankles. Intricate overlays of sequins catch the light and shimmer. I stare at my reflection and can't stop the smile that traces my lips.

I'd only been twelve when I'd attended a musical and watched the women shaking their hips. With the colored scarfs that they'd wrapped around their hips, their hair open and rippling down their backs, their laughter and happy faces as they'd flung their heads back, shaken their arms and legs, and moved to a rhythm I'd sensed but not heard—I'd felt a primitive calling to be one of them. To be as free, to not think, to be able to live in the moment as I allow the music to take over, to let my body flow with the beats.

My mother had loved everything to do with the East. Even though she had been dead set against my career as a dancer, it was she who'd influenced my eclectic taste in music. I reach for my purse on the dressing table, pull out

the picture I keep in its protective sleeve. It's of the four of us—Mum, Dad, me and Raisa. I touch my finger to Mum's smiling face. She looked so young, so happy there. I love this picture, taken on one of the many summer vacations we'd spent exploring the countryside, wearing my favorite red dress, a gift from Mum. It's the only picture I took with me when I left home. I had been angry and grieving at Mum's death, the loss too much to bear.

Had even wondered if the disappointment in my career choice had brought on the cancer. But my sister had banished the notion. It was Raisa who had encouraged me to follow my dream when my parents had been so against my dropping out of med school. She'd told me that if my heart lay in dancing, then I should follow it. If I didn't try, I'd never know what was right for me.

I'd taken her advice, and never regretted it. If only I could bring some of that courage to bear on the upcoming solo performance. My first solo performance. Gah!

There's a knock on the door and Isla pops her head into the room, "Five minutes, babe."

I nod as she closes the door behind her, then slide the picture back inside my handbag. This is it. I can do this. I have to do this. If I have any hope of competing in the World Belly Dancing Championships that will be held in a few months, then I have to start with conquering my fear of live performances, which begins with this one. Of course, I do have to actually sign up for the competition, which I will do... Just as soon as I get my courage together.

I rise to my feet, walk out toward the stage that's been erected in one corner of the ballroom of the Dorchester Hotel. It's the most exclusive hotel in town, also owned by Saint, one of the Seven.

The sound of guests talking and cutlery clinking against plates reaches me as I step on the stage. I walk to the center of the platform, take my stance. Wait... Wait...as the noise ebbs...flows...begins to die down. A hush creeps through the audience and I still don't move. I keep my sight focused on a distant point at the back of the room. Silence descends, yet I still wait. A beat, then another. The first strains of the music I'd chosen for this piece drift through the air. *Where Have You Been* by Rihanna.

The notes swirl around me, sink into my blood as I sway my hips, twitch the muscles of my stomach, raise my arms in the air, and allow the notes to guide me. I close my eyes, let myself sink into the rhythm, swirl my hips,

move my feet, glide my arms down to my hips, lower still, curve my spine and raise my arms above me, then straighten to twirl around and around. I dance to the beats until I am sweating and limber.

My joints loose, my skin warm from the exertion, sweat beads my forehead and trickles down my back. Finally, I leap through the air, land on my feet, roll, and sink to one knee, head bowed.

The music fades away.

In the silence that follows, my heart beat drums in my ears, blood pumps at my wrists, behind my eyes. My heart thunders in my chest—*clap-clap-clap*—the sound of the audience's applause echoes the rhythm.

"Bravo."

"Encore."

I allow my lips to curve in a huge smile. I did it. Yes. I pulled it off. Maybe, just maybe, I'll be able to make a career out of this, after all.

The hair on the back of my neck rises. My pulse rate ratchets up. I tip my head up, glance about at the smiling faces of the audience until my gaze clashes with his.

Amber eyes, burning brightly, fringed with those incredibly dark, thick lashes that I want to feel feather across my skin.

I swallow; my throat dries. A bead of sweat trails down my spine as I hold his gaze and I struggle to maintain my composure, despite the tickle. His lips firm and a nerve throbs at his temple. He narrows his gaze and the skin around his lips tightens. No doubt about it, he's angry. But why? What the hell did I do to warrant his ire? What do I even care if I did? I tip up my chin, then rise to my feet. I rake my gaze down that perfect nose, across his gorgeously shaped lips, the tendons of his throat that are constricted by the white collar he wears at his neck.

Oh. My stomach hollows out and my palms dampen. Of course, he's here in an official capacity. Likely, he officiated the wedding ceremony that took place earlier.

I raise my gaze to his, and the coldness in his eyes seems to deepen. He wipes all expression from his face, draws himself up to his full height, which puts him heads and shoulders above everyone else in the vicinity.

His shoulders bunch, the fabric of his long-sleeved black shirt stretches across his massive chest. His biceps bulge and strain the seams. He seems to be in the throes of some emotion that I can't quite identify.

I tilt my chin up, thrust out my hip and place my palm on it.

His jaw tightens. Then he turns on his heel and marches off.

What the hell—?

The crowd swallows him, people clapping and whistling. The sound washes over me. There's a touch on my shoulder and I shudder. I glance up into Isla's concerned gaze. "You, okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Or the devil... Which can't be right, because he's the exact opposite. Right? A man who's devoted himself to the service of God. So why the hell can't I get past this attraction I feel toward him? And it's not only because his name is Edward. This is something deeper, more powerful. More forbidden. Is it because I am not supposed to entertain such images about him that I can't stop myself from thinking along those lines?

Oh, my god! I snort. And God can't do anything for me right now, because he's the one who put me in this position.

"I'm okay." Or I will be, as soon as I wash off the sweat from this bout of dancing. And shed the impure thoughts that crowd my mind, and which I have no right to be thinking. To think, I can't even confess them aloud... because hell, there's no one else I'd rather be confessing to than the glowering, growling, grumpy man who'd clearly watched me dance and not been too happy about it. Well, too bad. Bugger him and his judgmental ass. I can do what I want, when I want, as long as it makes me happy. And right now, dancing is the only thing that seems to give me some sense of myself. Which is what I want, right?

A few of the men and women from the crowd step onto the platform and I clutch at Isla's arm. "I know it's not being very polite, considering this is a private gig and I do need more of these, but right now, would you mind very much if I went back to my room? I just need a break."

"From him, you mean?" She jerks her chin in the direction of where the glowering jerkass—argh, is it wrong to think of a priest in those terms? — had stood.

"You saw him?" I whisper.

"Hard to miss, when he glared at you all through your performance." Isla chuckles.

"Shit." I hunch my shoulders. Good thing I hadn't noticed him until the very end of the performance or there's no telling what would have happened. I'd have lost my rhythm, most likely, and that...is saying a lot. Once I start a dance routine, normally, nothing can distract me...but I suspect he could. The crowd of people reach us. I turn around, head the other way, leaving Isla to

manage them.

That woman is a keeper, seriously. The way she'd pulled off the reception for Arpad and Karina in a very short period of time—I'm talking days, here—was a miracle. She never loses her cool, always manages to get things organized. If only I could get her to organize my life, as well. I veer down the corridor and back to the hotel room that doubles as my dressing room.

Slipping inside, I place the bouquet on the dresser. Then shake back the hair from my face. Turning, I head for the bathroom, step inside to run the shower. I slide down one side of my blouse when the hair on my nape stands to attention again. I glance up and meet his gaze in the mirror.

Somehow, I am not surprised. After the way Isla had said he'd watched me through that performance, it was inevitable that he would follow me here.

I stare as he watches me from the doorway of the bath. Shit, is he going to come in? Why isn't he coming in?

I raise my shoulder and allow the sleeve of my blouse to slip further down my arm.

His chest rises and falls. He watches me with a searing intensity that sends a frisson of lust chasing down my spine, straight to that part of me between my thighs. My core clenches. Moisture pools between my legs, dots my palms. And it's not because of the steam from the shower.

I reach behind me to undo the ties of my blouse when he puts up a hand. "Stop," he commands and all of my pores seem to pop.

I halt with my hand on the knot that holds the edges of my bodice together, watch him as he curls his fingers at his sides, as his chest muscles ripple, and he drags his fingers through his hair, before whipping off his priest's collar and shoving it in his pocket.

Umm, okay, not what I expected.

He walks over to stand right behind me. The heat from his body sears me. The steam from the shower in front creates a fine mist that seems to dot his forehead, cling to the crisp collar of his shirt, now open to reveal the tendons of his beautiful throat. My belly flutters and my toes curl. What craziness is this that just the sight of his throat seems to send me into raptures of the kind I've never faced before? My fingers itch and my palms ache. I want to step back, close the distance between us and rub the curves of my ass against that thick, heavy length of his that would be tenting his pants about now. And I shouldn't do that. I blow out a breath, then move toward the sink. I hook my fingers over the edge of the sink, tip my chin up to hold his gaze in the

mirror.

"Why are you here, Edward?"

7

Edward

That's the question I'm asking myself. I shouldn't be here. What the hell am I doing here? I'd walked away from her the last time, determined to stay away from her. Then I'd stayed on after officiating the wedding, and seen her dance.

She'd moved her hips, her waist, bowed her body so gracefully to the music, allowed the notes to take over, had drawn the rhythm into her body and embodied the essence of the music. Hot, passionate, yet deep and soul-stirring. That's her. When she dances, she transcends the physical. She embodies the melody, becomes one with the tune...the chords...the notes... To see her dance is as much of a spiritual experience as when I pray to Him above. I clench my fists at my sides.

How can I do this? How can I compare what I have with my Savior to how I felt when I watched her? Why did I have to follow her from the performance and into her hotel room?

"How did you get in?" she whispers.

"The door," I jerk my chin toward the entrance to the room. "It hadn't closed completely."

And I had walked in and invaded her privacy. Why had I thought I could simply barge in here unannounced? More to the point, what had I been thinking anyway? Why had I thought it was okay to push the door open and step in? What's wrong with me? Why is it that when I see her, I seem to lose my head completely?

I squeeze my eyes closed, turn to leave, when she grabs my hand. Sensations vibrate out from the point of contact. I glance down at where her fingers are curled around my wrist.

I glance up at her and she releases me. "Sorry," she mutters, "I... I don't want you to leave."

And I don't want to go, and that is the problem. But I don't say that aloud.

Instead, I stare past her at the open door of the shower cubicle, "Why don't you finish your shower? I'll wait out here."

"You sure?" she asks.

I frown at her and she reddens.

"I didn't mean it that way. I mean, I do want you to wait. It's not that I wanted you to join me or anything. I mean—" She slaps her hand to her forehead. "Oh, hell, forget what I said. I mean—"

"I know what you mean." I can't stop the smile that quirks my lips. "Why don't you go on?" I jerk my chin toward the shower. "I'll be right outside."

I pivot, then step out and pull the door closed behind me.

I walk over to the window, pull back the curtains, and glance down at the road below. Just two streets up, the tourists and shoppers crowd Oxford Circus. You'd think there would be lots of traffic near the most exclusive hotel in London, but surprisingly, down here there are no vehicles, and almost no pedestrian traffic. Except for what seems to be a homeless man who sits on the sidewalk, almost right below the window. He seems to be holding up a sign as well...the letters of which are hidden from my line of sight. Hmm, given this is one of the most exclusive hotels in the city, it's strange the hotel allows him to stay there. Not to mention, it can't be a lucrative spot for him without foot traffic.

The sound of the shower running reaches me. I turn toward it, and of course, my imagination goes straight to her under the water, without clothes, the droplets running down her breasts, her stomach, to the place between her thighs. I shake my head, grab the rosary out of my pocket, sink to my knees and cross myself. Then I begin to pray.

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord...

I repeat the prayer, until all thoughts exit my head and my mind stills. My

heart beat slows down, my muscles relax, and my breathing stabilizes.

I stay there until I hear the sound of her footsteps. Then I open my eyes, and rise to my feet.

She walks toward me, wearing a white dress, her auburn hair freshly washed and flowing down her back. Light pours out of the bathroom, turning the fabric translucent, creating a halo around her. I take in the curves of her body. The highlights in her hair that glisten and sparkle as she moves.

She resembles an otherworldly vision, an angel who's arrived on earth to tease me, to test me...to reveal the error of my ways. She pauses in front of me, tips her chin up.

"Hello," she says softly, "hope I didn't keep you waiting."

You can keep me waiting forever, for that's the way it's going to be between us. I can't touch you, can't hold you, can't allow myself to think of you, but what I can give you is "friendship." I roll the word around my tongue, "You wanted us to be friends. I accept that."

"You do?" She frowns. "I thought you said we could never be friends."

"What I meant was that we could never be *just* friends."

She scowls, folds her arms about her waist. "Then what—?"

I raise my hand and she purses her lips.

"I thought it would be best if we didn't see each other at all. If I didn't allow myself anywhere near you, there wouldn't be any temptation. But I was wrong."

"You were?"

I nod, "I realize now, you were sent to me precisely so I could continuously test myself. You are the route to my betterment. Before you, I'd become boring... Complacent, even. I'd reached a plateau, where I thought I was doing everything I could to show the Lord that I am his faithful disciple, but it turns out that I was wrong."

She glowers at me. "You were, huh?"

"Yes. Absolutely." I square my shoulders. "You are His way of showing me that I have a long way to go before I master my senses. I thought I'd conquered my weaknesses, but now I can see that's not true."

"So," she straightens, "I am a weakness?"

"Exactly." I nod. "You're a failing, someone sent to hold a mirror up to my shortcomings."

"Shortcomings?" She huffs, "You're calling me a shortcoming?"

"Not you." I frown. "Mine, I am the one found wanting. I saw you and

realized just how long a road I have yet to travel before I can claim to be anywhere near the kind of perfection I hope to achieve."

"You are trying to achieve perfection, huh?"

"Aren't we all?" I drawl.

"Not me, buster." She shakes her hair back from her face. "I am human, and I plan to embrace my failings, my imperfections and my quirks, without which I am nothing but a colorless shadow of myself."

"You," I chuckle, "you'll never be a colorless anything. You're fire and radiance and purity—the kind I can only hope to achieve."

She opens and shuts her mouth. "Purity?" She shakes her head. "You're confusing me with someone else."

"I know what I see..." I rake my gaze across her features, "a woman who's passionate about what she believes, who wants to live life to the fullest, who wants to experience every single experience, every emotion there is. Someone who—"

She reaches forward and slaps her palm over my mouth. "Stop," she whispers.

Sensations curl in my chest and blood rushes to my groin. I step back.

She pulls back her hand. "Sorry." She hesitates. "I... I didn't mean to do that, but sometimes when I'm with you, it's difficult for me to hold back."

"That's what I mean." I spear my fingers through my hair. "Clearly, this is why we need to meet. It's the only way I can continuously test myself against the temptation that you embody. You're an impulse I need to steer clear of. An enticement I must...avoid at all costs."

She blinks rapidly. "Okay, now I am completely confused. You want to avoid me... Yet you say we need to meet. But earlier, you said we shouldn't be friends. So, what is it?"

"I'm saying, we should be friends with benefits."

She gapes. "Benefits?" she chokes out. "What...what kind of benefits?"

"The conversational kind."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." I quirk my lips. "We meet, keep our distance," I point to the space between us, "but we continue to converse, to exchange opinions on anything under the sun."

"And during the time we meet, you try to resist me?"

"Exactly." I snap my fingers. "What better way to prove myself to the Lord than to show that I can withstand the wickedest of lures that he sends

my way?"

"That's it." She throws up her hands, "First, you raise me up on some kind of bullshit pedestal that I definitely don't deserve. Then, you compare me to being some kind of sin. You know what? Forget it!"

She turns, heads toward the table in the corner and begins to stuff her clothes into her bag.

My heart begins to hammer; my pulse pounds at my temples. Hold on, what did I do wrong? I simply shared with her what I was thinking. Had I been wrong in that? Isn't it best to be upfront in these situations? What had I said that could evoke such a reaction from her anyway?

"Ava," I head toward her, "You're not acting in a sane manner. All I'm saying is, let's be friends and talk openly when we meet."

"To hell with that." She huffs, "I don't want anything to do with that, Father. You're a...a...completely self-absorbed prick, as far as I am concerned. How can you be a priest and serve your people if you can't even understand how it is to be in my shoes and be attracted to you...you...?" she heaves her bag over her shoulder and turns on me, "you who are already committed to someone else, and I can't stop thinking of you? Do you realize how horrible that makes me feel? And then you have the nerve to tell me that I am your test? Your trial, your bloody experiment... And all so what? You can prove to yourself that you are perfect? Well, sod that," she turns and heads for the door, "and sod you, Father."

Stop her, go to her, explain to her how difficult this is for you as well. Explain that you realized if you couldn't have any other relationship with her, being a friend could, at least, mean that you'd have her in your life. That you'd have a chance to, at least, see her, talk to her, hear her laugh again. Even though every moment in her presence brings home the fact that you can't have her. Can't be with her. Can't have anything to do with her. And all those explanations earlier... Well, they are just rationalizations for my actions.

She wrenches open the door and I call out to her, "Ava, stop. Please don't leave like this."

"I don't want to stay on when I'm clearly not needed. Why did you come here, Edward? Why couldn't you have left earlier?"

"Because I couldn't." I shuffle my feet, "I had to...see you once more."

"But why?" She firms her lips. "Tell me, why it was so important that you meet me?"

"Because..." I take a step forward, stop, then fold my fingers into fists at my sides, "because I will not act on my impulses, Ava. I will not allow you or anyone or anything else to come in the way of my chosen path, and if that means I have to use you to make a point to myself, then so be it."

Color drains from her face, then she grips the strap over her shoulder even tighter. "Well, you know what? I am not a...a test...or a trial or an experiment... I am a living, breathing woman, and there are many out there who'll take me for what I am, and cherish me and love me."

She hunches her shoulders, and the movement dislodges her scarf which floats to the floor.

"And I may have thought that perhaps there was a connection between us... And maybe I thought you might do something about it, that you'd, at least, be honest with yourself that it means something," she swallows, "something more than turning it into...this... Tool to prove to yourself just how strong you are and how perfect you can be."

A cold sensation stabs at my chest and my guts twist. What have I done? Why couldn't I have listened better to her? Why couldn't I have understood my own emotions more clearly? Why couldn't I have been more receptive to what she had to say? Why did I have to go and mis-interpret everything? Have I, though? Am I really that off-target? Am I really incorrect in seeing this situation for what it is? A chance to find out how committed I am to my chosen path?

I widen my stance, thrust out my chest, "I'm sorry you see it that way."

"Me too."

She turns to leave, when I call out again, "Ava." I walk toward her scarf, pick it up and hold it out. "I think this belongs to you."

"Keep it. Perhaps it'll be a reminder of what you refused to recognize between us." Turning, she walks out.

8

Ava

"He said what...?" Isla opens and closes her mouth. Clearly, she's as shocked as me. Unlike her, I've had a few days to process what Edward had tried to convey to me. The gist of it was... Nothing comes close to the relationship he's already consecrated with the One Above. I am a distraction. What had he called me? An irritant, someone who got in his way, someone he'd use as a means to test out how strong his resistance to temptation is.

"I mean, should I, perhaps, be flattered that he sees me as some kind of trial by fire?" I chew on my lower lip. "Maybe I should give him credit for trying to do what's right?"

"Right for you or for him?" She huffs up the slope of Waterlow Park. We're in my favorite green space in the heart of London...not far from the house I am renting. It's a one-bedroom, tiny place, rundown enough that I could snag a short term let on my shoestring budget.

"Right for both of us?" I hunch into my jacket. A gust of wind blows the hair into my face and I push it away. "I mean, I do understand where he's coming from... Kind of..."

"Do you...?" She turns to me, "You're a better woman than I, Sherlock."

"Umm...isn't that dialogue supposed to refer to Shylock?"

She waves a hand in the air, "Same thing."

"It's not." I laugh.

"Just as it's not cool that he actually mentioned to you that he wanted to be friends with you only so he could use you as a test."

"At least, he was open about it." I rub my hands together, then blow on them. Shit, it's February but the weather shows no sign of improvement. "I mean, if he'd acted on impulse and tried to kiss me or something... Now that...wouldn't have been cool, considering who he is."

"Do you want him to kiss you?"

"What do you think?" I reach the pinnacle of the slope, then turn to take in the sight of all of London stretched out in front of me. Which means it is largely flat... Except for the tall buildings in the distance, which constitute the city.

"I think," Isla pants as she lurches up to the flat stretch of space at the top, then pivots to stand next to me, "that you want to do more than that, regardless of the fact that he's a priest. Not that I blame you; he's freakin' hot." She fans her hand in front of her face. "And right now, the only one of the Seven who's not attached."

"What about Baron?" I frown, "Isn't he also unmarried?"

"Who knows with Baron?" She bounces on the balls of her feet in a bid to warm herself. "From what the rest tell me, they have no idea what he's up to. They only know he's alive because he sent a letter of congratulations to Arpad and Karina at their wedding."

"So, they do know where he is?"

"Nope." She shakes her head. "He only uses snail mail. There's a PO Box where they can reach him, but other than that, they have no idea what he's been up to all these years."

"So, he doesn't want to keep in touch with the others?"

"Well, I'm told he's still one of the co-owners of 7A investments, the company that the Seven own together... So presumably, he's able to access the money that they make for him to live on."

"You know a lot about the Seven, huh?"

"Only because they've been keeping me busy, planning their weddings. Those alphaholes," she shakes her head, "they spend their days fighting their attraction to their women, only to fall harder and then, can't wait to get married, very often overnight." She wraps her hair around her palms and tugs. "Honestly, the kind of stress they've put me through to find the right venues and book them, not to mention arrange everything else at the drop of a hat, it's a wonder I haven't had a cardiac."

She thumps her palm against her chest.

"Good thing there's only Edward left," Isla mutters, "and clearly, he's not

getting married."

"There's Baron," I remind her. "Also, how can you be sure?"

"Baron's missing, so I'm not counting him." She scowls at me, "And Edward's a priest, and considering what he just told you, you can safely cross him off the list of potential boyfriends."

"Can I?" I turn away, stare at the now partially-clouded-by-fog view of London in the distance. "I mean, just because he's a priest... And rude, not to mention, obnoxious..."

"There's also a small matter of," she points a finger in the direction of the skies, "you know, the relationship he has with the One Above."

"Tell me about it." I dig the heels of my boot into the ground. "I am sure I'm committing some kind of sin just by thinking of him in the way I am, but darn it, I can't get him out of my mind."

"Not even after how he treated you the other day?"

"Especially after how he treated me the other day." I shoot her a sideways glance. "Does that make me...stupid? Or just someone who loves punishment... Or maybe I simply have irrational expectations from this entire situation."

She closes the distance between us, grips my shoulder. "I know all about what it feels like to be attracted to the wrong man."

"Umm," I scowl at her, "something you wanna tell me?"

She blows out a breath, "Nope, just saying, that I empathize."

"Hmm, well, not much I can do about it, considering what's-his-face has told me there's no future for us. Not that I expected there to be. I mean, he's a priest." My shoulders slump. "Shit, this is sooo wrong on so many levels."

"Easy, babe." She pats my shoulder. "No harm done. It's not like the two of you acted on the itch or anything. You only thought about it, which hell... Nothing anyone can do about it. I mean, it's not like he can peek into your head and punish you for your thoughts, right?"

"Umm," I scowl, "isn't the whole point that God can, in fact, peek into your head and punish you for your thoughts?"

"I guess," she shrugs, "but you know what I mean?"

"No," I shake my head, "explain it to me."

"Well, I mean... So maybe the One Above knows your thoughts, but he's not telling anyone, is he?"

"No, I'm doing a damn good job of that myself." I gesture between us.

"What you need is a distraction from all this. Maybe a night on the town,

let your hair down."

"I think I'd prefer to go back to my studio, practice another routine that I'll be teaching soon." I swipe my hair over my shoulder, "I really need to focus on my career at this stage, you know?"

"Is that what you want?" She tilts her head.

"Don't you?"

"I want a successful career, for sure, and I want to make it on my own, but every success I've had only makes it seem even more hollow, makes me want to reach for the next one. I don't think I've ever taken the time to appreciate what I have, you know? And sometimes it makes me wonder if it's all worth it."

"Wow," I blink, "and I thought I was the boring introspective one here."

"That you are." She smirks. "Boring and introspective and way too beautiful for your own good."

"Aww, come on." I poke a finger into her shoulder. "Who are you and what have you done to my fun-loving friend?"

"Fun-loving, sex starved friend, who's not had any action in..." She counts on her fingers, "Whoa, has it been that long?" She pales. "No wonder my vagina is dictating my thoughts."

"Thought that only applied to men." I chuckle. "Besides, I can't weigh in on it. I've never—" Color floods my cheeks. "Shit, forget I said anything. Do you want a drink? I want a drink; shall we go to the pub—"

"Holdonabloodysecond." Isla stares at me, "Are you saying?" She shakes her head. "Nope, it can't be. Tell me it's not true. I mean, I know you're only nineteen, still...you know...I thought..."

"Shut up." I blush harder. "Seriously, Iz, lay off. It's not something I want to talk about."

"Are you holding out for the 'one'?" She punctuates the last word with air-quotes. "Is that why you haven't slept with anyone so far?"

"Not like don't have any experience... I do know how to use my vibrator properly, thank you very much." I laugh.

Isla rolls her eyes. "Not the same as being with a man..." She rakes her gaze over my features, "It's also the intimacy, you know. That's what I miss the most. Not that the men in my life have excelled at that in any way either... Still, it was better than nothing," she purses her lips, "I suppose."

"You don't sound very convinced."

"All I can say is that I haven't yet been with someone who can rock my

world, the way I read about it in romance novels—"

"Those kind of alpha males don't exist," I mutter. "Romance novels were dreamed up by women who, clearly, know how to spin a fantasy. It's why I never read them."

"What?" she screeches. "You haven't read any romance novels?"

I stare at her, and she chuckles, "Good one."

"Not." I pout. "I am addicted to them," I mutter. "How someone who started out with Twilight graduated to the kind of smut I read now, I'll never know. I singularly blame them for my addiction to a certain man who's completely unsuited to my needs."

"Now I see why he's so attracted to you."

"You do?"

She nods, "It's the combination of the little virgin façade, combined with the curves of Venus, which hides the heart of a little slut."

"Whoa," I blink, "I'm not sure who you are talking about here?"

"You, babe." She laughs. "You. Bet he looks at you and sees a little sacrificial lamb that he can't wait to sink his teeth into."

I stiffen. "You make me sound like some kind of...of..."

"Sinful dish?" she offers.

"I thought you were suggesting he was a vampire." I pout. "And now you're agreeing with him. Seriously, this is all kinds of screwed up. I need to take my mind off Edward completely." I straighten. "Yeah, that's what I should do. I need to find someone to sleep with. That will take my mind off Edward completely."

She frowns, "Don't do anything rash. Maybe you should think things through first. Sleep on it some more—"

"I'd rather sleep with someone else. I bet that will put things in perspective."

I pivot, brush past the others crowded at the peak of the hill.

"Where are you going?" she calls out as she rushes to catch up with me.

"To the bar, to get a drink and see if I can't find someone to shag tonight." I hurry down the slope, then turn to find her standing in place, her mouth hanging open. I wave my arm and beckon to her, "Aren't you coming with me?"

9

Edward

I step into the chancel of the church via the priest's door. The long sleeves of my cassock fit around my arms; my collar is snug around my neck, a reminder of the One to whom I belong. The One who'd saved me when I'd most needed Him. When I'd been doped out of my head on drugs, and a part of me had wondered what it would be like to end it all. When I'd floated in that strange out of body space, and turned toward the light in the distance; the realization had sunk in then. I wasn't alone. All I had to do was surrender to the fate that had brought me that far. However much I'd abused my system with drugs, I couldn't kill myself. Perhaps there was a reason to everything that had happened... Perhaps there was something more ahead, something I couldn't see yet. A future that was not what I had imagined, but a future nevertheless. One in which I could be of service to others.

That's when I'd surrendered to my His plan, and for the first time in my life, I'd prayed. I'd asked Him to show me the way, to tell me what to do next. How could I crawl out of the web of misery that bound my every move, that trapped me? And the answer had seeped into my soul. Live. Not for you, but for them. The people you can help, the world you can change, the children who need your love and your guidance, the souls you can help guide. Live for them.

And I had.

I sink down to my knees in front of the altar, press my palms together, bow my head. *Blessed Lord above, forgive me for I have sinned. Forgive me*

for I forsook You when I was tempted. Forgive me for straying from the path. Forgive me for doubting myself, and hence, doubting You. Forgive me for the sins I have committed, and for those I am yet to commit. Forgive me, for I blinked and looked away. Forgive me, for I was distracted by her beauty. Her grace. For I allowed myself to be swayed by the thoughts of flesh, by the thoughts of how it would be to not be alone. For I am not, not really, not when You are with me for every breath I take. Forgive me for being disloyal to You. Forgive me for contemplating a life without You. For there is none. This is all there is. Me at Your service to do Your bidding, to follow Your directives. Bid me, Lord, for I am Your humble servant. I surrender to You and I will accept any punishment that You bestow. I swallow down the emotions that block my throat. Speak to me, Lord. Tell me You forgive me; tell me You have not deserted me for my actions. Tell me You pardon the sins I committed by thinking of someone else other than You. Please my Lord, talk to me. Are You still angry with me? Do You not forgive me? I—

"I forgive you."

The voice slides through the thoughts in my head. I jerk my head up, open my eyes, stare up at the marble figure high above. The stillness, the tranquility, the beauty of His pathos sink into my soul. My heart begins to race; my pulse pounds. I gaze up and into the face of the one who has held my thoughts for so many years now.

"Even though you don't deserve it." The voice sounds from behind me. I pivot and watch as Sterling approaches.

I draw in a breath and his lips quirk. "You didn't think it was the Man above speaking to you now, did you?"

I squeeze my eyes shut. *Yes, I had.* And for a few seconds there, I had been convinced that He had answered. Even though, deep inside, I've always known that I must love Him without expectation, simply knowing that He loves, despite everything.

I turn back to the altar, make the sign of the cross, then rise up to my feet. "Sinclair, what brings the Sinner himself into the house of Christ?"

"You, Father."

"Me?" I turn to him. "Now, that's something I'd never thought I'd hear from you. Is there something I can help you with?"

"The question is, can you help me help you, Father?"

I tilt my head. "And I thought I was the preacher here."

"There's a spark of the divine in all of us, Father."

I chuckle. "You're a canny one. How did Summer manage to hold you down long enough to put a ring on your finger?" I jerk my chin to where the platinum band encircles his left ring finger.

He places the finger so his right hand is over his left, plays with the ring. "This? If you recall, I didn't have one in time for our wedding, but Summer wanted me to wear it and if it makes her happy... Well," he raises his shoulders, "but I am not here to talk about me."

"Too bad," I widen my stance, "when I was sure you were finally here to repent for your sins."

He chuckles, "That would take more time than we have today."

"Oh?" I frown. "I wasn't aware we were on a timetable."

"The only one that counts, Father." He gestures toward the door that leads out into the garden, "Shall we?"

I frown. "I'm not done here yet."

"You'll have enough time to commune with God, once we've had our conversation."

"That sounds...ominous. Should I be worried?" I glower.

"I don't know, Father. Should you?" He holds my gaze.

I don't back down.

Neither does he.

Finally, he steps back, "Look, ten minutes of your time. That's all I ask."

"Hmm," I rub the back of my neck, "not that I don't trust you—"

"My ego would be bruised if you did." He chuckles.

"But you are here, and I never turn away anyone who asks me for help."

"Is that what you think?" His lips kick up.

"Isn't that what this is?"

"Technically, I need you to help me help you, so," he shrugs, "I suppose that would work." He jerks his chin toward the garden, "Come on, Father, let's talk."

I step forward and he follows me through the priest's door and into the room behind. I step into my office, then come to a stop. Sprawled around the space are four other figures. I groan. "Is this what I think it is?"

"What do you think it is?" Saint drawls from his perch on my desk.

Behind me, Sinclair shuts the door and locks it. I glance at him over my shoulder to see him fold his arms over his chest. Guess leaving that way is out—not that I am going to try it. I'm not a coward. This is only about facing my friends and talking to them, something I'm good at. After all, I've done it

so many times before, right?

"I think, if you guys wanted to talk to me, you could have called."

"We did." Damian, picks up my phone, from where I'd left it charging on a side table in the far corner. "What's the use of having a phone, if you don't carry it?"

"I had other things on my mind."

"I'll bet." Arpad pushes away from his corner. He walks over to stand in front of me, "It's what we're here to talk to you about."

"That's my dialogue, surely." I laugh. "Every time one of you guys had a crisis, guess who was there to talk some sense into you?"

The others stare at me.

"Exactly." I nod.

"Exactly." Arpad smirks.

"Exactly." Damian chuckles.

I pause, glance around at their faces. "No." I stiffen. "No, no, no, I think it's time you guys left."

"I think it's time we find out what's happening with you." Saint smirks.

"Me?" I hold out my arms, "I'm just fine."

"You don't look fine." Weston scratches his jaw. "You look like you need to get something off your chest."

"What do you think I was doing just then?" I stab my thumb over my shoulder.

"Praying?" Sinclair frowns. He prowls over to stare at the cross high up on the wall. "Not that we can compete with the man up there. But hey, if He is your Father, we are your brothers...almost...so—"

"Hold on a second." I stare. "Is this you, Sinclair Sterling, pulling the bro-card on me?"

"Is it working?" He smirks at me over his shoulder.

"Not sure." I fold my arms over my chest, "When you guys hunt in a pack like this, it can be quite overwhelming."

"Welcome to the other side, bro." Arpad laughs. "You did us all a favor... Well, all except Baron, considering he missed all the good stuff."

I stiffen. "Let's not talk about Baron, shall we?"

"Agreed," Saint drawls. "Why don't we talk, instead, about what's been causing you to go infinite laps in the pool."

"Who told you that?" I frown. There's no change of expression on Sinclair's face, but his eyes gleam.

I blow out a breath. "Summer told you?"

He tilts his head.

"What did she say?" I demand. "It was simply one interaction by the pool —"

"When all you had on was your Speedo—"

"You went swimming in February in an outdoor pool?" Weston stares.

"When do you swim? In December?" I snap.

Weston shakes his head. "Ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer—"

"Don't change the topic, Ed." Sinclair prowls over to me. "You also had a conversation with her in the kitchen of my place."

"Where the girls were listening in..." I raise my eyes skyward. "Of course, they were."

"Before that, she met you at the guesthouse."

"Hey," I scowl, "you keeping tabs on me, or what?"

"And don't forget the wedding encounter." Damian smirks.

"It's Isla." I straighten. "She's the one who's been sneaking information to you."

"So, there is something to sneak, then?" Saint prowls over to me, "It's confession time, Ed. Tell us what's on your mind."

I glare around the room, take in the faces of my friends, the closest I have to family, my brothers, the ones who have had my back since the incident. "Yes." I rotate my shoulders. "Actually, there is something I need to tell you guys."

Saint straightens and steps away from the desk. Damian places my phone back on the table and gives me his full attention. Sinclair, Weston and Arpad glance at me, their expressions ranging from curious to intrigued.

"This is it then?" Saint finally says, "You're ready to tell us about what's crawled up your craw?"

"I am." I widen my stance. "Baron; he's coming back."

10

Edward

Silence descends on the room, then Arpad bursts out, "Did I just hear you say —?"

"Baron?" Damian scowls.

"He's returning?" Weston drums his fingers on his chest.

I nod.

"When?" Saint snaps.

"He didn't give specifics. All he said was that we need to be extra vigilant because we are closing in on the perpetrators behind our kidnapping."

"Ah," Arpad snaps his fingers, "so the information Antonio's been sending us is correct then?"

Arpad's referring to one of the Sicilian Mafia who is also one of our informants.

"How the hell does Baron keep track of everything that's happening from wherever he is?" Saint mutters. "You'd think he has someone keeping an eye on us."

Silence in the room. The men look at each other, then Sinclair widens his stance. "Wouldn't put it past the bastard." He scowls.

"Not that it matters." Damian shrugs. "We don't have anything to hide from him. If he kept in touch with us, we'd simply share everything anyway."

"How did Baron contact you, Ed?" Sinclair finally asks. "The last time we heard from him was when—"

"—he wrote me with advice for Damian, telling him not to marry Julia,"

Arpad takes up from where Sinclair left off.

"Knowing full well that's exactly what I would do as a result," Damian mutters.

"And now he's written to you, saying he's coming back?" Sinclair frowns.

"Because what, he knows Edward is in a similar quandary of the heart?" Damian asks.

"I am not in any quandary." I draw in a breath. Another. *Stay calm. You've just asked for the Lord's forgiveness; now, all you have to do is hold it together. Don't think about her. Don't think about her. Don't. Think. About. Her.* "About her." I suck in a breath, attempting to retract the words that slipped out, then curl my fingers into fists.

"So," Saint drawls, "you are in a quandary about her."

"I said I'm not in any quandary about her."

"But you actually...are," Damian frowns, "in a quandary about her?"

"Not about her." I scowl.

"Yes, about her." Weston smirks.

"All about her?" Arpad offers.

"No," I square my shoulders, "not at all."

"Yes," Sinner insists, "you are."

Anger thrums at the base of my spine; heat flushes the back of my neck. "It's. Not. About her," I grate out. "It's about me, and the fact that I haven't been able to live up to my vows, my promises, the word I gave to the most important presence in my life when I set upon this path. I haven't been able to adhere to them. Do you understand how that feels? To have your entire world turned upside down in a matter of seconds?" I glance about the room, take in each of their faces in turn. "To look at yourself in the mirror and realize that everything that you've stood for so far was a lie. That the only thing that mattered, the one thing that you thought you could rely on—yourself, your honor, your ability to be truthful to yourself? It's all gone. That you were fooling yourself so far. That you thought you'd come a long way in healing yourself, but really, all you've done is hidden behind a mask—which you thought was your true self, but it isn't, not really. For all there is, is you and the wound that never heals. The one that turned you into your worst nightmare. The one you couldn't live with. Yourself."

By the time I finish ranting, I realize I've said too much. I wish I could retract my words. My chest rises and falls. Goosebumps dot my skin. A bead

of sweat slides down my temple as I tuck my elbows into my sides. "What am I doing? Apparently, I can't even control my temper." This is what the thought of her does to me. She's crept into the crevasses of my disguise, torn off the mask I'd donned. She's exposed exactly how weak I am at my core. Is this why the Lord sent her to me. To hold up a mirror to my frailties? To reveal just how fragile my relationship with Him is? To tell me that I haven't changed, not really? For beneath it all, I am still the sad and lonely, tortured boy with a past that will never let go of me.

"What bullshit is this?" Sinclair growls. "Stop being so hard on yourself, Ed." He walks over to me, grips my shoulders. "Of all of us, you and Baron were affected the most by what happened at the incident. And yet, neither one of you has never told us the details."

"And I'm not starting now." I shake off his grasp. "I think it's time you guys go."

"Oh, fuck off," Saint snaps.

I glare at him and he glares back.

"No swearing. Not when you are in the house of the Lord."

"What-fucking-ever," he responds.

"Saint," Sinclair warns, "keep it down. The Father's already hurting. You're not making it any better."

"Of course, the Father's upset." He snorts, "He's realizing that he's not perfect. He's one of us. As flawed, as fallible, as prone to falling in—"

"Stop," I growl. "Don't go there."

"Oh?" Saint tilts his head, "What are you going to do, Ed? You going to punch me in the face? You going to finally give in to the insecurities that crawl inside of you as much as the rest of us? You going to finally get your head out of your arse and do something about your life that's been stalled since the incident?" He takes a step forward and I throw up a hand.

"I'm holding onto my temper with great difficulty here."

"I'm sooo scared." He grins. "What are you going to do about it, Ed? You going to get off your high horse and finally accept that you can't stay separate from reality. That you are like the rest of us. That you're in lust with ___"

Something inside of me snaps. My vision narrows; my pores pop. I swipe out and bury my fist in his face. Saint stumbles back as blood spurts from his face. He straightens, shakes his head, then bares his teeth. "Finally," he growls, "fucking finally, you show what's there under that exterior."

"I haven't even started." I take a step forward, swipe out my fist. He ducks, then jumps forward. He lowers his head, charges, catches me in the chest. I hit the ground, Saint on top of me. He raises his fist and I laugh. "Hit me. Go ahead, I deserve this and more."

Saint blinks. He scowls down at me, "What the hell?"

"Why did you stop?" I growl. "Hit me," I command.

"You lost it, man?" He frowns.

"You've lost it." I strike out with my fist and he evades it. Anger seizes me; frustration thrums at my temples. I rear up, smash my forehead into his chin and he yells.

"What the bloody fuck?" He pulls back his fist and I laugh and laugh.

"Do it," I spit out. "Hit me in the face."

He hesitates.

"Or have you lost your nerve?"

Saint's gaze narrows; his nostrils flare. His fist descends toward me. I close my eyes and wait. Wait. The next second, his weight is pulled off of me.

"What the—?" I snap my eyes open, just as Sinner hauls me to my feet.

Arpad and Damian restrain Saint as he glares at me, chest heaving.

"Stop this." Weston frowns. "You should know better than to rise to the bait, Saint." He turns on me, "And you, Father? What's gotten into you? You taunted him, knowing he was going to lose his temper, and of all the places, in Church."

"The Church?" I blink. "I am in the House of God," I whisper in horror. I squeeze my hands into fists. I've done it. I've sullied the one place that is more holy to me than anywhere else. I've tarnished the most sacred of spaces. I've given in to temptation. Again. What is wrong with me? I hang my head. "Get out of here, all of you," I whisper. "Out."

That's when the ringing of a phone breaks the silence.

Sinclair answers his phone, then glances up at me. "It's for you."

"Me?"

I take the phone from him, "Hello?"

"Edward? It's Isla speaking. I am calling about Ava."

"Ava?" My fingers tighten, "What's wrong with Ava?" My heart begins to race. "Tell me right now."

"She's fine..." Isla hesitates, "but not for much longer."

I hear the sound of music in the background, then something crashes to

the floor. A man swears in the background. There's the sound of cheering, then Isla gasps.

"Isla, what's happening?" I frown.

"We are at the National Portrait Gallery bar. You'd better get here fast."

I toss the phone back at Sinner, turn and race for the door, when he calls out, "Better change out of your priestly garb first, Father."

I pause to stare down at myself. Should I take it off? No way, am I going to a bar dressed like this... And yet... Why does it seem like I am making some kind of choice? Does it mean that I am forsaking Him? No. Of course, not. All I'm doing is going to help out a friend. That's allowed, right?

I shrug off the priest's robes, drape them over the nearest chair.

"Here!" Damian calls out behind me.

I turn and snatch my phone that he tosses in my direction. Then I grab my wallet and keys, and I run for the door.

11

"I love my mum to bits, but she annoys me to no end by agreeing with my Father on most things. Gah! I have come to realize it's really important to stand up for yourself and in what you believe in and not allow a man to dictate how you're going to live your life."

-From Ava's diary

Ava

"Ava, are you listening? Ava?" I pull the phone away from my shoulder, and stare at it. Raisa called me when I was at the bar, and I stepped out to take her call, and now I regret it. She's reminding me to come to my father's wedding... My father's wedding. OMG, how can those two words even go together? Can I actually look on while he marries someone else? Someone who'll take the place of my mother at his side?

"Ava?" I hear my sister's voice over the phone, and sigh, then press the device to my ear, "I am here, Raisa."

"Are you out clubbing?" I can practically see the scolding expression on her face.

"You don't have to sound so judgmental." I huff.

"I'm not," she protests, "I was just wondering where you were out. That's all."

"Yes, I am at a club, and no, I don't do this every night. I am only out because I've had a few hard days and needed to unwind."

"Of course," she mutters, "must be fun to dance for a living, then also

dance to have fun."

"You didn't just say that." I scowl, "Seriously, Raisa. I may not work a desk job like you, but I do have a career... It's just that it's a creative one."

"Of course," Raisa murmurs. Her tone is contrite, but I am not really sure if I believe her. "I am not faulting your career choice, Ava. It's just... I... It's unorthodox, that's all."

Wait until you hear about my choice in men. Hoo boy, talk about being unorthodox. I snicker, and all but sense Raisa getting prickly on the other end of the line.

"You don't have to make fun of me," she says in a hurt voice, "I really am trying to understand you, Ava."

"I know you are." I hunch my shoulders. "I know I've been a bitch since Dad broke his news. Well, no, even earlier, since Mom's death..."

There's silence on the line, then I sigh, "Okay, okay. In general, I've been a bit of a brat for a while now."

"Thank you," she exclaims. "Now that we have that out of the way, are you coming to the wedding?"

There's silence. A beat, another. "I... I need to think about it," I finally say.

"Think all you want." Her voice hardens, "Just as long as you come."

We'll see. I am still not sure I want to attend, but if I don't go my dad will be hurt and I don't want that to happen either. *I'll be there*, is what I want to say. Instead, I hold the phone away from my face. "Oh, someone's calling me. I'd better be going. Bye, Raisa."

Coward. I am such a coward. Why is it so difficult to simply tell her that I'll be there? Maybe because it feels like I am being disloyal to Mum if I say that I'll attend the wedding? Despite everything Dad told me, I still don't feel completely right with going to see my Dad marrying another woman. I shake my head. I need to stop obsessing about it and carry on with the reason I am out tonight. Music, dancing. Yes, that's why I came out today, right? To forget all of my worries for a few hours. I pivot, then head for the dance floor.

Twenty minutes later, the music pours over me, ripples down my stomach and in between my legs. I close my eyes, shake my booty, drag my hands up over my head. Let the rhythm infiltrate me, curve around my waist, sizzle down my legs, my toes. Ah. With the right music, the right beats, the right

tempo, it's like I am flying. OMG, this is sooo much fun.

I grind my hips, bend my knees, curve my torso to fit to the melody. Swipe my hair up and away from my neck, turn my head to the side, then the other way, grind my hips again, only to brush up against something... Someone. Hands grasp my waist, then I am pulled back and fitted against the unmistakable bulge of male hardness. Warmth grips me. He's here; he came for me. He has to have come. He couldn't stay away. Hot breath grazes my ear, the heat of his body envelops me. The scent of beer and stale sweat assails me. No, not him. Who the hell is this, then? I snap open my eyes as he leans into me.

"Hello baby, wanna go for a test drive?"

Eeeugh. Is that even a pick-up line, or what? I turn around to take in the features of the man who leers down at me. Sweat beads his brow; his cheeks are ruddy. His face boasts a weak chin and his lips are slightly parted as he pants down at me. Just my luck. Of all the creepy crawlies in the world, the grossest of them all had to come onto me. What the hell is wrong with me? Why do I seem to forever attract the wrong kind of man? And the one time I'd been sure my luck was changing, that I'd found someone who was different, and hot and kind and sexy and dominant, and yet, sensitive... Yeah. I know. Turns out, he was too good to be true anyway. "Get away from me."

I try to pull away, but he applies more pressure on my hips and holds me in place. "Now, now," his features brighten, "is that anyway to treat our new-found friendship."

"You're right," I nod, "I'd rather see your head on a spike."

"What?" He blinks.

"No, actually," I press a finger to my cheek, "I think I'd rather dig your heart out and eat it. Better still, bury my fangs in your neck and draw out your blood."

He pales. "Wh...what does that mean?"

"Don't you know?" I lean in close enough for his horrid body odor to overpower me. Ugh, someone get me a bucket. I bare my teeth, "I am a vampire in disguise."

He stares, then bursts out laughing. "You're funny."

"You're not." I pull back my fist, bury it in his throat.

He roars, releases me. I scramble away, lunge forward through the crowd of dancing people. A woman steps in my path; I shove past her. A man dances his way across my progress; I dig my elbow into his side. He yelps,

moves away. I dart past, make it to the edge of the dance floor when a heavy hand descends on my shoulder. I yelp, turn and swing. The sweaty barnacle ducks, then tightens his grip with so much force that pain sears my arm.

"Let go of me," I grit through clenched teeth.

"Says you and which army?" He smirks.

"Says me."

I hear the growled-out words, despite the fact that music is booming all around me. Hell, I'd hear him even if he didn't speak. All he'd have to do is think it, and I'll bet I could glean it from his mind... Whoa, hold on. He's not that Edward...and you're not Bella, much as you'd like to be. And this is not a fairytale, or a stalker vampire romance... This...is real life, and he's a priest, and you are a...foolish woman who's developed feelings for him. I twist my shoulder, try to get away again. This time, he hauls me around and against him.

I grimace, "Let me the hell go, you asshole." I dig my elbow back and into his side. He doesn't even lose a breath. He winds his arm around my neck, begins to sway with me. That unwashed body scent of his crowds me and his oily heat crawls around me. Gross. I raise my foot and bring it down on his massive one. He yells, shoves me away from him and straight at Edward, who grabs me, shoves me behind him.

Whoa, okay, not expected. Not that I didn't think he had it in him. I mean, of course, I'd suspected that the priest's facade only partially obscures the over-the-top possessive man hiding somewhere in there. Only, I hadn't been sure. I'd thought he'd saved that part of himself—that crazy devotion that comes from being fixated with something or someone. I'd been sure he was saving all those emotions for the One Above.

So, to have him throw a punch, catch the other guy at the temple and follow that up with a punch to the stomach... All in one move... Whoa... It's hot. Okay, it's crazily hot. I watch, open mouthed, as he follows up with a third hit to the chin. The other guy sways, then crumples to the ground. People move away, give him space, then turn away and continue dancing.

Edward turns on me, his gaze intense. His jaw flexes and a vein throbs at his temple.

"Edward, I—"

He holds up a hand, then jerks his chin toward the exit. I stiffen and he glares at me. Anger thrums from him—vital, real. A dense cloud of heat wafts off of him, slams into my chest. I swallow. Oh, shit. This isn't good.

Not at all. He takes a step forward; I scramble back. He moves in my direction. I turn, elbow my way through the crowd, reach the exit, and walk up through the winding staircase, past couples making out, past another couple dry-humping, their tongues down each other's throats. I swallow; my throat goes dry. I turn to glance over my shoulder to find his gaze locked on me. Goosebumps pop on my skin; my thighs clench. I lose my footing and stumble, only for him to grip my waist and straighten me. The warmth of his palms scalds me through my dress. I shiver, and he looks me up and down. His gaze widens. When he glances back at me, his pupils are dilated, his breathing ragged. Then he sets his jaw, schools all expression from his face. He releases me so quickly that I stumble again. This time I right myself. He tips his chin up again.

"So what? Now you're not talking to me?"

His jaw tics.

"Is this some kind of silent treatment?"

His eyebrows draw down. He folds his arms, stares down at me, down that patrician nose of his. His gaze is so intense, so angry...so helpless. I swallow. "Shit, it's never easy between us, is it?"

He blows out a breath, then pinches the bridge of his nose, nods toward the stairs. "Go on," he growls.

I turn, march up the steps, through the crowd of people around the bar, and out the main door onto the sidewalk. The cold instantly washes over me. My fevered skin seems to sigh in gratitude. I turn my face to the light breeze that blows past, hoping to hide my heated cheeks. Then, just like that, the temperature seems to dip. I shiver, wrap my arms about my waist.

"Where's your coat?" he snaps.

"Inside, with Isla." I turn to brush past him, "Maybe I should get it."

"Leave it," he orders, his voice taut. Tension grips every muscle in his body.

He stalks forward. I watch as he reaches a Harley parked a little up the road. He opens the storage box on the bike, pulls out a helmet, then turns to glower at me. What's his problem anyway? And since when do hot, sexy priests drive hot, sexy bikes? Why is it that he's hellbent on breaking every single stereotype I have in my head about men of the cloth? Not that I've known any of them before, considering I haven't ever been to church. What? My parents were agnostic. When they were not too busy quarreling, they were too busy making up. Which left me to my own devices. Hence—the

overactive imagination. None of which has ever dared me to dream of this hot as f guy who crooks his finger.

What the hell? Does he think he calls and I'll go running to him? I fold my arms across my chest.

He glares at me and I shiver. It's the wind; that's all it is.

He tilts his head. I tip up my chin. He arches an eyebrow and moisture beads between my legs. He holds out the helmet to me. I draw in a breath, take a step forward, another. By the time I reach him, I am shaking all over. Why does this man affect me so? What is it about him that makes me feel like I am back in high school and in the presence of my biggest ever crush? Umm, maybe because he is? Only it's more than a crush I feel... It's lust... love...? Nah, not that. Ridiculous. How could I be in 'anything' with this man whom I barely know at all?

But you do... You know enough about him. You know that he's sensitive, that he wants to dedicate himself to a bigger cause, that he wants to help his people, that he wants to remain loyal to his vows, to stay faithful to his one true love. And how could that not impress me? Strangely, it's the very things that make him unobtainable to me which also make him irresistible. And that, folks, neatly sums up the contradiction that my life often ties itself up in.

He places the helmet on my head. I peer up at him as he pushes the hair away from my neck, before snapping the strap under my chin. His fingertips brush my skin and a shiver races down my back.

He frowns, then pulls out a jacket, drapes it over my shoulders.

"What about you."

"I'm good," he mutters. "Besides, considering you're not wearing much, you need this more than I do."

"I'm wearing enough," I huff as I shove my arms through the sleeves.

"Is that what you call...this...this...bandage that you are swaddled in?" He rakes his gaze down the dress that hits somewhere above my knees.

So, it's a little tight, a little figure hugging, and maybe it emphasizes my boobs and the curve of my arse... But really, it's perfectly respectable. *Side note—yes, I had sorta hoped he'd end up in the bar.* Speaking of... "How did you know where I was?" I frown.

"Isla called Sinclair who handed the phone over to me."

"Oh, wow." I blink. "That's certainly a circuitous route to have taken for you to get to me."

"There are easier ways to get my attention," he grumbles.

"I wasn't trying to get your attention," I retort.

"Weren't you?"

"Of course, not," I lie. "I was merely out on the town, single and footloose, and ready to take someone home tonight—"

"Is that what you were trying to do in there?" He draws himself up to his full height, "Seemed to me, you were trying to get away from that man's unwanted advances."

"I was managing myself well enough, until you came along."

His lips twist, "I am the last person you should be lying to, Eve."

Don't say it. Don't remind him. Don't, Ava. "Because you are a priest?"

His jaw tightens. That familiar polite mask—the one I hate, the one that implies that he's hiding away the man behind the persona—is back on his face. Well, too bad. After all, he's made it clear that there can be no relationship between us. So, he can hardly blame me for throwing that at him. And I didn't throw it, as such. I mean, he is a priest. It's his chosen vocation, so why the hell is he so pissed off with me now?

He turns away, straddles the bike, then starts the engine. The boom-boom-boom of the pipes fills the space.

He glances at me sideways. "Get on," he snaps.

I pull the jacket closer. The scent of him floods me and it feels like I am wearing him on myself. If this is the only way I'm going to get close to him, then so be it. I'll take every opportunity I can to spend time with him. I throw my leg over and mount the steed.

He turns and asks, "You, okay?"

I nod.

"Hold on."

I slide in closer, place my hands on his waist. He zooms forward. I yell, then throw my arms around him as he accelerates. The front of my thighs and my chest are flush against him as he whizzes up the road. The cold air buffets my uncovered legs. I huddle even closer to the warmth that emanates from him. And for all that, he isn't wearing a jacket, but he shows no signs of feeling the chill. He really has extra-hot blood. That must be why he's also such a smokin' hottie. I snicker against his back, and the muscles under his skin seem to ripple. The only thing separating me from him is my jacket and the thin shirt that he's wearing. If I slipped my hand in between the plackets, I'd finally be able to touch, sense, feel what it means to be skin to skin with him.

Liquid heat pools in my core. My mouth waters. I turn my face into his shirt, draw from it deeply. The scent that is pure Edward overpowers my senses, and just like that, I am wet. Maybe I should bottle it. That way, when he's not around, I can still sniff him. Hell, I could come just by touching myself as I smell him. *Gah! Stop that...*

He turns off the main road and I glance around me. Huh? This is not the way to my place, so where are we going? Is he taking me to his... Where does he live? Near the church? He can't be taking me there...surely?

He turns off again, under a bridge, then around another roundabout, turns to the right, and there, in front of us, is the Tower Bridge, otherwise known as London Bridge, but from an angle I've never seen it.

We seem to be almost under it, but not quite. The entire structure is lit up in a silvery light that turns it into a beautiful artefact that is ageless, timeless... So serene that it's almost tranquil, despite the hustle and bustle of the city. How many others have watched it from exactly this angle? Who were they? What did they do? Did they also come here because they were avoiding something...like the big elephant between us...aka this attraction, this connection...this...completely insane need to be close to him, to feel him, touch him, hear him speak, laugh, to kiss his eyelids, his mouth, his cheeks, that beautiful throat of his that flexes when he's angry and stretches when he's sad. I swallow as he pulls over by a small park. He shuts off the bike and silence descends. My heart begins to thud and my pulse pounds at my temples. Why did he bring me here? To talk? About what?

Why isn't he saying anything yet?

I slide off the bike, pull the jacket even closer. He lowers the kickstand, disembarks, then opens the storage box on the bike. He pulls out a pair of leather pants and hands them to me. "Put them on; you're cold," he commands.

I grimace. "Is this how you speak to your flock? Do you order them around as well?"

A nerve throbs at his temple. "I didn't bring you here to argue with you."

"Then why did you bring me?"

He rolls his shoulders. "Come." He gestures me toward the park.

I step into the pants, fold up the hems so I don't trip on them. The waist band is elastic and I fold it a few times until it perches on my hips. Not very comfortable, but it'll keep me warm.

I cross the sidewalk, and head up the small park to a bench that faces the

view of the bridge.

I sink down and he sits... As far away from me as possible on the other side of the space.

My heart deflates a little. Shit, what was I expecting? That we'd hold hands and gaze into each other's eyes. As if. I stare ahead at the piece of marvelous architecture that stands there as if suspended in the darkness.

For a few seconds we don't speak. My muscles unwind and I slide down the bench a little. The cold sinks into my blood and I stamp my feet to stay warm. "If only there was something warm to drink," I mutter aloud, then blink when he slides a flask across the space.

I shoot him a sideways glance. "What's that?"

"Whiskey."

"I didn't know you drank."

"There's a lot you don't know about me."

"Only because you don't share anything with me."

He opens his mouth and I hold up my hand, "I know, I know, it's not like we've had much time to get to know one another; still..." I shuffle my feet, "all I'm saying is that I'd like to find out more about you."

He blows out a breath, then leans forward. "What do you want to know?"

12

Edward

What the hell am I doing? Clearly, I have lost it. That's the explanation for why I brought her here...to my secret spot. The place I've been coming to on my own since I was young. Staring at that incredible piece of manmade wonder is a reminder that there is hope. That if man puts his mind to it, he can overcome insurmountable challenges. That I can, perhaps, despite my past, try to break free and embrace who I have become. If only it were that easy to figure out what to do about this...whatever it is, between us. And, yes there is a connection here... I could turn a blind eye to it, I could try to avoid it, and that's what I've been doing, but my reaction to finding out that she was in trouble...had thrown me. I hadn't been able to stop myself from going to her, putting myself between her and the bastard who had tried to physically touch her... He'd...he'd...put his hands on her and I'd lost it. At that moment, nothing else mattered except teaching him a lesson. That he couldn't touch what was mine. That no one else could come near what belongs to me. That she... Belongs to me. That she... Is mine.

"Fuck." I rub my palm across my face.

Next to me she goes completely still. "Did you just—?"

"Swear?" I laugh bitterly. "That's the least of my sins."

"Have you sinned, Father?"

I stiffen, then turn to her. "I am sitting here with you, aren't I?"

She tilts her head, "Are you saying I make you sin?"

"What do you think?"

"I think," she turns to stare ahead, "that you can do anything you want, you can be anything you choose to be, but you've put barriers around yourself and you hold yourself up to impossibly high standards, the kind most men would find it difficult to live up to and—" She swallows. "That only makes you even more desirable."

"Where did you learn to speak like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you are laying out all of your emotions to the world and not hiding a thing." I shoot her a sideways glance. "Don't you have any self-preservation?"

"Not where you are concerned."

"You're not making this easy." I curl my fingers into fists. "I should leave you and walk away from here."

"Why don't you?"

"I should turn around and get out of your sight and never come near you again." I set my jaw.

"Do you really want to do that?"

"I should let you lead a life far, far away from me." I roll my shoulders.

"Will you be able to do that?"

"No," I lower my chin, "and that is the problem."

"What are you trying to say, Father?"

"That I have taken my vows, I am bound to the Church, and I will never be available for you as a man is for a woman."

"And yet, you came to the bar, knowing I was there, then proceeded to step in between me and another man, then drive me on your bike—which, by the way, was totally unexpected—and, bring me here..." She nods to the glorious sight of the illuminated bridge in front of us. "A place that is clearly special to you, so pardon me for feeling confused."

"I brought you here so I could get to know you."

"But you just said—"

I raise my hand, "Let me complete the statement. To get to know you as a friend."

"As a friend?"

"That's what we agreed to earlier, right?" I tilt my head.

"Hmm, the way you burst in on me at the bar, Father, I could have sworn you were jealous."

"Edward," I snap. "Call me Edward when it's just the two of us."

"Edward." She rolls the word about her tongue as if testing it, and every one of my senses focuses in on her. The sound of my name from her lips sends my pulse racing. This won't do. I am sitting here, hoping to come to terms with what can't be. Trying to find a way forward, but it seems everything I do only connives to deepen the attraction between us.

"And I wasn't jealous," I insist. "I merely saw that the guy was bothering you at the bar and did what anyone else in my position would have done.

"But no-one else came to help me; only you did," she points out.

"Guess, my reflexes were quicker than theirs, hmm?"

"Is that what you're telling yourself?" she mutters.

"It's true, though." I set my jaw. "And I forbid you from ever going to a bar again dressed like that."

"Dressed like what?" She glances down at herself. "I'm wearing a perfectly decent dress."

"A dress that's so short it barely covers your crotch."

"It comes to mid-thigh."

"Too short."

"It's what I'd wear during the day when I'm not dancing."

"Change your wardrobe."

Her jaw drops. "How dare you?" She springs up to her feet. "First, you tell me there can't be anything between us. Then, you think you can dictate what I should and shouldn't wear. If I didn't know better, I'd think that you were my—"

"What?"

"Father."

Ouch. I set my jaw. "I am merely a concerned friend."

"Oh?" She snorts. "And what are you concerned about?"

"Your safety, of course."

"So, if I decided to date other men, that'd be fine?"

My guts twist and anger laces my blood. I stare ahead, jerk my chin.

"And if I decided to sleep with someone else, you'd be okay with that?"

I dig my fingernails into the palm of my hand and squeeze down with such force that pain lances up my arm. I nod my head.

"Will you?" she asks.

I school all emotion from my face, turn to her. "Yes," I force the word through a throat gone dry. "Yes, I would."

Her features distort, a tear runs down her cheek, and a hot sensation stabs

at my chest. I reach for her, but she steps away. She turns her back to me, and the cold seems to intensify.

"I'm glad we cleared this up, *Father*." She stares ahead.

"Edward—" I correct her, "I told you to call me Edward."

"I'd prefer to stick to the right title, considering there can't be anything more between us." She squares her shoulders, "I'd better be getting home."

She pivots and begins to walk away.

I jump up, follow her, "I'll take you."

"No, thanks." She speeds up. I easily overtake her, plant myself in her path, and she pauses. "Get out of my way." Her voice waivers. She lowers her face so her thick hair obscures her features.

"Ava, please." I reach for her, but she steps aside.

"Don't touch me," she beseeches me. "Please." She starts walking again and I follow her. Is she crying? Did I do that? Did I upset her? My chest tightens. Of course, I upset her. Every time I meet her, I upset her, and yet I can't stay away from her.

She reaches my bike, walks by it. "Ava, stop." I race forward, step in her path once more. She comes to a stop, but keeps her head bowed.

"Look at me."

She shakes her head.

"Don't disobey me," I snap, and she jerks her head up. Tears glisten on her cheeks; her eyes flash green fire at me.

"There, happy?" she snarls. "You wanted to see how your words affect me? You wanted to ensure that I am heartbroken by what you told me, that you broke up with me?" She pushes her finger into her cheek. "Oh, wait! Of course, not. How could we break up, considering we had no relationship to speak of? And we don't, do we? Have a relationship?"

I rake my gaze across her features, the flushed cheeks, the parted lips, her jutted out chin that hints at the stubbornness in her—something I am already well acquainted with.

"Ava," I reach for her, then withdraw my hand. "You're wrong. We have a connection, something that is unique and will always bind us together. But I can't act on it. You understand that, right?"

"I do, but do you?" She swallows. "Perhaps that's why you feel the need to continuously run into me? So, you can tell yourself that there can't be anything between us. And yet, you keep finding excuses to come to me."

I purse my lips. "That won't happen again."

Her lower lip trembles, her eyes fill with fresh tears, her shoulders shudder, and help me, God, but I can't stop myself. I pull her to me, and wrap my arms around her. "I'm sorry, I truly am. I wish I could do something about this situation, but I can't."

"You can." She snuffles. "You can leave the Church."

I stiffen. "That's not going to happen; I take my vows seriously. When everything else around me was collapsing, the Church was there for me. I found solace in The Lord. He's the reason I was able to go on with my life and why I am standing here today. I can't abandon Him at the first instance I face a crisis of faith."

"Is that what you think I am?" She pulls back in the circle of my arms, "A crisis?"

"You are—" I peer into those beautiful green eyes of hers, "the most beautiful, most gorgeous, most loving woman I have ever met. Your passion for what you do, the intensity with which you live every moment, your sheer vivacity is unparalleled, Ava. You deserve someone better than me. Someone who can give you everything you desire."

"I want you."

"I am not yours to have."

She tries to pull away, but I tighten my hold on her. "No, don't leave, please just listen to me."

She huffs, then stills in my arms. "What is it?" she mumbles under her breath. "What do you want to tell me?"

"I'll never forget you, Ava. Never forget how you smile, how you laugh with your entire spirit, how when you're angry about something, your eyes flash. How when you dance, you put your entire mind and body and soul into it. You become one with the rhythm, Ava, and if that isn't true worship, I don't know what is."

She stares up into my face. "I... I don't understand," she whispers. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"I thought I could be friends with you. God knows, I've tried. But I underestimated the intensity of the chemistry between us. Clearly, I am not strong enough to resist it." My throat closes. I swallow down the ball of emotions, then peer into her eyes. "Try to understand, what I am doing is for the best."

She shakes her head, "No, no, please don't."

"I won't try to see you again. I won't approach you. I'll let you go so you

may live your life to the fullest, only..." I squeeze my eyes shut, "only I won't be there to see it."

"Don't do this, Edward," she implores me. "You're not even giving us a chance."

"I am giving you the best possible chance at living."

"I'll die without you."

I half smile. "No, you won't. You'll survive, you'll thrive, you'll embrace your dreams, fulfill your destiny. You'll become a well-known dancer, a devoted wife, the kind of mother every child should have." Pain twists my insides and my breath catches. I hunch my shoulders, force myself to step back from her.

She closes the space between us, launches herself at me. "I won't let you go. I won't let you do this to us."

"It's done." I should push her away, keep distance between us, but as she tilts her chin up, I find I don't have the strength. I pull her close, wind my arms about her, hold her as if I'll never get the chance again... Which I won't.

She holds my gaze and her features pale. A teardrop rolls down her cheek, and I bend down, then lick it up.

She stills. "Why did you do that?"

I swallow down the salty taste, then release her again. "So, I'll always have you with me."

"You have my heart, Edward."

"No, I don't." I take a step away from her. "You must keep it safe with you, Ava, so you can give it to a man who deserves it more than me."

13

Ava

That had been two days ago. Forty-eight hours. A lifetime. After that little bombshell he'd dropped on me, Edward had insisted on dropping me back home. I hadn't protested. Maybe I'd been too numb from the finality of his words. He'd meant it. I'd gazed into his eyes and the look in them had indicated that this time he was going to walk away. He wasn't going to return and tell me he wanted to try to be friends. Well, we'd tried that and look how well that had gone? I should respect his wishes, let him get back to what is important to him. His Church, his vows, his God.

Does God not have enough people worshipping Him, that He also has to bind my Edward to Him? Why can't He let Edward go? Would it help if I prayed to Him? The last time I'd prayed was when my mother had been unwell. Not that it had helped much.

But if Edward believes in Him so much, does that mean I could appeal to Him to release him? Would God actually hear me?

It hadn't helped before, but given how hopeless everything feels now, it couldn't hurt to start, right?

Which is why, after finishing my dance class for the day, I've walked into the nearest church. The temperature instantly dips and goosebumps rise on my skin. I slide my hands into my coat and walk up the aisle. It's late afternoon, and the sun's rays slant through the stained-glass windows that line the walls on either side of the aisle. I take a pew a couple of rows from the front, then kneel down and place my elbows on the back of the seat in

front of me. Ahead of me is the altar, and beyond that, the statue of Christ on the cross. I fold my fingers together, bend my head and studiously avoid looking at Him. After all, it's His fault I'm here. He's the reason I can't get Edward to consider anything beyond a platonic relationship... And not even that. Any kind of connection, really... It's because He has Edward's loyalty that I have no place in his life. I squeeze my eyes shut. Hell... No... Sorry, no swearing. Let's start again.

Dear God, I am not a regular church goer but I am here because... Well, I really don't have the right to ask You this. I mean, I know it's probably forbidden to even think about him that way. The 'him' here refers to Edward, of course. Funny how it's easy to refer to him as Edward and not Father. Truth be told, I never could get used to calling him Father. I couldn't really regard him as a 'Father,' if you know what I mean? Now you, God... You, I'd call Father. Because, well, you are the Father of all of us. I'm sorry I haven't come in and prayed to You before... I've just been busy with this business of growing up and figuring out how to make something of myself, know what I mean?

But I am here now...and hmm... Come to think of it, is that why You made me meet Edward? One way of bringing me to Your doorstep? I bite down on my lower lip. It couldn't be, could it? This isn't all some crazy convoluted plan for the One Above to remind me to pray, is it?

Though, if it is, then You've succeeded, for I am here on my knees, begging You to help me.

Asking You if there is any chance in hell—okay not hell, forget I said that—just a chance, really, that You'd consider giving me and him an opportunity to be together, because, you know, since I saw him, since I laid eyes on him, my world has changed. I mean, I hadn't even been aware of what I had been waiting for until I saw him... Does that make sense? He came into my life and I knew then... It's him. The one I'd hoped to find some day. My other half. He grounds me, God, he...makes me believe anything is possible. Much like You do. When I am here and praying to You, I can focus on what is possible. On the future, on what is to come, and things I didn't even know I wanted. It's like I am on the verge of something momentous that's about to take place. Or maybe it is the sense of possibilities that has my heart racing?

That sense of calm, yet the prickle of excitement from knowing that You can make anything happen...that adrenaline that laces my blood, that

sensation of the infinite, that I am but a speck of sand in time, and really, that my concerns are so minuscule in comparison to the wider plan... And there is a plan in store for me. There is...the one that You're unfolding. I can't see it...but I believe in it. Just as I believe in him. Despite everything I do, I am confident that there will be a chance for us to be together... I just have to trust.

Can I trust?

Can I?

My head spins, I snap my eyes open, glance up at Him on the cross. A strange stillness fills me. The hair on the back of my neck rises. My heart begins to race and my pulse rate speeds up. It's as if I am on the precipice of something...something... That all of this was orchestrated and I am but the pawn in a design that I cannot yet see fully. "Is that true?" I whisper. "Should I believe in You? In him? Is that why You brought me here? Will everything work out?"

I hear the susurrantion of wings, a white pigeon—or is that a dove—? flies down from the ceiling. It alights on the cross, and its guttural cooing echoes through the space. Goosebumps pop on my skin. Oh, my... That's...that's a sign. It has to be, right?

The dove cocks its head to the left, then the right, before flying up toward the ceiling. It heads for the open door and I follow it. I reach the door, step out. I follow the bird down the steps, across the sidewalk. I watch as it flares out its wings to soar up, and further up. I take a step forward, miss the curb and stumble and fall onto the road.

A car horn sounds and I glance up, straight into the path of an oncoming vehicle.

My heart begins to race, the pulse pounds at my temples, and sweat beads my forehead. I throw up my palms to shield myself and squeeze my eyes shut, only to be hauled to my feet and back onto the sidewalk.

The car horn blares as the vehicle speeds by, and I am yanked against a hard, firm, broad chest. The scent of fresh cut grass teases my nostrils. My heart hammers so hard, I am sure it's going to break out of my chest. Bands of steel seem to tighten around me as he tucks me into him, one arm about my shoulders, the other across my back and waist as he pivots away from the curb.

How the hell had he moved that fast? Where had he come from? How did he know that I was in danger? Are we forever doomed to be connected

somehow, no matter how we might try to wrench ourselves away from each other?

"What the hell were you thinking?" he growls as he turns me to face him.

"The...the dove..." I stutter.

"Dove?" he frowns.

"I followed it out from the church. The next thing I knew, I was falling forward...and...and—" A sob wells up, and he pulls me closer.

"Shh! It's okay, I've got you. I have you; nothing can harm you now."

The sound of his voice through me, sinks into my blood. My nipples tighten—is it because of his nearness, or the near miss with the car, or both, perhaps? I try to answer but my throat is too dry. My limbs tremble and my knees knock together. I push my nose into the valley that demarcates his pecs, dig my fingers into the front of his shirt, and hold on as he swings me up into his arms, with my handbag crushed between us.

I glance up, past the white of the collar at his neck, to the thrust of his pouty lower lip, that mean upper lip, the bead of sweat that slides down the sinews of his throat. Heat flushes my skin and my stomach flip-flops. Every part of me is alert and alive, and so in awe of where I am. *In his arms, being carried by him.*

He enters the church, walks up the aisle, all the way up to the altar, before turning and heading toward a door on the left. He walks through what looks like an office—because of the large desk in a center—out through another door in the back, down a garden path, with flower beds on each side, to a small one-story Victorian structure built from red bricks with a slate roof. He walks up the steps, shoulders the door open and steps inside. He carries me to the couch, and lays me down, setting my head on a throw pillow.

I sit up and he points a finger at me. "Stay," he snaps.

"But," I swallow, "Edward, I—"

"Not a word." He glares at me and I shiver. My thighs clench and moisture gathers between my legs. Shit, why the hell do I find his dominant manner so hot?

He walks inside a door which I assume leads to his bedroom. My handbag slides from my arm to the floor. I slump back in the couch, swallow down the thickness that clogs my throat. That was close, like, really, really close... If Edward had been one second too late, if I had lurched forward a second earlier... If the car had been speeding even a little faster... I gulp. My limbs tremble. Shivers ripple up my spine and I wrap my arms around my

waist to stay warm.

"Here." His voice interrupts my thoughts, and I snap my eyelids open. He drops a cover over me, tucks it in under my chin. "Scoot over," he mutters.

I scoot in further and he sinks down next to me. He places a first-aid kit on the table, then opens it and pulls out some cotton and antiseptic. He takes my hand in his, turns my arm, pushes up the sleeve of my dress and dabs at the gash I only now notice. Pinpricks of pain spark at my nerve-endings, and another bout of shaking grips me.

"You okay?" He frowns.

"Y...yes." I say through chattering teeth. "D...don't know what's wrong."

"Delayed reaction," he reassures me as he continues to dab at the injured skin. He rips a packet open, pulls out the bandage and places it over the scrape. He takes my palm, turns it face up.

"Wh... what are you doing?" I whisper.

He doesn't respond. Simply pours out more antiseptic onto the cotton ball, then proceeds to dab it on my palm where the skin has abraded. I wince. Again, I hadn't noticed it.

Guess I'd been too caught up in what was happening in the moment to realize I'd banged myself up. Another few seconds, and I might not be here on Edward's sofa in his house.

OMG, I am in his house, on his couch, and he's taking care of me. It's what I wanted, right? So why am I so close to tears? Besides, I didn't die. I am still here. I am alive and near him.

My entire body shudders and he frowns, then rises to his feet. He heads for a wooden cabinet in the corner, pulls out a bottle, and pours some of the liquid into a glass. When he returns, he sits down next to me again. He slides an arm under my neck, raises my head, and holds the glass to my lips. I stare into his handsome features. Those dark eyebrows, thick eyelashes, his dark hair messed up and falling over his forehead. He looks a little shaken, not as put together as all the times I've seen him in the past.

He jerks his chin at me, "Drink."

I take a sip and the alcohol burns its way down my throat. My stomach is suddenly on fire and I gasp. Tears prick my eyes and I blink them away.

"Again," he orders.

I hold his gaze, stare into those bright, beautiful eyes of his which glare at me with so much emotion that I gulp. He frowns, nods again to the glass, and I take another sip. This one goes down smoother. Warmth creeps under my

skin; my breathing grows more ragged.

I wrap my fingers over where he holds the glass, and goosebumps rise on my skin.

His throat moves as he swallows and his gaze intensifies further. I take another sip, and another. I swallow down the liquid as heat permeates my cheeks, my chest, snakes down further. I squeeze my thighs together.

His nostrils flare. Those golden irises dilate. He stands abruptly, tosses back the remaining alcohol.

Then he walks back to the cabinet, pours another healthy dose of the whiskey, and tosses it back. Whoa. Are priests allowed to drink? Guess they are. I mean, they do drink wine during Communion, right? And why would he have whiskey in his house if he can't drink?

I take in his tall figure; the broad shoulders clad in his customary black shirt tucked into black pants. The fabric molds to his slim hips, and clings to those powerful thighs. He's not wearing his robe... Guess I caught him off-duty. Of all the churches in all the world, I had to walk into this one. I snicker to myself. What I wouldn't give to meet him in a gin joint instead.

He jerks, as if the sound cut through his thoughts. He places the glass back on one of the shelves of the cabinet, then turns to me, "We need to talk."

14

Edward

She watches me with those big green eyes that seem to have swallowed up her face. Her features are drawn, there are shadows under her eyes, and her cheekbones seem too prominent. Has she lost weight since I last saw her? I frown, take a step toward her, then stop. *What are you going to do? Are you going to go back to her? Sit next to her, take her hand in yours, place your palm against her cheek and feel the softness of her skin, draw in the sweet scent of jasmine that clings to her hair?* I clasp my hands behind my back, then begin to pace. Back, forth, back.

She clears her throat, "Edward?"

I continue to pace.

"Ed? Please stop, you're making me dizzy."

I pause, then pivot around and stalk over to her. I stand over her, rake my gaze down her face. "What the hell is wrong with you?" I snap. "You walked out onto that road without a modicum of self-preservation. What were you thinking, Ava?"

She pales further. Her lips tremble, and she presses them together.

"Edward, I, I..."

I hold up a hand, "No, don't tell me. You came here to get my attention, didn't you? You decided that since I wasn't interested in you, you'd try a different tactic this time? You walked out there, knowing I would come after you and save you. Well, guess what? I won't be there every time, Ava. The next time you try something so completely stupid, I may not be around to

help."

Anger twists my guts; the band around my chest tightens. My knees tremble, and I squat down to disguise just how unable my legs are to support my weight right now.

"What do you have to say for yourself, huh? Do you deny that you purposely placed yourself in the path of that bloody car?"

She blinks. "Wow, that's twice."

"Twice what?"

"Twice that you swore in the last two minutes."

I drag my fingers through my hair. "Is that all you registered from what I told you?"

"Umm, no. You also mentioned that you're not interested in me, and that's incorrect."

I glare at her. "And what else?"

"That I placed myself in the path of that bloody vehicle—"

Anger thuds at my temples. If anything had happened to her... If she'd been hit... If she'd been hurt, or worse... What would I have done? Not all the prayers in the world would have brought her back then.

I glare at her and she swallows. "I didn't, Edward. I didn't step in front of that car on purpose. It was an accident. I told you so already."

Of course, I know that. Ava's artistic and sometimes preoccupied with her thoughts. That doesn't mean she's going to willfully put herself in the path of harm... I'd followed her out of the church, my feet seeming to have a will of their own, but had stopped myself from going to her. Then, I'd seen her pitch forward, that car speeding toward her... I'd lost it. I'd raced for her, had not even been aware how my feet had touched the ground. I'd reached her, pulled her up out of harm's way and then... I couldn't let go of her. I can't let go of her. I must. I have to. But what if I can't? What then?

"Edward?" She places her palm against my cheek, "Look at me, Ed."

"Ava." I swallow down the ball of emotion that clogs my throat. "Ava." I turn my face into her palm and kiss it, the softness of her skin, a caress. She cups my cheek, turns my face toward her.

I stare into those green eyes, the eyes of an angel, the gaze of a temptress, the fire that burns in them, my fate.

I rub my thumb across her lower lip. She flicks out her tongue and licks it. The blood empties to my groin and all of my senses focus on her. I lean in, capture her mouth with mine.

She parts her lips and I sweep my tongue inside, swipe it across her teeth, suck on her tongue, press my lips to hers, tilt my head and deepen the kiss.

She moans low in her throat and the sound sweeps through my mind. My muscles tense; my belly hardens. I tear my mouth from hers, peer into her face.

I can't do this.

You must.

I can't betray my faith.

You have no choice.

Is this Your way of testing me again, my Lord? Is this how You take me to the edge, only to thrust me over and over again into the path of this sin? Do You want me to embrace it? Is that why You'd put her in the path of danger? To show me just how powerless I am in front of Your will?

I'd thought myself infallible...untouchable, unapproachable; getting closer to the perfection that is You...and that was my mistake. So much ego, so much self-confidence, so much conviction in myself... When all along, I had been setting myself up for a fall. I see the error of my ways now, my Lord. I understand the mistake I've made all along. To think I could even attempt to be like You when, really, I am nothing but the dust on Your feet. I've spent all of my life trying to come closer to my ideal of perfection, to come closer to You, when really any attempt at thinking that I could be infallible is wrong.

I am, but human and prone to temptation. I may be Your vessel, but my flesh and blood still belong to that of a man. A man driven by his compulsion, the need to be close to her, to take her, embrace her, be with her in all the ways that a man can with a woman.

Will You forgive me, my Lord, if I sin?

Can I forgive myself if I do?

What am I if I do?

What am I if not my vows, the ability to hold onto my control, to resist every single temptation thrown in my path? The money has never been of consequence to me. No other woman has ever enticed me like this. As for obedience... What is Your will for me, my Lord? Did You put her in my path because You want me to fail?

Do You not want me in Your fold anymore? Am I not a vessel for Your Presence? Do You not want me to serve others in Your name? Is this my time to leave, to find out what lies in store for me outside of Your home?

My heart begins to thud in my chest. My pulse pounds at my temples. Sweat beads my forehead. I hold her gaze, and perhaps some of my inner turmoil shows, for she pales. I rise to my feet, turn to leave, and she grabs my hand.

"Wait, Father, will you not hear my confession before you leave?"

I frown. "You're not Catholic."

"I can still confess, right?"

"So, you're willing to share your secrets with me?"

She nods.

I scowl. "And what if I use it against you?"

"But you won't." She sits up. Her color is better, her gaze clear. "You'll listen and you'll forgive without judgement because that's what you do, Father."

"You have so much faith in me?"

"Not in you, but in your faith," she replies. "I know when it comes to your profession, you'd never compromise."

"So much trust." I roll my shoulders. "What if I don't live up to it?"

"But you will." She rises to her feet and the blanket falls away. *Don't look there, don't.* I take in the curve of her bust, her nipples pointed and outlined against the fabric of her dress. That familiar ache that has become an ever-present sensation since I first saw her intensifies. My groin hardens. I pivot, walk to the door, when she asks, "Don't you need your outfit?"

I turn and she points to where I've draped the frock over a chair. "Your robe, Father," she prompts me.

I stare at the robe then back at her. "I don't need it to hear your confession. As long as I am ordained—and I am—that is enough."

I head for the door, then pause and glance at her over my shoulder, "Coming?"

15

Ava

He's going to leave me. He's going to leave me. He's going to...leave me and there's nothing I can do about it. He's going to choose Him over me, as he always does. He's going to leave me to return to the Church. I know it just by the tormented look in his eyes. By how he holds my gaze and refuses to look away, how he steels himself as if waiting for the worst that is yet to come...which could be possibly, what? What could be more horrible than him walking away from me a final time, and never looking back?

I can't let him go.

Not after what just happened. He saved me...metaphorically and literally; he had rescued me from myself. If I had been ready to walk away from him earlier, now... I am not. Now, I am going to fight for him, with every bone in my body. Which is why I'd pulled out the only trick I have. I'd asked him to hear my confession.

Bugger, bugger, bugger.

I stare at the confessional booth. I haven't been to a confession before, but I've seen enough movies to know how it's done.

He takes his position behind the screen, and I slip into the adjacent cubicle. I kneel, then lock my fingers together; stare through the screen, at the hint of his chin, the angle of his nose, the curve of his beautiful lips that are visible through the lattice work.

"You wanted to confess?" His voice echoes in the enclosed space.

I open my mouth to speak, but my throat is so dry that nothing emerges.

"Ava?" He prompts me, "You said you have something to confess?"

"Y...yes."

Shit, why is it that when I need the powers of conversation most, words fail me? I shuffle my feet, hunch my shoulders, then straighten them. "Um, maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe I shouldn't have suggested it."

"Perhaps your subconscious wants you to open up? Often, speaking what's on your mind is the best way to gain perspective. At the very least, if you talk, it'll shut me up."

"Not that you say a lot," I mutter. "In all the time I've known you, which I admit isn't that long, you've never mentioned anything about yourself."

"This is your confession, not mine," he reminds me.

"You always have a ready answer."

"Not this time. All I'm going to do is listen, without judgement, remember?"

I hear the smirk in his voice. Asshole... Wait, that's not right. You can't call a priest an asshole... However much he is one. Right? And this is Edward, toned down in his role as a priest. How would he be if he weren't one? Why am I even thinking of that, considering that will never be a possibility? It's why I am here, after all, in a confessional, with him in the one role he is comfortable playing.

I blow out a breath, then lower my head,

"You start with saying, 'forgive me, Father, for I have...'"

"Bugger that."

"Eve!" he admonishes me and I subside.

"Do I have to say that?"

"Do you want to confess?"

"Yes. Yes, I do." I lower my chin, "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned... This is...ah. This will be my first confession."

There's silence from his side, then, "That's all right. Tell me your sins," he commands, and a shiver runs down my spine.

Here goes. "I lied to you."

"About what?"

"About being attracted to you."

"Is that right?"

I nod.

"I am in love with you, Edward,"

There, I've said it. For better or for worse, it is out there now. Maybe it's

a low blow to stop him from leaving, but what else do I have in my arsenal, right?

"Did you hear me?" I prompt.

"You haven't known me long enough to have fallen in love with me."

"Just like you have fallen for me; you just haven't allowed yourself to acknowledge it."

"Why do you think you are in love with me?"

I frown. "That sounds more like a psychologist's question than a priest's."

He chuckles. "A good priest is also a psychologist when it matters."

Right.

"So, why do you think you are in love with me?"

"Because I am."

"Answer the question," he snaps.

I stiffen, then choose my words carefully. "Because...before I met you, I didn't know what to do with myself. I loved dancing, but that was it. Anything outside of that? I was no good at it. I didn't know how to live... didn't know what I wanted to wear, what to eat, what to drink, when not to say the wrong thing. I was adrift, unmoored, like I'd been waiting for a signal in the dark, a beacon to guide me, a force to propel me. Something that would take me by my hand and point me in the right direction. Or maybe someone." I tilt my head. "Someone who'd tell me when to get up, what to wear, when to eat, when to sit, when to vote, when to dance, when to relax. Someone who'd take the choices out of my hand and direct me on how to survive. I want someone to believe in me... I want someone like you to guide me, to steer me, to be my conscience, to hear what my soul wants and interpret it for me. Because that's what you do, Father, right? You're the one who advises and directs people. You lead, they follow. That...that's what I want."

There's silence then, "What?" he asks in a low voice. "What is it that you're asking for?"

"Forgiveness for what I am about to ask for, Father."

"What's that?"

"For you to tell me what to do."

"And you'd obey."

"Always, and only for you, Father." I swallow, clench my thighs together. What the hell am I doing? What am I doing? *Don't say it, don't.* "I want you to direct me, to command me, to take control of my life and of me, my choices. I want you to tell me what to do, Father."

Silence extends for a beat, another. He's quiet for so long that I lean forward. I peer through the lattice, but I can't make out his expression. Shit.

I stand up, then press my palm into the screen that separates us.

What the hell is he thinking about? Did I upset him? Have I gone too far? This was a terrible idea. It really was. Why don't you ever know when to shut up, Ava? I turn to head out of the booth, "Edward I—"

"Kneel." His tersely spoken word whispers through the space. I blink.

"Excuse me... What...what did you say?"

"I said, on your knees."

I hesitate. What the hell is he talking about? He surely doesn't mean that, does he?"

"Now," he snaps and I slide onto the floor, on my knees.

16

Edward

What the hell am I doing? Why had I agreed to listen to her confession? I should have left right then, though that might have been difficult, considering we were in my house. And no way, would I have asked her to leave, not after that almost accident. Thank God, nothing had happened to her. Thank the Lord, she's on the other side of the screen on her knees. *On. Her. Knees.* My belly hardens. The knot that had gathered there since the day I'd seen her coils even tighter. *It's not too late. You can still leave.* And what? Turn to God again? With what courage?

The one thing He'd asked of me, my loyalty, and I have tarnished it already.

No longer is there space for only Him... Where once He had been my sole focus day and night, there is now another.

As long as I've followed Him, I've never faced a challenge like this one.

Oh, I've had ample opportunity to turn away, to find my way back to the fold. But at every turn, I've come up against her—my feelings of her, my feelings for her, my need...my lust... My love... It is all that, and more. She'd been wrong in saying that I am interested in her. What I feel for her goes far beyond that. It is this shining something inside of her that only I can see. From the moment I'd sensed it, I'd known. And I've been fighting against it. And now, it is too late.

I rise to my feet, walk around to the confessional and pull the curtain aside. I find her kneeling, head lowered. Such a faithful lamb. Such a trusting

woman. She is the ultimate Eve. Seductress. Temptress. Innocent and appealing. Lusty and guileless. Naive and wise, at the same time.

I step fully inside the booth, allowing the curtain to close behind me, then gaze down at her bent head.

A growl rips from my throat and she shivers. I lower my hand to her face, pinch her chin, and apply enough pressure for her to peek up at me from between her eyelashes. Her lips part; she gazes into my eyes. Her own shine a bright emerald in the murky light. She swallows, holding my gaze. The scent of her seems to intensify further and heat jolts in my belly. My thighs spasm; my stomach hardens. I reach down, push a strand of her hair behind her ear. She shivers.

"Edward—"

I shake my head, and she subsides.

I drag my finger down her cheek, down the slim column of her neck to the shadowed cleft between her breasts. She shudders, moans deep in her throat. The band around my chest tightens.

Is this it then? Do you want me to leave the only thing I have ever loved in my life? The safety, the seclusion, the meaning of what life is... You taught me that, and now you are abandoning me?

"Ed." She reaches out, places a palm on the tent at my crotch and a groan rips out of me.

"You will not move until I give you permission," I hiss.

She pales, retracts her hand, then nods. "As you wish, Father."

A shudder grips me. It shouldn't please me when she calls me that, but it does. How it does. And how damned I am for it. I am going to Hell, no doubt about it. If this is what is intended for me, then so be it.

I press my thumb down on her lower lip. "Open."

She parts her lips.

My groin hardens. I slide my digit inside her mouth, and she swirls her tongue around it. She bites down on my thumb and my dick lengthens. My belly knots. I tug my thumb from her mouth, lower my zipper. The sound echoes around the empty space.

She swallows, then gazes up at me, her green eyes glowing in the gathering darkness. So hot, so illicit. Apparently, the parts of me I thought I'd hidden away, have been right there, under the surface, waiting to reveal themselves. All they had needed was the right trigger. In this case, her.

Everything I had sacrificed and deprived myself of, everything I'd starved

myself of and emptied out, to make space for Him... All of it...had been for nothing. I thought I'd come closer to Him, to perfection, and that had been my failing. For in the very act of aiming to aspire to be like Him, I'd allowed my ego to intrude. I'd dared to think I was anywhere close to Him, and that had been my greatest shortcoming. I am very much a man, with all of the imperfections and weaknesses... It's just that it had all been carefully hidden behind the cloak I had donned. I had allowed myself to be taken in by the image I had presented to the world... I had begun to believe in my own story, the one I'd spun for my flock. So much so, I'd thought I could fool God into believing it too... I should have known better. All this time, I'd been setting myself up for a fall and not realized it...

Until she came along. Oh, how I hate her, how I am grateful to her. How I need to find a way to reward her. But first... I pull out my cock, and pump it once, twice.

Her breathing grows heavy. Her chest heaves. She reaches her hand out, and I click my tongue. "So greedy, so impatient... Oh, my darling, Eve."

"Ava," she whispers. "My name's Ava."

"The enchantress who caused my downfall."

She stiffens, lifts her chin, "Edward... I—"

"Shh," I admonish her, "don't talk."

She purses her lips and nods.

I reach down, dig my fingers into the back of her hair and apply pressure. She moves closer, tips up her chin. I drag the crown of my cock across her lips and she licks up the trail of precum. My balls tighten and my groin hardens.

"Open," I growl, and she parts her lips. I feed my cock to her. Piston my hips forward and the head of my cock bumps up against the back of her throat. She chokes; spit drools from the corners of her mouth, but I don't release her. Something about how she stares up at me with tears dripping from her eyes, turns me on even further. My dick thickens and my thighs spasm. I tug on her hair, yank her head back and a groan bleeds from her.

I push her head forward and my dick disappears inside her mouth.

Dear God, why is that the single most erotic thing I have ever seen in my life?

Will you forgive me for using Your name for when I am the most aroused I have ever been? Not even during the times before I'd become a priest, when I'd experimented with my sexuality, when I'd tried to understand what it was

that I had been missing all my life... The searching that had finally led me to You, my Lord... Never, at any of those times, had I felt like this. Is it wrong that I am breaking this vow, right here under Your roof? Can a relationship as close as ours break overnight? If I walk away from You after this, will You ever forgive me? How can I continue doing what I do, knowing I have broken my vow to You? Of everything I've done...this...this feels the most wrong. I'd pledged to keep myself empty, to stay a vessel for Your presence... Yet here I am, turning my back on everything I once held dear. Will You ever forgive me, my Lord, for I cannot stop myself? Will You think less of me, now that I have strayed from Your path?

I thrust in and out of her mouth, and she lets me. She holds my gaze, allows me to use her, as I increase the pace. In-out-in, my fingers clenched in her hair, as I slap my hand out and smack my palm into the wall next to me. My heart thuds in my chest, my pulse rate ratchets up, lust...heat...adrenaline laces my blood, as I pump in and out of her mouth.

I pull out until I am poised at the edge of her lips, then plunge back in. Her entire body jolts. Her chest heaves, more spit drools from her mouth to wet her dress. She juts out her chin, and the underside of my cock scrapes across her teeth. My thigh muscles coil and a ripple of heat seizes me. The tension curled at the base of my spine tightens, knots, curls in on itself until I can't breathe, can't think. Can't do anything but pull out of her and grip the base of my cock. "Fuck!" I growl aloud. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." I lurch back as I squeeze down to stop myself coming.

I tug her head back and she glances up at me.

"Open your mouth," I growl.

She parts her lips, tips her chin –up, and my balls draw up. I pump myself one last time then pull out as I come.

17

Ava

The tendons of his throat flex, his brow draws down, he closes his eyes, and a groan rumbles up his massive chest as he comes, shooting white streams of cum across my face. He continues to pump himself, the muscles of his forearms flexing, his biceps tensing as he seems to come and come across my mouth, my cheeks, my hair. I'm decorated in Edward, and hell, if it isn't the most erotic situation I've ever found myself in.

His chest heaves, his shoulders bunch, he lowers his head, opens his eyes and fixes those brilliant brown eyes on me.

My breath catches. *Jesus... No...no...no, I can't be calling to Jesus, not when I am here in His House.* But honestly, there is no better word I can use to encapsulate just how hot this guy is. Edward, I mean. The hot priest who glares down at me like he hates me. His gaze burns into me, like he...feels so much more for me. All the unbidden, unwanted, unseen, unheard carnal desires that I've harbored since I saw Edward on screen... The vampire, I mean, this time. Though Edward, the priest, is far sexier, bigger, taller, more present, more real, more vibrating with pent-up frustration, more ripped, more tatted up, more hurt... There's something hot and hungry and sad inside of him that makes me want to gather his head close to my bosom and cradle him there. A final burst of ropy white cum snakes across my face. I flick out my tongue and lick it up.

He draws in a sharp inhale. Then leans down, scoops up some of the liquid from my cheeks and holds it to my lips. I open my mouth and lock my

lips around his digits and lick it clean. He continues to feed me his cum and I eat it from his fingertips like the starving, filthy girl that I am. Then he rubs the remaining fluid into my cheeks. I swallow, squeeze my thighs together. Why is that so hot, so filthy...so incredibly demeaning, but dirty as all hell and so, so sexy?

He drags his thumb across my lower lip, then leans down to nip on it.

I shudder.

He leans back, wraps his fingers around the back of my neck and I shiver. His every action is so intense, so...so dominant, and he's barely done anything to me yet. I'd been right. The moment he'd taken off the persona worn to the world, I'd met a completely different side of him... A part of him that could completely consume me with his intensity.

A pulse tics at his temple, his shoulders bunch, and the planes of his chest seem to ripple with an unseen tension.

How long had it been since he'd last come? Did he allow himself to masturbate? Probably not; not someone as dedicated as Edward. So why had he chosen to break his vow of chastity, and with me?

I open my mouth to ask him, but he shakes his head as he pulls me to my feet. He tips up my chin, leans over me, then presses his lips to mine. He swipes his tongue inside my mouth, tangles his tongue with mine, tilts his head, deepens the kiss, sucks on my tongue until it feels like he's consuming me completely.

Heat flushes my skin, the blood thumps at my temples, my toes curl, and my fingers itch to touch him, but I lock them into fists.

When he finally draws away, both of us are panting. He stares into my eyes, "Forgive me," he mutters, "for what I am going to do to you."

"You can do anything you want."

"That's what I am afraid of."

"I'm not," I retort.

His lips kick up. "How can you be so perfect?" He rakes his gaze across my features. "So gorgeous, so completely flawless?"

"I am not," I protest.

"You are, where it counts, Eve."

"And where is that?"

He places his palm over my left breast. "Your soul, your heart... You have this innate goodness in you, something you were born with, something I have been searching for all my life."

"And you found it..." I glance about the space, "here?"

"And here." He taps the space above my heart. "Your beauty shines through, a mirror to the world, an innocence that declares itself unafraid of anything that comes your way."

"Except you." I swallow. "I am scared, Edward."

"Of what?"

"Of this, what is between us...this which is so new, so wrong, so illicit."

"And it is the most difficult thing I have done in my entire life."

"What?"

"Open myself to you." He lowers his head until his nose bumps mine. "You make me realize that I am not perfect. That I was wrong in thinking I have accomplished so much, when really, I am only getting started."

I take in his gaze, the color on his cheeks, the slight twitch in his left eyebrow. "I... I don't understand."

"You will, in good time." He steps back, tucks himself inside his pants, then bends his knees and sweeps me up in his arms.

I gasp, "Edward... What—?"

"Shh." He strides out of the booth, up the aisle, and retraces his steps from the last journey we'd made just a few hours ago when he'd carried me in from the accident.

"This is getting to be a habit, you carrying me."

"Let me carry your weight, while I can."

I frown. "What do you mean by that?"

"Just that I used you, now let me take care of you."

"How? By doing more of the same, I hope."

He chuckles. "You, Miss Ava—what's your surname?" He frowns. "I can't believe I've never asked you that."

"It's Erikson, and maybe because you were otherwise occupied?"

"There is that, Ms. Erikson." He nods. "When I am with you, nothing else matters. Not your name or mine. We may as well as be two lights headed on a collision course with each other, with nothing able to get between us."

"Ha, you're also a poet?"

"Only when I'm with you."

"And when you're with Him?"

He stiffens, glances down at me. "With whom?" He frowns. "Who are you talking about?"

I blink. "I meant the One Above, the One who is in competition for your

affections.”

"Not after this." His jaw tics. "I'm afraid I've fallen from His good graces."

"Isn't the Lord meant to forgive as well?"

He tilts his head. "But can I forgive myself?"

He stares straight ahead as he stalks out the back door of the church, down the path that leads to his cottage. He reaches the structure, shoulders open the door again, then walks past the living room, into the bedroom. He places me down on the bed.

He straightens and I grab at his sleeve. "Don't go."

"I'll be right back."

"No." I swallow. "No." My heart hammers against my ribcage. My scalp itches and my skin feels too tight for the rest of me. "Edward, please." I tighten my grip on him. "I've only just gotten you; I don't want to lose you."

His forehead furrows. "You'll never lose me, Eve, don't you see? Whatever is here between us is too strong for anything mortal to come between us."

"And what if...it's not mortal? What if it's some force we can't control, what then?" *What the hell am I saying? Where is this irrational fear coming from?* He's only just taken that crucial step toward me. Hell, he broke his vows for me... Something I'm still not sure how I feel about—so why am I clinging to him like a weak, helpless woman? Which I am not... No way.

He places his hand over mine. "I'm only going to get you some water. I promise, I'll be right back."

I nod, release him, watch as he prowls away, long-legged, powerful muscles of his thighs flexing under the fabric of his pants, the muscles of his tight arse coiling and uncoiling with every step he takes. I swallow, sit up in the bed, and pull up my knees so I can rest my chin on them.

He walks out and I turn my attention to the room. Other than the single bed, which I am on, there's a study table and a chair pushed up against the window. A wooden closet in the far corner, it's surface gleaming in the rays of the setting sun that pours through the window. I reach over and click on the lamp next to the bed. Blinking at the illumination, I glance up as he walks back in. He offers me a glass of water, urges me to drink it completely, then places the glass to the side, next to his phone.

He sits down on the bed. "We really do need to talk, now."

18

Edward

"About what?" She stares up at me, her face shining from where I'd rubbed my cum into her cheeks.

My cum.

My woman.

Mine.

And Him... What about the One to whom I'd dedicated my entire life? I lean back, putting distance between us. Her gaze sweeps down, before she raises her gaze back toward me. And I know she notices. And I shouldn't be doing this. I shouldn't be acting in such a shitty manner, not after I've come this far. But old habits die hard.

Apparently, there's a part of me, deep inside, that still holds onto the kernel of the man I'd thought I'd once been—unshakeable, focused, emptied of all personal emotions... So, I could receive His grace. His blessings. All that had mattered once was my devotion, my loyalty, my dedication to do what was right.

And what is *right*?

Her?

Me?

This unshakeable connection that I feel to her...the likes of which I'd only felt once before...When I'd been called to Him.

When I'd looked at Him and felt the kind of deep, intense rapport that had warned that it wouldn't get easier. That I'd do anything for Him; that I'd turn

my world upside down, tear down any barriers that could come between us; that I'd open up my heart and soul to Him. And I had. And look where that had gotten me.

"I want you." I glare at her flushed features. "I need you, but you have to understand that this isn't easy for me."

"I understand, Edward." She folds her fingers together. "I can't even imagine how difficult this must be for you. When was the last time you slept with anyone?"

"Before I was ordained."

"Which was what—?"

"Five," he mutters, "five years ago."

"And you've never slept with anyone since?" She gulps.

"Not even in my dreams. Not until you came along."

"You've slept with me in your dreams?"

"I have stopped myself from doing everything I know I can...and sleeping isn't one of those things." I allow my lips to curl.

"Right." She shivers, folds her arms even tighter around her knees and I am sure if I touched her between her legs, I'd find her wet and aching and empty and hot and waiting for me. Fuck me. I haven't even touched her properly yet, and the length in my pants insists it's time. That I shouldn't wait any longer. And that's a laugh. All these years, I've never been interested, not once, in anything except my need to please Him, the One Above... And now that I've taken the first step out from under His aegis...it seems my past is coming back to embrace me with a vengeance.

I rise to my feet, glance down to where she has her fingers wrapped around each other. The skin across her knuckles stretches white, and for a second, I want to close the distance between us, to hold her close to me and tell her I won't hurt her. Except, I'd be lying if I said that.

"Are you nervous?"

She nods.

"Good," I square my shoulders, "you should be."

"You're scaring me, Ed."

"That was my intention."

"It is?"

I allow my lips to twist.

"How much have you learned about what happened to us Seven when we were taken?"

"The incident?" she asks, her voice cautious.

"The incident." I say the word without changing my tone. Good. At least, the years of trying to control my feelings have turned out to be of some use.

I rise to my feet and begin to pace. "You are aware that the seven of us were kidnapped and held for close to a month before the cops found us?"

"Is that how you got the scar?"

I stiffen, then turn to glare at her, "Is that what you heard?"

"It's what I guessed." She raises a shoulder. "The women have mentioned the incident, but they never go into it in detail."

"Trust me, it's best that way." I set my jaw. "Suffice to say that what the kidnappers did to each of us..." I fold my fingers into fists at my side. "It changed our lives forever. It changed who we were. Changed our futures, changed how we perceived ourselves. It set us apart from the rest of the boys our age then and ensured that no matter how far we ran or how much we grew up, the specter of what happened to us would never be too far off from our minds."

"Why...why are you telling me this?" She twists her fingers together in front of her.

"I am not sure." I stare down into her face. It's the truth. Maybe I started out because I want her to understand the reasons behind what I am about to do? Maybe I am trying to make excuses for myself? Maybe... I am trying to lessen the coming blow. Maybe... I am just a bastard who is selfish enough to set aside the one good thing that has crossed his path in all these years by hurting her. But it's for her own good. It is. No good will come of this, not when there is no future for either of us. Not when she could do much better than me. My nerve endings jangle and I ignore it. There is someone out there who can give her everything I can't. I am doing this for her own good. I am. I lock my elbows at my sides, take a step back from her.

"This, whatever it is between us, ends here, Ava."

"What?" She blinks. "What are you saying?"

"I can't see you again. You understand that, right?"

"But," she gapes... "I thought now that you'd—"

"Come in your mouth, everything would turn out right?"

She pales. "Why are you doing this?"

"What?'

"Trying to make me hate you?"

Because it's the only way I can rectify what I've done to you, by ensuring

that you hate me enough to never look at me again.

"Clearly, I am not trying hard enough, if you are still here talking to me."
I roll my shoulders.

"You don't fool me." She rises to her feet. "You're doing this because you think it will drive me away from you. You're wrong about it, though."

"Oh?"

"I understand what it means to have found your calling, only to question your beliefs related to it."

"Do you now?"

She nods. "When I told my parents that I wanted to be a dancer, they flipped out. They thought I was joking, that it was a temporary passion, that I'd come to my senses and move beyond it, that it was just a hobby that I was taking too seriously, that I'd outgrow it. They tried everything to stop me from dropping out of university to pursue it."

"Did they succeed?"

"What do you think?" Her lips quirk.

"I think you are perceptive and strong and persistent. That despite your fragile appearance you have a backbone of steel."

She tilts her head, "You've given it some thought, then?"

I've given you a lot of thought.

"Once you set your mind on something, you don't give up." My heart begins to thud. I hear my words and I know it's a sign, that she can be stubborn and persistent and focused on what she wants. All the more reason it's important that she not waste her talents on me. "Which is why you'll understand what I am going to say next."

"What?" she whispers. "What is it?"

"I cannot give up my faith for you, Ava."

19

Ava

"Nobody's asking you to give up your faith, only your vocation." I tip up my chin. I wish I could be selfless enough to tell him that it doesn't matter, that I don't expect him to turn his back on his life's work, his ideals, his love and devotion for the One Above; but I'm only a woman. A flawed—and now morally corrupt woman, since I'd seduced a priest. OMG, I had, hadn't I? Add that to the list of my sins, as well—along with being selfish enough to want him for myself. Is it right to wish that he'd belong only to me? That he'd turn away from the One who's occupied his life and his thoughts for so long and give all his attention solely to me? Is it right to want to take him away from his flock, his people, the ones he'd, no doubt, helped heal along their life's journeys, as well?

Is it right for me to be this selfish, to want him for myself? Will he allow me to be this self-centered? Does it even matter what I want, when clearly, he's already made up his mind?

"Tell me, Edward," I insist, "why can't you, for once, think only of yourself?"

"Because I can't." He drags his fingers through his hair. "After the incident, I was on a journey of self-destruction. From the age of twelve when I was kidnapped to nearly nineteen, I hung out with the rest of the Seven, and yet in many ways, I wasn't one of them. They liked to get drunk and take part in fights they organized, first on our school grounds, and later, in a deserted parking lot outside London. They were good at it though... Me? I was into a

different kind of self-destruction."

He glances at me, then away, and begins to pace.

"What...what kind?" I sit back down on the bed, watch him as he walks to the window, glances out, then grips the edge of the windowsill. "Drugs, sex, getting into fights where none of the Seven were around to back me up," his voice tapers off.

"So, you were trying to hurt yourself?"

He turns to glance at me over his shoulder. "I did a damn good job of it, too. By rights, I should have ended up dead, or worse," he grimaces, "if it weren't for Baron."

"Baron?" I scowl. "The missing one of the Seven?"

"Oh, he isn't missing. He chooses to stay away."

"Why is that?"

"It's the only way he could cope with what had become of him, of us, I suppose." He raises his shoulders. "Who knows what went on in that mind of his? If the rest of us were trying to hurt ourselves, Baron took it a step further."

"What do you mean?"

"While I was dabbling with ways to cause myself pain so I could forget what had happened to me, Baron was... Let's just say, his appetite for self-destruction was more vicious than mine."

"How's that?"

He turns to face me. "He took risks with his life. Not only was he a brilliant hacker, but he was also into extreme sports. He loved adventure sports, training for the kinds of expeditions from which coming back alive is not certain. He kept pushing himself, challenging himself at every turn, and that was only the tip of what he told us."

"And you know this, how?"

"While I was imploding inside, Baron was challenging himself, pushing himself to see how far he could go before he could die, if that makes sense." He widens his stance. "In some ways, it made him the most clear-headed of all of us Seven. Which is why he's the one who found me one night in a drug den, shot out of my skull, OD'd, and perhaps a breath away from dying."

"So, he found you and saved you that day?"

"That's one way of putting it." He chuckles. "He gave me holy hell when I regained consciousness in the hospital. It's Baron who checked me into a retreat. A very expensive sober living place, paid for by my family's money,

of course."

"Of course," I say dryly. What little I know about the Seven points to the behavior that they make sure they always get their money's worth out of deals. Still, it was fair, I suppose. Baron came to his friend's' rescue and took the very important step of having him checked into a treatment facility. Then, in a strike of poetic justice, he made sure Edward paid for it out of his own pocket. Well, why not? It's one way of ensuring he felt the consequences of his actions, right?

"Like I said, I owe my life to him."

"And you're telling this to me, why?"

He raises his chin and fixes me with that stern glare that has my panties going damp at once. Hell, why is it that he can turn me on by just looking at me?

One side of his lips twists as if he's aware of exactly what I'm thinking, then he rotates his shoulders and cracks his neck. The sound shudders across the space, sinks into my blood, coils down into the space between my legs, which is already empty and wet and throbbing and—I turn away from him. "What is it you are trying to say, Ed?" I ask again.

"That when I was at my lowest, in the drug-filled haze, and fighting between life and death in the hospital, I had a vision."

"The proverbial light at the end of the long tunnel?" I say, only half-joking.

"Yes," he replies, all amusement wiped from his face. "I know I was dead when he found me. I know I stayed in that dead space for an hour before they revived me at the hospital. When I opened my eyes, I knew what I had to do."

"To become a priest," I say dully.

He nods. "Whatever I felt in that time... And it felt like I had journeyed to the depths of time. I felt like I had been gone much longer, you know... And it wasn't anything I saw or felt or heard... It was just a realization that I woke up with. A sense of peace, of contentment, even; something I'd never felt in the years since the incident, maybe even earlier. It was that complete rightness of it that led me to joining the seminary."

"So, you felt a divine calling and you made your choice?"

"You're not listening," he snaps. "It was not a choice. It was an awareness. I woke up one day and it was simply there, and I never questioned it."

"Not even now?" I take a step toward him. "When this—realization

between us too is just there. It's not what you or I asked for. It's simply a connection, a state of being, something I don't even question—" He raises his hand, but I continue, "And neither do you. I know it; don't deny it."

"It is there," He narrows his gaze on me. "I can't deny it. But I also cannot embrace it."

"No, no, no." I shake my head. My heart begins to thud. A hole opens up in my stomach, grows bigger, begins to swallow me. This can't be happening, it can't. "No." I hear myself say the word aloud as if trying to deny what I sense is coming. What I know he's going to do and which I hate with every fiber in my body, and yet, I am powerless to stop, damn him.

"Listen to me." He takes a step forward and I skitter back.

"Don't say it, don't," I beg him. "Don't do it."

"I have to."

"Please, give us a chance."

"You don't know what you are asking."

"Oh, believe me, I do." I dig my heels into the floor, lock my fingers together, "I know exactly what I am asking of you, and if you deny it, I know it's going to make you hate yourself for life."

"Not more than I already do." His lips twist. "I am so sorry, Ava, but this is how it has to be."

"It doesn't. You can change it. You have the power to do it."

"The only one with the power is Him." He jerks his chin upward. "I am but His servant, His to command."

"I am yours to command," I choke out the words. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

He winces. "It does. It means far too much, and that's the problem." He peers into my face, "Don't you see that?"

"The only thing I see is a coward who can't face the truth, who can't see what's right there in front of him, who refuses to acknowledge the reality of his situation."

"Which is?"

"That you don't belong to Him anymore. You may deny it all you want, but you're mine now Edward, and nothing can change that."

"Except me." He draws himself up to his full height. "I deny it, I deny you. I don't want you. I choose Him over you."

"No." I shake my head.

"Yes." He says it with a tone of finality. "Yes."

"Don't do it."

"It's done." He folds his arms across his chest.

"This is it then?"

"It would seem that way."

My chin wobbles, my hands and legs shake, and a hot sensation stabs at my chest. My knees tremble and I fold my fingers at my sides. "So, this is goodbye?"

His features shutter and his lips firm. He watches me with that detached expression on his face that I hate so much. The one which indicates that I have already lost him. So why am I still standing here?

Turning, I head for the door.

"Ava"

My heart stutters and hope blooms in my chest.

I turn to find him holding out my handbag, "Don't forget this."

I swallow down the emotion that surges up my throat, march toward him, snatch up my bag. "I hate the day I set eyes on you. I hate that He brought you into my life" I say in a low tone. "One day...one day you are going to realize that the choice you made here was all wrong, but by then, it's going to be too late."

Turning, I walk out.

20

Edward

She's gone. She left me. I had allowed her to walk out of here. I had encouraged her to walk out of here.

I didn't stop her. Didn't ask her to come back. Didn't run after her and grab her and haul her back to me. I'd watched as she'd stepped out of my home, and the door had snicked shut behind her.

Then, I had glanced around the familiar surroundings of the place that had once brought me so much comfort—the serenity, the sparseness, the starkness of it, a reminder that I had made my choice. I had chosen the greater good over my selfish needs. I had chosen my loyalty, my devotion, my faith. I had chosen Him. After one brief slip up when I had come so close to realizing how it could have been between us, I had walked away. I had reached inside myself, drawn on the last reserves of my self-possession, and I had turned away from her. I had held onto my principles, *everything that I hold dear...*

So why is there a nagging pain under my rib cage? Why is my stomach knotted and twisted? Why are my shoulder muscles bunched up? Why is there a heaving sensation in my guts? The bile bubbles up my throat and my belly churns. I pivot, race to the bathroom, and lean over the commode. I empty out all the contents of my stomach, and dry heave until I can't hold myself upright anymore. Managing to flush away the disgusting mess, I rise to my feet, head for the sink and rinse out my mouth, before sinking to the floor.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I'd slipped up and come all over her face and it had felt like I had marked her, branded her, tied her to me irrevocably. Just like He had staked his claim on me.

Then I had found my conscience and turned my back on her—and the anguish in her eyes, the hate and helplessness in her features, combined with her vulnerability, had me reaching for her again. Only I hadn't. I had told her that I denied that she was mine. I had lied.

She is mine.

Nothing changes that.

Just as I belong to Him.

And He comes first.

He always has.

Nothing can change that.

Nothing. Not even her. Right?

Everything that I hold dear...

My stomach churns again, my insides twist, and I turn to the commode just in time to dry heave again and again. By the time I sink back to the floor, I am shattered. It feels like I have puked my very guts out... And my heart... And my soul. Everything of meaning to me has deserted me.

Except Him. I still have Him. I lurch up to my feet, splash cold water on my face at the sink. I dry my face, then turn and walk over to the cross hanging on the wall in my bedroom. I sink to my knees next to the bed...next to where I'd lowered her recently. I turn away from it, tip my chin up toward the skies. I raise my arms, close my eyes.

Forgive me, Lord, for I have sinned.

I couldn't control myself.

I allowed myself to be weak.

How should I punish myself this time, my Lord?

How many times should I atone for what I have done wrong?

I empty my mind of all thoughts and wait. And wait. Sink inside, into the deep, quiet space inside of me where no one else is allowed... Where there's an infinite expanse, waiting to be filled by Him. His voice. His presence. I wait and wait. And the answer seeps into my subconscious mind.

Twenty.

I wince. Almost ask Him if he is sure, but of course, He is. And I am not one to question the Lord. I rise to my feet, walk over to my closet and pull out my discipline. I peel off my shirt, walk over to the center of the room, then whip myself. Pain pulses up my spine, my skin gives, blood seeps down my back. The pent-up pressure inside me lessens and my muscles loosen. I whip myself again and again. By the time I reach ten, my arms ache and my back hurts. Blood runs down to drip onto the floor. I draw in a breath, whip myself again, and the strands of the whip curl around me, to slice open the skin on my belly. I grunt, allow the pain to absolve me, whip myself faster and faster. Sweat pools under my armpits, drenches my back and sinks into my blood. Pain thuds at my nerve-endings, at my temples, behind my eyes. I don't stop until I hit twenty, then lower the discipline to my side. I glance up at the wooden cross on the wall, my limbs trembling, my throat dry.

Do You forgive me now my Lord? Am I still Yours?

I squeeze my eyes and wait, wait.

There's no answer.

21

Edward

"What are you punishing yourself for?"

I drag my attention away from the window of Sinclair's conference room. The very same place where, not long ago, the six of us had stood, discussing the disbursement of funds for the new non-profit that Sinclair had suggested. The same one that I am hoping we can put to good use in initiatives I consider worthy.

"What do you mean, punishing?" I turn to face Sinclair, who's sprawled out in his chair. He seems, for all the world, like a man at peace with his world, which, of course, he is.

He's married and Summer, his wife, only recently discovered she's pregnant. Between him and Saint and Damian—that's already three anticipated arrivals in our circle. Given how madly in love they are, I wouldn't be surprised if the rest of them follow suit shortly. They deserve it, all of them. Every single slice of happiness that comes their way. After everything we've been through, it's only fair that the rest of them have the best years of their lives to look forward to.

And you? What about you?

I am on a different path. Like Baron. Even before the incident, the two of us had always been different from the rest of the Seven. And then the incident, while it had brought us together... In some ways, it had also highlighted how disparate we were from the rest.

"I mean," Sinclair leans forward, "you look like shit, Father."

No kidding. I rub my unshaven jaw. It's been two days since I saw her. Two days since I shaved. Two days since I atoned, or tried to compensate, for my slip up. The Lord hasn't spoken to me since.

Not that I am worried. I've gone for days...months in the past, when He'd retreated to the Light. He'll return to me... He has to... He always does. He's done so on the other occasions when I had erred. None of them had been as serious as this, though.

I'd chosen Him though, hadn't I? I had turned my back on the one good thing that had come across my path. I had torn out my heart and willingly offered it to the Lord. *So, what more does He want from me?*

I clear my throat, then turn to stare out the window. "Why did you want to talk to me?"

"Baron."

I still, then compose my features into one of nonchalance before I turn to him. "You heard from him?"

"That's what I was going to ask you." He scowls at me. "You were the one who heard from him last, isn't that right?"

I nod. "Nothing since that last letter."

"Hmm." Sinclair leans his elbows on the table, then presses his fingers together.

"Doesn't it strike you as odd that he'd write, out of the blue, to warn us of the Mafia?"

"It's Baron." I raise my shoulders. "Who knows what prompts him to do what he does?"

"I thought you guys were close."

"Close?" I laugh. "That's not how I would put it." I drag my fingers through my hair. "More like, at loggerheads."

"Enough to keep sniping at each other all the time. Enough that when you were at your lowest, he tracked you down and hauled your arse out of that drug-den you'd crawled into."

I set my jaw.

Sinclair folds his arms across his chest, "You thought you and Baron came out of the incident the worst, so it gave the two of you some kind of permission to form your own pity club within the Seven—"

"Pity club?" I scowl.

"You forget we swore to always have each other's backs, no matter what. And that included giving the two of you space when needed."

"The lot of you gave us space?" I laugh. "None of you had an inkling of what we went through—"

"Only because you never shared," Sinclair snaps. "Do you realize how frustrating it is that the rest of us have been open about what happened to us? While you and Baron..." His jaw firms, "The two of you clammed up, as if there was some secret that bound the two of you, something that you didn't dare talk about, in case—"

"In case—?" I tilt my head.

"In case, talking about it would force you to acknowledge what actually happened."

"And is that so bad?"

"It is." He rises to his feet and grips the edge of the table. "If you want to heal, then you need to open up, Father. If not to one of us, then to her."

"Who?"

"Cut the bullshit, Ed. We know."

"Know?"

He nods.

"Know what?"

"That you and that delectable dancer of yours have a thing going on," a new voice answers from the doorway that connects the conference room to Sinclair's office.

I glance toward the man who fills the doorway, then groan, "Oh, no."

"Oh, yes." Weston walks in... Or rather, is dragged in by a very excited Max, who prances around on a leash. Weston unhooks his leash, and Max dashes toward Sinclair, who bends down to pet him.

"Hey, little bugger," he croons, "you missed me, did you?" Max barks, licks Sinclair's face, places his paws on his £7000 suit. Sinclair doesn't flinch. He scratches behind the dog's ears and Max positively whimpers in ecstasy, before dropping his paws back on the floor. The dog races around the table toward me. I hold my hand in front of his nose, then mirror Sinclair's gesture by digging my fingers behind Max's ears. The dog huffs, tongue lolling, before pulling away and racing around back to Sinclair, who once more pets him.

"Good practice for when the little one comes along, eh?" Weston walks over to deposit the leash on Sinclair's table. "My, how you've unbent since the snarling, growling man you used to be, not long ago."

"Speak for yourself." Sinclair straightens, and Max settles at his feet. "I

still have my edge."

"Wait until the patter of little feet sounds on your office floor. Then we'll see," Weston retorts.

"Office floor?" He glances around, "Why would I bring the kid in here?"

"You mean Summer hasn't told you?"

"What?"

"That she plans to split parenting duties half in half with you."

"As she should." Sinclair scowls. "Still, doesn't mean I'd bring the kid to office."

"You would if you had a creche in the office." Saint prowls in. "I am all for it, given Victoria is only five months from giving birth and I, for one, wouldn't want to be parted from the kid for that long—"

"So, you are going to bring the kid to work?" I ask.

"Probably not." Saint smirks.

"Then?" I frown.

"Ideally, I'd work from home. Hell, I could work from anywhere, and this way, I can spend time with my family. Best of both worlds."

"Of course." The three of us turn to Sinclair who stares between us. "What?"

"You going to shift to a home office, as well?"

"I haven't considered it," he rubs the back of his neck, "but it's a possibility. I'll need to discuss it with Summer."

The three of us look at each other, then I chuckle, "It's heartwarming; it really is." I glance around at their faces. "You guys gladden my soul."

"What?" Saint scowls.

"Truly," I jerk my chin at Weston, "it's incredible."

"Care to explain yourself, Father?" Saint drawls.

"Whoever said the Lord works in mysterious ways surely knew what they were talking about."

Sinclair arches an eyebrow. "If you think speaking in riddles will pique our attention?" He knocks his knuckles against the table. "Then you're right. Out with it, Father."

"All of you assholes brought to heel by the love of a good woman." I raise my gaze heavenward, "Thank you, Lord."

There's silence in the room, then Sinclair chuckles. "Well played, Father. You'd like us to believe that you are the last man standing, but as we all know, that's not true."

"What's not true?" Damian ambles in, his hair streaming about his shoulders. In jeans and sweatshirt, he's the most casually dressed among us. Of course, if Baron were here, he'd probably give Damian a run for his money.

I push the thought from my head, turn to Damian. "Nothing," I say at the same time as Sinclair declares, "That Edward is the last bachelor of the Seven."

"Technically, he isn't, considering we don't know if Baron is married or not." Arpad strolls into the conference room, then shuts the door behind him.

Baron again. Why is there no getting away from the mention of his name right now? Why is he on my mind so much?

Saint barks out a laugh. "Baron? Married? Not likely."

"Hello pot, meet kettle?" I tilt my head at him. "You, Saint, would have been the last man I'd have pegged to get married, and yet—"

"It's you who claims to be still standing strong, when we all know your heart is taken."

"By the One Above," I declare.

"Not that I am refuting that," Sinclair retorts, "but you are a man, after all. So, what if you decided to turn your back on everyday life and chose to become a priest? Underneath that calm demeanor is a man who, perhaps, feels more than any of us. The day you acknowledge it, the day you forgive yourself for what you've been through and stop punishing yourself for what you couldn't change, is the day you realize that you don't have to hide behind the persona of the calm man of the cloth."

I blink at him. "And here I thought I was the preacher."

"Can't preach to the converted, Father." Sinclair's lips twist. "You know everything I am talking about, but the day you acknowledge it is when things will begin to shift for you."

"You think I'm hiding from the world?" I scowl at him.

He meets my gaze with his unblinking one. I glance around the room, take in the expressions on the faces of all my friends. "Wow." I fold my arms across my chest, "Apparently, all of you think I am using my vocation as a crutch."

"Not a crutch..." Weston drums his fingers on his chest. "More like, you were taking your time to process your grief."

"You were the most stubborn of us, Ed. You needed to get your own way when we were boys." Damian widens his stance. "You were also the

angriest."

"Angry? Me?" I laugh, "Are you sure you're talking about me."

"Remember the time we came across the boys bullying one of the smaller kids in school? Who's the one who jumped to his rescue?" Arpad asks.

"We all did," I mumble.

"Yes," Arpad nods, "but who started it?"

I stare at him.

"You did," Weston chimes in. "You always took the side of the underdog."

"You had this sense of fair play inside you, which came to the fore when you saw any kind of injustice being done," Saint interjects.

"You were idealistic, the only one of us who wanted to make the world a better place. Yes, you were the angriest amongst all of us, but your triggers were more nuanced." Sinclair places the tips of his fingers together, "You saved your anger for when it would have the best impact."

"Or the worst outcome. As I recall, we were outnumbered that day."

"Ten to seven." Sinclair grins. "Still, we managed to hold our own."

"The fuckers didn't get off easy."

"No," I chuckle, "we managed to whip their asses, all right."

"Though I couldn't complain when the teachers finally separated us." Weston winces.

"And marched us all to the principal's office." Damian smirks.

"Suspended for a week." Saint picks up the narrative.

"And came back to a hero's welcome from the girls." Sinclair's grin widens.

"Couldn't have asked for a better conclusion to that episode," I agree.

"And what about the latest episode, Father?" Sinclair holds my gaze, "What kind of conclusion are you hoping for it?"

"It's concluded," I assert.

"What do you mean?" Sinclair frowns.

"It means," I fold my arms across my chest, "there is nothing to it. I am a priest, or have you forgotten that?"

"Have you ever let us forget it?" Sinclair asks wryly.

"You going passive-aggressive on me, Sinner?" I narrow my gaze on him. "You have something to say, why don't you come out and say it?"

"All I'm saying is, you have used the priesthood to hide from what's important."

"Or maybe I used it to face my fears."

"Did you?" He leans forward with his palms flat on the table. "Is that what you have been doing the last few years?"

I blow out a breath. "Yes. I have been using the discipline that comes with the life of a priest to manage my anger. To channel my frustrations, my hate, my resentment at what happened into something to benefit the greater good of the world."

"Wow," Saint blinks, "you truly do believe you can make a difference to the world?"

"Something like that," I mutter. "Look, it's no big deal. Apparently, the only way I could get past the incident was by dedicating myself to a bigger cause."

"Not that I doubt your cause for one second," Sinclair narrows his gaze on me, "but have you ever thought that maybe looking outside and helping the world was easier than searching inside for the answers?"

I stare at him. "And here I thought you were a shallow, obnoxious, a-hole of the first order with a superiority complex to end all superiority complexes."

Color smears Sinner's cheeks. "That too," he grumbles. "Don't deflect, Father. We are talking about you, not me."

"Yeah, don't turn the attention away from yourself," Damian chimes in.

"We ain't lettin' you go without answering this time," Weston drawls.

I rub the back of my neck, shuffle my feet. "Can't believe I allowed myself to be caught in this situation."

"Nothing you haven't done for the lot of us before." Saint smirks.

"Bet you enjoyed the counsel you gave all of us when we faced crises of confidence in ourselves."

"None of you faced a crisis of faith though," I say it in a low voice, but of course, all of them catch it.

Sinclair sets his jaw, Saint and Weston stiffen, Damian scrutinizes my features, and Arpad? He draws in a breath. "This one's a tough one for you, eh, Father?" he asks softly. "I can only imagine what you are going through right now."

"Can you?" I say bitterly. "When you all met your women, all you had to figure out was how to stop fighting yourselves. How to conquer your ego long enough to come to grips with your feelings for them. You didn't have to fight against your instincts, the very way of life you had carved for yourself,

or how to turn your back on the vows which mean more to you than your life."

"Do they Father?" Sinclair asks quietly. "Do they mean more to you than the very breath you take?"

"Yes." I thrust out my chin. "Yes, they do."

"Well, then," he lowers himself back in his chair, "this should be easy, huh?"

22

Edward

When he'd asked the question, I'd agreed at once, yet I can't get his words out of my head. Do my vows mean more than my very breath? Yes, they do. But so does she. It's why I had turned her away. It's why I am here, kneeling in front of the altar in church late at night after the entire world has gone to sleep. I hadn't even bothered going to bed. Instead, I'd stayed up, working on the paperwork needed to ensure that the funding for the various charities I support through FOK media remains uninterrupted. There are always new requests coming in and it is up to me to scan and decide which ones to support next. Children, the elderly, abused women, the most vulnerable among us, including pets... I want all of them to benefit from the dividends of the investments that the Seven have made. While I don't broker any of the deals, the rest of the Seven involve me in all decisions. It's why I am up-to-date with everything and have enough knowledge, if needed, to run the deals myself. Not that I am tempted...I haven't even thought about how it would be to drive those deals until...now... Until her... Until something inside me had wondered how it would be to come home to her every night, to live a normal life with her, to have children like the rest of the Seven are going to do.

I'd thought through all possibilities before enrolling in the seminary. At least, I thought I had. At nineteen, it had been easy to embrace the idea of never falling in love, of never having children. But with everything that has happened so far, I can't help but thinking, what if we were meant to be?

What if that's why God brought her to me? What if His intention all along was not to test me, but to encourage me to return to the real world? I blow out a breath.

Clearly, I am spending too much time with the Seven. Their thinking is beginning to rub off on me. It's the only reason I am beginning to question myself so much. I love the Seven like my blood brothers, but when it comes down to it, not one of them has any idea what it's like to be in my shoes. And the only one who does... He is gone. Except for sporadic, snail mail letters once every year or so. Mostly, ones addressed to all of the Seven, assuring us he is alive. Which is why the last one was strange. It had been addressed only to me—I hadn't mentioned that to the Seven. How could I when I, myself, couldn't fathom why he'd done that? Did he mean that the Mafia's threat was centered on me? Why would it be? What do I have that they want? Why would they zero in on me?

Why did they single out me and Baron for what they did when they took us? Maybe I could put that down to being in the wrong place at the wrong time... Maybe. So, what did it mean that Baron had addressed the letter to me?

And why did you have her cross paths with me, my Lord?

I close my eyes, raise my head up to the skies, open my arms to His grace. His benevolence. The only reason that I am here today. *Believing in You, throwing myself at Your mercy and asking You for Your forgiveness is what I believe in. It's why I exist today, my Lord, for You saved my soul. You took me in, redeemed me, saved me and gave me purpose. Show me the way now, my Lord. Tell me what to do. Take everything I am—my heart my soul, my life. Take anything you want from me, my Lord, but spare her. Let no harm come to her. Grant unto her, her heart's desires, keep her happy, for that is all I need. Tell me, my Lord, that you hear me?*

I draw in a breath, and the complex notes of the incense fill my lungs. The notes of Frankincense and tea-tree tease my nostrils. I inhale and let the scent waft over me, sink into me, fill my blood and go to my head. My breath grows deeper and my muscles relax as I allow my mind to focus on His benevolence, His grace, the complete self-assuredness with which He's guided me thus far.

Surely, you'll not let go of me, when I need You the most? When everything in me insists that the right thing to do is to turn to You.

And yet my heart... My heart disagrees. My heart persists in choosing

her. *And I can't bear it, my Lord. I can't fail you. I need to find a way out. I need to return things to what they were. I need You to show me the way. Tell me what to do, my Lord.*

I pray and pray, but the Lord remains silent. I beg Him, plead with Him, cajole Him to, at least, talk to me again. But He stays silent.

I stay there until the chill invades my clothes, my skin, until my knees threaten to give way, and my arms ache from being held aloft. My thigh muscles tremble, my biceps protest and yet, He remains silent.

I will not move until You answer me, not this time. I need You to steer me. Give me a way out. Please. I swallow down the anger, the hurt, the helplessness that fills my chest and clogs my throat.

Talk to me. You can't be silent, not anymore.

"Father," a voice says from behind me, "can I pray with you?"

I open my eyes, turn to find a man walking up the aisle. As he draws closer, the acrid scent of cigarette smoke deepens. I take in his features. He seems familiar. Where have I seen him? Where... He steps into the beam of light from the illumination above and that's when it clicks. He's the homeless man I'd seen near the hotel when I'd gone to see Ava.

"The church is closed, though you are still welcome." I frown, "How did you get in?"

"I used the side entrance." He nods to the heavy door that leads to the rectory. Huh. Had I left the door unlocked? But then, I haven't been thinking clearly since I returned from meeting the rest of the Seven, so I guess I might have forgotten.

The man stops next to me. He glances up at the figure on the cross. "Do you ever wonder if He was happy?"

"You mean Jesus?"

He nods.

"We have no reason to believe otherwise."

"And you, Father?" He turns to me. "Do I have reason to believe otherwise with you?"

I peer down into his features. The uncombed hair falling about his face, his worn-out but clean shirt, the faded jeans that hang off his hips, hinting that he may have been healthier at one point in time, which is, honestly, not too difficult to imagine, and it's not because of his clothes. It's the defeated slump to his shoulders, the faded look in his eyes, as if he's lost all hope. Something I am used to... For it is when they're at their lowest that people

most often approach me. Is that why I chose this profession? Because I recognize kindred spirits?

Because I want to cling to that part of me that feeds on my grief, my helplessness, my lack of control I had in that time when I was taken and made to do things which I've never confessed to another. *Maybe to her? Only to her. Where did that thought come from?* I let go of her, remember? I walked away from her. I chose Him. Which is why I am here, ready and willing to do His bidding. To help others. Like this man.

"I am happy with my lot." I hold his gaze. "How can I help you, my child?"

"I need to confess."

23

Edward

"Forgive me Father for I have sinned. It has been...many years since I last confessed."

He swallows, shuffles his feet. The air in the booth grows denser. I shift around to make myself more comfortable. Not that I begrudge the fact that he came this late... But the fact that he interrupted my time, when I was talking to God? I'm not too happy about that. Still, I'd never turn away someone who walks in and asks for help. I lean forward, press the tips of my fingers together, "Go on, son, what would you like to tell me today?"

He fidgets around some more, then leans in, "I... I did something very bad, Father." He pauses, gulps audibly, then blows out a breath. "It was because of me that many lives were spoiled."

"How is that?"

"I helped some bad men when I was much younger. I didn't realize what I was doing then, but it was because of me that many other boys found their futures changed completely." His voice wavers, and he buries his face in his hands. "If I could only turn back time, I'd never have given information of the movements of my classmates to those men."

"How old were you when this happened?"

"I was twelve." His voice breaks. He clears his throat. "I may have put those boys in jeopardy, but it might as well have been me who was taken, as well."

The hair on the nape of my neck rises. "Taken?" I keep all inflection out

of my tone. "Who was taken?"

"The boys I spied on." His tone lowers, "I... I couldn't help it, Father. My parents were well-off, but then they lost all their money in a stock market crash. It was only because they'd been patrons who had made large donations that I'd been able to continue my studies in the same school." He shuffles around some more. "And I needed the money." He glances away, then back at me, "I uh, you...you understand what I am trying to say?"

"What did you need the money for?" I can hazard a guess, but I want him to spell it out for me.

"Alcohol... drugs." I sense him shrug.

"You were an addict?"

"That's putting it lightly." He barks out a self-deprecating laugh. "Vodka for breakfast, coke, and not the drinking kind, for lunch, all combined with downers for supper. I was in terrible shape."

I stare through the pattern in the partition, try to make out the expression on his face, but of course, I can't. Who the hell is this guy? Why did he walk in here, of all the churches, and what is he trying to tell me? "How did your school authorities miss that you were an addict?"

"Oh, I was very well-behaved in class, the epitome of the model student. No one, not even my schoolmates, guessed just how far gone I was. If it hadn't been for the fact that my parents lost their fortune..." I sense him shrug, "I could have maintained the status-quo. But it was not to be... I... I—"

"You needed money?"

"You can say that again. And as with all things, when you are desperate, the vultures find you." He drags in a breath. "I was only twelve, Father. You need to understand, I didn't have a clue about the seriousness of what I was going to do."

I curl my fingers into fists, force myself to breathe, breathe. "What did you do?" I finally ask.

"This stranger approached me when I was trying to track down my favorite dealer, who had refused to take my calls because, of course, they know when you are desperate. When you need them the most, that's when they desert you. Have you found that, Father?"

He's blathering now, trying to stray off track, trying to lead himself and me away from the topic at hand. Typical. I've found this pattern to be true of many who come to confession. It's almost like they are in the therapist's chair here. Though, unlike the reasons that lead them to see a therapist, they

come here because their conscience doesn't permit them to stay quiet anymore.

Yet, even this far into the narrative, self-preservation kicks in and they try their best to wriggle out of it, to place the blame elsewhere.

"This stranger," I prompt him. "What did he want from you?"

"When I finally tracked down my dealer, he was waiting for me."

"Who?" I query. "The dealer?"

"The man," he snaps. "Are you following me, Father?"

I twist my lips. "I am right there with you."

"He was well-dressed, in an expensive suit, sunglasses, a hat... Looked like something out of a Mafia film."

My heart begins to thud. Sweat beads my temple. "Is that what he was? The Mafia?"

"So, I found out later." He swallows. "He wanted me to get information on some boys."

My pulse thuds at my temples. "What kind of information?"

"About their daily routines. How they got to school every day, where they went to football practice, what else they did in the afterschool hours."

"So, you did it?"

"Yeah." I sense him nod. "I got him all the information he wanted."

"And he rewarded you?"

"For my sins?" he says quietly. "Asshole, gave me drugs and kept doing so for the next... I don't know, many years. They made me dependent on them. I ended up being reliant on them for my next fix, something they exploited, in every way possible."

"And do you still work for them?" I keep my voice even.

"What do you think?" He laughs bitterly, "Once you've interacted with them, they never let you go."

I rub at the pain that stabs at my chest. What the hell am I doing, encouraging him to speak? I should ask him to shut up. I should get the hell out of here, before I do something I'll regret. I lock my fingers together, tuck my elbows into my sides.

"And the boys on whom you reported. What about them?"

He stays silent.

"You've come this far. Get it all off your chest. Pour out all the worries inside of you to make space for the Holy Spirit." I narrow my gaze on the screen and what I can see of his profile. *Go on, you asshole, confirm to me*

what I already know. Do it already. Give me the chance to get even for everything that happened to me and my friends. Say it. Do it.

"The b-boys," he stutters, "the...they were kidnapped."

My heart stops, then picks up speed and slams into my chest. The blood thuds at my temples. My palms grow clammy and I flex my fingers.

"What school?" I force myself to say the words, "Which school did these boys attend?"

He draws in another breath, seems to hesitate.

"Get out everything, my son," I prompt him. "Every last memory associated with what happened. Lay it all out, so you can make a fresh start.

He swallows, moves around again, then finally lets out a sigh. "St. Lucian's," he mumbles.

I freeze. "St. Lucian's?"

So, he definitely is talking about me and rest of the Seven. Not that there had been any doubt in my mind. Too much of what he'd told me matched what had happened to us. But I had to be completely sure.

"Only the most exclusive private school in the country," he scoffs. "You wouldn't think kids from such an exclusive school would be involved in something like that, would you?"

I stare at his profile through the screen. This is the person responsible for turning the lives of me and my friend's upside down. If he hadn't shared information on us... Someone else would have? Maybe. Maybe not. Right now, as the facts stand, it is this man—this pathetic, wretched excuse of a human being—who shared information on us, who is partially responsible for the emotionally deficient, heartless men that we have become. And maybe he hasn't fared that well either. But it doesn't change the fact that if he hadn't reported on us, if he had turned down the offer of the Mafia, there's a small chance we might have turned out normal. Normal? Hah! What's that? What do I know about it? Except, that it is what most of the Seven now have.

Not me, though.

Never me.

And this guy... This bastard sitting on the opposite side of the screen is responsible for the sodden, tragic-comedy farce that my life has become. My vision tunnels and my senses pop. I rise to my feet, walk around and yank the curtain open.

The man stares up at me. "Father?" He frowns. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing." I smile at him. "Everything is just how it should be. You

couldn't have picked a better church and a more apt priest to confess your sins to."

His shoulders sag in relief. "Thank you, Father. I'm so grateful that you listened and did not judge."

"Me, judge?" I chuckle. "No, I wouldn't do that. Why would I? After all, kids are young and resilient. They bounce back from such traumatic memories, don't they? Assuming they survived to tell the tale, that is?"

"Oh, they did." He bobs his head up and down. "They all survived, thank God for that."

"You sure 'bout that?"

"What?"

"That it was better that they survived?" I lean down and peer into his face, "Are you positive it was better that they survived?"

He blinks rapidly. "Uh... Yes. Of course. I mean, better to live than to die, right?"

"Wrong."

He gapes at me. "F...father, is everything all right? You...you...seem pale."

"Do I?" I reach out and clamp my fingers around his neck. "Wonder why that is?"

His gaze widens. I tighten my grasp and he coughs, then grabs at my hand. I haul him up to his feet.

"Wh... what are you doing?" he chokes out.

"What does it look like?"

I drag him out of the booth and toward the altar.

"Father..." He tries to speak, but I squeeze his neck, apply even more pressure. His body jerks. He opens and shuts his mouth, then digs his fingernails into my wrist. Pain shivers up my arm; all noise in my head fades.

"Do you know who I am?" I stare into his widened gaze. "Answer me."

He opens and shuts his mouth, but no words emerge.

"Nod, if you recognize me," I order.

"I... I..." He gags. "Edward Chase." He finally says, " I know who you are."

I blink. "And yet you came to me to confess?" I say in a low voice. "Why is that?"

His gaze widens, but he doesn't speak.

"Tell me, what game are you trying to play with me? Why did you walk

into my church? Why choose to confess to me?" I squeeze harder, and his eyes bulge. He begins to choke, to scratch at my wrists. His shoulders shudder, tears leak out from the corners of his eyes.

"Did you think you'd get Absolution for your sins? After all isn't Absolution an integral part of the Sacrament of Penance, is that why you came to me? To be forgiven? And who better to do so than one of the Seven who was a victim of your wrong doing?"

He shakes his head, and a cold sensation grips my chest. My belly knots, and my pulse rate slows down.

"Or maybe you came, knowing if you confessed to me, it would push me over the edge. Maybe you hoped I'd lose control enough to grant you eternal redemption. After all, it's thanks to what you did that I found my faith. So, it's only right that I use the authority conferred on me to grant you eternal peace."

His gaze widens.

"Normally I take the vow of confidentiality during confession very seriously, but in your case, I'll be making an exception."

He tries to speak, but only a choking sound emerges.

"By the power vested in me my by the Church, I absolve you of your sins, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost." My vision tunnels. Anger thrums at my temples. I release the grip on his throat with one hand while I continue to choke him with other. I raise my right hand. "In the name of the Father." I squeeze his throat, as I lower my hand. "Son." I increase the pressure on his throat as I swipe my free hand to my left, "Holy Spirit." I bear down with every last sliver of strength left in me. "Amen." I complete the benediction by moving my hand to my right.

When I loosen my grip on him, he slumps down to the floor. I lower my arms to my sides, then glance up at the figure on the cross above me. "So, this is what you wanted from me? This is the answer to my prayers then, my Lord?"

I stare up at the face of Christ, rake my gaze across His features frozen in agony.

"Tell me, my Lord, is this the way You repay me for the years I spent in Your service, in making sure I did everything that was my duty to You, in ensuring that I would leave no stone unturned in my loyalty to You? It was all a test, wasn't it? Every single thing I did has led up to this moment, and I am helpless to stop it. For I am not in control... You are...or so You'd have

me think?" I tip up my chin glare at He who does not speak to me anymore.

"Well, guess what? Not anymore. From this day on, I am no longer in Your service. No one controls my destiny. Not him—" I stab my finger in the direction of the figure on the ground, "not You, not anyone else. Me, I am the master of my destiny. Me, Edward Chase, from here on, I renounce my association with You."

The wind blows in through the open side door, which slams shut. The sound ricochets around the space, coils into my guts. "Oh, no, you don't." I smile up at the figure on the wall. "You can't stop me, not now. You had Your chance and You lost it. You lost me, my Lord. This is where we part ways."

I snatch the collar from around my neck and drop it on the man on the floor.

Then walk out the side door, through the garden, to my cottage. I pick up my phone, stare at it, then dial the one number I'd sworn never to call.

24

"Earbuds firmly stuck in her ears, my mum dances around the lawn, backlit against the sinking sun. Her weights are in her hands, swinging dangerously near to her head every time she raises her arms. She's supposedly working out, and as she launches into the chorus of Prince's Purple Rain, I can see her face light up."

-From Ava's diary

Ava

Thunder booms outside and I sit up with a gasp. It's dark in the room and I reach for my lamp and flick it on. The light illuminates the room but doesn't dispel the unease that gathers in the pit of my belly. I snatch up my phone, check the time. It's two am, the dead of night. Goosebumps pop on my skin. I rub my hands together, blow on them, then stare at the band-aid Edward had placed on the scraped skin at the base of my palm. I peel off the bandage, find the wound is already half healed. That didn't take long. Some gashes heal quickly. Others—well, others only fester over time.

A shudder runs down my spine.

It's freezing and not even being under three duvets is keeping me warm. Ugh. The temperature must have plummeted outside, as it sometimes does in London. It was sunny yesterday, the warmest day in March for the last fifty years, or so the media headlines had proclaimed. Which is why, no doubt, the mercury dropped the other way today. I roll up the bandage toss it into the wastebasket near the bedside table. Just then, lightning flashes outside. Rain

patters against the window at the same time that the doorbell rings.

Huh? Who can it be? I'm not expecting any of the girls to come by, and anyway, they'd never drop by unannounced. In the middle of the night. I pick up the phone and check my messages. Nope, nothing.

The doorbell rings again, then someone bangs against the door.

I stiffen, clutch my phone in my hand like it's a weapon. Shit, I don't have anything to defend myself with. But thieves don't ring doorbells, do they? *Not unless they want to take you by surprise when you opened the door.* My pulse rate ratchets up. I slip out of the bed and the cold wraps around me. I shiver, walk to the kitchen, glance around, then grab the first thing I find. A wooden spoon. Shit, that's not going to help.

The banging on the door resumes again, and I pivot, walk toward it and peer through the keyhole.

Golden eyes glare back at me. I gulp; my fingers tremble. The phone slips from my hand and hits the floor. Shit, shit, shit. I snatch it up, then juggling the wooden spoon and the phone in one hand, I open the door to find Edward framed in the doorway.

"Wha...what are you doing here?" I gulp.

He rakes his gaze down my features, to where I'm holding the phone and wooden spoon, then back to my face.

His hair is mussed, droplets of water dot his face, trail down his beautiful throat, down the demarcation between those sculpted pecks. Goosebumps pop on my skin for a second time in a few minutes, this time for completely different reasons. I rub one bare foot over the other and he jerks his gaze down my chest, to my hips, to my bare legs. Shit. In my hurry to get a weapon, I'd forgotten to wear something warmer, so I'm still clad in my camisole and the knickers that I'd worn to bed.

His nostrils flare. He glances up, meets my gaze. His irises blaze a gorgeous golden. I see myself reflected in them and shiver. Thunder cracks outside again and I jump. The phone slips from my hand. Again. He swoops down, grabs it before it hits the ground, then straightens. "Invite me in," he commands.

"Wh...what?"

"Ask me in, Eve," he snaps. "Now."

I gulp. "W...won't you come in?" I take a step back, then skitter to the side as he brushes past me. The scent of freshly cut grass mixed with rain envelops me. My nipples harden and my thighs clench. Moisture pools

between my legs. Shit, at this rate I am going to dampen my panties and he's going to know the effect he has on me, considering I have no clothes to hide behind.

The wind picks up outside again, and I close the door. I turn to find him standing in the center of the living room. He seems to have absorbed all the oxygen in the room, for I try to breathe, but my lungs burn. I try to swallow but my throat is too dry. Hell. Why does he have this effect on me? I take a trembling step forward, then another. He must hear the slight noise I make, for he tenses. He drops his backpack to the floor, then shrugs off his leather jacket and tosses it aside. His shoulders flex, the defined planes of his back outlined against the shirt that pulls tightly across his torso.

He raises a hand to run his fingers through his hair, and the action outlines his biceps, which bulge and flex. A hot flare of desire pools low in my belly. My thighs spasm, my palms dampen, and I rub them across my thighs. I rake my gaze down that delicious butt of his, those powerful thighs clad in jeans. He's also wearing biker boots. Proper shit-kickers. I've never seen him wear those before. For that matter, I've never seen him in jeans either. I lower my gaze, to the backpack at his feet.

"Are you going somewhere?" I frown.

"I came to see you." He pivots to face me and the force of his intense gaze slams into my chest. A shudder grips me. I tighten my grip around the wooden spoon I'm still holding in my hand. His gaze darts to that, then back to me. "Do you want me to use that?"

"What?" I blink at him. "What do you mean?"

"Do you," he takes a step forward, "want me," another step and another, "to use that," he stops a few inches in front of me, "on you?"

Heat flushes my skin. He's not. He can't be... Is he saying what I think he is?

"You mean..." I gulp, "you want to..."

"Spank you?" He tilts his head. "Do you?"

Yes.

Yes.

"No," I squeak, then clear my throat. "Wh...what are you doing here?"

"That's not important. What is, is that I am here. I came to see you, Ava." He drags his hand through his hair again and I notice his fingers tremble. Huh? Is he nervous? No, he's not nervous... This is something else. I peer into his features, notice the skin pulled tightly across his cheek bones. There

are fine lines around his eyes, which I swear I haven't noticed before. He looks on edge, strung tight, like he's about to do something...or has done something that's not in the normal scheme of things. Considering the time and his arrival on my doorstep.

"What happened?" I scowl at him. "What have you done, Edward?"

He stares at me, then chuckles. He peels back his lips and laughs, and the sound is harsh and ugly and so pain-filled that I wince.

I take a step forward. "Ed, what's wrong?"

He firms his lips, looks me up and down, before kicking his bag aside, his movements barely restrained. The backpack hits the wall, the sound a soft thud that reverberates through my blood. My pulse skitters; the blood pounds at my temples.

"Ed?" I tilt my head, "What do you want?"

"You," he bites out the word, "I want you."

25

Ava

The tone of his voice slices through the thoughts in my mind. It coils around my breasts, slithers down to nestle between my legs. I shiver. "B...but...your vows."

"Fuck my vows."

I blink. A part of me rejoices. Yes, yes. This is what I wanted to hear. This is what I've been hoping for since I first met him... so... Why am I not jumping for joy? Why am I not throwing myself at him, winding my arms around his neck, locking my legs around his waist and dry humping myself on the tent in his crotch?

"Edward?" I stiffen, "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is that you are still dressed."

"And you're not..." I stare at his throat, "you're not wearing your collar."

"I won't be needing it anymore."

"What does that mean?" I scowl.

"You don't get to ask the questions," he growls. "Which reminds me, why are we still standing here?"

"What do you mean?"

He closes the distance between us, so the heat from his body slams into my chest. "Do you or do you not want me to fuck you, Ava?"

My core clenches. My toes curl. All of my nerve-endings seem to light up. Jesus—and it is okay to use his name, since we're not standing in a church, right? This man... The power he has over me... It'll never go away,

not until the day I die. Not even then. Bet he'll haunt me in my afterlife and chase me through the catacombs of hell, which is clearly where I am going, considering I tempted one of God's most faithful disciples.

"What have I done to you, Ed?" I tip up my chin, stare into those brilliant brown eyes of his.

"Are you done?" he grates out through clenched teeth. "I am asking you for the last time, Ava, do you want me to shag you or not?"

I draw in a sharp breath, then nod my head.

"I didn't hear you," he growls.

"Y...yes," I whimper.

"Say it like you mean it, Eve."

"Yes," I snap. "Yes, yes, ye—"

He thrust his thumb inside my mouth. "Suck on it," he orders, and I curl my tongue around his digit. The saltiness of his skin, combined with that edgy, darkness that is pure Edward sinks into my blood. My pussy spasms. Moisture trickles down the inside of my legs.

He darts his gaze down to my crotch as if he can see right through my panties. I'm pretty sure he can't. Bet he senses it, though. He's always known what he does to me. How helpless I am in the face of his commands. All he has to do is ask and I'll lay myself down at his feet, legs apart, asking him to wreck me.

A moan bleeds from my lips. He jerks his chin up, his gaze alert, watching me, assessing me, stalking my every single movement. I freeze, not wanting to give myself away... Well, not more than what I have revealed so far, that is. Shit, at this rate, I am not going to last. I am going to orgasm just being in his presence... Yep, totally possible when it's Edward. The man exudes enough testosterone that just being close to him has heightened the senses of every single cell in my body.

He stares at my mouth with such intensity that a shudder ladders down my spine. I squeeze my thighs together and he scowls. "Stop fidgeting."

He drags his thumb down my chin, down my throat to the valley between my breasts. "You're so fucking beautiful, Ava." His words are complimentary but his tone... It's brooding. Almost angry. His eyebrows slash down and he hooks his finger in the neckline and tugs. The thin cloth tears down the middle.

I gasp, look down to find the two halves gape enough to expose the sides of my breasts. The fabric catches on my nipples and stays there.

"Fuck me," he growls. "The things I want to do to you, Eve. If only I had more time."

"What do you mean? We have time. You only just got here, you—"

"Shh," he raises his finger back to my lips, "any last requests, Eve?"

I gulp; my fingers tremble. Shit, that sounds dangerous and surprising and so bloody hot.

"L...last, requests?" I manage to squeak.

He cups my cheek, stares into my eyes, "Once I bury myself inside of you, you won't be doing any talking. Hell, I'm going to make sure I fuck you so hard, and in every hole in your body, in such quick succession that your brain cells are going to be out of commission for a while..." he explains in a matter-of-fact voice.

It's so different from his normal tone that I stare at him. "Is e... everything okay, Ed?"

"Everything is not okay, Eve," he explains patiently. "You are still standing and coherent." He shakes his head. "We need to change that."

"We...we do?"

He nods.

"Turn around and put your hands against up the wall," he orders.

"What?" I blink.

"Don't ask me to repeat myself. You won't like the consequences."

"I... I won't?"

He shakes his head.

"Do it, Eve." His gaze narrows. "Now."

I turn, head for the wall, then stop and stare at him over my shoulder. "My phone?" I manage to force out the words. "What about my phone?"

"This?" He takes it from me, stares at it. "You won't be needing this for a while." He tosses it over his shoulder.

I squeak, then exhale a sigh of relief when it lands on the couch.

He prowls toward me, circles the air with his finger.

I scowl.

He glares at me and I shiver.

He arches an eyebrow and I bite down the inside of my cheek. Shit, this...whatever mood he is in, is hot. Only... Something is different. I haven't known Edward long enough, but one thing I've always believed in, that I could trust him. This...this man standing in my living room... There's a sense of desperation, a ruthlessness that...feels right. Yeah, it feels right,

and yet, it's also disconcerting. It's as if he's peeled back a layer, the mask that he wears to the world, to reveal the wolf beneath...the wolf in sheep's clothing. Yeah, he was always alpha, even—perhaps especially—dressed in his priest's garb. But this version of Ed? This snarling, growling, jeans and shit-kickers garbed Ed... It's a whole new level. A person I have no hope of trying to control. Not that I want to... But also, I don't want to give in and do as he says. I mean... I'm not one to just be commanded... Though I like it, I want it, yearn for it. But I also want to be conquered. Know what I mean?

I turn to face the wall, raise my hands, then realize I'm still holding the goddamn wooden spoon in my hand. "Oh." I stare at it, and he reaches over my shoulder, plucks the weapon—I mean, utensil—from my grasp. Shit, now I feel truly naked. I mean, I still have some clothes on, but now I have nothing to defend myself with. Not that I want to defend myself against this guy...but... Yeah, shit, now I really am at his mercy.

"Ed?" I whisper and he shushes me.

"No talking, Eve."

"But—"

Whack. The back of the wooden spoon connects with my butt.

"What the—?" I screech. "Did you just spank me with that—?"

Whack, whack, whack. He hits my arse in quick succession with that freakin' wooden spoon and pinpricks of pain radiate from my backside. My core spasms. Moisture pools between my legs and I press my forehead into the wall. Damn it, this should not arouse me. Should not. Really shouldn't. But I am turned on. No denying. What's wrong with me?

I turn my head, scowl at him over my shoulder.

He slaps the wooden spoon against his palm, and the soft thud sends a shiver racing down my spine again. He tilts his head, holds my gaze, then nods as if satisfied.

"I assume you still want me to fuck you?"

I frown.

"Say no, and I'll leave," he adds.

I blink. Why is he doing this? Is he giving me another way out? Why did he barge in, in the middle of the night? Is he on his way somewhere? He is, that's for sure. So why has he stopped here first? Did he miss me? Maybe. Does he want me? Yes. Does he need me? Definitely. It's why he came by. Whether he knows it or not, he seeks comfort— No, he needs to give in to whatever is tearing him apart inside. Something he is not ready to share,

something that's shaken him enough to turn his back on his vows, his life-long pursuit of discipline, of the framework within which he's lived his life, and come to me. And I can't turn him away, I can't. More to the point, I need him as much as he needs me. If this is the only way I am going to have him, then so be it.

I nod my head.

The breath rushes out of him. "Say it aloud."

"Yes."

His eyes gleam. Something like satisfaction laces his features. "I'm going to take your mouth, and tear into your pussy, then I'm going to fuck you in the arse. You'll let me do that, won't you sweet Eve?"

Ava

His filthy words send a surge of heat through my veins. My pulse rate skyrockets. My knees wobble, and if I hadn't had my palms pressed into the wall, I swear I'd have collapsed by now. Who'd have thought the straight-talking Father Edward Chase has a dirty mouth on him? I stare up into his face, and his nostrils flare.

"Say yes, Eve," he growls. "Say you want me to take you in every hole. Tell me you want me to fuck you wherever I choose. Do it," he snaps, his tone half belligerent, half pleading. "Do it, Eve, you have my permission to speak."

I rake my gaze across his tense features, his flexed shoulders, the hard set of his stance as he stands there, watching me, waiting for me to tell him that it is okay for him to fuck me in the arse. Shit. I squeeze my eyes shut. Once I say yes, there is no going back. Once he has his hands and his mouth on me and his fingers inside of me, I'll be branded as his. He'll have spoiled me for everyone else. I'll never be able to look at another man and not feel Edward's touch, his kisses, the force of his presence, the strength of his attraction, the pull of that something inside of him, which is just so carnal yet so pure, so single-minded and intense that there could be no space for anyone else in my heart, my mind, my...soul. Only he can reduce me to this mass of quivering need that propels me to take the leap. That spurs me on to open my eyes, look him in the eyes and say, "Yes."

The breath rushes out of him. He flings the wooden spoon aside, closes the space between us and kicks my legs further apart. Then, he leans in close

enough for his body heat to envelop me. His big body looms over me as he presses his nose into my hair and inhales deeply. A ripple runs down his body and I know then just how affected he is by his proximity to me, as well.

"You smell so bloody good, Eve," he rumbles. He nuzzles into the curve between my ear and my neck, then runs his tongue around the shell of my ear and sucks my earlobe. My core clenches and moisture trickles down my thigh.

A groan bleeds out of me and he shudders. He presses his body into mine and the hardness of his arousal digs into the curve of my arse.

"F-u-c-k," he growls against my hair, then air hits my back. I glance over my shoulder to find he's dropped down to his knees, between my legs. My throat closes. He hooks his finger under the waistband of my panties and tugs. The delicate material snaps and he whips it off of me. He stuffs it in his pocket, then shoves his shoulders between my thighs, forcing me to part them further. He grips my hips, then lowers his head and swipes his tongue up my melting pussy.

Heat sweeps up my spine and the blood rushes to my face. Ohmigod. What the hell is he doing? How are his movements so sure, so focused? He's done this before. Of course, he has. No other way, could he know his way around a woman's body so well—oh! — He stabs his tongue inside my channel, in-out-in, and I throw back my head and pant.

He curls his tongue inside my core, slides his hand between my pussy and the wall and circles my clit with his fingers. I snap back my shoulders, simultaneously push against the wall and thrust my hips forward, riding the thrust of that wicked tongue, chasing the drumming of his fingers across my pussy lips. He brings his other hand up to cup my butt, then slides his thumb in between my arsecheeks and inside my puckered hole.

He continues to tongue-fuck me, while grinding his heel into my clit and sliding his thumb deeper inside my backhole.

Heaven help me.

Where did Father learned to eat out a woman like this?

The tremors sweep up my legs, coil in my center, then surge up my spine. I slap my palms into the wall, squeeze my eyes shut and give in to the orgasm that tears through me.

It seems to go on and on, then fades away as suddenly. I slump back, trembling. Sweat beads my shoulders and my back, my knees tremble, and my thighs spasm, unable to hold me up. The next second, the world tilts. I

crack my eyelids open to find that I am on my back, on the floor, with Edward looming over me.

"I am going to fuck you now."

His words slice through the noise in my head. I stare up at him as he reaches down and releases the zipper on his jeans. He shoves his hand into his briefs pulling himself out and pumps, once, twice, thrice. I gaze down at his long, thick, hard, length. It's gorgeous. Almost as beautiful as the man himself. Not that I have seen many cocks, not in real life, at least. Hello Pornhub, you've had your uses, but you have nothing on this one-hundred percent virile specimen who sits back on his heels, between my thighs. He slides his hand between us, scoops up the cum from my slit, and slathers it into my backhole.

No. I shake my head and clench my buttocks.

"Shh." He lowers his head to mine, brushes his mouth over mine, once, twice. I part my lips and he slides his tongue inside, tangles with mine. He sucks on me, draws from me. He groans into my mouth and I swear it feels like he's poured himself into his kiss. All of him. I taste myself on his breath, breathe in the lingering scent of frankincense, and under that, the familiar cut grass scent that is him.

It's so familiar, so reassuring that I relax.

My muscles unwind. I loop my arms about his neck, return the kiss. I open my mouth wider, tangle my tongue with his, and his big body shudders. I lean up and into him, strain to get closer. He hooks his arms under my knees, pulls them up, only to wind my ankles about his neck.

"Hold on," he growls as he inches his dick into my backhole.

"Oh," I gasp into his mouth, "oh, my."

He doesn't let up. He slides his tongue in and out of my mouth, while he slips a hand between us and curls his fingers around my clit. Heat slices through me; sweat pools under my armpits. Moisture drips from my cunt, as I shudder and dig my fingertips into his shoulders, wrap my ankles more securely about him...wait as he releases my mouth to gaze into my eyes.

"You're so tight," he rasps. "So hot." He thrusts his hips and slips inside further.

Too much, too full. "Edward," I gasp, "you're too big."

"I'm just right for you." He slips one thick finger inside my pussy and I shudder. He slides in another and begins to work them in and out of me. In and out.

All the while he holds my gaze, his golden eyes now a dark brown, almost as dark as the skies outside. I tip up my chin and he lowers his lips to mine again. He licks my mouth, presses his thumb into my clit, and curls his fingers inside my channel.

I arch under him, push my breasts up and into his chest, even as I shy away from the coming hurt. "Please," I whimper. "Please, Ed."

"Tell me what you need, Eve." He picks up speed, saws his fingers in and out of me, the wet, squelching sound of my flesh giving in to him filling the space. It's filthy, dirty and oh, so erotic.

The pores of my skin pop and a shudder grips me. My nipples tighten until they ache and my belly quivers. I tilt my hips up and he slides in and through the tight ring of my sphincter. "Oh," I gasp. "Ohmigod, Ed."

"Tell me how it feels," he commands.

"Like..." I swallow, "Like you've crammed yourself into me, like you are consuming me, and now I can never let you go."

A strange look enters his eyes. He glances away, then back at me. The tendons of his throat move as he swallows. "I'm going to have to go away, Eve. I'm going to have to leave."

26

Ava

I stare at him, "What, what are you saying, you—?"

He lowers his head and closes his mouth over mine, deepens the kiss, absorbs my words at the same time he begins to move. He pulls out of me, all the way to the edge then propels his hips forward and into me. Pinpricks of pain radiate out and up my spine.

He begins to weave his fingers in and out of me again, as he fills my mouth with his tongue and continues to fuck my arse. He slides out, then in one smooth, long swipe, fills me again. This time he hits a spot somewhere deep inside me that I didn't even know existed. My eyes roll back in my head. My entire body bucks. My shoulders jerk, and I arch under him, try to pull away, even as I want to get closer to him. To crawl under his skin and stay there. To tie myself to him and never let go... He can't go. Why did he say that he has to leave? Why?

I snap my eyes open to find him watching me. He holds my gaze as he plunges forward again and again, each time hitting that same spot, and I can't take it anymore. The tremors sweep up from my toes, up my legs, my thighs, pool in my center, before they slam up my spine and burst behind my eyes. The climax barrels into me and I yell—but he swallows the sound and keeps fucking me. He curls his fingers inside me, slams into me with such force that my entire body bucks. He thrusts once-twice-thrice then tears his mouth from mine, and with a low shout, empties himself inside me.

He slips his fingers out of my pussy, eases my legs down, then slumps

forward, and for a second, his entire weight presses me into the floor. I'm surrounded by his intensely male scent, by the heat of his body, which coalesces with mine, by the sensation of his skin slippery with sweat, sliding over mine.

Then he rolls over and deposits me on his chest.

I press my cheek into the V of skin exposed by his shirt. His heart thunders against my ear, his breathing a ragged melody that soothes me and reminds me once more about what he said.

I place my chin in the demarcation between his pecs, stare up into his face, "Don't go." The words rasp out and I swallow. "I don't know what happened earlier, but whatever it is, we can face it together."

He stares down at me. "Why do you think something happened?"

"Didn't it?"

"It doesn't matter." He grips my shoulders and I know he's going to push me off of him. He's going to set me aside, get dressed, pick up his bag and leave and I... I cannot allow that. My heart begins to race; the blood thuds at my temple. I sit up, wince when my backside twinges, both from the spanking and from where he'd taken me, but I don't care. I rise to my feet, hold out my hand.

He frowns. "What are you doing?"

"Come with me," I snap.

He scowls. "You don't tell me what to do."

"Oh?" I glower back. "I just let you take my arse, you asshole. The least you can do is humor me for a little while longer."

The furrow between his eyebrows deepens, he hesitates, and I add, "You owe me this much."

He looks like he's about to protest, then jerks his chin. He ignores my hand, and pushes up to tower over me.

I turn, head inside, through my bedroom, and into the ensuite, where I flick on the light switch. Pulling off my torn camisole I step into the shower cubicle, turn on the shower, then turn to find him watching me from the doorway.

I jerk my head toward the running water, and he frowns.

He opens his mouth to say something, then decides against it. Instead, he stalks over, at the same time reaching behind to tear off his shirt. I take in the expanse of his chest, those perfect pecs, the eight—no, ten-pack—shit, when does Father have the time to work out? He pulls off his boots and socks, then

shoves down his pants and his boxers, kicking them aside. He straightens and his cock juts up. It seems even bigger, thicker, if that's possible, considering he was just inside me. The head is swollen, and glistening from his cum, and a vein runs up the underside. Moisture pools in my mouth and I swallow, force myself to lower my gaze past those powerful thighs, to his corded calves and the wide feet that move toward me. He brushes past me, steps into the shower and raises his head to the flow of water. The space instantly seems to shrink, not that it was big to start, but with this six-foot, three-inch behemoth in the cubicle which had been perfectly big enough for me, there's barely enough space for me to slide around and in front of him.

He watches me with a narrowed gaze as I reach out and pour some of the soap into my palm. Then I wash his chest, run my hands down those sculpted pecs, down his hard stomach, circle around the hard shaft which twitches as I sink to my knees and wash his thighs, his feet. I tip my chin up, survey him through the downpour. Water drops cling to his cheeks, spike his eyelashes, flatten his hair so it outlines the shape of his skull. There are hollows under his cheekbones and dark circles ring his eyes. How had I not noticed them before? What happened to make him break his vows? To make him want to leave so suddenly.

Leave. He wants to leave. Not yet. Not if I can help it.

I reach up, curl my fingers around his thick shaft. My fingers barely meet around his girth. Fuck me. How the hell had I taken him, and in my arse, at that? It is going to hurt like hell tomorrow. Only, I am not going to stop there. I wrap my other palm around his dick, then swipe up.

He hisses out a breath. His gaze intensifies. His massive chest rises and falls, as he parts his legs, giving me better access. I rise up on my knees, continue to pump him, up-down-up, and his flesh hardens, lengthens, throbs in my grasp.

His stomach muscles clench, his jaw ticks, and a nerve throbs at his temple. He slams a hand out and into the wall, and his biceps flex as he takes in a deep breath, then another.

I balance myself with one palm on his thigh and he flinches. His muscles coil, his shoulders flex, then a growl rips out of him.

He grits his teeth, holding my gaze as I increase the pace of my movements. His cock jumps in my grasp and he bares his teeth. "What are you waiting for?" he growls. "Suck me off."

Edward

Suck me off? Did you just ask her to suck you off? And after you tore into her arse without prepping her properly? Without giving her enough warning? Why the hell did I come here in the first place? I should have left after making that call, and that had been my plan. I had gathered up the very basic essentials I'd need to survive and then I'd mounted my bike and left. I hadn't looked back. Hadn't mourned the remnants of what the last five years of my life had been reduced to. The rectory had been just a space in which my physical body had spent the nights. My time had been taken up by my connection to the Lord, one which I had severed.

And it had hurt. More than when I had left my life behind to join the Church. More than when I had been taken and abused. More than when I had gone on a drug-induced bender and almost died and been reluctantly brought back to the land of the living. Is this what people face when they lose a loved one? Or when they go through a divorce? A separation, a severing of a limb, a loss of something that had been tangible, but which had since—poof! —disappeared like it had never existed at all. Five years of a presence that had occupied my life, my mind, my soul. All of it, gone in an instant. Leaving behind the dregs of a man I don't recognize anymore.

I had straddled my bike, hit the road, and almost not been surprised when I'd landed at her apartment. I'd known I was coming here, even before I'd left. The one place I had pretended didn't exist. The one woman I'd tried so hard to ignore. The only person I could turn to, to fill the gnawing emptiness

that permeates my soul.

How could I even try to go on, when the most important parts of me have been left behind? When the only thing that had anchored me has been cut loose, leaving me adrift?

Is that why I had come here...in a final attempt to try to salvage something for myself? Am I that selfish that I would fuck her, claim her, give her hope...when I have nothing to offer to myself anymore?

I should leave. I should spare her further pain. I should simply get out of here, out of her life, before I do something that will hurt her even more.

I gaze down into those emerald green eyes that stare up at me with defiance. With lust. With the kind of devotion that I had once reserved for my Lord, and I know then, it's already too late. For her. For me. For what I am going to do. Which is going to haunt me for the rest of my days. *Get the hell away from her, you bastard. Give her a chance to come out of this unscathed.*

I squeeze my eyes shut and pray—pray—to whom? Not to Him. Not when I've lost my faith, when I've rejected Him. I've lost the very foundation upon which I have built my entire life. Fucking hell. How the hell am I going to walk away from her as well?

She cups my balls and squeezes, and I shudder. I open my eyes to find her rising to her knees. She bends her head, opens her mouth around my cock. I watch as my shaft disappears down her throat. The blood rushes to my groin and my dick thickens further, if that's possible. She pulls out, then licks the crown of my shaft, before taking me in again. The heat, the swirling of her tongue up my length, the scrape of her teeth on the underside of my shaft... All of it converges, coalesces into a hard knot that intensifies, tightens, lodges at the base of my spine.

My thigh muscles tighten and my shoulders tense. I lower my hand, dig my fingers into her hair and tug. Her head falls back, saliva drools from the corners of her mouth and the last bit of sanity seems to leave me.

I tighten my grip on her strands, pull her back, so my dick slides out, until I'm poised at the edge of her lips.

Her gaze widens, her grasp on my balls intensifies, and I can't stop the smirk that twists my lips.

"You want me to fuck you again, is that it? Is that why you stopped me from leaving?"

The green of her irises deepens and color smears her cheeks.

"Maybe you want to tell the world that the hot priest shagged you. Is that

why you have my cock in your mouth?"

A low snarl bleeds from her lips. She tries to pull back, but I hold her in place.

"Oh, no, you don't." I widen my smile. "You stopped me when I would have walked away. The least you can do is let me fuck your mouth," I pull her head forward and feed my dick to her, "first."

She chokes and more spit drools down her chin. She stares at me, her gaze hot and angry and filled with lust. Oh, yeah, this thing between us... It is carnal and base... And hell, if it isn't the only thing keeping me tethered to this moment. The present. It's all I have. It's all I'll allow myself to have. There can be no future for us. Not after what I have done. I am better off leaving her, giving her the chance at a normal life with someone else. Someone who isn't me. Not me. *F-u-c-k!*

"Breathe through your nose, Eve." I growl, and she flares her nostrils. Then sucks in her cheeks and the suction, fuck me... The action sets a storm of lust raging through my guts.

I hold onto the wall for support, then begin to pull her head back and forth, back and forth. She releases her grip on my balls, digs her fingertips into my thigh with enough force to send pinpricks of pain racing up my spine. The coiled pressure in my groin grows and grows until it seems to consume all of me, yet I don't stop. I continue to fuck her mouth, pull her forward and back, again and again. The moisture glistens on her cheeks and her breasts heave, the nipples pebbled and pink-tipped and gleaming in the light.

My mouth waters. I tear my gaze from her tits back to her mouth, up to her eyes, now glazed with desire and the need to come. But I am not going to let her. Not yet.

I tug on her hair and a low moan bleeds from her throat.

I increase the speed of my actions, pulling her forward and back, and her entire body jolts. Her breathing speeds up. She squeezes my thigh, widens her gaze, then scrapes her teeth on the underside of my shaft. And that's when the knot of pressure at the base of my spine explodes.

28

Ava

His features contort, he throws back his head, and with a muted roar, shoots his load down my throat. His orgasm seems to go on and on and I watch, entranced, as his big body shudders. His shoulders draw in and his massive chest heaves. His cheeks are flushed, the hollows under his cheeks are more prominent. He seems like a man in the throes of emotional turmoil, a man who is at the end of his tether.

The musky, peaty taste of his cum explodes on my palate, and I swallow and suck on him. Damn him, but the sight of him falling apart is burned into my brain. It's something I'll never forget. This power over him, this sense of control that infuses me, turns me on. I slide my hand around to squeeze his butt, then slip my finger in between his arsecheeks to tease his puckered hole.

His entire body jerks.

He lowers his head, locking his gaze with mine, then tugs on my hair. His dick slips out, and he urges me up to my feet.

"Not had enough, Eve?" He thrusts his face into mine, "What the hell do you want from me?"

"The same thing you want from me."

"Want me to fuck you properly, is that it?"

"Finally." I chuckle, the sound harsh. "Took you long enough to get the memo."

A snarl twists his lips and a rush of fear courses through my veins. *Shit, shit, shit. What is wrong with me? Why am I pushing him? Why am I taunting*

him further, when he already seems to have lost control?

He releases my hair, only to wrap his fingers around the nape of my neck. He pulls me up to my tiptoes, my skull resting on his fingertips. I raise my eyes, meet his burning gaze. The breath rushes out of me. The lust in his eyes, the anguish, the helplessness... It's as if he hates himself, but can't stop himself from what he is going to do, and for a minute, I feel sorry for him.

His fingers meet in the front of my throat and when he increases the pressure on my nape, my breath hitches.

I part my lips and he lowers his head until his nose bumps mine. Our breaths mingle and the thud-thud-thud of my heartbeat fills my ears. I hold his gaze as he opens his mouth over mine. He slips his tongue in between my lips, tangles it with mine. Pinpricks of heat vibrate from the contact. My chest tightens and a ball of emotion clogs my throat. For some reason, this feels very intimate, more than all of the previous times he's kissed me. Maybe it's because he has his eyes open, and I can take in the sparks of silver that flash in them. He tilts his head and deepens the kiss. I raise my hand and he grabs my wrist, bringing it up above my head, and holds it there, then presses his chest against mine. He thrusts his thigh between my legs and I part them. I wind my other hand about his shoulder, hold on as he thrusts his hips forward and his hard shaft digs into my belly.

A groan rolls up my throat and he swallows it. I slide my hand between us, my fingertips graze the crown of his cock, and he hisses against my mouth. I wrap my fingers around it and his chest heaves. He breaks the kiss to stare into my eyes as I begin to pump him up and down, up and down. His nostrils flare. He releases his hold on my neck and hand, then bends and grabs me under my thighs. He lifts me up and I squeak, wind my legs around his waist. He reaches behind me to shut off the shower, then walks out of the cubicle. He lowers me to the ground, reaches around me to grab a towel, then proceeds to wipe me down. His movements are brisk, almost impersonal, but the thick length of his cock points to just how aroused he really is. When I am dry, he drags the towel down his body, flings it aside. Then, closing the distance between us, he scoops me up. He walks over to my bed and lowers me onto it. On my back, I watch as he rakes his gaze down my body.

"Spread your legs," he commands, and hell, if I don't come right then. I part my thighs and he stares at my pussy with unconcealed greed. He licks his lips and I swallow. He lowers to the floor between my legs, circles my ankles with his fingers and tugs until my butt is poised at the edge of the bed. He

hooks my knees over his shoulders, then lowers his head to my core. He breathes in deeply and my stomach quivers.

"The scent of your pussy..." He draws in another breath and his shoulders heave, "It's pure aphrodisiac. Why did I ever think that I could resist it?" He stares up at me and his eyes gleam. "I'll never forget this, Eve, not as long as I live."

"Wait." I blink, "What do you mean—?" I throw my head back and gasp as he licks up my slit in one long, slow sweep.

"Oh, my god." I groan as he follows that up with another long swipe of his tongue. I jerk my body up and off the mattress. He licks me a third time and my eyes roll back in my head.

"I am ready to break my fast, little Eve, will you feed me?"

He closes his mouth around my pussy and I cry out. He thrusts his tongue inside my aching core. I dig my fingers into the sheets, squeeze my thighs around his head. "Omigod. Omigod," I wail. "Edward, please—"

He brings his hand up to pinch my nipple and I explode. The orgasm crashes over me with no warning. It sweeps up my body, exploding behind my eyes, and I cry out. I shudder as the climax grips me, then ebbs away. I slump. My muscles slacken. He continues to lick my clit, curls his tongue around the swollen nub and I moan. "Please" I whisper, "please, Ed."

He rises up, forcing me to open my legs further. The bed dips as he lowers his weight onto his elbows and brackets me in. The heat from his body slams into my chest, coils around me, pours into my skin and heats my blood. He peers deep into my eyes. "Do you still want me?"

"Yes," I moan. "Fuck me, Ed."

A fierce look heats his eyes. Those golden eyes blaze, mirrored pools of desire in which I can see myself, see my lust reflected in how his breathing intensifies. His nostrils flare. He reaches down to position his dick at my entrance then pauses. "Condom," he growls. "I need a condom."

"Oh." I blink, try to pull my thoughts together. Of course, we do. I hadn't even considered it, as out of my head with lust as I am. "I... I don't have any."

He frowns. "I'm clean." His lips twist.

Of course, he is, he's been celibate for as long as he's been a priest. And he's going to break his abstinence with me. I gulp, his scowl intensifies. He tilts his head and I realize he's waiting for me to speak. What...what was it I was going to say?

"Eve?" He prompts, "I said I'm clean."

"Uh, I... I am clean too." I blink rapidly. "Also, I am on the pill." I've actually been on the pill for years due to my irregular periods. Of course, it had crossed my mind that this meant if Ed made love to me, there wouldn't need to be any barriers between us. I confess though that I didn't think that it could actually happen. My breath catches, as the enormity of the situation sinks in. OMG, Edward's here and he's going to fuck me... Without a condom.

His shoulders flex and his biceps seem to bulge. "Good," he rumbles as he lowers himself between my knees.

Leaning over, he cups my cheek, then kisses me. He tilts his head, brushes his lips over mine again and again. He kisses me with such tenderness that my heart trembles and my toes curl. I flutter my eyelids down, wind my arms about his neck and open my mouth, my body, my heart to him.

"You ready?" he whispers, and his hot breath sears my mouth.

I nod, and he positions himself against my slit. The crown of his dick nudges my opening, and I draw in a breath. Oh, my god, it's happening. It's really, really happening. Edward is going to make love to me. I swallow, and he must sense my sudden panic because he brushes my mouth with his. "Shh, don't worry. I'll take care of you, Eve."

I gaze up at him. "You...you will?"

He nods. "Do you trust me?"

I pause.

"Do you?" He holds my gaze. "Do you, Eve?"

I swallow again, then nod.

"Say it then," he commands.

"I... I trust you, Edward."

A smile curves his lips. "Then promise me you won't believe what you'll hear about me."

"Hear about you?" I scowl. "What do you—?"

He pushes forward and breaches me.

"Oh!" Pain radiates out from my core and I gasp.

He freezes. "The hell?" His gaze seems to clear and his features twist. "Are you a virgin, Eve?"

29

Edward

She blinks and color smears her cheeks. Fuck me, it's not possible. She is young, but not that young. She is nineteen. Don't most women these days lose their virginity much earlier? Thanks to the confessions I've heard, I know that to be true. Not that I'd ever share it with anyone. Not even now that I am walking away from the priesthood. But still. Ava, a virgin?

"Answer me." I lower my voice to a hush, "Are you, a virgin, Eve?"

She nods. "I should have told you, but I didn't want to scare you away."

I squeeze my eyes shut. My dick lengthens further inside her, the thickness grazing against her soft, melting, warmth. My balls tighten and my thigh muscles spasm. She was a virgin. I was her first. Something fierce grips my chest. I shouldn't have come here... And yet, I wouldn't trade this for anything else in the world.

And I am going to leave her after taking her virginity? Goddamn it, this isn't fair. Not to her. Not to me. Of course, He had to orchestrate it this way, to make sure I would carry the memory of her sweetness, her warm, wet pussy that clamps around my dick, her virgin cunt that no one has had before. I am her first. And damn, if I am going to let anyone else take what is mine after this. I have to find a way to return. I will find a way to come back. No way, am I going to stay away from her after this. I lower my forehead to hers. "You should have," I agree, "and it would have ensured that I stayed far away from you."

"And now?" she whispers.

"Now, nothing will keep us apart, Eve."

"Then why are you not following through with your word?"

I lean back, balance my weight on my arms. "What do you mean?"

"Why are you not fucking me like you mean it?"

I can't stop the chuckle that rips up my throat.

This woman. The things she says.

"I don't want to hurt you." I lower my head and rub her nose with mine.

"It's your first time. I'd rather take it slow."

"I'd rather that you fuck me the way I want you to."

She tilts up her hips and I slide further inside her soaking wet channel. The heat, the warmth, the way her pussy clamps down on my dick, and it's like I am coming home. My heart stutters. My pulse pounds at my temples. The blood drains to my groin and my cock thickens inside of her. She gasps, tips up her chin. Those green eyes widen with surprise, with lust, with a tenderness that sparks off an answering heat in my chest. My belly knots. My dick throbs inside of her. I want to own her, to brand her, to possess her, to make her mine. To ensure she doesn't forget me during the time I am gone.

Does that make me selfish, God? Does that make me the kind of sinner whom You'll never forgive? Oh, wait. I don't need Your approval anymore. I can do whatever the fuck I want.

"Edward."

My name on her lips, the scent of her trapped in my skin, the feel of her legs wrapped around my waist. The heat of her pussy enveloping my dick. Fuck me, but I've died and gone to heaven. Or hell... And what a hell this is... One of my own making. One where I have never felt more, sensed more, heard more. One I can feel with every pore in my body. I touch my forehead to hers. "The things you make me do, Eve. You drive me out of my head, you know that?"

"That makes two of us." She reaches up, runs her fingers through my hair. "Please." She swallows. "Please make love to me."

My throat closes. My limbs tremble and something hot stabs at my chest. "I can do that, my darling Eve. I can give you this to remember me by."

"Remember you by?" She gulps. "Why do you keep saying tha—?"

I push forward, and my dick slips in further.

"Edward," she whines. "It's too much. I am too full, I—"

"Shh." I lower my head, brush my lips over hers. "You're beautiful, Eve, and it's not just your body I'm talking about. It's who you are. It's the

goodness in you. That purity of your soul that attracted me to you."

"I... It did?" She glances away.

"I saw you and knew there was something different about you. I knew you were going to be trouble, then."

"You did?"

I nod. "What I didn't count on was how much you'd occupy my thoughts."

"Same." Her lips tremble. "I couldn't get you out of my mind, from the moment I saw you."

Warmth fills my chest. This connection is all I have left. And I am going to have to walk away from it, too. Goddam it. Why did it have to turn out this way?

"What's wrong?" she whispers.

"Nothing." I pull out of her, then push forward, sliding in even further this time.

"Oh," she gasps again, then digs her heels into my back. She pushes up and into me and I grip her hip.

"Easy." I smirk. "I don't want you to be sore."

She snorts. "A bit late for that."

"So sassy." I scan her features. "You come across so much more grown up than your years, that it's easy to forget sometimes that you are only nineteen."

"Old soul." She half smiles. "It's why I am so independent; I've always been self-reliant."

"I wish..." *I could be there for you*, is what I want to say. Instead, I thrust my hips forward, ease myself inside her.

Her entire body jolts. "Oh." Her eyelids flutter. "Oh, Edward."

"When you say my name like that," I grit out, "it kills me, Eve. You know that?"

She peers up at me from under her eyelashes. "What else do I do to you?"

"You fishing for compliments?" I mock scowl.

She bites down on her lower lip. "You ready to give me compliments?"

"Always." I brace myself on my elbows, allow her to adjust to my size. Slowly, slowly... A bit late for that, though, considering how I had taken her arse earlier. "If I'd known..." I swallow, "If I'd realized that you were a virgin—"

"You wouldn't have come at all," she completes my statement.

I rake my gaze across her features and she blows out a breath.

"It's why I didn't tell you. There were enough barriers between us, as it was. Add to that, I was a virgin, and I knew you'd never give this," she gestures between us, "whatever this is between us, a chance."

"You should have told me, Eve."

"I don't regret it." She sets her jaw.

I purse my lips, not wanting to reveal what is on my mind. How can I? When she has given me something so unexpected. Something that affects me so deeply... But I cannot let that stop me. I need to put distance between myself and what I had done. I need time to work out what I want to do in life. It's not fair on her that I stay, not when I am so confused about who I am, and what I want for myself. If I am not clear about my path, how can I ever do justice to whatever is there between us?

It's why I need her to believe the worst of me... Fuck me, but I need her to forget that she ever met me. It is the only way I can leave, safe in the knowledge that I am not leaving her hanging in limbo.

No one knows that better than me. The days and nights when I had been taken and kept bound, not knowing if I was going to make it out of there alive... Not seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. That was the worst. I'd never want her to go through that.

I shouldn't have come here, but I did, and now I have to make sure that I complete what I started.

"That's good, I suppose." I smother the voice inside calling me a liar.

"It is?" She frowns.

"Virginity is so overrated anyway."

30

Ava

"What?" I stare up at him. "What the hell did you say?"

"You heard me." His lips twist in a smirk that is Edward, and yet, it isn't.

"What do you mean, Ed?"

"I mean..." He pulls out of me, then thrusts forward with just enough force that my entire body jolts. Tendrils of heat shudder out from the impact. My pussy clenches around his dick. Moisture pools in my core and my nipples tighten.

"Oh, god," I groan.

"That too." He stares at me with such burning intensity that my chest tightens. "But what I was going to say is that you had to give up your virginity some time. May as well have been to a man of God, right?"

Something hot stabs at my chest. My vision tunnels. Before I can stop myself, I snake out my palm, which connects with his cheek.

His face snaps back. The thud of the slap echoes around the room.

There's silence. Then thunder rumbles in the distance. Lightning flashes outside. The brightness illuminates his features for a second, highlighting the hollows under his cheekbones, the darkness that rings his eyes. For a second, he looks feral and wild...so unlike the quiet, if dominant, man I've come to know.

But do I? Do I know him at all?

I only met him a week ago and fell for him. I'd known there was more to him than the front he presented to the world, but at that time, I'd put it down

to the fact that behind his guise as a priest there was a passionate man, someone who felt so deeply; someone who, when he'd finally admit his feelings for me, would burn me up with his passion.

And right now, watching him, I know I was right all along. Behind that civilized veneer is a beast... someone who I have no clue about, someone I do not know at all.

"Edward—"

"Shut up," he barks.

I gape. "What are you—?"

"I told you to keep quiet, didn't I?" he growls as he pulls out of me, then plunges forward. His dick fills me, stretches me, and his balls slap against my inner thighs. The crown of his cock hits that secret spot deep inside of me and I cry out.

Above me, he tenses, then begins to move. He saws in and out of me, in and out. Each time he pushes in, his shaft hits that spot, again and again. Goosebumps pop on my skin. My nipples tighten into hard nubs of agony, my pussy clenches down on his shaft, and he groans. He tilts his hips, propels forward with enough force that the entire bed frame shakes. The headboard slams into the wall and vibrations of heat and lust shoot up my spine. "Omigod, I am going to—"

"Come for me," he snarls. "Come all over my cock."

His voice shoves me over the edge and I shatter. Moisture gushes out from between my legs and my body bucks. I throw my head back as the climax overwhelms me. When I open my eyes, he's above me, watching me, tracking my every reaction.

I blink at him, watch as the tenderness in his gaze slips away to be replaced by a coldness, a single-minded intent that sends a shiver of apprehension crawling down my spine.

"Edward—"

"Shh." He cups my breast, dragging his thumb across my sensitized nipple. "So, fucking beautiful." His voice is remote, his tone hard. Almost as hard as his shaft that's still inside of me.

"Ed—" I shiver as he hooks his arms behind my knees, shoves them up so they are bent on either side of my chest. I am splayed out, open and vulnerable. A sacrifice on the altar of this priest who seems to have shed the last vestiges of his humanity along with his robe. "Ed, please—"

He shakes his head and I subside. I draw in a shuddering breath, watch as

his nostrils flare. His shoulders bunch, then he pulls out of me, stays poised with his cock at the rim of my slit.

"You are going to come again with me."

"No," I beg. "Please, not yet."

"Yes," he insists.

"I can't."

"You will." He pistons forward, and I am so wet, so ready, that he slips inside easily, his thick shaft sheathed inside me, filling me again to the brim. I'll never be this...full again. This crammed with Edward.

"No." I surge forward, wind my arms around his neck, push up and fit my lips to his. I open my mouth over his, and maybe I take him by surprise, for he parts his lips. I thrust my tongue inside his mouth, suck from him, draw from that minty darkness, inhale that cut grass scent that is so very Edward.

His big body shudders, then he kisses me back. Of course, Edward takes control of the kiss. He angles his head, deepens the kiss. Pushes me back into the mattress, swipes his tongue across my teeth, drags it along the inner seam of my lower lip. He plunders my mouth like it's his last kiss, his last time that he's going to be this close and... *No, no, no. I can't let him go.* No matter that he's trying to make me hate him. As efforts go, it's pathetic. If he thinks he can simply say and do things in the hope that it's going to make me dislike him, he is so wrong. I cling to him as he pushes forward and thrusts into me. As he impales me over and over again. As he pistons his hips forward and rams into me with such force that both our bodies jolt with the action. As he hits that spot again deep inside me and the climax shudders out from the point of contact, races up my back, my neck.

He tears his mouth from mine and whispers, "Come."

And I burst into flames as he roars above me and empties himself inside of me.

He stays poised above me for a few seconds more, sharing my breath, his lips a hair's breadth away from mine, his eyes open and holding mine, as if he can't bear to shut them.

I hold his gaze, tracing the webwork of fine lines that radiate from the edges of his eyes. The thick hair that falls across his brow. The ridiculously long eyelashes that fan out above his cheeks. The patrician nose, the stern upper lip, that pouty lower lip, that I want to kiss. I draw my finger down the scar on his cheek, then tip my chin up. I raise my mouth to his and he moves away.

He releases his hold under my knees, pulls out of me, then rolls over the side of the bed. He turns to walk into the bathroom and I take in the marks on his back. What the—? Did someone whip him? Did he whip himself? And not too long ago, by the looks of it.

He comes back with a wet towel that he uses to wipe between my legs. He tosses the cloth aside, then turns to leave, when I jump up and throw myself at him. "Edward, don't go."

He stays silent.

"Please, just hold me. I need you, Ed. Please."

He draws in a breath and his shoulders shudder. Then he turns. He pushes me back onto the bed. He pulls the covers up over me. I am about to protest when he slips in next to me. He presses down on my shoulder indicating that I should turn over, and when I do, he winds his arm around my waist and pulls me to him. I weave my fingers with his where they rest on my belly. His hand is so big that his palm covers the expanse of my stomach. My back is pressed into his chest; his half-erect dick settles in the valley between my arse-cheeks. His thighs cradle the backs of mine; his knees lock into the grooves behind mine.

His warmth envelops me. His scent is all around me. And I know I should turn around to face him, throw my arms around him and hold him close and tell him not to leave me, because I know he's going to. As soon as I close my eyes, he'll be gone, and I'll never see him again. I half turn, when he slides his arm under my neck, curls that big forearm above my breasts. He tucks my head under his chin and orders, "Get some sleep."

I shouldn't. I should ask him what happened that had him come to me and simultaneously decide to leave me. I want to tell him I didn't tell him I was a virgin because I wanted him to be the first. My first. That there will never be anyone else. Instead, my eyelids flutter down and darkness drags me under, but I resist it.

Instead, I mumble, "Ed?"

"Hmm?"

"I saw the lash streaks on your back."

He stiffens, but doesn't say anything.

"Do you whip yourself, Ed?" I bite down on my lower lip. "Is that how you punish yourself? Is this how you deal with the aftermath of the incident?"

Tension radiates off of him and his big body seems to grow even more tense. Then he blows out a breath, "Sleep Ava, close your eyes."

I can't. I don't want to. If I do, you'll leave and I don't want that. I don't want you to leave.

"Ed," I swallow, "don't go, please."

"I have to, Eve."

"I can't live without you."

"You can."

"No," I whine, "I'll die if you go."

"You'll regret it if I stay."

"It's not true," I insist. "You know it isn't."

"So far, I've done what was best for me, but from now on, everything I do, I do for you."

"That sounds like a bad Bryan Adams song."

He chuckles, the sound without humor. "That's me, one bad pun after the other, baby."

"I love it when you call me baby." I yawn so widely that my jaw cracks.

"Sleep, baby." He presses his lips to the top of my head. This time sleep envelops me.

I come awake with a start, knowing something is wrong. I turn on my back to find I am alone in bed. Pale light filters in through the crack between the curtains. I spring up, throw off the cover, swing my legs over the bed, and race into the living room to find his backpack gone. I run back into the ensuite bathroom and his clothes are gone. Shit, shit shit. I knew I shouldn't have slept. Knew he'd leave. Knew he'd take off, and now I'll never see him again. *No, don't even go there. You're going to find him, wherever he is.*

I am not going to let him walk away from me like this. I round the bed, stare at the nightstand next to where he'd slept. Nothing. What had I been expecting? A note? What would he say? "Thank you for offering me your arse and your pussy and your mouth, but no thank you. It isn't enough."

What had last night been all about, anyway? He'd walked in, filled with purpose, then seemed to lose himself somewhere in between. He'd shown he could be caring and tender, only to do an about-face and be nasty to me, then seemed to turn passionate again. Shit. Something had been wrong. All those hidden messages in what he'd told me... I'd almost grasped them, then put them aside because I'd been too focused on what he'd been doing to my body. Oh, he'd made sure to distract me alright, and I'd fallen for it. If he had known I was a virgin, he wouldn't even have come to me, right? So, I should be grateful he had...but then he had left me. Bloody hell, what am I going to

do now?

The sound of a bike revving reaches me. What the—? Has he been outside all this time? Has he been waiting for me to go out to him? Have I missed my chance to stop him? I race to my closet, pull on my jeans and a T-shirt, then run into the living room. I grab my house keys from the table near the entrance, then shove open the front door, run down the steps, over the short garden path and onto the road, just in time to see him round the corner on the bike.

"Edward," I scream and give chase. My bare feet thud against the sidewalk. The impact of each step ricochets through me as I race forward. I reach the bend, turn, my feet stumble over a crack in the pavement. The ground comes up to meet me. I close my eyes, brace for impact, only to be hauled up and against something hard.

"Watch where you are going," a rough voice rumbles. The vibrations shiver over the planes of the chest against which I am pressed.

My heart leaps in my chest and my belly trembles. "Edward." My lips widen in a smile. "You didn't leave. Oh, Edward! I knew you wouldn't go." I tilt my head up. "I knew you wouldn't—" My gaze clashes with unfamiliar blue eyes. So cold, so chilling. Eyes so dead that, surely, the soul behind them belongs to someone who's seen too much, who has no humanity left in him. Eyes which are the exact opposite of Edward's smoldering golden ones.

"Y... you?" I stutter. "Who're you?"

"Baron." His jaw tics. "I'm Baron, and you're in my way."

*TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT, TURN THE PAGE TO READ
BILLIONAIRE'S PROMISE*

THE BILLIONAIRE'S PROMISE

1

Ava

"I'm Baron." He glares down at me. "And you're in my way."

Baron? I blink, why is that name so familiar? "Do I know you?" I scowl, "And what do you mean that I am in your way? I almost fell—"

"Until you didn't," he points out. "I saved you from hurting yourself."

"I thought you were someone else." I take in his harsh features, the dark blonde hair that falls over his forehead, the rich tan of his skin which hints at a life spent outdoors, the dark eyelashes that fringe a pair of brilliant blue eyes. The kind of eyes you could drown in, get lost in. So deep that they hide secrets. Secrets which I have had enough of. I no longer want to be drawn into something I can't fathom. I yank at his grasp and he releases me so suddenly that I stumble back. He grips my shoulder, holds me long enough to ensure that I've found my balance, then releases me.

"You're better off without him." His lips twist.

"How do you know that?" A chill runs up my spine and I wrap my arms around myself.

"Anyone who has you running barefoot on the sidewalk at," he glances at the watch on his thick wrist, "six in the morning, clearly doesn't deserve you."

"And I suppose you do?" I purse my lips together. What the hell is wrong with me? Why am I baiting him? Why does he rub me the wrong way, and after he'd saved me from a bad fall? I could have hurt myself... Not that I could be hurt any worse, after how Edward had turned and left.

Edward. I swing around and stare at the now deserted road. The houses on either side of the quiet London street mock me. The fog that envelops the street clears, and for a second, I think I see him in the distance. I take a step forward, trip over the same crack in the pavement. Damn it! I stumble once more and when thick fingers wrap themselves around my wrist, I try to shake them off. "Let go of me," I huff.

"Why should I when, clearly, you can't put one foot in front of the other without hurting yourself?"

"*You're* hurting me now." I glance down at where his massive palm is curled around my hand. Warm tanned skin, scarred knuckles that lead up to a veined forearm, peppered with hair. The sheer masculinity of this man is overwhelming. I glance up again into those blue eyes. The scowl that laces his features, the grooves etched into his forehead hinting at his permanent dark mood.

He releases me, and I turn back toward the image I'd seen, but the road is empty. The early morning sun's rays slant down, and the fog seems to disperse in front of my eyes.

"He's gone," I mumble. "I couldn't stop him." A tear squeezes out from the corner of my eye and I slap it away angrily.

"No one's worth crying over."

"Oh?" I swallow down the ball of emotion that clogs my throat, then pivot and brush past him. "And how would you know that?"

"Because I spent a lot of my early years crying over something that could never be righted."

"You?" I pause, then stare at him across my shoulder. I tilt my head up, all the way up, to take in his massive height. He's as tall as Edward... No, taller. And his shoulders are broader. His massive chest hints at hours spent in some kind of physical work. Maybe he trains a lot? Or he's in some kind of profession that demands he stay in top condition? What do I care anyway? Edward is gone. He hadn't left behind even a note. He'd shagged me—okay, so I'd asked him to shag me, fine, not denying that—and then he'd left.

He'd crept away while I was asleep, after promising we'd be together, and now I am never going to see him again. My stomach twists, my guts churn, and the bile rolls up my throat. Goddam it. I spring to the side, fall to my knees, and am violently sick. I retch so hard, tears run from my eyes again, my hair falls over my face, and then he's there. He piles my hair on top of my head, holds my forehead while I empty my guts out. Somebody, kill

me. This has to be the worst day of my life. Getting sick, and because that's not bad enough, in front of a stranger.

When I am done, he offers me his handkerchief. I glance up at him, and he jerks his chin, "Take it."

When I don't reach for it, he pats my mouth with the fabric. I snatch it from him, turn my face away and dab at my lips. I rise up, and he's with me. I turn and am about to hand the cloth back to him, then grimace and stuff it in the back pocket of my jeans. "I'll wash it and give it back to you."

I turn away, take a step forward and my legs seem to turn to jelly. Fuck me, what the hell is wrong with me? The ground comes up to meet me again, and this time, I am not surprised when he scoops me up.

"Put me down," I mumble.

He doesn't reply. Instead, he begins to walk back the way I'd come. "Which house?" he asks, his tone brusque.

"That one." I point toward the first house on our right.

He walks toward it, up the garden path, then takes the stairs two at a time, as if he isn't carrying me. Not that I weigh much, but hey, he could, at least, be out of breath or something. But there's not a hitch or any change in his breathing pattern to indicate that he is carrying the weight of another person. He stops at my front door.

I reach into my front pocket, pull out my keys. He shifts my weight, takes the key from me, unlocks the door, then walks through, before crossing the floor to the settee where he deposits me. He straightens then points a finger at me. "Stay there."

"Not that I was going anywhere, but seriously, what the hell is your problem?" I huff. "And I didn't give you permission to come into my house." I frown.

He arches an eyebrow, trains those piercing blue eyes on me, and I subside.

He places the keys on the coffee table then pivots and walks toward my kitchen as if he owns the place. Shit, the way his massive frame takes up space, he does, actually. His physical presence seems to absorb all of the oxygen in the space and my lungs burn.

Or maybe that's because of the growing realization that I've lost him. I've lost Edward. Had I ever had him? And he never told me that he isn't returning, but the sick sensation at the bottom of my stomach insists that he won't be anytime soon. My palms sweat and my chest hurts. I sit up and the

world swims around me again.

"I told you to stay put," he chides as he appears from the direction of the kitchen. He squats down in front of me, handing me a glass of water.

I take it and drink from it, upturn the glass, but he grips my wrist. "Not too much or it'll make you sick again."

I lower it, glance through my eyelashes at him. He takes the glass from me, places it on the table.

"How are you feeling now?" He searches my face.

"Better," I mutter. "I need to brush my teeth."

He peruses my features then nods, rises to his feet, and scoops me up with him.

"I can walk," I protest.

He simply stalks into the bedroom, putting me down at the entrance to the bath.

I step inside, turn to shut the door to find him standing, hands folded, a stillness about him that is at odds with just how alert his eyes are.

"You can go," I mumble, "I'll be fine."

He doesn't move. Not so much as blinks an eye.

"Whatever." I sigh, then close the door and lock it. Not that I don't trust him. Okay, I don't trust him. So what if he saved me from hurting myself, then hauled me back in here and made sure I was hydrated? I'd trusted Edward and what did he do...? He broke his vows for me. He fucked me. OMG, he took my virginity and then left me. He's not coming back, and once more, I've screwed up my life.

I had gone after the impossible. He'd been a priest, for hell's sake. Why did I have to fall for him? Why had I been so attracted to him that I couldn't conceivably want anyone else but him? Of course. Not only had I spoiled my career by leaving behind the safety of a degree and a possible nine-to-five job, but then I also had to go after a completely unsuitable man. Typical Eve.

Eve. Now I'm calling myself Eve? My heart seems to shatter. I crumple to the floor, hide my face in my hands and begin to weep. Large sobs that hurt my chest, fill my throat, and overflow until I am sure I am going to shatter into a million pieces, and every one of them would still cry, *Edward. Get over the dramarama, bitch.* Clearly, I've been reading too many romance novels if I am becoming so over-the-top sentimental. But damn him, he broke my heart.

In such a short period of time, he'd crawled under my skin, and imprinted

himself into my soul in a way... A way that only a man of God could have. Someone who was in service of a higher purpose than himself. Shit, what am I thinking? Why am I making excuses for him, when all he's done since I met him is give me second place in his life? He may have broken his vows for me, but then he left, and I simply cannot fathom why. Hell, maybe it wasn't even for me that he broke his vows. I may not know what happened, but clearly, there was something bothering him when he got here.

More tears well up and my pulse thuds at my temples. A banging sound fills my head and I am sure it is my heart pounding in my ears, but then a male voice calls behind me, "Open up, or I swear, I am going to break down this door."

"Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit." I scramble up, grab hold of a hand towel and wipe my face with it.

The banging increases in urgency, then the sound of a shoulder crashing against the bathroom door reaches me.

"Stop," I yelp as I rush toward it. The last thing I need is for the door to be broken down. The bloody landlord would definitely take it out of my deposit. I reach the doorway, yank it open and come face to face with Mr. Grumpy Pants himself.

"What's your problem?" I snap.

"You," he looks me up and down, "you're my problem."

"Jesus." I gape at him. "You insult me in my own home? If you hadn't helped me earlier—which, by the way, wasn't required. I can take care of myself, but you did and I am grateful for it, but now you can leave."

"No."

"What?"

"I'm not going anywhere," he informs me. "Not until you have a shower and get a good breakfast. You need it after your crying jag."

"Crying jag." I flush. Of course, he heard me weeping my stupid heart out. Why the hell does he care how I feel? Why is he so concerned about me? "Who the hell are you anyway?" I scowl. "You're seriously giving me the creeps, the way you've barged into my life."

"And you are getting antsy for no reason." He holds up his arms. "You can pat me down if you want. You'll see I'm not dangerous."

Dangerous? He doesn't need weapons to be dangerous.

I look him up and down. "No, thank you, and by the way, I am taken."

"Taken?"

I nod. "My uh...man... He just left earlier."

"That's who you were chasing after?"

"Only because he forgot his phone," I lie.

"He forgot his phone..." he says slowly.

"Y...yeah." I swallow.

"So, you were chasing after him, barefooted?"

I nod.

"So, where's his phone?"

"None of your business." I scowl. "Will you please step away now so I can shower?"

"Not stopping you."

Anger twists my guts and it feels good. Good to be able to focus on something else, other than that jerk-hole who walked out of my life. How dare he play with me like this? How dare he stalk in here, claim me, imprint himself all over me, then walk out without looking back once? How dare he?

I fist my hands at my sides, then step back and slam the door shut. I lock it again, march over to the shower and turn it on. I shed my clothes, step under the hot water and allow it to flow over me. A few hours ago, he'd stood here as I had sucked him off. Hell. Hell. Hell. No need to figure out if I will be going to hell for having teased the Father into breaking his vows... Clearly, I am already there.

Is this my punishment from the other One in our relationship? The One Above. The Almighty who, no doubt, is displeased with me for having tempted one of His own to sin. Gah, stop that. Why are you questioning things as if the Father's influence has rubbed off on you? Not long ago, he'd been here rubbing off on me. Ugh. Stop that. He's gone, remember?

He left you.

Walked out without a backward glance. So why are you still so...so... hung up on him?

I raise my head toward the spray, let the hot water wash away the tears. I stand under the pelting drops until my head clears somewhat. Then switch it off and dry myself. I wrap the towel around myself, secure it and walk into the bedroom. It's empty. Of course, it would be. Why had I thought otherwise? I walk over to my closet, pull on my underclothes, a pair of leggings and a sweatshirt.

I need to stop holding onto hope that he'll return to me. There's no reason to think he will. His actions had all been intended to hurt. Clearly, he wants

me to forget about him. Except, he took my virginity, something I'll never forget. To be fair, I hadn't mentioned to him that I was a virgin. Thank God for that. I got to spend some time with him. *Yeah, and he broke your heart too, how about that, hmm?*

It's only your heart... It will mend... Unlike whatever he is facing. It has to be something catastrophic that propelled Edward to leave behind the priesthood and take off. Something I intend to get to the bottom of.

I grab a hair tie, pile my hair on top of my head, then walk out of the bedroom, across the living room toward the kitchen.

The scent of toast and coffee reaches me. My stomach growls. I step inside the kitchen, pause. His back is to me and his broad shoulders are framed against the first rays of the sun that pour in. They halo him, highlight him, make him seem larger than life. A behemoth. Someone who came into my life, for what? To save me? From Edward? From myself? A shiver runs down my spine. I shake my head, walk over to the coffee pot to pour myself a cup. He turns to me then. "Sit." He jerks his head toward the table. "I'll pour it for you."

"But—"

"Go on," he says, his voice impatient. "This will go much faster if you cooperate."

I blink. "Excuse me?"

"I mean," he schools his features into an expression of patience, "sit down, please."

I hesitate. That *please*? It didn't sound like he meant it. In fact, it sounded as if he'd said it with much reluctance. He raises an eyebrow, turns his gaze to the table then back at me.

Fine, be like that. I slap the mug back on the kitchen counter, stomp over to the table and seat myself. I play with the ends of my hair, pull off the band and place it on the table. Then drum my fingers on the table. He turns, surveys my restless fingers, and I cease the movement instantly. Goosebumps flare on my skin. What is it about his glare that makes me want to rush to obey him?

He pours me a cup of coffee, brings it over, along with a stack of pancakes on a plate. On a second plate he's piled hash browns, baked beans and toast, which he places between us.

I blink down at the two plates, then up at him. "Uh, who is all this for?"

"You." He turns to grab his own plate, then sits opposite me. "I

substituted flaxseeds for the eggs for the pancakes," he remarks.

I glance at him. "You did?"

He nods.

"How do you know that I am vegetarian?"

"Because you don't keep any meat or fish or eggs at home?"

Right. "I do eat milk and eggs," I mutter. "Just happen to be out of them..." I shuffle my feet, "the eggs, I mean." Gah, shut up, what's wrong with me? Why do I tend to babble in his presence? Why does he make me nervous?

He picks up his fork and knife, then eyes me across the table. "You're not eating," he admonishes.

"Neither are you."

His lips quirk, then he glances down and digs into his food.

I follow his lead, manage to make my way through a quarter of the pancakes, before I give up and lean back. I watch him demolish the food on his plate like he hasn't eaten in years.

When he glances up, I push my half-filled plate toward him.

He scowls at it. "You haven't eaten nearly enough."

"It's enough," I insist.

"It's enough when I say it is."

I blink at him, "Seriously, you didn't just say that."

"What's wrong with what I said?"

"Are you trying to be funny or something?"

"I've never been more serious." He leans forward, "You need your energy; you are wasting away."

I scoff. "I wouldn't call this," I point at myself, "wasting away."

"You're right."

"I am?"

He nods. "You have decent curves. I've seen better, of course, but you'll do."

I gape at him. "You...you're...something, you know that?"

"I often have that effect on women."

I jump to my feet. "Out. Get out."

He meets my gaze with a cool glance. "You're overreacting."

"And you're not welcome here anymore."

"I'm afraid that's not your call to make."

"What?" I frown. "This is my apartment and you are seated at my table

—"

"In front of a breakfast I cooked for you."

"A breakfast you can shove up your—"

He tilts his head, and there's just enough warning in that single glance for me to press my lips together. Why the hell had I allowed him, a complete stranger, into my home? And yet, why does that jut of his jaw, the spark of anger in his eyes, feel so...right?

No, no, no. This can't be happening. I just had one man walk out on me a few hours ago, and already, I am attracted to another? Talk about being a slut. Only I'm not one. Hell, I'd never wanted to sleep with anyone else before Edward. And now, suddenly, here's another man, someone to whom I am attracted just as much? With as much intensity as Ed... It's the same... Yet different, though. With Ed...the pull had been sharp, incisive, almost clinical in the precision with which my heart had gravitated toward him. Probably because once I'd realized that he was a priest, every single interaction with him had felt wrong...but with Baron...there's a freedom. A need... An overwhelming pull to throw myself at him, throw myself at his mercy, and beg him to do anything he wants with me. Maybe the need Edward ignited opened up a hotbed of something... Some nameless emotion, some twisting sensation that I had hidden away for too long. And now it's out there, and I feel like I am exposed and aching and throbbing and crying out for attention.

My chest tightens. My scalp tingles. My skin suddenly feels too tight for my body. I take a breath and my lungs burn. My knees knock together and I sit down in the chair so suddenly that the legs creak.

"You okay?" His gaze intensifies as he peruses my features and I look away.

Heat flushes my skin and my toes curl. My own thoughts have aroused me in a way that I never would have expected. My thighs clench and my center throbs. The soreness in my backside and between my legs pulses and writhes. Shit, what's wrong with me? I place my elbows on the table, bury my face in my hands.

I sense him move then. Hear his chair scrape as he pushes it back. The pad of his footsteps, the sound of a glass being filled with water. His footsteps approach, then I hear the thunk of the glass hitting the table in front of me.

"Drink," he commands.

I stiffen. What the hell is his problem?

"Do it," he insists.

I lower my hands and scowl at him.

He simply folds his arms across his chest and glares at me.

Jerk.

I glower back, and his gaze simply intensifies. Hot, burning, overwhelming. The flesh between my legs throbs. Heat flushes my cheeks. I glance away, take a sip. And does the man move away? Of course, not. He waits until I tilt the glass and drink half its contents.

Satisfied, he sits down, pushes my untouched coffee mug toward me.

I reach for it, take a sip. The bitter taste of the java blooms on my palate. I sigh out my appreciation, take another sip. Dark, rich notes of chocolate, laced with a sweeter taste of honey, and in between, the characteristic bitterness of coffee flickers across my tongue. "It's good." I blink up at him. "Which coffee grinds did you use?"

"The one you had in your coffee canister?"

"Oh." I glance down at the cup, take another sip. "You sure?"

"Yeah."

There's an amused edge to his tone. I glance up to find his lips twitch.

"No need to make a national joke out of my question," I mutter. "It's simply that the coffee tastes so much better than when I make it."

"It happens." He raises his shoulders. "When someone else cooks the same dish you do, they have a different touch, a unique way of assembling the ingredients, which will, therefore, be perceived differently by your taste receptors."

"Oh." I blink. "Are you a chef?"

His features close. "No."

He gets up, takes both our plates and the used cutlery over to the sink and begins to wash up.

"I can do—"

He glares at me over his shoulder, and I shut up. Of course, Mr. Growly Pants will do what he wants, when he wants. He finishes the washing up—returns for my now empty coffee cup—which he takes to the sink along with his, and washes that up too. He finishes drying them, puts them away—in the correct places on the shelves, then wipes the counter clean.

"Make yourself at home," I bite out. "In fact, why don't you move in, while you're at it?"

He pauses, then turns to me. "Not yet."

My jaw drops. "What do you mean, not yet? I don't know you at all. You're a complete stranger and—"

"My point exactly." He folds his arms across his impressive chest and his T-shirt stretches across those beautifully sculpted pecs. His biceps bulge, drawing my attention to his thick veiny forearms.

My throat dries. My tongue seems to be stuck to the roof of my mouth. All the moisture in my body has drained to that single pulsing point between my legs. I gulp. "What..." I clear my throat, "What are you trying to say?"

"That you are too innocent."

I laugh, "Trust me, if you knew what I've been up to, you wouldn't say that."

His gaze narrows and color smears his cheeks. He opens his mouth, then closes it again. "What you have done or not done in the past is none of my business."

"Oh?"

He jerks his chin. "I am more concerned with the now, the present. The fact that you let me, a complete stranger, into your flat."

"You know what?" I scowl at him. "It's time you left."

"Oh, believe me, I am. I have no intention of staying, now that I know you are safe."

"The only threat here is from you."

"As I was saying..." he enunciates each word slowly, "you...allowed...me—someone you don't know— into your flat."

"You helped me earlier," I point out.

"I could have been simply trying to gain your trust."

"Is that what you were trying to do?"

"No." He blows out a breath. "I was trying to stop you from hurting yourself."

"So, you're not a stranger anymore."

"I was when you met me."

"Everyone's a stranger when you first meet them!" I throw up my hands. "You caught me at a weak moment, okay? And this back and forth is making my head spin. What's your point anyway?"

"That you shouldn't let anyone you don't know inside your home."

And sometimes, you shouldn't let even those you think do you know, because actually you don't...you don't know them at all. Damn you, Edward. I squeeze my eyes shut. "You are right. I'll be more careful next time."

"Good."

I open my eyelids to find him walking out of the kitchen. I reach for my hair band, find it's gone. Huh? I could swear I placed it on the table earlier. I shake my head, then rise to my feet and follow him. He snatches up the jacket he'd abandoned at some point on the arm of the couch; shrugs into it, then walks to the front door, opens it.

"Wait," I burst out. He pauses, turns to me. Waits as I try to figure out exactly what it is I want to tell him. What do I want from him? Why do I want anything from him? He's a stranger, right? So why doesn't he feel that way? Why do I feel like I already know him at some level? A wave of tiredness washes over me. I curl my fingers around the frame of the kitchen doorway where I am poised. "My name is Ava, Ava Erikson."

"I know."

"You do?"

He nods, then points to where I've placed my mail on the table near the doorway.

"Right."

He turns away, when I stop him again. "Wait." I call out to him and he stops, "Will I see you again?" I ask.

He hesitates then glances at me over his shoulder. "Do you want to see me again, Ava?"

2

Baron

She hesitates, glances away.

"Do you?" I persist. "Do you want us to meet again?" *What the hell am I doing here?* I'd been outside to ensure that she was fine. That she got back home safely. That she'd be okay...that I'd watch over her. That's what I had promised Edward when he'd called me earlier this morning.

It just so happened that it had coincided with one of my rare visits to London. I'd hauled ass from across town to ensure I was there before he left. Only I had missed him. By the time I'd arrived, asshole had taken off already. I'd tried calling him and had gotten the message that his phone was disconnected. Not surprising. It's what I'd have done if I wanted to disappear, and clearly, I have a lot of experience in that. What had packed a punch was the woman who had chased after him, only to trip and almost fall.

And I couldn't let that happen. Why had I promised to look out for her, when all these years I had wanted nothing to do with him?

Your guess is as good as mine.

Perhaps it's the fact that he picked up the phone and called me? Something I had simply not expected, not after all these years, not after how we'd fallen out. How we'd sworn never to have anything to do with each other. And yet, in his time of crisis, when he needs someone he can trust, he eschews the rest of the Seven and reaches out to me.

He could have done so at any time, considering he's the only one who's had my phone number all along, but he'd desisted. Of course, for Edward, it

wouldn't have mattered if I had been in the same city. He would have never reached out to me.

And now he'd called me... So, it had to have been a life and death situation. I could have refused him, of course. Could have asked him to approach one of the others...but...I hadn't. Perhaps it's time for me to return and face the shit-show of life that I left behind? A life on the fringes of which I had stayed for the past few months. None of them—not even Edward—had known that, of course.

I'd returned to town to watch my best friends getting married, one after the other. From a distance, of course, I'd seen them find the happiness they deserve. I don't begrudge them that. They need every bit of brightness that their women bring to their lives. As Ava had, no doubt, brought to Edward's. Something he, clearly, hadn't been aware of.

And you know that's not true. The Edward I'd once known had been hell-bent on depriving himself of even the smallest pleasure life had afforded him. It's why he'd turned to the seminary. Oh, of course, he'd claimed he'd felt the calling, and while I don't dispute that... I am pretty sure that's not the only reason he'd decided to become a priest. It would have been the discipline, the extreme deprivation that the life demanded that would have attracted him to it.

And then when he'd found something...or someone, who had broken through that self-imposed exile of his, he'd decided to flee. Typical. And I understand why he did it. After all, I did it too.

I tilt my head, train my gaze on the woman who's responsible for bringing me back to my own life again. A woman with auburn hair, so similar to the one who occupies my mind. But Ava is not her. She can't be the girl I glimpsed twice in the past fourteen years. The first time I'd seen her, she'd been but a little girl and the second time, while she had been grown up, I had only glimpsed her from a distance. Yet there had been something about her that had affected me so much both times. No, Ava can't be her. It would be too much of a coincidence for that to happen. Also, she belongs to Edward, remember?

"Well, Ava?" I demand. "You haven't answered my question yet."

She blows out a breath, then draws herself up to her full height. "Yes," she snaps. "Yes, I want to see you again."

The breath I'd not been aware of holding hisses out of me. Christ, had I been that on edge? Why does it matter to me whether or not she sees me

again? I'd returned only as a favor to Edward, to make sure that this woman—his woman—would be safe while he's off killing his devils or putting the demons in his head to rest, or whatever it is that ex-priests who are ex-friends do.

Typical Edward. When the going gets rough, he gets going. Much as I had done. When guilt had gotten too much to bear, I had raced out of there. I hadn't been able to put enough space between myself and the scene of my wrongdoing. And now, I am back...to face...my life. The remnants of it, that is. My friends, if they'll have me back.

And what I had been forced to do during the incident? That's gone. Over. In the past. Never to be spoken of again. Just as I'll make sure never to overstep the line with this woman. She is Edward's... All I am going to do is make sure that she stays safe... That I protect her from hurting herself, if necessary. Yep, I can do that. For Edward. For what I owe him. For the wedge I had driven between us, and which I have no intention of fixing, not for as long as I live. In fact, the reason I am back is because... Edward isn't here. It makes it so much simpler. Enough time to make amends, to make up for turning my back on my friends. I'll make the most of the time he is away to help his woman too. It's the least I can do for him.

"Good." I nod at her. "I'll be in touch." I shrug on my coat and walk to the door, then turn to level a glance at her over my shoulder. "Lock the door after me; don't open it for anyone you don't know."

She huffs, "Oh, please, I'll be fine."

"When it comes to your safety, I will not compromise. Do you understand?"

She blinks.

"Do you?"

"Y...yes."

"Good." I step outside, close the door after myself, and wait until the sound of the latch being snapped into place reaches me. Only then, do I turn and march down the steps. I stalk up the sidewalk to where I'd parked my SUV, get inside the car, then toy with the hair tie I had pilfered.

Why the hell did I do that? Why had I felt compelled to pick it up, like some teenaged boy in need of a memento from his beloved? Shit, it had been a moment of weakness, no doubt about it.

I stare at the purple-colored band, then bring it to my nose and sniff it. The scent of jasmine and luscious raspberries fills my senses. I am instantly

hard. Hell! This instant response to her... It's disconcerting, to say the least. If I am not careful, I am going to become obsessed with her... Correction, I already am obsessed with her. It's why I am sitting here, outside her home, in my vehicle, thinking about her scent, the softness of her skin, those delectable, perfect curves of her body. How right she'd felt in my arms when I had carried her inside...

What in the bloody hell is wrong with me? I returned to do Edward a favor, remember? Best I not lose sight of that. I slide the hairband into my pocket, then ease onto the quiet street. By the time I reach my destination on the outskirts of the city, the sun is up in the sky.

I park my vehicle, peer through the windshield at the deserted warehouse. It's where I'd last seen the rest of the Seven. At the Kings of the Alley showdown when I'd taken on the guy fielded by the Bratva and not been able to defeat him. I'd had to pull out and Arpad had taken my place. And that's when Edward and I had fought—for the last time. And I had walked out. My fingers tighten around the wheel.

Of course, they would want to meet me here. The tossers aren't going to go easy on me. Not that I blame them. If it were me, I'd do the same. Bet they've spent long hours thinking up their revenge. Bet they'll take their time exacting it, too. It's the only reason I am hesitating to go in. Not because I want to delay the inevitable. Not because I've been dreading this reunion for as long as I've been gone. Only consolation, Edward isn't here. Which makes it both good and bad. If he were here, he'd deflect the attention from me, do his best to soothe out the tensions. Or maybe not. Perhaps he'd be the first to exact his vengeance. After all, I had wronged him... Almost as much as our kidnappers had. Shit! I slam my fist into the wheel, hit the button for the horn instead, which blares. The noise echoes through the empty parking lot, ricochets through my mind, careening me straight into an image from my past.

Noise, so much noise, loud noise that didn't stop. Day and night, and the next day again. On and on until I couldn't hear myself think or breathe or feel parts of my body that had seized up, grown numb. My lungs hurt, my heart pounded in my chest, and I couldn't hold back the saliva that drooled from my lips. They had found me wounded, separated from my battalion and had taken me prisoner. They had patched me up... But that was only so they could keep me alive long enough to question me. Which had been worse? Kidnapped at twelve during the incident and held for a month, or taken as

POW at twenty-seven and being interrogated?

They had subjected me to the noise, the clanking, the thrash of heavy metal, the hard sounds that had reverberated through my skull, that stopped me from sleeping, from breathing... From living. *Oh, God, I want to die. Kill me, already. Now, right now.* I'd raised my eyes heavenward, and pleaded with whichever higher power was there watching over me. Please take me away, take me out of this pain, this misery. Put an end to this helplessness that grips me, this powerlessness that incapacitates me, this vulnerability that shrouds me, that wraps around my chest, my throat, that squeezes down so I can't breathe anymore. Can't breathe. *Breathe.*

In.

Out.

In.

I force myself to draw in the oxygen. Force my lungs to inflate. Deflate. Again. Focus on the small things. The smoothness of the steering wheel under my fingers. The scent of leather. The fabric of my T-shirt against my skin. The feel of my toes inside my boots. Breathe in again. Another breath. A third. Will my heartbeat to slow. My pulse rate to drop to normal. Then I straighten, open my eyes, wipe the sweat from my face. I turn toward the car door, only to have it wrenched open. I am hauled out of the SUV, and pushed to the ground. The impact of the crash reverberates through my body. I glance up to find my assailant standing over me. The sun slants in my eyes and I can't see his face. Then he bends to grab my collar again and a pair of familiar eyes fill my line of sight.

"You?"

3

Baron

"Get up," Saint growls.

I push myself up to a standing position. "I don't want to fight you."

"But I do." He lunges forward and his fist connects with my nose. Pain slices through my head. Sparks of red and white explode behind my eyes. I stumble back, straighten, sense him move and duck, out of instinct.

His fist whooshes by my face. The breeze from it lifts the hair from my forehead. He follows that up with another hit, this time to my side. Pain blooms up my spine. "Fuck."

He lunges forward, catches me in the stomach. The breath whooshes out of me. I double over, and he brings his fist up to connect with my chin. My head snaps back. Darkness overwhelms me.

Something wet licks my face, my nose, my mouth. I pry my eyes open to find a pair of doggy eyes staring down at me.

"Hey, Max, here boy," a voice calls... One I recognize as Sinclair's. The dog whines, glances from his master then back. He pushes his nose into my shoulder as if to apologize, then turns and darts off.

I groan, throw my arm over my face, and the movement sends a shudder of pain racing up my spine. Fucking hell. I draw in a breath and my throat burns. My ribs ache. My face feels like I've connected with a wall... Or Saint, in this case. Fucking Saint. I draw in a breath, and my ribs protest. My stomach lurches and I pant and stay still, hoping, praying, the sickness in my stomach will subside. I must have dozed off for a few seconds, maybe, when

a touch to my shoulder has me jackknifing up to sitting position. Instantly, my head throbs, my chin hurts, and my stomach twists in on itself. I gasp, lower my head. Take in a breath and another.

"Easy now." A man's voice—another one I recognize—reaches me. "You're a little banged up."

"No shit." I tip up my chin and scowl at the familiar features of my friend. I clear my throat. "Hey, Doc. How's it going?"

He shrugs. "I guess we'll find out, once we work out the reasons behind why you left the way you did—"

"Not to mention, finding out why you're back," a low voice growls behind me.

I blow out a breath, turn to Saint, then wince when a throbbing slices through my head. "I know you're angry—"

"Angry?" he snaps. "You think I'm *angry*—?" His voice rises in tandem to the pain that thud-thud-thuds against my brain.

"From where I am, that's a calculated guess, I'd say." I raise my hand to shield my face from the sunlight that pours down on me through the windows high up in the ceiling. I move to the side, take in the features of my friends.

Saint stands with his hands bunched at his sides. Next to him, Damian's arms are folded across his chest. On his other side, Sinclair stands, his body relaxed. Next to him, Max whines and Sinclair bends to scratch behind his ear. He straightens, fixes me with an unblinking glare.

Weston walks around me to join the rest of the men. I recognize it for what it is. A show of unity. Four against one. Arpad's missing, probably because he's on his honeymoon. Yeah, I've kept tabs on my friends. I may have left London and my friends behind, but they never left me.

I push myself to standing and my side screams in protest. My face feels numb, my ribs twinge, and I bite down the groan that works its way up my throat.

"I take it you are not happy to see me?"

My voice echoes around the empty warehouse.

"Whose choice was it to meet here, anyway?" I glance at Sinner. "Can't be you, Sinner. You never did have a flair for the dramatic. As for you, Saint?" I train my gaze on him, "You're too hotheaded. When you're that angry, you can't think straight."

Saint growls, takes a step forward, but Damian stops him. "Easy there, he's baiting you."

"It could have been you, Damian." I twist my lips. "You were the dreamer amongst us. You aimed high—congratulations on the success of your last single, by the way. It hit me, bro; it broke me. It's the reason I decided to come back."

Damian stiffens, seems like he's about to say something, then stops himself.

"I heard the song and knew something had shifted amongst you guys. To see each of you find the loves of your lives... It made me believe again."

Weston shifts his weight from foot to foot. I turn my attention to him. "You did good, Doc. Not only did you qualify, you became a heart surgeon. Of all of us, you were always the most level-headed. You kept your eyes focused on the goal, the big picture. It's not easy to have achieved what you have... Not after what happened to us."

The silence intensifies. The men stiffen. I glance between them, then rub the back of my neck. "Yeah, took only ten minutes of us meeting for one of us to bring up the incident huh?" I say wryly. "Not that I haven't tried to forget it, but something like that... Well, the more I bury it, the more it's right in front of me, haunting me at every turn, you get me?"

The men meet my gaze. The expression on their features range from empathy to disbelief to anger.

"Look," I take a step forward, "I understand how it must seem from where you are, but trust me when I say that it was for the best. If I had stayed on, it would have only screwed things further. It was best that I took off the way I did."

Anger pulses from the group. Saint's knuckles are white tipped, Damian and Weston stiffen. The only person who seems unaffected is Sinner. Which only means that he is livid. Very livid. The anger pulsing behind that cool expression is probably far more lethal than the obvious rage evident on Saint's face. Shit. I have to find a way to defuse this situation, before one of us does something that we'll regret. And regret, we would. The five of them, including Arpad, may hate me now, but we need each other. Our strange, twisted relationship is the only thing that's real in the post-incident life that we lead.

"Edward," I swallow, "he took off this morning."

All four of them seem to freeze for a second, then Sinner jerks his chin. "We know."

"You do?" I turn to him, "How—"

"You didn't think we'd allow anything to happen to one of us without the rest of us being aware?"

"You had eyes on him?" I nod. "Good, then you were able to track where he went?"

"No."

"No?" I snap. "What do you mean no? We need to find him before he does something he'll regret. We need to make sure he's safe—"

"The only person he needs to be guarded from is you, and considering you are here and he isn't..." Sinner raises his shoulder.

"He wasn't in his right mind when he called me. He..." I rub the back of my neck. "He hurt the last man who walked into confession."

"That's when he called you," Sinner says slowly, "so you could take care of it?"

I nod. "When I reached the church, he was still breathing. I hauled him out of there, and took him to Weston." I nod in his direction.

"You could have mentioned something of what happened then," Weston mutters. "It's a good thing I'd never turn away any of you Seven, no matter how suspicious the circumstances."

"And I thank you for that." I tilt my head.

"Still doesn't answer who this man is, or why Edward lost his temper with him and almost killed him?" Sinner frowns at me. "At least, I am assuming that's what happened."

"Exactly." I rub the back of my neck. "From what Edward told me, the man walked in to confess. Edward decided to help him, even though it was after church hours."

"Typical Edward," Damian mutters, "always going out of his way to help others."

"Which makes it all the more intriguing as to what caused him to lose his shit," Weston murmurs.

"Only one reason he'd resort to violence," Sinclair states. He turns to take in the expressions on the faces of his friends. "You guys thinking what I am?"

"That it had to do with the incident?" Weston offers.

"It did," I confirm.

Sinclair's shoulders stiffen. A jolt of anger runs through the men. Sinclair turns to me, "We need to question the man."

"I will question the man—"

"What the fuck—!?" Saint explodes, and I hold up my hand.

"—when he regains consciousness. He's currently still out."

"Where have you kept him?" Sinclair's voice hardens. "Where are you hiding the motherfucker?" His gaze ping-pongs between Weston and me.

"I'm not hiding him. I simply took him to a safehouse where Weston is treating him."

All eyes turn to Weston who nods, "I am. Asshole's still unconscious but his condition is stable."

Sinclair turns to me, "And when he's awake I get to question him." He narrows his gaze, "I need to be there when the bastard opens his eyes."

"And you will." I widen my stance. "You'll be there watching with the rest of them, while I interrogate."

"Why you motherfucker—" Saint steps forward.

Sinclair places a hand on his shoulder. "Easy, Caldwell."

Saint makes a threatening voice low in his throat. "When I get my hands on you, I am going to—"

"Yeah," I blow out a breath, "still the same Saint. More anger than common sense. How you managed to find a woman crazy enough to put up with your shit, I'll never know. I—"

Saint lunges forward. Both Sinclair and Damian grab him and hold him back.

"Stop it, you two," Sinclair orders. He turns on me, "Apologize to him."

I glower at Saint. "Why should I?"

"Because what you said was unwarranted. We don't insult each other's families, or have you forgotten that in the time you were away?"

I wince. Then squeeze the bridge of my nose. "You're right," I mutter before turning my attention to Saint. "I'm sorry, that was out of line."

"What's out of line, is you deciding to drop back into our lives, and thinking that you can pick up where you left off," he snarls.

"That's not why I returned."

"No, you returned because Edward needed your help, though why he reached out to you, of all people, I don't understand."

"I had the necessary skills to take care of it." I draw myself up to my full height. "And maybe...he trusted me more?"

"Keep telling yourself that." Saint bunches his fingers at his sides, "Clearly, all those years you spent away haven't changed your capacity to delude yourself."

"Is that what you think?"

"Not just me," he retorts.

I glance around at the faces of my once friends, then stiffen. Their expressions are simply variants of the anger I see on Saint's.

"It wasn't just about the man," I finally say. "If it were, he could have just asked Weston."

Sinclair stiffens. "What other help could he have asked from you?"

I meet his gaze, fold my arms across my chest and wait. Wait.

Sinclair's forehead clears. "I see." He nods. "How interesting."

"What?" Saint whips his head around. "What the devil do you mean?"

Sinclair jerks his head toward me, "The Father didn't trust any of us enough for this, apparently."

"What bullshit," Damian bursts out. "Any one of us would have put our life on the line for Edward."

"Evidently, it's something he values more than his life. Who better than his once best friend to take care of that, hmm?"

"Values more than his life?" Saint glowers at me. "What could he have valued more—?"

Sinclair unwinds his body long enough to clap his hand on the back of Saint's head.

"Ow." Saint snaps his head around "What the fuck, Sin— ah!" He blinks. "You mean—"

Sinclair nods. "Yes, dipshit. Exactly."

"Hmm." Saint turns and eyes me with a speculative gaze. "I see."

"What?" Weston glances between us. "The hell am I missing now?"

"Catch up, Doc," Saint drawls. "You're not normally this slow. Being married, plainly, has softened you too much around the edges."

"Speak for yourself," Weston says mildly. "I am guessing this is about a woman?" He tilts his head.

"Which woman?" Damian blinks, looks between us. "What the hell you guys talking about?"

"Ava," Sinclair clarifies. "Isla's friend, who was there at Arpad's wedding."

"She was?" His forehead wrinkles. "Guess I'll have to take your word for it. I might have been a little preoccupied with my new wife."

"You're forgiven, man." Saint smirks. "Pussy-whipped, as you are."

"And you aren't?" Damian chuckles.

I glance between them, realizing just how much I've missed this easy

banter. It would be so easy to slip into that old routine with them. To be part of the Seven once more. Shit, I really have missed it, missed them...missed the camaraderie. Missed this sensation that there are people who care for me, who may hate me sometimes, but who care enough about me, to fight with me. People who have my back.

Saint holds up his hands, "Hey, I'll be the first to concede, having Victoria in my life has changed everything. Speaking of," he glances at his watch, "I need to get going, or I'll be late for the appointment with the midwife."

"Midwife." I stare at him. "You're going to see the midwife?"

"With Victoria, yes." He scowls at me. "It's known to happen."

"It is?" I stare at him.

"We're pregnant, you tosser."

"We..." I open and shut my mouth. "Did you say *we're* pregnant?"

"So?" Color smears his cheeks. He glowers back at me. "You have a point you're trying to make here?" He snaps, then straightens. "Why the fuck am I still talking to this guy, huh?" He glances around at Sinner. "What have we decided to do with him, anyway?"

"Do with me?" I scowl, "You guys aren't going to do anything with me."

"Oh, yes, we are." Sinclair cracks his neck. "You hurt one of us deeply when you left. Now, you're back and he's gone. And for some reason, he's asked you to keep an eye on his girl."

"Has he?" Damian frowns. "We only have this wanker's words to go on." He jerks his chin at me.

"I may be many things, but a liar is not one of them," I snap back.

"Hmm." Sinner strokes his chin. "I shouldn't, but I am inclined to believe you on that."

"You are...?"

He nods. "Sure, you're too smart to lie to us about something so important. Also, I believe that you are here to make amends to us; that you want us...and Edward especially, to forgive you."

I shift my stance. "And do you think you can?" I swallow. "Forgive me."

He looks me up and down. "No."

4

"Dancing lets me escape, it allows me to transfer my thoughts to the rhythm of the melody instead of concentrating on the depressing details of my teenage life..."

-From Ava's Diary

Ava

"Thanks, Ava, that was a great session." The last of my students waves at me as she departs the studio.

I gather up the scarves I'd used during the lesson, which had gone better than I'd expected, actually. Especially, considering that my mind had not been on it. How could it be, when it had been occupied with not one, but two men? How is it even possible that I've gone from being a virgin to being fucked thoroughly by a man who'd broken his vows for me...to being strongly attracted to another—all, in less than a week? Hell, in less than twenty-four hours!

Hell. I deposit the scarves in the basket at the far end of the room, then turn to where I'd plugged in my music. This had been my third class of the day and I still have too much pent-up energy in me. Maybe I should try to compose another routine? Something I could use in yet another Eastern-themed wedding that Isla has been asked to organize.

I switch on the music, and as the beats of *Kiss Kiss* by Tarkan fill the room, I close my eyes and sway. Shuffle my feet, shimmy, allow the rhythm to grip me, sway my hips, grind them, let the vibrations travel up my thighs,

my belly.

"Holy shit, girl, you've got some moves."

I yelp, snap open my eyes. "Isla," I press my palm to my chest, "you scared me."

"Sorry." She holds up her hands. "I did ring, but you didn't hear me over the music, so I decided to come inside anyway. It's okay, isn't it, that I am here?" Her forehead furrows. "I'm not disturbing you or anything, am I? You did give me the passcode to the studio, after all."

"You're good." I turn and switch off the music.

In the silence that descends I feel my heart bumping against my ribcage. "It's all good." I turn to her. "I was just prepping for my performance at the next wedding you are organizing."

"Ah," she nods, "you mean Liam's wedding?"

"Liam's?" I gape. "You mean Weston's brother, Liam?"

Her lips turn down, then she smooths out her forehead. "The very same. He's marrying some society heiress or another. Which is great."

"It is?" I watch her closely.

"Of course, it is. The joining of two big families, the wedding of the year, almost as big as a royal wedding, and I get to organize it. It's going to be great publicity for my little company."

"So why don't you look happy?"

"What do you mean? Of course, I am happy." She pinches both sides of her lips, widens her fake smile until I am sure her cheeks hurt.

"Okay, that's creepy."

She switches off her smile. Lowers her chin. "You're right. I have mixed feelings about it."

"Because you like Liam?"

"Like?" She laughs. "That's not the word I'd use for how much I'd like to slap that annoying smirk off his face, right before I throw myself at him and lick those luscious lips."

"So," I say cautiously, "you do like him?"

"I hate him." She sets her jaw. "But we are not talking about him."

"We're not?"

"Nor am I here to talk about myself."

I peer into her eyes, then raise my hands. "Oh, no, no, no. I am not going to talk about it."

"Aww, come on, Ava. Let me, at least, live vicariously through you."

"What about the rest of the girls? Surely, being married to one of the Seven means they are having enough sex. They'll have much more to share with you."

"That's the problem. It's married sex, which is a bit like eating risotto."

I slow blink. "Let me get this straight. You're saying married sex is a bit like eating risotto?"

"Yep." She nods. "You know, it's rice and cheese and all the stuff that makes you warm and content and seduces you into a food coma, and you know you should stop eating, but you can't because all that serotonin has kicked in and made you happy, but really, it's weighing you down. But you don't realize it until it's too late."

I wince. "Unlike unmarried sex, which is like what? Chili-cake?"

"Precisely." She jerks her chin up and down. "Spicy and unpredictable and you never know when the taste is going to wallop you, and you peel back each layer and reveal a surprise... And then there's still the cream and—" She frowns. "Hold on, is there even a dish called a chili-cake?"

"Sure is." I nod. "It's a chili-laced chocolate sponge cake."

She wrinkles her nose, "Okay, not sure I'd want to eat that, but you know what I mean."

"Yeah." Though where I'm at now, it's more like being a patty in a hamburger, or the cream filing of an Oreo, if you know what I mean? I snort and Isla eyes me with curiosity.

"What's going on with you, Ava?"

"N...nothing." I walk toward the changing room adjoining the studio and she follows.

"It's something, babe, going by your expression."

I blow out a breath. Am I that transparent? But then, Isla has always been too perceptive for her own good. Besides, she's the only friend I am close enough to be able to confide in about what's happened, and I have to talk to someone about it. I can't possibly keep everything that happened bottled up inside. I push open the door to the changing room and walk in with Isla at my heels. I walk toward my locker, and pull out my street clothes. I need a shower, but I can take it when I get home. Instead, I strip off the yoga pants and my top and change into my leggings and a sweatshirt. Pulling on my shoes, then my jacket, I turn to her. "Edward," I murmur.

"What about him."

"He left."

"What do you mean, he left?" She frowns.

"He came to my place sometime early yesterday morning, then he broke his vows."

She stiffens, "He broke his vows. Is that a euphemism for—"

I nod. "Yeah. I chew the inside of my lip. We ah, did it."

"O-k-a-y." She lowers her chin. "Let me get this right. You and the Father had—"

"Sex." I blow out a breath. "Yeah. We did."

"Then he left?"

"He hopped on his bike and got out of there."

"How far could he get on a bicycle?" She laughs.

I roll my eyes. "A motorcycle, doofus."

"Ha-ha. Okay, but he's coming back, isn't he?"

"I..." I glance away, then back at her. "I'm not sure."

"Is there any reason you think he isn't returning? Did he tell you he wasn't coming back?"

"Yeah." I swallow.

"You sure about that."

"Let's see, his exact words were, 'I can give you something to remember me by.' And also, 'promise me you won't believe what you'll hear about me.'" I wipe away my tears. "And then, after he fucked me again the second time, he said that he had to go." I bite the inside of my cheek. "And PS, he also took my virginity."

"Virginity?" Isla stares at me. "Thought you said you weren't a virgin?"

"I lied." I brush away more tears. Shit, why the hell am I crying about him? A man who didn't hesitate to turn and leave, even after I begged him not to. He doesn't deserve me; he doesn't. "It still doesn't excuse what he did. He shagged me and then he left. I told him not to go. I begged him to stay. But he crept away from my bed while I was sleeping. The coward."

"Men," Isla huffs, "bloody wankers, the lot of them."

"They are." I nod "Especially Edward."

"Definitely Edward," she agrees. "He's a douchebag."

"The worst kind of douche there is. He's a motherfucking bastard and it doesn't mean anything that he broke his vows for me. Or that he did stay and hold me while I slept." I take in a shaky breath. "Or that he did come to me before he left. He could well not have. He could have simply crept away and then... I'd have never known that he had feelings for me. And that would

have been better, right?"

"Oh, Sweetie." Isla looks at me with compassion, and that's the last straw. My heart shatters. The sobs well up and I bury my face in my hands and allow the tears to overwhelm me.

She reaches me, pulls me into an embrace and I wrap my arms around her. I bury my face in my friend's shoulder and allow myself to give in to the weeping. Just this once, I'll be weak. This once, I'll allow myself to pour out all of my disappointment, my frustration, my helplessness in not being able to see that I was setting myself up for heartbreak.

What the hell had I been thinking, allowing myself to be attracted to a priest? Worse, I'd fallen in love with him. It had happened so quickly that I hadn't been able to stop myself. Correction, I hadn't wanted to hold back. I'd seen Edward and something had shifted inside of me. That base part of me had honed in on him. That primitive, feminine instinct in me had been attracted to him, hadn't cared that he had dedicated himself to God. Oh, how innocent I'd been. I'd seen him as a challenge, had wanted to woo him away from his chosen path.

I had succeeded. And now I have to pay the consequences for it. He'd come to me, with the intention of leaving. Hell, I never had a chance. He'd come to tell me goodbye, I realize that now. But as soon as he'd seen me, something had changed in him. He'd asked me if I wanted him to shag me and I... I had said yes. How could I have said otherwise? Why had he even asked the question? Why couldn't he have simply turned and left?

Would I have allowed him to do that?

Could I have let him walk out without...being with him? Why had I fallen asleep? Why had I not insisted that he fuck me again, and again, and again? So I'd have enough memories from one night to last me a lifetime. Shit, is that romantic? Or unrealistic? Or had I simply made the most of the opportunity I had been handed? If I had let him leave without sleeping with him, I'd have never forgiven myself. Truth.

And yet, he'd walked out on me. Had I slept with him hoping that it would change his mind? That once he'd been inside of me, he'd have never wanted to leave? A part of me had hoped... Okay, so I had staked my future on it. I had thrown myself into trying to please him, into being everything he wanted, and it had been incredible. The best experience of my life... One that I am not going to forget in a hurry—one I'm never going to get over. Let's face it, after Edward, after realizing what he'd given up to be with me, how

he'd turned to me for comfort, how he'd fucked me everywhere, in every hole... How could I possibly find anyone else who'll compare?

Baron could. He's as intense, as gorgeous... There is something about him that resonates with me...in a different way. A darker way.

Where Edward was light... Baron is the other side. Like opposite sides of the same coin. Or the edge. That thing just out of reach that makes me want to grasp it. That hints at something hot and passionate just under the surface. I suppose they are similar in that way. Edward had been restricted by the bars he'd imposed on himself due to his calling. Baron...he seems to have simply locked himself away. He is unreachable, in a different way.

I step back, and Isla releases me.

She scans my features. "You okay, hun?"

"Yeah." I swallow, "What was the name of the seventh guy you mentioned, the one who disappeared after the incident?"

She searches my features, "You mean, Baron?"

I open and shut my mouth, "His name was Baron?"

She nods, "Yes... Why?"

Shit, no wonder his name had seemed familiar but I hadn't placed it earlier. Guess I had been a little preoccupied when I'd met him. Only with the man I'd thought meant something to me walking out on me. No biggie. Of course, I hadn't made the connection between my Baron—no, not my Baron—between the stranger whose name is Baron and the Baron who is one of the Seven. The Baron who is a mystery and a challenge... One... I have no intention of pursuing. No way, am I going to be interested in him. Not so soon after Edward. The last thing I need is a rebound affair...and especially, not this quickly after Edward, and not with someone who knows Edward. Not to mention, someone who didn't mention to me that he knows Edward. The blood drains from my face.

"Everything okay?" Isla asks

"No, but it will be." I rub my palm across my face, glance down at the splotches of moisture on her jacket. "Sorry, I spoiled your clothes."

"Oh, forget about that." She waves a hand in the air. "It will dry. Now why don't we get you home, and I can pour us both drinks and—"

A sound at the doorway, has us both turning toward it.

I take in the man whose shoulders fill the space, who's so tall that the top of his head seems to brush the doorframe.

"You?" I swallow. "How did you get in here?"

5

Baron

"I walked in." I growl.

"You need to be buzzed in at the studio door." She frowns. "You can't just walk in like that."

"And yet, I just did," I point out.

"What is that supposed to mean?" She blinks. "Did you just break in?"

"It took me exactly three and a half minutes to crack the code to your studio door," I growl. "And the front door to the building doesn't even have a lock."

She reddens.

"Your security here sucks, you know that?"

"You're exasperating, you know that?" she snipes back.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet."

"Oh, piss off," she mutters.

"I will, after I take you home."

"I can take the tube," she insists.

"It's not safe. I'll drive you instead."

"Says who?"

"Says me."

"And who are you to tell me what I can and can't do?"

"I told you, when it comes to your safety I will not compromise, Ava."

"I am safe." She scowls.

"Says the woman whose studio is in a building whose door doesn't even

have a lock. Seriously Ava, you need to move your studio from this walking disaster zone of a place."

"Disaster zone?" She snarls, "You dare call the place I built with hard work and commitment, the first space I have created dedicated to my art, a disaster?" Her chest heaves and her cheeks redden.

Why do her eyes seem swollen? Was she crying again?

The woman next to her shifts restlessly. Shit, I had been so focused on Ava, I hadn't even noticed that there was someone else in the studio. So much for my security 'expertise.' And I had insulted her about something that clearly means so much to her, and that too, in front of someone else? Way to go, asshole.

I draw in a breath, then rub the back of my neck, "I apologize." I roll my shoulders, "I may have been out of line."

"May have been?" She arches a brow and I stiffen.

"I am sorry I insulted you about your studio." I glance around the space, "It's a beautiful space."

She narrows her gaze.

"Really," I turn to her, "I understand what it is to build something from pure passion."

"You do?"

I nod, "Of course. you'd have to be blind not to see how much this space means to you, Ava."

"Hmmp." She folds her arms about her waist. "Okay."

"So, you accept my apology?"

She seems like she's going to decline, then jerks her chin.

Thank fuck. "Doesn't mean the place is secure," I mutter and her gaze widens.

"We'll agree to disagree." She purses her lips. "What are you doing here anyway?"

"Came to see if you wanted a ride home."

When I'd left her after breakfast, she'd seemed like she was coming back to normal, but as I take in her features now, I notice the hollows under her cheekbones. Now that the flush on her cheeks from our earlier disagreement is fading away, she seems too pale. Her shoulders are hunched, and there's an overall defeated air about her.

Of course, it isn't that easy to bounce back from the kind of break-up she had. I should know. It took me years... No, I am still getting over it. So, how

had I expected her to simply pick up the pieces and move on after Edward left, with no explanation?

Fucking Edward. I should have known he wouldn't be able to do justice to the one good thing that had happened to him. If she were mine, I'd...take care of her, protect her, make sure she never wants for anything. Make sure I do everything in my power to keep her happy. I can still do that. I can ensure that I distract her enough so she doesn't spend her time thinking about him.

I fold my arms across my chest, glance from her to the woman who steps in front of her.

"I'm Isla." She comes forward. "And you are—?" She holds out her hand and I take it.

"Baron."

"Baron," She nods, then her eyebrows shoot up. She glances up, peruses my features. "Not the *Baron*, Baron?"

I arch an eyebrow and she scowls. "I mean, are you Baron, one of the Seven? The Baron, who left all those years ago and only kept in touch on occasion, Baron?"

"And if I am?"

"Are you?" Her scowl deepens. "You are, right?"

I draw in a breath. "Yeah, I am, though if you ask any of the Seven, they'll say that I am not one of them anymore."

"Omigosh." Isla opens and closes her mouth. "You are back? Do the Seven know? Did you—?"

"Hold on." Ava steps up to stand next to her. "So now you are owning up to being one of the Seven?"

"Of course, I am." I glare at her, "Your point being—"

"You didn't mention it to me when you met me."

"You didn't ask." I raise my shoulders.

"You could have told me that you knew—"

"Edward?" I tilt my head, "I'm telling you now."

"So, you two have met?" Isla glances between us, "When did that happen?"

Ava flushes. "This morning, after Edward took off, I ran out of the house to follow him and fell. Baron, here, helped me. He, uh, took me inside."

"He took you inside?" She blinks.

"Yeah," Ava drags her fingers through her hair, "and made me breakfast."

"You?" She turns on me, "You stayed to cook for her?"

I hold up my hands. "I was simply making sure that she was okay, before I left."

"Hmph." She purses her lips together. "That's all you did?"

"Honest." I turn my gaze back to Ava. "I was simply worried about her. And if you don't mind, I want to speak with her."

Isla folds her arms across her chest.

"Alone."

Ava tips up her chin and holds my gaze.

"Please?" I add. "Can I speak to you, Ava?"

Ava swallows, then nods, "Okay."

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to, Ava," Isla warns her. "If this guy is bothering you—"

"He's not," she replies.

"You sure?" Isla turns and grips her shoulder. "I can ask him to leave, if he is."

Ava meets her gaze, the two seem to have a silent conversation, then Isla blows out a breath. "Fine, I'll go then."

She turns back to me. "I have my eyes on you." She glowers. "If you hurt her in any way, you'll have me to contend with, and I warn you, it won't be good for you."

I lower my chin. "I promise, I won't harm her or cause her any kind of pain." *Not unless she asks.*

"Hmm." She purses her lips, "We'll see." She turns to Ava, kissing her on her cheek. "You take care, doll, and call me if you need anything."

Then, she brushes past me and leaves.

Ava glances at me, before moving to the side of the room. She grabs her handbag and hooks it over her shoulder. "I was just leaving."

She tries to brush past me, and I plant my body in her path.

She sighs, "Really? You are going to do this now?"

"Why were you crying?"

"I wasn't crying." Her lower lip trembles.

"Yes, you were."

"No, I wasn't." Her chin wobbles; her features contort.

"Shit, shit, shit." I haul her to me and she buries her head in the stretch of shirt between the lapels of my jacket.

I wrap my arms around her, hold her close as she sobs. My chest hurts, the blood pounds at my temples, and anger slices through my head.

Damn you, Edward, for breaking her heart.

And then, you had to hand her over to me, knowing I'd be attracted to her. Knowing that I'd want to protect her. You knew what it would do to me to find her so helpless, didn't you? You knew I'd give anything to be there for her in any way that she needs. You knew I'd be loyal to you. That I wouldn't betray you. That I'd be attracted to her and yet hold back, because she belongs to you. How dare you put me in this situation, you asshole? How could you ask me to look out for her, knowing every second of every minute that I spend with her, I'll want to make her mine? Fuck you, Edward! I hope you find no peace, wherever you are. I hope you spend each second missing her, knowing that I am here for her when you should be here taking care of her.

I tuck her head under my chin, rub soothing circles across her back. When she only cries harder, I scoop her up, walk over to the chair in the corner and lower my bulk into it. The chair creaks, but holds. I rock her in my arms, hum the first tune that comes into my head.

I'm not sure how long this goes on, but slowly, her sobs subside. She hiccups, draws in a breath. Her shoulders tremble, and I pull her even closer. She pushes her nose into my shirt, and inhales. And again. I pause, glance down at her, "Did you just sniff me?"

She pauses, then nods.

"Does it help?"

She nods again.

"Okay then."

I continue to hold her, until she pulls away. I loosen my arms about her, and she leans back, tips up her chin and glances at me from under her eyelashes. "Didn't mean to fall apart like that," she mutters.

"You are entitled."

"No, I am not. I've had enough of being the victim here. I hate crying, you know. Always have. It took me a full two weeks to break down after my mother died."

"I'm sorry." I peer down into her features. "Truly."

"Thank you." She nods. "She was unwell. Cancer." She swallows, looking down again. "She was ailing for nearly a year before she died...and it was a relief when she was gone, because she didn't have to suffer anymore. Does that make me a terrible daughter? That I was happy that she was finally out of pain?"

"No," I grip her hand between mine, "no, it doesn't."

"I didn't want to lose her, but I couldn't stand to see her suffering. And then...after she died, I found out that she had asked my father to marry her best friend after she was gone." She swallows. "That's the kind of woman she was. Always looking out for everyone else. Everyone except herself. She was too focused on her daughters, her husband. She didn't take enough care of herself. It's why she fell sick, I'm sure of it."

I run my fingers through her hair, tuck a strand behind her ear.

She tips up her chin, holding my gaze. "You knew Edward?"

I stiffen, then force my shoulders to relax. I knew this conversation was coming. Only, I'd hoped to have a little while longer before having to reveal how I'd happened to be there at the very moment that she'd run after Edward, but no matter. There is never going to be a good time for it, I know that. Still, it doesn't help when I glance into those big green eyes of hers and see the hurt in them. I wince, glance away, then back at her.

"I did," I clear my throat, "I do know him."

"So, you know that..." She swallows. "You know that he and I—, that we —"

"Fucked?"

She hunches her shoulders, pushes away from me. I release her and she slides off my lap. Her bag slides to the floor, as she begins to pace in front of me.

"We slept together... once... no, a few times that night, before he—"

"Stop." I bunch my fingers at my side, "I don't need to know the details."

"Why not?" She turns and stares at me. "Don't you want to know what he did to me the first time we were together? How he..." She swallows, "how he, took my arse."

I bunch my shoulders.

"How he came in my mouth."

My thigh muscles spasm, my stomach ties itself in knots.

"How he took my virginity when he—"

I spring up, walk over to her, slap my hand across her mouth. "Enough, woman," I roar.

My voice echoes around the space.

She blinks up at me, big green eyes that carry the remnants of grief from her mother's death, from Edward's desertion, from how she misses him. Shit, despite what he did to her, she still misses him.

I lower my hand to my side. "I made a mistake. I shouldn't have come here."

"No, you did the right thing," she says in a hard voice. "If you hadn't, I wouldn't have realized that Edward's friend is as unfeeling as he was."

"I have no idea why you're jumping to that conclusion."

"Oh?" She chuckles. "You just show up out of nowhere and don't tell me you know Edward?"

"I know it seems odd that I was there at the very moment that Edward left —"

"Odd?" she snarls. "Of course, not. Why should it be odd that as Edward leaves my life, his friend enters it? Then pretends he is concerned about me."

"I was—am concerned about you."

"Then appears to take care of me—"

"I did take care of you." I set my jaw, "I want to take care of you."

"Why?" she says in a low voice. "Why the hell would you want to do that?"

"Because Edward asked me to."

6

Ava

"Excuse me?" I shake my head. "What the hell did you say?"

"I said," he draws himself up to his full height, "that Edward asked me to watch over you."

"Hold on." I hold up a hand, and take a breath. "He asked you to look out for me?"

He nods.

"Edward knew he was leaving, so he called you and asked you to be there when I fell apart? He knew I'd fall apart. Of course, he did." I drag my fingers through my hair, then begin to pace again. "He knew I was weak. Knew I was in love with him, that I was falling for him and—"

"You were in love with him?"

"Yes, of course, I was." I pause, stare at him over my shoulder. "Why else would I collapse in such theatrical fashion when he decided to take off?"

"You didn't know him that long..."

"How do you know that?" I frown.

"When Edward called me, he gave me the highlights of, uh, how you guys met."

"He did, did he?" I fold my arms around my waist. "Geez, like this isn't weird at all. The man I fall for, not only is he a priest, but before he breaks his vows and takes off, he calls up his best friend—"

"Not his best friend"

"—to come by and take care of the woman he fucked—"

"You're more than that to him."

"—before he decides to take off without a word of explanation."

"He had a good reason."

"Oh, so now you're defending him?" I slap my palms on my hips. "Of course, you are. You men stick together, regardless of the fact that he and you —" I stab my finger at him, "are in the wrong."

"I am not defending him, and he is in the wrong."

"As are you."

"What did I do?" He stares at me. "I was trying to help you."

"You were trying to help me?"

"You know I was."

"How? By forgetting to mention to me that you knew Edward? By acting all solicitous when you were probably laughing at how broken down I am?"

"I didn't laugh at you, and you know that."

"Why would you agree to what Edward asked of you anyway? Why would any man agree to keep an eye on the woman his friend shagged? Unless—" I lower my hands to my sides, "Oh, I see."

"What?" He scowls. "What does that mean?"

"I understand now why you are doing this."

"Do you?" His expression grows wary.

"Of course, I do." I allow a smile to curve my lips. "You probably figured; you'd get me to trust you. You'd worm your way into my affections, so I'd spread my legs for you."

"Stop that," he growls.

"Why? Isn't that the truth?" I grip my breasts and squeeze. "Don't tell me you didn't think of it."

"I..." He wets his lips. His gaze drops down to where I am massaging my breasts. His chest rises and falls.

"Don't tell me that you didn't see me and think that you wanted some of it. That it didn't cross your mind to fuck me as well."

"I... I." His throat moves as he swallows. Then he firms his lips.

"What? Not so cocky now, huh? Why are you silent? Why can't you tell me what you were thinking of all along?" I shrug out of my jacket, let it drop to the floor. Then slide my hand down my stomach to the apex of my thighs. "Bet you saw me and wanted to get inside my pants. Bet you saw me and thought I would be an easy conquest, that you could shag me anytime you wanted and I wouldn't deny you."

He closes the distance between us, places a finger across my lips. "Shh," he murmurs, "don't do this."

"Why not?" I lean away and he drops his hand to his side. "It's true, isn't it?" I ask. "Tell me you didn't think of screwing me when you saw me."

"I did."

I blink. Heat courses through my veins. My core trembles. Even as something hot stabs at my ribcage. I fist my fingers at my sides, tip my chin up. "Well then, there's nothing more to say, is there?"

I bend to pick up my jacket, but he's already there. He straightens, holding it out for me. "That still doesn't negate the fact that I was there to take care of you. To ensure that you didn't do something you would regret later."

"What, like kill myself?" I mutter.

When he doesn't reply, I stare up into his features. "Shit," I swear. "That's what he was afraid of? He was worried that I'd be so heartbroken that I'd put an end to my life? Why, the ego of that man." I draw myself up to my full height. "As you can see, I am fine and coping well enough without him. Or you, for that matter. You've done your job, so you can leave now."

He simply jerks his chin toward the jacket.

I glance at it, then back up at him. "What are you still doing here? I told you, you can go."

He doesn't react. His stance indicates he'd be happy to simply stay there until I do as he asks.

I blow out a breath, turn and slide my arms through the sleeves of the jacket. He smooths it over my shoulders, and the heat of his big palms radiates through the material and into my skin. A shiver slides up my spine. He steps back, picks up my bag and hands it to me. Then he walks to the door and holds it open for me. I walk over to him, reach for the light switch, but once more, he beats me to it.

He switches off the light in the dressing room and I step through and into the studio. I walk through to the main exit. He follows me, flicking off the lights before he reaches me. I scowl at him. He simply arches an eyebrow. He holds the door open again and I step through into the corridor. I walk out, lock the door behind me, when the light in the corridor flickers and goes out.

"Damn it," I grumble, "I should have gotten that fixed."

I take a step forward and connect with something hard and solid. The scent of crisp mountain air and pine trees envelops me. Then he wraps his

hand around my shoulder. "Stay here," he rumbles.

"Not going anywhere, considering I can't see—"

A light flickers through the darkness. I blink, glance up to find him towering over me. I know he's big, I've seen him in broad daylight, but in the darkness, he seems larger than life. Big. Vital. Strong enough to weather any storm. Solid enough to lean on. I could pour all of my worries, my troubles, onto his shoulders and he would take it.

The air between us shifts, thickens into something hot and lusty and... My thighs clench. I lower my gaze and look away. He clears his throat, turns to shine the beam ahead, lighting a path through the darkness. "Come on." He grips my hand and his warm, thick fingers encircle my wrist, making me feel small and fragile in comparison. My nerve endings pop. Heat twists my lower belly. I bite down on my lower lip, allowing him to lead me across the corridor, down the flight of stairs, and out through the front door and onto the sidewalk.

Once there, he releases my hand, and of course, I miss his warmth. Shit, this is not right. How can I be so attracted to him, so quickly, when just a few days ago I'd been obsessed with Edward and couldn't stop thinking about him? Clearly, I am on my way to becoming a slut. Someone with no loyalty, someone who lusts after every good-looking man who happens to cross my path.

And that isn't true either.

I don't lust after everyone. Only Edward...and now him. Baron. One of the Seven. Edward's friend. Someone who hadn't revealed to me the real reason he'd been there to help me when he first met me. Do all the men in my life have to turn out to be such douches?

I pause. Baron takes a few steps forward before he turns to search for me. He frowns, angles his body toward me. I shake my head. "We're done," I mutter. "I don't want to see you again."

"Now, hold on—" He takes a step forward and I throw up my hand.

"I don't know what game you and Edward are playing, but I want no part of it."

"No games, Ava, honest—"

"You think I am going to believe you after what you revealed earlier?"

He scowls. "I expect you to think this through rationally."

"Oh, but I am. After what Edward did to me, the last thing I am going to do is have my emotions involved in any decision. It's why I am saying with

complete confidence that I don't want anything to do with you."

"You don't mean it."

"I've never meant anything more in my entire life."

He takes a step forward and I hold up my hand. "One more step, and I swear, I'll scream."

His shoulders bunch. He glances around the deserted road then back at me. "At least, let me see you back home."

"No, thank you."

"It's not safe for you to head back on your own this late," he insists.

"It's nine p.m."

"It's late."

"I can take care of myself." I draw myself up to my full height, which still means I only come up to the level of his chest. "I've been doing so all these years."

"That was before."

"Before what?"

He hesitates, "Before I came on the scene."

"Nothing's changed, then, for it makes no difference to me. You're still not in my life, in any form. This association, whatever it is between us, ends here."

"No," he grinds out.

"Yes." I tip up my chin. "You don't get a say in it. I don't want anything to do with you, Baron."

Turning, I walk toward the tube station. The hair on the back of my neck prickles and I'm sure he's following me. I will not look back. Will not give him the satisfaction of finding out that he makes me nervous. By the time I reach the tube station I am out of breath. I duck inside, walk through the ticket barriers, and onto the platform. Only then, do I allow myself to glance down the platform. I don't see anyone who looks like him. Whew. Okay. That's good, right? Doesn't mean that I am disappointed that he took me at my word and gave up the pursuit so quickly.

I get into the tube, find a seat and collapse. In twenty minutes, I am walking up the street, heading to my place. The itch at the back of my neck appears again. This time, I glance over my shoulder, but don't see anything. Strange. Is he here? Did he find a way to conceal himself so I don't spot him? I increase my pace, reach home and lock the door behind me. Only then, do I heave out a sigh of relief.

I head for the bathroom, have a quick shower, then dress in my pajamas. I pour myself a glass of wine. Slouching back against the sofa with a bowl of noodles—yeah, instant, I know, not good, but damn, if all that MSG doesn't taste delicious just now. There is something about cheap cup-o-noodles that takes me right back to my uni days when things were simpler. Also, because I'd preferred to do then exactly as I am doing now—slurp down noodles, swig down wine, and watch my favorite show on TV.... Which, by the way, hasn't changed either, for I flip on the TV and tune into *Twilight*.

On screen, Edward watches Bella as she's sleeping. Yeah, so it's stalkerish, but for some reason, that scene always gets me.

Maybe because the thought of being the focus of someone's attention in that singular fashion is mind-boggling. And erotic, and such a turn on. Gah! Oh, Edward. Why the hell does he have to share the name with my favorite fictional character?

I turn off the TV, walk to the kitchen and wash my bowl in the sink. After rinsing my wine glass, I turn off the light and head for my bedroom. Yawning, I walk to the window and peer out. That's when I notice the SUV parked outside on the road. I can just about make out the shape of the person behind the wheel. It can't be. Surely not. I peer through the glass, try to discern the features of the man... And it is a man, that much I can tell from the shape of the shoulders, the way his head is turned...in my direction. And in my imagination, the intensity of his perusal heats my blood.

Shit, it can't be him. Is it? It must be. My instinct tells me it has to be him, that there is no danger from whoever is in the car. What the hell is he doing here? Is he watching over me?

The way Edward watched over Bella? But this is not Ed. This is Baron, remember? Shit, I am tying myself in knots. I step back and the drape falls into place. Moving over to the bed, I slide in between the covers and switch off my lamp. I turn over, snuggle into my pillow and my eyelids flutter down.

When I wake up, the light slants in through the open window. Whoa, guess I managed to sleep through the night. I jump out of bed, pad over to the window, lift the drape to find the SUV still in the same position as last night. I peer through the window, make out the shape of the man behind the wheel. His figure is slumped back. Is he asleep?

I turn away, walk out to the kitchen, make some coffee, then set about making breakfast. I sit down to avocado on toast, lift the mug of coffee to my

mouth, then grimace. Shit, I am going to do this, aren't I?

I get up, pour some of the coffee in a travel mug, then fashion the extra toast and avocado I made into a sandwich, adding cheese and tomatoes to it. Yeah, it's vegetarian, but too bad; that's all he's getting in this house.

Piling the food into a takeaway container, I place it in a brown paper bag, and carry it with me, along with the mug. At the door, I step into my boots, grab my keys and step out of the house. I head down the path, cross the road, and walk around to the driver's side of the car. Before I can tap on the window, he rolls it down. Of course, he is awake and alert. He had to be to keep watch. Somehow, I just know that he hasn't slept a wink during the night. Adamant man.

I hand over the paper bag and the takeaway mug. He nods his thanks, takes a sip of the coffee from the mug, then sighs his gratitude. He places the mug in the cup holder, opens the container and digs in. I watch with some satisfaction as he finishes every last bite, then proceeds to drink the coffee. When he's done, he places the container inside the paper bag and hands everything over to me.

"Thanks," he nods, "but you didn't have to."

"I'd have done it for anyone," I mutter, "so don't go getting any ideas."

He tilts his head, surveys me closely. "What ideas would that be?"

"You know. That I've forgiven you for what you did."

"That's not why I'm doing this." He jerks his chin toward the dash.

"Yeah," I blow out a breath, "I need to get back."

I step away, aware that he's watching me as I head back inside the house. Shit, me and my soft heart. I should have simply let him be, not bothered to give him food. But seriously, how could I go about my breakfast, knowing he had spent the night outside in his car and not do something for him? Argh!

I get dressed, leave the house and walk past the SUV to the tube station. When I emerge on the other side, I don't look around for his car. Even if I had I wouldn't have spotted him. He's too good at this...whatever he does. What is his profession, anyway? Had he been a cop at some point, that he hadn't thought twice about shifting into surveillance mode with me? Well, whatever.

I walk up the steps and into my studio. For the next two hours, I devote myself to perfecting my new routine before my afternoon class. The day goes by quickly and after my third and final class, I go about shutting down for the night. I emerge into the crisp night air, spot the SUV parked across the road

again.

Of course, he's been there all this time, keeping watch over me. It feels weird...strange... Good? Yeah, it feels weirdly reassuring to know that he has my back. Not that I need protection, despite what he said. I am an average girl living in London. There is no reason to think I am in any kind of danger.

Still... It is comforting to know I have my own guardian angel watching over me. Shit, I have to stop thinking of him in those terms. His presence is getting to me, that's all it is. I pause, wondering if I should go over and tell him not to tail me anymore... As if that would stop him. If anything, I'd be playing into his hands if I did that. No, I am going to have to simply ignore him. That is the only way out.

I head back to the tube station and then home.

This routine continues for the next four days. How the hell he manages to keep up the surveillance on his own, I don't know. The only time he seems to sleep is in the car at night. Yet when I take him coffee and breakfast in the mornings, he doesn't seem to be run down. Most times, we don't speak either, except for the occasional and very civil good morning to each other.

Ha, he doesn't fool me, though. That civility is just a front for the barely civilized intensity he's hiding inside. And every time I see him, it's like he's a blow to the chest. How can I feel so connected to someone I've just met? How can it be happening all over again? Each day, I manage to tear myself away from him. Then, I get dressed, go to work, return, all with the SUV trailing me to and from the tube station on either side.

The nights... Despite the fact that my dreams are filled with Edward, it's Baron's face that I wake up with first thing in the morning. Shit, this isn't good. Not at all. Things are getting so muddled up in my head right now.

On the fifth day, I wrap up my last class, and step outside, then glance across the street to find the SUV missing. Huh? I glance up and down the street, find no car, no man. Well, that didn't take long, did it? Guess I wore him down.

I trudge to the tube station. Why had I thought that he'd hang in for longer, that he'd continue to follow me day in and day out...for how long? To be honest, I'd hoped for a few weeks, at least, if not a month. And he'd lasted, what, four days? And he said Edward had asked him to take care of me. Whatever. I snort, pull out my phone and call Isla.

"Hey babe, where have you been?"

"Just work, been busy you know?"

"Anything to do with Baron?"

"Baron?" I frown. "Why do you ask?"

"Only because he showed up here, and now, he and Sinclair are locked in some kind of argument."

Here? "Argument?"

"I hear the sound of something crashing in the background."

"Strike that." Isla's voice rises in excitement. "Sinclair just socked Baron in the jaw."

"What?" I tighten my grasp on the phone. "What do you mean, he hit Baron? Where are you?"

"At Summer and Sinclair's townhouse." More noises, the sound of something hitting the ground, something big and heavy and— "Shit, are they fighting?" I scowl.

"More like walloping each other," she mutters. "Whoa, this is something. Nothing like two alpha males going at each other to get the blood flowing."

More sounds of yelling reach me over the phone. My heart begins to race and my blood thuds at my temples. "What the hell is happening there?"

"Ooh." I hear Isla pulling in air between her teeth. "That was a bad hit. Baron's down."

"Wait, what?" I stiffen. "I'm coming over."

7

Baron

"Fuck you, asshole!" Sterling glowers down at me.

Bitch had gotten in a good hit; he'd managed to get through my defenses...because I'd let him. Don't tell him that. I'd been parked outside Ava's studio, waiting for her to finish, and following up on my various business interests via phone and email when Weston had called. Of the remaining Seven, he's the only one who's reached out since the last fight. He'd said he couldn't break rank with the rest, that they were all livid with me for what they'd seen as my desertion, but that if I wanted a chance to talk to them, now was my chance. The five of them and their wives had gathered at Sinclair's home, and if I wanted an opportunity to plead my case with them, I'd best get my arse over there. I had hesitated, hadn't wanted to drive off and leave her unescorted, especially not now that night had fallen. But I couldn't miss this opportunity. I had to get back into the circle of trust... This is the only family I know... Also, I need them on board for what's next.

So, I had reached out to someone I know I can trust. I'd asked Archer—my friend and business partner with whom I had started the security business after leaving the army—to step in for me. Archer had served with me in the army. Hell, it was because of him that I had joined the army in the first place. I trust him to watch over Ava.

As soon as he had arrived, I'd taken off to Sinclair's town house.

Weston had been on hand to let me in. He'd led me into the living room where the rest of the four, including Arpad, who had returned from his

honeymoon, had been gathered around the bar.

Sinclair had taken one look at me, and after scowling at Weston, he'd asked me to step out.

We'd each taken off our jackets and shirts, then circled each other, as the rest had come out to watch.

Each of us had waited for the other to make a move. I'd waited, waited... until he'd launched himself at me. Then we had gone a few rounds. I'd given as good as I'd gotten, then realized this was one fight I had to lose...for the greater win. If this is the only way to get Sterling to speak to me, so be it. So, I had allowed him to get the punch in.

Now I glower up at him, not needing to fake the pain that slices through my head. Bastard had managed to bury his fist in my forehead. Good thing I have a hard head. Still, the cut across my eyebrow is bleeding down my face. I use my arm to wipe away the blood, then hold out my hand to him.

He hesitates, reaches for me, then seems to change his mind at the last minute. He straightens, turns and walks off toward the house.

I stare after him. Anger pulses through me. "Don't turn your back on me, you motherfucker."

He pauses, turns to glare at me over his shoulder. "You may have fucked yours, but I never did."

Rage fills my head. My vision tunnels. I stagger to my feet, then rush him.

He turns back, lowers his head and charges. We meet in the middle. Or rather, his head connects with my middle. The breath rushes out of me. Pain coils out from where he head-butted me. I stagger back as he punches me in the side, and the other, follows with an upper cut. He raises his fist again and I catch the hit on my arm. Throw up my other arm to deflect the next, then rear back and manage to land one in his solar plexus.

I am going to lose; doesn't mean I have to roll over and play dead. If I did that, asshole would suspect me anyway. No, I am going to push back now. I swing again, plant one on his shoulder, then his side, then the other. He punches up, catches me under the chin. I stumble back, and he raises his fist. This time, there is no pretending. I know he's going to knock me down and I am ready. I glare at him, head on, wait for his fist to land, then he straightens.

He stands there panting, his chest rising and falling in tandem with mine. Sweat drips down his torso and mine. My chin thrums, my shoulder protests. Blood drips from my cut, onto my chest.

He straightens, his glare intensifies, then without a word, he pivots and walks off.

Saint glares at me, before he turns and follows.

Damian jerks his chin at me.

Arpad walks up to me, holds up his fist. "Good fight."

I frown.

"Go on, man," he urges, and I fist bump him. "Like old times, huh?" he mutters. "Good to have you back, Baron."

A hot sensation stabs at my chest. He turns, stalks off as Weston approaches me. "Let's get you cleaned up."

Ten minutes later, I wince as Weston stitches me up in one of the spare bedrooms that he's taken over as his temporary surgery.

"Shit, I need a drink."

"You do know it's all a myth...right?"

"What?" I scowl, then grimace when a pulse of pain radiates out from the cut. "If you're talking about me, then I am legend, of course, when it comes to fights."

"I don't know, man. The last time I saw you fighting the Bratva, you lost."

In more ways than he'll ever know. I fold my fingers into fists. "I definitely need a drink."

"Having alcohol doesn't really help numb the pain," Weston mutters. "It's a myth propagated by Hollywood that the whole world has bought into."

"What-bloody-ever," I mutter, "I could do with some whiskey right now."

"Here." Arpad ambles in with a bottle and three glasses. He tops up the glasses, hands one over to me, then sets one aside for Doc, before turning a chair to straddle it.

"So, you came back, eh?" He raises his glass at me.

I glower at him, then throw back my liquor. The alcohol burns its way down. It hits my stomach and heat radiates out from the impact.

"And you got married." I hold out my glass; he tops me up again. This time I hold up my glass, "Congratulations, man."

"Yeah." He grins and his entire face lights up.

"Whoa." I stare at him. "I take it, you're happy?"

"Delirious." He laughs. Asshole fucking laughs.

"Shit," I mutter. "You really do love her."

"I do." He chuckles. "It shows, eh?"

"Like a neon light," Weston says from next to me.

"Is that a subtle barb, Doc?" Arpad smirks. "Because I recall a time, not too long ago, when you walked around wearing a grin that stretched from ear to ear, right after you wedded a certain pastry chef."

"No, I didn't," he mutters.

"You did." Arpad laughs.

"I was merely on top of the world after snatching up the feistiest, sassiest, sexiest woman alive."

"Hey," Arpad scowls, "that was supposed to be my dialogue."

Weston leans back. "There. All done."

I touch my forehead and pin-pricks of pain radiate out from the touch. Nothing I can't handle.

"Once the endorphins wear off, the pain's gonna kick in some more."

I nod.

He writes out a prescription, hands it over. "Take the antibiotics to prevent infection. Keep the wound dry."

I stare at him.

"You know the drill, of course." His gaze narrows.

I tilt my head. "I don't know what you mean."

"Hmph." He scowls. "Wherever you've been, whatever you've been up to is not my concern...Actually, strike that." He shrugs. "It is my concern, as a friend. But as a doctor, it's clear to me that this isn't the first time you've been hurt, so, you don't get to hide from me, pal."

I merely arch an eyebrow, wince when my hurt forehead protests.

He blows out a breath. "Have it your way, but your scars don't lie." He points to the evidence on my shoulders and my back. "They tell me everything that you won't," he adds.

I bark out a laugh. "I leave six boys who don't know their heads from their arses and come back to six men who have their heads up their arses."

"Poetic." Arpad nods. "What have you been up to these last few years, anyway?"

"Hold on," Damian stalks in, "I want to listen to this as well."

"It's not fucking story time," I growl.

"Oh, I don't know, I could do with a bedtime story." Weston tops me off, then Arpad, before handing the bottle to Damian.

He fills up his glass. "Should we toast?"

"No," I snap.

"Yes," Arpad counters.

"Definitely." Damian raises his glass. "To old friends."

"To new memories," Weston drawls.

"You mean new mammaries, don't you?" I mutter.

He stares at me. "Only one set of mammaries for me, ol' sport." He winks. "And don't talk about my wife that way."

I blink. Shit, things really have changed and I've missed it all. Missed my friends growing into men, missed how they'd met their women, missed how they'd become more grounded, more serious, more stable. There is a contentedness to them that... I don't miss at all. No, of course, not.

"Right." I raise my glass in his direction. "I apologize."

"Accepted." He swigs back his drink. "Speaking of, I need to—"

The door is pushed open and Ava tumbles in. Hair flowing to her waist, flushed cheeks, bright eyes, her gaze finds mine, unerringly, connects and holds.

The breath rushes out of me. I stare back, rake my gaze from the purple tips of her hair, to the bag she has clutched to her side, to the pointed, purple tips of her boots, then back to her face. "What are you doing here?"

8

Ava

He glares at me. I take in his broad shoulders, the acres of cut muscle, the corrugated abs, the concave stomach, the jeans that cling to his powerful thighs. He shifts his position and I jerk my chin up, and spot the new stitches on his forehead. I draw in a breath. "You're hurt?" I take a step toward him and he freezes.

"Are you okay?"

"Don't I look okay?" he growls.

"Uh, you look a bit beat up, to be honest."

"A bit?" Weston snorts and Baron sets his jaw.

"Why did you come?" He scowls.

"Hello to you too," I quip as I walk inside the room. Four sets of eyes follow me. "Isla told me you were hurt, so..." I toss my hair over my shoulder. What the hell am I doing here, anyway? I'd heard her say that Baron was down and something inside of me had pushed me to his side. I'd grabbed a cab—a freaking expensive ride which had cost me nearly forty pounds—gah! And made it here in record time, and the arse that he is, he's glowering at me like he's displeased about seeing me.

"Well, as you can see, I am fine," Baron snaps.

"And in your usual growly-pants mood," I mutter.

"Growly-pants?" He growls—no surprise there—then frowns. "What does that mean?"

"She means you're being a bitch." Weston rises to his feet. "And in all

honesty, I agree."

"You stay out of this," I say at the same time as Baron.

Weston looks between us. A speculative look comes into his eyes. My cheeks heat. I know what he's thinking. He's seen me with Ed, and now, here I am checking up on Baron. Hell, the questions I see on his face. I have the same ones for myself. Only, I don't have the answers either.

Weston opens his mouth as if to say something, then shuts it.

"What?" Baron snaps. "Why don't you spit it out already?"

Weston scowls at Baron. "I hope you guys know what you are doing," he mutters.

"Why don't you stay out of this?" Baron glowers.

Weston bares his teeth. "Surely, you know that being part of the Seven means we are always up in each other's business?"

"Don't remind me." Baron rubs the back of the neck. "And you guys blame me for staying away for all these years?"

"You're back though, Baron," Weston's frown deepens, "which means, you need to play by the rules."

"As if any of you guys did?" Baron mutters. Weston opens his mouth and Baron raises his hand. "Stuff it," he barks. "Honestly, Wes, back the fuck up already."

"See?" I stab my finger at Baron, "See what I mean? Growly-pants. Definitely growly-pants."

He whips his head around and his gaze narrows. A vein throbs at his temple. "I don't need you here, either," he snaps.

"Too bad, I am here already." I move further into the room and the other men rise to their feet as one.

"Uh, I think Amelie's calling me." Weston places his glass down on the table with a thump.

"Yeah, me too. I mean, not Amelie, but Julia." Damian turns to me. "Hey, Ava. How's it going?"

"I'm good." I smile brightly at him and another growl rumbles from the asshole still sitting.

"I didn't see Julia on the way in," I say.

"Oh, she's not here." Damian smiles. "She's, uh, been a little under the weather."

"Is she okay?" I purse my lips. "Maybe it's the flu; everyone's been getting it."

Damian flushes. I blink. Uh, strange... Didn't think these men could look uncomfortable if they tried. Apparently, I was wrong.

"Yeah, she's good." Damian coughs. "All good."

"You won't be if you stare at her for much longer," Baron mutters.

"Whoa." I turn my head to scowl at him. "That wasn't very nice. You should apologize."

"Yeah," Damian smirks, "apologize, asshole."

Baron's jaw hardens. I frown at him, and he blows out a breath. "I apologize," he finally says.

"See, that wasn't so bad." I blink my eyelids at him. He lowers his chin, and his lips twist. My stomach jumps in response. Shit, that's hot. That mean look he has going there... It's potent and sexy and dangerous. My panties dampen. I twist my fingers into the material of my bag, hold his gaze.

Weston swoops up the soiled cotton, and the bandages. He thrusts them into a plastic bag. Then pulls off his gloves and deposits those too. He rises to his feet, grabs that bag in one hand, his doctor's bag with the other. "Right-o. I'll see you folks later." He walks toward the door, closing one eye as he passes me.

Damian nods at Baron, smiles at me. Baron frowns and Damian gives him the bird before sauntering out.

"Guess I'd better get going too." Arpad glances between us, then places his glass down on the table. He comes toward me, grabs my shoulders and kisses me on both cheeks.

Baron makes that growling noise again, deep in his throat. Arpad chuckles. "You take care, Ava."

He steps back, touches a finger to his forehead. "See you, Lieutenant."

I whip my head around in his direction. "Lieutenant?" I frown. "Did you serve in the army?"

Baron stares at Arpad. "How did you know?" he finally asks.

"You didn't think we'd have let you go without finding a way of keeping tabs on you." Arpad half smiles. "We lost your trail after you were discharged."

"Discharged?" I glance between them. "When were you discharged?"

"Two years ago," Baron mutters. "I was wounded in battle, then captured by the enemy."

"Wounded? Captured?" I feel the blood drain from my face. "How long were you—?"

"Six months." He murmurs.

The blood drains from my face, "You were a POW for six months?"

His features harden.

Behind me, Arpad walks to the exit. "I'll let you two catch up." I hear him leave, and the door closes behind him.

In the silence that descends, I am suddenly aware that we are alone. I glance around the room, at the view outside the window, then down at my feet. Anywhere, but at the man glowering at me from the chair.

I shuffle over to the chair Arpad just vacated... It happens to be the chair farthest from Baron. I sink into it, place my bag on the floor, then link my fingers together. Why had I come? Why did I feel compelled to get here? I should have gone home... Nah, I'd have never been able to do that. Not after how he's become a constant in my life. In just one week, he's become a stabilizing influence. Like Edward had been? Same, but different. Ed had been a strike to the heart...but Baron... He is chipping away at the barriers I've built around myself since I was a child.

I'd been overweight and way too conscious about it. I'd always felt like I stood out. It's why I'd retreated into myself, found solace in music and books. It's why dancing is so important to me—a way to embrace myself, my imperfections, to be free of judgment. When I dance, there is no me... There is only the rhythm and the ability to get lost in it. To forget about the world and all of my worries, to transcend to a space and time where there is only the now.

The hair on the back of my neck prickles. I glance up to find his gaze trained on me. Those cold blue eyes seem to have lightened in color until they resemble chips of ice. A frost that could creep into my blood, cut through the bone and change me forever.

I shiver.

"Are you cold?" He frowns.

"N...no."

I peer at him from under my eyelashes, take in the hard planes of his face, the square jaw, that thick upper lip, the puffy lower lip that I want to dig my teeth into.... What the hell? Why is it that every time I set eyes on him, my intentions always go there?

I glance away. "I shouldn't have come."

"No, you shouldn't have."

I stiffen.

"But I am glad you did."

I jerk my head toward him again. "You are?"

He surveys me a little longer, then nods. "Sure, this makes my job easier."

I snap my shoulders back, rise to my feet, "If you are going to insult me —"

He blows out a breath, raises a hand. "Sorry, that was out of line."

I stay where I am, watch him as he seems to struggle with some emotion. Then, he points to a corner of the room. "Hand me that shirt, will you?"

I walk toward the bed, where someone has flung down his shirt. Pick it up, and the scent of him is suddenly there. Dark, edgy, masculine, laced with that scent of crisp mountain breeze and pine trees that I've come to associate with him. I walk over, holding it out. He reaches for it and our fingers touch. Goosebumps sizzle up my skin. I retract my hand, and glance up to find that he's watching me carefully. Did he feel it too? He must have. A pulse tics at the corner of his jaw. He shoves one arm into his shirt, reaches for the other and winces. Sweat beads his forehead. "Fuck," he growls under his breath.

"Let me," I offer before I can think otherwise. Stepping into the space between his legs, I lower the shirt on his shoulder to give it enough slack, then reach for the other sleeve. I hold it down so he can wrestle his arm into it, then slide it over his shoulder.

The tips of my breasts graze his chest, and his body goes solid. His shoulder muscles tense. A cloud of heat seems to spool off of him and slam into my chest. I swallow. My nipples harden until they throb. My toes curl. Moisture pools between my thighs.

"Ava," he whispers.

"Y...yeah."

"You're stepping on my foot."

"Oh." I gulp. "OH."

I glance down to find that, sure enough, my one booted foot is squarely on his much bigger, broader, wider, also-booted-but-in-Doc Martens foot.

I step off of him, backing away.

The oxygen rushes into my lungs and I gulp it down. My head spins. It's only because I'd forgotten to breathe there for a few seconds. That man... Holy hell... Standing close to him was like being faced with a furnace... Or being at the edge of a tornado. Or both. Throw in some thunderstorms, and hail... Well, add in all the fury of nature and you'll understand what I mean. It was like being on the edge of an incline, glancing down at the slope that led

to a crazy jump, and knowing that once you set down the course there was no turning back. I stumble back, hit my chair and sit down again.

"I... I guess... I should leave." I clear my throat.

"You should."

I sneak a peek at him, take in the shirt that he's not yet buttoned. The column of his throat, the smooth expanse of ripped abs, the smattering of hair between his pecs. My stomach trembles and my thighs clench. I grip the arms of my chair.

"But you won't," he rumbles.

"What?" I frown at him. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"N...no." I fix my gaze on him. "No, I don't."

"You do." His lips curl. Oh, Hell, why does his smirk have to be that hot? That sexy. That mean...with a dollop of cruelty.

Argh. Stop it. Stop eating him up with your eyes, bitch. And just over a week ago, you'd been salivating over a hot priest. The one who ran out and left you on your knees...literally. Ugh. I've had enough of the Seven. I should get out of here. I should. I push my heels into the floor, rising up to my feet.

He follows my every move; the skin around his eyes creases. He watches as I take a step forward, angle my body. I should turn. I should go. I swallow, put one foot in front of the other. I reach him, pause in front of him. His gaze heats. He tips his chin up, leans back in his chair, then he widens the space between his thighs.

Don't look down, don't. I lower my gaze, take in the thick bulge outlined at his crotch. Instantly, my core clenches. Moisture pools between my legs.

I swallow, rake my gaze up his chest, to his face, to where his blue eyes peruse me with frank curiosity. He's waiting to see what I'll do next. Hell, *I'm* waiting to see what I'll do next.

I shift my weight from foot to foot, twist my fingers together in front of me. *What do you want? What do you want to do? Do you want to stay? Do you want to go? Fuck it. I should leave.* I turn away. That's when he grabs my wrist.

9

Baron

What the hell are you doing? Let her go. Unhand her, you bastard. She's not yours. She's his. She belongs to a man you've have avoided for more than half your life. So why the hell had he called me and asked me to take care of her while he's away? Knowing Edward, it's because he's testing me. But why is he doing that? Why go to this extent to put me in temptation's way?

Why test me in the first place, when he knows the first chance I get, I'll betray him?

I tug, and she stumbles back. Her hair flows about my face and I inhale. The scent of jasmine and raspberries, warm, sweet, and lush. Like her curves. Like the flesh between her legs, which would be wet and throbbing and willing. If I reached around and cupped her pussy, would she arch back and into me? Would she part her legs and allow me full access to her slit—to the cradle of civilization that exists between her full thighs?

A trembling seizes her. Her hips twitch and her waist shimmies. The dancer in her emerges, takes over, as if she senses that she is in danger.

I tug again and she turns toward me, her tiny waist at the level of my eyes. I release her hand, only to plant my palms on her hips. She shudders. Her breathing speeds up. I lower my chin, bury my nose in her crotch. A moan bleeds from her lips.

I draw in a deep breath and the scent of her ripens, the sweet scent of her arousal filling my lungs. The blood rushes to my groin and my dick throbs against the constraints of my jeans. I nuzzle into the apex of her leggings. She

groans. I tighten my hold on her, tilt my chin up and flatten my face against her pussy. A whine trembles up her throat.

"Baron," she whispers, "please."

The sound of my name from her lips, her pleading tone... All of it rushes to my head. I close my mouth around her core and she hisses. I fasten my teeth around the fabric of her leggings, and through it, on the swollen nub of her clit. She cries out, digs her fingers into my hair as I begin to fuck her pussy with my mouth, through the barrier of her leggings. She parts her legs, gives me more access, and I slide my hands down to cup her generous hips. "F-u-c-k." I squeeze her flesh and she shivers.

I tilt her hips, opening her up further as I continue to suck on her, eat her out through the bloody cloth that covers the singularly most delicious, most erotic part of her. Her entire body jolts. She tugs on my hair and my scalp tingles. Tendrils of pleasure flash down my spine. My cock thickens even more and I thrust my tongue into her fabric outlined slit. She cries out again, digs her fingers deeper into my hair, thrusts her hips forward and into my face. I bite down on her pussy once more and her body trembles. Through the fabric of her leggings, I scent her arousal deepen. I glance up at her and command, "Come." And she shatters. Her eyes roll back in her head, she cries out, then slumps against me. I cup one palm against her butt, bring the other down between her thighs. I grind my heel into her clit, massage her pussy as she trembles and shudders in the aftermath of the orgasm.

"Oh, my god," she mumbles. "Oh, god."

"God has nothing to do with it." I lean back as she opens her heavy eyelids and stares down at me.

She opens and shuts her mouth, then shakes her head as if to clear it. "Did I...did I come?"

I set my lips, "It would seem that way." I set her away from me, then rise to my feet.

"I'll bring you home."

"Wait, what?" She blinks, sways a little and I grip her shoulder until she seems steadier on her feet. Then I step back. I smooth down her sweatshirt, so it covers her luscious hips, and hides the apex of her thighs.

"What are you doing?" She scowls down at herself.

"Making sure you are covered."

"Covered?" She stares a second longer, then color flushes her cheeks. She glances up at my face. "Oh."

I button up my shirt, then move around and past her. "Coming?"

"I already did."

A chuckle barks out from me. I turn and level a gaze at her. "Sassy, huh?"

She tips up her chin. "You have no idea." She marches up to me, then plants her hands on her hips. "What was that about?"

"What was what about?"

"That," she stabs her thumb over her shoulder, "whatever that was."

"I was simply proving a point."

"And what would that be?"

"That I can make you come"

"So can I," she tosses her hair back from her face, "make you come, I mean."

"Not interested."

"Is that right?" She closes the distance between us, then plants her palm on my swollen crotch. "That's not what this feels like."

"It's a normal reaction to what happened; doesn't mean I am going to follow through with it."

"Why not?" She squeezes down and my pulse rate speeds up.

"Don't do it," I growl.

"Worried you won't be able to hold out?"

"The only thing you need to be worried about is saving yourself," I warn.

"What the hell does that mean?" She massages my cock and the blood empties to my groin.

"It means," I grip her hand and push it into my crotch, "you don't want to do this."

"I do."

"No, you don't."

"Why not?" She scowls, then slides her hand down to cup my balls. "You want this, so why won't you let it happen?"

"Because I made a promise."

She swallows. "To Edward?"

"And to myself."

"And what promise is that?"

"That I'll never hurt you; that I will take care of you while he is gone."

"What if I want you to hurt me?" She steps closer and my throat dries. My balls tighten; the band around my chest constricts until I can't breathe.

"What if this is how I want you to take care of me?" she whispers.

Her green eyes dilate until there's only a circle of green around the pupils. I drag in a breath, and fuck me, but I can smell the sweet scent of her arousal. Ripe and luscious and ready for the picking. My throat dries. I squeeze her hand, then pull it away and to the side.

"You'll have to find someone else to scratch that itch." I make sure to curl my lips. "I am not going to settle for Edward's seconds." I say this despite my indisputable hunger to dive in for a second helping.

Her gaze narrows. Color flushes her cheeks. She pulls her hand from my hold and brings it up, but I am already moving. I grab her wrist, wrench her hand behind her. The action bows her spine, thrusts out her breasts until they are flattened against my chest. The shape of her curves, those hard nipples that dig into my front. *Fuck me.* My thighs go hard and my dick thickens. I tighten my hold, pull her closer...closer...dip my chin until my mouth is poised over hers. Until we are sharing breath.

Until I can see the freckles that dot her cheeks, and fuck me, if I don't want to lick her right there.

She flicks out her tongue to wet her lips and my gaze darts to her mouth. Fuck me, but I want to kiss her. I need to taste her. Just once. I want to swipe my tongue across that honeyed mouth and swallow her up completely. The blood pounds at my temple and my heart hammers in my chest. I lower my mouth to hers.

10

Ava

His gaze narrows and his chest rises up and then down.

I swallow, bring down my eyelids, then part my lips, waiting...waiting. He releases me so fast that I stumble back. He brushes past me, heads for the door and stalks out. *Shit, shit, shit.* What the hell was that? Why the hell had I come onto him so strongly? It's like when I am with him, I lose track of who I am.

How had I acted so wanton? How could I have thrown myself at him, so quickly after Edward? This... Whatever it is between us, is doing my head in.

I march down the steps, head to where I'd deposited my coat and bag in the living room of the town house.

As soon as I walk in, Isla rushes up to me. "Are you okay?" she whispers. "Yeah... No." I shake my head. "I don't know."

I shrug into my coat and grab my bag, then glance past her to where Summer is watching me with sympathetic eyes.

"Want to talk about it?" she asks.

"Maybe later?" I half smile.

"Hang in there." She jerks her chin toward the hallway. "So, you and Baron?" She wrinkles her forehead. "Everything okay there?"

Ha, if she only knew.

"It's fine." I flash her a smile. "I'd better go; he's going to give me a ride home." I turn past her and head for the hallway when she calls out.

"Hang in there, Ava, it'll get better."

I laugh, "Nothing can make this better."

"Don't give up too quickly."

I pause and stare at her over my shoulder.

"What are you trying to say?"

She comes toward me, "That things are never what they seem with the Seven."

"That's putting it mildly." I bite the inside of my cheeks. "It's just... I feel..."

"Confused? Conflicted?" Isla pipes up.

"All of it, and more." I squeeze my eyes shut. "Everything is happening so fast, and I can't keep up."

"Maybe you are resisting too much?" she replies.

I open my eyes, scowl at her, then turn to Summer, "Do you feel that way, too? Do you think that I am fighting the inevitable?"

"If it feels this difficult, maybe."

"But...but..." I grip my bag at my side. "Surely, it can't be right that..."

"That you are attracted to Baron?"

I flush.

"I thought I was attracted to Edward."

"Who's not here anymore." Isla taps her chin "But Baron is."

"Doesn't mean I have to give in to the chemistry between us."

"So, there is chemistry between you two?" Isla asks.

"You don't know the half of it. It's like when we are in the same room... It's—"

"Madam." A plummy voice interrupts. "Mr. Baron's asked me to convey to Miss Ava that he doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Of course, he doesn't." I turn and huff at the butler who stands by the doorway to the hall. "You can tell him to—"

"Yes Ma'am?" he says politely. Bet if I told him to tell Baron to go sod himself, he'd convey the message in that polite, affable tone too. I blow out a breath, "Doesn't matter."

I turn to the girls. "I gotta go."

"This conversation is not over," Isla warns.

"Yeah, yeah." I turn to leave and Summer calls after me, "Join us here on Friday night? Just us girls."

I raise my hand as I follow the butler out of the house. He walks me down the steps, holds the door open for me.

"Thank you." I smile at him as I clamber inside the SUV.

He shuts the door, and I stare ahead as Baron pulls out onto the road. We don't speak for the duration of the ride. When we reach my place, I push open the door and am out of there as soon as he parks. Gah, that was the most uncomfortable twenty minutes of my life, ever. I flounce across the sidewalk, up the garden path, reach the front door and am about to open it, then stop. I glance over my shoulder to find the SUV still parked there. Is he going to spend the night in the car again? Of course, he is. Damn him, and after everything that happened earlier... The best thing to do would be to let him spend the night in the car. Again.

I bow my head. *Don't do it. Don't do it. Damn it.* I turn and march back to the car, then around to the driver's side. He lowers his window as I reach it, then arches an eyebrow at me.

"You may as well come inside the house."

He glares back.

"I mean, come on. It's stupid that you spend your nights here in the car, when there's a perfectly good couch in my living room."

His forehead wrinkles. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Sod that." I scoff. "I can keep my hands off you, if you can do the same."

He scowls.

"And after your earlier demonstration, clearly you can restrain yourself."

His jaw tics. His nostrils flare and he seems to be on the verge of saying something, then seems to change his mind. He rolls up his window, pushes open the door. I step back, walk over to the house, and unlocking the door, step inside. Placing my bag on the table in the hallway, I shrug off my coat. Then, grabbing my bag, I head to my bedroom. I deposit my bag on the side table, grab a pillow and a cover from the closet, then walk into the living room. Ignoring his bulk looming by the window, I deposit the bedclothes on the couch.

"There's only one bathroom," I nod toward the bedroom, "if you want to use it, while I get some water to drink?"

Without waiting for his reply, I walk toward the kitchen, drink some water, then grab a couple more bottles of water. By the time I reach the living room, he's seated on the couch. He's removed his shoes and socks, and as I place the bottle of water on the coffee table, I notice his bare feet. Large feet. Blunt cut toenails. I swallow. Suddenly my chest feels too tight. Heat flushes my skin. Moisture laces my core. I straighten, "Goodnight," I mutter, as I

head for my room.

"Goodnight, Ava." His low rumble courses down my spine, igniting pin-pricks of lust in its wake. Oh, Hell. This is bad. A very, very bad idea. I shut the door, then hesitate. Should I lock it? If I did, he'd hear me lock it. Not that I don't trust him to not come in here. Question is, do I trust myself not to go to him at night? Gah! Get a grip. Think of Edward. Ed. The man you've been masturbating to until a week ago. The asshole priest who broke his vows for you. Then left you. I draw in a breath, shrug out of my clothes, and toss them over a chair. Then, pulling on a camisole, I slide into bed. I can't stop the yawn that cracks my jaws. I shut off the lamp and am asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow.

His scent reaches me first. Cut grass and mint. I watch as his powerful shoulders cut through the water. He swims across the length of the swimming pool, reaches the side and hauls himself up. The water sluices from his shoulders...as he swings his legs over the side. His thigh muscles ripple, his concave stomach tenses, and he straightens. He walks toward me, his huge shoulders blocking out the light of the sun, the rest of the scene behind him. His chest planes flex and the tendons of his beautiful throat move as he reaches his hand out to me. I rise to my feet, move to him, arm outstretched. Our fingers connect. Heat vibrates up my arm and my stomach muscles clench. He pulls me to him and my chest connects with his wet torso. A giggle bursts from my throat and an answering smile curves from his lips. His amber eyes gleam, then he dips his head, closes his beautiful lips over mine. Moisture pools in my core. My heart begins to race. He thrusts his tongue inside my mouth, swipes his tongue across my teeth. My belly trembles. He scoops me up in his arms, walks over to a deck chair and lowers me onto it. He follows, covers my body with his, and the weight of him presses me down. My nipples tighten and my thighs spasm. He peers into my eyes, that golden gaze of his lit from within. He cups my cheek, touches his forehead to mine. "I need you," he whispers. "I want you. I can't live without you. You're what grounds me to this life. Without you, I am no one."

I frown up at him, reach to smooth out the wrinkles on his forehead. "Edward I—"

"Shh." He lowers his head, brushes his lips over mine. "Don't speak," he whispers. "Just feel." He pushes his hips into mine and that hard length of his stabs into my core. "See what you do to me, Eve?"

"Ed," I swallow, "why did you leave?"

"It's the hardest thing I have ever done. I couldn't be with you, Eve. I wasn't good for you, in the state I was. But I didn't want you to be alone."

"You didn't?"

"No." He kisses my eyelids, the tip of my nose, my mouth. "I couldn't be there for you, so I did the next best thing. I asked Baron to take care of you."

"Baron?" I frown. "What do you mean, Ed."

"You'll know when you feel it."

"I hate riddles," I pout.

"And I love you."

My eyelids snap open. I stare into the darkness. What was that? What a weird dream. Why had I dreamed that? I turn over on my side, throw my leg over my pillow. My core clenches. The remnants of the dream cling to my skin; the scent of him still envelops me. The strength of him, as if imprinted into my muscle memory. The way he'd covered my body with his, how that thick length of his had pushed into my core. I slide my fingers down to cup my pussy through my panties. Shit! The fabric is soaked. I dig the heel of my hand into the fabric and massage my clit. Pinpricks of pleasure shoot out from the contact. My breasts seem to swell, and a groan wells from my lips. What am I doing? What is wrong with me? I thrust my hips against my hand, wanting so much to shove my fingers inside my own pussy. But it wouldn't be enough. I need something bigger, thicker...wider...ugh! No choice. I reach for the drawer on my bedstand, when a groan reaches me.

I freeze. Wait, arm outstretched. Am I dreaming? No, I am awake... What was that? I focus on the darkness. Wait... Only silence reaches me. I lower my hand and my fingertips brush the handle of the drawer when another groan filters through from the direction of the doorway. No, I definitely hadn't imagined it. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and straighten. Another groan, this one more strident, more urgent. I rush to the door, open it and step out into the living room.

Moonlight filters in through the crack between the drapes. I can make out the figure on the couch as he moves, thrashes around. I head toward Baron, stand over him as his features contort. Sweat gleams on his forehead, across his shoulders—his bare shoulders. Shit, of course he'd taken off his shirt before falling asleep. The cover gleams against the burnished brown of his torso. The fabric dips around his waist as he flings his arm over his forehead and groans. Moisture glistens on his cheek. Wait. Is he crying? Are those tears? Can't be. But why not? Can't grown men cry in their sleep?

His shoulders bunch and the tendons of his throat move as he swallows. Then his fingers bunch on the sheet, his knuckles white as he grips the fabric. Another low groan rumbles from him and my heart stutters. I lean forward and touch his shoulder. His eyes fly open. The next second, the world tilts. I am on my back on the floor and Baron's fingers are around my neck.

11

Baron

"I am going to kill you," I growl. "I am going to tear you from limb to limb for what you did to me. Get your hands off of me, you filthy bastard." I squeeze down with my fingers, intent only on cutting off his air supply. If I could only snuff out his life, everything would be so much better. If I could only—

"Baron," her voice chokes. "Please...please..."

All thought empties from my head. I glance down at her delicate features, the auburn hair about her shoulders, her gaze wide, the green pupils dilated with—fear. Her pink rosebud-mouth open, as she chokes, and tries to draw breath.

"No." I release her and she coughs, draws in a breath, then another. She brings her fingers to her neck, presses her palms to the skin there. Her chest heaves as she coughs again.

"Fuck," I growl. "Fucking fuck." I scramble away from her, hit the side of the settee. "Fuck, I am so sorry, Ava. Fuck, fuck, fuck." I bury my fingers in my hair and tug. "I am so fucking sorry. What the hell is wrong with me?" I lower my hands and stare at my palms. "I almost killed you. You are not safe around me. This is why I should have slept in the car. I shouldn't be allowed anywhere near you. What the hell had I been thinking, allowing myself near you—?"

"Baron!" Her voice reaches me.

I ignore it. "I should have shot myself a long time ago. I am not fit to

survive. I shouldn't have accepted Edward's call, shouldn't have come here in the first place."

"Baron, stop." She sits up, and crawls over to me. "It wasn't your fault. You were sleeping. You didn't know."

"That's not an excuse." I stare at my palms, the lines that run across the width. "I could have killed you, Ava."

"You wouldn't have."

"You don't know that."

"Of course, I do. Protecting is in your DNA; it's woven into every cell of your body. Someone like you, who would give your life for another, would never kill."

"That's where you are wrong." I glance up at her. "I have killed more people than you can imagine."

"That was war, you didn't have a choice."

"You always have a choice." I fold my fingers together. "I just chose to ignore it."

"You did what was right," she insists. "You did what you were told."

"You know what the worst part of it is?"

She shakes her head.

"I enjoyed it. I enjoyed killing."

She pales.

"I was so good at it, they pulled me off the frontlines."

"They did?"

I nod. "Turns out, there's one thing I am better at than killing, and that's torturing the enemy for their secrets."

"Torturing?" She swallows. "You tortured people?"

I peer into her features. "That was my specialty, you know?"

"What do you mean?" She frowns.

"That was my job, in the army. To torture enemy soldiers for information. I was so good at it that they gave me a fucking medal for it." I laugh. "They didn't know that the only time the voices in my head fell silent was when I was sussing out their weaknesses and using them against them."

She sits back on her haunches. "You were still doing your job."

I laugh. "You don't understand." I lower my hands to my side, "I fucking stood over grown men, used their fears and their life stories against them. I knew exactly how to take their worst terrors and deploy them to find weaknesses in their psyches. I knew how to break them down and rebuild

them again."

"You...you brainwashed them?"

My lips twist. "I made them into weapons who could be redeployed undercover. I made them believe in their new identities enough for them to be sent back to their own countries. I sent them to their inevitable deaths."

"And in doing so, you helped many more lives back home."

I frown. "You think you know everything, don't you? You think you can view me with the same fucking rose-colored lenses as you viewed Edward?"

Her lips thin. "I didn't have to view him through anything. He was... good, inside and out."

"Oh?" I look her up and down. "And what about you, Ava? Was it good for you with him?"

"I am not answering that." She folds her arms across her chest. "You're hurting, I understand that. Doesn't mean you need to insult Edward or what...we had."

"And what did you have?" I sneer. "A few fucks before he left? The man was so afraid of what he felt for you, he couldn't even stay to face the consequences of his actions."

"He...he needed time to sort things out."

"He's so weak, he couldn't even stick to his chosen path. He walked away from the very profession that he claimed meant everything to him."

"He did it for me," she snarls. "Everything he did, he did it for me."

"He did it for himself." I allow my grin to widen. "You were just an excuse. Just easy pussy that he couldn't resist, he—"

She swoops out her hand and I grab her wrist.

"Don't even think about it," I warn.

"And what will you do, huh?" She holds my gaze. "You going to torture me like you did those prisoners? You going to pull your gun on me? Or better still," she reaches for my other hand and brings it to her neck, "you going to finish what you started? You going to choke me, Baron?"

I place my fingers in the exact same marks where my fingers had rested a few minutes ago. "Do you want me to...?" I wind my fingers around her neck. "Do you want me to choke you, Ava? Is that what this is about?"

"No." She swallows and the action sends vibrations shuddering across my palm. My dick twitches. Fuck, what the hell is wrong with me? Why does her fear, her wide-eyed gaze, the way her breathing speeds up—why does all of it only arouse me more?

"You're lying." I lower my voice to a hush, "You want me to hurt you, don't you? You want me to show you how it could be to walk that thin path between pleasure and pain."

"No." She shakes her head.

"You want me to tip you over the edge so you can forget him, so you can discover parts of you which you don't even know exist."

Her chest rises and falls. "You're wrong." She licks her lips; her gaze darts to the side then back at me.

I rise up on my knees, and loom over her. "You want me to fuck you."

"No," she tips up her chin, "that's not true."

"You're right."

She frowns. "I am?"

I lower my head until our eyelashes tangle. "You want me to not just fuck you, you want me to demolish you and build you back again as I did those prisoners."

Her lips part. The breath whooshes out of her, "No, I don't."

"You do."

I rake my gaze across her features. "Even now, you're imagining how it would be if I were to push you down on your front and mount you from behind. How it would feel to have my cock deep inside your most forbidden places. How you want me to remove every single imprint he left on your body and replace it with mine. How you want to be commanded, to be subjugated, to be told what to do every moment we are together. You want me to take your choices and give you a space where you don't need to think. Where you don't need to worry about the world outside. Where it's just you and me and our shared filthy passion. Where you could ask me to do every single depraved thing you ever dreamed of and things you didn't even know were possible. Where you'd spend the hours in a state of constant arousal, until you are so out of your mind with wanting that you'd take my cock every which way I wanted to give it to you. Where you'd want me to tear into your pussy, fuck your arse, take me down that gorgeous throat of yours. Where you'd want me to use you any way I desire. Where you'd be nothing but my little fuck toy, to wrench every last pleasure from your body until you are delirious and ready to climax over and over again...only..."

"Only?" She whispers.

"Only I wouldn't let you come."

I release her and she shudders.

I rise to my feet, then jerk my chin toward her bedroom door. "Go."

12

Ava

"What do you mean, go?" I stare at him.

"It's English. You do understand English, don't you?"

He sits down on the couch, then lies back and closes his eyes.

The bastard closes his eyes, as if this is the end of the discussion. Finish. Over. Kaput. What in the ever-lovin' hell is wrong with him? I jump up to my feet. "What do you think you're doing?"

Asshole simply folds his hands behind his neck. His biceps bulge and the planes of his chest undulate. Why the hell does he have to be so hot? Why does he have to be so damn obnoxious? And all those filthy things he said... I don't want him to do that to me... I don't.... Do I? And that dream... What the hell was that about? My subconscious playing tricks on me? Trying to justify why I should let Baron fuck me...when my heart still belongs to Edward. Does it belong to Edward?

I'd known him for such a short period of time. Had barely gotten to know him as a person. You don't need that to know though. When you know, you know...right? That's how Bella had known about Edward from the first moment she'd seen him. And then there was Jacob. Shit, I'd always been obsessed with Edward but a part of me had always wanted Jacob. I'd veered toward Edward because he'd been larger-than-life, all consuming. And...I'd always thought I had to choose. In which case, it was Edward. No brainer. But what if I didn't have to choose. What if... I could have both. First Edward... Then Jacob?

Jesus, I am a slut. That much is clear. And that...is all fiction. This is real life. Where the man I'd fallen for had walked out on me and now there is another man—a hot, sexy, beautifully-sculpted alphahole who is sprawled out on my couch, wearing only a pair of briefs, which ride low on his waist. I drag my gaze down the tented center of his crotch—is that an ongoing phenomenon or just something he sports when around me? And he is attracted to me... Clearly. Which is why he had lashed out at me.

"I know what you are doing," I mutter.

"Oh?" His voice is bored.

"You think you can scare me away by putting all of your thoughts into words? You think you can paint the filthiest picture possible in the hope that it would make me think twice about wanting to be with you? Well, you thought wrong."

"Is that what you think I was doing?" He brings up his other hand to scratch his chest and I shiver. My nerve endings pop. I can't take my gaze off of how he drags his fingertips down his sculpted pecs. Goosebumps rise on my skin. I squeeze my thighs together.

"I know that's what you were doing."

"Go to bed, Ava," he drawls. "You don't want to play with things you have no idea about."

"Then teach me."

He freezes. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." I walk over to the sofa on my knees. "It's why Edward asked you to take care of me."

He lowers his arm to the side. "You think Edward wanted me to fuck you?"

"Didn't he?"

He glares at me. "You're not thinking straight."

"No, you're not thinking straight." I rise to my feet. "Why would he ask you to watch over me in his absence if it weren't for the fact that he knew you'd be attracted to me?"

"Precisely," he mutters. "He knew I'd be attracted to you, but that I'd never go back on my promise to him."

"What promise?" I frown. "What did he make you promise?"

Baron looks at me then glances away.

Ed wouldn't, would he? "Tell me, Baron," I insist, "what did Edward ask you to promise?"

Baron rubs the back of his neck and a dull headache pounds at my temples, "He asked you not to fuck me, am I right?" I say in a low voice. "He asked you to look after me but not fuck me."

Baron blows out a breath, then straightens his shoulders. "Yeah," he mutters, "he explicitly asked me not to approach you. I was supposed to watch over you, but not reveal my presence."

"But you did."

"And here I am." Baron's lips twist.

"And that's not the first promise you have broken."

His brows draw down. "What was that?"

"I said," I squeeze my fingers together, "that it's not like you've kept all of your promises to him."

"What are you talking about?"

"Uh... You and Edward," I mumble. "Surely, you must have broken your promise to him and the rest of the Seven when you left for the army, so it's not like he'd have expected you to keep this promise. In fact, I'd wager that he fully expected you to break it. Which is why he trusted you to watch over me."

"That's the word though, isn't it? Trust." He sets his jaw. "I am not about to break my word."

"No, but you'll do everything in your power to ensure that I break mine." Not that I had promised anything to Edward, but surely, it is in a rule book somewhere the you can't sleep with a man and then with his best friend/enemy... Or whatever they are to each other...right?

"You're not making any sense." He frowns.

"You're the one not making sense." I throw up my hands. "First, you make me come..."

"I didn't touch you."

"A technicality." I huff. "You made me orgasm through my clothes. It's the same thing."

He drags his gaze down to my core, and his nostrils flare. "Trust me, it's not."

My knees tremble. "Then you throw that filthy dialogue at me, arouse me to fever pitch, then you expect me to walk inside and go to sleep."

"Sounds about right," he grumbles.

"Do you know how...how...frustrated I am right now?"

"That makes two of us," he groans.

"So why can't you just...just...put us both out of this misery?"

"Because," his voice takes on a long-suffering tone, "it's not right."

"Since when do you care about what's right and wrong, huh?"

"Since," his throat moves as he swallows, "since I made the decision to come home."

Home. This city is his home. The Seven are his family and Edward is his friend... And me? What am I in all this? Who am I to Edward? To him? Why do I feel so torn between them when, really, neither of them has done anything to stake his claim on me, or said anything to make me feel that I am special? Well, Edward had. Both when he'd fucked me and in my dreams. And Baron... He's shown through his actions that he feels something for me. But none of that is enough, is it? I need more. I deserve to be shown that I matter... That I am special and important enough for them to change things for me. That they want me more than anything in the world. And until then... I belong to neither. I belong to myself, first and foremost. I can do anything I want, and fuck what either of them thinks about it.

"So, you are here to take care of me, right?"

"Right."

"And watch over me?"

"Mmm...hmmm." He yawns.

"And ensure nothing happens to me?"

He nods slowly.

"And you are not going to touch me because you feel like you owe Edward something?"

A line appears between his eyebrows. "Your point being?"

"Just setting the parameters, that's all." I pivot on my heel and walk toward my bedroom, aware that he's watching my every step.

I give an extra twitch of my butt and hear his sharp inhale. Good. Two can play this game... Or three... Doesn't matter. What's clear is that I am not going to let either of them fuck around with me. I am my own woman. I am strong and independent and worked my ass off to get where I am. It's time I behave like one.

I reach the doorway to my bedroom, then turn. "Goodnight, Baron."

He glares back.

Jerk! Seriously, someone needs to remove that stick, or whatever it is, stuck up his arse.

I step through the door, close it gently, then show him the finger.

"I saw that."

His voice reaches me and I glower at him. Ass. I stick out my tongue, then pivot and head for my bed. I fling myself on it. I must have been more tired than I thought because the next thing I know, it's morning.

I roll out of bed, shrug on my pajamas, then stumble out into the living room. The couch is empty, the cover folded neatly and placed across the pillow. Apparently, that military training is good for something. I walk into the kitchen and the scent of coffee greets me. I go to the coffee maker, pour myself a cup and take a sip. Yum! The man knows how to make coffee.

I walk toward it, place my cup of coffee on the counter and pick up the folded note next to it. The words leap off the paper.

Don't skip your breakfast.

Gah! What the hell? That's it? He didn't even sign it. I mean, there isn't anyone else here who could have left it. But still. I crumple up the paper and am about to throw it away. Instead, I sink down into the chair, smooth it out and stare at the words as I eat.

He'd cooked me an omelet... Still warm. Which means he hadn't left too long ago. How had I not heard him leave? Though, to be fair, once I fall asleep, it's always difficult to wake me up. Had he peeked in on me before he left? Shit, I have to stop that particular fantasy of mine. It's creepy if someone watches you as you sleep. Even more so if it's a man... A hot, sexy, deliciously yummy man with a lot of issues. Boy, does he have issues. Is that why I am attracted to him?

First Edward, now Baron. Between the number of issues, the two of them have, they could keep all the psychologists in London busy. At least, one of them could cook. I finish off the omelet, then drain my cup of coffee. And it isn't because he commanded me to eat. Nope... Nah... I stare at the paper again. Will he return again to use the couch this evening? I hope so. It's the only way I can put the plan I have into action.

Rising, I wash my dishes at the sink, then head for my bedroom. Picking up my phone, I dial Isla's number.

13

Baron

I'd followed Ava as she'd headed from the tube station to her dance studio. Across from me, a couple of boys walked by, smoking. As I watched, one of them kicked the door that led to the dance studio. I pushed open the car door, but by the time I'd rounded the car, they'd already taken off. I'd glanced up and down the road and found no other cars or people. Which isn't unusual in this part of London. Not that London isn't a safe place, in general, but this is one of the shabby chic parts of the East End. It is up and coming, but still rough in parts. Many of the buildings have been converted to either offices or the kind of loft apartments that sell for millions. The remaining apartments are low-cost council housing. There's nothing in between. The extremes are what makes it dangerous.

It's why I'd asked Ava, once again, to move her studio somewhere safer, but she'd declined. Serves me right. I had insulted her pride when I'd criticized her studio, and in front of her friend. Of course, she's not going to back down about it now. Woman is stubborn. It leaves me no choice but to ensure I watch over her as closely as possible to secure her safety. But she is inside the building now. Which means she won't emerge until late evening, once her classes are completed. Luckily, Ava is a creature of habit. I could set my clock by her.

Is she as habitual when it comes to men? Is she as loyal? Does she still have feelings for Edward? Shit. I drag my fingers through my hair. Standing in the middle of the road, contemplating their relationship isn't helping me at

all. Nor had the filthy words that I'd spoken to her last night—which, as she'd guessed, I'd done for effect...in the hope of scaring her off. Not that it had worked. It had only served to get her back up. She'd marched into her bedroom, leaving me with a raging boner... One which I'd been sporting since I'd made her come. Fuck. When she'd come apart on my tongue... I swear, I could taste her cum through the fabric of her leggings...and her panties. Assuming she'd been wearing panties... Were they the same ones she'd been wearing when I'd sprung up from my sleep and taken her down?

I could have seriously hurt her... Fuck... See? That's the reason I've imposed this restraint on myself. No, I am doing the right thing keeping away from her. So, why am I still standing here watching the window of her studio like a schmuck? She'll be safe there for a few more hours. I can use that time to pound the frustration out of my system.

I turn back to the SUV, climb inside and ease onto the road. In half an hour, I've reached my destination.

Grabbing my gym bag from the back of the car, I head inside the building. Situated right next to the Dorchester Hotel, in the center of the city, it's prime real estate. If it were converted to flats, it likely would fetch an annual income equivalent to the GDP of a small third-world country. But Jace, the owner and a friend of the Seven, prefers to keep the gym inside intact.

When he'd learned that I'm back in town, he'd reached out to me and offered me the use of the gym, which I had gladly accepted.

I walk up the steps and into the large room with the boxing ring in the center. Walking into the dressing room, I emerge a few minutes later clad in shorts and a T-shirt. Binding my hands, I pull on my boxing gloves and head for the punching bag. I swing at the bag, punch it again and again. Ten minutes in, I am panting. Sweat beads my upper body, my forehead, and my T-shirt sticks to my skin. I take a break, wipe the sweat from my face. Raise my fists again, when footsteps sound.

"Want to go a round?"

I stiffen, turn around to find Sinner standing behind me.

"With you?" I scoff.

"Scared I'll whip your arse?" he taunts.

I shake my head. "You arrogant twat." I nod toward his office wear. "You going to change out of your pretty boy clothes?"

"No need." He walks to where a chair is positioned next to the ring.

Shrugging off his jacket, he hangs it across the back of the chair, then unbuttons his cuffs and pulls off his shirt. I walk over to the ring and climb in, wait for Sinclair to join me.

The squeak of shoes on the flooring warns me about the arrival of the others.

Weston ambles in, followed by Damian, Arpad, and a guy I don't recognize.

Sinclair binds his hands, then steps into the ring as he pulls on his gloves. He rolls his shoulders, bounces around on the balls of his feet as he takes position.

"Who's the new guy?" I ask.

He glances over his shoulder, then turns back to me. "Liam Kincaid."

"Any relation to Weston?"

"His brother. He's also the second richest man in the UK," he mutters.

"Who's the first?"

He scowls back at me and I raise my hands. "That would be you, I take it?"

He smirks. "So, what are you wagering?"

"Wasn't aware this was that type of a fight."

"I only fight for high stakes, and you know that."

"Hmm." I smack my gloved hands together. "If I win, you let go of whatever grudge it is you hold against me."

"And if you lose?"

"I won't try to get back in with the Seven again."

He tilts his head, then nods. "Deal."

I take my stance, when he straightens again. "Hang on, we need a referee." He turns and calls out, "Liam, care to referee our fight here?"

Liam prowls forward. "You're aware I won't do you any favors?"

"Wouldn't expect anything less." Sinclair bares his teeth. Liam nods. He struts over, springs onto the platform in a lithe move that belies his size, then ducks inside the ring.

"And you are?" He turns to me.

"Baron." I jerk my chin at him, and he turns to Sinclair.

"You sure you want to take him on? He seems in much better shape than you."

Sinclair scowls. "Just stick to your allocated role."

He twists his lips, then steps back.

Sinclair and I face each other.

"I let you off too lightly the last time," he mutters.

"Bullshit." I roll my shoulders. "We had polite company watching, so I spared you. This time, it's no holds barred, asshole." I spring forward and bury my fist in his stomach. The breath rushes out of him. He stumbles back, only to recover as I swipe my fist forward. He ducks, swiping at me. I lean aside and his fist slides past my face. I aim for his solar plexus, but he swings first and catches me in the shoulder. The same shoulder he hit yesterday. Motherfucker. Pain sizzles up my spine; I shove it aside, aim for his forehead, connect. His head snaps back. I follow up with an uppercut. He evades me, lands his fist in my side. My ribs protest as sparks flash behind my eyes. Fuck me. I move back, circle, and he does the same. We move at the same time. Clash in the center, chest to chest, arms wrapped around each other. Forehead to forehead.

"Give up," he growls.

"Never." One arm locked around his shoulder, I aim for his ribs, but can't get a hit in, as he continuously keeps moving...and me with him. We stay locked in the dance, trying to hit each other, failing, holding each other's gaze. No way, am I going to blink first. Neither will he. Shit. He grabs the backs of my shoulders, thrusting his face into mine. "Give in."

"No fucking way," I snarl, pulling free, land a hit in his side, then I kick his legs out from under him. He falls on his back, and I follow him down on one knee, pressing my gloved hand against his windpipe.

The referee whistles.

I ignore it, bare my teeth at Sinner.

"You cheated," he snaps out.

"All's fair in war. You were the one who taught me that, remember?"

"Is this war?" He raises an eyebrow.

I scowl down at him, then release him and rise to my feet.

"You two were only trying to kill each other, I take it?" Liam drawls.

"How did you guess?" I smirk, then turn and hold out my hand.

Sinner stares at it for a second, before reaching out and grasping it. I haul him up to his feet. We scowl at each other for a second, then he nods. "Good fight."

"Yeah," I glance down at his Italian loafers, "next time you should wear the right footwear. It makes a difference."

"You always did prefer to follow the rules," he muses.

"Yeah." I blow out a breath. "It's why I joined the army."

"And how did that turn out for you?"

"I've seen better."

"Me too." Sinclair's lips twitch.

"Your fighting skills have improved," I mutter.

"Yours haven't." He smirks.

"I've been busy recovering from the aftermath of—"

He nods. "When we found out you had been taken again..." he shakes his head, "it fucking cut us to the bone."

I squeeze my eyes shut. "Me too, bro. Me too."

"I assume this little demonstration was to show me just how loyal you are to your partners?" Liam interjects. "If so, consider the message received."

Sinclair nods. "You're Weston's brother, which means, there's a connection of trust which I won't breach."

"You guys done fighting?" Weston calls out from below.

I duck under the ropes, then jump down, "We're done *talking*," I retort. "And I need to get out of here, else I'll be late."

"You still on babysitting duties?" He quirks an eyebrow.

"What's it to you?" I scowl.

He pulls out a phone, swipes the screen and hands it over to me.

I stare at the phone, then stiffen. The video shows a woman dressed in a sleeveless red dress that contrasts with her pale skin and matches the red of her lips. She throws back her head and laughs at something that her companion...a man in a suit who's seated opposite her says.

The hair on the back of my neck rises. For a second there... in profile, she'd resembled my mystery girl. The one I'd spotted on the train platform a few years ago as she had thrown her head back and laughed at something that her sister had said. Goosebumps pop on my skin. Shit, this obsession with that red-haired woman of my dreams is definitely going to make me do something I am going to regret.

She tilts her head and her hair catches the light and burnished copper glints back at me. Her cheeks are rosy and her green eyes sparkle. She's, clearly, enjoying herself.

"Motherfucker," I growl. "Who sent this to you?"

"Amelie." He tilts his head. "She spotted Ava at the restaurant...which, luckily, happens to be next door."

"Next door?" I frown. "At the Dorchester?"

He nods and I brush past him, heading for the exit.

"You may want to change," he calls out.

I pause, glance down at my gym shorts and T-shirt. I'm sweaty, but who cares? Maybe she would? And if I stay to shower, no telling what the douche in a suit might get up to in that time.

Damian ambles over to us. "I know you're thinking it doesn't matter, but you don't want to be turning up there dressed like this."

"Like what?"

"Like a desperate asshole who interrupted his gym session to break up her date."

"I'm going to smash his head in," I interrupt him, "but that's beside the point."

"Aren't you getting a little too...possessive, here."

"So?"

"She's not yours. You know that, right?"

"Of course, I do," I say through gritted teeth. "I'm merely doing what Edward would have done in my place."

"That's all it is?" Sinner draws closer.

"Yes."

"You sure?" Weston asks.

"The fuck you guys care?"

"We care about you, bro," Damian says softly. "You've forgotten that when you are part of the Seven, you get all of us in your corner."

"That include Saint?" I mutter.

"Saint." Sinclair blows out a breath. "He's still pissed at you."

"What's his issue?" I rub the back of my neck. "You'd think I did something to personally anger him."

"Of the lot of us, he's the most sentimental," Weston offers.

"Saint." I stare at him. "You're joking, right?"

Weston holds my gaze, then smirks.

"You *are* joking." I roll my shoulders. "You had me there, for a second, Wes. I'd forgotten just how good an actor you are."

"We haven't forgotten what you've been through," Damian retorts. "You could have reached out to us when you were released. You could have come home."

"I came now."

"After that asshole, Edward, found a way to get you back," Sinclair

declares.

I scowl. "Wait. Hold on. Edward didn't do anything. I came back of my own volition."

"After he told you he needed your help," Weston reminds me.

"Wait, so you all think it was an elaborate plan on his part to get me here?"

"Maybe he killed two birds with one stone." Damian lifts his shoulders.

"He always was the most strategic of the lot of us." Sinclair rubs his jaw.

Liam draws abreast. "It was fun while it lasted but...I have to get going."

"Oh?" Sinclair asks, "Important date?"

"A wedding rehearsal."

"You mean your wedding rehearsal, don't you?" Weston pipes up, and Liam shoots him a dirty glare.

"See you later, *little* brother."

He stalks out.

"Why do I get the feeling he's not happy about his upcoming nuptials?" Damian stares after him.

"Because he isn't?" Weston suggests.

"So why go through with it?"

"Inheritance." Weston shrugs. "What can I say? We one-percenters find all the possible ways to make it complicated for our offspring to live their lives. In this case, if older brother, here, doesn't get married and produce an heir soon, he doesn't get access to the family business nor to his trust fund."

I wince. "Complicated."

"You're telling me?"

"Good thing I don't have such issues."

"You don't have an empire to inherit, either," Damian reminds me.

"I make enough from 7A investments—thanks to you jokers—to not worry about money for a long time," I retort. "Besides, some of us want more than just money."

"Not that old chestnut." Sinclair smirks.

"Speak for yourself, married motherfucker." I scowl.

"Married and soon to be a father," Sinclair declares.

There's silence, then Damian slaps him on the back.

Weston grips his shoulder. "Congratulations, bro!"

A hot sensation stabs in my chest. What the hell? Why am I jealous of what he has? I made a choice, remember? Besides, I'd never be safe with any

woman. Remember what happened just last night?

I reach forward, hold out my hand and Sinclair shakes it. "Congratulations," I mutter. "I am happy for you."

Sinclair grins, and that throws me. Jesus, in all the time I've known him since the incident, he's never seemed this happy. Is that what being married to the right woman does to you? Makes you more human?

Can I afford to be more human? Can I allow myself to feel the gamut of emotions that comes with being with the right woman? Hell, I know the answer to that. I may have found her, but I am not right for her. I can't jeopardize her safety any more than I already have. I need to stick to my promise, ensure that she is okay, keep her safe until Edward returns.

I turn, head for the shower. "Give me five minutes."

"It's not that I'm a social recluse and never had any friends. And it's true that sometimes I prefer staying home on a Friday night with a good book and a hot chocolate; that doesn't mean that the only reason that I had imaginary friends was because I felt lonely..."

-From Ava's Diary

Ava

"So, you're a dancer?"

The man on the other side of the table leans forward. His gaze takes me in and his eyes light up appreciatively.

"Uh, yeah. I am a dance instructor and I also have set pieces I perform at events, and on stage."

"Unusual profession."

"Nothing wrong with being a dancer," I say stiffly.

"Of course, not." He holds up his hands. "It was just a comment. I am sorry if I offended you."

I blow out a breath. *Come on, you can try to be civil. It's not his fault that he's not Baron...or Edward.* I shake my head, tip up my chin.

"And you?" I frown into his muddy brown eyes. "What do you do again, Calvin?"

"It's Kevin." He frowns.

"Kevin," I correct myself, "sorry. You said you work in an office, right?"

Not that I remember, but what are the chances he doesn't.

"Actually, I am a fireman."

"A fireman?" I glance at him closely. His dark hair is pushed back from his face, his eyes are intelligent, his chin shaved, and he's wearing a shirt, that outlines the breadth of his shoulders which, although not as impressive as Baron's (or Edward's), are decent enough to indicate that he does not, in fact, spend all of his time behind a desk.

"So, you fight fires?" I murmur.

"That's what firemen are known to do, yes." He grins and his eyes twinkle. Actually, they are not a muddy brown as much as a gray brown. Nowhere near the amber of another man. A man whom I had met and lost in such a short period of time that I am beginning to wonder if he'd been a figment of my imagination. Then I look at Baron and I know he isn't. Baron's a reminder of the Seven, and that includes Edward...

So yeah, he'd definitely been real. I only have to tune into my body to remember how he'd possessed me. How he'd taken me and imprinted himself into every cell of my body in such a short period of time. I squeeze my finger around the stem of my wine glass so hard that the ruby red liquid spills out. The stain blots the white table cloth and I swallow. Tears prick the backs of my eyes. Damn it, what is wrong with me, that such a small incident is pushing me over the edge? Bloody Baron. It's all his fault that I am strung so tight. It's because of him that I am here, faking interest in a man—who, to be honest, isn't all that bad looking, or boring, coming to think of it. He isn't Edward or Baron, though.

"You okay?" His voice cuts through my thoughts.

I glance up at him and shake my head. "Yeah, sorry, been a long few days."

"Want to talk about it?" The lines around his eyes deepen. He really is good-looking. Too bad he isn't either of the men who are currently on my mind. Men? Did I just think men? Why the hell am I thinking of them in the plural? Edward is gone; Baron is here. If anything, it's only Baron I should be thinking of right now. Or should I? Is it healthy to switch from one man to the other so quickly? I drag my fingers through my hair. This entire situation is getting out of hand. I rise to my feet, and he rises with me. "Everything all right?"

"Y...yeah." I swallow, "Just going to the restroom."

"You sure you're fine?"

"Yes," I force my lips to curve, "I'll be right back."

I head past the other diners—couples, families—all eating, enjoying themselves on a night out before they go home to their lives, their safety nets, their little corners of the world filled with love and happiness.

And me? What about me? What have I done, except screw up every single thing in my life? I'd had the chance to become a doctor and had dropped out. Then, I'd met Edward, and instead of turning away, I'd headed for the one thing I'd known I could never have. And then Baron. What the hell am I even doing, planning this entire charade...for his benefit? Why couldn't I simply *not* act on my impulses this time? Why can't I have a normal, safe, boring life? Because I am an idiot. Because I'll never be content with a life where I don't truly feel. Because I have to be fully engaged in everything I do. Because I can't live half a life. Because I have to be true to myself, and to what I want, no matter that it's unconventional. No matter if it is not how things are done in the rest of the world. Because...

I want him. As much as I want Edward. There, I've said it. Well, I've thought it. I walk into the restroom, reach the sink and grip the edge. I stare at myself in the mirror. The pale cheeks, the lipstick almost bitten off, my hair about my shoulders. "Why...why do you always have to go after what you can't have? Why do you have to be different? Why can't you be...normal?"

"Because you could try to hide in a crowd, and yet, you'd always stand out."

I whip my head around to find Baron stepping into the restroom.

"Because you are a shining star in the night sky." He meets my gaze, and his jaw tics. "Because you're the one unbroken seashell on the shore." He folds his arms across his chest. "And I am not going to let you walk out of here until you admit that you set up this scene to get my attention."

I straighten, fold my arms and mirror his stance. "G...get out." Shit, why am I stuttering? I am not nervous. I am not. I square my shoulders, scowl at his reflection in the mirror. "This is the ladies' room," I insist. "You shouldn't be here."

He bares his teeth. "This is exactly where I need to be."

I huff, "I am with someone else." I hold his gaze. "He's out there waiting for me."

"So, what are you doing here?"

I reach for the paper towels, pretend to dry my hands. "I was just leaving, actually." I turn and march up to the door, but of course, he doesn't move.

"Get out of the way," I hiss.

"Not until you tell me what you want."

"What I want," I flip my hair over my shoulder, "is for you to leave me alone."

"Funny, from where I am," he looks me up and down, "it seems like quite the opposite."

"Your ego is showing," I snap.

"And you," he widens his stance, "are lying."

"No."

"Yes."

"Let me go."

"No."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Me?" He glares at me. "I'm not the one pretending to be on a date in order to draw attention to myself."

I gape at him. "You have some nerve...you...you asshole."

"Alphahole." His grin widens. "I prefer alphahole."

"What-bloody-ever." I huff, "If you don't get out of my way, I'll..."

"What, what will you do?"

"I'll scream."

"No, you won't."

I gape at him, open my mouth...then shut it. "Damn you," I hiss. "Why did you have to come back and spoil everything?"

His jaw tightens, then he flexes his shoulders. "Your insults do nothing to me."

"So, what are you doing here then?"

"Making sure you don't do anything that you'll regret later."

"What do you mean?" I scowl.

"Your date. Ditch him."

My jaw drops. "What the hell? If you think you can rule my life—"

"Think?" He looks me up and down. "I have news for you, I already do."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do."

"You...you have no claim on me."

"Edward does."

"He lost any rights when he left."

"He had his reasons."

I clench my fists at my sides, "Oh, so now you're defending him?"

"Only because he's not here to do it himself." He shuffles his feet. "Look...just...do as I say and we can pretend this never happened."

"You mean, I should pretend that you didn't just come marching in here like a rhinoceros—"

"Rhinoceros?"

"Okay, alphaceros."

"First time I've been called that... Whatever that is."

I draw in a breath, try to clear my head. "Just... Let me walk out of here, and we can forget this ever happened."

"Nope." He smirks.

My jaw drops, "Seriously, you're a piece of work."

"I aim to impress."

"Far from," I scoff.

"You don't know it yet, but you are," his grin widens, "impressed."

"No, I'm not." I scowl at him. "And you're fooling yourself if you think otherwise."

The smile fades from his face. He peers into my eyes, and his gaze intensifies, "It's too late," he mutters, almost to himself. "I did meet you, and now I can't get you out of my head."

"Wh...what do you mean?" I swallow. "What are you trying to say?"

"You heard me." His eyes gleam. "You set up this entire charade, knowing it would get to me, didn't you?"

"N...no."

"Yes, you did. Admit it."

"I'll do no such thing." I firm my lips. "What I do with my life is of no consequence to you."

"You're right."

"I am?"

He nods. "Everything you do is not just of consequence, but it affects me. Since I saw you, I can't stop thinking of you. Everywhere I look, I see you. Every time I get a whiff of jasmine, images of you, your curves, your sweet tits, the way your cunt responds to my ministrations—all of it overcomes me."

"Oh," I breathe, "wh...what are you trying to say?"

"That I should give into this overwhelming need to throw you down and take you, but—"

"But you won't." I complete the statement for him.

He nods.

"Then let me out."

"Doesn't mean I can't make you come again."

14

Ava

"Wh...what?" He moves forward and I skitter back. "What do you mean?"

"What I said earlier."

"You...can't be serious."

"Don't pretend you didn't enjoy it the last time."

"So, what if I did?" I jut out my chin. "Doesn't mean I want it again."

"Don't you?" His eyes gleam as if he's enjoying a private joke.

"Asshole."

"Told you, I prefer alphahole."

"And I prefer...that you step aside and let me pass."

"Not happening." He takes another step in my direction. I slide back until my hip touches the washbasin.

"Turn around, grip the edge of the sink," he says.

"No." I set my jaw.

"Oh?" He reaches out, circles my throat, his grip gentle... Too gentle. I need him to curl those thick fingers around my nape, to hold me down as he shoves aside my panties and plants his swollen dick inside me... Like Edward did. Jesus, I need to stop thinking of both of them in the same breath, same vision, same time. No, no, no.

His grasp intensifies, and goosebumps pop on my skin.

"Don't," I swallow, "don't do it."

"Say 'no' one more time, and I'll step back. I'll leave here and walk out and you'll never see me again."

Say it. Do it. It's what you want, right? I'd staged this entire charade for his benefit and now, when he is here and finally intent on giving me physical pleasure—again, I am losing my nerve. Damn it, what's happening to me? Do I want him to leave? And then...what? He returns to keeping vigil in his car? And I see him when I bring him coffee? And he follows me home every night, interrupts my dates like this, threatens to give me an orgasm, without ever committing to me? Do I want him to commit to me...when my heart still belongs to Edward? Is this the way forward? To allow myself some level of physical comfort with him? Allow him to pleasure me, to use my body, to fill my thoughts and my mind with his touch, his scent, his nearness, so that, temporarily at least, I can forget about how it could have been with Edward?

"Fine," I whisper.

"Fine?"

I nod. I bring my hands up to grip his wrist, the circumference so thick that my fingers barely meet around it. "I...I'll do as you ask."

His gaze intensifies, then he jerks his chin. He releases me, only to grasp my waist and turn me like we were in some kind of dance. I face his reflection in the mirror.

"Bend over."

Before I can comply, he kicks my legs apart.

I squeak. He presses his wide palm into the center of my back and pushes down. I comply and a breath whooshes out of him. "My god, Eve, you should look at yourself."

"Wh...what did you call me?"

"Hmm?" He drags his fingers down to cup my arse and all thoughts leak from my head. Moisture pools in my center and my toes curl.

"This dress?" He swipes his hand down my thigh, until it grazes the hem. "I fucking hate it."

"It's a perfectly nice dress," I protest.

"And you wore it for another man."

"You have no claim on me."

"I am the one protecting you."

"From what?" I mutter, "Likely, imaginary enemies who are a figment of your imagination—"

His hand connects with my backside and I gasp. "What the hell?"

"Shh!" He slaps my right arse cheek, then the left, and the right, so rapidly that I forget to scream. Forget to protest, forget to do anything else

but focus on the heat that pools between my legs. Jesus. I am soaked, and all he's done is spank me. What the hell is wrong with me, that I crave how he hurts me? How he anchors me with his hold on my pussy as he slides his hand around and grips me between my legs. I moan and behind me he goes rigid. "You like this." His voice lowers to a hush. He yanks my dress up around my waist, then pushes aside my panties and shoves his fingers inside my cunt.

"Baron," I groan, "Omigod, Baron."

"Yeah, that's it, baby. Just like that," he croons as he begins to work his fingers in and out of me. In and out. In and out.

My belly clenches; my thighs tremble. A bead of sweat works its way down my temple. "Oh!" I whine. "Please, please."

"What do you want, baby?" He grabs my hair and tugs it back with enough force that my scalp protests. Pain slithers down my spine, arrowing straight to that groaning, growling, emptiness deep inside of me that stutters and coils in on itself.

"Please." I gulp, "Please make it stop."

"Like this?" He pulls his fingers out of me, only to reach back and tear my panties off.

"O-Oh." I stutter.

"How many more ways can you say, 'Oh'... Shall we find out?"

He releases his grip on my hair, and before I can turn around, he's dropped down to his knees between my legs. He shoves his face between my thighs, licks my slit, all the way up to between my arse cheeks.

"Ohh," I moan, "Ohhh, Baron."

I sense his lips curve against my sensitive skin, a second before he grabs my arse cheeks and squeezes them apart. Pain vibrates out from the point of contact and my core seems to melt. I grip the edge of the sink, push out my butt and lower my forehead to the cool ceramic surface.

He swipes his tongue up my pussy, thrusts his tongue inside my melting core. At the same time, he slides his thumb inside my puckered hole and I squeal. "Oh, no, no, no, no."

He pauses, "Is that a yes, Eve?"

I hesitate, then nod.

"Say it."

"Yes."

"Like you mean it, Eve," he orders.

"Yes, you bastard," I huff, "you alphahole, you—"

He bites down on my pussy and I cry out. He curves his thumb inside my back channel, as he brings his fingers up to pinch on my clit. The climax screams up my legs, and that's when someone knocks on the door.

He pulls his fingers and his tongue out of me, and the orgasm recedes.

"No!" I yell.

"Is that a no, darlin'?"

"No," I growl, "you sadist, it's not."

"Then what is it?"

"If you don't make me come in the next five seconds—"

Someone bangs on the door, then a woman's voice yells, "Customers need to use the restroom, can you—?"

"NO," I yell, "go away!"

"But—" the woman protests.

"I'll be out in—" I stare at the jerkass from the corner of my eyes, "three —" He raises his eyebrows. "Five minutes."

"I'll have to call security ma'am."

"You do what you have to do," I retort. "Just go away, now."

The steps recede, and I level my gaze on him, "If you don't put your mouth on me—"

He shoves his tongue inside my channel, grinds his heel into my clit and the breath whooshes out of me.

"Omigod. Omigod."

He works his tongue in and out of me, then slides his fingers up to strum my pussy lips; at the same time, he slides his finger, no, two fingers, inside my backchannel and I explode. The orgasm crashes through me and I cry out. Tendrils of heat flare out from where he continues to eat me out. Continues to worry my clit, to squeeze the swollen nub, which sends another shudder racing through me. Aftershocks of pleasure-pain grip me, and I slump. He rises to his feet and catches me, turns me around, rights my clothes. He leans forward until our eyelashes tangle and I am sure that he is going to kiss me. Instead, he pats my cheek. "Next time I'll make you come in 60 seconds."

He turns to leave and I blink. *Wait, what?* What was that about? He reaches the door, twists the handle to open it.

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Exactly what you heard, babe." He half turns his head to fix me with his gaze. "Assuming there's a next time, of course."

Turning, he leaves.

15

Ava

I run out of the door, watch as he disappears up the corridor, toward what I assume is the back door of the restaurant. I step toward him, when someone grips my arm.

"Are you okay?"

I jerk my head around to find Calvin—I mean, Kevin—holding my elbow. I glance down at where his fingers press into my skin, then up at him. Instantly, he releases me and steps back. "I came to give you this." He holds out my handbag and jacket.

"Oh," I take the jacket, shrug into it, then grab my bag, "thank you, I was coming back—"

"No, you weren't."

No, I wasn't. And maybe I should be embarrassed about it, but to hell with that. I am not going to regret my actions. I tip up my chin, meet his gaze.

"It's okay," he holds up his hands, "I know you're with someone else."

"No, I'm not."

"Hmm." He raises his shoulders. "If you say so."

"Look," I blow out a breath, "it's just that you aren't—"

"Him." Kevin jerks his chin toward the backdoor.

"Y...yeah," I mumble. "You're a good man, Kevin. It's just..." I shake my head. "Sorry, I should have never agreed to this date."

"Hey," he half smiles. "at least, now I know what it means to be in love."

"I'm not in love—"

He shakes his head, then stabs his thumb at the door. "You'd better catch him before he leaves."

"Yeah." I walk forward, then turn back toward him for a moment. "I truly am sorry." I break into a run, reach the door, shove it open and step out into the chilly, late evening air. Of course, the door leads into an alley. I sprint past the dumpster, past a stool with a cup overflowing with cigarettes. I reach the street, glance in either direction, don't find any trace of him. Shit, did I lose him? Why did he have to give me such an incredible orgasm then spoil it all with that...that comment about making me come in sixty seconds? My core clenches. Shit, why is it that just thinking about his hands on me, his tongue inside me, his mouth eating me out, turns me on so...so much?

I turn and walk up the street, toward the tube station. A gust of wind blows and I huddle into my coat. I reach the entrance to the subway that leads to the tube station, then hesitate. I glance around me, but there's no one. I pull out my phone and glance at the time. It's only 10pm, not that late. It should be okay, right? I take a step forward, hesitate, then snort. Watching too many movies, that's my problem. It's only a short distance to the tube. I'm sure it's going to be fine. I head down the steps, walk into the subway tunnel.

Footsteps sound behind me. I turn, find no one there. Strange. The hair on the nape of my neck rises. Shit, shit, shit, why had I not obeyed my instincts? Movies are based on real life, after all, and often, fact is stranger than fiction. I break into a run, heading for the steps that lead onto the platform of the tube station. If I can make it there, I'll be fine. There are bound to be tube staff around, not to mention, other passengers.

I just need to get down the next set of stairs and— A man bounds up the steps, wearing a black suit with black loafers. What the hell, is he a commuter?

Then, he plants himself in my path and I know he's not. I stop so suddenly that I stumble. Footsteps approach me from behind. I swing around to find there are two men closing in on me from the other side. Both are dressed in suits in varying shades of black. Shit, what is this? Who are these guys? I turn, back up, take a step back, another. The first man I'd seen moves toward me and I stumble back. My hip grazes the wall and a scream tumbles from my lips. "Who...who are you?" I reach for my bag, hold it out in front of me like a weapon. As if that's going to help.

The man chuckles and the sound echoes around the space. The hair on my forearms rises. My stomach twists in knots. Shit, now I know why villains on

screen have an evil laugh. Because they do so in real life, as well.

Shit, this is not good, not good. Someone will be along to help me soon, right?

He takes another step forward and I flatten myself against the wall. "G... get away from me." Shit, why is my voice trembling? If I come across as scared, that will only goad him. I stiffen my shoulders, tip up my chin. "Don't come closer."

I glance around the space, searching for CCTV cameras. There's one in the corner, but it hangs crookedly from the ceiling. Clearly, it's been disconnected. No, no, no, this can't be happening.

The man walks toward me and I cry out, "Come near me and I'll scream."

His grin widens. He reaches me, grabs my shoulder, and I howl. I raise my hand bag and back-hand him across his face. His neck snaps back. He stumbles back, then straightens. Blood drips from his nose. His features twist and he leaps forward, grabs me by my arm, then swings me around with such force that my cheek connects with the hard wall. Lights flash behind my eyes and pain lashes down my spine. My guts twist; the acrid taste of bile fills my mouth. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* Why had I stepped into the subway? Why are these guys attacking me? Where the hell is the jerkass alphahole when I need him? If you're out there, Baron, now would be a good time to show yourself.

My attacker moves closer, presses his body into mine. The scent of something metallic, coated with the greasy smell of burned meat, assails my nose. I gag, try to shake myself free, and something cold pushes into my neck.

"Stop struggling or I'll slit your throat."

I freeze. Try to draw in a breath, but my lungs burn. Shit, shit, shit, what the hell is happening? Am I caught up in a nightmare? He presses the metallic surface—a knife?—into my neck. Pain spirals out from the contact. Drops of something slither down my neck and I know it's blood. OMG, he is going to kill me, he is going to... The man grabs my hip and my heart slams into my chest. No, he is going to do something worse. He is going to— Cool air grazes my back and the scent of pine trees laces my nostrils.

I hear the sound of something smashing into the ground, then the entire tunnel seems to reverberate. I turn, already knowing what I am going to find, and yet, I can't stop the gasp of surprise when I see Baron bring his leg down—hard—into the stomach of the fallen man.

The bastard groans, tries to rise. Baron steps on him, kicks out his other

leg to take out another guy, then lunges forward to throw himself at the third. The two go down, roll, hit the opposite wall. The second man he'd hit rises to his feet, attacks him. He grapples while one guy clings to his back, the other in front, who swipes out his fist. Baron swerves and the fist connects with the man behind him. The sound of breaking bones, the *thwap* of knuckles connecting with flesh, then the man yells, lumbering back. The man on the ground stirs and I don't think twice. I stomp my foot squarely on his groin. The guy yells, reaching forward. I step back, kicking him in the shin. The second guy, meanwhile, turns around and lurches for me. I grab my hand bag and swing it up. It connects with his chin and he cries out. He stumbles back, just as Baron throws the third against the wall.

His head connects with the hard surface and he slumps to the ground.

Baron turns, rushes toward the second guy, wraps his hand around his neck, and flings him to the side.

I stumble the other way and Baron brushes past me. He grabs the guy on the ground, hauls him up to his feet and throws him into the wall. "You dare to touch her? You put your hands on her, you motherfucker." He closes his fingers around his face and shoves the back of his head into the wall again and again. The man's body jerks. His eyelids close and his body slumps. Still, Baron doesn't stop. "Bastard. How dare you threaten her? Scum, fucking shitstain of a human, I'm going to kill you, I—"

I jump forward grab his arm. "Stop," I yell, "you are going to kill him!"

Baron shakes me off, his gaze focused on the other guy, "Motherfucker, you dare come near her? I am going to make sure you're never able to touch another woman again."

"Baron!" I scream at him. I throw myself at him, grab his arm and plead with him, "Please, we need to go before someone finds us."

He pauses. His shoulders heave and his breath comes in pants.

"Baron, please, I am tired and—"

He releases the man and turns on me so fast that I blink. He looks me up and down, "Are you wounded?" He closes the distance between us, searches my features. "Did he hurt you?"

"Y...yes," I whisper, "but you hurt me more."

16

Baron

Her lips tremble and her chin wobbles. She squeezes her fingers together, and her knuckles are white. Damn it, I am responsible for this. I allowed my emotions to get the better of me. I walked out of there, left her unprotected for ten minutes, and what happened? They got to her. When I'd seen him put his hands on her, something inside me had detonated. My vision had tunneled; all thoughts had emptied from my head. All I'd known was that he'd touched her. He'd dared to threaten what's mine. She isn't mine. She is...his...but he'd charged me with taking care of her. One simple thing and I had failed. And now...she says I hurt her more than those bastards did? What the fuck?

"How?" I growl, "How did I hurt you?"

"Now you ask?" She tries to shove the hair back from her face but her hand shakes. "You...you walked out on me, you ass. After you made me come. You treated me like I was some kind of...of fuck toy."

"No, I didn't." I wrap my fingers about her throat. "If I had, you wouldn't be standing here mouthing off to me. And after putting yourself at risk."

Her jaw drops and color creeps into her cheeks. Good. At least, she is getting over the shock.

"I put myself at risk?" she hisses at me. "You think I am at fault?"

I nod. "Ever since I saw you, you've crawled under my skin. You've occupied my thoughts, broken through my ability to concentrate. You pushed me to the edge until I had no choice but to walk out on you for your own

protection."

"And see how that turned out?" She waves a hand in the air. "Are you happy now?"

I shake my head, apply enough pressure on her throat that her eyes widen. "You are so fucking fragile. I can off you so easily, you'd never even see it coming."

She swallows. "And is that what you want?"

I shake my head again. "I don't know what I want."

"That makes two of us." She shivers and I release my hold on her. I step back, look her up and down, then grip her hand, "Come on, let's get out of here."

I stalk forward, pulling her along. She stumbles, then protests, "Walk slower."

"You need to keep up."

"My legs are shorter than yours, asshole."

"You don't say?" I pause so suddenly she crashes into me. Then, turning, I scoop her up,

"Hey, what the hell? I can walk."

"And see how that turned out?"

She huffs, wriggles around in my arms. I pull her close, her handbag jammed in between us. "Stop it," I growl.

"Or what?"

"Or I'll have to take my hand to your arse when we get to the car."

Her breath hitches. "I'd like to see you do that."

"I'm sure you would." I allow a smirk to curve my lips. "Just as it turns you on to be brought to orgasm with the threat of being discovered in a public place."

"You know nothing," she snaps.

"I know that I am never again letting you go anywhere unguarded."

She freezes, then glances up at me. "Who were those men?"

I set my jaw. If she thinks I am going to tell her anything that could upset her further, she's crazy.

"Don't do that," she snaps, and I stare down at her, before glancing forward again.

"Don't do what?"

"Don't treat me like I am some stupid woman who doesn't know what's happening around her half the time."

"Trust me, if you were, that would make my job so much easier."

"Job?" She raises her voice, "So I am just a job for you, is it?"

Of course, not. Damn her. What the hell does she want me to admit? That from the moment I'd laid eyes on her, this entire plan had been shot to hell? That I should have tasked one of the Seven with protecting her? That I should have turned away and ensured I had nothing to do with her? As if I would have been able to do that. I'll never allow any other man close to her again. And Edward? What about your once best friend? After all, it's thanks to him that you met her. It's because of him that you returned to your life, that you found your life. I tighten my arms and stare ahead of me. "No," I say stiffly, "you're not just a job. You've never been just a job, and you know that."

"Do I?" I sense her stare up at me, but refuse to return her gaze. "Do I know anything about you, Baron?"

"You know enough."

"Spoken like a man," she gripes.

"That's me, all right." I reach the SUV, beeping the doors unlocked as I approach. I lower her to her feet, opening the door for her. She steps in, throws her bag down on the dashboard, then folds her arms across her chest. "You're a jerk."

I bend over her and she freezes. I tug on her seatbelt, snap it into place, then straighten. Her breath catches in her throat; her chest rises and falls. I smirk down at her, "You didn't think I was going to kiss you there, did you?"

"You—" She raises her fist, as I slam the door shut. Good, she's angry. I can work with that. It'll take her mind off what just happened, while I track down whoever was responsible for that attack, though I have my suspicions. I open my door on the driver's side, then slide in and slam it shut behind me. The entire vehicle rocks.

"What crawled up your pants?" she mutters. "I'm the one who was attacked. If anyone should be angry, it's me."

I turn on her and she meets my gaze head on.

I reach for her, then curl my fingers. "Shut up," I growl. "Not another word out of you."

She sets her jaw, but not before I spot the trembling of her lips. Shit, she is upset. Of course, she's upset and emotional. She was just attacked. I'd let her out of my sight and they'd moved in. If I had been a few seconds later, they'd have hurt her. Anger thrums at my temples and my blood thuds in my veins. I turn, stare forward through the windshield, draw in a breath, another.

I can't drive like this. I need to calm down. I rotate my shoulders, glare through the darkness.

"I still don't get why you're so upset."

I move toward her so fast that she squeaks. I thrust my face right into hers. She blinks, skitters back against the window. I follow her until I'm looming over her. She tips up her chin, her green eyes glowing in the darkness. Feline eyes. Eyes of a witch. Of a siren who's entranced me. Who's dug her pretty little claws into me and is hooking me to her in such a way that there is no bloody escape. "You want to know why I'm upset?" I growl. "Want to know why I am so fucking pissed?"

"Y...yes." She nods.

"I'll tell you why I'm so angry that I can't think straight."

I grip her chin and she shudders.

I press down on her lower lip until her mouth opens. Her eyes widen. Color sweeps up her skin. Her chest rises and falls, the nipples puckered and hard and pointing up at me, beckoning to me, beseeching me to squeeze them, tug on them, tweak them so hard that she feels it all the way to the sweet spot between her legs. The soft flesh there contracting, swelling, and filled with heat and wetness, so when I finally take her, I'll slam right into her, up to the hilt. When I finally cram my dick inside her tight little pussy, she'll be ready and willing and open. She'll take all of me, she'll clamp her cunt around my shaft and—

A moan bleeds from her lips and I lower my gaze to her mouth. "Why did you have to be so delectable, so gorgeous, so fucking beautiful, inside and out?"

She swallows. I lower my head and breathe in the exotic perfume of jasmine, and below that, the lush scent of raspberries.

My cock instantly hardens. The blood drains to my groin and my pulse throbs behind my eyelids, at my temples, in my fucking balls. I raise my head and stare into her eyes, "Fuck you, for what you do to me, and fuck me, for what I am going to do to the both of us."

She parts her lips, "What do you—?"

I close my mouth over hers.

17

Ava

Omigod, his lips are hard and soft at the same time and his tongue... He thrusts it inside my mouth as if he owns it, possesses it, owns me, and in a way, he does. Since he'd hauled me up from my freefall on the sidewalk as I'd watched Edward pull away, and he'd taken care of me and carried me inside the house, I'd known then that I need him. Is that why Edward had asked him to take care of me? Had he known that I'd need him? Since when had I become so dependent on another? I'd had enough courage of conviction to drop out of med school and pursue a career of my own; the kind that most people don't take seriously. And that hadn't bothered me. I had been so sure of myself, knew I had to do it to satisfy that need inside of me that only I felt. The ability to create a dance, to flow with the music, to feel the rhythm in my bones...that...was certainty.

This hot stabbing sensation in my chest, as this man pushes his lips into mine. As he releases my seat belt and pulls me to him, hauls me across the center console of the SUV and onto his lap; as he grips my hips, fits me over his crotch so his hard throbbing shaft settles between my legs? This... I have no idea what to make of it. It had been similar...yet different, with Edward. With him, every encounter had been fraught with tension, and the knowledge that it was forbidden. All of which had only made it even more erotic, more exciting, more real... More everything. With Edward...it had been this sensation that I couldn't resist as he'd drawn me closer, closer within his reach, his pull, his magnetic presence that had floored me, as I'd felt guilty

and known that there couldn't possibly be a future between us.

With Baron...the sensations are as strong, and yet, it feels freer, bigger, wider. Like he is larger than life and consuming me, owning me, imprinting his touch into my skin as he wraps his fingers around my throat in a gesture I am coming to recognize as uniquely his.

He presses his thumb down on my chin, forcing me to open my mouth wider, and he angles his head and shoves his tongue across mine. His lips flatten mine, his teeth clash against mine, and suddenly, I am straining against him. I throw my arm around his shoulders, or as much as I can reach, that is. I thrust my breasts into the hard planes of his chest and a groan rumbles from him. He digs his fingers into my hair and tugs. My scalp tingles and heat burns down my spine. My thighs clench and his hard length seems to grow even bigger, thicker, throbbing between us, digging into my soft center as he tilts his head and seems to eat me alive.

"Fuck," he whispers into my mouth and the strength of his intention seems to thicken, deepen until it presses down on the both of us. He tears his mouth from mine, stares up into my eyes. "Jesus, what you do to me, Eve."

"Eve," I clear my throat, "you called me Eve."

"Did I?" He frowns.

I nod. "It's what Edward called me too."

His face hardens and his jaw tics.

"It's just... It's too much of a coincidence that both of you call me by the same nickname, you know?"

A vein pops at his temple, and damn it, so maybe I shouldn't have said it, and definitely I shouldn't have mentioned Edward's name, but the thing is... It really is weird as hell that Baron calls me by the same nickname.

"You have to admit, it's a bit strange?" I prod.

"When Edward called me and asked me to return to watch out for you, he referred to you as Eve. I guess the name must have stuck in my head," he finally says. "Also," his gaze intensifies, "you look like an Eve."

"Oh?" I swallow. "What does an Eve look like?"

"Tempting, luscious, a siren who entrapped me the moment I set eyes on her."

My thighs clench and my toes curl. "O-o-k-a-y," I stutter.

"Is that all you have to say, *Eve*?" He lowers his face, to the junction of where my neck meets my shoulder. He sniffs, drawing in my scent, and something hot unfurls in my belly.

"Sexy Eve. Curvy Eve. Luscious Eve, who I can't wait to get my hands on. I should regret feeling the way I do about you, but you know what?"

"What?" I squeak.

"I don't."

He grabs me about my waist, lifts me back into my seat and I squeak. Whoa, when he handles me like that, like I weigh nothing... It's too sexy, way too much of a turn on. I am way out of my freakin' depth here. He leans over me then snaps my seatbelt into place.

The scent of him fills my senses and my heart begins a slow thump.

I glance away as he starts the car and eases onto the road, all in one smooth move.

We don't talk on the drive home. The silence stretches but neither of us break it.

When we reach my place, he shuts off the engine. We stay that way, wrapped in silence, unable to move, not saying anything to each other. Finally, I turn and push open my door. "Are you coming inside?"

He shoves his door open, walks around and behind me as I reach my front door. I open it, step inside then turn to him. "Those men—" I swallow.

"They won't hurt you again."

"What if they find me—?"

"They won't."

"How do you know that?"

He glares at me. "I just do."

"Do you know who they are?"

"You don't need to concern yourself with it."

"So, you know who they are?" I glower back at him. "Do they belong to the Mafia or something?"

He sets his jaw, "What makes you think that?"

"Just the way they were dressed."

"You're watching way too many movies." His scowl deepens. "Look, you really don't have to worry about it. From now on, I'll make sure that I never lose sight of you."

He steps back. "Lock the door behind you." He turns to leave.

"Wait," I call out and he pauses, then stares at me over his shoulder.

"Are you going to sleep in your car?"

He arches an eyebrow at me.

"I mean, come on, you already slept on the couch last night—"

"And look where that got us."

I squeeze my fingers together. "I... I'll make sure not to disturb you at night."

He shakes his head, "It's not a good idea, especially after—"

"What happened out there?"

He holds my gaze. "Yes, that's precisely why."

"Would that be so bad?" I whisper.

His gaze intensifies. He searches my features. "Yes," he snaps. "Yes, it would be."

"For you or for me?"

"For both of us." A nerve throbs at his temple.

"I...I don't care anymore."

"But I do." He pivots and begins to walk down the steps, and damn it, I can't let him go. Not yet. I surge forward, grip his arm, and he freezes. He glances down at where my fingers are wrapped around his arm, then he raises his gaze to mine. "Let me go."

"No," I shake my head, "I can't, Baron."

"This is not right." A muscle twitches above his cheekbone.

"Why not?" I swallow. "Edward left me. Likely, he isn't coming back."

"You don't know that."

"Even if he did... I... I don't know if I want to be with him anymore."

"Don't you?" He bends his knees, peers into my eyes. I stare into his bright blue gaze and the intensity of it sweeps through my core. My heart begins to pound and my pulse rate ratchets up. I glance away from him.

"That's what I thought."

He pulls away, stalks back to the car and this time, I let him go.

He walks around, to the driver's side, slides in, and slams the door. The echo reverberates around the empty street, wraps around me, settles inside my empty soul. I turn and walk inside, tears streaming down my cheeks.

I shut the door behind me and my bag slips from my hands. I stumble inside, to the bedroom, switch on the light, then manage to take off my clothes before stepping into the bathroom. I step inside the shower cubicle, start the shower, and the steam from the water envelops me. I sink down in a corner of the cubicle. I wrap my arms around my knees, bend my head and let the tears flow in earnest. Shit, shit, shit. I hug my knees more tightly to my chest, lower my forehead to mash it against my knees, trying to obliterate the pounding in my head. What the hell? Those men. I'm afraid to think of what

they could have done to me if Baron hadn't saved me. He rescued me. He's been taking care of me.

But I'm not over Edward. I'm not sure I ever will be. He's my first, and everything is so recent.

But Baron...I need him. I feel safe with him. When his arms are wrapped about me, when he is near me, when his scent enfolds me, it feels like anything is possible. It's as if I've found another part of me. How could something so wrong, feel so right? How can I feel so much for him in such little time? Why does everything with him feel so inevitable?

This is wrong... All wrong... I am, clearly, messed up in my head. I have been from the beginning. It's why I'd never been able to accept that my father could possibly want to be with someone else so soon after my mother's death. And here I am, attracted to two men... At the same time. What am I going to do?

I curl into myself and weep harder. Why did my Mom have to die so early? Would she have understood what I am going through? If I spoke to Raisa about it, I know what she'd say. That I don't need either of them. That's how she is—one-hundred percent devoted to her career. But that isn't me. Dance fills the creative core of me...but since I'd embraced that part of me, it's like the feminism in me had come to the fore. I want more. I want all of it. To be independent, to run my own business, to have a man, to have a family... I want it all. At least, that's what I'd thought. This curve ball that life has leveled at me... I have no idea what to do with it.

If only I could decide, one way or the other... If only I could forget about Edward... But I can't. That much is clear. He'll always be important to me... I'll always love him... And this thing with Baron? What is it, then? Shit, I have no idea. I swallow down the tears that still threaten, then rise to my feet, stumble. The ground rises up to meet me, stops, as I am hauled upright and against a hard chest.

"You came," I whisper.

"I couldn't stay away."

18

Baron

I'd pushed back my seat in the car, tried to settle in for the night, turned this way and that, tried to make myself comfortable. And failed. Those green eyes—tortured, helpless, filled with conflicting emotions that mirrored mine. The way she had met my gaze, and I had seen then what she feels for me... And then, she had looked away. And I had known she still has feelings for Edward.

Damn the man. Why does he always have to be there to turn my life upside down? Why did he have to put me in this situation while he's off doing what he does best—finding himself somewhere? If only the rest of us had that luxury... Some of us...don't even know who we are anymore. My past has been buried and no amount of searching will unearth the boy I had once been. The one before the incident, the one who'd believed he had a future. The one who'd had dreams of becoming a Cricketer, of representing his country on the pitch... I'd gone on to do that alright, just on a different kind of playing field.

One which had helped bring some discipline into my life. Which had grounded me, given me something to focus on so I could move past the tattered remains of my life. In a way, it had helped me to find a part of myself. Except, I never felt fulfilled. Never felt whole...

Not until I met her... She resonates with the deepest parts of me, the parts I've tried to hide deep inside. The parts which now insist there is more to life. Fuck. I can't afford to think that way. Can't afford this crazy attraction that

makes me want to take care of her in a completely different manner from what Edward had intended. Or had he?

Is this why he'd pushed us together?

Had he known that we'd be attracted to each other?

Had he wanted me to...fuck his woman? Keep her warm while he's away, and then what? Relinquish her when he comes back? Fuck. I'd sat up then, gotten out of the car. I'd turned toward the house, found it still in darkness, except for a faint glow from the bedroom window...and somehow...somehow... It hadn't felt right. To leave her alone after what had happened. She'd been attacked and I had hauled her back and deposited her without asking her how she was, or if she'd been hurt. If she needed anything. Yeah, I could do that. Just go in and make sure she was okay? I'd walked in—found the door unlocked and sworn aloud. Damn her, couldn't she do this one small thing that I'd asked her to do?

I'd stomped through the living room, the bedroom, and headed toward the sound of the shower of the bathroom. I shouldn't have peeked in, but in my defense, the door was open and I had wanted to make sure she was okay. Honestly, that's all it was. I'd spotted her on the floor of the shower cubicle and my heart had cracked. My legs had moved against my volition and I'd realized I was walking toward her. I'd opened the shower door and caught her as she had stumbled. Had pulled her to me, enfolding her in my embrace.

"I'm sorry...so sorry." I'm not sure what I'm apologizing for, except it feels like I should. "I'm sorry they attacked you." I tuck her head under my chin. "So sorry I didn't reach you earlier."

She clings to me, buries her head against my shirt and cries harder. I sink down and pull her into my lap. She curls into me, hooks her fingers into the lapels of my shirt and continues to sob. My heart stutters. A hot sensation stabs at my chest. I rock her against me, drag my fingers down her hair and hold her close to me.

"Shh," I croon, "it's okay, baby, let it out. I am so sorry I didn't take better care of you. I promise I won't let anyone hurt you."

She turns her face into the 'V' of skin exposed by my shirt. Her shoulders heave as the water pours down on us. I continue to rock her, rub my hand over her back. I wrap my arms around her and hold her until the sobs subside in intensity. She rubs her cheek against my chest, snuggles in further.

"Better?"

She nods.

I reach up to shut off the shower and she stiffens. "Don't leave me."

"I'm not going anywhere." I rise with her in my arms then step out onto the bathmat. "I'm going to make a mess of your space," I mutter.

She only curls up into my chest. I walk over to the counter next to the sink, try to place her on it, but she refuses to let me go.

"I need to dry you."

She shakes her head.

"I need to get out of my wet clothes," I insist.

She peeks up at me from under her eyelashes. "Can I watch?" Her green eyes flare with desire, with hurt.... With something else that I don't dare label yet.

"That...would not be advisable."

"Fuck that," she mumbles.

I bark out a laugh. "You always surprise me, you know that, Eve?"

I try to pull away and she wraps her legs around my waist, that's when I remember she is completely naked. I mean, of course, I'd known that she was naked. It just hadn't completely sunk in... Not until she presses her core into the hard column that tents my pants. "Ava." I wrap my fingers around the back of her neck and apply just enough pressure.

She tilts her chin up, gazes into my eyes. "Fuck me, Baron, please."

"If I do, we'll both regret it."

"If you don't, we'll regret it more."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I wrap her dripping locks around my hand and tug. She gasps and her breathing quickens.

"If I fuck you, there's no going back."

She swallows.

"If I shag you, I won't be able to give you up. Ever."

Her lips kick up. "And I thought men loved to fuck and walk away."

"You knew it was never going to be like that between us."

She scowls. "So, you have fucked and walked away from other women?"

I smirk. "What do you want me to say to that?"

"Nothing." Her gaze narrows. "I'd prefer you to make good on your words, instead."

"If we cross this line," I rake my gaze across her futures, "things will get very complicated."

"They already are." She licks her lips, and the blood drains to my groin.

"If I fuck you, I won't stop at half measures. I won't hold back. I'll take

everything you are willing to give me and demand anything you can't. I'll want you to give yourself to me not just physically, but emotionally, mentally. I'll possess you, body and soul. I'll imprint myself in every cell of your body. I'll own you so completely that you won't be able to separate where you begin and where I end. I'll dominate you so completely that you'll not be able to uncouple from me. I'll ask for control of your every emotion, your every thought, your every need. All of it will begin and end with me. Are you willing to take that? Ava? Are you?" I bend down and thrust my face in hers. "Tell me, will you be able to withstand this?"

19

Ava

A shudder runs down my spine. My belly trembles. If I touched myself now, I'd feel the wetness between my legs and it wouldn't be from the shower. The blood thuds at my pulse points. My head spins. The intensity of this man... And his words...? They're filthy and hot and such a freakin' turn on. Lust coils deep in my belly. My thighs clench. I try to close them, but he's standing between my legs so I only end up pushing my melting core into the hard rod that tents his pants.

"Tell me, Ava," he demands, "are you willing to submit to me?"

"I..." I swallow. "Why would I do that?"

"Because you want to?"

"That's not true." I try to pull away, but he doesn't let me.

I tip up my chin, holding his gaze, "I... I am a strong independent woman who—"

"Wants to silence her mind and inspire her body. When you are with me, nothing else will matter because you are all that matters to me. When you are with me, you don't have to think. You don't have to make choices. Well, except for deciding you want to be in this relationship with me."

His lips twist.

"When you are with me, you are exposed but free, because you know that you are safe with me. Even when participating in the most depraved and disgusting acts, and there will be many of those," his grin widens, "yet to me, you will be more beautiful than ever because I can see straight into your soul,

your vulnerability, so positively endearing yet so wildly sexy at the same time."

My thighs clench.

"When you are with me, I'll take care of all of your needs. I'll make sure that you never feel alone."

My throat dries. He lowers his head, peers into my face, "When you're with me, I'll treat you with respect and you will obey me, not only because you want to, but because you need to."

His blue eyes lighten to those burning chips of ice that cut through to my very soul.

"When you're with me, I'll fuck you like you are unbreakable, but care for you like you are the most fragile thing I have ever possessed."

The pulse between my legs flares to life. Oh, my god. Those words... I've never heard anything so filthy, so possessive, so hot... Yet so...tender. Can one man mean all those emotions in one sentence?

"You'll submit to me because I need you to. Because I need you more than you can ever need me." The skin around his eyes stretches tight. "You'll submit to me precisely because you are a powerful, independent woman who wants to unearth the deepest, darkest, most sensual parts of her personality. Because you want to know all of yourself. Because you have the courage to admit that under that sweet, strong exterior, you are as depraved as me. And because," he leans in close enough for our eyelashes to tangle, "in this relationship, the power rests with you."

"H... how's that?" I gulp.

"Without your willingness to submit, there is *no* relationship here. I may be a Dominant, but I'm not dominating you unless you are a willing Submissive. I can tell you to get on your knees, but only you can decide if you will or not." He gaze narrows, "You feel me, Eve?"

I nod.

"Say it then." His gaze lowers to my mouth, "Tell me what I want to hear from you. Say it aloud."

"Yes." I tip up my chin, "Yes. I want to be your Submissive."

His eyes gleam. "Good," he growls, "that's a good girl."

The flesh between my legs swells, throbs, pulsates to a beat that mirrors the nerve that throbs at his temple. My nipples bead, moisture pools in my core. Why did his approval just turn my world upside down? Like I have spent my entire life searching for it?

"Baron?" I whisper, "What will I have to do?"

He peels back his lips and his teeth sparkle. "Everything I ask of you."

"And what would that be?"

"To submit to my every wish, to trust me to do what is best for you. To allow me to play with you, fuck you, bend you over and bury myself inside you." He leans in closer and I have to tilt my head back to meet his gaze. "Your job will be to be on your back, thighs spread wide, to ride my cock and come all over my dick when I tell you to. To suck on my shaft if, and when, I decide you are allowed to. To turn over and loan me your arse if I decide that's where I want to take you."

My cheeks flush, the drumming between my legs seems to grow big, bigger, huge enough to take over my body. Liquid heat seeps through my veins. Sweat beads my palms. Oh, god, I want him to do all of that, and more. I want him to use me as his personal fuck toy, to make me hurt for his pleasure, to take me like I am his. To empty himself inside of me like he belongs to me.

"What would you have me do first?"

His gaze intensifies. "You don't get to ask the questions." His voice lowers to a hush, and I shiver. "Do you understand?"

I nod.

"Good." He pulls away and I lower my legs. He shrugs off his jacket, tosses it aside, then in one smooth move, reaches behind him, and with one arm, pulls off his shirt. OMG, that smooth move, that perfect, gloriously masculine, confident move... I gulp. My throat dries. All the moisture seems to have emptied to the space between my legs. His biceps flex and his chest planes undulate. I take in the expanse of his gorgeous chest, the sculpted eight-pack—yeah, definitely eight-pack—the concave stomach, the trail of hair disappearing down into his waist band. He pulls off his boots and socks, then unzips his pants and peels them off, along with his boxers. His cock springs free. Thick, long, it points up, the head dark and swollen, a vein running up from the bottom to meet the wetness that shimmers at the crown. It's a beautiful cock. As beautiful as Edward's. I swallow. This is wrong. I shouldn't be comparing them, I shouldn't. Why the hell can't I stop thinking of one without the other? Especially when he is standing in front of me, gloriously naked?

Baron rotates his shoulders. He cracks his neck and the sound seems too loud in the space. My nerve endings pop. I take in a breath and my lungs

burn. All of the oxygen in the room seems to have been sucked in by this larger-than-life asshole who looks me up and down.

"Part your legs."

I blink.

"Now."

I instantly widen my thighs. His gaze drops down to my core and his breathing intensifies. His nostrils flare. "Look at you," he murmurs. "Already wet and glistening. You're throbbing for me, aren't you, little girl? Can't wait to have my cock in your pussy. Can't wait for me to impale you, to thrust inside you, and work my shaft in and out of you. To bury myself in you to the hilt and nail you until you can't move for days."

"Oh." A moan bleeds from my lips. My pussy throbs. My stomach clenches. Moisture drools from my core. "Baron, please," I moan. "Please, please, please."

"Hmm." He winds his fingers around his fat dick and pumps himself, once, twice. His shaft increases in length, thickens, swells, and the crown throbs; precum drips from the slit on the head and my mouth waters. My fingertips tingle and I curl my fingers at my side.

"Do you want to touch me?"

I nod.

"Can't wait to take me down your throat, and wrap your tongue around my length and suck me until I come?"

My pussy squeezes in on itself. The emptiness in my core grows bigger, wider, clawing at me, tugging on me, wanting, needing to feel that beautiful dick of his in between my legs.

"Yes." I gasp. "Yes, Baron."

"Not yet."

I blink.

"On your knees, little girl."

"What?"

"Don't ask me to repeat myself."

I slide down from the counter, then sink to my knees.

"Good girl."

I flush. Shit, this is crazy. Why do I like his compliments? Why is it so important that he praise me? My nipples pebble. My breasts seem to swell. My pussy lips are so engorged...too engorged. I need relief. I need to find a way to fill that gaping space in between them. I need... I squeeze my thighs

together and he clicks his tongue.

"What?" I scowl.

"No cheating."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't give yourself relief."

"I wasn't."

"No lying, Eve."

I huff. "I wasn't..."

"Yes, you were."

"No."

"Yes."

"Finally, something you're saying yes to."

He chuckles. "Smart and sassy. Gorgeous and full of spirit. Your mouth is as beautiful as your cunt, you know that?"

I swallow. Heat flushes my skin...which feels too tight for my body. My scalp tingles. My toes curl. Every part of me seems to be awakening. Parts of me that I never knew existed seem to be coming alive. My core trembles. My chest hurts. Liquid heat pools in my belly.

"Baron," I whine, "please."

His lips kick up. And that smirk. OMG. So hot, so mean. He reaches for a towel then squats down in front of me. His thigh muscles bunch, his chest planes flex, and his biceps make that little twitch that nearly drives me insane. I swallow, watch as he drags the towel about my shoulders, down my chest, across my breasts, my stomach, my thighs, in between my legs. I shudder. And for all that, his touch is impersonal, almost clinical, as he dries me. He tosses the towel aside, then grabs another and drops it over my shoulders. "Stay." He rises to his feet, and damn him, but that means I am at eye level with his glorious, fat peen. Argh. My mouth waters. My lips part. I reach forward and he steps back. *What the—?* I tip up my chin, and he waggles a finger at me. "Not yet, Eve."

"But I wanna..." *Did I just whine? I whined. What the hell is he doing to me?* I am a strong independent woman, ready to forge ahead to make a mark on the world on my terms. This...mewling, writhing creature, who'd do anything for her master... Her lover? This isn't me. And hold on, why am I thinking of him as my master? Or my lover, for that matter? Considering we haven't even slept together. Okay, so he'd made me come. Hard. More than once. And now he's standing in all his naked glory in front of me, smirking

down at me, with a twist of those gorgeous, kissable, pouty lips that I want to bite down on.

His grin widens. His eyes twinkle. Of course, he knows exactly how turned on I am just now. *Jerk.*

"You wanna come, little Eve?" He places his palm against my cheek. "Do you?"

"You know I do."

He nods, "Pass your first test, and we'll see."

Wait... What?

Turning, he stalks out.

The bastard heads out of the bathroom, leaving me there on my knees. Naked. At least, I am not cold because he'd wrapped the towel around me. Still... *Asshole.* I stay where he's left me. My knees begin to hurt. My thighs spasm. A bead of sweat slides down my back and I shake off my towel. Thanks to the earlier hot shower, I am warm and the remnants of the heat seems to cling to the very air that I breathe in. My left shoulder blade itches. I reach back to scratch myself, lose my balance and fall over. Gah. This is stupid. Like really stupid. How dare he simply leave me when I am horny? Shit, I've been horny since... Meeting Edward. And his fucking me had only whetted my appetite.

Then, Baron comes along and my needs seem to have escalated to a whole new height. I feel hungry and torn apart inside, and so damn lonely. The physical need to be with him crawls across my skin, lodges in my belly. I rise to my feet, march out, through the bedroom, and the living room. I head for the kitchen, enter, then stop. Baron stands with his back to me. His very naked back. His tight glutes are a work of art. Honed and taut, with the hollows at the sides that you'd expect to find on a ballet dancer. They only serve to highlight just how in a shape he is. Does he, like, spend his every, single, free moment working out? And those thick thighs. Jesus, his thighs deserve a sculpture all their own. Right after his dick, that is. I could spend all of my days and nights worshipping at the altar of his cock. Argh. I did not just think that. I head into the room. He swings around, rakes his gaze up and down my body.

"I was expecting you."

20

Baron

"You...you were?" Her chin wobbles.

I'd wondered how long she'd last there. It had been a test for her as much as for myself. Though why I am stringing her along so...when all it does is heighten my need for her...is anyone's guess. Maybe because I am a masochist?

I smirk and she frowns.

I take a step forward. She freezes. I fold my arms across my chest, jerk my chin to the ground in front of me.

"No way," she grouses. "I am not kneeling, again."

"I'm not asking."

She presses her lips together, then stomps across to me. Her tits jiggle and her thighs shake. My shaft lengthens further, if that were possible. She lowers herself to her knees, folds her arms in front of her.

"Good."

I grab a chair, plant it in front of her. Then pick up the bowl of soup. I sit down on the chair, scoop up the soup and hold it out. "Eat."

She frowns.

"You cooked?"

"If you call opening a can of soup that, then yes."

She darts me a quick glance from under her eyelashes. "Do I detect a tinge of judgement?" She huffs.

"You need to eat better."

"I eat plenty, thank you very much."

"It's not the quantity but the quality that I'm questioning."

"I hate cooking," she mumbles.

"And I like cooking for you."

"Oh." She opens her mouth, and I slide the spoon between her lips. "Eat first. You are going to need your energy."

She swallows, stares at me. "For what?"

"What do you think?"

Her cheeks tinge. She parts her lips and the sight of her wet plump lips? Bloody hell. This was a bad idea. I should have taken her earlier. But that...would not have been right. Not when she still hadn't recovered from her earlier run-in with those men. I tighten my fingers around the spoon, which jerks. I dip it back in the bowl, continue to feed her.

She takes a few more mouthfuls, then jerks her chin in my direction. "You're not eating."

"I will...soon."

"The soup's almost finished."

"That's not my dinner."

"Eh?" She frowns, opens her mouth to receive the next spoonful. My cock thickens and my balls tighten. I dip the spoon into the bowl, offer the last of the soup to her. She swallows it, then asks, "Then what will you be eating?"

"What do you think?" I place the bowl on the floor, then straighten.

"You don't mean..." Her face grows redder. "You mean—"

I nod.

"On your back, little Eve."

She sits back on her haunches, then lowers herself onto the floor, her knees bent.

"Part your legs."

She spreads wide and I take in the flush that envelops her chest, the pointed nipples, the curves of her breasts, the delectable plumpness of her belly, below that her tender flesh. Her pussy lips are slightly parted and the shy bud of her clit peers out from under the hood. I slide my foot between her thighs, nudge her slit with my big toe. She shivers, tries to close her legs around the intrusion and I click my tongue. "Remember, you don't get to get yourself off."

"Why not?" she whines. "It's not fair."

"Life's not fair, baby." I rub my big toe up her pussy. "Deal with it."

Her entire body jerks. She lifts her pelvis up, tries to ride my toe. I pull back and her breath hitches. "Bastard," she grumbles.

"Technically, not true. My parents may not be happy with my choices in life so far, but they were married when I was born."

"They didn't like you joining the army?"

"To say the least." I press my entire foot against the warmth of her core and she freezes. I push into her center and she moans.

"S-so," she stutters, "did they know that you were imprisoned?"

"I assume the army informed them."

"And that you were freed?"

"I am sure they know of it."

"Do they know that you're back?"

"You really want to do this now?" I snap. "You want to talk about my family right when I am about to get you off?"

"Y...yes." She swallows.

I withdraw my foot, and she thrusts her pelvis forward, chasing the sensations with her pelvis. Good.

I rake my gaze across her features. "What I do or don't do with respect to my family is not your concern."

"But you are." She scowls. "I mean," she looks to the side, then back at me, "it's just human courtesy, you know. They are your family, surely they must worry about you."

"Trust me, they don't. My mother's too busy with her fundraisers and keeping up appearances. And by the time my father is done taking care of his business, and his various mistresses in different parts of the world, he has no time left for me."

I drag my big toe up her wet melting cunt and she shudders. I swipe it down to her opening, and she writhes under me.

Her tits rise and fall, her breath comes in little gasps, color smears her chest, her cheeks, and her lips are parted as she peers up at me from under heavy eyelids. She's magnificent, and fuck I'll never forget this sight of her ready and open and needy on the floor in front of me.

"What always confused me," I continue in a normal tone, "was that I was an only child and his heir, so you'd think he'd be more worried about me, at least, from the point of view of me inheriting his business, and being the bearer of his legacy. But apparently, that makes no difference to him." I raise a shoulder. "As soon as I turned twenty-one, I accessed the trust fund that my

grandfather left me. Then, I left home, never looked back. So, you see, Eve, nope, they don't really care about me. "

I had spent the best part of my teens trying to cope with the aftermath of the incident. And then, there had been Edward. Yeah...another mistake of epic proportions that had been...just like the one I am about to make now. And just like the last time, I am helpless. Unable to stop myself. A starving man who's spotted the first glimmer of an oasis in the desert. And what if that turns out to be a mirage? I stare into the face of the woman who's elicited these feelings inside of me. The woman I had sworn to protect. But who is going to protect her from me?

I pull back my foot, then jerk my chin, "Get up."

"What?" She blinks up at me.

"Up." I straighten. "On your feet."

She scowls back, then rises up.

"Come closer."

She huffs. "Lie down, spread your legs. On your feet... Make up your mind assho—"

I grab her hips, yank her close. She squeaks. I lift her up so she's straddled across my lap. "You want me to fuck you?"

She swallows.

"Do you?"

"Y...yes."

"Good." I reach for the condom I'd placed on the table behind me.

"Ah, Baron?"

I turn to her.

"I am on birth control."

"You are?"

"The only person I was with was Edward and he, uh, he'd been celibate for a long time before he was with me."

I stare at her flushed cheeks. Her thick auburn hair in a halo about her shoulders. I am not jealous that Edward took her virginity. I am not upset that he was with her before me. Who the hell am I kidding? A growl rips out of me. "I am clean too," I hold her gaze, "and I am going to wipe every trace of him from your body."

"Baron," she scolds, "it's not a competition."

"Isn't it?" I grab my dick, and fit it to her opening, thrust up, and in one smooth move, I impale her. She screams, griping my shoulders.

"Omigod, omigod," she chants. "You're too big for me."

"You're so small, Eve," I growl.

She wriggles her hips and I squeeze down to hold her in place. "Wait." I grit my teeth. The heat of her, the warmth, the wetness, the way her pussy welcomes me, clamps down on my shaft, clings to my swollen flesh, as she digs her fingernails into my shoulders and groans.

"Baron, it's too much."

"Not enough," I snap. "Nothing is going to be enough after this."

I bring my hand to her breast and squeeze. A moan bleeds from her lips. The sound coils in my chest, slides down to settle in my belly. My cock throbs, aches with the need to possess her completely. "Goddam you," I snarl. "I wanted to go slow, to make you wait, to hold on until I was sure you were ready, but when I am near you, I lose all sense of control."

"You...you do?" She gasps.

"You're inside me, Eve. You drive me crazy, you know that?"

She brings her hands up to frame my face. Her touch is so soft, so soothing. So very different from anything I've faced in the last few years. So sweet. So everything. A ball of emotion clogs my throat. I swallow it down. Focus on the curvy, little woman who's wrapped around my dick. She brings her thumb to my mouth, and I close my lips around the digit. I suck on it and her chest heaves. Her pussy clenches around my dick. I can't stop the growl that rumbles from me. "I need to be deeper in you."

I pump my hips upward, thrust my shaft into her. Her head falls back and her lips part. She snaps her shoulders back and grips her knees on either side of my thighs.

"Like that," I groan. "Just like that."

I begin to nail her, up and down, up and into her. Inside her. Trying to mark every millimeter of her hot, melting channel. She moans, digs her fingernails deeper into my shoulders, thrusts out her breasts in my face. I bend, close my mouth around a nipple and bite. She cries out. "Oh, Baron, please, please, please, I want to come, I need to come. Please."

"Not yet." I lick her swollen flesh, transfer my attention to her other breast. When I suck on her nipple this time, she groans, then pushes her breast further into my mouth. I curl my lips round the distended flesh, sucking on it, digging my teeth into the curve of her tit and she cries out. She tilts her hips, pushing down on me, trying to ride me, and find a rhythm that will get me closer, deeper, much deeper inside her. "Fuck this."

I rise, and with my dick still in her, walk over to the dining room table. I shove the plates and the cutlery aside—yeah, I had actually set the table... Imagine that. What had I been thinking? That I could get us to eat a civilized dinner? I should have known better. Known that as soon as I touched her, things would get out of control. F-u-c-k. I lower her to the table, then hook my arms under her knees and wrap her legs over my shoulders.

She reaches for me and I shake my head. I twist her wrists together, shove them over her head, and wrap her fingers around the edge of the table.

She gazes up at me, pupils blown, the darkness of her irises bleeding out until only a circle of green remains around the circumference.

"Hold on," I order.

"Wh...what?"

"I am going to fuck you now."

21

Ava

Fuck me, now? What the hell? What has he been doing so far? He pulls back then thrusts forward. I am so wet that he slides in to the hilt in one smooth move.

The breath whooshes out of me. His length throbs inside of me, filling me, stretching me to the brim. He seems impossibly big, too thick to have forced his way into my tiny channel. A moan bleeds from my lips. His gaze darts to my mouth. He leans down, rubs his thumb across my lips. "Open," he rasps.

I part my lips and he slides his finger inside. I lick his digit, absorb the salty, testosterone-filled taste of his skin. He slides his other hand under me, inserts his digit inside my pucker and goosebumps pop on my skin. *Shit, shit, shit. What's he doing to me?* With every hole in my body occupied by him, he begins to fuck me in earnest.

He pulls back, until his cock is poised at the entrance to my channel, then he thrusts forward with such force that the entire table creaks. He propels his hips, rams into me again. My body jerks; the table groans. Heat radiates from the point of contact as he locks his gaze on mine. I can't look away from his hard features—the blue eyes glowing as if lit from within; those massive shoulders of his that roll and flex with each push forward; the bead of sweat that trickles down his cheek. A vein throbs at his temple, the very air around him saturated with the fierceness of his desire. I can't take my eyes off of him. He pulls out, then pistons his hips forward and sinks into me until he

bottoms out against my pelvic floor. His balls slap against my arse; the angle pushes the hardness of his dick into the sensitive lower skin of my slit and tendrils of heat flare out from the contact.

He curves his finger inside my back hole, as he pulls his thumb from my mouth, only to replace it with his tongue. He kisses me, sucks on my tongue like he's trying to absorb my very essence into his blood, and that's when the climax sweeps out from my lower belly. It screams up as he releases my mouth, only to command, "Come for me, come all over my dick, sweet Eve."

I shatter. The orgasm crashes over me. Sparks of brightness overwhelm my vision. When it clears, I blink, watch him watching me with an expression I cannot fathom.

He reaches down, brushes his lips over mine, as he begins to pump into me, once-twice-thrice before his features contort. He holds my gaze as he empties himself inside of me with a groan, and oh, my god, that is the hottest sight I have ever seen.

He pulls his thumb out from my back hole, leans over me as he rests his weight on his elbows on either side of me. That's when the table creaks, sways, then collapses. I scream as the world tilts. The next moment, I am on his chest. "What the—?" I blink. "How did you move that quickly?"

"Training," he mutters.

I glance at him, then at the remnants of my poor dining table, then back at his face. A chuckle bubbles up. His lips curve.

"OMG," I snort, "I can't believe we broke the dining table."

"Guess my weight was too much for it?" he suggests.

"It's never seen so much action as in the last fifteen minutes."

"At least, now you don't have to disinfect it," he offers, and that only makes me laugh harder.

"This...this gives an entire new meaning to nailing the table," I sputter.

"You know what you should do after you have sex on a dining table right?"

"What...?" I wipe my tears. "What?"

"Table spoon," he declares.

I stare, then burst out laughing. I laugh until tears roll down my cheeks. Glance up to find him staring at me.

"What?" I blink, "What is it?"

"Nothing." He swallows.

"Are you sure? You seem pale."

"It's," he shakes his head, "it's just when you laughed..." He peers into my face. "It reminded me of..."

"What?"

His gaze intensifies. He glances to the side then back at me, "Seriously, babe, it's nothing."

"Hmm," I pout, "you're hiding something from me."

"And here I was sure you'd tell me off for my poor joke."

"That it was." I nod, "And by the way, you're trying to change the topic."

"Am I that obvious?" He winces, "Clearly, I am losing my touch. That's what happens when I try to have a conversation on an empty stomach."

I stare at him with suspicion.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," he pulls out of me, then sits up and rises to his feet, taking me with him. He sets my feet on the floor, then continues, "I still haven't eaten. You ready to serve me my dinner?" He waggles his eyebrows.

I glance around the kitchen then back at him. "There's, uh, some leftover pizza in the fridge."

"That's not what I am talking about."

He takes a step forward. I circle the mess of the collapsed dining table, not to mention the dishes he'd shoved to the floor earlier. I am going to have to do without them, considering I don't have the money to replace them. I glance up to find he's moved closer. I skitter back, and he points a finger at me, "Don't move."

"Oh, no, you're not going to command me to stay, just so you can catch me."

"It's not that." He glances around at the floor around my feet.

"Then what is it."

"Just hold it." He puts up a hand. I raise my leg to take a step to the side. He leaps forward, across the broken table, drops to his knees and grabs my ankle before I can place it on the floor. "Hey!" I lose my balance, grab at his head, dig my fingers into his hair to right myself. "What's wrong with you?"

"You were going to step on a piece of crockery." He holds up a shard that must have broken off from one of the plates.

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes." He smirks, tosses the shard onto the pile of broken furniture that had once been my dining table. Then he stands, scoops me up and tosses me over his shoulder.

"What the—?" I squeak. He turns, steps over the fragments of broken dishes and wooden splinters, and stopping only to switch off the light, heads out of the kitchen.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask, and darn it, my voice sounds breathless... And it's not because I'm turned on. Yea, right, because let's face it, being hauled over his shoulder like I weigh nothing... Okay, it's fucking sexy, and hot. My stomach flip-flops; I squeeze my thighs together to stop the itch that's gnawing at my core. Bloody hell, he just fucked me and now I want him to go again. Gah!! *Shut up, slut, what the hell is wrong with you?*

He veers into the bedroom, stalks over to the bed and throws me down. I bounce once on my back, my hair flowing around my face. I shake back the strands, stare up to find him looming over me; a wicked smirk curls his lips.

"No, no, no," I mutter as I crawl back on the bed. The light from the half-open door of the bathroom streams in. His silhouette is massive, a dark, solid figure that eats up all the light. He reaches the edge of the bed, plants his hands on his hips. "We have a problem," he rumbles.

"Do we?"

He nods. "I still haven't had dessert."

"D...dessert?" I squeak.

His grin widens. "The best kind, babe, where I get to eat all of it."

My core clenches, liquid heat crawls between my legs, and I squeeze my thighs together. "Th...that sounds nice."

He chuckles, "Oh, you have no idea, baby."

He places a knee on the bed. I push away from him. He swoops down, grabs my ankle, and I yell. Turn on my hands and knees, try to crawl away. He simply hauls me back, until my feet touch the edge of the bed. My heart beat ratchets up; my pulse pounds at my temples. He grabs my other ankle and I yell. Flail out with my legs, or try to, because he has a grip on me, and he's stronger than me. So he's, pretty much, restraining me, and I don't want to escape, not really. But damn, if I'm going to allow him to conquer me so quickly. Adrenaline laces my blood. I kick out with my leg, and must take him by surprise, because his grip loosens. I scream, lunge forward, throwing all of my weight into it. Only, he grabs my free ankle and hauls me back again. A giggle breaks free, then another. Damn it, I am getting hysterical. My pulse rate speeds up. My heart hammers so fast, I am sure it's going to break out of my chest. And my eyes start to burn. "Let me go, you oaf!" I

howl.

He releases his hold on my legs instantly, and I pause. *What the—? Did he unhand me? He did set me free. He did—* I move forward, but he's already on me. He lowers his body over mine, pins me down with his hips. The warmth of him enfolds me; his strength cocoons me; his big body is all around me. "Shh!" He curls his fingers about my nape, "Shh, baby, no need to panic. I'll take care of you."

The hold on my neck is erotic and comforting at the same time. My breasts swell and my nipples harden. I stay frozen until he begins to massage my neck.

"Ah..." A sigh escapes me as he digs his thumb into a knot right at the point of where my neck meets my shoulder.

"Easy, darlin'," he croons, like I am a skittish horse or a rabbit about to dart away. He applies enough pressure that I lower my cheek into the mattress. "Relax," he drawls, as he continues to dig his magic fingers down the length of my neck, into my shoulder. I sense him move, and glance sideways to find he's straddling me. His thick thighs bunch as he leans forward, and wraps his warm palms about my shoulders. He digs his fingers into my muscles, into the knots, and with circular movements soothes them away.

"That's sooo good." My shoulders relax and my muscles unwind. A delicious warmth grips me. I close my eyes as he continues to tend to me. He pushes my hair off my neck, I feel a slight touch and crack open one eye. "Did you just kiss me on my neck?" I ask

"What do you think?" I hear the laughter in his voice and can't stop my lips from curving in response.

"I think you're too macho for just tender gestures."

"You'd be right." He slides his fingers against my scalp, and my entire body hums. Who knew I had an erogenous zone there?

"Mmmm," I glance up at him from under heavy eyelashes, "this is wayyy too relaxing."

"Good." He continues to massage my neck, my shoulders, down my shoulder blades, my hips. By the time he reaches my butt, I am so far gone, I don't even react as he squeezes each butt cheek. My pussy hums, my thigh muscles respond, the rest of me is way too at ease. I sense him move again, as he slides down, feel the heat of his body, as he crouches over me. Then a wetness invades my most forbidden place. I squeak, angle my head and see

him lick me from my slit up the valley between my arse cheeks.

"Omigod." Heat flushes my cheeks. "What...what are you doing?"

"Shh, don't tense up now." He reaches up to slide his hand under my breast. He cups it, then pinches my nipple. My pussy instantly clenches, as does my arsehole. He makes a guttural sound deep in his throat as I moan.

"Baron, please," I gasp, "I am not ready yet."

He simply releases his hold on my breast, only to shove three fingers into my melting core. He begins to work me there and moisture pools between my legs. "Good girl," he croons, his breath hot against my hip. He drags my cum up my seam and smears it across my pucker.

I tense and he massages my hip. "Relax," he orders.

"Are you... are you...?"

"Going to take your arse?"

He pulls out of my pussy only to squeeze my arsecheeks and pry them apart. I whip around in time to see him spit on my arsehole.

22

Baron

"Did you just do what I think you did?" Her voice wavers.

I glance up at her, "What do you think I did?" I hold her gaze as I rub my spit into her back opening.

"Did you just...spit...there?" Her face reddens further. So fucking cute. This girl is so naive. How the hell did I get involved with her? More to the point, how had she gotten entangled with first Edward and then me? Even more worrying, why the hell am I developing feelings for her? I am, no question. It's why I've tried to walk away from her so many times, and failed. It's why I lean over and press a kiss to her pouting mouth.

I swipe my tongue across her mouth, then deepen the kiss. I bite down on her lips and she gasps. I ease my tongue inside, while I slide one finger inside her back hole. Her body shudders. I cup her pussy, press down on her clit. She moans and I work my finger past the circle of her sphincter.

I lean back, watch her features closely as I saw my finger in and out of her. I add a second finger and she swallows. Her eyelids shutter down.

"Look at me, babe."

She cracks open her eyes, and I hold her gaze as I scissor my fingers inside of her.

"Baron." Her shoulders shudder. I slide three fingers of my other hand inside her pussy, then proceed to fuck her with my digits. In and out, in and out. Her pussy clamps down on my fingers; her mouth opens in surprise. I sense the orgasm sweep up her body, her features tense in that way which

indicates she's close, so close.

"Baron, I need to... I have to..."

"Come," I command. And her eyes roll back in her head. A cry tumbles from her lips and she arches back, then collapses. Moisture gushes out from her core and I scoop up her juices. I pull my fingers out of her backhole, before I smear her juices at the entrance. Then I position my dick against her puckered opening.

She moans and her eyelids flutter open. "Did I come again?" She blinks.

"And you will many more times before the night is out." I ease the crown of my shaft into her tight opening. She tenses and I bend and kiss her cheek, the shell of her ear. I bite down on her earlobe and she shudders. I slip inside her a little more. The heat, the tightness... If her pussy is heaven, surely this is...as close to hell as it gets. A hell where pain and pleasure weave around each other like the coils of Satan's snake in darkness.

"Baron?" She frowns at me. "Are you okay?"

I shake my head. "I should be asking you that."

"It's just for a second there, you seemed to—"

"Black out?"

She nods.

"It's just..." I glance down at where my dick disappears inside her arse and my balls tighten. "You, Eve. It's you. Your body, your voice, your scent, your seductive holes that I can't keep out of."

She folds her arms under her cheek, watches me with those large green eyes. And something inside me, knotted for so long, seems to dissolve. Break. Disappear like it never existed. But that's a lie. I am marked, tainted by my past. She still has her future ahead of her. And here I am...taking everything she's offering, snatching up what she doesn't, demanding that she give herself to me. For what? So I can stain her with the same brush that painted me? So my mistakes will taint her?

I grip her arse cheeks, pry them apart. "Let me in, Eve."

She swallows and her breathing speeds up.

"I won't stop until I have taken you, marked you everywhere he has."

She bites down on her lower lip and my cock twitches. I tilt my hips, push forward, sink in another millimeter. She thrusts her hips back, and I push past the tight ring of her sphincter. A groan bleeds from her lips. My belly clenches. Heat grips me and sweat slides down my back. I release her butt, only to grab her hips and pull. "Up, on your hands and knees," I snap.

She pushes up as I pump forward, and sink inside her channel. A growl rips from me. I lean over her, press a kiss to her shoulder. "You okay, babe?"

She shudders.

"Tell me you're okay, Eve, that you want me to continue."

She hunches her shoulders.

"Eve?"

She nods.

"Say that you want me to continue."

"I..." she gulps, "I want you to fuck my arse."

Thank fuck.

I lean over, kiss the side of her neck. Bring my arm around her waist as I press my mouth to her shoulder, the damp skin between her shoulder blades. "You're fucking gorgeous, you know that? You're the kind of woman I never thought I'd meet."

"You don't have to be nice to me." She chuckles. "You're already in my arse."

I laugh. "That mouth of yours." I reach up and nuzzle her hair. "I fucking love it."

"And I love..." She gasps. "Uh, I think I am falling for you."

"Wait, what did you say?" I pause. "Repeat yourself."

"It was nothing." She turns her head in my direction. "Honestly, just a slip of the tongue."

I frown. "It didn't seem that way, from where I am."

"No, Baron, really, it's just... You know..." She raises a shoulder. "Just ignore me."

I glare at her. "Don't you dare develop feelings for me, Eve."

She half smiles. "What would you do if I did?"

"I'll..." I begin to withdraw and she reaches down between us and grabs my balls. She squeezes and my thigh muscles spasm. "Fuck."

"Exactly." She massages me, tugs on my balls. She handles them like they belong to her... Like I belong to her... *Fuck... No, no, no.* What the hell am I thinking? This can't happen. She can't fall for me...and I... Fuck me... I am already half-way in love with her. I knew I was developing feelings for her, but love? Fucking love. What is that about?

She tugs on my balls, drags her hands up to where my dick is still embedded inside her. She circles her hips, begins to move, and heat races out from the point of contact. I wrap my fingers about her hips, pull out, then

thrust in. She releases me, plants her hands on the bed, and thrusts out her butt. This woman... She's going to kill me with her openness, her willingness, her surrender to me... How she accepts me into her body, her heart... How she can bare her soul and share her deepest feelings. If only I could be half as open as that... Perhaps, we could have a future. And when she had laughed earlier... I could have sworn she was the same woman I'd seen on the railway platform not too long ago.

And yet, I can't share my past with her. Can't give her everything she deserves. Not when my secrets hold me back. Not when everything inside me tells me I need to find a way out before things get more complicated. Just for one night though, I can hold her, cherish her, fuck her like she is mine, love her like she is the only one for me.

And then when you leave her? What's she going to do then? Are you going to break her heart like that asshole Edward did?

But she loves Ed. She doesn't feel anything close enough for me. She did say that she thinks she's falling for me. After almost saying she loves me... which is precisely why I need to leave in the morning, before things become more complicated.

I pull out, then slide inside her, slowly, slowly, every millimeter of my shaft dragging against her channel. Her body trembles. Her hips twitch. I retreat, until I am poised at the edge of her opening, then thrust forward. Her body bucks. The bed creaks. I impale her, bury myself in her tightness and she cries out. Heat flushes my skin, tendrils of sensations pour out from where we are joined. "Fuck, Eve, F-u-c-k." I begin to move in earnest.

She throws her head back, pushes back, meets my every thrust. "Omigod, Baron, I'm coming, I'm going to—"

"Come with me, Eve," I growl. "Come right now."

She cries out again and her body shudders. Her shoulders snap back before she curves her body, screaming as she collapses.

I wrap one arm about her waist, holding her up as I pump into her, again and again. The tension at the base of my spine coils tightly, twists in on itself as I cram myself inside her one last time. My balls draw up, the vibrations flare out from my groin, up my back, to my extremities, and I empty myself inside of her.

23

Ava

I come awake to the sensation of something hot and wet lapping at my cunt. I part my legs, tilt my hips to allow better access. He eases his tongue inside my aching pussy, saws it in and out of me. A warmth trembles out from the point of contact. Heat suffuses my skin. I moan and arch my back, pushing out my breasts. My nipples pebble, becoming throbbing points of pain. I bring my hands up and squeeze them. A shudder runs down my spine. My belly flutters as he increases the pace of his ministrations. He drags his hands up my inner thighs, urging me to spread my legs wider, then uses his fingers to pull my pussy lips apart as he swipes his tongue around my swollen clit. A groan bleeds from my lips. My toes curl. He continues to swirl his tongue across my melting core, then thrusts it back inside my channel. He plunges that sinful tongue in and out of me, in and out, until shudders grip me. He releases my pussy lips, only to grind the heel of his hand into my clit, even as he slides a hand around and eases a finger inside my back hole. I moan again, release my breasts and bury my fingers in his thick hair. I tug on the strands and a growl rumbles up his massive chest. The vibrations shudder across my core, and that only turns me on even more. The climax ripples up from my toes, up my thighs, eddies in my core, before it slides up my spine. I arch my back, throw my head back and moan as the orgasm grips me. My core clenches and moisture slides down from between my legs. He continues to eat me out, slurping at me like I am the most delicious fruit ever. He licks me clean, then moves up to fit his lips to mine. He kisses me and I taste myself

and him—that edgy danger that is so very Baron. He moves onto his back, pulls me onto him, then kisses the top of my head. "Sleep, little Eve."

His voice soothes me and I burrow into him, and let the darkness overwhelm me.

When I wake next, I am tucked into his side.

He's sprawled out, taking up most of the bed, his arm flung out, with my head pillowed on it. I rake my gaze across his chest, down to where the sheets are pooled around his waist...and tented...at his crotch. Oh! O-k-a-y, doesn't this guy ever sleep? Is it morning wood? Must be, right? I glance up and my gaze clashes with his brilliant blue eyes. I swallow, watch him watch me. His hair is ruffled, thanks to how I'd pulled on it, no doubt. His jaw is shadowed and he looks ruffled, more relaxed than I've ever seen him, and yet, also alert. He's always alert, my Baron.

What? Why did I call him *my* Baron? He's not my...anything. My lover? Maybe... Nothing else. Except... Shit. I'd almost blurted out that I love him, then tried to cover it by saying I think I'm falling for him. How lame is that? And he...hadn't responded in kind. Of course, not. Why would he? I am simply a job for him... Albeit, one from whom he can also draw out orgasms... Not that I am complaining about that... But why the hell did I have to fall for him? More to the point, why tell him? Clearly, the sex is addling my brain. That's the only reason I hadn't been able to shut up. And he... Well?

Clearly, he has no such issues. He looks w-a-y too awake, like he had a good sleep and is ready to face the world. Like a night of mind-blowing sex is normal for him. Like he hadn't just brought me to orgasm so many times that I could still feel the imprint of his dick and his tongue in between my legs. Hmm. Wonder if I can't return the favor? I mean, fair's fair. Right? Without taking my gaze off of him, I slide my hand under the sheet. When I close my fingers about his already erect cock, his nostrils flare.

Oh, good. He's not as impervious as he'd like me to think. I grip his shaft, and my fingers barely meet around the circumference. Shit, is this guy huge or what? I massage him from base to crown and I swear his cock swells further. His gaze narrows. His shoulders tense. He doesn't move though. Simply holds my gaze with those intense blue eyes of his as I squeeze his shaft and knead his length over and over again. His jaw hardens. A pulse leaps to life at his temple. And a shiver runs down my spine. I slide down

until I'm settled between his legs, still under the cover. I lower my head toward his cock and his chest planes flex. I bring my fingers to his base, hold him upright, then tip my chin down and run my tongue across the head. A growl rumbles up his chest, and my core clenches at his response. With this man...

Everything he says and does seems to be calculated to arouse me, and damn him, he's not even trying. He just has to be in the same space for his pheromones to saturate the air, and I'd be turned on. Moisture pools between my legs as I dip my head and close my mouth around the swollen crown. His eyelids flutter down. He glares at me from under those thick eyelashes... which only emphasize how masculine the rest of him is. I swirl my tongue around the circumference of the head and his belly muscles jump. I bring my other hand down, cup his balls and squeeze, and a groan rips from him. His biceps tense, his shoulders stiffen. His features grow harder, and damn, if this isn't the most erotic sight I have ever seen. I may be sucking his dick, but I have him by his balls. Adrenaline laces my blood. A feeling of power grips me. I massage his balls, tilt my head and take him down my throat.

Instantly, my gag reflex kicks in. I cough. Tears well up, spit drools from my mouth and I pull back, only he clamps his hand on the back of my head and holds me in place.

"You'd better finish what you started, Eve."

Oh. His hard voice chafes across my skin. My nerve endings pop. Every part of me seems to flare to life. To challenge him. To please him. I stare at him, forcing my neck muscles to relax, to breathe through my nose, as I stay poised with his dick on the edge of my mouth. I lick him again, drag my tongue across the sensitive skin of the crown and his lips twist.

"That the best you can do?" he rumbles, and my belly flip-flops. *I'll show you what I can do, you jerk.* I dip my chin, and slide him inside my mouth. I close my lips around him, drag my teeth across the silky skin and his smirk vanishes. I breathe through my nose as I take him down my throat, and a growl rips from him. His fingers dig into my hair and he tugs. Goosebumps flare across my skin. I begin to suck him in earnest, pull back, then slide him inside my mouth...and again. I swallow and his chest rises and falls. "Fuck, Eve. Fuck." He tugs on my hair, so I pull back, then pushes me down. His gaze transfixed on my lips.

"The sight of my dick disappearing in your mouth, woman," he growls, "I'll never forget it as long as I live."

He begins to fuck my mouth in earnest, maneuvering me into just the right position that gives him the most satisfaction. Throughout, I continue to massage his balls, squeezing, tugging, watching as his body responds. As his thigh muscles clench, as his belly tightens, as color smears his cheeks.

His shaft thickens, broadens, fills my mouth, stretches my jaws. Pain slides down my neck; tears flow from my eyes. Still, I don't protest. Still, his gaze holds mine. The skin around his eyes stretches. He increases the pace, pulls me back, then forward, until all I can see is him, taste the salty-dark essence of him, smell his edgy, masculine, mountain breeze scent, now tinged with something more lush... Tinged with me. His balls draw up and my core clenches; my toes curl. Spit drips from my mouth and he shudders. "Fuck, I'm coming, Eve. I'm going to come in your mouth and you'd better swallow every last drop, you feel me?"

His hips jerk and he flings out his other arm, grabs the sheet, as his hold on my hair tightens. He growls as he shoots his cum down my throat. The hot liquid fills my mouth, spills over, and he reaches down and scoops up the overflow. He pulls out of me, uses his dick to smear his cum across my lips, then yanks me up and fixes his mouth to mine.

24

Baron

The taste of me on her lips... It's potent and erotic and so bloody right. I turn until she's once more on her back, under me, where she belongs. *My woman. Mine.* I soften the kiss, lick her lips, swipe my tongue across the seam of her mouth. She moans at the back of her throat, and the sound goes straight to my head. My heart stutters and something hot fills my chest. I tear my mouth from hers, peer into her face. "What the fuck are you doing to me?" I mutter.

"The same thing you're doing to me." Her features are serious, her gaze slightly clouded. Her pupils still dilated from the blow job she gave me.

I cup her cheek, drag my thumb across her lips. "That..." I swallow, "that was incredible."

Her mouth curves, her eyes sparkle up at me, and something shifts again in my chest. *Shit, this isn't good.* This can't happen. I can't let myself get close—okay, closer—to her. Considering I already have feelings for her.

I pull back, then swing my legs over the side of the bed and stand up. "Don't you have a class to teach?"

"I do," she replies, "but uh... I thought I could cancel?"

"Don't." *Shit, that...didn't come out right.* I turn around to find her staring at me, a hurt look in her eyes, and my heart, my stupid heart breaks. Bloody hell, since when have I become so tuned into her? I sit down on the edge of the bed and pull her close. "Hey, hey, come on." I rub her back. "I only meant, don't change your plans for me."

"Don't do that," she snarls. "Seriously, Baron, don't pull away from me."

"I..." I rake my gaze across her features, "I'm not."

"You are."

"It's your imagination."

"Oh, please." She tosses her hair over her shoulder, "You jump out of bed like you can't bear to be with me a minute more, when—"

"The truth is exactly the opposite."

She frowns. "What do you mean?"

I release her, then stand up again... Only to put distance between us, because if I continue to hold her in my arms, there's no way I'll be able to focus long enough to get my thoughts together. And right now, that's important. I need to get my shit together long enough to establish boundaries. It's the only way I can get through this—whatever this is between us—intact.

"I am way too attracted to you. I am developing feelings for you, Eve, and that's a problem."

"You don't say?" she mutters.

"You don't understand."

"Then explain it to me." She slides out of bed and stands in front of me, fully, gloriously naked. *Fuck*. "Explain why it is that we can't be together."

"You are Edward's—"

"He left me."

"He'll be back."

"You don't know that," she protests.

"You don't know Edward."

"And you do?"

"Better than you do."

"Somehow, I doubt that." She plants her hands on her hips, "You may've known the boy he once was, but I know the man he is now. The man who walked away from his calling because he—" Her voice fades. Her lips turn down.

"Exactly," I fold my arms across my chest, "he walked away from the Church for you. Do you really think he's not going to come back to you?"

"If he felt that much, why did he leave me in the first place?" She tips up her chin. "If he was that...into me, as you say, if he really felt something for me, why didn't he tell me so? Why didn't he stay and give me a chance to support him? To be with him? To help him work through things?" She throws up her hands. "Hell, why didn't he just come out and tell me how he felt about me?"

"Because love isn't that simple."

She firms her lips. "You're telling me?"

I stare at her flushed features, the stubborn set to her jaw, the resolve in her eyes, and blow out a sigh. "This was a mistake."

"What?" Her jaw drops.

"This." I point at the bed. "This should have never happened."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" she yells and I stiffen.

"I am very serious."

"So am I." She closes the distance between us and stabs a finger into my chest. "Are you seriously saying you regret what happened last night?"

"I regret," I swallow, "I regret letting things get this far between us. I should have stayed away. Shouldn't have allowed you to seduce me, I—"

"I seduced you? I...?" She shoves at my chest. "You're a jerk, you know that?"

Tell me about it. If this is the only way I can get her to stop thinking about me, if I can make her think I am enough of a douche—guaranteed, since I am... But if I allow her to see me that way, maybe she'll walk away. If she's angry enough with me, perhaps she'll never look at me again. Because, God forbid, one look from her, one touch... If she's anywhere in my vicinity, I won't be able to resist her.

So, I am a coward, that way. And what I am going to say is going to hurt her, but if it means it will put distance between us, then it's worth it. It's the only way to ensure that I, and that bastard Edward, can get through this with some semblance of a friendship alive between us.

If that means I am going to rip my heart out and pretend it never beat for her in the first place, then so be it.

"Now you know." I smirk, then draw myself up to my full height. "It was intense, babe. I'll give you that."

"Intense?" She scowls.

"Yeah, and your body...and your mouth...and man, that tight arse of yours... I'm glad I got to tap it when I could. In fact, I don't know of any other woman who enjoys anal as much as you do. It's what makes you special."

"I...it does?" She pales.

"Totally. One-hundred percent." I nod. "As for your pussy... So hot, so sweet, hell, I could write odes to it... But you know, you're not the only fish in the sea."

She opens and shuts her mouth. "What are you talking about? This is not like you Baron." Her lips tremble. "Why are you saying such hurtful things to me?"

"It's the truth."

"It's not."

"Unfortunately, yes." I bend my knees and peer into her eyes, "You see, I said and did what was needed so I could—"

"Get in my bed?"

I smile. "Knew you were smart. Knew there had to be a reason Edward was so hung up on you."

"Don't talk about him," she bursts out. "He was honorable. He wanted me enough to walk away from what was most important to him. Even when he left, he made sure I was taken care... If he'd only known what kind of a man you've turned into."

"And what kind is that?"

"A two-timing liar, who couldn't wait to bed the very woman you'd been tasked with protecting." Her features grow stricken. "That's why you did it. You wanted to get back at him. You wanted to get revenge on him...for whatever went wrong between the two of you... Which is why you left in the first place."

"If that's what you think..." I raise my shoulders.

"It's not what I think. It's the truth." Her chest heaves. "Admit it. All of this was part of your plan so you could hurt Edward. So you could throw it in his face when he returns."

"Sure." My heart begins to thud. Sweat beads my palms. *Turn away from her. Get out of here while she's still upset.* So, she'll believe the worst of me. So, she'll never be tempted to come near me again. If I can't stick around long enough to be here for Edward, the least I can do is make sure that when he returns—and he will return—he has his woman to turn to.

"Good chat, babe," I pat her head, "but it's getting late and I know you must be anxious to get to work." I pivot, walk out of the bedroom and to the kitchen where I'd run a wash last night. Yeah, I'd managed to wake up long enough to do that, and a few other things, last night, before I'd crawled back into bed and arranged myself around her. I'd pulled her close, spooned her, thrown my leg about her, so every part of me was plastered to her, before I'd fallen asleep. The feel of her soft skin, her curves, the tiny noises of contentment she'd made as she'd cuddled close and slipped deeper into sleep

— Yeah, good thing I have those memories to keep me going. It's all I am going to have... for I'm never going to meet another woman who'll affect me as much as she does.

I shake out my dry clothes, pull them on, then slip into the shoes I'd rescued from the shower last night. They're still damp, but what-fucking-ever. I can live with that... My heart though... How am I going to live without that?

I walk to the door, wrench it open and am about to step through, when footsteps sound behind me.

"Baron," she calls out and I pause. I want to look over my shoulder, want to see her face one last time. The delicate arch of her brow, the lushness of her lips, the curve of her shoulder. I shake my head. *No, no, no. If you see her, you'll lose the courage to leave her. It's best you walk away without a second glance.* I square my shoulders, stay where I am.

"I'll never forgive you for this."

The hurt in her voice sinks into my veins. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* I stare straight ahead, "You'll get over it, babe," I say without turning around, "just like I am already over you."

25

"The only person I feel comfortable around completely is my mother. I let my emotions out with her, and for that I am thankful."

-From Ava's Diary

Ava

"Jerk." I stare through the window of my bedroom at the SUV parked across the street. Through the tinted glass, I can make out the outline of the man inside, but not his rough-hewn features, not the breadth of his shoulders, or how he seems to soak all of the oxygen in the space.

Of course, the asshole is still there. God forbid that he break his promise to his friend. Men. I snort. They'd stand by each other... Make sure that no woman can come in between them... And me? What about me? Where do I stand in all this? Nowhere. That's where I am. He'd made that abundantly clear. So why am I still standing here, trying to catch a glimpse of him?

"What's wrong with me?" I turn away and begin to pace the living room. He'd flung that last comment at me, and I had been so shocked, I had allowed him to shut the door in my face. I'd rushed toward him, wanting to get the last word in, hoping that I could stop him, maybe. Maybe I'd held onto a sliver of hope that insisted that he was putting on an act...but...

No, he'd meant it. He'd meant every last, single, hurtful word that he'd carelessly tossed my way. *Shit, shit, shit.* How could I have allowed myself to become so entangled with this man? I'd allowed him into my life, into my heart. *Shit.* Tears well up and I wipe them away angrily. I will not cry over

him. Will not. My face crumples. I turn around and walk into the bedroom, through to the bathroom and turn on the shower. I stand under the hot water, allowing it to pour over me. Soaking in the warmth, the comfort, the memory of the heat of his body that had curled around me, protecting me, cocooning me when he had last been in here with me. He'd held me, soothed me, rocked me, then carried me out of the cubicle and dried me.

He'd taken care of me...like he'd said he would... Only he hadn't. It had all been an act. Or had it? Damn the man, he had been so convincing. I had been sure that he felt something for me. But then again, what would I know about that? I have so little experience with men. No wonder, I thought I was in love with Edward. Maybe it's the speed with which things took place with him that made me mistake what I felt for him? Maybe I am not really sure what I feel for him... Or for Baron, for that matter. It's just, each time he'd fucked me...it had felt like more than just a shag... It had felt...as good as being with Edward. Shit. Why am I comparing the two of them? They are nothing alike... Except that they know each other. What are the odds, huh? The only two men I've slept with...know each other, hate each other, yet seem to care for each other.

But do either of them care about me?

I sleep with Edward and he leaves me. Then I fall into bed with Baron and he promptly decides to run away from me. Why is it that I seem to be attracted to the same kind of man, and within such a short period of time? The kind who'll shag me, then fuck off at the first sign of feeling something for me? Is it me? Is there something wrong with me that these guys don't stick around?

I switch off the shower, dry myself, then put on my clothes. My phone pings. I walk over to my bedstand, pick up my phone and glance at the text message.

Raisa: Have you made up your mind yet about coming to Dad's wedding?

I stare at the message for another second. Have I made up my mind? No, no, I haven't. It still feels weird to refer to the upcoming event as Dad's wedding. He is my father. He was married to my mother. How can he be getting married again?

That's when the doorbell rings. Baron. It has to be him, right? I replace the phone on the bedstand, rush to the door, and open it. A stranger stands

there. He's tall, and broad, his hair shaved close to his scalp. His features are hard, his gaze intense. A sense of danger clings to his shoulders. He should seem threatening, but strangely, he's not.

"Ava Erikson?"

I nod.

"I'm Archer, a friend and associate of Baron's." He tilts his head.

"Associate?" I blink. "What kind of associate?"

"We run a security business together."

Ah! That would explain why Baron seemed so nonchalant with the surveillance duties he had taken on. There's so much I don't about him, though. Not that I've had a chance to ask him about himself either. Every time we've been together, it seems like we've spent time arguing... Not to mention that crazy chemistry between us, which complicated everything. Hell, if I won't take every new piece of information I can get about him. Maybe it will help me understand him better?

"I am here to oversee a delivery." Archer prompts me.

"A delivery?" I frown, "I didn't order anything."

"It's definitely for you." The man's lips kick up in a smile that's not warm but not threatening either.

He moves aside to reveal two men hauling in a table between them.

"It's a table?" I blink.

"A dining table." He nods, "I was told it needed to be put in the kitchen."

"Kitchen?" I know I am gaping, but honestly, this is not what I expected first thing in the morning, and before I've even had my coffee.

"May I?" He gestures to the space behind me.

I move aside, watching as he directs the men to carry the dining table into the living room. They place it there, disappearing inside. I hear the sounds of them moving around, cleaning up the broken pieces of table and dishes. A few minutes later they re-appear, carrying the remnants of my stuff out to their truck, then the new table into the kitchen. They return to the truck for chairs and a large box—on the side of which is printed: *Wedgewood*. What the—? That's the name of an extremely upscale dinnerware brand, and trust me when I say that it's expensive. So, he's replacing all the crockery, my cheap-ass supermarket-bought crockery that he'd broken when he swept it off the table...because he was in a hurry to make love to me. My cheeks heat. I fold my arms around my waist, look on as a few minutes later, they wish me a good day and leave.

Meanwhile, Archer walks out of the house, reappears at the doorway, with a couple of bags of groceries.

"You bought me groceries?"

"Not me," He stabs his thumb in the direction of the SUV. "The big guy did."

"Oh."

Archer disappears inside the house. I pop my head around the doorway once again, take in the SUV with the tinted windows. Damn it, what are you up to, Baron? Why are you doing this?

I turn around, head to the kitchen, and find it spotless, a newer, better table and newer, better crockery, which Archer puts away for me. He also unloads the bags of groceries, putting perishable items in the fridge. It's surreal.

When he is finished, Archer turns to me. "Thank you for letting us into your home," he murmurs. "Sorry that we intruded."

"Oh, no." I shake my head in disbelief. "Thank you for, uh, cleaning up the mess."

"You're welcome." He shifts his weight between his feet. "There's one more thing," he mutters.

"Oh?"

"Baron asked me to take over as your security detail."

"Security detail?" I frown. "I don't need security."

"The last attack on you would suggest otherwise, Miss Erikson."

I stiffen. "You know about that?"

"Of course, I got a complete debriefing from him."

"Right." I bite the inside of my cheek. "So, if you're taking over, then does that mean that Baron—?"

I rush away from him to the window and peer out to find the SUV is gone. In its place is a car I don't recognize. A hot sensation stabs at my chest. He's gone. He left me. He actually did it. So, he *did* mean everything he said? He really doesn't want me anymore?

"Miss Erikson?"

I turn to find Archer hovering in the doorway. "Please call me Ava, I insist."

"Ava," he smiles, "will you be leaving for work at the usual time?"

"Work?" I should go in. I need to keep the classes going. Now, more than ever, it is important to keep my routine going. I am not going to disrupt my

life again for another man. Besides, I can't let my students down. And today is Friday, which means that I have four classes today. I nod. "I do have to head in, but not for a few hours yet."

He turns to leave and I stop him. "Archer," I call out, "how do you know Baron?"

He hesitates then turns to me. "We served in the army together. When I got out, I decided to work with him." He glances at the door, then back at me.

"I must be going now," he murmurs. "I'll wait for you outside."

He heads out and I lock the door behind him, head to the kitchen, and put on the kettle. While I am waiting for it to boil, I walk toward the fridge and check out what he brought—fresh vegetables, cheese, milk. On the counter, I find apples, bananas, bread. Everything is marked as being ethically-sourced and organic. There's even a box of cereal—the one I like—and a few bars of chocolate, my favorite brand.

Wow, he'd certainly put a lot of thought into this. How does he know what brand of cereal I like to eat, or what my favorite brand of chocolate is? Had he simply guessed it or had he seen evidence of it in my kitchen already, and known what to buy?

When the kettle boils, I pour the hot water onto a tea bag in a mug, then carry it over to the dining table. My brand-new dining table. I grab the carton of milk from the fridge, pour a little into my tea.

Why is he being this attentive? And after he'd insulted me, then walked out on me. He may claim he doesn't want me, but he does care for me. Of course, he does. So why had he behaved so horribly toward me? It's almost like he wants me to hate him. Is that what this is? Does he want me to think that he doesn't want anything to do with me, so I'll stay away from him?

I head inside my bedroom, grab the phone from where it's been plugged into the socket... Something I don't remember doing. So, it must have been Baron who did it. Hmmm. I sink down on the bed. Why would he anticipate my needs one minute, and the next, turn around and tell me he's already forgotten about me? Gah! It makes no sense.

Later that evening, I sink into a comfortable chair in Summer and Sinclair's townhouse.

Archer had driven me to work, then brought me here. I'd told him he could leave, that I could take the tube home, but of course, he wasn't having any of it. He'd told me that Mr. Masters had ordered him to stay with me at

all times. Ugh! Of course, Baron had to have a strong dominant surname. And of course, I had allowed him to fuck me in the arse, without even finding out what his full name was. I hunch my shoulders.

What does that say about me? Am I doomed to forever fall for the wrong man? Am I such a slut that one whiff of the right peen and I can't think of anything but how to get it between my legs? My core clenches and my toes curl. And boy, oh, boy, both peens had been works of art. Big and thick and broad enough to stretch me in the most delicious way possible... *Gah, stop that.*

"Ava?" Victoria has a concerned look on her face. "You okay?"

"Yes, of course." I shake my head to clear it, as if that's going to help. I can still smell Baron's dark scent, feel the hardness of his chest pressed against my back as he'd bent over me and—

"Ava!" Isla snaps her fingers in front of me.

"What?" I jerk. "What happened?"

"Apparently, Baron happened," she drawls.

"Stop that," I scold her. "Uh, can I get something to drink?"

"Of course." Summer pours frozen margarita into a soup bowl—erm, I mean, a glass—and hands it to me. No, seriously, these are so huge I have to wrap both of my hands around the circumference of the glass to hold it up... Just like I had wrapped my fingers around his dick and—

"Hello, earth to Ava," Isla sing-songs.

I frown at her. "Yes, yes, I am listening."

"Are you, though?" She scowls. "Your head seems to be somewhere else... Maybe the rest of your body too?" She smirks.

"Oh, shut up." I bring the glass to my mouth, sip it. The fruity taste of melon and strawberries, laced with the pungent kick of the tequila, fills my palate. "Yum," I smack my lips, "these are deadly."

"Enjoy." Victoria raises her mocktail glass.

"Have another on my behalf." Karina nods.

"You're not drinking." I frown.

"No, and no I am not pregnant...yet," she continues, "but yeah, I am trying and," she raises her shoulders, "it's no secret that I want a baby so badly that I tried to get artificially inseminated—"

"Instead, thanks to Arpad, you found that doing it the real way is more fun." Julia laughs.

"Oh, you have no idea." Karina's eyes twinkle.

"I do, actually," Summer mutters. "It was a lot of fun...but wait until the morning sickness kicks in." She shakes her head. "It can be a bummer."

"I know, right?" Victoria turns to me. "Thankfully, I haven't suffered too much, but apparently, for some women it lasts the entire pregnancy, and—" She squeaks, "Wait, what? You're pregnant too?"

Summer beams, her features lighting up.

"OMG!" Julia jumps to her feet and rushes over to Summer, "You're having a baby? Oh, wow!" She hugs Summer, who laughs.

"Yeah, I only just found out," she says. "I couldn't wait to tell you guys."

"Congratulations," Karina walks over to her, "I am so excited for you, Summer, I really am."

"Thank you." Summer turns to Karina. She takes Karina's hand between both of hers. "Your turn will come, I promise."

"I am sure it will, if Arpad has anything to do with it," she mutters.

Summer laughs. "Enjoy it, babe. Once you're pregnant, he'll change."

"What do you mean?" Karina frowns.

"I mean, he'll want to wrap you up in cotton wool—"

"Unlike the ropes he prefers to use right now?"

There's silence in the room, then the women burst out laughing.

"Okay, enough." My cheeks heat. "TMI, you guys, TMI."

"Says the woman who's managed to bang not one, but two, of the Seven." Isla turns to me. "It has to be a record of sorts, right?"

"Wait." Amelie turns to me. "What did I miss? I thought you and Edward..." Her voice trails off. "It is you and Edward, right?"

She hesitates and my cheeks heat.

"Yeah, it was me and Edward," I mumble.

"But it isn't anymore," Isla pipes up.

I shoot her a dirty look.

Summer shushes Isla, "Seriously, Iz, sometimes you don't know when to zip it."

"Correction," Isla's shoulders hunch, "I never know when to zip it." She looks at me with a pleading expression on her face, "Sorry, Ava, didn't mean to dump your stuff out there."

I blow out a breath. "It's fine. I mean, what the hell? The rest of you know about it already, so..." I turn to Amelie, "I slept with Baron."

"Baron?" She frowns. "One of the Seven? The one who just returned...?" She blinks at me rapidly. "Oh." She nods, then her gaze widens. "OH," she

coughs, "you slept with Baron."

"Yeah." I drain the margarita, reach over and top up my glass. "Now you guys know all my dirty secrets. Not that there was much to begin with. At least, there hadn't been till a few weeks ago. You know, all I had was a crazy crush on Edward."

"You mean, the Father?" Karina prompts.

"No," I frown at her, "I mean, he's called Edward and also sparkles in the sunlight, but I'm talking about Edward the vampire—"

"Vampire?" Julia's gaze widens. "A real-life vampire?"

Isla frowns at her, "No silly, she means Edward from *Twilight*."

"*Twilight*?" Amelie repeats. "What do you mean, like dusk, dawn, twilight?"

"Not quite," Victoria pipes up. "I think she means, like *Breaking Dawn Twilight*."

"How can it be twilight when it's dawn?" Amelie's forehead furrows, "Unless it's a figure of speech I am not aware of, in which case—"

"I'm talking about *Twilight*, the book," I clarify.

"Unless you are talking about twilight-themed cupcakes which, I assure you, I am good at baking," she goes on as if she didn't hear me. "In fact, I think I should create an entire new range of sparkly cupcakes to celebrate baby showers." Amelie snaps her fingers, "It's a great idea." She reaches over, wraps her arm around me and kisses my cheek. "You are a genius, Ava."

"I am?"

"It's exactly what I was looking for as a means to differentiate my pastry business in the marketplace."

Like that clarified anything?

"Right." I manage. "You really haven't heard of *Twilight*?"

She stares at me, as if I am crazy. "Of course, I know about *Twilight*." She waves a hand in the air. "It's just, I need to call my team right now and get a plan in place. Twilight-themed cupcakes, ha!" She rubs her hands together. "It's a brilliant idea." She kisses me again on both cheeks, then brushes past me to grab her bag. "I gotta get going. You guys don't mind, right?"

I stare, bemused, as she hitches her massive tote over her shoulder. She heads for the door, then pauses and turns to me, "Oh, and if I were you, I'd enjoy the one who is still with you. Unless, of course, you'd prefer to keep

both," she smirks, "in which case, I wouldn't blame you." She blows me a kiss and heads for the door, which slams behind her.

O-k-a-y. I turn back to my margarita, my cheeks burning. Shit, of all the girls here, I know Isla the best. I'd met the others through her, and they had pretty much adopted me into their circle. But they've known the Seven much longer than me. What the hell must they think of me now? I clear my throat, "Uh, guess I'd better head off now."

"Oh, no you don't, woman." Summer grabs hold of me and steers me over into a chair. "You sit." She jabs a finger at me. "You're not going anywhere until you share all the juicy details."

"You mean all the details of the train wreck that my life is turning out to be, right?" I mutter under my breath.

"Stop that." Isla frowns at me. "No one here is judging you, Ava."

Except me. I'm judging myself. But that's my issue, right?

Summer walks over with another full glass of margarita, "Here you go."

She turns away to sink onto the couch near me. "So... Baron, hmm?" She waggles her eyebrows at me.

"Yeah, well, it's not how it looks." Gah, what a clichè I am turning out to be. I take another gulp of the margarita, which goes down smoothly. Lick my lips, then stare around at the faces of the girls. "What?" I frown.

"Deets, babe, the spicy, juicy deets." Isla leans forward in her chair, "How was it?"

"I am not telling you," I say, horrified. "Besides, who are you talking about?" I glance at her from under lowered eyelashes, "Edward or Baron?"

"Omigod!" Isla fans herself. "Bitch here gets all the dick and she's still complaining. Better two cocks than zero shafts, babe."

"Iz," I laugh, "your mouth will get you into so much trouble someday."

"Here's hoping." She drains her glass, reaches for the pitcher on the table in the center, "So...which one?" She tilts her head in my direction, "Or are you going to keep both?"

"What?" I choke on my margarita. "What are you talking about?"

Summer reaches over to smack me on the back. "Why, what's wrong with having two at the same time?"

"I couldn't," I gape at her. My cheeks heat. "I mean, I shouldn't, I mean... It's not how it's done."

"But you want to?" Karina drawls from her perch on the chair opposite me. "Do you want to keep them both?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." I shake my hair back from my face. "I mean, come on, this is real life, people. You don't go around bedding and staying in a relationship with two men. And to be fair, I only hooked up with Baron after Edward left." Okay, so it was immediately after Edward left, like he departed stage right and Baron walked in from the other side, but whatever.

"So, do you still have feelings for Edward?" Summer asks softly.

I chew the inside of my cheek. "Do I still want him? Yes, I do. At least, I think I do. I mean, I saw him and it was like love at first sight. I couldn't get him out of my head. And Baron? Well, there's something about him that's so compelling, almost hypnotic. There's an edginess to him, and an anger that's alluring. Edward broke his vows for me...and Baron... Well, he doesn't want my vows, so right now, I have neither, it would seem."

"Oh, babe." Isla places her glass down on the side table, then walks over and bends to hug me. "I am so sorry. Men can be cunts, you know that?"

"Yeah, only he was good to my cunt. Well, they both were, to be fair."

Isla chuckles. "At least, you got good sex out of it."

"There is that."

"You are two up on me, not that I was ever going to hook up with any of the Seven."

"No, you went for the bigger, meaner, older brother to one of the Seven instead," Karina mutters.

Isla straightens and flicks her hair over her shoulder, "Oh, please. I hated the man on sight, and now I am going to have to see him almost every day, when the wedding rehearsals begin."

"Rehearsals?" I frown.

"The bridezilla—and this one is the mother of them all—insists on at least three before the actual wedding."

"As long as you are getting paid..." Karina interjects.

"You bet, I am," Isla bares her teeth, "and it's all Liam's money so there is that, but enough about me." She turns to survey me down the length of her nose. "What are you going to do now, Missy?"

"Me?" I take another huge sip of the margarita and hiccough. Oops. I scowl up at her. "For now, I am not doing anything. Except staying clear of men."

"What if Baron changes his mind and wants you back?"

"He can go fuck himself," I mutter. "After the way he walked out on me, it's going to take more than just apologies for me to be with him." But damn,

if I don't still want to fuck him... Only, my emotions are already involved here... If I slept with him again, it would become something I couldn't walk away from.

"And Edward?" Karina asks. "What about him?"

"What about him?" I glance at her. "He left me; end of story."

"He'll be back."

"So, everyone keeps saying."

"As their security consultant, I am privy to the affairs of all the Seven" she murmurs, "and based on what I know, I can tell you the Seven don't like loose ends. Not that you are a loose end..." She hastens to add, "But you know what I mean?"

"No," I place the glass on the table, "I don't, actually. What are you trying to say?"

"Just that, chances are, Edward will return, and sooner, rather than later. What are you going to do then?"

I contemplate the depths of my glass. "I have no idea." I stare around the faces of my friends, before settling on Karina, "What would you do?"

She shakes her head. "Oh, no, no. You are putting me on the spot."

"No, I really want to know." I lean forward, "I am so confused; it will help me to get another perspective."

"I am probably the wrong person to ask," she mutters. "I am not the conventional, roll over and submit to a guy kind of gal... Well, none of us are, actually." She looks around the room. "And one thing I have learned is that, fuck society. No one knows your situation and what you are facing, so no one needs to understand your decisions. It's you who needs to follow your instincts."

"And what if my instincts are muddled? What if I can't figure out what to do?"

"Then it means you are not ready to decide. It means," she smiles gently, "that you wait."

"For how long, though?" Not that I am in any hurry, but hell, if it wouldn't help to figure out where I stand in this sorry mess.

"Until you're ready."

"When will I be ready?"

She chuckles. "You'll know when you know."

Julia's phone buzzes, she glances at it, and a smile tugs her lips. "On that note... And not that I want to break this up, guys, and don't think I am leaving

because hubby texted me...but—"

"Oh, please." Isla scoffs, "Just go, already. I mean, all you guys are so in love that it's making me sick." She makes a gagging noise.

I laugh. "Don't worry, I am right there with you, Iz."

"But... I do have to go, too." Isla looks over at me with regret. "I have a ton of things to prep for my upcoming weddings. Best I get home, so I can get an early start tomorrow."

"Okay," I rise to my feet, "I'd better get going too."

26

Baron

I pause in front of Saint's townhouse at Primrose Hill.

After I'd briefed Archer on Ava's schedule, I'd made it to my loft—which I hadn't been to since I'd met Ava—showered and shaved. Then made a few more calls, this time to my contacts to find out who could have been behind the men who'd attacked Ava. The information hadn't looked good.

It had confirmed to me what I'd already suspected. I need the help of the rest of the Seven. The situation is more serious than I'd imagined and I need my friends to back me up on my plan. I hate to ask them for help, but if this is the only way to keep Ava safe, I'll do it. I'd gladly sacrifice my life for her if it came to it... Only, this is harder. Meeting my friends face-to-face, asking them to back me up. Sweat beads my palm. I shift the folder I am carrying to my other hand, rub my palm on my pants, then raise it to knock on the door, when it swings open.

Weston, stands in the doorway, his face wreathed in a big smile. "Baron!" He grabs my arm and hauls me in for a hug. I stand stiffly, while he thumps my back, "I still can't believe you are back among us."

"Me neither," I mutter.

He releases me, then steps back and peers into my face. "You don't look like you got much sleep, though."

"You don't say." I scowl.

Motherfucker looks freshly scrubbed, his skin glowing with health. He's wearing a beard, which he hadn't had when we were younger. Of course, that

was years ago. I am still getting used to seeing the physical changes in my friends. Emotionally and mentally, though, they are still the same. Which means, all of them have the intelligence of a twelve-year-old—collectively.

Weston's smile widens. Shit, doesn't the man have anything better to do than look happy at the world? And content? Yeah, it comes off of him in waves. He reeks of happiness and fulfillment and all those emo words that I'd never have associated with any of the Seven. But then, I'd have never thought that I'd fall for a woman who was taken either... So yeah, shit happens.

I brush past him and walk inside. "So," I clear my throat, "I take it Saint doesn't know that I am coming to this little reunion?"

"He'll come around." Weston claps my back. "You know Saint. His bark is more dangerous than his bite."

"No, actually. I don't." I scowl. "The last few times I've met him, he's made it clear he doesn't want anything to do with me."

"Yeah." Weston's smile diminishes in wattage. Thank fuck. He was beginning to creep me out with all that happiness pouring off of him. There should be a law against any of the Seven being in such good spirits. I mean, it's practically written—somewhere—that the Seven needed to be growly, grumpy alphaholes, like me. So, to see them jovial and chilled out, like the proverbial cat that swallowed the canary, or in this case, like men who've found the loves of their lives, is disconcerting, to say the least.

"Saint's a bit of a complex character," Weston offers.

"Aren't we all?"

"Good thing Edward's not here. This way, you only have to deal with one pissed off wanker at a time—"

I shoot him a glance and he winces. "Oops, sorry, slip of the tongue. I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine," I drawl, "I am not going to collapse bawling if you speak about E."

"You're the only guy who was close enough to Ed to call him that."

"I'm also the only one who dared challenge him when he said he was going to join the seminary," I mutter.

"You knew him better than we did."

"None of you guys dissuaded him, either."

"He was hell bent on it." Weston frowns. "Considering what we went through, if that was what brought him some measure of peace then..." he shrugs, "who were we to step in between him and his calling?"

"Calling." I snort. "He was running away from facing his demons."

"Like you did." A new voice cuts in.

I turn to find Saint prowling toward us.

"You were saying?" I scowl.

"That you were the one who abandoned us."

"I joined the army," I snap.

"Without telling any of us."

"Didn't think it mattered, either way."

Saint closes the distance between us so quickly that I blink. He grabs my collar, hauls me up, "If you had only cared enough to open your eyes and see how your leaving was going to impact the rest of us. If you had only thought of anyone else except yourself."

"I did," I say through gritted teeth, "It's why I left, you tosser."

"Is that your excuse?" he growls. "That you were too shaken by everything that happened? That you couldn't cope with it? That you didn't have the balls to share your decision with everyone? No, you upped and got out... You decided not to stay in touch, except for your stupid snail mail letters—which was a bad decision, by the way. It's what helped us track you down, you bastard."

"I wasn't trying to hide." I raise my shoulders. "I simply wanted my space."

"No, you *thought* you needed space, when in reality, you were too afraid."

"Afraid?" I scowl. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You were afraid of your feelings. Afraid to feel any kind of connection with any of us. Afraid that if you, for one moment, stopped and allowed yourself to feel, that you would—"

"What?" I snap. "What would happen if I allowed myself to feel?"

"You'd have felt compelled to stay back and actually develop some kind of a relationship with the rest of us. Not to mention, you'd have been forced to sort out your shit with Edward and—"

"Enough," I break away from him, "this was a bad idea." I pivot and head for the doorway. "I shouldn't have come here."

"That's right, run away." Saint's voice follows me. "When the going gets tough, you always did do a Baron."

"Do a Baron?" I pause. "What the hell does that mean?"

"You know, losing your balls. Not having the courage to stand up and fight for what you believe in."

"You want to fight?" I reel around and confront him, "Want to get your arse handed to you, is that it?"

He laughs, "I'm faster than you, stronger than you, leaner than you, you arse."

"But you're pussy-whipped."

"And you aren't?" He smirks.

"I don't have a wife and a kid on the way to worry about."

"No, you're too much of a coward to commit to anyone."

"Is that what you think?"

"What other explanation is there?" He shrugs. "Not that it matters, to be honest. I am sick of this shit, anyway. You come home and everyone celebrates, as if you're a vanquishing hero. Little do they know how much of a weakling you really are."

"Weakling, huh?" I glance around, then place the folder on a coffee table nearby. I straighten, curl my fingers into fists, "Let's take this outdoors, shall we?"

Baron

"Actually, let's not." Saint rushes toward me. Asshole swings with his fist, catches me under the chin. My head snaps back; pain squeezes the backs of my eyes. My vision wavers. I shake my head to clear it, straighten but he's already in my face again. He lands a punch in my side, then the other, in my shoulder, back to my stomach. My body protests, my shoulder screams, and the breath screeches out of me. I lurch forward, throw my arm around him, and we hug each other in the semblance of an embrace that isn't really one. He punches me in the side, and again, as I lean the bulk of my weight on him. He staggers back, and I shove at him, my shoes squeaking on the floor as I propel the both of us toward the back of the room. I lean back, swing, catch him under his chin. Blood spurts out as he tumbles back into the wet bar. The force of his momentum carries him over. At the last moment, he grabs my collar and the impetus carries me along. I crash to the floor, his body knocks into me, and the bottles from the shelves above rain down on us. A bottle from the top-most shelf teeters over, then plunges down toward us, and I throw my arms around his head to shield him. The bottle hits the back of my hand, bounces off. I grunt as pain whips up my arm.

We stay that way for a few seconds. Another glass rolls over the counter, falls over to the other side. The crash echoes through the space, then there's silence. The scent of alcohol deepens. Puddles of liquor surround us, dotted with broken glass shards.

Saint pushes me off of him and staggers to his feet, pieces of broken glass

sliding off of him. He holds out his hand. I stare at it, then up at him.

"Thanks," he grumbles. "You protected me from getting hurt."

I firm my lips, then nod. I grab his hand and he hauls me to my feet.

"You guys okay?" Weston asks from the other side of the bar. "Figured it was best to let you chaps fight it out."

"What happened here?" Arpad walks in, followed by Damian and Sinclair.

"Thought we heard the sound of breaking glass." Damian glances around the space.

"Guess you guys were getting reacquainted?" Sinclair drawls.

"How did you guess?" I say wryly.

"So, what's the verdict?" Weston interjects. "You guys kissed and made up yet?"

We glare at each other.

Damian side-steps a broken bottle, then leans his elbow on a clear patch of the bar counter. "Or, if you want to go another round—"

"That won't be necessary," Saint snaps.

I tilt my head.

He blows out a breath. "Much as I hate to be beholden to you for anything, seems you did protect me from getting badly hurt."

"I'll pay for the damages," I offer stiffly.

"That won't be necessary," he retorts.

"So, you guys gonna shake or what?" Arpad glances at his watch, "I gotta get out of here in half an hour."

"Newlyweds." Sinner tsks.

"Better enjoy it before the kids come along." Damian chuckles.

Arpad scowls at them. "Relax, you guys. Let me enjoy my time with my new bride without all of you getting on my balls."

I snicker. "Oh, she has you by the balls all right, brother."

"Look who's talking." Arpad smirks. "You're in as much trouble as the rest of us, ol' chap."

"Hey, hey," I hold up my hands, "I came here on a work thing, so can we get to that?"

"Once you shake," Damian insists. "Go on," he urges me, "get it over with so we can get to what you want to discuss."

"Yeah, fine." I roll my shoulders, grab Saint's hand. We shake.

Saint jerks his chin. "I'll be watching you."

"Just as long as you can help me keep an eye on her."

"Thought you were doing that?" He frowns.

"Yeah, about that..." I shuffle my feet.

He releases my hand, fixes me with an impenetrable gaze. "What's up?" He scowls. "It must be something very important that made you walk in here and make peace."

"I wasn't the one who harbored hard feelings," I remind him.

He looks like he is about to protest, then nods. "I still haven't forgiven you for what you did, but if your woman is in danger..."

"Not my woman," I snap.

Saint stares at me, then his face cracks in a smile.

I stare, "That wasn't a joke, you wanker."

Saint bends, then pulls out a bottle of Macallan's from under the bar. He pushes the broken glass pieces to the side, slams the bottle on the table. Damian grabs a few glasses from the far end of the bar, lines them on the counter. Saint tops up the glasses, then hands me one.

"What are we drinking to?" I ask suspiciously.

He jerks the glass in my direction, and I accept it as the others reach for their drinks.

"Well?" I scowl, "Are you going to tell me or keep smiling like a maniac?"

Saint chuckles, "You heard that, guys?" He turns to the other men, "Seems another one of us is getting ready to bite the dust."

"The only one who's going to have a mouthful of dust is you, if you don't knock off your cryptic comments."

"It bothers you, huh?" Saint snatches up his own glass. "Being vulnerable and open, knowing your heart could be shattered any moment?"

"You're wrong, my heart can't be hurt anymore."

"Oh?" He scowls. "Why's that?"

Because it doesn't belong to me anymore, is what I want to say. Instead, I sip from the glass. The liquid burns its way down, and heat infuses my veins. "Because," I tip up my chin and stare at him, "I am not going back on my word to Edward."

Damian tosses back his drink, places the glass on the counter, "Ever occur to you that Edward called you and asked you for this favor as a way of bringing you two together?"

"What do you mean?" I frown. "That he purposely put us together, as a

test?"

"More as a way of getting the two of you to get to know each other?"

"Why would he do that?" I frown. "It makes no sense."

"Maybe he did it subconsciously?" Weston offers. "After all, the two of you were close."

"More like, after what we went through, we couldn't stand the sight of each other," I say wryly.

"What did you go through?" Arpad leans forward on the balls of his feet. "Neither of you has ever spoken about what happened to you during the incident."

I stiffen, then draw myself up to my full height. "It's best kept that way."

"If you don't talk about it, it's not going to help you heal," Weston warns.

"If I do talk about it, it's only going to dredge up a whole lot of shit that I am better off without."

Sinner shakes his head. "That's what I thought. Then, I met Summer and realized, turning your back on your feelings is a one-way trip to hell."

"A place I am well acquainted with," I mutter.

"It doesn't have to be that way." Sinner leans forward. "Let us help you."

"You can," I glance around at the faces of my friends, "by helping me track down who attacked Ava."

"Hanganobloodysecond," Saint bursts out. "Someone attacked her?"

"Why do you think I am here?" I reach for the bottle of whiskey and top myself up. "It happened last night, after she left the restaurant."

"Thought you were keeping watch over her?"

"Yeah," I rub the back of my neck, "she was on a date and I—"

"You lost your cool." Saint scowls. "It happens."

"Edward met her first," I mumble. "I shouldn't feel this way about her."

"You can't control who you develop feelings for," Weston interjects. "Trust me, all of us here have tried to resist and failed."

Damian nods. "We each had to go through some crazy shit before we could face our emotions, but once we did? Boy, was it all clear."

"Easy for you to say." I glower at him. "When you met your woman, was she already in a relationship with someone else?"

"Victoria was," Saint says slowly. "She'd just buried her husband, but he hadn't been her husband, in the real sense of the word."

"Well, whatever it was between Edward and Ava, it was very real." I squeeze my fingers around my glass. "It's why he asked me to watch out for

her."

"He's not here," Saint points out. "You are."

"What are you trying to say, man?" I frown. "I can't betray Edward."

Except, I already have, and fuck, if I am going to let it happen again.

"All's fair..." Saint bares his teeth. "Edward took off. You did the honorable thing; you came back to help someone in need. You were there for her when she needed you. If the two of you develop feelings for each other, well, that's just the way it is."

"If only everything was that simple."

"It's as simple or as complicated as you make it out to be." His lips twist.

"A word of advice from me, ol' chap?"

"Not that I care about what you're going to say, but don't let that stop you."

"I won't." Saint's smile widens. "After everything you've been through, you have a chance at being happy. It doesn't often happen that you meet someone who brings out the best part of you—which in your case is especially a rarity, given those parts are particularly hard to find—" he smirks. "So, if I were you, I wouldn't let the fact that she and Edward had a thing stop you."

"He left the Church for her," I snap.

"You faced your fears for her." He grips my shoulder. "You came back to a life that you hadn't been able to face, made up with your friends, put her needs before yours. Even now, you're thinking of her first. I'd say you have as much right as him to pursue her."

"What are you saying?"

"He means," Sinner drawls, "go after the fair maiden. Let her decide who she wants."

"Agreed." Damian nods.

Arpad jerks his chin.

Weston scowls. "You have to do what is right for you, man."

"And you?" I raise my tumbler in his direction, "What would you do if you were in my shoes?"

"Me?" He scratches his chin. "I'd go after what was mine." He looks me up and down, "Is she yours, Baron?"

I glare at him and he chuckles. "Thought so," He raises a shoulder, "The way I see it, you don't have a choice, man. You're going to have to follow your heart, and well, the rest is not in your hands anyway."

I stare into the dregs of the amber liquid in my glass. Are they right? Is it that simple? Am I over-complicating everything by my sense of right and wrong? My instincts are the only thing that kept me from getting killed in the army. It's what had led me to staying away from my friends. The same instincts which had known when it was time to return when Edward called... Which now tells me, the only thing worth living for is her. That if I'm not with her, if I don't use this opportunity that had been handed to me, I am a fool.

She wants me, she's made it clear. She still has feelings for Edward... But hell, it's true that I am here and he isn't. I hadn't meant to fall for her... I am not at fault here. He turned his back on her; he passed off his responsibility to me—and I intend to do what is in her best interests. Which is...allow her to see how it could be with me. The guys are right. Ultimately, it isn't in my hands who she chooses. All I can do is allow her to make the decision. It isn't mine to make. I can't force her to choose by default. If I respect her, I should allow her to decide for herself. And I do. I trust her to make this choice for herself.

I turn to Saint, hold out my hand. "I hate saying it, but you're right."

He smirks, bypasses my hand, to pull me into a hug. "I always am."

"What-bloody-ever." I thump his back, then step back, and glance around the room.

"There's one other thing I could do with some help on."

"What's that?" Arpad asks.

"The man Edward hurt," I brush past Saint, walk around the bar and step over the broken glass pieces to face the other men, "he hasn't woken up yet, so there are no clues forthcoming as to his identity; though I swear I have seen him somewhere before." I shake my head, "I just can't place him, though."

"You think he's connected with the attack on Ava?" Sinclair flicks dust off his £7000 suit jacket. No matter the occasion, he is always dressed like he has a bloody board meeting to attend. Me? I can't stand ties, or collars, for that matter. No wonder Edward fits right in with these guys. He constrains himself with his duty to the Lord—or at least, he used to do so. And the rest of the Seven, with the exception of our resident rock star Damian? They don't think twice about knotting a tie around their neck... If the occasion demands it. I'd rather face a bullet than do that. Oh, Wait, I had faced a bullet...many bullets, rather than risk being stuck in a nine-to-five existence,

or any kind of relationship, for that matter. And now I am willingly looking to embrace conventions... Only for her. If this is the only way to keep her safe? Then I'll gladly do so.

"Seems too much of a coincidence, don't you think?" I tilt my head.

"Now that you mention it." Sinclair widens his stance. "You think he's connected with the Mafia?"

"I know he is." I fold my arms across my chest. "It's why the normally controlled Father lost his composure. The man told him that he is linked to our kidnapping."

"How?" Damian scowls, "Did Edward mention any details?"

"He mentioned that the bastard was at St. Lucian's with us."

"What?" Saint exclaims. "Asshole was a fellow student? You think he shared information about us with the kidnappers?"

"Apparently." I nod.

"What else?" Arpad growls. "What else did Edward tell you?"

"He also said that he hadn't been in control of himself, which is why he'd lost his temper." I rub the back of my neck. "When he realized the man had helped perpetuate the incident and that he was still involved with the Mafia, he hadn't been able to stop himself. In fact, Edward had been sure that he'd killed the man. It was only when I went to the church and found his body, I realized he was still breathing."

"Did Edward mention where he was headed?" Saint interjects.

"Would you?" I narrow my gaze on him and Saint scowls.

"That's a no, then."

"And there's no way to contact him," Damian murmurs, "which means, there's no way for Ed to know that the man survived the attack."

"Do you think that's why he left," Sinclair turns to me, "because he thought he'd killed the man?"

"Among other things." I walk over to the coffee table, retrieve the folder with the pictures of the mystery man, then hand it over to Sinclair. "Thought I'd share his pictures, in case any of you recognize him."

Sinclair opens the folder, takes in the pictures. His gaze narrows, he flicks through the pictures, then stares up at me.

"What?" I frown. "You recognize him?"

"I swear I've seen him before, but I can't place where."

Arpad walks over to Sinclair, takes the pictures from him. "Shit, I know him, he's the homeless guy I got into a fight with. Bastard had video on his

phone of Karina walking up the steps of the Town Hall to get married."

"He did?" I frown.

"That's right." Sinclair snaps his fingers. "He used to sit in front of my office building. I am sure I put money into his hat a few times."

"Homeless guy?" Saint walks around the bar, snatches up one of the pictures from Arpad. "What the hell?" he swears. "I saw him in front of the Dorchester when I was with Victoria."

"So, let me get this straight," I glance around the group, "He's had encounters with each of you?"

"I didn't meet him," Damian says slowly, "but he must be the person whom Julia had a conversation with." Damian glances up from the picture he'd taken from Arpad. "She mentioned that a homeless guy had shown her his phone with the video of the song I'd recorded as an apology to her. It's what made her change her mind about me, you know. In a way, I owe my being reunited with Julia to him."

"And if he hadn't shown me the video of Karina heading up the steps of the town hall, I'd have never made it in time to stop her wedding." Arpad adds.

"He also had a signboard, on which he'd scrawled some poem from Byron."

"I noticed that too." Saint growls, "Asshole asked me for a cigarette, which I didn't have. Bet he ate at the soup kitchen at my hotel every night, too."

I turn to Saint, "So did he help you in anyway?"

"Not unless you count the fact that Victoria felt sorry for him, and I told her the same thing, that he probably ate at the pop-up soup kitchen my hotel hosts every night with the leftovers.

"Which made her look at you in a different light?" I surmise.

"If you mean that he humanized me?" He raises a shoulder, "I guess so, probably."

"And you Sinclair?" I tilt my head in his direction, "He help you with your love life?"

"I should bloody well hope not," Sinclair drawls, "though after I got together with Summer, I never saw him again."

"And what about you Weston?" I turn my gaze on him, "He help you too?"

"I noticed he was barefoot and gave him my shoes. Then when Amelie

asked me about them, I told her what I'd done." He scowls. "Guess he showed me in a favorable light, as well."

"He helped bring out the man behind the alphahole, again," I muse.

"What are you thinking, Baron?" Arpad turns to me, "You think he played some kind of cupid for all of us, helping us get together with our women?"

"That may be stretching things a bit, but yeah... I am thinking something along those lines. You have to admit that it's somewhat dodgy that the guy shows up at a pivotal moment for each of you, then seems to disappear from your sight when you guys get hitched."

"So what?" Weston rubs the back of his neck. "He's a well-wisher?"

And hell, if I couldn't do with some additional help in getting my woman. I shake my head. Now, that is fanciful thinking. I don't need anybody else's advice. I've got this. I'll find a way to make up for the way I'd acted with Ava. I have to.

"And you?" Sinner frowns at me, "where have you seen him before?"

"I don't know." I drag my fingers through my hair. "I am sure I have seen him before, although I feel like he was younger at the time." I raise my shoulders. "Either way, when he regains consciousness, I plan to be there to question him. Meanwhile," I turn to the guys, "I need to get to my woman."

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"My mum always told me that I'm perfect, that I'm beautiful and that no guy deserves me. But how much of what she says is lies? Is it a lie if she believes it's true? Is it possible to tell the truth and lie simultaneously?"

-From Ava's Diary

Ava

Half an hour after leaving Summer and Sinclair's townhouse, the car pulls up outside a fast-food outlet. I'd left their place and realized I didn't want to go home yet. Especially not, since the place reminds me of Baron.

Everywhere I look, I see him—on the couch, in the shower, in the kitchen, in my bed. Shit, it's like his presence is woven into every room there. Also, it had been so long since I'd danced...just for the pleasure of dancing.... Just being able to move to the music without worrying about anything else. Yeah, it's exactly what I need. I want to get to my studio, and I want to do it unaccompanied by Baron's watchdog. The man has no claim on me. I don't need his bloody protection. I am a free, independent woman who can do what I want, when I want, and no man is going to take that from me. I am going to get to the studio, and on my own steam. Which means I have to ditch Archer. So, I ask him to stop at the fast-food outlet.

I get out of the car, and so does Archer.

"I don't need you to accompany me in there," I point out.

He shakes his head, "Baron said—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know what he said, but surely, I am safe in there." I point

to the outlet. "You can see everyone who comes in and out of it."

He hesitates and I throw up my hands, "Come on. Surely, I deserve a bit of privacy, a few minutes of being able to eat my food in peace?"

He firms his lips, then nods. "Five minutes, then I'll come in there."

"Fifteen minutes."

"Ten," he folds his arms across his chest, "and that's about all I can agree to."

"Deal." I sniff, then turn and stomp inside the outlet. I place my order, glance through the shop window to find him standing to attention, his gaze fixed on me. Shit, this isn't working, I need to find a way to give him a slip. Just then, a gang of students walks into the shop. They mill around, chattering, pointing to the menu board on the wall. They press in closer to the counter, cutting me off from his sight.

Instantly, I spin around, walk to the door at the back. I pass the kitchen, travel down a short corridor, reach the door at the back and twist it open. I walk down the alley. Reaching the main road, I turn left, head for the tube station. Good thing I am wearing sneakers and jeans. It means I can run. I hit the tube station, make it to the tills and the platform. I glance back, half convinced that I'll see Archer, but I don't spot him. The tube train enters the platform—awesome! At least, luck is with me.

I jump on in it, travel another fifteen minutes east, then jump out at the station that is closest to my studio. I head out of the tube, up the quiet street. It's not that late, just past nine p.m. I've been to the studio this late many times before. The wind picks up and the hair on the back of my neck rises. Shit, since that encounter in the subway, I haven't been myself. I need to get over it. Need to live my life. Baron isn't going to be around anymore. I have to accept that. He opted to leave me; I have to learn to live without him.

I hurry my pace, reach the door to the studio, key in my passcode and push open the door. I step in, push the door firmly closed behind me, climb the stairs and reach my studio. Once inside, I lock the door, then head inside the dressing room. I place my handbag on the dressing room table and change into my yoga pants and a sports-bra—good thing I always keep a change of clothes here.

Back in the studio, I choose the track and turn up the volume.

The rhythm from the Maga remix of Eminem's *Ass Like That*, fills the space. I know, I know, not conventional belly dancing music, but I've always eschewed the more classical belly-dancing numbers in favor of an eclectic

mix of tunes to which I can really shake my booty.

I shake my hips, bump, grind, stretch again, then launch into the dance. Raise my hands, shimmy, grind-grind-grind, sink to my knees, head down, throw my hair back, spring up. Twirl on my toes, round and round, spread my legs, shake my booty. So, it's not just belly dancing, but a mix of moves I've picked up along the way. A lot of it from watching music videos, classical dancing, taking classes in other different dance forms—salsa, merengue, tango, and other eastern dance forms, like Kathak. Also, ballet—which I'd never been able to master, but which had helped me discipline my moves... Which, combined with the sensuous grace of belly-dancing, helps capture the eye of the person watching and keeps them riveted—at least, so I hope. My heart begins to pump harder, sweat beads my brow, flows down my back. The rhythm picks up and the beats thunder in my veins. I push myself to go faster, slam my feet into the wooden floor, twirl, whirl, pirouette, shimmy—the song ends in a clash of cymbals and I throw myself down, head down, hair in a cloud about my shoulders, my breath coming in gasps. That's when I hear the sound of scuffling. What the—? I jump up as the sound of a thud reaches me.

There's a banging on the door and I freeze.

Who could it be? I reach for my phone and switch off the music. Silence descends. I head for the door, glance through the peephole and freeze.

The man standing there wears a suit. He's staring straight at me. He has a bandage on his forehead. What the—? It's one of the guys who attacked me at the bypass the other day. He stares at the peephole, then raises his fist to bang on the door again.

A small cry bubbles up. I push my knuckles inside my mouth.

I stumble back, grab the phone, go to dial Baron's number, then remember. Shit, I deleted it.

That's when something slams into the door. Shit, he's going to break it down. *Shit, shit, shit.* I dial Isla's number; it goes straight to voice mail. He crashes into the door again and I hear it crack. Fuck, this isn't good. This is not good. I should have heeded Baron's advice and moved my studio somewhere safer, especially after that subway attack. But the rent on this place is so cheap. It's a steal. Now I know why. Clearly, I had left myself wide open and vulnerable. Oh, hell.

I pull up Summer's number; that's when the door crashes open.

The man stomps into the studio, and the phone slips from my hand.

I glance around the space for a weapon, anything that I can use against him. He shakes his head, "Don't even think about it." He stops in front of me and I swallow. *No, no, no, this can't be happening. Why the hell had I given Archer the slip? Why had I not thought this through better? Why had I been so upset with Baron that I had compromised my own safety?*

The guy looks me up and down. "What have we here?" He reaches for me, and I scream. I bring my knee up, kick him in the groin. He doubles over and I rush past him. I am almost at the door, when I feel the weight of his hand on my shoulder. I scream as he kicks my legs out from under me. I fall over, turning my face so my cheek connects with the hard floor, instead of my nose. The breath rushes out of me. Sparks flare behind my eyes. I lay there, stunned, when he grabs my arm and begins to drag me inside toward the dressing room.

I try to yank free, but my shoulder screams in protest. A groan rips out of me. He pulls me toward the dressing room, shoves the door open and throws me inside. I slam into the wall, hit my other shoulder against the hard surface. The pain reverberates down my spine. My head spins. I lose my balance and fall onto the dressing table, which shudders. I slide to the floor and my handbag falls next to me. I snatch it up, hurl it at the intruder. He laughs, even as he catches it, and tosses it over his shoulder.

I lay on the floor as he prowls closer to stand over me.

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Baron

I am on my way to her house, when my phone rings. I hit the handsfree. "Archer?" I ask.

"Baron, I'm sorry, but she gave me the slip."

"What?" I frown. "What do you mean? Where is she?"

"I'm at her house right now, and she's not here."

I swerve to the side and a car honks angrily as the vehicle passes me by. I hit the brakes and the car screeches to a halt. "What do you mean she's not there? Where could she be?"

"Not sure. Maybe...the studio?"

I release the brakes, peel onto the road, and take a U-turn.

"I'm on my way there now."

"I'm sorry about this. I literally lost sight of her for a few seconds, and she took off."

"We'll talk about that later," I snap. "Just get to the studio."

"On my way."

I disconnect, step on the accelerator and head for her studio. My heart begins to pound; adrenaline laces my blood. "Fuck." I slap my palm on the steering wheel. I knew it; knew I shouldn't have trusted anyone else with the job of watching her. But Archer is good. He is better than me when it comes to surveillance shit. It's why I'd asked him to keep an eye on her. But no one can protect her better than me. No one. And I had been too up my own arse to think clearly. I should have known she wouldn't accept anyone else to watch

over her. Shit, if something were to happen to her. No, it's fine. She's fine. She has to be.

Good thing, I am not too far from her studio. In ten minutes, I screech to a halt in front of the building with her studio.

I reach the door that leads to the building, and am about to press the buzzer when a gust of wind blows. The door swings open, then slaps against the frame again. What the—? The hair on the nape of my neck rises. I freeze, pat my side, then swear again. Of course, I don't have a weapon. I am not at war. At least, I thought I wasn't. How wrong I've been. I am in the middle of the biggest fight of my life, the one to protect my woman.

I head for the studio, find the door to the building hanging askew. My pulse thuds at my temples and anger squeezes my guts. I try to take in a breath and my lungs burn. If anyone has dared to hurt her, I'll kill them. The blood pounds in my veins and my heartbeat accelerates. I race up the flight of steps, find the studio door similarly busted. I slip inside. The space is empty except for the purse on the floor.

I jump toward it, look at the contents spread across the floor. Among them is a photograph. I pick it up, glance at the family in the picture. The mother, the father, the older daughter, the younger one with red hair, wearing a red dress. The same red dress I'd seen on the girl in that pub.

My heart begins to race and sweat beads my palms. It's her. I had been right all along. The girl I hadn't been able to get out of mind all these years? It's her. Ava. My Eve. I pocket the photograph when a sound reaches me. I freeze, glance in the direction of the closed door of the dressing room, when a scream rends the air.

My heart slams against my rib cage,

I race across the floor, burst into the dressing room, to find her on the floor.

A man in a suit has her hands pinned back. Another restrains her legs. I take in their features, freeze. They are the same men who attacked her in the subway. What the hell are they doing here? Why are they coming after her?

A third guy, also in a suit, stands over her. He turns to face me and I growl. My vision narrows. Motherfucker, I am going to kill all of them. I lunge forward, grab his shoulders and haul him back. I fling him to the side. He hits the wall at a roll, only to spring up again. I rush toward him, raise my fist, and bury it in his face. His eyes roll back and he slumps.

Before he can hit the ground, I turn back toward the dressing room and

freeze. She's on her knees and the man who previously had her hands pinned back now has his arm around her neck. The other guy stands between us.

Both men have their guns pointed on her.

Ava's chin wobbles, her face leached of all color. There's a cut on her forehead, her hair is askew, but otherwise, she looks unhurt. Good.

The man who's standing turns and walks toward me. I throw up my fists and he shakes his head. "Resist and Carlos, here, will not hesitate to shoot your girlfriend."

"Why," I growl, "why would you hurt her?"

"To get back at you, of course." He rocks back on his feet. "You guys need to stop sticking your nose in where you are not needed."

"Let her go," I growl, "she's innocent."

"You should have thought of that before you got involved with her."

A cold sensation stabs at my chest. I'd put her in danger, damn it. I'd thought I was protecting her, but I'd turned the Mafia's attention solely on her.

"She had nothing to do with it," I grate out.

"Oh, but she's such a hot piece of ass. Bet she has a really tight pussy, huh?"

Anger fills my head and my vision bleeds red. I jump toward him, and he raises his gun and fires. I duck and the shot echoes through the space. Ava screams as bits of plaster from the ceiling rain down between us.

"Baron," her voice hitches, "help me."

My heart stutters and the band around my chest tightens.

"Yes, Baron." The man in front of me bares his teeth, "Keep it up and we'll shoot her right in front of you... After we've taken turns fucking her, of course."

"Bastard," I growl, "you'll pay for this."

"Not if we kill you first." He aims his gun at me and I lunge forward again. I grab his arm, twist it. He screams and I watch the gun slip from his grasp to the floor.

He takes advantage of my momentary distraction and buries his other fist in my side.

Pain explodes up my spine and the breath rushes out of me. Bent over at the waist, I don't take my gaze off of her. I hold her eyes. *Stay strong, my love. Don't let them get to you.*

She swallows and tears roll down her cheeks. My guts twist. In that

second, I know I'll never allow anything to happen to her. My life was already hers... Now...my heart is too. My soul. Every part of me belongs to her. I won't let these men get to her.

I straighten, turn my gaze on the guy who'd hit me. "That all you got?" I smirk. "Surely you can do better than that?"

His features twist. "I am going to kill you, asshole." The man throws himself at me.

I take the full brunt of his weight, allow my body to go limp as we crash to the floor. We roll away from the dressing room, toward the body of the third guy, who remains unconscious.

The man jumps up, just as I stagger to my feet. He buries his fist in my face. My neck snaps back and Ava screams; blood drips from my mouth. He hits me in the side, and I lurch back. Hits me a third time, and I stumble to the side toward where the gun had slipped from his grasp earlier. I sink down to my haunches and grab the weapon. I train it on him and he instantly throws up his hands. He shifts his gaze from me to his friend who holds Ava captive. The guy turns his gun on me, but Ava screams, "No," and renews her struggles.

Taking advantage of the commotion, the first guy bolts.

I train my gun on the man holding Ava. By now, they are standing, his arm pinning her to his body.

He stares at his friend on the floor, then at me. His hand shakes, as he presses his gun to her temple, "Come closer and I'll shoot her." He swallows. "I mean it."

"Of course, you do." I turn the gun in my hand, hook my forefinger through its ring. "See, I am going to put it down now."

Sweat beads the guy's forehead. I hold up my other hand, palm face up, then bend slowly.

"No tricks," he growls.

I place my gun on the floor, then straighten. "See, that was easy."

"Kick it aside."

I take in his flushed features, the way his hand trembles. Shit, this man is a loose cannon.

"Do it." His voice shakes.

I kick the gun and it skitters to the side.

He bares his teeth, then turns his gun on me. I angle my body to the side but he's already firing. I duck and the shot misses me.

There's a thunk as the bullet embeds in the wall somewhere behind me. He presses down on the trigger again, and there's a clicking sound, and again. Thank fuck, either he's out of bullets or his gun is jammed. I don't care which.

I rush toward him, just as he shoves Ava at me.

I close my arms about her as he brushes past us. He races across the studio floor, out the main doorway.

I pull Ava into my arms. "You're safe." I murmur, "you're safe."

She glances past me and her gaze widens. I turn to find the guy on the ground staggering to his feet.

Shit, I didn't check him for guns. I was too focused on Ava. Fucking fuck.

"Don't do it," I warn as he pulls out his gun. He aims it at us.

Ava freezes in my arms. I release her and she clings to me, "No, Baron, no."

"Let go of me," I snap.

"No, I won't."

"You must."

"I can't."

"You have to."

"Baron, please don't do this. I can't live without you."

"You can." I glance down at her, "Do it for him." *For Edward.*

"No," she shakes her head, "no."

I lower my head toward her, when the sound of a gun being cocked reaches me. I hold her gaze, stare into her beautiful green eyes, swimming with fear, with love.

I love you.

I push her away, then raise my arms.

"Don't come closer," he warns.

I pause, take in the sheen of sweat on his face, the intent gaze, the steadiness of his aim. This guy won't miss. I only hope I can divert him, keep him talking until Archer gets here.

"You don't want to do this," I say in a calm voice.

The intruder's lips twist, "I don't have a choice."

"What do you want, money? I can arrange that for you."

He hesitates.

"How much? A million? 10 million?"

His forehead furrows. I take a step forward, and this time, he doesn't stop me. I make sure to plant my body between him and Ava. *Focus, focus. Keep him talking; keep her covered.*

"You can take everything I have."

His grin broadens. "Oh, but I will." He levels his gun at me, and I draw in a breath. This is it. If I can save her life, it will be worth it.

"No," Ava cries out, "don't do this."

"Shut up," he growls.

I sense Ava stiffen behind me.

"Do as he says," I mutter.

"You stay quiet." He points his gun at me, as I sink to my knees. He aims it at my temple, when the sound of footsteps from the staircase reaches us. The man starts and glances over his shoulder. I lunge for the gun on the floor and fire just as he collapses face down.

Blood oozes out from a wound in his back.

I glance up, take in the man framed by the doorway, holding a gun.

He's dressed in a black T-shirt, a leather jacket and denim jeans. His amber gaze holds mine, his dark hair brushing the collar of his jacket. His features—his very familiar features—are pale. He lowers his gun, glances down at his chest.

I follow his gaze to where blood blooms from the left side of his chest.

"No," I choke out, "no."

I run toward him, reach him as he sinks to his knees. I lower my gun to the floor, then grabbing him, I ease him to the floor.

Footsteps sound, then Ava reaches us. She throws her arms around him, "Edward, oh, my god, Ed!"

TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT, TURN THE PAGE TO READ THE BILLIONAIRE'S BRIDE

THE BILLIONAIRE'S BRIDE

1

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Edward

The darkness pulls at me. I am falling, twisting, writhing. The sound of harsh breathing, groans reach me. I turn toward it, reach out my hand. It's Baron; it has to be. "Don't hurt him." I cough. "Please don't. I'll do as you say. I'll let you do anything to me; just don't touch him."

"Is that so?" My captor's footsteps approach, and I flinch. I want to turn my face away. Want to squeeze my eyes shut and pretend whatever he is going to do is not happening to me. I am not here, not in this room with no windows.

How long have I been here? Days...weeks maybe? I've lost count of time, my entire existence narrowed to what I can feel, touch, sense...since I'd been blindfolded after I'd been taken.

My kidnapers had shoved me in a room. I had resisted and they had hit me on the head. When I'd come to, I'd heard the shuffle of other bodies, heard the breathing of the others, enough to realize that I wasn't alone. They had kept us bound, gagged, blindfolded in the same room. Then Baron had managed to reach me and free my restraints. We'd attempted to free the other boys, but didn't get far before the kidnapers had returned. One look and they could read our intentions. They'd dragged me and Baron out, separating us from the rest. They'd locked us up together, blindfolded but not gagged.

I'm scared, so scared. So is Baron, though he tries not to show it. We've

made a pact, that if we get out of here alive... We'll never allow anyone else to control us ever again.

Every time the kidnappers come back, they beat us. They'll leave, but never for long. They keep coming back for more. They feed us just enough to keep us alive. My entire world has narrowed to the next thud of boots on my back, my shoulders, on my chest. Beaten and left nearly unconscious.

The next time one of them returns, he tears off our blindfolds. Asshole is wearing a mask so we can't make out his features. I have the impression of a tall man, broad shouldered and with gray eyes. He tells me what I have to do. I refuse and he beats me again, this time until I black out. When I awaken, my kidnapper is ready. He tells me if I don't give him what he wants...he'll beat Baron.

I hesitate and he plows his fist into Baron's head, into his side. I hear the sound of ribs cracking and feel the anger thrum at my temples. "Don't," I beg him. "Don't do it."

"Are you ready to give me what I want?"

I hesitate again. This time he rams his fist into Baron's stomach. I hear Baron gasp in pain and somehow, that is so much worse than being beaten up myself. Somehow, hearing him hurting is much more horrible than anything this man could do to me.

"I'll do it," I force myself to form the words. "I'll do whatever you want."

He grabs my collar and tugs me up to my feet. My knees knock together, my shoulder throbs, my stomach knots, and I hate the weakness that boils up my throat. I swallow it down, will myself to stand straight. To push my chin up, thrust my chest out. *I am not afraid, I am not.* He turns me around, shoves me against the door, reaches for my pants and tugs them down.

It hurts, it hurts. I glance sideways take in the signet ring he wears on his pinky finger; the design on its surface is a bow and arrow. I glance up meet Baron's frozen eyes. His gaze widens, but he holds my gaze as the bastard buggers me.

"I won't make it."

"You don't have a choice." Baron bares his teeth. "The only way is forward."

Then pain slices through my head.

"No." My eyelids snap open. "No." My voice echoes in my ears. I take in the white ceiling, the walls, the smell of antiseptic and that sense of suspended reality that clings to a place which can never be a voluntary

destination for anyone. Clearly, I am in a hospital. I try to rise up, but my body protests. My chest hurts. Pain slices through my side and I groan.

"Edward." A face appears in my line of sight. "You're awake?"

I stare up into her green eyes, emerald light, welling with emotions. A tear slides down her cheek. I reach for her and my shoulder protests. I grimace.

"You were shot." She glances down at my chest.

I follow her gaze and spot my left arm in a sling. I am wearing a hospital gown that gapes in the front to reveal a bandage around my chest.

"I'm alive," I mutter. That has to count for something, right?

"You were very lucky. The bullet grazed your side; a few inches more and—" Her bottom lip quivers and tears fill her eyes.

"Hey," I grip her arm and tug. She sits down on the side of the bed. "I didn't make it this far to die."

"Where did you go, Edward?" She swallows. "Why did you leave me?"

I blow out a breath. "I had to, Eve. I just had to find a way to get my head screwed on right. I needed time to sort through all of my feelings."

"And did you?" She tugs on her hand and I release it. "Did you manage to clear your head?"

"No." I twist my lips, "No, I couldn't stop thinking of you. Every moment I spent away from you was a mistake."

"Oh." She wrings her fingers together. "I... I don't know what to say."

"There's nothing to say; I am back now and—"

She rises to her feet, puts distance between us. "You left me, Ed. You shagged me, then walked out on me with no explanation."

"I was confused, Eve." I struggle to sit up. My side twangs, pain slices up my spine and I push it away. "I had just given up the one thing that had grounded my life until then. I walked away from my faith. I was ready to leave everything behind... I wanted to get away from it all. Instead, I found myself on your doorstep."

"You broke your vows." She adds quietly, "You shagged me."

"I needed you, Eve."

"And I needed..." she raises a shoulder, "a man who would stay with me after taking my virginity."

I swallow. "I was your first; I'll never forget that."

"I...tried to forget you. I didn't want anything to do with you, not after how you treated me."

My heart begins to race. The pulse pounds at my temples. "And now?" I clear my throat. "How do you feel about me now?"

She trains her gaze on me. "I don't know." She glances away, beginning to straighten my bedclothes, "When that bullet hit you and you collapsed and I thought I'd lost you..." Her chin wobbles, "I knew then, that I still had feelings for you."

My shoulders relax, some of the tension draining out of me.

"As do I, for you."

"But it's not enough." She squares her shoulders. "I can't forget how you abandoned me. You didn't even have the decency to tell it to my face. You simply walked out."

"I'd told you I would have to leave."

"You didn't even wait until I woke up."

"You'd have stopped me," I point out. "I had too much shit to sort out. I knew if I stayed, I'd be too taken up by you. As soon as I slept with you, I knew it was a mistake."

She stiffens, and I firm my lips. "I didn't mean it that way."

"Sure, you did." She scowls. "You regret sleeping with me."

"No." I sit up. Every part of me protests, and I wince.

Ava protests, "What are you doing?"

"I am fine." I push my legs over the side of the bed and stand up. My knees protest, my thighs spasm. Sweat breaks out on my forehead and I feel lightheaded, but at least I am upright. "See?" I say through clenched teeth. "I'm standing, aren't I?"

"Edward," she admonishes me, "get back into bed."

"Why don't you make me?" I take a step toward her and my entire body protests. I grit my teeth, forcing myself to stay upright. "Come on, Eve, tuck me in."

She scowls. "I only stayed to make sure you were okay."

"I'm not okay."

"You're standing, aren't you?" She blows out a breath. "I... I need to get going, anyway."

"Not yet." I straighten my spine, "I need you, Eve."

She shudders, closes her eyes. "I... I am not sure what I need."

"You still want me," I insist.

She takes a deep breath, pushes her shoulders back. "I survived without you all these days."

"Is that enough for you? Surviving?"

"I did a good job of it, thanks to Baron."

"Baron?" I draw in a breath, trying to figure out how she knows about him. I asked him not to contact her. "Did he look after you while I was gone?"

She tips up her chin. "I don't need a man to take care of me."

"Too bad," I set my jaw, "I did what I thought was best in the circumstances."

"Best for you or for me?"

"Best for all three of us."

She laughs, "You have no idea what you are talking about."

"Don't I?" My legs tremble; the dull thud of pain in my side ratchets up. Damn it, I can't afford to be weak. Not when I have to get back on my feet as soon as possible. It's the only way I can show her that I am worth forgiving. Sweat beads my forehead. *Stay on your feet, don't you dare collapse on the bed.*

"I knew I couldn't leave you unprotected, and I didn't trust anyone else to take care of you."

"Except Baron?"

"Except Baron."

"He got there in time that day. If it weren't for him reaching me, I... I'd have—" Her chin trembles. Tears gleam in her eyes.

A hot sensation stabs at my chest. I close the distance between us, wrap my free arm around her "Don't cry, Eve." I tuck her head under my chin. The scent of jasmine laced with that lush womanly scent of hers, fills my lungs. I am instantly hard. *Shit.* I am trying to comfort her, yet being this close to her is sheer torture.

"Why did you do it, Ed? Why did you send him to me?"

I stiffen. "Did he hurt you, Eve? Did he do something to upset you?"

She rubs her cheek against the rough hospital gown. "The only person who's hurt me here is you."

I squeeze my eyes shut. "Don't say that, Ava."

"It's true, though." She pushes against me, but I hold her close for just a second more before releasing her. She steps away, putting distance between us, and my gut twists.

"Eve," I frown at her, "what's wrong?"

"Nothing." She twists her mouth. "Everything."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that," she folds her arms around her waist, "I am not the same woman you left behind."

"It's only been two weeks."

"A lifetime."

I purse my lips. Who'd know that better than me? My life had changed in an instant when those bastards had abducted me. Seven lives...changed in the blink of an eye. We'd never been the same again. So yeah, I know what she's talking about, but still... It hasn't been that long. I drag my fingers through my hair, wince when every nerve in my body seems to protest. Shit, I must be more beat up than I'd realized. "So...what are you saying?"

"That, it's best if we spend some time apart."

"No fucking way that's happening." I take a step toward her and she skitters back. That stops me. "You afraid of me?"

"No." She shakes her head. "Of course, not."

I scowl, "Then why—"

The door opens then, and Baron walks in. He glances between us. His gaze takes in my features, sweeps over my bandaged arm, before coming to rest on Ava.

His brow furrows. "Are you okay?" He walks toward her, and she holds up her hand.

"I... I'm fine, just need some space."

"Not happening," he snaps. "You were attacked, and from what that man said before I took him down—"

"You mean before I took him down?" I interject.

He turns to survey me, "You look like shit."

"No thanks to you," I growl.

"I shot you by mistake. You know that, right?"

"Is that right?" I take in his jeans and shirt, the ruddy glow of his features. Bastard looks in the peak of health, while I feel like I could keel over at any moment.

"You know it is." He frowns. "I was aiming for the guy who broke into the studio."

"Only I got him first."

"About that," Baron scowls, "how did you have a gun on you?"

I arch an eyebrow, "Because, I am one of the Seven?"

"But..." Ava swallows, "you were a priest."

"Precisely." I dig my heels into the floor to stay steady, "Because I was a priest, I know people from all walks of life, enough to be able to procure a gun. Besides, no way was I returning unarmed. Not when I knew I'd need to keep you safe, Ava." I glance between them. "Turns out, I was right to do so. If I hadn't arrived in time, I'd never have shot that asshole."

"He's alive, by the way," Baron offers.

"Too bad." I glower. My legs begin to tremble. I sway. Both Baron and Ava step toward me. Their shoulders brush and she stiffens. So does he. They spring apart as if an electric current shocked them. More likely, an electric connection did pass between them. I sit down on the bed, look between them, before turning to him.

"Did you fuck her?"

2

Ava

Shit, shit, shit, I knew it was a mistake being in the same room as Baron and Edward. But how could I stay away? Edward had been hurt. He'd been in and out of consciousness for the last two days. I'd stayed by his side, only to make sure that he was okay. That's it. It has nothing to do with the relief that had swept through me when I'd seen him framed in the doorway of the studio. Right before he'd been shot—by mistake—by Baron.

Now, Edward glares at Baron, a suspicious look in his eyes. Of course, he'd spotted the body language between me and Baron. Too bad. Not that there's anything between me and Baron anymore, not after he'd left me too. But he'd rescued me again, when he'd walked into the studio. If it hadn't been for him arriving when he did... I swallow. Still, I hadn't been prepared for Edward to figure out what had transpired between me and Baron so quickly. And no, I will not feel guilty about that. After all, it's Edward who left me in the first place, didn't he?

Now he fists the fingers of his free arm at his side. "Did you?" he growls. "Did you shag her?"

Baron raises his shoulders and drops them. He opens his mouth, shuts it, shuffles his feet. Shit, if that isn't a dead giveaway for guilt, I don't know what is.

And damn, if we have done anything wrong. Yeah, you only slept with his friend while he was away.

But it's not like I had been in any kind of committed relationship with the

Father... I mean, Edward. It is going to take some time getting used to not seeing him as a priest anymore. And the man in front of me with his bloodshot eyes, hair standing up every which way, anger bouncing off of him...is as far away from the calm, collected, Father as I can imagine. It's as if he left as one person, and returned as someone else. The change had already been underway the last time he'd seen me—when he'd fucked me, made love to me in a passionate blaze that had burned into my skin and imprinted itself in my cells. I swallow, glancing away.

"It's... just..." Baron starts to speak then purses his lips.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I burst out. "Yes, he shagged me. I shagged him. Does that answer your question?"

Both men turn to glare at me. Edward with those golden eyes that seem to be ablaze in a way I've never seen them before. And Baron with those twin beams of laser blue that seem to cut me to the bone.

"What?" I demand. "What did you think would happen, Ed? You abandoned me—"

"—Left you while I took some time to figure things out," Edward snarls.

"Then called your best friend to come back to the life he'd left behind—"

"—to watch over you." He squares his shoulders.

"Knowing full-well that I was in a vulnerable position." I purse my lips.

"—I wanted to make sure you weren't alone."

"And that Baron, here, was trying to cope with life after everything that he'd been through," I insist.

"—I was giving him the chance to mend fences with the rest of the Seven."

"You pushed us together, knowing there was a good chance that we'd develop feelings for each other," Baron interjects.

"I trusted you," Edward roars, and I jump. Whoa, hello! What the hell happened to the Father who was always tightly in control? Who wore his serenity like it was the most important part of his personality?

To be fair, I'd always sensed that burning intensity just below the surface, only I'd never seen him lose his cool before. Not like this, and sensing how full-on Edward is now, compared to how he never showed his emotions earlier? It's something else altogether.

Silence descends in the space, broken only by the muted sound of footsteps outside the door.

"You were supposed to watch her... From a distance," Edward growls.

"You weren't supposed to make contact."

"What can I say?" Baron drawls. "I screwed up. Oops."

"Why you—" Edward's jaw tics. A vein pops in his temple. Anger pours off of him as he glares at Baron, who meets his gaze with a stoic countenance.

OMG, this can't be happening. I cannot believe this is actually unfolding in front of me. I mean, I can't possibly be witnessing this kind of a showdown, and with two men...at the same time, right? Both of whom I fucked; no excuses. And who were—are? —close friends...had clearly been through a lot together.

Now, because of me, they are eyeing each other like they hate each other... Maybe they already did, to some extent, if I've correctly read between the lines of how they had spoken about one another. Still, I can't live with myself if I destroyed whatever little bit of trust remained between the two. Going by how the two of them are engaged in a game of who-blinks-first... Well, I'm afraid things are going to get a whole lot worse.

I drag in a breath, then step between them. "Stop it, you guys."

"Get out of the way, Ava," Baron snaps.

"Don't talk to her like that," Edward snarls back.

I throw up my hands, "No seriously, you guys, this is not the time or the place to engage in a game of who has the biggest dick."

Both sets of gazes train on me. I glance sideways at Edward's glowering face, then at Baron's stony one. Shit, I had to go and say that, right? Of all the things.

Baron opens his mouth and I hold up a finger, "Don't even think about it."

"You don't know what I was going to say."

"Oh, please." I toss my hair over my shoulder. "The way the two of you pounced on that comment—which is a figure of speech, by the way, I'll have you know—you think I don't know what's going through your minds right now?"

"Actually, I don't," Edward drawls.

"Neither do I," Baron widens his stance, "but I'd sure like to know."

I stare between them, "Seriously, now the two of you are going to unite against me?"

"Of course, not," Edward bites out.

"No way," Baron retorts at the same time.

The two glare at each other again. The tension in the room ratchets up. Now we are back to square one. Lovely.

"Enough. Really, you two, cut it out." I fold my arms across my chest.

Edward scowls.

Baron's jaw hardens.

The animosity in the room seems to hit a fever pitch. The hair on the back of my nape stands on end.

"Step aside, Ava," Baron's voice lowers to a hush.

"No, no, no." I wring my fingers. "Don't do this."

"Do it," Edward says in a hard tone. Then he turns his gaze on me, and his features soften, "Please. Baron and I we need to sort this out."

"But... You're hurt," I burst out.

Edward rises to his feet. He pulls his arm out of his sling. Sweat beads his brow, but his features don't change. "You mean this?" He smirks. "It's fine, just a scratch."

I blink down at his arm, then at his face. "You are crazy," I mutter.

"I have been since I met you," he agrees.

Baron growls deep in his throat and the hackles on my arms rise.

"Now, Ava," he snaps, and I skitter back.

I feel the breeze a second before he throws up his fist.

3

Baron

What the hell am I doing? Edward's hurt, for fuck's sake. And yet, he'd challenged me. Knowing full-well I wouldn't be able to resist it. I throw a punch, aiming for the unhurt part of his face. He rises to his feet, ducks at the same time. I stumble forward. Edward wraps his good arm about my neck, tugging. Motherfucker's hurt but his grip is powerful. Apparently, the ex-Father has been keeping in shape.

"Stop! Stop it, you two!" Ava yells, just as Edward yanks his arm tightly against my neck, cutting off my air supply. I try to take in a breath and my lungs burn.

"I am going to get help." From the corner of my vision, I sense Ava run for the door.

I cough, grip Edward's forearm, tugging. He grunts, then with a sharp twist, digs his elbow into my windpipe. Darkness flickers at the edge of my conscious mind. Fuck this. Hurt or not, I am going to have to bring him down. I bring my elbow up, shove back. Connecting with his chest.

A growl rips from him. His grip loosens. I break free, turning on him, to find him reeling back. Blood stains his hospital gown. His breathing is harsh, his face pale.

"Shit, shit, shit."

He sways on his feet, and I grab his shoulders, turn and ease him onto the bed.

"Why do you have to be such a stubborn motherfucker?"

"Why do you have to...be?" He glowers up at me, pulls away, then huffs again. Sweat beads his forehead, as he collapses back.

"I am sorry, Ed. Truly, I didn't mean to shoot you."

"Yeah," he says through clenched teeth. "I know, even though a part of me wishes that you had done it on purpose, just so I could find a reason to hate you."

"Like you don't have enough basis to do so now?"

"You and Ava." He curls his fingers into fists, "How could you, Baron?"

"It wasn't something in my control," I snap.

"I sent you to her because you were the only one who could keep her safe."

"You sent me, knowing you were putting me in temptation's way." I drag my fingers through my hair. "Admit it, Edward. You knew we'd be attracted to each other. You were testing her... Testing me."

"You think that's what this is?" he snarls. "Some trial by fire bullshit?"

"Isn't it?" I glare back at him.

He clenches his fingers into fists. "Is this some bullshit explanation that you've come up with to assuage your conscience?"

"It's the truth, something you are not able to admit to yourself."

"Your conscience is playing tricks on you."

"Your sub-conscious is double-crossing you."

"Like, you did?" He bares his teeth.

Anger suffuses my blood. "Why you—"

"What have we here?" A new voice sounds behind us. I turn to find Weston walking in. He's wearing scrubs, a white coat over top. "Ava told me you two were fighting but I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"Aren't you a cardiologist or some such shit?" I mutter.

"Yeah," Edward doesn't take his gaze off me, "shouldn't you be sending someone more common in to check in on me?"

"I would have, except apparently, I care enough about the two of you to make sure that you don't kill yourselves. A feeling which neither of you seem to share, it seems." Weston walks around the bed, taking in Edward's pallor, then glares at me. "Out."

"But..."

"Get out, Baron," he says in a calm voice, "now."

Something in his tone cuts through the chaos in my head. I pivot, walking

out of the door, up the corridor to the windows at the far end. Reaching it, I ball my fists at my side, then bang my forehead against the pane. "Fuck," I growl. "F-u-c-k."

I scent jasmine, and below that, the whiff of ripe raspberries. A second later there's a touch on my shoulder. I stiffen, but don't turn around.

"Baron?" Her soft voice wraps around my heart. Her scent intensifies as she comes around to stand abreast with me.

We stare outside the window at the large semi-circular driveway that leads to the road. A car stops, drops off a man and a woman, before driving off. To my right, a patient in a wheelchair with an IV attached to his arm sucks on a cigarette as if his life depends on it. What foolish creatures we humans are. We cling to life with every last breath we have, even as we inhale poisons that hasten us to the end.

Am I poison to her? Why did I taint her life? I should have stayed away. Instead, I had complicated things for her, for me, and for that asshole, Edward. Somewhere along the way, I had become addicted to her. I can't live without her. I'm not going to give her up that easily, not without a fight.

"You okay?" She glances at me from the corner of her eye. "I'm worried about you."

"Don't be." I draw myself up to my full height. "I'll be fine."

"You sure?"

I glance at her in time to see her chew on her lower lip. My blood instantly drains to my groin. Shit, my friend—okay, ex-friend—is lying there hurt. After I'd shot him. And here I am, lusting after his girlfriend. Well, technically she's mine now, and I'm not letting her go.

I close the distance between us, fit my knuckles under her chin and tip up her head. "Yeah," I murmur, "I've never been more sure in my entire life."

Her breathing grows shallow. Her pupils dilate. "Baron," she whispers.

"Hmm?" I rub my thumb across her lower lip. So fucking soft, she is such a bloody temptation, I can't keep my hands off of her. I lower my head to hers and she parts her lips. I share her breath, and that sweet scent of her arousal goes straight to my head. I brush my mouth over hers once, twice. She shudders. She digs her fingers into the front of my shirt. I slide my hand down her back, to the curve of her hip. That dip of where her waist meets her butt... Fuck me, but I could lose myself in that sweet roundness. Come to think of it, I have.

I deepen the kiss and she parts her lips. I lick into her mouth and a moan

bleeds from her. I gaze into her eyes as I slide my tongue across hers. She shudders, pushes herself closer, but I clasp my other palm around the nape of her neck, hold her immobile as I devour her mouth. She wriggles her hips, tightening her grasp on me. I palm her butt and she gasps. Her head falls back and her eyelids flutter as she submits to me... My cock thickens, and fuck me, if I don't have her right now, I am going to—

Footsteps approach and the sound of someone clearing their throat reaches me. Her eyes snap open and she tries to pull away, but I don't let her. I continue to devour her mouth, watch as her eyes glaze over with lust again. Good, no-one, no-one can stop me from wanting her. Except him... He can. I tear my mouth from hers, release her so quickly that she stumbles. I grip her shoulder, make sure she finds her balance before turning to face the intruder.

"Yes, Doc?" I tilt my face toward a wary Weston. His gaze narrows on me.

"I patched him up. You can see him, now."

"Oh, thank God." Ava brushes past him and walks to the room. I watch as she disappears inside. Fuck, I can't stop her from seeing him. But I can do my best to ensure that she doesn't think of anyone but me. Doesn't want to be with anyone but me. Can't stop loving me. Only me.

I grip my fingers at my sides with such force that pain tears up my arm.

"Easy, ol' chap," Weston drawls, "you don't want to burst an artery."

"That would be the least of my worries." I stare at the hospital room door through which she'd disappeared. What's she doing inside there? Is she touching him? Kissing him? Does he have his hands on her? Are they plotting how to be together? A growl rips up my throat. I take a step forward and Weston grabs my arm. "Don't be stupid, Masters."

"What-bloody-ever." I try to shake off his arm but his grip tightens. "Rein in your impulses," he cautions. "Don't do anything that will spoil your chances with her."

I pause, "Why are you so concerned about that?" I shoot him a sideways glance. "Thought you were on Edward's side."

"I am on the side of whatever—whoever Ava chooses." He tilts his head, "After all, it is her choice."

I press my lips together.

"It is, isn't it?" he says in a warning tone.

"Of course." I tug on my arm and he releases me this time. "And no one is going to stop me from influencing that." I turn to leave, then look back at him

and ask, "The man Edward tried to kill... "

"He's still unconscious."

I stare at him over my shoulder. "And the man who broke into Ava's studio... he's not conscious yet either?"

He shakes his head. "The bullet punctured one of his lungs but he'll survive."

"Too bad he's not dead."

Weston arches an eyebrow. "Look at it this way, between the two of them, we should have, hopefully, enough information to help us track down the kidnappers."

"Bloody incident," I spit out. "When I finally get my hands on those behind the kidnapping, I am going to wring their necks with my bare hands."

"Get in line," Weston says mildly. "So, what are you going to do now?" He looks me up and down.

"What do you mean?" I drawl.

He glances from me to the closed hospital door, then back, "You know what I mean."

"That's easy," I bare my teeth, "I am going to fight for what's mine."

4

Ava

"Are you comfortable?" I plump up the pillow behind Edward's neck.

Following his altercation with Baron, Weston had patched him up again, then given him more pain killers. By the time I'd emerged from Edward's room, Baron had left. I'd been disappointed, but also realized it was for the best. Standing up to one of them takes everything in me. Going toe-to-toe with two of them? That is nearly impossible. Not something I can do. So, when I hadn't seen or heard from Baron since, I'd taken it as a sign that I should focus on helping Edward recover. Not that it is something I have to do... But I feel compelled to do so... Maybe a part of Baron feels responsible for Edward getting hurt. After all, he had walked into my studio and saved me. I do owe him...somewhat.

Edward had still been asleep when I'd gone home last night, and when I'd returned today, he had seemed much better. So, I'd headed off to the studio, managed to get in the post-lunch dance class, then returned to check in on him. My plan was to head off for my late evening class, if everything went well. I'd cancelled my dance classes the last two days, but if I could get the ones in today, it would definitely help to keep some money coming in.

This time, he is awake.

I tilt my head in his direction. "There's one thing I want to ask."

"Anything." He smirks.

I frown, "It's a serious question."

He wipes the smile off of his face. "Is this serious enough an expression

for you?"

"Hmm." I huff. "When did you learn to shoot?"

"I didn't?" He raises a shoulder. "I saw the gun lying next to the man on the floor. I picked it up and when I saw him aiming the gun at the both of you, I followed my instinct and shot at the guy. I got lucky."

"Wasn't that difficult for you?" I swallow. "After all, you were...are a priest."

"Not anymore," he mutters. "Certainly not, after I've broken my vows in every form imaginable."

"Don't you have to tell the Church or something, that you are leaving them?" I frown.

"It's the first thing I did in the morning, before I left the city. I met the Bishop and spoke to him."

"And they agreed to let you go?"

"Canonical law states that once you are ordained as a priest, the sacrament can never be erased." His lips twist. "But before I left, I asked to be laicized."

"What does that mean?"

"I can no longer function outwardly as a priest."

"Oh, Edward." I twist my fingers together. "Why did you do that? It was so important to you, being in service of the Church and your flock."

"It was," he agrees, "until I found something more important."

He peruses my features and my cheeks heat.

"I can't accept it," I whisper. "It's too much of a responsibility."

"It was inevitable." His sighs. "I thought I could use the strictures of the priesthood to find some semblance of normalcy. Turns out, I was wrong. I thought I had overcome the aftermath of the incident, but... I had only been biding my time."

"I am not sure I understand what you mean."

He peers up into my face, "You will...in time."

"Why don't you tell me now?"

He raises his hand and cups my cheek. "So impatient," he murmurs, "so feisty." He runs his hand down my cheek, and twists a strand of my hair around his fingers. "So soft." He leans forward and sniffs, "I missed this." He peers into my face. "I missed you, Ava. Your touch, your scent, your little moans when you come apart in my arms, the way you kiss, how you get that little line between your eyebrows when you concentrate on something."

"Ed—"

"Let me say what's on my mind, Eve." He places a finger on my lips. "The weeks I was away, I swore if...*when* I came back, I wouldn't wait anymore. The distance I put between us showed me how important you are to me."

Heat spools off of his body, embraces me, cocoons me in a familiar bubble of contentment. This is Ed, remember, the man you fell head over heels in love with? The man who turned his back on everything he held dear, for you. "You still left," I whisper.

"Can you ever forgive me for that?" He winds the strands of hair around his palm and tugs. I lean in closer, until my mouth is poised just above his, until I am sharing his breath.

"I wish I could say that, given a choice, I wouldn't do it again," he whispers, "but it's what helped me sort through the thoughts in my head. It's what made me realize what you mean to me."

"It's what made *me* realize that maybe what we had was not completely right for me."

His brow furrows. "What do you mean?"

"Never mind." I shake my head. "That didn't come out right."

I rise to my feet and he grabs my arm. "Tell me what you're thinking, Eve."

"Please don't call me that," I whisper.

"Why?" he growls, and I glance away.

"Tell me why I can't call you by the nickname I gave you?" he demands.

I bite the inside of my cheek, refuse to meet his gaze.

"Is it because you don't like the name anymore?"

"No," I protest, "it's not that."

"Then?" He scowls. "What is it?"

"It's just that Baron... He..."

Edward's gaze intensifies. "Motherfucker," he snarls. "It's because he calls you by the same name, isn't it?"

When I don't reply, his jaw hardens. "Yet another thing he took away from me."

"I am not anyone's to take," I insist. "I am my own woman."

"And you are mine."

"I... I am not sure about that."

"Stop that." He pulls me onto his lap. "You belong to me. That's it. End

of story."

"If only things were that simple."

"It is that simple." He brings his big palm up to cup my face again, in a gesture that is so Edward, so dominant, yet so sweet that I feel like bursting into tears right then.

I glance away. "It's not, Ed. Things are much more complicated,"

His shoulders tense. "Because of him."

"You can say his name, you know," I chide him. "After all, he is your friend."

"Not anymore."

"You trusted him enough to ask him to look after me."

"Big mistake," he growls. "I wish there had been another way out."

"You could have stayed," I remind him.

"I'd have only destroyed whatever it was you felt for me, if I had."

"You changed what I felt for you."

"Did I, Eve?" He rakes his gaze across my features, "Or are you simply confused because he fucked you?"

"Edward!" Only when his head snaps back, do I realize that I've slapped him.

"Shit." I pull away from him, "Shit, shit, shit." *What's happening to me?* First Baron, then Edward. I've slapped both of them. Before I'd met them, I'd never slapped a single person in my life... If you didn't count my sister, growing up. But really, I've never lost my temper and now... I can't go a day without striking one or the other.

"I'm sorry," I mutter, "it's just what you said—"

"No, I'm sorry." Edward sits up against the pillow. "That was wrong. I shouldn't have said that. It's just, coming back to being shot, then seeing the two of you together..." he shakes his head, "I am making excuses. Nothing pardons how I insulted you." He drags his fingers through his already mussed-up hair. The usually composed Father—no longer Father—the usually unflappable Edward, all riled up and wearing a hospital gown... Not to mention that he's unshaven. The beard on his chin only adds to his rumpled appeal. And then, he had apologized. Not to say that when he'd been Father Edward, he'd been impolite, but his dominant traits had been tightly leashed. Hidden under a control that had been both thrilling and scary to observe. Now, it's as if his personality is tumbling out and he isn't quite sure how to handle it.

He stares at me, then holds out his hand, "Come 'ere."

I glance at it, then back at him, "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Come here, Ava." His voice lowers to a hush, and damn him, but I can't stop myself from obeying him. I walk over to him and he, once more, pulls me down into his lap.

"I missed you, Eve."

Something warm pools in my chest. I push the thick silky hair away from his forehead. "I did too," I say honestly.

"I want you to know that I don't blame you for what happened."

"You don't?"

He shakes his head. "Baron can be a little overbearing. And you are the most beautiful woman in the world. Of course, he made a play for you."

"It wasn't exactly like that," I mutter.

"He and I, we have a lot in common. If anyone knows how he operates, it's me. I know he must have come onto you hard, and before you'd realized what was happening, he'd have moved in."

"Edward, no, it wasn't all him," I insist.

"It's okay, Eve." He rubs his thumb across my cheek. "Whatever happened, it's only a temporary setback. Nothing we can't recover from."

"Hold on a second." I push at his chest. "Whatever happened was consensual, Edward."

He frowns. "You were distraught, not in the right frame of mind. Baron took advantage of you."

"No, he didn't," I maintain.

"Of course, he did." He peers into my face. "He must have." His jaw tics. "It's why you slept with him."

"I fucked him, Ed." I hold his gaze. "I wanted to be with him, and it wasn't only because I was missing you."

His amber gaze catches fire. A vein beats at his temple. "What are you trying to say?"

"That..." I swallow. No other way out, best to come out and say it. "I was...am attracted to him." I shake my head. "No, actually, it's more than that, Ed. I have feelings for him."

5

Edward

Something hot stabs at my chest. I fist my fingers at my sides. She has feelings for him. Of course, she does. Baron had swept onto scene when I had left. I had sent him, precisely for that. Of course, to keep an eye on her, without moving in on her. I had been so sure that he'd do that. It had never crossed my mind that he'd make contact with her... Okay, it had crossed my mind, but I had been so sure that Ava was mine, that she wouldn't be attracted to anyone else.

I should have known Baron is too similar to me. Oh, physically we are different, but our approach to life, it's similar. Perhaps that's due to our formative years being poisoned by the same toxin that tainted the lives of the rest of the Seven. They had moved on, found the loves of their lives, while Baron and I? We are still struggling.

And now we are both involved with the same girl.

Shit, shit, shit. What a mess this is turning out to be.

"Edward?" Ava asks, her voice subdued. "Are you okay?"

I'll never be okay. I'll never forgive myself for leaving her when I should have stayed. I hadn't been thinking straight, and you know what? I am not going to regret what I did. What is done, is done. It's time to move on.

"I'm not," I confess, "but I will be, once I figure out what I need to do to win you back."

"Edward, please." She rises to her feet, and when she tugs on her hand, I release it. I watch her as she drags the heavy cloud of hair off her neck and

over one shoulder. "This is not a competition."

"Isn't it?"

The door opens and Baron enters. He glances between us, then walks over to Ava. "You okay, Eve?"

"Don't call her that," I snap.

"Oh, and why is that?" He leans forward to slide his hand about her neck and Ava freezes. "Baron, please, don't."

He frowns, looks like he is about to protest, then nods. He lowers his hand to his side. "Why can't I call her Eve?" He frowns at me and I glower back. Anger pounds at my temples and I clench my fists at my sides.

"You know why," I growl. "I call her Eve. I referred to her as Eve on the phone when I called you."

"So?" Baron raises a shoulder.

"So, I called her that first; I get dibs on it."

"Dibs?" Ava barks out a laugh. "Did you just say 'dibs'?"

My neck heats. Yeah, I did. What can I say? She does that to me—totally wrecks my self-restraint. Makes me recede into the most primitive corner of my brain, which I'd hoped I had gained control of a long time ago.

"Yeah, did you?" Baron drawls. "How very mature of you, Chase."

"Fuck off, Masters," I snap.

"I see your time at whichever-beach-you-decided-to-spend-the-last-few-weeks did a whole lotta good for your temper." Baron smirks.

"It was a monastery, you bastard."

"Oh, is that what they are calling it nowadays?" Baron's grin widens. "Tell me, how much of the time did you spend high? How often did you have to say your prayers? Oh, wait," Baron pretends to think, "that was when you were a Father. Now that you are not, you don't have to pretend to have conversations with God, and all that other bullshit."

"I am going to shove your balls up your asshole." I throw off the bloody sheets, swing my legs onto the floor.

Baron's chest seems to expand. He bares his teeth, throws up his fist, just as Ava steps in between us.

His knuckles brush the side of her cheek and anger explodes behind my eyes. She stumbles back. I snatch her toward me, pushing her behind my back, then plant my fist in Baron's face.

He stumbles, straightens. A drop of blood drips from his face. A stricken look twists his features. "Shit, Ava, did I hurt you?"

"Yes, you did," I snap.

"No, it's fine. Really. It was just a tap," she protests.

I turn, survey her features. "Does it hurt?"

"No." She shakes her head. "He barely brushed my cheek."

"Let me see." Baron, the asshole, tries to brush past me and I turn on him.

"You've hurt her enough."

"I'm not the one who left her and went off gallivanting to wherever it is that you went." He glowers.

"I'm not the one who turned his back on the man you swore to stand by."

"I saved your life, you asshole." Baron growls, "I did everything possible to help you through the aftermath of the incident."

"Saved your life?" Ava pushes at my shoulder, trying to glance around me, "What the hell does that mean?"

"Nothing," I snap.

"Nothing," Baron mumbles.

"Shit, this is crazy." Ava shakes back her hair. "The two of you can't be in a room without coming to blows, yet there are so many things you two agree on. And the secrets you two seem to have?" She glances between us. "Seriously, it's unnerving, it's like you have a secret code or something."

Or something. I rub the back of my neck. Baron stares at me, then turns his gaze on Ava. "It's not intentional," he mutters. "Asshole, here, gets on my nerves."

"Makes two of us," I gripe.

"Glad we agree on something."

"Oops, do we?" I scoff. "I must be more wounded than I thought."

"Too bad the bullet didn't hit home."

Silence descends, then Baron's features twist.

"Fuck," he growls, "I didn't mean that."

"I know," I say quietly. "When you get upset, you tend to speak without thinking."

"So do you."

"Yeah." I shuffle my feet. "Guess we got off to a bad start."

"It happens." Baron lowers his chin. "It's not every day that you meet a ghost from your past you haven't seen in twelve years."

"Twelve fucking years." I nod. "Wouldn't have thought I'd make it this far."

"Me neither, man," Baron says wryly. "What say we bury our differences

long enough to figure out what we are going to do about us?"

"Us?" I scowl. "There's no us... There's only—"

"Edward, seriously?" Ava slips past me, stands facing the both of us. "Baron's calling a temporary truce. Why don't you take it?"

Because I don't fucking want to. Because a part of me is already mourning that I have lost you. Because I know I'll never measure up to the kind of man you need me to be. Because I am tainted but I can't let go of you.

"Edward?" Ava prompts. "Please, can you two stop fighting?" She swallows. "Just until we figure out what to do next?"

I scowl. Baron meets my gaze. "You know we need to figure this out," he mutters. "Trust me, I don't want this truce either, but it's the only way to move forward."

F-u-c-k. He's right. Doesn't mean I am going to make this easier for him. I fold my arms over my chest. "Fine," I snap, "let's talk this out then."

6

Baron

"You propose, what?" I stare at Ava. "No. No way, am I going to agree to that."

Edward folds his arms behind his neck. Asshole leans back in the hospital bed, like he's king of a fucking kingdom. And based on what Ava just said, I almost understand why he's smirking.

"No way, am I allowing him to move in with you," I growl.

"It's only until he is fully recovered," Ava pleads. "Look, the doctor told him he won't be up and running for a few more days. He'll need help, and I don't want him to be alone during this time."

I glower at Ed, who grins back at me. I ball my fists at my sides.

"Why can't he get a place of his own?"

"I will." Edward nods, "Just waiting for the paperwork on the apartment I am going to rent to come through."

"Why can't Saint put you up in one of his many hotels?"

"It still means he won't have anyone to take care of him," she replies.

"I'll hire him a nurse. Hell, I'll make sure he has round-the-clock attention," I snap.

"It's not the same as someone you know looking after you." Her forehead furrows. "You understand that, right?"

No, I don't. I set my jaw. "If you're alone with him, he'll take advantage of you."

Edward's expression sours. "I'm not the one who moved in on my

friend's woman while her boyfriend's back was turned."

"Boyfriend?" I growl, "You were nothing to her; you barely knew her."

"Like you've spent all that long with her?" He sits up. "You tosser, and after everything I did for you, this is how you repay me?"

"Finally," I bare my teeth, "now you show your true colors. Keeping track of everything I owe you, eh? You did what you had to do, out of some twisted guilty conscience, you—"

A piercing whistle blows through the space. I whip my head around, and so does Edward.

Ava lowers her fingers from her lips, her cheeks flushed, her eyes blazing. "The two of you are incorrigible. Here I am, trying my best to figure out how to move things forward, and all you two can do, is fight like you are ten.

She stares between us. "You know what?" She plants her hands on both of her hips, "You guys can figure this out. I have had it with both of you." She marches to the door.

"Where are you going?" I scowl.

"Some of us need to work for a living," she snaps back, "and I am already running late for my first class."

"I'll take you." I take a step forward and she turns on me.

"Don't you dare come near me." She points a finger in my direction. "In fact, don't leave this room, until you two sort out whatever it is that has the two of you at such loggerheads."

"So, am I moving in with you?" Edward ventures.

"No," I snap.

"Why not?" He frowns. "I thought we'd just settled it?"

"No, we haven't."

"I am sooo out of here." Ava turns to the door, then looks back and adds, "When you two have a plan figured out, call me, or... You know what?" She pauses. "Don't. If I don't hear from either of you, I'll be happy." She marches out of the door.

Silence descends. I glare at Edward, who glowers back at me.

"Well, that went well," I drawl.

He seems like he is about to respond, then slouches back against the pillows. "Shit, we really pissed her off, didn't we?"

"What did you expect?" I walk over and slump into a chair. "The two of us can barely look each other in the eye when we speak, let alone try to work

out what is clearly a sticky situation for all of us."

"Not my fault," he mutters.

"Edward, seriously, man." I rub the back of my neck "What the hell happened to you out there? You seem to be coming apart at the seams."

He draws in a breath, then shoves off his covers. "What did *you* expect? I've been cooped up in here for the last three days. Of course, I am going out of my head."

"Is that what it is?"

"What else can it be?" He frowns.

"When are they going to discharge you?"

"How about right now?" Weston walks in, this time dressed in jeans and button-down shirt, with his white coat on top. "Your test results are all fine. You're free to leave."

"Hallelujah." Edward swings his legs over and stands. "About fucking time."

Weston stares at him, "I can't remember the last time I heard you swear so much."

"Maybe before he joined the seminary?" I volunteer.

"So, it's definitely over, then?" Weston makes some notes on his clipboard, his voice absentminded in the way of most doctors when they are processing a few different streams of thought in their mind.

"What is?"

"Your priesthood?"

Edward stills. "Seems that way," he says, in a voice devoid of all emotion.

"How do you feel about that?"

"About what?"

Weston pins him with a stare. "Don't bullshit me, Ed," he snaps. "Being a priest was a big part of your life. How are you adjusting to life in the aftermath?"

"I..." He rolls his shoulders. "I am not sure yet, and that's the honest truth."

"Hmm." Weston looks him up and down. "You have a place to go, now that the rectory is out for you?"

"I'm trying to figure that out." He glances around, heads for the chair in the corner where his clothes have been folded. He pulls off the sling, winces, then struggles into his jeans and shirt. Then he sits in the chair to put on his

shoes and looks up at us. "What?" he growls.

"You know you can stay with any of us, right?" Weston adds.

Not with me, though. I fold my arms across my chest and Weston slaps the back of my head. "What the fuck?" I sputter. "Seriously, Doc."

"Aren't you forgetting something, asshole?" Weston growls.

"What, what?" I glare at him. Weston glowers back and I blow out a breath. "Yeah, yeah, you can stay with me." I mumble, "It's a studio, but hey, I am sure we can work something out."

"Oh, fuck off, Masters," Edward mutters. "I am sure you'd be glad if I took you up on your offer, but it's not happening. I am staying with Ava."

Anger thrums at my temples and I shove it back. *Don't lose it. Don't lose it. For Ava's sake.* You need to win her over and that's not going to happen unless you get back in her good books.

Which means, having to pretend to get along with your once friend. *It's the only way she'll realize that you are serious about her.* Fuck! I don't have a choice. I am going to have to grit my teeth and get through this.

"You ready to go?" I say through clenched teeth.

"You offering me a ride?" Edward arches an eyebrow.

"For my sins." I rise to my feet, heading for the door. "Don't blame me if you can't keep up."

Forty-five minutes later, we draw up in front of Ava's home. The drive had been tense. Neither of us had spoken and I had turned on the radio—because, yeah... That's how much of a coward I am. I figured it was best to fill the silence so neither of us had to speak. Fucking hell, the last I checked I still had my balls about me, so why the hell can't I have a direct conversation with this man I've known more than half my life? Maybe some things are best left unsaid? *Like, why the fuck didn't you called in all those years you had my phone number... And when you finally did, it was only because you needed my help with something?* Typical Edward.

To the rest of the Seven, he's always been the voice of reason. The calm and collected teen who'd become a voice of conscience for them. Me? I know better.

I know that hidden under that exterior is a man who is angry with the world, with himself, with everything that happened to us when we were kidnapped. I know, because I was there. I know, because I bore the brunt of what happened during the incident, along with Edward.

I know, because neither of us have ever discussed what happened during that time. Not with each other... And definitely not, with the rest of the Seven. There are some things you take with you to the grave, for if you mention them aloud, they became real. Too real. To the point that it would consume your every waking moment. Some things... You are never prepared to face, no matter how much time passes. Some things are best forgotten, because to acknowledge them would mean you have to face the consequences of the aftermath, something which I refuse to deal with.

I park the car, shove open the door, and head up the garden path. When I unlock her front door, he stiffens. "You have a key?"

Clearly, I do. I push the door, walk through, and drop the keys on the table in the hallway. I leaf through her mail, just to irritate him, then gesture to the couch. "Make yourself at home."

He frowns at me. "Like you?"

I smirk. "Yeah, I misspoke. Make yourself comfortable," I pause for effect, "but not too comfortable." I walk to the kitchen, top off the coffee maker with water and coffee grounds, then switch it on. I turn to find Edward leaning a shoulder against the doorway.

I tilt my head, "I've been staying here."

He stiffens. "You stayed here?"

"Yep." The coffee maker begins to bubble and I move away to grab two mugs, place them on the counter.

"You moved in with her?" he growls.

I allow my lips to curve and his expression darkens. "Don't fuck with me, Masters." His jaw tics.

I snatch up the coffee pot, top off both cups, then grab both off the counter. I walk over, hand one to him, then brush past him to sit in the chair in the living room.

Edward follows me. He sinks into the couch, then glares at me. "Well?" he growls. "You sleeping in this house with her?"

"I am sleeping in this house."

A nerve pops at his temple and my grin widens.

"Chillax," I drawl. "I slept there," I point to the couch where he is sitting, "until I didn't."

He curls his fingers into fists. "You just had to rub that in, didn't you?"

"Sorry, ol' chap." I raise my shoulders. "You'd prefer I lie? Truth is, your loss was my gain."

"So, this is how it's going to be?" he says in a hard voice. "The two of us always baiting each other, always at loggerheads, and never able to see eye to eye?"

"Guess nothing much has changed, huh?"

"Damn right." He scowls down at his cup of coffee, then stares at me, "You need to fuck off, Masters. You're not needed anymore."

"Didn't hear you say that when you called and asked me to step in."

"I changed my mind."

"I cleared up the mess you left behind at the church, by the way," I lower my chin, "and you are welcome."

"Considering how you fucked up everything else, you'll have to excuse me if I can't muster a thank-you."

"The man you thought you strangled," I tip up my chin, "he's alive, by the way."

Edward stiffens. "Too bad," he mutters, "he deserved to die."

I take in his features. "You didn't used to be this bloodthirsty."

"And you used to be my friend."

I wince, then drag my fingers through my hair. "Guess I deserve that."

"And much more." He takes a sip of his coffee, places his cup back on the table, "If you think you can come between me and Ava, you are mistaken."

"Correction." I set my jaw. "I didn't come between anyone. You left, remember?"

"And now I am back."

"I guess you're entitled to your opinion." I scowl.

He glowers back. The tension in the room escalates. Shit, this isn't how I'd wanted it to be. I'd known Edward would return, eventually... I'd hoped I'd have more time. I didn't expect for him to come back so quickly. Not before I'd consolidated my position with Ava. Before I'd won her over completely. If it means I am being greedy and duplicitous, then the fuck I care? I am not letting go of the one thing that brings me joy. I am not letting him take Ava from me, and if that means I need to play along with him for a while, even win his confidence, then so be it.

I hold his gaze, then blow out a breath, "Can we call a truce temporarily?"

His forehead furrows. "Why is that?"

"I don't know about you, but I can't fight on an empty stomach, man." I lean back in the couch, "Can we order some pizza first?"

7

"If we haven't been visited by people from the future yet, does that mean time travel will never be invented? However, these people that may have come back may have kept themselves hidden so we don't know they've come back, so the future is unchanged.... Um, does that make sense? Guess the past should stay in the past—we shouldn't change it but only learn from it. Besides there is no future yet, so how can someone come back from something that hasn't yet existed?"

-From Ava's Diary

Ava

I walk inside the house and the smell of cigarettes laced with coffee and a deeper, edgier smell I can only identify as testosterone hits me. What the—? I glance at the two men sprawled across from each other. Between them are used coffee cups. There's also an ashtray—a previously unused one which I'd shoved to the back of one of my shelves... Who'd found it? I narrow my gaze on the cigarette butts that have been stubbed out.

"Have you been smoking?" I scowl at Baron.

"Don't look at me." He jerks his chin in Edward's direction.

"You?" I turn on him, "You, Father? I mean, Edward. Really?" I scowl.
"Since when did you start smoking?"

"Since I left you and realized how much I miss you?"

My cheeks heat.

Baron makes a sound deep in his throat. I ignore it. I drop my bag on the

edge of the couch farthest away from Edward, then stoop to grab the ashtray. "Well, next time, take your butts outside."

"As long as you park your butt next to mine."

Before I can turn he's patted me on my arse.

"Hey," I straighten, "that was uncalled for."

"Sorry," he raises his hands, "I couldn't resist."

I glance over to find Baron curling his fingers into fists. "Keep your hands off her, you prick."

"I apologized, didn't I?" Edward drags his fingers through his hair. "It was a moment of weakness, okay."

"As long as it doesn't happen again," Baron snaps.

Edward jerks his chin. Baron, glowers, but doesn't say anything else.

"Hmm." I stare between them, "I assume you've come to some kind of understanding."

Neither speaks.

"Well, have you?" I frown. "Go on, you can tell me."

"We...may have." Baron concedes, "but first," he holds up his finger, tilts his head as if listening. "Wait for it, wait for it." The doorbell rings. "Pizza." He springs up, heads for the door.

"Pizza?" I blink

"Yeah, we have to eat sometime, don't we?"

I take in Ed's pale features, his rumpled clothes. He seems tired but not in pain. "How's the wound?" I ask.

"I'll live." He smiles lazily, and my breath catches.

Shit, this, being surrounded by all these acres of hot manliness isn't helping me at all. I turn away, "I think I am going to take a shower."

Baron returns just then with two massive pizzas.

"Everything okay with Archer?" he calls out after me.

"Of course." I glance at him over my shoulder. "He's a good man." I lower my chin. "He mentioned the two of you served together in the army?"

"We did." Baron places the pizza boxes on the coffee table. "There are only two other men I'd trust to watch over you. He's one of them."

"One of two, huh?" I say slowly. "So, there's you, obviously. And Archer..."

He nods.

"And the third man?" I tilt my head, "Who's the third person you'd trust to protect me?"

When he doesn't reply, I narrow my gaze on him. "It's Edward, right? You'd trust Edward to protect me, wouldn't you?"

Baron pauses, then resumes opening the pizza boxes.

"Well?" I prod, "You would, right?"

"Sure," he finally says, "why not?"

"Ha!" I stab a finger in his direction. "Clearly, you don't hate him as much as you say you do."

"You're right."

"I am?"

"Yep." He straightens, training that bright blue gaze on me, "It goes beyond hate. Let's just say, while I trust him with your life, I don't trust his intentions toward you."

Edward bares his teeth. "Same to you, asshole, with knobs on."

I stare between the two of them. "I get it now."

"What?" Edward scowls.

"This is why the two of you are pretending to get along?"

Baron tips up his chin at me. "We get along just fine." He coughs with his palm over his mouth, "Not!"

"Ha," I stab a finger at him, "knew it. The two of you are sitting across from each other, pretending to have a civil conversation, only so you can keep an eye on each other. So you can make sure the other one doesn't make a move on me."

Edward raises his hands, "Impressive piece of deduction there, Eve."

"It only took you what, fifteen minutes, to come to that conclusion?" Baron snickers.

I throw up my hands. "The two of you in this mood are impossible. Seriously, you guys need to chill out." I turn and head for my bedroom, when Baron calls out.

"The pizza will get cold."

"It will stay," I mumble.

"No, it won't," he retorts.

I turn, and scowl, "I need a shower."

"You can have one later." Edward nods.

I glance between them. "I am not winning this argument, am I?"

"Nope." Baron raises a shoulder, "When it comes to your well-being, I won't compromise."

Edward scowls at him, then turns to me. "Eat first, Eve." His voice

softens, "You must be hungry." His gaze holds mine. "Besides, I am starving and," he lowers his voice, "I'd love to eat with you."

Heat ripples across my skin and my toes curl. He may as well as have said, "*I'd love to eat you.*" My cheeks heat. Edward drags his thumb across his lips, and my belly flip-flops. Moisture pools between my legs. I take a step forward, only for Baron to plant himself in front of me.

I blink, glance up at him, "What?"

"Here, why don't you sit down?" He guides me to the chair he's just vacated. Sensations tingle out from where he touches me. I glance up, to find his lips curving in a knowing smile. I scowl.

"Not fair," I mumble. "The two of you are playing me."

He straightens, glaring down his patrician nose at me. "All's fair in love and war, baby," he drawls.

"I'm not some kind of...prey that the two of you can take turns toying with," I burst out. "I'm just a woman..." *caught between two alphaholes*. Oh, my god, how could I have gotten myself into this situation?

I stare between them. Baron folds his arms across his chest. Edward scowls from his place on the couch. The silence stretches, dense and heavy. My throat dries. I take in the pizza on the table, "May as well eat first."

No one moves for a second, then Baron nods. He walks around to sit in the chair opposite me. He reaches forward, takes a paper napkin, passes it over to Edward, who shares it with me. We each reach for a piece of pizza, then begin to eat.

"The chili flakes," I mumble, "can you pass them please?"

Both Baron and Edward reach for the packet. For a second, I am sure they are going to fight over who's going to give it to me. Then Baron retreats. Edward hands the packet over to me.

"Thanks." I rip it open, pour the flakes over my slice of pizza, bite into it. Heat suffuses my mouth. Sweat breaks out on my brow. I chew, swallow, and promptly hiccup. Yeah, that's me, always biting off more than I can chew. I never did know when things could get too spicy for me. Never did know when to stop before I burned myself, or in this case, my tongue. I hiccup again. Both Baron and Edward reach for one of the bottles of iced tea that had been delivered with the pizza. Baron snatches it up, unscrews it, and reaches across the table to hand it over to me. I thank him, tilt the bottle and wash down the pizza. The fire in my mouth subsides. I glance over to find Edward glowering at Baron—who continues to eat his pizza, his lips curled

in a slight smirk.

"Oh, for hell's sake." I place down my pizza and stare between them.
"This is not working."

"I don't know. From where I am, everything is peachy keen," Baron rumbles.

"Only because you won the last round," I accuse him, "and that's what this is turning out to be, right? Each of you trying to get one up on the other —"

"Sounds good to me." Baron's smirk widens.

"With me as the prize."

"Does that bother you?" Edward turns to me.

"What do you think?" I snap.

His forehead crinkles. "I think," he glances at Baron, "it's time we figure out a plan."

"You do?"

"Of course." He leans back, throws his arm across the back of a couch.
"That's why we are here, aren't we?"

"Hmm." I frown at him. Why is he being so placatory? Somehow, I can't believe that he actually wants to talk about the elephant in the room, the one we have avoided talking about openly so far.

"He's right." Baron crumples up the napkin in his hand and drops it in the empty pizza box. "Let's figure this out."

They both glance at me.

"What?" I frown. "Why are you both staring at me?"

"The two of us spoke about our situation," Edward gestures between him and Baron, "before you arrived."

"You did?"

"We couldn't arrive at any decision."

I snort, "Why am I not surprised?"

"So, we agreed to disagree," Baron chimes in.

"That's a start, I suppose."

"We also agreed on one other thing." Edward's eyes gleam.

I frown, "What?" I swallow. "What did you agree on?"

"That we'd let you choose."

8

Ava

"Choose?" I swallow. "You'll let me choose?" My heartbeat ratchets up. I stare between them. They can't mean what I think they do. "Really?"

Edward smirks. "We mean, we'll let you choose how to set up a schedule to spend time with us."

"Oh." My muscles relax. What the hell? Guess I am not ready to let either of them go...yet. What does that say about me?

"A schedule?"

Baron nods. "You pick a time to meet each of us, separately."

"This way, you get to know both of us...individually," Edward adds.

"It will give you more information to base your final decision on." Baron's features close and his gaze intensifies. No doubt, he thinks the final decision will be in his favor. He wants it to be in his favor.

And if it isn't? What will he do then? How hurt will he be? And it's inevitable that someone will be, right? At some point, I'll have to choose one of them. And the other one, whoever it is, will be upset and angry, and likely, never forgive me. Likely, this would end their friendship too. One forged in such difficult circumstances that it should be able to weather anything.

But this...this is so personal, so emotional. Will the two of them be able to get through it? Would they be able to see past whoever is the inevitable winner and understand it's for the best? And if they can't? If they stop being friends, if they hate themselves...more than what they do now, will I be able to forgive myself?

"This..." I jump up to my feet, "I can't do this."

"What do you mean?" Baron snaps.

"It's because of me that the two of you are pitted against each other. I don't want to come between the two of you."

"Trust me...the disagreement between us existed prior to your coming into the picture." Edward smirks.

"That's not how it seems to me." I fold my arms around my waist. "The seven of you are supposed to be friends, right? At least, from what I've heard from the girls, you guys stick together. You have each other's backs."

They both nod.

"So, imagine how it seems to me when I see the two of you hating each other... Thanks to me."

"We don't hate each other," Baron murmurs.

I chuckle. "Sure could have fooled me."

"We just have too much stuff from the past between us." Edward leans forward. "It means our friendship will always be fraught with...tension."

"But it doesn't feel right that, ultimately, one of you is going to lose."

They both freeze.

"Or didn't you realize that?" I roll my eyes. "How did you think this was going to end? The three of us becoming one big happy family? I mean, I am going to have to choose, right?"

They stare at each other, anger evident on both of their features.

"This is what I mean," I snarl. "One of you is going to lose. And both of you hate to lose. One of you is going to end up hating the other. Your friendship will be over, thanks to me. You won't be the Seven any longer." I rake my fingers through my hair. "How do you think that's going to make me feel?"

"Slow down, Eve," Edward cautions, "you're getting ahead of yourself."

Baron glances from him to me, "He's right...on this." He rubs the back of his neck. "Let's take it one day at a time. You don't know how or where this is going to end up. We are both mature enough to realize that one of us is going to get the girl." He winces, "And of course, I want it to be me."

Edward glares at him and raises his hand. "I mean, we are both sensible enough to realize that one of us is going to emerge the victor. Besides," he kicks out his legs, "fact is, we'd rather you choose one of us than someone else."

Baron stiffens, then nods. "For once, he's talking sense," he mutters.

"If... When you are ready to choose, it will, hopefully, be one of us."

"You are okay with that?" I scowl.

"Not exactly," Baron's lips twist, "but if this means I am, at least, in the running to be with you, then well... It gives me hope, and I'd rather have that...than lose you."

"Agreed." Edward strokes his chin. "As long as I know that there is a possibility that I get to be with you...it gives me a fighting chance. And fight for you, I will."

"I am not giving up easily, Eve," Baron rumbles. His features soften. "You know, I'll do anything for you... If it means I need to put up with—" he stabs his thumb in Edward's direction, "so be it."

I scowl at him, "You sure about this?"

"No, I am not." His scowl deepens.

When I stare at him, he raises his hands. "I mean, of course, I don't want to share you, but if it means, at the end of this, I have a chance of having you to myself, then," he raises his shoulders, "fair enough. It's worth a shot."

I blink between them. "You guys okay to shake on that?"

Baron's jaw hardens. "No," he snaps.

"Nope." Edward sets his lips.

I blow out a breath, "And you guys think this is going to work?"

"We'll make it work." Baron's features firm. "We have to."

"You bet; we'll make sure it does." Edward squares his shoulders. "Though I must warn you," he glances between me and Baron, "I am going to pull out all the stops." He narrows his gaze on Baron. "I haven't come this far to lose."

"Save the speech, Chase." Baron yawns, "By the time I'm done, you'll wish you had cut your losses and run."

9

Ava

"You agreed to what?" Isla stares at me.

We are in our favorite bar, at the top of the British Portrait Museum near Trafalgar Square. I've always liked it because you can look out of the window and spot Nelson's Column just a block away. I lean forward, take a sip of my wine.

"I agreed to allocate separate times for each of them."

"So, you mean, you'll be spending Monday with Baron," she counts off on her fingers, "then Tuesday with Edward, then Wednesday with Baron—"

"Uh, I don't think it's going to be that regimented."

"So, what do you mean?" Her brow furrows.

"Just that I'll be taking turns dating each of them."

"Dating?" She makes air quotes with her fingers. "Is that what you kids are calling it nowadays?"

"It really is strictly dating." My face heats, but I don't allow myself to acknowledge the blush. "This is supposed to be a fact-finding mission."

"Fact-finding?"

I nod. "Yeah, that's what they wanted and that's what I agreed to."

"And what is this fact-finding going to be about?" She presses a finger into her cheek.

"Finding out more about them, their backgrounds, their preferences; giving them a chance to get to know me better."

"And why would you do that?" She frowns.

"Why wouldn't I?" I scowl at her. "It's the simplest way of figuring out who I am most compatible with."

"Thought you already knew that?" She waggles her eyebrows. "After all, you did sleep with both of them."

"It just happened, okay?" I mutter. "If I had known it would land me in this situation—"

"You wouldn't have shagged either of them?"

I purse my lips. "No, that's not true. The way things happened—" The way I'd lost my virginity to Edward...when he'd walked in and stared at me and I had known then I wanted him, that I wasn't letting him leave without losing my virginity to him... Then, being so fiercely attracted to Baron. "I couldn't have stopped any of it," I say firmly.

"So, now you are going to try both of them out...for size?"

Heat sears my cheeks. "Not like that," I object.

"Then how?"

"There's not going to be any sex."

She chokes on her drink, places her wine glass on the counter, then snatches up a paper napkin to wipe her mouth. "No sex?"

"Absolutely not." I shake my hair back from my shoulders. "I already know both of them that way."

My flush deepens, and I square my shoulders. *What the hell? Why am I embarrassed?* Face it, I did shag them both. And I enjoyed it. And they were both hot and amazing and I felt wonderful at the end of it. Don't men sleep around all the time? Though this is not the same. When I was with Edward, I'd been convinced he was the only one. Then Baron had crashed into my life, and after how Edward had left me... Okay, so maybe I had been emotionally fragile...but I'd known what I was doing when I'd slept with Baron.

Edward had left me, and a part of me had been sure that he'd be back, I can't refute that. Yet, I had been so strongly attracted to Baron... And he'd been there while Edward wasn't. And it hadn't felt wrong... I had followed my instincts. Which is how I had ended up in this situation, right?

Maybe my instincts aren't so reliable, after all. All the more reason to stick to the plan; approach this in a more practical manner, as Baron has suggested. Try things out and see what works... If something feels wrong, I can ditch it, try something else. All along the way, I'll be gathering feedback on what works. It's the only way forward, right? It has to be.

The alternative is to be stuck with both guys angry and snarling at each other, and gosh, how I hate that. If there is even a chance for the three of us moving on from this, to live somewhat normal lives, then I have to give this a shot. "Besides, this is about figuring out whom I am most compatible with on an emotional level... And sex only muddies the waters... So yeah, no sex."

"Hmm." She purses her lips, "Which brings me to another question, do the guys know about it?"

"About what?"

"That sex isn't part of the bargain?"

"I may have, uh, forgotten to mention it."

Her jaw drops. "Wow," she blinks, "so you are just walking into this hoping to withhold from them?"

"Don't be crude," I mutter, "but yeah, that's exactly what I am going to do. I mean, not overtly, but I am going to make sure we don't get there."

"You're going to make sure that two hot blooded alpha males spend time with you and you don't end up in bed with either of them?"

"Umm, yeah?"

She shakes her head, then turns to the bartender, "Can you top us off, please? My friend, here, is going to need it."

"What?" I snap.

She motions zipping her lips.

"Tell me," I grumble.

"Not my place."

"Oh, please." I mutter. "Seriously, Isla, you've come this far, may as well spit it out."

"Is that what you told him?"

"What?" I frown, "Oh! For your information, I swallowed."

She opens and shuts her mouth. "Whoa, woman. Seriously, you have changed."

"It's called growing up?"

"It's called, having your cake and eating it too."

"Huh?"

"You know, dating two sexy-as-hell guys... With their permission... At the same time." She stares at me. "Honestly, despite the fact that I know you are not going to be able to stick to the 'no sex' thing—"

I make a warning noise.

"Not that you are not going to try or anything, but whether you are able to

stick to it is another thing altogether. Despite that—"

"Isla!"

"No, seriously. Despite all that, I am envious of you. I truly am."

I snort, "Why don't I believe you?"

"Come on, woman, you're trying to juggle two men. Me? The only action I'm getting right now is silicone."

"You mean, by imagining yourself with Liam?"

"Ugh, that man?" She makes a face. "That full-of-himself, prick-tard, who needs to get a life? The last time I met him at his wedding rehearsal, he looked at me like he hates me."

"Maybe it's because he actually likes you?"

"No, no, no, not falling for that, babe. There is no enemies-to-lovers thing happening here. The man positively loathes me. He can barely bring himself to talk to me when needed. Not that I mind." She snorts, "The less interaction I have with him, the better."

"So, you'll be happy when he gets married."

Her features freeze, then she recovers and raises her glass at me, "Nice segue, but I am not falling for it."

"Not falling for what?" I ask innocently.

"You tried to change the topic and succeeded, but I am steering us back to the issue at hand."

"What's that?"

"You and your men, Ava." She leans forward, "Surely, you do prefer one of them over the other?"

I scowl at her. "If I did, don't you think I'd have decided by now?"

"Come on," she drums her fingers on her table, "isn't there anything about one of them that outweighs the other?"

Let me see. Edward was my first love... He has that unshakeable strength inside of him that had attracted me from the beginning. Then, he'd left his faith behind for me, after which... he'd left me... But he'd returned back to me. He'd changed his life, for me.

Then there's Baron. Unshakeable Baron. Who'd broken his promise to his friend because he'd seen me and hadn't been able to stay away, although he certainly did try. The lust with him is combustible; it's like striking a match to gasoline. The attraction with him is palpable. When we are in the same room, it's like my gaze is drawn to him.

Well, to both of them, to be honest. They complete different parts of me.

Edward is my first love. And Baron... He'd swept me off my feet.

My head spins. Shit, what a mess.

I lower my chin, hunch my shoulders. "No," I mutter, "I can't find anything that tips the balance in favor of either of them. They are equally matched," I raise my gaze to hers, "and not only in that way."

"I didn't say anything," Isla protests.

"You didn't need to." I grab my drink, chugging down more of it. The alcohol hits my stomach and a pleasant warmth infuses my skin. I glance up to find her watching me carefully.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Say it, Iz."

"Hmm." She circles the rim of the glass with her finger. "You're going to think I'm crazy for even suggesting it..."

"Oh please," I snort, "as if I'll ever be surprised with what comes out of your mouth?"

She chuckles, "True that, but I don't think I've ever said anything this outrageous before."

"Which is?"

"That I agree with Summer."

"You do?" I blink.

She nods, "Why don't you enjoy both of them—?"

"But—"

"—for now," she adds. "Don't force a decision, babe. Just be with what you have, savor them, let your subconscious decide who you want."

"And if I can't decide?"

"You will." She firms her lips.

"But when?"

"You'll know when you know."

I blow out a breath, grab my glass and drain it. When, though? When will I know who is right for me? When will I find out who is my soulmate? And why did I have to fall for both of them?

"Speaking of..." She clears her throat, and I glance at her.

"Now what?" I mutter.

She jerks her chin toward the doorway of the bar.

I turn around and the breath whooshes out of me. "What are you doing here?"

10

Baron

I walk into the bar, and she watches me approach. "You shouldn't be here," she scolds.

"Says who?"

"The deal was that I'd set up a schedule to date you guys."

"Doesn't mean I can't stumble across you in a bar, does it?"

"And is that what this is?" She frowns. "Did you walk into this bar by accident?"

I hesitate, look away. "No," I mumble, "I walked in knowing you'd be here."

"Baron," she scowls, "this is not right."

"What's not right is that you are going home to him, and you'll be spending the night in the same bed as him." I belatedly notice Isla and smile at her to disguise my discomfort. "Hi, Isla. How are you doing?"

"Umm—" Isla rises to her feet, "I need to get going."

She bends, kissing Ava's cheek. "Call me if you need anything, okay?"

She nods in my direction, an acknowledgement. Meanwhile, Ava kisses her back and waves as she walks away, leaving us alone.

"She's a good friend." I slip onto the bar stool she vacated. "How did you two meet?"

"She was a good friend of my older sister's, actually. Then we met and got along really well."

"You have a sister?" I frown. "You never told me that."

"Guess I didn't have a chance."

"What does she do?"

"She's a marketing director. Has a well-paying job with a media company. She travels a lot for work, is very ambitious, and... She's my exact opposite." She laughs.

The bartender approaches me, but I shake my head at him.

"You're not drinking?" She frowns.

"I'm driving."

"Right."

I turn to her. "What makes you think that you are so different from your sister?"

She takes a sip from her drink, hunches her shoulders. "Because she's so focused, you know? She knows what she wants, and goes after it."

"And you don't?"

"I'm a med school drop-out."

"And now you run your own studio."

"Which barely breaks even—"

"Where you create art, and do what you enjoy."

"And I still struggle to get students."

"It's what you love," I insist.

"If only passion were enough to put food on the table."

"You're only getting started." I lean forward, "If you persevere... As long as you are doing what fires you up, you are bound to be successful."

She blinks. "Wow, that's some speech, Baron."

My neck heats. "It's true, though," I insist. "You're such an incredible dancer, Ava. Don't give up."

She smiles and her green eyes light up. "Thank you," she murmurs, "I needed to hear that. Maybe one of these days, I'll even have the courage to sign up for the World Belly Dancing championships."

"Oh, you definitely should. Bet you'd win the first prize too."

"I'd settle for simply not falling flat on my face." She laughs.

"You could never do that. You have too much talent to do anything but excel at anything that you put your mind too."

"Wow," she blinks, "you have no idea how much it means to me, to hear you say that."

Don't lose faith in yourself." I gaze at her earnestly. "Promise me that."

She licks her lips and my eyes drop to her mouth. "Say you promise," I

coax her.

"I promise," she whispers.

Her words are soft, her lips slightly parted. I move in closer, close enough to smell that jasmine and raspberry scent of hers. The blood instantly drains to my groin. My dick thickens. My thighs harden. I lower my head to hers, and she swallows. I push the hair away from her forehead and she trembles. I place my mouth in front of hers, close enough to share breath and a moan bleeds from her lips.

"Ava," I whisper, "fuck, you're beautiful."

She stares into my eyes, her pupils dilated. Her chest rises and falls and color smears her cheeks. I brush my lips across hers—once, twice—and she sways. I slide my hand behind her neck, hold her in place as I deepen the kiss. I lick across her mouth and she gasps. I slide my tongue in between her lips and she moans. I press down on her chin and she opens her mouth. I suck on her tongue, sweep my tongue across her teeth, pull her close enough for her hair to brush my face. The scent of her sinks into my skin; the taste of her goes straight to my head. I slide off my stool, push her legs apart and step between them.

A groan rips out of me and she shudders. She slides her arms under my jacket, digs her fingers into my back, and my dick lengthens. I pull her to the edge of her stool, thrust my hardness into her center. She gasps, straining against me, thrusting her breasts into my chest. Something crashes to the floor and I tear my mouth from hers, stare at her flushed features, those dilated eyes that indicate just how aroused she already is.

"Ava," I whisper and she shakes her head.

"We shouldn't."

"Why not?" I growl. "You want me, I want you."

"It's not right, to Edward."

"Don't talk about him," I snap.

She frowns up at me. "I thought we were all going to get along."

I snort, "I agreed to tolerate him."

"You agreed to give this arrangement a chance."

"Doesn't mean I can't kiss you."

"You can." She tilts her head, "Just know that I won't sleep with you."

"Wait, what?" I scowl. "What the hell do you mean?"

"I'm not sleeping with either of you, until I figure out where this is going."

"You mean until you figure out who you're going to choose?"

She scowls up at me. "I'm trying to do what's right."

"I'm right for you, Ava." I massage her neck and her chest heaves. "See how you respond to me? How you yearn for my touch, how your body reacts to my nearness?" I lower my head to hers again and her lips part. "You want me, Ava. Admit it. You need me. You can't live without me in your life. Without my telling you what to do. You want the strength of my dominance to subsume you, you want me to throw you down and rip into your pussy. You want me to bend you over this table and fuck you in the arse in front of everyone."

"Baron," she breathes, "what are you saying?"

"You want me to take you in front of this bar, so you can cry out and show them just what a good little slut you are. You love being an exhibitionist, Ava. It turns you on, thinking of all the forbidden things I can do to you. You want me to claim you, to tell the world that you belong to me."

"No," she whispers, "that's not true."

"It is."

"No, it isn't." I sense her move. The next second pain explodes behind my eyes; my groin screams in protest.

"What the fuck—?" She kneed me in the balls. Why that little— I turn around, find her running out of the bar. Shit. "Ava, hold on." I spring forward and my body protests. I grit my teeth through the pain, force myself to move forward. I race toward the door, up the sidewalk in her wake. "Ava, stop."

She turns around, scowls. "Why should I, after you pulled that underhanded stunt on me?"

I increase my pace, closing the distance between us. She yelps, faces forward, trying to run faster. I catch up to her, grab her arm and she screams, "Let go of me."

"Ava, stop." I haul her to me and she struggles in my grasp.

"Release me, you asshole."

"No."

"Why did you kiss me like that?"

"Because you like it?"

"How dare you say those filthy things to me?"

I yank her up to her tiptoes, clamp my hand around the nape of her neck. "Because it turns you on, Eve."

"Stop calling me that!"

"Why should I?" I haul her against me and her breasts flatten against my chest. "You make me crazy, Ava. You know that?"

"Good," she huffs, "because you do the same to me."

"So, choose me."

"I," she blinks, "I can't, Baron."

I stare into her face, and my heart begins to race. "Fuck," I swear. "F-u-c-k." I release her so suddenly that she stumbles. I grasp her shoulder to make sure that she finds her balance, then step away from her. "I'll drop you home."

Half an hour later, we pull up at her house. I grasp the wheel of the car, stare straight ahead.

"Baron, I..."

"Get out of the car, Ava."

She turns to me. "You're angry with me and it's not fair. You knew Edward would return, that this entire situation would turn out to be messy."

"No shit," I growl.

"Baron, be reasonable. I—"

"Reasonable?" I turn on her, "Why should I be reasonable, when you go home every night to sleep in the same bed as him?"

"I'll be on the couch."

"What?" I frown. "Don't do that. You won't be able to sleep well there."

"I'll be fine," she assures me.

"Why can't he move to another place?"

She blows out a breath, "We've had this conversation. As soon as he's able to fend for himself, he'll move out."

"Bet he can right now. Bet he's only playing the sympathy card so he can stay with you."

"Baron," she snaps, "that's beneath even you."

I snort, "Seriously? You have no idea what Edward is capable of. Just because he was a priest, doesn't mean he still tells the truth."

She flips her hair over her shoulder. "Do I detect the green-headed monster making an appearance?"

"You think I'm jealous?" I growl.

"Aren't you?"

"If I were jealous, would I be driving you back to deliver you into his

arms?" I squeeze my fingers around the wheel of the car so tightly that pain screeches up my arms.

"Yes, you would," she mutters, "because despite how much you don't agree with the situation, you'd honor your word."

"What-fucking-ever."

"Oh, I know you, Baron Masters, better than you realize. Which is why you'll never pull the stunt that you pulled today again."

I arch an eyebrow. "Don't get your hopes too high, Sugar. I'll kiss you where I want, when I want."

"No, you won't."

"The fuck, Ava?" I slam my fist into the wheel and the horn blares. "The fuck are you putting these restrictions on me? It's fucking unnatural. I want to be able to kiss you when I want, to lick your cunt when I am hungry, to slam into your pussy when I feel like it, to fuck you like you belong to me, to own you like you are mine."

Her breath hitches.

"And I know you want it too."

"Maybe," she finally concedes, "maybe I do."

"Bull-fucking-shit," I snap. "You know you do."

"Doesn't mean I am going to let myself have it."

"Why the fuck not?"

"Because I am determined to give both of you a fair chance."

"Fuck fairness."

"Oh?" She tilts her head, "How would you feel if I walked in there and asked Edward to shag me—"

"Don't you fucking dare do that," I roar.

"My point exactly."

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." I rake my fingers through my hair. "This entire arrangement is bullshit, and you know it."

"No, it isn't." She straightens her shoulders. "I need to give both of you an equal chance, and right now, this is the only way."

"What-bloody-ever."

I shove open my door, stalk around the car to her door, but she's already stepping out. She walks up the garden path and I follow her to the door. She steps onto the patio, and I follow her onto it.

She reaches for the door and I don't move. She huffs out a breath, "I am not going to ask you to come in."

"I didn't expect you to."

"Sure, you did," she mutters, "but it wouldn't be fair to Edward if I did."

"You going to tell him about how you kissed me back?" I allow my lips to twist. "You going to tell him how my filthy words turn you on, how you like it rough? How you want to be dominated and not given a choice, how you like your every hole filled at the same time, how you like to be spanked and treated like a fuck toy, how—"

She turns on me, "Shut up," she hisses. "Just shut up."

"Yeah," I widen my legs, "thought not. He can't give you what you want; only I can."

"How do you know he didn't give it to me rough?" She tilts her head, "How do you know that's not how he fucked me already?"

Blood thuds at my temples. My pulse rate ratchets up. I step into her space, then bend my knees and peer into her features, "Is that right, Eve? Is that how he gave it to you? Is that how he shagged you, Eve?"

She pales, opens her mouth, when the door to the house flies open.

"What's happening here?"

11

Edward

Baron straightens, as the two of them continue to stare at each other.

"What the hell are you doing?" I step outside, shoving at Baron. "Get out of her face, man," I growl.

He glowers from her to me, then back at her. "This isn't over, Ava." He shoves my hand away, then turns and stalks off.

Ava watches him walk down the path; her features wear a haunted expression.

"What did he say to you, Eve?" I demand. "Did he insult you, because if he did I—"

"No," she swallows, "it's nothing." She brushes past me and walks inside the house.

I watch as Baron gets into his car, then turn and stalk back inside. "It didn't seem like nothing to me," I mutter.

She places her bag on the couch and sinks down next to it. Her hair flows about her shoulders. It's obvious her shoulders are tense.

Walking over, I stand behind the couch, push her hair to the side, then dig my fingers into her shoulder. Finding a knot in her muscle, I work at it until it loosens.

"That feels good." She leans into my touch. "Don't stop, Ed."

I use my good arm and continue to massage her shoulders, alternating between the two, until the tension fades away and she's pliant.

"Mmm." She closes her eyes and leans her head back on the couch.

"Thank you, that was wonderful."

"The pleasure is all mine." I smile down at her relaxed features.

She opens her eyelids, gazes up at me from under her lashes. The curve of her lips, the relaxed set of her features, the sleepy look about her eyes... All of it pulls me in. I bend down until my face is poised over hers. She traces her gaze down my face, until it rests on my lips. She swallows and I close the distance between us until my lips are poised above hers.

"Ed," she mumbles, "we can't."

"Why not?"

"Because we shouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because I told Baron that I wasn't sleeping with him, or with you, until I arrive at a decision."

"Wait, what?" I scowl. "What did you say?"

She leans forward. "I am not having sex with either of you." She folds her arms about her waist. "Not until I've figured out what to do about all of this."

Walking around the couch to see her face, I argue, "That's bullshit, Eve."

"Yeah, that's what he said also."

"Stop talking about him when you're with me."

She throws up her hands, "Is this what is going to happen when I am with either of you and I mention the other one? Seriously, you guys need to grow up." She stands up and begins to pace. "I am trying my best here, and neither of you is helping me out."

I fold my fingers into fists at my side. "Can't say I blame him, though."

She pauses, then turns to face me. "What are you talking about?"

"You come home smelling like another man, and you think I am going to stand by silently and accept it?"

She pales, "It...it's not like that, Ed."

"Oh?" I round the couch, and walk toward her, "Then how is it, Ava, explain it to me?" I take a step forward and she skitters back.

"It's really not how it seems."

"Oh?" I allow my lips to curl. "Are you denying that you kissed him?"

Her gaze lowers.

"Thought so."

I move toward her and she stumbles back another step.

"Did he touch you, Eve?" I growl. "Did you let him press his lips to yours, thrust his tongue in between your lips, as he felt your shoulders, your

breasts, the curve of your hips? Did he wind your hair around his fist and yank on it as he closed his mouth over yours?"

Her breath hitches, then her face pales. "Stop it," she snarls. "Stop it, Ed."

"Why should I?" I close the distance between us, and she slides back until her body touches the wall. She stiffens, looking around her, "Don't even think about it," I warn. "Tell me what he did to you, Eve."

"Nothing," she snaps.

"You're a liar." I lunge forward and she screams.

"Don't come closer, Ed!"

"Why?" I allow my lips to curl. "Scared I'll kiss you and then you'll forget him?"

"This is not a competition," she snarls

"So, you keep saying, and you know what? I am fucking tired of it." I plant my hand on the wall next to her head and she freezes. Her breathing quickens. She darts her gaze from left to right and that's when I push my hips into hers.

Her gaze widens; she tips up her chin and stares into my face. Her pupils dilate. I pin her to the wall and I know she can feel every last swollen inch of my hardness. Color smears her cheeks, she buries her teeth into her lower lip and blood rushes to my groin.

"See what you do to me, Eve?" I growl. "When I am in the same space as you, I can't fucking keep away from you."

"Don't, Ed," she whispers, "please don't."

"Of course, you'd put the onus on me. You want me to take the choice out of your hands. Want me to show you what you're missing, Eve?"

"Edward." She searches my face. For mercy? Fat chance of that. "I know this is not you speaking. This is your ego, your fear, that's making you say these things to me."

"Ha," I scoff, "of course, you don't want to believe the worst of me. You think, just because I was once a priest, that I'll play by the rules. You think I'll stand by and watch as he uses every opportunity to seduce you, to convince you to choose him. You think I'll let it slide when he puts his hands all over you, then drops you home, knowing it will tear me apart to see him with you?"

"Ed, stop, please." She scrunches up her forehead. "You don't know what you're saying."

"You're right."

"I am?"

I nod. "It's time to stop speaking and show you how I feel, Eve."

Her gaze widens. She shakes her head, "Don't, Ed. Don't you dare."

I lower my head, place my lips close to hers, "Tell me you don't want me to kiss you."

She swallows.

"Tell me you don't want me, Eve."

"I..." She licks her lips, "I can't."

"Ask me to kiss you."

She shakes her head.

"Do it, Eve," I growl.

She raises her gaze to mine, peers into my eyes, and in hers I see a pleading, a request, a need, confusion and lust. Arousal and uncertainty.

"Fuck." I lean my forehead against hers. "I want you, Ava. I need you. You know that, right?"

She nods.

"Then let me kiss you, let me feel your lips against mine. All the time I spent away from you, the only thing that kept me going was knowing that I was going to come back to you. Don't deny me, Eve," I hold her gaze, "please."

She draws in a breath, squeezes her eyes shut, before opening them. "Okay." She nods.

"Okay." I rub my nose against hers. "Okay." I lower my lips to hers, brush my mouth over hers once. I lean back and she makes a sound of protest. My lips kick up. I lean my face into hers, press my mouth to hers again. I lick across her lips and she parts them. I slide my tongue over hers, and a moan tumbles from her mouth. I tilt my head, suck on her tongue, and she shivers. I deepen the kiss, licking into her mouth, dragging my tongue across her teeth, as I press my hips into her.

Her entire body shudders. I pour all the longing, all the frustration, the loneliness I felt when I was away from her... The helplessness at not being able sift through my emotions, knowing how much I missed her, despite knowing I needed time to figure things out... Still having to figure things out... The lust, the complete awe that I found her... I pour all of it into the kiss.

I press my body into hers so we touch at chest, hips, and thighs, until every part of me is imprinted on hers. I draw in her breath, share my own,

then lick into her mouth again, and she pushes her hips into mine. I plant a thigh between hers, pressing down into the soft, luscious center of her, and a groan bleeds from her. She wraps her arms about my shoulders and holds on as she begins to ride my leg. I deepen the kiss even more, until it seems like we are sharing the same breath, until her breasts are flattened against my chest. I tilt my hips and press into her soft core, giving her the friction she so craves. She pushes up against the column of my thigh, digs her fingers into my shoulders and rubs her core against my leg, over and over again. Her body tenses, her shoulders jerk, her entire body goes rigid. That's when I tear my mouth from hers, and stare into her eyes. "Come for me, Eve."

12

Ava

"Get yourself off on me. Come now, Eve," he commands, and I shatter. The climax rips up my spine. Sparks flare behind my eyes. My shoulders snap back as I cry out, then slump against him. The aftershocks ripple through me as I rest my forehead against his chest. He holds me there with his arm around my shoulders. I bury my nose in the strip of skin bared between the lapels of his shirt. Draw in the scent of cut grass, and below that, the faint trace of Frankincense which still clings to him.

"Do you miss it?" I whisper. "The priesthood, I mean?"

He stills, then drags his fingers down my hair. His fingertips catch on a knot at the ends and he carefully untangles it.

"Do you have a brush?"

"What?"

"A hairbrush."

I tip up my chin, "If you don't want to answer the question—"

He places his finger on my lips. "A hair brush," he repeats. "Do you have one?"

I scowl, but damn, I am so relaxed right now, I don't want to fight with him. "On my dressing table," I murmur.

He steps back, only to wind his fingers around my wrist. He tugs and I follow him to the bedroom. He leads me to the dressing table, urging me onto the stool in front of the mirror, then reaches for the brush. He starts near the tips of my hair and patiently unravels the knots. Brushing a few centimeters

more every time, he gradually works his way up to finally have the full sweep from scalp to tip.

I lower my chin, close my eyes and enjoy his soothing strokes. For a few seconds, there's only the steady rustle of the teeth of the brush through my strands. The sound of my breathing, the heat of his body, the slide of the fabric of his pants against the edge of my seat.

Then, "I don't miss wearing the robes." His voice rumbles and he draws the brush down another portion of my hair. "I don't miss the discipline and the routine, something I thought I would." His voice is pensive. I try to turn my head but he clicks his tongue. "Stay still," he scolds and I turn to face forward, watching his face in the mirror.

"But you do miss some parts of it, surely?"

"I miss..." His voice lowers to a hush, "Helping people, I suppose."

Of course, he would. He may be an alphahole, but that is just a part of him... Just as much as that something inside of him, that wants to do something for the greater good. Perhaps it's that core of him I had sensed, which had been as attractive to me as the strength of his presence?

"You could still do that, you know?" I survey his reflection in the mirror. "You could still help others."

"I am not sure if that's what I want to do...now."

"What do you want to do then?"

"I want to do...you?" He raises his gaze to meet mine. The look in his eyes... OMG, it's hot and smoldering and so bloody intense. That's the thing with Edward. Nothing about him is ever half-way. It's like he always gives one-hundred percent—no one-thousand percent—of himself to everything he does. His amber eyes flare with that inner fire I recognize and I have missed. I may not have known him for very long, but the time I have is imprinted inside of me. How could someone have had such an impact on my life in so little time?

"Ed..." I whisper and his lips twist. That smirk? Jesus, it's so hot. And so mean. Why is it that I am always attracted to the bad boy? Not once, but twice over? Clearly, I have a type. And clearly, this type of thinking is not getting me anywhere.

"Ed, please don't," I plead.

"I'm not doing anything." He turns back to the task of grooming my hair. The rasp of the brush against my scalp makes goosebumps erupt on my skin.

"Ed, please." I pull away, rise to my feet, then pivot to face him. "It's not

fair," I protest, "what you're doing to me."

"What am I doing to you?"

"You know exactly what." I scowl. "You're trying to seduce me."

"No, I am not."

"Yes, you are." I fold my arms round my waist. "You know, I am not going to sleep with either of you."

"But you're okay to kiss him, you're okay to rub yourself up against my thigh and come, you're okay to—"

"That's not fair," I burst out. "You begged me to kiss you."

"And you fell for it?" He raises an eyebrow and anger sparks at my nerve endings.

"You...you bastard."

"If you couldn't pass this test, I wonder what else you've been up to with him."

"You were testing me?"

"Of course," he smirks, "did you think I'd actually beg you for anything?"

I swallow. "How dare you?"

"Just trying to establish that your game of not sleeping with either one of us isn't working."

"You're right," I swallow, "it isn't. In fact, I was wrong to have thought that I could actually stick to this ridiculous notion...of trying to give each of you a fair chance. Especially when both of you seem to turn everything into a competition. When neither of you wants to play by the rules, what chance do I have?"

The blood thrums at my temples. What the hell had I been thinking? Trying to make some sense of this crazy, twisted relationship... Or whatever it is that exists between the three of us. I am the only one who seems to want to find the solution. Both of these...idiots, clearly, don't want to find a way out. I am the only one trying to play fair, when neither of them wants to respect the boundaries I have tried to create. Obviously, I am going about this all wrong. There is only one way out.

"Leave," I say in a low voice.

"What?" He frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Last I checked, this was still my house," I firm my lips, "and I want you out."

"What the hell?" He glowers. "I am not going to leave you alone."

"Ha," I snarl, "should have thought about that before your little...act,

earlier."

"I am not leaving, Ava." He draws himself up to his full height. "Not until we figure out who the hell is behind the attack on you at your studio."

"I don't care," I snap. "I want you out of my space, Ed. Now."

"You're angry. I understand." He rakes his gaze across my features. "You've been through a lot."

"You have no idea."

"First Baron, then me, turning up out of the blue... And the attack—"

"Was nothing compared to how you and Baron seem to play so easily with my emotions."

"That wasn't what I intended—"

"Oh, yeah?" I take a step forward. "Didn't seem like that to me. In fact, from where I am, you and Baron seem so consumed with trying to take the other one down you don't care how it's hurting me here."

"Shit, Ava." His features twist. "That wasn't my intention...and while I can't speak for Baron, I am sure he didn't mean to cause you any pain either."

"Well, too late, buster." I take a step back from him. "I suggest you be on your way."

"I am not going to leave you here on your own."

"You don't have a say anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"It means..." I swallow, glance around the room. Am I going to do this? Guess I am going to do it. I don't have a choice. It's not working this way and I can't allow myself to be torn apart like this between the two of them. For my own sanity, maybe this is the only way out. "I need a little time away from both of you."

"No." His features darken. "You don't mean it."

"See," I stab a finger in his direction. "There you go again, telling me what I do or don't think, and honestly, I am tired of it. I just need some time alone to think about where this is all going, about what I want to do with my life, without either of the two of you meddling in my affairs or ordering me around."

"Don't you dare do this, Eve."

"Oh, fuck off." I throw up my hands, "Both of you call me by the same nickname. Do you have any idea what kind of a mind fuck that is? I mean, what are the chances? Two men, best friends... Or at least, once-upon-a-time best friends, call me by the same bloody nickname, and of course, I have

fallen for both of them."

"Wait," he shakes his head, "you have fallen for both of us?"

I gape at him. "Hello? What do you think this entire," I shake my hand in the air, "situation is about."

"I thought..." He scowls. "I know you said you have feelings for him, but you have fallen for him as well?"

"Oh, my god." I slap my palm to my head, "I can't even... I mean... Seriously?" I march to the door of the bedroom, "Get out of my house."

"No."

"Edward," I slam my hands on my waist, "I want you out of my sight, right now. I mean it."

He places the hairbrush on the dressing table, then turns to me. "I'll leave —"

I release a breath.

"This bedroom. I'll spend the night on the couch."

"What the—?"

"Before I leave, I need to make sure there'll be someone watching the house at night—"

I make a rude noise.

"And that Baron..." his features harden, "has arranged for round the clock surveillance."

"Whatever."

He prowls toward me, and I watch him draw closer, closer still. He pauses in front of me, his big body blocking out the rest of the room from my line of sight. I gulp. A ripple of desire pulses down my spine. I jerk my chin toward the doorway. "Leave, please," I mutter.

"This isn't over, Eve." His jaw tics. "Not by a long shot."

I hold his gaze. I will not look away. Nope, I need to hold my own if I have any chance of getting through this in one piece. Hah! Famous last words. I am already broken inside. And confused. And at my wit's end about what to do. Time away from both... Yes, that is exactly what I need. A little time apart, without either alphahole breathing down my neck or getting jealous about the other. Yes, totally what I crave at the moment. Some peace and quiet please?

He lowers his knees, peering into my eyes. "Is this what you want, Eve?"

I nod.

He holds my gaze a second longer, then nods, straightens, and walks out

of the room. I close the door behind him, lock it. Bet he heard that. Too bad. Right now, it's self-preservation. That's my focus. I head for the bathroom, take a quick shower, then change into my sleep shorts and cotton-camisole. I slide into bed, switch off the light and pull up the covers. Shit, I didn't get any pillows or a duvet for him. I roll on my side. Too bad. He'll just have to do without it. Alphahole has a thick hide; that should keep him warm. And the bathroom... There isn't another in the house, and I locked the door. Forget it. If he wants to use it, he can knock. For once, it will be him asking me for something... Instead of the other way around. I close my eyes and must have fallen asleep, for the next thing I know, it's morning.

I throw off the covers, head to the bathroom, brush my teeth.

I walk back into the bedroom, just as my phone pings with an incoming message. I pick it up, swipe the screen to read the message.

Raisa: I've emailed you all the details of the wedding. Dad will be gutted if you don't come. Please Ava, don't be selfish.

Am I selfish? Is that why I'd fallen so quickly for Baron, right after falling for Edward? Is that why I am holding onto both of them, because I can't let either of them go? Is that why I am so confused, because I want everything? Is that so wrong, though? To not settle for what doesn't feel right?

It's why I had dropped out of med school. And not that embarking on a creative career is any easier, but at least, it feels right somewhere inside of me. Just like... It doesn't feel right to make a decision about the two of them...yet. And going to Dad's wedding? I sit down on the bed. I had read Raisa's email, and know that the wedding is in the backyard of our family home. It's only a few days to the event now and... Shit, I don't want to break his heart. Truly, I don't.

I reach for the phone to answer her message, keep my fingers poised over the keyboard, but the words don't come. I place the phone aside. Head to the closet, drag on a sweatshirt and leggings then walk out of the bedroom.

When I reach the front room, I find it's empty.

13

Baron

I open the door to my apartment and Edward stares back at me.

"What the hell do you want?" I growl.

"We need to talk." He scowls back at me.

"Like hell, we do."

I am about to shut the door on his face, when he says, "It's about Ava."

I glower at him, "We've already spoken with her about how she's going to spend time with each of us—"

"She doesn't want to see either of us."

"What?" I frown.

"She threw me out of the house."

I can't stop the smile that curves my lips. "She did, huh?"

"She wants time apart from *both* of us." He shoves past me and I watch as he prowls over to the window in the far corner of my loft-apartment.

I shut the door, walk over to stand in the center of the room.

"What do you mean? What the fuck did you do?"

"I mean exactly what I said." He drops his backpack on the floor. "We've both been pushing her... Too much, too quickly... Of course, it was bound to happen."

"Don't go putting the blame of your desertion on me."

"It wasn't desertion." He bites out the words as he stares out of the window. What does he see? The view of London spread out before him? His past...our pasts...as intertwined as it is because of the incident and what

happened to us? His future...my future? Which, for some reason, seems to be just as closely twisted together... Thanks to one auburn-haired, green-eyed beauty who has ensnared both of us.

"What do you call it, then?"

He pivots to face me. "It's called putting distance to get perspective, which I guess is what she's trying to do right now."

"Is that what you think?" I scowl.

"What I think is not important." He leans forward on the balls of his feet. "Nor is what you think of consequence."

"Is that right?" I growl.

He nods. "The only thing that matters is that we respect her wishes—"

I open my mouth to speak and he raises his hand "—for now."

I set my jaw. "I'm not sure that's wise."

"Why not?"

"If she has time alone to sort through things, what if she decides that she wants neither of us?"

"You mean, what if she decides that she doesn't want you."

"Ava belongs to me," I grit out. "She was mine from the moment I saw her."

"She saw me first."

I ball my fists at my sides, and his lips twist. "Hurts to hear the truth, doesn't it? I am her first love."

"She doesn't love you."

His smile widens. "She does."

"Has she told you that?"

"You think I'd reveal that to you?" He looks me up and down.

"You'd say anything to get a rise out of me," I growl.

"You know, I am not lying." He raises a shoulder. "Besides, she understands and appreciates the sacrifice I made for her."

"If you mean leaving the priesthood, that was a long time coming, precipitated by your inability to keep your temper in check."

The smile vanishes from his face. Good.

"And we all know you joined the Church, purely as a means of escape." I scratch my jaw.

"Escape?"

I nod. "Fact is, you couldn't deal with reality, you didn't have the balls to face what had happened, so you turned your back on the world."

His features harden. "You should talk. You shipped out and joined the army. If there's a deserter here, it's you."

"Ah, see, that's where we differ." I rock back on my heels. "At least, I was out fighting a battle. I was facing my fears while doing my best to protect innocent people, while you?" I shove my hand in the pocket of my slacks. "You were merely hiding from the inevitable."

He balls his fists at his sides, "Inevitable, huh? What's that?"

"Revealing to the world that you are a coward, Edward." I bare my teeth. "You were a coward then, as you are now."

He takes a step forward and I hold up a hand, "Think carefully before you do anything else. We both know I am in far better shape than you. It won't take me long to take you down."

"We'll see, shall we?" He throws up his fists at the same time that there's a hammering on the door.

We glare at each other.

"Were you expecting someone?"

I shake my head, glance around the space for a weapon, when a voice calls out, "Open the fucking door, wanker."

My shoulder muscles relax as Edward blows out a breath.

"Fucking Saint," he mutters.

"What the fuck does he want now?"

I pivot, head for the door, and fling it open. Saint stalks forward. He shoves my shoulder with his as he brushes past me and heads for Edward.

"Hello, asshole." Saint tilts his head.

Edward scowls back. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"You could be happier to see us now, considering we are childhood buddies and such?" Sinner saunters in through the door, followed by Damian, Arpad and Weston. Damian flings himself on the couch. Arpad wanders over to the bar in the far corner.

Weston walks toward Edward, "How's the wound coming along?"

"I'll survive," Edward snaps.

"Make yourselves comfortable," I call out sarcastically.

"No formalities, bro." Saint raises a hand, "You know us, we treat each other's places as our own."

"Don't I just?" I slam the door with enough force that the painting above the fireplace crashes to the floor. Good thing it came with the place, which I purchased a few years ago but never bothered to furnish. Considering I only

crash here on the rare occasion I am in town. Not that any of them notice my little burst of temper. Short of dying...

"Whiskey." Arpad pulls a bottle of Macallan's from the bar. "Don't you have any fucking vodka?"

"Since when do you drink fucking vodka?" I scowl.

"Since he met Karina?" Damian chuckles.

I glare at Arpad. "You don't even like fucking vodka."

"Guess I do, now." He places the bottle of whisky on the bar counter. "You missed out on a lot, ol' chap." He tilts his head at me, "It's good to have you back though."

"Yeah," I rub the back of my neck, "it's still no excuse to drink at," I scowl at the watch on my wrist, "ten a.m.?"

"Oh, that's where you're wrong." Arpad smirks. "This drink isn't for me."

"Who is it for, then?"

Five pairs of eyes turn on me.

"What?" I glare.

All of them shift their gazes to Edward.

"What?" He glowers at them. "This isn't a fucking tennis match."

"Sure, could have fooled us." Saint cracks his neck. "That's why we're here anyway—to referee."

"We don't need a referee," I growl.

"Oh?" Saint folds his arms across his chest, glances between us. "You two have some shit to sort out."

"That's putting it mildly." I snort

"And we're here to ensure you two don't kill each other," Damian adds from his position on the settee.

I shoot him a glare, and his smile widens. Asshole's enjoying himself.

Hell, all of them are. Tossers who have their lives all set up, wives, and kids on the way. They've managed to put their pasts behind them, managed to set to rest the ghosts from the incident. They've found their homes, have a future with their loved ones.

Me? I have none of that. Nothing, except a past as a soldier, the security company that I set up with Archer, and a future career as an investor; one which is going to take some adjustment. Not to mention a former best friend who is now my most hated enemy and a woman...who doesn't belong to me yet. And am I going to let go of her that easily? Of course, not. She is all I have left in this world. The hope of being with her is the only solace I have

left to look forward to. I cannot let go of this opportunity, to find out how it would be to be with someone who satisfies that craving deep inside of me.

"We are not going to kill each other." I blow out a breath, "We were merely discussing strategy."

"Strategy, huh?" Sinclair smirks. "Is that why the two of you were yelling at each other?"

"We weren't..." I glance at Sinclair, who tilts his head.

"We could hear you all the way down to the street," Damian pipes up.

I glower at him and he chuckles.

"Okay," I rake my fingers through my hair. "Yeah, so we had a bit of a disagreement."

"Nothing the two of us can't sort out," Edward mutters. "We certainly don't need the rest of you here staging an intervention."

"Too fucking late." Saint grabs a chair, turns it around and straddles it. "You should have thought of that before you guys couldn't keep it in your pants."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I growl at him.

"You know what he means," Weston drawls. "The two of you are involved with the same woman."

"None of your bloody business," Edward snaps.

"Much as it pains me to do so," I scratch my jaw, "I am forced to agree with Edward on this."

Saint shakes his head, "Afraid that's not how it works, ol' chap."

"What the fuck do you mean?"

"He means, since the two of you haven't been able to sort things out, we are going to have to step in."

"What the fuck?" Edward glares around at the five of them, "It's best you wankers stay out of this."

There's silence, then all of them burst out laughing.

"Fuckin' hell." Saint pretends to wipe a tear from his eye. "You guys hear what dear Edward, here, just said?"

"Yeah," Damian leans forward in the couch, "anyone want to remind him how he was part of each and every intervention on behalf of the five of us?" He turns to me, "Not you, of course, considering you missed all the fun.... Not," he mutters. "Anyway," he turns his gaze on Edward, "sorry, buddy, you're going to have to man up and take your share of advice on your love life... Which, considering the mess the two of you have gotten into... I'd say,

should be welcome."

Edward glowers back.

"Or not." He raises his shoulders. "Doesn't matter, either way." He jerks his chin at Weston, who leans forward on the balls of his feet.

"Fact is," Weston looks between us, "you guys have two choices."

"We do?"

"Yep." He nods and begins counting off on his fingers. "Shut up and listen to us or... Shut up and listen to us."

"Har, har." I deadpan, then walk over to lean against the bar. "Go on, get it out of your system."

Saint drums his fingers on the back of his chair. "So," he turns to Edward, "you love her?"

"What the fuck?" I growl at the same time as Ed.

"I'm talking to Edward," Saint says in a mild voice. "Go on, Ed, I asked you a question."

"What the hell kind of a question is that?" he objects.

"Answer the question, you piece of shit," Sinner growls.

Edward shoots him a dirty look, then turns to Saint, "Of course, I do, you dickwad. Not that it's any of your business."

"Hmm." He rubs his chin, then turns in my direction, "And you?"

"Me?"

He nods. "Do you love her?"

"Fuck off, you fucktard."

"Very original." Saint chuckles. "Still doesn't answer my question."

I bunch my fingers at my sides, taking a breath, then another, "I am not going to tell you what I feel."

"Why not?" Damian frowns. "It's not anything to be ashamed of, soldier."

"We've all been through it." Arpad nods.

"Consider it another coming-of-age rite," Weston adds.

"What-bloody-ever." I rub the back of my neck, begin to pace. *Of course, I do, so why is it so difficult to admit it aloud? Why hadn't I told her so earlier when I had a chance? So, it has only been two and a-half weeks since I met her. So what? When you know, you know, right?*

Something inside me insists that she's the one for me. *So why the hell can't I say what I am feeling aloud? Argh!* I dig my fingers in my hair and tug. *Jesus H Christ, what the fuck is wrong with me?*

"Well?" Saint prompts, "Do you?"

I turn around and face them. "And if I do?"

"So, you do?"

I fold my arms across my chest. "What's it to you, assholes?"

"I understand how difficult this seems," Sinner says in a low voice. "Trust me, when I met Summer I was confused as fuck. I had no idea why whenever I saw her, I wanted to run away yet simultaneously, shove her behind me and hide her away from the world."

"Whoa." I blink, "Did you just wax almost-poetic...about a woman?"

"My wife and soon-to-be mother of my child." He half-quirks a smile, "Who'd have thought, eh?"

"Not me," I mutter. "Mr. Ruthless Billionaire Bastard with hearts in his eyes... Fuck me dead."

"Right?" Sinclair smirks. "And you know what the starting point was?"

"No," I frown, "what was it?"

"It began with accepting that I was a piece of shit who didn't deserve her."

"Hear, hear," Damian agrees.

"It began with being very honest with myself about who I am."

"A fucktard?" I offer.

"That too." His smile grows lopsided. "But also, that I was a selfish bugger in everything, and even more so when it came to her. Only, when it came to doing things for her, I discovered I could be the most selfless person."

"You're not making any sense."

"My point, exactly." He widens his stance. "What I am trying to say, you piss-tard, is that it began with me facing myself. It began with me accepting what I felt for her."

"Which was—?"

Weston ambles over to me, "You just obtuse, or did your stint in the army addle your brains and other parts of you completely?"

"My parts are all in fine working condition," I mutter, "which is more than I can say for many of you."

"Afraid most of us here have proven our manhood, ol' chap," Weston drawls.

I open my mouth, and he shakes his head. "And I don't mean fucking or getting our women pregnant."

I tilt my head and he pauses next to me, "Every one of us had to bare our

soul, lay our heart on our sleeve, and swallow some very hard lessons."

"Not to mention, coming clean and admitting our feelings for them," Damian interjects.

"You mean groveling, don't you?" Arpad mutters.

"Lots of groveling," Weston concurs.

"A whole lotta groveling." Saint winces.

"That doesn't seem like the recipe for a happy relationship." I frown.

Weston smacks me on the back of my head, and I wince, "The fuck, asshole?"

"Is that all you took away from this rather protracted and painful conversation?" He glares at me.

"If you want to tell me something, why can't you guys simply come to the point?"

"The point," Sinclair arches an eyebrow, "is you need to come clean about your feelings."

"So, you may as well start practicing now," Saint adds.

"Now?" I grumble.

Damian and Arpad nod.

Weston raises his hand and I glare at him, "Don't you fucking dare, you bastard."

"Oh, I fucking will, you douchebag, unless—"

"Unless?"

"Unless you spit it out."

"What?"

He claps me on the back of my head and I wince, "Fine, fine, I'll say, it, I love her. I fucking love her."

I stare at Edward, who frowns back at me. Like that helped with anything.

"What a fucking mess," I mutter.

He narrows his gaze.

"Now that we have that out there." Sinner turns to Edward, "What are you two gonna do about it?"

14

Edward

"Why are you asking me?" I growl. "I am not the one who got us into this mess."

"Oh yeah?" Baron snorts, "If you hadn't called me, I wouldn't have come."

"If you hadn't gone back on your word of not making contact with her, this would not have happened."

Baron thrusts his chin forward, "If you hadn't—"

The sound of a whistle blows through the space and we freeze, turning toward Sinner, who glares between us. "Woulda, coulda, shoulda. You assholes know better than to spend time talking about what already happened. Question is," his gaze narrows, "what are you gonna do about it now?"

I glance at the faces of each of my friends. They regard me with expressions varying from curiosity to empathy to hope.... Fucking hope. It's the one thing I don't have. If she doesn't choose me, I have nothing. I left the one thing that mattered to me, for her, and if she turns away from me... I pivot and face the window. "F-u-c-k." I bunch the fingers of my free hand into a fist. *Don't go there. Don't even contemplate that. What you left behind... What you gave up... That's not on her. It's what you wanted to do.* It's not that I had been unhappy with my choice to join the seminary. It's not that I had not been fulfilled. It's not that I hadn't found joy in helping others... Something which I hope I can still do.

It was more... The gnawing, aching, emptiness deep inside of me, the one

that hadn't gone away, even after weeks of retreat. When I had turned to Him for help, had spent days in meditation and prayer, searching for an elusive answer. And all I had found was temporary peace. One that went away as soon as I returned to my duties. When worshipping him and dedicating my life to others...still did not fill the nothingness that infused me when I went to bed... Greeted me when I woke up the next morning, knowing that something was missing. And that restlessness had grown, until I'd met Ava and had been able to put a name to it.

Apparently, I am more human than I thought. More fallible, more vulnerable. I am not invincible. Hell, I'm not even cut out to be a man of the cloth. I know I need her to feel alive. Need her to help me get in touch with that part of me that I have hidden so carefully over the years. Need her to help me embrace the ugliness inside of me... For when I am with her, everything seems so possible. Yeah, she gives me hope...and it's why I can't lose her. I square my shoulders, then turn back to the silent room.

"We," I clear my throat, "we're gonna come up with a plan."

"Thought that's what you already did?" Sinclair arches an eyebrow.

"A real plan." I glance at Baron, who scowls back at me. "One that is fair for Ava. One in which neither of us is going to outdo the other. One which gives us both an equal...probability of being with her."

He opens his mouth as if to say something, then shuts it. He cracks his neck, regards me thoughtfully, "You have something in mind."

I nod.

"You going to share what you're thinking?"

I glance around the faces of my friends, "I think your job here is done." I tip up my chin. "You feel me, guys?"

Sinner holds my gaze a second longer, then jerks his chin. "Better get this sorted, you two." He turns to leave, then pauses. "There is one more thing."

He glances between Baron and Weston, "The guy who Edward put out of commission? I assume he's still unconscious?"

Baron nods, then turns to Weston, "And the fucker Edward shot? I want to know why they came after Ava."

"He's not yet in a position to speak," Weston replies.

"Hmm." Sinner rubs his jaw. "That's too bad. I was hoping they'd have some information on what we need to know to get to the bottom of these attacks on us."

"Attacks?" Baron frowns, "What attacks?"

I exchange a glance with Sinner, who jerks his chin. "It's a series of incidents, which have affected most of us, in some form."

I take in the faces of the rest of the Seven. "If the rest of you are okay with it, I can recap for Baron?"

Damian, Weston, Saint and Arpad nod in my direction.

"It begins with Damian's girlfriend and child being in a fatal car accident." I rub the back of my neck. "One we now speculate that the Mafia was behind."

"The same Mafia who were behind our kidnapping?" Baron frowns.

I nod.

"Shit," Baron mutters. "That's..." He sets his jaw, "that's just..." He turns to Damian, "I'm sorry man, truly."

"Yeah." Damian swallows. "Life, huh? What can I say?"

Baron walks toward Damian, grabs him by the shoulder and draws him close, "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when it happened."

Damian half smiles. Baron pulls him in for an embrace. They hug, clap each other on the back, before he pulls away.

"What else?" Baron scowls. "What else did those bastards do?"

"They kidnapped Victoria," Saint snarls, "Assholes took her from under my nose. Good thing we tracked down the bastard behind it."

"You did?" Baron frowns. "What did you do with him?"

"He's working for us, behind enemy lines," Sinner says with some satisfaction.

"Then Weston's mother was poisoned," I murmur, "They got her to the hospital in time, but we now speculate that the Mafia was behind that too."

"Assholes," Weston growls. "When we finally get the perpetrators who were behind it, I am going to wring their necks."

"They also attacked Weston's wife in her apartment," I point out.

"Good thing I reached her in time." Weston grunts. "If I hadn't..."

"But you did," I remind him, "and Amelie's safe."

"And there were, uh, certain benefits, shall we say, in the aftermath of that particular incident, all of which, I was the beneficiary of, so there's that..." He smirks.

The rest of the men chuckle.

"Now, the homeless man," I glance between the men, "Guess Baron told you that he was a student at St. Lucian's?"

Damian nods, "We also know that he used to be a junkie, hard up on his

next fix, who was used by the Mafia to supply the whereabouts of our locations to them."

"And yet," I tilt my head, "he helped all of you at various points."

"He did?" Baron scowls.

"He's played a role in smoothing the way for the five of them to get their women."

"Not me," Sinner points out, "though I admit, it was intriguing to read his Byron quotes... Shit," He straightens. "Byron. He quoted Byron."

"So?" I turn to him. "You remember something, Sinner?"

"Summer's father, before he died, he mentioned something about Byron. Fucking hell." He drags his fingers through his hair. "I never could understand the significance of it...but it's too much of a coincidence, don't you think, that the homeless man was quoting Byron?" He glances at me. "Surely, he must know more than he revealed to you."

"Only way to find out is when he wakes up." I turn to Weston, "Which could be when, Doc?"

"Anyone's guess." He narrows his gaze on me, "You sure lost your shit there, Ed. It's not like you to cause bodily harm to anyone."

"Yeah, well," I chuckle dryly, "apparently, there's a lot about me that I am discovering for the first time."

The guys stare at me with something like understanding...empathy... Even pity, on their faces. Jesus...and now I am using the Lord's name as a swearword. Which, I shouldn't, but I can, now that, technically, I've walked away from the priesthood, but bloody hell... I am, clearly, losing my head right now.

"I think it's time you guys left," I mutter. "Baron and I have shit to sort out."

No one moves. They stare at me, then at Baron.

"What?" I bark. "I may have almost strangled one man. Doesn't mean I'm going to do anything to Baron, who, by the way, can defend himself really well, considering he is the ex-soldier here."

"You're not too bad at holding your own in a fight, Fath—I mean Ed," Saint finally says. "Shit, it's going to take some getting used to, to not call you Father anymore."

"Tell me about it," I say bitterly.

Sinner stares between Baron and me, then nods. He turns to Weston, "So, you'll tell us when either of the men awakens?"

"You guys will be the first to know," he affirms.

"Well, then," Damian straightens, "time to get the hell out of here and let these two jokers sort their shit out."

The guys, one by one, hug Baron, then me. They say their goodbyes and walk out of the door. I rub the back of my neck, then turn back to the booze. I pour whiskey into my glass, top up another and push it toward Baron.

We raise our glasses, toss back the drinks. I place my tumbler back on the counter with a thump, then turn to him.

"About Ava," he begins at the same time as I say, "We need to talk—"

We both chuckle, then he gestures to me, "You first."

I top up my glass, then his, pick up mine and stare into the depths of the amber liquid. I take a sip, turn to him, "I have a plan."

15

"You know what I really hate? Boys. Okay, maybe I don't hate them but I hate how my mind reacts to them. I get so freaked and panicky about them. If I message them and they don't reply straight away, my mind's like, 'he's moved on to talk to another girl,' or 'you've pissed him off now; well done.' I also feel like I reply too fast to their messages... But maybe that's just irrational thinking. The thing is... I'm kind of scared of them. As in, I'm scared of what a relationship is (not friendship—I can be friends, easily). It's like foreign ground. I've never done the whole relationship thing. I've always thought you should start out friends to stop the awkwardness, but if someone doesn't want that, what are you supposed to do? Anyway, I'm going to go sleep or do something else that is totally unproductive whilst I try not care about boys..."

-From Ava's Diary

Ava

"I still can't believe you threw him out," Isla stares up at me from the corner of the dressing room in my studio. I glance at the door of the studio for, like, the hundredth time in the last hour. Will I ever feel safe in here? I mean, it's silly. Since those guys had broken in, Baron had insisted that Karina, Arpad's wife who runs a security agency, beef up the security on the place, and I had agreed. The door is reinforced, and all of my students have to be buzzed in, which does make me feel safer.

Still, this is where Edward was shot, and that...is something I don't think

I am going to forget anytime soon. At least, I still have the space. If it were up to Baron, he'd have moved me to a completely new studio...at his expense. Not that I'd have allowed him to do that. I don't want to feel beholden to him... Or to Edward. In any form, right now.

Shit, stop thinking about him and Baron. This is supposed to be a complete break, remember?

When Isla had dropped by, carrying two cups of coffee, it had been a welcome break between classes. She'd tried reaching me by phone, then when I hadn't answered the phone, she'd decided to drop by. For the past half an hour, I have been trying to explain the situation to her, or rather, trying to justify the reason behind what I had done, both to her, and I suppose, to myself. And it had been the right thing. It has to be, right? If I can't stop getting intimate with either of them when I see them, then clearly, this arrangement isn't working.

"I kissed Baron," I repeat, "then I walked into the house and made out with Edward."

"So?"

"So?" I scowl at her. "Seriously, Isla, that doesn't sound right to me."

"You are too influenced by what society thinks."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, just because conventional wisdom dictates that you can be only with one man at a time—"

"For a reason," I look her up and down, "I mean, how would you feel if Liam carried on with you and another woman—"

She scowls, holds up a finger, "Firstly, don't talk about that bastard. And secondly," she holds up another finger, "he *is* with another woman. He's getting married, remember?"

"How are the arrangements going?"

"He showed up for the first rehearsal, but I haven't seen him since. I feel sorry for his fiancée."

"Thought you didn't like his fiancée."

"I don't."

"Then why are you defending her?"

"Dunno, maybe I just think that she deserves better."

"Really?" I peer into her features.

She nods. "I mean, it can't be easy being engaged to the jerkass. He's, apparently, told her that she can do what she wants. He doesn't care." She

flips her hair over her shoulder, "I mean, he's paying for all of it. The least he can do is make sure he's getting his money's worth."

"Maybe he trusts you?"

"Not likely, considering I barely know the man." She snorts, "In fact, I am beginning to empathize with his fiancée."

"You are?"

She nods, "She's a lovely girl, actually. A bit naïve; he'll probably chew her up and spit her out."

"But not you?"

"Huh?" She frowns.

"He'd have met his match in you?"

"Stop." She glowers at me. "Don't go turning the spotlight on me, bitch."

"Yeah, okay." I raise my shoulders. "I tried. I mean, your love life is far more interesting right now."

"Ha, ha," Isla deadpans. "That's a joke, right?"

I give her a dirty look.

"I'm not the one getting boned by two hot alphaholes."

"I am not getting boned by them," I protest.

"Surely you've thought about it?" She waggles her eyebrows, "Imagine two dicks at the same time. Not to mention, you'll have two pair of hands, two sets of lips, two tongues and—"

"I can count," I say dryly.

"Can you, though?"

"What?" I groan, "Come out and say it, Isla." I place my now empty coffee cup down on the floor and lean forward in the tiny dressing room, "What's on your mind?"

"That pushing both of them away is not the way to go about this."

"Why not?"

"It's the proverbial *hiding your head in the sand and hoping that it will all go away.*"

"If only it were that simple," I mumble. "Not that I am not trying, believe me. I've tried to regulate the time spent with each of them and, clearly, that's not going to work."

"You barely gave it a chance to work," she points out.

I snort, "I only have to spend a few moments alone with either of them and things just get out of hand, so yeah, not going down that path."

"So, you decide you're not going to see either of them?"

"Well, yeah." I raise my shoulders. "What would you have done?"

"The opposite?"

"Huh?"

"Spend time with both of them?" She stares at me as if I am a complete idiot.

"Wait, what?"

"I mean, spend time with both of them."

"At the same time?"

"YES."

"So, what? Like, double date, except it would be a threesome of sorts?" I frown

"Yes."

"No." I shake my head.

"Yes." She nods.

I jump up, brush past her into the studio and begin to pace. "This doesn't make sense at all."

She stands up from her chair and leans against the doorway of the dressing room. "Why not?"

I turn on her, "Hello, can you hear yourself?" I throw my hands in the air. "You're basically saying I should be with both of them, and risk them hurting each other?"

"Why would they do that?"

"You haven't seen how pissed off each of them gets, when they know I am with the other. They have come to blows at least twice now, already."

"So let them fight it out." She raises a hand, "They need to get it out of their systems; let them."

"They'll hurt each other."

"They'll heal." She shrugs.

I stare at her, and she scowls back, "What? Don't tell me you don't find the thought of two men fighting over you, hot?"

"Honestly?" I bite down my lower lip, "It is a little hot, I suppose." She grins and I hold up a hand, "But mostly, it gives me a headache." I rub at my temples, "How the hell am I going to figure this out?"

"Don't sweat it, babe." She walks toward me and grips my shoulder, "Let things happen organically."

"I tried that, remember?" I sigh. "I think I took the meaning of 'organically' to be too literal."

"Maybe you just need to sleep with both of them, so you can compare how you feel, you know?"

"I've done that already."

"But do it more consciously?" She raises her eyebrows, "So you can weigh how you feel, and not just physically."

"It doesn't seem right... You know?" I slide my hands into the pockets of the leather jacket that I had thrown over my dress before leaving earlier. "It feels too cold, too calculated... And it goes against everything I thought a relationship should be about."

"Well, these are extenuating circumstances, so..."

"But does it justify that I am actually, in effect, with two men at the same time?" I glance at her, stricken, "Shit, it does come down to that, right? I am a two-timing little slut." Tears form in my eyes.

She frowns at me, "Stop being so judgmental of yourself."

"Why shouldn't I be?" I sniff.

She glances around, spots the box of tissues I keep in the far corner of the studio and goes over to grab them for me. She returns, hands it to me, and I mumble my thanks. "I mean, it's not natural, having such a deep connection with two men and not being able to decide." I dab at my eyes.

"It happens." She eyes me closely, "And it's not completely your fault. After all, those two set you up."

"Yeah," I bite the inside of my cheek. "Still doesn't help me, though. After all, I am the one caught in between them."

"That," she smirks, "is the key point here."

"What?"

"In between them." She titters.

"You have a one-track mind." I roll my eyes. "Nothing like that is ever going to happen."

"You don't even know what I am thinking of."

"Don't I?"

She arches an eyebrow, "Again, don't tell me that you haven't thought about it."

"No." My cheeks heat. "Okay, maybe."

"Ha!" she crows. "What better way of comparing them, then having them side by side?"

"Stop." I slap my hands over my ears. "Seriously, Iz, I think you're sexually deprived; you need to get laid."

"Tell me about it." She blows out a breath, then glances at her watch. "OMG, look at the time. I need to get going."

"Another, rehearsal?"

"With Liam's fiancée and the dildo I now keep in his seat, since he doesn't turn up."

I gape. "No, you don't."

"Sure, I do."

"Seriously?" I giggle.

"It started out as a joke," she admits. "Now, Lila and I do it whenever he doesn't turn up. It makes it all kind of fun."

"It is funny." I chortle.

"Yeah, I know." She rises to her feet, grabs her things then glances at me, "So, what are you going to do, then?"

"Good question." I move toward my music console, flip a switch. The strain of my favorite dance number *Girl like Me* by the Black-Eyed Peas and Shakira, fills the space. I raise my arms above my head, do a little shimmy, "I suppose I could always dance. It's one way of solving my problems." I move my hips, bump and grind. "I could pretend I am between the two of them, seducing them—"

"Umm, Ava?" I hear her call above the strains of the music.

"What?" I mumble, focusing on my steps—shake my hips, move my feet, bend, raise my arms. "Or I could rub myself up against one, then the other." I widen my legs, thrust my pelvis forward.

"Ava!" Isla says more urgently. "They are—"

"What?" I grumble. "Can I, at least, dance in my own studio, or what?" I shake my chest, undulate my body, "Maybe I could dirty dance with one, then the other, then with both, like—" I swirl around, come face to face with two heated gazes.

16

Ava

"Ah." I lose my footing, and would have fallen, but Baron and Edward both step up. Baron grips my left arm, Edward my right, and I find my balance. I glance between the two of them. From Baron's blue gaze that burns with that inner fire I am coming to recognize as uniquely his to Edward's golden one that sweeps down my curves and eats me up before coming to rest on my face.

The tension between us builds. Heat flushes my cheeks, my chest. My nipples pebble.

"Um," Isla clears her throat, "I guess I'd better be going. Call me if you need anything, Ava."

Her footsteps recede, the door slams behind her and then I am alone, with not one, but two hot, sexy, dominant-as-hell alphaholes.

I tug on my arms, but neither of them releases me.

"Hey, guys," I half laugh, "I think you'd best unhand me."

Neither moves. Both of them glare at me, like they want to hurt me, right before they kiss it all and make it better. OMG, stop thinking about them in the plural! What the hell is wrong with me?

"Baron, Edward, please, can you release my hands? You are hurting me."

Baron instantly releases me, Edward more slowly. I step back, wrap my arms about myself. "I didn't hear the two of you come in."

"I have the password," Baron concedes.

"Of course, you do," I complain. "Karina must have shared it with you,

huh?"

"I didn't give her a choice." He smirks. "And if she hadn't, I'd have simply hacked into her computer."

"Another of your many skills, no doubt."

"Just something I like to play with in my spare time." His grin widens. "Of course, there are other things I'd rather be doing instead, if you must know."

My flush deepens. "Don't think I asked, or that I care, either way."

"Sure, you do." He chuckles, "Admit it, Eve, you are dying to know more about me."

"And I want to know more about you," Edward interjects smoothly. "It strikes me that you haven't had the chance to tell me more about yourself since we met."

"That's true, I guess." I glance between them again. "I mean, I've, uh, been busy, I suppose."

"What do you say we pick you up after class and take you to dinner?" Baron asks.

"Both of you?" I look from Baron to Edward, then at Baron again. "At the same time?"

"It's only dinner," Edward drawls. "What do you say?"

"I... I don't understand." I frown.

"You have to eat sometime," Baron urges. "So do we."

"But at the same time?"

"Why not?" Edward interjects. "We can have a civil meal, the three of us, can't we?"

"Can we?" I step back from them. "The last time I saw the two of you, you were getting ready to smash in the other one's face. Then, both of you were pissed that I was maybe getting...uh, intimate with the other. Now you're saying we should go to dinner together..." I purse my lips. "Do either of you care to explain what the hell is happening?"

They look at each other, then Baron nods at Edward, which is weird. Not that he nodded, but because it's like a sign has passed between them, which means they are communicating, and that is strange. These two couldn't stand the sight of each other. Now, suddenly, they are here asking me to dinner? Together? I shake my head, "What?" I frown. "What is it?"

Edward raises his hand, "We, uh, met up earlier, after you, ah, threw me out."

"I am not sorry about it," I mutter and he smirks.

"Opinionated too, huh?"

I flush. "You were saying? That you two met?"

His eyes gleam. "Yep, we did, and we figured we should come at this at a different angle."

"Which is?"

"That the two of us try to date you together, for a little while."

"So, the three of us," I circle the space between us with my finger, "do stuff together?"

Baron nods.

"So, we hang out together."

"Yep," Edward leans forward, "you okay with that?"

"More to the point, are you okay with that?"

His brow furrows, then he schools all emotions from his features. "For now." He nods, "Yeah, for the moment, I am."

"And you?" I turn to Baron, "You're fine with this arrangement?"

He squares his shoulders. "Temporarily."

"Hmm." I purse my lips. "I wonder how long that will last?"

Edward grunts. "Don't write us off yet," he admonishes me. "Neither of us wants to risk losing you. And while each of us hates the thought of you being with the other, it would be a lot worse if we upset you so much that you turned away from us completely, hence—"

"This arrangement," Baron picks up the commentary. "It's not ideal, but it means each of us knows where the other is in relation to you."

"So, there is some level of transparency?" I venture.

"Exactly," Edward nods. "Earlier, each of us kept speculating about what the other was up to. This way, at least, whatever is happening is out in the open."

"Right." I glance between them again. "You do know that I am not compromising on the no-sex clause."

Edward scowls. Baron glowers back at me.

"Well?"

Edward seems like he is about to say something, then firms his lips.

"I am not deviating from that." I draw myself up to my full height. "I am not sleeping with either of you guys."

Both stay quiet. The silence stretches.

"Guess neither of you is happy with that," I say softly. "But that's one

thing I am not budging on." I glance between them again, "So what do you say?"

Baron's jaw tics and a nerve throbs at his temple. Edward glares at me, his amber eyes glowing with a golden light that seems to flare even brighter.

"Well?" I say. "Guess you are both not on board with it, then?" I hunch my shoulders. "If you're not, then I guess you should both leave now."

I am about to turn away, when Baron snaps, "Fine." He grumbles, "Fine, no-sex, for the time-being."

My muscles unwind. I nod, turn to Edward, "And you?" I murmur. "What do you say, Ed?"

"You're killing me, Eve," he says softly.

"Is that a 'no'?"

"It's a 'yes.'" He pinches the bridge of his nose. "I can't believe I am agreeing to it, but yeah, fine, no sex. Temporarily."

"No sex." I hold out my palm. "Promise me, neither of you will push it."

"What?" Baron scowls.

"What the fuck?" Edward glares at me.

"Promise me." I jerk my chin toward my upturned hand.

Baron growls, then places his large palm on my much smaller one.

"What-fucking-ever," he gripes.

My lips quirk as I turn to Ed.

He holds my gaze, then cushions my palm with his, sandwiching my hand between his and Baron's. Heat suffuses my spine. My thighs clench. Warmth from the point of contact with both of them sinks into my blood.

"Fine," Edward grumbles, "we'll do it your way."

17

Ava

I glance over the rim of my menu at the two men who sit opposite me. Luckily, we are seated at a round table at the restaurant, so we didn't need to argue over who was going to sit next to me. Not that they would have fought over that.... I blow out a breath. They totally would have fought over that. Who wants to bet that before the evening is over, the two of them will have come to blows with each other? Right now, though, they are both seated with their drinks in front of them, studying their own menus.

Baron's blond hair is combed back. He's wearing a button-down white shirt that sets off his tan. He's clearly made an effort to dress up for dinner. The strong chords of his throat flex as he takes a sip from his drink before placing his tumbler down on the table. Both men are, of course, drinking whiskey... And yes, it's the same brand. Their tastes clearly run similarly... including in women.

I wince, glance at Edward. His dark hair has shots of brown woven through it. His skin color is darker than Baron's, his jaw more pronounced. He's wearing a white T-shirt that stretches across his broad shoulders. It shows off his biceps, while the tattoo I'd seen on him earlier peeks from under his collar. His hair is disheveled, thick tufts falling across his forehead. Somehow, he seems untamed, unleashed...the mask he'd worn earlier having been ripped away from him at some point. He'd set aside his priest's collar and with it, apparently, the veneer of civility he had donned at one point.

How could I have ever thought of him as being gentle or disciplined? He

is wild, this man. All those emotions that he had smothered have only just begun to be revealed. All that passion that he'd locked inside has only now begun to be divulged. The dam has begun to crumble, and when he reveals what he really is to the world... Will I be there to see it? To which woman will he share that deepest part of himself, the secrets that he hides inside? He raises his gaze and meets mine, and a flush heats my cheeks. I glance away, then back at him.

Edward smirks. "You look good."

I chuckle, "I am wearing exactly the same outfit that I had on when the two of you barged in earlier. You've had time to go back and change while I? I had to make do with spritzing my face with water and refreshing my make up."

"You don't need any embellishments." Baron places his menu card on the table. "Your inner beauty shines through, no matter what you wear."

"Oh." My cheeks heat. "That," I swallow, "that's some compliment."

"It's true." He holds my gaze and the heat spreads to my chest. My nipples tighten and my belly flutters. He reaches forward and holds out his hand, I place my palm in it. He winds his fingers with mine, "I knew it from the moment I saw you, Ava, that there was never going to be anyone else but you."

The hair on the back of my neck rises. I glance the other way and find Edward glaring at our joined-up fingers. Shit, knew it. Who were these guys kidding? Two minutes into the meal, and already, I can sense the beginnings of a disagreement.

I place the menu on the table, then hold out my other palm, face up. Edward takes it and I squeeze his fingers.

"You, okay?" I whisper.

He blinks as if coming out of a daze, then nods. "You?"

"I'll be fine once I get some food in me." I tilt my lips up, and his features light up with an answering smile. His face brightens. The gold in his eyes seem to catch fire. My breath catches in my chest. I turn away to find Baron scowling at Edward.

I try to withdraw my hands and both men hold on.

"Guys," I warn, "please."

The tension builds between us; first Baron, then Edward releases me.

I fold my hands in my lap and stare at the menu blindly. Oh, jeez, this is going to be a disaster of an evening.

The waiter comes up to us. "Are you ready to order?" he asks us.

"She'll have the butternut squash ravioli with mushrooms and sage pesto," Baron replies.

"Get her the roast duck," Edward counters.

"I'm vegetarian." I mutter, and Edward blinks, then turns to the waiter.

"Get her the spinach and feta pie," he amends.

The waiter glances at both of them, then at me. I blow out a breath. Of course, neither of them had asked me what I wanted. Typical. The tension at the table grows. The waiter shuffles his feet. "Ma'am?" he urges me, and I roll my shoulders, feeling the beginnings of a stress headache. And this was supposed to be, a relaxing evening?

"I'll have..." both men stiffen, "neither," I murmur. I really wanted the ravioli, but dammit, I cannot show favoritism with these dumbasses without starting World War III.

I sense the surprise from both of them, but don't look at them. Instead, I turn to the waiter, "Can you get me the classic ratatouille, please?"

The waiter nods, turns to the men, who proceed to order. Baron orders the wine; Edward doesn't protest. Well, hallelujah. Apparently, they agree on something. Once the waiter leaves, they both turn to me.

"Thanks," Baron says. "We didn't handle that well, did we?"

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "That's putting it mildly." I glance between them. "Why does everything turn into a competition between the two of you?"

"Old habits," Baron mutters, "we weren't always this—"

"Combative?" Edward offers.

"I was going to say contentious." Baron smirks.

"I'd settle for cut-throat," Edward muses.

"That too." Baron nods. "It's just, after the incident..."

He glances up at Edward, who toys with his fork. "Fucking incident," he growls, "the aftermath of which seems as if it will haunt us for the rest of our lives."

"What..." I swallow. "What happened to the two of you then?"

Baron's shoulders freeze. His features close and when I look at Edward his jaw is set. Neither man breaks the silence.

"Fine," I mumble, "I get the hint. Sorry if I asked about something I shouldn't have. I mean, this is supposed to be a getting to know each other date...or something."

Edward leans forward. "Hey." He tries to catch my eye. "Look at me, Eve."

I glance away. Why the hell do I feel hurt? I mean, it's not like they had promised me anything, except that they'd try to get along. And they had agreed to my no sex condition. Speaking of, that had been a surprise. I honestly hadn't expected them to agree to that. Totally hadn't. Why the hell hasn't either of them pushed their weight around on that?

Maybe, they don't really want to sleep with me... Oh, come on. Of course, they do. So, the very fact that they had agreed to it...is...something. Maybe they really do want to try to make this work.

"Ava," Edward warns, "don't ignore me."

I huff, then raise my gaze to his. "What?" I scowl. "What do you want?"

"It's not that I don't want you to know what happened then, but it's..." he frowns, "not easy to talk about."

"It's the single worst time of my life," Baron says, his voice hard.

I glance from his closed features to Edward's angry ones.

"Whatever happened then, it defined both of you. It changed your lives. It pulled you apart even as it connected the two of you together for life."

Edward glances at Baron, who shakes his head.

"Nice." I shake my head. "When it suits you, the two of you agree with each other and have silent conversations that I am, clearly, not privy to."

"It's not like that." Baron frowns at me.

"Then what *is* it like?" I wrap my arms around my waist. "Clearly, there's a part of your lives, a hell of a big chunk of your life experiences, that the two of you share. One which you'll never let me into."

"We will," Edward murmurs. "I promise you, Eve, we'll tell you everything, just not now."

"Then when?" I scowl. "When the two of you are done bashing each other up? Or maybe when both of you have decided that this temporary 'peace' is no longer valid and decide to fall out again and go your separate ways."

"When...*if* that happens," Baron growls, "you'll be on the same path as one of us."

"Not."

"What?" Ed frowns. "We've had this discussion. You are going to pick one of us."

"Maybe," I mutter.

"No, maybes," Baron snaps. "You will decide on one of us."

"And if I don't?" I firm my lips. Not that I mean to do so. I mean, come on. I have enough drama on my hands just by having the two of them in my life. I am hardly going to risk making both of them angry by going after someone else. Not that I can even think of anyone else. These two... Between them, my heart has been twisted into knots, something I am not going to recover from very soon. So...yeah, not going there at all. Doesn't mean I can't have a little fun with them, right?

"You will not look at anyone else." Edward's voice lowers to a hush, "In fact, you will not even think of anyone else. You will choose from one of us."

"Is that an order?"

18

Edward

"Yes," I growl, "it's a fucking order."

What the hell? *What's wrong with you? Why the hell are you commanding her, knowing it's going to piss her off?* Maybe I want to make her angry? Maybe I want to see her lip's part, the flush bloom on her cheeks, her green eyes glittering as her chest heaves and she leans forward, to thump her little knuckles on the table...

"What the fuck?" she snarls. "Did you really say what I think you did?"

I allow my lips to curl. "You heard me, babe." I buff my fingernails on my sleeve. "It's either me or Baron here for you."

"Is that right?" She rises to her feet, "You can't control me."

Baron raises his head, a slight quirk to his lips. He stares up at her, peruses her face. Oh, yeah, I get the appeal. It's that sass of hers, the steel in her spine, her feisty sprit that makes me feel alive. It's the same reason Baron's so fascinated with her.

I turn to Ava, "Sit down, Eve."

Her cheeks redden and her chest heaves as she draws in a breath, then another. Oh, yeah, she's certainly found her backbone, the woman who'd been a virgin not so long ago. She's changed, all right. She's found the will to resist and I love it, even as a part of me regrets that I tainted her. I spoiled her. If I had left her alone, she'd probably still be the pure, untouched Ava, who would have ultimately given her virginity to someone else—my pulse pounds at my temples and my belly knots—something which I would never

tolerate. The thought of her being with anyone else...? I bunch my fists, press them into the table, much like Ava had done earlier. "Sit down, Ava. Now."

She blinks, stares at me, then at Baron, who jerks his chin.

She sinks into her chair. "There." She huffs, "Happy?"

"Not yet." I don't take my gaze off of her face as the waiter brings the wine. He pours out some for Baron to taste. He nods and the waiter fills our glasses halfway. I raise my glass and shift my gaze to Baron.

He lifts his glass. "To Ava."

I echo his toast, "To Ava."

She glances between us as a blush steals over her cheeks. She raises her glass, then takes a sip, swirls it around her palate. "It's good," she takes another sip, "really good."

"Only the best for my woman." Baron smirks at her and she laughs.

"Not your woman yet," she says.

"Oh, you will be." Baron's grin widens.

"You're awfully sure of yourself, Mr. Masters." She raises one eyebrow.

"No reason not to be." He shoots me a sideways glance. "No offense."

"None taken," I arch an eyebrow, "though if I were you, I wouldn't get too confident."

"Hey," she protests, "I am still here, you guys."

Baron opens his mouth to retort, when our food arrives. The server places the food on the table and leaves.

She frowns down at the food, "I think I lost my appetite."

"Eat," I order.

When she firms her lips, Baron, leans forward. "Eat, Ava, before the food gets cold," he coaxes her, and her gaze grows mutinous.

"Ava," I warn, "don't defy me."

She glances at Baron again, who stares down at her plate then back at her. "Go on, Eve," he cajoles.

She draws in a breath, then reaches for her fork and digs in.

Is she more responsive toward him? Does she place more importance on his words?

I scowl down, push the food around on my plate. Surely, it must be my imagination. Yeah, that's all it is. I reach for my glass of wine, take a sip, then place it down.

"So, Ava, why belly dancing?"

"Why the priesthood?"

"You first." I set my jaw, and she scowls.

"Why do I always have to give in?"

"Because you're submissive?"

Her jaw drops, "Of all the asinine—"

"I joined the army because it was the only way to deal with the ghosts of my past," Baron interjects.

Both of us turn to him.

He looks up from his plate, "In hindsight, it was the most cowardly and the most courageous thing that I had ever done."

"Cowardly?" She frowns.

He raises a shoulder "I simply placed all of my problems on the back burner. Only, they were still there when I returned."

"So, what are you going to do about it?" I murmur. "You going to face them head on now?"

He laughs, "What do you think?"

"I think," I reach for the wine and refill his glass, then Ava's, "you need to get drunk."

"What about you?" Ava asks

"I am the designated driver this evening."

"With your arm in a sling?" She scowls.

I smirk, take off the sling, and stretch my arm, "Surprise."

"Wow," she stares at me, "you're better?"

"The sling was just a precaution, to curtail movement, which would help the wound to heal faster," I explain, "but I'm definitely feeling better."

"Hmm," she purses her lips, "so you weren't as badly hurt as I thought."

"I just heal fast," I offer.

"Guess I didn't really need to ask you to stay with me, huh?"

My neck heats, but I refuse to look away. "You can't blame a guy for trying." I shrug.

"Edward," she gapes, "really... You actually pretended to be worse off just so you could get into my..."

"Pants?"

"I was going to say bed," she snaps.

"I suppose I should say I am sorry," I quirk my lips, "but I am not."

"Of course, not." She scowls. "Why should you? Doesn't matter that I was really worried about you, you...ass." She tightens her fingers around the stem of her wine glass, "Seriously, Ed, sometimes I don't think I recognize

you anymore."

"Me neither." I glance away. I should apologize, really, I should, but I only did what was necessary to get a head start over Baron. What's so wrong with that? I glance at her tense face, then at Baron's smirking one. Bastard. I glower at him and he shakes his head.

"What should we toast this round?" He raises his glass and turns to her.

"To not lying?" She shoots me a dirty look.

I wince, then smirk back at her. She glances away and at Baron.

"To following your instinct," Baron quirks his lips, before raising his own glass.

"To..." I stare at Ava, "to you."

She tips up her chin, finally meets my gaze, her green eyes bright with defiance, and something else... Excitement? She is enjoying this thrust and parry, the chemistry between the three of us, something which, I admit, has caught me by surprise as well. I take in her flushed features, the pulse that beats at the base of her throat. She bites down on her lower lip and my dick twitches. She flicks out her tongue, licks her lower lip and the blood drains to my groin. This woman... She simply has to look at me and I want to throw her down on the table and take her right here.

Baron clears his throat and the two of us jerk our heads in his direction.

His features are hard as he stares between us. "Please pass the salt," he says in a toneless voice. I hand over the salt shaker and he seasons his food, before placing it aside. "What about you Edward? Do you regret joining the Church?"

"Never," I scoop up some of the fish, close my mouth around the tines of the fork. "It was a phase of my life...which was essential in so many ways. It gave me structure and discipline, helped me ground myself at a time when I needed a direction."

"Do you ever wonder what you would have been if you hadn't joined the Church?" Ava asks.

"I certainly wouldn't have been sitting across from you and enjoying a meal with you." I glance back at her. "So no, I don't regret a single thing I did with my life because all of it has led up to this moment, when I can look in your eyes and tell you just how much you mean to me."

A glass crashes to the floor beside the table. Ava visibly shakes, turns to glance at Baron.

"Oops, sorry," he murmurs, "I am being exceptionally clumsy today."

"Seems you prefer to have the focus of the table on you, ol' chap," I mutter without looking away from Ava's gorgeous face.

"You accusing me of being an attention seeker or something?" he replies.

"Or something." I reach for the bottle of wine, empty the rest of its contents into my unused glass. I slide it over to Baron, then hold up the bottle for the waiter, who materializes next to me. "Another bottle, please,"

He vanishes with the empty one just as one of the staff scurries toward the table and sweeps up the glass shards.

"Excuse me," Ava pushes back her chair, "I need to use the restroom." She stands, then stares between us, "Can I hope that the two of you have not killed each other by the time I return?"

I frown. "Oh, come now, Ava. This is just friendly fire."

"Friendly fire?" Her voice rises in exasperation, "Seriously, why do I even bother?" She grabs her purse, then leaves the table.

I can't stop myself from taking in the sway of her hips, her thick auburn strands flowing behind her as she walks in the direction of the restroom. I glance up to find Baron's attention as riveted. A growl rips from my chest.

"What?" He frowns. "You're not the only one enamored with her, you know."

"Doesn't make this any easier to stomach." I scowl back.

"If we can't get through a meal together, how the hell are we going to make it through the next few weeks...maybe months?"

"Months?" I pale.

"You don't think this is going to get sorted out that quickly, do you?"

"It's only the question of all our lives." I grimace. "But months... I won't last. Seriously, when I am in the same space as her... All I can think of is...." I squeeze my eyes shut, take a breath, another, "It kills me to have you look at her." I finally manage, "I want to tear your eyes out, then beat you up, tie you up, and throw you into the Thames. That's after I've handed your balls to you, of course."

Baron winces. "Ouch, man. Spare the balls, at least. Not that I haven't had the same thoughts about you."

"How the hell are we going to manage this?" I grumble. The waiter arrives with a bottle of wine. "Thanks," I mutter, then indicate he can leave when he hovers at my elbow. Wish I was getting drunk as well.

"This is going to end badly." Baron takes a sip of his wine.

"It's not going to end well," I agree.

"This no sex thing is going to kill me." He slides a finger under the collar of his starched collar.

"It bloody sucks." I scowl. "I can't decide what's worse: that she's not sleeping with me, or that she's not sleeping with you either."

"I'd have said it's a relief that she's definitely not having sex with you... But hell, if it isn't a bummer that I can't get some either." He rubs his chin.

We glance at each other, and a chuckle breaks out from me. He smirks back. We both burst out laughing.

"Fuck," he rubs the back of his neck, "how did we get here again?"

"Afraid this one is my mess." I roll my shoulders. "If I hadn't picked up the phone and called you—"

"Which I am glad you did."

I stare. "You are?"

"Bet the rest of the Seven are pissed that you didn't reach out to them." His lips quirk

"Bet they are—" I chuckle.

"But seriously," he glances at the wine, "and maybe this is the wine talking... In fact, I am sure it is the wine talking..." He takes another sip. "You called at the right time."

"I did?"

"I guess I was waiting for an excuse to come back." He raises his shoulders. "I was tired of running."

"I was tired of..." Not feeling? Not letting myself think too deeply? Just having an existence which barely scratched the surface? Not facing my fears? My need to live life using all my senses? Not wanting to hide anymore? I take another sip of the water, "I was just tired..."

"You took the brunt of what happened during the incident." Baron's features harden. "If there was any way I could thank you for what you did..."

"You can leave her."

He starts, then laughs out loud. "You don't mean it."

"Don't I?"

"All these years and you choose now to call in that favor?"

"You asked."

"Doesn't mean I am going to give you what you want." His throat moves as he swallows. "Besides, she is not a thing...that we can pass around between each other. She deserves a chance to make up her own mind."

"With some help from us."

"I knew you had changed Edward," his jaw tics, "I just hadn't realized how much."

"And you, Baron." I tilt my head, "You haven't changed at all. You're still every bit as self-righteous, as focused on the straight and narrow as you were when you joined the army."

"Unlike you." He glares back. "You joined the priesthood to cover up just how twisted you really are inside."

"That's right." I bare my teeth. "And don't you forget it, you—"

Baron's phone buzzes. He pulls it out of my pocket, glances at the screen, then holds it to his ear, "Ava? Are you—"

The blood drains from his face.

"Who is it?" I snap.

He springs to his feet and so do I, "Baron, who the fuck was that?"

He shoves back his chair, runs toward the door, and I follow him, "It's Ava, isn't it?" I pant, "Is she—"

"They got to her."

I race after him toward the doors leading to the restrooms.

19

Ava

"Bitch, give me that." The man lunges for me and I scream. The phone slips from my fingers. I turn toward the door that leads to the restaurant but he's already there.

The breath catches in my throat and my heart begins to race. I pivot, heading up the alleyway, with the man in hot pursuit.

I'd finished at the restroom, come out into the corridor, but hadn't wanted to return. It would have been more of the same. The two of them going at each other like dogs fighting over a bone. Damn them, they have reduced me to this—a dog bone.

How could they? Are they both so blind that they can't see what it is doing to me to be stuck in the middle like this? I don't want to come between them, really. At the same time, I can't choose between them. My mind is too confused. And my heart? It's simply not going to be able to take another snarled comment from either of them.

They don't mean to hurt me, though. I am sure of that. They are just so busy trying to get one up on the other, even as they try to figure out a way to give me some space to figure out what I want. Ha, as if... I am giving them too much credit. They are thinking with their dicks, getting all possessive, when the other so much as looks at me. Yeah, this arrangement of the three of us spending time together is all going tits up.

I'd turned away from the dining room and walked toward the back door, instead. I'd pushed it open, stepped out into the cool night air. The sounds of

the restaurant had faded away as the door had shut behind me. I'd stood there, simply enjoying the silence, when a man had pushed away from the wall where he'd been leaning. He'd asked me if I had a light, and I had said no. He'd come toward me and I'd stiffened as I'd recognized him. I'd reached into the bag, gotten my phone, and called Baron before he'd realized what was happening. That's when he'd reached for me. I'd evaded him, managed to speak to Baron, and he'd lunged for me.

Now, I pump my legs...trying to go faster... Well, as fast as my heels will allow. Damn it, today of all days, I had forgone my flats in favor of these kitten heels. That's what happens when you have two men in your life. You lose perspective. And when your brain is addled with trying to figure out who you want more, you screw up all other parts of your life. I can't believe I wasn't more careful. After being attacked twice now, you'd have thought I'd have a better sense of self preservation, but apparently, not.

His footsteps sound closer. I turn to glance over my shoulder and cry out. He's right behind me. Ohmigod, oh, my god! I straighten, put on a burst of speed, then scream when he grabs my arm. He yanks me back and I stumble against him. The stench of sweat and cigarette smoke engulfs me. My guts churn; the blood thuds at my temples. I try to pull away, but his grasp tightens.

"I am going to teach you a lesson, bitch. Thanks to you, my friends are in trouble. You deserve to pay for what you did to them."

"I did to *them*?" I growl, "Asshole, the three of you attacked me. They deserve what happened to them.

"Oh, yeah?"

He releases me, only to raise his hand. I duck...too late. He catches me at the side of my face and my vision blurs. Pain slices through my head; sparks of white flare behind my eyes. I lurch back, my knees give way, and I collapse. He straddles me, shackles his fingers around my neck. He presses down and my lungs burn. I try to take in a breath, cough. Spots of black flicker at the corners of my eyes. Terror bubbles up and my stomach churns. I paw at his wrists, his hands, but he doesn't release me. My vision wavers, darkness closing in. The next second, his weight is pulled off of me. I drag in a lungful of air, then scream when someone bends over me.

"Ava, it's me, Edward."

"Ed?" My chin wobbles and hot tears spill over as Edward touches my cheek. I wince and his beautiful features harden. I hear the sounds of a

struggle, the unmistakable echoes of someone getting beaten. The ground seems to shake. I wince and Edward's scowl deepens. He rises, scoops me up in his arms.

"Your wound," I protest.

"Fuck that," he growls, and I begin to laugh.

"What?" He frowns. "What's wrong?"

"I'll always remember how you said 'Fuck my vows' when you came to see me, right before you—"

"Left," he says in a sorrowful voice.

"Oh, Ed." I press my aching forehead against his chest. Behind me, I hear the pounding of footsteps as my attacker races away. Then Baron walks over to us.

"Bastard got away," he swears as he shakes out his fist. His shirt is torn, his jacket blood-stained, his hair is mussed up and he looks...glorious.

Fuck, what's wrong with me? These men saved my life again, and all I can do is think about how I want them to touch me.

"You okay, Eve?" He places his hand against my unhurt cheek and I burst into tears.

"What the—?" He glances at me, then at Ed, "What did I say?"

"N... nothing," I blubber, "It's just...he...he..."

"He's gone," Baron says softly. "He won't hurt you again. Not as long as I—"

"—we," Edward corrects him.

"Not as long as we have anything to do with it," he agrees, and that only makes me cry harder.

"Shit, don't cry, Ava." Baron cups my cheek and I turn my face into the palm of his hand.

I coil into Edward's chest and allow the tears to fall.

Edward rocks me, Baron moves in closer and his crisp mountain air scent weaves with Edward's cut grass scent. Heat from both of their bodies envelops me, sinks into my blood.

"Shh," Edward croons, "you're safe with us."

I know.

Baron runs his fingers through my hair and I shiver. I hunch my shoulders, try to swallow down the sobs, and finally...finally...manage to turn down the waterworks.

"Better?" Baron whispers.

I nod.

"Sure?" Edward asks. "If you want, we could punch each other?"

"Wha—?" I stare up at him from under my spiky eyelashes. "Why would you do that?"

"To distract you, so you'd stop crying?"

"Like that would work?" I sniffle.

He stares at me and I hiccough. "Fine, fine," I mumble. "Be like that."

"You feeling better, Ava?" Baron peers into my face, "I think we need to get your face looked at."

"I'm fine," I mutter. "Just get me some aspirin for my headache and I'll be as good as new. Speaking of," I glance around us, "where's my bag, and my phone? I think I may have dropped them earlier."

Baron pivots, walks around the space. He pulls out his phone, shines the light close to the ground. "There." He picks up my bag, then spots my phone not far from it. He returns and hands both items over.

"Thanks," I mutter.

"There's water in the car," Edward tells him.

At Baron's nod, he turns, and they make their way to Baron's SUV.

He unlocks the car, opens the back and Edward lowers me onto the seat. He straightens and I grab his hand, "Thanks, Ed."

His features soften. "Anytime." He rubs his knuckles across my unhurt cheek, then straightens.

Baron comes around the other side, and slides into the back seat, next to me. Edward gets into the driver's seat, holds out his hand for the keys.

"You promise you'll treat her with respect?" Baron scowls at Ed.

Her? I glance between them. *Who are they talking about?*

Edward glares back at Baron in the rearview mirror, "Stop fussing."

"Not until you promise."

"Jeez." Edward cracks his neck, and Baron's scowl deepens. "Fine, fine." Edward blows out a breath, "I solemnly swear that I will drive Scarlet O'Cara with the due respect that she deserves."

I blink, "Did you just say Scarlet O'Cara?"

"That's what Baron calls his car." Edward smirks.

I lean my aching head against the side of the car. "You named your car after a fictional character?"

"Not just any celebrity." Baron frowns "It's Scarlet."

"A character."

"So?" He shifts uncomfortably.

"So...nothing." I stab my tongue into the inside of my cheek.

Baron holds up the key fob and Edward snatches it. He slams the door shut, then pauses.

"The bill for the dinner?" he asks.

Baron nods at his phone, "Just emailing the manager to take care of it."

"You also need to text Archer so he doesn't wait for me," I remind him.

"Already done." He flashes me a smile and my heart lurches. Shit, I am definitely a goner. And more confused than ever. My body doesn't seem to be able to differentiate between these two men. Neither does my mind. And my heart? What about my heart?

Edward glances about the space, then snatches the bottle of water from its receptacle and hands it over to me. I accept it, dig out the aspirin from my bag and swallow it.

"You okay?" Ed asks as I cap the bottle and stow it below the window.

"Yeah." I lean my forehead against the car window. "Thanks for taking care of me."

"You don't have to thank me, Ava. You know that, right?" Our gazes catch, hold.

Despite my befuddled state, heat flushes my skin. I swallow. "I know," I whisper.

Baron pockets his phone. Then reaches over and tucks me into his side. "How's your face?"

"It hurts," I whine.

"Let's stop at a supermarket and get some ice for her," Baron tells Edward, who nods. He sets the car in motion. I slide down, place my head in Baron's lap.

He runs his fingers through my hair and my eyes close. The next thing I know, something cold touches my swollen cheek. I sigh in relief as the throbbing instantly recedes. I hear the guys speaking in a low tones, as the movement of the vehicle rocks me to sleep again.

When I wake up next, it's to find that I am being carried into a house. "Where are we?" I yawn.

"At Edward's place," Baron answers.

"Edward has his own place?" I yawn so widely that my jaw cracks.

"I do now," Edward replies.

I am aware of being carried by Baron into a bedroom. Edward pulls back

the sheets. Baron places me on the bed, removes my shoes, and then pulls the duvet to under my chin.

"Sleep." He bends to kiss my forehead. I am aware of another soft touch to the top of my head, and sleep, once more, overcomes me.

When I wake up next, I am alone. Light floods in through the crack between the curtains of the window. I sit up and every part of me feels sore, but I feel rested. I touch my face and it doesn't hurt as much. I push off the covers, swing my legs over the side. That's when I notice the glass of water and a bottle of ibuprofen next to it. Guess the guys must have left it for me. I swallow down a couple of tablets with the water, then walk into the bathroom. I shower, and brush my teeth with the toothbrush and paste I find; spot a bathrobe, and not wanting to wear the clothes from last night, slip it on, then gather my clothes. I'll have to look for a washing machine, I guess.

I bundle my clothes under my arm, walk out of the bedroom. The landing is square-shaped with two other rooms leading off from it. I peek into one, find it empty; so is the other. I walk down the steps to the ground floor and the smell of coffee greets me. The low murmur of voices draws me and I head toward it. When I reach the kitchen, I pause. The scent of coffee and food reaches me. How long have these guys been up? I peek inside to find Baron and Edward seated at the dining table. The plates in front of them indicate the remnants of their breakfast.

"Why would they do this?" Baron growls, "Why are they targeting her?"

"Fuck, if I know." Edward rubs the back of his neck. "The only reason I can think of is—"

He exchanges a glance with Baron, who blows out a breath. "Us," Baron declares. "Fucking hell. I should have been more careful. I returned to town, led them straight to her."

"I am as much to blame," Edward rumbles. "I should have realized that being seen with her would draw their attention straight to her."

"Whose attention?" Both men turn to glance at me.

20

Ava

I walk into the room and their gazes track me. Baron pushes back his chair, then walks over to meet me half way. "How are you doing?" He pinches my chin, turns my face this way, then the other. "The swelling is almost gone."

"It doesn't hurt anymore," I confirm.

He glances down at the clothes I am carrying, "Do you want those washed?"

I nod. He reaches down to take them from me.

"They're dirty," I protest.

He shoots me a glance and I shut up. He tugs the clothes from me, shoves the bundle under his arm, then turns and pulls out a chair for me. I slide in and he pushes the chair forward, "I'll get you coffee." He kisses the top of my head, then heads off for a side door that I assume leads to a laundry room. I turn to find Edward staring at me.

"What?" I murmur.

"You two look good together."

My cheeks heat "Yeah, well...guess we did spend some time together."

"More than what you and I spent together." He nods, then pushes his cup of coffee toward me, "Take a sip."

"Baron's getting me a fresh cup."

"Go on," he urges me, "you look like you need your dose of caffeine."

I smile my thanks and take a sip of the coffee, then make a face. "It's black."

"It's coffee."

"It's bitter." I grimace

"It's coffee, woman." He laughs, then takes a sip, "Hot as sin and as black as my heart."

"You don't have a black heart, Ed."

He peers into the depths of the mug, "Somehow I don't think the One Above will agree to that."

"Are you upset that you left the Church?"

"No," he says at once, "I don't regret it one bit. You know, I'd do it all over again if it meant I could have you."

"Oh, Ed." I lean forward, place my hand on his, "I never wanted you to give up what was clearly such a big part of your life."

"You didn't force me to do anything, Ava." He glances up, meeting my gaze, "It was a long time coming. You were merely the spark that triggered what I should have done a long time ago."

"Were you that unhappy in the priesthood?"

"Not unhappy." He rubs the back of his neck. "Incomplete. Then I saw you and knew my life had changed forever. That I'd never be whole, not until I had you in my life."

I glance away. "Ed, please."

"No pressure, Eve." He chuckles but his voice is serious, "You take your time deciding, honestly."

I peer at him from under my eyelashes, "Are you sure about that, Ed?"

"Of course." He turns his hand face up, so our palms kiss. Goosebumps pop on my skin. Heat radiates out from the point of contact, and arrows straight to the space between my legs. I swallow and my throat feels too dry. He leans forward in his chair and his bare feet brush mine. Heat from his body flows over me, surrounds me, engulfs me. My thighs clench. His amber eyes flare and he closes the distance between us, places his lips right in front of mine. His nose bumps mine and we share breath. I part my lips and he tilts his head. When Baron opens the door that leads in from the laundry room into the kitchen, I spring back, my cheeks heating. I glance at Baron who watches us carefully.

"I didn't." I swallow. "We didn't... I mean." I stumble over the words. Oh hell, I didn't do anything wrong, so why the hell do I feel this guilty? "Baron, it's not what it seems like," I insist.

"It's okay, Ava," Baron says, his voice casual, "I understand."

"You do?"

He nods, "We had a talk, Ed and I, when you were asleep."

"You did?" I frown, glance between them. "What did you guys speak about?"

"You," Ed grins back, his tone lazy, "of course."

"Of course." I fold my arms in my lap, "And what was it that you guys discussed?"

"The terms of how we're going to stay here."

"Stay here?" I glance around the space, "Not that I have any complaints with it or anything... It's a nice house, but I need to get back."

"You're not." Baron pours out a cup of coffee, adds in three spoonfuls of sugar, plops in a drop of milk. He stirs it, then brings it over to me, along with a plate of food which he places in front of me.

I glance at the baked beans, hash browns, fried tomatoes and mushrooms, along with the thick slices of toast. Of course, he remembers that I am vegetarian. He's always one step ahead of me.

I dig into the food, am half way through the contents of my plate before I look up. Both of them are watching me with varying degrees of amusement.

"What?" I mumble as I chew on the hash browns, which have been cooked perfectly, by the way, something which I've never managed to get right. "Why are you two staring?" I scowl.

"You've got...something..." Edward leans forward and scoops up some food from the side of my mouth. He brings his finger to his mouth and licks it off.

Heat sears my skin. My toes curl. Shit, one gesture from him and I am putty. I place my fork down, reach for my coffee and take a sip. I can't stop the smile that curves my lips, "Just how I like it."

"You're welcome." Baron smirks.

"Doesn't change the fact that I need to return to my place. My classes are going to start in..." I glance around, can't spot a clock that indicates the time, "What time is it?"

Edward glances at his watch, "It's 10 am."

"In three hours." I take another sip of the coffee, place the cup down. "In fact, I need to be getting back right away."

I stand up, glance between them, "Which of you two gentleman is going to drive me back?"

They glare at each other. A look passes between them, then Baron turns

to me, "You're not going anywhere Ava."

"What do you mean?" I laugh, "Of course, I am."

"Even if one of us were to drive you, which we are not," Edward tips his chin up, "we wouldn't reach your place in three hours."

"How far can we be from my place?"

"Have you taken a look outside?" Edward nods toward the window.

I walk around the table, to the kitchen window, and peer outside. Greenery stretches out as far as I can see, which is not unusual in London. There are parts of the city in the outer zones which stretch into the country side, unless... "Where are we?" I turn to glance between them, "We're not in London, are we?"

"Half way to Scotland." Baron replies.

"What?" I blink, "What the hell are you guys talking about?"

"We drove through the night, got here around two in the morning."

"Which is where, exactly?"

"Somewhere in the Lake District," Edward murmurs.

"And you're not going to tell me exactly where?"

Both men shake their heads.

The beginnings of anger twist my guts. "And why is that?"

They exchange another of those looks that makes me feel like they are in on something...and I am not, which honestly, is damn annoying.

"Well?" I tap my toes on the floor? "Why is it that you won't tell me where we are?" I prompt.

"So, you don't call anyone to come get you," Baron finally says.

"Ha!" I blow out a breath, "If you think, that's going to stop me from getting out of here, you have another think coming."

I march back up to my room, glance around the space, but there's no sign of my purse with my phone. Heat flushes my skin. What the hell are these two guys playing at? I stomp downstairs, back into the kitchen, to find both of them sitting where I had left them.

"Where are my bag and my phone?"

"Why don't you sit down first?" Baron gestures to the seat, "And we can talk about our plan."

"I want my phone first, and my things."

"We'll get you another phone." Edward glances at me.

I firm my lips, "I want *my* phone."

"It may be bugged." Baron explains.

"Bugged?" I stare. "I don't understand."

"We figured it's not a coincidence that you were attacked three times. Each time, you were alone," Edward replies. "The only way they'd have tracked you was if they knew where you were and when you were at the most vulnerable."

"Who do you think is tracking me?" I blink. "Who are you talking about?"

"We think," Baron leans forward in his seat, "the Mafia is tracking you."

"The Mafia?" I open and shut my mouth, "What are you guys talking about?"

"Why don't you sit down, Eve?" Baron gestures to a chair. "Please, give us a chance to explain things."

I walk over to the chair, sink into it. "The Mafia?" I repeat. "What do I have to do with the Mafia?"

"Nothing," Edward raises his shoulders, "and everything."

"Cut the crap, Ed." I scowl at him. "Seriously, what's going on here?"

"The Mafia are the ones behind the incident," Baron offers. "They kidnapped us, held us for ransom—"

"Except for Sinclair, that is, whose parents didn't have much money to begin with," Edward adds.

"They took him by mistake," Baron clarifies, "but that's beside the point. They abducted us. Our parents paid the ransom, and the cops found us—"

"Though by then, the damage had been done." Edward's lips twist. "Since then, the Seven of us have tried to track down the perpetrators."

"And apparently, we are getting close, because they are trying to get to you." Baron adds.

"Why would they do that?" I place my elbows on the table. "Why do they want to hurt me?"

"As a means of using you to get to us," Baron points between himself and Edward. "We think they are trying to send us a signal to back off."

"Which only reinforces our suspicion that we are getting close to finding out the real identity of who the kidnapper was," Edward adds.

"How do you know it's the Mafia who attempted to hurt me?" I frown.

"The man Edward shot; he had tattoos that identified him as one of them," Baron replies, "and the man he tried to kill earlier—"

"Hold on, he tried to kill someone?" I stare at Edward, "You tried to kill someone?"

Edward's jaw hardens. "He was responsible for getting us kidnapped. When I found that out," he tightens his fingers round the handle of his mug, "I couldn't hold back. He is responsible for everything that happened to the Seven of us. Do you understand?"

"Still," I swallow, "you tried to kill him, Ed."

"He didn't die," Baron reasons.

"That's not the point." I take in Edward's features, his amber eyes currently filled with an emotion that I can't quite place, those high cheekbones, the pouty lower lip... So familiar, and yet, not. He's changed so much since I met him. He's the same, and yet... He's not. I am not sure what to make of him. A dull pounding starts at my temples. My face feels numb. Maybe I'm not over last night's attack either. I mean, a girl can only take so much.

"So basically, you guys brought me here to ensure that you could watch over me, keep me safe until you know the danger has been averted?"

Baron and Edward stare at each other, then at me.

"Yes," Edward says, "We thought it best to get you here right away. We didn't want to risk going to your place, in case it tipped off anyone."

"My classes—?"

"I've arranged to email the students that you are taking a temporary leave of absence." Baron explains.

And when I get back, I'll have to likely start from square one, because, well, students of dance are not necessarily the most loyal. My shoulders slump. "And my clothes—?"

"I've asked Archer to arrange for a few changes of clothing to be delivered here." Edward replies.

"A few changes?" I tip up my chin, "Exactly how long do you expect us to stay here?"

"Until the danger blows over." Edward tilts his head.

"And both of you will stay here with me?"

They both nod.

"Also," Edward folds his arms across his chest, "you can fuck either one of us, at any time."

I choke on my sip of coffee. "Wha—" I gape at him. "Excuse me?" I sputter, "Wha...what do you mean by that?"

"Exactly that," Baron murmurs. "We realized it's not right to put you under any more constraints, especially after everything that you have been

through."

"We thought it best to keep things simple, so if you want shag either one of us, you can do so," Edward adds.

"So, let me get this right." I narrow my gaze on Ed. "If I sleep with Baron, you'll be fine?"

Edward's jaw hardens, but he nods.

I turn to Baron, "And if I slept with Ed, you'd be okay?"

A vein pops at Baron's temple, "I have to be." He squares his shoulders, "It's the best way for us to see this thing through."

"And neither of you thought of asking me how I felt about it?"

Edward shuffles his feet, "Look, Ava, all we're saying is, we'll just act normal and if, at any point, you feel the desire to...shag one of us, the other one won't get in the way."

"How generous of you." I roll my eyes. "So, what you're saying is, if I get an itch, I should not hold back?"

Baron's jaw tics. "Let's just keep things natural, and allow them to progress organically." He rubs the back of his neck. "I realize how strange all of this sounds, but we've discussed it and believe that this is the best way forward."

We've discussed it. I stare between them and bite back the multiple sarcastic responses that stampede through my head.

Edward continues, "This way, there is no pressure on you, and there are no artificial conditions imposed on the situation. At the same time, if the situation arises where you want to sleep with one of us, then you can do so with a clear conscience."

I am literally speechless. This situation is completely insane. Seriously, the two of them talking about how we are going to stay in this place as fuck buddies, then negotiating the terms of how I am supposed to sleep with either of them if...when I feel like it...? Shit, this is going to be one cozy party... *Not.* Tiredness drags at my limbs. The headache at my temples intensifies. "I am not feeling well," I murmur. "I rise to my feet and both men get up as well."

"I am fine." I wave them off, "Really, I think I just need some rest."

"You need to finish your breakfast." Edward frowns.

My stomach churns. "No more food," I whisper.

I turn and my knees threaten to give way, but Baron is already there. He scoops me up in his arms.

"I can walk," I protest.

"I am taking you to bed." I sense him exchange a glance with Edward, who doesn't say anything. Turning, Baron walks out of the kitchen and up to my bedroom. He places me on the floor next to the bed. I shrug off the bathrobe, and Baron averts his eyes. I blink. *Whoa, what the—? Did he just glance away to give me some privacy since I am not wearing anything under the bathrobe?* That is some un-Baron-like behavior.

I slide under the covers. He tucks me in, then bends to kiss my forehead. I tip up my chin so our lips almost brush. At the last second, he turns his head and kisses my cheek.

"Wha—?" I frown, "Why did you do that?"

"You need to sleep, babe." His lips quirk, but his eyes are serious, "Get some rest; we'll talk when you feel better."

He turns to leave and my eyelids flutter down. Sleep pulls me under.

The sound of footsteps grows closer. I glance over my shoulder, but there's no one there. I increase my pace, reach the entrance to the subway, and hesitate. Do I want to walk in there? It's so dark. Just then, thunder flashes overhead, followed closely behind by raindrops. Within moments, they plaster my clothes to my shoulders. Shit. I step inside the subway and the rain cuts out. Cold grips me and I shiver. Goosebumps pop on my skin. I walk into the narrow passageway. The darkness deepens. I half turn, hesitate, then push forward, increasing my pace. I continue walking. Footsteps sound again behind me. I turn and cry out. There's a man silhouetted at the entrance. His shoulders fill the space. No, no, no. I turn, race for the exit. Another man steps up to block the way. He's so tall, so big. He widens his stance, slaps his palms on his hips. My heart begins to race, my pulse pounding at my temples. Sweat beads my palms and I wipe them on my dress. Behind me, the footsteps grow closer. I turn to find the first man is closer. Fear bubbles up; my arms and legs tremble. I turn away, only to find the second man is moving toward me. "No, please, no." My voice echoes in the space. I stumble back, trying to put space between me and the two men who walk toward me. My back hits the wall. The first man moves closer.

"What's wrong, Ava?" Baron frowns. "We won't hurt you."

"Baron?" I swallow, "Is it really you?"

"Of course, Sweetheart, who else would it be?"

"Don't call her, Sweetheart," The second man draws abreast. His golden

eyes glow, almost cat-like in the darkness. "She's not yours; she's mine."

Baron's jaw hardens. He pivots, grabs Edward by the shoulder, "She was never yours to begin with. She belongs to me, you hear me?" Baron throws a punch.

"She's mine," Edward blocks him.

"Mine," Baron growls. He raises his fist, sinks it in Edward's side.

"Mine." Edward lurches back, shaking his head to clear it. "I am going to rearrange your face." He leans forward on the balls of his feet, when I step between them.

"Stop it, you two!" I yell. "Stop."

I turn on Ed just as he throws a punch. My head snaps back as pain explodes in my head. I snap my eyes open, breath heaving, pulse pounding at my temples. A dream; it was only a dream.

Sweat drips down my back.

I sit up, shove the covers off and swing my legs over the side of the bed. Reach for the half-full glass of water and down the rest of it. At least, I don't have a headache anymore. Jeez, what was that dream? It seemed so real. Guess the incident from last night traumatized me in more ways than I realized. I need to put an end to this. But how? I glance toward the window, but it's already dark outside. How long did I sleep?

I take another quick shower, then slip into the bathrobe. My clothes must be dry by now. Guess I'd better go get them from the dryer.

I walk into the kitchen and spot a covered plate on the dining table. I walk toward it, find a note:

Eat!

That's all the note says. One word, written in a bossy-ass handwriting, which could belong to either of them. Of course, it's meant for me... They wouldn't dare talk to each other in such an over-the-top, demanding manner. Gah! I uncover the plate, take in the rice and curry on the plate. Whoa, how did they guess I like Indian food? More to the point, how did they manage to procure it here? Does one of them know how to cook? Or did they order it in? The spicy scent teases my nostrils and my stomach rumbles. I walk over to the microwave, heat up the food, then sit down at the dining table and inhale it. Yum. Washing the plate and cutlery, I stow them away, then head through the adjoining door into the laundry room. I pull my clothes from the dryer,

glance at the dress, then grimace. It's clean, but torn. Guess I am not going to be able to wear it again. I fold it and place it aside, then walk back through the kitchen.

It's so quiet. I peer up the darkened corridor and see the outline of a closed door at the end, light peeking around the edges, giving it a foreboding air. I guess one of the guys is using it? I turn the other way, head toward a closed door that seems to promise solitude. I push it open, flip on the light beside the door, and gasp.

OMG, it's a studio. An honest-to-god, beautiful studio, with wooden floors, and a mirror that runs the entire length of one wall. The lights in the ceiling emit golden rays that bathe the space. I walk toward my reflection, trail my fingers across the barre in front of the mirror. I glance around, find a table at the far end with a tablet on it. I swipe the surface, and it reveals a playlist... The tracks are all dance songs—dance songs by my favorite artists. Yep, they are all here. The tunes I love dancing to. Who programmed this? And why does Edward have a studio in this place?

I take in the wood on the floor, which is marked from use. Clearly, someone used this studio before...but the playlist... That was programmed for me. The door on the far side rattles. I walk toward it, and find it unlocked. I push it open, step out onto the landing. In the gathering darkness, the countryside stretches out. Lush green and quiet.

"Feeling better?"

I half-scream, turning in the direction of the voice.

21

Ava

The glow of a cigarette lights up the darkness, then a puff of smoke haloes his features.

"Edward?" I frown. "How many cigarettes do you smoke in a day?"

"A pack, maybe more?" He raises a shoulder and I gasp.

"A pack? Seriously, Ed?" I admonish, "These things will kill you."

"But what a sweet death it will be, hmm?" He takes another drag and the fragrant scent of burning tobacco fills the space. "Apparently, when I decided to fall from grace, I took the express." He smirks.

I toss my hair over my shoulder. "Honestly, I never know what to expect from you anymore."

"You and me both." His smile vanishes as he surveys the tip of his cigarette, "I am getting very good at surprising myself as well."

I walk over to him, take the cigarette from him and put it between my lips. I inhale, and instantly, my lungs burn. I cough, tears stream down my cheeks, and he laughs.

Smirking, he snatches the cigarette back and takes a healthy puff... Yeah, okay, so not that healthy. He takes another drag, this time blowing out a smoke circle.

"Why Father—I mean, Mr. Chase, I do believe you are showing off."

His eyebrows knit. "Maybe." His voice grows remote. Shit, what did I do now to piss him off?

"Sorry about the slip of the tongue... I guess, on some level, I still think

of you as Father."

"Is it so difficult for you to perceive me as a normal man?" He scowls.

"Yes." I shake my head, "No. I don't know. Perhaps there was always an element of the forbidden about you earlier that attracted me, you know."

"You mean you are no longer attracted to me now?" His frown deepens.

"I didn't say that."

"Are you worried that I am going to lose my temper with you?" he asks softly, "Because I almost killed a man?"

I shake my head truthfully. "It's not that, either. I know I sounded surprised earlier, but that's only because it came out of the blue, to find out what you'd done."

"Then, what is it?" He reaches for the ashtray on the chair next to him and stubs out his cigarette. "Why is it that since I returned, you've held yourself at a distance from me?"

"Distance?" I fold my arms across my chest. "I don't think my behavior with you kept much distance between us."

"You mean my making you come?"

A blush sears my cheeks. Thank God, it's already dark. Hopefully, he didn't spot how fiery my cheeks are right now.

He prowls toward me, his massive shoulders outlined against the inkiness of the night. Heat spools off of his body, slams into my chest. I gulp; my throat dries. He pauses in front of me, the boots on his feet brushing against my bare feet.

"You're not wearing any shoes?" he murmurs.

"I, ah, I was on my way to get my clothes from the dryer."

His amber eyes glow, "So no underclothes either?"

Heat flushes my skin and my stomach flip-flops.

"Answer me, Eve, do you have any underclothes on?" His voice lowers to a hush and I shiver.

"No," I whisper, "I am naked under this bathrobe."

His nostrils flare, "Did you say that purposely to turn me on?"

"Wh-what?" I stutter. "Of course, not. You're the one who started out on this entire train of thought."

"But you're the one who brought it to the surface."

"What, because I said I was naked under—?"

"Shh." He places one thick finger on my lips, "Don't say anything else. Not unless you want me to take this conversation to its logical destination."

His voice is thick with lust. Desire pulses between us. The strength of his dominance pins me down, pushes down on my shoulders. My throat closes. I can't breathe, can't think, can't do anything except stare up into his hard features. His jaw tics and a vein throbs at his temple. "Yes or no, Eve?"

His tone is hard, yet wary. As if he can't predict my response to him anymore. And it's true, in a way, I am not sure myself how to react to him. To what this man gave up for me. How he changed his life completely, to such an extent that I don't know him anymore... And that's a side benefit of this trip, right?

A chance to understand both of them. To find out what makes them tick. To share of myself with them, in the hopes of finding whom I am more compatible with.

"What is it to be, Eve?" he demands. "Yes or no?" The tendons of his throat move as he swallows. Perhaps it's that slight giveaway, the clue that he's not as sure of himself as he portrays himself to be, which propels me to jerk my chin.

His gaze narrows, "Say it aloud, Eve."

"Yes." I clear my throat, "Ye—"

He places his hands on my hips, lifts me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist, the bathrobe parting to reveal what I've tried to keep hidden. He fits his lips over mine and licks the seam. I part my lips and he sweeps his tongue inside. He swipes his tongue across my teeth, closes his mouth over mine and drinks from me. I sense us move, then feel the wall against my back. He thrusts forward, fitting his swollen length that tents his jeans against my melting core. It's so good, so hot, a groan tumbles from my lips. He swallows it, slides his hand down the open neck of my robe. He pinches my nipple and the spot between my legs instantly grows wet... Okay, wetter. He presses kisses down my jawline, to the base of my throat. He nibbles on the pulse there and I can't stop the moan that wells up.

"These little noises you make, Eve..." he growls, "I've missed them. Fuck, I've missed you, baby. So much."

I wrap my arms about his neck, pressing his head down further. He kisses his way down to the valley between my tits, then nips at the curve of my breast. I feel it all the way down to my core. He cups my breast, squeezes, turns his head, and bites on my swollen nipple. Goosebumps flare on my skin. I squeeze my thighs around him, pushing myself into the bulge at his groin.

A growl rumbles from him, "I need to be inside you, Eve."

Yes.

"Say it aloud."

"Yes," I murmur, "Yes, yes—"

He slips his hand between us, thrusts two thick fingers inside my melting channel. *Oh, my god!* I pant, rolling my head back against the wall. He adds a third finger and I moan. He works his digits in and out of me, in and out, and my entire body shudders. "Edward, oh, my god, Ed."

He kisses his way up my throat, nips on my chin, then closes his mouth over mine again. All the time he's working my pussy, sawing in and out of me, wet, squelching noises filling the space. Heat flushes my skin as I realize that's me... It's my sopping pussy that's causing that filthy sound. And that only turns me on even more. I pant into his mouth, share his breath, as he thrusts his fingers inside of me. He pulls out, only to cram his fingers back in me with such force that my body bucks. The climax crashes over me. I curve my spine, throw my head back and scream... At least, I think I must have, but he absorbs every last sound.

He pulls his fingers out of me. I hear the clink of his belt buckle, the rasp of the zipper being lowered, then he lines himself up with my entrance. He thrusts forward, burying himself inside of me, and I gasp. Too much, too full; there's so much of him. "Edward," I moan, "Ed, pleas—"

"Shh." He stays there, stretching me, throbbing inside of me, allowing me to adjust to his girth. As if that were possible.

"Why do you feel bigger than before?" I whisper. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"If you mean, did I masturbate while I was away, the answer is no."

"Wait..." I blink. "What? You didn't?"

He shakes his head. "How could I? When all I wanted was to feel your cunt—" he tilts his hips and pushes into me, "gripping my dick." He pulls out, then propels forward, burying himself to the hilt again. I moan. "When all I wanted to hear was the sound of your voice crying out for release." He slides his fingers behind to cup my butt, then drags the tip of his finger against my backhole, "When all I wanted to feel was you writhing against me."

Heat flushes my skin; my belly flip flops. He eases his digit inside my puckered hole. A moan slips from my lips. His dick thickens inside of me and I gasp. I clamp down on his cock and a groan rumbles up his throat.

"You're killing me, Eve."

He begins to fuck me in earnest. In-out-in, he nails me against the wall, and I am helpless, and turned on, and melting inside. I dig my fingers into his broad shoulders, feel the flex of his muscles as he rams into me again and again. His big body shudders, the planes of his back ripple, and hell, if that doesn't turn me on even more. I clench my thighs about his waist. He places his palm behind my head to cushion it, then tilts his hips and lunges forward. He hits a spot deep inside of me, one I didn't even know existed. The climax sweeps out from my core, shudders up my spine. "Ed, I'm—"

"Come with me," he rasps. "Come with me, Eve."

His entire body seems to tremble, then a groan rips from him. His dick pulses inside me and he buries his head in my neck as he shoots warm jets of cum inside me. My climax crashes over me and sparks flutter behind my eyes. I stay there, surrounded by him, engulfed in his masculinity, as the aftershocks grip me. He raises his head, kisses my mouth, my closed eyes, "You, okay?" he murmurs as he holds me close.

I nod, try to open my eyes, but it's like they are weighted down.

"Ed," I force my eyes open, "the studio. Why is there a studio in this space?"

"It's the reason I bought the place."

"I... I don't understand."

"When I was away from you, I knew when I came back, I'd do my best to make things up to you. Sinner helped me reach out to a few real estate agents about the kind of place I wanted to buy. This one just happened to be on the market, and when I read the details, I knew it was perfect.

"Because of the studio?"

"Because I knew you'd love to have a space of your own to work out and dance in." He swallows. "Because I want you to have a space where you can let go...in your own home."

"Oh." I swallow. "You remembered?"

"I remember everything, Eve. How you wrinkle your nose when you're unsure about something. How you move your hips when you dance. How you screw up your eyes when you smile."

"I don't screw up my eyes," I yawn and my eyes water.

He chuckles, "I think I wore you out."

"I'm just recovering from what happened yesterday."

His jaw hardens. "I'll never let anything happen to you, Eve. You have to believe that."

I glance into his amber eyes, and somehow, I believe him. This man... He'd take a bullet for me... Correction, he already took a bullet for me.

"I know." I rub my cheek against his chest. "I believe you, Ed."

He winds his arms around me and the familiar scent of cut grass envelops me. My muscles relax and my eyelids flutter down.

I feel a soft brush against the top of my head, "Sleep, darling, I've got you."

22

Baron

I push away from the desk where I've spent the last few hours working on my investments. I'd taken this room, which had been set up with a desk and a chair, and claimed it as my study. I'd needed a space where I could devote myself to the task of growing my assets.

All these years, I've been happy to coast along. The money that I've made through being a co-owner of 7A investments, along with the rest of the Seven, has been more than sufficient to take care of my needs. I haven't worked a day since I left the army—other than starting a security company with Archer, but I hardly consider that work—and yet, I am a billionaire...

Only, it's not enough now. I want more. I want to make enough to ensure that Ava never lacks for anything. I want to make so much money that my children and their children will have more than enough to have their every wish fulfilled. Some may say that's too much, that ultimately kids need to work for their living so they know the worth of their money, and a part of me agrees. Which is why I've already put a trust in place so the money I make will be held there until they come of age. It will be released to them on their eighteenth, then their twenty-first, twenty-fifth and thirtieth birthdays. Ava and my kids will not only be responsible, but they will also go on to become successful in their own rights. Whatever field they choose, whether it's a creative one like hers or a more finance-driven one like mine, they will shine. They'll be at the top of their game. The envy of everyone else, the—

The floorboards above me creak, and I pause. I glance outside to find that

it's completely dark now. Where has the time gone? I glance at the watch on my wrist. It's nearly nine p.m. The last I'd checked in on Ava, she'd been sleeping. I had wanted to wake her up, to feed her, but she'd been sleeping so peacefully, I had held back. Instead, we'd prepared a plate and left it in the kitchen with a note for her. I push away from the desk, rolling my shoulders as I walk out the door. The lights in the kitchen are dim, the food gone; there's no one in the living room either.

Everything is silent, but I swear I heard the sounds of someone moving around upstairs. I take the steps two at a time, reach the landing. I peek into Ava's room, find it's empty. Turning, I head for Edward's room. I glance inside and pause. He's on the far side of the bed, under the covers, his body curled around Ava's. Their shoulders, which is all I can see above the covers, are bare. Clearly, they are naked. His arm is curled about her waist, her head is pillowed on his arm. Their eyes are shut, their breathing even. Guess I heard them come up to bed. Had they fucked before that? While I had been working...they had been working too... Only, on each other.

I curl my fingers at my side. F-u-c-k. The blood pounds at my temples. I grind my teeth so hard that pain tears up my jaw.

It's fine, right? This is what we agreed to. Things could unfold organically... If Ava wanted to shag him...she was entitled to. They'd had each other before I came on the picture. If Edward hadn't called me out of the blue, I might never have met her. In a way, they belonged to each other before I came onto the scene. And in some twisted way, I owe Edward... If it weren't for him, if he hadn't called me, I wouldn't be here today.

I haven't forgotten what he's asked of me... Except, I can't leave. Not yet. Not without giving her a chance to make up her mind. Not without allowing her to get to know me better. This isn't just about what I want or what Edward wants... It's also about her... And maybe it's my greed speaking... Maybe I am being selfish for giving this a little more time, but I can't give up on us, on her... Not yet, not when everything inside me insists that there's still a chance.

And yet, here she is... She chose to go to bed with him.

Fucking hell. I pivot, walk down the stairs to the bar in the corner of the living room. I grab the half-full bottle of whiskey, head for the study. Lift the bottle and take a healthy swig, then another. The liquor burns its way down, hitting my stomach. Warmth tingles out to my extremities. I can still feel though...

Can still sense the softness of her curves as they fill my palms, can scent the sweetness of her arousal as she falls apart under my ministrations, hear her moans as she gives in to her arousal... Fuck! My cock thickens; my groin hardens. I tilt the bottle to my mouth, chug down more of the alcohol. My throat burns as it slides down my gullet. I lower the bottle, walk over to my desk, glance at my laptop, the papers I had worked on. I had mapped out my future, planned how I was going to diversify, where I was going to focus, how I would build a life for us... I had strategized my future with her... Only, I hadn't thought she may not want the same things as me. And clearly, she doesn't. She'd gone to him, hadn't she?

She'd allowed him to fuck her. She'd participated in it, and while I had agreed to this, that she could sleep with both of us while we were here, fuck, if it doesn't bloody hurt. The band around my chest tightens, the blood pounds at my temples, and I swipe out my hand, shove the papers off the desk. My fingers touch the laptop that skids across to the edge, tilts, then falls to the ground with a thud.

A gasp reaches me from the direction of the door. The scent of jasmine infiltrates the space. I stiffen, don't turn around as muted footsteps approach me.

She touches my arm and I stiffen.

"Baron?" she whispers, and the sound of my name on her lips... *F-u-c-k*. A hot sensation stabs at my chest. My guts twist. I raise the bottle to my lips, take another swig.

"Baron, are you okay?" She grips my arm and I shake off her hold.

"Go away," I say through gritted teeth. "Leave, Ava, or I swear, I won't be responsible for what happens next."

There's silence for a beat, another. Then, "And what if I don't want to?" she whispers. "What if I want to be here?"

"You don't mean it."

"I do," she insists. "I don't want to be anywhere else."

"I saw you with him," I growl. "You didn't seem like you wanted to be any place else."

"And now I am here."

"What do you want, Ava?"

"What do you think?"

"I am past thinking." I grit my teeth. "If I see you now, if I touch you again, I won't be able to back off."

"Maybe I don't want you to back off."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"Don't I?" she murmurs. "Or maybe you are too scared to acknowledge what you'll feel if you see me. It's why you still refuse to look at me. Funny," she chuckles, "I didn't think you were a coward Baron, you—"

I turn and freeze. "Fuck, Ava." I drag my gaze down her features, her plump breasts, her tiny waist, the sweet flesh between her legs with that narrow strip of hair that drives me insane.

"Why the fuck are you naked?" I growl.

"Why do you think?" Her lips tilt up. The minx chuckles. She actually chuckles.

"This is not funny," I growl.

"No," she wipes the smile off of her face, "it isn't."

I chug down more whiskey, wipe the back of my hand across my face. "If you think just because you are naked, I am going to bend you over the desk and rip into your pussy—" I bare my teeth, "you are abso-fucking-lutely, right."

23

Ava

"Oh." I swallow, "OH." Those filthy possessive words send heat racing down my spine.

I'd heard a noise and woken up from my dazed half-slumber to see Baron moving away from the door. I had a vague recollection of Edward carrying me up to his bedroom, and then to the ensuite. There he'd propped me up under the stream of water, then proceeded to wash every inch of my body. I'd barely managed to keep my eyes open as he'd cleaned himself. Then he'd dried me and himself, before carrying me to his bed.

I'd wanted to resist, but I had been so pleasantly tired, and besides, I didn't want to sleep alone. So, when he'd spooned me, I had snuggled into his embrace. I'd enjoyed the heat of his body, the feeling of ownership that his heavy arm around my waist had evoked. That is, until I'd spotted Baron. I'd seen him leaving and I knew he must be upset. Despite the guys insisting that it was fine for me to sleep with either of them, they were both too possessive, too alpha to not get jealous when I was with the other. It's why I had crept out from under Edward's embrace, and followed Baron down to the study. It's also why I hadn't worn any clothes.

Not that I want to seduce him... Ha! Of course, I do. But maybe it's also this sense of mischief rearing its head inside of me.

Could he actually refuse me if I turned up naked in front of him? Would he turn away from me as he had done the last time? Guess I am about to find out.

"Come 'ere." Baron crooks a finger at me.

I hesitate and he glares at me. "Don't defy me, Eve," he rumbles. "Come here, now."

His voice propels me forward. I pause in front of him.

"Good girl." He smirks and that edge of danger in his smile... OMG, he's the original bad boy, all right. He takes another swig from his whiskey bottle, then holds the bottle over my chest and tips it. The scent of woody alcohol deepens and the liquid trickles down my breasts.

He leans in, drags his tongue down the trail. He circles my breast, bites down on my nipple, and I shudder. He follows the stream down to my belly button, swirls his tongue in the hollow. Goosebumps pop on my skin. "Oh," I gasp. "Oh, my."

He laps his way down the slight swell of my belly, across the soft flesh of my pussy.

My thighs clench.

He nips on my engorged clit and my knees seem to give way. I stumble, and he grips my hip, holding me in place. He drops to his knees, buries his nose in my core and inhales. The gesture is so damn erotic. OMG. My nipples pebble and my thighs clench.

Heat explodes up my spine and my belly trembles.

He places the bottle of alcohol on the floor, grips the outside of my thighs. The calluses on his fingers chafe the sensitive skin, and my core clenches. A fat drop of cum slides out from between my pussy lip and he's instantly there. He laps it up, licks his lips, then stares up at me from under hooded eyelashes. "You drive me insane, Ava," he growls. "You taste so fucking sweet that I swear, no dessert will ever compare to the taste of you."

"Baron," I whisper, and he shakes his head.

"Don't talk," he warns. "Not one fucking word out of you, understand?"

I nod.

He lowers his gaze back to my pussy, stares at it. He urges me to part my legs, and heat flushes my cheeks, spreads over my chest. I force myself to watch as he continues to gaze at my flesh like it is the single most important thing in the world. The absolute attention he bestows on me is so hot, so damn sexy. Something hot stabs at my chest. I wriggle my hips, shuffle my feet, and he makes a warning noise at the back of his throat.

The rough sound chafes at my nerve-endings. My breath catches in my throat.

He blows on my heated flesh, and I shiver.

"All the time I was imprisoned behind enemy lines, every single moment that I was tortured, I swore to myself that if I ever got out, I'd live life to the fullest, never regret a single moment. I told myself that I'd fuck every single pussy I could get my dick into. Then I met you." He chuckles, "Turns out, I only wanted one wet hole. One tight, moist space to call my own. Why is it that you feel so much like home, Ava? Why?"

The pressure builds behind my eyes. A teardrop rolls down my cheek as he flicks out his tongue and swipes up from my opening to the swollen nub of my clit.

The rough texture of his tongue, the burn of the alcohol, the heat of his mouth... All of it goes to my head. The world spins. I grab at him, digging my fingers into his hair to steady myself.

He lowers his head, licking me again and again. He swipes his tongue between my pussy lips, swirling that wicked tongue around my clit. He bites down on my swollen core and I swear, I almost come right then. A whine escapes me as he thrusts his tongue inside my melting channel and proceeds to eat me. He weaves his tongue in and out of me, in and out; brings his hand down to grind the heel of his palm into my clit, and the climax sweeps up from my toes.

He pulls away and my orgasm recedes. I'm almost there... Almost. He rises to his feet and I blink. I open my mouth and he shakes his head. He walks around to stand behind me, and I force myself to focus. The heat from his big body pours over me, sinks into my blood. He leans in and his hot breath sears my ear. "Bend over."

"Wh...what?"

"You heard me." He bites the shell of my ear and I shiver. "Bend over the desk, or I'll make you do it."

He steps back.

I gape at him.

He jerks his chin toward the desk, "Go on."

I frown and he clicks his tongue, "Do it. Or do you want me to make you —?" He takes a step forward.

I skitter back, toss my hair over my shoulder. Fine, if he thinks he can coerce me into bending to his will... He is absolutely right. I walk to the desk, lower my head onto my folded arms. Then I have to part my legs to accommodate the angle. Bet the alphahole knew that already.

I turn my head, press my cheek onto my arms. Heat envelops me and I know he's come up to stand behind me. I glance at him over my shoulder.

He shakes his head. "Don't move."

I frown, and he flattens his palm at the small of my back. He applies just enough pressure that I am forced to stay still.

He plants his thigh between mine, kicking my legs apart. Cool air hits the exposed skin between my legs, and I shiver. He palms my butt and a shudder runs up my spine. He drags his fingers up the seam of my pussy and my toes curl. My heartbeat ratchets up. He continues up the valley between my buttocks, playing with my puckered hole.

"Who took you here last Ava?"

I bite down on my lower lip.

"Tell me." His voice lowers to a hush, and damn him, when he uses that tone, I can't refuse him.

"Y-you," I stutter, "you did."

"Good."

I gaze at him from the corner of my eyes, in time to see him spit on his fingers. He slides his digit inside my backhole and I wince.

"Shh," he murmurs, "let me prep you."

"That's what I am afraid of."

"What did you say...?"

"I said—"*Oh shit, shit, shit.*"

He nods.

"What did I say about speaking?"

You told me to shut up, you prick.

"Exactly." He smirks. "And did I tell you how I would punish you for your disobedience?"

I swallow, then shake my head.

"Guess I saved the best for the last, then, didn't I?"

He steps away and to the side, so I can't see him anymore. What the hell? I gulp. What the hell is he up to? I sense him move a second before his palm connects with my backside.

I jump. To be honest, it didn't hurt. It's more my ego that's taking a beating. What the hell is wrong with this man? I crane my neck, and he places his palm again on the small of my back. He holds me down with his hand even as his other palm connects with my backside. The shock of the impact courses through my veins. I yelp, bracing myself as he spans me on

one arse cheek, then the next, and again, alternating between the left and right cheeks until my entire backside seems to be aflame.

A trembling courses up my legs and my core clenches. My belly flip-flops and moisture drools from between my legs. I will not allow myself to be turned on, will not. I curl my fingers into fists, dig my heels into the ground as he pauses. He massages my burning butt cheeks with one large palm. The calluses on his fingers chafe against the sensitized flesh. Goosebumps pop on my skin. My thighs clench.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. This is not good. How can I be so aroused by what is, clearly, meant to be a punishment? He's trying to humiliate me, and I like it. Shit, what craziness is this? *Where's your ego? Your pride in yourself?* All gone... Kaput... Shredded to pieces by the asshole who dips his finger into my pussy. "You're soaking wet, Eve," he rumbles.

No shit, Einstein.

He drags the moisture up to my backhole, smears it around the rim. Scoops up more of my cum and slides his soaked digit inside my puckered hole. He slides his finger in and out of me and pinpricks of heat swirl out from the contact. He adds a second finger and I huff, grip the edge of the desk as he stretches me, preps me.

"Who'd have thought you had a taste for spanking, hmm? Makes me wonder what other secrets you're hiding from me."

As if I am going to tell you. I snicker and he pauses, then drives his fingers in and out of me at an increased pace. My toes curl, my belly clenches, and more moisture pools between my legs. He lowers his face into my line of sight. "I am going to wipe that smile off your face." He smirks. "By the time I am done, you'll remember nothing except my touch, my scent, the feel of my dick owning you, my cock buried deep inside your most forbidden place, you riding me, you coming all over me, you and me, baby, just us, you get me?"

I swallow, hold his gaze. The blue in his eyes deepens to a brilliant azure. Then he straightens. I hear the rasp of his zipper being lowered. The next moment, the crown of his shaft teases my back entrance.

Oh, hell. I draw in a breath and he pauses.

He drags his hand up my back, wraps his finger around the nape of my neck. He bends, placing his cheek next to mine. "Relax," he whispers, "I've got you."

I swallow. It's the same words Edward had told me. Shit, this is getting so

very complicated. So bloody complicated, with no solution in sight.

I must have tensed against him, for he drags his hand down the side of my breast, down my hip, and around to strum my pussy lips. He teases my clit and a moan drips from my lips. "Beautiful," he murmurs, "you're fucking beautiful, Ava. If I die, this is the last sound I want to hear. Your voice calling out for me as you give in to the orgasm that I am going to fuck out of you."

He slips his fingers inside my soaking pussy, moving them in and out of me. Heat sizzles out from the contact. I give in to his touch, my muscles relax, and he slips past my sphincter. Too much, too full. I can feel him all the way inside of me. I gasp and sweat beads my brow as he straightens. I sense his gaze sweep down my back, to where we are connected. "If you could only see yourself Eve," he growls, "you're the fucking hottest thing I have ever laid eyes on." He pulls back, then slips inside again and a groan tumbles from my lips. "F-u-c-k," he growls, bending over me. The heat from his big body surrounds me, cocoons me, cajoles me into parting my legs wider, allowing him to slip even further inside as he increases the pace at which he finger-fucks me. My entire body bucks, and his grip on my neck tightens. His fingers are long enough to wrap around my throat, impeding the flow of air. He pulls out again, then propels forward, burying himself inside me with such force, the entire desk shudders. He speeds up, thrusting his fingers in and out of me, even as he fucks my arse.

I try to draw in a breath, but my lungs burn and spots of black dot the edges of my vision. He thrusts into me, hits a spot deep inside, at the same time as he curves his fingers inside my channel. The climax whispers out from my womb, swoops up my spine. He releases the hold on my neck and orders, "Come."

Instantly, the orgasm roars forward, crashes behind my eyes. Floating. Darkness. Peace. When I open my eyes, I find him staring into my face.

I hold his gaze, bring a finger up to touch his mouth. "Kiss me?" I rasp. My throat hurts. Did I scream? I must have. It's the only reason I can imagine my throat feels so raw, right?

He brushes his lips across mine once, twice. So sweet. My eyelids flutter down as he straightens, pulling out of me. He hauls me up and into his arms as I yawn widely.

"You need to eat," he mutters, and I shake my head.

"Sleep... I need to sleep." I yawn again and my jaw cracks.

He chuckles, then pulls me close. I curl into his chest, closing my eyes.

I fall into a deep sleep, and when I open my eyes, I am in bed. I stare at the broad back, the dark hair, the tattoo of the snake crawling up his back and know the man I am staring at is Edward. I try to turn and find I can't move. Glance down to find a thick arm around my waist. Follow the corded muscles up to find Baron is behind me... He's spooning me. I swallow. I am in bed with both of them? Is that good? Not like I am trying to hide from one what I'm doing with the other, right? Shouldn't it be easier like this...? So why do I feel uncomfortable, like I've been caught doing something wrong?

How did I get here anyway? I frown. I fell asleep in Baron's arms. And he carried me up here to Edward's bed? Why the hell would he do that? Does he want to cause a massive disagreement, or what? I try to push his hand off of me, but of course, it's too heavy. Bloody hell. There's movement next to me. The hair on the nape of my neck prickles. I glance up to meet Edward's amber gaze.

24

Edward

I take in her flushed features, her sleepy gaze, her thick hair flowing about her shoulders. Gorgeous, beautiful, a vision to wake up to every day. She bites her lower lip and I feel the tug all the way to the tip of my dick. She shifts her shoulders; I drag my gaze down to where the covers are pulled up to the tops of her creamy breasts. I reach out, tug on the sheet, which slips down to catch on her nipple. I trace the outline of the swollen bud, and her breath catches in her chest.

I raise my gaze to hers. "Good morning," I whisper, "how did you sleep?"

"Good." She swallows. Her hand jerks, as she traces a path down the forearm of the man sleeping on her other side. "I... I can explain Ed." She gulps, "It's just... I um, woke up and, well—"

"Shh," I touch my finger to her lips, "are you hungry?"

"Hungry?" She blinks.

"Breakfast?" I tilt my head, "I could make you my special?"

"Your special?" She opens and shuts her mouth.

Guess I've surprised her with my calm acceptance of the three of us being in the same bed. Hell, if I hadn't surprised myself with my lack of outburst at having woken up last night to find the two of them in my bed. Maybe I'd been too tired, maybe I was just tired of fighting, or maybe they had looked so peaceful sleeping curled around each other in my bed, that I hadn't had the heart to wake either of them. For a moment, my mind had drifted back to when Baron and I were kids, fighting over our favorite toys, learning to take

turns, and having sleepovers. Ah, the innocence of youth. I'll never admit it, but I swear, I think I almost felt like it was supposed to be this way. Like we could have had this easy peace between us, if not for the incident.

So, I had contented myself with wrapping my arm around her and falling asleep. I had woken up to the most gorgeous sight ever. Of her in my bed, her face turned toward me, the sheet poised low on her breasts, barely covering her nipples. I'd give anything to wake up to that sight every day. My heart stutters in my chest, as I hold her gaze, "You do eat eggs don't you?"

She nods.

"Good." I throw back my end of the covers, swing my legs over and stand; reach for my sweat pants and shrug into them. When I turn, I find her gaze fixed on me. I drag my fingers down my chest and her breath hitches. I slide my hand toward the waistband and she jerks her gaze up to mine.

I smirk.

She scowls. "Jerk," she mouths the word without heat.

"Your jerk," I whisper back.

She opens her mouth, and I raise a finger to my lips. I glance at the slumbering Baron next to her, then jerk my head toward the door. "Come on," I say in a low voice, "let's not awaken Sleeping Beauty here."

Inch by inch, she slides out from under his arm. Baron stirs in his sleep and we both freeze.

He was a soldier and I'd have expected him to wake up with all this movement around him, but instead, he slumbers on. Maybe he's more tired than usual?

Maybe it's the fact that he slept with her that exhausted him, and sated him? I set my jaw, watch as she scoots all the way over to the end of my bed. Then she swings her legs over the side, glancing around for something to wear. I grab my T-shirt and hand it to her. As she shrugs into it, I walk over to the closet, pull out a pair of my boxer briefs, and return with them. She slips into them and they hang around her hips. The t-shirt dwarfs her. It reaches almost down to her knees and covers the boxers completely, but it'll have to do for now. I walk out of the bedroom and she follows me. I wait for her to precede me, carefully shut the door behind us, then follow her down to the kitchen. She switches on the coffee maker while I pull out the ingredients needed for making pancakes.

"I do eat milk, butter and cheese, as well; and fish," she ventures. "I guess I am a fake vegetarian."

"When did you give up meat?"

"When I was thirteen, I saw a documentary on how livestock are butchered to provide meat, and that was that." She shudders. "I gave up not only meat, but also fish and all animal products, but it was exhausting." She sighs. "Our society is so geared toward animal products... Sometimes I think there is a larger conspiracy at play. Big corporations want to rule our dining tables and dictate our eating choices. I resisted for as long as I could."

"You did well," I mutter as I crack the eggs and whip up the pancake mixture, "Looking at you, though, I'd have never guessed how ecologically and politically conscious you are."

"Why, because I am a belly dancer?" She frowns. "So, of course, I shouldn't have a single original thought in my head?"

"Hold on, spitfire," I say lightly, "you know that's not what I meant."

"Hmm," she purses her lips, "then what did you mean?"

I toss some butter onto the hot skillet, then turn to her, "Just that there's more to you than meets the eye and I, for one, can't wait to unpeel all the layers and get to know your deepest, darkest desires."

She draws in a sharp breath. "Edward," she shakes her head, "sometimes you...you..."

"Impress you?"

"Shock me."

"But you still find me irresistible."

"Whatever," she mutters.

"The sassy Eve, at a loss for words?" I smirk. "That's a first."

"The alphahole, whipping up a meal, in the hopes that he'll get into my pants?" She sticks out her tongue at me and I fix my gaze on her luscious mouth.

"Keep that up and I promise I'll bend you over the table right now and..."

The sound of someone clearing their throat reaches me. I glance up to find Baron in the doorway. He takes in the scene, winks at me—bastard, then saunters over to the table. He bends his head, kisses Eve on the lips. "Good morning, beautiful," he rumbles.

Her cheeks tinge pink. Fucking adorable. She glances at me, then at Baron, who wanders over to get three cups from the shelf; then he proceeds to pour coffee into them. He slides a cup over to me, then doctors one of the remaining two with sugar and cream, before walking over to the dining table. He hands a cup to Ava, places one at the setting next to her, before turning

back to pull out plates and other utensils.

I turn back to the pancakes, pour the batter over the sizzling butter in the skillet. Behind me, I hear Baron bustling around as he sets the table.

By the time I walk to the table with a stack of pancakes, he's set three places, and also placed other condiments on the table. I plate out the pancakes, seat myself.

"Can you please pass me the maple syrup?" Ava murmurs.

Baron slides the bottle over to her, as I pour honey over the stack on my plate.

"This place is certainly well-stocked," she muses. "How did you manage to get a hold of all this?" She gestures to the table.

"When I realized that the Mafia was targeting you, I mentioned to Baron the possibility of using this place as a hideaway."

"You did?"

I nod, "We both agreed that the only way to keep you safe would be to bring you here until the danger had passed."

"That's when I reached out to Archer and had the place stocked up," Baron adds.

"Hang on," she scowls, "so you guys have been planning this for a while?"

"Just over the last week." I raise a shoulder.

"And I thought you two didn't get along?"

"Oh, we don't." I glare at Baron, who scowls back. "But when it comes to your safety, we agreed that we won't compromise."

"It's annoying how the two of you gang up on me when it suits you." She rakes her hair back from her face.

"Only because the one thing we both agree on is that we'd do anything to keep you safe," I offer

She snorts, then glances between us, "And that includes cooking up an elaborate dinner?"

Baron frowns. "You mean yesterday's Indian food?" He jerks his chin at Edward, "That was all him."

She narrows her gaze on me, "Really? You cooked yesterday's dinner?"

"Are you doubting my talents?"

She purses her lips.

"You don't think I could whip up a lavish Indian meal for you?"

"Well," she blinks, "I mean—"

"Relax." I smirk. "I had a chef cook meals and freeze them for us."

"You did?"

"Of course, not." I grin. "I didn't have enough time for that, but I did ask Archer to stock up on a bunch of frozen lunches and dinners. All of the best quality, of course."

"Of course," she echoes. "So, all that time, when the three of us were discussing the best way forward, while I was trying to be fair to both of you, you two were secretly plotting a way to get me here?"

She scowls at me and I raise my hands, "And we were right in having a plan."

"After that third attack, it was clear that you need to be protected until we track down the remaining two guys who came after you in the subway," Baron reminds her.

She shivers, folds her arms around herself.

"I don't mean to bring this up to scare you, Eve." I lean forward and take her hand between mine. "It's just, we want to make sure you understand how serious this threat is. Which is why," I gesture to the space around us, "we brought you here."

She blows out a breath. "I understand. I really do." She glances between us. "I just wish I, at least, had a phone. My father's getting married tomorrow, and uh, he wanted me to be there. If I can't make it, I should, at least, let him know."

"Do you want to go to his wedding?" I hold her gaze. "Do you, Eve?"

She swallows, then glances away.

"If you did..." Baron tilts his head, "If you did, we'd make it happen."

She bites down on her lower lip. "To be fair, I'm not sure." She shakes her head. "It's only been six months since my mother died and while she, apparently, approved of the woman he's chosen to marry, I don't know." She shakes her head, "It's too soon. I mean, my parents were married for twenty-five years. They had me and my sister. It's not like it was some fly-by-night relationship, you know. They had a wonderful marriage, a close family... And then, just like that..." she snaps her finger, "she fell sick one day and was gone in a few months." A tear rolls down her cheek, "It was terrible."

I push back my seat, walk around and put my arms around her. "I am so sorry, Eve."

"And now he's getting remarried." She wipes the tears from her cheek. "I can't believe he's replacing her so quickly."

"Maybe she wanted him to marry?" Baron offers. "She'd have wanted him to be happy, right?"

"That's what he claims." Ava sniffles and my heart seems to break.

"Don't cry, babe. If you want to go and see him..."

"I do want to see him," she says in a fierce voice. "It's what my Mum would have wanted."

"If you want to go, we'll take you." I meet Baron's gaze over her head.

"It's dangerous," he cautions. "We'd be revealing our whereabouts."

"Not if we are careful."

"However, as many precautions as we may take, there's nothing stopping anyone from spotting us, then tracking us back here."

"We'll be very cautious."

He blows out a breath. "Is this important to you, Ava?" he murmurs. "Do you definitely want to go?"

"My father and my sister will never forgive me if I don't turn up." She smiles, then adds, "Also, Isla is organizing the wedding and she won't be very happy if I didn't turn up for it."

"Right." Baron scowls at me.

"Right." I jerk my chin at him.

"Where are they getting married?" Baron finally asks.

"In Windermere," she replies.

"That's the next town over," I offer.

"It is?" Ava's face brightens. "That means we can get there and back really quickly, right?"

"It's a forty-five-minute drive, at the most," Baron interjects.

Both of us turn to him.

"We can't stay too late." He raises a shoulder, and Ava's face breaks into a smile. She holds out her hand. Baron glances at it, then back at her. "You also can't leave my and Edward's side."

"I promise." Her grin widens. "Now, will you take my hand, you stubborn man?"

He grabs her palm, kisses the back of her hand. "You sure there's space for two more people?"

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"I LOVE my dad so much. I mean, I never really talk about him. I normally just talk about my mum, and leave my dad out. But that isn't fair because I love him... Obviously, because he's my dad. I'm lucky to have him as a dad, anyway. Plus, he bought me clothes yesterday! What a lovely, generous man! And omg, I desperately want these shoes that I saw... If I tell him, do you think he'll buy them for me? No, I am not a brat, really I am not..."

– From Ava's Diary

Ava

I glance at the suited man driving the SUV. Baron's broad shoulders are encased in a black jacket. He'd refused to wear a tie and his shirt buttons are open to reveal the demarcation between his pecs. That stubborn lock of hair falls over his forehead and his jaw is hard as he focuses on the road ahead. He looks delicious, and sexy, and so damn hot. My stomach flip-flops and my thighs clench. Being with him would have already made me the envy of every single person at the wedding...

Then, add in the man riding shotgun with him. In his dark jacket and yellow tie that picks out the golden flares in his eyes, Edward is the epitome of suave masculinity. His shoulders are as broad as Baron's, while the rest of him is leaner, which still means that he's a big guy, with his muscled physique, broad chest, tapered waist and those powerful thighs currently clad in what are, surely, tailor-made pants.

After we'd spoken yesterday, the guys had had Archer drop by with their

clothes and a suitcase full of garments. Baron had compromised and allowed me to use his phone—which was, apparently, secure—to call Isla to tell her that Archer was on his way. Of course, she had been curious about where I was, and I told her I couldn't reveal my location, which had prompted a flurry of questions. To which I'd said that I would tell her more when I met her at the wedding.

At least, I was able to give her instructions on the clothes she had to pack for me, which included this dress. Made of layered silk, with a modest neckline and a back that dips almost to the cleft of my butt, the pale pink dress coordinates beautifully with my burgundy shawl. Paired with matching lipstick, the combination is both sexy, as well as modest enough, to not steal attention from the bride. Not that it matters. I wouldn't care, either way. I'm not there for Lina. I am there purely to support my dad. I don't want to disappoint my family; that's all.

"You, okay?" Edward meets my gaze in the mirror. "You've been awfully quiet."

"I'm nervous."

Which is true... I am walking in with two men, and don't exactly want to be questioned about why I am there with both of them.

"You worried about raising eyebrows?" Baron asks me. Typical Baron. Never one to mince words, he always puts out there the stuff that others hesitate to say aloud.

"I suppose," I finally concede. "It's not every day that a woman walks into a social occasion with not one, but two gorgeous men, who are, obviously, not gay."

Baron snorts.

Edward arches an eyebrow. "Are you really that worried about being seen with both of us?"

"Yes?" I raise a shoulder. "No. I don't know. This entire situation is confusing enough without my having to try to put a name to this," I wave a hand in the air, "for everyone else."

"I'd say fuck 'em all," Baron drawls, "but I know that wouldn't work for you."

"Not." I chuckle. "No, I am not sure what I am going to say if anyone asks why I am with both of you."

"Tell them the truth," Edward suggests.

"Which is...what? That I am fucking both of you?" I glance out of the

window. "Do you realize how that makes me look?"

"Like you are irresistible?" Baron meets my gaze in the mirror, "Which you are. You should know that, Ava."

"You are a gorgeous, confident, young woman who can have anyone you want." Edward turns to me, "And that's what you should tell anyone who asks you."

Baron nods.

"It really is annoying when the two of you gang up on me," I gripe.

Edward chuckles. Baron's lips twist in that smirk which is hot and mean, and so damn filthy. My ovaries spasm. No, seriously, they do. Heat fills my cheeks and I glance out the window as we turn off the highway. Well, here we are then; time to face the music.

I knock on the door of my parent's bedroom. Old habits... I've always call it my parents' bedroom. Just because my mother is no longer there doesn't mean I am going to call it by some other name, alright?

"Come in," my father calls out and I walk inside.

He places the photograph of my mum and him on their wedding day back on the dresser.

I walk up to him, glance down at the photograph. "She was so beautiful," I whisper.

"I saw her across a crowded house party in London and knew she was the one for me."

I've heard the story of how they met a thousand times, and yet, I can't resist asking, "What was she wearing?"

"A sleeveless dress that reached her knees. I saw the back of her neck, the curve of her bare shoulder, and I was a goner."

"And you?" I murmur, "What were you doing?"

"I was in a pair of shorts, wearing a Santa hat while I jumped up and down on the couch." He chuckles.

"Was it Christmas?"

"Not quite. It was the middle of summer, but I was high enough on life... And yeah, enough alcohol to not give a damn. Then I saw her and knew that my life would never be the same again." His voice breaks and I turn to him in time to see a tear run down his cheek.

"Oh, Dad." I grip his arm. "I'm so sorry, Dad."

"Me, too." He swallows. "You meet your life partner and you think you'll

be together for the rest of your lives. You think you'll always have them next to you, that you'll be old and wrinkled before you have to say good-bye. Yet one day, they are gone, and you are left to pick up the pieces of your life and move on... Even as the grief consumes you from the inside, and you try to put on a brave face and smile because that's what they would have wanted. I don't want your Mum to be upset. I want her to feel like I am still living my best life for her."

"Oh, Daddy." I stand up on tip-toe and hug him, and he puts his arms around me and holds me close. The woody scent of his aftershave is so familiar, so comforting, that I almost break down. I bite back my tears, pat his shoulder, "I am so sorry I said those horrible things to you earlier."

"I think we all say things we don't mean when we're upset." He rubs his cheek across my hair. "You were hurting. So was I. We were all trying to figure out how we were going to go on without her."

"You're doing the right thing by marrying Aunty Lina." I lean back and he releases me. "I hope the two of you are happy, Daddy."

"Thank you, sweetheart." He smiles down at me, "It means a lot to me to hear that."

There's a knock on the door, then Raisa peeks in. "Everything okay?" She glances between us.

"Yeah," I sniffle, "I was just catching up with Dad, that's all."

"I am so happy you came, Ava." She smiles at me.

"Me, too." I look up at the ceiling to keep the tears from falling and messing up my make-up. "Thanks for being so patient with me, big sis."

She screws up her face, "Don't call me that. Not that I am not your older sister, but it makes me feel old when you do."

"Some things never change." I chuckle.

Her smile widens. "And some things do." She peers into my face, "You ready for this?"

"Yeah," I square my shoulders, "I am."

"Good." She turns to my father, "And you, Dad, you ready to do this?"

He blows out a breath. "Yes." He straightens his spine. "Yes, I am."

He tucks me under his arm, then holds his other arm out to Raisa. She walks over to us, and the three of us hug.

"Thank you," Dad says hoarsely. "Thank you for understanding."

Two hours later, I watch from the sidelines of the small dance floor that had

been erected in the backyard of my childhood home. The large white marquee that had hosted the ceremony is aglow with twinkling lights strung from the ceiling. The sides of the tent are open and a gust of air sweeps through, rustling the table cloths behind me. The DJ on the far end plays a tune that has me tapping my foot in rhythm.

"Hey, you," Isla comes up to stand next to me, "long time no see."

I glance at her sideways, "Speak for yourself. You've been missing all through the ceremony."

"Don't ask." She mimics wiping sweat from her brow "Last minute issue with the DJ, but I finally pulled in a favor." She waves at the tall man behind the console, who grins at her before turning his attention back to the set up.

"Thanks again for packing my clothes for me," I gesture to the dress I am wearing. "Thanks to you, I am, at least, properly dressed."

"You can thank me by telling me more about what's up with you." She arches an eyebrow, "What's up with all the secrecy?" She frowns. "And where are you staying anyway?"

"Uh, I told you, it's just a security thing," I mutter. Shit, I hate not being able to share the details with her, but the guys made it clear, I am not to tell anyone about where I am staying.

Even now, the two of them stand on opposite sides of the tent, keeping a wary look out over the crowd. During the wedding, they'd both parked themselves on either end of the small group of invitees and kept a vigil, as well. It's like I am traveling with my own security team, in a way.

"Ava." Isla hisses at me, "Ava, you listening to me?"

"Eh?" I give her my full attention, "Sorry, what did you say?"

"You are so not acting yourself." She frowns. "Is everything okay?"

"Of course, it is." I take a sip of my champagne. "Your wedding arrangements, as usual, have been top-notch. I am glad you were able to take on the wedding preparations so last-minute."

"Not as last minute as the weddings I've had to put together for the Seven." She snorts, "I mean, your dad gave me an entire month to plan. Imagine that."

I dig my elbow into her side. "Stop being so snarky."

"You stop being so secretive."

"I am not being secretive." I glance about the room and feign innocence.

"Oh?" She peers into my face, "So why is it that you didn't mention to me that you were going to be here with both of them?"

"Who?" I frown. "Who are you talking about?"

"Seriously, Ava?" She scowls. "Don't give me that. This is not like you, at all, to hide things from me."

"Yeah," I hunch my shoulders. "Look, it's complicated, okay?"

"When isn't it?"

A waiter passes by and Isla grabs my empty champagne glass, sets it on his tray, and grabs two more. "Thanks, Mark." She nods at the young guy, who blushes before scurrying off.

"Do all of your team have a crush on you?"

"Only the young impressionable ones." She hands me a glass, before sipping from her own. "And don't change the topic, Slick."

"Would I do that?" I widen my gaze.

"And stop giving me the innocent act." She glowers at me. "Tell me what's happening with you, Ava, seriously."

I take a sip of the champagne, and the cool, crisp liquid slides down smoothly. "Well, basically, I am sleeping...with both of them."

She chokes on her champagne, and I pat her back as she splutters.

"Easy, easy," I mutter, "don't go drawing all the attention to us now."

"You're doing fine in that regard all on your own, considering those two have ensured you are always in their line of sight since you guys walked in."

"That's only because they are protecting me."

"Protecting you?" She frowns. "What do you mean?"

"I was attacked..." I mumble, "again."

"Wait, hold on." She stares at me. "You were ambushed in the subway, then in your studio.... Are you saying, it happened again?"

I wince, and her features soften. "Oh, honey, I am so sorry. I didn't mean to bring back any flashbacks by talking about it."

"I'm stronger than that," I lie.

"No one is that strong, Ava. We can pretend to ourselves that things don't affect us, but everything does. Even tripping and hurting ourselves when we are children leaves scars on our physical body. Our cells remember everything. The memories in our body stay with us, whether we like it or not. They change us; they have ramifications for how we act and react. The only thing we can do is manage the stories we tell ourselves about it."

"Wow," I stare at her, "that was profound."

"Right?" She shakes her head, "Sometimes, even I don't know where I come up with this shit."

"You never do talk about your past, you know." I take in her features. "I go on and on about my family and you... You never tell me about yours."

"But we are not talking about me, are we?" She waggles her eyebrows. "You were talking about bedding both of them. How is it?"

"How is what?"

"You know, DP."

"DP?"

"Double penetration?"

"Oh." I stare at her. "OH." I redden. "No, no, no. I don't know about that."

"No?"

"I mean, I don't sleep with them at the same time." I wave my hand in the air, "How could you even think about that?"

"Aw," her lips turn down, "and here I was, hoping things were finally getting exciting."

"Trust me, I've had enough excitement just trying to keep up with two of them in my life at the same time." I shake my head, "Seriously, I am at my wits end."

"Whose dick is bigger?"

"What?" I redden, and she chuckles. Gah! She's always trying to catch me out, this one. I purse my lips, push my finger into my cheek and pretend to consider the question. "You do know, it's not just about the size; it's also the technique." I sniff.

"And?" She taps her feet on the ground, "Give, girlfriend, which one wins?"

I lower my chin. "Sadly, it seems they are neck and neck on both accounts."

She clicks her tongue, "Poor Ava, you have such a hard life." She shakes her head, "All that double dosage of cocks and lips and hands and legs and balls... Girl, you lead a tough life."

"Stop it." I choke. "Seriously, it's not at all how you make it out to be."

"Oh, well," she takes another sip of the champagne, "things could be worse; you could have neither of them."

"Yeah, tried that, and it didn't work, either." I grimace.

"Well, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em."

"Okay, I am getting tired of trying to keep up with you here." I scowl, "What are you trying to say, Isla?"

"Just that you should have a good time, while you can, babe." She snatches my glass from me, then hands both flutes over to the hovering Mark.

She jerks her chin at the DJ, who nods, then speaks into the mic, "Can we have the newly wedded couple on the floor?"

Applause breaks out as my father leads Lina onto the floor. Throughout the dance, she stares up at him with adoration in her eyes. My father seems a little tired, and maybe sad. She places her palm against his cheek, leans up to say something. He chuckles and some of the weight around his shoulder dissipates. Maybe this really is a good thing. Maybe she'll make him happy, and maybe she does deserve him, after all.

I watch as they glide around the dance floor. The song comes to an end, and everyone claps as my father leads Lina off the floor. He smiles at me and I blow him a kiss, then nod at Lina. They move over to talk with their friends and the DJ switches to a throbbing beat. "Okay everyone, time to get on the dance floor." The DJ speaks into the mic, "Let's all celebrate the wedding of Lina and Christopher!"

"Okay, this should be good." Isla grabs my arm and yanks me onto the floor.

"What are you doing?" I laugh.

"Come on, Ava, you've been dying to dance, and I've made sure the music is good for the kind of dancing you like."

"Is that right?" I chuckle. The music changes again, the familiar beats of a fast dance remix come on. I can't stop myself from tapping my feet against the floor, swaying my hips, shimmying my waist, my shoulders.

"Woohoo!" Isla hoots. "Go for it, babe." She launches into her own bump and grind version of a dance that's both seductive and funny at the same time.

I laugh, shake my booty, fling my hands up in the air, drag them down my body as I move to the rhythm. Isla mirrors my moves and soon the two of us are shaking it up, dancing with each other, and to the music. Around us, the dance floor fills up.

More people join and soon we are pressed in from all sides in the tiny space. The music moves to an even faster beat, the lights dim, and strobe lights are flicked, transforming the atmosphere closer to that of a night club.

The crowd seems to thicken even more. Sweat beads my forehead, slides down the valley between my breasts. A man jostles Isla. She turns at the same time as him. He apologizes to her, she laughs. The two begin to dance together. My dress sticks to my back. Shit, I'm too hot. I push my way

through the swaying bodies, to the edge of the dance floor. Then walk across the lawn to the side of the house. I can still hear the music, but there's no one here. Besides, it's cooler.

A breeze blows over my fevered skin and I lift my face to it.

The thump of the beats reaches me across the space. The cadence seeps through my veins, sinks into my blood. I close my eyes, letting the rhythm wash over me as I move my feet. I widen my stance as I grind my arse, sinking down in a semi squat, before I thrust my hips out, then my breasts, then weave up to straighten.

I sense a change in the space in front of me, then a pair of warm hands land on my hips.

I snap my eyes open, take in the strong chords of his throat, the sculpted pecs and the black marks of the tattoo exposed by the open neck of his shirt. His broad shoulders block out the sight of everybody else, and I gulp. I lift my eyes to meet his amber gaze.

Edward moves in sync with me, his gaze intense as he takes in my undulating body.

The hair on the nape of my neck prickles. Heat sears my back. I glance sideways, already knowing that I'll find Baron behind me.

His big body towers over me and his biceps stretch the tight fit of his light blue shirt that set off the flint in his eyes. He must have abandoned his jacket at some point—not that I am complaining. He's rolled his sleeves up to expose his thick veiny arms, the powerful forearms dotted with dark brown hair. His wide palms rest on my shoulders, the heat of them burning through the thin material of my dress.

Baron's movements are stiff...as stiff as the unmistakable bulge that tents his crotch. He moves in closer and his pelvis cradles my hips. The thick column of his shaft nestles against the curve of my butt. Lust thickens my veins; moisture laces the hollow between my legs.

I turn forward as Edward bends his knees slightly. His movements are smooth, coordinated, a self-assurance to his steps that hints at some kind of formal lessons. I tip up my chin, rise on tip toe.

"Where did you learn to dance?" I murmur.

"Ballroom dancing classes." He smirks.

"What?" I gape. "No."

"Oh, yes." His smile widens. "One of the few things that my mother cared about. After all, I had to dance so she could take me to parties and show me

off. At least, in this, she was determined that I appear civilized." He bares his teeth and my knees threaten to give way from under me. This man... He's deadly. OMG—my thighs clench and my heart begins to thunder in my chest.

I turn my head sideways, "And you Baron?" I tilt my head, "Clearly, dancing isn't one of your hobbies?"

"Is that a challenge?" He growls.

"It's an...invitation?" I bat my eyelashes at him and his grip tightens on my hips.

His forehead furrows and he picks up his pace, matching his moves to mine... To the left, to the right, circle...and to the right again. I face forward to find Edward matching us step for step. To the left, right, circle, again. Just like that, the three of us are in sync. Flying. Floating. When you have the right beat, the right partner—or partners—dancing is like flying.

I raise my arm, wind it around Baron's neck. Bring my other hand up and place my palm against Edward's cheek. His amber eyes gleam. Edward moves in closer, until we are joined from chest, to hip, to thigh. Baron tilts his hips behind me. His throbbing length seems bigger, hotter, more insistent. My throat closes and sweat slides down the valley between my breast. I tip my chin up as Edward lowers his mouth to mine. He kisses me deeply, smoothly, thrusts his tongue between my lips. A grasp on my chin urges me to turn my head. Edward releases my mouth, for Baron to replace it with his. He brushes my lips once, twice, then swipes his tongue across my mouth. I groan, parting my lips, and instantly, he swoops in, closes his mouth around my tongue, sucking, nibbling, biting on my lower lip, and my pussy instantly clenches. Ed kisses his way across my cheek, down my throat, to the valley between my tits. He cups my breast, tweaks my nipple so hard that I cry out. The sound is swallowed by Baron's mouth. He kisses me harder. I pant against his lips, press my fingers into the side of his neck. A moan ripples up my throat, and he shudders. He tears his mouth from mine, then growls, "To the car, right fucking now."

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Ava

I walk inside the house, then pause in the middle of the living room. The door shuts behind me and I shiver. A ripple of apprehension runs down my spine. Shit, shit, shit, what am I doing? On the way home, none of us had spoken in the car. Baron had driven, barely keeping under the speed limit, and the SUV had seemed to eat up the miles. He'd barely parked when Edward had jumped out of the car and come around to open my door, then led me to the house. After unlocking the door, he'd gestured for me to go ahead. I'd moved in, conscious of his gaze eating me up. I'd headed for the stairs, then stopped.

Shit, what should I do? Go straight up to my room? To Edward's room where we had spent the night? To Baron's room? What is the right protocol to follow when you are about to bed two guys? Two guys... Gah! For someone who'd been a virgin not too long ago, I've, clearly, come a long way. OMG. Two guys. Two alphaholes... Two massive dicks... How the hell is this going to work? Can I handle both of them at the same time?

Why the hell had I thought this was a good idea?

At least I had had the presence of mind to move away from the dancefloor and the crowd of people. With some luck, no one should have seen the three of us engaged in that little dance-fuck-fest.

Why did I care what they thought of me anyway?

Most of the people there were my parent's friends...and I had always been the rebel. The girl who'd dropped out of medical school to become a belly dancer. I mean, who does that, right? So, I shouldn't worry about the

fact that I was dancing with two men. Still, I am fairly certain that no one saw us.

Besides, most people had been drinking since the afternoon. Everybody had been happy and ready to dance, and no doubt, the champagne had helped lower my inhibitions too. And the dance... It had been the music which had seduced me. It had gone to my head and I had gotten carried away. I had allowed myself to be seduced by the heat of their bodies, the feel of their hands on my hips, their lips on mine.

Edward stops not far from me. He looks me up and down as he unknots his tie and allows the length to hang down from either side of his collar. Heat zings in my belly. My throat goes dry. Footstep's approach. I glance past him as Baron stalks over to stand next to him. His blue gaze holds mine. He reaches for his rolled-up sleeve and smooths it down his arm. I gulp.

Baron's lips twitch. "You want a drink, Eve?" he rumbles.

"Yes," I breathe, "yes, please."

His smile widens. He knows I am nervous, and he's enjoying it. Jerk. At the same time, he's offering me a drink to help distract me. Typical Baron. Confusing, a little mean, and a whole lot gentle. He stalks over to the bar, grabs a bottle of whiskey and swigs from it. He ambles over, hands it to Edward, who drinks from it without taking his eyes off of me.

He offers me the bottle and I glance from him to Baron, then back at Ed. I twist my fingers together in front of me.

"What's the matter, Ava?" Edward murmurs. "You scared of us?"

I shake my head.

"You changed your mind, Eve?" Baron quirks an eyebrow. "If you have ___"

"No," I rush out, "it's not that."

"Then?" Baron takes the bottle from Edward, tilts it to his lips. The strong chords of his throat move as he swallows and a pulse flares to life between my legs.

"What is it?" Edward studies me. "What's wrong?"

"N...nothing."

Baron tilts his head, "It's something." His lips kick up, "Go on, you can tell us anything; you know that."

"It's just," I shake the hair away from my face, "it was different on the dance floor, you know? It was more organic, more natural, and here... It just feels forced."

"Hmm." Baron's eyebrows draw down. "You know we won't force you into doing anything, Eve."

"I know."

"Nothing you don't want us to do to you, that is." He smirks and goosebumps pop on my skin. OMG, that's what I am afraid of, and I don't know how to categorize the feelings that bubble up from somewhere deep inside.

It seems natural to be with both of them...and yet... It's unusual. This is not what normal people do. This is not how one is supposed to choose between two men... I mean, I feel something for both of them. I've tried scheduling time with each of them. I've tried not sleeping with them, only to sleep with each of them separately... And now, here I am, faced with both of them... Actually, on the verge of doing it with both of them at the same time. It should feel odd...but it doesn't. Which should count for something, right? If only I could, somehow, get past the strange reluctance that grips me.

I lower my hands to my sides, walk up to Baron. I take the bottle from him, tilt it to my lips and take a healthy swig. The liquor burns its way down, leaving a trail of heat in its wake. I take another sip and warmth flushes my skin. A pleasant numbness radiates out from my stomach. I raise the bottle and Edward takes it from me.

"Enough," he scolds, "don't want you getting drunk."

"As if." I toss my head, pivot and head for the stairs. I stop with my leg poised on the lowest step. Turn to find them walking toward me. Oh, hell, this is it. I turn, take the steps up to my room. Yeah, if I am going to do this, then it is going to be on my turf. Not that I am going to be able to control much of what is to come, but hell, if I am going to give in to everything. At least, I am going to initiate the proceedings. Take the lead in something. Famous last words. I stop at the foot of the bed, glance toward where the men stand just inside the doorway of the room. I reach for the sleeve of my dress and shrug it down, then the other side. It slides down, pools around my ankles, I kick it off along with my heels.

Baron's chest rises and falls.

Edward's nostrils flare.

I reach behind me, unhook my bra and drop it to the ground. Then, without taking my gaze off of them, I slide my panties down to the floor and kick them aside.

Baron's jaw tics. He walks toward me, grabs his shirt at the back with one

hand and—in that way that men do—yanks it off and flings it aside. He pauses in front of me, and I gesture to his pants.

"Take them off," I rasp.

He toes off his shoes, unbuckles his pants and shoves them down along with his boxers and socks. He folds his clothes, places them on a nearby chair then straightens to reveal his long, thick cock that points straight up. The head is fat and swollen, almost purple with arousal. I can't take my gaze off of its heavy perfection. Precum oozes from the crown and my mouth waters.

He bends, grabs me by my waist and throws me on the bed. I squeak, bounce on the mattress once, then lay there with my hair across my face. I reach up to push the hair from my face and he points a finger at me.

"Stop."

"Wh...what?"

"You don't get to direct the proceedings, little Eve."

"And...you do?"

"Damn-fucking right." He grabs his already erect dick and pumps himself once. His shaft seems to lengthen even more and my breath catches. Oh God, have I actually had that inside of me?

I glance past him to where Edward watches the two of us, an indecipherable look in his eyes.

"Ed," I swallow, "you okay?"

He doesn't reply. He fists his hands at his side, rakes his gaze down my naked body.

"On your knees," he snaps.

"Wh...what?"

"Do as he says," Baron orders.

Well, hell...again, the two of you gang up on me... And this time, it's going to lead to a gang bang. OMG. I snort and Baron glares at me.

"Do it," he growls, "or else." He takes a step forward and I flip over, then push up to my knees.

"Good girl," Edward praises me and I flush.

His footsteps approach and he comes around to stand in front of me. I glance up to find him undoing his shirt, leisurely, one button at a time. He pulls off his shirt, along with his tie, drops them to the floor.

He toes off his shoes and does the same with his pants and briefs. He turns to me and I take in his erect cock. It juts up, thick and heavy, a vein running up the underside. His dick is not as long as Baron's, but what he

lacks in length, he makes up in width. Fuck. As I watch, his cock seems to swell further—fat, turgid, and so damn huge. How the hell am I going to take not one, but two, monster cocks inside me at the same time?

He lowers his head, drags his lips over mine. I part my lips, and instantly, he slides his tongue inside. He kisses me, long and deep, and with such intensity that my head spins.

The bed dips, heat sears my back, then big palms grip my hips.

Baron slides his fingers around to strum my pussy lips and I moan. He slides two fingers inside of me and I arch back and into him. Edward cups my breast; he tweaks my nipple and I shudder.

He releases my mouth and Baron instantly replaces it with his. He swipes his tongue across the seam of my lips, licks into my mouth, and drags his tongue across my teeth. My pussy clenches around his fingers and he groans. He presses kisses across my cheek, to the shell of my ear. He sucks on my earlobe and my entire body jolts.

"Fuck." he breathes, "you're so fucking sexy, little Eve."

He shoves my hair aside, kisses his way down to the curve of my shoulder. He bites down and I tremble. Edward cups both of my breasts, bringing them together. He bends down, bites on one nipple, and I shudder. He kisses his way to the other, then sucks deeply on the nipple and I feel the pull all the way down to my core.

"Bloody hell, you're soaking," Baron growls. "You're dripping all over my hand, Eve."

Yeah, well, you have two men, two pair of hands, two pairs of sinful mouths kissing you, sucking on you, licking their way across your most sensitive parts, and then we'll see how you do.

As if he heard me and wants to punish me for my impertinent thoughts, Baron shoves two more fingers inside of me and I moan. He begins to work his fingers in and out of me. The wet squelching noises fill the space, and it's so dirty and so raw that I can't stop myself from panting, from throwing my arm up and around him, pushing my breasts deeper into Edward's roaming mouth. He squeezes my tits with so much pressure that a sound of protest leaves my lips. Baron closes his mouth over mine again, as if he can't bear to let the sound escape. He bites down on my lower lip, then licks into my mouth again. I wind my fingers around his neck, pulling on the hair at the nape of his neck. He shudders, releasing my mouth, just as Edward rises up to kiss my chin. He brushes his mouth across mine again, nipping on my lips,

slurping on them, before thrusting his tongue inside my mouth and sucking on my tongue.

Baron increases the pace with which he's moving his fingers in and out of me. At the same time Edward lowers his head to my other breast. He bites down on my nipple and heat sears my spine, my pussy clenches, my thighs spasm and I almost collapse, but Baron's hold on my waist keeps me upright.

He kisses his way down the slope of my shoulder, down my spine, just as he curves his fingers inside me.

Edward releases my breast only to massage my thigh. He slides his fingers around and into the valley between my butt cheeks. That's when the orgasm rips through me.

It washes over me and I pant, close my eyes, and allow the waves to carry me up...higher up...before they fade away. I slump against Baron, who pulls his fingers out of me. He brings it to his mouth sucks on it.

"Fuck," he groans, "you taste fucking sweet, Ava."

I open my eyes in time to see them exchange a glance.

"What...?" I clear my throat. "What was that about?"

Edward glances down at me. "I'm hungry."

"Umm." I swallow. "We had dinner already," I remind him and Edward's smile widens.

"We missed dessert."

"Oh."

"Time to make up for that."

He glances at Baron, who runs his hands up to cup my breasts. He begins to massage them, running his rough callused digits across my sensitive nipples. A moan bleeds from my lips.

"Oh, my god," I groan, "Oh my g—OD."

I cry out as Edward drops to his knees on the floor. Baron positions me to face Edward, so he is at eye level with my pussy. Immediately, Ed fits his mouth to my cunt and begins to eat me out.

"Jesus," I moan as he crams his tongue inside my channel. My thigh muscles turn to jelly. My legs slide apart further, giving him better access. He grips my hips, holds me in place as he tilts his head and sticks his tongue in and out of me, again and again. Meanwhile, Baron continues to knead my breasts. He sucks on my earlobe, then inserts his tongue inside my ear, and my eyes roll back in my head.

"Oh," I gasp, "oh, my fucking god."

I hear Baron chuckle, right before he catches my nipples between the forefinger and thumb of each his hands. He pinches with such precision that I yell. Heat sluices down my spine, and I throw my head back and groan as moisture gushes out from between my legs.

Edward licks it up, slurps his tongue up my melting slit with long, deep swipes that seem to penetrate to the core of me.

Baron releases his hold on one breast, only to pinch my chin, turning it toward him, before he places his mouth over mine. "Come," he growls. "Come right now, Eve," he says, as Edward closes his mouth over my pussy. That's when I explode.

This second orgasm whips out from my womb, up my spine, to crash behind my eyes. Seconds later, I open my eyes to find myself slumped against Baron. I glance up at his blue eyes, which bore into me.

"Wow," I mumble. "What was that?"

"That," Edward rises to his feet, "was just the first course."

I turn to gaze up at him from under heavy eyelashes, "I thought you said that was dessert."

His grin widens, "I lied."

He glances at Baron, who places both of his hands on my hips. He lifts me up, then turns me around before placing me back on my knees, so I am facing him.

"Oh." I blink. "Now what?"

"Now we fuck."

Ava

My muscles have turned to jelly. There is not a single, solid bone left in my body. My brain cells have all melted into a gooey mess. It's the only reason I don't protest as the two men maneuver me as if I don't have a single thought in my head. Which, to be fair, I don't.

Baron lies back, and Edward positions me over Baron, with my knees on either side of his thighs. He grips my hips, and Edward releases me. The bed dips, heat sears my back, and I glance over my shoulder as Edward kneels behind me. He places his hands on my waist, above Baron's hands. There's a least an inch of space between them, as if there's a tacit understanding between them not to touch each other.

Baron increases his pressure on my waist. I turn back to him just he lifts me up slightly so I am positioned a little above him.

Edward leans in so his hard chest is pressed into my back. He reaches under to play with my pussy and I huff. He slides his fingers in and out of me, scoops up my cum, and brings it up to smear it around my backhole. I shiver.

"Ed," I breathe, "please..."

"Please what?"

Please be gentle, is what I want to say. But just then he inserts a finger inside my backhole. I freeze.

"Shh" He brings his other hand up to my chin, turns me to face him, bends down and licks into my mouth. He nibbles on my lips until I part them,

then sweeps his tongue inside. He kisses me, tilts his head and swipes his tongue across my teeth. He deepens the kiss, floods my mouth with his taste until I relax.

Baron walks his hands up my waist, cups the undersides of my breasts. He drags his fingertips across the sensitive skin and I shiver. I raise my arm wind it around Edward's neck, just as he thrusts his fingers in and out of me. He scoops up more of my cum, slides it inside my backhole. He inserts a second finger and I part my legs further apart, allowing him deeper access. Baron cups the heavy weight of my breast in one hand, brings the other hand down to strum my clit. He weaves his finger about my clit and a shudder runs up my spine.

Edward pulls his fingers out from my backside, only to slide them in again. He scissors his fingers and my back channel stretches to accommodate him. A groan ripples up my throat and my thigh muscles threaten to give way.

"Fuck," he breathes against my lips, "you're so tight, baby."

Heat sears my skin, and my pussy clenches and comes up empty.

"Please." I clear my throat, "I want..."

I glance down at Baron and he slides a finger inside my soaking pussy.

He adds another finger, a third, and I arch my spine, reach out with my free hand... Searching, wanting. His strong fingers twine with mine. My belly clenches... Needing...wanting... More. I angle my head to meet Baron's gaze. The blue of his irises deepens; green flares in their depths.

I need this. I want this. I am so, empty. So...so...empty.

Baron nods. He pulls out his fingers. At the same time, with his other hand on my hip, he guides me down until the crown of his dick breaches me. A trembling grips me. I lower my thighs, sink down another centimeter onto his fat shaft. Sweat beads his brow and the skin around his eyes creases. He tightens his grip on my waist, applies more pressure, and I slide down the rest of the way.

"Oh." I throw my head back, impaling myself on his cock. His dick stretches me, chafes against my sensitive inner walls. Ripples of pleasure radiate out from the contact. My nipples harden. My chest heaves.

Edward runs his hand down my spine, flattens his large palm at the small of my back. He applies pressure and I lower my arm from around his neck. I flatten my palm against Baron's hard chest, then lean forward and over him. He brings up his hand, fastens it around my nape. He eases my head down,

until my face is poised close to his. He rises up to meet me half-way, rubs his nose against mine. My lips curve and he brushes his mouth over mine, and again. He releases my hand only to slide his down and pinch my nipple. My core clenches and my muscles tremble. Behind me, I sense Edward move. He positions his dick against the rim of my backhole, and I freeze.

"Shh," Baron tightens his grip on the nape of my neck, and somehow, it's reassuring and arousing. I feel claimed, and turned on, and incredibly horny. He licks into my mouth and I part my lips, allowing him further access. He kisses me, even as he massages my breast. He deepens the kiss, sucks on my tongue and my eyes roll back in my head. I am melting inside. My thigh muscles quiver. My shoulders tremble. I give in to the kiss completely, and that's when Edward pushes into my backhole.

A moan trembles from my lips and Baron swallows it down. "It's going to be so good for you, baby," he croons, "so good." He feathers kisses against my jawline, down to my mouth. Licks the edge of my lips. "Oh, Eve." He groans into my mouth, "You're fucking glorious."

I relax further and Edward thrusts forward, past the tightness. He hits a spot deep inside and my insides quiver. It's too much. Too full. Like nothing I've ever felt before. The burning in my backchannel is balanced by the fullness in my pussy. I gaze into Baron's eyes as Edward pulls out. He plunges forward and my entire body bucks.

"F-u-c-k," Edward breathes, "you're so fucking tight, Ava. So hot." The heat from his body sears my back, flows over my shoulders.

Inside me, Baron's cock thickens, pulses. "Touch your tits," he orders.

I slide my hand up to squeeze my breast. I play with my nipple and a whine spills from my lips. My pussy clenches, and a groan rips out of Baron. He thrusts up and into me just as Edward pulls out. Edward grips my hips, squeezes, then plunges back into my back channel. Heat sears up my spine as Baron pulls out. He thrusts into me, as Edward retreats. In and out, in and out. They move in rhythm, fucking me, pounding both my front and back holes. The vibrations from the impact radiate out, my toes curl, and my fingers tremble.

There's so much of them in me, it feels like I am no longer in my skin. It's like they've literally fucked me out of myself. A chuckle spills from my lips and Baron frowns. His lips curl, his eyes gleam, then he picks up the pace. He pistons his hips forward and impales me, again and again, just as Edward pounds into me from behind. Edward's hands on my hips... Baron's

hold on my neck, his fingers meeting around the front of my throat... His grip tightens and spots of black flicker at the edges of my eyes.

Edward brings his hand to my breast. He shoves my palm aside, and tweaks my nipple so hard that pinpricks of pleasure pool in my belly...

Oh, God. Oh, God. I throw out my hand and Baron catches it. He twines his fingers through mine. I try to draw a breath, my lungs burn, my pussy clenches, and my back channel quivers. Every part of me is stretched and tensed and aching for release. I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. *Please, please, please.* My eyelids flutter down.

"Open your eyes, Ava," Baron commands. "Look at me."

I snap my eyelids open, hold his blue gaze, just as he releases his hold on my throat. The climax rips through me. Edward grips my chin, turns me toward him. "I fucking love you, Ava," he growls as he thrusts into me one last time. The orgasm crashes into me. The breath rushes out of me. My eyelids roll back and sparks flare in front of my eyes. I swear, I do see stars... No, really, I do. When I open my eyes, it's to find I am slumped over Baron's chest, with Edward hunched over me. Someone—Baron?—rubs my back. Someone else—Edward?—drags his fingers through my hair.

"You okay?" Baron asks, at the same time as Edward.

They stare at each other, then Baron turns to me. "How do you feel?"

"Awful."

"What?" Baron frowns.

"What?" Edward growls. He drops his head down to peer into my face, "Are you okay? Did we hurt you? If we did—"

"Relax." I smirk. "I am good. In fact, I don't think I've ever been better."

"Ah," Edward's brow clears, "you little tease."

He wraps his fingers around my thick strands of hair and pulls. My scalp prickles. Goosebumps pop on my skin and I shiver.

"The only thing that can improve things is..." I turn and lock gazes with Baron, "If the two of you come inside me, right now."

"We don't have to," Baron murmurs, even as his cock throbs inside my pussy.

"We could just jerk off..." Edward grimaces, "if you're too sore."

I squeeze down with my inner muscles, and both men groan.

"Fuck," Baron swears.

"Bloody hell," Edward groans.

"Please," I bite the inside of my cheek, "I insist."

They look at each other, then another of those stupid, mysterious male glances passes between them.

Edward leans in. He kisses me as he starts to thrust into me, again and again. Sweat beads his brow, his jaw hardens, and his dick thickens inside of me as he grunts.

Under me, Baron pistons his hips up, thrusting inside me. Vibrations shiver up my spine and heat flushes my skin. I groan as they fall into an easy rhythm. Baron thrusts, Edward retreats. Edward lunges forward, Baron pulls back. In-out-in, their movements grow more frantic. I glance at Edward's face. His amber eyes gleam and a nerve throbs at his temples.

"I am going to come, Ava." He plunges inside me, ramming into me with such force that a whine tumbles from my lips. I turn back, lock gazes with Baron. His blue irises glow, his jaw tics, and sweat glistens on his forehead. He pulls me down, kisses me as he thrusts up and into me. His dick thickens, and he hits a spot—or was that, Edward? It's difficult to say when both of them are pounding into me, filling me, touching me so deeply inside that I know I'll never feel this possessed again, this changed by another experience.

Baron groans, while behind me, Edward grunts. Then they come, simultaneously shooting their loads inside me.

Edward kisses my cheek, my neck, then straightens. He pulls out of me at the same time that Baron does. I glance down to find cum sliding down my inner thighs.

"Fuck, that's hot," Edward murmurs. He throws himself down on the bed, and I ease down to lie between them. My arms and legs tingle. Then, as the adrenaline fades away, they feel weighted down. The sweat dries on my skin and I shiver. Baron pulls the cover over us. I turn over on my side and he spoons me. I snuggle into Edward and he slides his hand under my neck. My eyes close and I fall asleep. It's the deepest, most dreamless sleep I've had in years. When I wake up, light creeps in from between the curtains. I glance around to find that I am alone in bed.

28

Ava

I slide out of bed and my core hurts. I head toward the bathroom and other parts of me protest. I step under the shower and the heat soothes away the ache in my tired muscles. I get out of the shower, brush my teeth, then head for the closet. The clothes that Archer brought me earlier are still in the suitcase he delivered to me. I pull out fresh underwear. Thank God, Isla had been able to get it for me. It would have been mortifying if it had been Archer who had to pack the bag; not that either of the men would have let him do that. Both of them are too possessive to tolerate that. No wonder Baron had agreed to my calling Isla. They must have realized it was the only way they could get fresh clothes over to me. I finish dressing in a skirt and a blouse, then pull a thick pullover on top, finishing off with a pair of thick socks, before walking down the steps.

I enter the kitchen to find Baron tapping away on his phone at the dining table. Edward's at the stove, making breakfast. The scent of whatever he is cooking wafts over to me. My stomach grumbles. The toaster pops and he pulls out the bread and places it on a plate.

Baron glances up when I enter. His features brighten. He rises to his feet, walks over and kisses me on my cheek. Huh? No demanding kiss on the lips? When was the last time he did something this innocent?

"Eve," he rumbles, "did you sleep well?"

I can't stop the blush that rises to my cheeks.

He peers into my face and his lips quirk, "So you did sleep well."

I nod.

"Good." He leads me to the table, pulls out a chair for me, then eases it back in after I am seated.

"Ava." Edward walks over to place a fully-loaded plate in front of me. "Did you get some rest?" He bends, kisses me on the forehead, then pours some orange juice for me.

Baron heads over to the coffee maker and returns with a steaming mug of coffee. He places it in front of me. I glance down at my breakfast, then between the two of them.

"Wow," I mutter, "that's some service, you guys."

"Only the best for my girl." Baron squeezes my shoulder before sitting down.

Edward points at my plate, "Eat, you must be starved."

"The way the two of you constantly go on about my eating, you are going to have to roll me out of here."

"I don't see an issue with that." Edward looks me up and down and heat sears my cheeks. I glance away, devoting myself to my breakfast.

Baron puts his phone aside, accepts the plate that Edward sets down in front of him. Then, Edward takes his place and the three of us eat in silence. When I've managed to put away most of the omelette and the toast and fruit salad, I pick up my coffee, wait until the guys have finished eating.

"So," I ask when Baron sets down his fork, "are we going to address the elephant in the room?"

"If you're talking about Ed, here, I see him more as a rhino."

"A rhino?" I blink.

"He constantly butts in where he's not needed and tramples over everything." Baron smirks.

"I rather see myself more as a cheetah." Edward yawns.

"And I'm what, a lion?" Baron's grin widens.

"And I'm confused." I glance between them. "Aren't you two supposed to hate each other?"

"Temporary truce." Baron raises his shoulder, "You have to admit, that entire going at each other's throats dynamic was getting a little passé."

"And that was a good diversion," I scowl, "but as I was saying earlier, aren't we going to talk about—?"

"No." Baron shakes his head.

"Nope." Edward scowls.

I gape, "You don't even know what I am going to—"

Baron holds up his hand. "We're never talking about it." He exchanges a glance with Edward, who nods.

"Never," he agrees.

"So..." I set down my mug of coffee, "let me get this right." I glance between them. "We are not going to talk about what happened last night?"

"What happened last night?" Baron fixes me with that impenetrable gaze.

"Yeah, do enlighten us." Edward tilts his head.

I can't believe this. They are going to make me recap the details. Jerks. Fine, if they think I am going to back down from it, they have another think coming. "I slept," I glance at Baron, "with you," I turn to Edward, "and with you." I glance between them and wave my arms, "at the same time."

"And it's not happening again," Baron says in a hard voice.

"Never again," Edward emphasizes, "and that's the last we are ever going to refer to it."

I throw up my hands. "There you two go again, doing the thing...you do..."

"What?" Baron scowls.

"Excuse me?" Edward arches an eyebrow, all cold and mean-like.

Well, whatever. This time, their over-the-top sexiness is not going to distract me.

"When it suits you, the two of you unite against me, and when it doesn't, you decide to fight over me."

"Which is stopping right now," Edward drawls.

"It is?"

Baron nods, "We're done behaving in such an immature fashion."

I snort, "Famous last words."

"We mean it this time." Edward leans forward, "We had a talk this morning."

I push back my chair and jump up, "Another talk? And once more, I am not part of it?"

"You were tired." Edward scowls. "We let you sleep in."

"Oh, you let me sleep in." I scoff. "If you expect me to thank you, prepare to be disappointed," I snap. "Besides, who's fault is it that I was tired?" At their blank looks, I continue. "I handled the both of you, at once, Jesus, do you know how difficult that was for me?"

"I don't know, babe," Baron mutters, "from what I saw, you enjoyed

yourself tremendously."

"Asshole." I pale. "The both of you... Fuckers. Wankers. Tossers of the first order." My chest heaves, "I hate both of you. I wish I'd never met either of you."

"Done having your tantrum?" Baron says in a cold voice that, honestly, pushes me over the edge.

"Done?" I glance between them. "No, I am not done." I grab my plate with the remnants of my breakfast and smash it to the floor. Neither of them reacts. *Oh, yeah? That's how it's going to be, is it?* I seize Baron's plate with his leftovers and throw it down, reach for Edward's plate when he grabs my arm. "Let me go," I snarl, "let me the fuck go."

"Sit down, Eve," Baron snaps.

"No."

"Do it, or I'll make you." I shoot him a sideways glance, take in his hard features, the tic of his jaw, the nerve that throbs at his temple. I hold his gaze and his blue eyes turn even colder. Chips of ice that can burn me, cut through me, slice me to the bone and I'd never be able to stop him. Never. I release my hold on Edward's plate, sink down into the chair.

Baron pushes a glass of water toward me. "Drink," he orders.

I lift the glass and my fingers tighten around it. I so want to throw it in his face.

"Don't," Edward says in a mild tone.

I glare at him, take a few sips, then keep it down.

His lips twist, "Now we talk."

29

Ava

"Talk?" I purse my lips, "I thought the two of you said that you would never again discuss what happened last night."

"We're not doing it again Eve," Baron rumbles. "That was a one-off."

"Oh, why is that?" I stare at him. "Because you two decided so?"

"Among other things." He nods, and I blow out a breath, "See, this is the problem, the two of you deciding things that concern me, without keeping me in the picture."

"We let you decide how to manage the situation first, and see what happened then?"

I pale. "That...that's not fair," I say in a low voice. "I tried my best to be fair. I tried to figure out how best to allocate my time between the two of you."

"And it made you miserable." Edward leans forward, "You were torn apart and unhappy. You put so much stress on yourself that you stopped finding enjoyment in life."

"Not true." Actually, it is. That entire phase of trying to be with each of them separately, only to feel guilty when each became jealous of the time I spent with the other was nerve-wracking.

"Exactly," Baron nods, "which is why we are taking the onus off of you."

"I thought that's what bringing me here was about."

"That was for your safety," Edward clarifies.

"And both of you sleeping with me at the same time?" I frown. "What

was that?"

The two exchange glances, then Baron turns to me, "That was a one-off."

"A one-off?"

"It was..." he blows out a breath, "inevitable."

"Inevitable?" I scowl. "You could be a little more complimentary about the experience."

"Fucking you is as close as it gets to a spiritual experience," Edward growls. "Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"It's like coming home," Baron snaps, "but you know that already."

"Oh," I mumble, and my cheeks burn again. Shit, I am not used to this... I mean, sleeping with the both of them was...like...mind-blowing. But talking about it? Hell... My pussy clenches, my backhole hurts, and every part of me seems to come alive. My heart begins to thud in my chest. Shit, just thinking about it...is sending my libido into overdrive. "And it is...an experience I am never going to forget."

"But it won't happen again," Baron growls. "You understand?"

"Either we sleep with you individually, or not at all," Edward grumbles.

"And for now, we choose not at all," Baron interjects.

"Wait," I blink, "what do you mean?"

"It means, for the moment, sex is off the table," Edward murmurs.

"Neither of us is gonna shag you," Baron clarifies.

"B...but, why?" I grip the edge of the table. "I mean...are you two sure you can go without shagging?"

They glare at each other, then both nod.

"Yes," Edward rolls his shoulders, "I can."

"I'll make it work," Baron mutters.

"But...why?" I drag my fingers through my hair, "I don't understand the rationale behind this decision."

"Sex only confuses the issue," Edward offers. "I should know, right?" he says in a self-deprecating voice. "Apparently, the Church was onto something, in this respect, at least."

"This way, that particular source of tension is dispelled. So, you can focus on the individuals." Baron drums his fingers on the table. "We can all focus on the relationship aspect instead. Gives us the opportunity to think with a clear head."

"Do I get a say in this?" I glance between them.

Baron sets his jaw.

Edward folds his arms across his chest.

"No, don't answer that." I raise my hand, "You've already made up your minds, and of course, why does what I think about it matter?"

"You know, it's the right thing to do," Baron says softly. "You do, Eve."

"It will help you in coming to a decision faster." Edward reaches for my hand and I pull away. He frowns and I firm my lips. Just because they are right, doesn't mean I am going to let them know that I agree, right?

"Fine." I rise to my feet. "Whatever."

"So, you're okay with this?" Baron asks cautiously.

"Do I have a choice?"

"No," Edward replies. "No, you don't."

"Well then," I raise a shoulder, "there's nothing left to say anymore."

Turning, I storm out of the kitchen. I suppose I should help them clean up the mess I created, but too bad. Since they are making all of the decisions, they can handle this on their own.

I head back to my room, unpack the rest of my clothes, put them away, have a long bath, wash my hair and dry it, take a nap. When Baron peeks his head inside and asks me to have lunch with them, I refuse. For once, he doesn't insist and I'm both relieved and pissed off. I mean, he'd never have allowed me to go hungry nor would Edward... And now, they are letting me stew here on my own? Gah!

As the day wears on, I can't bear being locked up in here further.

I grab my hip-scarf from the closet—thank God, Isla had packed it for me—then I head down to the studio. I shut the door, pull up the playlist to a medium beat song, one that I can stretch to, and ease into a rhythm. By the time I am on my third song, my heart is pumping and sweat beads my brow. I throw myself into a choreographed routine that I've been working on, in the hope that I can professionally compete someday.

I shimmy my shoulders, grind my hips, raise my arms, allow the music to sink into my blood as I move my body to the beats. I close my eyes, twirl again and again, and once more. I throw back my hair, tip up my chin and see Edward at the doorway. I continue to dance, undulate my shoulders, lift my hips, drop them heavily, then lean into a lighter half-drop.

His gaze narrows. The beat on the track kicks in.

I lift my hips upward and slightly forward in a strong, accented move. Activate the outside of my thigh and my hip to give the movement oomph, drop slightly, then lift again.

His chest rises and falls. He takes a step forward, then another.

Sweat trickles down between my breasts. I shift my weight from leg to leg, straighten my supporting knee, and release the other, then slide my hip out to the side, then back.

He swallows, closing the distance between us. He places his big palms on my hips, then sinks to his knees. I continue to lift one hip and drop, then the next, and the first.

A groan rips from him. He stares at my curves, slides his palm down to cup my butt cheeks. A moan slips from my lips. I keep moving, lift and drop, thrust to the side and drop. He doesn't release me. He leans in and presses his cheek against my stomach. The warmth of him sears me through the clothes I am wearing. I dig my fingers into his hair and tug. Urge him to look up.

He glances at me from under his long sooty eye lashes. "You slay me, Eve," he whispers. "You are my downfall and my saving grace."

"Oh, Ed." I sink down to my knees, cup his face, "I love you, Ed."

He leans in close enough for our eyelashes to tangle. The music winds down, then switches off completely. Our noses bump and we share breath. My heart begins to pound in my chest.

"Edward." I whisper, and he stares down at my lips.

"I want to kiss you, Eve."

"Do it." I swallow and my throat hurts. "Do it, Ed."

His lips part, then he raises his gaze to meet mine. "I can't."

He rises to his feet. "I'm sorry, Eve, but you understand, right?"

"No" I jump to my feet. "I fucking don't."

"You heard us earlier; no sex."

"Fuck that." I curl my fingers into fists. "Fuck the stupid, idiotic condition you guys have laid down."

"I can't," he mutters. "We all agreed."

"No, the two of you agreed." I throw up my hands. "Oh, for fuck's sake."

I brush past him, out the door, and run into Baron. He stares at me, then at Ed, a strange look in his eyes.

"What?" I snap. "What do you want?"

"Eve, please." I hear Edward approach, and fuck, I really don't want to talk to either of them now. I brush past Baron, take the steps two at a time. I reach my room, slam the door and bolt it, then throw myself on the bed.

"Bloody hell." I bury my face in my pillow. This entire situation is untenable. I really have to get away from them. Just be on my own, get a

respite from this crazy sexual tension that's always there when I am with either of them. It's just not possible that I am so attracted to both... That I can't make up my mind if I prefer one over the other.

Someone knocks on the door.

"Go the fuck away," I growl.

"You missed lunch," Baron calls out.

"I am not hungry."

"I am leaving your plate by the door."

"Go away," I yell, then bury my face in my pillow again. Exhausted, I fall asleep, and when I awake next, the light is fading outside. My stomach grumbles. I slide off the bed, walk to the entrance and open my bedroom door. I glance outside, then on the floor. On a tray near the door is a covered plate. I snatch it up, shut the door, then sit on a table near the window and polish off the sandwich. It's a little soggy, but still delicious.

Wonder who made it? Baron or Edward? Probably, Edward made it, and Baron brought it to me. Gah! The two of them have a certain understanding between them that comes from having known each other for years. There's animosity between them, no doubt, but they seem to be getting along better than ever. And hell, if I am not beginning to think fondly of both of them. This, despite the fact that both of them feel that they have the right to order me around.

Shit. I really need to find a way out of here. If I can get to the main road, I can hitchhike back, right? Why couldn't the alphaholes have trusted me enough to give me a phone? Well, this is why... Because I'd have found a way out of here much faster. Damn it, why can't they treat me like I can make up my own mind? Because I can't? After all, I am still dithering over which one of them is my 'one'? Bloody hell, all this thinking is definitely not helping me any. I jump up, begin to pace. I only have to stay awake until they go to bed. And then I can leave.

I can try to find the keys to Baron's SUV...and then drive away. They might hear me leave, but that's okay. They don't have another mode of transportation. By the time they figure out a backup plan, I'll be long gone.

They haven't mentioned any security around the place. I haven't seen anything either. Bet they thought keeping an eye on me was enough, right? Would it be safe, though? Is it safer to stay here? Not for my sanity, at any rate. I am done bending to their will. It's time for me to strike out, assert my independence. I've come this far, haven't I? I've forged my own way in the

world, despite everyone telling me I couldn't make it. I'm only twenty-one, and an entrepreneur already. I founded my studio, cultivated a successful clientele... I can do this.

An hour later, I am dressed in jeans and a shirt, with a jacket. I still have my handbag, so I pull out my wallet, check the money I have, and my credit cards. Yeah, I'll be okay. I pace a little, glance out of the window, wait. A few hours later, I hear the sound of footsteps ascending the stairs. The footsteps approach, stop outside my door. Then there's a knock.

"Ava," Edward calls, "are you coming to dinner?"

"I'm not hungry," I call back.

"Did you eat your lunch?"

"Yes," I snap, "now go away."

"You still sulking?"

"What do you think?"

"If you come down, we could provide you with free entertainment."

"If you mean the two of you bashing each other up," I snort, "you forget, I've seen that already."

There's silence, then he says, "We only want what's best for you, Eve."

"You're not my parents," I yell, realizing as the words leave my mouth that I sound like a spoiled child. "Now, go away."

I sense rather than hear him sigh. "I'll leave dinner outside the door for you." A few minutes later, I hear his return and the sound of a tray being placed on the floor. Then, his footsteps recede.

I wait another half-hour before I peek out the door, grab the food and demolish it. The pasta is yummy. Shit, Edward can cook. Or was that Baron? I know he can cook, but there's so much more I don't know about him. I can stay, of course, and get to know him better. And then what? I'll still be as confused as I am now. And honestly, I can't bear that anymore. I can't.

I pace a little more before finally laying down on the bed. When I awaken again, it's completely dark outside. I slip on my shoes, slide my wallet into my back pocket, then crack the door open. It's dark outside and the doors of the other two rooms are closed. I walk across the landing, down the stairs. One of the steps creaks. I freeze, wait... Nothing moves. I blow out a breath I hadn't been aware I was holding, then walk down, past the living room, to the table near the front door, where I'd seen Baron toss the keys. The bowl is empty. Shit.

I glance around the living room, head for the coffee table. Nothing. I walk down to the room that doubles as Baron's study, crack the door open, peer inside. It's dark. Good. I walk across to the desk, and spot them. There, next to his laptop. I snatch the key fob, retrace my steps to the front door. I swing it open, slowly, expecting something. Maybe alarm bells to go off?

Nothing moves. An owl hoots somewhere and the wind rustles the leaves of the trees. The house is silent. I step out, close the door behind me, then reach the car. I press the key fob, and the door beeps open. Shit, the beep is too loud. I'm sure they definitely heard that, right? I glance at the still silent house, but there's no movement. I open the door to the driver's side, haul myself inside. Adjust the seat, then start the car. Sweat beads my palms and my hands slip on the steering wheel. Shit, shit, shit.

Keeping the headlights off, I grasp the wheel tighter, then ease the car down the short driveway, and onto the country road. I drive carefully, then when I feel confident enough, I switch on the headlights. I steer the car down the narrow road, until I reach the highway. A car whizzes by. I glance both ways, accelerate onto the main road, and head in the direction of London.

I speed up, keep a look-out in the rearview mirror. The road is empty. I blow out a breath, peer through the windshield at the road ahead. Cars pass by, and I continue on. A few more minutes pass and my muscles relax. Maybe...maybe I'll make it. Even if they do catch up with me... Well, big deal... Maybe they'll punish me... I smirk... More likely, they'll lock me up in the room like an errant child. Seriously, those guys need to get a life. If only they had included me in their decision-making, maybe I'd have stayed. Maybe not. I glance up at the rearview mirror and freeze. Headlights light up the space behind me. Shit. I step down on the accelerator and the car behind me speeds up too. I accelerate further; the car keeps pace. Shit, could it be them? I can make out two passengers in the front of the car, but they are too far for me to see their features. Shit, how the hell could they have gotten hold of a car that quickly?

I glance at the road, then back at the mirror, to find the car gaining on me. Shit, shit, shit. I accelerate further, and the car behind me increases its speed. Hell, ugh! I can't lose this round... Not that it's a competition, but I have my pride. I am going to outrun them if it's the last thing I do. I step on the accelerator, grip the steering wheel more tightly. The SUV leaps forward. The headlights light up the road and there, straight-ahead, eyes stare back at me. I scream, swerve to miss the deer. The brakes screech and the car hits the

bank of the road, hurtles down the short slope. A tree looms ahead, there's a loud bang, then everything goes dark.

30

Edward

"She's gone."

"What the fuck?" Baron swears aloud.

I'd thought I'd heard a beep, followed by the sound of a car driving away, had glanced outside and seen the SUV gone. I'd rushed into her room... knowing already that it would be empty. Then stepped out to find Baron at the doorway to his room.

"The SUV's gone."

"Fuck. The car keys." He races down the steps to the study. I follow him, knowing already what he is going to find. He reaches his desk and swears. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." He turns to me, "The car, we can track it."

He stalks out of the study, up the stairs to his room. I follow him. He snatches his phone, pulls up the app. I reach him, glance over his shoulder at the green dot on the screen.

"Well?"

"It's not moving."

"What does that mean?"

"How the fuck do I know?" He turns on me, "This was a bad idea. We should have spoken to her, reasoned with her, not acted like overbearing brutes..."

"Which we are." I grimace. "Let's get to her first, then point fingers at each other."

He nods. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." He squeezes his fingers around the phone,

the skin across his knuckles stretching white. "If something happens to her, I'll never forgive myself."

"Hold on, man." I grip his shoulder. "We'll find her."

"I should have walked away when you asked me to." He squeezes his eyes shut, I stayed on. I couldn't bring myself to leave, and now she's gone."

"We'll find her, Baron," I insist. "She's not far. You said so yourself; we just need to hurry before anything happens to her."

He snaps his eyelids open. "Shit," he shudders, "if they get to her first."

"They won't."

He drags in a breath, "We'll find her first."

"We will."

"And when we do, I—"

"Not now," I snap. "Pull yourself together. Focus, solider. Let's get going."

"Right."

"Right." I clap his shoulder, "See you downstairs." I head for the doorway, when he calls out.

"Edward, how do we get to her? She took the car."

I glance at him over my shoulder, "You didn't think I'd allow you to have the only ride in town, did you?"

His eyes gleam, "Bastard."

"Wanker." I smirk. "See you in a minute."

By the time I pull on my clothes and reach the door, he's already there. I walk around the back of the house, to the garage in the far corner. A few minutes later, we pull out of the driveway in my Aston Martin.

"You had this in the garage, all this time?"

I raise my shoulders. "I had Sinner equip the place with the essentials."

"Remind me to thank him..." He shakes my head, "No, actually, don't. That would only feed into the bastard's ego, and he has more than enough of that to go around."

"As do you."

"And you," he reminds me.

"It's what got us into this situation in the first place."

Baron stares straight ahead.

"Fuck," I slam my palm down on the steering wheel. "Bloody fuck." I turn onto the highway, press down on the accelerator. "How much further?"

"Another few miles." Baron repeatedly glances down at the phone, then

up at the road, finally cautioning me, "Slow down. We should be coming up to it."

I lose speed, search the area as I drive.

"There," Baron exclaims.

I slam on the brakes, park on the side of the road. By the time I am out of the car, he's already at the SUV. He races over to the passenger side and freezes. "She's not here."

I take in the car's front end, which is crumpled against the tree. "The airbags deployed," I state unnecessarily.

"Where the fuck is she?" he swears.

I walk around to the driver's side, spot the trampled grass around the space. "Look at this"

Baron stalks around the car, follows my gaze, and his features pale. "Fuck," he growls. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"They got to her."

"We need to find her before they hurt her."

Baron's phone rings just then. We glance at each other, then he answers the phone. "Archer?" He listens for a few seconds, then disconnects and stares at me, "The man you injured at the church? He's awake."

Two hours later, we pull up at the safehouse outside of London, where both the homeless guy and the guy who'd broken into Ava's studio, have been taken.

I park the car behind two other SUVs and follow Baron into the house. We walk past the empty living room to the bedroom where the homeless guy is. Archer straightens from his position by the window.

"Has he spoken?" Baron takes in the figure on the bed.

"Not yet." Weston glances up from his chair next to the bed. When Archer had moved the injured men here for their own safety, Weston had opted to come with them, staying available to monitor their progress.

I walk around to stand over the man. He's a big man, and his bulk takes up most of the narrow bed. His eyes are shut, his hair in disarray. His features are ashen, the marks around his neck standing out in contrast against his skin. I curl my fingers into fists. I should have killed the bastard; too bad he didn't die. I take a step forward and Baron grabs my shoulder.

I turn to him and he shakes his head. "Let me question him."

I scowl. "Asshole was responsible for what happened to us."

"And he may have information that can help us find her," he reminds me. "Information that I can pry from him."

I open my mouth to protest and he raises his hand, "This is my specialty, Ed." He rolls his shoulders, then continues, "The guy who broke into Ava's studio—the one you shot? He would have more information on why Ava was kidnapped."

"But he's still unconscious," I point out. "Whereas the homeless guy is awake."

Baron purses his lips.

"Also, he did mention that he's involved with the Mafia." I add, "Surely, he must know something about Ava's abduction?"

The sound of a car pulling up outside reaches us. This is followed by the sound of a door slamming, then footsteps approaching from the front of the house. We exchange glances, then look at Archer.

"Did you alert the rest of the Seven?" Baron asks him.

"I did," Weston confirms.

"What the fuck?" I scowl at Weston.

"Why did you do that?" Baron growls, before turning to Archer, "Did you know about this?"

"Uh." He rubs the back of his neck, "It's—"

"Not his fault," Weston interjects. "I threatened to go to the cops unless he agreed to let me call the others."

"The fuck?" I turn on Wes, "Why would you do that?"

"Because you guys need back up." Weston leans forward in his chair. "Something which you two are too proud to ask for. So, I took the decision out of your hands."

"Seriously?" Baron balls his fists at his sides. "It's bad enough we agreed to let you monitor this bastard in the safehouse."

"Not that you had a choice. I am his doctor and he's my patient." He leans forward to check the vitals of the guy, who stirs.

"He doesn't deserve an ounce of care," I growl. "Bastard's behind our kidnapping... And chances are, the same people are behind Ava's kidnapping."

"Ava?" Weston straightens. "The hell you talking about?"

"She ran out on us," Baron rubs the back of his neck, "and they took her."

"And both of you couldn't do anything about it?" Weston scowls.

Baron's face flushes. He leans forward and I slap a hand in his chest,

"Easy, ol' chap, we need to keep our cool here."

"This bastard," Baron glares at the man on the bed, "he'd better have some answers."

The sound of wheels on gravel reaches us, car doors slam, then Damian walks in, followed by Arpad, Saint, and finally, Sinner.

They take up positions around the room.

"Well?" Sinner levels his gaze at Baron, "You going to question him or what?"

Baron draws in a breath. Degree by degree, he seems to force himself to relax. He unfurls his fists, rolls his shoulders. He pulls another chair up to the bed. He stares at the features of the man on the bed, then stiffens.

"Shit," he swears aloud, "now I know where I've seen him before."

"You've seen him before?" I growl, and he nods.

"I thought I recognized him when I first saw him, but couldn't place him."

"But you can now?" Arpad straightens.

"Yeah." Baron blows out a breath and looks at Saint. "Remember the time you and I fought at the underground parking lot and I defeated you?"

"You didn't defeat me."

"Sure, I did," Baron smirks, "though that's not the point." His features harden. "I saw him in the crowd that day."

"You did?" Arpad frowns.

"You sure?" Sinner asks.

"Yeah." Baron squares his shoulders. "Best to get on with the questioning." He glances toward me, "Do you know his name?"

"Anton," Weston interjects, "Anton Ruzlovksy."

I whip my head around, "He's Russian?"

Arpad stiffens; he stares hard at the figure on the bed. "I am going to call Nikolai in on this."

Arpad's wife is Nikolai's sister; their father is *Pakhan* of the Bratva. Arpad, himself, is part of the Bratva...as a special consultant, of sorts...or so he claims. Asshole is probably more in with the Bratva than he is letting on.

He straightens, exchanges a glance with Baron, who nods. Arpad pulls out his phone and walks out, while Baron leans over the man, "Anton, can you hear me?"

Anton's eyes flutter.

"Anton Ruzlovsky?" Baron's voice is firm, "Nod if you can hear me, Anton."

Anton swallows. His eyes flutter again, then he nods almost imperceptibly.

"Good," Baron says in an encouraging tone. "I'm Baron. Baron Masters. Can you tell me who you work for, Anton?"

He opens and shuts his mouth, but nothing emerges.

"His vocal chords suffered some trauma," Weston mutters, "but he should be able to speak."

"Can you hear me, Anton?" Baron asks.

Anton nods.

"What do you have to do with Ava's kidnapping?"

The guys stiffen.

"Ava was taken?" Sinner snaps.

Neither Baron nor I reply.

"Fuck," Saint growls, "this asshole had better start talking, and fast."

I scowl down at the prone figure, who takes in the faces around the room. His chest planes move.

"Anton, hey!" Baron snaps his fingers and Anton jerks his attention back to him. "Ava," Baron growls, "what do you know about Ava's abduction?"

His lips move. Baron presses his ear close to Anton's mouth.

He clenches his jaw. "You are lying," Baron growls. "You do realize, we are not going to go easy on you. The only way you can alleviate what's coming to you, is if you tell us the truth."

Anton swallows, then shakes his head again. His lips move and Baron straightens. "Asshole insists he had nothing to do with the kidnapping."

Anger coils in my gut. "We don't have time for this," I growl. "We're here holding our dicks in our hands, while Ava is, at this moment, being held by kidnappers."

"I know," Baron growls, "I fucking know."

"Ed," Damian cautions me, "take it easy, man."

I glare at Baron, who glowers back at me.

"You too, Baron," Damian says in a low voice. "The two of you fighting is not going to help anyone, especially not Ava."

Sinner straightens. "Ask the asshole who's behind the incident? Who did he give the information to?"

"Who did you work for, Anton?" Baron growls. "Who asked you for information on the seven boys which led to their kidnapping?"

His lips move and Baron leans forward. "What was that? Can you repeat

yourself?" Anton's lips move again. Baron stiffens; he stares at me. "Byron?" He scowls. "Did you say Byron?"

A ripple of tension runs round the room. I scowl at the prone man. "Do you have a full name, you asshole?"

Baron holds up a hand and I purse my lips. "Ask him Baron," I insist and Baron glares at me, before turning to the guy.

"Do you have a full name for us? Does Byron have a surname?"

The man's lips move again. Baron leans in, presses his ear close to the man's mouth. His scowl deepens. "Michael Byron? Is that right, Anton?"

Anton nods.

"Did he send you to talk to us?"

Anton shakes his head.

"So why have you been interacting with each of the Seven? Why have you been appearing at crucial junctures at each of their lives? Why have you been tracking them?"

Anton's lips twist, he whispers again, and Baron pulls back to stare at him, "You expect me to believe that?"

Anton's lips curve. His shoulders shake. Is the asshole laughing? What the fuck? I move forward, but Baron reacts before me. He shoots out his hand and his palm connects with Anton's cheek. Anton coughs, or at least I think that's what he does because no sound emerges. His face reddens and spittle flies out of his mouth. He shakes his head, then beckons Baron closer.

Baron leans in and Anton tips up his chin. The tendons of his throat strain. "It's true," he whispers, and I catch the words this time. "All of it." He swallows. "I wanted to make up for what my actions did to all of you. I wanted to make sure you found some measure of happiness."

"We didn't need your help," Saint growls. "We were doing fine on our own."

Anton snickers. Saint's face reddens. He thrusts his chest out, takes a step forward, and Sinner grabs his shoulder.

"Steady, ol' chap," Sinner mutters, "he's trying to get you worked up."

"Well, he's succeeding." Saint shakes off Sinner's arm. "Asshole has two seconds to come through with some information of use, else I swear, I am going to finish what Father—I mean, Edward here, started."

I scowl at him. "I am no longer a priest, you prick. Best remember that."

"Priest? Somehow, now that you are no longer one, this new nickname suits you." Saint looks me up and down, "Hey, Priest." He snickers, "How are

you, Priest?"

I ball my fists at my sides, glare at him. "The fuck is your problem, you piss-head?"

"Welcome to the real world, ol' chap," Saint grins, "where you are allowed to speak your mind without fear of a larger power striking you down for your sins... Unless you are like our man on the bed here, in which case, it's only a matter of time before they catch up with you. And no one can save you from what's about to come next." He glares at Anton, "You catch my drift, motherfucker?"

"You heard the guy." Baron straightens his spine. "You have one last chance to tell us something that's going to help find Ava, else I am going to let Saint, here, take a shot at you, and I can tell you, there's nothing holding him back. Not the law, not the fear of any repercussions. Sadly, the man has enough money to buy out not just the cops, but also governments, if needed, not to mention the Mafia. He can kill you right now and vanish your body and no one would ever know."

Anton's lips twist... Did the asshole just smirk? I glare at his face. "So, you expect us to believe that you followed us around to make sure our lives didn't go to shit?"

He nods.

"And you came to me to confess, because you knew I was one of the Seven?" I scoff.

He stills, then nods again.

This doesn't make sense. I stare at him, hard. "I still don't understand why you came to see me. Clearly, you wanted me to lose control. You knew there was a good probability I'd react exactly the way I did with you... Unless..." I roll my shoulders. "Unless you guessed that I was at the end of my tether. You knew I was falling for Ava and conflicted about how to balance my feelings for her with my calling."

He tilts his head.

"You were hoping that your revelations would push me over the edge, that it would make me do something that I would regret enough to leave the priesthood? That it would nudge me toward her?"

His lips twitch and anger curls in my chest. My blood hums and my pulse rate ratchets up. I step toward him. "Or were you hoping to get exactly the kind of reaction you got from me, where I almost killed you? Did you hope to die in church at the hands of a man of God as a way of repenting for your

sins?"

Asshole stays quiet. He doesn't even blink.

"Answer me, you motherfucker," I bark. "What kind of game were you playing when you came to see me?"

His jaw hardens but he doesn't say a word. Bloody-fucking-hell. I clench my fists at my sides.

He'd better start speaking, or else, Saint will have to get in line behind me. Strange how, once you go down the path of sin... Each progressive one becomes simpler, easier, faster until you forget the true nature of your actions, until everything is tainted by the same brush, until... To err becomes a part of you...and then you walk the line between light and dark, knowing you'll always be a shade of grey. It's only the intensity of that in-between color which changes... And well, that doesn't count for much. It's still grey.

"You have one minute," Baron growls, "sixty seconds before I step away and let these guys beat it out of you..." he shrugs, "so what's it going to be?"

Anton glances around the room, then back at Baron. He tips up his chin and Baron places his ear next to Anton's mouth again. Anton's lips move. Baron's features grow stonier. He shoves back his chair and heads for the door. I follow him.

"We're coming with you." Sinner pushes away from the wall.

"No." We both say in unison. I nod, then Baron turns to glance at the guys.

"This one's ours."

31

"My happiest moments are in a car. Looking out the window, the music on full blast, without a care in the world. I just like watching the world go by. I get this overwhelming feeling as I pass fields upon fields or people upon people. It's like I'm in a film. And then, that perfect song comes on and the sun shines and it's pure happiness."

-From Ava's Diary

Ava

My head pounds and my mouth is so dry. I swallow and my throat hurts. I try to move and my shoulder screams. I try to open my eyes, only to find my eyelids are glued together. I pry them apart, and stars burst behind my eyes. I groan, and the sound echoes around the space. Where am I? What the hell happened? I remember being in the car... The deer... I'd veered off the road. I remember the headlights of the car lighting up the tree and then... Nothing. Shit, I must have crashed. So how did I get here? I try to move, find my arms are bound behind me. I glance down to find my legs are tied to the legs of the chair that I am seated on. What the hell?

My heart begins to race. Had they found me? The men who had assaulted me, then broken into the studio... Had they finally gotten to me? It must have been them who chased me on the highway. And I'd thought it was my guys. Shit, if only it had been Baron and Edward who had been after me. I never should have left the house...but they hadn't included me in their decisions and I had been so mad. Shit, had they realized that I was gone? Would they

come in search of me? Of course, they would, but how quickly could they find me?

A bead of sweat slides down my back.

I glance around the space, taking in the rest of the room. High ceilings, walls which must have been white at one point but which are now a faded gray. Near the doorway there's a pile of cloth—looks like faded carpet. Had someone bought the material with the hope of doing up this room, then abandoned it? A ray of sunlight filters in through the only window, and motes of dust dance in its path. I stare at them, watch as they are highlighted by the sunshine, only to disappear.

Shit, life really is fleeting. Time doesn't wait for anyone. It hadn't for my mother. She's gone, and we are left grappling in the aftermath. A family broken and grieving for her, yet unable to come together to comfort each other. My father had done the right thing. He'd moved on, not from my mother, but from wallowing in self-pity. He'll never forget her and he's chosen to honor her memory by living.

And me? I am still stuck there—in my head, a girl without a mother, someone who misses her so much, and yet, has refused to spend time with her family. I've rebuffed my sister at every turn, not wanting to comfort her or let myself be comforted. I've allowed my selfishness to override everything else. I've clung to my grief, nurtured it, not allowed anyone or anything to touch it. I've held it close, reveled in it, thinking as long as I had it, I had a connection with my mother. I am still holding onto the memory of how it was to be with her. As long as I house that grief in me... At least, I have some last vestige of connection to her physically... I haven't wanted to move on and I have blamed my family for dealing with it, for coming to terms with it, for wanting to honor her memory by staying in the present. Me... I am still stuck there...with her...the memory of the last breath that she took.

And then, when I had been so attracted to both of them, it had only pushed me to withdraw into myself. No wonder I hadn't been able to make sense of my feelings for both of them. No wonder I hadn't been able to choose. How could I, when so much of me was still trapped in coming to terms with the grief in my life? The grief I am ready to relinquish.

No, I won't forget my mother...but... I am ready to live for her... Ready to make her proud of me. To fulfill my potential completely, to let my true nature shine in everything I do. Whether it is dancing...or love. I am going to

give it my all... I am finally ready to make my choice. I know what I want. I know who I want to spend the rest of my life with, and no asshole kidnapers are going to come between me and the kind of life I have always wanted.

Heat presses down on my shoulders and sweat beads my forehead. Why is it so hot? Did they crank up the heating in here? I glance outside at the sun shining through the window, the warmth amplified by the glass panes. Where are Baron and Edward? Do they know where to look? If they don't find me... No, they will. They are smart. More than smart, they are tenacious. They'll track me down. They wouldn't let anything happen to me.

My palms sweat. I tug on the ropes that restrain my hands, but it only seems to tighten them further. Shit, whoever tied me up knew what they were doing. I force myself to relax my muscles, blinking away the sweat that drips into my eyes. Why the hell is it like a sauna in here?

A low vibration hums through the space and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. Shit, what was that? What the hell is happening? I strain my ears, close my eyes, and try to focus in on the sounds. The scent of smoke reaches me. I cough, snap open my eyes. Is someone smoking out there? The scent of burning intensifies. Bloody hell, is the house on fire? My heart begins to race. "Help," I yell, "Help me!"

I tug on my ropes, yank at them, but they don't give. I push down with my feet, managing to move the chair slightly. My muscles protest. Sweat pours down my face. Shit, this is not good, not good. "Help," I cry out again. There's silence, except for the crackling sound, which I swear, has grown louder. The heat in the room pushes down on my chest, my shoulders. My throat closes; the band around my chest tightens. Shit, if there's a fire, am I going to stay here like a sitting duck? I stare at the door, then back at the window. If only I could creep a little closer. Surely, the air nearer to the pane would be fresher?

I push against the floor, leaning toward the window. This time the chair moves a little more. I force myself to push again, and again. My breath catches, panting. I focus on the window pane. I've managed to move, maybe a few inches. It's just the angle at which I have been tied to the chair—it's all wrong. OMG! I am going to burn in here. Shit, shit, shit.

Why are the guys not here? Surely, they should have figured out where I am by now? And if they haven't? What if there are no clues to lead them here? What if they have no idea where to look?

Tendrils of smoke slither in from under the door frame and I cry out.

"Please, no," I gasp, "no, no, no." I push against the floor, leaning in the direction of the window. *Pretend it's a belly dance, but one where you are burdened with weights. Where your arms and legs are bound and it's up to you how well you can put the muscles you've gained thus far to use.*

I undulate my hips, wriggle my torso, even as I push my heels into the ground and careen to the right. With a screech the chair moves toward the window. I repeat the action, and again. My head pounds, my heart hammers so hard against my chest that I am sure it's going to break through my ribcage. I pant, draw in a breath and cough. I panic as I realize the room is filling with smoke. Shit. My eyes water and my pulse thuds at my temples. Damn, if I am going to go down without a fight. I lean my torso to the right, push off with my feet. This time, the chair careens to the right, then tips over. "No..." I scream as the chair hits the floor, my cheek smashes into the wooden planks, the reverberations sweep through me, and the hammering in my head intensifies. "No...please." I sob, "No, I don't want to die like this. Please."

32

Baron

"What the fuck is that?"

I stare through the windshield at the smoke that rises into the air. Edward leans forward, peering through the windshield. "Fuck." He presses down on the accelerator and the car leaps forward. He negotiates the winding country road, screeching around the next corner, as I fix my gaze on the plumes of black smoke.

"If anything happens to her, I'll never forgive myself," I reach for the phone, dial 999. As soon as the operator comes on the line I give them the location of the fire, then hang up.

Edward clutches the steering wheel, the skin stretching white across his knuckles. "F-u-c-k!" he yells. "This is fucked up; why the hell would they want to harm her?"

"To get to us?"

"We were wrong in not discussing everything openly with her." He slams his fist on the steering wheel and the car wobbles.

I brace myself against the door, staying focused on the scene ahead, "If we get her out unhurt... I'll..." I can't bring myself to say it. I can't walk away from her, can I? But I'd heard her tell Edward that she loved him. That must mean something, right? I should have walked away when Edward had asked me to. I hadn't, and now, here she is, likely trapped in the burning house.

"Fuck." I grab my hair and tug on it. "She's going to be fine; she has to be

fine."

Edward careens around the next corner, pulls into the driveway of the house. I've unbuckled my belt and jumped out before the vehicle has come to a stop. I race toward the doorway, Edward in on my heels.

I try to push open the door and it doesn't budge. I put my shoulder to it and it barely moves. "Motherfucker."

Edward notches his shoulder against the door "On my count: one, two three..." We put our strength behind it and the door shudders.

"Once more," he grunts. "One, two three..."

We smash our shoulders against the door and it creaks, groans, then comes away at the hinges. We stamp across the fallen door, into the hallway. Smoke fills the hallway, and I cough. Heat sears my skin, sweat beads my forehead.

"Fuck." My heart pumps in my chest like it wants to escape. "This is not good."

"Where the fuck could she be?" Edward cries.

We stare around the space. "I'll take the stairs, you check the rooms on this floor."

"Hurry," he urges me.

We split up, I race for the steps, hit the landing on the first floor. Glance down the corridor and swear. Smoke swirls across the space. I tear off my jacket, hold it to my nose. Four rooms; there are four on this floor.

Ahead, flames zip up the doorframe. The door catches fire then crashes to the floor. The sound sweeps through my mind—the zing of bullets, the cries of soldiers. All of it overwhelms me. My stomach churns, bile boils up my throat. Images flood my mind and I am powerless to stop the flashback.

Smoke, so much smoke, so thick that I can't see in front of me. My foot brushes something. I glance down, take in the charred body. My guts twist. Bile splashes up my throat. I swallow down the acidic taste, grip my gun, keep going. I can't see my hand in front of my face. Cries fill the space, more bullets, the thump of bodies hitting the ground. I keep my gaze trained forward. Keep moving. I just need to get to the other side. A bullet whizzes past me. My pulse rate ratchets up. Adrenaline laces my blood. I train my gun, take aim and fire. And again. And again.

There's a touch on my shoulder and I snap out of the memory. I turn to find Edward next to me.

"She's not on the ground floor." He coughs. "I am going to search the

rooms on the top floor." He peers into my face, "You got this?"

"Yeah." I swallow.

I pull away, head for the first room, kick down the door, and see it's empty. Head for the second one, step through the doorway. Smoke fills the space. I cough, try to draw a breath and my lungs burn. The smoke parts, I glance around the space, realize she's not here. I race down the corridor, and up the stairs. As I reach the landing, I hear Edward cry out, "I found her."

I spring forward, toward the only room with an open door. I dash through the smoke, to find him bent over a prone figure tied to an upturned chair.

"Fuck." I rush to him, drop to my knees.

"Found her unconscious," he murmurs, as he unties the ropes on her feet.

I reach for the knots that tether her wrists together. My fingers slip. I swear, draw in a breath, then pick at the knot again. It loosens. I pull the rope apart, attack the second knot, which falls away. I tug at the rope again and it slackens enough for me to pull it down and off of her.

She slips from the chair and I grab her just as Ed completes untying the ropes on her feet. I haul her up in my arms, move toward the door just as a stack of fabric near the doorway catch fire.

I've barely made it through before a lick of fire flares up behind me. I turn, to find Edward on my heels. Behind him the doorframe is on fire. I head for the stairs and am halfway down the last flight when I realize Edward is not with me. I turn to find him frozen at the top of the stairs. What the hell? I retrace my way up the stairs, and pause a couple of steps below him, "Edward," I yell, "What's wrong?"

Sweat beads his forehead, his gaze is focused on a point in the distance. His muscles are locked, and he seems frozen, in shock? Shit, "Edward!" I growl, "Get a grip, man." I step up next to him, nudge him with my shoulder, "Ed! Jesus Christ, man, snap the fuck out of it."

He blinks, then turns his gaze on me, "Baron?" He murmurs, before his gaze moves to the woman in my arms.

"Go," he gestures, "get her to safety."

"Oh, I will, I promise, but you are coming."

He tilts his head, "I can't."

"The fuck you mean?"

"I must atone for my sins."

"Sins? What sins are you talking about?"

"I gave him up and now I must pay my due." His voice is without

inflection as if he is in a dream, or in shock? "This is not the fucking time to have a crisis of faith." I snap, "You need to come with me, now."

He shakes his head, "Take her out of here, Baron."

Behind us, something crashes to the floor and the entire building seems to shudder.

"Fuck." I glare at him, "I am not leaving without you."

"Ava." His voice grows haunted. He glances down at her again, then back at my face. "She's the priority here."

I hesitate.

"Go." He points down the stairs, "Go, before it's too late. I'll be right behind you."

Fuck, fuck, fuck. No way, am I leaving him, but if I hesitate, I'll endanger Ava as well. *Bloody hell.* I pull away from my friend and race down the last flight of steps, only to slip. I lose my footing, tumble down the rest of the stairs and turn my body at the last second to cushion the impact.

Her limp body collapses on top of mine. My back hits the floor and pain flashes behind my eyes. My guts churn, nausea bubbles up, and I swallow it down. I draw in a breath, scoop her up in my arms as I straighten, then race out of the doorway. I draw in gusts of fresh air as I place her down on the grass, then lean away, coughing, gasping. Next to me, she stirs, coughing, and I turn to her. I cup her face, "Eve?" I plead. "Ava, open your eyes. Please."

Her eyelids flicker open. Her gaze widens as she takes in my features. "Baron." She swallows, "Oh, my god, Baron." She coughs as she rises up and throws her arms around my neck, "The fire... I was so afraid."

"You're safe." I close my arms around her, bury my face in her hair. Smoke, burning wood, and below that, the faint scent of jasmine. My heart stutters. "Fuck, Ava, if anything had happened to you..."

"I'm fine." She coughs again. "I knew you'd come." She begins to cry, "Knew you and Edward would find me in time."

I stiffen and she must sense the tension in me, for she pulls back, and peers into my face, "Edward." She swallows, "Where's Ed?"

"The important thing is that you're safe."

"Edward." She grabs at my collar, "Where's Edward, Baron?"

I stare toward the burning house, then back at her.

"No," she shakes her head, "no, no, no." She scrambles away from me.

"Ava, stop."

"Oh, no," she snaps, "don't you dare ask me to stop. If Edward's in there, I am going in." She staggers to her feet, hobbles toward the flames. I spring up, dash after her and grab her arm, "He'll be fine. He said he'd be right behind us."

Just then a creaking sound reaches us. We glance up to find flames shooting up from the roof of the house.

"No!" she screams. "No, Edward!"

She tries to break free and I throw my arms around her, "Shh, Ava, please..."

"No!" she screams and turns in my arms. "I can't let anything happen to him, Baron." She grabs my collar and rises up to tiptoe, "I love him, don't you understand?"

Something cold stabs at my chest. I glance down at her sobbing face.

"You love him?"

"Yes." She sobs, "Please, help him, Baron, please... He went in there to save me. If anything happens to him, I'll never be able to forgive myself. Please, Baron... Please."

I circle her wrists, pull them away from my collar, before I release her. Then I brush past her and walk into the burning house.

33

Edward

I glance over my shoulder at the flames that lick the far end of the corridor. If I am going to die, at least, I know that she is safe. That I'll be sacrificing myself for her.

The crown molding catches fire. The flames edge toward me as I watch, trapped in my own personal hell.

If there was going to be a way for me to go, then it makes sense it would be like this—bathed in fire, purified of my sins. The cross that I have borne since the incident. The event that had scarred my life, had ruined me for any relationship... Until her. She had given me a reason to haul myself out of the unfeeling, unseeing existence I had settled for.

I believed I had found my calling... And in those years, I had found a certain kind of peace, dedicating myself to the higher good... Focusing on everything else... *Anything else*, but the festering mass of pain deep inside that had only grown, bigger, wider, more solid with time... Until it had lodged in my gut, had weighed me down, anchored me to a state of being from which I couldn't escape.

If becoming a priest was the single most courageous act I had undertaken, then walking away from everything familiar was the riskiest one. One I hadn't hesitated to take, because the path led to her. She saved my life, and I willingly sacrifice myself for her...and in that...there is a certain poetic justice.

I will die, consumed by the fire that will finally purify me. That will wipe

away the hate I carry deep inside, the scars, which are all that remain of the boy I had once been.

And she won't be alone. She has Baron to protect her, to take care of her. She'll be safe and happy. *My woman and my best friend*. I clutch my fingers at my sides. My woman. *Mine*. Fuck... I close my eyes. Why is it I find it so difficult to let go of her, even now?

Baron is right for her. He isn't tainted, like me. He is right for her. He has to be. Fucking Baron. Seems, he was always destined to come out ahead of me... *It's not a fucking competition, Ed*.

Of course, it is. The race to capture the heart of a woman who means so much to me... It's right I don't win this one. I don't deserve her.

"Priest, motherfucker."

I snap my eyes open, turn to find Baron, racing up the stairs.

"The fuck you doing, asshole?" He pants as he comes to a stop next me.

"What the fuck is it to you?" I scowl.

"I don't give a rat's ass what you do to yourself, but the woman out there... She's losing her shit, and if you don't get out of the fire, she's walking right into it with you."

I lower my chin to my chest, "I don't fucking deserve her, man."

"You can say that again." Baron growls, "But it's not for you or for me to decide. She gets the final choice in this matter." His jaw tics. "And she chooses you."

"What?" *She wants me? She chose me? She needs me? She wants to be with me?* I frown and Baron's features soften; there's an indecipherable look in his eyes.

"Yeah," he closes the distance between us, "she wants you, man. You're her first love. Hell, it was always you and her. Me? I was the interloper."

"You watched over her, took care of her while I sorted my shit out."

"And that's all it was ever meant to be." Baron's features harden. "I was wrong to think otherwise. I should have stayed true to my word to you. I should have bowed out a while ago... It's just... I couldn't."

"Baron, I—"

Fire licks up the wall, the chandelier hanging from the ceiling in the hallway shudders before the crystals explode. "Fuck." I throw up my arm to protect my face. Pain slices up my side. "Shit, we need to get out of here."

"Now, you're talking." He bares his teeth.

There's a high-pitched whine, and the ceiling above us groans.

"Motherfucker." Baron charges down the steps, and I follow him.
The stairway seems to tremble. Intense heat overwhelms me.
Behind us the crackling, popping sound intensifies. Flames hiss and a lick
of fire lashes out from the side. I duck, then jump down the last step.

34

Ava

Come on, come on, where are the two of you?

I gaze at the burning house, at the flames that leap up into the sky. The fire's gotten even more fierce in the last few minutes. Shit, shit, shit.

It's bad enough that they risked their lives to save me. I shouldn't have sent Baron in there...but Edward. Oh, my god, Ed. How could I have allowed him to be consumed by the fire? They are going to be okay; they have to be. The sirens wail in the distance and I close my eyes and sob. *Help is on its way. It's going to be fine, you guys. Just make it out of there. Please, just make it out.*

Only when my knees touch the ground do I realize that I am praying. I clasp my palms together, stare at the entrance of the house. *Come on, come on, please.*

God, I am so sorry that I tempted him away from you. Please don't take your anger out on him. Please. Let them both live. Please I beg you.

The sirens draw closer, then the fire-engine pulls up next to me. The firefighters jump out. One of them squats next to me. He's saying something, but I can't focus. Can't take my gaze off the doorway. *Come on, you guys. What's taking you so long?*

The firefighters swing into action. They unravel their hoses, train them on the house. A torrent of water zooms forth. Someone places a blanket around my shoulders. My thighs tremble and my heart flip flops in my chest. I stare at the doorway. *Please, please, please.*

"Miss, you have to move away; you are too close to the fire."

I shake off the arms that grip me. *Not close enough. I am not nearly close enough. Please, you have both got to make it through. I'll never forgive myself if anything happens to either of you.*

I close my eyes, tilt my chin-up. *Please, if you are up there and watching over us, I am sorry if I took him away from you. You know I didn't do it to hurt you. I wasn't being vindictive. It just felt right. Please don't punish him for that.*

More sirens sound, then an ambulance drives up and a medic jumps out. Someone's talking to me. I ignore them. *Please, please, please.* I repeat the word like a mantra. *If anything happens to either of them...please no, you can't be that cruel. Please help them. Please.*

A cry goes up around me. I snap my eyes open, lower my gaze to the door, to the two figures outlined against the burning inferno. I am on my feet and running. They stagger toward me and I throw myself at them. Edward catches me, then sinks to the ground, with me on top of him. "Ohmigod, ohmigod," I blubber, "ohmigod, Ed. I thought I'd lost you."

He rubs his palm down my hair and his fingers catch in a knot. My scalp tingles and it's so familiar, so comforting, that my tears intensify.

"Shh," he holds me close, "it's okay, I am here."

"Thank god, Baron got to you in time."

Edward kisses my forehead, "He saved my life." He glances past me, "Baron, where is he?"

"He was right here." I turn around to find he's gone. "Wait, where did he go? Baron?" I call.

A few firemen surround us. One of them wraps the blanket around me again. "Miss," he says firmly, "we need to check him out and treat his wounds."

"Of course." I move away from Ed, who holds out his arm.

"Don't go too far." He smirks.

"I won't," I promise, half-smiling, half-crying. I glance around for Baron and can't see him anywhere.

One of the medics tends to my wounds. Another attends to Edward. They place a mask over his face, then strap him onto the stretcher. I follow him toward the ambulance, glancing around again. *Where the hell is Baron?*

One of the medics walks past me and I hail him, "Excuse me, do you know what happened to the second man who walked out of the building?"

"If you mean the guy who saved your friend, he left."

"What do you mean, he left?"

The medic raises a shoulder, "He refused to be treated."

"But...he was hurt. How could you just allow him to leave?"

"Can't force him to accept help, ma'am." The medic urges me into the ambulance. *Shit, shit, shit. This isn't good. It can't be good. Why did Baron leave and without saying a word to me or Edward?*

The medic slams the door of the ambulance, which sets off. I bite down on my lower lip. My fingers tremble, and I squeeze them together in front of me.

Edward pulls the oxygen mask off of his face. The medic protests and he dismisses her concern. "Just need a second," he insists.

She frowns, then nods at him.

He turns to me, "What's wrong, Eve?"

"It's Baron," I murmur, "he left."

"What do you mean, left?"

"He walked away. One of the medics saw him leave. He literally just took off, without saying a word to me. Why would he do that, Ed?"

Edward draws in a breath. "Maybe," he says carefully, "maybe he's telling you by his actions what he can't say in words."

"You mean," I swallow, "you mean, this is him saying goodbye?"

He reaches over and takes my hand in his, "You knew this was inevitable, Eve." He weaves his fingers with mine. "One of us was always going to come away empty-handed."

"It's not fair." A tear runs down my cheek. "I love him, Ed. I love both of you."

"I know." He tugs and I sink down on the floor of the ambulance. I place my head on his chest. He flinches.

"Shit," I mutter, "you're hurt."

"Nothing I can't bear," he assures me. "I love you, Eve." He runs his fingers down my hair.

I turn my nose into his chest, breathe in the scent of smoke, of cut grass and testosterone. My belly trembles, my thighs clench, yet the emptiness in my chest gapes. More tears well up and I swallow them down. "I love you too, Ed."

A day later, I park the Aston Martin in front of my house. Edward had

wanted to drive, but when I'd pointed out that he was on painkillers to combat the burns he'd suffered, he hadn't protested.

His wounds hadn't been extensive though, thank God. All in all, we had escaped with minor injuries, considering how serious the fire had been.

Within hours of arriving at the hospital, the rest of the Seven had turned up, wives in tow. The men had huddled in conversation with Edward over the next few hours, while the women, including Isla, had kept me company.

I'd sensed their curiosity about the situation, though none of them had asked me where Baron was, and for that, I was grateful.

It seems he made my choice for me... Which is fine. I had told him that I loved Edward, after all; and I do. I am happy to be coming home with him, right?

But why couldn't he have told me that face-to-face? Why did he have to leave without a word? I had tried calling him, but had only gotten his voice mail. I'd tried texting him, but he hadn't replied.

None of the Seven had heard from him either.

He had disappeared on his friends once before... And apparently, he is doing it again now. Does he just want to lay low for the moment? Away from me...and his friends. He had returned to his life and now, thanks to me, he had decided to go quiet on them again. Shit, I curl my fingers around the wheel.

"You, okay?" Edward turns to me. He's wearing a black T-shirt, a jacket on top, and jeans with his usual shit-kicker boots. I am still getting used to seeing him in such normal clothes, I guess. With his hair long enough to brush his collar and the makings of a beard clinging to his chin... He looks so different... So rough. So not like the sleek, powerful man I saw slicing through the pool that day. He's the same...yet not. And I know I caused the change in him... And it's thrilling, but also...a little bit overwhelming. Does anyone want to take on the onus of changing someone else's life that completely? Had meeting me caused him more harm than good?

"Don't," he mutters. He reaches out, places his palm against my cheek, "Don't overthink it."

"Yeah." I glance away and he pulls his hand back.

"It's safe for you to go back home, if that's what you are worried about."

Ed had told me that the man he'd almost killed—Anton was his name—had given them more information on the men who were behind the attacks and my abduction. With Archer's help, they had tracked down the men as

they had been about to board a flight to Sicily. The men had confessed to all the attacks on me, including kidnapping me then setting the building on fire before leaving. They said that they were only following instructions. Their goal had been to send a message to the Seven, to stop enquiring after the Mafia.

They should have known that everything they did would only strengthen the resolve of the Seven to go after whoever was behind the attacks.

In this case, the Seven had made the decision to hand the two men over to the police, along with the third man, who is still unconscious. While the Seven prefer to stay away from the cops on most occasion, this time, they felt it was the best way to put the men behind bars long enough for them to not be a threat to us anymore. Of course, Ed mentioned, they have a contact in the police force who helped them to put the men away with the least fuss possible.

Of course, they do. The Seven are nothing, if not powerful and resourceful. They take care of their own. Which is why I don't understand why they've decided to allow Baron this time away? I mean, aren't they concerned that he might be upset enough to do something that he shouldn't?

I turn to Edward. "I am not worried about my safety," I murmur, "I know you guys have dealt with my..." I swallow, "my attackers."

Yeah, it is still difficult to say that aloud. Given a choice, I'd prefer to forget about how they'd ambushed me, then broken into my studio, and ultimately, kidnapped me and left me, restrained, in a burning building. Thankfully, there are no other lasting injuries, though the last two nights I still haven't slept properly. Which is to be expected. It had been an emotionally traumatic experience. And this, despite the fact that I had been so sure that the guys would get to me.

I can only imagine how difficult it must have been for them after the incident. I had been kidnapped and held for a few hours. They had been kidnapped and held for closer to a month. The kind of scars they both carry... Are, clearly, so much more intense.

"Then what is it...?" he murmurs. "You can tell me, babe."

"It's..." I close my eyes, "It's nothing."

"It's something."

How can I tell him, that while I am happy to be with him, a part of me misses Baron? Somehow, I had not thought that he would leave. While I'd chosen Edward...technically... I hadn't realized that's what I was doing, and I

hadn't completely comprehended that it meant losing Baron. Shit, why do I feel so...forlorn? Like I lost something vital, something I didn't know had ended, until it was gone.

"It's Baron, isn't it?" Edward blows out a breath, "You're thinking of him."

"No," I lie, "it's just...everything over the last few days has been so much to take in."

I sense him peruse my features and I turn my face away. If I meet his gaze now, he'll see exactly how little truth there is in what I am telling him.

I push open the car door and walk around to the curb. Edward steps out. His ankle is bandaged, and he has a cane to help him walk. It's just a sprain. The burns on his back are more serious and will require daily visits to the burn unit for debridement.

I tuck my handbag under my arm—a new handbag that Isla had gotten for me. She'd also helped with packing my clothes at Edward's house. Archer had packed up some of Edward's things and helped transfer everything to my place.

I'd asked him about Baron, but Archer had confessed that he didn't know where Baron was. He'd told me that he was moving Baron's things into storage. That's when I'd asked him for Baron's home address—and he'd revealed that Baron had left the city. Temporarily, at any rate.

Which is good. It's good that he's away, that there is no temptation to go check on him.

No, I have Edward. The man I had fallen in love with first. This...is everything I had hoped for. So, why am I not happier?

I reach for Edward's backpack and he scowls at me. "No woman's carrying my load."

"Of course, not," I mutter. "God forbid, you admit to actually needing someone's help."

"Eve," he scowls, "that's not what I mean."

"Hmm." I turn away, as he heaves his pack on his shoulder, then takes a step toward me.

"I know how you can help me," he says.

"Oh?"

"Yeah." He holds up his arm, points at the space next to him. "Come 'ere."

I notch myself under his arm, and he leans on me. I wrap my arm around

his waist, take some of his weight. Gah, he's too heavy, but I am not going to say anything.

"Happy?"

I scowl up at him and he chuckles.

"Shall we go inside?"

35

Ava

It's been a week since Edward and I returned from the hospital, and things are going... Fine. Every morning, he cooks me breakfast, then I do my admin stuff for my studio, while Ed gets on calls with the rest of the Seven. He's been taking an active interest in 7A, the company that he owns with the rest of the Seven. The money he's made, up until leaving the Church, has all been in a trust that carries out charitable work, and he doesn't want to touch that. So, he's working on a separate 'starter portfolio' with the Seven that he can grow and invest. The gains will provide an income from which he is going to live. And when I say live, I mean he can live a very good lifestyle off the money he's set to make.

His sprain healed up quickly, and while I took the tube to work the first two days, from the third day onward, Edward has insisted on taking me. I can tell that leaning back against the car seat—any seat, really—causes discomfort, but he denies it.

Now that the men who attacked me are behind bars, at least, I've been able to regain some level of independence. I have told Ed he doesn't need to drive me, but he insists.

While I am in the studio, he heads off to the offices of 7A or makes calls, or sometimes, simply heads back home to work on his assets some more. He's always back in time to pick me up... And yeah, he has cameras stationed within my studio, so he can keep an eye on me. And yeah, also tracking devices in my phone—a new one that he bought for me.

We normally have dinner together, which he insists on cooking, and then, we sleep in my bed. He spoons me as I fall asleep and I am glad for his warmth. Still, most mornings I wake up on the opposite side of the bed from him. It's like he's giving me time and space to come to terms with the decision. And somehow, it's not helping.

I wish he were more demanding, more dominating, more the kind of Edward he was when he'd sauntered into my home and fucked me before taking off. Somehow, that Edward had been raw and hurting. He hadn't cared that he was going to upset me when he left... Or if he did...he hadn't shown it. And it had been honest and real and... Everything that I had been looking for. Now, he's the same man... So, why do I feel so unsettled about being with him?

Today, after the last student departs at the studio, I decide to stay a little longer. I text Edward to let him know that I need a little more time. Then I flip the music to one of my favorite pick-me-up dance songs. The beats of *Gasolina* by Daddy Yankee fill the space. It's reggaeton, not strictly belly dancing music. But told ya, I love to interpret belly dancing in my own style.

I shimmy my shoulders, lift one side of my hips, drop, swirl into a figure eight, then lift my arms, allow the beats to thrum over my skin, sink into my blood. I plunge headlong into the rhythm, the music already pounding at my temples. Lift and drop my hips...lift and drop, let the beats ripple down my spine, curve my torso, my hips, twirl on my toes, and again. Drag my fingers down my arms, turn, and crash into something hard. My heart hammers in my chest and my eyelids snap open. I meet Edward's amber gaze.

"Oh," I press my hand to my heart, "you scared me."

He grips my shoulder to right me. "Did I?" He peers into my face. "You didn't expect me to come in, did you?"

"N...no." I step back and he lowers his arm. "I won't be long, I just wanted to take some time to perfect a new routine."

"That's okay," his lips twitch, "I love watching you dance."

And there was a time when I'd loved having him watch me. I walk over to the panel in the wall and shut off the music. Silence descends. My breath still comes in pants from my earlier exertion. I reach for my towel, mop my forehead. "I really won't be much longer," I murmur.

I sense him move, hear his footsteps approach, and stiffen.

He bends, pressing a kiss to the curve of where my neck meets my shoulder. I freeze.

He takes my shoulders, urges me to turn around. I drag my feet, allow him to position me so I am facing him.

I stare at the tendons of his throat, the familiar square jaw, now set in uncompromising lines. He notches a knuckle under my chin, tilts it up. I raise my gaze, meeting his eyes, then glance away.

His chest rises and falls; he blows out a breath.

"It's not working, is it?" he asks, almost tenderly.

"What...what do you mean?" I swallow. My heart begins to race. Shit, shit, shit. And I thought I had disguised my emotions so well.

"Don't hide from me, Ava." His voice softens even further. And somehow, that makes it all so much worse. I wish he'd rage at me. That he'd throw a tantrum; that he'd demand that I give him my full attention, that I dance for him, strip for him, that I drop to my knees in front of him... But he does none of that. He wipes the tear that trails down my cheek, before urging me to glance up at him.

I raise my gaze reluctantly, gazing into those glowing golden eyes. Eyes that have seen so much. That see me now, for what I am. A woman in love with his best friend. The man I've missed since he walked away from me.

"It's okay," he says, "I understand."

"No, you don't..." I burst out. "How can you, when even I don't get what's wrong with me?" I pull away from him and begin to pace. "You are my first love, Edward. You swept into my life, you turned it upside down. It was so full-on, so everything, so much that I wanted and then—"

"I left."

I pivot to face him, take in the set lines of his features.

"I hurt you, Ava. I broke your heart. I was selfish... I'd like to think I wasn't but... Maybe it was all too much for me. Maybe I had been waiting for a sign, for something or someone to push me to take that step, to force me to face my demons... Maybe all of that came to the fore when I met you. I wanted you, Eve... I still do... But I lost you then. I came back and expected to take up from where I had left off."

"And that's what I wanted too," I blurt out. "You're everything I want, Ed."

"But I am not everything you need."

I frown, "What...what do you mean?"

"Look at you, Ava. You're not fully here. You haven't been since the fire. Since Baron left. You go through the motions of the day, but you barely pay

attention to the food that you are eating. At night, you flinch when I wrap my arms around you. You wake up on the opposite side of the bed from me—" So, he had noticed?

"You've been going to the studio earlier and earlier, preferring to stay later."

Argh, have I been doing that? Have I become that much of a cliché?

"And even now, when you were dancing, you weren't really there, were you?"

I jerk my chin around and meet his gaze.

"You were miles away; you hadn't realized when I walked into the studio... You didn't even sense when I was in your personal space, Ava."

"Oh, Ed," my lip trembles and my eyes well, "this is such bullshit."

"It's love." His lips curve in a sad smile. "We don't choose who we fall in love with, when we fall, or how we fall... Indeed, sometimes we don't realize it until it's all but lost to us."

"Ed, no," I shake my head, "please don't do this."

"It's done." His throat moves as he swallows. "You are too good a person. You'd stay with me, just out of a sense of duty...of purpose, even, but you and I both know, your heart is elsewhere."

"Oh, Ed." A ball of emotion clogs my throat. "This...this isn't how I wanted it to be."

"It is, what it is, Ava." He raises his hand as if to touch my cheek, then lowers it to his side. "Know this. I want you to be happy, Ava. I wanted to make you happy. When you chose me, I had been thrilled and excited and flattered and... I'd wanted you. I'd wanted to make a life with you. I'd looked forward to spending the rest of my days with you. I'd wanted it all and returned here with you... Only, something had shifted."

I stare at him through tear-drenched eyes.

"Whenever I've tried to kiss you over the last few days, you've flinched."

"I... I have?"

He nods, "Even now, when I try to touch you—" He reaches for me and I lean away from him.

"See?"

I swallow, "It's...it's not intentional."

"Exactly." His lips twist. "Your body recognizes what your heart has been trying to communicate to you for days."

"Which is..."

"That you don't belong to me, Ava. Not anymore."

"Oh, Ed." I take a step forward and he holds up a hand.

"Don't feel badly, Ava. I am not going away completely empty-handed."

"You...aren't?"

He shakes his head. "It's thanks to you that I found a new lease on life. The Church was everything I needed at that stage in my life to stay sane, calm, and feel loved. You showed me I am still human, that I could feel that pull toward another person, someone who could calm me and help me feel normal. In a way, I transferred the dependence I had on the Church to you. But really, what you did was give me a starting point. You opened me up to other possibilities in life, to forgiving myself without the crutch of blind faith—not that faith isn't helpful, but blindly following isn't healthy—and that's where I was."

His gaze softens, "You taught me that it's possible to find that one person I could truly trust, help, and be helped by. You also made me realize that I can't replace one obsession with another. You've shown me that I need to find myself first."

"I have?"

He nods.

"If I don't discover who I truly am, how can I give myself up to another?"

"I think, you're giving me too much credit," I murmur.

"Or not enough." He tilts his head, "You were at the right place at the right time...for me. Call it serendipity or call it an act of God," he smiles, "but you showed me I could keep my faith in the Power Above, without having to bind myself to an institution to nurture it. You set me free to explore, to discover who I truly am, and for that, I will always be grateful."

"Oh, Edward," I fold my fingers together, "whenever you decide you are ready for a relationship, whoever it is you decide to be with, she is going to be a very lucky person."

"And you and Baron are lucky to have found each other. You have what so many of us will spend a lifetime looking for."

"Hopefully, you'll find her well before that."

He tilts his head, "If you or Baron, ever need anything...at any time..." He shakes his head as if to clear it, then turns and heads for the door.

When he reaches the exit, I call out, "Edward, stop."

He pauses, his big body almost filling the doorway.

"I... I did love you, Ed."

"I know," he says softly, "but you love him more."

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"So... everybody says that nobody's normal and that everyone is different right? The definition of normal is conforming to the standard or the common type; usual; not abnormal; regular; natural. So, if everyone is different, then doesn't that make being different normal? And if being different is normal then everybody IS normal, but at the same time, they're different. So, in actual fact, everyone is normal BECAUSE they're different. Ugh...sooo confusing!"

From Ava's Diary

A month later

Ava

I ring the doorbell to Summer and Sinclair's townhouse on Primrose Hill. I'd barely managed to complete the practice session after my classes at the studio before I'd changed and raced over, for a get together with the rest of the girls.

I haven't seen Edward since he left my place a few weeks ago. And while I initially was upset about it, I realize now, he was right. It would have been wrong for both him and me, if we had stayed together—not when my heart is clearly dwelling on another. Since then, I had thrown myself into work and my studio is flourishing. Which, in turn, has given me the confidence to compete.

Yep, I had finally put aside my fears and am now practicing for the next World Belly Dancing Championships. Apparently, I am done hiding my

talent from the world. This is my passion, this is what sets my heart on fire, so I am going to embrace it and share my talent with the world. I am going to do it for myself this time, and not because I am trying to prove anything...but because... I enjoy it, thrive on it, and I know I am good at it. Baron was right. I needed to have more faith in myself. Now, I do. I am gonna aim for the first prize. No half measures anymore for me.

The door opens and Summer stands there wearing a pink jumpsuit that declares: *Mommy To-Be*.

I glance at it, then at her face.

"Too obvious?" She quirks an eyebrow.

"No," I laugh, "it's you." I step forward and hug her. "You are glowing," I compliment her.

"So are you." She moves back, looks me up and down, "Yep, definitely glowing."

"Must be the sweat from practice." I chuckle. "I didn't have time to take a shower."

"We women glow, period." She grins back at me, "You can take a shower in the guest room, if you want."

"Oh, can I?" I cry gratefully. "That would be perfect."

"Come on," she pulls me inside, then glances over her shoulder at the hovering butler. "It's okay Jeeves," she waves at him, "I've got this."

He lurks there for a few more seconds, then half bows. "As you wish, Madam." He pivots and leaves.

"Is his name really Jeeves?" I whisper as she shuts the door behind me.

"No, but he answers to it." She giggles, "And he definitely looks like a Jeeves. I've yet to get Sinner to respond to any of my Bertie Wooster jokes though."

"Good luck with that." I frown. "I can't see the grouchy Sinclair Sterling laughing at anything."

"Oh, he laughs alright; he has a weird sense of humor."

"Only because you bring that out in him." I tilt my head at her.

"Yeah, guess that's the sign of a healthy relationship, right? I mean, I am sure Baron would laugh at—" her voice trails off. "Jeez, sorry," she blinks rapidly, "didn't mean to bring the B word into our conversation."

Yeah, well, I'd had a few very drunken nights with the girls over the past week where I had poured out my heart to them.

"It's okay," I murmur, "I can't hang around you and the Seven without

mention of Baron, or Edward, for that matter."

"Hmm," she peers into my face, "so he hasn't contacted you at all?"

"Who?"

"You know who I am talking about." She leads me toward the flight of stairs.

"If you mean Baron, no, and I don't expect him too either."

"Hmm." She huffs again.

"What?" I scowl. "What is it?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me," I pause with my foot on the first step, "please, Summer."

"It's probably nothing, but Baron has been in touch with the Seven."

"He has?"

"He's taking an active interest in all of their investments, so he attends all of their calls."

"Oh." I swallow. "And how is he? I mean, has Sinclair mentioned anything—?"

She reaches down and grips my shoulder, "He's apparently, okay, and back in London. He's staying at a service apartment that he's renting from Saint."

"A service apartment." I swallow, "You...uh, you don't happen to have the address, do you?"

Her eyes twinkle. She whips out her phone from her pocket and fingers flies across the screen.

My phone dings and I pull it out, glance at the message she sent me. "Thanks, Summer."

"You're welcome." She nods toward the front door, "Go girl, what are you waiting for?"

Baron

I glance at the view outside the window of my penthouse apartment. The lights of London twinkle back at me, their cold, silvery haloes a reflection of my surroundings. Chrome and steel, blacks and browns. The colors and lack of textures is perfect for how I feel.

I raise the glass of whiskey, drain it. Then head back to the bar to top up my glass. At this rate, I am going to become an alcoholic, which is probably not a bad idea. Though, even the alcohol is not helping me of late. The thoughts in my head, the visions of Ava laughing, dancing, teasing me... The images overwhelm me. Truthfully, I haven't tried too hard to stop thinking of her. Why should I, when it is all I have left of our time together?

Sometimes I wonder if I imagined it all. Spending time with my best friend and my woman... It had been a special kind of heaven...and hell. Both, rolled into one. I had done the right thing...leaving her... So, maybe it had been cowardly. I hadn't been able to face her, to tell her that I was giving her up. Hell, I'd been worried that if I saw her face, I'd lose all reasoning, that I'd plead with her to walk away with me. And she didn't deserve that. She didn't need me putting her on the spot again.

I slide my hand inside the pocket of my pants. My fingers brush something. I pull it out, glare at the purple hairband. *Her* purple hairband that I've carried around with me, since the day I first met her outside her house. I bring it to my nose and sniff it. Instantly, the lingering scent of jasmine laced with raspberries fills my senses. My groin hardens, heat flushes my chest.

Fuck. I'll never be rid of her. I'll never get of her... and she...? She loves Edward. I had seen the distress in her eyes, when she'd thought he was trapped inside the burning building. I'd seen the relief in her eyes when we had both staggered out. How she had run to him, and embraced him. And seeing them together had clarified everything for me. I'd done what was needed. I had taken care of her while Edward was away. And now... I need to get out of their way. They need to get on with their lives together... While me? I have to figure out how the hell I am going to live mine.

I stuff the hairtie back into my pocket.

One step in front of the other, soldier. Keep going. Don't stop. Tunnel vision. Focus on...what? Making money? Yeah, that's the one thing I'm good at. I may not have worked directly with the Seven the last few years, but I haven't lost my touch for keeping on top of my investments. Truthfully, work is the only thing that has managed to distract me. When I am applying my mind to mathematical equations...and tinkering with the algorithm that Saint and Sinner invented to forecast the movements of the stock market... For those few hours, at least, I have been able to push her to the back of my mind... Kind of...

Frankly, she is always on my mind. The scent of her is entrapped in my skin, the taste of her, a remembrance on my palate. The memories of her coil in my heart. And I guard them jealously. If this is all I have to hold onto... Then I'd be a fool to forget a single moment of the time I had with her.

I drain my glass, reach for the bottle again, when the intercom buzzes.

I walk over, depress the button and the porter's face appears. "I have a Ms. Ava Erikson here for you."

"Excuse me?"

"Ms. Ava—"

"Send her up."

I step back from the screen. What the—? What is Ava doing here? How had she found out where I'm staying? Probably, through one of the Seven... Or their wives. I shake my head. Why had Edward allowed her to come? Likely, he doesn't know. He hasn't been on the last few calls with the Seven either. I figured it's because he needs time to concentrate on his new relationship. I have tried hard not to be angry or jealous about it... And have failed. In a way, it's good that Ed hasn't been on the calls. Likely, I wouldn't have been able to disguise my bitterness. So, I had given her up. Doesn't mean I have to be gracious about my loss, does it?

So, what the hell is she doing here? I head back to the bar, topping up my glass.

Behind me, I hear the elevator doors part. I hear the click of her heels against the marbled floors. Is she wearing the same purple tipped boots that I had seen her in so often? The scent of jasmine invades the air, and the blood rushes to my groin. Fuck. I haven't even seen her, and already, my body is betraying me. I cannot think of her in this fashion, cannot allow her to play havoc with what little bit of restraint I have managed to hold onto.

"What are you doing here?" I growl.

She doesn't answer, but the scent of jasmine intensifies. Her footsteps approach. I raise my glass to my lips, and damn it, my hand trembles. It actually trembles.

"Answer, the question," I snap.

"No, you answer mine first." Her voice cuts through the space.

I turn, look her up and down. "Making demands, are we?"

"Not in a good mood, are we?"

"I was, until you came through the door."

Her lips tighten. "Still the same old alphahole, I see."

"Leopard. Spots, and all that," I drawl. "Why did you come here, Ava?"

She glances around the space, then back at me, "Uh, nice place."

"It's cold and boring." *Everything you are not.* "Next?"

She locks her fingers together in front of her body. "Ah, can I get a glass of water?"

I hesitate and she frowns, "Come on. Surely, even you can extend that much hospitality to me?"

"Not." I growl, "But what-fucking-ever." I head behind the bar, pour a glass of water and hand it to her. Keeping the barrier of the bar between us is cowardly, I know...but it's best this way. If I stand next to her, I won't be able to keep my hands to myself.

She drains the water, places the glass back on the counter.

"Well?" I glance at my watch, "Better make it quick. I have a date."

"No, you don't."

I arch an eyebrow, "And you know that, how?"

"Because you love me."

Shit. I feign a yawn. "There you go, deluding yourself. If I loved you, I wouldn't have left you."

"It's because you love me that you left me."

I smirk. "This isn't one of your sweet romances."

"I only read erotic romances. The ones in which the villain is also the hero."

"Neither of which I am." I place my elbow on the counter. "I don't play any part in your story, babe."

She pales. "I don't believe you."

"Better believe it."

"You still love me."

"And you love Edward."

"I love you more."

"And you arrived at that brilliant piece of deduction, how?"

"Sometimes it takes absence and time to put things in perspective. After you left... I missed you. Nothing was the same. I was with Edward but..." she swallows, "all I could think about was you. I realized that you are the one I want. You are the one I need. You are the person I want to be with, Baron."

Something hot stabs at my chest. I fold my fingers into fists, glare at her as she shuffles her feet.

"Edward and I are no longer together." She lowers her chin and folds her fingers together in front of her. "It's been a month since we decided to break up."

"A month?"

She nods. "I wanted to give myself enough time to make sure that I knew exactly what I had to do next."

"I know what you need to do next." I jerk my chin toward the door and her gaze widens. "You should leave."

"No."

"You need to get out of here, Ava."

She shakes her head, "I know you're upset Baron—"

"Upset?" I laugh, "That's putting it mildly. You made up your mind; I've made peace with it. I am ready to move on—"

"No, you're not."

"Oh?"

"If you were, you wouldn't be glaring at me like you'd like to spank me and kiss me simultaneously."

My cock twitches; my groin hardens. The thought of marking that sweet curved backside of hers, right before I turn her over and bury my face in her melting core—I stiffen, and no, I don't mean only my dick. I square my

shoulders, crack my neck. "Nice dialogue—" I drawl, "but it's too late."

"It's not."

"It's time you took that sweet tush of yours out of here."

"Not yet." She places her bag on the counter, pulls out her phone and places it face-up. Then swipes across the screen. She pulls up a playlist.

"What are you doing?"

"Something I should have done a long time ago."

She digs in her bag, pulls out her hip scarf and ties it around her hips. The material clings to her luscious curves, emphasizes the tiny span of her waist. She takes a few steps back into the center of her room, and juts out a hip. She places a hand on it, then tips her chin up, "Can you press play, please?"

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Ava

His blue eyes glower as he eats me up with his gaze. The skin around his eyes tightens and his lips thin.

"Please," I urge him. "Please hit play."

"No," he snaps, and I draw in a breath. *Fine, I can do without the music.*

I bend my knee to drop the hip. The tiny coins at the edge of the hip scarf jingle. I straighten the knee to lift the hip, keep my knees soft and centered. Drop hip downward, then flow into a heavy deep-seated drop. Every tiny move is amplified by the sound of the coins rubbing against each other.

His chest rises and falls. He leans forward, his gaze captured. He watches my every step as I rise up and into a lighter half-drop. I trace a circle with my hip, out to the side, then back, then pull into my center.

I keep circling, keep an open connection between my hip and heart, drawing energy in my movement. Keep everything supple and flowing, allow the energy to flow around my body.

I sense him walk around to stand in front of the bar. Good. He's caught in the energy, the rush of the performance. As am I.

I lift my hip upward and slightly forward, activate the outside of my thigh and hip to give the movement oomph. Drop slightly, then lift.

He takes a step closer, leans forward on the balls of his feet.

I bring my shoulders up together, then let both go. Another fast shoulder drop, while swaying my body from side-to-side. I ground my feet and shift my weight to the side, push my hips back, then round to the other side.

I peek up at him from under my eyelashes, and flinch. The coldness in his arctic eyes—it's freezing. His gaze intensifies. I hold the connection, refuse to look away as I move into a figure eight. I twist my hip forward, shift the weight onto the front of the foot, then turn the foot and the hip inward.

He swallows, clenching his hands into fists.

I twist my hips inward, then out again. I lift and drop, lift and drop again. Shimmy shoulders, undulate my waist, as I flow into a figure eight, this time in the vertical direction. Keeping my movements fluid, I channel the energy from my belly. Again. And again.

Sweat beads his forehead. The skin around his lips whitens. I twirl my fingers, beckon to him, and he takes a step forward, and another. I reel him in and he closes the distance between us. He glares down at me as I hold up both of my arms, lean my torso forward. My breasts brush his chest and he hisses.

"I need you, Baron." I tip my chin up, and his lips firm.

"You're stretching my patience." His jaw tics and a nerve throbs at his temple. His blue eyes deepen into that almost cerulean color that takes my breath away.

"Fuck," he growls. "F-u-c-k."

"Yes, please." I widen my legs, shimmy down his length in a wide plié squat. I lower my butt until I almost touch the floor. Then gaze up at him from under my eyelashes. His glare intensifies and his chest heaves. The blue in his eyes is stormy, tortured, tormented. Tension rolls off of him; the force of his dominance pins me in place, and I stay there, poised. A beat, then another. My throat dries, my thigh muscles protest, but still, I don't move.

The band around my chest tightens, my leg muscles scream at me to move. I begin to straighten and he clicks his tongue. "Don't even think about it," he growls.

I freeze, tip up my chin, and hold his gaze.

"Did you mean what you said?" he finally asks.

"A...bout?"

"About making up your mind?"

I nod.

"Are you sure this is what you want?"

I jerk my chin.

"Are you convinced that you belong to me?"

Yes. Yes. Yes. I tip up my chin, meet his gaze. Allow him to read the

expression on my face. "

His throat moves as he swallows. Then his jaw firms. "If we do this, if I fuck you now, there is no going back."

I don't take my gaze off of his face.

"If I take you now, I am never letting you get away."

My scalp tingles, my fingers tremble, and a pressure builds at the back of my eyes.

"If we are together, Ava, I'll ask everything of you. I'll strip you bare, I'll infiltrate your deepest desires, your most secret dreams, the most intimate of your places. Nothing about you will be off limits. Not your thoughts or your words, not your body or your mind... Certainly not, your soul. I'll imprint myself in every cell of your body... Your every breath will belong to me."

My toes curl, my belly trembles, and moisture pools between my legs.

"The flutter of your eyelashes as you fall asleep, your dreams, the first thing you see when you wake up in the morning... All of it will be mine. I'll be in everything you see, in every taste you draw into your body. Every sensation that filters to you will originate from me... Do you...understand what I mean?"

I draw in a harsh breath. The band around my chest tightens. My skin feels too tight for my body. This man, these words... They are etched in every particle of my being.

"Do. You. Understand?" he snaps.

I jerk my chin. My legs threaten to give way from under me, and I push my heels into the ground to hold steady.

"Say it, then," he growls. "Say you are mine."

"Yours." I swallow. "I am yours."

"That you get that there's no going back.

"No going back."

"That you belong to me."

"You." I nod.

"That—"

"I love you," I burst out. "You, Baron, only you."

His breath catches. His gaze bores into me. The emotions rolling off of him vibrate between us, thicken and swirl. Heat spools off of his body, slams into my chest. I gasp, trying to draw in a breath, and my lungs burn. The strength of his intention lassoes around my shoulders, ties me to him. Then he moves. He dips his knees, swoops down and grabs me between my legs. He

straightens, hauls me up with him, by my pussy, and my entire body jerks.

"Last chance, Ava," he cautions. "Leave while you can."

"I... I can't." I lick my lips and his gaze darts to my mouth.

"If you stay, I am not letting you go, not until I have fucked the thought of any other man out of you."

Heat flares low in my belly. My core clenches, and he must feel the instinctive reaction, for his lips curl.

"So, you in or out? Eve?"

Oh, my god. My nipples pebble, my breasts ache, and all of my brain cells seem to combust. "In," I rasp, "I'm in."

"Good." He releases me so suddenly that I lose my balance and wobble. He steps back and the warmth of his body recedes. A shiver runs up my spine.

"Take off your clothes," he growls.

I hesitate and he arches an eyebrow.

"Now." He lowers his voice to a hush and my nerve endings spark.

"Do it." He leans forward.

I spring into action. I untie the hip scarf. It pools around my feet, and the coins jingle. I toe off my boots, kick them away with the scarf. The clinking rises then fades away. I lift the skirt of my dress, grab my stockings and begin to roll them down. I pull them off, hold them up, and let them slide through my fingers. They flutter to the ground, and neither of us glances that way.

"All of it," he grates out. "Take. It. All. Off."

My mouth dries. Not that I haven't been naked in front of him before, but this...feels different. Like it's the first time that he'll be seeing all of me. Nude and vulnerable and completely bared for his inspection.

I undo the top button on the front of my dress, then the one after it, and the next. Push one sleeve down, then the other side. I tuck my elbows close to my sides and the dress flutters to the ground. I step out of it, then shrug off the camisole I am wearing as well.

I stand in front of him, clad only in my purple bra and panties.

He looks me up and down, "You know what they say about purple, right?"

"N...no," I stutter.

"It's a sign that you haven't been fucked enough, something I need to rectify...soon."

He smirks, and goosebumps pop on my skin.

Shit, all this build up. It's doing me in. The cool air in the room brushes over me and my nipples pebble. Or maybe it has to do with how he's staring at me, like he's going to eat me up. Oh, how I do hope he does.

He raises his gaze from my chest to my face. "Off with it," he growls.

A giggle bubbles up and he frowns.

"What?"

"That was a very imperious command."

His glare intensifies. His shoulders flex. "If you need help taking the rest of your clothes off—" he leans forward, and I hastily reach back and around for the clasp of my bra. I undo it, shrug it off. Reach for my panties, roll them down and step out of them. I stand before him without a shred of clothing. Without a shred of armor. He takes his time perusing my form—from my eyes, to my lips, my breasts, my stomach, the flesh between my thighs, to my feet. By the time he raises his gaze to my face, every part of me feels like it's on fire. My nipples are so hard, they are twin points of pain. My belly trembles and my core feels too moist. I squeeze my thighs together and he shakes his head. "Not yet. You don't have any right to relief. Not until I give you permission."

Oh, hell. I gulp, "This is going to be a long...long night."

"You have no idea." His lips twist. He makes a circle in the air with his fingers. I frown and he lowers his chin. "I can help you...if you want." He closes the distance between us and I instantly pivot, turn my back on him. Heat from his big body flows over me, cocooning me. The contrast between that and the cooler air on my front makes me shiver.

His breath sears the shell of my ear as he whispers, "Bend down; grab your ankles."

"Wh...what?"

"Don't make me repeat myself."

He places his palm at the small of my back, urging me to do his bidding. I widen my stance, lean over and grab my ankles. I glance between my parted legs as he sinks to his knees.

"What the—?"

He slides his tongue up my exposed slit from the entrance of my pussy to my backhole.

"Oh, hell." I gasp, "Oh, my, bloody hell."

"Indeed." I sense his lips curve against my tender flesh. He thrusts his tongue inside my cunt and my thighs tremble. I would fall, except he grabs

my hips, holding me in place. He thrusts his broad shoulders in between my legs, forcing me to slide them apart further.

He thrusts his tongue in and out of me, in and out. Bringing his hands up to grip my inner thighs, he pries them apart, pulls his tongue out of my pussy, only to bite down on my swollen clit. I scream. The climax screeches up my legs and that's when he releases his hold on my cunt. He straightens, and my orgasm retreats. I blink. What the hell? What's that all about?

He bends forward, winds his fingers around the nape of my neck, urges me to unbend, stand straight. He pinches my chin so I turn to glance at him, and he licks my lips. He brushes his mouth across mine and the taste of him, laced with my essence, sinks into my palate.

"You fucking taste of honey, you know that?" He groans into my mouth and my heart hammers in my chest. "You're so damn irresistible. Once I let you in, I'll never be able to get you out of my head." He stills, "Who am I kidding?" He murmurs as if he's talking to himself, "You're already imprinted on my heart, Eve, and I don't know what to do about it."

I swallow.

"When I thought that I'd lost you, I swore that I'd never let anyone this close to me again. Why should I trust you again, Eve? Why?" He stares into my eyes, "Tell me what stops you from leaving me again?"

"I... I won't," I promise.

He holds my gaze and somehow, something in his eyes tells me he doesn't believe me completely yet.

"How can I prove it to you?" I murmur. "Tell me what I should do, to show you how much you mean to me."

"You won't be able to do it."

"Try me."

"You're sure?" His eyes gleam.

I nod.

"Move in with me."

"O...kay."

"Marry me."

"What?" I blink. "What did you say?"

"Marry me, Ava."

39

Ava

"Is that a proposal?"

"If that's what you want it to be."

I stare at him. "You sure are romantic." I strive for a light tone, but my voice comes out all breathless.

The expression on his face doesn't change. He holds my gaze, "Well?" He tilts his head, "What do you say?"

"Okay." I blow out a breath,

"Is that a yes?"

"It's..." I swallow, "It's a yes."

"Good." He releases the nape of my neck, steps up and around me. "Come." He jerks his head.

"Wh...where?"

"I'll show you to your room."

Right. I bend to pick up the clothes I had kicked aside earlier, then grab my bag from the counter and trail behind him. He leads me down the short corridor and pauses at the first room on the right. He pushes the door open, gestures for me to enter. I walk in, take in the double bed, the nightstand, the walk-in closet in the corner, the dresser pushed up against one wall, a writing table and chair on the other side. My feet sink into the thick carpet, and I wriggle my toes. "It's nice," I say.

"It'll do."

He retreats to the exit and I stop him, "Wait."

He turns to glance at me.

"Where...where are you sleeping?"

"My room is across the hallway."

"So...uh, we're not sleeping together?"

"When you're in my bed, you won't be doing much of that."

Oh, my god. He sure has a way with words. And that's not the only thing he knows his way around. My breasts feel too heavy, my scalp tingles, and moisture beads between my legs. His nostril's flare and his eyes gleam. Damn it, he knows exactly what his words do to me.

"So...we are going to have separate bedrooms?"

"Only until the wedding." He turns to leave and I take a step forward.

"But why?" I blurt out. "Why this distance?"

He pauses, then continues toward the door.

"Is it because you want to punish me for not coming to you sooner?"

He doesn't say anything, but the set of his shoulders, the way he holds himself so erect that his spine is totally upright gives him away.

"Just so you know," I lower my hands to my sides, and my stuff falls to the floor, "I am not going anywhere."

He stares straight ahead.

"Also, it's really not fair that you judge me this harshly. You were there, Baron. You saw how conflicted I was between the two of you. It was difficult for me to untangle what I felt for each of you."

He holds up a hand, and I firm my lips. Damn him. Only Baron can have this effect on me. His one gesture, and I want to follow his lead. His one look, and I want to throw myself at his feet and ask him to take me. His one touch, and I am ready to debase myself to please him. This...this is what I missed. The surety of his demeanor. The way he can be hard toward me and yet gentle, at the same time.

There is a poetry to his actions... A certain push-pull at play that always keeps me on the edge. It makes me want to hit him, then kiss him again. The way he constantly challenges me, forces me to become a better version of myself. And the fact that he loved me enough to walk away from me...? It's what clarified everything for me.

Not that Edward wouldn't have made me happy. He'd have loved me and protected me. Hell, he took a bullet for me, for hell's sake... But Baron wanted my happiness enough to turn his back on me. He thought that I deserved to be with the man I had confessed to love. He still thinks that I

don't love him enough.

But he's wrong. He'd been there for me when I'd needed someone the most. Second to losing my mother, the time I had been away from him were the worst days of my life... Especially because I hadn't been able to put a name to the emptiness, the desperate sensations that had eaten away at me from the inside. It had taken me a while to figure out what it was. Luckily, Edward had loved me enough to point me in the right direction. As soon as I had sorted out everything in my head, I had come to him.

And I am not leaving. Not now. Not ever. This is it for me. But how do I convince him?

He takes another step toward the door and I call out again, "Wait, if I am moving in here, then what about my stuff?"

"We can go get it tomorrow."

"And my classes, my studio?"

He turns so I can see his face in profile, "None of that needs to change. I want you for my wife, not my captive."

He faces forward, and I call out. "Wait..."

He glances over his shoulder.

"I... I need a T-shirt or something to change into for bed."

He looks me up and down, "You can survive for one night. I'll arrange to have your things delivered tomorrow."

This time when he leaves the room, I don't try to stop him.

I glance around the room, then back at the door. Shit, shit, shit. So that's it? We live under the same roof, have our own rooms, then we get married and what? He fucks me?

I chose to come to him...and he what? Holds me at arm's length? This is not the kind of welcome I foresaw. When he'd asked me to bend over, I'd been sure he'd fuck me... Instead...he'd aroused me, brought me to the edge of an orgasm, and then he'd pulled away. Bastard. What the hell is he trying to do here?

I pick up my bag, place it on the nightstand, and drape my clothes over the chair. I grab a quick shower then slip into my panties and camisole, before sliding under the covers with my phone. I dial Isla. Her phone rings, then she picks up the call. Her face appears on the screen.

"Hellooo," she sing-songs. I hear voices in the background, see lights, a blur of people...

"Sorry, are you busy?"

"Not for you, babe." She steps out of the room; a door closes behind her and the sounds fade.

"Where are you?"

"Out with a bride who needed a shoulder to cry on."

"You mean..." I lower my chin

"Yeah," she blows out a breath, "the bride of the man who shall not be named." Her lips firm. "Except for the one wedding rehearsal, asshole didn't turn up for any of the tastings or for any of the other meetings. It's like he really doesn't care. I really feel sorry for the bride...so..."

"So...you're hanging out with her?"

"So?"

"So, you broke your rule about not socializing with the clients."

"She was just sooo sad." Isla grimaces, "When she asked me out for a drink, I couldn't refuse."

"Or maybe, you wanted to get more info on Li—"

She frowns.

"I mean, the man who shall not be named."

"Of course, not." She purses her lips. "Not really. I mean, I did lend a sympathetic ear to her as she poured out the details of their relationship, which is beyond dysfunctional, but really, I was just doing my job."

"Hmm," I scowl, "if you say so."

"And we are not here to talk about me." She raises an eyebrow. "What's up? Everything okay with you and Baron?"

"Wait, what?" I blink, "How did you know about...?"

"Why else would you be calling me?"

"You mean, I only call you when I need a sounding board?"

She smirks.

"Iz..." I scowl.

"Not that I mind. I mean, your life is far more interesting than mine right now."

"Trust me, I'd trade mine for something tame and boring..." I mutter.

Her gaze narrows, and I rush to add, "Not that I could ever accuse you of that. Not now that what's-his-face is occupying so much of your time."

She glowers and I motion zipping my mouth, "Okay, won't go there."

"So... Baron?"

I deflate a little. "I am at his place."

"Finally." She blows out a breath, "I mean, honestly woman, what took

you so long?"

"I just needed some time to cleanse my palate."

She stares at me and I point a finger at the screen. "I didn't mean it that way."

"Then how did you mean it?"

"Just that I needed a little bit of space from both of them... Enough to sort out my thoughts." I raise a shoulder, "I mean, I admit I surprised myself when I realized it wasn't Edward but...Baron that I want... But uh, I may have needed a little bit of time to get my courage up to face him, you know?"

"And?"

"And what?"

"You're in his house, but you're not with him...so?"

I narrow my gaze, "Jesus, woman, give me a chance to tell my story."

"Go on..." she says impatiently, "why the hell isn't he ravishing you as we speak?"

My cheeks pink. "Uh, I thought that's what he was going to do."

"And then?"

"Then he pulled away."

"Like, literally pulled away?"

My cheeks heat, "He, uh, asked me to marry him."

"He what...?" She opens and shuts her mouth.

"Yeah." I bite the inside of my cheek. "It surprised me too. As much as him putting me in another room and telling me that he isn't going to sleep with me until after the wedding."

"And you agreed?"

I raise my shoulders, "Umm...yeah?"

"So, you are going to, once more, toe the line."

"Uh, not sure he gave me a choice."

"So, first he...comes onto you physically, only to retreat and ask you to marry him. Then he puts you up in his guest room."

I nod.

She taps her cheek, "Seems to me, your alphahole is insecure."

"Well, that's an oxymoron. Alphaholes don't get insecure... But," I hunch my shoulders, "I have to concede, you may be right, in this case. He did ask me if I was going to change my mind again."

"How dare he?" She grimaces, "I mean, it's a valid question. But seriously, how could he question your intent?"

"Yeah," I nod, "I mean, I am here; I am not going anywhere. This is where I want to be. With him. And I told him so, and I thought he believed it, but—"

"He's having trouble accepting it."

I nod.

"His mind gets it, but it hasn't quite sunk in."

"Exactly."

"So, you know what you have to do, right?"

"What?"

"Come on, Ava, do I have to tell you everything?"

"Gah." I sit up in bed, clutching the sheets under my arms "Can you please tell me what you're thinking?"

Her eyes twinkle. "If he doesn't come to you, you'll have to go to him, Ava."

40

Baron

I lower my whiskey glass, as I stare at the screen of my computer. What the hell had come over me? When she'd walked in... When I had seen her, it was like I could finally breathe. All that time away from her, I'd thought I was alive. I was so wrong. How could I be, when my heart no longer belongs to me? She'd walked into my apartment and I couldn't believe that she was really here.

At the same time, I knew... I know it's right. That she belongs with me. Has been mine from the moment I laid eyes on her. I'd known it, and yet, I'd walked away. I'd thought, he deserves her. After everything he's done for me, I'd thought I owed him this much... I owed him a chance at happiness. So, I'd left... And she'd come to me.

And I'd wanted to throw her down and tear into her pussy. I'd wanted to bury myself in her tight little cunt; I'd wanted to cram myself in her arse, and fill her mouth with my cum. I'd wanted to paint every inch of her body with the evidence of my arousal, my ownership. I'd wanted to lick her up and bite down on the sensitive skin between her legs. I'd wanted to mark her creamy thighs, redden her bottom with my handprints. I'd wanted to... Fill every hole in her body and show her who she belongs to. Hell, I wanted to put my ring on her finger and mark her as mine for the world to see.

So yeah... I'd run with it. I'd asked her to marry me... Until that very moment, I hadn't realized how much I wanted her to be mine, in every sense of the word.

Which is all good; but the distance? Putting her in another room while I stay in mine... Shit, what was I thinking?

I'd checked in on her earlier, to find that she was sleeping. She seemed to be naked. Her clothes were dumped on the chair by the desk, the soldier in me had cringed. I'd walked over and folded her clothes, then sat there next to the bed. I'd watched her sleep. Like that's not creepy or anything. I was simply making sure that she was okay. She'd slept deeply, her cheeks pink, her lips slightly parted. Her auburn hair was in a cloud around her face. She'd looked innocent and at peace, and I'd wanted to cover her body with mine and bury myself inside of her...

That's when I'd gotten up and left. I'd ended up in the third room, which is my temporary office. I'd gone over my investments, put in calls to Asia and the US. That's the benefit of running a portfolio with global interests. There's always someone, somewhere in the world who is working.

As I wrap up my last call, my phone rings again. Damian's picture—or to be more specific, that of him and his pregnant wife Julia—shows up. I stare at it, take in their laughing faces. Will I ever have that? Do I want that? Can I have that with Ava, given everything we've been through?

I answer the call and Damian's face fills the screen. "Hey, motherfucker." He smirks.

I groan, "Now I know why I stayed away from you guys for so long."

"And we're going to make up for it with a vengeance."

"We?" I frown, "What do you—?"

Another face appears on the screen. Sinner; it's bloody Sinner. Then Saint, and Arpad, and Weston. I grip my phone, am about to chuck it aside, when Sinner warns, "You want to hear what we have to say, asshole."

"Do I?" I growl.

"Stop being a bastard," Saint barks, "and listen to what we have to say."

"Look who's talking." I roll my shoulders. "The biggest bastard of them all."

"At least, I know who I am," he mutters.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what I said." He smirks. "I've never shied away from what I am. I wear my proclivities on my sleeve."

"That wife of yours needs to have her head examined for staying with you," I snipe.

Saint's features freeze, and for a second, I am sure he's going to explode.

Probably drive over and bash my face in, which I deserve, considering I had broken the only rule... One I had repeatedly violated during my interactions with them since I'd returned... Wives and significant others, including kids, are off the table when we speak to each other. Specifically, when we insult each other. I had just broken the rule again... So, what's new?

The rest of the Seven threaten...and posture, but with the exception of Edward, they all conform, one way or the other. It's only me and Ed who'd tried to forge a different path to cope with the aftermath of the incident. We were hurt the most and we'd lashed out at life... At ourselves. Then at each other. And look where that has gotten us. In a mess I am still trying to make sense of.

"Apologize." Saint's features are hard. "You're not yourself, so I understand why you said something you didn't mean. Say you're sorry, you piece of shit."

I stare at Saint. *Whoa? What? No raging and tearing things up? No threats of punishments...? He isn't coming over to physically beat the shit out of me? Something which I had actually been looking forward to, if I am being honest.* Nothing like being able to use my fists, to be able to let off steam. Of course, I could walk in next door and fuck my woman... I shake my head. Not yet. She isn't mine yet. *She came to you, remember? She wants you. This time, she chose you...* But hell, if a part of me inside, still can't believe it.

Just like I can't believe Saint—motherfucking—Caldwell is ready to forgive me for my error of judgment.

"I'm sorry," I say through gritted teeth. "You're right; I didn't mean it."

"You're angry." He nods, "It's understandable."

"I apologized, didn't I?" I growl. "You don't have to pretend to get what I am going through."

"Oh, but we do," Weston says, his voice soft. "If we, the alphaholes who've been brought to our knees by the right women, don't get what you're going through, then who can?"

"That why you called me up at—" I glance at my watch, "four in the morning?" I smirk. "Thought you guys had your families and stuff to take care of."

"That's what we are doing." Damian's smile widens.

"What?" I frown.

"Taking care of family, you turd," Saint growls.

"I...ah..." My throat closes and a pressure builds behind my eyes. "The

hell are you guys trying to say?"

"Want us to spell it out?" Sinner sighs, "Fine, you are our family, you tosser. We are each other's family. We have been since the incident and you know it, and you have been fighting it."

"No, I have not." I scowl.

"Yes, you have." Saint nods. "Edward was the stubborn one, but you were the sensitive one."

"Sensitive?" I laugh, "You guys been drinking...? Oh, wait," I pretend to think, "you guys don't do that anymore, now that you are the responsible ones."

"Nice try," Arpad smirks, "but you can't distract us."

"None of us realized how much you had been hurt," Weston picks up the narrative. "If we had any indication just how much you and Edward had been impacted..."

"It's done; it's behind us," I say through gritted teeth.

"Is it?" Weston, tilts his head. "Edward managed it by joining the priesthood, and it was there for him when he needed it most. However, he eventually realized just how much of a crutch it was, and opted out. He's still trying to find his mooring, and that's okay. He's already started on the journey. But you?" He shakes his head, "You have your destination in front of you, but refuse to recognize it."

"If this is about Ava—"

"Of course, it is about Ava, you toff," Sinner growls. "We know that she left Edward."

"And that she came to you last night," Damian murmurs.

I glare at them. Not a surprise that they know she's here. Much as I'd like to deny it, the Seven of us are up in each other's business. Put the wives and girlfriends into the mix, and well... You have communication pinging back and forth faster than a ball at a Wimbledon tennis match. Ava must have, no doubt, spoken to one of the women, and that would have alerted the entire network to what's happening.

"Remember what you said earlier, Saint, about not talking about the women?" I remind them.

"This is different." Saint glares at me, "We're talking about *you*, and your completely asinine attitude in refusing to accept what's right for you."

"And you guys know that, how?"

"Experience." Sinner blows out a breath, "Like we've said, been here,

done that. And we're not allowing you to fuck up your life... No more than it is right now."

"Not sure you guys get a say in that," I mutter

"Might be a little too late for that, ol' chap." Arpad chortles.

"What do you—?" The intercom app on my phone buzzes. I'd switched off the connections in the rooms so it wouldn't disturb Ava. "Hold on."

I switch out of the call and place the phone to my ear, "Yes?"

"A Mr. Chase to see you, sir."

"Chase." I frown.

"Should I—?"

"Send him up." I switch back into the call to find the rest of them waiting.

"Well," Damian asks, "is it him?"

"Who?"

"Cut the crap. You two finally going to bury your differences, or what?" Saint growls.

"You guys behind this?" I mutter.

The guys stay silent. I take in their faces and blow out a breath. "The fuck, you think you're doing?" I growl. "What the fuck is wrong with you? If you think this is going to help, you are so wrong."

"Hold on," Sinner's glare intensifies, "we were only trying to—"

I switch out of the call and raise my phone, intent on throwing it, then stop. Fuck. That would only wake up Ava, and that's the last thing I want." I place the phone on the table, then get up and head out of the study. Making sure Ava's door is firmly shut, I head for the living room, just as the elevator dings. It opens and Edward steps out.

41

Edward

When the guys had called me earlier, I had been pissed. But then they'd reminded me, again, how I'd intervened when each of them had been at a critical juncture in their lives. What I didn't tell them was that I had been a different person then. Someone who had literally divorced myself from what was going on inside of me. Someone who was focused on others, on the betterment of my flock. In their happiness lay mine. Which, honestly, wasn't a bad space to be in. Only, it had meant that I had locked away every damn feeling of my own. I had turned away from myself, had turned my back on my emotions, on the guilt and recriminations I had carried inside for so long. I hadn't been able to save him... Hadn't been able to save myself.

Until she had come along. A bright light at the end of a period of soul-searching darkness. Ava had been the catalyst, and I had been ready to break my vows. It was as simple as that. And I had loved her, truly... And it was that part of me which had known that she would be happier with Baron.

The guys had asked me to bury my differences with Baron. The truth is, there's nothing to forgive. So why hadn't I joined their conference calls? Why hadn't I been able to face Baron before this? Honestly, I don't have an answer to that. Now, as I step out of the elevator and take in the unsmiling countenance of the man who glares at me, I know he's hurting. As much as me.

I walk toward him, and he doesn't move. I pause in front of him, hold out my hand.

"Friends?" I murmur. "You ready to be friends?"

He glares at my proffered hand then back at my face, "What are you, ten?" He pivots around, heads to the bar, and pours out whiskey in two tumblers.

Well, at least, he hadn't asked me to leave. Though that's not Baron's style. I'm the one more liable to lose my temper nowadays. Breaking free of the discipline of priesthood has, apparently, unleashed an entire range of emotions in me, many of them unused for decades. Is that good or bad? The jury's out on that.

I stalk over to the bar, pick up the tumbler from the counter. "Ava?" I murmur.

"She's asleep."

I raise the glass to my mouth, and toss back the alcohol. Baron does the same. He fills up both of our glasses, then contemplates his own tumbler.

"What are you doing here, Ed?" he asks.

"I had to see you."

"What for?" he growls. "We've said everything there is to be said."

"Have we?" I peruse his brooding features, "We've never spoken about the incident."

"There's nothing to speak about." He begins to prowl about the space. Walks around, restless, before he comes to stop by the window. "There's nothing more to it."

"There's everything to it." I tilt my head, "We need to address what happened that day. We couldn't face it afterwards. Both of us agreed we'd never tell a soul what actually transpired that day..."

"And we haven't." He glances over his shoulder. "It's gone, buried, forgotten."

"But it isn't, is it?" I place my glass on the counter with a thump. "It's festering away within each of us. It's eating us inside. We didn't confide in our families, not our therapists, not even in the Seven. Hell, we haven't spoken about it to each other since."

"So?" He shrugs, "Neither of us turned out the worse for it."

"We could have put ourselves out of our misery a long time ago, if we had acknowledged how much it had scarred both of us. It's no joke when two young boys have to bugger—"

"Stop." He pivots so fast that some of the liquid sloshes over the side of his glass, "Shut the fuck up, Priest."

"Yeah," I glance at him thoughtfully, "I left the priesthood, and the rest of you seem to have adopted that nickname so naturally. Apparently, you can try to leave your past behind, but it always tags along somehow, know what I mean?"

"Go preach somewhere else," he growls, "I am not in the mood."

"Well, too bad." I stalk forward and he stiffens.

"The fuck you up to, Ed?"

"Just trying to put things right."

"There's nothing to righten," he snaps

"There's only everything to lose if I don't."

"Fuck off," he snarls, "don't come the fuck closer, man."

"Oh, yeah, what are you going to do if I do?"

He bares his teeth, "You wanna fight? Is that it, asshole?" He tosses back the rest of his drink, then flings his glass aside. It hits the floor and shatters. He throws up his fists, jumps forward as I rush him.

We meet somewhere in the middle. I bury my fist in his shoulder, but the asshole gets one in, right in my injured side. Fucking bullet injury—it hasn't healed completely. Pain slices through my head. I shake to clear it. Punch him in the stomach. He staggers back, only to straighten and lunge at me. He head butts me and the breath leaves my lungs. He gets in another punch to my solar plexus. I reel from it, then lob one at his side. His chest heaves, he lurches back, then throws himself at me. I take his full weight, and the bastard's fucking heavy. I sidestep the shards of glass on the floor but my feet slip on the drink he'd spilled earlier.

I crash to the ground, him on top of me. It's like a brick wall has collapsed on me. My lungs burn, my side screams, and my shoulder hurts like a bitch. I shove him to the side and away from the broken glass. We roll over and over, until we come to a stop, me leaning over him. I dig my elbow into his throat. "Give up," I growl.

"No fucking way," he snarls.

I increase the pressure until the color leaves his cheeks.

"Give the fuck up."

He glares at me. Anger, hatred...and something else. That fucking helplessness I'd witnessed in his eyes, that I'd felt when we'd locked gazes during that fateful time.

"Fuck," I growl, "F-u-c-k." I release him, only to lower my forehead to his. "Fucking hell, man." I swallow. "I am so fucking sorry for what I did to

you."

"Yeah." His breath emerges on a rattle. "Me too. No one's more fucking sorry than me for what I did to you that day." He grabs the back of my neck, searches my eyes, "It wasn't your fucking fault though, you understand?"

"Yeah." A hot sensation stabs at my chest. "It wasn't your fault either." I hold his gaze.

"I forgive you, man," I finally say. The pressure builds behind my temples. My throat closes. I draw in a breath, then another. Force myself to feel every single fucking emotion that coils in my chest. "I forgive you; you hear me?"

"Me too." He swallows. "I forgive you."

That's when I hear footsteps approach us.

"What the hell is happening here?"

42

Ava

The sound of voices had woken me up. I had pulled on my clothes then crept out of the room. I had peeked into the living room, to find the two of them engaged in conversation.

I had hesitated, not wanting to interrupt, when Baron had charged Ed. They'd sprawled to the floor, rolled over. I had stepped toward them, intent on breaking up the fight; that's when Ed had placed his forehead against Baron's in what was, clearly, an emotional moment between the two.

They had spoken in low voices. I crept close enough to hear them forgive each other... And the way they had looked at each other... There was so much pain, so much shared history, so much...anger, and underneath all of that, so much...connection. It was such a private moment... I had felt like an intruder. It didn't feel right, somehow. I had witnessed what was, clearly... something very emotional between them and they weren't even aware of it... That's when I had spoken up.

Now, both of them glance at me, until Edward springs up. He holds out his arm to Baron, who hesitates, then grabs it. Ed pulls him up. Both men turn to face me.

"Well?" I glance between them, "What was that all about?"

Both men hold my gaze; twin expressions of stubbornness greet me.

"Come on," I blow out a breath, "I heard you guys speak, and this wasn't a normal bro-to-bro conversation, the kind you guys normally indulge in."

"Bro-to-bro?" Edward mutters. "What does that even mean?"

"I mean, it wasn't the kind of posturing you Seven indulge in when you get together. This felt...raw...and real...and painful."

"That's because it was." Baron blows out a breath. He glares sideways at Ed, and the two exchange one of their looks.

"See?" I throw up my hands, "This is what I mean. You guys have a shared history and neither of you ever shared it with me."

"It wasn't the right time earlier." Baron stalks over to me, "But it is time now." He cups my cheek. "Believe me when I say, it's not an easy story to tell but," he swallows, "you deserve to know."

I glance past him at Edward, who nods at me.

"Okay." I swallow. "Tell me then."

Baron leads me over to the settee, then sinks down next to me. Edward sits in the chair opposite us. He glances at Baron, who takes my hand in his. He weaves his fingers through mine and the gesture is so...tender, so unlike how Baron has been with me before. And it's not like he hasn't been affectionate... But this, is almost more like a plea for my support... My heart stutters. My throat closes. *Oh, hell, do I really want to know about what they are going to tell me?*

"So," I square my shoulders, "what is it?"

He hesitates and I glance down at my palm that is swallowed up by his much larger one. I bring our joined hands up and kiss the back of his. "You can tell me anything, Baron."

His chest rises and falls. I glance up to find him staring at me with such vulnerability in his eyes, my breath grows shallow and my heart begins to pound. "What is it?" I murmur, "You're scaring me, Barry."

"Barry?" He blinks. "No one calls me Barry."

"Guess I do, now."

His lips quirk. He rolls his shoulders before composing himself. "You know about the incident, of course, and I guess you've heard something about how Ed and I..." he firms his lips, "how we were hurt the worst by it?"

"It's what I gathered from the girls, yes." I nod.

"When we were kidnapped, Ed and I were initially held with the rest of the Seven," Baron says in a hard voice. "We were all blindfolded and gagged then, so we could hear the rest of the boys, but not see them."

"Baron managed to free himself. He got to me and freed me. We'd been best friends since the first grade. Before we could remove the restrains of the other boys, they got to us. They separated us, took us into a different room,"

Edward murmurs. "And then," he swallows, "then one of the men raped me."

"Oh, Ed," I swallow, "I am so sorry." My heart feels like it's going to shatter; tears prick the backs of my eyes. I swallow them back and my throat burns.

"The worst thing was, as he bugged me, I was actually aroused. I was twelve-years-old. I didn't understand the difference between physiological reactions and desires, and they used my naiveté to shame me." Edward pauses to gather his thoughts, or maybe, his courage. "But it gets worse... They forced me to use the erection on Baron."

"What?" I cry in horror. "How could they? Oh, my god!" I glance from Ed to Baron, who stares into the distance.

"I refused, of course." Edward murmurs, "so they began beating him up. I could see them hit him, hear his groans." Ed swallows. "It was..." He shakes his head, "When I finally couldn't take it any longer, I agreed."

"You...a...agreed?" I blink.

"It was either that or stand by and watch him being beaten to death." Ed sets his jaw. "When I agreed, one of the men raped me again. He forced an erection on me, and this time, I had to use it on Baron."

"Which, in turn, elicited an erection from me, and when they asked me to use it on Ed, I—" Baron's throat moves as he swallows, "I knew if I didn't, they'd only beat him up, or beat me again and... I couldn't bear the thought of it...so I did it."

Edward jumps in, "They made it seem like they were giving us a choice, which only added to the guilt each of us felt—and still do—but the truth is, we didn't have any other option. They used our shame to manipulate us. The thing is, if you want to cause serious psychological harm to a child, use shame. It's the most powerful emotion, and the hardest one to erase."

"We didn't know how to handle it, so we buried it," Baron adds. "As you may have noticed, that didn't work out so well." He grimaces and shares another look with Edward.

"There were so many times, when I was sure that I was going to break, that I couldn't bear it anymore. It was the courage in Edward's gaze that kept me going. Baron's voice cracks, and I grip his palm between both of mine.

"Oh, my god." Tears flow down my face and I wipe them away. "I am so sorry for what they did to you guys. You were so young, just coming to terms with your own sexuality. It would have hurt you, and scarred you for life."

"And it did." Edward lowers his chin. "So, there it is, our sordid little

secret."

"Now you know." Baron tries to pull his hand away from me, but I hold on.

"And you haven't told anyone else about this?"

Both men shake their head.

"So why tell me?"

"Because," Baron turns me, "I want you to know. We," he jerks his chin toward Ed, "we want you to know about what happened between the two of us. You need to know everything about me, so we can make a fresh start."

"A fresh start." I tip up my chin, "Is that what it is?"

"It's," he peers into my face, "whatever you want it to be, Eve."

I swallow down the sobs that threaten, "Okay." I half smile, "It's going to be okay." I reach up, brush the hair off of his forehead, "Thank you for telling me."

He nods.

I turn to Edward, "Thank you for sharing this with me. Thank you for trusting me."

"I came today because," he links his fingers together and leans forward, "because I wanted you two to know that you have my blessing..." He chuckles. "Not that a blessing from an ex-priest means a whole lot." He lifts a shoulder, "And it's not that you two need it, but for what it's worth, I don't hold a grudge against either of you."

Baron wraps his arm around me and pulls me close. I recognize his gesture for what it is. Possessiveness, a mark of ownership, establishing his claim in front of his friend... And I can't blame him. After everything we've been through, this feels right. And organic and natural, and so real.

"Thanks, man," Baron murmurs, "it...means a lot to hear that from you."

"You better treat her right," he says quietly, "else you'll have to answer to me."

"Edward," I swallow, "I... I'm so sorry."

"Don't be." His lips twist. "You gave me a new lease on life and I'll always be grateful for that." He rises to his feet, "And now, I need to get going."

He has almost made it to the elevator when Baron calls out to him, "You're coming to the wedding, right?"

Ed stiffens, his shoulders go solid, then he seems to force himself to relax. He jerks his head in our direction, "I'll make sure to swing by."

43

Baron

The elevator doors close behind Edward. Silence descends in the room. I pull my hand from between Ava's grasp and stand. "I am going to bed."

I begin walking in the direction of my bedroom, when she calls out, "That's it?" Her voice is incredulous, "That's all you have to say about what just happened?"

I tilt my head, "Well, that was a surprise. I hadn't expected to reveal my background quite that way... But now you know."

"What happened wasn't either of you guys' fault." Her voice grows closer as she walks up to me. "You know that, right?"

I raise a shoulder, "Doesn't matter whose fault it was or wasn't; it happened."

"And you are not responsible for it."

"Maybe so," I rub the back of my neck, "but surely, I could have done something to prevent it."

"Like what?" She reaches me, presses her palm against my back, "You were kids, and you had been kidnapped and—"

"Spare me the details." I drag my fingers through my hair, "I was there, remember?"

I move away from her, pushing open the door to my bedroom, "Goodnight, Ava. Get some rest."

I turn to close the door, getting a glimpse of the hurt on her face. Her features are ashen, those big green eyes wide with hurt and...empathy. Shit,

this is why I hadn't been able to tell her what had happened. This is exactly why I had refused to tell anyone else about the incident. I don't need anyone's sympathy. Certainly, don't need them telling me how sorry they are.

Shit happens. You deal with it... Or not, as the case may be. Either way, you move on. As I had.

I had left for the army, and while the rest of the Seven may think it was a way of escaping what had happened, and perhaps it was, it had been my way of dealing with the shit-show of cards that I had been dealt. Besides, I had come back, right? I have faced the music, so to speak. Hell, I've even buried my differences with Edward...

So why the hell can't I let this woman, who means so much to me, in? Why is it so difficult for me to take that final step and allow her into my life completely?

I close the door gently, shutting out the sight of those gorgeous green eyes. My heart squeezes in my chest and I ignore it. I strip as I head to the bathroom, stand under the shower. Not that it helps. I need more.

I. Need. Her. Need to bury myself in her sweet core and forget about the world for a while. I need to wrap myself around her curves, draw in her scent, lick her lips and taste her cries as she comes. I need to bite down on the tender skin where her neck meets her shoulder, and mark her as mine. My dick throbs as the blood rushes to my groin. But I refuse to jerk myself off. I hurt her. Again. I deserve to live with the discomfort. It is the least I can do.

I switch off the shower, dry myself on the way out of the bathroom. Dropping the towel, I climb under the sheets.

I close my eyes, and instantly, the sound of my screams fills my ears.

"Don't hurt me." I cough. "Please don't." I throw up hands to protect my face, even as the vicious kicks continue—in my side, in my stomach, on my other side. Pain rips up my spine and I gasp for air.

"Stop." Edward voice sounds behind me, "Stop beating him. I'll do it. I'll do as you say."

The blows stop and I slump against the floor. My back aches, my shoulder screams in pain. My entire body is one throbbing mass of hurt.

Hands grip my pants and someone pulls them off of me, along with my briefs. Someone else pulls off my shirt. The cool air hits me and goosebumps pop on my fevered skin. I want to cover myself, want to draw into myself and pretend I am not here. But I can't. I won't. I will survive this. I will do what

is needed to come out of this alive. I will do what is needed to keep myself and Edward in one piece. Edward, I need to get to him. I push myself up to my hands and knees, beginning to crawl toward him.

Laughter follows me. "Look at him go," a voice yells. I jerk my head around and glare at the masked man with the gray eyes. I memorize the shape of his eyes, his height, the width of his shoulders. If I get out of here alive, I am going to hunt down these monsters and kill them. I am going to make them pay for this.

"What are you looking at, you piece of shit?" He takes a step toward me and I scramble away. I crawl as fast as I can until I reach Edward. "Ed," I grip his shoulder, "Ed, you okay?"

"Baron," he blinks rapidly, "Baron... I am so sorry."

"I am sorry too, Ed."

"Enough." Someone kicks my thigh from behind and I fall onto my side. He kicks me in the stomach and I groan, double over.

"Stop," I pant, "please, stop."

Behind me, I hear Edward growl, "Stop hurting him, you prick."

"Insult me, will you?" The man steps around me, and kicks Ed in his side. Edward groans, throws his hands up to protect himself. Shit, shit, shit. "Stop," I yell, "we'll do as you say. Stop hitting him, you bastard."

Something—someone kicks me in the side. Pain explodes up my spine. "When will you two learn to stop speaking, and do as you are told?" Another kick to my already bruised ribs, and I cry out. Another to my legs, my arms. Someone plants his foot in my stomach and my entire body bucks.

"Stop," I howl, "don't hurt me."

"Baron?"

"Stop it," I cry. "Stop."

"Baron!"

Something closes around my neck. Someone's hands. My breath traps in my chest. I can't breathe; my lungs burn. I lunge toward my tormentor. I swoop out and my fingers brush something. I grab hold of an arm, tug. The breeze rushes over me as he stumbles and falls, his hold on me loosening. Instantly, I am on him. I reach for the direction of his face, wrap my fingers around his neck, begin to squeeze. *I am going to kill you. Kill you.*

"Baron, stop! You're hurting me."

I snap my eyes open, and meet her wide green ones. My fingers are around her neck, squeezing down, as I lean over her, straddling her on my

bed. She coughs, digging her fingers into my palms, "Stop," she gurgles, "stop it."

I loosen my hold and she draws in a breath, coughing. Tears run down her cheeks. I bend and lick them up. She gasps. Her chest rises and falls. I peer into her features as I press my thumb into the pulse that flutters at the base of her throat.

"What are you doing here, Ava?" I lower my voice to a hush and she pants.

"I... I..."

"Couldn't keep away, could you?" I drag my palm down to her breast, squeeze.

A moan spills from her lips. "I... I heard you scream, came in to check, and saw that you were caught up in a nightmare."

"You shouldn't have come." I rub my thumb across the nipple outlined against the cotton of her camisole. "You should have known that once I get you in my bed, I am not letting you go."

She stops struggling, glances up at me.

"Or maybe that's what you wanted, hmm? You wanted to catch me at my most vulnerable, so you could slip past my defenses?"

"Baron." She swallows, "Th...that's not true."

"Oh?" I drag my fingers up her throat to notch them under her chin. I push up and she lifts her head, holding my gaze.

"I... I came to help. I know you have flashbacks from the incident, and now I understand what happened to you."

"Do you?" I tilt my head. "Do you really understand how it is to have been through what I have?"

"I..." Her lips tremble, "I can't claim to know how that feels. Whatever happened to you was terrible and completely wrong. And I have not the tiniest inkling of how it is to live with it. But...if I can help ease the burden somewhat."

"And how would you do that?" I lower my lips until my mouth is positioned just above hers. "How would you, as you say, lessen the pain of what happened, little Eve?"

"With my body..." she gulps. "With my body, I thee worship. With my heart, I will ease your sorrow. With my soul... I... I'll share your grief. With my hands I will soothe the loss of the little boy you once were. With my cunt, I'll... I'll welcome you into me so you never feel alone again."

My breathing grows ragged. My chest tightens, my throat hurts, and a burning sensation crawls up my spine. "Is that right?" I choke out. "Is that how you mean to sacrifice yourself for me?"

"It's not a sacrifice, if it's what I want to do," she murmurs. She reaches up to cup my cheek, "I want to ease your agony, in any way I can, Baron. That is," she peers up at me from under her eyelashes, "if you'll let me."

Bloody fuck, this woman... She guts me. How can someone so young and so beautiful be this... Profound, this intense, this ardent in her intentions. Her green eyes gaze up at me like I am the center of the world. My heart stutters and my groin hardens. In all my life, I have never felt this...connected...this vulnerable...yet this powerful. I want her. I have needed her since the moment I saw her. And now she is in my bed, in my space. With nothing and no-one standing between us. It's time...she finds out what it means to be owned by a man who is never going to let go of her again.

I hook my finger in the center of her camisole and tug.

Ava

The cloth tears. I yelp, glancing down to find he's torn my camisole right down the middle. He lowers his mouth to my breast and bites down on my nipple.

"Oh, my god," I huff, "Baron."

"Shh." His hot breath sears my skin. He licks the swollen bud, then turns his attention to my other breast. He swirls his tongue around the nub of my nipple, and my pussy clenches. He glances up at me as he closes his hot mouth around my aching flesh. Goosebumps rise on my skin. He increases the pressure around my neck and my breath catches.

"Baron," I whisper, "please."

He bares his teeth as he reaches between us. He slides his fingers inside my panties. His fingertips brush my soaking center and I shudder. Closing his palm around my pussy, he squeezes. Heat shivers out from his touch. I squeeze my thighs together, trapping his hand there, and his eyes gleam.

"Who does your pussy belong to, Ava?" he growls.

"You," I groan, "it belongs to you."

He slides two fingers inside me and I gasp, "And your cunt?" he asks. "Who does your cunt belong to?"

"You," I gasp, "only you."

He brings his face close to mine, as he pulls out his fingers, only to shove them in between my lips.

"And your mouth?" His gaze intensifies, "Who does your mouth belong

to?"

"You." The sound emerges garbled as I speak through his fingers, "You, Baron."

He nods. He pulls his fingers out, wipes them on my chest, and the gesture is so filthy, so hot that I have to squeeze my thighs together again. His nostrils flare and a pulse beats to life at his temples. He reaches down to slide his fingers between my arse cheeks. His fingers brush my backhole and I flinch. "And this hole?" He growls, "Who will you let inside here, sweet Eve?"

"You." I moan, "only you—"

He pulls back, only to shove his fingers between us. He snaps the delicate strap that holds up my panties and I shiver. He reaches down, positions his dick against my entrance. "I am going to fuck you now, Eve."

He hooks an arm under my knee, pulling up my leg so it is bent and next to my chest, then he plunges forward.

A scream rips from me as he buries himself to the hilt. Too much. Too full. I throw my arms about his shoulders, holding on, as he stays there, filling me, stretching me, possessing me. His dick throbs inside of me. Every hard ridge imprinted against my melting channel.

"Fuck," he groans, "you're so fucking tight, Eve."

He pulls out, then propels his hips and impales me again. His balls slap against my butt, his cock lengthens, thickens, as he begins to fuck me. He pounds up and into me, and my entire body bucks. The headboard of the bed hits the wall, something crashes to the ground. I can't stop the giggle that bubbles up, and his gaze intensifies. "You find this funny, Eve?"

His fingers around my throat tighten as he pulls out, stays poised at the rim of my entrance, only to propel forward as he buries himself inside me again and again. He hits that spot deep inside of me that makes me tremble.

"Oh, my god, Baron. Oh, Baron."

He thrusts into me again as his fingers tighten around my neck. Darkness mars the edge of my vision as he pounds into me. The climax rips up my legs, threatens to overwhelm me. That's when he loosens his grip on my neck. He lowers his mouth to mine and commands, "Come," and I shatter.

My orgasm shrieks over me, or maybe that's me screaming. He closes his mouth over mine, absorbs every last sound I make as he continues to nail me. In and out, in and out. My entire body shudders. The aftershocks grip me as he rips his mouth from mine, pushes his forehead against mine and groans.

He pulls out of me, releasing his hold on my neck and leans back on his haunches as he comes.

He paints my stomach and chest with hot streams of white. He drags his fingers up his cock as he squeezes out every last drop. Then he rubs his cum into my breasts, down my stomach, into my pussy. Then he flips me over. He pulls me up so I am poised on my knees and forearms. He scoops up the cum, slathers it into my back entrance, then fits himself there. I stiffen and he winds his fingers around the nape of my neck. "Shh," he whispers, "I've got you, Eve."

I swallow as he leans down and kisses my shoulder. He nibbles his way up to my cheek, urging my face toward him. Then he kisses me. He presses his mouth to mine, licking my lips, sucking on my tongue. Warmth fills my chest. He slips inside my backhole and I groan. He swallows the sound. Brings his other hand around to play with my pussy lips. He slides one finger inside my cunt, and a whine slips from my lips. He works two fingers, then three, and it's so full, so much. Every hole of my body is filled with Baron. His touch, his lips, his fingers, his cock as he slips in through the tightness. He presses his heel into the nub of my clit, as he thrusts his tongue inside my mouth. Simultaneously he plunges forward, owns my arse as his dick throbs in my back channel. He begins to move, sawing in and out of me, as his cock seems to thicken inside of me. That feeling of fullness as he slides one more finger inside my pussy is too much. Too soon. Oh, my god. I am going to—

"Come," he growls against my mouth, "come all over my fingers."

The orgasm floors me. It seems to go on and on. My knees give way and it's his hold on my nape that keeps me upright. He thrust into me one more time, then buries his face in my neck. He bites down on my shoulder, as his dick throbs and he empties himself inside of me.

My eyelids flutter down, and I slump. I am vaguely aware of him leaving me, and I protest.

"Shh," he kisses me, "I'll be right back."

I vaguely hear the water run in the bathroom, then footsteps sound and the cool wetness of a washcloth presses into my pussy, then between my arse cheeks. I flush, open my eyes to find him wiping his dick, before he tosses the cloth aside.

"You forgot to clean the parts of me where I am wearing your cum."

"Good." He laughs, "Now you can't forget who you belong to." He climbs into bed, pulls me to him and I pass out again.

When I come to, I am resting on his chest. His arms are around me; the thud-thud-thud of his heartbeat is a comforting sound against my cheek. I peer up at him from under my eyelashes to find him gazing at me. His blue eyes burn in the dark, the look in them, contemplative.

"What," I clear my throat, "what are you thinking?"

"Why are you so good to me," he murmurs, "when all I have done is hurt you?"

"You saved me," I whisper. "You showed me, it's possible for me to be anything I want. The only limitations are those I set on myself."

"I did?" He frowns. "How's that?"

"By being you." I rest my chin on his chest, "When I think of everything you've been through, and yet, you never lost hope. You continued to believe."

He chuckles, "You sure you're talking about me?"

I nod, "You watched over me, protected me, loved me..."

He frowns, opening his mouth, and I place a finger across his lips, "Shh, I know you do. It's only a technicality that you haven't said it yet."

"A technicality?" He blinks.

"I mean, you do love me. Why else would you ask me to marry you, and then break your condition—which was stupid anyway and destined for failure—of not sleeping with me until the wedding?"

"Stupid?" His lips curve and his eyes gleam.

Before I can react, he flips me over so I am on my back, and he's bracketed me in between his arms. "I'll show you exactly how stupid it was."

He pushes forward and impales me. I am still so wet that he slides inside to the hilt. My pussy spasms around his dick. His thick, fat shaft pulses and a groan spills from my lips.

His chest rises and falls, his shoulder muscles tense, and his biceps bulge as sweat beads his forehead. "How is it that every time I am inside you, it's like the very first time?" He growls, "Why is it that I can't get enough of you? What is it about you that pulls me back to you again and again? That I want to stay buried inside you... If I were to die like this, I'd be the happiest man ever."

He hooks his arms under my knees, pushing them up, until my thighs are pushed in next to my chest. He lowers his mouth to mine, kissing me deeply as he begins to move. Slowly, so I can feel every ridge of his cock, he buries himself inside me and pulls out, again and again. I wrap my fingers around

the headboard, as he tunnels into me.

"I am going to fuck you so hard, you won't know where you begin and where I end. I am going to come inside you again and again until your every pore leaks with my cum. You feel me, Eve?"

"Yes," I pant against his mouth, "yes, Baron."

He pulls out, then slams into me, hitting that spot deep inside, and I cry out. He propels his hips forward again and again, hitting that very same spot, and my entire body bucks. He doesn't stop until my orgasm screams up my spine, when he growls, "Look at me, Eve."

I stare into his blue eyes and the connection is so hot, so real, so everything that I shatter. He holds my gaze, as he empties himself inside me with a hoarse cry. Sweat clings to his beautiful shoulders as he slumps over me. His weight pushes me into the bed, holding me down, pinning me in place... And I know, there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

The next time I open my eyes, he's gone.

"Baron?" I call, and my voice echoes in the empty space. I slide out of bed, find a shirt he must have folded and put aside earlier. There are so many facets to this guy, I don't think I'll ever really get to know him completely. It's what draws me to him, knowing I can never really predict what he's going to do next.

I pad out into the hallway, peek into the living room, then the kitchen, finally, walking down to the partially-closed door at the end of the corridor. I push it open to find him standing at the window, wearing only his sweats. His broad shoulders block out the view of the early morning sky. I walk over to him. His shoulder blades bunch and I know he's aware of my presence. I slide my arms around his waist, rub my cheek against his back.

"I missed you," I whisper. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you."

"Were you?"

He nods, then turns around and lowers himself onto one knee.

"Baron..." I open and shut my mouth. *OMG, it can't be, can it? Is he going to—? No, is he, really?*

He slides his hand into his pocket, then pulls out a ring. He holds it up and the light glitters off a band made of jade.

"Oh." I swallow. "Oh wow, how...how did you get this? Where did you get this from? Did you know I was coming here?"

"I had hoped." He smiles. "As for the rest, I got this made the day after I

met you."

"You...you did?" I gape, "No, seriously?"

His lips twist. "What can I say? I saw you and knew you were going to be my wife. I should have asked you right away, but I hesitated. Not anymore."

He holds out his palm and I place my hand in his.

"No gems are free of conflict and I know how important ethical sourcing is to you." He slides the ring onto the finger of my left hand. "The green reminds me of your eyes, and the jade is forever."

"Forever." I stare down at the band on my finger.

"Will you be mine?"

"Yes," I cry, "yes!" I take a step forward, go to throw my arms around him, but he moves aside. Huh? I frown, "What is it, Barry?"

"There's one more thing you need to know," he murmurs.

My heart begins to thud and my pulse rate ratchets up. "What?" I whisper, "what do you want to tell me?"

He walks over to the coffee table and I follow him. He picks up his wallet, pulls out a photograph and hands it over to me.

"It's the photograph that I carried in my purse. I thought I'd lost it."

"I found it when I walked into your studio, the day Edward turned up," he replies.

I notice he doesn't directly refer to the attack that day, for which I am grateful.

"Thank you for returning it to me." I peer up at him from under my eyelashes.

That's you in the picture, isn't it? The girl wearing the red dress."

I nod, and he blows out a breath. "I knew it was you, the moment I saw you."

"Knew it was me?" I blink. "I don't understand what you're saying."

He moves away and begins to pace. "That day, when Edward left you and I found you on the sidewalk, it's not the first day I saw you."

"It isn't?"

He shakes his head, "I saw you first when you were much younger. Maybe you were ten or so?" He raises a shoulder. "You and your family were having lunch at a pub on the outskirts of London. I was there with the Seven. You were wearing this same red dress on that day."

"I was?" I blink.

"I noticed you because you were so happy, so utterly carefree, and wished

I could be like you."

"Oh." I swallow, "That was a long time ago."

"It was," he agrees, "but I never forgot your face."

"I have a vague recollection of a family outing that summer," I murmur, "and I remember wearing that red dress. It was a gift from my mother. It was my favorite dress. She told me I resembled a shining light when I wore it."

My eyes fill and I glance away. I'll never get over losing mum. Just when I think the pain is lessening, something like this happens, and the loss seems so very insurmountable.

I hear the sound of footsteps and the next second his strong arms surround me. He pulls me into his chest. "Shh," he croons, "I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't." I rub my cheek against his shoulder, "It's just... I still miss her, you know?"

"You were lucky to have her. My family threw money at me and hoped my problems would resolve themselves. They didn't realize that all I needed was their support to get through the hellish aftermath of the incident."

"You have me now." I glance up at him. "And apparently, you knew I existed long before I met you."

"I saw you again, you know?" he murmurs. "Two years ago, on one of my infrequent visits to London. I was at Paddington Station, about to catch the Heathrow Express to the airport, and I heard your laugh."

"My laugh?"

"Your laughter is the most beautiful sound in the world. I heard it that day at the pub and never forgot it. Every time I remembered it, it made me feel hopeful and happy and wistful, all at the same time."

"Wistful?"

"You were so young, just a child, and yet I couldn't forget your face. And then I saw you all grown up on the railway platform, and knew you were the one for me, but the timing was all wrong."

"All these years," a ball of emotion fills my throat, "all this time, you knew?"

He nods. "I thought I'd never find you again." He cups my cheek, peers into my eyes, "And then when I did, I knew the most important thing was for you to be happy. It didn't matter who you were with, as long as you were happy."

"That's why you left?"

He nods, "And I thought my life was over. I thought..." His throat moves as he swallows, "I thought that I'd lost you, Eve."

"But you didn't," I glance up into those glistening blue eyes, "I am here and I am never leaving you again."

"I'll hold you to that." He smirks, "There's one more thing I need to confess."

I tilt my head, "What?" I frown, "What is it?"

He slides his hand into his pocket then holds up something purple.

I blink. "My hair tie?" I turn to him, "Where did you find it?"

"At your place, that first day I carried you home. I took it without telling you." He glances at the purple hair restraint then back at me, "I needed something of you to carry around, apparently."

He holds the hairband out to me and I shake my head, "You found it, you keep it. It's yours now."

"And you?" He searches my eyes, "What about you?"

"I'm yours, Baron. Only yours."

"Mine." He lowers his lips to mine.

45

Ava

I glance at myself in the mirror in Summer's town house. The simple white gown I've chosen has a sweetheart neckline and cinches in at the waist before flowing down to my feet. My hair's flowing around my shoulders, just how he likes it. On my feet, I am wearing green colored heels which match the green of my ring. My make-up is light, a touch of lip gloss, and purple eyeshadow to bring out the green of my eyes.

"What do you think?" I meet Isla's gaze in the mirror. "Too simple?"

"It's," she looks me up and down, "gorgeous; very you."

"Not that I had much time to find a dress," I mutter. "I mean, how did he manage to accelerate all the paperwork so we could be married in 24 hours?"

"Welcome to the brotherhood of the Seven." She grimaces, "Each of them seems to try to break the record of the previous one, when it comes to organizing their wedding. And of course, each of them has to ask me to organize it. And of course, I can't say no." She mock wipes her brow, "The number of grey hairs they have given me over the past few months is not funny."

"You like the challenge; admit it," I giggle.

"Yeah, right." She blows out a breath, "At least, I am not marrying one of them."

"No, you decided to set your sights on the older brother to one of them."

"Gah, stop it." She throws up her hands, "Liam's getting married in a week, and that will be that." She dusts off her palms.

Summer peeks in, "Isla, I think Amelie needs your help with the catering."

"Of course, she does," She turns and marches toward the door, then points a finger at Summer, "You make sure she gets down to the back garden in ten minutes, you hear me?"

"Yes Ma'am." Summer chuckles as Isla throws me a smile, then disappears down the corridor.

"Whew, she's in a mood." Summer saunters in, then sinks down into a chair. "How are you feeling?" She peers up at me. "No nerves or anything?"

"Nope," I smile, "I feel good."

"Good."

"Only thing."

She leans forward, giving me her full attention.

"He hasn't yet told me that he loves me."

"Hmm." She places her fingers together. "But he asked you to marry him and pulled out all the stops to get this ceremony underway as soon as possible."

I nod.

"And he found you a ring that's exactly the kind you'd have wanted."

"Mm-hmm." I jerk my chin.

"Seems to me like love."

"It is love," I declare. "It's just, I wish he'd say those three words aloud, you know?"

"When Sinclair asked me to marry him, it was part of a transaction." She tilts her head at me, "Did you know that?"

"No," I blink, "but you two are so much in love."

"Oh, the alphahole was in love with me, all right. It just took him a while to figure it out. Hell, it took me a while to figure out what my feelings for him were."

"But it all worked out."

"And how." She laughs as she places her palms across her belly. "I can't believe how thrilled I am to be carrying his baby."

"You're glowing." I smile back at her. "You look radiant."

"I feel radiant." She grins back, before glancing away. "If only my sister were here to share my happiness."

"Karma, right?" I turn to face her, "Hasn't she been away in Sicily, with her new beau?"

"That's the thing," Summer pushes her hair back from her face, "I've never met this man, and it's not like Karma to be away for so long."

"But she does call?"

"She texts me most weeks. Why she can't just pick up the phone and call me, I don't know. She doesn't answer when I call, just texts me back, which is really strange. I messaged her to tell her that I'll be coming over there if she didn't visit me soon, to which she didn't reply." Summer scowls, "I mean, meeting someone who sweeps you off your feet is all well and good, but what the hell is so pressing that she hasn't come back to visit even once in all this time?"

"Maybe he's possessive?" I chuckle. "He doesn't want to let her out of his sight."

"Don't we know all about that?" Summer rolls her eyes. "If you think Barons' bad now, wait until you get pregnant. He'll chain you to his side."

There's a knock on the door, then Julia walks in. In her hands is a bouquet of cascading greens. She offers me the bunch of eucalyptus, ferns and sage.

"Wow," I gaze at it, "it's beautiful. It's exactly what I would have chosen for myself." I had been so preoccupied with everything else, I had forgotten about the bouquet. "Thank you so much," I cry as I reach for the bouquet.

"Thank your husband to-be." Julia laughs, "He had this ordered especially for you. Clearly, he knows you well."

The blood rushes to my cheeks. I bring the bouquet up to my nose and sniff at it. "I think I am going to cry," I sniff.

"Don't you dare," Summer admonishes, "don't want to spoil your make up, now do you?"

Just then Amelie pops her head in, "There you are." She smiles at Summer, "Your man's been looking for you."

"I saw him, not ten minutes ago," Summer mutters.

"Yeah, but the Seven." Amelie chuckles.

"The bloody Seven." Summer laughs as she rises to her feet, "Speaking of, it's time for you to officially join our collective." Summer grins. She walks over, taking my hands in hers, "You ready?"

I weave my hand through my father's arm, and clutch my bouquet of cascading greens.

"You look beautiful," my father says as he places his palm over mine.

I blink away the tears that his softly spoken words elicit... Christ, what's it with me and the waterworks? "Thank you for being here with me, Daddy." I sniff, "And after how horrible I was to you."

"You know, you could say anything to me and I'd never take offense." My father pats my hand, "It's a child's prerogative to say what's on your mind, and it's a parent's prerogative to forgive."

"Oh, Dad," I glance up at him, "I was so wrong to judge you. I understand now that it's possible to love two people. Ma was your past and Lina is your future. I get it now."

"You've grown up, Ava." My father glances down at me, his eyes shining. "My little girl is a woman, ready to start her new life."

"You're going to make me cry," I sniffle.

"Oh, no." He beams down at me, "No tears today, only smiles."

Isla gestures to us that it's time to walk down the aisle. I draw in a breath, as my father leads me onto the garden path.

We'd decided to marry in the picturesque backyard of the Sterling's home, with the slopes of Primrose Hill, stretching out before us. We'd also decided to exchange vows in front of our friends and family and without having anyone officiate the wedding.

I glance up and my gaze collides with Baron's searing blue ones. The connection is instant. Electrifying and sexual, caring and full of those emotions he seems to carry under that hard exterior of his.

We reach him and my father places my hand in his. Baron brings it up to his lips and brushes his mouth across my knuckles. I shiver. His lips curve against my skin and his gaze intensifies as he stares deeply into my eyes. My thighs clench and my palms grow sweaty. I part my lips and his gaze drops to my mouth.

I blush. Baron smirks. He moves away, but doesn't release my hand. I lift my chin up, hold his gaze as we exchange our vows.

Then Baron grasps both of my hands in his. He leans down as I tip my head up. He gazes into my eyes, and in his blue ones, I see that unsaid emotion again. His irises deepen, until they seem almost azure in color. He lowers his lips to mine. "I love you," he whispers, then kisses me.

I pause my conversation with Raisa to glance around at the faces of my friends and family. Saint stands with one arm around Victoria, the palm of his other hand on her five-month pregnant belly. Amelie leans into Weston as

she converses with Victoria. The two men gaze down at their wives, looks of such adoration on their faces, that honestly, if I hadn't seen it for myself, I'd have never guessed that they could be such alphaholes.

The doors to the house are flung open to reveal a piano, with Damian seated at it. He plays the keys and the notes float across the distance. I watch as Julia leans a hip against the piano, then leans over to kiss him.

Meredith, assistant to the Seven, and in many ways a guardian to all of them when they were younger, looks on with a smile on her face. Next to her is Peter, Sinclair's chauffeur and Meredith's now fiancé. That's the thing with the Seven. Despite being gazillionaires, none of them allow class or economic status to define what they are or who their friends should be.

Arpad and Karina are seated at a table, engaged in an animated conversation. Summer and Sinclair stand nearby, their arms around each other.

Raisa nudges me and nods toward a particular group, making me smile. Baron converses with my Dad and Lina—yes, I invited her—periodically laughing and looking my way. I am trying my best to accept her. I realize now that she is not trying to replace my mother. She reached out to me and told me as much. I can see how much she and my Dad love each other, and somehow, in light of recent events, and knowing how it feels to be torn apart by my feelings for two men, I can empathize with their situation too.

Isla walks over to me, a glass of champagne in hand. "Congratulations, babe," she smiles widely, "that was a gorgeous ceremony."

"All thanks to you." I tip up my chin, "You have one hell of a talent in organizing the best weddings in such a short time." I grip her hand, "Seriously, Iz, thank you for putting this together so quickly."

"Oh, pfft." She tosses her hair over her shoulder, "Anything for you, babe. At least, I didn't have to herd guests, considering you guys wanted to keep this so intimate."

"Speaking of," Raisa nudges Isla with her elbow, "who are those three delicious men in that corner?"

I turn in the direction of her gaze to the far corner, where, as if they are keen to distance themselves from the rest of the married folks, three men—and the only bachelors among the group—level hard looks at each other as they engage in some, evidently, serious conversation.

"The growly one is Isla's Liam," I say, then chuckle and duck when Isla smacks my arm and protests, "Not my anything, that one."

"The one in the grey suit is Hunter Whittington, a friend of Baron and Liam's." I continue, "And the third guy is Karina's brother Nikolai Solonik. All three do business with the Seven."

Raisa opens her mouth to ask a question when the barking of a dog cuts through the space. Max—Summer and Sinclair's dog—tears across the garden toward me. I bend down, hold out my arms as he jumps up and licks my face. His paws brush my dress, leaving doggy prints all over it, but I don't care.

I giggle, pet him as Jeeves hurries over to me. "I am so sorry, Madam; he escaped me."

"It's okay." I laugh as I pat the excited dog. "He's so cute," I chuckle as he evades Jeeves outstretched arm and darts off with the butler in his wake.

"He's certainly ensuring that Jeeves' fitness levels have shot up." Summer smirks as she approaches me. Sinner follows, not far behind, with my husband next to him, holding two glasses of champagne.

My husband... Gah, he's my husband. Baron hands me a flute, then raises his glass to me as he raises his voice to our guests, "I'd like to propose a toast." His lips quirk.

Isla and Raisa move away as the group hushes.

Baron gazes into my eyes, "When I saw you the first time, I knew you were the one. When I am with you, I like myself more. When I look at you, I know I can weather any storm. When I hold your hand, I know you are what was missing all along. When I think of you, I become a better person. When you are with me, I know I can overcome any challenge. When we are together, anything is possible. Now that you are mine, I can't think of anything I want more than to take care of you, to love you, to cherish and protect you. As long as I am alive, you'll never want for anything, and after I die—"

I reach up and place my finger on his lips, "No talk of dying today."

He smirks, "As you wish, my love."

He raises his glass, "To my wife, the most beautiful woman on this earth, and to me, the lucky bastard who doesn't deserve her."

He kisses my fingers and I blush, raising my glass to my lips. Baron takes a sip from his flute, then glances past me at the sound of a loud engine. He hands me his glass, and at my puzzled look, he bends down, kisses me on the cheek, and says, "I'll be right back."

He walks past me, and I turn to find him stalking toward a familiar figure.

Edward stands by his motorbike, on the other side of the house. He's wearing a leather jacket, his helmet under his arm. The wind ruffles his dark hair as Baron approaches him. He holds out his arm. Baron eschews it, instead throwing his arm around Ed. Ed hesitates, then hugs him back. The two talk, then as one, they turn to me. Edward waves at me, a smile splitting his face. I wave back. The two men converse some more, then Edward claps Baron on his shoulder. Baron returns the gesture, before stepping back. Edward slides on the helmet, mounts his bike, then raises the stand and starts the machine. The double barrels thunder, the noise clearly heard even at this distance. He takes off, and Baron turns and prowls over to me. I hand him his glass as he bends to brush his lips over mine.

"How is he?" I murmur.

Baron frowns, "He'll be fine... I think."

Jeeves walks in just then. He hovers at the side until Summer turns to him,

"What is it?" she asks.

"Umm, I'm sorry, madam, but your sister and her husband are here to attend the wedding, though they haven't been invited."

"My sister?" Summer scowls, "What do you mean, my sister? And she's not married, even if she is my sister. Which she can't be, because my sister is in Sicily, so..." She glances past Jeeves, then pales, "Oh, my." She swallows. "Oh, my god," she squeals, then takes off in the direction of a woman who's wearing a pant suit. She's standing next to a tall, broad man whose cold eyes take in the gathering.

"Karma." Summer throws her arms around the woman, "Oh, my god, Karma, you're here! I missed you so much. Why didn't you tell me that you were coming? I would have sent the car for you."

"There's no need for that," the man next to her interjects, "my wife has my car and chauffeur at her service."

"Wife?" Summer steps back. She tips up her chin and plants her palms on her hips, "And who are you?"

The man casts a glance around the garden, making sure to meet the gaze of each of the Seven who is present. My husband tenses. He wraps his arm around me and pulls me close. Saint and Weston move forward as one. Their shoulders are a solid wall that blocks their women from the man's line of sight. Arpad rises up from the table and flanks Weston, effectively blocking Karina. Peter wraps an arm around Meredith, while Damian rises up from the

piano. He covers Julia with his bulk as he steps up to the double doors that lead to the garden.

O-k-a-y, what the hell is this? Some kind of battle lines are being drawn here that I can't quite figure out. "What's happening?" I whisper to Baron. "Who's he?"

Sinner stalks toward the new arrivals, and plants himself in between Summer and the man. "My wife asked you a question," he rumbles. "Who are you?"

"I," the man's lips turn up in a semblance of a smile, one that resembles a shark who's sniffed his next prey, "I am Michael Byron."

[**EDWARD GETS HIS OWN STORY AND HEA IN THE PRETEND CHRISTMAS BRIDE HERE**](#)

READ AN EXCERPT

Mira

"You're pregnant?" I yelp, then flush when everyone at my friend Gio's wedding turns to stare at me. We're at the bookshop her husband had gifted her, because that's where Gio wanted to hold the ceremony. And the brew of choice? Coffee. Also there's cupcakes, because what else do you need when you're a smuthead getting married in your favorite space? Talk about marriage goals. Tiny the Great Dane who's currently being dog sit by one of Gio's friends, parks himself next to me. He looks at me with melting eyes and I swear he's the only sympathetic gaze in the house.

I tighten my grip on the mug of coffee in my hand, flash a smile at Gio, "I mean, you're pregnant; oh my god, you're pregnant!"

I take a step forward and stumble across Tiny's flag-like tail. Oof! The cup goes flying from my hand, the contents spill over the man standing to the side. The cup bounces off his chest and hits the ground, then spins away.

"What the—?" He glances down at the coffee stain he's wearing across the front of tailor-made jacket which mold his shoulders and pants which cling to his powerful thighs. My heart stutters. My pulse booms at my temples. I draw in a sharp breath and under the bitter whiff of coffee is the sharp tang of something more complex, something spicy and savory and so laced with electricity it arrows straight to my center. My toes curl, goosebumps pepper my skin. I glance up and into his face and tawny-brown eyes blaze at me. The anger in them cuts through the noise in my head. I

flinch, take in the mess that was once his \$10,000 three-piece suit. I should know the price; it's the world of privilege I come from too. Which indicates he can afford another with ease, but to see the loathing in his features you'd think otherwise. I manage to get ahold of myself and gasp, "Oh god, I'm so sorry."

I remove the scarf from around my neck and dab at his suit lapel, then at his thigh then—*stay away from his crotch. Not his crotch*—I brush my scarf over the impressive packet between his legs. His thigh muscles bunch. Anger vibrates off of his big body and I flinch, retrieve my arm.

"Am I always like this? I'm not. Do I often ask questions of myself and reply to them? Only when I'm nervous." I chuckle, make sure to keep my eyes averted. "Which is when I'm a klutz. What comes first though? Being nervous that leads me to being a klutz. Or being a klutz that makes me nervous. Or maybe one leads to the other in an endless feedback loop." I nod. "Yep that's what happened, which is why I tripped over Tiny's tail. But Tiny didn't mean to cause the accident, did you?"

Tiny woofs, then head-butts me. The momentum causes me to tumble forward. The man catches me around the waist. I look up and this time when our gazes meet, gold fire sparks in his. A lick of fire, a whip of mahogany, a sheen of amber all polished to a burnished, searing flame that would burn you on contact. The air between us seems to ignite, drawing in all the oxygen in the room. I try to breathe, my lungs protest. I sway and his hold on my waist tightens. His jaw hardens. The sharp contours of his cheekbones lend a stark, almost cruel quality to his features. I've never met this man before but I've heard of him from Gio. Edward, that's his name, and he's a former priest. He walked away from the church and embraced a life in pursuit of money—or so I heard from the girls—not that I have a tendency to gossip, okay maybe a little. When you don't have a choice in your future, you take pleasures in the little things in life, and gossip happens to be one of those treats I refuse to deprive myself of. Besides, I want to know why he walked away from what was surely his calling? It takes strength of conviction to become a priest, but then to leave it behind? Why would he do that? On that count my girlfriends had been mum. It was his story to tell they'd said. Which let me to speculate it had to have been because of a woman? Did he break up to be with her? Though from what I've heard he is single. So does he still think of her? And why is my mind racing at a million miles an hour? Why are my palms sweating, my stomach twisting and turning, why is my heart banging into my

chest like thunder cracking across the skies before a storm?

A heavy weight pins me in place. I can't move. Can't speak. Caught up in the tractor beam of this man's gaze, I'm a butterfly trapped in a bell jar. Then Tiny woofs, and both of us jump back from each other.

"Sorry, sorry, oh my god, I am so sorry." I wave my hands in the air. "And I sound like I'm a record, stuck on repeat. You do know what I mean by a record, right?" I peer up at him. "Of course, you do." I take in the threads of grey at his temple. "You're older than me—not dinosaur age, but close to it—so I'm sure you do."

The man's already rock-hard jaw grows more rigid. A nerve throbs at his temple. The tension coiled in his muscles thickens the air between us. I swallow around the ball of nervousness in my throat, and attempt a smile. "I didn't mean to imply you were ancient. I mean, you're, what, twenty years older than me?"

He scowls.

Ugh, that didn't come out right. He probably thinks I'm insulting him. Which I didn't mean to.

"Okay, fifteen, at least." I cough. "Not that I don't like older men. I have a soft spot for them." I shuffle my feet. "No, no, not that kind of soft spot. I find older men much more confident. You know what you want, and don't hesitate to get it. You guys have your shit together, you know?"

His scowl deepens.

"I don't mean I find you attractive. Not that you're not good looking. You have that whole tall dark and intense look going on, which I admit, is a turn on. Not that *you* turn me on."

The blood drain from my face.

"Oh my god, I didn't mean to say that. Also, whoa—you'll have to dry-clean your suit. I'll pay for it, of course."

Utter silence follows my proclamation. Even Tiny is quiet. Guess I shouldn't have offered to pay? Maybe I should have kept quiet. But his demeanor is daunting. Why is he standing there, silent, except for his body language which screams his displeasure? A muscle works above his jaw. If he grinds his teeth any harder he's going to crack a molar or two. Why is he so annoyed? It was a honest mistake after all, "At least, the coffee was decaf." I offer.

Someone titters— then turns it into a cough. Someone else, chuckles, then manages to stifle it. But the man in front of me stays silent. His

shoulders are bunched, the tendons of his neck stand out in relief. He might as well be carved out of stone but for the rise and fall of his impressive chest.

I hunch my shoulders. "You're not saying anything. Why aren't you saying anything? Are you pissed-off? Oh god, you're pissed-off. I'm sorry, you make me nervous, can you tell? Haha, I prefer to fill the silence when the person I'm talking to stays quiet. I do like to speak, the only time I clam up is in church, so I hope you won't insist I go to confession and own up my sins to the—" *don't say priest, don't say priest*—"priest." Oops!"

I had not meant to say that out aloud. No shit, Mira why did you think of the p word in his presence? You know you have no filter between your brain and your mouth, or where he is concerned between that part between your thighs and your mouth. No, don't think of how moist you are down there. Not right now.

Edward's shoulders swell. The tendons of his throat are so pronounced he's beginning to resemble the hulk. Only his face is utterly emotionless which is frankly terrifying. I gulp. At my side I sense Gio trying to smother her laugh, but I don't dare look at her. I draw in a ragged turn, want to turn and run out of there. But one thing I'm not is a coward. It's why I didn't run out on my family either. That would have hurt them too much. Instead I'd bargained with them—a few months of freedom in exchange for returning to the fold. Helplessness squeezes my chest. Any day now I'll get the call and have to go back home, to the arranged marriage that would follow. Until then—I can live life the way I want. I'd found work at a local kindergarten, made enough to rent my own studio, everything was going well. Until the kindergarten went out of business. But I'm going to find another job soon. I'm not going to give up and going back home, not until my parents call for me. I have the strength to face my uncertain future knowing I won't have control for much of it. And this, here, in this moment I hold the power.

I square my shoulders, jut out my chin, "I didn't mean to talk about your past. I was warned not to. Not that I'm a gossip—okay, maybe a little."

I hold up my thumb and forefinger. "And only because gossip is good for you. It helps to de-stress. And you look like it would help if you were to relax. I'll bet you keep it all locked up inside. Which makes you a prime candidate for a coronary. Not that it's any of my business. Oh my god." I squeeze my eyes shut. "I've done it now, haven't I?"

When I look at him again, his expression veers between fascination, disgust and anger.

"Okay, that's it. I will not speak anymore. I'll wipe you down, and you can be on your way." I leans forward, brush my scarf over the front of his pants again and again. His thigh-muscles coil. The fabric of his pants stretch until I'm sure they're going to pop at the seam. I sense his gaze bore into the top of my bent head but I don't dare look up.

"You done?" He finally growls through gritted teeth. And his voice—it's gravelly and hard and carries the promise of all the delicious, unforgivable things he could do to me. And I want him too. I swallow around the ball of emotion in my throat, "It's not getting any better, is it?" I ask in small voice. "No, it's not. Am I making it worse? Of course, I am." I slowly tip up my head and meet his gaze. "Can I make it up to you?"

His lips thin, he looks ready to bite my head off, then a cunning look comes into his eyes.

"How are you at obeying orders?"

Mira

"Orders?" I blink slowly. "What kind of orders?"

Not the kind you read in your smutty books. Definitely can't be those kind of orders.

The skin around his eyes tightens. "What are smutty books?" he rumbles. My never-endings spark. Oh my god, that caramel-velvet voice of his brushes up against my skin, and every cell in my body seems to come alive. Also, no, no, no, did I say the S-word aloud?

"I meant, slutty books." I cover my face with my hands. "I said that aloud, as well, didn't I?"

I peek through the gaps in my fingers in time to see him nod slowly. He doesn't say a word, though. He merely glares at me like I'm a puzzle to solve, or maybe, an annoyance, or an irritant, or a pest he'd prefer to swat away.

The silence stretches. Our gazes catch. The air between us crackles with awareness. The fine hairs on the back of my neck rise. A heavy feeling pushes down on my chest. I swallow, and my throat feels like it's lined with sharp glass. What's happening to me?

"Do you always say what comes into your mind?" he asks in a voice that's detached but also curious, in the way a scientist might be while observing an animal in the wild.

I frown. "Of course not." I wave a hand in the air, striving for casual. "Only when I'm nervous. Not that I'm nervous now. And do you make me nervous? Of course not."

"Also a liar." He drags his thumb under his lower lip, and my gaze is drawn to his mouth. Gorgeous mouth. Hard mouth. A mean upper lip that hints at the his authoritarian nature. That puffy lower lip that might signify his pursuit of pleasure. A hedonist. A savage. A fiend. He's all of them. Does that make him a heartless monster? Or a merciless lover? One who seeks gratification, but not in an instant way. This man would wait months...years, if needed. This man would pursue what he wants with a singular focus. And oh, to be at the receiving end of that intensity.

What I'm facing now is a tiny insight into how it would be if he were to get fixated on me. I shake my head. Fixated? I don't want that. Not at all. I don't know this man. All I know is the passing reference to him within the circle of my girlfriends, whose husbands he's a friend of. I've never seen him with a woman, though.

"I've never seen you with a woman." What the—! "Did I say that out loud?" I ask weakly.

His features harden until they could be carved from a diamond-hard material, whatever that's called.

"Oh, shit," Gio says in a soft voice from behind me.

Indeed.

"Umm, sorry? Did I say something wrong? Of course, I did. But why is it wrong? I have no idea. No one has ever seen me with a man before today either, so it's not odd not to be seen with someone of the opposite sex. By the same token, it's allowed for a woman to have friends who are men and a man is allowed to have woman friends. Besides, you're no longer a priest, so..." I swallow, for he's leaned forward on the balls of his feet.

It's a slight movement, but it brings him close enough for his spicy electricity filled scent—to crash over me. It's as if I've been bathed in a cloud of aphrodisiacs—oh wait, those are his pheromones! A-n-d my stupid stomach goes into free fall. "Sooo, what I'm trying to say is, it doesn't matter if you have women friends. Or girlfriends. Or ladyloves, as they called it in the regency era. I mean, you look stuffy enough to belong in an historical romance. All you need is a ruffled shirt..." I hum thoughtfully. "Yep, a white ruffled shirt, which would stand out against your skin and be the perfect foil to your cut-glass cheekbones. Does that mean you're good-looking? Of

course not. I mean, if you smiled a little more... Now—"

"Smile?" he asks in that dark, dangerous voice, and that swirling sensation in my belly intensifies. My toes curl. Goosebumps pop on my skin.

"Smile," I say in a dazed voice. "You know, when the sides of your mouth curve up because your sense of humor is tickled, or when you feel the urge to show your appreciation of a situation like this." I project my most confident, school-picture-day smile. "Not that either of those have crossed your mind for a decade."

"How do you know that?" he asks in a curious voice.

"Oh, b-b-b-because your lips have been set in a firm line since I saw you earlier. And there's this wrinkle between your eyebrows which seems to have been etched in permanently, and then the frown-lines that radiate out from the corners of your eyes, which are, no doubt, because you're old—er,"—I cough—"older and distinguished. Anyway, you have that dark-cloud-brewing-over-your-head look that only adds to your charm. From far away. I mean, it's understandable you don't have a girlfriend or any significant woman in your life. You look like you're angry at the world, and there's an internal war going on inside, and you're all scowling and brooding and menacing. Which is all fine in a smu—I mean, romance novel. But in real life, no one wants to be around a man who's an alphahole."

"Alphahole?" He says the word as if he's trying it on for size, and it fits. Speaking of fits, from the looks of it, he'd need an XL condom, given the size of the resting-package at his crotch. A-n-d, my gaze slides downward. It... it's bigger than what it was earlier, so the tent under that coffee-stained fabric is... because he's aroused? Am I thinking in questions? That's a first. That's how rattled I am in his presence.

Tiny woofs. I jerk my chin up to find he's looking at me with a glint in his eyes.

"Was I caught in the act?" When he only raises an eyebrow, I continue, unabated. That's me, I keep digging that hole. "I was. So what?" I tip up my chin. "A man can stare at a woman's chest, but a woman can't ogle a man's package?"

One of my girlfriends—Penny?—gasps, before turning it into a cough.

"Hear, hear," Gio calls out.

Someone else titters, then the sound cuts off.

I don't dare look around the room, though. Can't take my gaze off those tawny eyes of his. Burnished gold, glistening copper, hard like topaz

gemstones. They could sear me, look right through me to decipher my secrets. They could turn soft like melted butter which... is not me. He's an unfeeling brute, a vicious beast. The devil incarnate. The kind of man who'd be all wrong for me.

Besides, I don't like him. I don't like the fact I can't read him. I prefer someone who's open and honest with his feelings, who can be sensitive to my needs. This man... He'd break me down, then leave me. I'd be better off keeping my distance from him.

"Oh, look at the time." I raise my hand and pretend to gasp at my empty wrist—no, I don't wear a watch, but so what? It's the intent behind my gesture that counts, right? "I need to be someplace else, somewhere urgent. Nice meeting you Mr. Ex-priest who shares his name with the man who's side I was not on in Twilight."

I turn to leave, when he drawls, "Team Jacob, are you?"

I pause, then scowl at him over my shoulder. "Is that a problem for you?"

"Is it for you?" he shoots back.

"Of course not."

"Good." He nods with satisfaction. "Remember, you asked how you could make things up to me?"

I nod slowly.

"Marry me."

My jaw drops, "You're kidding."

"Am I?" His eyes glint.

My heart crashes into my rib cage. This is a joke—him asking me to marry him. Only it doesn't feel like that. His harsh features indicate he has not one funny bone in his gorgeous, sexy, chiseled out of granite, body. And to be married to him? This brooding, unfriendly, severe man, this... dark, handsome in an uncompromising manner man, who'd relish getting his way with me in bed... is... not something I want. Of course not.

I turn to face him. "Of course, you are." When the expression on his face doesn't change, I swallow, spare a glance around the room and find no one willing to meet my eyes. "Aren't you?" I ask in a small voice.

He tilts his head, "What I am, is offering you a job."

"A-a job?" I manage to choke out.

"I assume you need one?"

"What makes you think—" I shut up because there's a knowing look on his features. What gave it away? I am still a plus-size woman. Never mind,

I've been surviving on dry ramen for the last week, ever since the kindergarten where I worked went bust—my body shows no signs of losing those stupid curves. Good thing, Gio had already moved out of the apartment when I lost my job. There's no way I would have wanted to bother her with my problems or allowed her to buy my food. And I know she would have insisted. It's not that I don't want to burden her because I know money isn't an issue for her and Rick. Hell, most of my friends are married to rich men. I'm too ashamed to admit I need help. I need to do this on my own. But what hurts the most is not being able to see the kids I used to take care of.

Between my aching heart and my empty stomach, I've only managed to make it to two interviews, both for jobs I didn't get. I'm running out of options. And there's no way I'm calling up my family. My stepmother and stepsisters would be only too happy to tell me, again, I'm a failure. I had enough of that when I lived with them. I am not subjecting myself to that ordeal again. So yeah, I need a job.

He sees the expression on my face, and a flash of satisfaction fills his face before he schools his features back into a mask. He reaches into his suit pocket and pulls out a card before handing it to me. "Be at my office, eight a.m. tomorrow."

Edward

"You think she'll turn up?" Sinclair spots me as I bench press twice my body's weight. My chest squeezes down, my shoulders scream in protest, my biceps threaten to tear apart, but I ignore it. Breathe through it. In and out.

"She will."

"And if she doesn't?" He assists me as I push the barbell up and over my head.

"She will," I grunt.

"There's a chance she won't."

"If she doesn't, there are more fish in the sea, but she will." I lower the weight down to my chest, hold, then he assists me as I hoist the barbell up again. The tendons on my throat strain, and my triceps feel like they are being shredded. I push the barbell up and hold. And hold. Sweat runs down my temples, between my pecs. My stomach muscles harden, my thighs contract. I push my feet into the floor and brace. Brace. *You need to bear the weight. Bear the mistakes of your past. Bear how you were abandoned by*

your parents when you needed them most. Bear how she decided you were not the one. Not that I blame her. Baron would be—has been—a better husband for her. And now, they had a child. A family. Moisture trickles out from the corner of my eyes, joining the beads of sweat on my face.

"You okay, mate?" Sinclair murmur.

"Why wouldn't I be?" I begin to lower the barbell down, and he doesn't let go. He helps me as I push up and through the pain again. *Work through it. Keep riding it. At some point, you'll find the calm in the center of the storm.* At some point, I'll figure out my life's purpose.

It's the only reason I took the meeting my grandfather. My father's father, who I never met before. Imagine my surprise when he called me and introduced himself. My father never spoke about him.

After the incident the communication with my parents broke down. They were at a loss for how to deal with what had happened to me. And I took refuge in whatever helped me find oblivion from the emotional pain I was carrying—am still carrying—inside. I almost hung up but he pleaded with me to meet him. Just once. Ten minutes of my time. I finally agreed because, why not?

Being the General Manager of the London Ice Kings has given me some focus. Working with Rick Mitchell, the captain of the team, we steered the team to victory in the League. From being the underdogs to one of the highest paid teams in the world, and in one season. It was unheard of. I'd accepted the position as a favor to Knight, the owner of the team. But in working toward a greater goal, I discovered some measure of satisfaction. You can take the priest out of the church, but you can't take the need to help people from him. It's also the reason I agreed to my grandfather's request.

"You've been through a lot in the past week." Sinclair helps me ease the bar onto the rack. I draw in a breath, feel my heart thunder in my chest, and the blood pounds in my ears, drowning out all thoughts for a few seconds. It's the main reason I work out. Pushing my body in a way I can't push my mind. Controlling how much I can lift in a manner I never can control my thinking.

All those restraints, the limitations I imposed on myself. I lived my life according to the direction of the Church. Found some modicum of peace in the routine, the daily prayers, the sermons... All the while, knowing the storm brewing inside me would break loose, and ignoring the warning signs. Until it did. I sinned. And punished myself by leaving the house of God.

Unmoored, I left everything behind. I travelled until I managed to ground myself. And by the time I returned, it was too late. She had turned to Baron. And they were happy together. And me?

The empty shell that constitutes me, Edward Chase, lives from moment-to-moment, not quite sure what I wanted out of life. I feel un-needed, unwanted, useless to everyone, even myself. Maybe that's why I grasped onto Grandfather's ask. I could be of help to someone, after all.

I don't need a shrink to tell me I'm going about this all wrong. I don't need a shrink to tell me the person I see when I look in the mirror is not the person I was. I don't need my friends to point out I'm on a one way trip to a crisis again. Hell, I'm living from one crisis to another internally. Every minute I get through without doing something I'll regret is a win. As is the deal I made with my grandfather. It gives me a reason to... keep going.

I sit up, then reach for my bottle of water and chug from it. I lower it and raise a shoulder. "I'll live."

"For how long?" he asks softly.

"For however long it takes, I assume."

He searches my features. "I'm worried about you."

I bark out a laugh. "Since when did you start going soft?" I raise a hand. "Forget I said that. All six of you are married, and most of you with kids... Who'd have thought?"

His mouth curves in a smile, the kind I never thought I'd see on Sinclair fucking Sterling's face. The meaner they are, the harder they fall, apparently. The seven of us were united by an incident that changed our lives forever. And each of my friends went through their journey and found their soulmates. It's not to be for me, and that's okay. I'm happy they're happy. All of them. Including Baron. He makes her happy, and in her happiness is mine.

"Speaking of,"—he tilts his head—"what time is your girl coming to the office?"

"Not my girl, merely a—"

"Cog in the wheel?" His smile grows sly. "A piece in the puzzle. A—"

"Stepping stone to my larger plan? Yes," I say dryly.

"Hmm." He grabs the bottle from me, drains in.

"The fuck does that mean?"

"Nothing. Why should it mean something?"

I frown. "No, of course not, but if you have something to say—"

He caps the bottle, then wipes his hand over his face. When he lowers his

arm, his eyes gleam. "It would be lost on you. Ergo, you need to learn your lessons yourself."

"Thanks. And to think, I'm the one who gave the sermons."

"You know what they say? Even a doctor needs another when he's unwell."

I lower my eyebrows. "Are you saying—"

"Nothing. You do you, Ed. Find your way. I have every confidence that you will."

I snort. "What-fucking-ever."

He laughs. "The classic rejoinder of a man who's at a loss for words. Also,"—he nods toward the clock on the wall—"you need to rush if you don't want to be late."

I *am* late but not for the meeting with her. I left instructions with my HR director to get her settled in. I'm on my way to a much more important meeting. When I walk into the conference room adjoining my new office, the five men in the room turn to glare at me. Once again, I'm the outsider, but I prefer it this way. They're brothers. Some of their blood runs through me, but I've never met them before today.

"Knox." I jerk my chin toward the man standing in the far corner. The sunlight streaming in casts his face in shadows. The other four are at strategic positions around the conference room. None of them are seated. And I'm sure their locations weren't chosen by chance. These five are united in a way that tells me I am the opposition. The enemy. The one who came in from the cold to take over their business. The one chosen by their grandfather to take over as the CEO of their company.

"Edward,"—Knox tips up his chin—"or should I call you Priest?"

There's a challenge in his tone—one I don't rise to. I've come across enough men who've decided it's best to go on the offensive when they're backed into a corner, as my half-brothers, no doubt, are at this moment.

"Priest, I prefer Priest."

"Yet, you left the church?" This from Ryot who's standing closest to me.

"Funny how you only value something when you don't have it anymore,"

I murmur.

"Like your girl who's not your girl anymore?" Tyler, the brother standing on the other side of the table, drawls.

Anger squeezes my guts. My pulse begins to race. "Better than not knowing if your child is your own or not." The moment the words are out of my mouth, I regret it. I raise my hands. "Sorry, that was a low blow."

Tyler's jaw tics. A nerve pops at his temple. He folds his fingers into fists and takes a few steps forward, as if he's about to jump over the table and hit me.

But the brother standing near him—Connor—moves forward and touches his shoulder. Tyler seems about to shake it off, but the other man says, "Don't. William won't be happy if you fuck up this meeting."

William. So they do refer to our grandfather by his first name? He's the chairperson of the company, so it stands to reason it's easier for all concerned to call him any other name at work, and he'd asked me to do so the one and only time we'd met. But I'd have thought when they were among family they'd refer to him as Grandpa? Or Grandad? Not that he looks like either of those.

Tyler lowers his arms to his sides but continues to glower at me.

The fifth man who, so far, stands in one corner of the room reading, looks around, then snaps his book shut and walks over to the table. From my research, I know that Brody is the quietest of the five, and the one I know the least about. He keeps to himself and does not participate in the day-to-day running of the company. The only reason he's here is because William asked him to come.

Brody pulls out a chair, turns it around and straddles it. The rest of the brothers look at him, their expressions ranging from anger to frustration. All of their gazes are tinged with stubbornness. Do I really want to take over the company and deal with their egos, not to mention, the roadblocks they'll put up to block any plan I want to execute?

If it's challenge I'm looking for, being the GM of the London Ice Kings provides me plenty—or rather, did provide me plenty—right until the time they won the League, and on their first attempt. I played a role by helping to put the team together, but the glory belongs to the players. And they won the championship.

I have the option to continue as GM, but I'm ready to hand that off. I paved the way for someone else to take over and build on the foundation I set

up. That's me. I prefer to do the hard work, the dirty work, the work that requires the most obstacles to be overcome. And once that's done, I moved on.

The only time I stayed consistent was when I was part of the church. The routine, the discipline, and the regulations ensured I could focus on the only thing which mattered—my devotion to the Lord. And then I left it behind, and with it, my ability to have a focal point in my life. I hoped being the GM of the Ice Kings would provide me with that anchor, and it did. Briefly. But something was missing. The position always felt temporary. I loved building something with the team, but like I said, something was missing. Something I hope I'll find as the CEO of the Davenport group of companies.

It's why I accepted William's offer to take over this role. The fact that it means working with my half-siblings is something I've both been looking forward to while also dreading. It's not every day a man finds out he has an entire blood family he never knew anything about.

I glance about at the faces of my half-brothers, then pull out the chair at the head of the table and drop into it. The men stiffen. None of them move for a few seconds. Then, Knox steps forward into the light. I take in the scars on his face as he crosses over to the chair at the other end of the table. He sits down, and his brothers follow suit.

Then, Knox leans forward in his seat. "You have something to tell us?"

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READ AN EXCERPT FROM MAFIA KING

Karma

"Morn came and went—and came, and brought no day..."

Tears prick the backs of my eyes. Goddamn Byron. His words creep up on me when I am at my weakest. Not that I am a poetry addict, by any measure, but words are my jam. The one consolation I have is that, when everything else in the world is wrong, I can turn to them, and they'll be there, friendly, steady, waiting with open arms.

And this particular poem had laced my blood, crawled into my gut when

I'd first read it. Darkness had folded within me like an insidious snake, that raises its head when I least expect it. Like now, when I look out on the still sleeping city of London, from the grassy slope of Waterlow Park.

Somewhere out there, the Mafia is hunting me, apparently. It's why my sister Summer and her new husband Sinclair Sterling had insisted that I have my own security detail. I had agreed... only to appease them... then given my bodyguard the slip this morning. I had decided to come running here because it's not a place I'd normally go... Not so early in the morning, anyway. They won't think to look for me here. At least, not for a while longer.

I purse my lips, close my eyes. Silence. The rustle of the wind between the leaves. The faint tinkle of the water from the nearby spring.

I could be the last person on this planet, alone, unsung, bound for the grave.

Ugh! Stop. Right there. I drag the back of my hand across my nose. Try it again, focus, get the words out, one after the other, like the steps of my sorry life.

"Morn came and went—and came, and... and..." My voice breaks. "Bloody asinine hell." I dig my fingers into the grass and grab a handful and fling it out. Again. From the top.

"Morn came and went—and came, and—"

"...brought no day."

A gravelly voice completes my sentence.

I whip my head around. His silhouette fills my line of sight. He's sitting on the same knoll as me, yet I have to crane my neck back to see his profile. The sun is at his back, so I can't make out his features. Can't see his eyes... Can only take in his dark hair, combed back by a ruthless hand that brooked no measure.

My throat dries.

Thick dark hair, shot through with grey at the temples. He wears his age like a badge. I don't know why, but I know his years have not been easy. That he's seen more, indulged in more, reveled in the consequences of his actions, however extreme they might have been. He's not a normal, everyday person, this man. Not a nine-to-fiver, not someone who lives an average life. Definitely not a man who returns home to his wife and home at the end of the day. He is...different, unique, evil... Monstrous. Yes, he is a beast, one who sports the face of a man but who harbors the kind of darkness inside that speaks to me. I gulp.

His face boasts a hooked nose, a thin upper lip, a fleshy lower lip. One that hints at hidden desires, Heat. Lust. The sensuous scrape of that whiskered jaw over my innermost places. Across my inner thigh, reaching toward that core of me that throbs, clenches, melts to feel the stab of his tongue, the thrust of his hardness as he impales me, takes me, makes me his. Goosebumps pop on my skin.

I drag my gaze away from his mouth down to the scar that slashes across his throat. A cold sensation coils in my chest. What or who had hurt him in such a cruel fashion?

*"Of this their desolation; and all hearts
Were chill'd into a selfish prayer for light..."*

He continues in that rasping guttural tone. Is it the wound that caused that scar that makes his voice so... gravelly... So deep... so... so, hot?

Sweat beads my palms and the hairs on my nape rise. "Who are you?"

He stares ahead as his lips move,

*"Forests were set on fire—but hour by hour
They fell and faded—and the crackling trunks
Extinguish'd with a crash—and all was black."*

I swallow, moisture gathers in my core. How can I be wet by the mere cadence of this stranger's voice?

I spring up to my feet.

"Sit down," he commands.

His voice is unhurried, lazy even, his spine erect. The cut of his black jacket stretches across the width of his massive shoulders. His hair... I was mistaken—there are threads of dark gold woven between the darkness that pours down to brush the nape of his neck. A strand of hair falls over his brow. As I watch, he raises his hand and brushes it away. Somehow, the gesture lends an air of vulnerability to him. Something so at odds with the rest of his persona that, surely, I am mistaken?

My scalp itches. I take in a breath and my lungs burn. This man... He's sucked up all the oxygen in this open space as if he owns it, the master of all he surveys. The master of me. My death. My life. A shiver ladders along my spine. *Get away, get away now, while you still can.*

I angle my body, ready to spring away from him.

"I won't ask again."

Ask. Command. Force me to do as he wants. He'll have me on my back, bent over, on my side, on my knees, over him, under him. He'll surround me,

overwhelm me, pin me down with the force of his personality. His charisma, his larger-than-life essence will crush everything else out of me and I... I'll love it.

"No."

"Yes."

A fact. A statement of intent, spoken aloud. So true. So real. Too real. Too much. Too fast. All of my nightmares... my dreams come to life. Everything I've wanted is here in front of me. I'll die a thousand deaths before he'll be done with me... And then? Will I be reborn? For him. For me. For myself.

I live, first and foremost, to be the woman I was... am meant to be.

"You want to run?"

No.

No.

I nod my head.

He turns his, and all the breath leaves my lungs. Blue eyes—cerulean, dark like the morning skies, deep like the nighttime...hidden corners, secrets that I don't dare uncover. He'll destroy me, have my heart, and break it so casually.

My throat burns and a boiling sensation squeezes my chest.

"Go then, my beauty, fly. You have until I count to five. If I catch you, you are mine."

"If you don't?"

"Then I'll come after you, stalk your every living moment, possess your nightmares, and steal you away in the dead of night, and then..."

I draw in a shuddering breath as liquid heat drips from between my legs. "Then?" I whisper.

"Then, I'll ensure you'll never belong to anyone else, you'll never see the light of day again, for your every breath, your every waking second, your thoughts, your actions... and all your words, every single last one, will belong to me." He peels back his lips, and his teeth glint in the first rays of the morning light. "Only me." He straightens to his feet and rises, and rises.

This man... He is massive. A monster who always gets his way. My guts churn. My toes curl. Something primeval inside of me insists I hold my own. I cannot give in to him. Cannot let him win whatever this is. I need to stake my ground, in some form. *Say something. Anything. Show him you're not afraid of this.*

"Why?" I tilt my head back, all the way back. "Why are you doing this?"
He tilts his head, his ears almost canine in the way they are silhouetted against his profile.

"Is it because you can? Is it a... a," I blink, "a debt of some kind?"

He stills.

"My father, this is about how he betrayed the Mafia, right? You're one of them?"

"Lucky guess." His lips twist, "It is about your father, and how he promised you to me. He reneged on his promise, and now, I am here to collect."

"No." I swallow... *No, no, no.*

"Yes." His jaw hardens.

All expression is wiped clean of his face, and I know then, that he speaks the truth. It's always about the past. My sorry shambles of a past... Why does it always catch up with me? *You can run, but you can never hide.*

"Tick-tock, Beauty." He angles his body and his shoulders shut out the sight of the sun, the dawn skies, the horizon, the city in the distance, the rustle of the grass, the trees, the rustle of the leaves. All of it fades and leaves just me and him. *Us. Run.*

"Five." He jerks his chin, straightens the cuffs of his sleeves.

My knees wobble.

"Four."

My pulse rate spikes. I should go. Leave. But my feet are planted in this earth. This piece of land where we first met. What am I, but a speck in the larger scheme of things? To be hurt. To be forgotten. To be taken without an ounce of retribution. To be punished... by him.

"Three." He thrusts out his chest, widens his stance, every muscle in his body relaxed. "Two."

I swallow. The pulse beats at my temples. My blood thrums.

"One."

Michael

"Go."

She pivots and races down the slope. Her dark hair streams behind her. Her scent, sexy femininity and silver moonflowers, clings to my nose, then recedes. It's so familiar, that scent.

I had smelled it before, had reveled in it. Had drawn in it into my lungs as she had peeked up at me from under her thick eyelashes. Her green gaze had fixed on mine, her lips parted as she welcomed my kiss. As she had wound her arms about my neck, pushed up those sweet breasts and flattened them against my chest. As she had parted her legs when I had planted my thigh between them. I had seen her before... in my dreams. I stiffen. She can't be the same girl, though, can she?

I reach forward, thrust out my chin and sniff the air, but there's only the damp scent of dawn, mixed with the foul tang of exhaust fumes, as she races away from me.

She stumbles and I jump forward, pause when she straightens. Wait. Wait. Give her a lead. Let her think she has almost escaped, that she's gotten the better of me... As if.

I clench my fists at my sides, force myself to relax. Wait. Wait. She reaches the bottom of the incline, turns. I surge forward. One foot in front of the other. My heels dig into the grassy surface and mud flies up, clings to the hem of my £4000 Italian pants. Like I care? Plenty more where that came from. An entire walk-in closet, full of clothes made to measure, to suit every occasion, with every possible accessory needed by a man in my position to impress...

Everything... Except the one thing that I had coveted from the moment I had laid eyes on her. Sitting there on the grassy slope, unshed tears in her eyes, and reciting... Byron? For hell's sake. Of all the poets in the world, she had to choose the Lord of Darkness.

I huff. All a ploy. Clearly, she knew I was sitting next to her... No, not possible. I had walked toward her and she hadn't stirred. Hadn't been aware. Yeah, I am that good. I've been known to slit a man's throat from ear-to-ear while he was awake and in his full senses. Alive one second, dead the next. That's how it is in my world. You want it, you take it. And I... I want her.

I increase my pace, eat up the distance between myself and the girl... That's all she is. A slip of a thing, a slim blur of motion. Beauty in hiding. A diamond, waiting for me to get my hands on her, polish her, show her what it means to be...

Dead. She is dead. That's why I am here.

A flash of skin, a creamy length of thigh. My groin hardens and my legs wobble. I lurch over a bump in the ground. The hell? I right myself, leap forward, inching closer, closer. She reaches a curve in the path, disappears

out of sight.

My heart hammers in my chest. I will not lose her, will not. *Here, Beauty, come to Daddy.* The wind whistles past my ears. I pump my legs, lengthen my strides, turn the corner. There's no one there. Huh?

My heart hammers and the blood pounds at my wrists, my temples; adrenaline thrums in my veins. I slow down, come to a stop. Scan the clearing.

The hairs on my forearms prickle. She's here. Not far, but where? Where is she? I prowl across to the edge of the clearing, under the tree with its spreading branches.

When I get my hands on you, Beauty, I'll spread your legs like the pages of a poem. Dip into your honeyed sweetness, like a quill pen in ink. Drag my aching shaft across that melting, weeping entrance. My balls throb. My groin tightens. The crack of a branch above shivers across my stretched nerve endings. I swoop forward, hold out my arms, and close my grasp around the trembling, squirming mass of precious humanity. I cradle her close to my chest, heart beating thud-thud-thud, overwhelming any other thought.

Mine. All mine. The hell is wrong with me? She wriggles her little body, and her curves slide across my forearms. My shoulders bunch and my fingers tingle. She kicks out with her legs and arches her back, thrusting her breasts up so her nipples are outlined against the fabric of her sports bra. She dared to come out dressed like that? In that scrap of fabric that barely covers her luscious flesh?

"Let me go." She whips her head toward me and her hair flows around her shoulders, across her face. She blows it out of the way. "You monster, get away from me."

Anger drums at the backs of my eyes and desire tugs at my groin. The scent of her is sheer torture, something I had dreamed of in the wee hours of twilight when dusk turned into night.

She's not real. She's not the woman I think she is. She is my downfall. My sweet poison. The bitter medicine I must partake of to cure the ills that plague my company.

"Fine." I lower my arms and she tumbles to the grass, hits the ground butt first.

"How dare you." She huffs out a breath, her hair messily arranged across her face.

I shove my hands into the pockets of my fitted pants, knees slightly bent,

legs apart. Tip my chin down and watch her as she sprawls at my feet.

"You... dropped me?" She makes a sound deep in her throat.

So damn adorable.

"Your wish is my command." I quirk my lips.

"You don't mean it."

"You're right." I lean my weight forward on the balls of my feet and she flinches.

"What... what do you want?"

"You."

She pales. "You want to... to rob me? I have nothing of consequence.

"Oh, but you do, Beauty."

I lean in and every muscle in her body tenses. Good. She's wary. She should be. She should have been alert enough to have run as soon as she sensed my presence. But she hadn't.

I should spare her because she's the woman from my dreams... but I won't. She's a debt I intend to collect. She owes me, and I've delayed what was meant to happen long enough.

I pull the gun from my holster, point it at her.

Her gaze widens and her breath hitches. I expect her to plead with me for her life, but she doesn't. She stares back at me with her huge dilated pupils. She licks her lips and the blood drains to my groin. *Che cazzo!* Why does her lack of fear turn me on so?

"Your phone," I murmur, "take out your phone."

She draws in a breath, then reaches into her pocket and pulls out her phone.

"Call your sister."

"What?"

"Dial your sister, Beauty. Tell her you are going away on a long trip to Sicily with your new male friend."

"What?"

"You heard me." I curl my lips. "Do it, now!"

She blinks, looks like she is about to protest, then her fingers fly over the phone.

Damn, and I had been looking forward to coaxing her into doing my bidding.

She holds her phone to her ear. I can hear the phone ring on the other side, before it goes to voicemail. She glances at me and I jerk my chin. She

looks away, takes a deep breath, then speaks in a cheerful voice, "Hi Summer, it's me, Karma. I, ah, have to go away for a bit. This new... ah, friend of mine... He has an extra ticket and he has invited me to Sicily to spend some time with him. I... ah, I don't know when, exactly, I'll be back, but I'll message you and let you know. Take care. Love ya sis, I—"

I snatch the phone from her, disconnect the call, then hold the gun to her temple, "Goodbye, Beauty."

*TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT READ **MICHAEL AND KARMA'S [FORCED MARRIAGE STORY HERE](#)***

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READ AN EXCERPT FROM THE PROPOSAL

Liam

"Where is she?"

The receptionist gazes at me cow-eyed. Her lips move, but no words emerge. She clears her throat, glances sideways at the door to the side and behind her, then back at me.

"So, I take it she's in there?" I brush past her, and she jumps to her feet. "Sir, y-y-you can't go in there."

"Watch me." I glare at her.

She stammers, then gulps. Sweat beads her forehead. She shuffles back, and I stalk past her.

*Really, is there no one who can stand up to me? All of this scraping of chairs and fawning over me? It's enough to drive a man to boredom. I need a challenge. So, when my ex-wife-to-be texted me to say she was calling off our wedding, I was pissed. But when she let it slip that her wedding planner was right—that she needs to marry for love, and not for some family obligation, rage gripped me. I squeezed my phone so hard the screen cracked. I almost hurled the device across the room. When I got a hold of myself, for the first time in a long time, a shiver of something like excitement passed through me. *Finally, fuck.**

That familiar pulse of adrenaline pulses through my veins. It's a sensation I was familiar with in the early days of building my business.

After my father died and I took charge of the group of companies he'd run, I was filled with a sense of purpose; a one-directional focus to prove

myself and nurture his legacy. To make my group of companies the leader, in its own right. To make so much money and amass so much power, I'd be a force to be reckoned with.

I tackled each business meeting with a zeal that none of my opponents were able to withstand. But with each passing year—as I crossed the benchmarks I'd set myself, as my bottom line grew healthier, my cash reserves engorged, and the people working for me began treating me with the kind of respect normally reserved for larger-than-life icons—some of that enthusiasm waned. Oh, I still wake up ready to give my best to my job every day, but the zest that once fired me up faded, leaving a sense of purposelessness behind.

The one thing that has kept me going is to lock down my legacy. To ensure the business I've built will finally be transferred to my name. For which my father informed me I would need to marry. Which is why, after much research, I tracked down Lila Kumar, wooed her, and proposed to her. And then, her meddling wedding planner came along and turned all of my plans upside down.

Now, that same sense of purpose grips me. That laser focus I've been lacking envelops me and fills my being. All of my senses sharpen as I shove the door of her office open and stalk in.

The scent envelops me first. The lush notes of violets and peaches. Evocative and fruity. Complex, yet with a core of mystery that begs to be unraveled. Huh? I'm not the kind to be affected by the scent of a woman, but this... Her scent... It's always chafed at my nerve endings. The hair on my forearms straightens.

My guts tie themselves up in knots, and my heart pounds in my chest. It's not comfortable. The kind of feeling I got the first time I went white-water rafting. A combination of nervousness and excitement as I faced my first rapids. A sensation that had since ebbed. One I'd been chasing ever since, pushing myself to take on extreme sports. One I hadn't thought I'd find in the office of a wedding planner.

My feet thud on the wooden floor, and I get a good look at the space which is one-fourth the size of my own office. In the far corner is a bookcase packed with books. On the opposite side is a comfortable settee packed with cushions women seem to like so much. There's a colorful patchwork quilt thrown over it, and behind that, a window that looks onto the back of the adjacent office building. On the coffee table in front of the settee is a bowl

with crystal-like objects that reflect the light from the floor lamps. There are paintings on the wall that depict scenes from beaches. No doubt, the kind she'd point to and sell the idea of a honeymoon to gullible brides. I suppose the entire space would appeal to women. With its mood lighting and homey feel, the space invites you to kick back, relax and pour out your problems. A ruse I'm not going to fall for.

"You!" I stab my finger in the direction of the woman seated behind the antique desk straight ahead. "Call Lila, right now, and tell her she needs to go through with the wedding. Tell her she can't back out. Tell her I'm the right choice for her."

She peers up at me from behind large, black horn-rimmed glasses perched on her nose. "No."

I blink. "Excuse me?"

She leans back in her chair. "I'm not going to do that."

"Why the hell not?"

"Are you the right choice for her?"

"Of course, I am." I glare at her.

Some of the color fades from her cheeks. She taps her pen on the table, then juts out her chin. "What makes you think you're the right choice of husband for her?"

"What makes you think I'm not?"

"Do you love her?"

"That's no one's problem except mine and hers."

"You don't love her."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Excuse me?" She pushes the glasses further up her nose. "Are you seriously asking what loving the woman you're going to marry has to do with actually marrying her?" Her voice pulses with fury.

"Yes, exactly. Why don't you explain it to me?" The sarcasm in my tone is impossible to miss.

She stares at me from behind those large glasses that should make her look owlish and studious, but only add an edge of what I can only describe as quirky-sexiness. The few times I've met her before, she's gotten on my nerves so much, I couldn't wait to get the hell away from her. Now, giving her the full benefit of my attention, I realize, she's actually quite striking. And the addition of those spectacles? Fuck me—I never thought I had a weakness for women wearing glasses. Maybe I was wrong. Or maybe it's

specifically this woman wearing glasses... Preferably only glasses and nothing else.

Hmm. Interesting. This reaction to her. It's unwarranted and not something I planned for. I widen my stance, mainly to accommodate the thickness between my legs. An inconvenience... which perhaps I can use to my benefit? I drag my thumb under my lower lip.

Her gaze drops to my mouth, and if I'm not mistaken, her breath hitches. *Very interesting.* Has she always reacted to me like that in the past? Nope, I would've noticed. We've always tried to have as little as possible to do with each other. Like I said, interesting. And unusual.

"First," —she drums her fingers on the table— "are you going to answer my question?"

I tilt my head, the makings of an idea buzzing through my synapses. I need a little time to flesh things out though. It's the only reason I deign to answer her question which, let's face it, I have no obligation to respond to. But for the moment, it's in my interest to humor her and buy myself a little time.

"Lila and I are well-matched in every way. We come from good families —"

"You mean rich families?"

"That, too. Our families move in the same circles."

"Don't you mean boring country clubs?" she says in a voice that drips with distaste.

I frown. "Among other places. We have the pedigree, the bloodline, our backgrounds are congruent, and we'd be able to fold into an arrangement of coexistence with the least amount of disruption on either side."

"Sounds like you're arranging a merger."

"A takeover, but what-fucking-ever." I raise a shoulder.

Her scowl deepens. "This is how you approached the upcoming wedding... And you wonder why Lila left you?"

"I gave her the biggest ring money could buy—"

"You didn't make an appearance at the engagement party."

"I signed off on all the costs related to the upcoming nuptials—"

"Your own engagement party. You didn't come to it. You left her alone to face her family and friends." Her tone rises. Her cheeks are flushed. You'd think she was talking about her own wedding, not that of her friend. In fact, it's more entertaining to talk to her than discuss business matters with my

employees. *How interesting.*

"You also didn't show up for most of the rehearsals." She glowers.

"I did show up for the last one."

"Not that it made any difference. You were either checking your watch and indicating that it was time for you to leave, or you were glowering at the plans being discussed."

"I still agreed to that god-awful wedding cake, didn't I?"

"On the other hand, it's probably good you didn't come for the previous rehearsals. If you had, Lila and I might have had this conversation earlier—"

"Aha!" I straighten. "So, you confess that it's because of you Lila walked away from this wedding."

She tips her head back. "Hardly. It's because of you."

"So you say, but your guilt is written large on your face."

"Guilt?" Her features flush. The color brings out the dewy hue of her skin, and the blue of her eyes deepens until they remind me of forget-me-nots. No, more like the royal blue of the ink that spilled onto my paper the first time I attempted to write with a fountain pen.

"The only person here who should feel guilty is you, for attempting to coerce an innocent, young woman into an arrangement that would have trapped her for life."

Anger thuds at my temples. My pulse begins to race. "I never have to coerce women. And what you call being trapped is what most women call security. But clearly, you wouldn't know that, considering" —I wave my hand in the air— "you prefer to run your kitchen-table business which, no doubt, barely makes ends meet."

She loosens her grip on her pencil, and it falls to the table with a clatter. Sparks flash deep in her eyes.

You know what I said earlier about the royal blue? Strike that. There are flickers of silver hidden in the depths of her gaze. Flickers that blaze when she's upset. How would it be to push her over the edge? To be at the receiving end of all that passion, that fervor, that ardor... that absolute avidness of existence when she's one with the moment? How would it feel to rein in her spirit, absorb it, drink from it, revel in it, and use it to spark color into my life?

"Kitchen-table business?" She makes a growling sound under her breath. "You dare come into my office and insult my enterprise? The company I have grown all by myself—"

"And outside of your assistant" —I nod toward the door I came through—"you're the sole employee, I take it?"

Her color deepens. "I work with a group of vendors—"

I scoff, "None of whom you could hold accountable when they don't deliver."

"—who have been carefully vetted to ensure that they always deliver," she says at the same time. "Anyway, why do you care, since you don't have a wedding to go to?"

"That's where you're wrong." I peel back my lips. "I'm not going to be labeled as the joke of the century. After all, the media labelled it 'the wedding of the century'." I make air quotes with my fingers.

It was Isla's idea to build up the wedding with the media. She also wanted to invite influencers from all walks of life to attend, but I have no interest in turning my nuptials into a circus. So, I vetoed the idea of journalists attending in person. I have, however, agreed to the event being recorded by professionals and exclusive clips being shared with the media and the influencers. This way, we'll get the necessary PR coverage, without the media being physically present.

In all fairness, the publicity generated by the upcoming nuptials has already been beneficial. It's not like I'll ever tell her, but Isla was right to feed the public's interest in the upcoming event. Apparently, not even the most hard-nosed investors can resist the warm, fuzzy feelings that a marriage invokes. And this can only help with the IPO I have planned for the most important company in my portfolio. "I have a lot riding on this wedding."

"Too bad you don't have a bride."

"Ah," —I smirk— "but I do."

She scowls. "No, you don't. Lila—"

"I'm not talking about her."

"Then who are you talking about?"

"You."

Isla

I stare, sure I haven't heard him correctly. "Eh? What are you talking about?" I shake my head as if that might clear it. "If this is some kind of joke —"

"Not a joke." He slides his hand into the pocket of his tailor-made slacks.

"There's no way I'm not going ahead with that wedding. And I do need a bride. Ergo—" He tilts his head as if his words are self-explanatory.

"I'm afraid you're making no sense."

His lips twist. "Oh, you definitely need to be afraid, but of the repercussions from turning me down."

I scowl. "This entire conversation is fascinating but as you can see" —I gesture to the computer in front of me— "I have *miles to go and promises to keep*."

"Quoting Frost won't change the fact that you're going to be marrying me in" —he pulls back his coat sleeve, exposing a watch that I have no doubt cost more than the annual rent of my office, and which is nestled amidst a smattering of dark hair on his thick wrist— "exactly seven days."

A shiver of something—excitement, apprehension, nervousness, disbelief... maybe all of the above—ripples under my skin.

"I think you'd better leave."

"I think *you'd* better start making preparations to make things up to me." Bastard's grin widens. He's enjoying himself at my expense, no doubt about it.

Anger bubbles up, and I tamp it down. I can't afford to lose my temper. Liam Stick-in-the-mud Kincaid may not be utilizing my services any longer, but he's one of the most powerful men on this continent—in the world, even—and the last thing I want is to make an enemy of him. I curl my fingers into fists, draw in a breath, then another. When I finally speak, my tone is even. "What things? I don't have anything to make up to you."

"Oh, but you do. It's because of you my bride decided to jilt me at the altar—"

"You didn't reach the altar," I point out.

"Semantics—"

"Are everything." I allow myself a small, tight smile. I'm not going to let this gazillionaire-McGrumpy walk all over me. I have a couple of weddings to plan right after this one. They are nowhere near as high profile as Lila's but they'll keep me busy for a while. All the more reason to get this stuck up wanker out of here.

"Which is why I can't marry you."

His eyes darken further. "Sure you can."

"I can't, I'm already married."

He lowers his gaze to my left hand before I have a chance to cover it.

Shit, shit, shit.

"So, you're not only a bad friend, but you're also a bad liar."

I shoot up to my feet. "I'm not a bad friend. I'm a good friend. The kind who dared to tell Lila exactly what she needed to hear when no one else had the guts to tell her the truth."

"You ruined her life."

"I gave her a chance to live life on her own terms, and I'm not a liar."

He smirks. "You lied that you were married."

"I am married."

"You're not wearing a ring."

"Plenty of married women don't wear rings."

His smile grows broader, and it's not a nice one. My stomach churns. Why do I get the feeling that I've walked into a trap?

He leans forward on the balls of his feet. "Isla Bailey, twenty-five, university dropout. Mother and brother live in Lymington. You had a happy childhood... until your father died of a heart attack when you were eighteen. A fact that made you decide to drop out of college and travel the world."

"That's very presumptuous of you to think one was linked to the other."

"Doesn't take much to join the dots."

"Go on," I say slowly.

"You tried your hand at being a tie-dye designer—"

"I like colors."

"A diving instructor—"

"I like the colors of fishes underwater." I raise a shoulder.

"A beekeeper."

"I like the color of—"

"Bees?" He smirks.

"I was going to say honey, but yeah, sure, bees, too."

"A professional bridesmaid?" He arches an eyebrow.

"Weddings can be very colorful, you know? Also, you'll be surprised how lucrative a job it is. Also—" I frown. "How do you know all this?"

"It's on your bio on your website," he points out.

Of course, it is.

"I also had you investigated."

I gape at him. "You had me investigated?"

"You didn't think I'd allow you to plan my wedding without making sure your background was acceptable? Which also means, I know you're not

married."

I plant my hands on my hips. "And I intend to stay that way. I'm focused on building my career and my company—"

"And there won't be much of that left, considering I'll personally make sure you never work in this country or on this continent—or in fact, organize any wedding anywhere in the world—again."

My heart flips up into my throat, and my pulse begins to race. "You wouldn't do that."

"Try me." He reaches over, picks up the pencil I was using earlier, then twirls it between his fingers.

I try to focus on the action, but the scene in front of my eyes blurs. I blink away the hot tears that have accumulated in my eyes and set my jaw. "You're blackmailing me."

He raises his gaze skyward. "Finally, she gets it."

"So, if I don't marry you, you'll destroy my career and my reputation?"

He lowers the pencil to the table. "You'll pose as my wife. Put up a united front with me to my family. Convince them and my friends how much you love me. Also, you need to produce an heir—"

What the—? I shake my head. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold on. Back up. What do you mean, 'an heir'?" I make air quotes with my fingers.

"I need to be married and have a child before I can get ownership of my business."

"You talk like this is a stipulation of some kind..."

He shuffles his feet. For the first time since he prowled into my office, he seems less than confident. In fact, he looks downright pissed. "My father's will says, unless I marry and produce an heir by the time I'm forty, I won't inherit my company or get access to my trust fund."

"I see." I lean back in my seat. "So, this is why you proposed to Lila and hustled her into marrying you."

"If by that you mean I courted her—"

"You used your charisma to unduly influence her."

"—I wooed her, took her on dates, to dinners, even the blasted opera, then bought her the biggest engagement ring I could lay my hands on."

"You mean that tasteless hunk of stone on her finger?" I cover my mouth and cough. "No wonder it was so easy to convince her to walk away from you."

His jaw tics. A nerve pops at his temple. He looks about ready to burst

out of his uber-fitted suit. Oh, goodie. At least I got a rise out of him. That has to count for something, eh?

"That tasteless hunk of stone cost close to a million dollars," he says through gritted teeth.

"Money isn't everything," I announce in a prim voice.

"You certainly weren't complaining when you chose the most expensive venue possible for the wedding."

I straighten my spine. "If you mean the All Villa in Bali, that was Lila's choice. She wanted to get married in Bali, you know."

"And, no doubt you jumped at the idea, considering you get a fifteen percent commission on the entire cost of the wedding."

"Hey, you get what you pay for. I've been busting my ass for the past few months to get this event organized. Do you even know what an impossible task I've pulled off? I've managed to get all of the preparations completed in eight weeks. Eight bloody weeks. That's just forty-two days. It normally takes close to a year to organize a ceremony of this scale. And I pulled it off in less than one-fourth that time."

"Good, so it won't be a problem to flip things around to accommodate yourself as the bride, too."

"I never said I was going to marry you."

"Haven't you been listening to anything I've been saying?" His features grow even harder. Grays and greens shoot through the blue of his eyes until the color resembles that of a gathering storm. "If it's custody of the child you're worried about, once you deliver the child, we will separate. There'll be a prenup, of course, but I'll make sure you're reimbursed for your time." He says all of this in a voice so casual, he might as well be asking about the weather. No, strike that. I've heard people speak with more emotion about the weather changes in London than he has about his entire crazy-ass idea.

I curl my fingers into fists and resist the urge to leap up screaming. *Won't do to lose it. Need to keep my cool. Need to make him see just how crazy this entire conversation is.* "Have you even heard yourself? We barely know each other, and now you're saying you want me to marry you—instead of the woman the world thinks you're going to marry. Not only that, you want me to produce a child, and then you'll divorce me?"

"We'll co-parent and have equal rights to the child." He raises his arms in a conciliatory gesture. "I'm not the kind who'll keep a mother away from her child."

"Of course not," I scoff. "But you're the kind who'd force a woman to marry him."

"Fake marry."

"Doesn't seem fake when we're supposed to produce an heir," I protest.

"There are ways of doing it without my having to touch you. Unless," he looks me up and down and a calculating look comes into his eyes, "unless you prefer it to be done the old-fashioned way. In which case, I might oblige you. If you ask me nicely, that is."

My head spins. My heart seems to have taken up permanent residence in my throat. My stomach feels like a twister has become entangled inside.

"You're not making any sense. You can't walk in and threaten me into marrying you, then announce you need me to produce a child for you, in the same breath."

His grin widens. "I just did."

"There's still time." I raise my hands. "Walk away now, and I'll forget any of this happened. In fact, I won't even go to the media with news of how you intimidated me."

"You're not going to do that."

"Oh, yeah?" I snap back my shoulders. "And why is that?"

"Because when you marry me, even though the marriage is fake, no one else will know. To the outside world, you'll be the wife of Liam Kincaid, which means, doors will automatically open for you. Your past transgressions —"

"Transgressions?" I shout.

"Transgressions" —he firms his lips— "will be forgotten. Socialites and influencers will queue up to patronize your services. You'll run the most successful wedding planning outfit in this country, if not all of the continent."

I blink. Now that he mentions it... It's true. Once I hitch my star to the Liam Kincaid reputation, it'll be easy sailing. Everyone will want a piece of my wedding planning company. I'll have more projects than I can handle.

"Your showpieces will, of course, be your own wedding. You can give it any twist you like; make it the kind of wedding you've always imagined for yourself."

"For myself?"

"You must have thought about how you'd like to get married." He glances at his watch and straightens. "Well, this is your chance to execute it. Use it to show the world and all the headline seekers exactly how it should be

done."

"S-o-o-o, I can do anything I want for my wedding ceremony?" I pluck at the rubber band around my wrist.

"Yes."

"The budget?"

"Unlimited. I'll need to sign off on the bills, but nothing is too good for my bride. Whatever you want, you can have it."

I squeeze my fingers together. Surely, I'm not considering this. I'm not actually thinking of going through with this insane proposal of his. On the other hand, if I do, I'll have everything I want. The wedding of my dreams, the chance to prove a point to all the naysayers who thought I'd never make it, and a resounding 'fuck you' to all my competition. Hell, there won't be competition. I'll wipe them off the map with this showpiece of a wedding. No one will ever question my competency again. And I'll have enough clients to keep me going for years. Even after I divorce him, it won't make a dent in my reputation.

"Well?" He scowls. "What's it gonna be?"

I pluck at the rubber band with more intensity. "So, I can transform it into the wedding of my dreams, the kind that'll make every media outlet, gossip magazine, and wedding blog sit up and take notice?"

"Do you not understand English? Or have you not been listening to me?"

I straighten in my seat. "I heard you the first time," I say in a low voice.

"Good, so what's your answer?"

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FROM THE AUTHOR

Hello, I'm L. Steele. I write romance stories with strong powerful men who meet their match in sassy, curvy, spitfire women.

I love to push myself with each book on both the spice and the angst so I can deliver well rounded, multidimensional characters.

I enjoy trading trivia with my filmmaker husband, watching lots and lots of movies, and walking nature trails. I live in London.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hello, I'm L. Steele.

I write romance stories with strong powerful men who meet their match in sassy, curvy, spitfire women.

I love to push myself with each book on both the spice and the angst so I can deliver well rounded, multidimensional characters.

I enjoy trading trivia with my filmmaker husband, watching lots and lots of movies, and walking nature trails. I live in London.

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