



DARK KINGDOM

JAGGER COLE

DARK KINGDOM

A DARK ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

JAGGER COLE

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PLAYLIST

Anti-Hero - Taylor Swift

Power Over Me - Dermot Kennedy

Black Hole Sun - Soundgarden

Last Goodbye - Jeff Buckley

Better Angels - Marcus Mumford

Angela - The Lumineers

Lover - Noah Gundersen

The Night We Met - Lord Huron, Phoebe Bridgers

Stand For Myself - Yola

Don't Miss - The Blue Stones

Virginia (Wind In The Night) - The Head And The Heart

Weird Goodbyes (ft. Bon Iver) - The National

Here to Forever - Death Cab for Cutie

Save Us - Lennon Stella

Listen to the playlist on [Spotify](#).

TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains darker themes involving a primal kink, CNC, past (off screen) SA and trauma, and suicide. While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. Please read with that in mind.

PROLOGUE



Four Years Ago, Ascot, England:

RAIN and fog shroud the cemetery, as if nature herself has dressed for the funeral today.

I look down numbly into the open coffin that cradles my father's body. It's dressed in a slate gray suit he never could have afforded when he was alive. Or at least never would have spent the money on, even if he'd had it.

Words like "alone" and "orphan" thud dully inside my head. First my mother, when I was four, and now my father, a month after my twentieth birthday. Her from the blunt violence of gunfire, him from the creeping assassin of cancer.

The priest finishes his words, and silence falls over the meager crowd of mourners. It's just me, the housekeeper of the family and estate my father worked for Mrs. Dubois, the groundskeeper Mr. Peddleton, and Chris, my father's friend and darts partner from down at The Spotted Hen.

A firm hand lands gently on my shoulder.

And my uncle, Jonathan. My father would have been enraged to know his brother was attending his funeral. But, you know, it *is* his funeral.

Sort of hard to protest the guest list.

I glance down at my watch—the one that Jonathan gifted me last night as we sat at the bar at The Spotted Hen over scotch. He and my father might not have spoken in sixteen years. The history between them might be the reason my father severed all ties with the rest of the Cross family and moved us away from Manchester for the job here in Ascot working for Jean Margaux.

But Henry Cross was still Jonathan's brother. And even a man as dangerous, connected, and powerful as my uncle can still feel grief.

My eyes drop to the watch again before I lift my head a little and turn to peer through the rain, looking for someone else that I was hoping would be here. Someone I wish was here by my side right now above anyone else, even Jonathan. Someone I didn't ask to be here because, well, who knows why.

Ah, yes. Because I'm the "emotionally stunted son raised alone by an emotionally stunted father", as she likes to tell me with that sly grin of hers that sends me reeling and takes the wind out of my lungs. Because I know it comes from a place of humor, and love.

And love.

A love that was...one thing, and is now, as of two weeks ago, very much another.

Despite the rain and the fog, and Mrs. Dubois crying quietly beneath her black veil, and the body of my father lying before me ready to be put into the ground, I smile. It's not because I'm a psychopath. It's because when Celeste dances into my head, I become helpless. When I even imagine that smile, it's the only physical motion I'm capable of making, like my heart is too full to do anything but grin.

But she's not here.

I know deep down that's probably a good thing. If Mr. Margaux, the powerful and connected Frenchman who employed my father for the last sixteen years, isn't here for Henry's burial, his daughter being here might raise... questions.

Those questions might escalate if she were standing next to me, holding my hand. Which she would be, if she were here.

Questions along the lines of "why is Jean Margaux's youngest daughter wrapped in the arms of her father's chauffeur's son?" The boy with nothing to offer but grease-stained hands and a dangerous last name. The pauper with his hands on the gilded elite French princess.

There wouldn't just be questions. Answers would be demanded.

Celeste and I had always been close, to a point. Friends, to a certain degree, raised basically under the same roof—her a resident, and me the son of the help. But I think both of us always knew the truth, or knew it since we were old enough to realize what it meant:

Celeste Margaux and I were only ever "friends" because calling it more or pushing it any further would be dangerous. Because of her father. Because of the family my father came from, even if he spent the last sixteen years pretending otherwise.

And then two months ago, a week after her eighteenth birthday and two after my twentieth, we stopped being "friends".

A single kiss more than decade in the making burned that façade to the ground, finally letting us both see what had

always really been there underneath. And after that single kiss, there was no going back.

My blood hums against the chill in the air as my mind replays all the stolen moments over the last fourteen days. Gaspd kisses in the pantry of the huge Margaux estate while Mrs. Dubois is busy in the kitchen. Celeste's teeth biting down on my neck, trying not to scream as my fingers down the front of her panties drive her over the edge behind the garage.

Her body feverishly grinding to mine, our skin slick against skin, our mouths devouring each other in the gardens before dawn.

The smile plays across my lips once again as I lift my eyes to scan the road by the cemetery. She's not here. My smile fades, but I nod to myself.

She can't be here. We both know that would raise too many questions.

"You know you can't let her be a part of your decision, Adrian."

I tense and slowly turn to glance back at my uncle. My father, when he *did* bring up his brother, always framed him as a savage criminal. A bloodthirsty, reckless force of chaos rampaging across Britain.

The man who stares back at me, the man I've come to know again over the last two terrible days, is anything but reckless or chaotic. Dangerous, of course. But one doesn't become—much less stay—the head of the Cross organization by being reckless. My uncle is a coldly calculating, highly intelligent man.

And now he wants me to sit at his side and learn the ways of the empire that bears my name. My father kept me from that

world. But I know it's in my blood. I *know* that's where my destiny lies.

So therein lies the dilemma: stay here in Ascot, and step into my father's shoes working for Jean Margaux. Be a chauffeur and personal mechanic to the ill-tempered, coldly dismissive French businessman. Or step into the shoes I was born to step into, and learn how to sit at the head of the Cross family table one day, after the mantle passes from Jonathan to me.

That should be an abundantly easy choice to make. Stay in the house of a man I dislike as his servant, or seek the throne of power, wealth, and limitless possibilities at my uncle's side? But of course, it's not an easy choice to make at all.

Not when all my mouth ever wants to taste is Celeste's lips.

"Adrian—"

"*I know*," I growl quietly.

Jonathan nods slowly. I can see in his eyes that he understands what's going through my head. Not just sees it, but gets it, too. I never told him about Celeste, but he guessed all on his own and spoke to me about it last night at the pub when he gave me the watch.

There's a possible middle ground here, though. Since my father and I left Manchester, the Cross Family seat of operations has moved to London. And Celeste has every intention of attending Kings College, also in London, beginning with the fall term.

We can finally stop sneaking around. In a few short months, we can *be together*.

So it's okay if she can't be here today.

I turn back to the coffin, staring numbly at my father's body as Mrs. Dubois sobs beside it. Chris, my father's pub friend, shakes my hand solemnly and then turns to pay his last respects to my dad. He lays three feathered darts on my father's chest, patting them with a soft hand.

The sound of car tires on gravel has my heart jumping into my throat. I turn, and there's no stopping the grin spreading across my face as I recognize the Margaux family's black and silver Bentley rolling to a stop on the white stone drive a dozen yards away.

My heart surges. She came.

I pull away from my uncle and walk quickly through the drizzling rain, *sans* umbrella, towards the girl I've loved since I was old enough to understand what that really means. The tinted back windows roll down as I approach, grin on my face —

"Mr. Cross."

My smile shatters, and my heart falters as the grim, lined, aristocratic and distinctively French face of Jean Margaux, not Celeste, greets me from inside the dark car. I stutter to a stop, at a loss for words.

"Mr. Margaux, I wasn't expecting—"

"Your father was a loyal employee, Mr. Cross," he says tersely. "He shall be missed."

I swallow, nodding.

"Thank you, Mr. Marg—"

"I'm fully aware of who you *were* expecting," he hisses quietly.

I stiffen. His eyes narrow, and his lips curl slightly.

“You were expecting a prettier face, no doubt.”

“Mr. Margaux—”

“I’m going to say this to you one time and one time only, you little asshole,” he snarls.

My eyes drop to his hand that is tightly clasping the diamond hilt of his cane between his knees. I suddenly realize he’s not alone. There’s a burly man in a black suit sitting next to him in the back seat of the car. And instead of a cane, this man’s hands are wrapped around the stock of an enormous, gleaming Glock 17.

“Stay the fuck away from my daughter.”

My eyes snap to his. But I don’t flinch. I don’t quail from this man, or fumble apologies, or beg for his forgiveness. I stare him right back in the eyes.

It’s not something a man like Jean Margaux is used to, and I can see it filling his eyes with anger.

“Sir,” I mutter back. “All due respect—”

“Respect, Adrian,” he snaps, “would have been keeping your filthy hands off of my Celeste in the first place.”

“*Respectfully*, sir,” I growl back, “I love—”

He barks a cold, brutal laugh.

“Ahh, *c’est l’amour*, is it?” He smiles cruelly, sneering at me.

“*Yes*.”

He snorts.

“Sir, you can’t tell me to stay away from—”

“You think this is *my* order? That I am here simply to be cruel to you on this day of mourning?”

My eyes narrow.

“Yes, I do.”

He shakes his head.

“*Non*, Adrian. While these may also be *my* wishes, this request doesn’t come from me.”

He smiles triumphantly.

“This is what *Celeste* wishes.”

My heart thuds and my mouth thins to a line as I glare at him.

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Margaux,” I grunt. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to—”

“You’re the proverbial *other man*, Adrian.”

I freeze as his words hit me like a slap. Jean just grins at me.

“You were a fling, boy. A dalliance with ‘the help’. With the filth,” he sneers. “She’s not here because *you mean nothing to her*. She’s busy getting on with her real life.”

His smile widens.

“Getting ready for her big day tomorrow.”

He’s baiting me. But even as I hold myself back from asking what the bloody fuck he’s talking about, I can tell he sees that’s getting to me. Cracking me. Breaking me.

“Ask me,” he hisses thinly. “*Ask me*, you little bastard.”

I swallow.

“What the fuck is tomorrow?”

His teeth flash.

“Her wedding day, Adrian. She’s getting married.”

I stare. I want to see the lie in his eyes. I want to see it slipping out of the cracks in his cruel mask. But, the harder I stare, the more brightly the truth burns.

He's not lying.

"Here. See for yourself."

One of the hands on his cane drops beneath the window. It comes back holding a delicate cream card with gold calligraphy across it. I pluck it from his hand and stare at the words mocking me, inviting me to celebrate the marriage between Celeste Meline Margaux and a certain Amir El-Sayed.

Tomorrow.

Rain blurs the golden lettering and starts to melt the delicate card in my hands. I let it drop to a puddle at my feet as Jean begins to laugh.

"You were *never* the end game, Adrian. Ever." His eyes glint at me dangerously.

"Now fuck off to your world of petty crime and nothingness. To your insignificant, miserable life, without her in it. You and your father's belongings will be waiting for you at the gates to my home. After that, if I ever see you again..." He turns to nod at the silent man with the hand cannon next to him.

"I'll have someone blow your head off."

His eyes dart past me to the small gathering by the open grave.

"Now please tell Mrs. Dubois and Peddleton to return to their jobs immediately, if they'd like to be employed tomorrow."

He shifts his eyes back to me and smiles thinly.

"Fuck off and fly away, little boy."

The tinted window rolls back up and the car glides away, sending up wet gravel and mud that splatters my shoes and shins.

But I don't feel it. I don't feel anything as my heart begins to calcify, turning to stone inside of my chest.

"You're the other man. A fling. A dalliance. You were never the end game."

My lips curl into a snarl as I drop my eyes to the soggy invitation, welcoming me to *celebrate* the eternal bond of the girl I love to some other man.

My heel slams into it, crushing it to a wet pulp before I turn and walk in a daze back towards the hole in the ground holding the man who raised me, and the man standing beside it who will guide me into the next phase of my life.

Without her.

Jean Margaux may think he took a win today. But he's wrong. My life will not be insignificant. It will not be petty.

I am destined to be a *king*.

And one day, he, like everyone, will bow to me.



Four years later, London:

I GRUNT as the alarm drags me from sleep. My brow furrows, and the tinge of a hangover starts to bite into me as my body wakes.

Christ, I can still taste the scotch on my lips.

With a groan, I reach over and slam the alarm off. My fingers find and stab at the button for the automatic shades on my bedroom windows. Slowly, with a soft mechanical hum, the blackout shades roll up, letting the sunlight in.

My eyes squeeze shut, wincing. But I have things to do today. And there's no rest, as they say, for the wicked.

Or the hungover.

I fling the covers back and then roll out of bed directly onto my toes and fingertips on the hardwood floor. My muscles coil and flex as I push up and down, pumping out a set of pushups that gets my blood coursing through my veins, chasing away the lingering remnants of alcohol.

Heart racing, I instantly roll onto my back, gritting my teeth as I alternate elbows to knees, feeling my core clench with each crunch. When that fresh hell is done, I roll back over for another round of pushups, then flipping again for more brutal

crunches. Lastly, it's rapid high-intensity dumb bells until my arms and shoulders scream.

But at least the hangover is fading.

I pad naked across the elegantly-wainscoted bedroom on the top floor of my three-story townhouse. I can faintly hear the new Velvet Guillotine record blasting from my kitchen, reminding me that Noel crashed here last night after our night of apparently bottomless scotch.

But for Christ's sake, the man needs to *stop* with that fucking album.

The shower is cold, which has me gritting my teeth and hissing. But it's what I need, and the hangover retreats further as I rinse off. I step out to shave quickly—with hot water, thank you very much. The silver straight razor gives me pause, and I allow myself ten seconds of melancholy, remembering the man who this once belonged to.

It's been six months since Jonathan passed—cruelly and ironically to the same pancreatic cancer that took his brother, my father. But in the two and a half years he had me under his wing, I grew in ways I never imagined I could.

Now it's me who sits at the head of the Cross table. It's a delicate balancing act, considering I'm both the leader of a billion-dollar criminal enterprise as well as a student in my final year at Lords College graduate school of business.

There's a chance this tightly-wound balance is a contributing factor to my Thursday night scotch shenanigans.

I dress for the day quickly: dark charcoal gray suit, crisp white shirt, midnight blue tie and pocket square, dark brown shoes. By the time I'm heading down the stairs to the first-floor kitchen, my hangover is just about gone.

Velvet Guillotine's *Wreck Me Gently* seems to be on its fifth rotation of the morning as I step into the kitchen. Worse, Noel is bloody *singing along* to it in his goddamn boxers and t-shirt as he flips something on the stovetop, his back to me.

"This song? Again?"

He chuckles without turning.

"Bloody love this fucking record."

"Oh, do you?" I mutter dryly. "I'm not sure fucking Scotland is aware of that just yet, if you could maybe turn it up for them?"

Which he does. Wanker.

I groan and step past him and dialing the volume on the speaker it's blasting from.

"Is there coffee?"

"Oh, *yes*, but of *course*, m'lord!"

I roll my eyes as he turns to flip me off and nod at the pot.

"Hot and strong."

"Lovely."

The smell of sausages suddenly makes my stomach gurgle as I start to pour a mug of back coffee.

"Oi, speaking of Scotland..." Noel turns to give me a look that says he's been wrestling with the same hangover his morning that I am. "How was your head this morning?"

"Vindictive," I grunt. "Yours?"

"A bastard." He sighs, shoving his fingers through his dark hair. "Thanks for letting me crash."

"Any time."

It made sense. We'd been drinking with friends at the Deluxe Lounge, which is a stone's throw from my townhouse near campus but much further to Noel's flat. Plus, I'm starting to recall the end of the evening over more scotch at my kitchen counter once we got here.

"Were we the last ones standing at Deluxe?"

My brows furrow, thinking. "Thomas and Cassandra left early, I remember that."

"Well, there's a shock."

I grin. Our two good friends are newly engaged and newly pregnant, and still as perpetually entangled in each other's arms as ever. Lately, it seems when they come out, it's only to humor us, and only for as long as they can stand not being alone together.

"Lars was chatting up that redhead..." Noel frowns. "They may have left together?"

I give him a look. He grins.

"Right, as if that didn't happen."

I smirk at him. "Surprised you noticed."

"Hmm?"

"Seems there was something, or should I say someone, occupying your attention last night."

He glances at me. "Look, I was just—"

"Noel, I don't care if you're friends or, you know, whatever, with Matilde."

Maybe I should care. Maybe it should bother me more that somehow, Matilde Laurent, née *Margaux*—as in, the older sister of the girl who put a bullet through my heart out of

fucking nowhere—has somehow become part of our little group here in London.

Maybe it *would* bother me more, if it wasn't for the fact that Celeste and her goddamn husband, *Amir*, have basically dropped off the face of the planet somewhere in Dubai.

With their fucking *daughter*.

I swallow the hatred that boils like molten lead in my chest, waiting for it to cool to the edged steel it always turns into.

Matilde knows enough to not mention her sister around me. But, from my own digging—and I *have* dug—Matilde has also barely been in contact with her own sister for the last four years.

She's also smart enough not to mention her father around me. But there too it's the same thing. She and Jean haven't spoken in a year, since Paul, her husband at the time, ran off with our friend Oliver Prince's wife Vanessa. Apparently, Jean took that personally, and decided it was Matilde's fault that her shit-head husband wanted to stick his prick in another man's wife.

Jean Margaux: still the same son of a bitch four years on.

“Seems to be a good thing; she's coming out more often now.”

“Good thing for you, you mean.”

Noel glares at me. I shrug.

“She's a package deal, you know.”

“Yes, Adrian, I'm aware that her children aren't an optional add-on.”

“I'm just saying, ‘step-father’ has a nice ring—”

“Adrian?”

He turns to glare at me. “If you want this breakfast on a plate instead of shoved up your ass, shut the fuck up.”

I grin into my coffee as he finishes with the bacon, sausages, beans, and fried eggs on the stove. Not quite a full English, but I’ll take a half any day.

I’m not just giving him shit for the sake of giving him shit. Matilde Laurent *does* come with two small additions: three-year-old Naomi, and eight-month-old Cora—two more casualties of Paul and Vanessa’s fling, along with Oliver’s three-year-old son, Jacob.

Noel plates our food and then pauses, a scowl on his face.

“When did Prince fucking leave last night, anyway?”

I sigh. Noel and Oliver are seemingly perpetually in competition with each other over *something*. And most recently, that something seems to be Matilde, given how they were both vying for her attention last night before she slipped out early to relieve her nanny.

“Late.”

I eye him.

“*Much* later than her, relax.”

“I’m perfectly relaxed.”

I roll my eyes.

“And he went home. *His* home. He has a young son, remember?”

“I’m not sure I could forget, given how many times he mentioned it to Matilde last night.”

I shake my head as I shovel food into my mouth.

“They both got burned, Noel.”

“No, *she* got burned. Oliver Prince is a dumb, greedy prick who lost his wife because he only gives a shit about himself.”

I glare at him. “Do I need to lean on Thomas to make sure you two get into the ring soon?”

“Please do,” Noel chuckles, gulping down breakfast before his brow furrows. He glances back up at me.

“I *did* appropriately bust your balls last night about completely ignoring the blue-eyed blonde in the black dress who was all over you, right?”

“You did.”

“And again I say, why the fuck was I the one sleeping over at your house last night instead of her?”

Because I don't want blonde hair and blue eyes. I want raven hair and emerald green ones.

“Because I know how good a breakfast you can make, Ransom.”

He snorts, shaking his head.

“Look, I know you're wound pretty tight what with school, and the business. But, Christ, Adrian. How long has it been?”

I stiffen.

Noel chuckles. “I'm being fucking serious, you know. When's the last time you allowed yourself some female comp—”

“I allow myself exactly as much female company as I want, Noel. But thank you for your interest in my bedroom activities, you fucking creep.”

He grunts, turning to sip his coffee and letting the subject drop.

Technically, it wasn't a lie. I *do* in fact allow myself as much female company as I want. It's just that the amount of female company that I want these days is none.

I simply don't have that urge anymore.

The only girl I ever wanted cut my heart out, burned it, and stamped on the ashes in front of me four years ago. My celibacy since isn't any sort of bloody torch I'm carrying for her.

It just...is what it is.

I glance at my watch—the same one Jonathan gifted me the night before my father's funeral—and frown.

“Fuck. I need to run.”

“Mind if I use your shower to clean up here?”

I nod. “Sure. But if you wank off in my bloody shower, it's going to be war.”

Noel sighs. “Adrian, please.” He grins. “That's what your pillow-cases are for.”

“Fuck you.”

He smirks. “What's your morning like?”

“Advisor meeting with Professor Higgins.”

The funny thing about being at business school here at Lords College is that it's only about twenty-five percent actual learning things. The rest is making connections and building relationships. And even in my world, that'll be handy. Handy, if not necessary.

The professors know that, too. I mean, Higgins isn't just some tweed-wearing schoolteacher. When he's not advising at Lords College, he's the Vice President of Rutger Capital, one of the

largest, most aggressive hedge funds in the UK. He also knows *exactly* who and what I am. And he doesn't turn a blind eye and "not give a shit", but actually gives a shit precisely *because of* who and what I am.

Because the place where the gilded world of the elite and the dark world of crime meet is *money*. The marriage of sin. Higgins is my advisor because, one, he sees the business acumen in me, not just the hustler. And two, because he *also* sees the hustler. Rutger Capital knows full well there's more than a pretty pound to be made doing off-the-books business with people like the Cross family.

"Don't forget tonight."

"I'll be there."

"You know it's fight night?"

"Precisely why I'll be there," I grunt. "Let yourself out when you're done. Cheers for breakfast."

Then I'm out the door and heading across the street to the campus.

The "tonight" Noel is talking about is a meeting of the eight of us: myself, Noel, Thomas, Oliver, Braddock, Lars, Kristoff, and Maddox.

In the beginning, we were all mostly strangers—all first-year students here at Lords, with all manner of backgrounds. From wealth and privilege. From royal names and titles. But also from the streets and houses of crime—mafia, Bratva.

The common thread running through all of us was, and remains, Thomas. It was he who ended up being the lynchpin in this whole bizarre group that has somehow come to mostly call itself friends despite the different roads that led us here, and the different titles we bear.

It's why he decided to name the group what he did. It was Thomas who said that in all of us, all eight of us, there are both kings and villains.

Yale University has the Skull and Crossbones. The University of Oxford has the absurdly pretentious-sounding Bullingdon Club. Lords College has us: the Kings and Villains.

The biggest difference between us and those other prats? You've heard of them.

You'll never hear of the Kings and Villains.

Secret society sounds...stupid. Fellowship, as Thomas likes to call it, sounds ridiculous, like we're playing some stupid fantasy game involving hobbits and elves or some shit.

To me, the group just...*is*. Eight men with their eyes on conquering the world, who found each other through various connections to one of their own.

We meet on Friday nights. And every third or fourth meeting, such as tonight, we have a fight night amongst ourselves. There's no deeper message or meaning to it. It's not because we've seen *Fight Club* too many times. It's not some fucking blood oath or bullshit like that. Like the group, it just...*is*. We box, one round at a time, winner fights winner, until there's only one left standing.

Normally, that last one standing is either Noel or Thomas. Noel, because his father was the relatively famous boxer Colin Ransom. Thomas, because despite his bookish accountant's appearance, he can fight like the bloody devil. *I can fight*. We all can. Braddock hits like a goddamn truck to the face, and Maddox is a fucking monster. Kristoff has almost certainly killed people with those hands of his. But Thomas, for all that he grew up privileged and gilded...he has one leg up.

He was trained to fight for *years* by Noel's famous father, when he was the Ashford family's personal trainer. That's how the two boys became friends, actually. It's also how—no disrespect intended—a guy like Noel, with the lack of money, influence, or power his family has, got into Lords College.

Because *Sir* Geoffrey Ashford, Thomas's father, took a shine to Noel right from the start. He always looked at him like a second son. Probably because his *actual* second son, James, Thomas's older brother, is a pretentious trust-fund douchebag. James will do nothing with his life, and his father knows it. Thomas and Noel, however, like the rest of us, will conquer it.

I duck into the faculty offices just as it starts to drizzle outside. My mind ticks, trying to recall the fight schedule this evening.

I grimace.

Fuck, I'm fighting Kristoff tonight. I want to smirk, wondering if Thomas did that on purpose—pitting the two criminally-connected ones of the group against each other. Me, the lowlands gangster, and Kristoff, whose way to Lords College has been paved with blood money, courtesy of his employer, the Bratva-connected oligarch Boris Tsavakov.

I'm still trying to calculate the best plan of attack for dodging that Russian motherfucker's south paw, when Higgins opens his office door.

“Ah, Mr. Cross.”

“Mr. Higgins.”

He grins. Behind him, I can already see the paperwork he wanted to go over with me last week. It wasn't school related. It was *business* related.

“Shall we?”

“Absolutely.”

TWO HOURS and a very meaningful handshake later, I’m headed to my afternoon lecture. After that, I’m stepping outside again. It’s raining again as the sun is going down. I mentally tick off the schedule for the evening:

Home, to change. Then dinner with Thomas at Chesterford’s, our usual Friday night steak spot. And then to the Red Dragon pub, where we’ll first have a pint and then head through to the private back room to which only we hold the keys.

Through there, it’s down the stairs to the old sub-basement beneath the pub. And that’s where kings and villains will collide for the evening.

The rain is coming down harder as I jog across campus back to my townhouse. My head is down, my eyes stabbing at the dreary darkness ahead of me to find the next streetlight around the corner. When suddenly something small, drenched, and gasping comes slamming into me.

I snarl, gripping the person by the arms, ready to shove them away—or fight them, if they insist upon it. When suddenly, we both stumble under a streetlight, and the glint of it on her dripping wet, stricken face takes the very ground out from under me.

It’s *her*.

For the first time in four fucking years, I’m face-to-face with Celeste Margaux.

And time stands perfectly still.

I've thought of this moment. I've envisioned it in my head a thousand different ways. In some of those scenarios, I hurl her away, or snarl in her face for stabbing me through the heart from behind. In other versions, I grab her, never let her go, and crush my lips to hers until all she knows is my mouth.

My pain.

My vengeance, in carnal form.

But now that we're actually here, standing right in front of each other? Now that I've got her in my hands, literally, for the first time in *four fucking years*?

I don't know if I should choke her or kiss her.

Time stops around us. My steel-blue eyes stab into her swirling emeralds. My lips curl, still unsure if I'm going to sneer, or slam them against hers.

"You..."

"*Adrian.*" Her voice breaks, croaking as her eyes widen in fear. Her fingers grip my soaking wet dress shirt tightly, clinging to me desperately like I'm a life raft in a stormy sea.

"What the *fuck* are you doing—"

"*I need your help.*"

She swallows, her face pale and her eyes impossibly wide as she holds onto me.

"Someone's trying to kill me, and I need your help."



MY OWN FEET brought me here—my own decisions, my own choices, my own impulses. And yet, now that I’m actually standing in front of him, it’s like I’m suddenly unclear how it is I’m actually here.

How this is real.

Because suddenly, and jarringly, for the first time in years, I’m standing in front of *him*.

The man who stole my heart and broke it. The man who lit in on fire and laughed at the ashes.

The man who looks at me now with a vicious lethality that burns fiercely into my very eyes.

Yet Adrian Cross—hatred between us or not, and our history aside—is also the one man on Earth I know who can keep me safe.

Because the walls are closing in, and I’m running out of time.

His piercing, stormy blue eyes scorch into me, engulfing me with the same intensity I knew back then. They’re older now. Harder. *Colder*. And the storm inside them is angrier than it ever was back when I was his, and he was mine.

It seems insufficient to say something like “a lot has changed in four years”. It’s not a big enough statement. It doesn’t give

this moment enough gravity. And also it may be only half true. Because standing here, staring into Adrian Cross's eyes for the first time since the day our fairytale came crashing down around us, it's like nothing's changed at all.

But things most certainly have. And even if I haven't seen him at all in the years since, I know *exactly* what Adrian Cross has become.

I guess I always knew it was in his blood to be this version of himself. Before, he was the boy with grease stains on his jeans. Now, he's in a crisp, dark suit, brooding and pulsing with power and masculinity, every inch the kingpin he is.

Every bit the man I've spent almost every day thinking about.

Hating.

Missing.

Trying to cut from my mind.

“*You.*”

He rasps the word, his face haunted and lined beyond his years as he stares down into my eyes. His powerful hands are still gripping my shoulders from our crash together, and my fingers tighten instinctively against his soaking wet dress shirt as the rain pours down over us.

“Adrian—”

“What the *fuck* are you doing here?”

The words hit me like a slap, so hard that I actually flinch. It's not as if I've never played out in my head how it would go if he and I ever were face-to-face again. In some of those fantasies, I fall willingly into his arms, hungry for his lips and desperate to erase the last four years.

In others, I slap him as hard as I can—for destroying everything we had. For taking what had taken me years to work up the nerve to give, and then crushing it beneath his heel like it was nothing.

Or for simply never chasing after me.

What the fuck are you doing here?

That was never a scenario I played out. Because it was the one I never *wanted* to play out.

I know Adrian hates me, even if I've spent four years living in a fantasy world where he doesn't in order to keep myself from drowning.

I blink, staring up at him as the rain runs in rivulets down my face. I'm suddenly realizing he might not even know—or fucking care—that my fury at him matches his at me.

If that's the case, he has *no fucking idea* how unfair that is. After what I did.

For him.

But I didn't run to Adrian Cross to point fingers.

I came to him because my life is in jeopardy.

“I need your help.”

His brow furrows deeply, his eyes narrowing.

“Adrian, *please*. Someone's trying to kill me, and I need your help.”

The tree-lined street of elegant townhouses and brick walls covered with creeping ivy is silent but for the rain pelting down over us. For a second, with our eyes locked together, it's as if time stands still and the fantasy I used to have of

everything evaporating and the whole clock resetting to four years ago has come true.

And then, his eyes and his lips thin dangerously. I shiver as his hands drop stiffly and suddenly from my shoulders, and his body pulls away from mine.

“Find it somewhere else.”

The “what the fuck are you doing here” was a slap. This one is a knife to the chest, as the venom and hatred in his voice stab into me.

I blink, my heart wrenching as he glares wrathfully into my eyes.

“Find it fucking somewhere else, *Celeste*.”

He turns, the air sucking from my lungs as he starts to walk away. But suddenly, my incredulousness and pain turn to fury.

No.

“You don’t get to be the angry one!” I hurl at his retreating back.

I gasp as he whirls on me, his face swirling with a dark anger.

“*Excuse me?!*”

I don’t flinch this time. I don’t back away, or stand down. I sneer, jutting out my chin, letting the momentary joy I felt seeing him again fall away until the only thing left is the anger I’ve felt for four years.

“You...” I close my eyes and suck in a breath.

No. This isn’t the time for this.

My eyes open again, pleading with his.

“Adrian—”

“Piss off.”

“Adrian, *please!*”

“You need help, Celeste?” He snarls venomously. “Go talk to your fucking husband.”

“*You’re my—*”

The world blurs, and my heart skips when his fingers wrap around my throat. The force of him slamming me back against a wet, ivy-covered wall knocks the wind from my lungs, and my face goes white as the pure hatred in his eyes twists into me like a blade.

“I am *nothing* to you, Celeste.”

His fingers squeeze harder as his eyes stab into me.

“And you are *beyond* nothing to me.”

The truth always hurts. But it’s not until you’ve heard it spoken out loud, coldly and brutally to your face, that you realize how much it can feel like dying.

My heart wrenches and twists in my chest. I swallow, feeling the lump of it tighten to get past his grip on me.

“*Amir—*”

“You’re mistaking my anger for *giving a fuck*,” Adrian snarls thickly, looming over me. The cold blue flickers in his gorgeous eyes, like the glint of a blade before it eviscerates you.

“But don’t assume for one second that making me angry isn’t hazardous to your fucking health. And believe me, mentioning your fucking *husband* is the fastest way to find out just how lethally unhealthy my anger can be.”

The words hurt so bad I swear he's actually stabbed me in the heart right here on the street. I could swear that's my own blood seeping out of me, even though I know it's just the rain soaking my clothes.

My husband.

He means Amir. He just doesn't know how wrong he is.

It'd be poetic, if wrong, to say that marriages don't happen because of threats or pain. Of course they do. My "marriage" to Amir was one of those.

Except it wasn't a marriage.

It was a contract. One written in blood, sealed with my soul, and buried in the ashes of what I once had to save the very man standing in front of me now with his hand around my throat.

A man whom I went to a figurative prison to save, even though he'd just shattered me.

For a second, my mind flashes back to my father's study four years ago. The night Henry Cross died. The night my heart died, too.

The night my father turned my world to poison, when he showed me the truth. When he threatened to kill the man looking at me right now with such hatred unless I signed a devil's deal. Unless I "married" a man I didn't know.

Amir El-Sayed—the then twenty-year-old son of a Saudi billionaire. My father and Amir's, Nasser El-Sayed, were entering into a hugely, mutually lucrative business arrangement.

But Nasser had a problem.

In fact, he had the same problem Jean had: his offspring was in love with “the wrong” person. Just like Jean couldn’t stomach his daughter being with the son of his chauffeur, Nasser couldn’t abide the fact that his own son had fallen for one of the help.

Amir’s “Adrian” was an Italian girl named Magdalena, a housecleaner at the Nasser family’s lavish estate in Lake Cuomo. Like Adrian and I, they’d been married in secret. And Amir’s father, like mine, was only aware of the relationship itself, not the marriage.

The problem was, in Nasser’s world of religiously conservative middle eastern countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, having a son proclaiming his love for a “commoner”—a “servant”, at that—wasn’t just bad for business. It was unacceptable.

So they cooked up a deal. And *I* was the deal. I’d be Amir’s fake wife, to appease and placate the other conservative-leaning businessmen Nasser worked with.

And I agreed to this, even though it ripped my heart to shreds. Because the thought of what my father might do to the man I loved if I refused was too much to bear.

So I gave in and I ‘married’ a man I didn’t know, whom I would never love, and who would never love me, so that the ink could dry on our fathers’ business deal.

That was four years ago.

Then everything changed a month ago, when Nasser died in an accident on his yacht. Amir—unlike his father—felt that he *did not* need to appease any of those same businessmen with their older-generation ideas.

So with the El-Sayed empire falling into his control, Amir and I mutually decided to end our contract. He would go his way with his father's money and empire, free to live the life he wanted with Magda. And I, wanting nothing but freedom, would find it...somewhere. Somehow.

Less than two weeks later, Amir and Magda were dead, too.

While they were on holiday in Rome, a garbage truck smashed into their limo, crushing it into the side of a building.

A horrible, horrific accident. Or at least, an *accident* until the driver of the truck was caught fleeing the scene, shot dead in a standoff with the Italian police, and it was discovered that he wasn't actually employed as a garbage truck driver at all.

He *was*, however, employed as an assassin by a shadowy group called the Ghost Syndicate.

I wanted to tell myself that this "accident", or rather, assassination, had nothing to do with me. This was just shady big money politics involving Amir and his late father's immense wealth and empire. I tried to convince myself that with our "marriage" dissolved, I was safely out of that world.

When we'd decided to dismantle our fake marriage, I'd told Amir explicitly that I didn't want or need a single penny of his fortune. He tried to insist on setting me up for life, but I was adamant.

As it turns out, I didn't get a single penny.

I got *all* the pennies.

Two days after Amir was killed, I found myself in a conference room in an elegant law firm in Paris with a small army of his family lawyers explaining to me what a "lineage pass-through clause" was.

The short version? Amir *had* respected my wishes not to be given any money. Or, he'd tried to. What everyone had overlooked was that Nasser had this "lineage" addendum to his own will, which is similar to a next of kin clause.

Nasser's wife was long dead. He had no siblings or other family, and his only son had just passed. And since the bulk of the paperwork transferring Nasser's finances to his son were still in transition when Amir died suddenly, there was only one lap for the entire El-Sayed empire to land in.

Mine.

The lawyers swore up and down this would all be kept quiet. But even ordinary money talks, and this kind of money *screams*.

Soon after, the attacks started.

They looked like accidents at first—a van losing control in traffic and slamming into the outdoor cafe table I'd just gotten up from. A piece of equipment from a construction site I was walking past crashing to the ground not five feet away from me.

Then it got worse. And at a certain point, you just have to stop using the word "accident". Because accidents aren't planned, and these were. Which means someone's after me, because of the estate I now own but want nothing to do with.

And the only man I know who can help me is the man in front of me.

Whom I hate.

Who seems to hate me, too.

Who I still, after everything, can't tell if I'd rather spend my days running away from, or running towards.

I take a slowly, shaky breath.

“He’s dead, actually. Amir, I mean. A few weeks ago, now.”

“How sad,” Adrian grunts dryly.

My mouth purses. “Look, not that it’s any of your fucking business, but it wasn’t what you think it was.”

“No?” He snaps. “Then please, enlighten me, Celeste.”

“It’s not like I was in *love* with—”

“Oh, no, you just fucking married him!”

His thin laugh is so cold it’s like the sound of shattering ice.

“You had a fucking *child* with him, bitch.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, clenching my teeth together tightly to stop myself from saying things I can’t.

Lives beyond my own depend on it.

“It was a business arrangement. My father and his were—”

“Oh, now I *know* you’re desperate for something, if you’re trying to spoon-feed me bullshit like that.”

My eyes narrow at him.

“You know what? You’re a fucking bastard.”

“*Yes I fucking am,*” he roars brutally. “And I don’t give a shit about you, your dead fucking husband, or your goddamn kid.”

“You don’t know—”

“You know what *do* I know, Celeste? That one day, you were mine, and the next—”

“*Stop it.*”

“And the *next*, you’re marrying Amir fucking El-Sayed, running off to his fucking palace in Dubai or Qatar or who the

fuck knows where, and having a goddamn daughter with him!”

We eye each other coldly. I hate this feeling.

“Things change,” I whisper.

“On a *dime*, it would seem.”

My teeth bare.

“Look who’s fucking talking, the *godfather* himself over here!”

“You always knew what I was.”

“I knew what your *uncle* was.”

“I should thank you,” he hisses, shrugging. “When you showed your true colors, it made walking away from my old life and embracing the one waiting for me all the easier.”

The lump lodges in my throat.

“You’re welcome.”

“Goodbye, Celeste.”

I shiver as he turns away from me.

“They’re coming for me next, Adrian.”

He tenses, slowly swiveling his gaze back to me. Silence settles over us for long, drawn-out seconds. Finally, he speaks.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Amir didn’t just die, Adrian. He was killed.”

“I think I’ve been clear how fucking few fucks I give about that.”

“Well, ever since, there’ve been these accidents that keep happening around me. The brakes failed on my car and put my

driver in the hospital on his way to come pick me up.”

His brow furrows.

“My apartment in Paris blew up.”

His jaw clenches.

“They’re saying it was a gas explosion. The only reason I wasn’t home was that I happened to take the long way home through the park back from my lawyer’s office.”

He eyes me—less furious, but still brutally cold and uncaring.

“If any of this bullshit was true, Celeste, I’d have heard about it. Everyone in the world would have heard about Nasser and Amir dying, especially under those sort of circumstances. But fuck it. Whatever your angle is, nice try.”

“You didn’t hear about it,” I snap, “because the family’s legal team and the executives of the El-Sayed companies are covering it up, trying to secure assets...”

I furrow my brow, looking down.

“I...well...they’re mine now, actually. It’s all mine now. Somehow.”

“How terribly nice for you,” he says icily.

I lift my gaze angrily, glaring at him.

“Someone is after me, Adrian. Are you seriously this cold now?”

His eyes darken as his lips thin.

“It’s not that I don’t care, Celeste,” he growls. “It’s that I’m not surprised. Look what family you married into. Look at the kind of shady, big money business the El-Sayed family was involved in. Nasser was *exactly* the kind of man your father does business with—”

“Look who’s talking!”

He glares down at me.

“If anyone is after you, it’s because of the money. Drop it, walk away. There, problem solved. Now fuck off and die.”

I purse my lips.

“I can’t.”

“Keep fucking pushing me, and I assure you, you can, and you will.”

His words slice into me, and I shiver at the casual cruelty in his tone.

“I mean I can’t walk away from the money.”

As in, I legally *can’t*.

“Then I can’t help you.”

He turns, leaving me staring at him, my mouth falling open.

“What the fuck *happened* to you!?”

“YOU!” he roars, whirling on me and taking my breath away.

“*You* fucking happened to me, Celeste,” he snarls. “I’m no longer the boy you thought I was back then. And I’d have to be a goddamn *idiot* to believe a single fucking word that comes out of your mouth.”

I blink, feeling like I just got slapped, or gutted. My stomach knots as we stand two feet apart, glaring at each other.

“My condolences on Amir,” he mutters quietly.

“You don’t mean that.”

“No, I don’t.”

He eyes me up and down coolly.

“Goodbye, Celeste.”

And then, without another word, the man to whom I once gave my entire heart only for him to cut it in two turns and walks into the night, leaving me shivering and shattered.

Wishing I could erase the last four years.

And maybe everything before that, for good measure.



“RIGHT, WELL, SILENCE IT IS, THEN.”

I blink, realizing I’ve been staring for the better part of ten minutes at the steak Thomas was good enough to order for me when I called to tell him I’d be running late.

Late, because I was down in the basement of my townhouse pummeling the living shit out of a practice bag. Hitting it over and over, roaring out my pain and hate.

Because seeing Celeste again is like being visited by all three fucking ghosts from *A Christmas Carol* all at once. It’s seeing what might have been, and what was taken from me. It’s remembering what I had and lost. It’s the demons of the past taunting me, dangling her in front of me.

Part of me thinks how it would have been so fucking easy to reach out and take her back. To erase the past four years, to brush them aside.

To take her in my arms again. To make her *mine* again.

But easier said than done.

There’s a primal part of me that roars at the thought of her being in trouble. Some part of me that I haven’t managed to burn or cut out of myself, where the idea of someone trying to hurt her makes me want to kill with my bare hands.

Except, then the wisdom I have now that I didn't have then reminds me of one brutal truth: I don't know if I can even trust a single word that comes out of Celeste's pretty mouth.

Actually, screw that. It's not that I don't know. It's that I *do* know that I can't, and don't, trust a single word out of her fucking mouth.

I *want* to, mind. I want to believe her, want to throw all the shit between us aside to be her knight in shining—or at least somewhat tarnished—armor once more.

But again...easier said than done.

My eyes land on the scotch on the rocks sitting beside my dinner plate at Chesterford's. I push aside the memory of her touch and the scent of her that I inhaled even today in the rain, playing havoc on my heart and twisting it into a knot.

I *have* to push that aside.

Instead, I replay what she told me—about Nasser, about Amir. My brows furrow. With my considerable resources these days, I've had the both of them on my radar for years. Hell, I've had my eyes tuned on *Jean* for years as well.

I could lie and say it was for business reasons. But obviously that's bullshit.

My jaw clenches.

Over the years, I've seen the images posted online, and in a few select business and society publications. Celeste and Amir, smiling and happy as can be.

With their goddamn *child*.

The three of them in a stunning penthouse in Dubai. In a sprawling vacation bungalow in who-the-fuck-cares-where. On yachts. At elegant dinner parties with some of the world's

most elite movers and shakers, toasting with the finest champagne.

Hatred swirls in my core.

I don't know what fucking game she's playing, but she's lived a *life* with this motherfucker Amir. And my radar has picked up *nothing* about the death of either him or his father.

So what the hell is going on, and why the absolute fuck is she suddenly here?

“Cross?”

I frown and shake my head to clear my thoughts before I glance up across the table. Thomas is eyeing me curiously, half-smirking. He takes a sip of his scotch, adjusting his glasses as he swallows and pushes back his blonde hair.

When I first met him, I pegged Thomas for a bit of a nerd. Not in a bad way, just...that's how he presents. But when you look harder, and get to know him well, you realize it's a very carefully curated look. It softens him. Makes him appear an easy target to would-be rivals.

That's a mistake that would prove deadly for anyone trying to cross him. And it's a mistake he's betting on, with the glasses instead of contacts and the clean-shaven, buttoned-up look that screams “mild-mannered accountant”.

Underneath it, though? Thomas is a beast. He's a calculating machine, always playing nine-dimensional chess with all facets of his life and business ventures. While he does come from money and elite status, being the son of a duke—an actual, honest-to-god duke—it's never softened him.

Rather, it's made him toughen up, to make damn sure softness never brought him down.

I also know first-hand that underneath that tweed and starched shirt exterior is a fighter's body honed to a precise machine. Being trained by Colin Ransom made him a nerd who could probably take the title in any light-weight boxing circuit he wanted.

"Not into steak tonight?"

I shrug, shaking my head.

"Odd day."

"Higgins give you shit on the terms we were ironing out?"

I shake my head, sipping my drink. "No."

"Still hungover from—"

"Thomas..."

"Oh, shit, I know. It was having Noel crashing in your guest room—"

"*Enough*," I snap suddenly, like it all hits me at once.

Celeste, her scent, those eyes, her hands gripping my shirt, the years since she shattered me, the ways I've tried to burn her out of my fucking brain, the way I hate her when I look at her, and hate myself more that I don't really mean it.

I look away, my body humming with a searing energy. I close my eyes and suck in a breath of air before I pull my gaze back to Thomas.

"I just ran into Celeste."

He stares at me, his brow arching.

"Well...*shit*."

Perhaps it would be more in keeping with my usual stoic, walled-off emotional persona not to have mentioned that part

of my past to Thomas or any of the Kings and Villains group. But I did.

It's the oddity about us all. It's not even like we're all best buddies—I mean Noel and Oliver are a perfect example of “frenemies”. But still, we end up taking our walls down when we meet. We lay bare our ghosts and demons. Or at least some of them.

And Celeste is my own personal demon that they all know about.

Aside from all that, Thomas would know anyway. His fiancée Cassandra is good friends with Matilde, Celeste's sister.

“Where?”

“On the bloody street a block from my place, after class.”

He frowns. “She just...happened to be walking by?”

“She crashed right into me and told me she was in trouble, and that she needed my help.”

Thomas nods slowly, folding his arms over his chest.

“And you...”

“Told her to fuck right off.”

He frowns. “You want to talk about it?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Drink?”

“Actually, Thomas?” I nod to the waiter for our bill. Then I turn to smile thinly at my friend.

“I think I'd rather go fight.”

He grins as the waiter brings our bill for me to sign.

“You know you're up against Kristoff first tonight, yeah?”

“Good.”

He chuckles as he stands.

“Shall I warn our Russian comrade that you’re coming in hot?”

I knock back the rest of my scotch and smile darkly.

“Tell him to bring backup.”

MY VISION EXPLODES in a shower of stars when Kristoff’s fist lands on my chin, almost knocking me on my ass. But I surge into it, swinging a return half-blind. His grunt tells me I made contact, and I snarl as I go in for the attack.

My earlier hubris aside, fighting Kristoff Zima is like going toe-to-toe with Ivan fucking Drago—the Soviet motherfucker from *Rocky IV*. If he actually brought backup to a fight, I’d be beyond fucked. Truth be told, on a good day, I’d be hard pressed to have thirty percent odds against him.

Lucky for me, today has been the opposite of a good day. And that makes me angry. And angry makes me vicious.

I charge him like I’ve got nothing to lose. Honestly, right now, with Celeste infecting my goddamn thoughts and ripping me apart all over again, it feels like I don’t.

Our friends around us cheer, urging us on as we dance bare-chested in the ring, looking for an advantage. We’re wearing gloves—I mean, however brutal, it’s still a friendly fight, and this isn’t actually *Fight Club*. None of us can go into an office building or business school lecture hall on Monday with horrendous facial damage.

But we're still swinging to hurt.

Kristoff charges, but I dodge to my right, ducking his nuclear missile of a hook and then coming in hot. I snarl, getting two punches into his midsection before feigning a hook to the face to get his arms up, then slamming him again in the ribs.

Yeah, that'll piss him off.

He comes at me like a tank. I channel everything burning like an oilfield fire inside of me—the anger, the hatred, the swirl of confusion at seeing Celeste earlier.

It all comes together and explodes like a bomb, and I charge with a roar on my lips as my swing connects. He grunts, shaking it off as his lips twist.

“What’s got into your panties, Cross?”

My breath comes quicker as we circle each other like two hungry wolves.

“Now, did you actually get laid last night? Or...” His smile thins. “...is it just blue balls?”

He’s taunting me. I mean we all taunt each other in the ring. But tonight, it’s like pouring gas on forest fire.

I dodge a halfhearted punch of his, my jaw grinding as he winks at me. Kristoff thinks we’re playing a game. The problem is, he’s the only one playing it.

Me, I’m looking to kill.

I’m looking to burn Celeste out of my brain with violence and fury.

“What’s the matter, Cross? Some girl get you all riled up?”

“*Kris...*”

I can hear the warning in Thomas' voice from the sidelines.
But it's too late.

There's already one in the chamber. And the hammer just got
cocked back.

“Awww, poor widdle Adrian. Were you finally about to break
your Celeste dry-spell—”

Trigger. Fucking. Pulled.

Kristoff is a lethal, Bratva-trained fighting machine.

But tonight, I am Death, Famine, War, and Conquest all rolled
together. Tonight, I've got nothing to lose.

I'm dimly aware of the confusion on his face when I surge into
him. My hits connect over and over, a savage, red-misted
bloodlust settling over my vision until I'm blind with it. Until
all I know is the sound and feel of my fists hitting his face.

The sensation of us falling to the ground.

The roars from the others and the hands scrabbling to yank me
off my friend, who I've somehow turned into the embodiment
of all my demons and the target of all my wrath. Who I just
keep hitting and hitting and hitting, until an arm wraps like
steel around my neck, and drags me away.

REALITY IS the cold brick wall of the alley behind The Red
Dragon slamming into my back. Or more accurately, Noel
slamming *me* into *it*.

My friend snarls as he shoves me, shirtless, into it again, his
eyes narrowing coldly.

“What the actual *fuck*, Cross?!”

I blink, and slowly the red miasma and the deranged lust for violence of any kind and at any cost recedes.

Holy fuck.

“Drink. *Now.*”

My eyes blink again, as Noel shoves a beer bottle into my hand.

“I said fucking drink.”

Numbly, I bring the bottle to my lips, swigging it as he does the same with a bottle in his own hand, glaring at me coldly and not without a little bit of concern and wariness.

I take another slow slug of beer. My jaw tightens as my gaze snaps to the left, to the door leading back inside.

“Kris—”

“Will live,” Noel barks. “He’s a big boy, he’ll be fine. But what the *fuck* was that about, Adrian?!”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

“Leave it,” I snarl, as my hand tightens so hard around the bottle I’m amazed it doesn’t shatter.

“It’s a friendly boxing match, Cross. Not a fucking cage fight to the death. Those are your goddamn *friends* in there!”

“Noel—”

“What the *fuck* were you thinking—”

“Celeste is back.”

Noel blinks, going suddenly quiet and still. His brow creases deeply as his eyes lock with mine.

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

I shake my head.

“*Why?*”

“We’re not going there.”

He eyes me warily as he drinks.

“I think we’re definitely going there.”

I look away.

“*Fuck,*” I mutter under my breath as I slam back half the rest of my beer, the cool damp air settling on my bare torso. “It’ll be fine. I just didn’t see it coming.”

“Well, no shit.” His gaze turns curious. “Seriously though, what the fuck did she want?”

I exhale slowly, trying to calm myself.

It doesn’t work. But it does focus me, and slowly, I can feel that fury hardening like it always does to the cold, lethal, steel edge of a blade.

“She wanted to spoon-feed me a bunch of bullshit, actually.”

Noel’s brow arches as he raises his drink and drains it.

“What the hell for?”

I shake my head.

“No idea.”

But I’m sure as fuck going to find out.



“GOOD EVENING, MISS GAGNON.”

I always did like the sound of my mother’s maiden name. It also works quite well for checking in to hotels anonymously.

I smile at the doorman who opens the front entrance to the Dorchester Hotel for me.

“Thank you.”

“Of course, Miss.”

Sunglasses on and scarf wrapped round my head in a very Audrey Hepburn way, I walk towards the private elevator that’ll take me up to my suite. Until my stomach rumbles, reminding me I’ve barely eaten since...well, I don’t even actually know.

The last few weeks have been a blur, especially since Amir died.

My “husband” who wasn’t ever actually my husband.

Because we were never *really* married.

I mean there were enough legal documents involved that we *were*, for all intents and purposes. But we never actually did *that part*. Not because his father and mine didn’t care—they did. And they both wanted it.

But “officially” joining us in unholy matrimony was just one more thing after the fifty or so contracts, NDAs, and various other legal documents Amir and I both signed over the course of that first blurry, heartbroken week after I left Ascot. And by the time we got to that part—the actual “getting legally married” part—Nasser and my father had both left to deal with other business items, leaving us to do it ourselves.

Which we never did.

I was still a devastated wreck after being shown the truth about Adrian. But even with all my heartache and hatred for the boy who’d gutted me, I was able to at least tell Amir that I was *already* legally married.

Amir never wanted to go through with it either, of course. For obvious reasons and because he too was being forced into the arrangement by his father. So when the day came, he paid the Justice of the Peace to forge the documents and never say a word.

Amir may have died three weeks ago.

But *my husband* is alive and well.

Because hatred or not, pain or not, and the acrid smoke of our past still stinging my eyes or not, the man I secretly married at eighteen is *still* my husband. It’s just that I’ve just spent the last four years away from him. And not a single day has gone by where I could decide if I wished I’d never met him, or if I wished he’d come find me.

It’s been hell.

But I suppose it could have been worse. The man I was forced to play wife to could have been someone horrible.

Or someone who had an interest in being physical with me.

Amir and I weren't especially close. But in a weird way, we were friends. Neither of us bent over backwards to become besties or anything like that. But when you live with someone for four years, you can't help but become friendly. Honestly, it was almost like an ideal roommate situation.

He kept to himself for the most part, and so did I. I'd be the cover for him having Magda over secretly. Or there'd be times when Amir and I would "just happen to be" at the same exclusive resort as Magdalena—traveling under a fake name, of course. I'd simply stay in her accommodations while she and Amir shared ours.

They both always made it clear that they were perfectly happy to help me in the same way—that if I ever wanted to bring a man home, or go to Bali for some holiday fling, Amir would be my assist.

But I never wanted to, so I never did.

I gave my heart and my body to one man. And even after he shit all over that and tore what we had to shreds, I never wanted anyone else.

God, I'm a fucking idiot.

"Miss Gagnon?"

I blink, quickly pulling myself out of my own head to smile awkwardly at the front desk clerk.

"I'm sorry. I was going to ask if you were still offering room service."

"Of course, Miss Gagnon. Our signature suites have twenty-four-hour access to amenities. Shall I send up a menu?"

"You know what? I'll just have two of whatever the chef recommends this evening. And an order of macaroni and

cheese, if possible.”

“Very good, Miss Gagnon,” the woman smiles cordially.

“Oh, and a bottle of your best French Chardonnay.”

“Of course. I’ll have it all sent up presently.”

“The wine can come first, please. Two glasses.”

When the gilded VIP elevator opens to the top floor of the hotel, I step out and use my keycard to open the door to the enormous, opulent suite we’re staying in.

I mean, I’m technically worth over a billion dollars right now, and there’s been an attempt made on my life. I think I’m allowed to splurge on luxury hotel suites and good wine.

Plus, the security—and more importantly, the privacy—that comes with staying in a suite usually occupied by heads of state is completely necessary with the threat hanging over my head.

Inside, I kick my heels off and turn to pad across the hardwood floors to the windows to take in the stunning views of London.

I never get to them. Instead, I gasp loudly when my bare foot comes down hard onto a half-inch tall, pink stiletto high heel.

“Fucking *Barbie*...” I wince, biting back the pain as I glance down at the treasure trove of doll’s belongings I totally missed behind the sofa.

“Hello?”

“It’s just me!” I whisper-yell across the giant living room in the direction of the bedrooms.

I hear a door down the hallway open and close softly. A minute later, a familiar face and the only friend I’ve had for four years steps into the room.

“Sorry Adele, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Adele smiles, casually waving away my concern, though she *does* look like I probably just scared the shit out of her. Which is fair. What I didn’t disclose to Adrian tonight is that I’m not the only one with a threat hanging over their head.

“Is Dahlia asleep already? I just ordered us some room service, and got her some mac and cheese in case she was still up.”

Relief floods her face as she holds a hand over her stomach.

“Oh my God, *merci*. I didn’t realize I was starving until you said that.”

Adele’s elegantly floral French accent floats across the room.

“She *just* went down.”

“Do you think I could...?”

She grins. “*S’il vous ait*, go ahead. She’s fast asleep.”

Grinning widely, I squeeze Adele’s shoulder as I move past her and down the hall. I open the closed bedroom door quietly, feeling the cold brutality of the night so far fade away as I lay eyes on my three-year-old goddaughter, snuggled into her blankets.

A softy turning nightlight in the corner gently casts hazy pink and blue rabbits across the walls, giving me just enough light to avoid stepping on any other Barbie fashion accessories as I tiptoe to the bed. I lean down, brushing aside her beautiful dark hair to gently kiss her forehead.

“Night night, little love.”

I tiptoe back out, quietly closing her door before I head back to join Adele just as a knock lands on the door to the suite.

Adele goes white. So do I, briefly, before I remember my exchange downstairs.

“It’s okay, it’s just room service.”

Adele exhales in a whoosh.

“I got us wine.”

Sure enough, when I glance through the peephole, it’s a hotel bellhop holding a tray with a bottle of Chardonnay chilling on ice, and two glasses. The man smiles when I open the door.

“Good evening, Miss Gagnon. Where shall I—”

“I can take it. Thank you.”

Taking the tray, I shut the door and bring it over to the couch, where Adele is rolling her eyes.

“One of the richest women in the world, and you still won’t let someone else open your wine for you.”

“Yeah, because I have two hands that work, and I’m not a helpless idiot.”

She laughs, shaking her head as I insert the corkscrew and deftly open the wine myself.

Adele is amused by my inability to be—or rather my disinterest in being—one of those wealthy people who is incapable of doing anything themselves. It actually used to annoy Amir, who *had* grown up with the mindset that if you had money, it meant you literally had to do nothing for yourself in life.

I mean, I grew up rich, too. It’s just that I’ve never once been comfortable watching someone on a payroll do simple tasks I’m more than capable of doing myself. That’s not luxury or power in my books. That’s just being a lazy snob.

“Well, if you’d rather *not* enjoy some of this delicious—”

“Oh, just pour the wine, bitch.”

I snicker, splashing heavy pours into both glasses before handing one to Adele.

“*À ta santé.*”

“Cheers.”

We clink glasses, and I take a deep drink of the gorgeous, buttery wine. We drink in silence for a minute or two, even though I can tell the question is burning a hole through her forehead.

Not because I’m enjoying making her anxious. But because I’m back *without* the answer we both were hoping for when I set out earlier to knock on Adrian’s door and beg for his help.

Finally, my glass almost gone, I exhale, look down, and slowly shake my head.

“It was...”

Terrifying. Wonderful. Eviscerating. Exhilarating.

“It was wrong. Surprising him was a bad idea. I’ll give him a day or two and then see if I can arrange an actual sit-down meet—”

“Celeste,” Adele says quietly.

Her hand slides across the sofa to squeeze mine gently. When I look up, her eyes are full of compassion as they hold mine.

“How are *you*? I mean, after seeing him...”

“I’m fine.”

Lies. Lies that I cover badly with another big gulp of wine.

I slowly exhale.

“And there are other options that might be better, anyway.”

She nods quietly, eyeing me.

“You know you don’t owe us *any* of what you’ve done since —”

“Yes, I do.”

I turn to her, my face lined with emotion.

“*Non*, Celeste—”

“*Yes, I do.*”

Because the woman my age sitting beside me saved my life three and a half years ago. Literally. And when she hears the thickness and the emotion in my tone, I can tell by the way her eyes flicker that she knows what I’m referring to.

“You would have done the same for me,” she says quietly, as the scar on my wrist tingles.

“Of course I would have. But as it happened, it was you that did it for me. And even without that, it’s not about owing anything, tit for tat, quid pro quo. You’re my best friend, and I love you, in case you’ve forgotten.”

She grins.

“And I love Dahlia as if she were my own daughter.”

“*Oui*, I know,” she murmurs, her voice choking with the same emotion sticking in my own throat.

I glance down the hall towards the bedroom where she’s sleeping: Dahlia, the girl who’s played as important a fictional role in a very public life as I have for the last four years.

I played a doting wife.

She played my daughter.

You had a fucking child with him.

My lips purse as the venom in Adrian's words burns acidly in my stomach.

When everything first happened—when I left home and was thrust into this lie playing Amir's wife—Nasser wanted his son and I to “cement our union” with children. It would clear up any doubts about the legitimacy of our marriage.

Except, I can't.

Have children, that is—a fact I didn't even know before the El-Sayed private family physician examined me in preparation for Nasser's plan for grandchildren. Apparently, I've got an irregularly-shaped uterus that makes the odds of conception so astronomically low that it might as well be less than zero percent.

Two weeks later, I was introduced to Adele.

At the time, she was a shell of the strong, empowered, *free* woman sitting next to me now. When we first met, Adele was Nasser's housekeeper at his opulent mansion in Paris.

His housekeeper.

His victim.

His prisoner.

She spent a year effectively locked in that house, even when he was living elsewhere. And when he *was* in Paris, he made her life a living hell.

Nasser El-Sayed was a sadistic piece of shit. But Adele is stronger than I think even she realizes. She endured a year of Nasser beating her, torturing her, and sexually assaulting her.

Then she realized she was pregnant by him.

Nasser was ready to terminate it, and possibly kill her as well. Until he saw opportunity. And suddenly, Adele's curse and mine became a blessing to both of us, and her name was Dahlia.

The girl born from horror and trauma became the light of both of our lives. Publicly, she was "my daughter". And with her mother's green eyes that were so similar to mine, and her father's dark hair that matched Amir's, it was an easy sell.

But the one absolute demand I ever got to make in the last four years was that Adele would be my full-time nanny. Wherever Dahlia went, she went. Which was mercifully never anywhere *near* Nasser.

It was the least I could do, especially after she'd saved me in my moment of ultimate darkness.

So, for the last four years, this has been my family unit: Adele, Dahlia, and I.

Surviving together.

When everything happened with Nasser and then Amir, I grabbed the only two things I cared about—*them*—and we ran. Now, here we are, with plan "A" in smoldering tatters at my feet.

"These *other options*," Adele says cautiously, her brow crinkled in concern. "Dare I ask?"

"You might not want to."

She swallows, her lips twisting.

"Have you and your sister...?"

"No. *No.*"

A sad, bitter smile lifts one side of my mouth.

“Complicated” doesn’t quite cover it with Matilde and me. Neither does “we were never close”, though that’s one of the more accurate ways to describe the relationship between my sister and I. And that was even before I spent four years as a prisoner, without a single instance of contact.

Yes, it’s heartbreaking at times to think I’ve never met my two nieces—Naomi, who’s Dahlia’s age, and eight-month-old Cora—especially now that my sister’s divorced, after her bastard of a husband ran off with another woman.

You’d have thought our father effectively cutting her out of his life and his will following the divorce would have brought us closer together.

But family is complicated. And in a way, perhaps it’s a blessing right now that Matilde and I are fairly publicly estranged.

It means she and Naomi and Cora are safe—or at least *safer*—from the threat hanging over me. And of course, even though we haven’t spoken in more than four years, that hasn’t stopped me from hiring private security to covertly watch her and her girls as they blissfully live their lives.

A knock on the door startles the both of us again before I catch my breath.

“Just dinner,” I smile reassuringly at Adele, as I rise and walk to the door.

This time, I do allow the woman with the push-cart laden with covered dishes to bring it all to the table by the windows. When she leaves, Adele and I sit with our wine and dig into what the chef has surprised us with—roasted Branzino with charred leeks and a creamy cauliflower puree.

For a moment, I can pretend the whirlwind roaring outside isn't there. I can pretend the jangling alarms bells and red lights blaring in my head aren't there. For a moment, I can breathe.

I have Adele and Dahlia. And we're safe.

For now.

But just like that, the moment passes, the wind begins to howl again, and the cold creep of dread claws its way back up my spine. And I'm suddenly almost overwhelmed by the bitterness of wondering why on Earth I ever thought Adrian would help me.

Because he won't.

The Adrian Cross I came face-to-face with tonight is not the boy I fell in love with. Or even the one who ripped my heart to shreds. The one I ran from in order to save, all the same.

The Adrian Cross I met tonight is the devil in a Savile Row suit. Full of hatred. Full of malice.

Full of very clearly not giving a shit about helping me.

I'm going to have to go elsewhere to protect myself and the two people I love.

And something tells me Adrian is going to like *that* even less.



I ENJOY, yes, *enjoy*, the frightened looks and the hushed whispers that spread through the office like wildfire as I make my way to his office.

Even those who don't immediately realize who I am soon catch the plague of fear that spreads out around me. But I bite back the smug smile at seeing the normally cocky day traders and finance types slinking back to their private offices or hiding behind their cubicle walls.

I even catch a glimpse of a terrified-looking Sam Westerly—the Westerly in 'Moorebrook and Westerly' on the side of this very building—retreating into one of the hedge fund's sleek conference rooms.

They know me. They fear me. But goddamn it, they also respect me.

Or at least they respect the massive amounts of cash I've injected into this place.

Higgins—as in, my professor at Lords—and his hedge fund are not the only place where I've invested Cross family money. As I've said, where the gilded world of the elite and the dark world of crime meet is *money*. And even privileged, old-money little shits like Sam Westerly and his ilk are quickly

able to swallow any moral or societal reservations about men like me when I slap that kind of money on their table.

But today, I'm not here to see dear old Sam. Or his equally terrified partner, Milton Moorebrook.

Ahead of me, the door to the private office of their youngest and most gifted senior trader opens. A ticked-off but familiar face greets me with a wry smile as I stop in front of him.

“A bit dramatic, don't you think, Adrian?”

Oliver Prince glares at me as he steps aside, gesturing with a nod of his head for me to enter his office. He shuts it with a heavy click behind me, sighing as he leans against it, folding his arms across his chest.

“If you're trying to get me ostracized from the finance community, or outright fired from this fucking job, you're doing fantastic work.”

I grin.

“Oliver, please. I'm merely here to see my favorite trader and inquire as to how my portfolio is doing.”

He shoves his fingers through his dark blonde hair. Then he arches a brow, glaring at me as he marches past me to sit at his all-glass desk near the floor-to-ceiling windows of his corner office.

Oliver is all of twenty-four—far younger than most of the people who are under him in this company. But the man has a mind like a machine. And even if he comes from wealth and privilege, it's his laser ability to hit the markets *flawlessly* that got him where he is.

To the rest of the world, Oliver Prince is the Golden Boy. A trader with a Midas touch, and business acumen that can rival

anyone's. His reputation is immaculate, and his investment returns are some of the best in the industry.

Top hedge fund managers and financial groups fall over themselves to fawn at his feet. Not just because he can make them lots of money, or because he's very intelligent, or because he comes from the same blue-blood old money bullshit that they do, but because the "Golden Boy" is just so goddamn charming and *good*.

I've said that in our group, there are both kings and villains. Some are in a gray middle area, like Noel, or Lars. Others, like myself or Kristoff, stand firmly in the villains territory.

But then there's Oliver, who's up there with Thomas in terms of falling squarely under the kings header.

And yet, I see through that.

To me, he's always had the mind of a kingpin. Of a god. An emperor. When I look at Oliver Prince, I don't see the Golden Boy. I can see right through that mask to a darkness and a hunger I'm not even sure he sees himself.

I see a power that people should fear if one day he decides he's tired of being the Golden Boy.

Today, though, he is very much still that Golden Boy—if not clearly annoyed with me—as he drums his fingers on his desk. I casually stroll across the room to his bar cart, pouring myself a heavy splash of expensive Scotch. I turn and raise a questioning brow, but he shakes his head.

"A bit early in my world."

"Not in mine."

I grin, bringing the glass to my lips as I sink easily into the chair across the desk from him. I fold one leg over my knee,

leaning back as I swirl the scotch around the crystal tumbler.

Oliver glares at me with a mix of annoyance and amusement. He might be pissed that I've decided to stroll in here with all my criminal warlord energy. And yet he's also slightly amused by it. He doesn't want to show it, but I know he's biting back a smirk, knowing he's going to be the talk of the office for the next month after getting a surprise visit from yours truly.

"Phones exist, Cross."

"Phones don't have thirty-year-old scotch sitting in their office."

"Says the man who I'm sure has scotch twice as old as that sitting in his."

I shrug easily.

"But that's all the way on the other side of *town*, Oliver."

"*Precisely*, Adrian."

He leans back in his chair, dragging his fingertips down his clean-shaven jaw.

"As fun as this is, and as much as I enjoy our banter," he grunts, "I am actually fairly busy today. So why don't we cut the bullshit and the games, and you tell me why you're here without invitation or warning."

"Aside from the scotch?"

He grins, shaking his head.

"Aside from the scotch."

I nod slowly.

"Well...what do you know about Nasser El-Sayed?"

The room goes quiet. Oliver's brow lifts.

I'm fully aware that he knows what that name means to me. I might not bare my entire soul to my friends within the Kings and Villains. But I've shared enough for them to know that name, as well as knowing to never, ever speak it in my presence.

Oliver clears his throat.

"Where are you going with this, Adrian?"

"Nowhere malicious. And nowhere devious, I can assure you. I'm just curious about him."

"For what, business purposes?"

"Perhaps."

"Adrian, I'm not sure how many times I need to tell you, I really don't have time for bullshit today."

"I'm not bullshitting you, Oliver," I grunt. "Tell me what you know about him."

He scowls at me. But he clears his throat, drumming his fingers on the armrest of his leather chair.

"Fine, fuck it. Let's play this game. Nasser El-Sayed: fifty-six-years-old. Connected by marriage, I forget how, to the Saudi royal family." He shrugs. "Oil-rich beyond anything you and I can possibly comprehend, with his fingers in basically every dark pool and shady government between North Africa and China."

When I just nod, Oliver sighs and keeps going.

"He's corrupt as fuck. But most of these big oil guys are. Conservatively religious, but mostly just for show and to play the game."

He frowns at me.

“I’m not sure where you want me to go with this. Adrian. We both know that you’re fully aware of who and what Nasser El-Sayed is.”

I nod, slowly sipping my scotch.

“Is he dead?”

Oliver sputters.

“Excuse me?”

“Is. He. Dead.”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“I should fucking hope I’m sure,” he snaps. “Morehouse and Westerly are heavy investors in at least a quarter of his companies.”

He smiles wryly.

“Let’s just say they make us a lot of money. It’s just business, Adrian.”

I shrug.

“I don’t care. So, he’s alive then.”

“Adrian, if he wasn’t, you would have heard about it. The entire financial world would have felt the ripple effect of Nasser El-Sayed kicking the bucket. Believe me, there are governments that would quite possibly crumble if he were suddenly to die.”

My teeth grind.

“And his son, Amir?”

Oliver doesn’t say a word.

“Oliver, I’m asking you a question.”

“Yeah, but a question I’m inclined not to answer.”

“And why is that?”

He frowns at me. “Because we’re friends, Cross. In case you’ve forgotten.”

“I haven’t. And it’s as your friend I’m asking you to tell me about Amir.”

He sighs heavily, looking away as he drums his fingers on the armrest again.

“I don’t know what you want me to say, Adrian. He’s his father’s son.”

“And the next in line to inherit the El-Sayed empire.”

Oliver shrugs.

“That’s how all these guys operate. I mean, the Middle East is a very patriarchal society. I don’t mean to generalize. But especially in the higher circles, and the people who run the oil fields? Yeah, they’re pretty patriarchal. And yes, as far as I’m aware, with Nasser having no other children, his empire would fall squarely into Amir’s hands.”

“Who is alive.”

My friend’s brow furrows.

“Look, Adrian, these are private, incredibly powerful and wealthy people. And they’re not ghosts. Neither of those men’s deaths would go unnoticed. Actually, it would be almost impossible to hide that news, especially given how big they are in the world of finance.”

Fuck. She almost had me believing her.

I nod quietly as I drain the last of my scotch and set the glass carefully on the corner of his desk. I take a breath and stand.

“Thank you, Oliver,” I grunt in a clipped, cold tone as I turn to leave.

Oliver stands as well, stopping me.

“Adrian, what the fuck is this all about?”

I ignore—or at least try to ignore—the boiling fury in my gut as I glance back him.

“Nothing. Just crossing some T’s and dotting some I’s.”

I start to turn for the door again.

“Is this what the other night was about, when you went apeshit on Kris?”

I tense, one hand on the knob to his office door. But I say nothing.

“Adrian.”

“You’re busy, Oliver. I’ll see you Friday.”

“Is this about Celeste?”

Close as we are, even Oliver seems to pale and stiffen at the look I give him when I glare back in his direction.

“I’m asking as your friend, Cross,” he says quietly.

He stands and steps out from behind his desk, walking my way until he stops right in front of me.

“And Kristoff’s fine, by the way. I mean, you should call him. But he’s fine.”

When I don’t respond, he sighs.

“You can tell me what this is really about, Adrian.”

“Just tying up loose ends. That’s really it.”

He nods as I twist the knob on his office door.

“Next time, Cross, do me or at least my career a favor and call ahead?”

“You can tell them I came to congratulate you in person on how well you’re investing my money.”

He smirks.

“You *should be* congratulating me on how fucking well I’m investing your money, because I goddamn am.”

The anger at what I’ve just heard is still throbbing in my chest. But I plaster a faux smile on my face as I meet my friend’s eyes.

“Thank you, Oliver.”

I STORM BACK through the offices of Moorebrook and Westerly leaving the same wake of black energy and hushed fear with which I entered.

Back downstairs, Cade gives me a look as he opens the door and lets me into the back of the Bentley before following me inside.

Cade Black used to be a top advisor and lieutenant for my uncle. Now, he’s my second-in-command, and a huge asset. He’s also got morals the same color as his last name, which can certainly be useful. I might be a hardened, cold motherfucker. But even I have limits.

Cade has none.

He shuts the back door to the Bentley, cocooning us both in tinted-window silence.

“Well?”

I shake my head grimly.

“Nothing. They’re both very much alive, and still making everyone lots and lots of money.”

I haven’t mentioned Celeste to Cade, or her being the impetus for us dropping by to Oliver’s office today. He just thinks I’m trying to clear up a rumor I’ve heard about the El-Sayed father and son.

“And that means...?”

“Nothing,” I grunt. “It means nothing changes.”

We pull away, and I turn to gaze out the window as the car struggles through the murderous London traffic.

Hearing that Amir and his father are very much alive doesn’t actually mean *nothing* to me. What it means is that Celeste, even four fucking years on, is still able to sink her claws into me. It means she’s still able to get to me. To poison me.

With lies. With her bullshit.

I don’t know what her fucking angle is. But whatever it is, I’m not getting involved.

I’m *not*.

Not this time.

I’m sorely tempted to lock myself in the basement of my townhouse and slam my fist against a practice bag—or a human being, if I can find a willing or unwilling victim—over and over and over again, until my knuckles break and my skin rips and bleeds.

I *want* to hurt. I want to bleed out the poison of Celeste before she turns my blood toxic and black.

But I don't. I don't even go home. Instead, we drive to The Ten Bells.

The East London pub was once the seat of power for the Cross family, back when my grandfather, Jeremy, was in charge. My Uncle Jonathan preferred more opulent and more elegant furnishings for his throne, choosing instead a glass and steel tower not far from where Oliver's office is now.

But me, I prefer it here. I prefer the shadows. Or maybe I just like the Old World connection to a grandfather I barely knew.

When we pull up in front of the pub, The Ten Bells isn't actually open for the day yet. I frown at a matte black Range Rover parked outside. While it's not as if I instantly recognize the license plate or even the car itself, there's a certain familiarity to it.

Cade notices the same thing, because I catch him glancing at me out of the corner of my eye. When I turn, I can see the scar that runs down the left-hand side of his face tensing as he frowns.

"I'll check it—"

"I'm fine," I grunt, opening the car door and stepping out.

I can see the protest on his face, but he acquiesces. That's what makes him a good second: loyalty, but also the understanding that he is in fact *second* below me. My word is law.

That said, I still slip my hand into the back of my coat as I approach the door to the pub. My fingers brush the cold steel of my gun holstered at the small of my back as I step through the front door.

Instantly, I stop as I take in the solitary dark-haired figure sitting at the bar in the expensive-looking and obviously custom tailored dark blue suit. His back is to me, and his large,

tattooed hand curls around a half-pint of beer. He turns at the sound of the door.

I smile curiously as my hand drops from my gun.

“My, my, my. Alfie fucking Kane, as I live and breathe.”

My contemporary, who in another world might have been considered a rival, grins and stands from his bar stool.

“Been a while, Cross.”

Years ago, Alfie, who’s only a bit older than me, worked for my uncle. He was good at what he did, and loyal, and when he split off to do his own thing, they parted on good terms.

Now, he and I run criminal enterprises that coexist. We’re both smart enough to understand that doing business together is far better than trying to step on each other’s toes and eventually go to war.

Plus, I genuinely like the guy.

I stride towards him, and our hands lock in a firm handshake. When we pull apart, I shake my head.

“It *has* been a long time now. How the fuck are you?”

“All’s good. Can’t complain,” Alfie growls in his thick cockney accent.

His sharp eyes follow me as he rolls his muscled shoulders and brings the pint glass to his lips to polish off the last of his beer.

“So, what can I do for you, Alfie?”

“What? I can’t stop by one of my favorite pubs for a pint?”

“You certainly can. But I happen to know there’s roughly three-thousand pubs between your house and here, so...”

I lift a brow significantly.

“Questions arise, Alfie.”

He chuckles, glancing around the bar that’s empty aside from Justin, the bartender who’s polishing glassware at the far end.

“Is there a place we can talk?”

“Go ahead.”

His brow furrows, and the smile drops from his face.

“Someplace a bit more private, Cross.”

“All right. This way.”

He follows me to the back of the pub, down the hall, up the staircase, and then down another hallway to my private office through the black and gold filigree door.

I nod at one of the two couches by the fireplace as I move to the bar cart to pour us both a drink. After passing him his glass, I sit across from him, bringing my glass to my lips.

“You look worried, Alfie.”

He shakes his head.

“Not worried, just...” His brows knit. “You’re a good friend, Adrian. And because of our history, and my history with your uncle, I wanted to tell you this in person.”

My face darkens.

“Spit it out.”

Alfie clears his throat again.

“Your girl. She...she came to see me.”

Violence boils inside of me. My pulse thrums in my ears. My vision darkens at the corners as my eyes narrow at him.

“*Excuse me?*”

“Celeste Margaux came to see me last night.”

My jaw grinds so hard, I can feel it in the back of my skull. My hand tightens to the point that the scotch in my glass sloshes.

“What for? What the fuck *for*, Alfie?” I snarl venomously.

“Hang about. *Easy*, friend.” He puts his drink down, holding both of his hands up, palms out, conciliatory. “Look, mate, it’s nothing like that, I promise.”

“*Tell. Me.*” I rasp darkly.

He inhales and exhales slowly.

“Protection, actually.”

My eyes narrow even more.

“What?”

“She wanted protection, Adrian. And I don’t mind telling you, she was willing to pay for it.”

I see. Fucking. *Red.*

For a second, I envision myself smashing my glass into his smug, handsome face and shredding it off his skull.

“With *money*, Cross,” he grunts, clearly seeing the violence on my face. “Don’t let your mind go there. Because that’s not what I’m saying. Look, I know she’s your girl.”

“She’s not my girl.”

“Well, she’s not my charge to protect, either. So I turned her down.”

My jaw ticks as I stare at him.

“Why?”

“Because relationships matter in this business, Adrian. And because your uncle was a good friend. And because you and I are friends. But *as* your friend, let me advise you on something.”

He takes a measured breath, raking his fingers down his jawline before standing and moving to my side of the coffee table between us. I’m still clenched with rage as he drops a heavy hand onto my shoulder.

“Whatever this thing is with you and Celeste Margaux?”

Alfie stares at me a moment.

“*Fix it*. Or clean it up. Because I know there’s a connection between you. I turned her down, but that just means there’ll be others she asks. Except those others might not say no. And something tells me, whatever it is between you and Celeste...”

His gaze still holds mine.

“Knowing you? And seeing your reaction to her asking *me*?”

He shrugs.

“When it ends up being some other prick who starts offering her protection, it’s going to start a fucking war.”

It’s the truest thing I’ve heard all day.



I SMILE WARMLY and thank the grocery store clerk as she passes me back my credit card. Hoisting the four bags of fresh produce, handmade pasta and other supplies, I step out of the small market and head back into the night.

The lavish suite I'm staying in right now has a full-sized industrial grade kitchen that would rival anything you'd see on most cooking shows. And yet, Adele, Dahlia and I have been living off room service and delivery for weeks now.

I am *dying* for a home cooked meal. And besides, Dahlia can't live off of room service macaroni and cheese.

Well, that's not quite true. She certainly and happily *could*, if Adele and I let her. But no. Even if I have to make it myself, she'll have something that was prepared by someone she knows.

As I walk back to the Dorchester, a cool wind manages to creep down the neck of my jacket. It's like cold fingers walking down my spine as I shiver and quicken my pace to the hotel just three blocks away.

For a moment, I swear I hear footsteps behind me. I even turn, rolling my eyes at my own paranoia when there's nothing. But it's been like this for days, ever since I went to see Alfie Kane.

I knew going to Alfie was bound to cause problems. I knew it would cause ripples. And I'm almost shocked that those ripples haven't splashed on my shores yet, and grabbed someone-in-particular's attention.

I did the research. I know Alfie and Adrian are friends of a sort—or at least not enemies. I know the Cross family and Alfie Kane have an understanding across various parts of the city where they do business together and don't get in each other's way. I've heard the story: how Alfie was once employed by Adrian's uncle, Jonathan, but when he set off on his own, he left without bad blood. How the two organizations coexist peacefully now within the city.

But I'd hoped ruffling feathers and causing waves would have at least resulted in protection. Instead, I struck out when Alfie Kane smiled, shook his head and sent me politely but firmly away without the deal I'd hoped for.

Now I'm nervous as a cat waiting for the other shoe to drop. I've spent the past few days glancing over my shoulder and jumping at the slightest footstep behind me, wondering when it is that Adrian will catch wind of what I'm doing and come after me.

I know the drive within Adrian. And I'm well aware he'd view even a man he considers a friend, like Alfie, *also* as a rival. Peace treaties, and even friendship, don't mean for one second that Adrian won't view me going to a rival to seek a business arrangement as an act of war.

Even if Adrian *passed* on that business arrangement himself purely out of spite and, apparently, hatred for me, me going elsewhere for it is bound to cause problems.

And yet, so far, so good.

I round the corner a block away from the Dorchester, when suddenly a figure emerges from the darkness of an alley in front of me.

I gasp sharply as he grabs the lapels of my coat, the bags of groceries dropping to my feet. Then a cold, naked fear grips me as he slams me back against a brick wall in the shadows.

My heart leaps into my throat before my eyes suddenly focus on the man looming over me—his stormy blue eyes glinting and the lethal edge of his jaw grinding as he glares into me.

Adrian.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Celeste?” He whispers darkly.

I swallow my heart back into my chest, defiantly setting my jaw as I glare right back up at him.

I refuse to show fear. I refuse to cave to his magnetic beauty in his lethal dark charms.

“Buying groceries,” I snap. “Is that a problem?”

His lips curl dangerously.

“Leave this fucking city.”

“Last time I checked, it’s a free country. Or did you forget?”

“No, I remember that quite clearly, as I proved the other day when I knew I was free to tell you to get fucked and die. And that I would not be helping you out of whatever bullshit you’ve stepped into.”

I wince at his coldness. His cruelty. At the words that I should be able to brush off at this point, and yet still manage to wound me like a blade. But I center and brace myself, lifting my chin defiantly at him.

“Well, good for you. May I please go now?”

His grip tightening on the lapel of my jacket gives me the only answer I need.

“Alfie. *Kane*,” he growls. “What were you thinking, Celeste?”

I shiver. Fuck, I hate being right sometimes. And I especially hate that I was right about this. But again, I’m out of options and I’m out of places to go. So all I do is shrug.

“You exercised your free will to *not* help me. I was exercising mine to go find help elsewhere.”

I smile sweetly.

“Actually, I believe that was your own oh-so-eloquent parting shot, Adrian. *Go find it fucking somewhere else*, I believe is how you phrased it. Well, I did.”

“Not as I hear it.”

My lips tighten as he smiles cruelly at me.

“Stay the fuck away from Alfie.”

“Why?”

“I mean it. I won’t tell you again.”

“*Why?*”

“Don’t fucking test me, Celeste.”

I sneer at him coldly. “What is it, Adrian? Is it because he’s a man?”

He glares daggers at me, saying nothing.

“Or is it because he’s an *attractive* man?”

I physically flinch at the way the storm clouds explode like a dark wrath behind his eyes, and at the way his jaw grinds so tightly that the veins pop on his neck.

“Are you quite done with these childish quips of yours, trying to upset me like that?”

I smile sweetly again, pushing him.

“Now, why would me talking about an attractive man upset you, Adrian?”

I’m playing with fucking fire, and I can see it in his eyes.

“Do *not* play games with me, I’m warning you.”

I swallow thickly. But this time, I manage to knock his hands from my lapel and shove him back a half step.

“I’m curious if you think scaring women in the dark at night and accosting them in—”

“Are you scared, Celeste?” He murmurs, rattling me to my core as he looms over me.

Yes.

“No,” I snap.

“Well, some things have certainly changed, then.”

“What? I was never scared of—”

“Not that. I meant that four years ago, you were quite a good liar.”

The color floods into my face, and I stiffen as he leans closer.

“*Not so much anymore*, are you?”

I glare at him.

“So tell me, Celeste, because I’ve been oh so very curious.”

“About *what*,” I spit, shivering at the cold, cruel smile spreading over his chiseled face.

“Did you spend the last four years getting used to being disappointed by your husband in bed? Did you have to imagine my thick, fat cock pounding into you like I know you crave every time he touched you?”

It’s a moment of revulsion and heat. A wave of nausea at the idea of any other man putting his hands on me, or being inside me.

But it’s also a moment of wicked, horrible, traitorous heat that comes with remembering how the man in front of me used to touch me. And fuck me. And make me scream for more of his rough touch and animalistic passions.

I could clear this up right now. I could tell him about Amir being married and head over heels in love with the woman he died with, and that our whole arrangement was a sham. But I can see this hurts him like he hurt me, so I won’t. And I know that’s cruel and fucking childish, but this is war.

And as they say, all’s fair...

“My relationship with Amir is none of your—”

“Was.”

Adrian smiles maliciously.

“Your relationship with Amir *was*. Past tense.”

I swallow, glaring at him.

“Our relationship is none of your concern, Adrian.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“What ques—”

I gasp as he suddenly surges close to me, invading every inch of my personal space as he cages me to the wall at my back.

His hands grab the front of my coat again, making my traitorous body tighten, squirm, and clench.

“Did he make you *scream*?” He rasps, moving close to my lips—so close that I swear he’s about to kiss me.

He doesn’t. But just the same, heat washes over me like a wave, turning my skin slick and making parts of my body prickle and ache in a way I hate.

I swallow the lump that forms in my throat and squeeze my thighs together, as if to douse the heat that is growing between them. My mouth thins and my jaw sets as I glare up into his cold, beautiful eyes.

“He never made me cry,” I whisper heatedly. “He never broke my heart, Adrian.”

His eyes glitter as a shadow crosses his face.

“How romantic,” he mutters sarcastically.

“You don’t even know what romance is.”

“No?” he shrugs. “Maybe not. Maybe I thought I did. Or maybe you and I were just never meant for hearts and roses, Celeste,” he prowls, moving close again. This time, his hand slides up until his fingers wrap around my throat, making my pulse skyrocket.

Making the heat in my core surge uncontrollably.

He leans in quickly and I gasp, flinching.

“But damn, we could fuck like *gods*.”

I’m shaking. I’m barely able to stand. And I’m *wet*. Horribly, undeniably so. Adrian lingers there, looming over me and pinning me to the wall with his hand around my throat. His

fingers aren't squeezing, but it's still a tight enough grip to send throbs of black, raging desire coursing through my veins.

His lips stay where they are, millimeters from my ear, as if fingering a trigger right before he puts a bullet through me.

"Are you going to help me or not?" I choke out.

Adrian stiffens. His fingers loosen from my neck, and his lips pull away.

And the moment is over.

A low growl rumbles in Adrian's throat as he steps back from me. Light from a streetlamp dances across his face, making his eyes glitter as they bore into me.

"No," he growls. *"Not now. Not ever. But I am going to give you this advice one. More. Time."*

His lips curl, and he seems to grow even taller as he looms above me. I shiver.

"Walk away, Celeste. We both know you're very good at it."

And with that, he turns and strides back into the darkness.



“TEA?”

I shake my head.

“Coffee, please. Black.”

Martin Higgins, AKA Professor Higgins, AKA the VP of Rutger Capital who I’m currently embroiled in heavy contractual negotiations with, smiles easily at me.

He’s good at the whole “smiling easily at me” thing. Even though I can see the fear lingering just below the surface.

But that’s good. Most of the time, the senior vice president of one of the largest hedge funds in the world sitting across the table from his twenty-four-year-old student from business school would be a massive power imbalance.

As it happens, the two of us sitting across from each other *is* a massive power imbalance. It’s just the imbalance is not what you’d expect.

In this arrangement, *I* have the upper hand. I am the one with power here, and he’s the one afraid of me. Because money talks, but so does fear. And when you control both, you can rule the world.

A minute later, Martin’s assistant furtively enters the enormous glass office. A tray shakes in his hand as he delivers

a cup of bergamot tea to my professor and a double espresso to me. Higgins quickly waves him away and when the door closes again, he steeples his hand on his desk.

“Well, shall we get down to it?”

“That would be ideal.”

Higgins smiles.

Rutger Capital is expanding into a new green energy market. There’s an opening for someone to get in on the ground floor of this new investment portfolio and make an *obscene* return, to the tune of two hundred percent.

That someone will be me, and those returns will be mine.

What they’re looking for is four hundred million pounds. And I just so happen to have it. There’s a lot of money to be made in the shadows. My grandfather knew that. My uncle knew it too. Every Cross before them knew it as well.

But there is an absolute *fuckload* to be made out in the open. You just need to have the capital to play with the big boys. And after dealing in the shadows and mastering that, I now have that capital.

Higgins begins to go over some of the contractual stuff that we went over a week ago. I’m barely paying attention.

I’m distracted by thoughts of Celeste.

Why now? Why at *all*? And what the fuck does she want? Why would she ever come find me when I hope she knows God damn well how venomous my hate for her is?

Venom wrapped in silk.

Poison served crystal stemware.

Someone is trying to kill me, Adrian.

I hate to admit it, but it's had me up all night. For a week, actually. It's had me quietly asking Cade to get some men together and fucking find her in the city. Which is, not at all coincidentally, how I found her at the Dorchester. How I accosted her a block away from it two nights ago, after finding out she went to Alfie fucking Kane.

He was wise to turn her away. He was even wiser to tell me about it and let me hear it from him directly. We may be friends of a sort, certainly not enemies, but even if he was one of my best friends, finding out only through the grapevine that he took her deal would have ended with his head on a pike on top of a tower somewhere.

I hate this woman with everything I have. But every part of her turns every part of *me* into some sort of possessive animal. She flips a switch in me that I know would have me go full fucking medieval on anyone who would stand between her and me.

She's mine and mine alone to hate.

I shake my head, angry at myself for even going there. I quickly slug back the steaming hot espresso from the cup in front of me. Higgins is prattling on about something. And so I do what I do best: scorch Celeste out of my head and pay a-fucking-attention.

“As you can see, Adrian, the returns for one year in just this sector alone are phenomenal. Our analysts are looking at a minimum of twenty-three-point-two percent over five years.”

I shrug.

“My analyst is looking at twenty-four-point-one over the same amount of time.”

Higgins lifts his brow, smirking.

“Your analyst being Mr. Prince, I assume?”

I keep my face neutral, though he's right. Higgins, for all his blathering around me because of his latent fear of me, is in fact a very astute man.

"Is Mr. Prince interested in investing in this—"

"Mr. Prince is merely a classmate of mine," I smile thinly. "And I've spoken to him about this in confidence, purely in an advisory role."

Lies. All lies.

I've made lots of money at the head of the Cross table. Certainly enough to swing this deal, but I still don't want all my eggs in one basket. Most of the money's coming from me. But Oliver will be my second, silent partner in this arrangement, funding his share through one of his dark channels.

As I said before, I don't just speculate that there's more to Oliver than the rest of the world sees. I *know* there is, because he's obviously willing to play in the dark. He just doesn't want that to be found out.

He even uses a company of his that he named "Golden Crown LLC" to secretly invest in places where he shouldn't publicly be making money. The name was a thumb to the people who think of him as this Golden Boy figure.

Higgins isn't quite shaken off the trail.

"Look, Adrian, it doesn't need to be all you. If he's interested too, I'm sure we can—"

"He's not."

Bullshit. Oliver's going to get just as rich as I am on this deal.

For a second, my mind flashes back to my first days at Lords College of Business, fresh from Ascot, mourning the loss of

my father and diving headfirst into the dark, murky world of my uncle's empire.

Part of that jump into the deep end was a plan to take our business to places neither him or my grandfather or any of the Cross men before them had taken it: to the fucking stratosphere.

Because as I said, there's plenty of money to be made in the shadows. But there's quadruple that to be made out in the open, once you have the cards to play there.

Higgins and I spend another hour poring over some contracts, looking over projections, and generally hammering out the rest of the details before he closes the file. But I can tell something's bothering him. I sit back in my chair with amusement barely hidden on my face.

"Yes?"

He clears his throat uncomfortably.

"Look, Adrian, there's something you should know."

"What?"

"There are..." He coughs again. "Other parties interested in this deal."

I want to snarl at him to frighten him back into line. But instead, I just lift a brow.

"We've talked about this, Martin."

"Parties with deep pockets, Adrian."

"Deeper than mine?"

He lifts his shoulders eloquently.

"*Higgins...*" I growl, a warning edge in my tone.

He smiles weakly.

“Look, I’ve spoken to my board of directors, and we’d love to stay with the agreement we’ve already established with you.”

“But?” I grunt.

Higgins swallows thickly.

“I’m sorry, it’s just business—”

“Martin, just *tell* me. I’m aware that there’s a tipping point where deeper pockets outweigh your board’s fear of me.”

He tries to chuckle. He doesn’t succeed.

“Oh, Adrian, they’re not scared of—”

“They are.”

Higgins smiles weakly.

“Now why don’t you tell me who the hell these other parties are.”

“There are actually two other interested parties. Because of the client’s desire for anonymity, I’m afraid I can’t tell you one of them.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Or to reach over this desk and throttle it out of him.

“But the other one...” he stiffens, frowning. “Well, the other I can categorically say we would rather *not* be associated with, but...”

Which means it’s someone dark. Darker than me, or at least someone more open about it than me.

“*Well?*” I snap through gritted teeth.

Higgins clears his throat nervously again.

“Cillian Kildare.”

Son of a bitch.

A rival. Specifically, a rival where the only reason we're not murdering each other in the streets is because his father and my uncle were level-headed, intelligent men who brokered a truce of sorts.

A truce, however, that Cillian has seemed to be hell-bent on gutting from balls to chin ever since he took over from his father three years ago.

The same age as me, Cillian Kildare is my counterpart in *lámh dheas dhearg*. Which, if you don't speak Gaelic—and I sure as hell fucking don't—means “The Red Right Hand”, an Irish mafia family with a similar size and reach as the Cross family.

In an ideal world, Cillian and I would have an agreement similar to the one that Alfie and I have.

Well, no. In an *ideal* world, I'd launch him into the fucking sun, because he's a sociopath with anger issues, a disturbing fascination with Machiavelli, and a black hole where any sort of moral compass should be.

Cillian is the sort of man who would be happy to watch the world burn because he likes how the smoke smells.

And that's bad for everyone, and business.

But I digress.

For now, there's a truce. He keeps to his business, I keep to mine. And at least for a generation or so, there's been no blood spilled in the streets between us.

But that could—and will—change on a fucking *dime* if he thinks for a fucking second he's going to muscle in on this deal I have with Higgins.

“I'm telling you this, Adrian—”

“Because you want me to scare him off, I know. Because your board might be scared of me, but at least I’m the devil they know.”

Higgins smiles weakly at me.

“Always better than the devil you don’t know, Adrian.”

Isn’t that the fucking truth.

I stand abruptly, buttoning my jacket.

“If I successfully remove this...problem...you’re going to tell the first interested party to go fuck themselves.”

Higgins puts on a brave face.

“Well, of course, Adrian, I’m with you. I’ll take it to my board —”

“You’ll ram it down their throats,” I growl quietly.

I put out a hand, which Higgins shakes nervously.

“You’re coming to the annual investor gala in a few weeks?”

“Make this deal happen, Martin,” I growl.

I turn and stride out of the office.

CILLIAN KILDARE TESTS our truce on a regular basis. His people do business on the edges of my territory all the fucking time. It’s like a dare, waiting for me or one of my men to get stupid, put a bullet in someone, and start the war he so desperately wants.

It’s not just that he’s power and money hungry, because he’s got plenty of both—though not as much as me. So why? I honestly don’t know, though I suspect it’s because deep down,

Cillian is just a fucking deranged psychopath who gets off on violence even more than I do.

He's one of those men who thrives on instability. So I've been determined not to capitulate, because denying him that instability is actually the biggest 'fuck you' I can possibly give him.

But I can also flaunt our truce. Like I'm about to do as I roll right up, without invitation, to the front door of The Weeping Banshee, where Cillian holds court.

Sort of like the pub where *I* keep court.

God, I hate the similarities between myself and this fucking psychopath.

As expected, two big men in black at the front door step in front of it, glaring at me. When they realize who I am, there's a flicker of fear as they falter, unsure of what to do.

"*Move,*" I growl.

"Mr. Cross...." One of the men fumbles. "Is he expecting—"

"If he isn't, he fucking well should be."

They swallow nervously and glance at each other. Finally, one of the guards turns and talks quietly into an intercom on the wall. All I hear is a murmured response I can't make out. Eventually, he nods and turns back.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. Cross."

He smiles nervously and turns to open the door.

"He's expecting you."

I roll my eyes.

Well, now he is.

I step inside the pub, stopping in the doorway to let my eyes adjust to the dim smokiness of the place. My gaze stops on the black and white photo near the far end of the bar. In it, my grandfather Jeremy and Cillian's grandfather Donovan are smiling, holding pints, and shaking hands.

I instantly think of my father.

He'd fucking hate that I was here. He'd hate everything I've become, to be honest. Even if I've spent the last four years building myself into a version of me that I hope he would have been proud of.

But it's the war that's that eventually exploded between Jeremy and Donovan that sent my dad and I from London to Ascot in the first place. Back then, there was major bloodshed between the Cross and Kildare families. And when a stray bullet killed my mother, my father took me away from London and never looked back.

But my mother's death ended up being the catalyst for peace between the two families, or at least a ceasefire. But my father never saw it that way. To him, my uncle Jonathan and my grandfather Jeremy were the instruments of her death. And no matter how hard my uncle tried to rekindle that bond with my father, it never happened.

Those days are in the past. Now we walk a brittle, uneasy truce.

Except right now, Cillian's trying to fuck with that truce by stepping on my deal. Unwise.

"Mr. Cross?"

I turn, nodding at the guard as I follow him to the back of the bar and up a flight of stairs. At the end of a hallway, we stop in front of an office door—annoyingly, not so dissimilar to mine

—and the man knocks before twisting the knob and opening the door.

Cillian sits behind a huge wooden desk, shrouded in a halo of cigarette smoke. He grins around the cigarette dangling from his lips, shoving a hand through his dark hair as his piercing green eyes glint at me.

“Adrian Cross,” he purrs, like a jungle cat looking for an opening or a weakness to exploit.

Spoiler alert: he’s not going to find one.

He stands and we briefly shake hands.

“Drink?”

“Only if you are.”

He winks.

“Is the Pope Catholic?”

“I don’t fuck with religion, Cillian.”

“Ah, yes, well...unfortunately I do, so you’ll have to trust my papal expertise. And on that note...”

He turns and strides over to a bar cart, where he pours us both obscenely heavy measures of Irish whiskey. He turns, smirking at the way my brow raises at the offered glass in his hand.

“When in Dublin,” he grins.

“Indeed.”

I take my glass as he raises his.

“*Sláinte*,” he mutters.

“Cheers.”

We both take a sip as he settles back into his chair behind his desk, grinning at me.

Motherfucker. He knows exactly why I'm here, and he's relishing it. In fact, part of me wonders if the only reason he approached Higgins was to piss me off and get me here for some bantering back and forth. Like he needs the excitement to keep his sociopathic heart beating.

If so, the trick here is to appease his sickness as quickly as I can and get the fuck out so I can go back to my life.

That, and figure out what the fuck I'm going to do about Celeste.

Cillian takes another sip and then sets his glass down. He pulls a fresh cigarette from a silver case, sticks it between his lips, and lights it with a gold-plated Zippo. He exhales slowly as he laces his fingers behind his head and grins at me.

His dress shirt is open at the collar, showing a tattoo on his muscled chest that creeps almost all the way up to his strong jaw and lethal looking cheekbones. His green eyes glint dangerously at me.

"Now, to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Adrian? It's been ages."

"I think we both know why I'm here."

"Oh?" He grins. "Enlighten me."

Goddammit.

I do *not* want to play stupid games with this fucking guy today.

"Where'd you get the money?"

He smiles.

"For?"

“You know damned well. For the Rutger Capital deal.”

He shrugs, smirking at me.

“You don’t have pockets that deep, Cillian. So let’s just stop fucking tap dancing, and you can just tell me who’s backing this.”

The intercom on Cillian’s desk buzzes, and I scowl at the interruption.

“Mr. Kildare?” A man’s voice grunts. “Your eleven o’clock has arrived.”

Cillian looks up at me and shrugs, an infuriatingly oily smile his face.

“Well, Adrian, this has been a fucking pleasure as always. But unfortunately, my next appointment is here.”

“They can go fuck themselves,” I hiss.

Cillian grins.

“Ahh, now that’s something I’d pay to watch.”

I frown.

“Excuse me?”

He taps the intercom on his desk.

“Send her in.”

Her?

“We’re not fucking done here, Cillian—”

The door opens behind me, and I whirl to see who the fuck is more important than this meeti—

Celeste.

The world freezes.

“No indeed, Adrian,” Cillian chuckles darkly. “No, I very much doubt we’re even a little done here.”



SHIT.

It's not as if I ever thought working with Cillian Kildare would be a good idea. In fact, it had every marking of being a truly terrible one.

However, things go from bad to worst-case-scenario when I walk in and find Adrian glaring pure malice at me.

When Adrian refused to help me, I went to Alfie. And when Alfie said no, I had to dig even deeper in the gutters and the shadows. Which of course, in this city, will bring you to Cillian Kildare.

The deal is simple...or, as simple as it can be with a devil like Cillian. He gives Adele, Dahlia, and I protection, and I give him a large sum of money. Like a *large* sum of money.

Of course, I know it would never be that simple with a man like Cillian. Not with those lethal green eyes. Not with that jaw cut from a steel blade, or the powerful, veined hands soaked in blood and murder.

But, putting my fate in those blood-soaked hands is still better than falling prey to the people hunting me. At least I hope so. That was the gamble I made when I approached him for a deal a couple of days ago.

But now? Now, whatever bravado I'd built up inside crumbles when I walk in and lock eyes with an even bigger, darker, and powerful devil.

One that I know intimately.

Adrian's eyes turn the color of a hurricane about to slam into a shore. He stands, unfurling to his full height and power, and thuds a glass of whiskey down on the desk.

"*Really?*" he rasps quietly.

I swallow the naked fear that creeps up my throat. Because I refuse to show it to his face, just like I refuse to back down, or quail, or even blink. Instead, I shrug.

"Really *what*, Adrian?"

His eyes narrow dangerously.

"You're working with *him* now?" He stabs a finger back at Cillian.

Fuck.

He's angry, as I imagined he'd be if—or rather *when*—he found out about my arrangement with Cillian. But standing here now under the viciousness of his gaze, I'm starting to get the feeling that my money didn't just go into Cillian's pocket but was used to screw Adrian out of some business deal.

Something in the dark glimmer in Cillian's green eyes tell me I'm entirely correct about that.

The Irish mafia boss grins as his gaze darts between Adrian and me.

"Oh, now, this is even better," he chuckles darkly, his voice full of glee and malice.

My heart races as Adrian stabs his gaze into me.

“What the fuck is this?” he growls.

I straighten, ignoring the toxic attraction to him, the way I am instantly drawn to his jawline, his strong shoulders, his lethally attractive eyes.

“This is my meeting time, I believe.”

I smile as casually as I possibly can as I pull my eyes away from Adrian and over to Cillian.

“Unless, of course, I’m mistaken?”

The Irishman grins wickedly.

“No. You’re right on time, love.”

Something nuclear scorches across Adrian’s face.

“Oh now, this is *delightful*,” Cillian chuckles, smiling dangerously as he takes a sip of his drink. He grins as he waves a finger between Adrian and I.

“Is she yours?”

“*No*,” Adrian rasps.

“I’m not anyone’s,” I blurt.

We speak at the same time, which sort of knocks away the heaviness of either statement. It also makes Cillian’s smile grow more dangerous and gleeful.

“I have to warn you,” he grins. “I’m going to need to charge by the hour for couples counseling.”

“I’m going to tell you this once and once only,” Adrian growls thickly, whirling on Cillian. “This is not a game you want to play with me.”

I shiver. Because suddenly I think back to the last time I heard him say those words, when he was saying them to me.

In the dark, with his hand around my throat and my skin prickling. With my nipples hard and aching. With my thighs flooding with wet heat, because apparently I'm broken and deranged.

"I was only playing a little stickball, Adrian," Cillian drawls in his thick Irish brogue.

He draws on the cigarette in his lips, his eyes piercing into Adrian before he exhales slowly.

"But suddenly I get the feeling we just stepped into the major leagues."

"What you're stepping into is a mountain of *shit*, Cillian."

Adrian rolls his neck and his shoulders, straightening his suit and buttoning his jacket across his firm torso.

"The streets between our families have been clear of blood for twenty years. Unless you want to change that—and I can promise you it'll start with *your* blood—I would suggest you walk the fuck away from all of this..."

He viciously stabs a finger at me without pulling his hard glare from Cillian.

"*All* of this, right the fuck now."

The room crackles with a dark energy. I shiver in spite of myself, digging my fingernails into my own palms.

For a moment, I think they're going to come at each other like two Titans; like two Greek gods, or demons, smashing boulders and mountains into each other until they lie in smoldering ruins.

But instead, Cillian just sits back in his chair, swirling the whiskey in his glass and drawing slowly on his cigarette as his eyes drift between the two of us.

“Adrian, Adrian, Adrian,” he sighs. “I thought the Crosses were known for their manners. And yet here you are, coming into my office barking orders.”

“This isn’t me barking, Cillian. This is me being nice.”

Adrian gazes at him levelly.

“Trust me, you don’t want to see me bark.”

He leans forward, his knuckles on the edge of the desk.

“And let’s face it: I’m known for my manners about as well as you’re known for your rational decisions and your sobriety.”

The puckish grin fades from Cillian’s face. And suddenly, the full magnitude of his darkness and his possible psychosis roll like storm clouds across his face.

“Careful, Cross,” he hisses. “You are wandering dangerously close to insulting territory.”

“Eat a bag of dicks, Cillian.”

Adrian whirls, and I have to sink my teeth into my bottom lip to stop from gasping as he surges right into me. He stops right by my side, leaning down, his shoulder grazing against mine, his lips just *barely* brushing my earlobe.

Just enough to set off every single alarm bell in my body and turn me into a pillar of liquid flame.

“*Enjoy your meeting,*” he rasps with a subdued, cold fury that shakes me to my core and turns me to molten fire.

“It’ll be practice for *ours*, after.”

“W—we...”

I swallow thickly, using every ounce of my strength not to shake or fall to the floor.

“We don’t have a meeti—”

“Oh, believe me...”

His lips brush my ear, making my thighs clamp tightly.

“We sure as fuck do now.”



“DRINK?”

I shake my head.

“No, thank you.”

Cillian shrugs, rising from behind his desk and crossing to the shelf full of liquor across the room. He pours a heavy splash of whiskey into a crystal tumbler, turning to raise an eyebrow at me.

“You’re sure?”

“Quite sure.”

“Even after *that*?”

My lips purse as I fight to not visibly shiver.

“I’ll... I’ll take a small one, thank you.”

A slow, triumphant smile spreads over Cillian’s admittedly handsome face, even if his dark green eyes seem to exude pure malice and darkness.

He passes me a glass before sitting back across from me.

“Now then.”

I clear my throat.

“Yes, so, as to the details of our—”

“We’re not talking about the details yet,” he growls. “Actually, we’re not talking about our deal at *all* anymore until we discuss what just happened here.”

“I’m not sure what there is to discuss.”

Cillian sighs, sinking back into his chair.

“I was *born*, love. But not yesterday. What is it between you and Cross?”

I shrug. “Nothing.”

“Try again.”

My lips purse.

“It’s a personal matter. It doesn’t concern our deal.”

“Ahhh, yes. But the thing is, your personal business is about to become my *professional* business, Ms. Margaux,” he rumbles quietly. “And if it involves ticking off Adrian Cross, that’s something we need to discuss in a wee bit more detail.”

I swallow back the panic, shrugging casually.

“My business with Adrian doesn’t concern our deal, and he plays no part in the services I’ll be paying you for.”

Cillian chuckles, reaching for his glass and taking a slow, thoughtful sip.

“Do us both a favor, Celeste.”

“What’s that?”

The smile disappears from his face like a light being flicked off.

“Don’t think for an *instant* that it’s wise for you to tell me how to run my business.”

I shiver as the fear balls up in my throat. And then suddenly his smile is right there on his face again, flashing instantly in the way that only a true psychopath can really pull off. He sighs, swirling the whiskey in his glass.

“I’m waiting.”

“Then you’ll be waiting. Because I’m not going to discuss my personal life with you.”

“Personal life between you and Adrian cross.”

I glare at him.

“Would you *like* an exorbitant amount of money, Mr. Kildare, in exchange for the services of a few of your men? I might not be in your business. But I’m fairly certain that thirty million pounds is *slightly* more than the going rate for bodyguards.”

Cillian chuckles quietly.

“Depends on how long those services would be required.”

I want to scream that for thirty million pounds, it’ll be for as long as I damn well need. But I’m pretty sure that won’t fly, even with Cillian.

“Six months.”

Cillian arches a skeptical eyebrow.

“And what precisely happens in six months that it clears up all of your problems, Ms. Margaux?”

Six months is how much time I need. Six months is how long it will take for a dedicated team of financial consultants to liquidate the entirety of the El-Sayed fortune and transfer it to me. Which will allow me to use that fortune to find those who are trying to kill me.

And kill them first.

At least, that's what the financial consultant I spoken to in confidence and with a strict NDA in place said. The second one that I spoke to just now under the same conditions said the same thing. As did Michelle, my lawyer.

Six months. I need to stay alive for six months, then I'll have the capital and the clout to throw around to stop anyone coming after me, Adele, and Dahlia.

"It's just six months," I shrug at Cillian.

"The details—"

"The details are my own business. Now, would you like the thirty million or not, Mr. Kildare?"

He eyes me coolly, drumming his fingertips on the edge of his desk.

"Adrian Cross is not a friend of mine."

"Well, that makes two of us," I mutter grimly.

He laughs a low, dark laugh.

"That said, while he and I might be rivals, we have an uneasy peace between us." Cillian leans forward, tenting his fingers. "And something tells me, helping you is going to disrupt that."

I say nothing.

"That disruption could be bad for business, Celeste."

"Thirty million seems to be generally considered a good thing for business, though."

He grins darkly, shaking his head again.

"And yet, war between me and the Cross family..." he shrugs.

"Might not be worth even that much money."

"Don't they say that conflict is a ladder to success?"

A smile haunts the corners of his face, curling the corners of his lips.

“You’re really not going to tell me what this is between you and Cross, are you?”

“No. Now, do we have a deal or not?”

Cillian stands, his green eyes lancing into me as he extends a hand across his desk.

“I’ll have my people tell you how to send the funds.”

THE REST of my meeting with Cillian takes all of five minutes, considering all it entails is hammering out a few more details of my protection.

But even as we are negotiating the terms of my own safety, my mind is only halfway present.

The other half is firmly dwelling on *him*.

Adrian.

When I step out of the meeting, I’m fully expecting Adrian to be waiting in the hallway, knives out and teeth bared. This may be Cillian’s domain—and it *is* his domain—but it’s pretty obvious that Adrian doesn’t give a single flying fuck about whose domain is whose.

But he’s not there. Knives are not waiting for me. It leaves me swirling in a confusing vortex of disappointment mixed with relief.

Was I *expecting* to find him out here? Or was I hoping? The thought sours in my stomach as my brow furrows deeply.

Why would I *hope* for him to be here? Or anywhere? I shouldn't wish to be in Adrian's presence at all after his coldness, and his darkness.

After what he did to me.

To us.

Outside The Weeping Banshee, I'm still a swirling mix of emotions. And I'm still glancing around, expecting, or—God fucking help me—*hoping* that he's out here, ready to pounce.

But he's not.

And I hate how empty that makes me feel.

THE NOW-FAMILIAR DOORMAN at the Dorchester Hotel greets me as he opens the front doors for me. Across the lobby, I step into the gilded private elevator and punch the button for my suite. The doors begin to close, and slowly I feel my shoulders unclench as my breath slowly exhales through my lips—

Until a hand jams between the doors, stopping them before they can shut completely.

Strong, tattooed fingers curl menacingly around the doors, wrenching them back open. My face pales. My heart thuds. And suddenly, there before me, stands Adrian.

I shiver as he steps inside, staring at me coldly and saying nothing as the doors slowly begin to close again behind him.

I swallow thickly.

“No, Adrian.”

Then the door shuts with a click, and the elevator begins to rise.

Still, he says nothing. All he does is stare at me with that lethally cold hatred in his eyes until the silence suffocating us threatens to swallow me whole.

And then, just when I don't think I can stand another millisecond and I'm sure I'm going to scream or explode from the tension crackling through the tiny elevator, Adrian's hand juts out and his index finger jams the stop button.

My heart jolts as the elevator stops cold. I turn to him, swallowing thickly.

"Adrian..."

What the *fuck*, Celeste," he snarls. "I mean what the *fuck*?"

"*What* it is, is that you wouldn't help me," I snarl back. "I know you made damn sure Alfie wouldn't either. So—"

"So *why are you here?!*" He roars, surging into me, choking the breath from my lungs as his strong fingers wrap around my throat. The explosive response arrests me, and I gasp as he backs me into the golden, mirrored wall of the elevator.

Adrian looms over me, pinning me tight and drowning me in his wrath.

But through it all, I find my voice.

"*Screw you.*"

I shove at him, but he grabs my wrists and slams them back, caging me against the wall. Hissing, I jerk my knee up. But he twists to the side and slams his hip against me, pinning my thigh against the wall.

"*Don't,*" he rasps.

"Don't what?" I snap back. "Don't stop the Cross family line right here and now with a knee to your balls?"

He smiles grimly.

“You’re *not* working with Cillian Kildare.”

“You’re right, I’m not. I’m merely sourcing protection from him.”

“You’re not doing that either, Celeste,” he snarls.

My eyes narrow. “You don’t get to have a say in that. Actually, you don’t get to have a say in *any* part of my—”

“Cillian Kildare is a sadistic sociopath.”

“I’m surprised you don’t hang out together, then.”

His lips curl venomously.

“You’re not listening to me.”

“You’re absolutely correct, asshole. I’m not!”

“Celeste, you’re not—”

“I need *help*, Adrian!” I scream.

The sound echoes in the golden metallic chamber of the elevator. I shake, my shoulders heaving as I glare at him.

“And you wouldn’t give it to me, so I found it elsewhere. Exactly as you said, *your highness*,” I sneer.

Adrian’s face darkens.

“I don’t help liars.”

“I’m not a liar. *Fuck you.*”

“Oh? Why don’t we start with the fact that Amir and Nasser aren’t fucking dead.”

I stare at him.

“You’re insane.”

“No, I’m thorough. And unlike the boy you had twisted around your finger four years ago, I don’t take the bullshit that cascades from your mouth at face value anymore.”

I wince at his words.

“So, yes, I looked into it, Celeste. And surprise-fucking-surprise, they’re both still very much alive.”

“That isn’t true.”

His eyes gleam maliciously as he leans close, sucking the air from my lungs.

“Let me get this through your head. I don’t believe a *word* that comes out of your mouth, Celeste.”

“And let me get through this through *your* egomaniacal head, *Adrian*,” I spit. “I hate you.”

His lips curl into a sneer.

“You used to sing a very different tune.”

“I also used to be eighteen fucking years old!” I snap. “And I used to think I was the only one!”

His face hardens.

“Excuse me?”

I shake my head, my eyes dropping away.

“Forget it.”

“No. What the fuck are you talking—”

“I’m not talking about anything that matters, because it’s dead and buried and burned and in the past. Like everything about us, Adrian.”

“*Everything?*” He growls.

I gasp as he suddenly draws close—so close that his body pins mine to the wall behind me. So close that the heat of his skin throbs against me, and so close that the dark aura around him threatens to consume me whole.

“Excuse me?” I stammer.

“You never answered my question before.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“If we’re talking about things that are long buried or things that are still very much in front of us,” he breathes, “I want an answer.”

“To *what*.”

His eyes turn the color of a furious ocean.

“I want to know if you’ve spent the last four years utterly frustrated and unsatisfied sexually. If it was any small comfort to pretend Amir’s I’m-sure-pathetic attempts at giving you pleasure were *me* fucking you, like I know that dirty fucking girl inside of you truly wanted.”

A ball of forbidden darkness pools and throbs in my core as my mouth falls open.

“You—you can’t talk to me like—”

“I can, actually. And the thing is, Celeste...”

He leans close, captivating me with his fierce, vicious eyes and the dark, sultry tone of his voice.

“The thing is, I know for a *fact* that you fucking love it when I talk to you like this.”

I’m numb, a growing heat building under my skin as my core turns to liquid fire.

“I do not—”

“Like the dirty girl you are.”

I swallow thickly, shivering as he moves closer.

“Like a *whore*.”

My eyes flash.

“*Fuck you*.”

“Like my personal little fuck toy.”

Goddammit, why is this asshole turning me on by talking to me like I’m a fucking streetwalker?

I know why.

It’s because this game is rigged. And he *knows me*. Just like he knows precisely that speaking to me like this will turn me to putty.

Fucking bastard.

“I’m not that girl anymore,” I snap.

“No shit. But some things never change, Celeste.”

I glare at him.

“*Everything* has changed when it comes to you and—”

“Tell me, little liar,” he growls. “Do your nipples still turn that darker shade of pink when you need to get fucked? Has that changed?”

My face turns to pure fire.

“*You—!*”

“I guess they still do,” he smirks. “And do you still squeeze your thighs together like a desperate little whore when you’re especially achy for me to bend you over the nearest *anything* and fuck you senseless until you scream my name?”

My jaw drops, and the ball of heat in my core begins to melt and drip like honey through my system. Adrian glances down, and I wince.

My thighs are clenched.

Tightly.

Fuck.

Adrian smirks cruelly, and his fingers tighten around my neck a touch more, sending this horrible thrilling sensation through me and making every nerve in my body howl with excitement and desire.

He leans close, and I bite my lip as his warm breath brushes my earlobe.

“Are you still a dripping wet, messy little girl for me whenever I even touch you?”

My eyes snap to his, fury surging in them.

“Fuck. Y—”

His hand releases my wrist and suddenly jams between my thighs. My eyes bulge when he brings it right up under my skirt. And in one motion, before I can even grasp what he’s doing, or scream, or stop him, or hit him, or *anything*, Adrian’s yanking my soaking wet panties to the side, and sinking two fingers deep into my slick, dripping wet pussy.

“*Adrian—*”

He curls them, and instead of cursing his name or screaming at him...

I moan.

I fucking *moan*. And the only thing that makes it worse is the low, smug chuckle in my ear.

“Lots of things have changed, Celeste. But some things never do.”

“Fuck...you...”

I struggle to make words as he starts to fuck his fingers in and out of me. His palm grinds against my clit, making my thighs shake as my throat opens and closes.

“*Exactly* the same,” he growls deeply. “Still such a messy, greedy little slut for me.”

I whimper, chewing on my lip as my traitorous hips begin to rock against him.

“You’re a fucking bastard.”

“And you’re a lying little whore.”

Fury flashes in my eyes before his breath teases again over my ear.

“But you’re *my* lying little whore, Celeste. Always were, always will be—”

I shove at him, but he’s stronger. Adrian pins me to the wall, and suddenly, a mix of aching need and dark desire explodes through my core as his fingers tighten on my neck. The ones between my legs curl harder, faster, stroking my g-spot incessantly as the world blurs at the edges.

My mouth hangs open and my body shakes as my eyes roll back in my head.

“You love when I treat you like my little slut,” he purrs into my ear.

“I hate you.”

He starts to finger fuck me harder, faster. And everything begins to crumble.

“Get the fuck...away from me...Adrian—”

“The sooner your messy little pussy comes all over my fingers, Celeste, the sooner I will.”

I choke on a moan, writhing in pleasure under his touch.

“What—why—”

“I’m proving a point,” he snarls. “Now stop talking, open your legs, and fucking come for me like a good girl.”

“I...hate—”

“*Lies,*” he rasps into my ear. “Now shut up and come for me. *Now.*”

His teeth sink into my earlobe sharply, just as his fingers stroke my g-spot perfectly. His palm grinds against my clit, and suddenly, I’m shattering for him.

I bite my lip so hard I taste coppery blood as I orgasm around his hand. I can feel my pussy clenching and wringing his fingers as I spasm and shake, shuddering around him as my lungs scream for air.

And then, just as I’m coming down, he releases me.

His hand drops from my neck.

His fingers stroke once more in and out of me, before they slide out from between my legs.

I watch, horrified, more turned on than I’ve been in *years*, as he brings his glistening, sticky fingers to his mouth, and wraps his lips around them.

His eyes hold mine wickedly as he slowly licks them clean. Then, before I can stop him, his hand shoves back under my skirt and inside my panties to sink deep into my quivering pussy again.

“*Adrian...*”

“You might hate me, Celeste,” he growls. “But your pussy is head over fucking heels for me.”

“You asshole—”

I moan as he strokes my g-spot again, and I hate that I whimper in protest when he withdraws his fingers. He brings them up again, wet and glistening, but this time, they don’t go to his own mouth.

This time, they hover in front of *my* lips.

“Open.”

My face heats, and I stare at him.

“Adrian—”

“Open your pretty mouth and lick your cum off my fingers while you tell me you still hate me, Celeste.”

He leans close, his sinful lips right against my ear.

“I want you to taste your lies.”

I start to shake my head.

“Open. Your. Fucking. Mouth. Slut.”

And I do.

It’s not that I’m scared. It’s not that I think he’ll hurt me or something if I don’t.

It’s just that I’m quite suddenly powerless, like I always have been with him. It’s my inability to stop the dark, depraved lust that surges inside me whenever he’s around. To say no to my twisted desires and fucked up needs...

And so I open my lips and whimper. His finger slides inside.

“*Suck.*”

I do, shivering and throbbing with horrible heat and desire as my tongue swirls over his finger, tasting my own sweetness on it.

Slowly, he slips it out of my mouth. He smirks as he steps back, and I don't even realize he's hit the button for my floor again until the elevator starts to rise once more.

I stand there on wobbly, shaking legs, my mouth still hanging open, shocked and appalled at myself.

But also swimming in a haze of desire.

Adrian straightens his tie, and I suddenly realize I'm slumped against the wall with the front of my skirt tucked into my stretched, soaked panties, and my hair disheveled as fuck.

I blush, quickly fixing everything as the elevator comes to a smooth stop. The doors open, and Adrian turns to me.

"I believe this is where you get off?"



I'M PANTING and shaking everywhere, trembling as the door closes between us. And suddenly, I'm alone in the hallway.

My mouth opens, but no air seems to reach my lungs, and it feels like I'm in free-fall. My skin prickles to goosebumps as I slowly back away from the elevator doors, as if they might suddenly open again.

As if he might suddenly charge out and touch me again.

It's not as if I'm backing away from that. It's just that I'm preparing myself. Because a deep, dark, desperate part of me *wants* there to be a round two.

When my back hits the wall opposite the elevator doors, the touch is like a wake-up call. I blink, shivering, finally able to suck in oxygen.

I slump against the wall and my hands slide over my stomach as if to clutch the dark ball of twisted energy swirling within my core.

What the fuck was that?

A tremor runs through me. Lasciviously. Hauntingly. For a dark, flickering moment, I replay the motion of Adrian casually and boldly sliding his hand under my skirt. Touching me; sliding his fingers into me.

Making me come *so fucking hard*.

Was that...?

Yes.

Yes, it was consensual, that is. No, he didn't ask permission. But we both know he didn't have to, even if part of me wants to invent a "no" in my head that certainly wasn't there.

I swallow again, heat spreading over my skin like wildfire as I try and process what just happened. I look down at myself, my face heating even hotter as I see the disheveled state he got me into. I adjust my clothes, fixing a button that somehow managed to come undone, pushing the wild strands of hair back from my face.

I adjust my skirt and reach beneath. My face burns even hotter as I adjust my panties.

Yeah, I need to change.

And shower.

And possibly call a therapist.

I take—or at least attempt to take—a deep, calming breath. I turn towards the door to my suite but stop at the gilded mirror hanging on the wall just outside of it. I pause to fix my hair and my clothes once more, all the while carefully avoiding looking into my own eyes.

But then, of course, I break. And when I do catch my reflection and finally look into my own soul, what I see there scares me.

It's not fear. Not anger about what just happened.

It's *want*, and desire.

And it's the fact that I want more of that and want more of *him* that scares me the most.

Shivering, I turn and use the key card to open the door. I step inside and force a smile when I see Adele sitting on the couch across the living room with Dahlia in her lap.

“Hey!”

Something's wrong. Adele's pale and unsmiling. And the usually highly animated three-year-old on her lap is eerily still, quiet, and equally pale.

My brows knit.

“Is everything oka—”

I gasp as I catch sight of the man out of the corner of my eye. Fear sinks its claws into my heart, and with a gasp, I whirl, bolting as the man steps out of my peripheral vision.

Alarm bells blare in my head as I rush for the kitchen. Where there are knives, and heavy pans...things I can defend us with.

“Celeste, *STOP.*”

The man's voice booms from behind me.

“I'm MI6, Ms. Margaux!”

I freeze at the deep, commanding voice, not to mention the very official-sounding tone.

“You're going to want to think twice before going for any blunt or sharp objects. I'm just here to talk.”

A cold sensation creeps up my spine. I turn to glance at a terrified Adele and Dahlia before dragging my gaze to the man standing between us.

He's large and built, probably in his late forties, with thinning, greying hair, a clean-shaven jaw, and every mark of someone

in a government position like an agent for MI6, Britain's version of the CIA.

"Now, Ms.—"

"Do you have an ID badge?"

The man smirks, arching a brow.

"What do you think?"

"I think this isn't a James Bond movie, and I think if you work for the government you carry government ID, and I think I'd like to see it."

I swallow, standing taller.

"I'd also like to know how it is you got inside my hotel room without my permission."

The man smiles thinly.

"I was invited inside."

Adele pipes up. "That isn't—"

I glance over to see her sitting white-faced, her mouth snapping shut after just those two words. Then she shakes her head side to side.

I turn and glare at the man standing across the room from me.

"I'm guessing we have different definitions of the word *invited*. And I'm going to need to see some ID, or you'll find out exactly how many blunt and sharp objects I have in that kitchen."

The man smiles, sighing as he reaches into his jacket.

"Easy," he growls.

He pulls out a very official-looking black leather wallet and flips it open, revealing an even more official-looking white ID

with a gold embossed emblem and “Agent Preston Caldwell” written across it.

Shit. In some fucked up way, I was almost hoping he would be a fake, even if that meant he was an assassin. Because fake is something I can run from, or even maybe stand my ground against.

Neither of which I can with an *actual* government agent.

I don’t know why he’s here. But this can’t be a good thing, and I’m guessing it has something to do with, say, some of the current facets of my life.

“Satisfied?”

There’s a smugness to the glint in his eye. I swallow, pursing my lips.

“Fine.”

“Wonderful. Now, Ms. Margaux...”

His lips curl.

“Or is it Mrs. El-Sayed?”

I shiver as his brow arches higher.

Or—pardon me—is it Mrs. *Cross*?”

When my face pales, he smiles even wider.

“You can understand my confusion, Celeste.”

“What do you want?” I mutter.

“A moment of your time, nothing more.”

I glance over at Adele and Dahlia.

“I’m not here for them,” Agent Caldwell murmurs quietly.

“Then let them go.”

“I’m not keeping them.”

I glance at Adele, who stands quickly with Dahlia in her arms.

“*Chambre?*”

“*Yes. Bedroom,*” I whisper hoarsely at her before mouthing “lock it”. She nods back, glancing nervously at Agent Caldwell, then back at me before her arms tighten around her daughter and she rushes down the hall.

When we’re alone, I swallow once again as I attempt to stare down my uninvited guest.

“What do you want, Mr. Caldwell?”

“Agent.” He shrugs. “Semantics, I know. But doctors don’t go through medical school to be called Mr. or Mrs., and agents don’t go through years of military and field training to be called the same.”

I roll my eyes. “Fine, *Agent* Caldwell. Why the fuck are you in my hotel room?”

He starts to chuckle.

“Is something amusing?”

“Indeed,” he sighs, looking around the room before focusing back on me.

“What I’m amused by, Celeste, is the dreadful state your life must be in, that my simply being here doesn’t narrow it down enough for you to guess what the reason is.”

I tense, trembling.

“Well, why don’t you help me narrow it down?”

“While I am curious about what other bullshit you might be embroiled in,” he grunts, “I’m here because of Adrian Cross.”

I stiffen for a second before I lift a shoulder casually.

“I’m sorry, Adrian who?”

Agent Caldwell starts to laugh.

“Celeste, I’m not a tabloid newspaper, and I’m not some old friend recognizing you on the street,”

I stiffen as he takes a step towards me, his eyes narrowing.

“I am *MI-fucking-six*, of Her Majesty’s government. So the sooner you stop playing fucking games with me about your involvement with Adrian Cross, the sooner we can get to the good part.”

“And what, may I ask, is the good part?”

“The part where I fuck off out of here and let you get on with your life, Celeste. Or perhaps the part where I can actually help you with the...shall we say *troubles* that seem to be following you about these days.”

“What troubles?”

He rolls his eyes.

“You can continue to play it that way if you like. Just as you can continue to traipse around the city asking every single wannabe gangster low-life that lives here for protection.”

My heart tenses.

“But we both know what’s coming for you is an inevitability. I know you think you have a runway, Celeste. But I also know it’s running out faster than you want it to.”

My lips purse, my eyes narrowing at him.

“What I can offer you, Celeste, is more of it.”

“More of what?”

“Runway.” He shrugs. “Or perhaps rope to hang yourself with. But either way, what I’m offering is protection, at least in the immediate short-term.”

My pulse thuds as I swallow.

“Why would MI6 want to protect me?”

“I don’t think MI6 much gives a fuck about you, to be honest,” he shrugs. “But we *do* give a very large fuck about Adrian Cross. And your involvement with him and your history with him is, or at least could be...beneficial to us.”

What the hell does MI6 want with Adrian?

“We both know what he is, Celeste. But it goes deeper than you think. He’s put his hands in too many pies he shouldn’t have, especially when it comes to countries and organizations he *should not* be dealing with. And it’s not something we can ignore anymore.”

I clear my throat, forcing myself to stand tall as he glares malevolently at me.

“I can’t help you.”

Agent Caldwell’s brow arches.

“Beg your pardon?”

“It sounds like you’re pitching me a deal. I’m politely declining.”

His eyes turn beady. “You’re going to want to rethink—”

“I have no knowledge of any danger surrounding me, or anyone I know. I’m not meeting with any gangsters. And whatever you’re proposing, I don’t want any part of it. Just like I don’t want any part of Adrian Cross’s life. So, no, Agent Caldwell, I don’t think there’s anything I *want* to rethink.”

The room goes quiet. He smiles coldly.

“I’d invite you to choose your next words very carefully, Celeste.”

I smile even more coldly.

“Congratulations. You’re aware of my history with Adrian Cross as a teenager. I was an idiot and I got caught up in something, like idiot teenagers do. *That was it.*”

“You married the man.”

I shiver.

“Agent Caldwell, that was a very long time ago. So, are we done here?”

He sighs, glancing around.

“Not quite. There is one more thing we need to talk to you about. It’s just...”

His gaze drifts down the hall towards the bedrooms.

“You leave them the *hell* out of this,” I hiss dangerously.

He turns back, smiling amicably.

That wasn’t what I meant, Celeste. What I was going for is, is there someplace we can talk that’s more private? This is... sensitive.”

He glances past me.

“How about out there?”

He nods his chin to the glass sliding door that leads to the outdoor patio off the suite.

I shrug. “Fine. But the answer is still going to be no, whatever you’re asking.”

He smiles. “Please. I think we got off on the wrong foot. Just hear me out, all right?”

“Fine.”

I walk over and step outside to the veranda the balcony. Agent Caldwell follows, sliding the glass door shut behind him. When he turns to me, I shrug.

“Well, what is—”

Adrenaline surges and I gasp as he rushes me in a nanosecond. I jolt as he crosses the few feet between us, and I try to scream, but my cry is strangled as his hand wraps tight around my throat.

It’s the second time this has happened to me today. But this time, it brings naked fear, and fury.

I kick and thrash. But the man is much bigger than me. He slams me back into the railing of the balcony and then he keeps pushing me backwards. Horror explodes up into my throat as he literally lifts me up and over the edge, until I’m dangling in midair with one foot barely on the railing and the other one and both arms flailing.

The world blurs and my stomach lurches as my eyes drop the dizzying eighteen floors to the street below.

“Allow me to be *much* clearer than I’ve been so far, Celeste,” Agent Caldwell snarls with a dead coldness to his voice.

“You’re just as dirty as Cross. And don’t think for a second I don’t know everything about your history with him, with the El-Sayeds, all of it. So let me be *abundantly* clear about this. You’re going to be my inside mole with him.”

I started to shake my head, but I choke as his fingers tighten.

“This isn’t a negotiation, and that wasn’t a question. You’re going to get cozy with him again. You’re going to get me everything I want on him. In return, I’ll make sure the same bastards who murdered Amir and his father don’t cut you into little bits in front of that little girl in there before doing the exact same thing to her.”

I scream out a wrenching, howling scream, but it emerges muffled against his hand. I flail, but it’s useless and he knows it, by the smile on his face. He extends his arm some more, and I choke again as he dangles me even further out into the empty air.

“Do I make myself clear?”

All I can do is nod. Literally.

Agent Caldwell holds my terrified gaze with his cold one before he nods abruptly. With a yank, I’m flung back onto the right side of the balcony, where I collapse onto my hands and knees on the tiled ground.

I gasp for air and shake with pure adrenaline and fear. My eyes blink, and I shiver as I turn to see his feet on the ground next to me.

“I’ll be in touch. You’re in a bigger mess than you realize, and I am the only way out for you, Adele, and Dahlia. I’ll take your silence as an agreement.”

I watch his feet retreat to the glass door, but then he pauses.

“Get me what I want, Celeste. And you might just make it out of this thing alive.”



IT'S MIDNIGHT. Under the gloom of a dim London moon, I sink deeper into the shadows.

He should be out any minute.

Nobody knows I'm here. Not even Cade. If he did, he'd probably tell me what a shit idea this is. But honestly, he wouldn't have to tell me.

I already know this is a bad idea.

Just being here could erase years of an uneasy truce. But I'm past the realm of reason right now. Past caring, and using sound, good judgment.

Because that's what Celeste does to me.

It's what she did to me four years ago, and what she still does today.

She unbalances me and shakes the ground beneath my feet. She cages me in and brings out a beast in me.

She turns me into a fucking animal. An animal that tonight is on the prowl.

This is a string I needed to follow to its end. I still haven't quite figured out what the hell Celeste is doing, or what her

angle is with her lies and her bullshit. But I do know one thing for sure:

She is not—I repeat, *not*—going to be working closely with Cillian Kildare.

Or anyone else, for that matter.

That in itself stirs up a confusing mix of emotions. I tell myself I'm blocking this deal, same as I'll block any deal she makes with fucking any other man in the city, as a means of screwing her over. As a means of throwing my weight around and watching her fail, whatever her plans may be.

But even I know that's a lie. A cover. A veil I've attempted to pull over even my own eyes to hide the truth.

The simple fact is: she was *mine*. And even four years on, wherever life has taken her, I don't consider that I've ever lost her at all.

I've just lost my grip on her.

And that's the part I'm trying to hide, even from myself: the fact that Celeste *is* always and *will* always be fucking *mine*.

It's been just shy of a week since our...encounter.

Since I lost control.

Since I touched and tasted her again, and felt her defiance and yet also her raw need. Keeping away from her since then has tested my self-control to a degree I'm not sure I've ever experienced.

I've broken twice, emerging from a sort of fugue state only find myself in front of the doors to the Dorchester Hotel. Or standing across the street in Hyde Park, in the shadows, looking up at the lights of her suite.

But that's as far as I've gone. Because I can't go back there. I *won't* go back there. Because as much as I want to remind her who she belongs to, or as much as I want to leave my mark on her for anyone else who dares even look at her to see?

I have to remind myself that Hurricane Celeste once almost destroyed my world.

I won't, can't, get sucked into that bullshit again.

Across the street, the door behind the trucking depot opens. I watch as the man with dark hair, green eyes, lethally sharp cheekbones, and a cigarette between his sculpted lips steps out into the darkness.

Precisely on time.

How is it that I know that tonight of all nights, of anywhere in this fucking city, that this is where I'd find Cillian?

Because he may be a chaotic psychopath, but Cillian is also a man of habit. And just like I know that he plays his poker here tonight in the back room of the Eastham Trucking depot, I also know that after he's had a good hand, he allows himself a break.

When he's up, he doesn't give his enemies even the flicker of a chance of taking their money back. He gets up, takes a break, and makes them wait. Which gets them even more anxious and throws them even more off for the next hand, where he'll beat them again.

Well, this time, *he'll* be the one returning to the table thrown off his game.

Or in a fucking body bag, if he doesn't fucking listen to what I'm about to tell him.

Cillian looks up at the sound of my footsteps. His eyes darken for a moment before he realizes who it is. Slowly, I watch his chiseled cheekbones lift as that black, maniacal smile spreads across his face. He takes a great slow drag on the smoke between his lips before plucking it out with his fingers and exhaling slowly.

“If you’re looking to buy in, Cross, it’s ten grand to sit at the table. Another five to—”

“I’m going to say this one time, Cillian,” I growl quietly, stepping closer to him.

He sighs, rolling his eyes.

“Adrian, Adrian, Adrian. Are we really going to talk business right now?”

“No, we’re not. This isn’t business, and there isn’t going to be any haggling or an arrangement. This is me telling you, and you listening. Period. Got it?”

He takes another drag wordlessly. Cillian is not a man who’s used to or enjoys being told what to do.

Celeste is right: maybe he and I are more alike than I care to admit.

“You’re interrupting my private life, Adrian.”

“None of us have private lives, Cillian.”

He glares at me.

“Well, Adrian, right now I’m about seven drinks deep and I’m well up at the poker table in there. If you’d like to talk, pony up the cash and have a seat and I’ll take your money as well. If that’s not why you’re here, I’m leaving.”

He turns for the door. But my arm jerks out, my hand gripping his shoulder harshly and pulling him back. He whirls with a dangerous shadow crossing his face, the green of his eyes glinting.

“I would invite you *not* to touch me again, Cross,” he growls thickly.

“Your deal with Rutger Capital is being cancelled. They’re no longer interested.”

His face stays completely neutral. There’s a reason Cillian is a formidable poker player.

“Has it, now?”

“It has.”

“I think an email might have been an easier way of sending that message.”

“Maybe they just wanted that personal touch.”

He rolls his eyes.

“This is because you leaned on Higgins, I assume?”

“The opposite. He asked me to make *you* go away.”

“That’s asking a lot.”

“I’m not asking shit. I’m telling you.”

Cillian toys with the cigarette in his fingers.

I smile thinly.

“There’s more.”

“Well, by all means, Adrian. I’m all ears.”

“Your deal with Celeste?” I shake my head. “That’s over. If she’s paid you any money, return it. If not, simply walk away. Either way, the business is done.”

Cillian is silent for a moment as he rolls the cigarette between his fingertips. He eyes me curiously with a slight hint of amusement.

“What’s your story with her, Adrian?”

I shake my head.

“That’s none of your concern.”

He laughs quietly.

“But it *is* my concern. Or it will be, when she writes the nice fat check I’m expecting next week. See, after that, her protection and any interference from anyone *literally* becomes my business.”

He eyes me again, but I don’t budge an inch. And my face reveals nothing.

Cillian laughs to himself.

“Fine. You don’t have to tell me. Do you honestly think I wouldn’t have dug into this on my own time, anyway?”

He smirks as my jaw clenches.

“As if I wouldn’t find out that your late father once drove cars for *her* father?”

My pulse starts to thud in my ears. Cillian just grins, rubbing his hands together.

“How deliciously soap opera, Cross. Is that what this is all about? A piece of ass you had years ago?”

My jaw clenches dangerously.

“I’d watch my next words very carefully if I were you, Cillian.”

He chuckles.

“Adrian, you devil! So, let me guess. Jean Margaux’s little princess fell for the son of the help, and you got to get your dick wet in some tight French puss—”

My fist connects with his face, knocking the cigarette from his lips and making him grunt as his head whips to the side. I snarl, seeing blood and blackness as I advance on him.

Suddenly he’s whirling back to me, and the cold metal of a gun is pressed between my eyes.

I go still. So does Cillian, and our eyes lock on the barrel of the gun in his hands.

“I’ll give you that one, Cross,” he murmurs. “You got that one hit in, because I’m man enough to admit that perhaps I crossed a line there.”

My eyes narrow to mere slits.

“Perhaps.”

He makes a tsking sound, slowly shaking his head.

“There won’t be another, though. Not without your head painting the side of this wall. Is that clear?”

I don’t say shit. I just glare death at him.

Cillian eyes me right back before he sighs. Slowly, he lifts the barrel away, lowering the hammer and flicking the safety before slipping the gun back into his jacket.

We glare at each other as he slowly steps back from me.

“If you still care about this girl—”

“I don’t give a shit about her.”

Cillian shrugs, spreading his hands in appeal as he steps backwards towards the back door.

“Then why are we even having this conversation, Adrian?” He eyes me. “Get your shit together. Get your house in order. And figure out what the fuck you actually want. This is just business, Adrian. Tend to yours, I’ll tend to mine.”

He reaches behind, opens the back door, and fires his parting shot.

“And if you come after me again, I’ll put a fucking bullet between your eyes.”



COMMON SENSE WOULD SUGGEST that in times of conflict, when I'm closer to war and bloodshed than I've ever been as the head of the Cross organization, I shouldn't have the time or fucks to give about drinking and boxing with my friends.

The brutal reality, though, is that it's the exact opposite.

For the past four years, it would seem that the more stressed I am, the closer I am to burn out, or the harsher I'm pushing myself to scramble to the top of the pile, the more I need these Fridays.

The more we *all* need the kings and villains.

When I'm wound this tight, a practice bag won't do. I need the adrenaline rush of facing another man in a ring, even a friend, and going in for the kill.

Metaphorically speaking, of course.

My world is currently very much out of alignment in a way that drives me fucking crazy. And even though I've spent the last week exclusively dwelling on thoughts that involve slowly peeling, if not cutting, the clothes from Celeste's body and fucking her like a savage while I mark every inch of her skin with my teeth—which drive me *equally* fucking crazy....

I fucking need this.

I skip dinner with Thomas, so I'm alone when I walk into the Red Dragon for fight night and see Kristoff standing at the bar grabbing a pint. He glances up, and our eyes meet. I grimace.

Fuck, I never actually called him and apologized for going Berserker on his ass last time.

I clear my throat awkwardly as I approach him.

"Look, Kris—"

He shakes his head. "Don't worry about it, Cross," he grunts with his slightly Russian accented, deep voice.

"I was out of line last week."

He shrugs. "We're all out of line sometimes, Adrian. Or at least, out of alignment." He grins. "I'm fairly sure that's why we're all friends."

"Still. That was..." I frown. "Unwarranted."

Kristoff shrugs again.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Adrian, but I've had much worse."

He grins that crooked, roguish smile of his that always manages to make me grin too.

"No hard feelings, then?"

He smirks. "Buy me a couple of vodkas and let me get in a couple of hits next round? Sure. Then we're even."

I chuckle. "I can do that."

We each knock back two shots of vodka to settle whatever bad blood there might be between us, even though we both know there's never *gonna* be bad blood between us, between any of us. In fact, there's a good chance I'm still functioning four

years into having the weight of the entire Cross empire on my shoulders precisely because of these other men.

Pints in hand, we head through the door and down the stairs. Thomas is already here, and he grins when he sees Kris and I entering together. Noel does the same, crossing the room with a drink as he glances between us.

“Everyone kiss and make up?”

Kristoff rolls his eyes and raises his fist.

“Got a kiss for you here, Ransom. And I think we’re up first. You ready to dance or do you need to stretch first?”

Noel grins. “My, my. So eager to get the shit kicked out of you, Zima?”

The door behind us to the stairs opens and closes, and Oliver walks down to join us.

Now, we’re all here.

Let the catharsis begin.

NOEL ENDS up being the last man standing. But it’s a razor-thin win over Thomas.

When we’re finished, the eight of us collapse onto the barstools in the corner set up by the fully-stocked bar and the smattering of chairs around the few circular tables. Noel pours a round for everyone, and we all clink glasses, a toast to our collective ass-kicking and this weird bond we all have. I glance over and smirk as I tip my glass to Kristoff.

I didn’t have to “let him” get a couple of hits in at all tonight. The fucker came at me like a hurricane. Not that I don’t

deserve it, after going off the deep end last time.

“That was harder than I thought it would be,” he grunts, grinning at me. “I’d ask what the fuck lit that fire in you *this time*, but I’m not sure I want to know.”

I take a sip of my drink and remain silent.

No, he doesn’t.

Again, it’s not as if I keep things from anyone here. But Celeste is a different story. And besides Thomas and Noel, news of her being back in my world hasn’t exactly spread to the rest of the group.

There’s no need for it to.

I still don’t really know what my goal is here, beyond tearing down any of her plans—whatever they may be—involving going into business with Alfie, or Cillian, or fucking anyone in this city.

Anyway. Whatever the fuck she’s up to, she’ll soon realize I’m her only avenue in this city. And when she’s forced to come to me again, I’ll have a smile on my face when I say no a second time.

The problem is, my “no” seems to be attached to an inability to stay away from her. An inability to stop thinking of her. An inability to *not* replay the moans falling from her lips as I sank my fingers deep into her greedy, slippery little pussy, until my cock felt like it was going to explode.

And I damn well nearly *did* flip her around and fuck her like a maniac against the same gold-plated elevator wall I’d just made her come against. Until my survival instinct kicked in.

Or reason.

Or whatever it was that cock-blocked myself.

Maybe it was just remembering that I'd danced into her orbit of bullshit once, and it cut me down. Maybe it was remembering that I'd held her in my arms once, and told her I loved her, and told her I'd give it all up for her.

And as it turns out, the whole thing was bullshit anyway. I was the man on the side. Her brief taste of the working class before she married some fucking Saudi billionaire's kid.

Fuck her. And fuck whatever bullshit she's trying to peddle me. Amir's not fucking dead, and neither is Nasser.

But whatever she thinks is going to happen between us most certainly is.

I glance over to where Lars is putting two stitches into Maddox's brow—sewing up a gash he himself put there in their round. A short while ago, they were coming at each other like rabid wolves. Now, they're clinking glasses together while one fixes the damage done to the other in the heat of the moment.

If only life outside of the ring down in this pub basement was the same. If only a little toast, a “good fight”, and a few stitches could mend the past.

But it can't.

Kristoff turns to talk to Oliver and Braddock, and Thomas plops down on a bar stool next to me.

“Feeling better?”

I shrug. “I'm fine, Thomas.”

“It's not going to help if I mention I'm always here to talk, is it?”

“It's not.” I smile as I shake my head. “But the effort is appreciated.”

Then I hear it.

“Amir El-Sayed.”

I stiffen, whirling around until my eyes land on Braddock, Kristoff, Oliver, and Noel at the table behind me.

Thomas glances at me.

“Adrian—”

“What did you just say?”

My voice is louder than I intend it to be, and it silences the room. The four of them turn to me nervously. They might not all know about hurricane Celeste slamming into me recently. But they know damn well who Amir is, and I *know* they know not to mention his name anywhere near me.

Oliver’s brow knits. “Adrian—”

His eyes dart past me, to Thomas.

“Do not look at him,” I hiss. “Look at *me*, Prince. What. Fucking. *About*. Amir El-Sayed?”

Oliver frowns into his glass. Braddock clears his throat.

“He’s dead, Adrian.”

I blink, my mind spinning.

“He...” I frown. “No. That’s impossible. I’d have heard.”

“It’s being kept under wraps,” Braddock rumbles in his deep, gravely tone. He holds up his phone. “I just got an email about it from a friend of mine who’s been freelancing at the law firm that handles Nasser’s legal needs. He’s dead too. Nasser, I mean. Both of them killed in accidents that look a whole lot like not actual accidents, if you get my meaning.”

Oh shit.

Oh fuck.

I stand abruptly.

“The whole firm is in panic mode, apparently. They and the board of Nasser’s company are trying to keep the lid on the whole thing, because, well, shit, there’s a lot of unknowns about what happens to that entire empire if they both—”

He frowns I storm across the room and start yanking on my shirt and jacket.

“Cross, where the fuck are you—”

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Noel silencing them all with a look. But I don’t have time for explanations. Or fear. Or regrets.

I don’t have time for anything except getting to Celeste as fast as I fucking can.



“MAMA! MAMA!”

Dahlia squeals, slipping out of my arms and hitting the ground with both feet before she bolts to Adele, leaving a trail of wet footprints across the hardwood floor. I grin as I grab the towel she’s just dropped on the ground and wrap it around my bikini bottoms, watching as she launches herself into her mother’s arms.

Adele laughs, toppling backwards with the force of her daughter slamming into her.

“*Je me rends!*” She laughs. “*Je me rends!*”

I surrender.

Mother and daughter giggle as Adele tosses Dahlia up in the air and catches her.

“Did you have a good swim?”

“I did a cannonballlll!” Dahlia squeals animatedly.

She pulls away from her mom and drops to the ground, rolling into her best cannonball shape with her eyes squeezed tightly shut. I laugh as Adele raises her eyes to me.

“Thank you,” she smiles.

“One day,” I raise a finger to her. “One day, I will teach you to swim, too.”

Adele doesn't swim. But she's been adamant that Dahlia learns and I've been all too happy to play instructor-slash-lifeguard-slash-playmate for my favorite three-year-old.

“How was the pool?” She laughs as Dahlia scampers past her towards her bedroom.

I know what she means. *Was it busy? Was there anyone who may have recognized you?*

I shake my head.

“Totally empty.”

Of course it was empty. I just took a three-year-old swimming at ten-thirty at night.

Adele and I are both more than slightly worried about Dahlia's current sleeping habits. But a late-night swim has I'm sure tuckered her out, and she'll be crashing like a rock any second now.

Adele smiles, turning to glance towards her daughter's room before looking back at me.

“I hope you don't mind, but I ordered room service again.”

“Perfect.”

“And more wine.”

“Even *more* perfect.”

She laughs. “Let me get the monster down while we wait.”

I nod. “I'm gonna go shower. Goodnight, little love!” I call down the hall.

“Night night, Auntie Celeste!” Dahlia yells back.

Laughing to myself, I pad barefoot down the hall towards the master bedroom. Inside, I peel off the wet bathing suit and wrap myself in a fluffy bathrobe. Before I turn on the shower, I head out to the balcony through the glass sliding doors next to my bed.

I shiver at the chill that creeps up my bare legs, but I like being out here. I chew my lip as I glance down, my finger hovering over the contact in my phone.

It's not exactly the emergency we've talked about. But the not knowing is killing me.

I have to know who's coming for me, and when.

I quickly dial Michelle's number. Two rings later, a woman's familiar, French-accented voice answers.

"Celeste?" She whispers quietly, her voice full of concern. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I'm sorry, Michelle. Nothing's wrong. I just..." I close my eyes.

"Celeste—"

"Michelle, I'm completely in the dark here."

She sighs heavily.

"Okay, okay," she murmurs quietly. "Wait a moment. I'll call you back on a much more secure line. Two minutes, Celeste."

Then she hangs up.

Michelle has a penchant for dramatics. But she's not so far off here.

Michelle is not only my lawyer, she's also my de facto spy within the El-Sayed family, since she works for the firm that handles all of Nasser and Amir's business dealings.

We first met four years ago, when Amir slipped her half a million Euros in cash to forge our marriage certificate. After that, with that kind of secret on the line, I guess we sort of became friends.

Two minutes later on the dot my phone rings. I answer quickly.

“Hey.”

“So, nothing’s wrong?”

“No, nothing at all. But...is there any word?”

Michelle’s been my eyes and ears while this whole thing has been unraveling around me. Neither of us knows who’s coming for me. And neither of us knows if that person or persons is inside the El-Sayed network. But if they are, Michelle will find out and be my warning bell.

She sighs into the phone.

“No, nothing I’ve picked up on. But you’re safe?”

“I am, yeah.”

“All of you?”

“All of us.”

She exhales. “Good. That’s good. Look, the short answer, Celeste, is that you’re okay. I’m plugged into as many channels as I can be, and if there’s a danger to you, it’s not internal. Not that Nasser didn’t have plenty of *external* enemies that you may have inherited,” she mutters under her breath. “May he rot.”

I smile wryly.

“Adele and Dahlia are okay?”

“They’re great. We’re all just sort of hanging on.”

“Listen, Celeste, I’m on it, okay? I’m on your side here. If something’s coming, at least if it’s coming from within the organization, you’ll be the first to know. From me.”

“Thank you, Michelle.”

“It’s my pleasure. You know that.”

I smile.

“What about you?” My mouth twists unhappily. “How are you doing?”

I didn’t know until a year or two after I met her. But years before—before me, and before he met and fell in love with Magda—Amir and Michelle had a short but intense secret relationship. She finally divulged it to me over a glass of wine once, and I remember feeling so heartbroken for her. It was clear she still had feelings for Amir, and she’d had to watch him fall in love with another woman. And then she’d had to forge his marriage documents to me.

“Oh, I’m...” she sighs. “I’m fine.”

“You know, if you ever want to talk about it...”

Michelle laughs quietly. “No. I’m okay, Celeste. Besides, I think deep down, I’ve always been much more attracted to bad boys than I have to rich boys.”

I grin. “Why not both?”

“Like you?”

I tense. There’s a chance that when I was tipsy I may have revealed my past with Adrian the same night she divulged her fling with Amir.

“Sorry. That was a joke.”

I relax a little. “I know.”

“It’s good to talk to you, Celeste. And I’m glad the three of you are doing okay. Call me any time?”

“I will. Thank you, Michelle.”

I hang up, sighing as I drop the phone onto the bed before flopping back onto it.

What the hell am I doing? The last month I’ve felt like I’ve been treading water until my legs threaten to fall off, and I’m still barely keeping my head above the surface.

Something has to give, or I need a break of some kind. Because Agent Caldwell wasn’t wrong.

I’m running out of time, and I’m running out of runway.

And while it’s comforting to hear there’s nothing coming for us from *within* the El-Sayed empire—at least not anything Michelle has detected—that’s still not saying much. The threat could be coming from anywhere.

Nasser was a universally-disliked man. Which means the forces that came after him, and came after Amir, are still out there and are now coming after me. But my plan of outlasting them until I have the money to fight back is quickly slipping through my fingers.

I groan as I sit up and slide off the bed. I pad back across the floor to the ensuite bathroom and crank the water on hot. Just before I slide in I decide to say goodnight one last time to my little swimming buddy.

I open the bathroom door and step back out into the bedroom.

Something stops me.

Chills me.

I tense, and it's one of those horrible moments where your brain doesn't quite grasp or process the reality of what is happening.

But there's nothing made up about the silhouette of a large man standing in the open sliding glass door to the balcony.

The silhouette of a man holding a knife.

Reality suddenly hits me like a bullet. I scream and whirl around, bolting back towards the bathroom. The footsteps behind me are heavy and fast. Another scream is torn from my throat as strong hands grab my hair and yank me to the ground.

I go sprawling, screaming again as a haggard man with a mustache leans over me, hatred and violence in his face.

He says nothing. He doesn't have to. The steel toe of his boot slamming into my ribs says it all. I scream, groaning and writhing, trying to curl into a ball as he kicks me again and again.

"Please, stop."

"Uh-uh, princess," he snarls. "You don't get to tap out yet."

Suddenly, he's yanking me over and the full weight of him slams down on my torso as he sits astride my stomach. His eyes drop to the barely-still-tied bathrobe, and a lascivious grin spreads across his face.

"Who says we can't have a little fun, eh?" he growls in a thick English accent.

He reaches for me, and I react. My knee slams up, catching him not quite in the balls, but close enough that he grunts and twists aside. I slam the full force of my forearm into his head,

catching him off guard and knocking him to the ground before I scramble to my feet.

I bolt to the door, but only make it two steps before something heavy hits the back of my head.

My legs stop working. My vision starts to fade. And slowly, I crumple to the floor to the sound of a grating, rasping, evil laugh.

To the crushing pressure of the man sitting astride my stomach again.

And the sound of a zipper and belt buckle being undone.

“Time to play, *Mrs. Cross.*”



ONCE AGAIN, this is a terrible fucking idea.

I'm alone. I have no backup. I'm not sure what I'm about to walk into, or even if I'm walking into anything at all. All of this is the polar fucking opposite of how I usually operate.

Over the last four years—first under Jonathan's tutelage, and then on my own—I've learned the hard way to survive this job and the world in which I now operate.

Attention to detail matters. Being prepared matters. Knowing what's behind the door before you kick it down with a gun drawn can mean the difference between walking back out of that room or bleeding out on the floor.

And yet, here I am rushing headlong into this with no fucking clue what I'm up against.

It's a terrible idea. And I'm being reckless. But goddammit, that's what this woman does to me. That's what she did to me four years ago, and it's apparently what she continues to do to me now, having come back into my world.

She shatters my rules.

She throws me off kilter.

She makes me forget who and what I am.

Four years ago, it almost meant walking away from everything. Even before my dad got sick, there was always a part of me that knew Ascot wouldn't be my future; that at some point, push would come to shove, and I'd find myself with my uncle rather than my father.

I knew that would break my father's heart a little. Most likely a lot. But I knew what was in my blood, and I *knew* the Cross table was where I belonged. I knew that's where I'd end up.

That is, until things changed with Celeste when I was twenty and she was eighteen, and after nearly sixteen years of being playmates, and friends, and confidants, it exploded into something so much more.

Something completely inevitable, and something both of us were powerless to stop.

A look that lingered too long. A delay in leaving a room. And then a kiss sixteen damn years in the making. Just one kiss, and I was fucking done. One kiss from that girl and I was ready to drop everything and walk away with zero regrets.

Until it all came crashing down and I realized, after my father died and Celeste shredded me down to the bone, where I was always meant to be.

Of course, when I get to the hotel, I don't go in guns blazing. I do a pass through the lobby with my eyes wide open, seeing if anything looks suspicious. When I find nothing there, I leave and make a detour around the back of the building.

I'm hoping to find nothing. I'm hoping this boils down to paranoia or an over-abundance of caution. But at the service entrance my eyes land on something that makes my teeth grind and my pulse quicken.

The “secure” back door that usually requires a keycard of some kind is propped open, held that way by a brick.

Yes, it could be an employee. Or maybe the maintenance guy, or one of the cooks who left the door open after heading out for a quick smoke break or something.

But the world I operate in doesn't have time for coulds or maybes.

I step into the kitchens, moving quickly to the back stairway. The VIP elevators will be a no-go without a guest keycard. So I swipe a maintenance card from someone's jacket hanging by the kitchen door and take the stairs instead.

I think back to what happened the other day, when I made her scream into my ear against the elevator wall.

Once again, the swirling maelstrom of emotions when it comes to Celeste assaults me like acid rain, twisting my mind. But I shake the feeling away as I take the stairs two at a time, gun in hand.

There's a voice inside of me that screams “What the fuck are you doing? Why do you care? Why are you doing this?” It's the same voice that rationalizes that if she stepped in shit or a trap, it's her own fault. It's her own fallout to deal with, and it doesn't concern me.

And yet, when it comes to Celeste, it *all* concerns me. Because all of her still is mine, four years on and four years after I should have burned the last of her from my system. Four years after I should have drowned myself in whatever drug, drink, or pussy would cut her out of my memory.

But nothing's changed. I might hate her. But she's still fucking *mine*.

She'll always be mine, and mine alone.

I pause outside the service stairwell to Celeste's floor. Cracking the door open, I slip out, moving to the corner of the hallway and glancing around it. And then I see him.

The man standing with one foot blocking the elevator door.

He's not an employee of the Dorchester Hotel. One, he's not dressed like a like a fucking Shriner monkey like the rest of the bellhops I saw in the lobby.

And two, I'm fairly certain that employees of the Dorchester Hotel don't carry Glockes.

My eyes slide to the other side of the hallway, and my pulse quickens: the door is ajar.

Crap. The guy is not working alone.

I move fast. He reacts quicker than I thought he would, but I'm still faster. A shot will alert whoever's inside that there's trouble out here, so instead I use the butt of my gun to hit the side of his head over and over, until his eyes roll back and blood leaks out of his ears.

Rest in hell, you piece of shit.

You see? This is what Celeste does to me. She brings this savageness out of me. She ignites an animalistic fury at the thought of anyone hurting her.

Even if I fucking hate her.

I'm approaching the door to the suite when I hear it.

A scream.

A scream that rips my heart in two and sends adrenaline roaring like napalm through my veins. After that, there's no stopping me. There could be fifty men behind this door with guns trained on it, and I wouldn't care.

As it happens, when I go crashing through, nothing greets me except the scream of a woman. Followed by the higher scream of...

Holy fuck.

I jolt, my vision glitching out. And my heart turns to ice as my eyes land on...*her*.

The girl.

Celeste's daughter.

She's clinging to a woman who must be her nanny, and both of them shriek and shy away from me, cowering behind the couch.

I don't have time for this. I don't have time to study the daughter from another man of the woman who was once mine. I don't have time even to process the hatred and the pain that slices into my heart, leaving it bleeding out onto the floor.

A second scream rips from behind a closed door. I don't think. I just move, fast and hard, and the door shatters under the weight of me.

The scene that is revealed before me turns me into a god of wrath.

Celeste is unconscious on the floor, her nakedness barely covered by a bathrobe. Instantly, my eyes go to the man—the fucking *dead cocksucker*—sitting astride her.

Leering at her unconscious body.

Reaching for her bathrobe.

Working his zipper down.

I don't even have time to bring the gun up. I just run at him, and I hit him harder than I've ever hit anything in my fucking

life. I hit him so hard, I feel the bone of his jaw shatter under my fist. He crumples to the ground.

Then I feel the sting of a blade.

Motherfucker.

This is what happens when I don't know what's in the room before I crash into it. I was so blinded by the piece of garbage sitting astride Celeste, about to do God-knows-what to her, that I missed something crucial, like the knife in his other hand.

I grunt, gritting my teeth and rising as I turn on him. The man's jaw is horribly askew, with blood trickling from his lips. But he's already up and bolting for the door.

I drop to my knees next to Celeste and put a finger on her neck.

She's alive.

Then I hear the wrenched scream through the shattered bedroom door, and I'm instantly up and running again.

In the main living room, the man with the broken jaw is moving towards the child and the nanny cowering behind the couch with a horrible glint in his eye. The blade he stabbed into my shoulder is still on the floor of the bedroom. Now, he's holding a gun.

Jesus. Another weapon I fucking missed.

He gurgles something, spitting blood and unable to form words as he lurches towards the woman and the child. But he doesn't need words to convey the murder in his eyes as he approaches them both.

And then, something happens.

The nanny who's been holding the little girl's face against her chest, so she can't see the monster approaching them, suddenly shatters. She screams an unholy, anguished cry I've never heard from a human being before.

And in one motion she whirls, shoving the girl face down onto the couch, grabbing a lamp from the side table, and lunging between the little girl and the savage with a gun. The brandished lamp is clearly a useless defense against his weapon.

But then suddenly, like a jolt of lightning slamming into me, something clicks.

Yes, I see the pure horror, terror, and fear in the woman's face. But yet, I see something else, as clear as the gun in the man's hand.

This woman is right here, right now, perfectly willing to *die* to save this child.

In slow motion, my eyes drag to the woman: terrified, but brave and unyielding in the face of death, her green eyes glinting, and that's when it hits me.

Holy shit.

This isn't a nanny or baby-sitter.

This is the girl's mother.

The man raises his gun, but I'm faster. My shot slams out, and the woman holding the lamp screams as her attacker's brains splatter all over the wall beside them before he crumples to the ground and stills.

She looks at me with wide, shocked eyes for one second, then scoops the girl into her arms and tears down the hall into one of the bedrooms.

Everything is buzzing. Everything is numb. I yank out my phone and dial Cade's number even as I'm bolting back into the bedroom and gathering Celeste into my arms.



Four Years Ago, Ascot, England:

“ADRIAN...I...”

What do you even say to someone at a time like this? “I’m sorry?” Of course I’m sorry. “My condolences?” How...stiff.

I’ve known death, too...sort of. But I was two when my mother passed, around the same time Adrian lost his. But that gives me no knowledge on what you say to someone, as an adult, when their parent dies.

And when it’s the second of their parents to die? When I look at this man whom I love with all of my heart, something breaks in me when I see the pain on his face. Seeing the way his soul is ripping apart, and seeing him consider that with both parents gone, he’s now alone in the world.

That’s when I realize I don’t have to say anything at all. Not in words, at least.

I press into him, circling his tense body with my arms, and pressing my face to his chest. Loving him. Holding him. Making sure he understands without words that he is *not* alone in this world.

On the other side of the glass window, inside the hospice care room at the hospital, the nurses are pulling the sheet over

Henry's face. Pancreatic cancer hits viciously and quickly, and there's no curing it. You just have to accept that "the rest of your life" is now very, very short.

But even still...we both thought we'd have more time with him. They'd given Adrian's father four months.

We got four weeks.

My arms tighten around Adrian, holding him close and willing the heat and the love from my body into his. His muscular arms encircle me back, and I close my eyes as I feel his lips press to the top of my head.

"I—I need to settle his affairs, I guess," he murmurs in a daze. "I—*fuck*, I don't even know. I think I need a lawyer or something, right? I need to call my uncle, too. And your father, and—"

"Adrian."

I pull back, reaching up to cup his haggard, grief-stricken face.

"Later. We can do *all* of that later. Together. Come with me."

I drive him in his beat-up old Nissan pickup truck back to the Margaux estate. For a second, my memory flashes back to a year ago—before we became "we". When it was still just Adrian and Celeste goofing around. Or, at least, us goofing around while I tried to hide how completely head over heels I was for the gorgeous, intense, roguish son of my father's chauffeur.

A year ago, he was teaching me to drive manual in this very truck. Today...well, things are different. We're different.

Different like in love.

Different like *married*.

Even if it's a secret only he and I know.

When we get close to home, I look over, and my heart breaks. His face is hardened and pale, his eyes piercing the misty rain outside, and yet seeing nothing.

My gaze darts to the road signs for the overlook we've been to a million times together—first as just two kids looking to enjoy the view out over the hills of Ascot. And more recently, as a place to be alone.

To be intimate.

Without hesitation I pull off the road to the overlook just about no one even remembers is here anymore. The branches of the trees lining the dirt path up to the overlook itself haven't been pruned in years. The flower blossoms and leaves drag and scrape against the sides of the truck, wiping away rainwater as if we're going through a green leafy car wash. Until suddenly, we're through.

I park under the canopy of heavy branches, like the mouth of a woodsy cave that looks out over the valley below. The engine silences as I twist the key, and I turn to look at Adrian.

I reach across the bench seat to take his hand. His eyes close, but his fingers entwine with mine, squeezing tightly as my thumb runs over the band of his ring that matches mine. I pull close to him, my lips brushing his cheek.

"What do you need?" I whisper.

He turns, his eyes stormy and locked with mine as his hand slides up to cup my face.

"You," he growls thickly. *"As always, I need you."*

It's a blur as my mouth crashes to his. Seatbelts unbuckle, and I'm moaning into his lips as he pulls me across the bench seat

into his lap. My thighs spread to straddle him, gasping as I fumble to yank off my sweater. Adrian tears at his own shirt, peeling it over his muscled, chiseled body as my bra falls away.

He kisses me again, my nipples dragging across his hot skin. His mouth descends to my jaw, my neck, the hollow where it slopes into my collarbone. I moan, hands gripping his shoulders as his lips encircle one of my nipples. I cry out, grinding into him as his hands shove my skirt up to my waist.

His fingers slip into my panties, making me cry out. He rolls them over my engorged clit, and for a second, I'm almost embarrassed at how *wet* I am. But I remember him telling me once not so long ago how hot that was. How much he loved feeling me this wet.

How much he loved tasting it.

I slam my lips to his, kissing him deeply as my hand drops to his belt. I unbuckle it, feverishly slipping my fingers into his pants and his boxers. I moan when he groans as I curl my fingers around his thick shaft.

We've done this almost *constantly* over the last few months. But even so, the sheer size of him, and the feel of him so hot and thick in my hand, always ignites me.

Adrian lifts his hips, shoving his jeans down. His cock springs free against my thighs, making me whimper in anticipation. One of his hands tugs my panties to the side and the other snakes into my hair, gripping it tightly as he kisses me possessively.

I center myself over him, choking in pleasure as his swollen head eases between my lips. I lower my hips just as he drives

up, and I explode in a moan as his thick length slides all the way into me with one smooth thrust.

“Adrian...”

I ride him hard and fast, rolling my hips and bucking against him. Wanting to give him his pleasure, but also completely lost in my own. His fingers dig into my skin, gripping tightly, leaving marks I never want to fade.

I cry out into his mouth as I come, my body clenching and exploding around him. He pounds into me faster and faster. His body tightens, his cock thickens. My forehead pressed to his, my brow crumples as I explode again, and then again.

His hand cups my jaw as his lips crush to mine. I hear him groan my name into my mouth and feel his cock surge hard inside of me. And then we're both coming together. His cum spills deep, his body clenched and coiled against mine as I cling to him.

And it's everything.

“I love you, Celeste,” he murmurs softly against my lips.

“I love you, too.”

Adrian grins, his stormy blue eyes calm now as he pulls away. He reaches up, pushing a strand of my raven hair back into place.

“My sunshine,” he says quietly.

I love when he calls me that.

We stay like that for another fifteen minutes before it's time to get home before I'm missed. We're both laughing as we straighten ourselves up. Then, we switch spots, and Adrian drives us the rest of the way back to my father's estate.

In the garage, where we'll part ways for the night—me to the main house, him to the staff cottage he shared with his father across the gardens—he catches my hand and pulls me around. I happily lose another ten minutes being kissed by him against the wall of the garage before we both know it's time to go.

I skip into the house. And even if I do have to slip my ring off and hide it away now that I'm home, I'm still grinning like an idiot as I dance down the hall towards the kitchen. I'm passing the large open door to the library when my father's voice breaks my reverie.

“Celeste.”

I gasp, stuttering to a stop and turning to see him sitting on the arm of the Chesterfield. His eyes lock with mine, narrowing as he stands, one hand on the crystal at the top of his cane.

“Father—”

“You were with him.”

He growls the words, laced with poison.

My lips purse as I meet his gaze.

“Don't lie to me, Celeste,” Jean Margaux hisses. “I'm not an idiot, and I'm not fucking blind.”

“Dad, his father just—”

“That *boy* is nothing but a stain on your future, Celeste,” he snaps. “Now, Matilde? With Paul? Now *that* is a smart—”

“Business deal, yes.” I snap. “For you.”

It's no secret why my sister married Paul Laurent, heir to the Laurent worldwide shipping and logistics empire. Heir to a *fortune*, too. That marriage cemented a sweetheart deal for my father with Pierre Laurent, Paul's dad.

Jean smiles mirthlessly.

“You should be so lucky, Celeste. And that won’t happen if you’re mixed up with a cretin like *Adrian Nobody Cross*.”

“I’m an adult, father.”

He laughs coldly.

“Oh? So adult and grown up that you to live in my house, drive my cars, wear the clothes I pay for, spend money on the credit card in *my* name.” His lips curl cruelly. “And still, you sully our family name with that Cross boy.”

“Stop—”

“A family of criminals!”

“I know what his family is—”

“And what *he* will be, Celeste. It’s in his blood. Even his father—”

“The man just *died*,” I snap.

“And may he go to God,” Jean says dryly, crossing himself.

“But you could see the criminal in his eyes below the surface. A good worker, yes. But I should have fired him years ago. With that name?”

“I’m leaving now.”

“Like *hell* you are!” He roars, startling me.

I whirl back, glaring at my father.

“You can’t tell me to stay away—”

“*Watch me.*”

My lips purse. “Then you’ll lose me, too. Because I love him!”

“You have no fucking idea what love even is!” he belts.

Tears spring to my eyes, even as I try and suck them back—determined not to let him see me break.

My father inhales slowly, standing tall in his light gray suit with his hands clasped on his cane.

“I’m sorry, my daughter. But what I’m about to do, I do because I love you.”

I frown as he clears his throat.

“Ciara? If you would be so kind?”

The double doors that lead from the library to his private office slide open. I frown in confusion as a girl with dark hair streaked a badly-dyed blue, too much eye shadow, and sketchy tattoos on her forearms steps out.

Though maybe my age, she looks haggard, and haunted. My eyes drop down over her, and I stiffen.

She also looks *extremely* pregnant.

I bite my lip, turning to eye my father.

“Who is this?”

He smiles.

“This? Why, Celeste, this is *you*, had things fallen differently. Or, this *will* be you, without my intervention.”

My brow furrows as I turn back to the girl.

“Who are you?”

“Ciara McGonnel, miss,” she murmurs quietly. “I, uh, I live in Bagshot, just down the road.”

I swallow.

“And tell me, Ciara,” my dad says mercilessly, “have you eaten a rather large meal recently?”

She blushes scarlet. I glare at him.

“What the hell are you doing—”

“Please, answer the question,” he growls.

Ciara shakes her head.

“No, sir. I’m pregnant.”

“Ahh, *pregnant*.”

“What is this...” I snarl.

“And who might this baby’s father be, Ciara?” My father continues, smiling coldly at me as he asks her.

She swallows thickly and looks up at me, her eyes meeting mine.

“Adrian Cross.”

I blink. My heart thuds. The room is silent. Then I snort.

“This is pathetic.”

“Celeste—”

“This is *pathetic!*” I scream at my dad. “Are you serious? This is so obviously fabricated. Ciara,” I turn to her. “I’m sorry he’s paying you to put yourself through—”

“He calls me his sunshine.”

I stiffen. A creeping cold begins to gnaw at me.

“What did you say?”

“Adrian. He says I’m his sunshine.”

Ciara looks down at her hands.

“Look, I know it don’t mean what I want it to mean. I mean I know he says it to the other girls, too.”

I blink, my heart clenching.

“The other—”

“Ladies!” My father crows, glancing at his office door. “If you would be so kind?”

Three other girls my age step out. Two are visibly pregnant. The third has her hands clasped over a tiny bump under her shirt.

Oh my God.

They’re all my age. They’re all my *height*. They all have dark hair.

“Your dear Adrian certainly has a type,” my father says quietly.

I’m numb, staring in disbelief as he turns to one of the other girls.

“Tell me...it’s Rochelle, isn’t it?”

The girl nods quietly. “Yes, sir. Rochelle Parsons.”

“What did this boy call you?”

“His sunshine, sir,” she mumbles.

I want to throw up.

“This...no.” I shake my head. “This isn’t—”

“And Leanne?” My father smiles at one of the others.

She glances furtively at me and then quickly looks away.

“Sir?”

“Miss Leeds, what is there on this boy’s hip?”

No. Please God, no.

I know what’s on Adrian’s hip, deep under the waist of his pants, down the groove towards his cock: a small tannish

birthmark I've always thought looked like a heart.

You'd only see if it he was naked in front of you. And very close. Intimate.

"A birthmark, sir," Leanne mumbles quickly. "Like a wee little heart. He...he liked it when I kissed—"

"That's *quite* enough, thank you," my father snaps sternly, hushing the girls lined up next to him.

He turns to me, my face white, his triumphant.

"Ladies, you may leave us. My guards will escort you back to your homes. Thank you for your cooperation."

The four of them glance at me—a mix of pity, sadness, and even a dashing of smug satisfaction on their faces as they file past me. In the hallway, Gerard, one of my father's guards, herds them away and then nods at my father as he closes the library doors.

It's completely silent as I stare at a random spot on the floor, feeling like I'm about to shatter into a thousand pieces.

"I'm going to ask you this once and only once, Celeste."

I swallow.

"Are you pregnant?"

I close my eyes, shaking my head as my arms wrap around myself.

"No."

"Good. That's something. But you have still *sullied* this family, my dear. Tarnished four generations of Margaux by having a goddamn fling with the *help*. And a criminal, no less?! The implications, if this got out to my business associates—"

“Please, can I just be alone—”

“Not a goddamn chance, daughter of mine,” he snarls. “Not a *chance*. There is only one way out of this mess, and you *will* take it.”

My eyes widen at him.

“You can’t tell me what to—”

“*WATCH ME*,” he bellows, making me gasp in real fear.

“I have a new business venture with a Saudi gentleman named Nasser El-Sayed. He spends his time between Dubai and here, and he has a son with a similar...” my father waves his hand dismissively in the air.

“Family image problem.”

That’s what I am? An “image problem”, because I love who I love?

“Nasser’s son Amir insists he is *in love* with some common servant girl who works for his father. As you can imagine, that doesn’t fly with the religious and socially conservative men Nasser does business with in the Middle East. Meanwhile, you need a clean slate; well, so does Amir.”

I stare at him.

“You want me, what, be his *cover*?”

My father stares unwaveringly at me.

“You will be whatever I say you’ll be.”

He sighs impatiently when I brush away tears. He brings a hand up, pinching his nose as if this is an annoyance to him.

“Celeste, I can see you still love him. Even with...” he nods at the door where the four pregnant girls just exited. “All of *that*.”

I look away.

“I’m a powerful man, Celeste. He’s but a boy. And, well, accidents happen in his line of business, now don’t they?”

I whirl, my face aghast.

“*No—*”

“Do *not* push me, Celeste,” he snarls. “One phone call, and I can make him disappear and clean up this mess how I *should*.”

My face pales to chalk-white as I stare at him in horror.

“But I won’t,” he grunts. “So long as you do this.”

I start to cry.

“He doesn’t love you,” he mutters. “He made a fool of you, Celeste.”

Hot tears roll down my cheeks as I start to crumple.

“You’re just another...” he sneers. “*Notch*, as they say. Something he’ll go on to brag to his mates about.”

The sob wrenches from my throat. The fight in me is gone.

“And if you don’t do what I say, Celeste, he will die. I can promise you that.”

All I can do is nod, sobbing as the last of my defenses shatter.

“Okay, okay,” I cry out. “*Okay*, I’ll do it.”

I wipe tears from my eyes against my sleeve as I look up haggardly at my father.

“When do I meet—”

“In two days, at your wedding.”

It feels like a gun just went off, deafening me. I stare at my dad in shock, not fully understanding what he just said.

“Did you imagine I wanted you to go out for fucking coffee with this boy and call that good enough? No, Celeste, you’re marrying him.”

But I’m already married.

“Please, don’t—”

“Yes.”

His eyes narrow dangerously.

“You did this, my dear. Not me. And do not test me, Celeste. There is only one way forward from this mess you’ve dragged yourself into, and this is it.”

I turn, staggering towards the windows that overlook the front drive and gardens. My heart twists in my chest as I see the four girls being helped into cars. The girls who look just like me.

I thought I was his sunshine.

Turns out, I was just another star in the sky.



EVERYTHING HURTS.

Every inch of my body feels like it's been run over by a truck.
When I try to open my eyes?

Yep, even those hurt, too.

But slowly, painfully, I force them open, only to be blinded by
the light that floods past my irises and hits my retinas. I wince,
but of course, that also hurts.

Fuck.

I can feel clean sheets and bedding beneath me. A soft bed.
Warmth, safety. And then suddenly, it all comes back and
replays horribly in my head.

I remember the silhouette in the window, and the man chasing
and grabbing me, and then pushing me to the floor. I
remember the cold look in his eyes as he leered at my body.

That's all. As he reached for me, I faded to blackness.

But that's not the thought that suddenly jolts me screaming
into consciousness and lurching up off the bed.

It's the thought of the two other inhabitants of the hotel suite.

I sit bolt upright, drowning in the pain of doing so. My eyes
bulge wide as they stare wildly around the room. But I don't

have to wonder where I am. Not when the first thing I see, standing at the foot of my bed, is Adrian.

The room is dimly lit, but even in the dull light, I can see how elegant the bedroom is—all matte black, dark tones, and brushed gold.

Slowly, my vision focuses, and I realize he's looking straight at me. I swallow as I drink in the sight of him, impossibly sexy, standing there in a black suit with no tie, the top button of his dress shirt open, revealing the swirl of ink beneath.

Though I have barely laid eyes on Adrian for four years, even I can instantly see the way he carries himself, and how his clothes fit him perfectly.

Money and elegance, worn with disdain.

He wears the trappings of a world he's had to fight and kill his way into. And now that he's there, he likes reminding those high society people that he is not, in fact, one of them. That he is a usurper.

A conqueror come to burn the whole kingdom to black ashes at his feet.

It's the same look he flings at me, as if he wants me to burst into flames. To turn to ash right here in front of him, if only so he can warm his hands on the fire.

"Where am I?" I finally croak.

He lifts a dark brow.

"My home."

I already knew that, and he knows I already knew. Why am I making small talk with this man?

I glance around, swallowing hard before my eyes snap back to him.

“Adele and...the girl...are here,” he growls quietly.

I run my teeth over my lip.

“She’s not...”

I looked down, twisting my fingers.

“She’s not yours. Yes, I know.”

My eyes drag up to his.

“Oh, *now* you know?” I snap.

“Yes, *now* I know, Celeste,” he grunts back, his eyes icing over as they sink into me like claws.

“That woman, Adele...she looks exactly like her. The girl, I mean.”

“Her name is Dahlia.”

He shrugs.

“She’s hers, I assume?”

I nod.

“With Amir?”

I shake my head.

“His father. Not by her choice.”

A low growl rumbles in his throat.

“Adele has...” I look down at my hands again. “She’s been through a lot.”

We say nothing for a few seconds before he clears his throat.

“How are you feeling?”

That's so like the old Adrian, to ask about my well-being. But while it could be taken as a comfort, I know the words are in fact cloaked in chainmail. Dipped in acid. Wrapped with barbed wire. Booby trapped. The words are presented with the meaning behind them carved away.

"Fine. I..."

I shift and I wince.

"I hurt a little."

Suddenly, like a knife stabbing into my brain, I start to remember everything that happened before I blacked out.

Everything.

The man straddling my waist, running his eyes over me. His hands reaching for my nakedness as I lost consciousness.

My stomach turns, and a sour, horrifying feeling bleeds through my system. I stare up at Adrian in horror.

"The man..."

He shakes his head.

"Dead. He won't be hurting you anymore."

I swallow, growing pale.

"Did he—"

"*No.*"

He snarls the word, letting it cut the air between us like a vengeful blade. Like the edge of an executioner's axe as it buries itself in the chopping block.

"No," he rasps again. "If you're asking if he touched you *like that*...if he violated you..."

His eyes darken.

“If he even *looked* at you like that, the answer is no.”

I shiver, chewing on my lip.

“Thank you,” I say quietly.

Adrian doesn't say a word, and I look up at him.

“I mean for...”

My lips twist.

“For being there.”

He nods. My gaze drops, and for the first time, I realize the difference in my attire. Before, I was in a bathrobe. Now I'm dressed in a clean, if baggy, white t-shirt and equally baggy gray sweatpants that smell like Adrian.

My eyes snap painfully to his.

“Did you....?”

The corners of his lips rise in a dark, smug grin, making me shiver heatedly.

“No. I have a personal doctor. His nurse came to examine you, dress your wounds and change your clothes.”

The way he's phrased it gives me pause, but I don't have to think too hard. I already know the answer, even though I ask the question anyway.

“Why the nurse, and not the doctor?”

“I'm sorry?” His eyes pierce into me, a shadow crawling across his face.

“Your doctor is a man, isn't he?”

He nods.

“And his nurse is a woman, I'm assuming?”

He lifts his shoulder.

“Did you honestly have the nurse come over with the doctor in order to have *her* undress me, because she’s a woman?”

“Yes. And your point is?”

I clear my throat, nodding as I look down at my hands again.

“Well, in any case, thank you.”

He’s silent, and when I look up, I tremble at the way his eyes pierce into me.

“Okay. This is how this is going to work.”

“How what’s going to work?”

“You aren’t working with Alfie, and you’re sure as *fuck* not ever going anywhere nearer Cillian Kildare ever again.”

A cloud settles over me.

“That’s not for you to—”

“It is now,” he growls icily. “So again, without interruption. As I was saying, this is how it’s going to work. First, you’re staying here.”

I tense, my brow furrowing.

“No, I’m not.”

“It’s not up for debate. You’re staying here.”

There it is again. That possessive tone to his voice and an equally possessive glint in his eye that sends tendrils of heat curling through my body in places they shouldn’t. That dark ownership he seems to have over me no matter what I do that makes me both terrified and aroused.

“I don’t think I should stay here, Adrian.”

He shrugs. “And I don’t think I was giving you an option.”

I glare at him. “You can’t just *keep me* here.”

“Watch me.”

I shiver. He means it, too. That much is abundantly clear. When he says this isn’t up for discussion, that it’s not a debate, he’s not trying to be smug. He’s not trying to start a fight with me. He’s just telling me his perception of the facts.

This will not be debated, no matter how hard I scream, fight or rail against him.

“Well, if I’m going to be staying here—”

“I would remove the word *if* from your vocabulary in this matter.”

I glare at him.

“*If* I’m going to be staying here...what happened before...in the elevator...”

The hungry grin that creeps over the corners of his mouth stops my words, turning my face bright red.

“What happened before won’t be happening aga—”

“What happened before will be happening again whenever I choose.”

I stiffen, my core clenching erratically in a way that unnerves me.

“*Excuse me?*”

“You’ll stay here under my protection.”

He begins to move around to the side of the bed I’m sitting up in, stopping only when he’s right next to me, looming over me.

Sucking the air from my lungs.

“You’ll stay here under my protection. In exchange, you’ll be...” He smiles. “My toy.”

Goddammit. That throb in my core only surges hotter, sizzling deeper between my thighs until I’m clenching them to try and stave off the heat and the wetness creeping between them.

“Fuck you,” I throw back at him.

“If you’d rather I use the term *whore*, of course, we can do that instead.”

My mouth drops open as I stare at him.

“Why the fuck do you hate me so fucking much, Adrian?!”

“Because you *ran*,” he snarls. “And it’s not *just* that you ran, Celeste. It’s that you almost shook me from my path, just because you could—”

“I ran to *protect you!*” I scream.

“I’m not the boy I was, Celeste.”

“No shit!”

I glare at him.

“I’m not going to be your fucking whore, Adrian.”

He shrugs casually.

“Adele and the kid—”

“*Dahlia*,” I snap. “I told you, her name is Dahlia.”

He smiles thinly.

“Very well, Dahlia. They need a place to stay and to be safe, don’t they?”

My face turns to granite.

“You son of a bitch. You wouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t what, Celeste?”

“Don’t you *dare* threaten them!”

“I’m not threatening shit. I’m *telling you...*”

I gasp as his hand shoots out, grabbing my chin and lifting it as he leers down at my face. The magnetic attractiveness of this man shatters my defenses, even if he’s holding me like I’m exactly the whore he keeps calling me—sprawled, vulnerable in his bed. Hair wild, eyes like daggers as he grips my jaw as if he’s ready to kiss my mouth.

Or claim it in other ways.

“I’m telling you: it would be in your best interests to stop pretending you don’t want me to rip your fucking panties off right now and stretch your pussy wide around my cock.”

My eyes bulge.

“I...I...”

I’m stammering. I’m fucking *stammering*.

It should be the easiest two letter word in the world to throw right back in his face right now. *No*. And yet I am incapable of saying it.

And he damn well knows it.

Adrian smiles darkly. The sheer power in him surges around him, filling the room with black ink.

“You can’t even say it, can’t you?” he murmurs. “You can’t even tell me no. Is it because you’re such an eager, greedy little slut for me?”

“Stop fucking calling me that.”

“If you’re worried about how wet I’m making your panties, don’t worry. I’ll get you more later.”

My jaw drops open, eyes wide and heat surging in my cheeks as I stare at him.

“You...you can’t speak to me like—”

“I will speak to you exactly how I choose to speak to you. As I will *do* to you precisely what I wish to do to you, Celeste,” he growls.

His finger traces down my jaw to my neck, and for a moment I shiver as his fingers curl around it. But then they keep moving, teasing lower, tracing down over the white cotton of the baggy shirt, until his finger slides between my breasts, down over my sternum.

Against my will, my nipples harden to sharp visible points against the thin material, and his eyes glow with the same lust that is igniting within me.

“And I would get very, *very* used to that, if I were you.”

Slowly, he pulls back to a standing position, glowering down at me like a mad king surveying his captive enemy.

“Are you sore?”

I sneer up at him. “I’m fine.”

It’s a lie. Again, *everything* fucking hurts. But for some reason, even if he’s not the one that did it to me, telling him how badly it hurts seems too vulnerable. And being vulnerable in front of this new version of Adrian Cross feels like opening a vein in front of a hungry shark.

“So, you’re not in pain?”

“I’m perfectly fine, thanks,” I throw back.

“Good. Turn over.”

I stiffen as heat floods my core.

“Excuse me?”

“I said turn the fuck over.”

I swallow thickly.

“Why?”

“*Why* is another word you can strike from your vocabulary while you’re staying here.”

“Wh—”

I stop myself before I say that verboten word again.

“*Por que,*” I spit at him.

Adrian smirks.

“Because that’s our agreement, Celeste,” he rumbles. “You stay here—”

I start to open my mouth.

“*And Adele and Dahlia stay here,*” he mutters. “And in exchange for my protection—for all three of you—*you,*” he murmurs, dropping his eyes down over my body. “You will be my fucking plaything.”

I inhale deeply, trying to slow the roaring pulse in my ears.

“Do I have a choice in this agreement?”

He smiles.

“No, Celeste. Because you’re out of options.”

I glare at him.

“There are plenty of other places where I could get help—”

“Believe me, there aren’t. Going to Alfie was a dangerous move. Going to Cillian was a stupid one. Trust me when I say I’ve made the calls ahead of time now. And if you choose to

go further down the rabbit hole and venture into the deeper, darker recesses of this fucking city, you will find nothing but closed doors.”

I clench my hands into fists, my skin prickling as I glare up at his toxically gorgeous, insidiously magnetic eyes.

“I am *it*, Celeste. Whoever you’re running from, whoever is after you, whoever tried to have you killed in your hotel room? What stands between them and you is *me*. And these are my terms. They are non-fucking-negotiable.”

“I’ll fend for myself.”

“No, you won’t.”

“*Watch me.*”

“I think you are having a hard time grasping the concept of *non-negotiable*. You’re staying here.”

“This is imprisonment.”

He sighs. “No. This is you being out of options. If you go out there without me—though that isn’t going to happen, trust me—but if by some miracle you *were* to go off on your own, you wouldn’t last a day.”

“I’d like to make you swallow those words.”

“And I’d like to make you swallow my cock right here and now.”

I go bright red, staring at him with my jaw on the floor.

“So, because I will not ask a second time, Celeste...”

I shiver as his hand drops again to cup my jaw as he leans down close, his lips so near to my own that I can almost feel them humming against me.

“*Turn the fuck over.*”

I swallow, heat pulsing through my core.

I want to throw his words back in his face, or slap it, or spit in it even. But, pride aside, he's more correct than he knows. Even I don't like my chances of surviving more than a day out there on my own. And so instead, I sneer at him, stiffening as he pulls away.

“Fine.”

I bite my lip to stifle the wince as I roll onto my stomach, face down in the pillow before I twist my head to glare at him.

“Happy now?”

Not quite.”

“Well, what the hell else do you want me to—”

Heat explodes through my shocked, horrified face as his hand grabs the back of my sweatpants and yanks them down to mid-thigh.

And suddenly, I'm bare-assed and face down on Adrian's bed under his fierce, hungry gaze.

“Now, Celeste,” he growls. “I want you spread those fucking legs for me.”



NONE OF THIS IS AN ACT. I *am* as hard and as cold as she must think I am. It's not to scare her. And it's not staged edginess to throw her off.

This is just who I am now. Four years have done that to me. Four years post Celeste ripping my fucking heart out and setting my world ablaze molded, chiseled, and redefined me into the man I am today.

Before, things were different. Four years ago, before everything, I walked a tightrope between two chasms: the good and the evil. And for the most part, I was good. I followed the law. I did as my father told me. I never did anything I shouldn't have under the employ of Jean Margaux.

Well, except fall in love with his daughter.

But that darkness that I could always feel inside only came out when I was with her. It was only Celeste that could pull the devil from his lair inside of me.

In bed. On the bench seat of my car. Against a tree in the woods far back on Jean's property. Above the garage. In the greenhouse. Against her bedroom door with her father lecturing her about something on the other side of it.

That's how that darkness manifested in me. And then, ironically, once she was gone, it all came out at once, consuming me. Pulling me away from Ascot and into the dark underworld of London to sit at my uncle's side and learn every facet of his empire. Until it was me sitting on that throne itself.

Yes, the darkness I've existed in for four years has twisted and morphed into a different sort of darkness. One of violence and viciousness, of cold calculation, and of brutally unflinching decision making. It's what running an empire like this demands of you.

But now? Staring down at this girl I simultaneously hate and fucking lust over more than anything in this world? Looking at her, face down on the bed in front of me with her ass bare to me, and her legs spread just enough for me to see the glistening pink of her sweet little cunt nestled between her thighs?

The old darkness overtakes me.

The darkness that's been buried for four years. The darkness that, again, only she seems to be able to bring out.

There's been no one else since Celeste. I'm aware of the absurdity of that. I'm twenty-four, richer than God, genetically blessed, with the body that comes from working out like a maniac seven days a week. On top of that, I have a dick that doesn't know when to go down. Sorry, not sorry.

Oh, there have been offers. Opportunity has wiggled its ass in my face more times than I can count. But it's not as if I've denied myself because I'm carrying any sort of torch for the girl who wrecked me all those years before. It's not because of any sort of leadership mantra—like “retaining your power” or anything weird like that. Like how soccer players abstain for a month before a championship.

Fuck that.

And believe me, it's not because anything *mechanically* isn't working. Trust me, it works just fucking fine. So to speak.

No, it's because some sick, fucked up, twisted part of me needs the darkness that only this woman can bring out in me. No other woman, however, tempting or beautiful or willing to do whatever the fuck I want, is able even to catch my eye.

None of them wrecks me inside like this girl does.

Those other girls don't break the chains that hold back the demon inside of me like Celeste does. In fact, she seems to be the only woman on Earth capable of tempting and enraging that monster into breaking its way free. And giving me that dark thrill that I crave.

And right now, that demon and that dark thrill is gnawing at my very soul, screaming to be released.

As my eyes stare between her thighs, I envision tearing my own clothes off, climbing onto the bed, shoving her legs wide apart and driving every inch of my thick cock deep into that wet, pink little slit. I imagine fucking her over and over to within an inch of her sanity, until she's clawing at the bedsheets and screaming my name.

Which is not to say that that *won't* be happening. Spoiler alert: it very much will be.

But I'm not sure I even trust myself to let the full monster out, not completely. Four years of this unleashed all at once won't be good for either of us. Besides, I prefer indulging slowly.

I'd prefer to let myself take small hit after small hit, building slowly until I consume all of her.

“Spread your fucking legs.”

Her face twists, her cheeks burning red and her mouth hanging open. Her eyes stare at me with this look that says she's trying so hard to look pissed off or indignant or horrified.

But she's failing miserably. Because when I look into those eyes, I don't see hatred. I don't see anger. I don't see disgust.

I see need.

I see the same lustful need that used to tempt me and goad me on four years ago. The same need I hungered for, hunting her down to her room before the Margaux house was even asleep. Accosting her in the woods at the back end of Jean's estate when she went out for a run.

Back then, I couldn't last four fucking seconds without touching, kissing, biting, sucking, fucking, or devouring this girl. And after four years without her, I'm about to drink my fill.

"Fuck you, Adrian," she hisses quietly. "No, this is fucked up."

"Then walk away," I smile wolfishly.

And before she can say another word, my hand drops between her thighs. I bite back a groan as my finger drags through her absolutely dripping wet, greedy little pussy.

Celeste moans, shuddering under my touch.

"Or better yet, try telling me how fucked up it is again without moaning like the good little slut you are."

She whimpers as I let my finger tease across her clit, her eyes rolling back before she yanks herself back into reality. Suddenly, she reaches back, shoving my hand away and slamming her thighs together.

"Get the fuck away from—"

She doesn't get to finish those words. Because this time, my palm comes down across her ass. Hard.

Celeste yelps. But even with the sharp intake of breath, and even with the dagger glare she forces at me, I can see right through it all. I can hear the moan under the sharp intake of breath, and I can see the quiet begging for more behind the glare.

Because she may be a very good liar. But she's forgetting that I know her too well. Intimately. Vividly. Deeper than I think she even realizes. She could lie to me with words, and she did.

But her body can't lie.

"Spread them," I growl.

Her face flushes, and I see that defiance like a sweet drug all over her face. She still doesn't comply, though, so I spank that ass again. I'm hard as fucking steel in my pants, tenting the front of them obscenely as I let my palm swat first one cheek and then the other. Until her ass is flushed red and my palm is twitching for more.

"Do you want me to keep asking, slut? Or would you like to do as you're told?"

She shivers.

But her legs spread.

"*Good girl,*" I growl as my hand slides back between her legs to find her dripping.

Her cunt's dripping so much she's making a wet spot on the bedsheets under her. Two of my fingers easily sink into her, and Celeste twists her head to moan into her pillow.

My only response is to use my other hand to spank her ass again. I grunt, feeling the way her pussy grips my fingers and

clenches them as my spansks resonate through the room. Celeste gasps, whipping her head to glare at me.

“What the fuck was that for?!”

“To get your attention. You don’t get to hide your lust from me, my little slut.”

She shivers as her eyes lock defiantly with mine.

“I want you to look at me while I play with this wet little pussy.”

Her eyes widen, her throat making a swallowing motion as her face heats even hotter.

“You’re deranged.”

“And you’ve been craving this for four fucking years, haven’t you?”

“KEEP TELLING YOURSELF—*OH, FUCK...*”

Her voice chokes as I sink my fingers into her, curling them against her g-spot as my thumb adds pressure to her clit. Her lips quiver before she bites them hard, as if to stop them by force.

“Don’t lie, Celeste. You’re so fucking wet for me. So unbelievably fucking *messy* for me.”

I sink a third finger into her, and her eyes screw up as she moans deeply. She twists her head, but my hand reaches up, grabbing a fistful of her hair and twisting her gaze back to me.

“Uh-uh,” I hiss darkly. “Eyes on me.”

My fingers start to pump into her, and I watch the pleasure melt over her face.

“Don’t you even blink. Don’t you look away. I want you to look *right here* into my eyes when you fucking come for me in a way I know damn well Amir never made you come. In a way I know only I can.”

“You *arrogant*—”

“No. Arrogance is the mark of incompetence. Arrogance is bravado. It’s a show of force to push an issue.”

I smile seductively.

“I don’t need to be arrogant. Not when it comes to making you come.”

I spank her ass again before bringing the fingers of my other hand to her lips.

“Open.”

My other hand is still pumping into her, working her into a slippery, whimpering puddle. She’s shaking, barely containing the moans. But she keeps her lips clamped shut.

“Do it.”

She glares at me defiantly, keeping her mouth closed.

“Do it or it’ll be something else between your lips besides my finger.”

Her face heats, and her eyes drop right to the front of my pants.

I smirk.

“Dirty, *dirty* girl,” I growl. “Is that what you’re after?”

She rips her eyes up to mine, and I see pure, raw need all over her face. I move closer to the side of the bed.

“*Open.*”

My finger hovers by her mouth. She keeps her lips pursed... until I let the fingers of my other hand trace over her clit. Instantly, she moans, her mouth falling open as her eyes roll back.

My finger sinks between her lips.

Celeste's attention snaps to mine. Slowly, her mouth closes.

"Good girl."

Her lips wrap around my finger, and I bite back a snarl as she begins to suck gently.

"Unbuckle my belt."

She shivers and then whimpers as I start to stroke my fingers against her g-spot again. I take my glistening wet finger out of her mouth, and Celeste gasps as I slide it down the cleft of her ass to rub her tight little back hole in slow, languid circles.

"*Fuck...fuck...* Adrian, that's not—"

My finger sinks into her asshole and she moans wildly.

"Such a *dirty* little whore," I growl.

She mewls, writhing, as my fingers slide into her. Slowly, fumbling, her hands move across the bed to grab my belt. She twists onto her side, raising one leg.

She *wants* my hands where they are.

I groan as she undoes my belt, and I don't even have to ask before she's popping the button of my pants and pulling the zipper down. Her fingers slip under the waist of my boxer briefs before she pauses, like she's just now realizing she's getting ahead of herself.

Like she's realizing she's showing her hand, and it's *eager*.

“Don’t stop now,” I grunt, curling my fingers against her g-spot as I swirl the other hand over her ass. “You were being such a good girl. Take my cock out.”

She pulls my briefs down, and I watch as pure hunger spreads over her face as my thick, heavy cock springs free right in front of her mouth.

Our eyes lock as I start to alternate my fingers in and out of her holes. She moans, and her small hand wraps around my thickness. I push my hips forward and I growl as my swollen head pushes between her pouty, wet, defiant lips, deep into her mouth.

“*Fuck, yes,*” I hiss. “Just like that.”

I groan, keeping my fingers busy with her as I shallowly thrust my cock between her lips and over her wet little tongue.

“Now suck.”

And God help me, she does, in a way that makes my world turn to fire. In a way that takes the very soul out of my chest as I as I fight to remain sane as the heaven of her mouth engulfs me.

Eagerly.

Wantonly.

My hips push, burying myself deeper down her throat. I can feel her pussy clenching tighter and tighter around me as I begin to roll her clit with my thumb. Her tongue slides up and down the underside of my cock, her body trembling as I work her faster and faster. Until suddenly, with a cry, she pulls back.

“Oh *fuck!* Adrian!”

She twists and convulses on the bed, whimpering and moaning as the orgasm shatters her. Her body writhes, her holes

greedily sucking on my fingers while a tendril of spit connects the swollen head of my cock to her pouty, swollen lips.

I could come right here and right now. I almost tell her to open wide and say please so I can empty my balls across that tongue. But I've been denied the taste of her for four years.

And I'm fucking starving.

With a grunt and a superhuman effort of will, I pull away from Celeste's mouth. I grab her by the hips and yank her around until her legs fall off the edge of the bed and she's bent face-down across it. I drop to my knees behind her, and before she even knows what I'm doing, I'm grabbing her ass in both hands and dragging my tongue from clit to asshole.

"Oh *fuck!*" She screams into the bedsheets, writhing as her toes curl against the floorboards.

I fucking *devour* her little pussy. I suck her clit between my lips, humming into her, growling as I feast on her wetness. My palm slaps her ass again and again. And this time, when she comes, it's like a symphony reaching its conclusion in my ears.

She's still convulsing as I stand. And in a haze of lust and desire, I stroke my cock.

Once, twice, three times, and then I explode.

I roar, losing myself in the sight of my white cum spurting in ropes across the red prints of my hands on her ass, and dripping down her slick, puffy and swollen pussy lips.

When I finish, coming to from almost blacking out, I groan. I stroke my cock slowly, lazily, squeezing another few drops of my hot cum onto her skin before I step back, catching my breath. She lays there, shuddering and gasping for air, slumped across the bed like a good little toy.

Like *my* good little toy.

I tuck my dick back into my pants. Celeste shudders, as if coming back to reality. She twists her head, her face flushed bright red, before she quietly collects herself. Her teeth chew at her lip as she blushes, pulling her sweatpants up to cover the mess I've made between her legs.

She stands and then sits on the edge of the bed, as if she's not sure what to do now.

"*That...*" she whispers quietly. "That was—"

"That was me making you come harder than I know you've come in four fucking years. You're welcome."

She glares at me.

"Pompous bastard."

"Greedy little whore."

Her lips purse. But goddamn, I see it right behind her eyes. As I said, she can lie with her words all she wants.

Her body can't get a fucking rumor past me.

"Is this really what this is going to be?" She swallows.

"This is *exactly* what this is going to be. You'll stay here. You'll be safe. And you'll be *mine*. Any questions?"

She swallows, staring up at me.

"Yeah, plenty."

"Too bad."

She gasps as I reach down, cupping her jaw and leaning down close.

I want to kiss her. Fucking hell, I want to kiss her so bad it hurts. But I won't. Because what this is, is revenge. This is

carnal. This is me taking my pound of fucking flesh.

This will not be romance. This will not be anything we had before. She gave that up when she ran away and burned me to the ground.

“Your friends are staying down the hall. Third door on the left.”

She swallows.

“And your belongings from the hotel suite are in there.”

I nod my chin at a walk-in closet across the room, then glance back at her.

For a minute, I consider making it a hard rule that she that she doesn't change or bathe unless I say she can...that she must spend her time here walking around reeking of my lust and my cum, constantly feeling me on her skin and between her legs.

But then, we do have other company here.

“You have an ensuite bathroom all to yourself—”

“Can I leave the *room*?”

My mouth grinds.

You wouldn't leave the fucking bed if I had it exactly how I want it.

“The house is yours to explore, aside from my office.”

“That's where you keep the dead bodies?”

“No, that would be the basement.”

She swallows thickly.

“What about going outside?”

“Back yard is all yours.”

“I mean beyond your property line, Adrian.”

“Nope.”

Her lips purse.

“So, I’m a prisoner here.”

“If that’s what you choose to call it.”

“That’s the definition of what I am here, Adrian. A prisoner.”

I shrug again. “Your words, not mine.”

She folds her arms over her chest, simmering.

“Then if there’s no further questions, we’re done here.”

I turn and walk to the door.

“Until?”

I grin deviously as I turn, march back across the floor, and make her gasp as my firm hand cups her jaw.

“You’re learning quick, Celeste.”

She quivers as I lean down again to let my lips hover an inch from hers, relishing the way her breath sucks in. Relishing the scent of her skin mixed with that of her lingering arousal.

“Until I’m ready to make you my dirty little slut all over again.”



I HAVE OFFICIALLY LEFT reality behind. I mean truly. I have burned my membership card to the land of real life.

Maybe it began the other day in the elevator. Perhaps that was the first step towards my demise. But it's been signed, sealed and delivered now, with a knife to the heart here in my new prison of Adrian's guest room.

When the door shuts behind him, I let out a breath that it feels like I've been holding since, well, since I woke up. Or at least since he touched me.

Since he made me scream.

"That was me making you come harder than I know you've come in four fucking years. You're welcome."

He's not wrong.

And even if I'm pretty good at doing things myself...Adrian's better. It's like he knows my body better than even I do. And that's what makes this game even more dangerous.

Because the rules are rigged, and this is not a fair battle.

He already knows my playbook. He knows all my moves. He knows everything about me, including the ways to make me scream and squirm.

Including the darkness that lurks inside me that only he can bring out. And yet in the last four years, it would seem his ability to take me to that dark place has only grown.

And suddenly I feel it...the green sting of jealousy searing my heart as I think about what, or who—or several who's?—have been a part of Adrian's descent into deeper darkness over the last four years.

Visions of women I don't know and hopefully will never meet flash in my head. Women who feed his darkness in ways I never did. Women who beg him for it harder, and more dangerously, with his hands squeezing around their throats...

I choke, whipping my head back and forth and wrenching myself from that horrible place my mind takes me.

And it hurts. God *damn*, it hurts. And I hate that it does. It's so fucking unfair that it makes me feel like that at all, for one. Because, well, because I hate Adrian Cross. Or that's at least what I keep telling myself.

But I gave up the right to be jealous when I left, even if it was to save him. Even if at the time, I did it because I hated him.

For those other girls. Just like all the other girls that have been in his life since.

I stand abruptly. Trying to shake those vibes from my body as I storm over to the walk-in closet and yank open a dresser drawer. Sure enough, my clothes from the hotel are here. All my things are.

I grab some fresh clothes and head into the ensuite bathroom, making a point of locking the door. Visions of the man who charged me the last time I tried to take a shower assault me, and I grow cold for a moment.

But it passes.

Because even if I'm locked in the devil's very own tower, he's the only monster in this place. Adrian might be a sadistic bastard who knows every filthy button to push of mine, and I might still hate him for everything that came before.

But I know I'm safe here.

We're safe here.

Under the hot shower spray, I wash the sins of what just happened from my body, my face burning and my body tingling.

I can still feel him between my legs. And I hate that the memory makes my hands linger there—remembering, touching, sparking a fire before I quickly yank them away.

Fucking traitors.

I rinse off, jump out of the shower, and towel off quickly. In the mirror, I wince as my eyes travel across the bruises still on my body from the attack back at the Dorchester. I bite my lip as I pull the towel away from more of my body.

The marks are horrendous. But there are other marks—newer marks—that are the opposite. Marks from Adrian should be the same thing to me as the bruises from the man who attacked me.

But they aren't, not at all.

One man bruised me to hurt me.

The other did so to *mark me*. To remind me that he's still very much under my skin.

I painfully pull on a pair of pajamas over the array of bruises and head back out to my bedroom.

Part of me almost expects the door to my room to be locked. Yet it opens freely. I poke my head out—again, expecting a trap or expecting him to jump me, pin me down, and take his pleasure from my body again—

God, what am I doing? Hoping it happens again?

But it doesn't, and I step out and head down the hall to Adele and Dahlia's room. At their door, I take a breath, trying to brush away the lingering thoughts of Adrian and everything that just happened between us not twenty minutes ago from my mind.

Then, and only then, I knock.

The door is yanked open, and I find myself face to face with Adele.

“My God, Adele, are you ok—”

I gasp as she hurtles into me, wrapping her arms around me and making me wince as she hugs me fiercely. But I hug her back just the same.

“*Celeste...*”

“I'm so sorry,” I whisper, my voice breaking.

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

I shake my head. “They were there for me.”

“They came for us too,” she says quietly.

“But I was the one they really wanted.”

She shakes her head as she takes my hands in hers.

“This is not your fault, Celeste.”

I blink away tears as I hug her again. Then I glance past her, and a smile spreads over my face. Relief floods my heart as I

look through an open door to a bedroom and lay eyes on the little girl asleep on the king-size bed.

“She’s okay,” Adele chokes. “She’s...scared. I mean she was fucking terrified, but I covered her eyes...”

My heart breaks as Adele starts to cry, and I hug her again.

“Fuck, Adele, I—”

“You didn’t bring this upon us, Celeste,” she says quietly. “*He* did.”

I know which “he” she’s talking about, too: Nasser. Except, after my talk with Michelle, I’m not so sure it was anyone from the inside. But then again, that bastard is still to blame, if his enemies are now our enemies.

We walk into the room and I shove those thoughts away.

“Are *you* okay?”

Adele nods. “I’m fine.”

“Do you need anything? You must be starving.”

She smiles sweetly. “We ate, actually.”

My brow furrows. “When?” I frown deeper. “Actually, what time is it, even?”

Now that I think about it, I have no idea.

“It’s three in the morning.”

I stare at her.

“Jesus Christ, I just woke you up, didn’t I?”

She smiles wryly.

“I don’t think I’ll be sleeping much tonight.” Adele takes my hands in hers. “Come, let’s chat.”

She takes me into the sitting area and then walks over to close the door to the adjoining bedroom. Then she flops down next to me and reaches for a bottle of wine on the coffee table in front of us.

I lift a brow.

“One of the staff brought it along with the food earlier. Want a glass?”

“Sure, thank you.”

My brow furrows as she pours me one.

“How—” I flush. “I don’t want to ask how long I’ve been out, but...”

She laughs quietly. “Only a few hours, I think. At least since the doctor and his nurse left.”

“You saw them?”

She smirks. “Of course. I was in the room with the nurse when she was examining you.”

My brows lift. “Really?”

She frowns. “I don’t know this man, Adrian. I mean, all I do know is your history, what you’ve told me. And he seems extremely protective of you, but...”

I grin. “He let you stay in the room?”

“Something tells me I would have been out the window if I had a penis. But yes, he let me stay.”

“And Dahlia?”

Her brow furrows, and my stomach drops.

“Oh God, what?”

But Adele just smiles.

“Stuck to Adrian like glue.”

I stare at her.

“*Excuse me?*”

“She wouldn’t let go of him. It’s been like that ever since the hotel...”

Adele shivers, and looks at her hands.

“After Adrian barged into that room, the man who was attacking you ran out bleeding. He had a gun, and he came at us, but I—”

She chokes, and I take her hand in mine, squeezing.

“We don’t have to talk about this—”

“Dahlia didn’t see,” she chokes. “I hid her eyes so she couldn’t. But after Adrian... killed him...he came over to see if we were okay. And when Dahlia turned around, she just latched on to him. I had to promise her we’d see him again tomorrow to make her fall asleep.”

Well, *that’s* not anything I expected to hear. My mind flickers to the man with the dark aura surrounding him and savage energy pouring off his very heart. The man who just spanked my ass, and played with my body until I came, and fucked my mouth, and then shot his cum all over me.

I shiver, drinking the wine deeply.

“So...what now?”

I shake my head numbly.

“I think now we’re *here*.”

She gives me a look. “He changed his mind fairly quickly, then, no?”

“He did.”

Adele’s eyes narrow.

“Celeste—”

“He just changed his mind, Adele. That’s all.”

“At what cost? Or should I say for what price?” she says, her voice icy and the demons of her own past snarling, barely under the surface.

I shake my head. “It’s not like that.”

I smile weakly, hoping that I’m selling the lie.

“He just changed his mind.”

But Adele clearly isn’t convinced just yet.

“Celeste, men like him—”

“He’s not Nasser,” I say quietly.

“I know that. But men like them, with the power they have?” She looks down at her twisting fingers. “Nothing is ever free, Celeste.”

“He and I will work something out,” I lie. “I think for now, it’s maybe an ‘enemy of my enemy’ kind of thing.”

She nods, seemingly satisfied.

“As long as you’re okay and this isn’t...you know, something else.”

I shake my head.

“I’m a big girl, Adele. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you, though?”

I lift a brow.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean being here with him. Your past—”

“Is in the past,” I say quickly. “He’s a businessman now and this is just business.”

“And you? Is it just business?”

I delay answering longer than I should.

“It’s just business.”

And it will be, because even though I may have just made a devil’s deal—my body, my moans, and my submission for his protection—that’s where it ends.

That’s where our deal reaches its conclusion.

I’ll be his plaything.

He’ll be our protector.

My heart is off limits.

Later, when the sun is almost breaking the horizon, I hug Adele goodnight, and go back to my own room.

I repeat it to myself again and again and again as I crawl under the sheets, like a prayer.

He’ll have my body and submission. I’ll have his protection.

But he won’t really have *all* of me.

That part of me is walled off to him.

It has to be that way, or I’m truly lost.



I HAVE TO ADMIT: part of me imagined our deal would go into effect immediately. Part of me also thought the deal would involve me spending all my waking and possibly sleeping hours in this house tied to a bed as Adrian's personal sex slave or fuck-toy.

A horrible part of me was maybe even a little too excited about the idea. Before the rational side of me buried that excitement and forgot to mark the grave.

And yet, that's not what happens that first morning, when I wake up in Adrian's house. For starters, I'm not actually tied to the bed. And I'm clothed, as well. Even stranger, there's no sign of the mad tyrant king of the castle. I half expect to find him watching me, glaring at me when I wake, but I'm alone.

When I'm dressed, again, expectations don't match reality when I realize the door to my room is unlocked. I'm not really a prisoner here at all.

But then again, yes, I am. I test the theory by walking down the stairs, going directly to the front door, and attempting to open it. There's no one inside the house. But outside, three men in dark suits turn to smile impassively at me. A fourth man—this one taller, more built, and with strikingly dark, handsome features and a scar down the side of his face—

marches up the stairs and politely but firmly tells me it would be, quote, *best* if I stayed inside.

There's a firmness to his tone that tells me this isn't actually a suggestion at all.

Back inside, I meet a flustered, middle-aged man who introduces himself as Charles, Adrian's "master of house and staff", which sounds to me like a fancy way of saying butler.

For a moment, I smile ruefully, my head shaking in disbelief at the man the boy I knew has become. Before, his father was my father's chauffeur and mechanic and he was the boy with the grease-stained hands and the dangerous last name.

Now the boy with the grease stains is gone, replaced by a man who dresses in Savile Row suits. Who has butler. Who lives in a huge and gorgeous mansion-like townhouse.

A man with *power*.

But the name remains.

Charles insists on serving me breakfast at the kitchen island. But I'm not halfway through before I hear familiar laughter in the backyard. Taking my toast with me, I find Adele and Dahlia already up and playing in the rose gardens of Adrian's high-walled backyard.

Again, the security presence is almost invisible, but not quite. If I look around, every now and then I'll catch a glimpse of a of a man who is clearly a guard on a neighboring rooftop. Or through the gates, or by the back wall.

If I allow myself just to enjoy the moment, it's almost as if the three of us are alone and carefree. But it's clear: our deal, Adrian's and mine, has started.

Heat floods my face.

Oh, it certainly has.

Later, I'm up in my room as afternoon winds into evening when there's a knock at the door. I look up, preparing myself for battle, when a thought hits me.

Adrian wouldn't knock. Not with the deal we have put in place. Adrian would march right in and take what he wanted. And just the thought of that sends tendrils of heat curling through parts of me that I wish they wouldn't.

Quickly, I swallow and clear my throat.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Cross?" Charles calls through the door.

My brow arches.

Mrs. Cross. Lest I forget where I am, and who has me under his control.

"Come in, Charles."

The door opens and the man stands stiffly in the doorway.

"Dinner will be served presently in the solarium."

"Dinner?"

"Yes, ma'am. With Mr. Cross."

My brow furrows, my mouth thinning.

"You can tell Mr. Cross I'm not hungry, but thank you."

Charles clears his throat, his face completely neutral.

"I don't believe it was a request, Mrs. Cross."

Savvy, Charles. Very savvy.

"All the same," I smile. "Please pass along my regrets to Mr. Cross that I will not be joining him this evening. I have some

things I need to do here. And I'm really not hungry."

This time, I see the flicker of uncertainty cross Charles's face.

"If he has a problem with that, he knows where to find me."

"Mrs. Cross, may I suggest—"

"Thank you, Charles. I just need to get to some things now."

He clears his throat deferentially.

"Very good, ma'am."

The door closes and I sink back into the bed as I hear him retreat. I open my laptop and start to go through my email. But not three minutes goes by before different, louder, and far angrier footsteps approach the doorway.

As expected, there's no knocking this time. The door just swings open, and I shiver at the swirling wrath of dark energy that explodes into the room along with Adrian.

"I believe Charles was quite clear about my expectations for you."

"Then decrease those expectations, please."

His jaw ticks.

"You were supposed to follow him down."

"For dinner..."

"Yes, for dinner."

"Just the two of us."

"Again, correct. Let's go."

"And yet you sent Adele and Dahlia to their quarters to eat, I'm guessing?"

“Their ‘quarters’ are the size of the Royal Suite at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel. I sincerely doubt it’s causing them any discomfort.”

“Why aren’t we all eating together?”

Adrian sighs, gritting his teeth.

“They’re family, Adrian.”

“They’re not *my* family.”

His gaze says it all.

“Are you seriously taking the fact you don’t like her father out on a three-year-old?”

“You’re deflecting, and this is our arrangement.”

“I thought our arrangement was me being your whore,” I mutter sarcastically.

He shrugs.

“Your words. But if you prefer the term, I’m on board.”

My smile fades.

“Prick.”

“If I want to feed food to my whore before I feed her my cock, that’s part of the game.”

I swallow the heat from my face, something wicked throbbing deep in my core.

“Says who?”

“Clearly, you haven’t been with many escorts.”

Goddammit.

Again, jealousy surges inside of me. A green mist clouds my eyes, and my mouth tightens to a line. I *hate* that my mind

goes there, and I hate that I care that my mind goes there.

Bile rises in my stomach as I look away. He's probably had a positive *harem* of women through this house in the last four years. Maybe even in this very bed I'm lying on.

Feeling ill, I quickly scramble from the bed., standing as I clear my throat.

Adrian's brow arches. His eyes shamelessly slide up and down my body.

"You haven't even changed."

"And I'm not going to—*Hey!*"

I jolt as he suddenly storms towards me, and before I can even process it or do anything, he grabs me, physically hauls me off the ground, and throws me over his shoulder.

"What the *fuck*, Adrian?!"

My face goes red and I pummel his back as he calmly turns and marches us into the bathroom. He drops me down, pushing me against the wall with one hand as the other reaches over to the enormous claw foot tub against the wall. He cranks on the water, testing it as I squirm.

His other hand grabs me by the collar of my shirt and holds strong, pinning me to the wall.

He tests the water once more before he turns, giving me his full attention.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I snap.

"You were instructed to change and prepare yourself for dinner. You've chosen not to do that, which means I have to do it for you."

"You're doing nothing of the sort—"

“Have you showered since last night?”

I blink.

“Excuse me?”

“Have you showered since I made you come all over my fingers and my tongue like a greedy little slut?”

My face turns bright red as I swallow the heat.

“*No*,” I hiss quietly.

“So perhaps we should wash my *cum* from between your legs before you join me for our evening meal.”

I simmer, torn between fury and absolute desire for this man.

God, am I sick in the head.

Adrian pours some sort of bubbles into the water, and I watch them rise before I realize he’s looking back at me.

“What is it?”

“Strip,” he growls.

I swallow.

“Can I have some privacy?”

“No.”

A dangerous smirk teases his lips.

“Are we going to pretend it’s something I haven’t seen before?”

He moves closer, making me suck in a breath.

“Or tasted?”

My breath catches as he leans even closer, his lips brushing my ear.

“Or felt come, stretched around my cock while I’m deep inside?”

My teeth sink into my bottom lip to stifle any sort of sound as my body stiffens.

“Just...give me some privacy.”

“That’s not going to happen. Are you taking your clothes off, or am I?”

“Fuck—”

“Right, well, the hard way it is, then.”

I gasp as he grabs the front of my yoga pants, and I shiver as his fingers slip under the waistband and into my panties as well. In one motion he yanks them down to my knees.

“What the fuck do you think you’re—”

“Quit fucking squirming.”

“Get off me!”

This time, my ability to fight surges into my veins. Before I know it, I’ve shoved him away. And just as he comes back at me, my hand winds back and slaps him hard across the face.

“Take your hands off—*goddammit*, Adrian!” I screech as he grabs me, completely unfazed by my slap.

He whirls, sits on the edge of the tub, and shoves me down across his thighs. My eyes stare as he grabs my yoga pants and my panties, yanking them further down. I wriggle, but his other hand is firm, keeping me pinned across his knee with my bare ass up in the air.

“What in the *hell* do you think you’re—”

THWACK

His palm connects with my ass cheek, and the sound that rips from my throat is the most mortifying thing I've ever heard come out of my lips.

It's not a scream. It's not a cry of pain.

It's a fucking *moan*.

But when I try to get away from him again, his arms tighten, keeping me pinned as his hand spans the other cheek. And again, it's a whimper that tumbles from my lips.

He chuckles darkly.

"You're enjoying this too much. We might need to find a punishment that actually punishes you."

"Take your hands off me, you ass—"

Instantly, I moan even more as his hand delves between my thighs, his fingers sliding easily through my slick lips. I feel him growling, his muscles tightening and something warm and hard throbbing against my stomach.

Two of his fingers sink into me, curling deep. My eyes close, and my mouth falls open as I clench, trying to fight it, but welcoming it at the same time as he begins to roll his fingers over my clit. He does it over and over until my thighs are quivering. Until my body capitulates. Until I'm seconds away from coming, bent over his lap with my ass red from his palm.

Which is, of course, exactly when he stops.

"Get in the tub."

I choke, swallowing the lump of pressure in my throat and blinking as I turn to glare at him.

Adrian smirks.

“Well, now. I believe we *did* find the punishment that actually punishes you, after all.”

He leans close.

“*Denying* you,” he purrs. “Now, get in the fucking tub.”

“You son of a—”

I choke, gasping as he stands, lifting me in his arms and turning to dump me unceremoniously into the lavender scented bubbles.

“Okay! Okay!” I mutter. “Fine, I’m in. Now get out.”

He ignores me, and I watch in disbelief as he rolls his sleeves up his muscled, veined, tattooed forearms.

“What...what are you doing?”

He reaches for body wash and a loofah. My brows arch.

“Are you joking?”

“Nope.”

He kneels on the floor beside the tub. I blush, too stunned to do anything as he lifts my arm and starts to wash my armpit with the loofah. Then my shoulders, then my back. It’s not until he’s moved to my front, the loofah teasing over my nipples, that my teeth clamp into my lip and the spell is broken.

“*Stop it,*” I say quietly.

“No.”

I simmer, stiffening and yet melting at the oddly gentle sensation of Adrian washing me. He’s slow and methodical with the soapy loofah—down my back, under my chin, and across my breasts. He lifts an arm, pushing suds from the shoulder to my elbow and then higher.

For a second, I flinch and try to move my arm away.

But it's too late.

His grip tightens and I feel him stiffen. And when I hazard a glance at him, I shiver at the way his eyes have zoned in on my wrist, a darkness clouding his face.

“What the fuck is this?”

It's my scar. It's *the* scar. The mark of where life presented me with a choice, and I chose the path of continuing to live instead of stopping it. A choice that Adele helped me make in a way I'll never be able to repay her for.

“It's nothing,” I mutter.

“Celeste, what the *fuck* is this?” he snaps.

“It's nothing, Adrian. I tripped and fell through a sliding glass door at the Palms Resort in Bali a few years ago.”

It's a lie.

My mind flashes to a time in my life where I thought I only had one way out of the hell I'd found myself in, and to a bathtub in a house in Paris not that different from this one—only the water was turning first pink and then red. The light fading from my vision, and the weight dropping from my shoulders, along with the cage around my heart and the daggers sliding into me, the lights dimming around me.

Until suddenly I wasn't alone. Suddenly, Amir's father's housekeeper was there.

Screaming. Pregnant. And dragging me from the water, wrapping a towel around my wrist and calling the paramedics.

Saving my life.

I'm not telling any of that to Adrian. It's not his to know.

“What the fuck is—”

“*Fuck off*, it’s nothing,” I snap. “I just told you: I tripped.”

I jolt as he viciously grabs my chin, lifting my eyes to his.

“You don’t get to do that.”

“Do what?”

“Mar yourself. You don’t get to hurt yourself like that.”

I swallow, my face crimson.

“You don’t get to tell me what I can and can’t—”

“Yes, I do. And you will never, *ever*,” he snarls, “fucking hurt yourself like that again. Do. You. Understand?”

Rage explodes in my stomach as my heart gets dragged right back to the same place I was in four years ago. The place where I was shattered from him. Heartbroken. Falling into deeper and deeper darkness as I swirled down the drain and found only one way out.

I hiss as I yank my arm away from him.

“You have no fucking right.”

“I have *every* right,” he snaps. “Am I clear?”

A pause.

“Yes.”

“Louder.”

“*Yes*,” I spit. “Yes, *your majesty*. I won’t do anything you tell me not to. And I’ll do everything you *command* me to.”

My words are flat; sarcastic. Adrian’s jaw clenches, and his eyes drop to the scar again. Then they slide back to my eyes.

“Good,” he growls, leaning closer and sucking the air from my lungs.

“*Good girl.*”

Heat explodes from my face down through my chest, electrifying my nipples as it shivers through my core to surge between my legs.

I look away, hugging myself as Adrian sighs.

“Stand,” he commands.

Numb, still tingling, I do as he says. I stand in the tub, suds slipping down my skin. I flush, biting my lip again as he runs the loofah over my ass and up and down my legs—even parting them to run it gently across my most private place.

Shamefully, it takes everything I have not to moan.

“Sit.”

I want to explode at him again. I want to throw this commanding shit right back in his face and tell him to go fuck himself. And yet, I’m powerless to. Not because he’s taken my power, but because something about *his* power does this to me.

Something about the way he overwhelms a room and sucks all the light and energy out of it, replacing it with darkness, brings me to my knees for this man.

Not necessarily in a way I dislike.

I sit back in the tub. He tilts my head back, and I shiver as he begins to pour sudsy water over my hair.

“What are you—”

“Washing your hair. Sit still.”

I flush.

“Adrian. I can wash my own—”

“I said sit still.”

So I do so, hugging myself and feeling the throb between my legs as the rough, crude, dark kingpin gently washes my hair with a tenderness that melts me.

It’s the contrast of the strong and firm, yet gentle hands over me. The hot water, just shy of being too hot. The lavender scent of the bubbles making my head swirl as my eyes close. I begin to float. So much so that when his hand begins to slide over my breasts, all I can do is breathe heavier.

My skin tingles as his fingertips slide around a nipple and then pinch it. I shiver, and this time, I don’t hold back the whimper. His hand pushes down into the water, and my body shivers as his large hand slides between my willingly parted thighs. He drags his finger up my lips and growls as he sinks it into me.

Only to suddenly stop.

I stiffen as my eyes open, my face flushing with heat and frustration.

“What are you—?”

“As I said, we *did* find a punishment that actually punishes.”

I glare at him, and I’m about to pull away when he rolls his finger over my clit. And just like that, I come apart. My eyes roll back as my treacherous hips push against his hand—

Only for him to stop again.

God. Damn. Him.

I grit my teeth as I glare at Adrian.

“You’re doing—”

“Whatever I want,” he snarls thickly.

“I thought you said that I was going to be your *plaything*.”

“And you fucking are. But I’m going to play with my plaything at *my* pace and for *my* pleasure. Not yours.”

He rolls my clit again, and I bite back a jolting gasp.

“I’m going to ask you a question,” he growls. “If you answer, I’ll continue. If you don’t…”

He leans close, smirking, as my face heats.

“Then *I* don’t. In fact, I may even bind your hands behind your back so you can’t do it yourself either.”

I sneer.

“Might make eating your mandatory dinners a bit more difficult.”

“Not when you’re sitting on my lap and I’m feeding you bites.”

My core clenches.

“That’s infantilizing.”

“That’s life,” he grunts. “Now, let’s start again.”

He rolls my clit again as I chew on my lip. But, of course, he stops just as I start to melt for him again.

“I want you to tell me…”

The smirk leaves his face.

“Why the fuck did you run?”

I stiffen.

That isn’t the lewd question I was expecting. I was expecting him to try to pry into my fantasies or ask me something crude about my nonexistent sex life with Amir. To make me tell him

to his face how hard I came for him yesterday, which was, you know, *hard*.

Not this very real question about our very real and broken past.

Our eyes lock.

“What?”

“I want to know why the fuck you ran.”

I glare at him.

“I ran because you’re an...”

A shadow crosses his face, and I look away.

“Adrian, I ran to protect you.”

“I didn’t *need* to be protected. You knew who and what I was, who my uncle was. You knew I wasn’t scared of your father,” he hisses. “I fucked you against your bedroom door while he tried to have a conversation with you through it, for fuck’s sake.”

I blush fiercely, gripping the sides of the tub as his finger flicks over my clit.

“That was filthy, and disgusting, and—” I choke.

“And *precisely* why your pussy came like a fucking faucet for my dick when it happened. So how about...”

I groan as he slides a finger into me, curling it against my g-spot as his palm grinds into my clit.

“How about you stop making excuses, and tell me the fucking truth?”

My eyes narrow at him as I start to shake.

“*Fine*, Adrian. You want the truth?!”

“Did I fucking stutter?”

“I ran because I met the other girls!”

He freezes.

“What?”

Suddenly, his hand leaves my thighs and the heat fades from my body.

“I met the other girls, Adrian,” I hiss through clenched teeth, my heart wrenching as it all comes back.

He stares at me coldly.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“*Really?*” I spit. “You’re going there?”

“*Going there? I’ve been there for four fucking years!*”

I gasp as his hand surges from the water, sliding up my body as his fingers wrap coldly around my throat. My eyes bulge as his blaze into mine with a brutal lethality.

“*Yes,*” he rasps, sending fear and excitement exploding through my core. “Yes, we’re fucking going there.”

I take a deep breath, my heart wrenching and black poison seeping into my heart as I replay the scene from my father’s library, cutting like a knife to the heart.

“I met your other girls, Adrian!”

He stares at me, his brow lined, his eyes narrowed. His hand drops from my throat.

I exhale slowly, my eyes closing.

“Look, I was mad. I was mad for so fucking long. What we had...or, what *I* had with you...”

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

“It wasn’t some stupid teenage dear diary thing for me, Adrian,” I say coldly. “When I found out about the rest of them...”

My heart clenches, like the blade that’s still stuck in there is twisting deeper again.

“It hurt. I mean it *really* fucking hurt. But I got over it. I got over you.”

Lies.

My eyes blur, my heart aching as I let my gaze lance into him.

“I *had* to get over—”

“There were never any other girls, Celeste.”

“Adrian, I—”

“And if you ever even remotely loved me, you’d never think there could be.”

His face is like iron as he stands, reaching for a towel to dry his hands before he drops it unceremoniously to the floor. He looms over me, making me feel tiny as I hug myself in the rapidly cooling bathwater.

“We didn’t fall apart because of me, Celeste,” he rasps, cold fury swirling around him like a black mist.

“We fell apart because of you. Because of your fucking fear. We fell apart because you fucking *let us*.”

And then he’s gone, leaving me shivering in the water.



“ARE YOU ABSOLUTELY FUCKING SURE?”

I’m not usually this cold to, or demanding of, Cade. But it’s been four days since things fell the fuck apart in Celeste’s bathroom and suffice to say my mood has been fucking *black*.

Cade knows me well enough to get that, at least.

“One hundred percent sure,” my number two’s deep, gravelly voice rumbles through the phone. “I spotted the ink clear as day on the both of them.”

My eyes turn to slits as my teeth grind, peering through the darkness at the front of the pub.

“Thanks. Speak to you soon.”

“Hold on, hold on,” Cade grunts, his voice taking on an edge. “Where the fuck are you?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Fucking hell, Adrian. You’re not *there*, are you?”

“Cade, what I need from you right now is to stay at the house. I need men surrounding it. I want them on the on rooftops, and I want them sharp and alert. Nothing gets in that fucking front door or any of the others. Do you understand?”

“You know I’m already on that. But I’m sending men to—”

“You’re not sending shit right now. We’re not starting a war with Cillian.”

“No, we’re not. *You’re* starting a war with Cillian, and without any fucking backup. You’re not goddamn Rambo, Adrian.”

“I’m leaving my gun in the car,” I hiss quietly.

“Is that supposed to inspire confidence? Because it doesn’t.”

“Relax. It’s just a conversation. Keep them fucking safe, Cade.”

He sighs over the phone. “Permission to speak freely?”

I weigh that decision for a second, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel of my Range Rover.

“Fine, speak,” I finally grunt.

“The little girl. She’s—”

“She’s none of your concern. Only their safety. Is that understood?”

“It’s always understood, boss.”

“Good.”

“But Adrian, *please* do not go into Cillian Kildare’s fucking pub with fists swinging.”

I smile as I shut the door to my car, walk to the trunk, pop it, and reach inside. My hands close around the handle of a baseball bat.

“You don’t have to worry about a thing,” I mutter. “I won’t be using my fists. Speak to you soon, Cade.”

“*Fuck*, Adrian—”

I hang up and turn towards The Weeping Banshee with murder and violence coursing through my veins like my favorite drug.

Like an orgasm I can't wait to have.

Cade and his people cleaned up every speck of evidence from what happened in the hotel suite at the Dorchester. Celeste and the other two checked out, and generous tips were left for the cleaning staff, even though we left it immaculately clean.

The two pieces of shit that tried to hurt them have been relocated to the basement of a building I own over in Shoreditch.

The two that are still alive, that is. The man who tried to do the unthinkable to Celeste as she lay unconscious is dead. I mean, obviously, considering my bullet took off half the back of his skull as he made a move on Adele and Dahlia.

Which is regrettable, because I would have liked to have gone over him with a blow torch and a pair of pliers for a month.

But alas, some things we can only dream about.

His friend, the one I beat to a bloody pulp in the elevator, had the misfortune of *not* dying. It was a few days before that happened to him and his friend at Cade's hands in the Shoreditch basement.

Sadly, they had nothing to say...and Cade is *very* persuasive.

However, in death, they said plenty. When Cade stripped them, he discovered matching tattoos on both would-be-assassins: blood-red hand prints on their ribs.

It's the mark The Red Right Hand gives to soldiers who have been promoted through their ranks. Or, simply put, it's a trail of breadcrumbs that leads *directly* to Cillian fucking Kildare's front door.

Cade might be right: I can't really go in there and start World War Three between Cillian and myself.

But I *am* about to go in there and *fuck some shit up*.

The bouncer out front of The Weeping Banshee eyes me as I make my way across the street. He frowns.

“Mr. Cross—”

Before he can say shit, and just as his eyes land on the baseball bat in my hands, I move—fast. I slam the bat into his midsection, doubling him over, and then crack it over his back, knocking him aside.

The front door to the pub slams open under the force of my kick, and the second I’m inside, anyone who’s not there on official business is out the door.

The ones who remain are fair fucking game.

Three of Cillian’s men are on me at once. But again, I’ve got the fucking baseball bat. One goes down with a grunt as it slams into his gut. The next gets the handle jabbed between his eyes, which turns his lights off *fast*.

The third has the audacity to whip out a gun. Which he immediately loses when I break probably half the bones in his hand with the bat. He is screaming when I catch him in the side of the head, knocking him out cold and silencing him.

I grunt as I’m hit from the back, the force of it slamming me behind the bar and crashing into a shelf of glassware. I whirl, swinging for the fucking fences, and crushing the assailant’s nose in the process. Another asshole jumps the bar, and my bat clears a shelf of liquor and some more glassware before I connect with his chest, cracking his ribs.

With a snarl, I shove him back, lunging over the bar to tackle him to the floor and go at him with my fucking fists.

Until a shot rings out.

“ENOUGH!”

It's like a record scratching to a halt. I stop the beating, my chest heaving as I pull back from the man I've got pinned to the ground. For the first time, I realize there are somewhere in the realm of fifteen men surrounding me.

But when I whirl, bat in hand, there's only one man who I lock eyes with.

Cillian, standing at the bottom of the stairs the lead up to his office, with a smoking gun in his hand.

“Cillian,” I growl, smiling demonically as I look him up and down. *“Just the man I was hoping to see.”*

He stares at me like I'm insane.

“Are you out of your fucking head?”

He gestures broadly at the wreckage of his pub before ripping his gaze back to me.

“Do you have a goddamn death wish, Cross?”

“Funny thing that, I'm here to ask you that exact fucking question,” I snarl.

Before he can respond, I'm making a beeline for him. His men start to charge me, but Cillian waves them off.

“Stop.”

He frowns, hefting the gun in his hand before slowly raising it to the ceiling and bringing the hammer down slowly.

“Can we talk like civilized human beings, Adrian?”

“I doubt it.”

He arches a brow.

“Because you’re not a human being,” I growl. “Civilized or otherwise.”

He rolls his eyes and turns to his men.

“Everybody, get the fuck out.”

We wait, eying each other until the last of them files out the front door. When we’re alone, he sighs as he walks over to the wreckage at the bar.

“I’m going to bill you for all of this, you know.”

I turn my head and spit blood on the floor before I return my gaze to him.

Cillian sighs.

“I don’t read minds, Cross. Would you care to tell me what the fuck this is about?”

“Really?”

“Really *what?*”

“Really, you’re going to play fucking stupid with me on this?”

“Adrian, I swear to Christ I have no fucking idea what the hell you’re talking—”

“What’s going on is you sending thugs to harm her.”

Cillian’s brow furrows.

“What?”

“Are you that hard up that her canceling your deal would make you risk open war with—”

“*I* cancelled our deal, actually.”

I stare at him, dumbfounded. Cillian shrugs.

“The money would have been nice, but it wasn’t worth the headache of getting into a dick-measuring contest with you. And something tells me I’d have been playing marriage counselor for the two of you more times than I’d want—which is already *zero*, by the way. So no, Adrian. I actually have no idea what you’re on about.”

My brow furrows.

Shit.

Cillian ducks behind the bar and grabs a bottle of Irish whiskey and two glasses before he beckons me over. He clears the bar top of glass with a sweep of his arm and slams both glasses down.

“First, we drink.”

“I don’t need to join you in your alcoholic tendencies. We can talk just like this.”

He glares at me.

“My so-called ‘alcoholic tendencies’ are my culture’s way of settling anything. So sit the fuck down, shut the fuck up, and have a drink. And I’d watch where you swing that fucking bat, because I honestly have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about.”

He pours the whiskey and sets the bottle down heavily on the bar.

“Drink.”

We do, our eyes sharp and locked the whole time before we slam the glasses down.

Cillian instantly refills them before pulling out his cigarette case and slipping a dart between his lips. He lights it with that

gold-plated Zippo of his, taking long drags as the smoke curls around his sharp cheekbones.

“So, what the hell are you talking about, Cross?”

I suck on my teeth, eyeing him.

“Someone came after Celeste. *You* came after—”

“I did no such thing.”

A shadow slips over his face as he drags slowly on his cigarette.

“Whatever devilish bastard you think I am, Adrian, it’s probably a pretty good approximation...”

His eyes are murderous.

“...but one thing I *don’t* do is come after women and little girls.”

I open my mouth to speak, shut it again. Cillian rolls his eyes.

“Of course I know about the girl, Cross. I do my research, same as you. Celeste’s deal with me was for the three of them. Same as the deal I’m sure you have with her now.”

He eyes me.

“She’s under your protection now, isn’t she?”

My jaw clenches. “She is,” I growl with gravel in my tone.

“Good, fine, whatever.”

“That doesn’t make you angry?” I prod.

“Of course it makes me bloody angry! Do you have any idea how much she was going to *pay* me?”

Dark fire surges in my chest at the thought of the *other ways* Celeste is paying me.

“Angry enough to—?”

“No, Adrian. A simple business deal falling through does not anger me enough to do that.”

“And if I were to tell you I had evidence saying otherwise?”

“I’d ask to see it.” He nods at the glass in front of me. “Drink.”

“Answers first.”

“I’m giving you answers. Drink.”

We eye each other again as we slam back another.

Cillian cracks his neck.

“Okay. What’s this supposed evidence?”

“The two men who came for them. You share something with them.”

He arches a brow. “Enlighten me.”

“A particular taste in body art.”

His brow furrows as he leans against the back bar, drumming his fingers across it as he eyes me coolly. The glow of his cigarette casts dark shadows across his face.

“Elaborate.”

“They had the mark of the Red Right Hand tattooed on their sides. They were *your* men, Killian.”

I pluck the bat from where I’d leaned it against my side of the bar and twirl it slowly in my hand.

“You can see where I might have...concerns.”

He nods slowly.

“I can, I can. Do these men have names?”

“Well, they don’t have the ability to breathe or pump blood anymore, so I’m afraid it’s too late to ask them.”

His lips curl. “Hmm.”

“That’s all you have to say?”

Cillian sighs.

“Adrian, I run a business. I have employees that come, and employees that go. But if you let me see the bodies,” he shrugs, “I might be able to help you.”

I glare at him.

“Cillian—”

“I swear to fucking God this wasn’t me, Cross. Hand to *God*, this was not me.”

“Find something else to swear on, because God and I don’t talk.”

He shrugs.

“What’s holy to you then, Adrian?”

“Nothing.”

His lips curl into a dark smile.

“Well, I know something that at least *used to be*.”

He grins.

“Your wife, Adrian. How about I swear on Celeste?”

Violence clouds my vision.

“Careful...” I hiss.

He doesn’t say a word as he pours two more drinks and nods at me. He doesn’t have to prompt me this time before I knock it back along with him.

“So, she’s yours again?”

“She’s under my protection.”

“That’s not what I’m asking. Is she *yours*?”

“No,” I hiss, lying through my teeth.

“Then, Adrian, let me ask you something.” He shrugs. “If she’s not yours, why are you even here? And why the fuck are we having this conversation?”

This is going nowhere. And besides, I think it’s safe to say I’ve got what I came here for. I can read people like books, and I came here to look Cillian in the eyes and wait for him to lie to me.

Except he hasn’t. If those two goons were his men, I can tell he was genuinely unaware of their attempt on Celeste’s life.

So who *was* aware of it?

In any case, it’s time to go.

I rap the bar with my knuckles and turn to leave, violence, alcohol, and questions surging through my veins.

“Since she’s *not* yours...”

I stiffen, turning back to eye Cillian coldly.

He grins darkly.

“I mean, I’d hate to set the cat among the pigeons. But if she’s not yours, I don’t mind telling you this...”

“Tell me *what*?” I snarl.

“Like I said, Adrian, I do my homework as well as you do. And there’s more to that girl than you think there is.”

“I’m well aware of her past—”

“It’s her present I’m afraid you might not be so acquainted with. You know that someone’s after her?”

“Of course I do.”

“And I’m sure you know about Amir and Nasser El-Sayed?”

“None of this surprises me, Cillian.”

His smile grows wider.

“Hmmm. Now what if I were to tell you that Celeste had a meeting with MI6 the other day?”

I stiffen. A ringing tone hums in my ears.

Fucking WHAT?

I don’t answer, but my lack of an answer tells him everything he needs to know. Cillian smiles as he takes a slow drag of his smoke and pours himself yet another drink.

“Ah, finally I stump you.”

My teeth grind.

“Word is, MI6’s got a keen interest in you, my friend.”

“We’re not friends, Cillian.”

He chuckles, clutching his heart through his tailored shirt.

“You fucking wound me, you know that?”

“No, I don’t.”

“You’re right, you don’t. But there it is. That’s all I know. Do with it what you will.”

He glances around the place.

“If we’re quite through here, though, I think I’d like you to get the fuck out of my bar before you break anything else. And believe me, I *will* be sending you a bill.”



AT FIRST, I have no idea why I'm awake.

It's dark, the house is totally silent, and I'm alone. I squint into the blackness and fumble as I reach for my phone on the bedside table.

It's two o'clock in the morning.

I rub my eyes, putting my phone face down again as I sink back into the pillows. It was probably nothing—a car horn outside, or maybe even Adele or Dahlia having a nightmare down the hall.

My eyes close again, and I'm just about to drift back to sleep when I hear it again: a bang, coming from downstairs. I bolt upright in bed.

There's the sound of a door slamming. Then a crashing sound. My blood turns to ice, and for a moment, all I know is fear.

They've found me.

Whoever killed Amir and his father have found me here at Adrian's place. And guards or not—

I frown. No, that's impossible. Though they're always just out of sight, I have zero illusions that Adrian's place isn't guarded like a fortress. No one that loud and clumsy is just casually stumbling through the back door at night.

Which begs the question: what the hell is going on downstairs?

I slip from the bed, pulling on a hoodie over my tank top and sleep shorts before I crack open the bedroom door. I glance down the hall, thinking for a moment again that maybe it's Adele—or perhaps it has something to do with Dahlia, and she needs my help. But their door is shut.

The shuffling sound comes again from downstairs, and I stiffen. Shivering, I tiptoe down the hall to the back staircase that leads down to the kitchen. As quietly as I can, I make my way down, take a huge breath, and then peek around the corner.

The kitchen is dark and empty.

Maybe I really am going crazy.

I turn to head back to bed, when suddenly my gaze lands on something by the back door. Something that looks like spilled paint, or ink, or coffee. My brow furrows as I walk quietly across the floor before suddenly stopping cold, my blood chilling.

It's blood. There's *blood* dripped all over the floor by the back door.

And the doorknob. And the lock. And the alarm code keypad next to it. My face pales as I turn to follow the smear marks across the sink and countertop, the drips across the floor that lead out of the doorway opposite the one I came through and into the hall.

What the fuck is this?

I move quickly, following the drips and smears of blood to the main entryway to the townhouse. My eyes slide up the

staircase, following the trails of blood upstairs with a sick, gnawing feeling growing in the pit of my stomach.

Upstairs, the nauseated feeling only gets worse as I trace the blood down the hall. And when the drips come to a stop in front of Adrian's bedroom door, I go pale.

He's hurt.

Without thinking, without calling for help, and without knocking, I simply twist the doorknob and barge into the room.

"Oh my God, *Adrian...*"

The room is dark except for a light in his bathroom. He whirls at the sound of my voice, his haunted eyes glinting wickedly in the dim light.

"What are you doing in here?" he rasps.

"You're hurt."

"I'm fine," he mutters.

But I ignore him, stepping into the room and closing the door behind me. Adrian turns, scowling.

"I said I'm fucking fine, Celeste."

He turns from me again. I gasp and my hand flies to my mouth when the light from bathroom illuminates his back.

Blood. A ripped shirt. The glint of something that might be a metal blade, or glass, sticking out of it.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Adrian—!"

"I said *get out*," he snaps.

"No. Let me help you."

I move towards him, but he glares coldly at me.

Keep the fuck away from me.”

“Adrian, goddamn it, let me—”

I gasp, choking, as his fingers wrap around my throat.

“In this house, you are under my rule, and you will follow my commands—”

“You will *bleed the fuck out*,” I choke, “unless I help you.”

He stares at me silently.

“Just let me fucking help you, okay?”

The muscles of his jaw grind. Then he turns away.

“I don’t need your help.”

“Yes, you do.”

He’s swaying on his feet, and a fear in me that I haven’t really known for four years grips me as I grab him.

“Come here.”

I pull him into the bathroom and nod at the toilet seat.

“Sit.”

“He’s already got a medical kit half open on the vanity, the contents strewn everywhere and sticky with blood. But I ignore the horrific scene as I grab a pair of scissors and use them to cut the shirt off his back, gently peeling away the fabric.

The glass doesn’t look like it’s in very deep. But it’s firmly jammed in there and blood is flowing freely down his tattooed back.

“Jesus, Adrian. What the fuck happened?”

“I fell,” he mutters.

“Bullshit.”

“Into a sliding glass door at the Palms Resort in Bali.”

I smirk as I roll my eyes.

“Touché.”

I turn back to his wounds, grabbing a handful of gauze.

“This is going to—”

“Just fucking do it.”

I grip the piece of glass with the gauze.

“Celeste, just fucking yank it *out* already.”

And I do, wincing, even though he doesn't himself. Blood pours from the wound until I slap the gauze onto it, pressing tightly. I pull the gauze away just long enough to wipe the gash down with antiseptic wash. Then I cover the whole thing with a fresh bandage and tape it down across his bare back.

Then my eyes wander across the myriad other fresh cuts, nicks, and bruises dotting his back and shoulders.

“Seriously, Adrian, what the hell happened to you?”

“*Nothing*,” he snarls, pulling away. “Are we done here?”

I glare at his back.

“No, we're not.”

I watch his shoulders stiffen, his inked muscles rolling as something rumbles in his chest.

“Just leave it, Celeste.”

But I can't. Not this time. I've *left it* too many times before when it comes to he and I. I've *left it* to sit there and crumble to ruins. Or rot away. Or sear my skin like a hot coal until all I knew was pain and suffering.

Never the truth. Never the answers. Never the conversation we always needed to have.

“No,” I say again, firmly. “Not this time. Adrian, tell me what happened.”

He half turns toward me.

“This is the side of me you don’t want to know.”

“Says who?”

“Says me. Trust me, Celeste. I am *not* the boy you once—”

“I know you’re not,” I whisper. “But I always knew the man you’d become.”

His mouth thins.

“*Really?*”

“Well, maybe not *all* of this...”

I look around the gorgeous bathroom in the extravagant house.

“But I knew what you were.”

“And you ran.”

“Yes. But I knew what you were, and I wanted you anyway. And I lo—”

I stop myself before I can say the word. But he turns towards me, his eyes glinting.

“What happened tonight, Adrian? How did you get this?”

He looks away.

“I dropped by Cillian’s pub for a few pints.”

My face pales.

“*Cillian* did this?”

“No, *I* did this by...” he trails off. “Never mind.”

“Adrian—”

“I did this by crashing into his bar with a baseball bat and taking out seven of his men. Happy now?”

My mouth falls open as he turns away.

“*No*. Why would you go there?”

“For answers,” he snaps. “The two men who tried to hurt you in that hotel room bore the tattoos of his fucking gang on their bodies.”

I stiffen, blinking rapidly.

Not because of the revelation that Cillian may have had something to do with the attacks. Not because of any sort of secret Adrian’s cracked open. No, my heart thuds in my chest and threatens to jump into my throat because this man—who looks at me like he wants to devour me whole or possibly flay me alive—went into the lair of a rival tonight, alone, with a baseball bat.

For me.

I chew on my lip and lay a hand gently on his shoulder.

“You went there for me?”

“*Yes*,” he snarls, whirling on me with a fury that makes me gasp. “*Yes*, I went there for you.” He growls.

“Why?” I choke.

He laughs coldly.

“Four fucking years later, and you still don’t fucking know. You still don’t even understand.”

“Understand what?”

I gasp as he stands abruptly, looming over me with those stormy eyes burning into my soul.

“That even after everything, Celeste, even after you stabbed me in the back, and broke us, and ran from everything,” he hisses. “I would walk into hell. I would *kill*...”

I shiver, jolting as his one hand grabs my jaw, the other gripping my waist like it's his most treasured possession as he slams me back into the wall, pinning me to it.

“Even though I've spent four years hating you and trying to carve you out of my soul,” he says, “I'd burn the fucking world for you.”

When his lips slam to mine, it's not a kiss.

It's a conquest.

It's a brutal, unflinching, shattering assault on my mouth. And yet, it turns me to pure fire. I whimper as his lips sear mine, his hand slipping into the hair at the back of my neck and gripping it tightly in his fist. His hand slides over my hip, pushing under my sweatshirt and tank top to grip my bare skin tightly.

His lips bruise mine, and I moan when his tongue demands entrance. His hand slides up my ribs, leaving a trail of heat under his fingertips as he grips the tank top and sweater and shoves them up high. I whimper when the clothing slips over my breasts, my nipples dragging across his firm chest.

Adrian devours my mouth as he twists a nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

Biting my lips.

Assaulting my tongue.

Sucking the air from my lungs as I drown in him.

He pulls away just long enough to rip the tank top and hoodie over my head, tossing them aside before he slams me painfully against the wall.

I moan, my arms circling his neck and my body shivering as I press myself hard against his bare skin. The masculine smell of him and his dark, swirling aura bind me like black chains, sink into me like dark, barbed thorns that I'll never be free of.

That I never want to be free of.

His fingers twist my nipples to the point of pain. But that pain changes instantly to pleasure as it surges through my core. Heat pools between my legs, and I shiver hungrily, kissing him back as his hand delves into my sleep shorts. His finger easily slides between my lips, curling into me as I moan hungrily.

The shorts drop to my ankles, and I barely have time to step out of them before he's lifting a thigh to his hip and grinding against me. The friction of the rough fabric of his slacks against my bare lips electrifies me. And shamelessly I can feel my hips eagerly wanting more.

I hear the jangle of his belt buckle, the rip of his zipper. And when his pants hit the floor I moan at the feel of his thick, swollen cock springing free right against my slit.

I claw at him, moaning and drowning in his darkness as he devours my mouth, my jawline, my neck. His hands claw at me like an animal as his teeth rake my skin. I'm doing the same thing—gasping, choking for more as my fingers drag down his back.

I wince when I realize my hands are wet.

“Adrian, your bandage—”

“Does it look like I give a fuck right now?”

His mouth slams to mine, choking off my words and my worries. And they melt away. Because this is how we always were, and this is how we still are.

Like animals. Like two storm clouds crashing together.

I shiver as his hand drops to my ass, gripping me tightly and making me whimper as he lifts me up against the wall. His hips center his swollen crown at my entrance. And in one thrust, he drives all the way in.

My mouth falls open, my head dropping back as an inhuman, guttural cry rips from my lips. His sheer size takes my breath away, stretching me to my limit. And yet, the soothing balm of pleasure that floods through me afterward is like heaven.

He growls, fucking into me again—brutally, savagely, fucking me against the wall as I wrap my legs around him and beg for more. Harder. Deeper. I want him to let go completely.

I claw at him, hissing as his teeth bite down hard on my neck, leaving marks and maybe even drawing blood. Our bodies grind together, my nipples dragging over his chest as his fingers dig into the flesh of my ass.

With a groan, he whirls, stepping out of his pants. I cling to him as he storms from the bathroom into the darkness of the bedroom, his cock still balls-deep inside of me. My heart lurches as I fall backwards across the bed, but he's still right there on top of me, spreading my thighs and wrapping a hand around my throat.

I whimper as he drives his cock deep, his mouth hovering inches from mine.

“Scream for me.”

He pounds into me, and my eyes roll back as I lose myself in the feeling of him filling me. It feels like he's in my stomach.

In my heart. In my fucking soul. Our bodies grind together slickly, and when I get the taste of copper in my mouth, I realize it's his open cut.

But I don't care. I don't care about the bruises, or the marks, or the blood, or the cuts. I don't care about the animal savagery of this.

Because this, and all that we are, is elemental. Like two Greek gods clashing on the mountaintop. And the harder he fucks me, the harder he pounds me into the bed, the more I know this isn't love making. This isn't even sex.

This is a battle. And if it's to the death, so be it.

My arms and legs wrap tight around him. My screams grow louder and louder, until he slams a hand over my mouth.

I bite down hard on his hand. He does the same to my neck.

"I get so hard when you fight me, my little slut."

I groan, eyes rolling back before I lurch for his ear with my teeth. Adrian growls savagely, hissing as he pulls away before I can bite down.

"*So sorry,*" he rasps darkly. "Better luck next time."

I shudder, ecstasy surging in me as I grit my teeth and try to bite at him again. But he dodges that attack too, making a tsking sound as his hand wraps around my throat.

"You'll have to do better than that if you want to hurt me."

"Maybe I'll wait until you're asleep and stab you."

I cry out, moaning as he rams his cock into me and uses his palm to spank my ass hard.

"And maybe you'll be the one waking up with your hands bound behind your back and my cock fucking your ass until

you can't walk for a week.”

“I'm sorry, I think you might be confusing the size of your ego with the size of your dick. Would I even wake up to that?”

He chuckles a dark, malevolent laugh.

“Keep it up and I'll both remind you of my size and shut you up by burying my cock down your throat.”

A spasm of filthy arousal surges through my core.

“Ahh, except you'd like that, wouldn't you, my little slut?”

I whimper, my body convulsing even as I shake my head side to side.

“You disgusting, arrogant—”

“Do us both a favor and stop pretending you're not about to make a fucking mess all over my cock.”

His hand tightens around my throat, and my eyes roll back as the fire begins to consume me from the inside out.

“Now be a good girl...”

The world goes white.

“And make that little pussy *come* for me. Come like my good little fuck-toy, Celeste.”

I swear to God, it's as if Adrian's entire house has just been nuked from orbit. All I know is white light and heat, and the feeling of my soul leaving my body. An unearthly sound that takes me far too long to realize is my own scream of pleasure rips from my mouth. My body arches and spasms off the bed, and I cling to him with every ounce of my strength as the climax explodes through me.

All I can do is hold on to him for dear life as I come over and over, every muscle in my body quivering and spasming, until

my screams of ecstasy have ripped all the air from my lungs.

He groans, driving roughly into me before his mouth slams to mine. I can feel him surging and throbbing deep inside. His hot cum spurts into me again and again and again as he pins me to the bed and crushes his lips to mine.

Devouring me.

Punishing me.

Saving me.

And damning us both to hell.



THE AFTERMATH of our lovemaking looks like a crime scene.

Like two mortally wounded beasts have just finished a fight to the death.

My vision is blurred as I lie sprawled across Adrian's violently blood-streaked bed with one leg flopped haphazardly over the side. My skin tingles all over, and I can't even feel my extremities.

Adrian lies on the floor, half propped up against his nightstand with a glass of whisky in his hand and a fresh bandage hastily slapped over his gash. His chiseled, muscular, ink-swirled body is pumped up, as if he's just finished a marathon.

Quite honestly, it feels like I have too. A marathon I ran naked through glass, or tree branches. I shiver as I drop my chin, letting my eyes drag over the sight of myself.

Sweet Jesus. I look like I just did battle with a wolverine—a rabid one, at that. Fingernail scratches and bruises the same size and shape as Adrian's fingertips cover my skin. Red bite marks, suck wounds, and stinging pink handprints from spanks dot my pale skin from my neck all the way down to my fucking toes.

Of course, they're centered on certain places. My breasts, for instance, are so sore it makes me gasp even to sit up. And between my legs...good fucking God. I'll be amazed if I can pee or even sit at all in the next week without wincing.

And yet... holy fuck. I mean *holy. Fuck.*

That was death by fucking. Mutual self-immolation. Raw, unbridled, unhinged lust.

It was masochistic, savage, brutal, and all-consuming. And yet, covered in bruises as I am, sore all over, and still not quite able to find reality or my breath, I still crave more of it. Like some fucking junkie aching for another hit, desperate to do anything—to crawl through glass if need be—for more of that sweet relief.

God, am I ever fucked up.

I drop my head back to the pillow, shivering as I suck in another breath of air. But then I jolt when I feel a firm hand wrap around my calf. I groan, my eyes closing and a heated shiver curling its way through my core. His hand slides higher and higher, spreading my thighs before he pushes between them.

I groan and move to close my legs.

“You can't be serious.”

“I haven't gotten my fill of you yet, slut,” Adrian rasps from the floor next to the bed.

I try to close my thighs, but then I wince as his hand tightens on my already-bruised skin, pulling my legs apart.

It's not as if I fight it. At *all*. He pulls, and I let them open.

“You're an animal,” I groan. “A deranged, rabid...*oh fuck...*”

My eyes fly open and then squeeze shut in bliss as his fingers find my slick pussy. Two of them slide into me, curling up against the front wall and stroking my g-spot as his thumb rolls my clit.

I moan and gasp as I feel him rise, his other hand grabbing my hip and yanking me closer to the edge of the bed. I shiver as he moves between my legs. His mouth hovers over my inner thigh, his teeth dragging over my skin as I gasp in a mix of pain and pleasure.

“Fuck, Adrian...ow! I’m still pretty sore—”

“And I’m still not done with you yet. Stay still.”

I whimper as he nips my thigh again before moving higher. His mouth hums against my pussy, and I melt as his tongue snakes into me. My nipples harden, my back arching as my chest thrusts to the ceiling.

My hips roll, and mewling, whimpering, pathetic sounds fall from my lips as he pins me to the bed and devours me. He pushes me higher and higher towards—God, I don’t even know—my twelfth? Fifteenth release of the night?

But this is what happens when the lid blows off. This is what happens when four years of anger and fury and pain and lust and desire can’t be contained any longer.

He sucks on my clit, making me gasp sharply before he backs off, letting his tongue swirl gently around it. Then he dives in again, assaulting my clit with his tongue harder and harder until my toes are curling and my body shakes.

Then he stops abruptly and pulls away.

“*More,*” I croak, before suddenly my face turns crimson as I realize I just said it out loud.

Adrian chuckles darkly.

“Such a greedy little whore, aren’t you?”

I want to hate it when he calls me that. And yet... I don’t. Not at all. What I hate is how wet I get being called such filthy, depraved names.

He pulls away. My eyes open to see him sitting back, purposefully leaving me trembling and aching and hovering *right* on the edge of my release.

“*Bastard*,” I glare at him, and he smirks.

“Say please.”

“Fuck you. I’m not begging.”

“You sure?”

His hand reaches for me, and my breath sucks in and my teeth clamp down on my lip. My eyes go wide, eagerly watching in anticipation as his fingers tease towards my aching pussy.

But of course Adrian catches the look, chuckles, and backs off again.

“So fucking *eager*. I bet I could touch you with one finger right now and you’d come like a greedy little slut.”

I bite my lips, squirming. It only proves his point.

“You desperately want me to let you come, don’t you?”

I swallow, glaring at him.

“It makes no difference to me,” he smirks, raising one side of his mouth. “Maybe I could just leave you hanging like this for the next week. In fact, I might actually make good on my threat of tying your hands behind your back, so you can’t do it yourself.”

The thought of that makes me terrified. And he can see it on my face.

His grin curls up dangerously.

“Perhaps we’ll play a little game.”

I take a shaky breath, looking away.

“The only games we seem to be playing here involve you thinking that because I’m forced to play your little games, I enjoy them. When in fact, it’s the—*ohhh...*”

I whimper, writhing on the bed as he sinks a finger into me, stroking it against my g-spot and bringing me right back to that edge.

Only to back off again. Bastard.

“Yes, and hating every second of it, I can tell,” he growls. “I think your pussy deserves a fucking Oscar, if that’s the case.”

I glare at him.

“All right. What’s the game?” I mumble.

“I’m going to ask you a question. And then you’ll answer.”

“Why?”

“Because if you do, I’ll let you come.”

I purse my lips.

“*Fine*. What is it?”

He sits back, eyeing me.

“Why Dahlia?”

I blink suddenly, like a record scratching. My mood shifts uncomfortably and wildly as we jolt hard, from lust, hate, and passion to...Dahlia.

I wrinkle my nose.

“Excuse me?”

He drags his nails down his jaw, his face darkening.

“I mean why have another woman’s child masquerade as your own?”

Whatever fire I still have left inside me extinguishes as I look away.

“Answer me.”

I gasp as his hand suddenly cups my pussy, dragging a finger through my lips. The fire and lust inside of my chest may have just snuffed out. My pussy doesn’t seem to have gotten the message.

“Stop it, Adrian.”

“Answer me.”

“No—*ohh*—”

I whine in pleasure as he circles my clit with a finger.

“*Answer me.*”

“I—this is no longer a game I want to play,” I blurt.

“And I don’t really give a fuck. Tell me what it is.”

“What *what* is?” I hiss through clenched teeth, my toes curling as I fight the waves crashing through me.

“Tell me what that deep, dark little secret is.”

“*No.*”

I try and kick away from him, but then I yelp when I feel him bite the inside of my thigh.

“You fucking animal!”

“I can do this all night long, Celeste,” he breathes. “In fact, I’ll do it all night, all morning, all day tomorrow, and all night *tomorrow*, too, if I want.”

I groan.

“The point is, there’ll be no mercy until you tell me whatever that dark little secret is that you want to keep from me. And until then—”

“Because I can’t have kids of my own!”

The words rip from my lips unbidden, and the room goes silent.

My heart thuds in my ears, an empty ache gnawing inside of me.

“I can’t have children, Adrian,” I sneer coldly, glaring at him. “Happy now?”

His hand stops moving on me and then drops away entirely, leaving me feeling cold and alone. I swallow as I curl up into a ball.

“My uterus is fucked up, so I can’t.”

I glance up to find his eyes boring holes into me. A horrible thought slides into my head.

“Let me guess,” I say coldly. “The thrill is somewhat gone now with that primal urge out of the picture.”

His brow furrows to shadows.

“Excuse me?”

“You know what I’m talking about. Nature, and all that. The evolutionary drive to knock up your conquest. To further your progeny,” I sneer. “I’m no fool. I can see how you’re looking at me, Adrian. I’m damaged—”

“No.”

I gasp sharply at his dark-edged tone as his hand slides up my thigh again. Then I’m shivering as he pulls me towards him, and opens my legs again.

“It’s the exact opposite, actually.”

As he pulls me, my gaze shifts lower, and I gasp when I see how fucking huge and swollen and hard his cock is.

I allow my eyes to slide back up his muscled torso to his gorgeous face.

“That’s what does it for you, then?” I snap. “That you won’t be *able* to get me pregnant? Is that what gets you hard—”

“What gets me hard,” he rasps, making me moan as he grabs my ankles and yanks me towards the edge of the bed. “What gets me hard is that fucking *mouth* of yours.”

I whimper as he stands, grabbing me and flipping me onto my front with my ass up in the air at the edge of the bed.

“And your pretty little fucking pussy,” he groans, his hand sliding between my legs and his fingers stroking through my wetness as I moan into the sheets.

“This greedy pussy that doesn’t seem to be able to get enough of milking my dick.”

“Pig,” I mumble, gasping when I feel him move between my legs from behind.

His hot, heavy cock slaps against my ass, making me whimper as he drags the swollen head across my tender skin and down between my thighs. I can feel the slick trail of his pre-cum across my skin, and I shiver, aching with need as he lets the fat head nudge between my lips.

“Is it hard?” He growls.

“Is what hard?”

I gasp, shivering as he centers himself.

“To try and bullshit me while your telltale pussy is dripping all over my fucking balls.”

“You *arrogant* fucking—*oh my God...*”

My eyes open wide and the breath leaves my body as Adrian buries every thick, throbbing inch of his huge cock deep inside me in one thrust. I might be sore, but him entering me still feels so fucking good that I moan into the sheets.

“What also gets me hard,” he growls, making me whimper as he tugs my head up by the hair, “is the fight in you. What gets me *really* fucking hard, Celeste, is the way your mouth tells me you don’t want this while your pussy swallows my dick whole.”

I whimper as he grabs my hip and a fistful of my hair, pounding into me as I scream for more. His muscled abs slap my bruised ass, making me wince. And yet the pleasure of him filling me takes away any pain and drags me into sweet, sweet oblivion.

The feeling of him claiming me and utterly dominating me takes away everything else: the fear that’s been chasing me. The uncertainty of him and I. The worry about those who I love, and the worry even for myself that is simmering underneath all of it.

It takes away the sleepless nights, and the four years of doubt and darkness. Until all I know is the feel of him taking me back and making me his.

Adrian growls, his teeth sinking into my shoulder, making me whimper as he fucks into me.

“*What—*”

As the first word of a horribly cursed question falls from my lips, I snap them shut again.

“What?”

I shake my head, closing my eyes as I rock back against his thrust.

“*Nothing.*”

He stops, and I whine.

“Just keep going—”

“No. What were you going to say?”

He slowly drags his cock out until just the head is lodged inside of me, stretching me wide before he slowly, achingly slowly, sinks back in. I moan, pushing my hips back to take even more of him. But he grips them firmly, stopping me.

“*Tell me,*” he growls.

He grabs a handful of my ass, spreading me wide as fucks me slowly, shallowly, and maddeningly, in a way that drives me crazy.

“*Adrian, please—*”

“*Tell. Me.*”

And I break.

“What are we...?” I blurt.

“Fucking. This is called *fucking*, Celeste.”

I flush, biting my lip.

“You know what I mean.” I twist my head to look at him. “I mean you and I. What is this, Adrian?”

He stops moving, his eyes darkening.

“I mean, we’re married, but we...you know...”

“Hate each other?”

It stings when he says it. But, he’s not wrong. Or maybe he is. Or, fuck, maybe I have no idea about any of this anymore.

Maybe this really is just lust obliterating the malice we feel towards each other.

“So why are we doing this? Why—*oh shit...*”

I whimper, moaning as he slowly buries himself inside me again.

“Because we’re good at it,” he growls.

“But if we hate each other—”

“Hate-fucking has a nice ring to it.”

Hate-fucking.

Whatever it is, I can’t get enough, which might mean I’m sick.

“Hate-fucking...”

“Yes,” he grunts, pushing his hips into me and burying his cock deep as I moan. “*Hate...*” he growls, thrusting hard into me again to punctuate his words. “*Fucking.*”

His hands tighten on my ass and in my hair.

“Except you’d never know it, by the way this greedy little pussy tries to swallow my cock and never let go.”

My face heats as filthy lust surges in my core.

“You’re a crude, arrogant—”

“And you love every fucking second of it,” he growls, punctuating every word with a powerful thrust into me, bringing me right to the edge as my eyes roll back in my head.

“Because I know you’ve missed me fucking you for four years. Fucking you like your fake husband never—”

“I have to tell you something,” I blurt.

He doesn’t even slow his strokes as I struggle to form words.

“I—I—*Adrian*...”

“Speak up, Celeste,” he groans.

A whimper tumbles from my lips.

“Amir—”

He tenses, stopping instantly.

“I *do not* want to hear his fucking name while my cock is inside of—”

“My messed-up uterus isn’t the only reason Dahlia is just my pretend daughter.”

The room goes still and quiet.

“Amir—”

I cry out as Adrian’s palm comes down hard on my ass.

“I *told you*...”

My eyes bulge, a moan choking raggedly from my throat as he starts to fuck me even more savagely.

“I *told you* not to say his fucking name,” he rasps.

“We never...I mean, he and I never....”

Adrian stills behind me.

“We never even tried.”

I twist my head and shiver as my eyes lock onto his cold expression.

“Excuse me?”

“*I never slept with him,*” I murmur quietly. “I never slept with anyone.”

The room seems to throb around me.

“There hasn’t been anyone else. I never touched another man. Not since you.”

I half-expect him to smile. I’m waiting for the walls to come down with this final admission, and the boy I used to know to reappear, gather me in his arms, kiss me, and tell me it’s all going to be okay.

What I’m not expecting is the sheer darkness that covers his face. Or the way his cock grows even harder—the way his hands tighten on me even more.

Then he pulls back and starts to ram into me brutally, viciously.

But of course, me being the sick fuck that I am, I started to moan as the pleasure overwhelms me. It’s as if the harder he fucks me and the more brutally he rams into me, the more ecstasy my body receives from it. Like a masochistic, fucked up tango.

He snarls, his face a mask of fury as his fingers dig into my ass and pull at my hair, fucking me until my breath leaves my lungs and it’s all I can do to moan and drool into the sheets.

And crave more of this.

“You wanted me to believe you had, though, didn’t you?” he snarls.

I tense, shivering.

“W—what?”

“You *wanted me* to think you’d been with him.”

My eyes close.

I want to deny it. But he’s right.

I wanted him to be hurt. The way he hurt me.

I gasp, shuddering and choking for air and sanity as he fucks me into oblivion, his cock rock-hard as he pounds me into the bed like a piledriver.

“You wanted to hurt me, Celeste.”

“Yes,” I choke, whimpering as I nod into the sheets.

“You wanted me to bleed.”

I’m moaning, mewling, drowning in pleasure as he rams into me harder and harder. He drives against that spot inside over and over until there’s no stopping it: it’s as if my heart and my body have separated, as if the place between my legs and the place inside of my chest are two warring nations unable to sit down to a peace talk.

And while my heart might be laid waste, and burning, and aching and crying...the pleasure nerves between my leg are on a victorious rampage, celebrating and rioting in the streets as Adrian fucks me.

And there’s no stopping the wave that crashes over me.

I scream into the bedsheets as I come hard, shuddering and wrenching and screaming his name as I explode in an enormous orgasm. Adrian snarls, pounding into me one last time before pulling out. I hear him grunt and hear the slickness of his fist pumping his cock. Then I gasp as I feel the hot spray

of his hot, sticky cum across my ass, dripping down between my legs and over my pussy.

He pulls away, his hands dropping from my ass and untangling from my hair.

“Well done,” he snarls in a cold, hardened tone. “Now get the fuck out.”

I tense, my heart breaking as I slowly turn to look at him.

“What?”

There’s not a single foothold there. Not a single crack in his armor. And even naked, it’s as if he’s wearing his usual black knight armor over every inch of his body.

“The door, Celeste,” he hisses dangerously. “It’s that way. Use it.”

And just like that, the rest of it fades away. Slowly I stand, angry, sad, and mortified as I pull away from him and walk into the bathroom to grab my clothes. I tug them on, ignoring the sting of my bruises and the slickness still coating my thighs before I step back into the bedroom. I march to the door, then stop, turn, and level my eyes at him.

“Fuck you, you malicious asshole.”

“Oh, I’m not the malicious one, Celeste. I might be an asshole, but you’re the one that tried to twist that knife. *Leave.*”

This wasn’t hate-fucking.

This was just us fucking while hating each other.

I wrench open his door, storm out, and slam it as hard as I can behind me.



IT WOULD BE easy to say that as fast as things explode into heat, they cool even faster.

But that's not entirely the truth. In fact, it's an outright lie.

In part, yes, things cool between Adrian and me. The fire that might have been sparking again between us goes out after that night. So does the passion.

And yet the lust cannot be contained. There's no cooling that.

When Adrian fucks me, *God* do I want it. Horribly, viciously, wantonly, uncontrollably. It's just the fucking is no longer interspersed with intimate talks. Or him taking me in his arms. Or kissing me at all, for that matter.

Instead, once we strip away whatever else was starting to kindle between us, all we're left with is the physical.

Pure physical lust. Pure physical need. Pure physical violence, acted out in carnal form.

And if my body harbored any hopes that Adrian's emphatic viciousness that night when he sent me from his room would mean a chance for my body to heal, it was dead fucking wrong. Instead, over the next week, I find myself wincing with almost every step, finding it hard to find a single way to sleep that doesn't make me ache. And forget facing frontward in the

shower. The water against my back stings enough. But when it strikes against my sore nipples or achingly sensitive pussy, it's more than I can bear.

From an outsider's perspective, I know what this would look like.

Abuse.

Torture.

It would look like Adrian acting out on his anger at me with physical violence.

But I know that's not what this is. He's not beating me, and I don't "deal with it" or "swallow it back". I'm not "putting up a brave front".

I fucking *crave* this.

I ache for the darkness that he rips open inside of me. I might hate that I do, but I *do* lust for his rough touch and his unapologetically crude language. For the way his brutality turns me into a puddle and takes away all of the other darkness taking up space in my body, heart, and mind.

I *love* that the way he grabs me and fucks me any way he pleases makes me whimper and drool for him. Takes away four years of doubt. Of anger. Of feeling like I was trapped. Takes away the darkness that came out that night that Adele saved me, until all that's left is him...even if it includes his anger at me.

So maybe at the end of it, all we really do have is hate-fucking. But as fucked up and as messed up as that sounds, it's cathartic. It's a therapy I have never once known; a drug I will never be able to get enough of.

And so, when I gingerly walk the halls of his house, I find myself craving and anticipating the moment when he'll step out of a side room and snatch me into it. When he'll press me against a bookshelf to lift my skirt, spank my ass until I cry, and then fuck me until I'm drowning in a puddle of pleasure.

Or when he'll wake me up at three o'clock in the morning, unapologetically shoving my knees up to my chest before burying his tongue between my legs, soothing the painful ache he caused not four hours before.

There's no denying the game we're playing is messed up. There's no dancing around how unhealthily psychotic this behavior is, both his and mine.

But there's also no tempering or dampening it. There's no squashing it out, no pretending it's not there.

There's no denying it. Or him.

A week after the night Adrian came home bleeding—the night things exploded to the next level—I find myself walking into the back yard to see Adele and Dahlia playing with a bunch of Barbies.

The new addition to Dahlia's collection is impossible to miss: a giant, four-story sprawling, sparkling mansion, complete with a matching neon pink convertible, neon pink Range Rover, and neon *blue* speedboat. For Ken, of course.

Adele looks up when she sees me walk into the backyard. When I arch my brow at the extravagant plastic mansion, she smiles and rolls her eyes. She turns and kisses the top of Dahlia's head before she stands and meets me halfway across the backyard.

“So, that's new.”

She shifts her feet uncomfortably.

“A gift from the Lord of the Manor, it would seem.”

I stare at her.

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

“*Adrian?*”

She nods.

“What, he just left it out here for you?”

“No...”

She clears her throat.

“He actually gave it to her himself, this morning.”

My eyes narrow.

“If he scared her—”

“He didn’t scare her,” she smiles. “Really. He knocked on the door, got down on one knee, and gave her an enormous box wrapped in princess paper with a crown on his head.”

I stare at her, stricken.

“I’m sorry, your English...”

She laughs at my sarcasm.

“I’m completely seriously, Celeste. He had a crown on his head.”

“With a wrapped present...”

She nods.

Well, this is...*curious*, if not reality-breaking. What’s even more curious, though, is that Adrian and I were both up until pretty much daybreak trying either to give each other a heart attack or break each other’s pelvises.

He may have won, because I can barely fucking move today, and I could barely take a shower just now, a few hours later, without wincing. And he's getting down on a knee to give Dahlia a present?

"*Huh,*" I scowl. "Well, that's out of character."

Adele nods, eyeing me as I wince and limp to one of the metal chairs around the patio table. She drops into the chair next to me and we both smile as we watch Dahlia play with her new Barbie house.

But eventually I can feel that her gaze is no longer on her daughter. And sure enough, when I turn, she's boring a hole into the side of my head.

"What?"

I try to sound casual. But Adele is a bloodhound for my bullshit.

"*What?*" She says thinly. "*What* is that I'm worried about you."

I shrug, playing dumb.

"Adele, we're okay here. I know you can't often see them, but there's guards everywhere. I mean, there's people up on the rooftops—"

"I'm not talking about our safety here, Celeste," she says quietly. "I'm talking about *you and him.*"

I stiffen, trying to repress the heat before it floods into my cheeks.

"I'm fine. I told you, there's nothing to be worried about."

"*Non?*" She snaps. "How about this?"

I wince as she grabs my wrist, yanking my arm out and shoving my sleeve up. My face crumples as I follow her stricken gaze to the bruises traveling up my arm.

“They’re...not what you think,” I smile weakly.

“No?”

“No. Adele—”

“How about this?”

I gasp as her hands move quickly, grabbing at my shirt collar and pulling it away from my neck and cleavage.

Her face goes white.

“*Mon Dieu, Celeste...*” she whispers hoarsely.

I flush, hastily grabbing the collar back from her and buttoning it back up.

“It’s fine. I’m—”

“It’s not *fine*! Jesus Christ, Celeste!” She hisses. “Is he...”

Her face gets paler, and she leans forward.

“Is he *hitting* you?”

“No, Adele, it’s not what you—”

“Is he hurting you?”

Yes, but I fucking love it.

But I’m probably fucked up in the head for even thinking that. And I’m sure as hell not admitting that to a woman who endured real, actual abuse.

I smile weakly as I take her hand.

“Adele, I’m *okay*. It’s *really* not what you think it is.”

Her mouth thins.

“You don’t want to know what I think it is.”

“Whatever it is, it’s not.”

I blush as she peers at me.

“So you...” Adele arches a brow. “You willingly endure... this?”

I look away, chewing on my lip, feeling my body hum with heat and shame.

“I mean...”

I glance back at her, and this time, a curious smile curls the corners of her lips as she sees the eager smile on my face.

“*My my my...*”

My cheeks burn hotly.

“We can go ahead and drop this now, Adele. Seriously, new subject.”

She whistles low, fanning herself as she sits back in her chair and laughing quietly to herself.

“Okay, no more pushing into your kinks.”

I groan as Adele smiles. Then her face darkens.

“What *is* the actual plan here, Celeste?”

I shrug.

“I got an email from Michelle yesterday, and she thinks—”

“Celeste,” Adele frowns as she takes my hands in hers across the table. “We talked about something else, too. Remember?”

I do remember.

She means Plan B.

Plan B is, well, the backup plan. It was what we discussed if Adrian and every other person in the city said no. If we were all out of options, we would liquidate what we had, create new identities for the three of us, and disappear.

We would make new lives somewhere else. And they might not be glamorous lives, but we would be new people. We'd have a chance.

I used to think it wasn't such a terrible idea. Now, the idea of running...

I frown. God, I really am screwed up. Am I suddenly against the idea of running to a new life because I crave the brutality of a man who hates me? What the fuck does that say about me, if I'm willing to put that ahead of Adele and Dahlia?

Nausea washes over me, and I have to suck in a breath of air.

No. It's that I don't want to run because running isn't a smart idea. Whatever's going on here, we *are* safe. This house is protected.

I smile weakly at Adele.

"Let me try and make this work with Adrian. We're safe here, you know we are."

She shakes her head, looking away.

"Adele, it's just five more months. In five months—"

"Will you *survive* five more months of that man?"

I swallow, unable to find anything to say back.

"Auntie Celeste! Come look at Barbie's new car!"

I exhale thankfully at Dahlia's innocent save.

"I'm fine, Adele," I murmur quietly, squeezing her hand before I stand.

“Really. This is all fine.”

“WE’RE GOING OUT TONIGHT.”

I start, gasping and whirling to find Adrian standing in the doorway of the kitchen holding a garment bag in his hand.

I flush, my pulse racing as I glare at him. He just glares right back.

“What?” he mutters.

“You could make your presence known, that’s what.”

“It’s my house.”

“Yeah, but you have a way of sneaking up on me.”

Adrian lifts an incredulous brow.

“I’m six-foot-four and weigh 215 pounds. I have a hard time imagining sneaking up on anyone.”

“Yeah, well, you do. Like when you don’t knock when you enter my room.”

“So?”

“Ever heard of something called privacy?”

He sniffs dismissively. “You don’t get privacy from me.”

I glare at him, simmering.

“What happens if I’m in the middle of changing or something when you decide to barge in without asking?”

“Honestly?” He lifts a shoulder. “I’d most likely bend you over the first thing I see and bury my cock in your pussy until you scream my name.”

Heat claws its way from my chest up my neck and into my cheeks at just the thought of it.

“Was there something you wanted?” I snap.

Adrian smirks.

“I’d watch your words right now, if I were you, given the direction of our current conversation.”

I swallow, clenching my thighs but wincing.

“You’re going to kill me if you try and touch me right now,” I mutter.

“I’m pretty sure it’d be worth it to you anyway.”

“Arrogant much?”

“I’m not arrogant. I just know that I have a huge cock that you love bouncing on, slobbering on, and coming all over like a good little slut.”

Lust explodes in my core, but I glare at him.

“As I said—”

“No, as *I* said,” he interrupts. “We’re going out tonight.”

I stiffen.

“*Out-out?*”

“Is there another kind of going out?”

I frown, and his brow furrows.

“If there was any sort of threat at all, any way you or I would be hurt, do you honestly think I’d be taking us out?”

I don’t even want to banter with him about that. It’s an obvious “no”. Because even with his sadism and his darkness and his malevolent knack of turning me to putty in his hands and

making me scream his name, I know in the bottom of my heart he would never let anything or anyone hurt me.

“Where are we going?”

“A gala.”

“And I have to come with you because...?”

“Because misery loves fucking company, why else?”

I roll my eyes.

“As a blunt reminder, Celeste, this isn’t remotely your decision anyway. I don’t know why we need to discuss it. You’re coming.”

I glare at him.

“*Fine.*”

I nod at the garment bag.

“What’s that?”

“What you’ll be wearing.”

He unzips it and my jaw drops at the gorgeous—and I do mean gorgeous—emerald green evening dress shimmering in the black bag.

“*Wow.*”

Adrian smirks at me, heating my core.

“Should I try it on?”

He shakes his head.

“It’ll fit perfectly.”

“You seem oddly confident about that.”

“I think I’ve run my hands and mouth over you enough times to know your size down to the sixteenth of an inch.”

I throb with heat, shuddering as my thighs clench.

“Well, thank you.”

He nods, still looking at me with those stormy blue eyes expectantly. The heat in the kitchen seems to rise as the silence envelops us.

“Was...” I swallow. “Was there something else?”

“Yes,” he grows. “Turn around.”

I stiffen, glaring at him.

“Excuse me?”

“I know you heard me. Turn the fuck around.”

“Why?”

He smiles darkly.

“So that I can bend you over the counter, lift your dress, and bury my cock in you. Because I’m hard, and I want to feel your pussy squeeze my dick until you come for me.”

My jaw drops.

“Jesus *Christ*, you don’t have an off switch, do you?”

“None. Now, are you going to turn around and bend over, or am I going to do it for you?”

“Adrian. It’s two o’clock in the afternoon.”

He frowns. “And?”

“And you have staff...?”

“Not now, I don’t. Charles is out.”

I stare at him.

“Are you forgetting Adele and Dahlia?”

“No.”

“And if they walk in?”

“Then that’s a conversation I suppose we’ll have to have. At the moment, though, they’re outside. Now, I’m going to count to three, and if your skirt isn’t raised high enough and your panties aren’t pulled down far enough for me to see that ass, I’m gonna rip them both off and fuck you up against the window so that everyone can see what a good little fuck-toy you are.”

God, do I want to hate him. I want to slap him. I want to be utterly repulsed by his behavior and grossed out by his filthy talking.

Except, again, I’m broken, and messed up, because the way he talks to me and the way he touches me and the way he looks at me doesn’t do any of that.

It just turns me the fucking hell on.

“And if I say no?”

“You won’t.”

He drapes the garment bag across the kitchen counter and levels his eyes at me.

“We both know you won’t.”

Goddammit.

I could pretend to be scandalized. But he’ll see right through it. And besides, there’s no way I’m even going to make it upstairs without my arousal dripping down my fucking legs.

My face heats. Our eyes lock as something filthy and desperate and needy surges in my core. My teeth drag over my lip, and before I can stop myself, I’m slowly turning, lifting my skirt for him, and bending over the counter.

I reach back, heat throbbing on every inch of my skin as I hook my fingers into my panties and peel them down to my thighs as I hear his zipper pull down.

“Good girl.”



I'VE SPENT the last four years learning how to fortify.

How to build walls. To dig moats and trenches, to build up defenses, to have an army ready to invade and to defend at a moment's notice.

I've spent the last four years preparing for anything, making myself bulletproof, shoring up my defenses against any surprises. Because that's how you survive in this game.

And yet, despite all my training, despite the way I've iron-clad my mind and covered my heart in chainmail...I'm *not* prepared for the sight of Celeste walking down the stairs to the foyer, dressed in the gown I gave her earlier.

Because when I see her...*fuck*.

I mean, honestly *fuck*. Each defensive wall crumbles. Each moat floods. Each trench collapses. And every single paid mercenary drops dead at my feet.

There is no defense. There never was, and never will be.

That's why the only armor I have left when it comes to her is my anger and malevolence. But even those are starting to look like the shams they really are.

She glides down the stairs like a vision in emerald, her jet-black hair pulled tight and high in an elegant bun with just a

single tendril draped down the side of her face. Her green eyes glimmer, highlighted by the emerald dress.

The one that brushes her ankles, slit high on her thigh, showing those black wrap-around stilettos.

My cock lurches, rabidly throbbing against the front of my tuxedo pants as I bite back a groan.

There's no fucking way I'm surviving the night.

Actually, I'm not even sure we'll be getting out the *door* without me emptying my balls into at least one of her wet, willing holes. Perhaps all of them.

She flushes when she gets to the bottom of the stairs.

“Well?”

“You look good enough to devour.”

She blushes, her lips spreading into a grin across her heated cheeks.

“Was that actually a compliment?”

I roll my eyes.

“Don't get cute, or it's going to be the last one.”

She grins.

“So you think I'm cute, huh?”

I groan.

“We're leaving now.”

“You look good, too, by the way.”

I stiffen, turning back to her.

“Thanks.”

“I never would have pictured you in a tuxedo.”

“Well, get used to it. It’s the armor of the evening.”

Outside, Cade nods to the both of us, opening the door to the Bentley. He’ll be coming tonight too, but not in the same car. I’ve even instructed my driver to keep the partition up.

No one lays eyes on her.

How the fuck I’ll survive this evening without murdering every man at this fucking party is going to be a miracle with her wearing that dress.

“So, what is this thing we’re going to?”

“An open market of dark money and dirty deals masquerading as a fundraising gala.”

She laughs as she gets into the car. I climb in after her, and she turns to grin at me. When I don’t even crack a smile, she gasps, and her mouth falls open.

“Oh wait, you’re serious?”

“I’m one-hundred-percent serious.”

Tonight is the annual Rutger Capital gala, where politicians, movers and shakers in high finance, and old-money families rub shoulders and make lame jokes while they plot to take over the world.

Honestly, it’s a mercy to the world that I’m going to be there too, if only just to make a few of those staid old shitbags piss themselves.

“Wait, that’s really a thing?”

I turn to her.

“How on earth did you spend four years in the elevated world you were caught up in without going to one of these things or

catching a glimpse of how it all works behind the velvet curtain?

She shakes her head, looking away as the car pulls away from my townhouse.

“I...never mind.”

“Tell me.”

Her lips twist as she glances back to me.

“I didn’t really get out much. I certainly didn’t go to any events like this.”

“I can only hope it’s because you were as ruthlessly defiant to those motherfuckers as you are to me.”

She blushes, chewing on her bottom lip as her green eyes dig into mine.

“Maybe a little bit.”

I allow myself a smug smile.

“That, and everything was curated.” She frowns. “Do you really want to hear about this?”

“Yes.”

She nods.

“I was serious before, you know. About Amir.”

I see fucking *red* at the mere mention of his goddamn name.

“Adrian...”

She puts a hand on mine on the seat between us.

“I meant it. Nothing—I mean *nothing*—ever happened between us.”

I frown.

We've been avoiding this topic since it came up the other night. Partly because I don't quite want to believe she was keeping that information from me just to hurt me. Partly because I'm pissed that she was.

But also, because the idea of some other man spending four fucking years with her, even if he didn't get to lay a single goddamn finger on a single fucking hair on her head, makes me want to commit murder and then some.

"He *never* touched me, Adrian."

"How is that possible?"

I mean, come on. Sham marriage or not, just fucking *look* at her. How the hell would that motherfucker be able to keep his hands off her?

But suddenly, I think I understand.

"Wait...gay?"

She shakes her head.

"In love."

"You're going to have to explain that one for me."

She smiles wryly.

"I wasn't the only one that showed up to the party with my dance card already filled out."

I stare at her.

"What the fucking Charles Dickens shit is that?"

She giggles, rolling her eyes.

"Amir was *also* already married before we got thrown together, Adrian."

I blink.

What?

“There was another woman, Magdalena, and Amir was head over heels for her. But she wasn’t good enough for Nasser, because she was just a housecleaner at one of their properties. It didn’t matter. Amir was smitten with her. They got married in secret, which made his father furious—the same as Jean was about you and I.”

My hand tightens dangerously around hers. Possessively.

“So...” she looks out the window. “We weren’t really and truly married.”

“Excuse me?”

“We had enough other contracts to bind us in almost every way marriage does. But there was no marriage ceremony. Nothing official. Amir paid the officiant off to not do anything.”

My heart punches against the inside of my chest.

“This other woman...”

Celeste looks down.

“Magda. She died with Amir in the car crash when the garbage truck hit them.”

“Were you friends?”

She shrugs.

“Sort of. Ish. She and Amir were totally wrapped up in each other, and Adele has really been the only good friend I’ve had for the last four years. But yeah, I mean, Magda and I were close enough, I suppose.”

“Close enough that it hurt when she was murdered?”

She nods. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” I growl quietly. “For you losing a friend.”

I turn and glare out the window.

“And him, I guess.”

“Thank you,” she says quietly.

“And that is the only time you’re going to hear that from me.”

Celeste giggles.

“I would be shocked otherwise.” She sighs. “Anyway, bottom line, I didn’t go out much, not at all really. I guess because a highly curated online presence can sell a story, but publicly, together?”

She shakes her head.

“Amir and I were a complete disaster. I mean, we came off as roommates at best. There was no chemistry or anything.”

“I sure as fuck hope not,” I snap.

She laughs quietly. The sound fills the back of the car, and my head, and the inside of my chest. I turn, drumming my fingers on the armrest of the door.

Celeste frowns curiously. “Are you nervous about tonight, for some reason?”

“No.”

“You look—”

“I’m not nervous, I’m...”

My teeth grind.

“Hateful.”

“About?”

“About the last four years. About fucking *Amir*.”

She frowns.

“Adrian, how many times—”

“I don’t give a fuck that he didn’t get to touch you. I mean, I sure as fuck *would* give a fuck if he had,” I snarl. “But even without that...”

My eyes narrow as I gaze out the side window

“He had four years with you. I didn’t.”

The car is silent. When I turn back, she’s staring at me with this curious expression on her face; her eyes are wide and her mouth is opening and closing, like she’s trying to figure out how to say something.

Maybe I am too. But before either of us can solve the riddle of what to say, the car pulls up in front of the Regency Hotel, and the moment is over.

We’re here.



I BLINK, my face paling as we step out of the car into a wall of camera flashes. Panic grips me in a claw-like grasp.

But suddenly, Adrian's hand is firmly at the small of my back, then slipping over my hip to pull me tightly against him. When I turn to look at him, his stormy blue eyes captivate mine, calming me somehow.

"It's just a stupid gala for stupid, pompous dipshits," he growls quietly. "And they don't give a shit about you and me. We're nobodies."

"And yet, cameras are flashing in our faces," I murmur, turning into him.

Adrian shrugs.

"Well, not *nobodies*. But not the main show, either. Come on."

He pulls me along the red carpet and up the stairs to the Regency Grand Ballroom.

"On the surface, this is a charity event put on by an obnoxious hedge fund," he growls. "Thing is, I happen to be a major investor in that obnoxious hedge fund..."

"...and under the surface?"

He smirks. "I mean, *I'm* here, if that answers your question."

Inside, Adrian plucks two flutes of champagne from a passing tray. He hands me one before his palm goes right back to the small of my back firmly and possessively. We wander into the crowd and suddenly, ahead of us, a middle-aged man in glasses arches his brows in delight and smiles widely as he makes a beeline toward us.

Adrian grumbles to himself as the man comes to a stop in front of us, beaming.

“Adrian, lovely to see you here.”

My date nods gruffly.

“Likewise.”

The man smiles even more broadly.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you: the board and I want to extend our gratitude for clearing up that other issue for us.”

Adrian smiles thinly.

“And the other interested party?”

The man smiles weakly.

“Ahh, yes, well, we’re still working on swaying the board in your favor on that.”

Adrian’s eyes narrow.

“Sway harder.”

His hand firms at the small of my back as if to pull me away. But the man smiles as he awkwardly extends a hand to me.

“And you might be?”

Adrian sighs. “Celeste, this is Martin Higgins, VP of Rutger Capital, provider of the free champagne tonight. Higgins, this is Celeste, my sex slave.”

I choke, sputtering on my champagne as my face goes beet red. A flush creeps into Higgins's face as well. But then he laughs, I'm sure assuming it's a joke.

He's only half wrong.

He turns to smile at me awkwardly.

"Well, he's a funny man, isn't he?"

"Not really."

I put my hand out to shake the other man's hand.

"Yes, well, lovely to meet you, Celeste."

"And you, Martin."

I'm not unaware of Adrian's venomous glare at our hands touching. It's pure jealousy, which makes me simultaneously roll my eyes and swell with needy tingles.

I don't hate that he's this possessive when it comes to me. On the contrary, I love it.

"We have to go mingle. But...Higgins?"

Adrian's gaze lands heavily on the man.

"*Get me* that board decision. Yesterday."

"Of course, Adrian, we're doing the best we—"

"*Yesterday.*"

Adrian pulls me away before Higgins can say anything else, tugging me through the crowd. We've barely made it five feet before a figure steps in front of us.

"I was wondering if you'd make an appearance."

I look up, my brows arching politely in greeting.

The man is handsome in a classic, old-money way. Dark blonde hair slicked back from his face, clean shaven, bright blue eyes, perfect teeth, and a very monied, sophisticated cut to his obviously custom tailored tuxedo.

Adrian grunts.

“One of the more tedious parts of this job is coming to bullshit like this.”

“Welcome to my world,” the other man smirks before turning to me with a curious look. “You’re Celeste, aren’t you?”

I smile confusedly as Adrian sighs.

“Celeste, this is Oliver Prince. Prince; Celeste.”

Oliver smiles warmly.

“I’ve heard, well, plenty about you.”

My lips twist.

“Oh, really?”

Oliver chuckles.

“Only good things, I can assure you.”

“This is what makes him such a good trader.”

“My charm?”

“Your ability to smile through a lie, Prince.”

I elbow Adrian hard as Oliver chuckles.

“You know, Celeste, your sister was just in town.”

I did know that. And maybe in a parallel universe, I would have made the attempt to connect with her. But, again, “not close” doesn’t really describe it. And aside from she and I not seeing eye-to-eye on pretty much anything, I’d never want the danger following me to bleed onto her, or her children.

“So I heard,” I smile at Oliver.

“Do you speak much these days?”

“Not really, I’m afraid.”

He frowns. “I see. A pity.”

“Oliver is still trying to decide if he’s in love with your sister or just wants to steal her from her from a friend of ours,” Adrian grunts.

Oliver glares at him.

“That isn’t true.”

“Who’s stealing who now?”

We turn as a darker and edgier voice joins the conversation. The face I look up into is the polar opposite of Oliver Prince’s. This time, I see dark and brooding hazel eyes, dark hair, and a grimness that makes me tremble.

“Noel,” Oliver says in a clipped tone. “We were just talking about you.”

“All good things, I hope?” He smiles at Oliver with a glint in his eye.

“Never,” the blonde man fires back with a too-wide grin.

Adrian’s hand circles around my waist, pulling me tighter to him.

“Noel Ransom, Celeste...” he clears his throat. “Cross.”

Him calling me by his name, sends a shiver down my back, making my thighs clench.

“Celeste, Noel Ransom.”

“Noel,” Oliver clears his throat. “I was under the impression this was an invite-only event?”

The two of them smile at each other with all the friendliness of warring generals.

“Oh, don’t worry, Oliver. The private after party where all the good little private school boys with daddy’s trust fund money can jerk each other off is still terribly exclusive. And I’m *sure* you’ll enjoy yourself.”

Oliver’s eyes narrow. Noel grins as he turns back to me.

“Well, Celeste, it was lovely to finally meet you.”

He smiles, but I notice he does not extend his hand. And I’m sure the dark force at my back looming over me has everything to do with that.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go poach at least five of Oliver’s clients.”

He turns and launches one last smile at a glaring Oliver Prince before he disappears back into the crowd.

“Prick,” Oliver mutters.

Adrian chuckles.

“One of these days, the two of you just need to fuck and make up. I’m assuming you have to go do damage control now?”

Oliver rolls his eyes. “I’m not worried about Noel when it comes to my clients.”

“You sure about that?”

Adrian nods across the ballroom, where Noel is already charming an older couple. Oliver hisses under his breath.

“God damn that fucking man. Those are the *Hendershires*.”

“They look captivated.”

“Yeah, well, they’re locked into a contract with me. Just the same, how the fuck did he even get *in* here?”

“Oh, I’m not surprised.”

The three of us stiffen, all turning simultaneously at the familiar Irish voice. Cillian Kildare smiles over the rim of his glass of whiskey in that dark, malicious, slightly sociopathic way of his.

“They’re letting anyone in tonight, haven’t you heard?”

Adrian’s eyes narrow at him.

“Cross.”

“Kildare.”

The Irishman smiles, winking at me in a way I’m sure is engineered to send Adrian to murderland. Judging from the way his hand grips my hip hard enough to leave a bruise, it’s working.

Then Cillian turns away to Oliver.

“Prince, a moment.”

Oliver glares at him.

“We’ll speak later.”

“I think sooner rather than later would be best.”

Cillian turns to smile at Adrian and me.

“A delight, as always. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go rattle some financial planners. That’s always such *fun*.”

As he disappears back into the crowd, Adrian stiffens as he turns back to his friend.

“What the *fuck* was that?”

“Nothing.”

“Oliver—”

“Adrian,” he grunts back, “it’s fine. Besides,” he grins, “I’m the Golden Boy, remember?”

He pats Adrian’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m going to go mingle.”

Oliver turns back to me, flashing a grin worthy of whatever “Golden Boy” moniker he just mentioned.

“Pleasure to finally meet you, Celeste.”

“You, too.”

With that, he’s gone. Adrian sighs, and I smile as I turn to him.

“Well, that was a whirlwind. Now what?”

His eyes flash with a hungry fire that immediately jumps the distance between us, igniting me as well. I shiver as I feel him tug me tightly against his hip.

“Now,” he growls, leaning down into my ear, “I find the closest room with a lockable door, drag you inside, spin you around, lift that gown up, and fuck you against said lockable door until my cum drips down your thighs for the rest of the evening.”

My breath intakes sharply, my lip catching in my teeth as my pulse thuds wildly. Heat pools between my legs, and I’m about to tell him something along the lines of “the sooner the better” when suddenly we’re surrounded by five middle-aged men.

“Adrian, there you are!”

Martin Higgins, from earlier, beams. Adrian groans openly as he turns.

“What is it, Higgins?”

The other man laughs, as if Adrian's just made the funniest joke in the world.

"Well, I thought since you were here, I'd introduce you to some of our board, to whom I'm not sure you've been formally introduced. This is Michael Covington. James McGowen..."

I clear my throat and start to turn away, but Adrian grabs my wrist, holding a finger up to stop Higgins' introductions before he turns to me.

"Where do you think you're going?" he murmurs quietly.

"To get a drink," I smile. "This seems like it might preoccupy you for a while."

"You'll stay right here," he grunts.

I roll my eyes.

"I'm going to get a drink. This is a bit dull for me."

His hand tightens on my wrist.

"Don't wander too far."

"Or?"

"Or I'll hunt you down and find you," he growls, directly into my ear, which sends an electric pulse straight between my legs.

He releases me, turning to level his lethal gaze at the crowd of assembled businessmen as I slip off into the gala.

There's a bar against the far wall, and I smile at the bartender as I order a glass of champagne. I thank him, sipping it as I turn.

"A night out without the kid, I see."

I freeze as a chill rakes like an icy blade down my spine. I whirl, and my heart thuds as I lock eyes with *him*.

The man who the last time we spoke dangled me over a fucking balcony.

“*You*,” I hiss at Agent Caldwell. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing here?”

“You went dark, Celeste,” he snarls, eyeing me up and down. “I thought we had an agreement.”

“An *agreement*?” I snap. “You could have killed me.”

He smiles mirthlessly. “Correct. Intimidation is a powerful motivating tool. And yet...it doesn’t seem to have worked.”

“Leave me the fuck alone.”

He laughs coldly.

“You don’t get to walk away from—”

“I wasn’t *walking away*, I was seeking protection for me and mine.”

Agent Caldwell licks his lips delicately.

“You don’t seem to hear me, Celeste. We’re not done here.”

I shake my head.

“No. I found the protection I needed. So we do *not* have a deal.”

His teeth flash.

“I don’t give a flying fuck about whatever deal you’ve cut with Adrian fucking Cross. You don’t get to run down the clock with MI6, Celeste,” he hisses.

“I don’t have anything for you.”

He chuckles darkly.

“I don’t believe you. You’re living with him, in his house. You have all the access in the world.”

Before I can do anything, his hand jerks up, grabbing the side of my head and twisting it to the side. I choke, coughing as he surges into me, licking the thumb of his other hand and smearing it across a part of my neck that makes me wince.

He chuckles as he looks at the bruise he’s just wiped the concealer from.

“*All* the access, it would appear.”

I shudder and then shove him away as I lurch back from him.

“Don’t you *dare* fucking touch me.”

But instantly he marches right into me, grabbing my wrist and yanking me close to him.

“You don’t seem to understand how this works, Celeste. So let me break it down for you.”

His hand grabs my hip in a far too intimate way that sends a cold chill to my core.

I’m *immune*. I can do whatever the fuck I want to you. I could order you to do whatever. *Anything*,” he snarls with heavy insinuation. “I can make you dance to my tune. I can bend you over a table and have my fucking way with you myself if I please.”

He laughs coldly as I turn to ice.

“I can do *whatever the fuck I want* when it comes to you. And if that involves *touching you* however I want? Believe me, Celeste, that’s what’s going to happen.”

“You *son of a bitch*—”

“And if that doesn’t work,” he interrupts brutally, “well, there’s always Dahlia, now isn’t there?”

I go absolutely still as every part of me freezes. My eyes widen as I look up into his.

“You’re a fucking monster.”

“I am a servant of Her Majesty’s Government, Celeste,” he growls.

“You’re not James Bond.”

“No, I’m not,” he sneers. “But believe me, that I will do anything and everything to achieve my goals.”

I’m cold, falling into a numb place.

“Get me something on Adrian. We both know there’s a *mountain* of shit to dig up, just like we both know he can only protect you for so long. *We* can keep it going, though.”

He loosens his grip on me.

“Find me something. Believe me, that is the far easier way to play this game.”

With that, he turns and slips into the crowd, disappearing with a blink.

I’m shaking all over. A cold knot balls in my stomach, which I quickly try to drown in champagne, slugging back the glass in my hand before setting it on the bar. I order a second one, and drain it just as quickly as the first.

I tremble, turning as my eyes scan the crowd. I get one more flute of champagne, and then push my way slowly into the mass of strangers.

I need to get the fuck out of here.

But getting out of here involves finding Adrian, and there's no sign of him. I glance around the ballroom, searching for that piercing, stormy blue gaze. When I can't find it, I widen my search.

For a second, I'm sure I catch the back of his head disappearing down a hallway.

“Adrian!”

I lurch after him, hearing his footsteps echoing into the dark as I follow the shadow down a hallway and around the corner.

Only to find the hallway empty.

Shit.

I turn to head back to the main gala. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a hand jerks from the shadows, choking the scream in my throat as strong fingers wrap around my throat. Adrenaline roars in my ears as a powerful grip yanks me into a side room. The champagne flute drops, shattering at my feet as a door crashes shut behind me and I'm slammed into it.

“*Perhaps I wasn't clear,*” a cold, snarling voice rasps into my ear.

Adrian.

“*No one touches you but me.*”



SHE MOANS A STIFLED, whimpering, hungry sound as my mouth crushes hers. I press into her, pinning her viciously to the bathroom door at her back.

My knee slides between her thighs, shoving them apart as my hands greedily move down her dress. I bunch it in my fists, yanking it up high and pulling the slit to the side.

I can't quite claim that I bought her a dress with a slit this high for this express purpose. But I won't say I *didn't* get it for this reason, either.

By the same token, I can't say I *planned* to fuck Celeste in the elegant, candlelit, single-occupancy women's bathroom down the hall from the main gala.

But I sure as fuck didn't *not* plan to.

She whines as my mouth drops to her neck, my teeth dragging over her skin and nipping at the tender spots.

"I thought I told you," I growl into her collarbone. "You are *mine*, and *mine* alone."

"I don't know what—*oh fuck!*"

She cries out when my hand comes up to firmly cup one of her tits, my thumb and finger pinching the nipple roughly through the exquisite material.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” she whispers.

“I’m talking about you speaking to *any* other man at this party,” I snarl.

She slams her palm into my chest as she tries to shove me from her. But of course, it doesn’t work. I’m immovable.

“What the fuck are you talking about? I’m perfectly allowed to talk to whomever—”

She cries out as I suddenly flip her around to face the door as I lift up the back of her gown. I know she’s not wearing a bra because there’s no way she can with this dress. It’s one reason I chose it. All she’s got underneath covering her nakedness is a little strip of lacy black thong against her pussy.

Which I instantly slip my fingers into and rip away with a single strong jerk of my arm.

Celeste cries out, wincing, as I let the torn fabric drop to her ankles, useless.

“Are you fucking deranged?! Adrian, what the—*oh fuck...*”

She moans as I slide two fingers into her, sinking them up to the knuckle in her greedy pussy as I stroke against her g-spot.

“You possessive *animal*,” she moans.

“Yes, *I am*,” I snarl. “And the sooner you get used to that, the better off we’ll both be.”

“What, I can’t even *speak* to other men?”

“Did I stutter?”

I start to finger her harder and faster, relishing the slushing sounds of her eager pussy trying to suck my fingers deeper. I groan as I yank my belt off, unzipping my pants and freeing my swollen, pulsing cock.

Celeste whimpers when she hears the jangle of my belt, and moans when I let my swollen head push between her thighs.

“I didn’t bring you here dressed like that to flirt with other men.”

“I wasn’t flirting!”

She groans as my fingers leave her pussy. When I center the glistening head of my cock in her wetness and push it between her lips, though, she gasps eagerly.

“*Oh fuck, oh fuck,*” she whimpers, breathing so hard I almost wonder if she’s hyperventilating.

“Adrian, what are you—”

“Open your mouth.”

I bring my hand up, cupping her jaw and slipping my fingers between her lips. She whimpers, sucking and eagerly tasting herself.

“Good girl.”

The air leaves her lungs and her legs almost give out as I drive every fucking inch of my rock-hard cock deep in her greedy little cunt.

“The next time I see you smiling and standing so close to, or *touching*, another man like that...” I hiss into her ear, nipping the lobe as I started to fuck her hard against the bathroom door.

My abs slap against her ass, and the lewd sound of her dripping wet pussy stretching around my thick cock fills the candlelit bathroom.

“The next time I see that, whoever the fuck he is, I’ll tie him to a chair, cut his eyelids off, and fuck you over his lap so he can

have a front-row seat to seeing how very much *mine* and mine alone you are.”

I frown, pausing as I grind my cock deep inside of her.

“After which, of course, I’ll have to cut his throat.”

She moans as I pull out and then ram back into her sopping wet heat.

“Because *no one* sees you like that but me. No one thinks of you like that but me. *Say it.*”

She moans, clawing at the door as I pound into her. My palm slaps against her ass.

“*Say it, Celeste.*”

“I’m yours!” She chokes, a wrenching sob of ecstasy tumbling from her lips as her legs shake and her ass pushes back against me.

“Yours and no one else’s!” she cries out. “I’m yours and no one else’s!”

I’m growing closer to coming, my balls tightening at the aphrodisiac-like words that come out of her fucking mouth. But I hold back, because I’m not done with her. I keep fucking her until I feel her pussy clamp down around me, squeezing tight as she begins to flood my balls with her cum.

“*Adrian!*” she whimpers as she orgasms, quivering and panting against the door.

But I’m nowhere near through with her.

I reach around, rolling my thumb over her clit, getting it nice and slick before I bring it to her mouth.

“Suck.”

She does so eagerly, whimpering as she eagerly wraps her lips around my thumb.

“*Good girl.*”

She moans as I slide my cock in and out of her pussy, her tongue swirling around my thumb.

“Get it nice and wet. Because we’re not done.”

I slide my thumb from her mouth, twisting her head to crush my lips to hers. I devour her tongue and her lips as I bring my hand down to where we join. I keep my cock balls deep inside of her as I grip her ass, spreading her cheeks wide open as I rub my glistening thumb over her asshole.

Celeste whimpers quietly into my lips.

“Adrian, what...*oh my fucking God...*” She chokes as my thumb slowly slides into her tight little ring. I groan, kissing her deeply as I bury it to the first knuckle, then the second. And then slowly, I start to fuck her again.

“All of you is mine, my little whore,” I growl. “Your dirty little mouth. Your sweet little cunt.”

I drop my lips to her ear, dragging my teeth over it.

“And *this*: your tight, virgin ass. It’s all mine.”

She’s choking on her breath, her eyes rolling back in ecstasy as she nods and moans eagerly. And, fuck me, her pussy is somehow, unbelievably, getting even wetter around my cock.

I grind into her, sliding my thumb out only to replace it with two fingers. She winces as I push into her, but then I feel her relax and she lets me in. I start to alternate my thrusts between fingers and cock, and her whole body starts to shudder and shake. Her legs tremble, I can see her toes curling in her heels as she claws at the door.

“Oh my fucking *God*, Adrian...”

“Say it,” I rasp into her ear as I fuck her. “Say all of you is mine.”

“All—*oh God*... All of me,” she moans, sobbing in pleasure against the door as her pussy clenches around me. “Every single part of me belongs to you!”

“*Good girl.*”

I rub her clit with my other hand, fingering her ass as I fuck her tight little pussy—

Until a knock on the door has me snarling, and her jumping.

“Excuse me! Are you going to be long? Hello?”

I don’t say anything. All I do is slide my cock from her pussy and my fingers from her ass. Celeste starts to straighten up, but then gasps as I keep her bent against the door. I ease the swollen, head of my cock back, dragging it across her pussy lips until it centers on her asshole.

Celeste stiffens, whipping her head around, eyes bulging.

“Adrian—”

The knock on the door, infuriatingly, comes again.

“Hello?”

Celeste chokes.

“*Occupied!* Its occu—*oh fuck*...”

She slams her hand over her mouth, her eyes staring wide as my head begins to pry her tight hole open. She shakes her head, but I just nod.

“*Say it.*”

“*All of me,*” she whispers. “*All of...oh my GOD!*”

I groan as my cock, slick from her pussy, begins sinking into her impossibly tight back hole. Celeste groans, slamming a palm to the door, bracing herself and moaning as I start to fill her.

And then that *fucking knock* comes again as a woman's shrill voice calls through.

"Hello!?! This appears to be the only line-free bathroom. And I really—"

"I said *occupied!*" Celeste hisses through the door.

I push in deeper and deeper, her eyes rolling back as she swallows me in. Until finally, every inch of me bottoms out in her hot, tight ass.

I groan, biting her shoulder viciously as I wrap her hair in a fist. I reach around, sinking two fingers into her pussy and grinding my palm against her clit as I start to drag my cock out of her asshole, only to push right back in.

"Where's my cock, my little slut?"

She whimpers, clenching around me.

"*Where is my cock?*" I rasp.

"My ass!" she cries out. "It's in my ass!"

And then, I start to fuck her like she truly belongs to me.

Because she does.

We move together, our bodies slick, my hips crashing into her ass as I claim the very last part of her that no one, not even I, has ever claimed before. I grip her hair tightly, fingering her pussy and sucking and biting at her neck before I twist her head around to bruise my mouth to hers.

It's as if we're two animals rutting in heat, uncaring of anything else. I fuck her ass from behind against the bathroom door, heedless of the world around us, of the woman banging on the outside the door, of *anything*.

And when she comes, it's my name she screams.

My name that she moans into my lips as I swallow her release.

I sink into her heat, my world blurring as I groan into her mouth and empty my balls deep in her ass. My cock pulses and throbs, pumping again and again until it feels like my fucking soul is going to leave through the head of my dick.

I keep her pinned to the door, both of us gasping for air as I cover her body with mine. Slowly, gently, I slide out of her, relishing her whimpers. I drag her torn, ruined panties up her legs and pull them into position before I cup her face and twist her around to kiss her deeply.

"Such a good girl," I murmur into her mouth.

The woman who's been pounding on the door looks like she's ready to give someone an earful when we finally open the door. Celeste turns red and quickly moves past her. I just grin down into the woman's shocked, horrified face.

"All yours."

I take Celeste's arm, and we sail away.

I don't give a shit about this gala, or about talking to any of these people. All I care about is taking care of her.

Of being with her, and no one else.

I lead us back through the crowd and out the doors to the waiting car.

And then home.

CELESTE FALTERS, pausing at the open door to my room.

“Adrian...”

Her brow wrinkles a little, and I notice the way she winces as she shifts on her feet.

“I...” her eyes slide to my bed.

My eyebrow goes up.

“I know, I know,” she bites her lip, eyeing me with flushed cheeks. “I *know* our arrangement. I know it’s supposed to be whenever you want, but I...” she swallows. “Adrian, I’m a little sore. Actually, I’m a lot sore. And I—”

“Follow me.”

I start to walk towards the bathroom.

“Leave the dress.”

She walks in naked, the bath already halfway full of soapy bubbles. Her eyes instantly widen when I drop my own clothes.

We’re naked together.

“Get in.”

She flushes, her eyes dropping to my semi-hard cock.

“Adrian, I’m really—”

“I’m not going to fuck you, Celeste,” I growl quietly.

At least not right now.

She climbs in, and I settle in behind her. We sit like that, her back to my chest and my fingers stroking her skin, gently

washing her with a loofah until the water begins to cool.

When we're done, I gather her in a towel and carry her over to the bed, and again I see the concern in her eyes.

“Adrian—”

“Celeste, I'm not actually a monster. I already told you, I'm not going to fuck you, and I have no intention of hurting you.”

Her lips twist.

“Tell that to my ass.”

We both grin at the same time before her eyes drop to the turned-down sheets.

“Then why your bed?”

“To *sleep*.”

Her eyes lock with mine.

I know this is a first. Over the past month I've been fucking every hole Celeste has on every surface of my house, including my bed.

But we've never slept through the night together. In any bed, let alone mine.

Yet, right now, the idea of her sleeping anywhere else pisses me off. The idea of her in any other bed but mine, even if it's alone, has anger rising petulantly in my chest.

Celeste's brow furrows.

“What?”

You're sleeping here.”

“With you?”

“Clever girl. It is my bed, so yes.”

She chews on her lip.

“Why? Feeling mushy?”

I roll my eyes.

“Do I really strike you as someone who gets mushy?”

She smirks.

“Not in the slightest. That’s why I’m asking.”

“Will you just get the fuck into the bed?”

“*Why*, Adrian?”

“I don’t know. In case I want to fuck that ass again in the middle of the night,” I mutter.

She grins as she moves into me, cupping my face and leaning up to kiss me softly on the lips.

“Okay.”

I grunt as we slip under the covers. I turn off the light and pull them up over the both of us.

I shouldn’t feel this happy—this fucking *elated*—when her warm, bare body snuggles back into me. Or when she reaches back and takes one of my arms, pulling it around her like a blanket.

Or when her breathing turns slow and deep and regular. Or when she falls asleep in my arms.

I shouldn’t.

And yet, here I am.

Grinning like a motherfucker.



CELESTE GASPS as my hand shoots out, gripping her ankle tightly as I yank her back into the bed. The gasp turns to a giggle and she falls into my arms, laughing, before my hand slides down to grip her ass firmly. And quickly, that giggle turns into a whimper.

“And just where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

She rolls her eyes.

“To *pee*, if that’s okay.”

“And if it’s not?”

“Then you’re going to have a very wet bed.”

“Didn’t peg you for being quite that kinky.”

Celeste makes a face.

“Gross. If you’re into that, please count me out.”

“Oh, come on now. Don’t yuck my yum, baby,” I tease.

Celeste pantomimes a gagging motion.

“I do *not* want to know about your pee kink, Adrian. *Seriously* gross. Especially—”

Her face darkens as she looks away. She twists, trying to get out of my arms, but I hold her tightly.

I know what this is.

There were two walls up between us. On her side, it was me believing she had had a relationship with Amir. That wall has been brought down. But the one on my is still standing.

The one where she thinks, or at least assumes, as any normal person would, that I've had...*relations* in the last four years since her.

Of course, I haven't so much as touched another woman since Celeste. And yet, she doesn't know it. That wall remains. I've let it remain.

I'm guessing a psychologist would have a field day with that. Maybe it's a defense mechanism. A way for me to cage part of myself off from her and keep one avenue of escape open in case things go to hell again.

Who the fuck knows.

In the meantime, I have to admit, a sick part of me enjoys watching the jealousy rise in her green eyes.

"Get off me. I have to pee."

"I already told you," I growl. My hands pull her hips back against me. And a shiver goes through her as she feels my rock-hard cock slide between her thighs.

"You're not going anywhere."

It's been three days since the gala. And I'm not actually sure if we've left this bed, or even the room itself.

"Adrian, at certain point, I have to do other things, you know."

"Such as?"

"Things! I have a life!"

“Do you? I was under the impression you were a fugitive running from danger, and that I was your only source of protection.”

She twists from my arms, rolling her eyes.

“And if I want to do other things?”

“What? I took you to a gala.”

“Oh my, yes, our one thrilling evening out.”

I arch a quizzical brow.

“I’m sorry, Celeste, was getting fucked up the ass in a bathroom with a crowd of fancy people on the other side of the door not quite thrilling enough for you?”

She turns bright red and her eyes glint wickedly.

“Next time, maybe I’ll have to do it with the door wide open. What do you say?”

“Do you have to be so fucking crude all the time?”

“Mostly, yes.”

She chews on her lip, the color hovering in her cheeks.

“And if I just want to...I don’t know...go for a run, or to the park, or a playground?”

“Playgrounds are for children.”

She groans.

“How come Adele and Dahlia get to leave the house?”

Because Adele and Dahlia aren’t really in danger.

Deep down, I think Celeste understands that too. They’re collateral, at best. She’s the main target.

In the last few weeks, I've had multiple people digging into this whole mess. Thomas, for one. I've sent copies of some of the legal documents involving Amir and Celeste that she managed to snag copies of when she fled.

I've had my own financial analysts—including Oliver—do a deep dive into the financial contracts to see if there's anything there that might illuminate any of this. To see who specifically would want Amir and Nasser dead, and is now after Celeste, wanting the same thing to happen to her.

Somewhere in the numbers, I know we'll find the answer. Because of course, this all boils down to money. And it's a *fuck load* of money.

Of course, Adele and Dahlia not being the targets has more to do with Celeste than she'll ever admit. It has almost everything to do with Celeste—at least the lack of a target on little Dahlia's back.

To the world, the adorable three-and-a-half-year-old is Celeste's child. And yet, that doesn't seem to be a concern for anyone who is after Celeste. And I'm guessing it has to do with a lack of a will.

Celeste doesn't have one.

If she were to die, there's no legal document making sure any money—like the money coming to her from the El-Sayed estate—would go to Dahlia.

Because, well, Dahlia is not really her daughter.

I would never tell her, but I've run some...experiments, with heavy oversight, of course. Cade and his men were always on hand to make damn sure nothing happened to the two of them. But I had to know.

For instance, Adele and Dahlia go almost daily to the park across the street. Or to the shops down the road. To the farmers' market. To one of those fucking stupid mommy-daughter music classes every Wednesday.

All those excursions have gone off without a hitch. In fact, no one is even tailing them. Nobody ever shadows them.

There is *nobody* out there trying to go after that little girl.

When Celeste and I made one car trip across the city to the Rucker Capital Gala, though, it was another story. Cade clocked no less than three cars that were following us there, and on the way home.

Which means one thing: Celeste is the ultimate target here, and the buck stops there. It does *not* follow through to Dahlia. But that's only because people think Dahlia is Celeste's daughter, and Celeste hasn't made a will.

My gut tells me if the world truly knew that Dahlia was *Nasser's* child, it would be a very, very different story altogether.

I'm not ashamed to admit it's not the only digging I've done. But the other digging isn't into the El-Sayed family.

It's to discover whoever the fuck that was at the gala who was putting his hands on her by the bar.

The motherfucker who grabbed her hip. Who touched her. Who whispered something into her ear.

I don't know who he is, but when I find out, I plan on cutting his dick off slowly and making him choke on his own balls for laying a hand on her.

In the meantime, though...

I growl, my grip on her tightening. It's as if the surge of anger at the idea of any other man laying hands on her only drives my libido higher.

"Um, excuse me," she murmurs, feigning pulling away from me. "I asked why some people in this house are allowed to leave and *others* aren't?"

"Because some people in this house are *guests*, welcome to come and go as they please."

She whimpers as I lift her leg, pushing my hips forward so that my swollen cock head grazes back and forth across her pussy.

"*Adrian...*"

"And *other people*," I growl, reaching around to tease her clit as I ease my head against her opening.

"Other people I just can't abide the idea of them not being in my fucking bed, so I don't *let them* leave."

In one motion, I slide into her.

"*Holy fuck* you're big," she moans, gripping the sheets.

Her hips rock eagerly as I lazily drag in and out of her. My hands grip her ass as I pump into her, the underside of my cock grazing her clit with every thrust until she's shaking and whimpering on the bed.

"*Harder.*"

I groan, and my dick twitches inside of her. My palm comes down her ass with a smack as I start to drive into her harder, faster.

I love that she loves it rough like this. I love that my darkness finds its equal in her. It did when we were younger, to an

extent. But we were both young then; we were both still figuring it all out.

Yet for the last four years, that dark hunger has been swirling—in both of us, apparently—until finding each other again has led to it all rushing out in a torrid, lurid, sadistic rush.

And I can't get enough.

My teeth grind as I fuck into her from behind, my arm circling her tightly, keeping her pinned to my chest as I drive into her. My fingers roll over her clit, until suddenly, with a shudder, she's crying out, her body quaking for me and her pussy clenching around my cock.

I wait until her orgasm twists through her before I slide out with a low groan, only to nudge my swollen head back, letting my slick cock rub her own cum around her tight, puckered asshole.

"Adrian," she moans.

I'm already pushing inside. Her muscles clench, spasming and fighting for a moment as if daring me to push harder. And when I do, her tightly muscled ring yields willingly, opening for me as she turns her head to choke a satisfied moan into the pillows.

A deep, guttural sound rumbles from her chest, and I groan when her fingers dive between her legs and entwine with mine to rub her clit alongside me.

I hiss, thrusting into her, gritting my teeth as the heat of her tight ass swallows me whole. I fuck her slowly, then faster and harder, until I've got one hand on her clit and the other wrapped around her throat as my thick cock *owns* her ass.

It all becomes a blur of heat and slick bodies. I lose track of how many times she comes for me, until finally, with a groan,

I sheath myself to the hilt and empty my balls deep in her ass.

We're both shuddering, clinging to each other as we lie there. My cock is still all the way inside her as her body shudders around me.

"*How?*" She groans.

"How what?"

"That shouldn't feel so good," she purrs, curling her toes against the sheets.

"Maybe it's time to just admit it," I growl, twisting her head as I hungrily devour her mouth.

"Admit what?"

"That you truly are my good little whore who loves getting fucked up the ass like an eager little slut."

Color explodes in her face as she kisses me harder.

We're past the part where she hurls insults at me and pretends she doesn't love it when I talk to her as filthily as possible. Because her body always, *always* gives her away anyway, like it is right now.

I can feel her ass tightening on my cock, her pussy flooding my fingers with even more wetness as I say the words.

Her body can never lie to me. At least she's realizing that now.

Slowly, not wanting to really hurt her, I slide out. She groans, stretching out on the bed, and I can't help but fling the covers aside to see her in all her glory. I reach down and spread her lewdly open.

"*Adrian,*" she gasps bashfully, flushing.

But *goddamn* do I love the sight of her freshly fucked holes, especially when they are still gaping and my white cum is still

dripping out of them.

She turns, pulling me close and kissing me deeply.

“I’m going to go shower,” she murmurs quietly into my lips.

“And then I’m going *outside*.”

My brow furrows.

“Just in the backyard, *okay*, your highness?”

“Fine.”

I drop back onto the bed, giving her ass a swat and making her giggle as she gets up.

I watched her pad into the bathroom and then hear the shower going. I sit up in bed, grab my laptop, and answer a few business emails until I hear the shower turn off. She pads naked into the room a few minutes later, drying her hair and winking at me before she saunters into the walk-in closet.

That’s another thing that’s changed.

Before, most of her stuff was in her room. Now?

Well, now I don’t even think either of us remembers the last time she was even *in* her bedroom. Most of her clothes are now in my walk-in closet.

She’s still in there getting dressed when my phone rings. With a sigh, I pick it up and answer when I see the name on the screen.

“Alfie. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Silence.

“What’s going on, Alfie?”

“I’m afraid this isn’t a social call, Cross.”

My brow furrows.

“Okay...”

“You asked me to look into that man from the gala.”

My eyes darken. He means the motherfucker who had his hands on Celeste. Who I grabbed a picture of from the security footage, courtesy of the Regency Hotel general manager, and sent to Alfie.

“And? What gang is he in?”

So that I can walk into his office and shove him out of whatever floor window he's got.

“He's not in any gang.”

I scowl. “Okay, so what investment—”

“Adrian.”

Alfie pauses, sighing heavily.

“Don't shoot the messenger. And please know I don't relish this phone call.”

My pulse thuds in my ear as I hear Celeste humming something beautiful in the walk-in.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Alfie?”

“I'm talking about the fact that the man Celeste was talking to at the party is with MI6, Adrian.”

I go cold.

Across the room, Celeste saunters out of the walk-in closet wearing a sundress that would normally make my dick jump right back to attention. She even twirls around and smiles coquettishly over her shoulder as she lifts the back of it to flash me her bare ass with a giggle before she saunters from the room.

“Your wife is talking to MI-fucking-six, Adrian. And I think you might want to do something about that.”



I'M PULLING a hoodie on over the sundress, halfway out the door to the back yard, when I hear the pounding of footsteps behind me. With a grin, I turn, grinning even wider as I see Adrian racing toward me clad only in jeans slung low on his hips.

I'm still sore from, well, the *several* times we've had sex since last night. And this morning. And...my face burns to think of it.

And the *other* fucking I just received in his bed, when I came like a hurricane.

But even still...I could be persuaded. This man—shirtless, storming towards me like he's about to have me right here on the floor—gets me wet instantly.

That is, until he actually gets to me.

Until the grip that curls around my throat isn't one of lust, it's one of *fury*, as is the look on his face.

I go white, gasping as he slams me into the wall, pure, livid malice exploding across his face.

“Adrian—!”

“What the *fuck!*?” He roars in my face. “Celeste, what the actual *fuck!*?”

I choke, struggling to swallow as I stare at him with wide, terrified eyes.

“I—I don’t—”

“ANSWER ME!”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about!!” I choke-scream through my clenched throat. “Get your fucking hands off—!”

“*MI6?!?*”

I go stone-cold.

“I wanted it to be a lie,” he hisses dangerously, his eyes turning to venomous poison. “I wanted it not to be true so *fucking* badly,” he snarls quietly.

“Adrian, it’s not—”

“Then what the *fuck* is it, Celeste?!” He bellows. “Riddle me this! Why the fuck are you flitting around and talking to MI-MOTHERFUCKING-SIX?!”

“*They* came to *me*, okay!?” I hiss back. “And I didn’t give them anything! Of course I didn’t—”

“When did they come to you? At the gala?!”

My silence turns his face crimson as he leans close, his lips curling lethally.

“*When?*”

“When I was staying at the Dorchester! He was there one night when I got home. He terrified Adele and Dahlia half to death —”

“I don’t give a fuck about that. But I give a huge fuck about you talking to a government fucking agency who has a *very* vested fucking interest in putting me in fucking prison!”

“I didn’t tell him anything! I’ve been *here!*” I shove him back, spreading my arms in appeal. “What the fuck do you think I am that you think I’ve been spying on you, Adrian?”

“Have you been?”

“*No!* What do you think I have, a fucking decoder ring up my ass?!”

My head slams back into the wall as he shoves me against it, looming over me with his eyes stabbing into me.

“I’m fairly certain I would have discovered that less than twenty minutes ago,” he hisses. “But I’m willing to go searching again. Shall I?”

I flush heatedly. But I twist away from his grip, backing away down the hall, into the house.

“Adrian, *please.*”

“I’m not interested in your begging, Celeste,” He whispers low, stalking after me. “I’m not interested in excuses, or lies, or bullshit.”

“I’m not *lying* to you!” I snap.

“Maybe we should call our friend Mr. MI6, and you two can get together over drinks again. Where he can put his fucking hands on you, and you can tell him intimate details about my business!”

“*What* fucking intimate details do I even know about your business, Adrian?! Anything I know, everybody knows! It’s in the papers, for God’s sake! It’s not exactly like I’m privy to confidential information, aside from knowledge about your sex addiction and—”

“And *what,*” he hisses.

“*Anger issues*,” I snap, backing away from him into the living room.

He slowly advances on me, shaking his head.

“I want fucking answers, Celeste.”

“I’ve told you everything!”

“Begging your pardon, sir?”

Both of us whirl with snarls on our lips to see Charles standing uncomfortably in the doorway. He clears his throat awkwardly.

“Begging your pardon, Mr. Cross. I just—”

“What is it, Charles?” Adrian says icily.

“There’s mail.”

I shiver at the spark that ignites in Adrian’s eyes as his jaw grinds.

“Then *leave it*. You have the rest of the day off.”

Charles nods graciously.

“Thank you, Mr. Cross. But I’m afraid that what I mean is, there’s something here for *Mrs.* Cross.”

He lifts up a black envelope.

“I’ll just...leave it here then, shall I?”

“You can burn it, for all I fucking care,” Adrian grunts.

Charles shares a look with me.

“Well, I’ll be going then.”

He drops the envelope onto the round table in the foyer before he heads to the back door.

Adrian glares at me. But I ignore him—because I’m still both scared by and furious at his complete distrust in me—and

march over to the table.

“We’re not fucking done here.”

“You might not be. I am. You’re welcome to keep talking shit and accusing me of things all you want. But I don’t need to stay here and listen to it.”

“You damn well do.”

I ignore him, grabbing the black envelope off the table as he folds his arms across his chest and glowers at me.

The envelope has my name on it, and this address, but no return address. I frown as I start to open it.

That’s weird, I wonder how it got delivered with no postage.

“Celeste!”

I gasp as Adrian barrels through the doorway from the living room, all but knocking me to the floor as the envelope falls from my hands.

“What the *hell*, Adrian!?” I snap, glaring at him as I shove him off me. “Look, I know I fucked up. I know I should have told you about Agent Caldwell. But that’s all that happened: the asshole surprised me in my hotel room, threatened to kill me by dropping me over the fucking balcony, and then acted like a creep at the gala. *That’s it*. I haven’t said anything. I haven’t *done* anything wrong.”

Adrian eyes me, his jaw grinding. I glare right back. He reaches for the envelope, but before he can open it, I snatch it from his hands.

“Uh, *may I*? It is addressed to me.”

“At my house.”

I roll my eyes. “What do you think it is, a bomb?” I shake the envelope, shaking my head as he braces for a second.

“Adrian, it’s *paper* inside.”

“Celeste—”

I turn the envelope upside down and tap it out on the table. A single sheet of paper folded in three falls out.

“See? No anthrax. Nothing. May I?”

Before he can answer, I snatch the paper off the table and open it.

My heart chills at simple line typed across the page.

It doesn’t belong to you. I’m going to take it back.

I’m still staring at it in a numb haze as Adrian steps closer, pulling it from my cold fingers. I feel like I’m outside my own body as I watch his eyes scan the page over and over, his brows drawing together.

“*Fuck.*”

“Adrian, what does that even mean?” I whisper hoarsely.

“I don’t know.”

He pulls his phone from his pocket.

“Adrian, seriously, what does that mean?” I blurt, panic rising in my chest. “What did I take? What doesn’t belong to me?”

“Celeste, I said *I don’t know.*”

The anxiety roars in my ears, threatening to drag me under as he yanks the phone to his ear.

“Cade,” he snarls. “Where the fuck are you?”

I’m panicking. I’m falling. I’m drowning in a black pit of terror. My mind flashes to Dahlia. To Adele. To myself. I

stumble backwards out of the foyer, scrabbling at the wall until I find what I am looking for: the key fob to Adrian's Range Rover that is parked out front of the townhouse.

Adele and Dahlia are down the street at the farmers' market.

I'm going to find them, *now*.

I grab the keys in my fist, pulling them from the hook. Adrian's back is to me as he stands in the living room doorway talking in dark, low tones to Cade.

He doesn't notice when I slip past him. He doesn't hear when I open the door and smile at the two men standing guard out front. When one moves to step in front of me, I just smile and dangle the keys, nodding to where they can see Adrian on the phone behind me.

"I just have to get something from the car," I say as calmly as I can, trying to hide the sheer terror from my face.

The men nod, stepping aside. I walk quickly down the steps, down the walkway.

Behind me, the front door slams open.

"Celeste!!"

I start to run, bolting through the gate and fumbling for the door as I click the button to unlock the Range Rover.

"*Celeste!!*" Adrian roars.

I'm still trying to figure out why the unlock button made a weird gurgling electronic sound instead of its usual bright chirping tone and thinking *that's weird* as I reach for the SUV's door handle.

And then it all happens in slow motion.

Someone slams into me from behind, whipping me around. And I'm only *just* able to get a lungful of his scent and feel the strength of his body against mine as he turns me around to face the house before searing heat suddenly envelops us both.

Thunder booms around us. And all I hear is screaming as we both get punched through the air and slammed against the gate as a fireball roars over our heads.

In a daze, lying on the ground with my ears ringing and my vision swimming with black spots, I turn. My heart skips a beat, my eyes blinking quickly as I go pale with nausea and panic and take in the roaring inferno where the Range Rover used to be.

“Celeste!!”

I'm aware of him hovering over me, terror in his eyes as he holds my head.

“*CELESTE!!*”

And then it all goes dark.



I WATCH her as she sleeps.

Lying there in my bed, she looks for all the world like she's dreaming sweet, wonderful, innocent dreams.

Like she's unmarred. Unbroken.

Completely fine.

And of course, that is how she *looks*, because she is buried in my duvet with the blankets pulled to her chin. Covering the burns. The cuts. The bandages.

I wince for a second, breaking my attention on her, as Dr. Brewer, my personal doctor, finishes with the last of the bandages around my ribs.

“What do you think?”

Dr. Brewer is the kind of doctor to which something like this is not shocking or appalling. Or if it is, he does a damn good job of hiding it. Lord knows he's paid well enough to do so.

Years back, Dr. Brewer was my uncle's doctor. I know for a fact he's also tended to Alfie, and I'm sure he's patched up more than a few holes in Cillian as well. The money is good when you're a mob doctor, you just have to be available at very odd hours and be prepared to deal with some very “interesting” situations.

“I think you should stay off your feet, and I think in a few weeks you could probably see a cosmetic dermatologist about some of the burns on your back—”

“I’m not talking about me.”

I nod my chin to where Dr. Brewer’s nurse, Veronica, has just finished taking a vitals read on Celeste.

“She’ll be fine. Fortunately, your back probably took the worst of it. And from talking to your explosives expert, Mr. Black, it would seem the blast was mostly directed *up* rather than out. Which was very lucky for you both, Adrian.”

I nod.

“Call it a small miracle, I suppose.”

I frown.

It’s not a miracle at all. It’s just what happened. I’ve already gotten a very preliminary report from Cade after he surveyed the scene and dealt with the police.

The bomb planted under the front seat was rigged with a timer switch to go off when the door was electronically unlocked and someone sat down behind the wheel. But me charging out of the house like a maniac and roaring at her—especially after I heard the odd way the key fob beeped—halted her for a few seconds. It stopped her from being inside when it detonated.

The blast was, I’m sure, intended to cause untold carnage. No one *directed* it to simply go upward like a geyser of fire, not outward like a bomb is supposed to. But my Range Rover has its bulletproofing on the sides but not the roof, for weight reasons, and that is why the pillar of fire went up instead of out, incinerating us both.

As it is, my back is badly burned. Both of us have shrapnel wounds and gashes from bits of flaming hot metal zinging past us.

Aside from that, though, we're okay.

I turn my attention back to Dr. Brewer.

"You're sure?"

He nods.

"She's okay, Adrian. Though she needs rest." He eyes me with a stern look. "*Lots* of rest, and I hope I'm making myself clear."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"He glances at the nurse, who flushes and darts from the room before he turns back to me.

"Veronica mentioned some..." he clears his throat. "Some *marks* when she examined Celeste. Marks like handprints, like bruises." His brow arches a little more. "*Intimate* bruises."

"If you're suggesting that I beat my wife—"

"I'm not suggesting anything," he says, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Nor am I judging two adults for engaging in whatever consensual activities they wish to behind closed doors. All I'm suggesting, Adrian, is that you tone down the spankings and the *yes, sirs* until she's better. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

He rolls his eyes as I smirk at him. It's a good thing he does such good work and goes so far back with my family because Dr. Brewer, unlike most people in my life, does not have a fucking filter.

"Anything else I should know?"

He shakes his head. “Just rest, Adrian. For *both* of you.”

“Thank you for your work, Doctor.”

After I escort out the doctor and his nurse—who’s here because even if I trust Dr. Brewer with my life, he’s still not putting his fucking hands on Celeste—I head immediately back to her.

Alone with her, I sit on the edge of the bed and stroke the hair from her face. My heart wrenches as my jaw tightens.

I need fucking answers. But first, I need a reprieve from the world, and the chaos marching through it, and I need to spend the reprieve with her.

I sit there for another hour, just watching her, lazily stroking her hair. Finally, I pull out my phone to make the calls I need to make. My own people have of course already been alerted.

But I also have friends who can help, or at least be consulted, and it’s rather handy that men like Alfie compared to men like Thomas can offer *extremely* polar opposite forms of help.

After that, I put the phone away. My head throbs, and my ears are still ringing from the blast. And my back hurts like a bastard.

But she’s okay.

She’s still alive.

She’s still mine.

I slide onto the bed next to her, gathering her in my arms against me.

Stroking her hair. Feeling the beat of her pulse in her wrist, and the beat of her heart against my chest.

Trying to figure out how the fuck it is I morphed from hating this woman to never wanting her to leave my side.



MY BEDROOM DOOR opens at seven-thirty, same as it does every morning these days like clockwork. I'm already awake and I'm sitting up expecting it, my eyes on the door when Adrian walks in exactly on time, carrying my breakfast tray.

The routine always follows the same pattern to the letter.

He brings the tray to my bedside table, frowns at the water glass I've left too close to the edge—in his opinion—and uses an elbow to push it back before setting the tray down. He says good morning in a gruff, just shy of grumpy tone, which always brings a grin to my lips.

Then he marches over and throws open the curtains, letting light into the room, sits on the edge of my bed, asks me how I'm feeling, and fastidiously watches me eat my breakfast.

It's not creepy or overbearing or anything like that. There's a weird sort of dark tenderness to the way he sits patiently, asks me how I'm feeling, and watches me inhale the perfectly-cooked omelet, toast, and bacon on the tray across my lap.

If I ever ask about his own injuries from that day just over a week ago, he shrugs the question off. When I'm done eating, he takes the tray, puts it back on the bedside table, and then pulls back the covers. He helps me from the bed, though I

don't really need assistance, scoops me into his arms, though I can walk just fine, and carries me to the bathroom.

There, he sits me on the edge of the vanity while he fills the tub with warm, sudsy, lavender bubbles. After that, he undresses me—actually chastising me if I've started to do it myself while he's been filling the tub.

Then he picks me up again, and I relish the powerful, warm feel of his hands on my skin before he lowers me into the bath. Then he washes me with a loofah, as if I'm a helpless invalid, or a child. He cleans every part of me, gently and just shy of sensually. He even washes my hair with such patience and care that it actually blows me away.

When we're done, he dries me off, combs out my hair, and tucks me back into bed...before pushing my legs apart, moving between them, and using his fingers and his tongue on my pussy to make me explode.

He gives me a deep kiss with the taste of my cum on his lips, tucks me in, and then leaves to attend to his business for the day.

We have this routine down to a *science* at this point. Because it's been happening every day for eight days, since the blast that almost killed me that he ripped me away from.

Aside from a slight ringing still in my ears, a headache that's lasted a little too long, and a few lingering cuts and bruises, I'm fine.

Looking around the house, on the surface it would appear as though nothing has changed. There are no men with guns guarding every window and door. And the mood hasn't grown darker. But I know things have changed from talking to Adele,

which is what I mostly do during the day when Adrian is at work.

I may not pick up on anything different. But Adele's eyes are sharper than mine, and she has in fact noticed an increased security presence surrounding the house. Like the men who look like casual bystanders down the street, who are actually Cross family operatives. Or the construction workers redoing the roof on the building next door, who amazingly don't seem to have replaced a single shingle.

That alone should make me feel even safer, knowing that this house is locked down tighter than a fortress at this point. But none of that could be in place, and I'd *still* feel safe.

And that's all down to Adrian.

Because even with all his darkness, and even though he still has that grumpy malevolence clouding him, and even if we still bicker at times like an old married couple, I know in my heart that nothing at all is going to happen to me while I'm under his care.

Today, on day eight, nothing about our routine changes. The tray is on my lap, the curtains are open, and Adrian—clad in a dark gray suit, no tie, shirt collar open—sits on the edge of the bed watching me with that gruff expression as I pick at my food.

Something tickles me inside and I bite back a grin as I sigh and put the plate back on the tray.

His brow furrows. "What?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm just not hungry today."

It takes everything I have not to laugh when he stands and moves closer, glaring down at me.

“No food games,” he grunts. “You’re healing and you will eat every fucking bite on that fucking tray.”

It’s so predictable it really does almost crack me up. And to be honest, I *am* hungry. I’m *going* to eat everything. But watching the possessive, dominant way he’s prepared to actually shove it down my throat is weirdly amusing. And comforting.

“*Fine*,” I sigh, making a big show of it. “Fine, if you insist.”

“I do.”

He glares at me, but there’s a twinkle in the corner of his eye that suggests he’s on to my games.

I finish breakfast, he removes the tray, and same as always scoops me into his arms and takes me into the bathroom. I tease him again as he fills the tub, pulling my own shirt off so when he turns back, I’m already topless.

His jaw clenches and he looks like he is about to chastise me for changing our routine. But he doesn’t say a word. Instead, he moves to where I’m sitting on the vanity and goes to lift me.

This morning, his mouth suddenly drops to my bare breasts, and I gasp as he sucks and bites one of my nipples for a moment before backing away.

And heat explodes through my core.

After a month of near constant sexual activity with his man, eight days without has made me a little insane, and I may or may not be climbing the walls. Maybe that’s why I’m being such a brat this morning.

I brought it up once a few days ago, but Adrian insisted on following the doctor’s orders that he shouldn’t touch me.

“And I suppose going down on me doesn’t count?” I remember muttering bitterly at him.

“No, it doesn’t. That’s therapeutic.”

How very Adrian.

As he bites my nipple for the first time in over a week, fire roars through my core. He goes to move away, but I grab him, pulling him into me hungrily and lifting my lips to his.

“Adrian...”

“You’re still healing, Celeste,” he grunts, his brow furrowing.

“I need you to fuck me. *Please.*”

He smirks.

“There’s my eager little slut.”

I whimper as his hands move to my thighs, spreading them around his hips as he moves between them. He’s still wearing his suit, but I can feel his massive, throbbing erection, hard and pulsing against my panties through his slacks.

“Adrian...”

I moan quietly as he brings a hand between us, and I gasp as he drags a finger up my slit. His mouth lowers to my ear.

“Celeste,” he groans thickly.

I moan, ready to melt.

“Yes?”

“Get in the fucking bathtub.”

I’m groan, wincing as he pulls away.

“You fucking bastard.”

He gives me a smug look.

“Greedy little slut.”

I purse my lips and level my gaze at him.

“You only get to call me that if you’re actually going to treat me like one.”

He looks amused.

“You’re saying the title has to fit the job?”

I roll my eyes.

“If you want to put it that way.”

“Well, in that case,” he growls, making me gasp as he lifts me up and sets me down in the tub. He leans close to my ear again, sending a tingle down my spine.

“*Rest up*. You have a job to do.”

AN HOUR LATER—AFTER I’ve been bathed more thoroughly than I’ve ever bathed myself, and of course, after my daily morning mind-blowing orgasm against his tongue—Adrian is gone, shuttling off to work at one of his offices somewhere.

And I, of course, stay in lockdown at Castle Cross.

I mosey downstairs and find Adele and Dahlia in the back yard, where I spend the next three glorious hours playing princess tea-party with them.

There are times when watching Dahlia, so good and pure and happy and smiling, is better than anything you could ever get from a professional therapist.

And honestly, she’s the reason I’ve kept going the last couple years. Even if she’s not my own blood, I still think of her as

family.

Of course, there are also times when watching her brings a sharp pang to my heart, knowing that this little girl really is as close as I'm ever going to get to having a child of my own.

That used to hurt more. But these days, I've mostly made peace with it. It's not "settling" to have Dahlia be the closest thing to a child of my own I'll ever have. She's enough.

And she has all of my heart.

While we play, I notice Adele glancing at me, surreptitiously searching my skin for a mark or a hickey that she can latch on to. She won't say anything...she's stopped doing that. She's also stopped asking me if I'm "sure I'm okay", because I think she's starting to see that I am *way* more than okay.

That my mood, at least before the explosion, actually went *up* the more visible bruises I had and wincing steps I took.

But now, over the last week, there have been no fresh marks. No bite marks. No scratches. No bruises. All thanks to Adrian deciding to completely cage that beast inside of him that I fucking crave.

Bastard.

Later in the afternoon, my phone rings. When I glance down, I smile curiously when I see Michelle's name.

"Hey Michelle—"

"Are you okay?!"

Shit.

She's probably only now heard about the explosion. And I'm a total asshole, because I never called to tell her about it, or that I'm okay.

“Celeste, my fucking *God!* I just heard about the car!! How are you?!”

I cringe as I move across to the far side of the of the back garden and sit on a bench.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. I’m so sorry, Michelle. I should have called.”

“*Christ*, Celeste. We need to find you someplace—”

“I’m perfectly safe here.”

“Celeste, your car exploded in front of you.”

I shrug.

“It could have been meant for Adrian.”

“That really doesn’t do anything to make me feel any better.”

“I know. But you never know. I mean, maybe it was meant for his second-in-command, or someone else altogether. I mean perhaps they got the wrong car—”

“Celeste, *please.*”

I’ve had this exact same discussion with Adele about nine times over the last eight days. But pushing it aside instead of dwelling or lingering on it is my way of moving forward.

I have to. I have no choice but to.

“Michelle, it’s really fine.”

“It’s really *not*, Celeste. You’re running out of time. And I think we both know that.”

“I’m safe here, Michelle, okay?”

She sighs.

“*Are* you, though? Or are you just there because it’s where you want to be?”



IN THE EVENING, the routine starts up again.

He wants me in my room by five, as if I'm three years old and bedtime is approaching. At five-thirty on the dot, he's striding through my bedroom door—this time *sans* jacket, the top button of his shirt unbuttoned, and his sleeves rolled up.

Which is all just supremely unfair, given my sexually frustrated state the last couple of days.

We make small talk while he undresses me, steadfastly refusing to touch me intimately as he checks my wounds and changes the bandages. At six-thirty, Charles knocks on the door and leaves a cart with dinner for the two of us outside in the hall. Adrian gets it, drags a chair over to the bed, and we eat like that—him on one side of the cart, me sitting on the edge of the bed, eating in almost a weird little fancy picnic way.

After dinner, it's bath time again. At night, he doesn't wash my hair. But he does slowly wash every other inch of my body, until I'm curling my toes and basically on fire with need for him.

Just like in the morning, he towels me off, carries me back to bed, drapes me across it, and then proceeds to devour my

pussy until I'm screaming in orgasm. Then he dresses me in pajamas, kisses me goodnight, and leaves.

Five nights into this, I finally caved and begged him to stay. And yet he refused. When I pushed the issue he groaned, surging against me and taking my breath away as his hands went to my hip and neck, his lips hovering by mine.

"If I stay in this bed with you," he'd growled, "I'll *break* you. Because there's no way I'll be able to keep my fucking hands off you, and there's no way I won't be able to take you every fucking way I want."

And that was the end of that conversation.

So tonight, on day eight, at four-fifty-three, I head back to my room and sit up in bed waiting. Five-thirty hits, and my eyes lift from Michelle's email on my phone to the door.

Nothing happens.

At five-thirty-two I look up again, frowning. By five-forty, worry is really beginning to seep into me. But then suddenly the door opens and in strides Adrian, wearing a jacket and even a tie. When I look at him quizzically he ignores me and marches straight to my walk-in closet.

"Uh, hello?"

I hear him rummaging around before he strides back out, holding a shimmering black gown in his arms, which he drapes across the bed at my feet.

"I need you bathed, dressed, hair and makeup done, and downstairs in the solarium in forty-five minutes."

I stare at him.

"Um, what?"

“We’re having dinner down there.”

“Not up here?”

“At a certain point, Celeste, it might be good for you to get out of this room.”

I roll my eyes. “Uh, *yeah*. I think we’re on the same page there.”

He smirks at me, raising a finger.

“Forty-five minutes. Don’t be late.”

And with that, he’s out the door.

Umm, okay.

It feels weird to bathe by myself, and I find myself annoyed that someone else isn’t running their fingers through my hair, or lovingly sudsing the parts of my back I can’t reach. But I get through it.

After that, I dress in the gorgeous black gown I didn’t even know was in my closet, and head downstairs. Enroute, I make a detour to Adele and Dahlia’s room. But when I poke my head in, they’re not there. Strange.

I take the long route back down through the townhouse, checking one of the spare living rooms that’s somehow become Dahlia’s playroom over the last month. I even glance out the windows of the living room at the back yard, wondering if they’re out there.

But again, nothing.

By the time I get to the solarium, I’m under a dark cloud of worry as I stumble inside.

“Where are they?”

Adrian looks up from the table he’s sitting at.

“Excuse me?”

“What did you do with them?”

“Who?”

I glare at him.

“Dahlia and Adele. Where are they?”

He sighs.

“They’re out at dinner. The finest macaroni and cheese in town.”

My jaw drops.

You sent them *out*? At *night*?!?”

“They’re *fine*, Celeste.”

“The fuck they are! Adrian, someone tried to blow up—”

“Dahlia is not the target. Neither is Adele.”

I shake my head. “You don’t know that for sure.”

“Yes, I do.”

My eyes narrow.

“*How*?”

“You don’t want to know my methods. But trust me: neither she nor Adele is the target. You are.”

“Yeah, except the whole world thinks that Dahlia is my daughter.”

“And that is precisely why she’s okay.”

My brows knit. “I’m not following.”

“If it were public knowledge that she was Nasser El-Sayed’s daughter, I’m fairly certain she’d already be dead. Probably Adele along with her.”

Cold shivers creep up my spine.

Adrian stands, shaking his head.

“However, that’s not going to happen. Because as you said, the whole world thinks she’s yours.”

“How is that any better?”

He shrugs. “Because you don’t have a will.”

“What?”

“You haven’t made a will. There’s nothing to pass anything of yours to that little girl in the event of your death. And whoever is after you knows that. So, as long as the world assumes she’s your daughter, or at least anyone’s daughter but Nasser’s, she’s clear of this whole tangled fucking mess.”

His brow furrows.

“Now, if you’re through accusing me of kidnapping your friends, *sit*. Have some fucking wine.”

I blink, and for the first time since I barged in, I actually look around to take in the surroundings.

Holy shit.

The solarium, which is a Victorian-style glass and iron room that juts out from the back of the house over the gardens, is always beautiful, full of plants and light. And the farmhouse style table and elegant chairs surrounding it always make me feel cozy.

Tonight, though, it’s at another level altogether.

Candles are everywhere, and I swear, Adrian’s brought extra flowers and plants in specifically for tonight. Dinner is already served at the table, two plates across from one another, an

open bottle of what looks like very old red wine sitting between them.

I stare at him.

“What is this?”

“It’s our dinner, and it’s getting cold. So again, if you’re quite done accusing me of nefarious things, sit the fuck down and start eating.”

I grin as I look at him.

“Thank you.”

“For?”

I smile. “For everything you’ve done for me. For accepting the baggage that came with me.”

He shrugs, grunting as he sits and reaches for the wine and pouring.

“As toddlers go, she’s actually pretty decent.”

I roll my eyes.

“As toddlers go, she’s a freaking *angel*, especially considering what she’s gone through.”

He nods as I take my seat across from him, taking a large gulp of delicious red wine before glancing at him.

“We never had that discussion, did we?”

“What discussion is that?”

I look at him. “You know what I’m talking about.”

Adrian looks down at the wine in his glass as he swirls it.

“Children.”

He shakes his head.

“No, we didn’t. But then, we were kids ourselves.”

“That was only four years ago.”

“A lot can change in four years, Celeste.”

Understatement of the fucking century.

“Still,” I shrug again. “It just feels like a conversation people should have *before* they get married, doesn’t it?”

“There’s a lot of conversations we probably should have had before we got married.”

I smile as his eyes meet mine across the candlelit table.

“Do you regret it?”

“What, marrying you?”

I nod. “It’s okay. You can tell me. You’re not going to hurt my —”

“Not ever, not for a second.”

My cheeks flush as my teeth sink into my bottom lip, refusing to smile like an idiot even though I want to.

“Not even once?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

I clear my throat, looking down and digging into my dinner, which is just as delicious as the wine.

“Oh, by the way, can I ask you a favor?”

I know I’m changing the subject. He knows it too, but he nods anyways.

“What’s that?”

“My lawyer is going to be coming into town tomorrow, and I’d love to sit down with her.” I shrug. “You know, just go

over some of the contract stuff, and...I don't know."

"Try and figure out what you're going to do with a billion dollars?"

I smile wryly.

"Pretty much, yeah."

He eyes me, drinking his wine slowly.

"She's welcome to come over any time."

I make a face. "I...actually need to go to *her*."

"Out of the question. She can come here. It's perfectly safe."

My brow furrows. "No, the thing is, she's not *officially* my lawyer. She's just going over all of this with me because we're close."

"Excuse me?"

"She's actually..." I smile weakly. "She used to be one of Nasser's lawyers."

His eyes turn to slits.

"Why the fuck are you talking with one of Nasser's lawyers?"

"Because we're friends?"

"Celeste—"

"It's not what you're thinking. She was instrumental in setting up the contracts that would cover Amir and I being married without actually being married. She hid our secret."

"Why would she have done that?" He grunts skeptically.

"Because she was someone who saw two young people in trouble, and wanted to help them."

He frowns. "Why the fuck can't she come here, though?"

“Because she still technically works from the law firm that handles Nasser El-Sayed’s affairs, and people are watching her.”

“People are watching *you*.”

“Yeah, but I’m already in the crosshairs. She’s not.” I shake my head. “I won’t do that to her, Adrian. I’m not painting a target on her back. She’s already done way too much for me, considering...”

I look away.

“Considering what?”

I sigh heavily.

“She was in love with him. Amir, I mean. They were involved briefly before he met Magda. I guess they were working together on a bunch of legal staff, late hours and all that. She was smitten with him, but he was younger, and rich, and obviously the son of her client. But still it happened: she fell madly in love with him. But it didn’t last. Amir didn’t quite feel the same way, and moved on. Then he found Magda.”

“And yet, she still helped you, which also helped him be with another woman?”

I nod slowly.

“*Yep*.”

“You don’t find that suspicious?”

I stare at him. “You’re ridiculous, you know that?”

“I’m just saying, it seems like she’d be the prime suspect to exact a revenge killing.”

I roll my eyes. “You watch too many crime shows.”

“My entire life *is* a crime show, Celeste.”

I grin. “True. Well, she’s not the devious type. Maybe some people would have tried to seek revenge. But Michelle is too kind. She’s too good. Kind of like Adele in that regard.”

As I sit there thinking about Michelle and her unrequited love, a dark shadow begins to creep through my heart. A sourness pools in my stomach, thinking about the way she loved him, and the way she thought he loved her.

And then how she had to watch for the next couple of years, and see him first dating other women and eventually falling for someone else entirely.

My eyes drag across the table, stabbing into Adrian as he methodically eats his food, his gaze out the windows.

Just like that, my green-eyed monster comes roaring out to play. I push my chair back sharply, grabbing my wine as I stand abruptly and march over to the window.

I have to put some space between us; I can’t bear to look at him right now without thinking of all those years that we were apart. All the years I spent alone pining for him, and all the years he probably spent burying himself in anyone that would spread their legs for him.

I mean, just look at him. Lethally beautiful. Darkly and sinfully addicting. Rich. Well-dressed. Dominant.

I cringe, biting back a tear as horrible visions of Adrian cavorting with an endless sea of strange women parade through my head.

I jolt when his hands land on my hips from behind.

“Stop. I just...I need...”

“What do you need?”

I gasp as his lips brush my ear.

“Tell me what you fucking need, Celeste.”

My eyes close.

“I need to erase the last four years. I need to erase the nightmares I have of the last four years of your life.” I choke.

“I need to purge myself of the thoughts of what happened when I wasn’t here with you.”

I feel him tense behind me.

“Why? What do you think happened when you weren’t here, Celeste?”

“I...” I bite back the tears beading in my eyes. “Adrian, I was a girl back then. But I’m an adult now, and I know how adults act. I know how men act. What men need. And I know I wasn’t...”

My chest tightens.

“I know you spent the last four years hating me and looking for any way to possibly purge me from your system.”

I shiver as he turns me abruptly to face him, his eyes narrowing and his mouth thinning sourly.

“Is that what you think I did?”

“Adrian, *please*. That’s what anyone in your position would have done. You’re gorgeous, rich, powerful...”

Tears starts to roll down my cheek.

“Come on, you don’t have to lie to me. I just need to find a way to move past it and—”

“And what if there was nothing to move past?” he growls quietly.

His hand slides over my hips, pulling me into him. I want to resist, to put space between us so that I can process the

jealousy I don't even really have to right to have.

But with him, I'm helpless, and I can't.

"Adrian, please..."

One of his hands slides up to my jaw, cupping my chin and lifting my eyes to his.

"Tell me what you think happened over the last four years."

"I think..." I blink back hot tears. "I think I spent the last four years dying a little inside," I choke. "And missing you so much it hurt, even if I hated you..."

The tears start to trickle hotly down my cheeks.

"And I think *you* spent the last four years forgetting me in the lips and bodies of more women than you could even keep track of."

Our eyes lock; his stormy and piercing, mine tragic.

"And I don't blame you for that. I just need time to try to get past it—"

"Zero."

I blink, frowning.

"What?"

"Zero. It's a number that's quite easy to keep track of."

I shake my head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"These supposed harems of strange women that I've been fucking for the last four years don't exist," he rasps, lowering his lips towards mine. "The number you're looking for is zero, Celeste. There was zero of them."

I stare at him. "That—that's impossible."

He shakes his head. "Not impossible."

“Not even...” my chest tightens as my pulse thuds. “One-night stands? Escorts?”

“I don’t have any interest in either of those things.”

“Adrian—”

“There’s only ever been one, Celeste.”

I whimper as he pulls me savagely to him, his hand tangling in the back of my hair, threading through it.

“There’s only ever been you.”

His mouth crushes to mine, and I lose myself, wrapping my arms around his neck and kissing him feverishly. I whimper as he lifts me into his arms, turns, and carries me from the solarium upstairs to his bed.

Day eight, and our dry patch ends.

And holy *fuck* does it end.



I WINCE as I walk down the stairs into the foyer.

Goddammit. Last night, it's not just our streak of not fucking that broke. I'm pretty sure *I* broke too.

Every part of me hurts. Because last night, the two of us made up for eight freaking days of no penetrative sex over the course of about seven hours.

Seven solid hours of me writhing in his bed, clawing at his shower wall, whimpering into the floor as he fucked me from behind. Gasping for more as he took me in every single possible way, in every single place a man can take a woman.

Needless to say, as sore as I am, and as painful as it is even to walk right now, I am on cloud fucking nine.

But I'm also a little nervous. Because as much as I've been proclaiming I want to leave the house, actually doing so—especially since the explosion—has me more than a little rattled.

I keep telling myself it's going to be fine. We're taking three armored, bomb-proof cars that Adrian somehow has secured access to. The kind of vehicles that visiting presidents or monarchs take while they're driving through the streets of London from private airports.

Michelle has landed in London, and is currently staying in a suite at the Savoy Hotel. From Adrian's house, the three armored SUVs will take different routes there, accompanied by full regiments of heavily armed guards. I'll even be leaving the house wearing a blonde wig, disguised as a cleaning woman.

Three other vehicles will leave after us and go to three completely different places in the city to further throw people off the scent. In fact, Cade even had the bold idea of Adrian not actually accompanying me to Michelle's hotel.

Instead, he'll wait for the next three cars to pull up. At which point, he'll walk out the front door with a woman who works for the Cross organization, who is around my height and who will be wearing a dark wig. The two of them will get into one of the second convoy of SUVs and be driven somewhere outside of London. Again, to throw anyone else off the scent.

Honestly, it's a pretty solid plan. Just the same, I'm nervous.

Adrian pulls me close, wrapping an arm around my waist as he pushes my hair back from my face. He leans down, kissing me softly and yet possessively.

"Everything is going to be fine," he growls. "I've made sure of it."

"What about you?"

He lifts a shoulder. "I'll be fine, too."

"Yeah, except you'll have a target on your back."

"I always have a target on my back. I'm used to it. You don't get to have targets on your back."

I shake my head.

"Adrian—"

“This isn’t really up for discussion, and again, it’s something I’m used to.”

His hand slides up, cupping my cheek.

“In and out of the hotel: that’s it,” he growls. “Oh, and Cade will be with you at all times.”

He pulls me close.

“After your meeting, straight back here, okay?”

I smirk.

“Yes *sir*.”

I shiver as his grip tightens on me. And when he pulls me against him, I gasp at how fucking hard he is.

“That’s what you saying ‘yes, sir’ does to me,” he murmurs darkly.

“I said that one second ago.”

“And?”

I flush. “And you’re relentless.”

“Guilty as charged. Now get going. The sooner you leave, the sooner you can get back here, and I can stop worrying about what the fuck could go wrong with all of this.”

He kisses me fiercely and then opens the front door. Cade is waiting for us, and he nods at his boss.

“You don’t have to worry about a thing, Adrian.”

And then, we’re off.

THREE HOURS OF PAPERWORK LATER, I groan as I lean back on the couch in Michelle's hotel suite.

"Is that really all of it?"

She smiles, pushing her long blonde hair back from her face.

"I think so."

"Phew."

She laughs as I roll my neck. We've been going over just about every single contract, document, and piece of paper connecting me to Amir and to Nasser, and it's quite a pile.

"You're sure I can take all this back with me?"

Michelle nods.

"Yeah, I've made copies."

Her brow furrows.

"Look, Celeste, I'm happy to keep working with you on this. In fact, I would love to. It's just with me there's a level of..."

I smile, putting my hand on her arm.

"I get it. Relax. I'm not letting you be a sitting duck."

This is why I've asked for copies of all these documents. Because as highly capable a lawyer as Michelle is, the more she works with me, the more the danger she's in.

Because we still don't know where this threat's coming from. Hell, it could be coming from within her very own law firm, for all we know.

"You have someone you can count on to take it from here?"

I nod. Adrian's already mentioned he's got people he trusts implicitly that can help go over all the legal work.

“He’s a good man, your Adrian,” Michelle smiles, as if reading my mind.

I smirk.

“Who have *you* been talking to?”

Michelle laughs. “You know what I mean. I mean, no, of course I can’t condone the business he’s in. But if you ask around about him...” she arches a row. “And I *have*...he’s a good man, for a criminal. He also has an extremely good law firm on retainer.”

Michelle sinks back into the couch, sliding her fingers through her hair

“Funnily enough, I’ve worked with one of his friends before.”

“Who?”

“Thomas Ashford. I believe they’re friends from business school.”

“Really?”

She nods.

“The hedge fund he was working for a couple years ago hired our firm to go over some discovery issues.” She shakes her head. “The man is a computer when it comes to dissecting contracts. Honestly, he he’d be a great lawyer. But he’d probably only make half what he does in finance.”

She grins.

“Talk to Adrian. Make sure Thomas takes a look at these.” She shrugs. “He’s who I’d have look at them, if I were you.”

We stand, and I give her a hug.

“Thank you, Michelle, for everything.”

“Anytime, *amie*.”

She sighs, then looks at me sharply.

“You’re sure you’re okay?”

“I *know* I’m okay.”

“Well, that’s good enough for me.”

CADE and three other armed men are waiting for me when I leave Michelle’s hotel suite. Wordlessly, the four of them glance around in all directions as we crowd into the elevator.

“Got what you came for?” Cade grunts as the doors close.

“Yes, and thank you for all your help.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Mrs. Cross.”

I smile at his formality.

“You know you can call me Celeste, right?”

He shrugs. “Mrs. Cross works for me.”

“Well, thank you again.”

He nods, his jaw tightening as we approach the ground floor.

“When we get out, I need you to follow my lead. Keep moving, keep your head down, and we’ll be back in the car in no time. Okay?”

Fear spikes my heart rate, seeing him and his men on such high alert. But then I remind myself that’s why they’re here: to be on alert. To expect danger, so they’re ready if it does come.

The elevator doors open, and the five of us step out. We move quickly down a service hallway next to the concierge desk,

then into an unused kitchen area before Cade holds up a finger and shoulders open a back door.

He ducks out first, gun drawn, glancing around before he looks back.

“Clear. Let’s go.”

The other three guards usher me outside just as one of our armored black SUVs pulls up. One of the men opens the door, and I’m being hurried towards it when suddenly, a shape comes out of nowhere.

It happens so fast, I can’t even scream. I just whirl as the figure lurches into me. Cade roars, and four guns are suddenly out as chaos erupts.

But there’s no attack. Instead, my eyes go wide and my face pales.

And I come face to face with a fucking *ghost*.

“*Celeste!*”

The woman clutches at my jacket, her eyes wild and haggard.

“Get her the fuck back!!” Cade barks, shattering my numb disbelief.

Two of the men grab the woman, making her scream and flinch as they drag her off me and shove her up against the alley wall. Cade snarls and levels his gun. But suddenly, I’m shaken from my reverie.

“WAIT!” I scream, shoving past the guards. “WAIT! STOP!”

“Celeste! Get back—!”

“I know her!” I choke, my pulse thundering in my ears as I throw myself between the armed men and the woman sobbing against the wall. “I *know her!*”

Because even though she's in rags, covered in dirt and dried blood, with untamed hair and a wild, haunted look in her eyes like she hasn't slept in a month...

Even though she's supposed to be dead...

I know *exactly* who Magdalena El-Sayed is.



I DON'T LIKE THIS.

I pace the doorway of the living room, eyeing the woman huddled on the couch. She's shaking, just like the cup of tea in her hands, as she shrinks into the blanket draped around her shoulders.

Celeste and Adele sit on either side of Amir El-Sayed's widow, hugging her and rubbing her back as she blinks back tears. This has been going on for the last twenty minutes, since Magdalena finished her harrowing, dramatic tale of surviving the accident that crushed the limo she was in with Amir. How she crawled out of the wreckage and caught a glimpse of the truck driver holding a gun, as if he was looking for any survivors.

How when the police came, she hid; how she crawled through shattered glass, twisted metal, and the blood of her true love to escape down a side alley. How she came home to find her apartment—the one she stayed in when she couldn't be with Amir at his and Celeste's place—ransacked and emptied of anything electronic.

How she read the writing on the wall and went into hiding, fearing for her life, with just the clothes on her back and whatever cash she had stashed around the apartment.

Yet, even after hearing about her ordeal—sleeping behind trash cans in Paris, running from dangerous-looking men who she thought recognized her in Calais, and more—there’s *something* about all this that bothers me.

Something that won’t stop jangling a silent alarm in my head.

Celeste looks up, and when she sees the look on my face, she leans in to say something quietly to the two women before standing and crossing the room to me. She takes my hand, pulling me out into the hallway and partially closing the sliding doors to the living room to give us some privacy.

“What’s going through your head?”

My brow furrows and my jaw sets tightly.

“I don’t like this,” I growl quietly.

Celeste frowns. “Adrian, she’s a fugitive. I mean she’s been on the run for over a *month*, with no safety net.”

I nod slowly. Celeste sighs.

“I already know what you’re thinking, anyway.”

“Oh?”

She nods. “You’re wondering *why now*.”

Yep. That’s exactly what I’m thinking.

“Adrian,” she sighs. “I think it’s because she didn’t know where I was until now. She’d figured out that I came to London, but not where I was staying, or who *with*—”

“I can leave.”

Celeste and I turn quickly at the sound of Magdalena’s quiet, broken, Italian-accented voice. She hovers in the doorway to the living room, her eyes red, her cheeks dirt-streaked, the blanket still wrapped around her.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Cross,” she mumbles fearfully. “I—I know how this must look. And I apologize, I didn’t mean to surprise Celeste like that—”

“Magda, it’s not a problem at all,” Celeste says gently, shooting me a sidelong look.

“I..I was at an internet cafe this morning, and I saw that Michelle Hagan had posted a picture of herself having coffee. It wasn’t geotagged or anything, but there was a napkin on the table next to her that said The Royal Cafe, which is—”

“The cafe in the lobby of the Savoy Hotel,” I growl quietly.

She nods, swallowing.

“It was a long shot, but I thought...with her here, and knowing or at least thinking *you* were here somewhere, that maybe you were all meeting.”

Celeste swallows heavily, blinking back a tear as she hugs Magdalena.

“I’m so sorry that you’ve been out there all alone.”

She pulls back, her face falling.

“And I’m sorry for your loss. Amir was a good man.”

I take a deep breath and resist the urge to punch something. I even begrudgingly admit that as much as I want to hate the motherfucker who got to live with Celeste for four years, it could have been much worse.

He could have touched her. He could have had her the way *I* have her. In which case, I’d be forced to go find his grave, dig up his rotting corpse, and cut it up before setting it on fucking fire.

“I’m sorry,” Magdalena starts to cry again, big, gulping, ugly sobs. “I just...I have nothing left, and nowhere else to go—”

“You can stay here, of course,” Celeste says firmly. She turns to shoot me a piercing look.

I grit my teeth.

“Yes, of course,” I grunt. “It’s not a problem.”

Magda sobs again, and before I know what the fuck is happening, she’s throwing herself into my arms and hugging me tightly.

“Thank you,” she sobs. “Thank you, Mr. Cross.”

There’s a heavy clearing of a throat behind me. I pull away, turning to find Cade dipping his chin to me.

“They’re here, Adrian.”

I nod curtly, turning back to Celeste and Magdalena.

“I need to borrow Celeste for a moment, Magdalena.”

She nods, wiping at her tears. I step past her, my eyes landing on Adele.

“Adele, would you kindly set her up in the guest room next to yours and Dahlia’s? Charles is around if you need help with anything.”

“Oui, of course.”

I smile as she stands and walks over to put an arm around Magda’s waist.

“Whatever she needs. Just ask Charles.”

Magda sucks back another sob, smiling weakly at me before Adele helps her down the hall to the stairs.

I take Celeste's hand and lead her to my office, where we find Cade, Thomas, and Noel waiting for us. Thomas is at my desk, already poring over the legal documents Celeste brought back from her meeting with Michelle.

He frowns when we step in, adjusting his glasses as he methodically leafs through pages of documents.

"Anything jump out at you right away?"

He nods thoughtfully, his eyes skimming a page one more time before he glances up to Celeste.

"Did you and Amir share finances?"

She nods. "Yes and no. I mean, I *had* no finances. Not really. Well, other than my trust."

Thomas arches an eyebrow.

"Trust?"

"From when I was a kid. Matilde and I both had them, set up by our parents."

"And you have sole control over it?"

Her face darkens as she shakes her head.

"No, not yet. Not until I'm twenty-three."

Thomas's frown deepens, and I catch his quick glance towards me.

"Your father?"

"No. I mean yes, he set it up. But the trustee is a neutral third party. A financial manager who just monitors it until I'm twenty-three, and then the funds fall under my control."

He nods. He shoots me another quick look.

“Would you happen to have a copy of the trust agreement lying around?”

“I think it’s in that pile, actually.”

Celeste reaches past him for one of the other file folders

“Right here.”

“Good. I’ll take a look. Might take a while though, if you wanted to get back to your friend?”

Celeste smiles. “Thank you, Thomas.”

“My pleasure, of course.”

I’m starting to follow Celeste out of the study when Thomas clears his throat.

“Oh, Adrian, just quickly...I wanted to talk to you about the Higgins paperwork.”

I frown, glancing back to Celeste.

“I’ll be fine,” she whispers, smiling as she steps close to me. She sinks into my arms, kissing me slowly before disengaging from me.

“I’ll be upstairs with Magda and Adele.”

I nod, my eyes following her as she disappears around the corner. Then I turn back.

“Talk to me. What’s wrong? I know you don’t have shit to say about the Higgins paperwork.”

His face darkens as he nods, glancing down at the papers concerning the El-Sayed money.

“This is a fucking target, Adrian. And I mean a target you can see from high orbit. There are...what, three dozen Middle

Eastern families powerful enough and hungry enough to try and take this. Easily just as many in Europe.”

He puffs the air out slowly through his lips and sits back in my chair.

“There’s blood in the water. And every shark in the sea is going to come sniffing around, looking for a taste of it.”

Noel grunts.

“The question of the hour, though, is how a billion-dollar Saudi estate somehow falls that neatly and elegantly into Celeste’s lap. And why does that seem purposeful.”

My eyes glint at him.

“Careful, Ransom.”

He rolls his eyes.

“Fuck off. I’m not suggesting Celeste is some criminal mastermind offing her husband and father-in-law for the cash. But those two *were* taken out. Amir is obvious, but I tapped into some connections I have. Nasser? They’re calling it heart failure. But no one and no media is mentioning the massive amounts of cocaine found in his system which *led* to that heart failure.”

Thomas’s brow furrows.

“I mean, rich guy, partying on a yacht...” he shrugs. “I’m not saying there’s not something up here. But to play devil’s advocate, things like that *do* happen.”

Cade shakes his head.

“Not to Nasser El-Sayed. He was stone-cold straight edge. Oh, I know a lot of these guys are devout at home and all until they’re out in western nightclubs. But Nasser *genuinely* didn’t

drink or use drugs. Ever. This wasn't him going too hard one night; this was done to him."

I nod. "So Nasser's death was orchestrated. And Amir's too, obviously, and for bonus points it all happened while Nasser's will was still going through the lawyers. Meaning it skipped getting embroiled with Amir's own legal team and went straight to the next in line."

"Celeste," Thomas grunts.

"Exactly."

Cade's phone buzzes. He frowns, turning to bring it to his ear. He mumbles something, nods, and then hangs up. A second later, his phone dings with a text.

"I need to show you something, Adrian."

I raise a brow.

"I had one of my guys do another once-over just now of the two fuckers who attacked Celeste back the Dorchester. You know, just to see if there's anything we missed."

Thomas frowns.

"That was a month ago."

Cade nods.

"You still..." Thomas's face is aghast. "*Have the bodies?*"

Cade shrugs. "Yes. And?"

I shoot Thomas a look that says, "best not to ask". He just swallows as he shakes his head. Cade walks over to my desk and sets his phone down on it, open to a picture of...well, a body. And judging from the lack of half of a skull, it's the body of the man I shot as he advanced on Adele and Dahlia.

“Unfortunately, Cillian wasn’t lying. I did some digging. Both of the guys from the Dorchester had the Red Right Hand tattoos, all right, but they were only ever extremely low-level thugs with the Kildares; only ‘made’ guys with that organization are supposed to get the ink.” Cade shrugs. “My guess is, those two fucks got bogus bootleg Red Hand tats to show off to their mates. But, look: this is what I wanted to show you.”

He zooms in on the shoulder of the dead man.

“There. That.”

I frown as I peer closer.

“Fuck me,” Noel growls. “Is that *Russian*?”

Cade nods slowly.

“Dunno what it says, but it does look Cyrillic to me.” He glances at me. “Could be Bratva.”

HALF AN HOUR LATER, I shake Kristoff’s hand firmly as he steps into my office.

“Thanks for coming.”

“Not a problem. A lot of Bratva ink is unique to the different families, so I might even be able to tell you who specifically they worked for.”

As I said before, Kristoff, like me, falls squarely into the “villains” category. He doesn’t talk about it much, but I know he comes from a Bratva background. Currently, he’s employed by Boris Tsavakov, a blood-soaked Russian billionaire

oligarch who's basically Bratva himself, for all intents and purposes.

Cade opens the phone again and hands it to Kristoff.

“Well?”

Instantly, Kristoff starts to chuckle.

Shit.

“Tell me,” I grunt.

He shakes his head.

“Sorry, Adrian. I wish I could point a finger at one of the big families—Volkov, Kashenko, Reznikov.”

He sighs and looks up at me.

“Unfortunately, the ‘gangster ink’ on this fucking dickhead is Russian for ‘I lost a bet. I eat dick’.”

My jaw grinds.

Fuck.

Kristoff sighs, glancing back at the phone screen. “Is that...” he looks up. “Did they work for Cillian Kildare?”

“At one point,” Cade mutters. “But they were nobodies. They got fake Red Right Hand ink for street cred, or something.”

Kristoff clicks his tongue in disgust. “That’s my guess. Street cred Irish mob tats they didn’t earn...Russian tats about dicks they got on a dare...and by the looks of the shitty quality, in prison. And not from a Russian, by the way. The spelling is way off. Which means *they* weren’t Russian, either.”

Anger and annoyance surge inside of me. I really, *really* didn’t want this to be a fucking dead end.

“Wait. Hang on.”

Kristoff frowns.

“The fuck is...”

His brow furrows deeper as he zooms in on another tattoo on the man’s chest—a string of odd lettering.

“I saw that one too,” Noel grunts. “It didn’t look Russian, though.”

Something dark flashes across Kristoff’s face.

“It’s not Russian. It’s *French*, crossed out.” He frowns. “*Cut out*, actually. Look.”

He zooms in further on the ink, and my brow arches.

“Fuck me,” I mutter.

He’s right. When I look closely, I can read remnants of French: *Honneur et Fidélité*.

“That’s the motto of the French Foreign Legion,” Thomas murmurs.

Kristoff nods. “And when it’s cut like that, it means they’ve been kicked out under bad circumstances.”

Noel scowls. “So, what, mercenary?”

“I’d bet on it,” Kristoff mutters.

Something flickers in my brain—something jolted to the surface by Magdalena having just retold her story about the garbage truck and the limo, and the driver with the gun.

“Speaking of mercenaries...” I glance up at Kristoff. “You ever heard of an outfit called the Ghost Syndicate?”

He’s good. He’s *very* good. He only slips for one eighth of a second. But that’s all it takes: one small peek for a fraction of

a second at the darkness that lingers behind my Russian friend's eyes.

“Nope.”

Just like that, he brushes it off.

“Never heard of it.”

Curious. But I file it under “things to never bring up again”.

Because Kristoff, like all of us, I'm betting, has secrets he clearly doesn't intend to share. Ever.

So I won't ever ask.

LATER, after I walk Noel, Thomas, and Kristoff out, and thank them for their help, I turn back to Cade.

My jaw grinds.

Something's been nagging at me. A threat I've known about for years, but always kept at a distance, because I had no interest in fighting him.

But the coincidences are starting to stack up like bodies. And the dominoes are beginning to look far too neatly and expertly set up.

“I need you to find someone,” I growl quietly.

Cade nods, and I catch the hungry, eager glint in his eye that he always gets with the promise of a chase or hunt.

“Got a name?”

“Yes, I do.” My eyes narrow. “John Flannery. I'd start around Ascot.”

“I'm on it.”

“Thank you.”

“Dead? Or...”

I shake my head.

“Oh, no. Very much alive. I need him to be able to talk, Cade.”

Because I have some questions. And if he answers them the way I think he probably will, I’ll have all the ammunition I need to go to war.



“HOW IS SHE?”

In the library of Adrian’s house, I look up, tossing a book aside as Adele walks in.

“She” in this case is Magda, who’s been effectively locked in her room for the last three days. Not because anyone’s imprisoned her there. Because she’s terrified.

She won’t see me, even though we know each other. She *definitely* won’t see Adrian or any other man. But she will see Adele. And she will *definitely* see Dahlia, which makes me smile.

I of all people know how that little munchkin has a way of chasing away anyone’s dark clouds.

Adele sighs as she flops onto the couch next to me. She looks away, her face a mix of anger and rage and sadness.

“Wait. How are *you*?” I frown curiously as I put my hand on her arm.

She keeps her gaze averted, but I watch as her other hand comes up, as if to brush away a tear. She swallows, stiffening before she takes a deep breath. When she looks back at me, she looks unbelievably sad.

“Adele, talk to me.”

She takes another slow breath.

“Magda is...like me,” she says quietly.

My brows knit.

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“*Nasser.*”

My stomach drops and my heart shrinks in on itself as bile rises in my throat.

“*Oh my God...*”

“He...” Her lower lip quiver as she shakes her head angrily.

“He *had* her. Before Amir, that is. Back when she was the housekeeper at his mansion on Lake Cuomo, where they used to go when Amir was a teenager. I went once or twice. That’s actually where Magda and I met, when she was brand new.”

Adele looks away.

“That piece of shit put his hands on her. Over and over. He... he made her do things, and assaulted her...”

A ball of sadness lodges in my throat, and before I can stop myself, I’m wrapping my arms around her and rocking her against my chest as she sobs quietly.

“I don’t know... It somehow doesn’t help, knowing I’m not the only one. It’s *worse*, knowing that there were other girls out there just like me.”

I hold my friend tightly, stroking her hair until her breathing slows again.

“I’m okay,” she mutters quietly.

“Did you know about this before?”

She shakes her head.

“She just told me twenty minutes ago. It happened before she and Amir hit it off. She was young when it happened—very young. And then the family stopped going to Lake Cuomo for a while, and for a couple of years she was effectively paid to clean a house that no one lived in. But then Amir went for the summer before university, and the two of them, they just...”

She smiles wryly.

“They clicked, I guess. When you know, you know. Isn’t that what they say?”

Adele shrugs.

“She never told him about his father. And I think...I think that may have been one of the reasons that Nasser and your dad made their deal. It wasn’t just that Magdalena was a servant girl and didn’t come from royal blood or money or anything like that.”

She stiffens, a black shadow crossing her face.

“It’s because deep down, Nasser hated her and couldn’t bear to look at her, knowing what he’d done to her.”

Her eyes narrow.

“He didn’t look at me after a while, either. Only in the dark, or with my head covered.”

I want to scream. I can’t hold it back, a sob wrenching from my throat before I can stop it. I pull away, shaking and we cling to each other for a few minutes before I sit back on the couch.

“I can’t imagine how she survived.”

“Me either,” Adele shudders.

“I’m guessing being on the run, being alone and scared...”

She nods. “It’s bringing a lot of it back up for her. She’s...” Adele shakes her head. “She’s been through a lot the last month. Like, *a lot*.”

Hatred and anger at Nasser, and at the men who are now chasing me, maybe even chasing Magda, flare inside of me. Adele seems to read my thoughts.

“I don’t know if anyone knows she’s alive. But if they do, the same target that’s on your back is going to be on hers, for all the same reasons.”

“Yeah, but I’m the one that had all the assets dumped in her lap.”

“For now, yes. But Magda and Amir have a *real* marriage certificate. A secret one, but it’s real. And that’s going to mean a legal claim to the entire thing.”

I shake my head, dropping back against the couch.

“She can have it. Seriously. I don’t want it.”

Adele makes a face.

“I don’t think she wants it, either. I think she just wants to be free of the whole thing and get away. She just wants to know that nobody’s waiting for her in the dark anymore.” She frowns. “Do you think...?”

When she trails off and looks away, I frown.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“No, tell me.”

“Do you think someone like Adrian can make that happen?”

“What, make someone disappear?”

She grins. “Ideally not in a Godfather, horse-head-in-the-bed sort of way. I mean literally disappear. Off the map, where no one will ever find you, and you can begin a new life.”

“Are we still talking about Magda?”

Adele smiles wryly.

“I don’t know. Sometimes I wonder where my place is in this world. Or Dahlia’s.”

“Oh, that’s easy. Both of your places are right here with me.” I shrug, grinning at her. “Sorry, you can’t ever move out.”

She laughs. “Adrian might have something to say about that.”

“Adrian can go fuck himself,” I grin. “You’re my friend, Dahlia is my goddaughter, and neither of you is going anywhere.”

I pause.

“I mean, unless you *want to*, of course. You know, kidnapping and all that.”

She grins at me, squeezing my hand.

“For now, I think we’re quite happy right here.”

“Good. Where is the little munchkin, anyway?”

“Playing Barbie with Magda.”

“That was sweet of you.”

She snorts.

“To capitalize on free childcare? Yeah, I’m a real Mother Theresa.”

I laugh as she runs her fingers through her hair.

“Three can be a *real* pain in the ass, I’ll tell you that much.”

“Hey, don’t you talk shit about my goddaughter like that.”

Adele smiles.

Dahlia really is therapeutic. She’s the reason I’m alive, that’s for sure. And I think right now, her and Barbie are giving Magda a reason to be alive too.

“HOW’S THE PATIENT?”

I jolt, surprised by his voice. I whirl after closing the bedroom door. And for a moment when I do, words fail me.

This happens all the time. Words and the ability to string them together into sentences have a way of leaving me when I lay eyes on Adrian.

Especially if he’s shirtless.

Especially if he’s sitting up in bed.

Especially if he’s looking at me in that way he’s doing right now, as if he’s methodically deciding which pieces of my clothing to remove, and in which order, before making me scream his name.

I flush, and a smirk slips over his face.

“My my, where did your brain just go?”

“Nowhere,” I mutter quickly, marching across the room to the closet, where I strip and reach for some pajamas.

“By ‘the patient’, I assume you mean Magda?”

He doesn’t say anything. When I step out again wearing sleep shorts and a tank top, he nods.

“Yeah, Magda. She’s been locked in that room for three days.”

I open my mouth and then close it.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

But before I turn back, I can already feel his eyes boring into me. I take a breath and turn, padding across the room to slip onto the bed next to him.

“She’s another one of Nasser’s victims too.”

His face goes livid.

“*What?!*”

“Before Amir. She worked at one of Nasser’s properties, just like Adele. And just like her...”

I purse my lips tightly, looking away.

“That *motherfucker*,” Adrian growls quietly. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

When I turn back to him with an expression of surprise on my face, he frowns.

“What? Please tell me that doesn’t surprise you.”

“No, it’s just—”

“I’m capable of empathy. Celeste. I’m not a sociopath.”

I grin.

“No, it’s just that your emotions are usually pretty well-guarded, put it that way.”

“I have my moments. Maybe you bring it out in me.” He raises a brow. “I scared you just now when you came in?”

I grin. “You didn’t scare me, you surprised me. I thought you were asleep.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because it’s late?”

“I was waiting for you.”

“Well, speak of the devil, and she shall appear.”

He chuckles as I turn, grinning, and give him a peck on the lips. Then I spring from the bed and walk across to the bathroom to grab my toothbrush. As I’m brushing, I look up into the mirror, smiling when I see him padding into the bathroom too—shirtless, sweatpants slung low on his grooved hips in a way that makes me swoon.

For the next five minutes, it takes everything I have to not laugh at the two of us. With everything that’s gone on between us, and our dynamics, and who we are...

And yet, here we are, side-by-side at two bathroom sinks, brushing our teeth together like an old married couple.

I spit and rinse. He does the same. And then, as if on cue, we turn to each other.

It’s a question that’s been rattling in my brain for days, weeks—almost a full month now. And in this moment, it feels like the right time to finally ask it.

“What are we?”

Adrian smirks, cocking a brow. He folds his arms across his muscle chest.

“Pretty sure we’ve had this conversation.”

“Point of order. We’ve *started* this conversation, but you—and I as well—have artfully dodged finishing it.”

“Can you define the question a little better?”

I roll my eyes.

“Adrian, it’s not rocket science. I’m simply asking what we are. Is this just lust and hate-fucking?”

His jaw ticks, but he says nothing.

“Is this some kind of messed-up therapy for our past? Because if it is...”

Something stabs into me.

“If it is, then, it is what it is,” I finish stiffly.

My mouth thins and I frown. “I like things defined, is all.”

“Is our arrangement not something you want anymore?”

I sigh.

“Look, I like being here with you. I like what we do and what you do to me.”

Heat floods through my system just thinking about it.

“Even the part where you’re my whore...?” he growls.

My thighs clench and I flush.

“Yes, even that. I mean, I’m not saying I *don’t* want that. I...”

My cheeks burn as I look down at my hands.

“I just want to be more than your plaything.”

“That implies that you still *also* want to be my plaything.”

I blush fiercely as I glare up at him, biting back a grin.

“Asshole.”

“You know it.”

“I just want to do more than what we’re doing, is all.”

He raises a brow.

“If you’re suggesting bringing a second dick into the equation, believe me, that’s going to end in murder.”

I roll my eyes.

“And if it’s another *pussy* I’m talking about?”

I look at him sharply. But he shakes his head.

“Also murder.”

I grin.

“So, I guess swinging is off the table for us.”

“Unless you want to become mass murderers, I’m afraid so.”

He sighs, his hands sliding over my hips.

“Be serious. What were you actually going to say?”

“I want to go out. I want to do...” I shrug.

“Couple shit?”

I run my teeth over my lip and nod.

“Yes.”

“Does that mean you think we’re a couple?”

“I think we’re fucking *married*, dickhead.”

“Well, we’re certainly talking like we hate each other, like a good married couple.”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, forget I said—”

“Stop.”

His hand juts out, grabbing my wrist and pulling me back against him.

“Fine.”

“Fine what?”

“Tomorrow night, we’ll do something.”

I smile curiously at him. “Really? What are we doing?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Will it involve leaving this house?”

He nods. “Yes, it will.”

“Does it involve—”

“Look, do you want to be surprised or not?”

I sigh. “Fine. Yes, I want to be surprised.”

“You’ll enjoy yourself.”

“I don’t find that hard to believe.”

He pulls me to him, kissing me, and I shiver heatedly as I feel his hands wander down to grip my ass. He turns us, pinning me against the vanity and lifting one thigh up to his hip. I whimper as I feel the thick bulge of his cock pressing against my pussy through his sweatpants and my shorts.

Do I want to give in and do whatever he wants to do with me?
Obviously.

Except something stops me.

I want to be more than his whore to fuck whenever he wants.

Breathing heavily, I put a palm to his chest, pushing him away. Adrian groans, taking my bottom lip in his teeth before he finally releases it.

“*What?*” He grumbles.

“Tomorrow night.”

“Yes, tomorrow night we’re doing something.”

“So tomorrow night, we can continue this.”

I glance down at the massive erection tenting the front of his sweatpants, feeling the pull of desire.

“You’re joking,” he mutters thickly.

“I’m not. I think it’ll be more fun if we have some sort of...I don’t know, a cherry on top of the evening. Something we can both be anxious about and look forward to.”

“Or, better idea, we fuck now and then we can look forward to fucking *again* tomorrow night?”

I giggle as I lean up to kiss his cheek.

“Not happening tonight.”

“I think you’re forgetting the terms of our arrangement.”

“I’m amending them.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m amending them.”

Adrian growls and reaches for me. But I swat his hand away.

“Ah-ah,” I wag a finger at him. “Channel it. Let it fuel you.”

“It’s going to fuel me into unconsciously fucking the shit out of you while we both sleep.”

I flush deeply.

“And while that is a *very* tempting offer, *save it*,” I whisper, biting my lip. “For me.”

He groans, dropping his forehead to mine.

“*Fine*,” he mutters thickly, his mouth sliding across my cheek.

“Tomorrow,” he purrs my ear. “Tomorrow, and afterwards you’re not going to be able to sit or walk straight for a fucking *week*.”

The thought probably shouldn’t get me so wet.

Yet here we are.



“YOU KNOW, at a certain point, I’m just going to assume you’re kidnapping me.”

I allow myself a grin, glancing over to where she’s next to me in the passenger seat.

Looking stunning.

Who am I kidding. This woman would be stunning wearing a barrel of mud. Or rags. Or dressed like a zombie from some stupid fucking postapocalyptic movie. Hell, I’d still want to fuck the absolute shit out of her—zombie makeup or not.

But tonight, she looks like a princess.

She’s wearing a midnight blue dress—her shoulders bare, a neckline that’s making it extremely hard to drive, and a hemline slit halfway up her thighs that’s doing a bang-up job of making sure that if the cleavage doesn’t kill us both, her legs fucking will.

Still, I manage to keep the Porsche on the road without crashing into a tree.

Even if it means the occasional jerking course-correction after my eyes linger too long on her.

After a particularly sudden one of these, Celeste gasps—one hand gripping the armrest of the door next to her, the other

flying to my hand on the shifter.

“Where are we going?” She asks nervously. “I swear, Adrian, it really does feel like you’re kidnapping me.”

“I’ve had you kidnapped for the last month. Why the fuck would I need to drive us anywhere to do that?”

She sighs, and I can imagine her rolling her eyes behind the black velvet blindfold over her face.

I’ve lied to her about tonight, but I think it’s a fairly forgivable offense.

Earlier I told Celeste that I was taking her to some hot new restaurant in Kensington that she had wanted to try. I even took it a step further and told her I’d bought out the whole place for our safety and security, to ease her mind about anyone coming after her.

But, that lie has become frailer and more brittle the longer we’ve been driving in the car. Hitting the highway has to have been a dead giveaway. And now, almost forty-five minutes later, I think she’s coming to terms with the fact that we are not, in fact, going out for Middle Eastern food.

“Adrian—”

“Will you just sit back and let me take you somewhere special?”

She swallows.

“You’re not going to tell me where?”

“I’m not going to tell you where.”

“Why not?”

“Because surprises...”

She shrieks when I reach over and pinch one of her nipples through the gown.

“You fucking bastard!” She chokes, grinning at me as her face turns red. I grin right back, even if she can’t see me.

“See? Surprises are fun.”

I watch the way she chews on her lip and with difficulty remember I have a road to stay on. When I glance back, I realize we’re almost there anyway.

I pull off the main road and turn down a gravel one that leads up to where we’re going. It’s not Ascot. Because well, fuck that place. I’m never going back there unless I can help it. But this is the closest thing I know to the place I wish I could take her.

We drive a little further until I pull off the gravel road onto a dirt maintenance one.

On the surface, this is perhaps not a smart idea. We’re out in the open, and I’ve forbidden Cade or any of my men to follow us.

That said, I’m not flying blind here.

Two of my men are running interference even as we speak. One is wearing one of my coats with the collar flipped up. The other, a shorter, thinner fellow, is dressed like Celeste, wearing a trench coat of hers and some sunglasses.

The poor fuck is even wearing a long black wig and lipstick.

The happy decoy couple was last seen taking a long walk around my neighborhood before getting into one of my Range Rovers and driving off in the opposite direction to the one the real me and the real Celeste are driving.

Of course, I also have a gun under my seat. But I don't expect to have to use it. In fact, since the explosion, it appears that whatever malevolent forces have been hounding Celeste have faded away, or at least taken a break.

In a perfect world, the motherfucker managed to lock himself in the trunk of my SUV and blow himself to kingdom come the day of the car bombing. Though I doubt that.

But maybe they got bored. Maybe someone took them out. Or stopped paying them.

Who the fuck knows?

All I do know is that tonight is all about Celeste and me, and the outside world is not invited.

At the end of the dirt trail, I pull the car through a small canopy of green until we come to a stop. For a moment, before I reached for her blindfold, I let my eyes gaze out over the sight before us.

We're southeast of London in Honor Oak Park, up on the quaintly-named One Tree Hill. In the distance, you can vaguely make out the lights of London, and before us lie the rolling hills of the English countryside.

I turn the car off. Celeste stiffens.

"Are we here?"

"We're here."

"And where exactly *is* here?"

"It's...here."

I reach over, and she gasps as I pull the blindfold off. Her eyes widen as she blinks.

“Adrian, where...” she slowly shakes her head, glancing at me before turning back to stare out over the view before us.

“Beautiful, isn’t it? I come here when I need to clear my head, or think, or just get the fuck away from everything else.”

Her eyes are shining as she takes in the view. “You know what it reminds me of?”

I nod. “Yep. It’s why I come here.”

It reminds me of the overlook back in Ascot where she and I used to go to get away, to escape our lives. And then later, when things turned more serious, to moan into each other’s mouths and to fuck each other senseless. To stay out way too late, pushing the very bleeding edge of her curfew before Jean would send one of his psychopaths to hunt her down.

It was thrilling. It was messy.

And it was the best time of my life.

Unless, of course, you count the last month.

She grins, turning to me. “So, do you come here a lot?”

I nod.

“Do you ever...” She swallows and glances back out the window.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

I reach for her and take her hand. Celeste’s face turns soft in the darkness, her eyes gleaming at me.

“Do you ever think of us when you’re up here?”

“Literally every single time.”

I watch the way her cheeks flush and her eyes sparkle at my admission.

“I wish things had been different,” she says quietly.

“We can’t change the past.”

“I really wish we *could*, though. I wish I could have seen through the bullshit back then, and hadn’t been so scared and weak.”

My jaw tightens.

“You weren’t weak. You’ve never been weak.”

“But I *was*,” she says softly. “I saw those girls lined up in front of me who all seemed to know you in ways I thought only I knew you.”

“Only you really knew me,” I murmur darkly. “You’re the only one who’s ever really known me.”

“I know *now*,” she chokes. “I just hate myself for not knowing it back then.”

We sit quietly in the dark for a minute, her hand in mine.

“You’re not the only one with regrets, you know.” I shake my head. “I’ve hated myself for four years for not staying and fighting for you. I should have, Celeste. I should have fucking chased you to the ends of the fucking earth.”

Her lips twist unhappily.

“Jean would have killed you.”

“He might have tried. But not chasing you wasn’t because I was ever afraid of him.”

“What, then? Because you were angry at me?”

I shake my head.

“No, not even that. I was afraid of chasing you, and finding you, only to discover it wasn’t all the terrible trick I wanted to believe Jean was playing on me. On us. I was afraid I’d find you, only to see that the truth was exactly as your father said it was. That you and I were all in my head: a dream.”

My eyes narrow, my gaze stabbing through the darkness outside the windshield.

“And I chose to spend the next four years living half an existence rather than face the possibility of waking up from a dream I never wanted to wake up from.”

I sigh.

“Celeste—”

I turn, but before I can say another word, her mouth is searing to mine. She chokes back a sob, gripping me tightly and kissing me madly.

And just like that, it’s four years ago. Just like that, she’s eighteen, I’m twenty, and we’re right back on that overlook in Ascot, in the front of my shitty Nissan pickup.

I groan, reaching for her—my hands tightening on her hips as I yank her across the stick shift into my lap. Her thighs spread and the dress pushes up to her hips as she sinks into me. She moans, and I kiss her deliriously, like we really are in a dream that might end at any moment.

Except I know now that isn’t true.

It’s no dream. Just a reality that was too good for me to believe in.

Until I found it again, pinched myself, and realized I wasn’t dreaming at all.

Our hands move feverishly but with determination, ripping at each other's clothes. A button on my shirt pops away, but I don't give a fuck. Her panties tear in my hands, and I *definitely* don't give a fuck about that either.

There's not enough space, nor do we have the fucking patience for foreplay. But then again, our whole lives together have been foreplay, even the last four years apart.

And now, this just comes naturally.

Her hands frantically rip my zipper down, and my swollen cock springs free against her thigh. Celeste moans, shuddering as I yank her dress down off her shoulders, baring her breasts. My teeth nip and bite and suck, my hands clawing at her, gripping her, bruising her skin.

Leaving my mark on her.

Her own teeth find my neck, biting, sucking, and marking me just the same. And it's exactly how I want it.

I want this woman marked by me, so that every man who sees her forever knows that she's claimed. And I want *her* mark on *me* for the exact same reason.

She rises up, reaching between us and making me groan as her small hand curls around my heavy cock. She whimpers, teasing her clit with the crown before I take her hips and center her over my swollen head with a groan.

I push up just as she sinks down. Her mouth falls open and her jaw goes slack, her eyes widening in ecstasy as every fucking thick inch of me buries itself to the hilt in her slick pussy.

"*Fuck,*" she moans.

And then we're off.

It's savage, and yet there's a sensuality to it that we've both carefully avoided this last month. It's as if letting that color blend into what we've had the last month would be too much. Too overwhelming.

It would pull us too far away from this game we've been playing, where we pretend we're still in this forced arrangement.

This time, this isn't about an arrangement, or rules, or any sort of revenge.

This is just her and I.

She rides me slowly, her slick walls caressing every inch of my cock as I stretch her to her limit. My mouth finds her nipple, biting and sucking again as my hands grab her hips, bouncing her on my dick.

"Adrian," She moans, ripping my shirt open and clawing at my chest.

We move faster, harder; the car is rocking and the windows fogging up as we rush headlong toward our release. Her forehead drops to mine. My head twists, crushing my lips to hers just as she crests.

"Adrian—!"

"I love you."

Fuck me. I didn't mean to say it out loud. And yet the second it flies from my lips, I have zero regrets.

Because there's no uncertainty about it. It's not a lie, or a line, or bullshit.

It's me finally letting go.

It's the last of my walls coming down.

The second I say it, she crumbles.

“I love you too, so much,” she whispers.

And then it’s like a trigger being pulled, and she’s exploding for me. I can feel her pussy gripping me tight, spasming around my cock as her cum drips all over my balls. I grind into her, thrusting my cock deep as she explodes around me until there’s nothing stopping me from joining her.

With a grunt, I dive in deep. My balls twitch, and I groan into her mouth as my cock pumps rope after thick rope of cum deep inside her.

We cling to each other as a silence and a warmth settles around us. And I just hold her like that, still deep inside. Still hard.

After a few minutes, slowly I start to push into her again, and she starts to push back.

And the wheel keeps turning.

Because I will *always* crave this woman and she will always crave me. And nothing is ever going to break that cycle.

Nothing will ever stop that wheel from turning.

“MR. CROSS?”

I look up from where I’ve been lazily running my fingers through Celeste’s hair while she reads a book, her head on my lap.

Charles clears his throat in the doorway to the living room.

“A Mr. Higgins is here to see you?”

My lips thin dangerously, twisting at the corners.

Good.

Summoning Higgins here was a coin-toss. His fear of me could have either had him scurrying to my door as quickly as he could, or it could have sent him into hiding to avoid what we both know is the reason he’s here.

Lucky for Martin Higgins, his fear of me is about as big as his intelligence.

Running and hiding after I’ve called him here, for the reason we both know I’ve called him here, would have been a mistake. And, let’s be real, it only would have momentarily delayed the inevitable anyway. And he knows it.

“Shall I send him in?”

“Yes, thank you, Charles.”

When he turns to head back to the door, Celeste frowns up at me.

“Your professor?”

I nod. “And SVP of Rutger Capital, yes.”

“Little late for office hours, isn’t it?”

I grin, pushing a tendril of hair out of her face.

“He’s not here to go over my homework.”

“Business?”

I nod again before my brow furrows.

“It...might be better if you weren’t here.”

She smiles as she sits up, kissing my cheek.

“Okay, okay, fine. Kick me out. I get it. The *men* have to speak,” she drawls sarcastically.

“Think of it more like plausible deniability.”

Her brow creases.

“Should I be worried?”

Not if I get the answer I think I’m going to get.

“No,” I assure her as we both stand. I lean down, cupping her cheek and kissing her. “Just need to go over some numbers is all.”

She nods.

“Well, I’ll be in the kitchen making some tea. Want some?”

“Sure.”

At the doorway, she says hello to Martin Higgins and he smiles at her, his eyes glancing nervously to me. When it’s just

the two of us, after Charles closes the doors, I nod to the couch.

“Have a seat, Higgins.”

He swallows thickly, awkwardly shuffling to the couch and sitting, legs crossing and uncrossing as his hands fidget.

“You look nervous, Martin.”

His eyes snap to mine, the color draining from his face.

“Adrian—”

“Higgins, we could play this stupid game for hours, until you’ve sweated through my fucking couch. But I rather like that couch, so let’s cut the *fucking bullshit*, shall we?”

He folds as I surge towards him, falling back into the couch cushions as I loom over him.

“No more games, Martin. And no more hiding behind your fucking *board*.”

“Adrian—”

“You gave me Cillian Kildare’s name so I could scare him off the deal, and it worked. But you’ve spent weeks tapdancing around trying to ‘sway’ your board away from this other interested party, when you could have easily given me their name as well and let me clear the deck again.”

Higgins looks pasty as he nervously swallows.

“I already know, Martin. I just want you to tell me I’m right.”

It’s not a bluff.

I’ve gone through *every single* possible interested party who could be trying to muscle their way into my deal with Rutger Capital. I’ve dug into every goddamn whale, big spender, hedge fund, private equity group, dark money pool, and

underworld player who could possibly be both rich enough and *stupid* enough to make this play for my deal.

And at the end of the day, there's really only one.

Although, in his case, attempting to steal my deal isn't necessarily out of stupidity. It's out of arrogance. Out of disdain for me.

But that arrogance *is* stupid in this case, as it is also his unmasking.

And it'll be his downfall.

I was never naïve enough to think distance or time would erase the feud between us. I doubt he was either. And so, while he's played his chess pieces, I've risen to king and quietly played my pieces as well.

Some moves he's seen, because they've been warning shots across his bow.

But others—the majority of my moves against him—I know he doesn't know about. If he did, he'd never have looked twice at Rutger Capital once they were talking to me.

“Well?”

He looks like he's about to piss himself.

“Adrian, *please...*” he whimpers.

“Martin, I'm not a cruel man. And it's not like you've personally wronged me. This is just business. We both know the deal between us is mutually fantastic, and there's no reason to rock the boat or make waves with *him*. Just tell me what I want to know.”

His face pales as he sees the truth on my face.

“*Tell me.*”

His eyes drop to his shaking hands.

“Martin—”

“*Margaux*,” he chokes quietly. He shivers as his terrified eyes raise to mine. “Jean Margaux.”

I smile widely, triumphantly, like a shark showing all its teeth.

There’s blood in the water.

And it smells *delicious*.

I’M STILL REASSURING Martin that he’s not going to be cut into a million pieces as I usher him, sobbing, into the back of his waiting car, when I feel a presence behind me. I glance back, and when I see the look on Cade’s face, mine hardens.

I slam the door, sending Higgins on his way before I turn to my number two.

“Unless you’re already full from making your professor wet himself,” he says quietly, a glint in his eye, “I have the next course waiting in the basement.”

My brow lifts.

Cade grins wickedly.

“I found John Flannery, Adrian.”

IT’S NOT that I *want* her to see or hear this.

It’s that Celeste has to.

This is her past as well as mine, and this motherfucker threw her life for as big of a loop as he did mine with his lies.

Plus, I want her to hear it from John's own lips.

I want her to know who was behind the lies.

Holding Celeste's hand, we follow Cade into the basement of my townhouse. Past my home gym, we come to the locked door. I turn to her, my eyes peering hard into hers.

"You're sure you want to come in here?"

"I'm sure."

"It's not just a man I need to interrogate in there, you know. It's..." I shake my head. "A side of me you've only caught glimpses of before. If you come in there—"

"I want all of you, Adrian. I love *all* of you, even the dark parts."

I cup her cheek, leaning in to kiss her softly.

"All right. So be it."

We turn, I nod as Cade unlocks the door, and we step inside, where John Flannery is seated in a chair surrounded by four of my men, looking scared absolutely shitless.

I see right away this isn't going to be hard. When I walk in, the man caves completely, turning into a pale, blubbering mess.

Yeah, he knows what this is about.

"*Fuck*, Adrian!" He bawls. "Fuck, mate, I'm so fucking sorry! You know I...I...back then, I was using—"

He whimpers when I calmly take the gun out of the back of my pants, cock it, and point it at his fucking head. I hear Celeste's sharp intake of breath, but she doesn't say a word.

“*Please—*”

“I don’t want to hear your goddamn excuses, John,” I snarl. “I want to know everything. *Now.*”

He chokes out a sob.

“*Please, Adrian! I have a son! I—*”

“Then I would suggest even more strongly that you start talking *immediately,*” I hiss. “Tell me everything. *All* of it, John. What the fuck did you do four years ago?”

He looks up at me pitifully, crying his eyes out.

“*Please, Adrian. Ciara and me...we was both using back then. So much. You remember that. We had no money, and a fuckin’ baby on the way. So when he offered...I mean sixty thousand pounds, Adrian! It was bloody lifeline. And all we had to do was say the baby was yours! And, you know, he wanted detail type shit, yeah? And I’d seen your birthmark before in the locker rooms at school...*”

I snarl thickly, my fury surging through me.

John sobs.

“*Fuck me, it was wrong, Adrian! I know it was so fuckin’ wrong, man. But that money...that money let us keep Ethan. And that boy got me clean!*”

He’s weeping now.

“I’m bloody well *alive* because of him, Adrian!”

My eyes narrow.

“You’re alive because I’ve chosen not to shoot you in the brain right here and now.”

He blubbers, shaking in the chair.

“I’m so bloody sorry, Ad—”

“Tell. Me. His. *Name*,” I snarl.

I already know it. I just want to hear it out loud. Need to hear it out loud. Because even if I hate the man, and even if Celeste does, too...I need to *hear it* before I go to war with the father of the woman I love.

And she needs to hear it, too.

“Tell me who gave you the sixty thousand.”

He nods, tears and snot running down his face.

“The rich French guy your father worked for.”

My eyes close.

“You know, Jean Margaux.”

I hear a strangled sound next to me, and when I turn, I see Celeste looking away, her hands balled into fists and her face dark as she squeezes her eyes shut. I know this is hurting her. And I hate that she has to hear it. But she does.

I grit my teeth as I turn back to my men.

“Uncuff him.”

John’s eyes bulge.

“What—”

“Get out.”

“Adrian, please—”

“*John*,” I hiss, opening my eyes to let them sear into his. “Ethan just saved your life a second time. Because I’m not making any boy grow up without a father. I want you *never* to forget that, though. Every time you look at him, know that he

is the only reason you're still breathing. Do I make myself perfectly *fucking* clear?"

He nods, crying and shaking as he hangs his head.

"Get him the fuck out of here."

When they're gone, I whirl, roaring as my fist slams into the wall over and over until the sheetrock is pulverized and my hand is throbbing. When I stop, shaking all over, soft hands slide around my waist and gentle lips press to my back. I turn, and Celeste's crying as she takes my hands in hers, brings them to her lips, and looks me in the eyes as she kisses the blood away.

"In for a penny," she whispers.

"You know what this means."

She nods.

"I have to go to him, Celeste. You know that. This ends *now*."

"Are you going to kill him?"

I shake my head.

"Not unless he forces my hand."

I pull close, kissing her fiercely until my phone dings in my pocket. With a groan, I pull it out. I frown when I see Thomas's name, but I answer it.

"Thomas, what—"

He blurts it all out in a frenzied rush, but not so fast that I don't hear every word. That I don't *feel* every word sinking deeper and deeper into my heart like so many knives.

When I look over at Celeste, I realize I may have just lied to her.

I may very well be killing Jean Margaux tonight.



“COME ON IN.”

Thomas nods, stepping into the townhouse and following Adrian into the study. His brow furrows when his eyes land on me, leaning against Adrian’s desk.

He gives his friend a quick glance.

“This...this might be better with just the two of—”

“She can be here. In fact, I think she *should* be here for this.”

Thomas’ face is filled with concern as turns back to me.

“Are you close with your father?”

I smile disdainfully. “No. Not at all. We haven’t even spoken in almost four years.”

“Good. Then this might hurt less, then.”

I shiver. Adrian scowls.

“What are you talking about?”

Thomas exhales slowly, folding his arms over his chest as he leans against a bookshelf.

“Your attorneys went over with you what a lineage pass-through clause is, I assume?”

I nod. “Yes, it’s how the entire estate came directly to me from Nasser after Amir was killed.”

He nods. “Precisely. And it seems the clause was added a number of years ago, after Nasser started working with a new law firm...Chevalier and Lacroix, out of—”

“Paris, I know,” I murmur, frowning before I shoot Adrian a look. “That’s Michelle’s firm.”

Thomas sighs.

“It also happens to be a firm your father funnels about seventy million euros in billable hours to every year.”

My brows arch.

Now, *that* I didn’t know.

“Well, the way the lineage pass-through clause worked, since you were legally tied to Amir when he died while his father’s will was still being processed by lawyers, the full estate then landed on *you*. But in your case, more specifically, it went your fiduciary trust, not to you personally.”

Adrian frowns, nodding. “And?”

Thomas’s face darkens.

“I, uh...I looked into this trust, Celeste. And into the financial management firm that acts as trustee until you’re twenty-three. This financial management firm...”

He takes a slow breath.

“I’m sorry, but...there’s no easy way to say it... There *is* no financial management firm.”

My eyes widen.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Thomas glances at Adrian, then back to me.

“Celeste...”

His mouth thins.

“It’s a bogus financial accounting office, owned by a shell company, owned by...”

Oh God.

“*My father,*” I croak, knowing the answer before he even says it.

Adrian’s face turns livid. Thomas nods slowly.

“Yes. Now, in accordance with the terms of your trust agreement, if you die, your entire fortune—and in this case, that includes the El-Sayed empire—would fall to the trustee of your trust. Which would be this financial management firm. Except—”

“Except it doesn’t exist,” I spit.

He shakes his head.

“Look, I’m not...” he glances at Adrian. “Put simply, Nasser was killed, and while his money was in limbo, his only next of kin was *also* killed. Now that money belongs to Celeste, *except* for the little detail that it actually belongs to her trust until she’s twenty-three. Or forever if, God forbid, something fatal were to happen to her before then. And that ‘trust’ is effectively one man.”

“*Jean,*” Adrian snarls viciously.

“Kristoff called me this morning, Adrian,” Thomas says quietly. “He looked into the guy who posed as the garbageman who ran into Amir’s car. That man was *also* disgraced French

Foreign Legion, and Kristoff said he had ties to a group of assassins known as the Ghost Syndicate.”

The kitchen goes silent. Thomas breathes slowly.

“This is entering territory I’m not as familiar with as you, Adrian. But I think the signs point to a very obvious—”

“Thank you, Thomas,” Adrian growls. He turns to eye his friend. “For your own sake, it might be time for you to exit this discussion.”

“Heard loud and clear,” the other man grunts. He shakes Adrian’s hand and claps him on the shoulder.

“Call me, or any of us, if you need anything.”

Adrian nods as Thomas turns to smile sadly at me.

“I’m sorry to have connected the dots like this, Celeste.”

“It’s okay,” I murmur in a daze.

He nods at Adrian again, and then heads back down the hall. When we both hear the front door close softly, our eyes meet.

We both know what happens now.

“I have to go to him, Celeste.”

I nod quietly, feeling numb as my pulse pumps heavy and thick in my veins.

“If you want to come too—”

“I don’t,” I croak.

I wince, because suddenly, for the first time in years, that makes me feel *weak*. But I can’t do it; I *can’t* face a father who’s literally been sending people to kill me simply so he can collect more money.

“Adrian—”

“I think you should stay here,” he murmurs softly as he crosses to me, folds me into his arms, and holds me tightly. “I’ll go alone.”

I nod into his chest.

“Are you going to kill him?”

He’s silent for a minute.

“I don’t want to.”

“*Why*,” I spit venomously. “If it’s because of me, you have my bless—”

“It’s because killing him is an easy end for him,” Adrian growls quietly.

He pulls back, and our eyes lock.

“And I want him to suffer, like he made us suffer.”

My lips thin to a line.

“Maybe you could call me? I mean when you confront him?”

“I can do that.”

“And then come right back here.”

He smiles as he leans down, tilts my face up to his, and kisses me softly.

“Count on it. Because after this, it’s over. It’s. All. Over.”



I SIT IN THE DARKNESS, my head whirling, and four years of fury churning like fuel in the fires of my soul.

But, wheels have been set in motion.

Torches lit.

Blades sharpened.

He made his bed. And now, he'll fucking *bleed* in it.

None of this is exactly spur of the moment. For years, while I've kept Jean Margaux distracted with frivolous, lame-duck *public* attacks on his companies, his income, and his pride, I've also been waging a much broader, far more lethal war from the shadows.

All I needed was the right moment. The right kindling. The right spark. And tonight, the stars that will lead to his downfall have finally aligned.

Tonight, Jean's empire burns.

Higgins fessing up about Jean trying to steal my Rutger Capital deal was one thing. Flannery admitting that it was Celeste's father who paid for the lies that ripped us apart was just one more nail in the coffin.

But the kill shot—the match that’ll burn his kingdom to the ground tonight—that’s all thanks to Thomas, and his machine-like ability to tear into contacts. Which is how he discovered the silver bullet that I will use to destroy the bullshit “trust” that Jean still has Celeste wrapped up in.

Through his own pompous hubris, or perhaps his own greed to cement a new business deal by marrying off his daughter, Jean overlooked one small thing: the hold his fake “neutral financial officer” had on the trust became null and void the second Celeste legally tied herself to Amir El-Sayed. That detail was buried deep in there, and I almost can’t believe it was ever overlooked. But Thomas ferreted it out.

Which means he has no legal claim to that trust. There’s no other owner but Celeste. Which means it’s *all* hers. And Jean Margaux’s not getting a fucking dime of it.

But he is getting what’s coming to him.

I’m not armed. But that’s deliberate. If I was, there’s good chance I’d empty the whole clip into Jean’s fucking face before I have the chance to tell him how his life is now going to unravel.

And I wouldn’t want to deprive myself of that pleasure for anything.

In the darkness, I stop, hearing the sound of approaching footsteps and the tell-tale sound of his cane upon the floor. I pull my phone out, dial the number, and wait a second.

“I’m here,” she says softly.

“It’s time.”

I slip the phone into my breast pocket, the line still connected, and sit down.

The doors from the library that lead into Jean's study slide open, and he steps inside. He crosses into the room nonchalantly, heading for his chair by the bar cart. He flicks the light on, turns, and just about has a fucking heart attack when he sees me sitting at his desk, my feet up on top of it.

"Putain de merde!" he chokes, stumbling back, his eyes wide in shock. When he focuses and realizes who I am, his gaze narrows.

"You little bastard..."

"You know why I'm here, Jean," I growl as I casually drop my feet from his desk and stand.

"Patrick!" Jean barks. "PATRICK! Get in here!"

I smile, casually folding my arms across my chest and leaning against the side of his desk. Footprints echo from elsewhere in the house, and suddenly a large man in a dark suit storms into the study.

The very same large man in a dark suit, in fact, who was sitting in the car the day of my father's funeral. The man Jean nodded to when promising me he'd "have someone blow my head off".

Celeste's father smirks at me.

"I've waited a long time for the chance to put you down like the dog you are, Mr. Cross."

He turns and nods at his guard.

"Shoot this little fucker, if you would, Patrick?"

He turns back to smile at me.

"Goodbye, Mr. Cross."

I just smile. Slowly, seeing that I'm still alive and not full of bullet holes, the grin fades from Jean's face. He whirls back to Patrick.

"I said *shoot* this—"

My grin grows wider as I watch the color drain from his face. His man Patrick—who, as of a year ago, when I paid off his gambling debts and made sure his brother didn't do time for the petty theft charges he was facing, is actually now *my* man Patrick—is standing there with the same Glock 17 I saw in his hands four years ago.

Only now, he's calmly pointing it at Jean's face.

I shove a hand through my hair as I casually stroll over toward the two of them.

"Thanks, Patrick. Why don't you take a walk?"

"Certainly, Mr. Cross." Patrick smiles politely at Jean before turning the gun and passing it to me, stock-first. When he steps out of the room, Jean slowly drags his stricken gaze back to me.

"You should know something about me, Mr. Margaux," I murmur quietly, fingering the gun. "I have a thing about not taking people's parents from them, because I *know* first-hand what that does to a person."

My gaze narrows lethally.

"I may hate you for what you did to me, and what you did to undermine my happiness. But I *won't* take Celeste and Matilde's father from them, even if they both hate you."

I turn and set the gun down on the desk. When I turn back to Jean, a bit of color is creeping back into his face as he forces an awkward smile.

“I’m aware that you were behind the killings of Nasser and Amir El-Sayed.”

He shifts on his feet, looking like he’s trying to back himself out of that corner, before he sees on my face that there’s no escape. He smiles coolly.

“Is the head of the Cross criminal organization *really* going to lecture me on issues of morality? You can’t possibly be that delusional.”

“Actually, I was going to give you a lesson in trust law,” I say smoothly, smiling.

Jean frowns. “Pardon me?”

“Your bogus financial manager? The one supposedly holding the purse strings to Celeste’s trust?” I glare at him. “It doesn’t even matter that the company’s bullshit, because the entire trust became null and void the second you legally bound her to Amir.”

His eyes flick from side to side, his jaw clenching as fear begins to seep through him.

“That—no, I—”

“Here.”

I reach behind me and toss him a copy of the contract, which he catches awkwardly. I stroll over to his bar cart and start to pour myself a healthy measure of scotch.

“Page seven. I’ve circled the relevant sub-clause.”

I hear papers shuffling quickly behind me as I sip, a grin on my face. When I hear his sharp intake of breath, that smile only grows.

I turn to see Jean looking like he might be sick. He clears his throat, swallowing as he turns to smile weakly at me.

“Ahh, well. You’ve become a wise man in the last few years, Adrian. Hopefully wise enough to see that we can work something out, smart men that we—”

“Shut up,” I hiss, glaring at him. “I can overlook you causing me unhappiness. I’m not a child, Jean. But I will *not* overlook you screwing with Celeste’s happiness and her future.”

My eyes blaze as I move towards him, my teeth bared.

“Or her *life*, you piece of shit.”

His eyes grow wide, his face turning ashen.

“I—”

“I know you hired the man at the hotel, Jean.”

He swallows, grappling with his fear as he tries to glare at me.

“That could never be traced back to me.”

“Maybe not. But I still know.”

I lean close to him, snarling.

“And so, for that matter, does *Celeste*.”

I let that sink in as I knock back the rest of the scotch in the glass.

“*Very* nice scotch, by the way, Jean. Would you like one?”

I smile as I turn and stroll casually across the room back toward the bar cart. When I hear the shuffle of his feet, and the metallic click of the gun I’ve been waiting for, I smile before I turn to face him.

Sure enough, Jean’s by the desk, looking haggard and scared, aiming the Glock 17 right at me.

“On second thought, Adrian,” he hisses with a smile. “Perhaps you’re not as smart as I thought.”

He levels the gun at my chest.

“Celeste is aware of—?”

“All of it, yes,” I growl.

He sighs.

“It’s a shame you told me that. Because it means when I’m done with you, I’m afraid she’ll have to be next. I’m sure my lawyers can poke enough holes in that clause nullifying the trust. So don’t worry,” he grins. “The El-Sayed estate will be in good hands, namely mine. And who knows? Perhaps I’ll have a memorial garden set up in honor of my poor daughter, tragically lost to gangland violence after being mixed up with the notorious criminal Adrian Cross.”

His eyes darken as he smiles at me.

“Now, as I said to you once before, *fuck off and fly away, little boy.*”

He squeezes the trigger. When all he gets is a dull click, my grin widens devilishly. Jean stares in horror at the gun. His face turns downright white, and he quickly tries to pull the trigger over and over.

I smile grimly as I pull my phone out of my pocket. In a way, it breaks my heart that she had to hear what she heard.

But she *did* have to hear it. What’s necessary isn’t always pleasant.

“What the fuck is this?” Jean hisses.

I glare at him and tap the speaker button.

“It’s the truth that I’ve always known, Father.”

Jean jumps, his eyes staring at the phone in my hand. And if he wasn't pale before, he goes even more deathly white when he realizes what's just happened.

"Wait, Celeste—"

"Don't talk to her," I snarl quietly as I move towards him. "You've lost the privilege of talking to her, seeing her, or in any other way, shape or form being part of her life," I hiss savagely. "Oh, and before I forget."

My lips curl.

"Are you familiar with a Geoffrey Ashford?"

He shakes his head numbly.

"Ah, well, he's a big name and player with the HMRC tax authority. And as it *happens*, I'm quite good friends with his son, Thomas. It turns out the tax authority is *very* eager to go over some of your math."

Whatever color or life was left in Jean's face evaporates like mist.

He swallows, looking gaunt and frail, leaning on his cane like it's the only thing holding him up right now.

I smile coldly.

"Now, let *me* say this clearly, Mr. Margaux."

I step close to him, my eyes brimming with fury and malice.

"If I ever see you again, I will have someone blow your head off."

I grin demonically as I lean close to his ear.

"That someone is *me*, Mr. Margaux. And I'll be more than happy to do it."

When I pull back, the fight and the ego is shattered in him. He's a shell, staring haggardly at me, the boy who beat him.

"Now fuck off and fly away."

I turn, leaving him there in his study as I walk out. I'm smiling as I kick open the front door to the mansion where my father was once "the help", and I grin widely as I positively skip down the big stone front steps to the gravel driveway.

I inhale, bringing the phone to my ear.

"And with that, it's over," I say. "I'll be home in two hours, and you should most certainly be in bed, naked, and fucking wet for when I—"

"*Adrian!!*"

A death-like chill rips down my back at the sheer terror in her voice.

"CELESTE!"

I hear another scream, and then the sound of her sobbing.

"*CELESTE?!?*" I roar, breaking into a dead run toward the side gate of Jean's property, where I've parked. "CELESTE—"

"It didn't belong to her."

I stop cold at the women's rasping, broken voice.

"And now I'm going to take it back."

The line goes dead, and I fucking *run*.



I'M stock still as I stand in the midst of the chaos, like a stony cliff with a typhoon's wrathful waves breaking against it.

Not because I'm lost, or unsure what to do. It's not because I'm broken.

It's because—inside?

I *am* the wrathful waves.

Cade and his people are doing what they should be doing: fortifying the house, locking shit *down*, and bringing in even more men and firepower. Noel is with Dr. Brewster, helping him make sure Adele is okay—aside from the mild concussion and the gash on the side of her head, that is.

I stand alone, my heart full of venom and malice; my every thought is poisonous and wrathful.

I'm going to destroy her.

All this time, I've had *Jean* in my crosshairs. He's the one I pinned it all on—the death of Amir and his father. The attacks on Celeste. But in my zealousness to crush him beneath my heel, I was blind to one small detail...

There's more than one monster out there in the world.

And in my idiocy, I let one into my very home: *Magdalena*.

I don't know what's driving her. I don't know if she's been working with Jean all along, or by herself, or if she's just off her fucking rocker.

But I don't fucking care about the reasons right now. I only care about the fallout: that three hours ago, Magdalena finally emerged from her room, walked into the guest-room-turned-playroom where Celeste, Dahlia, and Adele were playing, and slammed a wrought-iron bookend against the side of Adele's head, knocking her out cold.

All before she disappeared, forcibly taking Celeste and Dahlia with her.

My men were prepared for anything coming *at* the house. What they weren't prepared for was someone coming at them from *inside* the house. None of the three guards at my front door was shot fatally, but two are in critical condition right now, after Magda shot her way out of the house.

And now, she, an innocent three-year-old girl, and the woman I love, are *gone*.

“Adrian.”

I glance up, shaking away my swirling black thoughts to find Cade standing in front of me.

“What do we have?”

“Security cameras have her forcing Mrs. Cross and the girl into a car at gunpoint before driving off. The good news is, the car is chipped, and we've found it.”

I swear under my breath.

“And the bad news?”

Cade's eyes narrow, and he shakes his head.

“Abandoned at a private airfield, where it looks like they got on a jet registered to Nasser El-Sayed.”

My blood turns to pure acid.

“Where did they go?”

Cade’s jaw tightens. “Manifest with the traffic tower says New York City. But...that’s bullshit. After they reached cruising altitude they made a hard U-turn before turning off all communications and transponders. The tower lost track of them after that.”

Motherfucker.

I tell myself that if Magda wanted to hurt either of them, she would have done so already. Which makes me think this is a kidnapping, not an assassination. Which means I can get her back.

I have to believe it.

I *have* to get her back.

Fury rages inside me as I shove my fingers through my hair.

“Okay, we’re going to need help.”

“I took the liberty of reaching out to Kristoff already,” Cade nods.

“Thank you.”

I glance across the room, and something breaks in me when my eyes land on Adele.

She’s an image of pure anguish: crumpled in on herself, in a fetal position on the floor of my living room, her hands around her knees as she rocks and sobs in pain and fury.

“Adrian—”

I hold up a finger, turning from Cade to march across the room, yanking my jacket off. And I don't stop until I'm kneeling beside Adele and wrapping the garment around her. She looks up at me in horror and anguish, tears coursing down her cheeks.

"She...she just...she *took her*—"

"And we are *going to get her back*," I hiss, my pulse roaring as I pull her against my chest. Adele sobs into me, clinging to my shirt as I hold her close.

"Mr. Cross, sir?"

I scowl as I raise my eyes to see one of my men standing there. His brow furrows.

"What is it?"

"There's, uh...someone to see you."

"It can fucking wait."

"It's Cillian Kildare, sir."

I stiffen. And suddenly, the swirling, venomous chaos in my head coalesces into fire.

He fucking wouldn't...

But if he has, I'm going to rip him apart on my front porch.

I ease Adele onto the couch before I turn, wrath personified as I surge towards the foyer. Cillian sees me coming, and he holds up his hands, palms-out.

"*Easy*, Cross," he rumbles, eyeing me as I stop in front of him.

"I—unlike *some* people when they visit other people's homes or places of business—come in peace."

I glare malice at him.

“What the fuck do you want, Cillian?”

“I heard what happened, and I’ve come to…” he shrugs.

“Offer my assistance, as it were.”

Bullshit.

A tornado doesn’t drop down on a forest fire to help put it out. It lands to further stir it up, to fan the flames and scatter fire and ash.

That’s all Cillian ever has been or will be: a force-multiplier of chaos.

Or else, he’s here to parlay his “help” to get something he wants from me. Either way, he can go fuck himself with the business end of red-hot poker.

“Offer it elsewhere and get the fuck out of my house.”

I don’t have time for Cillian’s bullshit right now. I whirl around to march back into the living room.

“I heard you were having trouble with MI6, Adrian.”

I stiffen, my jaw grinding before I suddenly turn back. I’m on him in a second, grabbing a fistful of his collar and snarling into his face as I slam him into the wall.

He just grins.

“*Talk,*” I seethe. “Right. Fucking. *Now.*”

His eyes drop to my hands, and he scowls as he swats them away. He reaches into his jacket, pulling a cigarette from his case and slipping it between his lips. The gold Zippo flicks, and I glare hatred at him as he slowly drags on his smoke.

“Well, for starters, I know that our friend ‘Agent’ Preston Caldwell doesn’t actually work for MI6.”

I blink, staring at him as he grins and casually blows a stream of smoke out of the corner of his lips.

“Excuse me?”

“Clean your ears, will you? I said he doesn’t—”

“What do you *mean* he doesn’t work for MI6?”

“I think it’s fairly self-explanatory, Adrian. He’s a fraud. A fake.”

My eyes narrow.

“And how exactly do you know that?”

Cillian’s smile curls dangerously.

“Because *I asked him.*”

The foyer is silent but for my pulse drumming in my ears. Cillian sighs, shrugging.

“Well? Go ahead, Cross. I know you want to ask—”

“*Where is he?*”

He grins wickedly, nodding with his head to the front door.

“I’ll take you to him.” He rolls his eyes when he sees the look of doubt on my face. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, Adrian. Bring whatever army you want with you. I’m not trying to stick a fucking knife in your back here.”

“You’ll forgive me if I’m skeptical about *you* helping *me.*”

“Well, lucky for you, I’m a *very* forgiving man.”

My eyes narrow.

“*Why.* Why help me?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I figure if your girl gets killed, you’ll most likely swallow a gun yourself. And then who the fuck am I

going to have fun antagonizing?”

I glare vitriol at him before he chuckles, grinning back at me.

“What do you *want*, Cillian?”

“A free, unified Ireland, a three-way with Charlize Theron and Natalie Portman, and a squeaky-clean liver. How about you?”

When my gaze turns to pure murder, he sighs.

“I don’t want *shit* from you, Adrian. But it’s been...*suggested* to me by certain individuals that I may or may not do business with, that the business I may or may not do with them might be in jeopardy if I *don’t* help you.”

He lifts a shoulder, taking a drag of his cigarette as he smiles thinly at me.

“You’re not the only one with dirty hands that the dear Prince deigns to play with, Cross.”

Interesting.

“Now, am I taking you to this fucker or not?”

A pause.

“You’re fucking taking me. *Now.*”

I glance down the hall, nodding at Cade and two other of my men. Cade nods back, and the three of them jog down the hall as I step out the front door with Cillian. We’re piling into a car when a hand grabs my shoulder, whipping me around to come face-to-face with the goddess of death and vengeance herself.

Adele.

Her eyes are still red-rimmed and puffy. But there’s pure rage boiling behind them as well now, like a super-volcano about to blow.

“Adele, we’re—”

“I’m coming with you.”

“I don’t think that’s a very good idea—”

“*Regardez-moi dans les yeux!!*” She roars at me with the power of a demi-god.

“*Yes, look me in the eyes, Adrian,*” Adele rasps lethally. “And tell me you think there is a chance in *Hell* I won’t break the world in half to get my daughter back.”

It’s the exact same fury channeling through me regarding Celeste.

And so there’s no way I can tell this woman no.

“Let’s go.”

Cade drops a hand to her shoulder, nodding.

“You can ride with me.”

HALF AN HOUR LATER, we’re walking into the cellar of a crumbling brick building in Harlesden. Cillian leads us down a hallway to a door that looks like it once had a walk-in refrigerator behind it, where two guards with guns stand at attention as we approach.

“All right, let’s see our honored guest, lads.”

One of the men pulls on the heavy door handle, grunting; he wrenches the rusty metal door open before reaching inside and flipping on a light switch. A single bulb flickers on, and beneath it, my eyes land on a man who looks to be a sneeze away from shattering completely.

My lips curl wickedly.

It's the same cocksucking motherfucker who was putting his hands on Celeste at the gala.

He blinks at the sudden light—his face purple and bloodied, his nose shattered, and his shirt ripped open to reveal a myriad of bruises and cuts. He blinks again, until suddenly, he seems to realize we're all staring at him.

He screams into the filthy rag stuffed into his bloodied mouth, thrashing and panicking as he tries to break free of the chains binding him to the rusty chair he's sitting on.

Cillian grins as he strides into the room and kicks one of the chair legs hard.

“Rise and shine, sweetheart,” he grunts, smirking at the fake MI6 agent. Then he glances back at me innocently. “What? I said I asked him. I didn't say I asked him *nicely*.”

I nod, and Cillian reaches down to pluck the rag from the man's mouth.

“My friends didn't believe me when I told them I had a new pet,” he growls into the man's ears. “Now, be a good boy and tell them what you told me, Preston.”

The man's eyes widen in absolute terror as they lock onto me.

Good. He knows just how fucked he is.

“M-m-m...Mr. Cross...”

“*Tell him.*”

The bound man shivers.

“I—I'm not MI6. I don't work for the government. I—”

He gasps, bleating in terror as I storm across the divide between us and grab him by the throat.

“*Who*, then?”

“Magdalena! Her name is Magdalena!” he sobs. “She reached out to me two months ago, said she had work for me. I...I do contract work, small potatoes stuff—debt collection, smacking people around, that’s all!”

“I’m going to ask you this once and once only,” I hiss quietly. “Why did she have you harassing *my fucking wife* for information on me, pretending to be MI6?”

His already white face goes the color of putrid milk.

“Your—”

“*Yes. MY WIFE, motherfucker,*” I snarl.

He shudders, his eyes bulging.

“She wanted me to lean on her,” he sobs. “The goal was to drive a wedge between the two of you.”

“*Why?*”

“I don’t know! Honestly! All I was supposed to do was badger her until you and she parted ways, until she left your protection.”

My eyes close.

There it is. That’s why. Magda’s goal was to get at Celeste—whether to hurt her, or to take her, God knows. But she couldn’t do any of that with her under my roof.

Until she found a way to get under that same roof and do it from in there.

“Please! Please, Mr. Cross! I swear to God, I was never going to hurt her! Just scare her, that’s all! Please, for the love of God, *please* don’t kill—”

“If you tell me where I can find this Magdalena, you’ll live.”

Cillian starts to open his mouth, but I shoot him a look before glaring at not-so-Agent Caldwell.

“I—I don’t know where she is. But I could call her. You could trace it!”

I glance at Cillian, who lifts a shoulder and nods.

“Yeah, we could do that.”

He ducks out the door and speaks low to his men. A minutes later, he steps back in with another of his guys holding a laptop with some equipment attached to it.

“M-my phone’s in my pocket,” Caldwell mumbles, nodding with his chin.

Cillian yanks it out, scrolls through the contacts, and then glances at his man. The guy with the laptop nods back.

“Good to go over here.”

“If you let on *shit*...” I growl thinly.

Caldwell shakes his head violently.

“I won’t. I swear—”

“Shut up. Keep her talking for at least a minute,” Cillian mutters as he presses the call button and holds the phone up to Caldwell’s ear.

Dimly, I hear a women’s voice snap at him through the speaker.

“Yes ma’am,” Caldwell replies in a tone devoid of the fear and pain I’m sure he’s drowning in. “No, I just wanted to touch base and see if there was anything else—”

He swallows, nodding at whatever she’s said.

“Right, of course. Well, maybe I—”

He nods again.

“*Twenty more seconds, cunt,*” Cillian whispers.

“There’s still a few...ahh...loose ends back here. If you want, my next contract doesn’t start for another month. I’d be happy to clean them up, so nothing traces back to—right, no, of course, I understand. Well, a pleasure doing business—”

His eyes dart unhappily to me.

“She hung up.”

I glance at Cillian, who turns to his guy with the laptop.

“Well?”

The man nods.

“We got it, boss. She’s in northern Italy...Lake Cuomo.”

My mind flashes to Celeste telling me Magda’s story. How she was a victim just like Adele—the housekeeper of Nasser’s Lake Cuomo mansion, whom he brutalized. It all makes sense.

I turn to Cade.

“Call the airfield.”

Then I glance back at Caldwell with disdain on my face.

“You laid hands on my wife, motherfucker.”

He pales.

“*Please—*”

“You’ll live because of that traced call. But if I *ever* see you again—”

“Cross.”

Cillian clears his throat.

“Before you go turning into Mahatma bleeding Ghandi on this piece of shit, thought I’d mention one last thing.”

Caldwell’s eyes bulge in fear as he yanks his gaze to Cillian.

“Please! Mr. Kildare—”

“He had a room in a building across the street from the Dorchester so he could spy on Celeste while she was staying there. Little sneak had a camera with an SD card full of pictures of your girl...”

Cillian raises a brow.

“*Au natural.*”

My vision turns red as my eyes slide like a knife across concrete back to Caldwell.

“Now, before you ask,” Cillian adds. “I can only assume as to their full nature. I stopped when the pictures started to get... *indecent*, out of respect to you.”

I swallow cold fury, stabbing my gaze through Caldwell; I’m seconds away from revoking my mercy.

Cillian clears his throat again.

“Adrian.”

“*What?*” I answer, still glaring at the terrified, quivering man in the chair.

“Our friend Caldwell here is wanted in both the States and Sweden for various sexual battery and assault charges...”

Cillian’s face turns livid.

“Involving minors.”

My blood turns to cold fire in my veins.

“I only tell you this to add context to the fact that we *also* found cameras in his little spy house pointed towards the bedroom that the child was sleeping in.”

It all happens incredibly fast.

I feel someone’s hand slip under the back of my jacket and yank my gun from my belt. I whirl, but I’m suddenly being shoved aside as an arm extends and levels my gun directly into Preston Caldwell’s screaming face.

And pulls the trigger.

Caldwell flies backwards, his head exploding in a shower of red as his body flops to the ground, still chained to the chair.

Every eye in the room is riveted on Adele, with my gun smoking in her hand.

“Well *fuck*,” Cillian murmurs, whistling in what might be admiration as he steps back from the blood on the floor.

Adele is shaking, staring with a cold fierceness at nothing as Cade slowly moves to her side. She jolts as he wraps a hand gently around the gun. But she nods, the spell breaking as she lets him take it from her.

My brow furrows.

“Adele—”

My gaze holds hers. Nothing is said, but I watch the emotions flicker clear as day across her face. Rage, fear, self-loathing, disbelief at what she’s just done.

And then, finally, acceptance.

“Good shot,” I say quietly.

Her lips twist into a half smile.

“Can we go now?”

“I think we should.”



“I’M SCARED.”

Me fucking too.

But I won’t show that, just as I haven’t shown it the entire time we’ve been here. Instead, I hold Dahlia tighter, keeping her face buried against me.

“I know, sweetheart,” I whisper, trying to keep my voice from shaking. Across the living room of the huge, opulent manor on the shores of Lake Cuomo, Magdalena El-Sayed paces back and forth—gun in hand, muttering incoherently to herself.

She’s been like this since she snatched us from Adrian’s house. Since she walked into the room where Adele and Dahlia were playing, while I was on the phone with Adrian, my heart breaking as I listened to my father say that he’d been trying to have me killed.

Since she suddenly smashed a bookend against Adele’s head and leveled a gun at me as I ran screaming to Dahlia.

She’s mostly just been muttering and waving a gun around, without saying much besides barking at us to get into the car or the plane that brought us here.

“I want to go home, Auntie Celeste.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, biting my lip so hard I taste copper as I nod, forcing warmth and calm into my voice.

“I know, baby, I know. We’re going to go back to Mr. Adrian’s house soon. We’re just playing a game, remember?”

Her small hands grip my shirt tighter.

“I don’t like this game. She hurt Mama.”

I bite back a choking sob.

“Oh, no! No, honey, it’s all just part of the game! Your mama’s okay!”

At least, she was when Magda forced us from the room at gunpoint. Adele was bleeding and unconscious, but she was still breathing.

Across the room, Magda suddenly stiffens, whirling to glare at us. Ice stabs at my heart as she starts to march over, and my arms instinctively hug Dahlia tighter. But I force away the fear as I glare at Magda.

“You’re scaring her,” I hiss quietly.

Her eyes drop to the little girl in my arms before her gaze drags back up to mine.

“Why are you doing this, Magda?”

She turns away, muttering to herself.

“It didn’t belong to her. It’s mine. I’m going to take it back.”

I shiver. It’s one of the only recognizable sentences she’s said since we left Adrian’s house.

“It didn’t belong to her. It’s mine. I’m going to take it back.”

Then her voice devolves into more mumbling.

“Magda?”

I jolt as she spins suddenly on me, Dahlia whimpering as my arms tighten hard around her. The gun in Magda's hand waves wildly, and I wrench to the side as if to cover Dahlia with my body. Until the pain that cuts into my abdomen reminds me why I'm not already doing that.

Because I'm tied to a chair. Only my arms are free, so that I can hold Dahlia.

Magdalena's wild eyes lock into mine, and I shiver as I see them focus sharply for maybe the first time.

"It didn't have to be like this, you know."

The way her craziness suddenly sharpens to lucidity is terrifying.

"What didn't have to be like this?"

My eyes drop to the gun, now firmly in her grip.

"Any of this. I had a plan, Celeste. I knew what was meant to happen." Her lips twist. "Until *you* stepped all over that."

"Is this about *Amir*?!"

Horror washes over me.

"Magda, you know perfectly well what that was! I wasn't ever trying to take him from you! I never wanted him at *all*!! It was my father and his—"

"*Do not* say his fucking name!" She screams, going white and shuddering. "Do not!"

I nod quickly, holding Dahlia tight to me as she whimpers in fear.

My voice goes softer again. "I won't. I won't, Magda. But if all of this is because you think I was trying to take Amir—"

"I don't give a shit about *Amir*."

I recoil, my brow furrowing deeply.

“What?”

“I had a *plan*, Celeste,” she mutters again, her eyes dissolving into crazy again for a second before refocusing once more.

A million theories fly through my head, as they have for the last few hours. Like maybe Magda is bipolar, and she’s gone off her meds? Maybe she’s had a stroke? A complete nervous breakdown?

“Magda, you and Amir were madly in love—”

She barks a cold, mirthless laugh.

“In *love*,” she sneers. “You truly think I could ever love the son of the man who did all *that* to me?!”

I swallow.

“Amir was not his father, Magda.”

She laughs loudly, a deranged look flaming in her mad eyes.

“He was literally his blood! Of course Amir was his father!”

I stare at her.

“Then *why*? Why on earth would you be with him, and marry him, if you never even—”

“Because I was *owed*.”

And suddenly, horribly, it clicks.

This wasn’t ever about Amir. It wasn’t even really about me.

It was about the money.

“It was going to be so easy. Amir was a puppy eating out of my hand. He married me the second I told him I was in love with him, and I had it all planned out. There was going to be a party on the monster’s yacht, and I was ready to do it then.”

Her eyes narrow.

“But then *you* showed up. And suddenly, Amir had to fake-marry *you*, and the party got cancelled. And I spent the next *four fucking years* looking for another opportunity.”

Her lips curl.

“And then, opportunity came to me. First with that piece of shit overdosing. I never found out who gave it to him to thank them. Then the crash, with Amir.”

Her mouth goes small.

“I thought I was dead after that, you know. When I woke up in that car wreck, I thought I had died and was in Hell.”

She smiles thinly.

“But it was in fact opportunity come knocking one more time. They were both gone, and I had the legal claim through marriage. But then, *you again*. And it all went to shit. I am *owed* that money, Celeste. I earned it. I paid for it, time and time again, every single fucking time that pig used me, or hurt me, or beat me.”

Fear roars in me as she haphazardly waves the gun barrel towards Dahlia in my arms.

“Do *not* point that thing at her!” I scream in a strangled voice.

Magda smiles cruelly, allowing the gun to play over us.

“Listen to me!” I blurt. “Magda, you can have the money! You can have all of it! I’ve spent the last month and half trying to get away from it, because I *don’t want it!* You’re right! Nasser was a goddamn monster, and I’m glad he’s dead.”

I press Dahlia tight to my chest, covering her ears.

“And what he did to you, he did to Adele, too.”

She sighs, and I shiver as her eyes blur back to madness.

“Yes, Celeste, I know. Which means even though I will be taking the estate off your hands, since you claim not to want it —”

“I don’t!” I blurt in terror as the gun waves over us again. “Magda, it’s yours. All of it. I’ll sign literally anything you want. Just *please stop pointing that gun at her!!*”

Her wild eyes semi-focus on me.

“Yes, well, unfortunately, being that Nasser is her father, it means I also need to do this.”

Her arm shoots out so fast I don’t even realize she’s done it until she’s gripping the back of Dahlia’s shirt. She yanks, and just as my arms flex to tighten, I cry out as Magda slams the butt of her gun into the side of my head.

The world blurs for a second.

My muscles go slack.

And then I’m screaming as I feel Dahlia getting torn from my arms.

“NO!!”

“Auntie Celeste!!” Dahlia screams, crying as Magda hefts the little girl in her arms and marches across the room.

“DON’T YOU FUCKING TOUCH HER!!” I scream. “*MAGDA!*”

“She’s the same as Nasser!” Magdalena crows. “The blood of that monster flows in her veins, too!”

“*Stop it!!*”

I’m screaming as tears roll down my face. Magda shoves Dahlia into a chair and ties her to it with a length of rope,

oblivious to the way the little girl's crying.

Pure adrenaline and fear explode through my core. My arms wrench painfully behind me, clawing at the rope tying me to the chair. But it's already so fucking tight, and it feels like the knot has been soaked in water, swelling it and making it impossible to pull open.

But that doesn't stop me from trying.

I'm sobbing, shaking with fear and rage as I claw at that fucking knot until my nails break and split and blood coats my fingers.

"Magda!! Let her go, Magda! Take the money and just *go!*"

But the crazy has taken over again, and when she turns to me, it's a woman I don't even recognize.

"The same blood, Celeste. She'll be the same monster."

She levels the gun at Dahlia.

And something in me breaks.

I wrench, twisting at the rope around me and shoving it higher up my body. I twist again, shoving and shoving until I'm stuck in a position my arm doesn't want to go in.

So, I make it.

The scream rips from my throat as I feel my shoulder dislocate. But the rope slides free, and I shove it over my head as the world slows to a crawl.

The gun levels at Dahlia.

Magda pulls the hammer back.

And I fling myself across the room.

Between them.

Thunder erupts. Something punches into my chest. And suddenly, my shirt is slick with hot wetness.

Oh God.

My head hits the ground hard. My vision blurs, but behind the shape of Magda falling to the ground as well, I see figures racing into the room.

Adrian.

Adele.

She's going to be okay.

Dahlia's going to be okay.

But I don't think I am. And when the lights go out and I slip into nothingness, I realize...

This is the end.



ADELE and I reach them at the same time—her sobbing as she rips the rope away from her daughter and scoops the little girl into her arms, me crashing to my knees and pulling Celeste’s limp body against mine.

There’s a ringing sound in my ear. Partly from Magdalena’s gun going off as we crashed in through the doorway, just in time to watch as Celeste *threw her-fucking-self in front of it*. And partly from my own gun as I put a bullet through Magdalena’s heart.

But that’s not what I’m focusing on.

I’m focusing on the copious amount of blood soaking Celeste’s shirt.

Jesus.

My heart twists and wrenches as I run my hand over her, looking for the bullet wound and the source of the blood. So much blood. My brow furrows, pulse thudding as I trace my fingers over body again and again.

Before suddenly, like a drowning man getting some air, I’m filled with hope.

The blood isn’t hers.

I even rip her shirt open to check. But the blood is all on the shirt itself, not her. Shaking, my hand goes to her neck.

Her pulse is strong.

My heart beats again.

She's alive.

She's alive.

This is *not* the end of us.

Not even fucking close.



Four months later:

I STARE into the rain through the hospital windows. For a second, I'm brought back to almost five years ago, to my father's funeral on a dark, rainy day.

There are days I wonder if he'd be disappointed in me for following in my uncle's footsteps to the Cross throne. But then I think about things like the night I confronted Jean. The night I *didn't* kill him, when I most certainly could have. Maybe should have.

My uncle Jonathan would have shot him in the face and pissed on the body.

Sparing his life, though, is something Henry would have done.

So I'd like to think my father is looking down at me from wherever the next life may be and smiling, seeing that I've found my own path, somewhere in the middle between him and his brother.

Besides, killing Jean would have been too good for him. Instead, I've made sure he'll be spending the rest of his miserable days fighting and clawing for his every penny.

I wasn't bluffing that night. Thomas's father, Geoffrey Ashford, really *is* closely connected with the higher-ups with

HMRC tax authority. They were all too happy to have a viable reason to dig through Jean Margaux's web of lies, and fraudulent financial managers were the tip of the iceberg once they started prying into his affairs.

Bank fraud, conspiracy to defraud the Crown, tax avoidance, illegal money transfers, undisclosed business dealings with hostile foreign governments...the list just went on.

Jean's not in jail or anything. Not yet. But he's in a prison of sorts just the same. He's under house arrest now, in the mansion that will slowly crumble around him, now that can't afford to pay any staff, since his assets are frozen.

I have not a single shit to give nor a single tear to shed for him. All I know is, he was wrong. My life is *not* insignificant, or petty, as he predicted it would be.

It could never be anything but wondrous with Celeste by my side.

As if reading my thoughts, her hand squeezes mine, pulling me from my thoughts. I turn, my eyes dropping fondly to the giant diamond on her hand. I grin widely as my gaze drags up to hers.

Two months ago, in a ceremony in the back yard, we renewed our vows—vows we once said in secret that we could now say out loud, surrounded by friends and family.

And one very cute three-and-a-half-year-old flower girl.

There are parts of what happened that terrible night in Italy that Dahlia may need to work through later in life with a therapist. But for now, she's doing okay. There's still the occasional nightmare. But then, she's got a fantastic mother.

And a *rich* mother, at that.

After the El-Sayed fortune rolled into Celeste's own name, she made the decision to give up the whole thing and legally transfer it to Adele and Dahlia.

They're currently in the process of moving into a house in Kensington twice the size of mine.

"Yes, Wife?"

My heart swells as I pull Celeste into my arms. There are times when I'm still *so* fucking mad at her for what she did that night in Italy. The night I watched her throw herself in front of a gun.

But at the same time, she did it to save Dahlia. And the fact that this woman was ready to sacrifice herself for a child?

That made me fall even more in love with her, not that I would have thought that possible.

She beams at me, leaning in to kiss me softly before she turns and nods at Noel.

"Is he going to be okay?"

Noel's pacing the floor of the hospital distractedly, his brow furrowed deeply like he's furious at the floor he's so hell bent on staring down.

Outside, it might look a lot like the day I buried my father. But it's not death we're gathered here today for.

Today, it's life. Specifically, the birth of Thomas' and his wife Cassandra's daughter, Ella.

"Noel."

He stops pacing and stumbles, turning to glare at me as if I've just interrupted something important.

"What?" he snaps.

I grin. “It’s going to be fine.”

He grunts, turning to continue his pacing. Past him, Oliver and Kristoff sit beside Braddock and his—regrettably insufferable—wife, Rebecca. But he’s got his newborn daughter, Julianna, with him as well.

Time keeps moving. The wheel keeps turning.

“They should be *out* here by now,” Noel mutters.

I chuckle.

“Ransom, relax. They’ll come out when they’re—”

The door behind him opens. And suddenly, looking like he’s just had the very secrets of the universe revealed to him, there’s Thomas, holding a tiny little bundle in a blanket.

“Gentlemen,” he whispers hoarsely, his eyes wide as saucers and so full of love it almost hurts to look at him.

“I’d very much like you to meet Ella.”

Congratulations are crowed. Hands are shaken. Cigars are offered around before the waiting room attendant glares at us with firm shake of her head and we slide them into our pockets sheepishly. I slide my arm around Celeste’s waist as we gaze down into the sleeping face of Thomas’ daughter.

Eventually, it’s time to go. Thomas beams at us all as he rocks Ella, promising to call everyone soon before retreating back to the recovery wing to be with Cassandra.

The rest of us begin to filter out of the hospital.

“You know,” Celeste murmurs, slipping close to me as the elevator doors close in front of just the two of us. “It wouldn’t hurt to *practice* trying for one of those...”

I turn, and our eyes lock.

Heat swells within me.

My finger jams the stop button of the elevator as I pin her to the wall and crush my mouth to hers.

EPILOGUE



Three years later:

“ARE YOU READY?”

I glance at Adrian, taking his hand in mine before we both turn back to Dr. Keller.

No. Because I'm not sure if I can do this again.

“Ready,” I breathe, squeezing Adrian’s hand.

I gasp as Dr. Keller smears some of the cold jelly on my stomach before she stops to raise her eyes to me.

“Look, before we turn this on and check for viability, I just want us all to keep our expectations within the realm of reality. We’ve got a *ton* of science we’re using here to push the odds in our favor. But, at the end of the day, the math is still the math.”

I’m painfully aware of the math and the number involved here. Three years and five attempts at IVF later, *yeah*, I’m aware of them. For me, the number is eight, as in an eight percent chance of any of this resulting in a viable, healthy pregnancy.

And so far, those slim odds have not worked out in our favor.

Dr. Keller brings the wand to my stomach. But Adrian clears his throat and holds up a hand.

“A minute, if you would, Dr. Keller. Alone?”

She smiles, nodding at us both as she stands and leaves the room. When the door closes, Adrian exhale and takes my hand.

“This is it.”

“Adrian, the odds—”

“No, I mean this is the last time we do this, Celeste.”

Tears sting my eyes as I hold his. But all he’s doing is saying out loud what I’ve been saying in my heart for a month.

This really is the last time I can mentally, emotionally, and physically put myself through this.

“There’s a *lot* of kids out there who need loving homes,” he murmurs gently, cupping my face.

“I know. I know. Okay,” I nod, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. “Okay, I’m in. After this, if it doesn’t work out, we’ll start down that route.”

He grins. So do I. And when he pulls me close, my heart soars as he crushes his lips to mine.

Dr. Keller knocks on the door before stepping back in, smiling at us both.

“Ready to find out?”

I nod firmly.

“I am.”

She settles into the chair and brings the wand back to my abdomen. The round end of it pushes over my skin as Dr. Keller glances at the screen.

“Okay, so here’s—”

She tenses.

So do I.

“Mr. and Mrs. Cross?”

Adrian’s hand tightens to iron around mine as Dr. Keller slowly turns back to us.

“Congratulations.”

I blink, staring at her.

“I’m sorry. Could you repeat that?”

She grins as my heart surges into my throat.

“I said congratulations. There’s a viable heartbeat.”

I shriek. I mean I fucking *shriek*, grabbing Adrian’s hand so hard that he cries out too. I turn to him, love and disbelief on my face as he grabs me in his arms and pulls me close.

“*I love you,*” he groans into my ear. “*I fucking love you so much.*”

“I love you t—”

“Wait.”

No.

No no no no no no no...

My face falls, and my heart shatters as my eyes drag to Dr. Keller, frowning at the screen.

“*Please,*” I choke. “*Please no...*”

I can’t. I can’t do this. I can’t have gotten *this close*, only for her to be wrong—

“Yeah, there it is.”

She whistles, oblivious to the stricken expressions on both Adrian's and my faces as she stares at the monitor.

"There *what* fucking is?" Adrian rasps lethally.

Dr. Keller blinks, turning to us before arching her brows in mortified surprise.

"Oh, my goodness, I'm so sorry, that came out *completely* wrong."

She laughs, grinning at us as she pats my arm.

"I didn't mean to scare you. Everything looks wonderful, Celeste."

I blink, my mouth opening and closing.

"But—but..."

"It's just that I thought I heard something else and had to check."

"The hell do you mean, something else?" Adrian mutters.

Dr. Keller grins.

"A second congratulations are in order."

Wait, what?

"You're having twins."

Interested in Dante and Vivian's story? Order [King of Wrath](#) now for the first book in a steamy romance series themed around the seven deadly sins.

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The Kings and Villains series continues with Noel's story. Grab [*Burned Cinder*](#) now for the next book in this dark and steamy series.

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This isn't an epilogue or continuation to *Dark Kingdom*. But this extra hot "follow-up" story is guaranteed to keep the steam going.

BURNED CINDER PREVIEW

Thank you so much for reading *Dark Kingdom*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, you can continue the Kings and Villains series with [Burned Cinder](#). You can even scroll on for a sneak peak from that book!

My books all exist within one shared world. So, there are also lots of other characters who we met in *Dark Kingdom* with stories of their own! You can find some of those right here:

Noel Ransom: [Burned Cinder](#) & [Empire of Ash](#) (Cinder Duet)

Kristoff Zima: [The Hunter King](#) & [The Hunted Queen](#) (Hunted Duet)

Oliver Prince: [Prince of Hate](#)

Alfie Kane: [Outlaw](#)

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Burned Cinder*.

Chapter 1



ELLA

Fire burns.

I tense, my lips thinning as my hand hovers over the little votive candle flickering on the elegant table. Not touching the fire, but just close enough for my nerves to jangle as I feel the first flickering tongue of heat tease against my palm. I flinch for a second, but I curl my toes tightly in my heels, forcing my hand lower to the crystal cup holding the tea light.

My eyes close. Cold sweat—a mocking contrast to the searing heat on my palm—breaks out across my back. I count backwards from ten, tears stinging the corners of my closed eyes as the fire hungrily lashes my soft skin.

Three, two—

“Miss?”

The break in meditative focus is deadly. With a gasp, I yank my hand away, the full ache of the flame against my hand suddenly searing through my skin. I bite hard on my lip, keeping back the whimper of pain before I turn away from the cocktail table.

I've zoned out. The bartender in the white tuxedo jacket who was mixing up drinks for three people I don't know down at the far end of the bar is now free. And smiling easily at me.

"What can I get for you, miss?"

I swallow, my skin still tingling with cold sweat, my palm throbbing with pain.

"Uh, wine, please," I mumble.

God, could I be any more out of place here?

"Tonight, we're pouring a '61 Moet Dom Perignon *Charles et Diana*, as well as an '82 Chateau Latour."

Of course they are.

Wine that costs thousands of pounds a bottle, in the stunningly gorgeous back gardens of an equally stunning Surrey mansion, served for an engagement party that had to have cost an absolute *fortune*.

"Miss?"

I blink, my face reddening as I realize I'm zoning out again.

"I'm sorry," I stammer. "The champagne, please."

"Very good."

The man smiles, turning to pluck one of the vintage, priceless bottles of bubbly out of its cold-stone holder. He delicately pours a glass of liquid that costs more than I make in a week, and then hands it to me.

"Enjoy your evening, miss."

"Thanks."

I turn, transferring the stemmed champagne flute from my fingertips to my palm, wincing as the chilled bubbly cools the

aching burn in my palm.

I should probably start exploring other ways of dealing with social anxiety that don't involve barbecuing my own skin.

I sip the champagne as I let my gaze drag over the absolute fairytale setting laid out before me. Huge crystal bauble-lights with flickering bulbs inside meant to imitate gas lamps hang from unseen wires, seemingly floating in the evening sky above the garden. White linen, crystal, silver, and white roses dot the tops of the round tables spread across the grass. A string quartet plays Bach in a corner, and catering staff in white tuxedos serve equally as expensive wine and canapés to the assembled guests.

My head slowly shakes as I drink it all in.

I used to belong to this world. That is, until I lost my membership card to it.

My lips thin. No, it wasn't lost.

It was burned.

I chew on my lip, suddenly feeling the surge of the anxiety come back. I very much doubt anyone here even knows me, or knows who I am. After all, I'm well aware I was a very last-minute addition to the guest list. But still.

I swallow as I glance down at myself, trying to judge if I actually fit in or clearly stand out as an imposter to this world of elites. The shoes I spent too much on. But the dress, mercifully, is borrowed from the lady of the evening herself. And while I normally wear it up in the world's messiest bun, Harry insisted on turning my hair into a complex sculpture of spray and bobby-pins before I came tonight.

But all of that is just camouflage—a mask to look like I still belong to this world. Look hard enough, though, and you'd see

right through the cracks.

My brow furrows as I rotate my hand, eyes examining my nails. Yeah, there's some of the cracks right there: the bit of dirt under the painted fingernails that just won't come out no matter how hard I scrub. The way my cuticles are cracked and raw from cleaning chemicals.

The knowledge that beneath the black ankle-length gown I'm wearing, my knees are bruised blue—a door prize from spending three hours on them yesterday morning, scrubbing Naomi's kitchen floor.

These are marks that brand me as an outsider. As a commoner. As someone who does not belong here.

I once did. But he took that from me.

I gulp down another mouthful of champagne, my eyes wandering back to the flickering tea lights on the table beside me.

Stop that.

Instead, I allow myself to gloat on the little piece of revenge I set in motion last week. *True* revenge would be his head on a pike for what he did. But I'll settle for the destruction of his kingdom.

For now.

I smile thinly. This revenge is the entire reason I've swallowed back my pride and my pain to work in Naomi's house—which is rightfully *my* house. It's the reason I've kept my head down, cleaning and scrubbing the very home I grew up in.

Because working in that house gives me access to Naomi. And Naomi gives me access to *him*.

Or at least, his email, which was left open on the desktop in Naomi's home office. It's a simple thing we've all done. Only this time, it's going to cost him his empire.

My lips curl wickedly.

Fire burns, and everyone pays.

"There you are!"

The malice fades from my face at the sound of her voice. I turn, beaming at Julianna as she rushes across the garden effortlessly, in heels, and throws her arms around me.

"Sorry, I walked in and realized you're basically the only person I know here."

She is *actually* the only person I know here, who I've seen so far at least. And even if there are others here I do know. By now, they've long forgotten me.

That's something else I can thank *him* for.

Seven years ago, I would still be a part of this elite club. But seven years ago, I hadn't gone to Hemlock Estates Reformatory School, or had my family's fortune taken from me. Seven years ago, I hadn't lost touch yet with best friends like Julianna McCreed, who once lived on the same street in posh Knightsbridge as I did.

Some things from the "before" time, I'll never get back.

Some people, too.

But some, either by dragging myself through the mud, or by sheer serendipity, I've found again. Julianna falls under the latter.

A month ago, we reconnected after quite literally bumping into each other, in Knightsbridge, of all places. Her, visiting a

business associate. Me, about to go scrub the toilets at the very house that was stolen from me.

Of course, I didn't tell her that. No one can know about that job. And that's not pride, that's because my being there is, and has to be, a secret.

Okay, and maybe also pride.

Instead, I made up some fake story about "seeing the old neighborhood again." But in any case, we swapped numbers, and later finally reconnected over drinks, where she invited me to her—this—engagement dinner.

Three years ago, in what was then *the* tabloid gossip story of the year, Julianna was outed as being in a relationship with her then English professor—the very famous, very much older than her, very incendiary writer Bastian Pierce. They've actually been engaged for a little while, but they're just now having the official celebration, a few months before the wedding.

I can't blame them for waiting. Bastian's been putting out *New York Times* bestsellers and adapting one of his hit books into a Netflix series. And Jules has been tied up graduating top of her class from Cambridge, entering their graduate-level business school, and helping to run Horn Publishing House, which her father owns.

I mean Christ, save some ambition for the rest of us, girl.

We both grin as we step apart, my eyes dropping over her absolutely stunning dress.

When we were kids, people used to joke that we were sisters when they'd see us playing together. Both of us had the same blue eyes and blonde hair, the same willowy frames and long legs.

These days, I know you'd see the differences if you really looked. Her flawless nails, and the dirt under mine and raw skin on my cuticles. The easy smile on her face, the mask I wear to hold back nightmares and anxiety. The easy flourish to her walk. The way I ache from cleaning and scrubbing, and from the bruises on my knees.

Julianna kept her elite-club card, even if she never became the snobby asshole most of the people in this world do.

Mine turned to ash.

I beam at her. "Okay, you look *stunning*."

She blushes, waving me off.

"Please. Look at you!"

I roll my eyes. "Jules, it's *your* dress."

She laughs, rolling her eyes back.

"Yeah, but it never looked even a little good on me. You're freaking glowing in it."

"Well, thank you."

Because otherwise, I would've been the worst dressed person here.

I glance past her, to where her fiancé, Bastian, is chatting with a group of guests, grinning that roguish, handsome smile he's quite famous for.

I shake my head, laughing.

"I seriously can't believe you're marrying my favorite author. Like how is that real?"

She grins. "Uh, *my* favorite author, thank you very much."

We both laugh, and I can feel my anxiety loosening its grip on me a little. Mercifully.

It's not even that there's a crowd of strangers here. That doesn't bother me. I mean at work—my other work that isn't cleaning Naomi's house—I'm serving drinks to crowds of strangers all the time, and I'm fine.

It's that this crowd of strangers represents a world I was barred from. A garden I was cast out of.

Burns on my skin. Pain in my heart. Shock in his eyes. His blood on my hands.

“Well, since you don't know anyone here—”

I jolt, blinking away the vicious flashbacks. I turn my attention back to Julianna, forcing a smile to my face.

“You definitely need to come meet my Oxford Hills friends.”

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood. Julianna's led to the prestigious Oxford Hills Academy, and finding her own Prince Charming.

Mine led to Hemlock Estates Reformatory School, being stripped of everything, and being left to fight the world on my own.

I turn to follow her gaze, to one of the circular dinner tables with a crowd of handsome couples sitting around it. I might not be personally acquainted with them, but I do know who at least most of them are.

The four heavily tattooed men in tailored suits are all the heads of or next in line to run four major Bratva crime families—Volkov, Tsavakov, Kashenko, and Reznikov. But their dates—i.e. their wives—are all equally as well known. The daughter of the recently retired US Secretary of State. An actual

princess. The director of worldwide operations for the Free Them Foundation. A doctor in training.

And me: the bartender and chambermaid.

How illustrious.

I swallow as I eye the table full of Julianna's worldly, wealthy, and powerful school friends.

"Yeah... yeah, definitely."

Julianna gives me a soft smile but doesn't push it. She obviously knows about Hemlock Estates. But beyond that, she doesn't know the details.

No one knows the details. No one but Noel Ransom, that is.

Julianna doesn't know I'm slinging drinks in Shoreditch, in East London, either. She doesn't know I'm working for Naomi, under a fake name, in order to infiltrate and take down the empire of the man who destroyed me.

She doesn't know I owe more money than I could ever hope to pay off to one of the most brutal loan sharks in London. She doesn't know I'm barely surviving and keeping my head above water.

And she won't.

"Oh, shit, before this night gets carried away and I completely forget!"

She beams at me, biting her lip like she's holding in a secret.

"Uh oh," I giggle. "What is it?"

"Okay, you know how I was telling you at lunch the other day —"

The lunch I insisted on paying for, because I'm an idiot and wanted to save face. Even though it just about emptied my

checking account.

“—how we’re trying to partner Horn Publishing with that new media production company?”

I nod. Charm, Inc, a UK-based startup company that’s gunning for Netflix and HBO as a new heavy-hitter in streaming entertainment. Julianna is trying to hammer out a deal to partner with them to produce high quality series and movies adapted from books carried by her publishing company.

It’s founder and CEO, Jacob Prince, I only vaguely know of. But his father, Oliver, is unknowingly going to be the cannonball that destroys the empire of the man who stole my life.

I’ve waited seven years, plotting from the shadows, to take him down. And soon, it’s all going to be worth it.

Noel Ransom will pay for what he did to me.

And to my mother.

“Well, don’t be mad, but... you know that online portfolio you were showing me?”

My brows knit. She means my web design stuff. I didn’t get to go to fancy preparatory school. I didn’t get to go to university, either. Instead, in-between fighting for my very survival working two hard jobs, I’ve been teaching myself coding and web design and building out a demo portfolio. Which I showed Julianna at lunch the other day.

“Yes?”

“Okay, well, I...” she bites her lip again. “I showed it to Jacob.”

I groan. “Wait, seriously? Jules, it’s just a bunch of demo mockups. It’s definitely not something I’m trying to use to

pitch—”

“He wants to meet you to talk about bringing you on to do all of Charm Inc’s in-house UX and web design.”

I blink, the air sucked from my lungs.

“I—I’m sorry... what?”

She grins.

“You heard me. He wants to sit down and talk about bringing you in.”

I frown. “Yeah, because you told him I was your friend—”

“Nope,” she shakes her head. “I showed it to him blind and just said I really liked the designer’s work.” She winks. “Which I do.”

“You’re joking.”

She laughs. “I’m not. Here, he wanted me to give this to you.”

Julianna slips me a crisp white business card with “Charm Inc” embossed in gold leaf, and “Jacob Prince, CEO” under it, alongside his personal number.

“He also said he might be able to drop by the party tonight. But if he can’t make it, you should definitely call him.”

I nod, staring numbly at the card.

“I... yeah, I... of course,” I blurt.

“He’s also *gorgeous*,” she snickers. “So, if the job doesn’t motivate you...”

I groan, rolling my eyes.

“Who’s gorgeous?”

Julianna and I both gasp as Bastian steps up behind her, grabbing her waist and pulling her into him. She giggles,

beaming as she twists her head around to kiss him softly.

“You, my love.”

He snickers. “Liar.”

She sighs. “Fine, I was telling Ella to call Jacob Prince, because he wants to give her a job, and because he’s a smoke show.”

Bastian rolls his eyes.

“Right, yeah, if you like blond Ken doll douchebags with the personality of a gym mat.”

I giggle. Julianna rolls her eyes, grinning as she kisses her fiancé deeply. When she pulls away, she gives me a look.

“He’s not a douchebag.”

“He’s *kind of* a douchebag.”

She sighs, turning to stick her tongue out at Bastian.

“He is not! He’s just a finance type guy.”

Bastian nods emphatically at his soon-to-be-bride and then lets his gaze switch to me.

“Right, Ella, a *finance* guy. Which is the nice way of saying douchebag.”

I laugh again as Julianna playfully slaps his arm.

“Okay, I’m going to go work on my speech.”

Her mouth falls open.

“Wait, Bastian, you didn’t write it yet?”

“Yeah, gee, whatever will I do. I wish I... I dunno, wrote for a living or something.”

She blushes as he kisses her cheek. Then he winks at me and turns to saunter back across the garden.

“What can I say, I love him,” Julianna sighs wistfully, grinning as she watches him walk off.

I grin. “I’m so happy for you. And this party, by the way... *wow*.”

“Yeah, that’d be my dad pulling out all the stops.” Her eyes roll. “Which is also his way of trying to buy my love after all the years he basically lived at the office and forgot about me.”

“I mean, it’s buying *my* love, at least.”

Julianna laughs, snorting through her nose.

“I’ll pass it on. Also, since Bastian’s and mine place is kind of far from London, my dad’s house here in Surrey just seemed more convenient.”

Yes, *convenient*. A, what, ten bedroom manor home surrounded by picturesque gardens and fountains and looks like something out of *Bridgerton* is quite a “convenient” place for, well, anything.

“And also, I mean, it’s a quick, easy skip from London, which helped.”

It’s quick and easy if you have a car. Even easier if you have a driver that comes with that car, like probably every other guest here has. As opposed to me, who took a bus, two trains, and a taxi I can’t really afford to get here.

Julianna sighs. “Okay, since I know Bastian’s going to spend five whole minutes writing some freaking Pulitzer-winning engagement party speech that’ll have everyone sobbing and laughing and solve world peace or whatever, I should go make mine better, or... something.”

She levels her smile at me, the corners of her lips curling.

“I’m so glad you’re here, and that we reconnected, you know.”

“I’m so glad too,” I grin as she slides into me and hugs me tightly.

“You want me to introduce you to the crew first?”

I shake my head. “No, I’ll head over. I’m going to top off some champagne first. Liquid courage and all that.”

She grins. “They’re a fun bunch. I think you’ll fit right in.”

I nod, laughing as she yanks a piece of wrinkled paper out of her cleavage and runs off. Turning back to the bar, I finish my glass, but I don’t ask for another. One is giving me the courage to even be here. Two, and I’ll slip from confident into tipsy.

Instead, because I’m not really ready—ever—to go introduce myself to a table full of rich, powerful, beautiful strangers, I just linger, drinking in the whole scene and feeling so happy for my re-connected friend.

“Her own stepfather.”

I stiffen. Instantly, the glow from the champagne and the laughs with Julianna evaporates. The warming feeling in my chest hardens and grows cold. My skin prickles as I tense.

“No way, that’s not her—”

“It absolutely is. That’s Ella Ashford.”

I don’t move a muscle. I just freeze, staring coldly at a hedge across the garden from me. But in the very corners of my peripheral vision, I can half see the two older women murmuring to themselves, staring at me.

“Her own stepfather. That’s bloody insane.”

“Didn’t she go to prison?”

I want to run away. I want to explode.

He's not my fucking stepfather, I want to turn and scream at them.

He's not, and he never was.

I suddenly jolt from my frozen state, turning to quickly stalk off past the bar into the darkness of the surrounding gardens. The party fades away behind me, and I tremble, gasping and sucking air into my lungs. I bolt further around the side of a catering tent into a small clearing in the middle of a rose garden, every inch of me shivering and shaking.

Noel Ransom is *not* my stepfather. He and my mother never actually married.

Before she died.

But it didn't stop him from taking everything, and then throwing me into a hole for the next four years to rot.

My face scrunches up, livid anger surging through me before I clench my eyes shut tightly. I desperately wish I had a candle, or a lighter of some kind. Even matches. Anything to ground me... to pull me back from the edge of exploding.

But then slowly, I take a breath. And then, gently, I smile thinly.

Plans have been set in motion, and the years of fighting him from the shadows are about to pay off. He took everything from me and walked away. But when I take everything from him?

I'll be there. Smiling.

Making sure he knows it was—

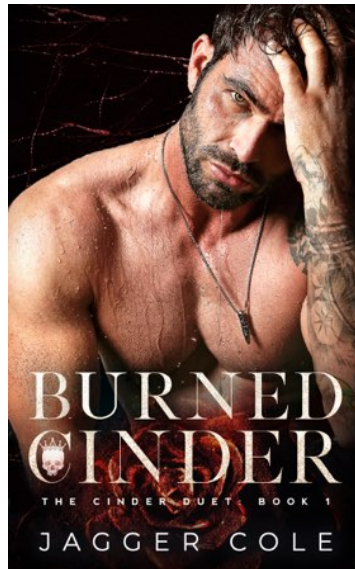
“You've been hiding from me, little one.”

I almost scream. And the only reason I don't is because the sudden growl of his voice from the shadows scares me so deeply that my throat closes up. I whirl, my face draining of color, my eyes widening as I stare at the devil himself, sauntering out of the shadows.

His golden eyes catch the dim light from a nearby gas lamp. His perfect, cruel lips curl, flashing vicious white teeth.

“You should have *stayed* hidden.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jagger Cole

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at

www.jaggercolewrites.com

