



made

in

malice

corrupt credence

book one

ALBANY WALKER

MADE IN MALICE

CORRUPT CREDENCE

BOOK ONE



ALBANY WALKER



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Albany Walker

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CONTENT WARNING

Dear Reader,

Made in Malice is a MFM contemporary novel that deals with some dark elements. This novel is a work of fiction and contains content for mature audiences only. Due sexual content, parental death, violence, explicit language, graphic depictions of sex, alcohol abuse, and other triggers this book may not be suitable for all readers.



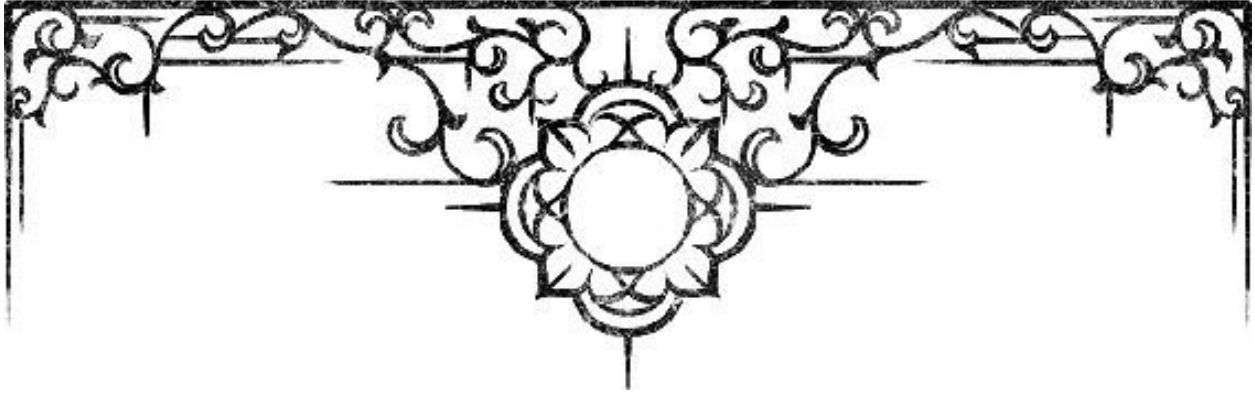
MORNINGSTAR ESTATE

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“Nova Devlin?” the spiffy man standing in the hall of my apartment asks with an air of suspicion when I open my door.

Yeah, I’m feeling the same. “Who are you?” I’m not answering his question. I have enough sense not to tell this man who I am. He’s probably from a collection agency looking to sue me for medical bills or some crap. The Gucci loafers are a nice touch, probably fakes, but I bet he regrets coming into my building. The carpet is sticky in some spots, but we’re not going to talk about that.

“My name is Virgil Haynsworth. This is 32059 Cheboygan, Apartment D, is it not?” I wonder if he got his rump kicked when he was a kid with a name like that. I take a good look at his empty hands, which are hanging loosely by his sides, his lean body, and clean-shaven jaw, and contemplate what the heck he’s doing around here. I stick my head farther out the door to see if there’s someone else waiting out of sight to serve me with paperwork or something, but the hall appears to be empty.

“That’s what it says on the door,” I finally respond.

“Then you must be Nova Devlin. I have a pressing matter I need to discuss with you.”

“If this is one of those extended warranty things, I don’t even have a car,” I retort, ready to close the door.

“Miss Devlin.” He peers down his nose at me, giving me assistant principal vibes. “It is very important that I speak with you.”

“Okay.” I keep my grip on the door, ready to slam the thing in his face if he tries anything. I regret even answering it at this point, but I thought it was Junior from across the hall again, and I was ready to give him an earful for banging on my door and running away all the dang time.

“We should really speak privately.”

I snort. It's not ladylike, but I'd rather be rude than dead any sooner than I already will be. "If you think I'm letting you in here, you're wrong. Plus, my boyfriend is sleeping, and he gets really cranky if he gets woken up." I don't have a boyfriend, and I certainly wouldn't have a cranky one.

He moves his hand, reaching into his inside jacket pocket, and I slam the door in his face and flip the deadbolt before he can pull out whatever he's grasping.

"I didn't mean to frighten you, Miss Devlin, my apologies." I can hear him clearly since the walls in this place are paper-thin.

"Sure, I'm not dumb enough to open the door again, mister. If you have something to tell me, say it now or get the heck out of here."

A small white card slides under the door, and I hop back before realizing what it is. It looks safe enough, but I've read stories on Reddit about girls being drugged just from touching something they think is harmless.

"I don't feel comfortable talking in the hall, Miss Devlin. I assure you this is to your benefit. Please call the number on the card. If you're not willing to arrange a meeting, we might discuss matters over the phone," he offers.

"What's this about?" I have to admit that his tenacity definitely has my interest piqued.

"Your family," he answers just loud enough for me to hear him through the door, but anyone else eavesdropping in on our conversation would have a hard time picking up his reply.

"They are dead. I can't pay their bills. Do you think if I had that kind of money, I'd be living here in this crap hole?" Damn hospitals, they are worse than leeches. They take everything from you, then squeeze you for blood after. I knew he was a bill collector. What a waste of time and money to send him here.

"I'm here at the behest of your grandparents, but I'm afraid I cannot say any more under these conditions. Call the number on the card."

"My grandparents?" I whisper past the whooshing sound in my ears. I don't have any family. Mom told me she and dad were both orphans, and that was how they bonded and fell in love, so what the heck is he talking about?

With shaking fingers, I jerk the door open to accuse him of lying, but the hall is empty. I shut and lock the door again while examining the card at my feet. There's fancy silver lettering shimmering up at me, but I'm still too apprehensive to reach down and grab it.

I pull it away from the door with the toe of my sock-covered foot, worried

a draft will suck it back under the slot and it will be gone forever, and then I head into the kitchen. I don't want to use my gloves to pick it up, but I do have some dollar store sandwich bags I can put over my fingers.

I know I must look like a crazy person, and I feel like a crazy person, but it's better to be crazy than dead or worse.

I still don't bring the thing close to my face when I pick it up to read it.

VIRGIL HAYNSWORTH

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WHEN I FLIP the card over, there's a hand scrawled phone number on the back in black ink. "What the heck is he doing all the way up here from South Carolina?" I flip the card over again, knowing I didn't miss anything, but my curiosity is piqued, and who says things like *behest*? I roll my eyes. It must be some sort of scam anyway. I don't have grandparents.

I toss the card into the soil of one of the dying plants stationed near the door. I can't bring myself to throw it in the trash yet, and I'm not setting it on the counter or the table. I'll get rid of the card next time I remember to water my mom's flowers.



I TWIST the key in my deadbolt, locking up my apartment before making sure to avoid the super sticky spot to the right of my door. I feel like the stain has gotten bigger in the few months since I've lived in the unit. I still find myself looking at the ceiling to make sure there isn't some dead body up on the third floor slowly decaying and dripping down. Yeah, my mind is a dark place sometimes.

Like a creeper, I look through the dingy glass at the main level of my unit, searching the parking lot. It's been hours since Virgil left, but you can never be too careful with people who want something from you. When all I see are the same crappy cars I always see, I shake off the dramatics and push

the door open so I can make it to the bus stop with only a minute or two to spare. I don't feel like chatting with the randoms that hang out at the covered bench, and it's cold as hell outside.

The driver doesn't even look in my direction when I climb in and take the first available seat toward the front of the bus, but she knows my stop and always lets me off on the corner near the restaurant so I don't have to backtrack down Michigan Ave, even when I don't ask her to let me off early. I appreciate her for it.

The ride is short, less than ten minutes, before it's time for me to get off. "Thanks," I mumble before waiting for the doors to open and let me out. I'm eager to get into work. The bus smelled like someone crapped their pants, and the frigid, late December air seems to cut through all my layers. At least I know it will be warm inside the restaurant.

"Hey, Nova," Elijah, one of the other servers, says as I breach the doorway.

"Hey," I reply, keeping my hands close to my face to blow warm air on my fingers. The thin knit gloves don't do much to keep me warm, but they are better than nothing. "Been busy?" I question, looking around Bobcat's, the restaurant I work at. It isn't packed, but most of the tables are full, so hopefully, that means it's a good night for tips.

"Meh." He shrugs noncommittally. I almost ask him what he's waiting for, since he's not one to usually stand around, but after another second, he asks, "Want to have a drink later?"

"I'm closing," I tell him. It's my way of saying no without saying no. My age wouldn't be an issue here, but I'm not interested for several reasons.

"I'm here until ten. I could hang out and wait for you to get off," he replies lightly.

I wasn't expecting him to say that, so I don't have a response mapped out. The look of panic on my face must be effective enough to answer for me, because he adds, "It's no big deal if you have something else going on. I just thought you might want to grab a drink. Maybe we can do it some other time," he says with a flat smile before walking away.

I groan on the inside. Now I'm going to have to see him for the rest of the night, and I know my embarrassed brain is going to try to come up with some excuse to tell him about why I can't hang out, but I'll just end up looking like an idiot and rambling if I try to talk to him. I need to keep my head down and focus on work so I don't make this awkwardness even worse.

“Why didn’t you just say, ‘Not tonight, maybe another time?’” I mutter to myself while shoving my stuff into one of the back lockers.

“Nova, get your ass on the floor,” Veronica, the night manager, hollers into the back room. I roll my eyes. I’m not even due to start for another ten minutes, and it isn’t like we are swamped.

“Coming,” I yell, giving up on getting the metal door to latch with all my crap loaded inside.

I grab a black half apron from the shelf, wrap the thing around my hips, and tie it in the back. A few of the other girls wrap it around front too, but I can barely make a bow when I do that since my waist is thicker and it looks dumb.

“Where am I?” I ask Nico, one of the bartenders. He’s a hard worker who’s friendly but private, and we get along great.

He doesn’t even look up from his pour to tell me, “You’re with me. There’s a game tonight, and I’m not dealing with Candy’s lazy ass.”

I let out a relieved sigh. The bar is usually the busiest, which means I can avoid Elijah, and being occupied will make the night go faster. “Am I taking over for Veronica?” I scan the booths and tables surrounding the bar, noting a few glasses that need to be filled and a guy who’s just looking around like he’s waiting for something. It’s not hard to tell by his empty plate that he wants the bill.

“Can’t take over when she hasn’t done shit,” he says, leaning closer to keep his words between us.

I imagine Veronica used to work hard at some point—she would have had to in order to become shift manager—but those days are long gone. She only takes tables if we’re short staffed, and even then, she bitches so much, I would rather do twice the work than listen to her complain.

“I’ll check on everyone.” I make a quick round, introducing myself and asking if anyone needs anything, even though I know she’s going to keep most of the tips from this group.

“Veronica, sixty-seven needs to be closed out.” I poke my head into the kitchen, interrupting her conversation with another server.

“Just use my number.” She rolls her eyes as if I’m the one not doing my job, then resumes her chat. I’m not even supposed to know her number, let alone use it, but she does this kind of crap all the time, and it sucks, because it’s a surefire way to keep all the tips.

I let the door swing shut and get the man his bill, not bothering to disturb

her for the other customers when I know she will give me the same response. Maybe I'll get lucky and some of them will leave cash tips.

"Hey," Elijah says, startling me, even though he kept his voice low.

"Yeah?" I pull my head back and search his face, silently hoping there's a reason he's standing so close to me other than to ask why I turned him down for a drink.

"Some older guy asked to be seated in your section. Just thought I would give you a heads-up."

"Really?" I glance at the lobby area, bouncing my eyes over the group that's waiting, but I don't spy anyone familiar.

"Yeah, not a regular that I recognized. It's some dude in a suit," he adds.

"Thanks," I tell him sincerely. It's on the tip of my tongue to add more and give him an explanation about why I didn't take him up on the drink offer, but Emily, the hostess, steps to the side, allowing me to see the spiffy lawyer dude behind her. "Crap."

"What's wrong?" Elijah pivots to look in the same direction I am. "That's him. You know him," he surmises from my reaction.

"Not really," I tell him truthfully without divulging more information.

"Sure looks like you do," he says under his breath while walking away.

Emily leads him to my only empty table. Joey just got done bussing it a few seconds ago, so it's still damp. I watch as Virgil looks down at the scarred wood top with utter disdain curling his lip. Maybe the loafers aren't fake and he really is as snooty as he seems.

He blots at the table with the napkins he must have asked Emily for as he angles himself into the chair. Normally, I would head straight over and offer to dry the table for him, but I can't seem to get my feet moving. I wasn't expecting him to show up here. How did he even know I worked here? Did he follow me?

I wait for Emily to leave the table, then meet her at the hostess station after walking the long way around. "Hey," she chirps with a smile.

I get straight to the point. "Hey, that guy asked to be in my section?"

Her smile slips into a frown. "Yeah."

"What did he say?" I keep my voice down so the waiting patrons can't hear me.

"He just asked to be seated with you. He waited a while for a table too. Is he a creeper or something? I'm sorry." She looks over her shoulder as if she's trying to get a glimpse of him again.

“It’s fine,” I reply dismissively. There’s no way she could have known I’d prefer he wasn’t here at all, let alone at one of my tables.

I make a point of stopping at a few other tables before finally heading over to Virgil, though I can feel his eyes on me the entire time, or maybe it just feels like that, because when I do decide to head over, his face is behind a menu, and he’s not watching me at all.

“Mr. Haynsworth,” I greet coldly, or at least I try.

“Miss Devlin.” He does icy much better.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“You *may*.” He raises his brow as if to reprimand me for the way I asked. “Bottled water if you have it, a scotch, neat, if you do not.”

“Why are you here?” I question as soon as he’s done speaking.

“I’m a busy man, Miss Devlin. I don’t have time to wait for you to come to your senses and agree to meet with me.”

“So you can tell me here” —I make a point of looking around at all the full tables and loud crowd— “what you couldn’t tell me in my empty hall?”

“If you’re willing to accompany me to my vehicle, yes. Otherwise, I’m here to convince you to speak with me at your earliest convenience.” There’s a sardonic smile smeared across his face, as if even asking me to speak with him is below him and he’s indulging me by doing so.

“You thought showing up here would do that?” I take the plastic menu he’s offering.

“I’m prepared to make it worth your while.”

My spine goes ramrod straight. There are a few things a man can say that will stick in a girl’s craw, and implying she can be easily bought is one of them. “How’s that, Mr. Haynsworth?” I ask through clenched teeth.

“I will give you five thousand dollars to speak with me.” He meets my eyes, and I get the feeling he’s dead serious.

Well, I suppose that’s not *easily* bought. “I’m not signing nothing.”

“Anything, I’m not signing anything,” he corrects, seeming to grow more and more aggravated by the moment.

I narrow my eyes, giving him a glare, and use my best low-class slang. “What’da want ta eat?”

His lips purse into a constipated scowl. “I’ll have the ribeye, rare, baked potato, no butter, with broccoli, and light on the salt.” His eyes rake over me again as if I’m a heathen and eating here is the last thing he wants to do. I’m not sure what crawled up his butt and died since he left my apartment, but he

is in a sour mood.

I walk away without another word and submit his order correctly, even though I'm tempted to enter extra butter, then ask Nico for a scotch neat, because we don't have bottled water.

I don't return to his table after dropping off his drink until his order is ready, but I keep my eye on him when possible. At one point, he had a hushed conversation on his phone where it seemed like he didn't speak but listened a great deal, and I have to admit I'm curious about what he wants to tell me.

After his call, there was a notable shift in his demeanor, so much so that when I returned to the table, he actually apologized for his poor manners. "Please excuse me, though I have no right to ask. I've had a trying few days."

My own irritation crumbles as the stranger's dissolves. I was goading him, and I knew it. "It's okay, I haven't exactly made it easy on you."

He looks down at the food I placed in front of him, then back up with a pleased expression. "This smells divine, thank you. Have you considered my offer?"

Is he kidding? It's the only thing I've been able to think about. Five thousand is a big deal. "What's so important?" I'm fishing, but maybe I'll learn something.

"If you agree to call me tonight, I will tell you."

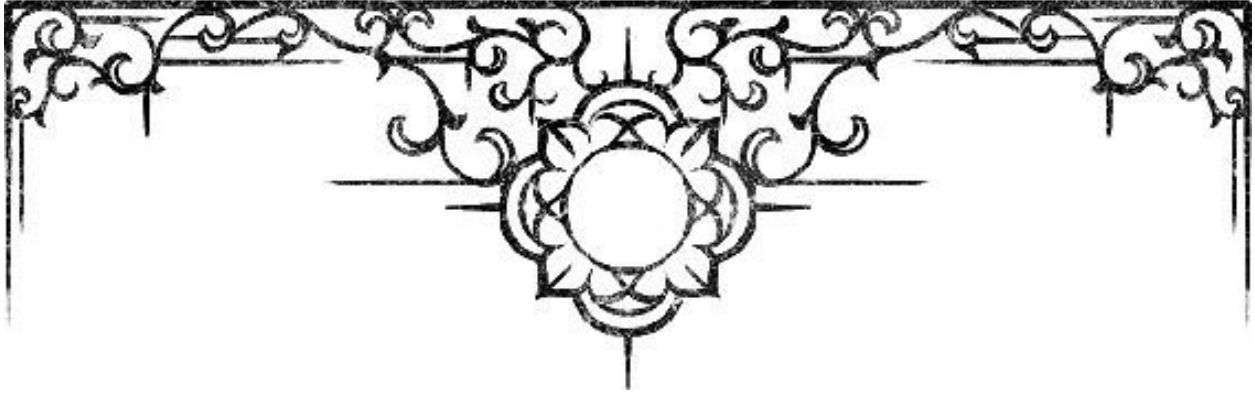
"On the phone?" I confirm.

"Yes." He's holding his knife in one hand and his fork in the other as if he can't wait to eat.

"Fine, it'll be late though. After I get off work."

"What time do you get off?" He ducks his head briefly at my suspicious glare. "I was merely going to offer you a ride home, so you didn't have to take the bus. Also, so I might know when to expect your call, but I can be patient."

"So you did follow me. I'll check on you in a few," I tell him, then slip away from his table with a strange feeling of anticipation in my stomach.



I'm uneasy when I walk the few blocks to the bus stop. Not only do I feel like there are eyes on me, but the five bands of hundred-dollar bills Mr. Haynsworth left on my table in the padded envelope feel like a lead weight. I was too paranoid to put them in my bag, so I shoved the envelope of fresh bank bills into my underwear at my hip.

I thought five grand would look like a lot more money, but I've never seen that many hundred-dollar bills, so what do I know? I didn't expect him to leave the money. Hell, I half convinced myself it was a lie just to get me to agree to talk to him, but now that I have it, I'm even more nervous. What is he going to expect from me in return?

I breathe a sigh of relief when I step into the warm interior of the bus. It still smells like crap, but it doesn't bother me as badly as it did earlier. I check behind the bus a few times to see if anyone is following, but it's too bright inside for me to make out the types of cars traveling the road.

When the driver rolls to a smooth stop at my corner, I almost lose the nerve to get off the bus. What if Mr. Haynsworth just gave me the money to lull me into a false sense of security, and he's really planning on taking it all back when he catches me walking home alone?

Knowing I can't ride the bus forever, and every stop would make my walk home longer, I finally get my rump up off the seat and head to the exit.

"Careful walking," the older man rumbles in a raspy voice that speaks of years of smoking.

"Thank you," I mutter, wondering if his words are an omen I shouldn't ignore. The doors snap closed behind me the moment my second foot hits the pavement, and I have to step away from the curb quickly when the driver pulls away, leaving me isolated on the street.

With my keys already palmed, I make the short walk to the entrance of

my apartment building with my head straight forward, and I don't exhale fully until I get into my building.

I was half convinced I would find the fancy lawyer waiting at my door for me, since he didn't snatch me off the street, but my hall is blessedly empty. I can hear the other tenants watching TV and listening to music, but I don't even slow down.

When I flip the deadbolt into place after dashing into my unit, I bang my forehead against the dented metal door to allow my heart rate to slow.

My phone and the money volley for my attention. I didn't get a chance to count all the bills at work when I secreted away into the bathroom to look at it, but I did flip through each stack to make sure it wasn't a bunch of singles or paper.

Now that I'm home, I pull all five bank wrapped stacks out of my pants and lay them on the kitchen counter. My heart starts beating fast again as I think about all the things I could do with this money. I could get a car, a better apartment, and move out of the area, but most likely, I'll tuck it away for a rainy day. Just knowing I have it if anything happens would be such a relief.

With a little dread in my stomach, I pull my phone from my back pocket and reach for the card with his number. The soil is so dry, I have to blow off a few crumbs of dirt that stick to the heavy paper before dialing.

He picks up on the first ring. "I wasn't sure you would call." I can't tell if his tone holds begrudging respect or a reprimand.

"I said I would," I counter, feeling slightly defensive. "What do you need to talk to me about?" I lower myself onto my lumpy couch to get off my feet, but I keep my eyes on the money as if it might disappear now that I'm on the phone with him.

"Your grandparents would like you to come home," he says slowly.

"I told you, my grandparents are dead. Maybe you have the wrong person." Even as I say it, I doubt it's the truth.

"Nova Devlin, born on March twelfth to Clara and Grant Devlin."

I suck in a breath when he says my mother's name, even though I was expecting there might be some truth to his words. "I don't understand," I mutter reflexively.

"I assumed as much. Your grandparents are very much alive, Nova, and they have been trying to contact you since they learned of your existence."

"Why would my parents tell me they were dead?" I whisper, thinking out

loud. They must be horrible people, right? Why else would my parents tell me they didn't have any family? I rarely even asked them about it because I could tell it made my mom sad.

"Your mother left home when she was younger than you are now, Nova, when your grandparents forbid her from seeing Grant."

"What? Why would they forbid her from seeing my dad?"

"I believe that question is for your family to answer. As I said, I'm here on their behest. They can't leave their home right now, but they desperately want to know you." I imagine a little old man and woman with white hair sitting in recliners, regretting whatever decision they made to alienate my mom.

"What about my dad's parents? Are they dead?" It feels odd asking this question and hoping the answer is yes—not because I want them to be dead, but because I feel like everything was a lie and I need something to be true.

"You would have to speak to your grandparents about that, Nova," he answers. I suppose that makes sense. Virgil is just a lawyer, so I can't imagine he has all the details on the family drama.

"Why didn't they call me themselves?"

"Astrid said she wanted the best chance to get you to listen and thought someone coming up here to personally speak with you would get the best results. I got the impression she felt like this was her final opportunity."

"Astrid? That's her name?"

"Yes, and your grandfather's name is Rory."

Astrid means star, and my mom named me Nova. She always told me I was her bright star. She wouldn't have named me something so close to her mom's name if she hated her, right? "This is...a lot. I..."

"I know, which is why I insisted on privacy, but there's more you should know."

"I'm listening," I tell him when he doesn't immediately continue.

"As I said before, your grandparents would like you to come home, to return to the estate, where you will have plenty of opportunities in life, such as attending Cadieux College, and get to know your family. I'm prepared to return you to them this very evening if you're willing."

"What? I'm not just picking up and leaving with you." Is this guy crazy? And did he say estate?

"I understand your reservations, Miss Devlin, I do, but this is a time sensitive matter." He doesn't divulge why it's time sensitive, but it's not hard

to jump to the conclusion that it may have something to do with my grandparents' health. What else could it be?

That's a strange thought. Up until today, I already thought they were dead, and it never really bothered me since I never met them, but it tugs at something in me now. Maybe it's because the only family I ever had is gone, and this is like some weird, unasked dream to belong somewhere again come true.

"I can't just trust you at your word, Mr. Haynsworth, pretty promises or not. You may think I'm being stubborn, but in my world, being smart keeps me alive."

"I was worried you would feel that way, which is why I went ahead and booked you a flight on a commercial airline in two days."

"Two days?" I look around my crummy apartment, thinking about all the things I would have to do before I could pick up and leave, and it dawns on me that it's not much. I don't have anyone who would miss me if I left, other than some of my coworkers, and even then, it's not really me they would miss. They would miss how hard I work and be pissed if they had to take over my shifts on short notice.

My lease was only for six months, a perk of living near a college—cheap rent in crappy apartments with short-term leasing. With the money he gave me, I could pay off the two remaining months, and if South Carolina didn't work out, I could come back, find a new job, and pick right back up where I left off. I wouldn't even have to do much to clean out my fridge. Damn, now I'm a little sad because I'm examining how pitiful and lonely I am.

"They have been waiting for a long time to meet you," he tells me solemnly.

"I have a lease." I make a last-ditch effort, even though my resolve disappeared a few minutes ago.

"I'll take care of it and any other bills you have." Does he sound too eager?

"I need the option to come back if I want to, with a place to stay."

"You won't want to return to this, Miss Devlin, not after meeting your family." He sounds very sure of himself. "But I will make sure your lease is paid in full for the next year, and I will get you an open-ended ticket if that makes you more comfortable with the arrangement."

Dang, who knew I was so good at negotiating?

"I'll give you the night to think it over, Miss Devlin, and deliver your

itinerary along with your flight details tomorrow. I'm sure that will give you enough time to get matters in order for your trip."

Calling it a trip seems easier. I'm not picking up and moving several states away, I'm just going on a trip, a vacation of sorts. "I'll have to get luggage," I say out loud, but I'm really speaking to myself.

"No need, everything you require will be provided."

"You had me, but that made it creepy, Virgil. You expect me not to even pack my clothes and toiletries?"

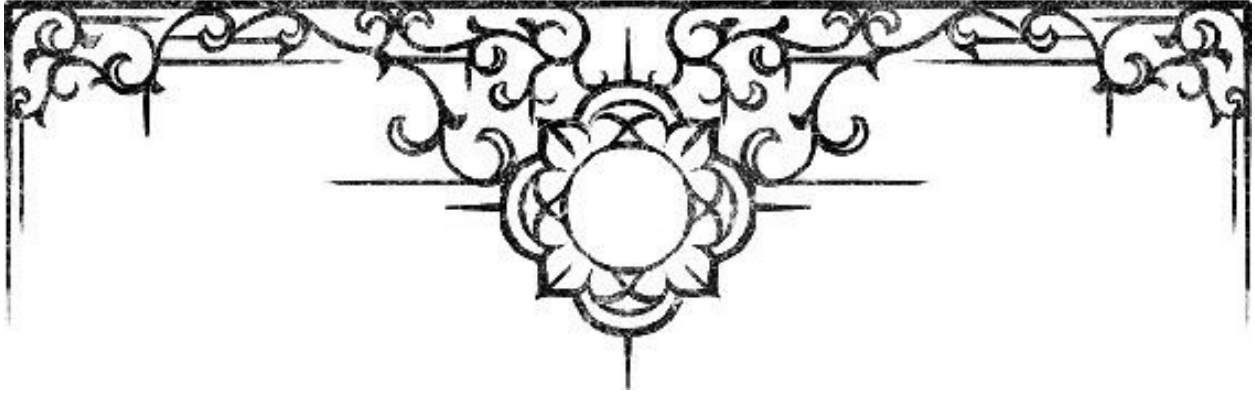
"Pardon me, I just mean that once you're home, you will have access to resources to acquire anything you might need or want."

"Sounds sketchy, and I don't like owing people. I'll bring my own things," I counter. There is no way I'm getting stranded in South Carolina without clothes, even with five grand in cash. If this doesn't work out, maybe I'll like the area. It doesn't get nearly as cold down there as it does in Michigan.

"I'll have some luggage delivered with your other things. Is there anything else you need, like a car to take you to the airport?"

"No, I'll arrange that." I refuse the offer, still too leery. I'm not special enough for someone to concoct this elaborate of a plan, but I still can't accept his offer.

"I'll speak with you soon, Miss Devlin. Call me if you need assistance making arrangements." Virgil hangs up the phone, leaving me wondering what the heck I just agreed to and how crazy I am.



*B*y the time the afternoon rolls around, I've convinced myself I imagined the entire conversation with the lawyer two nights ago and upturned my life for no reason. If it weren't for the cash tucked into the fanny pack I picked up at Target yesterday, along with other wasted money purchases, like a new toothbrush and other travel crap, I would think I imagined the entire thing.

I spent a little time on my phone, looking up Astrid and Rory Devlin, but I found zilch on either of them, which really makes me think I'm insane for believing any of this.

Kirby was pretty shocked when I called to let him know I'd worked my last shift at Bobcat's. He pleaded for me to reconsider for all of two seconds, then he was a jerk for me quitting without notice, which I understand. The worst part is, I might have quit a decent paying gig for nothing.

I haven't heard from Virgil at all. There have been no deliveries of luggage, plane tickets, or itineraries to speak of. Maybe he's just some guy who gets off on ruining people's lives, but then why would he give me so much money? My thoughts circle again.

Just when I'm about to get my rump off the couch and put my meager stacks of clothes back in my closet, there's a hard knock at the door. I rush over, but I don't unlock it right away. "Who is it?"

"Delivery, I need a signature."

I check the peephole to see a man in a dark jacket standing in front of the door, and nerves fill my stomach. Maybe I was hoping it was a lie. That would have been easier to cope with.

"Okay," I reply and unlock the door. My eyes scan the bag in his hand. It's from a designer store. This guy is lucky he didn't get robbed, but then I take a long look at him and change my mind. He's a big man, with a neck

like a tree trunk and hands that look like meaty hammers.

He lifts an arm, extending a handheld electronic that looks like a phone in a bulky case. “Nova Devlin, you need to sign before I can bring the rest up.”

I look at the phone, only seeing an X and a line next to it.

“Your finger will do.” He nods to get me moving. I scribble my signature on the line, then hand it back, prompting him to turn over the heavy paper bag with the designer label on the side.

“I’ll be back with the rest,” he says, slipping the device into a pocket. When he leaves, I notice the door across the hall is cracked, and Junior’s mom is eyeing me with a look of disdain. She doesn’t try to hide her dislike for me or her snooping.

“What you be doing to get a delivery like that?”

“Nothing you’re implying,” I mutter under my breath. I usually try to play nice, since I don’t like to get into trouble with people who know where I live, but the last few days have either made me brave or stupid. Probably stupid.

She clicks her tongue at me but still doesn’t close her door. If we were neighborly, I might tell her I’m leaving for a little while, but I’m afraid she would use the info against me in some way, so I keep my mouth shut as the man returns, climbing the stairs with a box so large, I can’t even see his head anymore, just his beefy arms wrapped around the thing.

I immediately back into my apartment, thinking I don’t want him to set it down in the hall in case it’s too heavy for me to move. “One more trip,” he tells me after placing the box down on my threadbare carpet.

“Okay,” I agree slowly. This time, I wait just inside the door and only open it when I hear him coming up the stairs. He has two boxes this time, stacked on top of each other, making it nearly as large as the last load. He huffs and stands back to look around my apartment. I don’t bother examining him for his reaction. I know it’s a dump, so there’s no point in pretending it’s not.

I don’t know what I’m supposed to do now. Do I tip him? Once the idea strikes, I dash over to my bag and rifle through my tip money to pull out a ten, then I reconsider and go for the twenty. It’s more than I would have ever given up before, but I didn’t have extra then.

“Thank you for hauling all this up here.” I extend my hand, feeling weird, even though I make a living on tips.

“You’re welcome.” He tilts his head as if I surprised him, then he lifts his

hand in a stop gesture, halting me from giving him the money. “That’s been taken care of. Do you need a hand packing, or should I wait outside until you’re ready to go?” He clasps his hands in front of his body as if he’s standing at the ready.

“Help me pack?” I question, confused.

“Your flight leaves in three hours. You should take a look at the file.” He nods his dark head toward the bag I set on the counter.

“File?” I sound like an idiot with all these echoed half questions.

“Yes, I’m your escort.”

“My escort.” I roll my lips in to make sure I don’t repeat anything else.

“It’s in the file,” he reiterates.

I shuffle over to the bag and find it filled with a few smaller boxes and one monogrammed envelope style folder that matches the designer label. The gold latch opens with a push of a button and a click. My mind cannot process how much this single item is probably worth, let alone what else is in the bags. The interior of the envelope contains several papers to sort through. While I’m glancing at the sheets, the man says, “You may call me Alden.”

I finally see a paper with his name and read through it briefly. “You’re my escort,” I say, looking at him in disbelief. I don’t even know what that means.

“Yes.” He’s still standing in the same spot. I’m not sure he even moved a muscle—and he has a lot of them—other than to speak.

“I don’t need an escort. I didn’t agree to one either,” I argue, knowing it’s not this guy’s fault, but I’m already overwhelmed, and I’m not happy about this little addition.

“You signed the contract,” he tells me, looking in my direction.

“What contract—Oh you... I thought I was signing for the packages.”

“You should always read anything you sign,” he warns belatedly.

“Let me guess, I’ll owe you five thousand bucks when this is over?”

“No, you are not financially beholden to me at all.”

“So you’re here to make sure I get on the plane and go to South Carolina?” I tap the papers on my thigh as my aggravation builds.

“Among other things,” he concedes.

“What other things?”

“I am your escort, your protector.” He says the words slowly, as if he thinks I’m dumb, or he’s finally catching on that I had no clue about any of this.

“My protector from what? Someone robbing me of all this crap?” I kick at one of the boxes.

His brows rise, but he doesn't show any other sign of indulging me with an answer. “Where is your boyfriend?” He looks down the single short hallway.

It takes me a moment to figure out why he would be asking. I told Virgil I had a boyfriend.

“Not here. Virgil didn't say anything about an escort,” I deflect, changing the subject.

“Is he going to be a problem?”

“No.” I cross my arms over my chest, curious what kind of a problem a boyfriend could be in this situation.

“Shall I wait outside, Miss Devlin?”

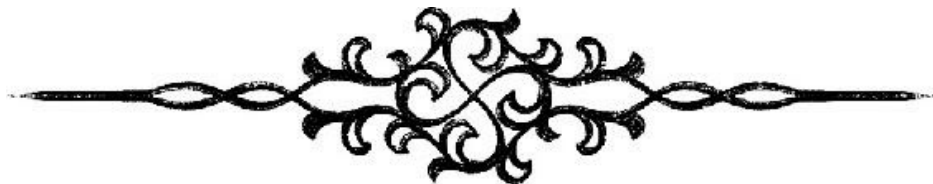
“Don't bother, Junior's momma would probably call the cops on you or try to get her kids to rob you.” I look him up and down. I doubt they would even have the nerve. Alden looks like he eats little children for breakfast with his protein shakes.

“Shall I help you pack?” He looks around, and I catch a strange expression on his face I can't quite read. Maybe it's disbelief.

“No, you can have a seat if you want to. I have to open these boxes. I'm guessing it's luggage, but I'm hoping it's not this same stuff.” I push the bag on the counter as I walk by to get a knife from the drawer to cut the tape.

“It's not to your liking?” Alden questions.

“Are you kidding? Do you know how much this stuff costs? It's a waste of money.”



“ALL THIS IS SUPPOSED to come on a plane with me, but half of it is empty. Aren't there limits to what you can bring?” I'm standing at the curb with Alden, grateful for his presence now as we wait for the oversized SUV Uber

he ordered.

“Yes, I know, I watched you pack it. And not for you.”

I sort through his answers to my questions. “Who hired you?” I turn to face him.

He takes the time to look down at me before answering. “Your grandparents.” His dark eyes roam over my face as if he’s searching for something.

“Do you know them?”

He looks away. “Knowing them in your context suggests a familiarity that we do not share. I have worked for them for a year or two,” he hedges in a formal tone.

“You’ve met them though?”

“I have,” he answers, but he doesn’t volunteer anything else.

An older white suburban pulls up to the curb, and the passenger window rolls down, but not before Alden shifts so he’s standing in front of me. He takes this protector thing pretty seriously by the looks of it.

I lean around him to see a younger dude with acne ask, “You need me to open the back?”

“Wait for me here, Miss Devlin,” Alden tells me, then louder, he replies to the driver, “Yes.”

It only takes him a minute to load the trunk, suitcases, and other bags into the back of the SUV, then he returns to the curb and opens the rear passenger door, motioning for me to get in with a wave of his hand. I let him see my side-eye as I climb in and plop my rump on the seat.

“That your dad?” the guy asks, watching Alden jog around the other side in the rearview mirror.

“Hardly,” I reply softly as Alden slides in next to me. First, he doesn’t look that old, and second, he’s about a foot taller than me, and that’s just the beginning of our differences. His eyes and hair are a deep brown, while my hair could be called muddy blonde. When I was younger, it was nearly white, but that dulled by the time I was in third grade. My eyes are a funny blue green color that seem too bright for my pale skin, but they are the best thing I have going in the looks department, so I’ll take them.

“Airport?” the driver asks as if we didn’t already give him the destination on the app.

“Yes,” Alden answers for us.

Nervousness I was able to ignore when I was too focused on Alden’s

appearance surges through my stomach. I can't believe I'm about to get on a plane to meet people I didn't even know existed three days ago. "I'm probably going to end up in a ditch somewhere," I mumble, assuming no one will hear me over the man singing about how much he loves his truck on the radio.

"I'm here to prevent that or anything else, Miss Devlin," Alden tells me, but his tone is flat. Maybe I offended him, and he thinks I don't believe he could protect me. How the heck do I tell him I'm more worried about the stupid choices I've made up until this point than I am about him?

"Nova, you can call me Nova," I murmur, then let my head fall back against the seat for the short ride.

"What do we do now?" I ask once we're in the airport. Considering I didn't know he would be with me, I'm relying pretty heavily on Alden.

"Have you ever flown commercial?" He pushes a trolley with all my luggage stacked on it, and I'm glad he's the one doing it, because he gets lots of looks, and I can't tell if it's just him or the expensive brand that has everyone's attention.

"I've never flown period," I tell him softly, but he's got super hearing, so I know he picked it up. He does a quick double take of the side of my face.

"It's not that unusual," I defend.

"Why didn't you take the jet? It's much nicer, and you wouldn't have had to deal with all...this," he sneers as he glances around the busy airport.

"This seemed like the safer bet. Call me crazy, but an uptight dude randomly showed up at my door with promises about grandparents who I thought died before I was born wanting to meet me, so I'm a little skeptical about his motives to get me on a plane halfway across the country." I'm exaggerating about the distance, but it feels that way to me.

Alden slows to a stop, his arms jerking the trolley back so the trunk shifts. I turn to look at him. He has one brow raised, looking like that wrestler who turned into an actor but with a little more hair.

"What?" I ask, looking around when he doesn't say anything. "You think I'm nuts for even going at all, don't you?"

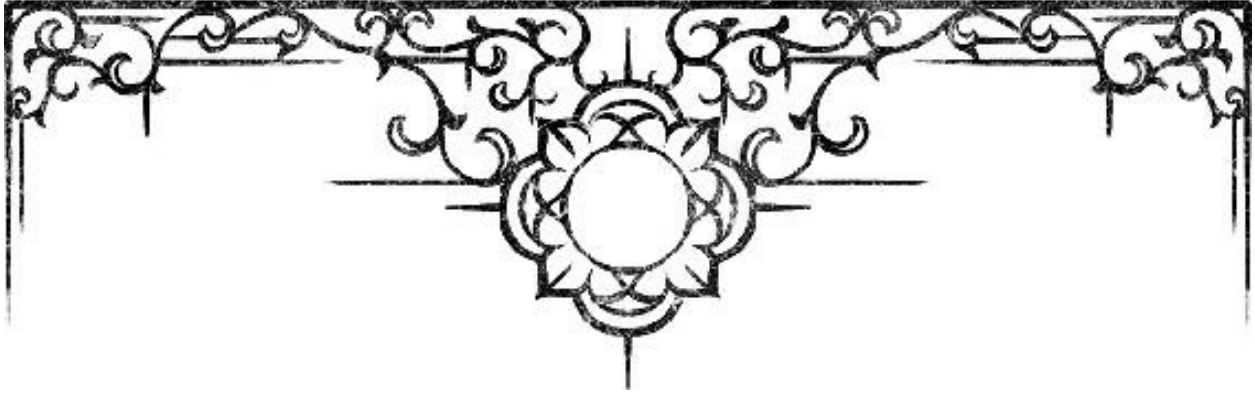
"Miss Devlin—"

"Nova," I interject.

"I have no idea what to think," he continues.

"Same page." I gesture between us. "If you see me on the news next week, or a Walmart corkboard for missing people, it'll be safe to assume I

was an idiot.”



While we're waiting for my overpriced luggage to make it to the sorter thing, I pull the folded itinerary out of my bag. I refused to bring the small, monogrammed duffel with me when there was no need, so I left it in the luggage trunk, along with the fancy folder.

I scanned this sheet several times while we were on the plane, which wasn't much different than riding a bus, other than takeoff and landing. It says there will be a driver waiting to take me to my "family estate."

"Are you coming with me, you know, to the house?" I ask Alden. I figure he's as safe as I'm going to get. He could have killed me several times already, but he only seems to look out for me.

"Yes." He says it with a snap of finality, as if he thinks I'm trying to get rid of him. Little does he know...

"Cool, how long did they hire you to be my escort?" Calling him my protector sounds weird, but escort is almost laughable. When I think of an escort, an expensive call girl comes to mind. That doesn't fit Alden's image at all.

"Until I'm dismissed."

"How long is that?"

"So eager to get rid of me, Miss Devlin?" He reaches for my trunk and the other matching luggage coming down the conveyor belt.

"Nova, and no, you're kind of growing on me. Plus, I figure if something goes down, I can probably run faster than you."

"You do, do you?" I think that's a smile I see on the corner of his lip, but it's gone too fast to really tell.

"I could take you," I tease. It's been a while since I let my guard down around anyone, and it's not like I have much of a choice with him, so I might as well make the best of it.

“Surely,” he quips dryly.

“So you’ll be there when I meet them?” I ask once we start making our way to the exit with the loaded trolley. My stomach is in knots, and it’s not because I’m worried I’m setting myself up to be abducted. The reality that my parents hid something pretty dang important from me my entire life is sinking in, not to mention there was probably a good reason for that, and here I am, walking straight toward it.

“The property is very well protected.” He gives me a non-answer.

“From what, and why does that matter?”

“Any outside threat.” He glances down at me. “You’ll be free of me in certain locations.”

I laugh nervously. “Is there a moat surrounding the castle?”

“No, but the fence is impossible to cross without detection, and they would never make it to the house.”

My feet stop moving, and I gape at his back. I don’t think he’s joking. Alden stops after me, proving he is very aware of what I’m doing. “What are they, royalty or something?” I’m being flippant, but this is messing with my head.

“You really have no idea.” He says it as if he’s speaking more to himself than me, but I answer anyway.

“No, and I’m thinking maybe I’m not ready for this.” I look around, seeing countless strangers streaming past me—a sea of people with destinations in mind and futures planned out. Why the hell did I let some money and the promise of a family lure me here?

“Nova,” Alden says softly, slowly. He must know I’m about two seconds from running, because he releases the trolley and turns to face me fully. “They will not hurt you.” There’s conviction in his tone, but I don’t know him well enough to know if I can believe it.

“Why didn’t I know about them? Who are they?”

“I can’t answer those questions.” Alden takes one step closer to me. I know if I run, he’s going to come after me, and we’ll make a scene, which is the last thing I want.

“Can’t or won’t?” I ask, wondering why I put any trust in him at all. Am I really that desperate?

He doesn’t placate me with a response, which gives me my answer. He knows the truth, but he won’t tell me, which means his loyalty isn’t to me at all. It’s to the people paying him, my grandparents, which I should have

assumed all along.

“I want to go back to my crappy apartment,” I admit out loud.

“They are expecting us, Nova, and you don’t want to disappoint them.” I can’t tell if he feels sorry for me or if his somberness means something else entirely. “They won’t hurt you,” he tells me again, but any trust I thought we were building has dried up.

When my feet remain rooted to the ground, he reaches for my arm, gripping me tightly so I couldn’t get away if I wanted to, then he comes close enough so I can hear his whispered words. “They need you, remember that, Nova.”

“Why do they need me?”

His lips thin, and I know I’m not getting an answer.

“I’m so dumb.”

“It would have been foolish to deny them. By coming this way, you will have freedoms, choices.”

“You’re saying they would have brought me here against my will?”

Alden steps back from me, and his grip on my arm loosens, leaving an ache behind. “Are you feeling better, Miss Devlin?” he questions as if the whispered conversation we just had didn’t happen and he was only checking on me because I felt ill. It’s also not lost on me that I’m Miss Devlin again.

“Fine, thank you. Must have been the flight.” I don’t meet his eyes when I answer.

“If you’re ready, the car is waiting.” He waits for me to walk ahead of him, then follows me with the trolley.

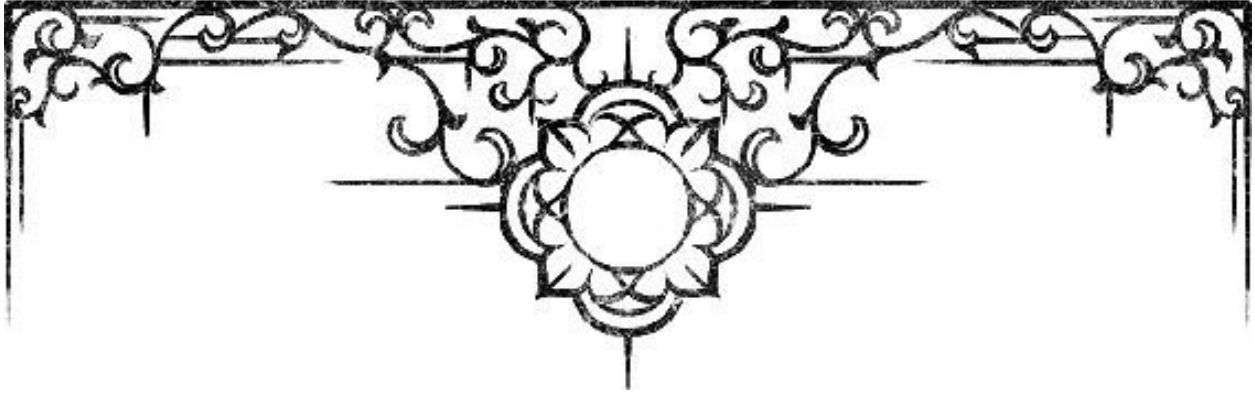
Panic flares in my stomach when we step outside and I see rows of cars lined up at the curb. I don’t even have a chance to enjoy the warmer temperature before Alden says, “This way,” then gestures toward a black SUV with the rear gate already open. There’s a man standing next to the open rear passenger door dressed in a suit. He ducks his head down when our eyes meet in some weird greeting.

Alden leaves the trolley at the curb near the rear of the vehicle, then ushers me into the backseat with his body behind mine.

The man at the door closes it the moment I’m inside, and I start to breathe heavily. Why am I more frightened to be in this car than I was on the plane? Alden slides into the seat next to me and instructs, “Buckle up,” without even looking at me.

My fingers shake as I look over my shoulder to find the belt, but I do as

I'm told. I should have run for the hills the day Virgil showed up at my door.



I lose track of time on the ride, getting lost in the plush greenery creeping along the sides of the roads and the low, hanging Spanish moss draped over trees as my mind processes the new information. Apparently, my grandparents are loaded. I assumed they had some money, considering the high dollar luggage, and I let myself get intimidated by that back at the airport, which leads to the real discovery.

Not only do they need me for something, but if I understood Alden correctly, then coming here was never a choice for me. I wonder what they'll think when they find out that I was raised as a poor kid and I have bum kidneys, assuming they don't already know everything about me.

The dense tree line gives way to small houses before opening to a small coastal town with colorful shops and restaurants lining the shoreline. "Where are we?" I ask, speaking for the first time since getting in the car.

"About twenty miles from Charleston," Alden answers before the driver can, but I watched his mouth open as if he would have. "Cadieux Island is just ahead."

"Island?" I shift to see out the windshield a little better just as the driver turns onto a two-lane bridge surrounded by clear blue water. I doubt I hide the awe in my features as we approach a large stone structure stationed on the right side of the bridge.

There's a traffic light, which is glowing green, attached to the side of the building, but the driver slows anyway as we bump over a thick line in the cement. "It's a draw bridge," Alden informs me. "It's not lifted often, since boat traffic usually goes around it, but it can be opened and closed, cutting off access to the island." Our eyes meet briefly, then he looks away to focus straight ahead again. The fact that he offered the information without me asking feels important.

I glance behind me to look at the road, and that's when I notice a small building, right at the entrance of the bridge, that almost looks like a guard shack to a gated community. There's even a red gate lifted to allow traffic through.

"This is where they live?"

"Yes, Cadieux is about eight miles from end to end. The college is in the center, and the remaining land is divided equally among the four founding families. There are no other residences besides those employed or hosted by the founders. Even the dorms are on the mainland."

"That's the college?" I ask, even though it's a moot question. The building that comes into view before we even reach the island is a gothic dream, comprised of weathered stone, tall spires, and cathedral arches that would make Notre Dame weep. It's not massive by any means, and it would be more comparable to a large high school than any university I'm used to seeing, but it's still one of the most impressive buildings I've ever seen, certainly in real life.

We slowly pass through the lush green grounds, and I feel like I'm a world away from home where everything was brown or gray, dormant for the winter. However, I don't see one student milling about or enjoying the sunshine, and it dawns on me that it's probably winter break for them.

I don't take my eyes off the school, not even when we pass the mostly empty parking lot and slip into the shade of the forest. If I didn't see the sandy coastline minutes ago, I would never believe we were on an island.

As we round a curve, tall brick fences come into view on either side of the road. They match in size and color, but the jagged black points spaced evenly along the top distinguish them from each other. To the left, the points resemble a trident, or a pitchfork, while to the right, it's more of a spade. "Your family occupies the northeast section of Cadieux." Alden points toward the spade fence.

"Who lives over there?"

I motion toward the other side, and the driver makes a sound, almost like a grunt, but it's Alden who answers. "The Morningstars."

The name catches me a little off guard. It's not every day you hear a last name synonymous with the devil.

The fence seems to go on for a mile or more, but we eventually slow down, and I see two wrought iron gates mirrored across from each other. The driver presses a button near the roof of the SUV, and the gate on the right

slowly starts to open.

As we approach the driveway to turn, the gate on the opposite side begins to peel back. A sleek black car revs toward the metal from within the property without any signs of slowing. “Oh crap.” I reach for Alden’s leg, pulling him away from the door, at the same time I point with my other hand so he’ll see the car that looks like it’s about to crash into the gate, or maybe T-bone us.

In what seems like slow motion, he looks down at my hand gripping his thigh just above the knee instead of looking out the window. The car timed the gate perfectly, and now we’re the only obstacle in its path.

I wave my hand frantically at the driver, who seems to be staring right at us, but there’s no way he could see me behind the tinted windows. Heck, all I can make out through the windshield of the car is short dark hair. My entire body tenses, and I curl into the seat, but I can’t take my eyes off the car coming right at us.

I expect to hear crunching metal and feel the SUV rock to the side, but the black car turns, its tires squealing at the last possible moment as it fishtails down the lone road.

“What a psycho,” I blurt out and look at Alden, who I now realize has his hand on my back and is leaning over me as if he was going to shield me with his body if the car did hit us.

“Morningstar,” the driver curses. I almost ask why he didn’t move or get out of the way, but it dawns on me that it was a game of chicken, and we didn’t lose.

I release my death grip on Alden’s leg and lean back in my seat, my heart thundering wildly while they both look like this is an everyday occurrence. What the hell have I gotten myself into?



WE STOP in the center of the circle drive, right in front of the home that was

clearly designed by the same architect who built the college, because it shares some of the same gothic features.

I wasn't far off with the castle comment. The façade is obscured with ivy, concealing some of the stone. It's hard to imagine knowing someone who lives here, let alone being related to them.

The door is opened by a man in slacks and a suit jacket, with light brown wavy hair tucked in neatly over his ears, but the top is a little longer. It's not until Alden urges me closer that I notice his green eyes and the silver dappled through his locks. The image of my mom flashes in my mind, and I know this man is indeed her father.

The air gets knocked out of my lungs, and my feet stop working. His eyes roam over me in much the same way I was examining him, but he doesn't show any outward signs of recognition. He's definitely not the white-haired old man I was anticipating. His age is hard to guess, but I wouldn't put him over sixty-five, and that's only because my mom was forty-one when she died.

If it weren't for Alden's palm high on my back, I'm not sure how long I would have remained unmoving and just stared at him.

"Nova," he greets after we climb the steps up to the massive, arched entrance.

"Y-Yes." I'm not proud of the croak, but there it is.

"I'm Rory Umbra, you're grandfather."

"Umbra?" I question, looking over at Alden and feeling betrayed. I have no idea why I thought they would share my last name, considering he's my mom's father, but I wish someone would have mentioned this before.

"Pardon me, please come in." He steps to the side, allowing me into the vast foyer. Maybe they have a different word for it in a house this big, but I don't know it, we just called it the front or backdoor when I was growing up.

The floors are marble, or some other stone, that gleams under the sunlight shining through the high windows. I try not to gape as I look around, but it's a hard battle. I cannot imagine my mom growing up here.

And she gave it all up. Why?

"Thank you, Alden," Rory tells my escort warmly, making me feel like the interloper I am.

"Yes, sir. Would you like me to show Miss Devlin to her quarters?" He's doing that stiff stance again, where his hands are clasped together in front of him like a soldier.

“If you wouldn’t mind, or I can call for Bridgit.” Rory ignores me to speak to Alden. Why the heck was it so important for me to drop everything and get here if I’m just being shuffled off to my *quarters*?

“It’s not a problem.”

Rory finally looks at me again, and there’s a tightening around his eyes for the briefest moment before his face becomes impassive again. “I’m sure you want to get settled after your travels. I’ll call for you this evening when Astrid can join us so we can discuss everything. I hope your trip was comfortable.”

I wouldn’t have had time to respond if I wanted to, because Rory pivots on his loafered heel and strolls away as if his rump were on fire.

“So warm and fuzzy,” I mumble under my breath. From the way Virgil described them, I was expecting a warm welcome, or at least an *I’m so glad you’re here*.

“Shall we?” Alden lifts his hand in a forward gesture and begins walking, expecting me to follow, which I reluctantly do because I don’t know what else to do.

He leads us down a long corridor, in the opposite direction Rory went, and takes a right when we reach the end of the hall. “What’s behind all these doors?” I question as I pick up my pace to keep in step with him and stop gawking.

“Rooms?”

“Duh, what kind of rooms?”

He gives me that single arched eyebrow again, probably because I just said duh. I don’t think that’s part of the normal dialogue here, or maybe he just thinks it’s strange that a twenty-year-old still says it.

“All different kinds, but none that you need to worry about. These are your rooms.” He stops at a set of arched double doors and pulls a single key from his pocket to unlock it, then he tucks it away instead of handing it over to me.

“Uh, shouldn’t that be mine?” I point to his pocket, then flush when I realize I’m also pointing at his groin.

He ignores my gesture. “You’ll have your own set.”

“Why do you need a key?”

“Because I do.” He motions for me to go into the room.

“Who else will have a key? Why bother even locking it if everyone can get in anyway?” I’m shuffling past to get through the door while keeping an

eye on him, so I don't get a look at the room until he walks in right after me, forcing me to move faster or risk him bumping into me.

"Holy crap." I forget all about the key and the ulterior motives behind why I'm here. I'm slightly embarrassed to realize I might be easier to buy than I thought.

"No one but you will have the key to your bedroom, however, the property is secure," he tells me, but I barely hear him. I'm too busy gaping at my *quarters*, which have a fully furnished living room, doors leading I don't know where, and a darkened hallway off to the right. The lead glass windows all along one wall allow late afternoon sunlight to stream in, warming the expansive room.

"The Umbras' private wing is on the north end. This is the guest wing," Alden informs me as I spin. Should I be ashamed that the sting of my supposed grandfather's chilly greeting is easier to ignore now? I find myself making excuses for him and his indifferent behavior. Maybe it's a class thing and rich people don't show emotions, or maybe my grandmother will be warmer.

"I'll let you get settled," Alden tells me and starts to back toward the door.

"Wait, you're leaving?"

"Is there something you need?" His question reminds me that a familiar face does not equal a friend. He works for the Umbras, and he's done his job by delivering me here.

I force myself to ask a question, so he doesn't know I just didn't want to be alone yet. "Am I supposed to just stay in here until someone comes to get me?"

"That's probably for the best until you speak with your grandparents. Your things should be brought along soon, so you can get settled."

"Okay," I agree, already resigned to the fact that I'm in deep waters without a lifeboat. I need to rely on myself, which isn't anything new to me. I've been taking care of myself for a while now, which is probably why I foolishly jumped at the chance of having a family that was offering me school and a home.

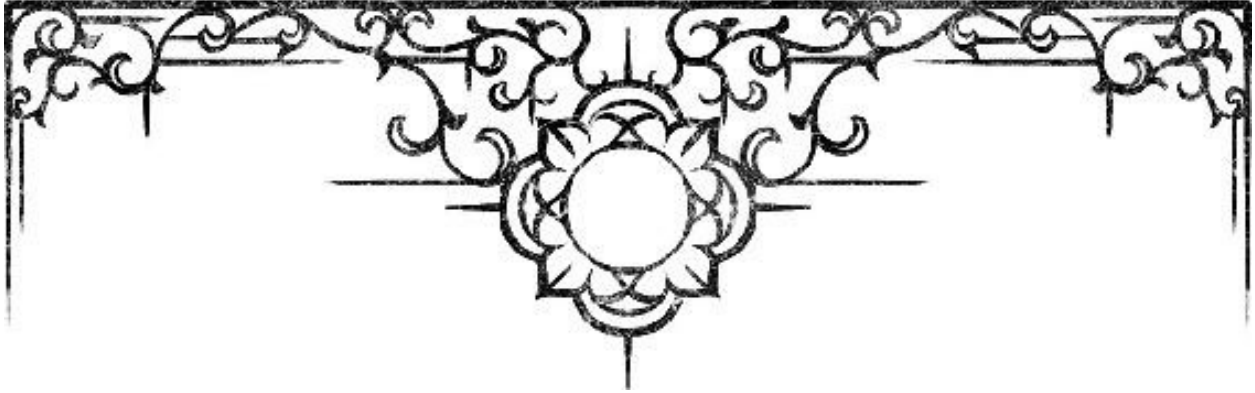
Alden hesitates as if he can read my thoughts, or maybe I'm just not as good as I thought I was at pretending to be tough.

"Thanks for hauling my stuff around," I say as a dismissal. I don't need anyone feeling sorry for me, and that's what this feels like it's careening

toward.

“Miss Devlin.” Alden does that weird head lowering thing, and I kind of hate it. I haven’t done anything to earn his respect or deference.

“Later.” I pivot around and wait to hear the door close before I start properly exploring. One thing is for certain—it’s a heck of a lot nicer than my apartment. Who cares if I’m still just as lonely for the time being?



The knock comes promptly at eight. I'm not ashamed to admit I was dozing on the plush couch while watching TV. It actually took me a second to recognize what the sound was and answer the door.

I crack the door, looking into the hallway to find a woman who's a little older than me with a smile plastered on her face. If I had to guess, I would say it was as fake as my own. "Hello," I greet.

"Good evening, Miss Devlin. Your presence has been requested at dinner." I can't ignore the way her smile falls flat when she glances down at my jeans and T-shirt.

I wipe under my eyes to make sure I don't have any smudged mascara on my face, but there isn't much I can do about my clothes. It's not like I have something better to change into. "Sure, okay," I agree before meeting her in the hall.

We walk in strained silence for several seconds before the woman airily asks, "How was your trip?"

"Good, thanks," I say too quickly, wishing I would have elaborated a little more to use up more time. "I bet I could get lost in here."

"It takes a bit of getting used to," she agrees.

"Have you been here long?" I'm assuming she works for the Umbras, but I don't want to come right out and ask what she does.

"I grew up here. Not in the main house," she amends quickly, as if I would have known the difference. "My parents have been with the Umbras for a long time." She sounds proud.

"That's cool. Do you go to the college? It's certainly beautiful." I'm prodding for details about the school. I tried to look up information online, but apparently Cadieux is a private college, and the very limited data I could find was along the lines of a *you don't call us, we call you* kind of thing. It

said the students who attend are hand selected to be future leaders of the world. Virgil did mention me attending school there, but the thought makes me nervous since I was never a straight A student in high school, though in my own defense, it was a shitty time for me.

“It is lovely.” She does that imitation smile thing again, not answering if she attends or not, then waves her hand toward a room we just reached. “Enjoy your meal.”

“Thanks,” I say at her clear dismissal, then I enter the empty dining room. The table could easily sit twenty people, and the wood top is so shiny, I can see the chandeliers hanging above reflected on the surface. The high-back chairs are all throne-like, with armrests and ornate designs carved into the wood. It’s over-the-top opulence, and I feel very much out of place.

“Nova.”

I jerk in the direction of a soft, feminine voice and find a petite woman with blonde hair that seems golden under the lights. Her hands are up near her mouth, as if to cover the fact that she just called my name, while her light eyes are wide as she stares at me.

I don’t get the same visceral reaction to her resemblance to my mother in the way I did with my grandfather, but I find soft touches of my mom in this woman’s face. Her high cheekbones and perfect little nose are dead giveaways.

Finally, she removes her hands, and my grandfather joins her on the opposite side of the room from me. His stoic demeanor is much the same as it was earlier today, until he looks down at his wife, then his unaffected mien is replaced with what almost looks like sadness for just a brief moment.

“Hello,” I say, feeling awkward. I have no idea what they expected in a granddaughter, but I can almost bet it wasn’t me.

“Hello,” she responds with a wide smile. She strides over with speed and poise until she’s standing right in front of me. We’re about eye level, since she’s wearing heels, but she is delicate and thin where I’m sturdy. Dad used to joke that I was built for hard labor, and I never saw it as a bad thing.

“It’s like looking at your mother.” She scans my face so slowly, I start to feel uncomfortable, and I’m not sure where to look.

“I don’t see the likeness,” I admit. I always thought I looked more like my dad.

“Well, I do. How are you? Was your trip okay? Did you get unpacked?” She grabs my hand to hold it in hers, and I’m slightly alarmed with how cold

her skin is.

“I’m okay, I have so many questions.”

“I’m sure you do.” She pats my hand, then guides me over to sit down at the first seat next to the head of the table on the left side, before taking the seat directly across from me.

Seconds after we’re seated, an older woman rolls a silver cart into the room and starts serving food. She places Rory’s dish down first, then Astrid’s, followed by mine. It’s a salad with spiky greens and some sort of vinaigrette by the smell of it. Lastly, she adds a small bowl of rolls before backing silently out of the room.

Astrid resumes speaking the moment she’s gone. “You’ve been working?”

“Yes, as a server since I graduated.” Which was well over a year now. I’ve never felt bad about that before, but now I find it a little lackluster.

“You did a good job taking care of yourself,” Rory chimes in, drawing my attention.

“Now you have us. You can go to school and take your place in the family,” Astrid says, speaking over her husband.

“At Cadieux?” I probably sound too hopeful. I don’t know why I want to go to that school so badly—maybe because I know I would never be able to get in on my own, or maybe it’s because it looks like something out of a medieval fairy tale—but my desire to attend has grown exponentially since I saw the school.

“Absolutely. Generations of our family have attended Cadieux.”

“Even my mother?”

Astrid’s charming smile slips at my question. “Yes, for a short time,” she answers, her tone flat. “We can get you enrolled first thing Monday.” By the time she’s done speaking, her smile is back in place as if it never disappeared, and Rory is watching his wife intently. I wonder if he’s worried my presence will disrupt their lives.

“Why did she leave?”

Rory’s attention shifts back to me at my question, while Astrid turns her focus to her food. “She fell in love with your father,” he answers.

“And?” I prompt, because I know there is more to the story.

“And she left to be with him,” Astrid says rather quickly, maybe even cutting off Rory’s response.

“So she had to choose?” I still haven’t touched my salad. I’m not even

hungry at this point.

Rory turns the question around. "What did she tell you?"

"She didn't." I don't want to admit she told me she was an orphan and that her parents were dead, because I think that would be needlessly hurtful.

Astrid sets her fork down after only a few demure bites of greens, and the server returns to take her plate almost immediately. We all remain quiet while the dishes are removed.

"There was no choice, but she still decided to leave. I wish things would have been different, but you're here now, and I can't be anything but happy about that," Astrid finally tells me.

I don't need to be a rocket scientist to know this conversation is hard for her, and there's a part of me that's worried about rocking the boat too much. That doesn't mean I won't keep looking for answers, but I'm sure there are other people I can talk to besides my grandparents.

"I'm excited for the chance to get to know you." I don't intentionally leave out Rory, but he's just so quiet and standoffish. I wonder if he thinks I'll disappear from their lives like my mother did, or if there's some other reason he's so aloof.

"We are too, Nova, more than you know." Astrid is smiling again, which makes me feel better. "Is your room okay? Do you have everything you need?"

"Yes, everything is...more than I could ever ask for." It takes me a moment to come up with the right words.

"Wonderful. I called Tabby. She'll be by tomorrow to get your measurements."

"Measurements for what?" Please do not tell me Cadieux has a uniform. It's a college, not a high school.

"So she'll know your size, dear. She's been my shopper for years, and I trust her implicitly. She'll take care of everything you need."

"You mean clothes?" I want to make sure we're on the same page.

"Yes, and anything else, like shoes and bags."

"I brought my things," I tell her, but she must know, because someone had to give the okay for the luggage, right?

"Of course, dear, I just want to make sure you have what you need. I thought you might need a few other options for the weather and school events, but if you don't want to see what she has to say, I'll respect your wishes."

Dang it, when she says it like that, I feel bad for rejecting her kind offer, and it's probably better if I do have some nicer stuff. "You're right, I could probably use a few things. Thank you for thinking of it."

Her smile is wide when she responds. "Certainly, I'm so happy you're here."

"Me too," I answer automatically, but there's some truth to my words.

The conversation slips into more mundane topics. Astrid asks for more details about my flight, how I like South Carolina so far, and what I think of my room and the house. I answer everything dutifully, but I'm really dying to ask more about my parents and what they could possibly need from me like Alden implied.

When dessert is served, I allow myself one more burning question. "Do you know anything about my dad's family?"

Astrid's lips purse the tiniest bit before she thins them, however it's Rory who answers. "His mother died of cancer while he was a senior in high school, and I do not believe his father was ever in the picture."

It's sad, but it's actually kind of comforting to know not everything my parents told me was a lie. "Thank you." I let him hear and see how grateful I am for the information.

"Do you need Bridgit to show you back to your room? I'm sure you're tired," Astrid asks after only taking a small bite or two of her tiny cake.

"I think I can find it, unless...unless you don't want me wandering around?" I make sure they hear it for the question it is.

"Explore, this is your home," she replies. "And if you ever need me, I'm usually in the north wing in the evening, or you can just ask one of the staff to find me. I'll make sure you have my numbers too."

"Okay," I agree softly, feeling slightly better knowing that they don't expect me to stay holed up in my room like a prisoner.

I start to push back from the table to rise when Rory adds, "Please notify Alden if you plan on leaving the house so he can be with you." His words remind me of my escort.

"Why does he need to be with me?" I'm not expecting him to come right out and say it's because they want to make sure I don't take off like my mom did, but he catches me way off guard when he replies.

"It's for your own safety."

"From what?" I press.

"He's being overprotective." Astrid waves her hand good-naturedly at her

husband, dismissing his worry.

Rory ignores her. “I can ensure your welfare here and at the school, but Alden will make sure you are protected when I can’t.”

It’s almost on my tongue to ask from what, but Astrid catches my attention and rolls her eyes as if to say, *please just indulge him*.

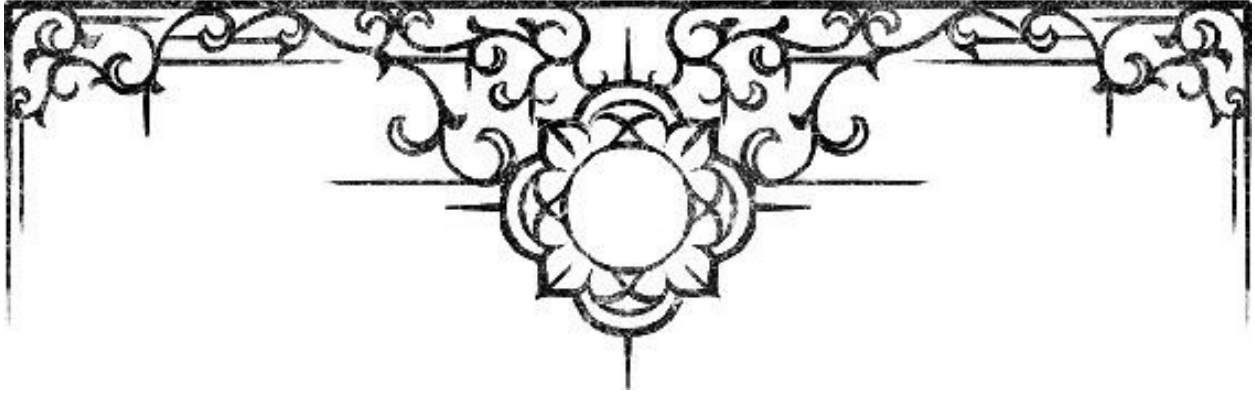
“Okay,” I agree, still unclear of his motives.

“Sleep well, Nova. I’ll look forward to tomorrow.” Astrid lays her hand over Rory’s and gives his fingers a soft squeeze while speaking to me. “If you’re up for it, I’d love to take you on a tour of the college.”

“I would love that.” I don’t have to fake my enthusiasm. I can’t wait to get a look at the school.

“That’s settled then. We’ll meet with Tabby in the morning, then we can visit the school after lunch.”

“I’ll let Alden know of your plans,” Rory says, but I can’t tell if he’s speaking to me or Astrid.



As my eyes adjust to the bright, early afternoon sunlight, I notice Alden standing next to the open rear door of a black car. Astrid walks ahead of me, no sign of her age in her steps as she saunters to the vehicle and slides into the seat.

I allow myself a glance in my escort's direction, but his gaze is focused straight ahead, so I just take my seat with a lot less grace than my grandmother displayed. The door shuts immediately after I'm situated, and I notice it's not your typical backseat. There's leg room for days, two TVs, and center console that looks like something out of a limo. Clearly, this car was made for the passenger's comfort.

Alden gets into the front passenger seat, and the car slowly accelerates. I'm a little surprised he's coming with us, considering Rory said the school was one of the only places he didn't need to accompany me to, but I'm too excited to see Cadieux to give it much consideration.

Thankfully, there's no battle at the gate, and we exit smoothly onto the two-lane road that takes us through the forest. The little pitchforks on top of the brick fence seem slightly campy considering the name of the people who live there, but maybe that's the point. They might as well embrace their name, since it's not like they chose it.

As the tall spires of the school come into view over top of the lush green trees, I feel the same awe I experienced yesterday. Before the accident, I always hoped to go to college, but even then, I knew if I did, it would be a local community college, not a private school that only admits a tiny percentage of applicants.

I also recognize that getting into this school has nothing to do with me and everything to do with my mom's parents, but I want to prove myself and I think I can. Things are a lot different for me now than when I was actually

in high school, barely earning enough credits to graduate because I missed so many classes, but losing my parents in a car crash and almost dying from my own injuries made it a little hard to study. My remaining kidney is doing the work of two, and it's not in the greatest shape, which means the chances of me needing a transplant before I'm fifty are pretty high, so I'm excited to embrace any chances life puts forward.

"Ready?" Astrid asks, pulling me from my musings. Alden is already waiting at the open door. I exit quickly, hoping they all think I was just staring up at the school and not thinking about all my shortcomings.

"Will we be able to get in?" I question, looking around at the empty campus.

"It helps to know the right people." Astrid winks at me conspiratorially. I suppose being a member of one of the founding families gives her a certain amount of freedom.

The driver opens the large wooden door, and we enter a massive hall with a matching door at the opposite end of a long corridor. The ceilings are high and have pointed arch details above all the stone pillars that seem to be holding each archway aloft. The symmetry alone is awe-inspiring.

It's dim inside when the door closes behind us, the only light coming from the high windows that don't seem to allow much sunlight in. Heavy black chandeliers provide a soft glow as well, but not enough to chase away the heavy darkness.

I can tell the space on either side of the corridor is expansive, but I can't see much beyond the shadowy darkness. It's as quiet as a tomb, as if everyone who steps inside holds their breath, which I don't doubt. It's eerie and yet astoundingly beautiful.

There's a loud clicking noise, and then the darkness recedes, allowing me to see the gray stone and shiny floor. To the right are several large tables with high-back wooden chairs that seem as old as the building, and the wood is heavy and dark. The tables are interspersed with more comfortable seating areas, like plush chairs and sofas I would bet are a more modern addition.

"Here we are," Astrid says, looking around proudly. "Your mother used to love coming here and—" She cuts herself off with a shake of her head. "This is the Union. Coffee and snacks are over there." She points to the opposite side of the hall. It is also more modern, but it still manages to fit in with the old-world aesthetic. "The library is down the hall, and there are a few boring offices on the right. All the classes are held in the wings." She

points to the left and right.

I start to walk forward to explore. I'm very curious about what she almost said about my mother, but I'm too hesitant to ask her to finish. The soles of my sneakers don't make a sound as I peer beyond the pillars. I bet I could spend hours exploring this floor alone. There are staircases, mirrored on each side, leading up to the three stories. Balusters and railings line the upper floors, making it clear you can see down to the ground level from above. I would love to get up there and get a closer look at the ceiling.

"As you can see, it's an old building. There are a few places that are off-limits to the staff and students. It seems like something is always being repaired," she adds as if she's admitting the faucet leaks. "Stay out of the restricted areas. We don't want anyone getting hurt."

Alden clears his throat as if he's prompting me to reply.

"Of course," I say automatically. It probably wouldn't have crossed my mind to do otherwise, but the specific mention does make me curious about those areas.

"Good. Would you like to see the main library? Your mother loved hiding in there when she was a little girl," she divulges easily, and it makes me want to give her a little something of my mom.

"She used to play hide-and-seek with me when I was little," I share.

Astrid's eyes soften, confirming I made the right move.

Alden and the driver hang back near the main entrance, while Astrid leads me down the long corridor and into a beautifully appointed library. It's hard to imagine my mother as a child at all, but thinking of her slipping through the tall bookcases and into nooks and crannies seems even more surreal, especially since she would pretend I was hard to find over and over when I was always in the same few places in our tiny house.

"The doors are usually left open until midnight, though you won't always find someone working the desk that late. It's closed now for break." Astrid casts her lingering gaze around the room. I get the impression she hasn't been here in a while.

"That's good to know. I'm sure I'll have some catching up to do with my studies." I run my hand over the spines of the leather-bound books as I move up and down a few rows. That thought brings a host of others. In my excitement and apprehension, I totally forgot about things like being the new girl and starting in the middle of a year.

"How many students are enrolled in Cadieux?" I try to make my question

sound casual, but I can hear the nervousness in my tone.

“Just under fourteen hundred.”

Wow, I’m pretty sure that’s smaller than my high school. There is no way people aren’t going to notice I’m a new face. “Will there be any other transfers this semester?”

“I don’t think so, but you could ask your grandfather, he would know.”

“Oh, does he teach here?”

“The founding families each have a regent on the board. Rory is the current president, but he will relinquish his role to the next family in succession in a few years. It’s the way it has always been done.” She sighs out the last part, but I can’t tell if his time coming to an end soon is a relief or if she’s unhappy about it.

Her mention of the other families makes me think of the encounter we had with a Morningstar yesterday. It’s easy to assume there isn’t any love lost between the families. I bet that makes board meetings awkward.

“So there’s a predetermined order and a term each family is in charge?” This is pretty darn interesting stuff.

“Yes.” Her lips curl like the Cheshire Cat, and I feel like there’s something I’m missing. “It’s such an amazing legacy to be a part of.”

“I bet,” I reply, feeling uncomfortable, but not really sure why.

“Sorry I can’t stay longer. I have a few things I need to take care of.” Astrid’s features soften, and I wonder if I imagined the eerie grin.

“Sure. Do you mind if I walk back? I’d like to explore the campus a little more.

“Just send for a car when you’re ready.” She waves off my suggestion of walking while holding the door open for me to exit the library ahead of her.

“When you come in to get your schedule sorted, you’ll head right over there.” She points across the hall.

“Thanks,” I tell her, grateful for all the info.

“Nova wants to explore a little.” Astrid relays the information, and Alden nods in acknowledgement. “Just send for someone when she’s ready.” With those parting words, she sashays toward the exit, and the driver opens the door for her before following her out.

“Sorry,” I say the moment Alden and I are alone.

“For?”

“I wasn’t thinking that if I chose to stick around, you would have to as well.”

“It’s my job to be where you are. Don’t apologize,” he dismisses flatly, making me think that what he said and how he feels are at odds.

“Mind if I check out the upstairs? I won’t be long.”

Instead of answering me, Alden leans his shoulders back against the stone wall and crosses his arms over his barrel chest in a pose that implies a lack of patience, but he doesn’t object. He sure seems to be in a bad mood today.

I take the staircase on the left, feeling the smooth polished wood under my hand, but my eyes are busy roaming. The second floor is much smaller to accommodate the high ceilings below it, but I see a few closed doors near the back wall and a hall I’m assuming leads to the other wing. I’m going to need a map of this place, especially after I get my schedule. There’s no way I’m going to wander around like an idiot my first few days.

My eyes are already taking in the beautiful stone arches as I reach the third floor. It’s a little daunting to think about all that weight suspended over my head, but to say I’m in awe would be an understatement.

It’s darker up here. Either the lights aren’t turned on, or there’s just less. It feels abandoned, or maybe it just seems that way since the place is nearly empty right now. There’s a small sitting area with three high-back upholstered chairs grouped together over in the far corner. If Alden weren’t waiting, I would sink into the deep green velvety one and claim it as my own.

When I turn to head back downstairs, I yelp and cover my mouth to stifle the sound. “Holy crap, you scared me,” I hiss at Alden once I can breathe.

He’s completely unaffected by my outburst. In fact, he looks bored. “Holy crap?” he mocks with that single lifted eyebrow.

I don’t bother defending myself, it’s not like I should have to anyway. “I thought I didn’t need an escort in the school?”

“You do today,” he counters.

“Let’s just go.” I start down the stairs. I can’t hear him behind me, but I can sure feel him. He’s like this looming presence that makes me feel edgy, like he might elbow me down the stairs at any moment, but I know that thought is only in my head. That would get him fired for sure, and he takes his job way too seriously for that.

I squint my eyes once I shove through the heavy wooden doors. It’s too bright, too green, too everything. The muted interior felt comforting, but the sunshine feels out of place. “You can call the car,” I say over my shoulder, not bothering to look if he’s with me.

“I thought you wanted to *explore*?” He makes it sound like a bad word.

“I’ll do it on my own time.” I let him know that I’m aware he thinks I’m an inconvenience. I wish I could relieve him of the burden just as much as he does. Besides, I’m sure my grandparents will lighten up when they realize I’m not going to run away like my mom did. I already know what it’s like to be broke and struggle to pay bills, which is a heck of a lot harder than dealing with a couple of overprotective grandparents who mean well.

“Nov—shit.” He turns what I think is about to be my name into a curse. Before I realize what’s happening, Alden is standing in front of me, so close I can’t even see around him.

“Move,” an unfamiliar voice drawls.

“No,” Alden replies tightly.

“Why can’t I say hello to the little Umbra cunt?”

My mouth falls open in silent outrage before I snap it closed and step to the side to get a look at the person calling me names. I wasn’t prepared.

I was expecting a buttoned-up snob, but what I see has me wishing I would have stayed hidden.

He’s tall, at least six foot, with shiny dark hair that’s combed so neatly, it looks oiled. The side part is perfectly lined up, but that’s where the civility ends. His light eyes almost look eerie under his dark brows. There’s a thin hoop in his left nostril made of a black metal, and at least three black ball studs near his ear, but none of them are in his lobe. Black and gray ink swirls up his neck, right to his perfectly chiseled jawline, then it disappears under the collar of his anything but simple white shirt that’s stretched over his chest, outlining more piercings in his nipples, and that’s when I stop staring at his body.

“Well, well,” he coos in that slight drawl. “Did they pluck you right off the street, Charity?” His voice is filled with disdain while his eyes linger on me, letting me see he’s returning the thorough once-over. The sardonic curl of his lips and slitted gaze imply he clearly finds me lacking.

“Pretty much, pretty boy.” I don’t need to be told who this is. I would bet my five grand that this is Morningstar. He’s not the first asshole I’ve come across, but he might be the best looking.

“We’re on school property,” Alden says as if it’s a deterrent of some sort. It must work, because the man darts his eyes over to my escort—who I’m thinking might just be a bodyguard—and I realize how tense I was under his gaze.

“When have I ever given a fuck about rules?”

“Only when it suits you, Morningstar,” Alden responds coolly, confirming my assumption about his identity.

“Or when it amuses me. Tell Umbra her desperation reeks of disappointment” —he turns those icy blue eyes toward me again— “and gutter trash. See you around, Charity.”

“Later, pretty boy.”

He flashes his teeth at me, but it’s not in a smile as he turns and saunters down to a slick black car. It’s the same one I thought he was going to use to ram us with at the gate.

“Could you have been any more antagonistic?” Alden snarls under his breath as the car slowly creeps away.

“Yes,” I answer honestly.

He spares me a glance, then makes a phone call, barking orders for someone to bring a car to pick us up.

“What the heck is his problem anyway?” I fold my arms over my chest, feeling crappy that his words are getting to me. I mean, how could he know that I’m broke with one look?

“Power, greed, and loyalties—typical rich people shit—but don’t kid yourself, Nova. All of the families hate each other. The Morningstars just don’t hide it,” Alden informs me as an SUV pulls up to the curb.

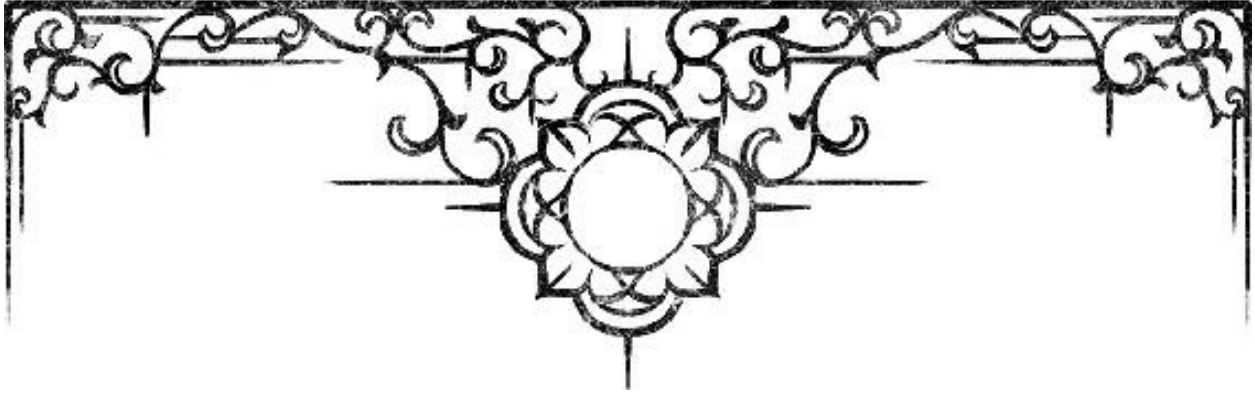
“Lovely. Thanks for the heads-up. So the whole escort, protector thing?” I leave the question open-ended.

“Is more of a deterrent than anything else—a reminder that they are not the gods they pretend to be.”

“Gods.” I snort, thinking it must be a bit of an exaggeration. “Please tell me he’s too cool for school.”

“I wish I could, but that would mean he’d miss out on being worshiped by these sheep,” Alden says.

“Wow, this just keeps getting better and better,” I mumble under my breath, and I’m pretty sure it makes Alden smile, but as soon as I think I notice a change in his expression, it’s gone before I can read it.



Astrid does a double take when I meet her in the dining room for breakfast, but she doesn't utter a word about my outfit of worn jeans and a T-shirt that might be a tad too small now, but it's still one of my favorites.

I decided to leave all the clothes her buyer Tabby had delivered hanging in the oversized closet of my room and wear what I'm comfortable in. I want to be the real me and not some washed out version of myself. It's going to make it pretty clear I'm an outsider, but I doubt I'm going to fit in with folks who would judge me for my clothes or where I come from anyway.

"Good morning, dear," she greets with a smile that looks slightly indulgent but manufactured.

"Morning." I take the same seat I used the first time we sat down and ate together. Rory's chair is empty, and Astrid notices when I look in that direction.

"He's already off to start his day," she says, answering my unasked question. "You have an appointment with Bella Quade. She runs admissions."

I take the small piece of paper she slides across the table with a name, phone number, and what I'm assuming is the location of her office, written in neat script. Nervous excitement builds in my stomach, making it impossible to try any of the food offerings served on the table.

"I almost forgot this." Astrid stands up and comes around my side of the table. I freeze for a moment, unsure if she's going to try to hug me or what, but a glint of something in her hand catches my eye. She leans forward, her hand extended, but seems to think better of her actions at the last second and decides to present me with what's in her hand by placing it in my palm.

"What is this?" I question softly, because the shimmery white metal is

absolutely beautiful, and I'm a little in awe to be holding it. The thin chain is long, with a ball clasp allowing you to change the length of the necklace, but the pendant is the real star. It's a square yellow stone, surrounded by clear stones that might be diamonds, but I have no way of knowing.

"It was your mother's, and I would like you to have it."

The white metal is deceptively heavy for the delicate appearance. I curl my fingers around the beautiful pendant and necklace. The only piece of jewelry I saw my mother wear was a thin gold band that matched my father's wedding ring, and those were sold at some point or another to pay bills.

If this truly was hers, then why did she leave it behind? Or was it just a reminder of her old life that she no longer wanted?

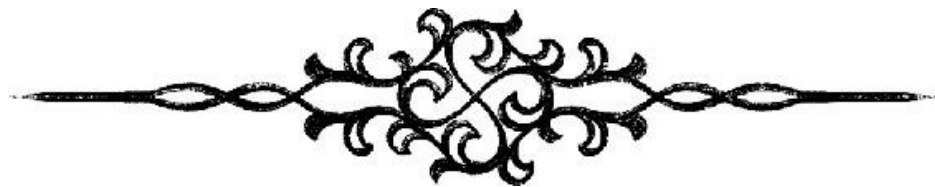
"I'm sure she would love for you to wear it. I know nothing would please me more, Nova," Astrid tells me.

I'm torn. I want it, mostly because I've never had anything quite so lovely, but shouldn't it be more important that it was my mom's?

"I knew she was never coming back when I found it in her room." Astrid sounds utterly devastated, which makes me feel horrible, so I decide to slip the heavy necklace and pendant over my head. When I look up, my grandmother's eyes are glassy with unshed tears, but she's smiling.

"Thank you, Nova." Her words seem heartfelt, but her tone shifts immediately when she adds, "You should probably be going. We don't want you to be late." She leaves the room before I can reply.

I tell myself it's because she got emotional, but something about the exchange feels off. When I stand, the weight of the pendant bounces between my breasts. The shiny white metal and gems look out of place over my shirt, so I tuck the chain under my collar and adjust the necklace so it's barely visible around my neck.



"TRY NOT to cause too much trouble," Alden tells me under his breath after

opening the main entrance for me at school. I don't bother responding, especially after he accused me of antagonizing Morningstar yesterday when all I did was respond to his nastiness.

I find the administration office easily. It's almost directly across from the library on the main floor, just as Astrid said it would be. The young woman behind the reception desk greets me with a smile that quickly falls as her eyes roam over me. "May I help you?"

Dang, maybe I should have worn the stuff Tabby left. She's looking at me the same way I probably looked at the homeless guy who hung out at the bus stop all the time—part dread, part abhorrence.

"I have an appointment with" —I look down at the paper to make sure I get the name correct— "Bella Quade."

Her eyes narrow as she turns to the side to pick up a desk phone. She keeps her voice soft, but I can still hear her one-sided conversation. "Mrs. Quade, there's someone here who says they have an appointment with you?" She sounds doubtful. "Sure, I can show her back." The girl peeks over at me again with that same suspicion, but there's curiosity now too.

After hanging up, she stands and straightens her shirt over her flat stomach before pushing her chair in. "Right this way." She doesn't wait for me to even round the desk before taking off down a long hallway in her flirty flare skirt and heels.

There's a tiny piece of me that wants to pull the pendant out of my shirt to see if it would change her attitude, but it's a fleeting thought. That's not who I am or who I want to be, though it would be nice to fit in for once.

"Are you applying for a scholarship?" she asks without even looking backwards.

"No," I respond without divulging anything else. I'm sure she'll know everything she wants to about me in no time flat, whether it's true or not.

She makes a humming sound, then finally stops at a wooden door that looks exactly like all the others evenly spaced down the hall, but this one has a gold plaque that reads, "Isabella Quade, Director of Admissions," in a bold script.

"Here you go, she's expecting you." She does a game show pivot and brushes past me, just avoiding bumping my shoulder in the process.

I watch her walk away, thinking about telling her to shove her attitude up her butt, but I keep my mouth shut, knock politely on the door, and wait for a reply.

“It’s open,” comes a feminine voice.

With one deep, calming breath, I turn the knob and enter the room, remembering Alden told me none of the families get along, but the Morningstars don’t hide it. I have no idea how this person is going to react to me, considering she will know exactly who I am.

“Nova,” she greets, rising and extending her hand for me to shake. I grip her fingers and release quickly before she offers me a seat in front of her desk with a wave of her hand.

After taking her own seat, her eyes roam over my face while a soft smile plays on her mouth. “Wow, you have your father’s eyes, that’s for sure.”

“You knew him?” The question comes without thought.

“Not well, but I did.” Her features shift a little, causing her forehead to wrinkle. “What happened was tragic.”

“Yeah,” I agree without much feeling behind the sentiment. It’s not the first time someone has used those exact words to describe the accident that killed my parents and almost me, but tragic doesn’t feel like a big enough word, nothing does.

“But you’re here at Cadieux, and I know Astrid is just tickled.” Is that sarcasm in her tone?

“I’m certainly here.”

There’s this long pause where neither of us know how to continue before she looks down at some papers on her desk to remind her why I’m sitting in her office. “I don’t usually handle scheduling, but we want to get you into class as soon as possible,” she tells me as if she’s doing me a favor. “I have your transcripts. Am I understanding you were in an accelerated credit program so you could graduate on time?”

“Yes, I missed a lot of school after the accident.”

“Understandable. What are your strengths and interests?” Mrs. Quade gets right down to business after the awkward initial meeting, and we spend the next half hour discussing class options and getting me set up in the system so I can do a few placement tests. I have no doubt I’ll be in the low classes with all the freshmen, even though I’m older. These kids all probably came from private schools, but I’ll eventually catch up...hopefully.

“The library is right across the hall. I already reserved a study room for you to get started on testing. The sooner you get them done, the sooner we can get you into the appropriate classes,” she tells me as if I’m going to go over there and twiddle my thumbs.

“Thank you,” I tell her, rising as she hands me a sticky note with my student number and temporary login credentials.

“Let me know if you need assistance figuring anything out,” she tells me as I’m leaving, and I don’t know if she’s genuinely willing to help, or if it’s her subtle way of reminding me I’m clueless.

I feel the girl at the reception desk eye me as I leave the office and head over to the library. There are several more people in the Union than there were this morning when I entered the office. I ignore them and hurry across the hall, but before I can reach the door, someone steps in front of me.

“If it isn’t Charity,” he drawls slowly, pleased with himself. It wouldn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out where I was going to be today. I’m certain his presence isn’t an accident. I told myself I would ignore him the next time we met, because I knew there would be a next time, and it would just be easier if I didn’t make myself a target for him, but the moment I hear his little moniker for me, my good intentions go out the window.

“Couldn’t wait to see me again, pretty boy?” I don’t meet his eyes, I don’t even look up, which means I get a good view of his upper chest and neck. His shirt is black today, but it’s still tight enough that I can see the barbells through his nipples outlined by the fabric and the tattoos that seem to cover almost every inch of him but his face. I thought rich guys wore pressed pants and loafers, not dark jeans and boots.

He takes another step closer to me. He’s trying to get me to back up, but my feet remain planted on the ground. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t a little frightened. Even the hair on my arms is standing up as if my body can sense the barely restrained violence coming from him.

I’ve never been in a fight. I would probably crumple like a sack of potatoes if someone hit me, but I still can’t back down. He’s close enough now that I can smell his cologne and feel the heat coming off his body, and it does nothing to alleviate the tension tightening my back and shoulders.

I should try to get around him, but I know he would stop me, so I just stand here, waiting for whatever it is he wants to say or do. His hand moves, and I flinch, but he just gently touches my chin and lifts it, forcing me to look up at him.

Our eyes lock, and I know he can read the question in my gaze. *What could you possibly want with me?* His expression is much harder to read, so I give up trying.

“Go home, Charity. No one wants you here.”

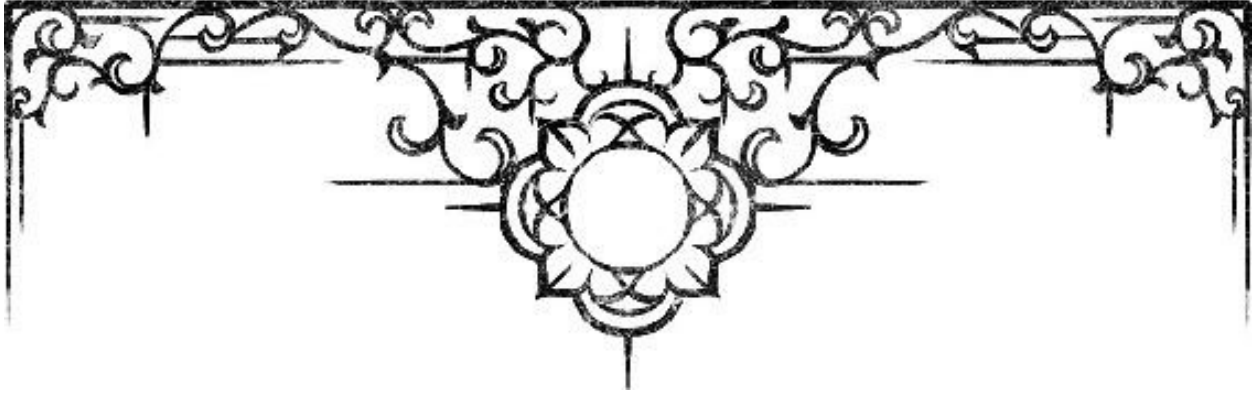
The words sting, but I try really hard not to let it show. I can feel people gathering around us, but not one of them steps up to break us apart, not that I expected it anyway. I've seen my fair share of public fights, physical and otherwise, and everyone loves to witness the train wreck as long as it's not them who's getting clobbered.

"It should be fairly easy for you and everyone else to ignore me then, pretty boy." I blink slowly before jerking my head back so he's no longer touching me, but we're still in a stare off.

"Nova, there you are." Rory's voice is hard and tight, despite his words seeming to convey his relief. I still don't back away from Morningstar. It would be a sign of weakness I can't afford if I want him to leave me the heck alone.

"I was hoping I would catch you." Rory comes over so he's standing right next to me, but he turns his attention toward the man in front of me. "Lucian, I didn't know you attended class on Mondays, or any day for that matter." My grandfather wraps his arm around my shoulders and guides me away from the immovable wall apparently named Lucian.

It's not until we're in the library that Rory releases his hold on me. His reaction to Morningstar being in my face confirms that I should stay as far away from him as possible, but I have a feeling our encounters are only just getting started.



I close the top to my shiny new laptop at eleven when my eyes are blurry from looking at the screen all night. When I got home this afternoon, I told Astrid that I didn't think I would be down for dinner. She seemed a little disappointed, but beyond asking how my first day went, she let me be. I glossed over the part about Lucian Morningstar and the way all the other people didn't seem to know how to act around me, and gave her the highlights about my lunch. I might have exaggerated about my confidence on how well I did on a few of the tests, but I did it for both of our benefits.

I throw myself back on the bed, sinking into the soft pillow top, and my eyes fall closed. I have a ton on my mind, like how I really did on the tests, what kind of classes I should take, and maybe, most importantly, how I can get Morningstar off my back.

The soft knock on my bedroom door has my eyes ripping open, and I realize I must have fallen asleep, or I was very close to it.

"Miss Devlin." Alden's voice comes through the door.

"Yes?" I croak out. It's been hours since I've spoken, and it's easy to tell.

"I thought you should know your grandfather informed me this evening that I will be accompanying you to your classes."

"He what?" I ask after tearing the door open to face Alden, certain I misunderstood him.

His eyes go down, and I realize I took my pants off hours ago. I'm only wearing the same too small shirt I wore to school and Walmart underwear. I slam the door in his face.

It's a shame my first thought isn't embarrassment. Instead, I'm relieved that he wouldn't have been able to see my scars. The shame will come later when I remember how chubby my hips and thighs are, how my stomach isn't flat, and I can't remember the last time I shaved.

“I thought you should know, so you can prepare,” he continues through the door as if I didn’t just flash him, always the professional.

“This is because of Morningstar, isn’t it?” I question, even though I know the answer.

“You didn’t tell me he cornered you in the hall.”

“He didn’t corner me. I could have gotten away,” I defend.

“But instead, you went toe to toe with him.” I can hear his disappointment.

“Better than cowering. I’m not going to let some bully push me around. He’s not the first one who’s tried, and I’ve survived.”

He mumbles something, but I can’t quite make it out, and I don’t bother asking either.

“I’ll talk to Rory and tell him I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Apparently you do, and it wouldn’t work anyway. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“We’ll see,” I counter with every intention of making Rory back off.



NO AMOUNT of begging gets Alden to wait outside while I finish up my test in the study room. The man is like my giant shadow, constantly looming over my shoulder and daring anyone to get close to me. We don’t encounter Morningstar until we’re walking to the cafeteria for lunch. He’s surrounded by a small group, but it doesn’t look like he’s paying any of them a lick of attention.

I avert my gaze, hoping to pass by unnoticed like the rest of them, and it might have worked if it weren’t for Alden’s big head. “They really got you slumming it, huh, cuz?” A nasty sneer lifts Lucian’s lips, and where he seemed positively bored before, now he’s eager to entertain his posse.

Alden ignores the jab, but I can’t, not with the familiar name. Are they really related? There’s no way I would ask now, since it’s really none of my

business, but I want to know if Alden is related to the guy trying to make my life hell, and if he is, how the heck did he end up working for the Umbras?

Alden urges me to keep walking with the presence of his body behind mine, never slowing. I know without looking back that Morningstar and his crew are behind us, and even the sounds of their footfalls are annoying.

I give my best detached impression and act like I don't hear or see any of them trailing behind us. Honestly, this is such high school crap. I expected to get some flak for being new, but it would have been nice to know I would be public enemy number one beforehand, or even how I earned that position.

I doubt I'm going to be able to eat when it feels like everyone in the place is staring, but I'm not going to let them know they are getting to me. "So what's good?" I ask Alden. If we're stuck together, I might as well make the best of it.

"Take a look around. Do you think anyone here would settle for less than the best of everything?" He keeps his voice low enough that unless someone were right on our heels, they wouldn't be able to hear him.

I glance at the food stations and decide on the place with a grill. My hopes for something simple I can pick at are dashed when I see the menu board offering various seafood options. "Is there any place where a girl can get some chicken nuggets?"

"Come on." Alden leads me over to another section, where there are woks filled with all kinds of meats and veggies. Some are coated in sauces, but there's a silver pan filled with small chunks of fried chicken. I'm thinking it's the closest I'm going to get.

"Thanks," I tell him before grabbing the serving spoon to help myself to a small portion.

"Whoa, save some for the rest of us," a girl, who's not even in line, says, which prompts me to add another scoop to my plate. It's petty and counterproductive, but I don't care.

"Aren't you eating?" I question Alden when he follows behind me with empty hands.

"I'm working," he reminds me in a flat tone.

"Oh right, how could I have forgotten?" I roll my eyes and choose a table that's far away from anyone else already sitting down, and then I realize my mistake almost immediately—there's room for Morningstar and his fan club to join me.

Much to my dismay, Lucian takes the seat directly across from me after

plopping his tray almost on top of mine. I decide to speak to him first in an effort to thwart whatever he's about to say to me. "I don't remember inviting you to sit down."

"I don't need an invitation, Charity."

"How old are you?" I tilt my head to the side and examine his features, wishing I could find him as ugly as his personality, but I'm sure it will come. Ugliness always shows itself.

"Why? Want to know if I'll get drunk enough to fuck you at some point?"

I let him see how little I think of his response with my look of disdain. "No, I thought you might have had an early growth spurt that would explain your maturity level, but I can see your age doesn't really matter."

I would swear he wants to smile, or at least bare his teeth at me, but he pretends to be unaffected by my comeback.

Alden is standing so close to the table, his thighs are pushed right up against the wooden top, as if he might need to get between us at any moment.

Morningstar and I have a stare off for several long seconds, and sadly, I'm the one to break it by speaking. "Why don't you just tell me what you want and leave? That way we can both enjoy our lunch," I offer.

"I am enjoying my lunch. You're not significant enough to change that." He tears a bite out of a burger as if to prove a point. When he's done chewing—such a gentleman—he adds, "But if I make you uncomfortable, you could always crawl back under whatever rock or deadbeat they found you under."

"Clever, clever boy," I sing. "Do you feel better after putting me in my place, or are you just jealous I wasn't under you?" I don't know where the boldness comes from, because I'm dying of embarrassment on the inside, but I'll never let it show.

Morningstar's eyes narrow just the tiniest bit in warning, but I'm saved from his wrath when Alden jerks my chair back and demands, "Time to go, Miss Devlin," then hauls me up by my arm. I'm not going to lie, it hurts, but I hide that too as he marches me out the door, leaving my food untouched.

Alden is silent until we make it into the study room I was assigned yesterday in the library, but once the door is closed, he explodes. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"With me?" I yell right back. "I'm not the one skulking around, looking for him so I can talk crap every chance I get."

"Would it kill you to just keep your damn mouth shut and not engage?"

"Is that a real question? I'm not going to cower to some bully who hates

me because of whom I'm related to. That's stupid."

"He's not just some bully, Nova. The Morningstars are the next family in power. He can and will make your life hell, or worse."

"Unbelievable," I mutter to myself. I can't believe I'm getting crap for this. "Do you ever think that maybe he acts like a spoiled brat because that's how he's treated? And that you people catering to him are part of the problem?"

Alden's nostrils flare, but he doesn't respond to my question, instead he hisses, "I can't protect you from your own stupidity."

"Good, don't. You think I want someone else around, telling me what a horrible piece of garbage I am? I got the fucking memo loud and clear, and if my grandparents want me around as much as they say they do, then you won't have to worry about my stupidity again. Just go." I point to the door, my chest heaving from yelling.

Alden opens his mouth like he's about to say something, but I shake my head.

"Don't worry, I won't put your job with them in jeopardy, but you need to leave."

The second the door closes softly behind him, I pull out my cell phone and dial my grandmother.

Hours later when I'm finally done with all the testing, I leave the study room and find the area blessedly empty of Alden just as Astrid promised. I explained that having him around was making integrating into the school even harder, and I also said I would not accept an escort, and if she wanted me to stay, then he would need to go. It took a little coaxing, but I didn't budge, and it feels like a small victory. Now I just need to make sure I don't end up regretting the rash decision.

I'm not oblivious to the stares I get when I walk past the Union, but I pretend to be as I step out into the warm afternoon sun and shield my eyes.

By the time I'm thirty minutes into my walk back to the house, I'm grateful for my holey jeans and thin T-shirt, because it's gone from warm to hot, even in the shade, but it feels good to get some fresh air and be alone with my thoughts—not that I'm not alone enough in the house, because I am, but it's not the same.

When I hear a car approaching, I think about ducking into the tree line until it passes, but I'm already worried that if I can hear it, they can see me, so I just shift onto the grass, giving them more room. When the engine revs, I

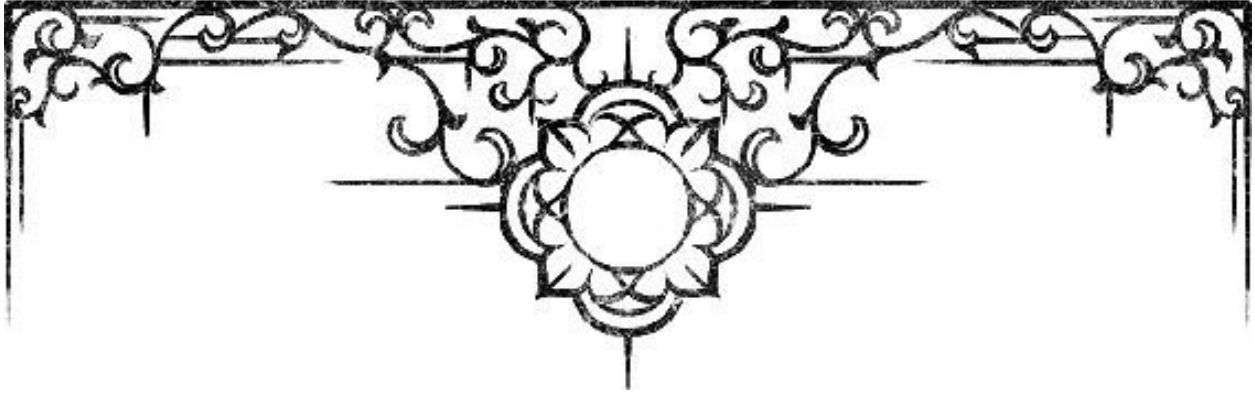
look over my shoulder to see a familiar black car zooming right toward me.

My mind goes blank for just a second, but then my instincts kick in, and I run toward the trees as the car hits the soft shoulder, kicking up sand and debris.

I go down hard, tripping on the uneven ground, and my palms scrape along the grass as if I'm sliding into first base.

The air gets knocked out of my lungs, but I don't have time to worry about breathing, because I'm too busy looking at the car ahead of me as it slams on the brakes, screeching to a halt. I gape, trying to pull air into my lungs while realizing he was just trying to scare me. He never left the shoulder, and I overreacted, damn it. I lost this round.

Embarrassed and pissed, I roll over onto my back and wince. The car speeds away while I'm still staring up at the cloudless sky, wondering why I thought any of this was a good idea.



Wednesday, I wake up with a little dread swirling in my stomach, and I'm achy from the fall. After my shower, the mirror in the bathroom shows a ring of bruises around my upper arm from Alden jerking me around yesterday and skinned knees from the fall. My ragged outward appearance echoes how I feel on the inside.

Thankfully, when I made it to the house yesterday, I was able to go straight to my room without having to explain why I looked like a twelve-year-old who just learned how to ride a bike with no hands.

My palms are still sore, but landing in the grass meant I didn't have to pick gravel from the small scrapes and cuts, so I'll take it as a win.

I have a meeting with Mrs. Quade at ten to discuss my class options, so I dig through my closet to find something to wear that won't show the aftereffects of yesterday or be too tight on my legs, but I come up empty, which means I can't ignore the clothes Tabby dropped off any longer.

My hands bump over the velvet hangers, wishing I wouldn't look like an absolute fool in the flirty skirts and maxi dresses. It's what a lot of the girls here wear, but I've never really been a dress girl, not to mention I'd probably end up with my butt on display when I fall or get tripped, so it isn't a chance I'm willing to take.

I opt for a super soft pair of army green, wide-legged pants with a belted waist, then tuck in an old Universal Studios ET shirt I got at a thrift shop. It makes me feel more like myself, even when I slide my feet into a pair of simple brown sandals she left for me. Thankfully, you can't really see my feet unless I'm walking, because I can't remember the last time I painted my toenails.

Rory meets me in the hall near the front door, and I pause when he gives me his full attention. "Astrid said you are refusing to allow Alden to

accompany you.” So it’s not a coincidence we ran into each other.

“Yes.” I hold my ground, telling myself this is not about me being selfish and just trying to get what I want, though that’s what it feels like now.

“Do you have a problem with him?”

“No,” I answer quickly in an effort not to get him in trouble. Just because I think he’s a little bit of a jerk doesn’t mean I want him to lose his job. “I don’t want a bodyguard. It just makes me stand out more than I already do, and you don’t have to worry about me taking off.” I’m hoping the last part will help.

“It was always for your safety, Nova,” he tells me, and I almost believe him. “Please be careful. Trusting the wrong person could cost you more than you know.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem, since nobody really even talks to me. Plus, and I mean no disrespect, but I didn’t grow up like this. I know there are very real dangers.”

“You mean like a spoiled brat?” He actually smiles at me when he says it, and it tells me Alden repeated what I said about Lucian.

“Yeah, a bit,” I admit, knowing there’s no point in denying it. I wonder if Alden told him everything I said.

“If Alden is a deal breaker, I have a compromise, and I’m hoping you will indulge me.” Rory slides his hands into his pants pockets and leans back a little on the heels of his loafers, waiting for my reaction.

“What would that be?” I’m leery, but I’m willing to listen.

“I don’t want you walking to and from school anymore,” he says as his gaze turns a little shrewd. Is there nothing this man doesn’t know?

“You want me to call for a ride.” I nod once, thinking it’s definitely better than getting chased down the road and eating dirt.

“Close,” he says, walking over to the front door and opening it. There’s a small black SUV parked at the front of the circle drive. “It’s more practical than your mother’s car, but that’s in the garage when you’re ready for it.” Rory extends a key fob to me. “There’s a remote for the gate inside.”

“This is for me to drive...by myself?” I question slowly.

“It’s yours, even if you were to leave.” He maintains eye contact with me as if he’s telling me something important. Does that mean he wants me to go?

“I—”

“Just take it, Nova,” he interrupts me.

“Oh, I’m going to take it.” I hold the key to my chest, and a small chuckle

escapes me. “I was just thinking I might be a little bit of a hypocrite now for that spoiled comment, but I don’t even really care.”

Rory smiles again, seeming much more relaxed than the other times he’s been around. Maybe he just needed a little time to adjust to me. “Smart girl, just like your mother.”

“Thanks,” I tell him, feeling like I’m missing something again, but I’m not sure what.

“Be safe, and please let us know if you’re going to the mainland.”

Twenty is a little old to have to check in, but I think I can manage to do that without too much trouble, at least for now. “I don’t really have anywhere to go, but okay,” I agree.

Rory looks down at his watch. “Don’t you have a meeting in a little while?”

“I do, thanks for the reminder. I’m going to go.” I start walking slowly toward the SUV as if to give him time to change his mind, but he just slides his hands back into his pockets and watches me.

The interior still has that new car smell, or I think it does because I’ve never really smelled it, only heard about it. Everything is leather and shiny. I don’t know what half the stuff does, nor do I have the time to figure it all out now, but I search for the ignition, coming up empty.

A knock on the window has me jumping, then I feel around for the door handle to open it. I feel a little silly when I say, “I don’t know how to start it.”

“As long as you have the fob on you, you just need to push in the brake and turn this.” He twists a little knob to the left of the steering wheel, and the car starts with a low hum. “Turn it again to shut it off.”

I look around to make sure I don’t need an explanation on anything else, but the gear shifter seems pretty straight forward, and I think I can figure the rest out. “I’ve never had a car before.” I grin over at him.

His face falls. “You do know how to drive though, right?”

“Yes, I just never had a car of my *own*.” I dismiss his worry.

“Well, be safe and call if you need anything.” He steps back from the car, and I buckle up before slipping it smoothly into drive and gliding away.

By the time I reach the gate after the long driveway, my face hurts from smiling so much. If I weren’t worried I would be caught on camera, I’d probably be jumping around in my seat, doing a happy dance.

It only takes me a second to find the button for the gate and barely any time for it to open. I ease out slowly onto the road, a little worried

Morningstar might try to play chicken with me. My track record isn't so good, considering I was in the grass yesterday, but thankfully, he's not around.

I'm still grinning from ear to ear when I park the car in the back lot, far away from any other vehicles, and approach the school from the backdoor. It's closer to the offices anyway, plus I get to avoid walking past the Union.

When I enter the main lobby of the administration office, the same girl is sitting behind the desk, but this time when she sees me, her lips curl up in a smile, and she drops her gaze from mine really fast, which makes me realize she's not smiling out of recognition, she's laughing at me.

"I have an appointment with Mrs. Quade." It almost sounds like a question because my voice goes high on the end with suspicion. Is she laughing because she knows what my class schedule is like, or is there something else I'm missing?

"I'll let her know you're here." She turns fully away from me and uses the desk phone. "Your ten o'clock is here... I'll send her back." She hangs up the phone and announces, "She's ready for you."

"Thanks," I respond out of habit more than any real appreciation.

"Careful, wouldn't want you to trip." She sniggers, and I pause mid-step with my back to her for just a moment. At least I'm in on the joke now. Morningstar must have told everyone I biffed it. Great.

I don't give her the satisfaction of a reaction or a response, instead I head to the same door she led me to last time and politely knock, even though I'd much rather pound my fist on the door, or maybe on a certain pretty boy's face.

"It's open," she calls out, and I twist the knob to let myself in. "Have a seat," she offers easily.

I lower myself to the edge of the chair, nervous about how the testing went, but it feels weird to ask how I did when I'm sure she's going to explain everything.

"You got through testing pretty quickly." She types on her computer, just barely glancing in my direction. "It's usually something we administer before acceptance, and we give a week to complete all the modules."

I'm not sure if that's something I should be proud of or not, or how she expects me to respond, so I just wait for her to divulge more info.

"I'll go over a few things with you about class requirements, then you can sign into your school account and select the classes available to you from the

dashboard. I would suggest doing it today, as many of these classes have already started.” She twists her computer monitor so I can see the screen and starts pointing and explaining about credit hours and the importance of a balanced schedule.

Twenty minutes later, I’m walking out of her office, feeling only slightly overwhelmed and pretty excited. Instead of going home, I head to the library and request a study room. It’s probably not necessary since there aren’t that many people around, but I want to be able to focus, and I’m not sure I would be able to in the main area with people coming and going.

My soft footsteps seem loud on the stairs since this place is so quiet. I find myself looking down the rows of shelves on my way to the study room, but the floor appears to be empty, which makes it feel eerie.

The feeling of being watched, even though I’m alone, makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I glance over my shoulder and see the same empty space I just walked through, but the feeling doesn’t go away. By the time I reach the hall with the sectioned off rooms, I’m about ready to break out into a full run. The only thing stopping me is the fear of looking like a chicken if someone were around to see it.

With one last glance back, I reach forward and pull the door to Room 106 open.

As I slide my hand along the wall for the light switch, someone grabs my arm and jerks me into the dark room. A scream tries to tear itself from my throat, but a hand clamps over my mouth before much sound escapes. Panic freezes me for a single second before I kick, shove, and squirm.

I must surprise whoever it is, because the hand on my mouth gets yanked back before I hear a hiss of a sound and wrench my arm free. It all happens so fast, the door isn’t even fully closed yet. I shove myself through the gap and run back toward the stairs so fast that even when I see someone coming out from one of the rows of bookshelves, I know I’m not going to be able to stop myself from slamming into them.

I try to issue a warning to get out of the way, but it comes out as a weak puff of air instead of the words I intended. His light eyes widen right before I crash into his chest and bounce off, flying backward and landing on my butt.

“What the fuck?” Morningstar barks above me, but I’m too busy looking over my shoulder because I would have bet he was the person waiting for me in the room, but if he wasn’t, then who was?

The hall behind me is empty. I blink a few times before turning over and

almost crawling as I get up, then I hobble my bruised body right back down the hall and rip the door to the study room open again, but this time I don't walk blindly inside.

My bag is on the ground where I must have dropped it, but the room is empty.

"Are you fucking deaf?" His voice finally breaks through the ringing in my ears, and I look over my shoulder to see him looming over me, scowling down at my bloody arm.

The moment I see the long scratches, the burning pain registers. He grabs my wrist before I think to jerk back and twists my arm from side to side, examining the marks.

"What is this?" he hisses as his free hand moves the sleeve of my shirt, lifting the fabric to see how far the marks go up, but he ends up revealing the purplish bruises Alden left on me yesterday when he marched me out of the cafeteria.

Finally, I jerk my arm away from him, but he doesn't back off.

"What happened to you?" His icy blue eyes search mine, and if I didn't know any better, I could almost confuse his curiosity for concern.

"Nothing," I say as I reach down for my bag. The movement reminds me of the other aches in my body, namely my butt, but I don't wince like I want to because I'm not letting him see that I'm in pain.

My palm burns when I fist the strap of my backpack. I'll be lucky if I didn't reopen the small cuts from yesterday. I may not be able to blame him for what just happened in that room, but I can blame him for my hands, since he's the reason I fell both times.

"Bullshit. What happened to your arm? Why were you running?"

"I'm clumsy, but you know all about that, right?"

He has the audacity to ignore my snide question as he decides to look past me into the dark study room. His eyes scan the small space with suspicion, and I use his distraction to shoulder past him to get the hell out of the library. I'm not sticking around here when I know someone could be waiting to get me alone again.

"Where are you going?" he calls to my back, but I just give him the finger over my shoulder instead of answering. Is it baiting him? Probably. Do I care? No.

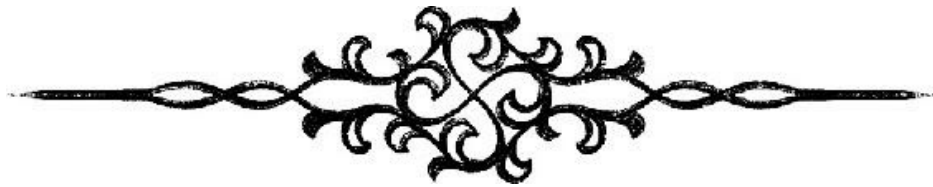
When I reach the main floor of the library, it feels like a completely different world. There are a few students milling about, but they are all too

busy to even look in my direction, or maybe that's what they want me to think.

Just as I'm about to walk past the front desk, I double back to the woman seated behind the dark ornate wood. "Is there another exit from upstairs besides those stairs?"

Her eyebrows bunch as her eyes narrow in my direction. "The back stairs are off-limits to students."

I almost tell her someone must be using them, and it clearly isn't me, because I just came down the main set, but I don't waste my breath.



LUCIAN

“What did she say?” I demand as I try to pull my eyes off the new Umbras ass. Her pants are loose on her legs, but the thin material hugs her in all the right places, allowing me to see her ass jiggle with her hurried steps as she flees the library, giving me all kinds of ideas and pissing me off because she’s not running from me.

“She asked if there was another exit from the upper level.”

I finally peel my eyes away from the door once she’s gone and look at the woman behind the counter. Her eyes are wide and fearful as she gazes up at me. “That’s all?” I prompt, making sure she’s telling me everything.

“Yes, sir.” She nods jerkily. “I explained the rear stairs are off-limits.”

I turn my back to her and examine the library and the other people here. “You know who she is, correct?” I don’t bother looking at her while I’m speaking.

“Yes,” she confirms slowly, like she doesn’t know how she should answer.

“Do you really think you have the right to tell *her* what is and isn’t off-limits?”

“Well, um,” she stammers.

“Where are the back stairs?” I interrupt.

“Straight through there. I could show you,” she offers immediately, demonstrating that she understands perfectly well who runs this place.

Instead of answering her, I just walk away. I haven’t spent much time in the library, but I’m sure I can find it without her simpering behind me. Heads turn as I walk past the few students, but none of them speak to me, which is the way I prefer it.

The wooden shelves rise nearly to the high ceiling, blocking much of the view, so it takes me a few minutes of wandering around before I find the door marked “Restricted.” I try the knob, and it twists freely in my palm.

When I haul the door open, I find a simple wooden staircase that twists up to the second floor. It’s empty, but I expected it would be. Most of these sheep are easy enough to control with simple instructions, which makes me wonder why Umbra was asking and, more importantly, who she was running from, because some thing, or possibly someone, spooked her, and it wasn’t

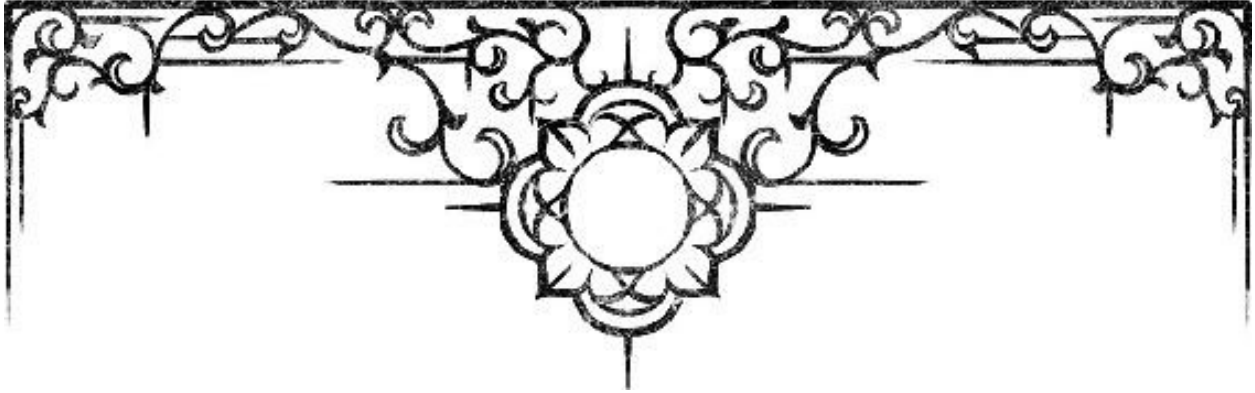
me.

I allow the door to close silently behind me and climb the steep steps two at a time, reaching the landing then the top rather quickly. The door opens to the same hall of study rooms we were in not long ago. I make my way back to the room she entered to pick up her bag and take another look around.

I find a simple black pen under the table with the name Bobcat's etched into the side and an out-of-state phone number. I slide it into my back pocket, knowing it could be nothing, but there's a chance it belongs to Charity or the person who was in here waiting for her.

I'm certain that's what happened. The scratches on her arm were fresh, and she was running from something. I could see the fear in her eyes before she crashed into me. It pisses me off, because it's been absent in her gaze every time she looks at me, but it was present when someone else was fucking with her. That's not going to fly.

At least I learned something. I need a different approach with the charity case, and I need to make sure everyone else at this school knows she's off-limits to anyone but the Morningstars.



Nova

MY HANDS ARE STILL SHAKING when I make it back to the estate. My eyes are focused on the rearview mirror almost as much as the windshield because I'm convinced Morningstar, or whoever was in the study room, is going to come up behind me and run me off the road.

Alden is standing near the garage, speaking to someone I haven't been introduced to, but he turns to watch me as I park my car and hustle into the house without a backward glance in his direction. I don't want him catching sight of me or the scratches on my arm to confirm my need for an escort or protector. I refuse to walk around with a bodyguard. If I can hack it where I grew up, then I can sure as heck take care of myself here. I just need to be more careful.

I lock myself in my room, leaving my bag on the sofa before heading straight to the bathroom to scrub my arm. I probably should have done it sooner, since some of the little pinpricks of blood are already dried and crusty, but I didn't want to be caught by Morningstar or whomever he sent to mess with me. I've come to the conclusion that's the only thing that makes sense. He had someone waiting for me in the room. He probably expected them to keep me there so he could come in and tell me how worthless I am, or maybe even something worse. It surely doesn't seem like he's opposed to violence to get what he wants, but I must have surprised them when I fought back.

The welts on my arm look even worse after I scrub them with soap and water. My whole arm is red. I might have gone a little overboard with the

scouring, but I have no idea what scratched me. My best guess is fingernails, and who knows when they last washed their hands? I shiver involuntarily just from thinking about it, then change my shirt to something with long sleeves so I won't need to explain what happened if anyone comes by.

As soon as I'm done, I head straight for my bag so I can get my scheduled fixed. This isn't going to stop me. If anything, it just makes me more determined to show them that I'm not going to be pushed around.

The sound of the key sliding into my locked door has my head snapping to the right. While I appreciate the comfy living space, I have to admit it's tempered with knowing I have no expectation of privacy, not even with the hired guns apparently.

Alden doesn't even look abashed when he walks right in and closes the door behind him.

"Did you need something?" I finally ask when it seems my glare isn't going to be enough to get him talking or leaving.

"What happened today?"

I tug at the cuff of my long-sleeved shirt and play dumb. How the heck does he know anything happened?

"Why did you practically run into the house like the devil was on your heels?"

The description is so accurate, I could snort, but I don't. "I had to poop," I tell him with a straight face.

His head moves just enough to let me know my answer surprised him. Good. When his eyes narrow just a second later, I suspect he knows it was a diversion tactic, but how can he argue?

"What happened at school?"

"I got my results and came home to enroll in my classes. Why are you asking? Didn't they dismiss you from guard duty?"

"That's all?" he urges.

"Pretty much. Is there something else you need?"

"Why did you change your clothes?"

"It's cold in here." It's not really a lie, but I would have been comfortable in my tee.

He starts to make a slow lap around the sofa, and I have to work to keep him in my sights. The easy camaraderie I thought we had is gone. I don't trust him, and I never should have.

"You're not telling me everything," he says under his breath.

I ignore it, because I don't have anything to tell him, and I'm not sure he expected me to respond anyway. "Why are you here?" I ask him slowly with an expectant glare, since he didn't answer me the first time.

"You're going to end up hurt if you're not more careful."

"Is that a threat?"

He makes a hissing sound as he sucks in a breath. "No, and you know it wasn't."

"Do I?" The ring of purple around the top of my arm would suggest I don't, but I don't say that. It would just make me seem weak.

"Tell your grandmother you changed your mind and want an escort," Alden demands when he finally stops circling me.

"No."

His lips pinch for just a second, but the tic in his jaw remains longer. "You don't understand the dynamics here," he counters.

Does he really think insinuating I'm ignorant is going to get me to do what he wants? "It's not your concern."

"You're pissed because I told you to rein it in with Morningstar. I was trying to help you."

It takes everything in me not to answer his bait. I want to defend myself again and say I wasn't goading Morningstar, only standing up for myself, but I know it will fall on deaf ears, so I don't bother replying.

"I really need to finish up. You can leave my key on the table if you don't mind." I look down at my computer, dismissing him, but I can still sense his presence in the room almost as keenly as if I were still watching him.

"Well, I do fucking mind," he says without an ounce of shame.

I lift my eyes, but not my face, and track his movement until he's standing a few feet in front of me. I give him my attention because it's clear he has something more to say. "You don't belong here."

Ouch. I make sure to keep my features masked so he doesn't see how his words make me feel.

"That's not really up to you, is it?"

He takes a menacing step forward, and I actually lean back because I'm not exactly sure what he's about to do. Something in my expression must show my thoughts, because he stops mid-step and eases back a pace or two.

"You need to leave." I reach for my phone lying on the table next to my laptop without taking my eyes off him.

Alden looks up at the ceiling and lets out an exasperated laugh as he

shakes his head. “You are infuriating.”

I get to my feet, still clutching my phone, and sidestep until I can get behind the couch. Instead of arguing with him, I keep my mouth shut, since everything I say seems to irritate him, and now is not the time to prove a point.

“Do yourself a favor. Get off this island and never look back,” Alden says before pivoting and storming out of the room. I take a step toward the door to lock it behind him, but there’s no point. He could get right back in.

I debate heading to the bedroom, since he said no one had a key to it, but I’m not even sure I could believe him at this point. I don’t know what his problem is. Maybe getting him taken off escort duty got him in trouble, because I swear every time we speak, he gets more hostile with me, and I’m tired of being on alert every second of the day.

I drop back on the couch and finalize my selections, then slam the top of my computer closed. My first class is a little after nine tomorrow morning, and I have the perfect excuse to get out of this house and off this island.

I know I’m breaking my word when I slip past the guard shack at the end of the bridge to get to the mainland. Rory’s request about letting him know if I plan to go to the mainland echoes in my head, but I ignore it. I need some space from this island and a few necessities.

The small town is busy for a weeknight. Most of the restaurants have full parking lots, and the streets are teeming with people walking. It doesn’t take me long to find a Walmart, but it does take me forever to walk to the doors since I parked way at the back of the lot so I wouldn’t have to worry about anyone scratching up the side of the car with a cart.

Walking through the large doors gives me a sense of familiarity that I’ve sorely been missing. I know what to expect here. The stores are laid out almost the same, and I can find the same stuff I would at home.

My cart has more notebooks, pencils, and pens than I’ll probably need for the next year, but I did wander up and down the stationary aisles three or four times, trying to kill time. Before leaving, I head to the back of the store and find a portable door lock. The video I watched after scanning the package seems pretty convincing, and it’s easier than changing the locks or screwing it into the molding.

Still not ready to head back, I take a drive along the coast. I get stopped at one of the lights and can’t help but notice the packed bar and grill with a large “help wanted” sign hanging in the window. At the last minute, I decide

to find the nearest parking spot and head in to ask for an application. I'm not ready to commit to full-time work with school, but surely I could do some evenings and weekends, which means less time where I'm reminded just how much I don't fit in on the island.

The place is on the small side, but the wide open doors leading to a huge deck with more seating on the other side of the bar and an amazing view of the ocean make up for it.

The hostess gives me a quick once-over and a practiced smile before saying, "How many?"

"I was actually hoping to get an application."

"Oh, good. I didn't want to tell anyone else there's an hour wait." She sighs with relief. "Head over to the bar and ask for Mickey." She points toward the right.

I make my way through the bar, shimmying past people gathered at tables too small for their party size, but everyone is all smiles. I can only guess, but I think it has something to do with the view and atmosphere.

I end up leaning over the end of the scarred wooden counter to get the bartender's attention. "Just because you're pretty don't mean I can get to you sooner," the salt-and-pepper-haired man drawls thickly.

I smile at the compliment, knowing it's just flattery, and raise my voice to be heard over the crowd. "I'm looking for Mickey."

"Well, you found me, darlin'. What can I do for you?" He gives me his full attention but still pours a shot into a short glass without spilling a drop.

"I was hoping to get an application."

His slightly bushy brows rise higher than I would have thought possible. "Got any experience?"

"I've been a server for a few years."

"When can ya start?"

"I'm going to school, so I can do a few evenings and weekends," I warn before he begins assuming.

"You ever work the bar? Wait, how old are you?" he questions.

"No, twenty."

"You're hired. You know how to pull a draft, don't ya?"

"I think I can manage." I smile.

"Hop on back here and give me something pretty to look at."

"Hey!" someone gripes from farther down the bar, but I don't know who. I hesitate, unsure if he really means it, but when he glances over at me

again, then at the bar, I know he's not joking. I shove my sleeves up, noting I'm not dressed to be working behind a bar, but wash up anyway.

"I need two Blue Moons and four house pours," Mickey shouts and resumes slinging bottles.

Finding the beer cooler for the bottles of Blue Moon is easy, but it takes me a second to read all the draft levers to find the right one.

As soon as I'm finished, Mickey lifts one of the glasses to his lips and drains the pint with a few gulps. "Perfect, I think you'll do. Give these to the ugly bastard down at the end."

My eyes immediately go to the end of the bar and scan the people sitting there. "Who?" I ask quietly, making Mickey chuckle.

"Jimmy!" he hollers, and a man turns his head to look in our direction. "That'd be him."

The guy is not even close to ugly. His blond hair is thick and wavy on top but cut short on the sides, highlighting his dark eyes. His neatly kept short beard suits him well, he looks like he may be in his late twenties, but he could be a few years older. Now if Mickey would have said mean instead of ugly, he would have led me right to Jimmy. I gather the drinks up and walk them down to the end of the bar, placing them in front of the waiting man.

"Who are you?" he questions.

"Nova."

"Only Nova I know is a 1969 two door." His eyes roam over me without shame, and a flush colors my cheeks. I don't know if I should be offended or flattered by his perusal, because his tone doesn't give much away.

"You better not be giving her a hard time, Jimmy. I'll boot your ass out of here."

"I own the place, old man," Jimmy snarls and shoves a bill across the counter for me to take.

"I don't give a shit. Ignore him and come on down here and give me a hand, darlin'." This place may be good for my wallet and self-esteem, but it might threaten my sanity. The next hour passes quickly. I spend most of that time being backup for Mickey, but we manage to discuss which days and hours work best for me before he sends me packing for the night with a thick wad of bills in my pocket.

I end up avoiding Jimmy for the most part. He was actually seated at a booth in the corner of the bar with a few other men, but I felt his eyes on me too often, or maybe it was my eyes that strayed to him too often.

Being in the packed bar made it easy to forget about all my issues at the house and school, but when I step out into the evening humidity, all those worries come flooding back. As I walk the few blocks to my car, I pull my phone out to check the time, only now realizing I have a few missed calls and texts.

The number is unknown, but it doesn't take more than a glance to understand the demands to know where I am are coming from Alden. I send off a quick reply to the final message that only came about twenty minutes ago.

Me: Went into town to grab some supplies. On my way back now.

The return text bubble pops up almost as soon as I hit enter, but my phone starts ringing a second later. "Dang it. Hello?" I only let him hear the greeting.

"You're supposed to tell me when you leave the island." His voice is deep and deceptively calm.

"Really? I thought all that was squashed. Astrid agreed I didn't need an escort." I play dumb, then hit the unlock button for the car since I can see it parked at the curb a few cars down.

"Nova," a masculine voice says from just over my shoulder. I turn on instinct and come face to chest with Jimmy.

"Yeah?" I'm a little breathless as I step back to look up at him, but he did startle me. I shouldn't be talking on the phone while walking. I'm clearly too distracted.

"Whom are you talking to?" Alden demands.

"Mickey said he forgot to give you this for your shift." Jimmy holds out a bundle of folded T-shirts for me to take.

"Thank you," I say, taking the shirts while trying not to drop my phone. I can't hear Alden's muffled words at this point anyway. "You didn't have to bring them out. I could have gotten them when I came in for my shift."

Jimmy searches my face for a second. "Where do you go to school?" The slight tightening around his eyes sends a warning bell to my brain. For some reason, I don't want him to know it's Cadieux, but I can't explain why.

"A local college," I hedge, hoping he was just inquiring about my age to make sure I'm old enough to serve alcohol.

"What happened to your arm?"

My phone starts lighting up and buzzing, giving me an excuse to end the conversation. "Sorry, I need to go. I didn't expect to be out so late this

evening.”

I back up a few steps with Jimmy still watching me, but he doesn't try to question me anymore. Once I'm farther away, I spin on the ball of my foot and step off the curb so I can get behind the wheel of the Macan.

I can't bring myself to look up at him when I start the luxury SUV, even though I know he's still standing there. He's probably wondering why someone driving such an expensive car would need a job at a bar, but it's really not anyone's business as long as I do my job, or that's what I tell myself at least when I look in the rearview mirror to find him still watching me drive away. I wonder if he gets a lot of students from Cadieux and doesn't care for the crowd. Bobcat's would get flooded with Wayne State students some weekends, so I get it.

When my phone starts to buzz again, I hit the button on the dash to answer it. “I'm headed back now, in the car, safe and sound.”

The other end is silent for a breath, and I almost wonder if it was someone else calling, but then Alden says, “I'll meet you at the bridge,” and then the line goes dead.

I would be lying if I said I wasn't a little nervous when I make the turn for the bridge. It's been a while since I had to answer to anyone, and I'm not sure what Alden will tell my grandparents or if it will make Astrid rethink making me keep my escort around.

A figure steps away from the guard shack right into the road, and I hit the brakes hard, jerking the car to a stop several feet away from a very pissed off Alden. I'm tempted to just go around him, but it would be childish, so I hit the button to unlock the door when he reaches for the handle.

He crams his tall frame into the passenger seat and slams the door harder than necessary. “Hey, no need to take it out on the car,” I grumble.

Alden ignores me, so we end up driving in silence to the estate. It's only when I'm about to head to the front of the house when he says, “Keep going straight.” I spare him a quick glance but do as he asks, heading around the side of the house to the back. “To the left.” He points to a fork in the road, and I follow that too, getting farther and farther away from the main house.

First, we pass a large garage, if you can even call it that, because it almost looks like a smaller version of the house, but the large bay doors inform me that it stores vehicles. Past that, there are several smaller houses dotted along the curving drive. “Slow down,” he instructs once we reach what seems to be the end of the houses.

I press the brake until I'm creeping along and eventually come to a stop near the edge of another line of trees. It's growing darker by the second, but it's the silence that's making me uncomfortable.

"So what is this? A tour of where I'm *allowed* to go?" I'm feeling defensive, and I'm still aggravated at Alden. I had begun thinking of him as an ally here before he turned into a jerk just like almost everyone on this island.

"No, let's go for a walk." He opens the car door and exits without waiting for me to agree.

I sit here for a moment, practically stunned and getting more and more irritated. "Don't slam my door," I snap when I reach the front of the car.

He gives me a bored look and ignores my comment.

I cross my arms over my chest.

"What happened at school today?"

"What?" I ask, confused, since I assumed I was going to get yelled at for going off the island.

"At the library?"

"I have no clue what you're talking about." I play dumb because I don't want to tell him someone grabbed me in the room, or that I ran smack dab into Morningstar when I ran away.

"Someone said they saw you on the ground in front of Morningstar. Did he push you down?"

"No," I answer honestly, and it rings with the truth.

Alden's eyes narrow. "Why would you defend him?"

"I'm not. It's the truth. Do you have someone spying on me?"

"Do you think I would have had to spend the last few hours searching for you if I did?" He scowls, allowing me to see he's not happy about the way he spent his evening.

"Astrid agreed to no escort. There were no stipulations. I'm not your problem."

"Wrong, all of this is my problem. You think these people are just a bunch of rich fucks, but you're in more danger here than in that shitty little apartment, and before you get all teenage angst on me, this isn't just about you. There's a lot more at play here than you understand."

The teenage comment stings. He's saying I'm immature, but I don't let on that it bothers me. "Then tell me, why all the secrets?"

Alden rolls his lips in as if he's actually stopping himself from speaking,

then he shakes his head briefly. “I doubt you would believe me, and I don’t know you well enough to predict how you would react. It could have the opposite effect.”

“How about you let me decide for myself since I am an *adult*?”

Alden watches my face for a long second, but when he finally speaks, I know he’s decided to keep me in the dark because he doesn’t give me any useful details. “The founders have enemies, anyone with the kind of power and money they have does. If you’re going to go off the island, let someone know and stay away from the Morningstars.”

“You act like I’m hunting him down,” I retort.

“Maybe not yet.”

“What the heck does that mean?”

“Figure it out,” he snaps.

“Got it,” I reply flatly.

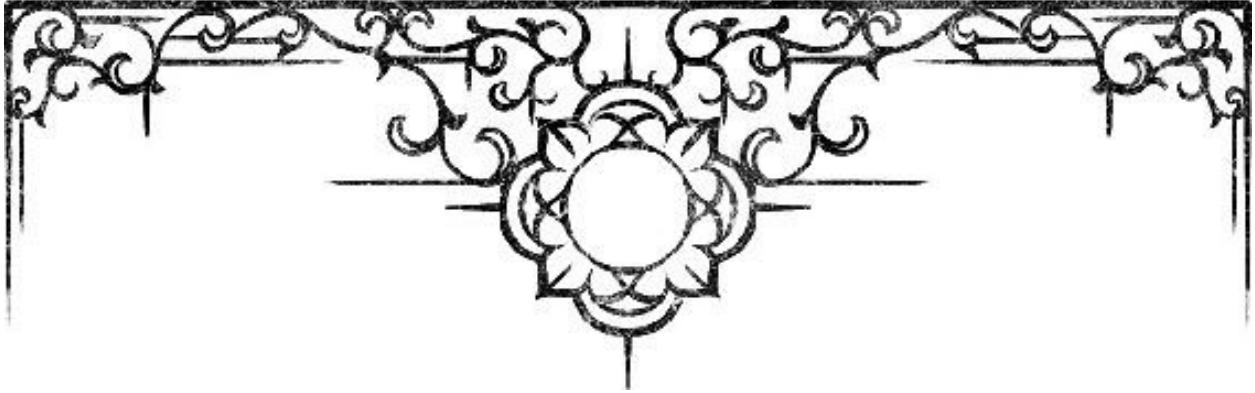
“If you’re as smart as you think, you’ll listen to me and keep your head down.”

“Are we done here?” I start to step back toward the side of the car. There’s a petty part of me that would love nothing more than to leave his butt here and make him walk back, but that would be about as immature as he accused me of being.

Alden just shakes his head as if I’m such a disappointment and too dumb to deal with. It makes me want to defend myself, but there’s no point, so I don’t.

When he pulls the door closed after getting in, he’s at least careful not to slam it this time. I do a three-point turn, so I don’t end up on the grass, and head back to the main house. I’m the one to break the silence when I ask, “Do you know if I should park back here? Rory never said.”

“I run security, not the garage,” he replies, and my shoulders tighten with his reproach. That will be the last time I speak to him unnecessarily.



Nova

THE SCRATCHES on my arms are still red and scabbed in a few small spots, so I find another long-sleeved shirt to pair with black shorts left by Tabby. I have a feeling my wardrobe is going to shift to include a lot of the things she brought, but it would be silly to wear jeans when it's almost eighty degrees outside when I don't have to.

My legs are pale and are made to look even more so by the dark fabric of the shorts, and the small scabs on my knees are still present, but I'm tired of sweating my butt off, and everyone probably knows the story now anyway.

The house is quiet when I leave with enough time to grab a coffee and maybe a muffin or something from the Union if I think my stomach can handle it.

When the gate opens at the end of the drive, I breathe a sigh of relief that the neighbor isn't around, then I make a quick turn so I can get out of here before he shows up. What Alden doesn't seem to understand is that I would much rather just keep my head down and not be bothered, but I'm not going to stand by and let someone try to intimidate me. I'm sure he'll get tired of screwing with me soon enough anyway.

When I walk down the long corridor from the back entrance, I feel like people are staring, but it's just my head messing with me, because when I actually take a chance and glance around, no one is paying me any attention.

While I'm in line for coffee, I recall the map I studied of the school last night, but now that I'm in the building, I feel all turned around, like I might go to the wrong wing. Once I finally have my drink, I glance at the plaques

on the walls to make sure I'm heading in the right direction as I speed walk to my first class. My stomach does a nasty flip when I realize not only are the doors closed, but there's no one else around. I know I'm not technically late, but I'm cutting it pretty close.

Easing the door open, I keep my eyes lowered as I enter the room. Without looking at anyone directly, I assess the layout. The room isn't overly large, but it's sloped, with three sections of long tables descending evenly down it. The section in the middle is the largest, having four chairs positioned behind the tables, while the two side sections each have two chairs.

I take a seat at the empty two-person table in the very back row of the left side of the room and rush to get my laptop open, if only to have something to hide behind while I get situated.

My relief of finding an empty table so conveniently near the rear of the room is short-lived, however, when the girl in front of me turns around and levels me with a look of sheer disdain. I pretend not to notice the way her eyes narrow or her nose crinkles as if I smell bad, but her words are impossible to disregard, even though she's talking to the girl next to her. "She's supposed to be an Umbra, but it looks like she just rolled out of bed."

"Anya." The other girl darts her eyes over to me, not bothering to hide her smile, before focusing on her friend. "She's off-limits."

"He said we can't touch her," Anya reminds her friend with a malicious sneer still aimed at me.

I lean forward and keep my words soft, so the other people around us won't be able to hear. "I bet it took you all morning to come up with this little act. Maybe even half of last night." I lean back into my seat and let my face relax into a mask of indifference, then add, "How does it feel knowing you'll never once cross my mind when I dominated your thoughts before you ever met me?"

Anya's top lip lifts as if she's about to snarl something at me, but the teacher in the center of the room speaks, and I avert my eyes to her, proving my words to Anya and her friend. I spend the next ninety minutes dutifully acting as if they don't even exist.

Being in the back row offers the bonus of a quick exit, which I take full advantage of. I take my mostly full coffee with me and drop it into a trash container just outside the room. I have a few hours to kill between classes, and the library isn't an option unless I want to sit at one of the shared tables on the main floor, and that sounds pretty damn close to torture right now.

Instead of turning tail and sitting out in my car, I force myself to take a spot at one of the small seating areas in the Union. The grumble of my stomach is what pulls me from the assigned reading pages about thirty minutes later.

I debate ignoring it, but I know I'll regret it later when I can't focus in my next class because I feel like crap. I hate that I have to decide between eating and possibly drawing unwanted attention to myself or going without to keep the status quo.

With one quick glance around, I leave my laptop and bag at my table and head over to the coffee shop to get a bagel and drink.

My steps falter when I pivot to return to my seat. It's no longer empty. Morningstar looks quite comfortable with his tattooed arms splayed wide along the arms of the chair, taking up way more room than should be possible with just his presence alone. There's a small part of me that gets pissed at how gorgeous he is. It doesn't seem fair that he can be so attractive and such a jerk. I mean, being that pretty should make him nice, but he bumped along the mean tree at some point.

Alden's words are in my head again, telling me that I antagonize him, and I know it to be true, but I don't know any other way to behave.

"Are you just going to stand there and stare at me, Charity?"

Dang it, I was staring. I should pick up my computer and walk away, but I don't have anywhere else to go. At least there are witnesses here. "Just wondering what I've done to earn the honor of your presence, Morningstar, and how to avoid doing it in the future," I deadpan.

I'm not imagining the curl of his lip, but I don't know him well enough to read the meaning. It could be humor, but he could also be imagining strangling me.

"Such a mouth you have. Did you pick that up off the streets like everything else?"

"Yup, cultivated right out of the gutter. You should run along, my kind of slum could be contagious."

I lower myself into the seat across from him. I'm not dumb enough to get within striking distance. I watch his eyes go to the slathered cream cheese everything bagel cradled in a napkin in my palm before his eyes meet mine.

Unsaid words in a familiar manta filter through my thoughts. *Do you really need that? Boy, you must be hungry. Are you going to eat all that?* Purely out of spite, I bring it up to my mouth and take a bite. I may as well

give him a reason to say something.

I barely taste the food because I'm too busy waiting for him to say or do something, but he just watches me, turning my awkward game around on me.

"So what do you need today?" I ask between bites. "If you wanted to be the first person to tell me how trashy I am" —I make a check mark with my finger— "someone already beat you to it."

"Did they now?" he questions while I take another bite.

"You'd be so proud."

"Care to tell me who I should thank?"

"I've already forgotten her. The delivery was amateur at best." I lift my eyebrows, hoping he catches the hint and realizes I'm talking about him too.

"Well, when you've been around the block as many times as you have, it's hard to come up with something original," he defends smoothly.

"Touché," I agree, even though it's the furthest thing from the truth. Spending months of your senior year of high school in the hospital and mourning your parents' deaths puts a damper on your social life, at least it did mine. I'd go so far as to say I'm downright sheltered. I've been worrying I would end up as one of those twenty-four-year-old virgins you hear about. Now, it doesn't seem like such a big deal in the grand scheme of things. "On that note. I have a proposition for you."

Morningstar moves his tongue behind his lips, licking his teeth, and it's predatory. It almost makes me back down, but I'm already committed.

"Why don't you enlighten me as to why you abhor my existence, and after, I will promise to stay as far away from you as possible?"

"Big words for a girl who barely made it out of remedial English."

That one stings. Not only is it proof that someone showed him my test scores, but he's calling me stupid. I didn't even know I did that badly, which means his comment could be fitting.

I look up when I realize my eyes are on my lap. Fuel is the last thing I need to give him, and showing him he hurt me would do just that.

"It's a good thing I've been offered this superior education." My teeth remain mostly clenched, but at least I didn't let him stun me into silence.

"Why are you here, other than the obvious, that is?" Morningstar asks.

"First, I need to know what you assume 'the obvious' is to answer your question." I might as well bleed him for any information since it seems to be so elusive here.

"The Umbras' estate isn't up to par with ours, but I'm sure it's much

more comfortable than what you're accustomed to."

"Ah, so I'm here for the big house and comfy bed," I surmise.

"I'm sure the new Porsche doesn't hurt either. What did you have to do to get that out of old man Rory so quickly?" The insinuation is enough to make me gag, but I don't give him the satisfaction.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I taunt instead.

"Maybe I'll have to find out for myself." His glowing blue eyes seem to darken with his words, and I don't miss the way his gaze travels over me in a way that shows signs of interest, but it feels tainted.

"Doubtful," I counter because I don't want him looking at me like I'm a thing he can have if he deems me worthy.

"I showed you mine." His tone is harsher, but still suggestive. I don't think Prince Morningstar likes to be denied, even if this is all a game to him.

"I'm honest enough to admit opportunity is part of why I'm here, but I'm not looking to take over some old family rivalry. I don't know what your beef is with the Umbras, and I don't really care either." Lie. "So how about you forget whom I'm related to and just ignore me like you do everyone else at this place?"

A muscle ticks in his cheek. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned that I noticed how he barely acknowledges anyone else's existence.

"Why do you think I'm here?" I ask, deflecting from the fact that I just admitted to paying attention to him.

"It doesn't matter. You being here at all is a problem."

"Why?"

"Because there are only two kinds of people, Charity." He leans forward so his elbows are on his knees and his tattooed hands are hanging between his spread legs. "The ones under me, and the ones against me, and I haven't figured out which one you are yet."

I shrug with what I hope is indifference before pulling my eyes from his intense gaze. "Maybe that's because I'm neither. I am not your enemy, and I'm not your subject." The utterance it muttered in a hushed tone as I realize there are people around watching us, and they are not even trying to be discreet. I feel like I'm being judged from every direction.

I lean forward to shut and snag my laptop off the table between us. I'll have to step into his space to get my bag, but I'm hesitant. Something in my gut is telling me not to let Lucian Morningstar anywhere near me.

"I need to get to my next class," I tell him as I stand, hoping he will get

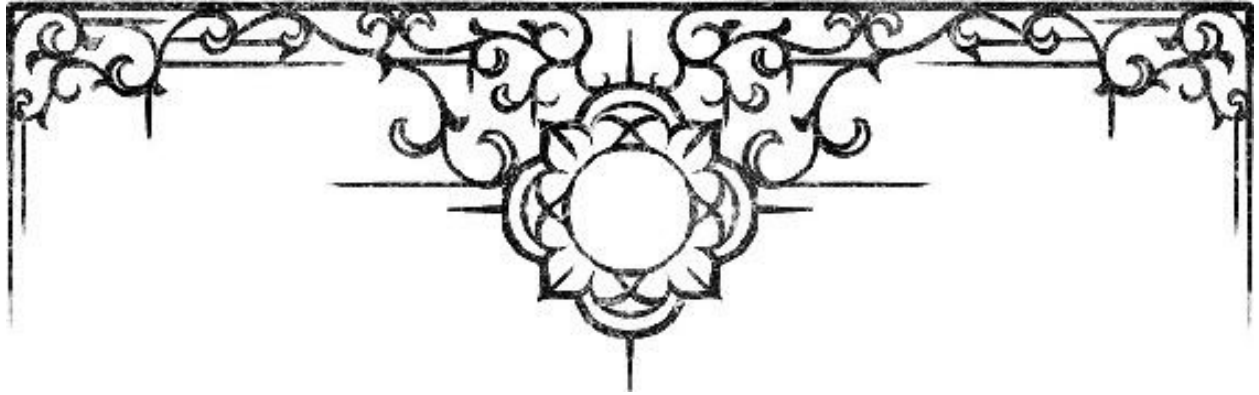
up and leave so I can get my bag and get the heck out of here.

“I’m not stopping you,” he says innocently.

Even though warning bells are going off that something isn’t right, I still bend forward and reach for my bag, which means I’m leaning over him when he loudly says, “I know you’re used to fucking as a form of payment, but I’m not interested. Don’t touch me again.”

My entire body freezes except my eyes, which go straight to his. The icy blue gaze that meets mine is flat, even as heat and humiliation crawl up my neck to flush my cheeks. I’ve actually been stunned into silence. It doesn’t matter that I didn’t touch him and wasn’t even planning on it. All that matters is what he said and the harsh whispers and snickers I hear filling the space.

When I can move again, I make a point of jerking my bag up from the floor, but I don’t run from the Union like he wanted me to. I put my back to him, which is probably a mistake, and then I walk away with my chin tipped up and my eyes focused only on the long hallway in front of me.



LUCIAN

I catch myself checking out the Umbra bitch as she sits in front of me with balls of steel, giving almost as good as she's getting. Something close to regret niggles at me when I think about how different things would be if I met her anywhere else but here.

We would have been strangers, and I would have fucked her against a grimy wall in a club. Her thick hips would have been draped around my waist as she panted and pleaded against my neck before I shoved her down to her knees and fucked her mouth. Thinking about her fat lips wrapped around me while she gazed up at me with those defiant doe eyes makes my dick harder than the last time I got off.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" she sneers, but I can see she's uncomfortable. She may not think she's easy to read, but she's fucking transparent.

"Maybe I'll have to find out for myself." *Some night, when you're fast asleep, thinking you're tucked safely into bed and nothing could hurt you, I will.*

"Doubtful," she boasts. Evidently, she has no clue what I'm capable of.

"I showed you mine," I taunt her.

Surprising me, she admits she's here because it's better than where she came from. I'm still waiting on those details, but my source has been slow to reveal any information. At first, I thought he was holding out on me because he was worried the Umbras would suspect he was the leak, but now I'm not so sure.

When she asks me to forget about her and treat her like everyone else, I have to clench my teeth to keep from reacting. If only it were that fucking easy, but she had to show up here looking like sweet innocence wrapped in sin and buck against every-fucking-thing I've laid out. I hate everything about her almost as much as I hate her fucking family.

"Why do you think I'm here?" she asks.

"It doesn't matter. You being here at all is a problem."

"Why?" Her head tilts to the side with curiosity. Why is she so frustrating?

“Because there are only two kinds of people, Charity. The ones under me, and the ones against me, and I haven’t figured out which one you are yet.”

She breaks eye contact with me and scans the Union. I knew we attracted attention as soon as I sat down, but it seems as if she’s just now noticing my audience.

“Maybe that’s because I’m neither. I am not your enemy, and I’m not your subject.”

The only other option is family, and that’s the last thing she is.

She reaches for her laptop, showing signs of leaving. I think about stopping her but decide to let her think she’s getting away from me without my dismissal.

“I need to get to my next class.” There’s a pleading tone in her voice I would bet she’s not even aware of.

“I’m not stopping you.” The second she leans forward to pick her bag up off the floor, I speak loudly enough for everyone watching to hear. “I know you’re used to fucking as a form of payment, but I’m not interested. Don’t touch me again.”

I see the hurt and embarrassment flash in her eyes before she averts her gaze from mine, and I like it, but what I like even more is watching her ass sway from side to side as she walks away with her chin tipped in the air with defiance.



NOVA

Telling myself that putting up with this crap is worth it over and over again isn't quite cutting it after the debacle in the Union. I try to focus on the professor during class, but I feel like I'm back in eighth grade and everyone just found out that Julie went down on Ricky in the band room closet. Somehow, he was cooler after, but she was called all kinds of names and treated like a pariah. I don't know which was worse—the girls and their slut shaming, or the boys acting like Julie would be willing to go down on them too.

I hear all the chuckles at my expense, as well as the mock whispers calling me desperate and insinuating that I'm willing to do anything for money, and it sucks, but I try to comfort myself with the knowledge that the taunts will pass, just like they did for Julie...two years later.

I don't rush out of the room when class is over in hopes of avoiding some of the other students in the hall, but it's pointless. When I exit the room, there are several stragglers lingering there, and I'm not at all surprised to find they all seem to be waiting for me or to witness something they think is going to happen. I glance around, looking for Morningstar, since he's not an easy one to miss, but come up empty.

Unfortunately, his existence can be felt even without him actually being present. The king has spoken, and it seems to be open season on the new girl. The hostility I sense from the hateful glances are enough to have me wanting to get the heck out of here and grateful it's my last class of the day so I can.

I keep my face relaxed as I pretend not to notice the people gathered around, even though it seems orchestrated. If I said I wasn't a little nervous walking through the gauntlet of students, I'd be lying, but I wonder if that's not part of the tactic to keep me on edge, wondering what could happen. Morningstar definitely seems manipulative enough for those kinds of mind games, and the girl from my earlier class said they couldn't touch me. Unfortunately, I don't know if I can believe her.

Just when I start to consider that maybe I was overthinking the reason for the crowd, I feel someone right behind me almost breathing down my neck. I don't speed up my steps or move to the side, because that would let them know they are getting to me, but man do I want to.

Three steps later, my foot lifts much higher than it should when the person syncs their steps with mine and shifts their foot under my heel, causing me to stumble forward. Thankfully, I don't fall, but my bag does slip down my arm and hit the ground with a nasty thwack. Damn it, my new laptop better be okay.

Streams of people move around me when I stop to haul my bag back up my arm, making it impossible to know which of them tried to trip me. I mutter an acerbic, "Grow up," anyway.

"You okay?" a guy asks from just over my shoulder, so I have to turn to see him properly. He has several inches on me and gorgeous, dark auburn hair and a face to match. He looks to be several years older than me and way out of my tax bracket. He is what I expected of Morningstar. He's dressed in dark slacks and a white button-up that seem simple enough, but his clothes speak of wealth. It could be the fabric, the tailored cut, or just everything about him. Whatever it is, he oozes money.

Even without all that to take into consideration, I'm skeptical of why he would ask me if I'm okay. "Fine," I answer, trying not to be too rude, but my tone conveys irritation I don't bother hiding.

His eyes roam over me, and he's not even trying to be subtle before he says, "Derry Quade," in what I'm guessing is an introduction.

"Nova Devlin."

His head tilts to the side as he asks, "You didn't keep your mom's name?" proving he already knew who I was.

"No," I reply slowly. It's still pretty much the social norm, and it certainly was nineteen years ago, to take your father's name, so I'm wondering why he's even asking.

"But you're an Umbra."

"So they tell me." I start to walk away.

"One of the founding families," he continues as if I need the reminder, then he steps up to keep pace beside me.

I shoot him a quick glance, but it's pointless. He seems just as baffled as to why I'm not using the family name as I am about why it matters to him that I'm not.

"Morningstar will still fuck with you, but most of the others will back off if you throw your weight around a little."

I do a double take at the side of his face. Was that an insult about my size, or just a reference to having a founding family name? "And be like him? No

thanks.”

Derry’s brows rise in what seems like surprise. “Not a fan?”

“How could that be surprising?” I shove out the door, not really expecting a response from him, but he continues to trail behind me.

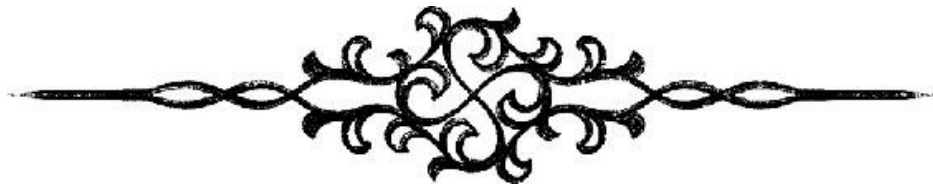
“Most girls don’t care how he treats them.”

“Despite what he would have everyone believe, I’m not desperate for anything, let alone his attention. I would rather he forget I exist.”

That stops Derry in his tracks, or maybe it’s the fact that I’m heading to the parking lot and not showing any signs of slowing because I parked in the boonies, but he’s no longer keeping pace with me, which is just as well. The disdain I heard when he said Morningstar’s name is enough to let me know he doesn’t like the bully any more than I do, but I’m not one to ally with the enemy of my enemy just because.

As the warm breeze lifts my hair and cools my sun warmed skin, I allow myself to entertain the idea of cutting my losses and disappearing from the island and all the drama that comes with it, but it feels like cowardice, like I’d be letting them push me away from opportunities I wouldn’t otherwise have without this place and the school, and I can’t let it happen.

As I slip into the plush leather seat behind the steering wheel of my new car, I acknowledge that pride may be inherited. That, or I’m already letting this place influence me, because I don’t want to give any of it up, which is terrifying.



LUCIAN

Getting her schedule from one of the girls who works in the office was easy. A simple demand was all it took, because she knew I wasn't asking. She would have handed over anything with a smile, but that schedule leaves me wondering what the fuck is taking Umbra so long to find me standing next to the car her supposed family bought her.

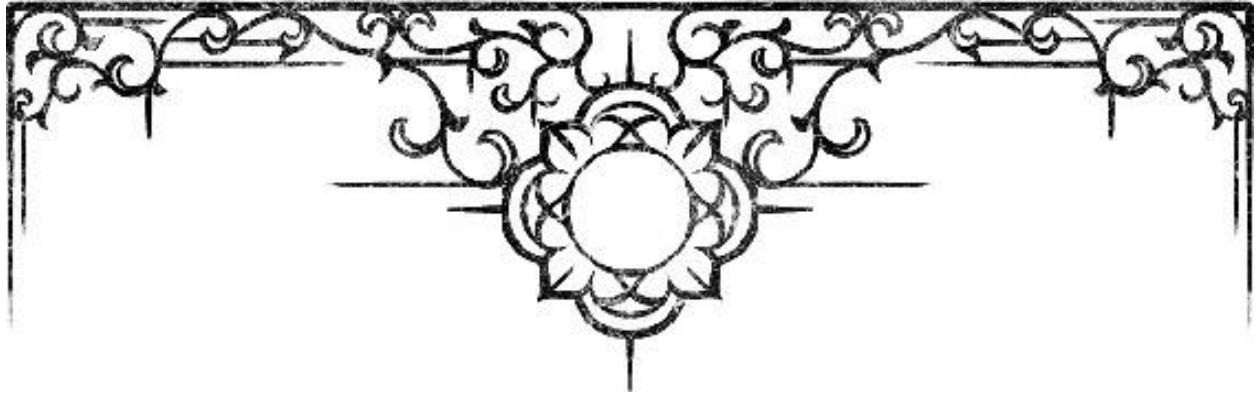
I don't know why that pisses me off, but for some reason, it does, though everything about her bothers me. I'm tempted to etch my name in the black paint, but movement at the door finally pulls my attention away.

I push off the car when I realize she's not alone. Derry, the carrot-topped Quade motherfucker, is at her side, standing a little too close. He should fucking know better. I already put word out that the new Umbra bitch is off-limits, and that includes the other founding families. He can have her when I'm done with her for his scheming and plotting bullshit...if I decide to let him.

Derry's head lifts as if he can sense me eyeing him, and he keeps his loafered feet planted on the sidewalk instead of following her farther to her car, but it doesn't matter, because he already fucked up.

Once she realizes he's no longer chasing her, she shakes her head from left to right, sending her long hair spilling all the fuck over, then she struts through the parking lot like she owns the damn place, even in her ripped Vans and faded shirt. Another spike of something hot and covetous has me clenching my fists. It pisses me off that I want her for anything other than to use her against the Umbras.

I slip between the cars before she can see me with a new target in mind. Apparently, Derry needs a reminder of who runs Cadieux, and it sure the fuck isn't a Quade.



NOVA

The rest of the week is slow and filled with tension at school and at home. I'm no closer to getting to know my grandparents or finding out anything about my mom and why she left home than when I arrived. I haven't seen Rory or Astrid much. It seems my first few days of denying dinner with them set the tone, because no one has asked me to join them in the last couple of days. I eat from the buffet that's laid out in the morning, and there's always a silver domed plate left near my door for dinner.

Strangely enough, it's lonelier than when I lived alone. Sometimes, I feel like a ghost walking around the house because it feels so empty. Even arguing with Alden seems fun at this point, but it's Saturday and I have my first shift at Hooker's bar and grill. Unfortunately, I feel obligated to tell Rory, so that's why I'm searching the house for him at seven o'clock to no avail.

Finally, I head into the kitchen. There's always staff in there, so if this doesn't work, I'm going to have to call him, and for some reason, I don't want to do that. It feels weird since I think we're technically in the same house.

"May I help you, Miss Devlin?" I startle a little at the voice that comes from behind me.

Bridget gives me a weird smile like she knows she scared me and feels bad for it, but something about it feels fake.

"I was looking for Rory," I answer, then shift to the side so she can join me in the kitchen from the hall.

"It's Saturday. He and Mrs. Umbra are out." She delivers the information like it's something I should have already known.

"Oh, okay." That makes things easy for me. I don't stick around after. My Hooker's T-shirt is already tucked into my bag as I head out to my car. Before I start the engine, I shoot off a quick text message to Rory to let him know I'm leaving the island, and then I put my phone on *do not disturb* just in case he decides to ask where I'm going so I'll have a good reason not to answer. I just need to make sure I don't look at the screen to see any notifications.

Since it's pretty early for the bar crowd, I'm able to find a spot in the back of the bar's parking lot. I'm a little leery to leave Mabel, my newly named pride and joy, parked here, but I think parking on the street might be worse.

I pull open my bag and slip the T-shirt over my head, then tug my long hair out of the collar. It's hard to ignore the words scrawled across the front of the shirt, especially after the encounter with Morningstar in the union. I never would have made the association if it weren't for him and his insistence about me being a sex worker, but now when I look at it, I think of him, which pisses me off. The jerk takes up enough space in my head without the added distraction.

I lock up my SUV, then head into the bar. There's a pretty girl near the door wiping down menus, and she looks up as I enter. "Hey." Her smile is easy as her eyes stray down to see my shirt that matches the one she's wearing. "You must be the new hire. I'm Amanda."

"Nova," I reply. "Is there a place I can put my bag?"

"Sure." She leaves the menus on the hostess stand, and I follow her through the tables, past the bar, and to a door that reads, "Staff Only."

"You can use one of the open lockers. Do you have a lock?" She eyes me.

"No, I didn't think to bring one." I probably should have, but in my defense, I've had a lot going on recently.

"I don't mind sharing mine," she offers kindly. "But you'd probably be fine anyway. We've never had a problem before, and nobody really messes with Jimmy."

"Thanks, but I don't want to put you out. I'll pick up a lock before my next shift." I reach in and pull my wallet out of my purse just in case. There isn't much cash in there, but I want to keep what I have, plus I don't want to deal with replacing my license or anything. I shove the thing in the back pocket of my jeans on the opposite side of my phone—I'm sure it looks a little strange, but I don't really care—then I put my bag in the first empty locker.

"I'll show you how to clock in on the register." She gestures for me to follow her out of the small back room.

"There she is, how's it going, darlin'?" Mickey booms through the bar, even though there's no need for him to be so loud.

"Good, thanks. How are you?"

I creep toward the bar area to hear his response. "Better now that I have

another pretty face to look at.” He bounces his gaze between me and Amanda, who smiles good-naturedly at him.

“You’re such a flirt, Mickey.”

“Ain’t nothing wrong with making a woman feel good. My wife would agree.” He winks. “She would also feed me to my dogs if I ever did anything but run my mouth, not that I would. That woman was sent to me from the lord himself.” He makes this funny little noise of appreciation that sounds like a hum.

“I was just going to show Nova how to clock in,” Amanda continues as if she’s heard all this before.

“I got it. I need to run a few things by our little star before we get busy anyway.” Mickey shoos Amanda away from the bar, then throws the towel he was using to wipe his hands over his shoulder and heads straight for me.

“Pretty sure Jimmy got you all set up in the computer,” Mickey mumbles as if he’s speaking to himself and then twists the screen of the ordering computer toward us. He hits a little house icon near the bottom left of the screen, then tags the button for the timeclock before walking me through the process. I’m instructed to pick a six-digit number as my login code that will also serve as my employee number for placing orders. I learned Mickey’s last time. He uses 123456, which is almost laughable. I bet everyone in the place knows his number.

The ordering system is easy enough to pick up, but I spend time entering each order while we’re slow to practice while Mickey does all the pouring. Before long, the empty seats begin to fill, and the noise level ratchets up until Mickey is shouting orders from across the bar for me to enter. We work well as a team, with me bending to get to the coolers with the bottles and handling most of the drafts, while he pours all the liquor and mixed drinks.

The short apron I tied around my waist is padded with bills and I’m sweating, but the smile on my face is genuine when I approach Mickey to ask if I can run to the bathroom while we have a slight lull.

“Hurry back, darlin’, I’ve got a feeling it’s going to be a busy one tonight.”

I have to turn sideways a few times to get through the crowd, but I make it to the bathroom quickly. While I’m washing up, I blot a little cold water on my face and neck with the paper towels before pitching them into the trash and pushing back out into the crowd.

I should have been more careful and paid better attention to my

surroundings instead of rushing back to the bar. If I did, there's no way I would have ended up in the middle of somewhat familiar faces.

"Holy shit, look who it is!"

Someone else snickers. "And she's advertising her services right on her shirt."

"What kind of discount do we get for multiples? I got a twenty, or make that a ten," the guy behind me says as he grabs my hip and pulls me back so I can feel him pressed up against my butt. There's a single second that passes where I'm afraid to act because I'm too worried about losing my job like the old me would have been, but then instinct kicks in, and I throw my elbow back as hard as I can into his surprisingly hard gut and wrench myself away from him.

A hand wraps around my wrist, and I spin to fight that off too, but it's not one of the guys from school—it's Jimmy, and he looks even more pissed than usual. Once I realize it's him, I stop fighting, and he releases me while stepping between me and the group of guys. "Go back to the bar, Nova," he tells me softly while still eyeing the group.

I hesitate for just a second. I want to tell him not to make a big deal about it, because I'm the one who will have to deal with the fallout at school, but I stop myself. Even if Jimmy offered to buy them a drink, these guys would still treat me like crap the first chance they got, so I turn my back and walk away, knowing I'm going to pay for it later.

The rumble of Jimmy's voice carries for just a few seconds as I station myself behind the bar. Mickey is eyeing the same direction I just came from, but I don't know if he saw what happened.

I try to pretend everything is fine and that I wasn't manhandled and called names by a couple of preppy jerks and ask, "What do you need?"

Mickey focuses his knowing eyes on me for a brief moment, then his gaze shutters before he turns away. "Need a bucket of Coors for Lindsey and a couple of them fruity lemonades for Sarah."

I get straight to it, scooping a few shovels of ice into one of the dented metal pails before shoving six bottles into the ice to place it down near the end for pickup.

Within five minutes, I notice Jimmy is back at the table I'm starting to think of as his with a few other men. I scan the bar for the guys from school but come up empty, allowing me to relax a little.

"Last call!" Mickey shouts through his hands cupped around his mouth. I

glance at the clock, then approach him in confusion.

“It’s not even midnight.”

“Can’t serve alcohol after twelve on Saturdays.” He grins at me and tips his head back to consume a shot of amber liquid.

“Want one?” He offers me the glass.

“No thanks,” I reply with my hands held up. The last thing my kidneys need after barely any water today is liquor.

Mickey winks. “Smart girl.” It makes me wonder if it was some sort of test, but somehow, I feel like I would have passed even if I would have taken the drink.

We’re slammed for the next fifteen minutes with orders. I even run out of buckets to serve the bottles in, but they still get delivered six bottles at a time. Mickey hastily pours into two glasses at the same time, barely spilling anything as he finishes his last two mixed drinks and backs away from the bar for the patrons to grab their orders.

Amanda comes jogging up and leans over the bar, trying to get one final order in, but Mickey shuts her down with a shake of his head and his finger pointed to the clock.

“Shoot, he was a good tipper too.” She pouts as she spins to go tell the customer it’s too late.

“So, aside from the dickwads, how was your first night?” Mickey flips the towel off his shoulder and starts wiping the bar. I bet it’s not even a conscious thought, because it seems more like a habit.

“Good, it went by fast,” I answer, telling him the truth. Bobcat’s was busy, but nothing like this fast-paced environment. Hooker’s doesn’t even serve food after ten.

“Think you can handle Friday next week? It’s even busier.”

“I’ll manage, as long as I’m not slowing you down.”

“Ha! It might just be that you’re prettier than a picture, so nobody cared about the wait, but I got no complaints from anyone tonight, and that’s got to be some kind of record.”

I grin. Like I said, this place is good for my ego and my wallet. “What can I do to help with closing?”

“Be still my heart.” Mickey feigns at grabbing his chest. “If I were forty years younger and didn’t have my Molly, I might just put you in my pocket.”

I roll my eyes, but I smile while I do it. Mickey’s eyes go up above my head, and his expression shifts. “You take care of them idiots?”

I look over my shoulder, then shift to the side when I realize Jimmy is standing right behind me.

“You know them?” he questions instead of answering Mickey.

“No,” I reply, giving him the truth, but his eyes narrow as if he thinks I’m lying. “I don’t, but I think they go to the same school I do.”

“What school is that?” He crosses his arms over his chest.

“Cadieux,” I admit softly. Honestly, I’m not sure he can do much more than read my lips since the bar is still pretty loud as people finish their drinks while chatting, but I know he understood when one corner of his lip lifts in a sneer.

Dang it, I knew there was a reason I didn’t want to tell him where I went to school. Guys like them probably come in causing trouble all the time.

“I just transferred in,” I defend, hoping I’m not going to lose my job because I go to school with them. “I didn’t ask them to come, I didn’t even want them to know I worked here.”

Jimmy misunderstands me. “Are we not good enough for you?”

“No.” I put conviction behind the single word, offended that he would think that of me, but I guess we are judged by the company we keep, and it could look like they are my kind of people since I go to school there.

“What then?” he demands, his arms crossed over his barrel chest.

“Quit giving her a hard time, you jackass. Anyone with eyes could see she didn’t want anything to do with them rich pricks,” Mickey defends.

“I didn’t want them coming in here and giving me crap. I get enough of that at school,” I explain a little too honestly.

“Why do they give you shit?” Jimmy’s gaze isn’t any less shrewd.

“Because I’m not like them,” I answer with only a little of the truth. The real reason they don’t like me is a mystery only Morningstar could solve, but I doubt he ever will, at least with any real motive other than he hates me because I was born into a family he despises for yet another reason I may never know.

“That island is a dangerous place,” Jimmy warns, but I’m still not convinced he believes me.

“I’ve been told,” I agree.

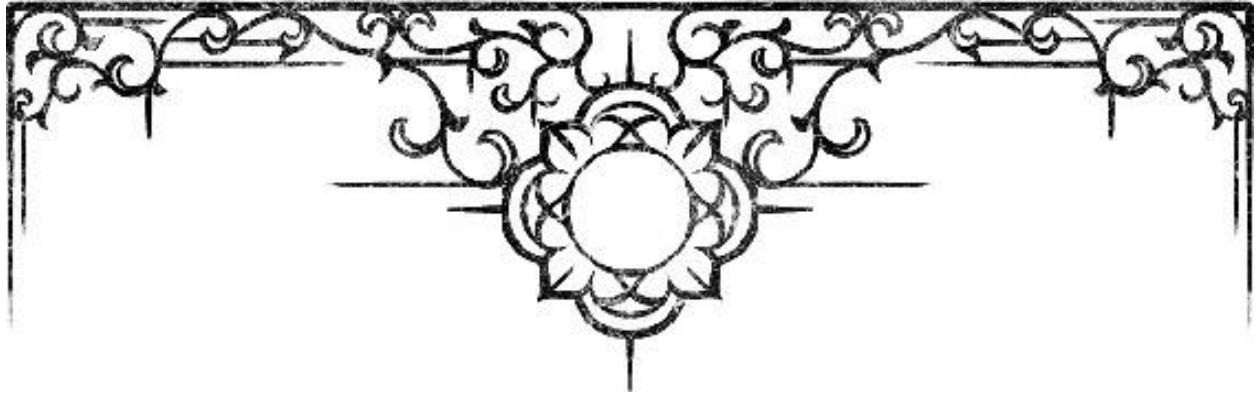
“Those founding families think they can get away with anything,” he continues.

“Like what?” I don’t mask how curious I am to know more about the island, the founders, and even the school.

“Anything,” he snaps. “Their money spends just the same as everyone else’s, so I allow them in the bar, but I’m not going to have a problem here, got it?”

“Got it,” I reply, still meeting his now cold stare. Good to know I’m on thin ice. I won’t be putting too much faith in keeping my job here, especially when news gets out that this is where I work. I bet Morningstar would love to see me get fired.

I wonder just how far I would need to go to make sure his influence wouldn’t be felt.



LUCIAN

The club is packed, making it feel like the middle of summer instead of winter. Sweaty bodies fill the dance floor, but my mind isn't here, it's back on the island where the little Umbra is probably tucked sweetly into her soft sheets.

I adjust my position in the booth, draping my arm over the black leather, knowing I would much rather be sneaking into her room where I could straddle her waist and use one hand to cover her mouth to stifle her scream, and the other to...

"Hello." A sultry voice pulls me from my musings.

Her pouty mouth is painted blood red as she toys with one of the curls hanging over her tits, making sure to draw my attention there. She has dark hair and brown eyes, so she's not a match for the girl I want to use.

I don't speak to her, but that's nothing new. I seldom give any of these sheep my consideration.

"May I sit?" she asks, already curving her body with her ass angled toward me to slip into the booth beside me.

I make eye contact with one of my men, and he immediately puts his hand on her shoulder, stopping her from getting closer.

"You need an invitation to sit with Morningstar," he tells her, and she slides her hungry gaze back to mine.

"What do I need to do to get invited?"

"Open your mouth," I say, feeling bored, but the distraction is helping with the ache in my cock caused by someone I can't stand who's miles away.

The girl tips her chin down a little, making sure to keep her gaze locked on mine, then opens her mouth as if she's already thinking about swallowing me.

"Wider," I tell her. There's an edge to my tone, so she probably thinks she's turning me on. She couldn't be more wrong. "Now bleat."

With her mouth still agape, she shifts her face so she can see me better.

"Are you deaf?"

She finally closes her mouth to ask, "Bleed?" then glances around as if she's looking for something. Probably a knife. Would she really go that far? I

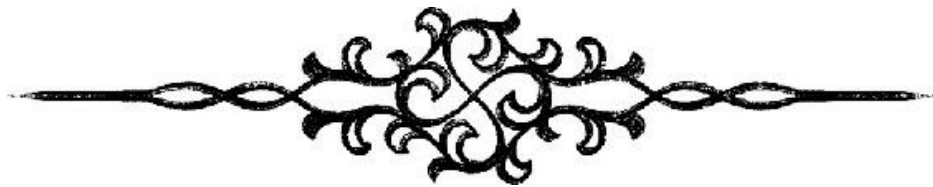
don't even know why I'm asking. She would, and so would countless others just because I told them to do it. She disgusts me. It's like I can feel her nasty fingers gouging into me to see what pieces she wants to keep.

"I said bleat, you fucking idiot. Get her out of here."

"Wait—" She tries to fight the man pulling her away, but it's useless, just like she is.

"Don't let anyone else near the table," I tell the others before downing the rest of my drink. I'm smart enough to know I'm dangerous tonight, not only to them, but to myself. I wish Nox would have come with me, but he's been fucked in the head for weeks, and I can't seem to pull him out of it this time.

Maybe I'll find my oblivion at the bottom of this bottle or the next.



NOVA

As I approach the bridge to get back on the island after my shift, I notice a few cars lined up in front of the small building that resembles a guard shed. I get in line, wondering what the holdup is. I've never even seen the barrier down, but it is now.

The first car gets turned away, along with the second. The third doesn't even try pulling up to the window, it just follows the two cars in front of it and makes a U-turn to get back to the mainland road.

The revving of an engine can be heard for several seconds before I spot the car responsible for all the noise. The red bar starts to rise, but an attendant steps into the path, blocking the other cars ahead of me from entering the bridge while it's up.

A black car speeds past me, not even slowing when it makes the turn into the wrong lane of traffic on the bridge and narrowly avoids the man standing in place of the barricade. The guard's hair whips back from his face, and he sways a little as if he's caught in the drag of the car, but in the next second, his eyes pop open, he strolls back to the shed, and the bar drops back into place.

All the cars ahead of me file out of line pretty quickly, and within just a few seconds, I'm looking out my rolled down passenger side window to speak with the same man who was almost just ran over.

"It's a private island, ma'am. No public invite tonight," he says without even really looking at me.

"My name is Nova Devlin. I live here." I sound like I'm lying. I wouldn't even believe me if I were him.

He bends down to get a better look into the car. "You live here?" He sounds skeptical. Like I said, I don't blame him.

"Yes, with the Umbras." That sounded a little more confident.

"Oh, right." He begins to nod. "Sorry about that." He steps back in a rush as if I might decide to burst right through the gate.

"No problem. Should I..." I start to ask if I should call ahead to let them know I'm coming, but he's already inside the building, so there's no way he could hear me.

I wonder if Morningstar notified him that he was coming, or if he just

assumes the roar of his engine is enough of a warning.

I don't rush over the bridge or even past the college. To be perfectly honest, I'm leery of being on the isolated road with him in the middle of the night. I'd probably end up with my new car in the ditch, or worse.

I let out the breath I was holding when I turn down the lane that leads to the estate when I don't see the glow of taillights ahead of me. This is one time when I can thank him for driving like a speed demon.

My stomach hollows out when, halfway down the road, my headlights illuminate Morningstar's black car on the wrong side of the road half into the grass. I slow down as a feeling of dread fills me. Is this some sort of sick trick, or does he need help? I can't tell if he hit anything because there's no light coming from his car at all.

Should I call someone? Maybe Alden?

Slight movement on the ground spurs me into action, and I punch down on the gas for a second before slamming on the brakes and throwing the SUV into park.

Lucian is propped up against the rear wheel of his car, and the side of his face is red with blood as it drips down his jaw. It brings back so many unwanted memories, I almost throw up right on the spot, but I fight down the bile in my throat and run over to him.

He squints up at me, but the rest of his features are soft as if he's confused.

"Are you okay?" I ask like an idiot, dropping to my knees in front of him and reaching out, but I'm unsure if I should touch him.

He blinks. "Charity?" The single slurred word is enough to tell me he's been drinking, and it pisses me off. He could have killed himself or someone else.

"What were you thinking?" I admonish when what I really want to do is get up and leave him here, but I can't. He could be hurt worse than it seems, plus it's just wrong.

Lucian moves his tongue around the inside of his mouth, and I see blood on his teeth. "Crap, I need to call an ambulance." I start to get up, but he grabs a hold of my arm, stopping me. His touch is surprisingly gentle considering his words.

"Don't you fucking dare. I will bury you."

I pull my arm away to prove I can and give him a glare in return. I almost say, "Try it," but I manage to keep the taunt to myself. He's in no shape to

spar, even verbally.

“You’re hurt,” I remind him. Drunk people don’t always feel pain—my mom didn’t. I shove thoughts of that night away. I need to be present here.

“Bullshit,” he snaps, then turns his head to spit blood from his mouth.

“Drunk and delusional,” I mumble.

“I’m not drunk.”

“Did you take a bath in whiskey then?”

“What the fuck are you even doing out of bed, Charity?” He leans to the side a little.

“None of your business, pretty boy. Is there someone I can call for you since you’re too stupid to let me call an ambulance?”

Lucian makes a snorting noise and knocks his head back against his car. I watch his eyes roll back in his head before he shuts his lids.

I immediately reach out to shake him, but his eyes snap open as if he can sense me moving closer, and he looks at my hand near his face and shoulder like he’d rip them off if I tried to touch him.

“I thought you passed out,” I defend hastily.

“Sure,” he says, but he clearly doesn’t believe me.

“Can I call someone?” I offer again.

“No, just get the fuck out of here. I’ve got nothing to give you.” The blood smeared across his face makes his angry words seem even more threatening, but I ignore it.

“Where’s your phone?” I inquire, thinking maybe he can call for help himself.

“You looking to steal it? Go ahead and try to rob me, you broke bitch, and see what happens.”

If he’s trying to kill my goodwill, he’s doing a very good job. I push off the ground and try to give him a wide berth to walk around, but he falls to the side and grabs my ankle unexpectedly, tripping me.

The *oof* of air leaving my lungs when I land on my chest and chin is loud in the silence of the night.

“Shit,” he curses as he releases my leg and tries to crawl forward.

I scramble away from him, and he tries to messily get up, only to fall over again. There’s blood dripping from my chin and a metallic taste in my mouth from biting my tongue, but the rest of me is fairly unscathed, so I look around.

The driver door of his car is open, probably from him getting out, and the

airbag is blocking my view of the interior to look for his phone. I'm also afraid to turn my back on him to go retrieve my phone, so I fumble for what to do next.

Lucian is holding himself up with his palm on the car, but he doesn't look too steady on his feet. Despite how messed up he is, I know he could still do a lot of damage if he got a hold of me, so I round the other side of the car to keep him at bay.

"Give me a number to call so I can get you help," I offer in a last-ditch effort.

"C'mere," he says softly, coaxingly, but I'm not dumb.

I start to back away, getting closer to my car and an escape. His eyes look wild, and I don't think I've ever been more afraid of someone in my life.

When he bellows for me to stop and pushes himself off the car to walk unsteadily toward me as if his will alone is enough to ignore his injuries, I turn and run back to my car, then slam my finger down on the lock tab before putting it in drive and speeding out of there.

I'm still breathing heavily when I stop at my gate. I can see his entrance behind me in the mirror. My heart is beating fast, but I still open my door and jog across the road, looking for the intercom box.

"Hello?" I say, leaning down a little to be closer to the speaker. "Hello, can someone hear me? Lucian needs help. He's on the road about a mile back. He didn't want me to call an ambulance, but he's hurt. Please send someone to help him."

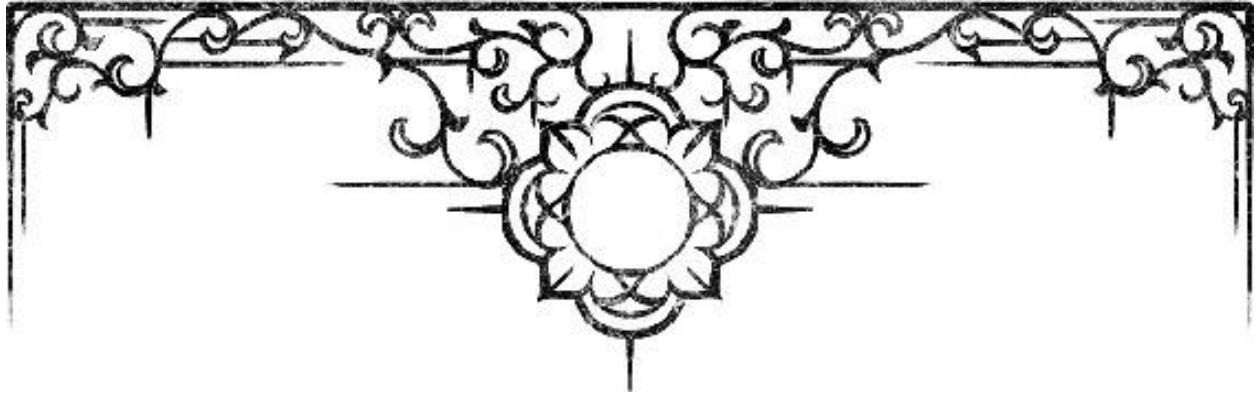
I jump back when I hear the static crackle. "He'll kill you," says a voice eerily similar to the man I just left on the road. I wipe my chin with my fingers coming back bloody, already knowing how willing he is to hurt me, then back away slowly. I've done all I can. If he dies out on the road, it's not my fault, it never was. I should have kept driving.

The second the gate shuts behind me, the one across the road opens, and a white car speeds out, not even slowing to look in my direction. I drive a few hundred feet up the drive, then turn my car off before jogging back to the gate. There's no way I'm going out there, but there's some weird part of me that needs to make sure Morningstar isn't dead, and this is as close as I can get.

I expect to hear an ambulance or see flashing lights or something, but after nearly ten minutes of nothing, I decide maybe whoever it was that left took him to the hospital, or maybe I'm just too far away to hear any of the

commotion.

Exhausted, I amble back to my car, noting I haven't been this sore since the accident that almost killed me. Cadieux Island is hazardous to my health, but I'm still not leaving, not even with an axe over my head like Lucian Morningstar. My only hope is he's too drunk to remember anything that happened tonight.



NOVA

I'm embarrassed to admit I did a lot of internet stalking Sunday after waking up and showering. My chin matches my scabbed knees, and I'm pretty sure I chipped a tooth or maybe cracked it, because my tongue keeps worrying the sharp point that wasn't there before the fall.

Lying to Rory about how it happened when he came to find me to ask about my job yesterday afternoon wasn't fun. I don't think he believed the story, but he didn't call me out on the lie, so I suppose that's the best I could hope for. I almost asked him if he heard anything about Morningstar, since my search of the local news and social media both came up empty, but I think he would have suspected I had something to do with what happened, and I didn't want to deal with that.

As I park in the back lot for school Monday morning, I scan the rest of the cars for his and come up empty, but that doesn't mean much. His car was likely damaged, and I'm sure he has more than one anyway.

As soon as I step out of the car, I regret my black leggings and old band shirt. It's hot, but I chose the outfit for personal comfort, not because it would keep me cool, plus I wanted some protection for my legs. My knees are going to be all scarred up soon if this keeps up.

Thankfully, the scratches on my arm are almost healed, so I can forgo the long sleeves, but the bruise Alden left on my upper arm is a little more stubborn, only fading to a sickly yellow color. There's not much I can do to hide my chin, since the little gash is right on the front like it split when I hit the ground. I feel like makeup would only increase the chances of it getting infected, and let's face it, I'm not having the greatest luck, despite the fact that I'm living in a mansion and driving a new car.

I head straight for my first class, barely seeing anyone as I walk past the Union because I have my eyes locked on the hall ahead of me. No one tries to trip me or even sends any scathing comments in my direction. It should be refreshing, but it only makes me more nervous about what's coming.

I take the same seat as last time, but the girls in front of me are too busy whispering to each other to even notice me. I catch tiny snippets of their conversation, and it only makes me more curious, because I know I heard the

name Morningstar murmured. Do they know what happened this weekend or if he's okay?

Without warning, the hair on the back of my neck stands up and a chill skates down my spine. I feel warmth at my ear, but I'm too afraid to turn. Surely he's not going to do anything to me in the middle of class. There are too many witnesses, right?

"Turn around," he orders, and the girls in front of me snap their heads forward while I barely breathe. The only thing stopping Lucian Morningstar's lips from touching my ear is my hair, and I've never been more grateful for my thick locks.

I sense him shift, but it's not far because he drapes himself in the chair right next to me. I don't look over to watch him sprawl, however I can see his shape in my peripheral. His tattooed knuckles are red and split on the desk, but that's all I can make out clearly. It's a chore not to look at his face to see if the wound he had on his head is visible, but my survival instincts must kick in, because I'm able to stop myself from moving a muscle, or maybe I'm frozen. Either way, it works in my favor.

I feel him staring at the side of my face and flinch when I see his hand come up. He makes a deep rumble of a sound in his chest, then turns my head with his fingers dangerously close to the cut on my chin. I wince a little from the surprised pain but recover quickly.

"If it isn't my little nightingale," he says, barely moving his lips. My eyes dart up to his hairline, and I see a red, angry gash that probably should have had stitches.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I say, letting my gaze fall back to his eerie eyes.

"Do you always lie so much?" He narrows his eyes.

"To save my skin? Always," I admit truthfully.

"I need to speak with you."

"Isn't that what you're doing now?"

"No."

"I'm in class." I turn to look at the stage, hoping the teacher will start class.

"And I'm not asking. You can get up and walk out with me, or I can carry you out."

I open my mouth to say he wouldn't dare, but the words die on my tongue, because he would, without question.

“And fair warning.” He leans in really close again, and this time, I feel his lips against the bottom of my ear. I fight the shiver that wants to make me tremble from his warm breath. “If you fight me, I’ll probably enjoy it.”

I shove my chair back from the desk so fast, it scrapes across the floor and makes a screeching sound. Lucian chuckles darkly and licks his bottom lip as I stand. We have the attention of everyone in the room. I don’t know where to look, so I focus on the wall above everyone’s head.

“You’re just full of surprises, nightingale. I can’t tell if I like it better when you defy me or when you listen.”

“Neither, you like neither,” I retort, if only to make myself feel better, but it just makes him laugh harder.

He reaches past me and shoves the door open for me to walk out. I look around the empty hall, wondering what the hell I was thinking coming out here willingly. If I made him carry me out while yelling, maybe the teacher would have notified Rory or something.

“Keep walking,” he instructs, using his body behind mine to keep me moving.

“Where to?” I question, stalling.

Lucian blinks his light blue eyes at me lazily. If I didn’t hate him for being such a jerk, I might think it was sexy, or maybe scary, but it’s something to see. “That way.” He nods his head down the hall, toward the Union.

I sidestep him and walk in that direction. At least there will be people around.

Right before I pass the stairs, he drops his arm in front of me, grabbing a hold of the handrail of the stairs and barring me from going farther. “Up,” he demands.

“And if I say no?”

He stares down at me, his eyes nearly as wild as they were Saturday night when I ran from him. “Same rules. You walk your pretty little ass up there, or I will carry you.”

“My butt isn’t little enough for you to carry up there,” I argue, aggravated with him and myself that my heart did something funny when he called me pretty.

“Try me.” He tilts his head to the side, and suddenly, I feel more like prey as realization dawns. He does like this in some weird way.

He must know the second I back down, because he eases out of my space

and allows me to walk ahead of him, but he's practically on my heels all the way up to the third floor, where I step quickly to the side, keeping away from the railing in case he wants to push me over.

His light eyes go to my chest as I try to hide the fact that I'm heaving. He, however, isn't even breathing hard.

When he starts to walk toward me, I back up, matching his steps to keep distance between us. When I bump into someone else, I realize I stepped right into his trap. Hands wrap gently over my upper arms, and Lucian says, "You're scaring her," but his mouth never moves.

I look up and over my shoulder and nearly scream as I jerk myself away. How the hell can he be in front of me and behind me?

"Fuck, look at her chin," the one from behind me says, then glares over at the other Lucian.

"What the heck?" I whisper while wondering if I've finally lost my mind.

"You really don't know anything do you, nightingale?"

"Stop calling me that and Charity. My name is Nova."

"I will call you whatever I like, little lamb." Lucian looks positively pleased with himself as he peers down at me, or maybe he just likes pissing me off.

"May I?" The other steps up with his hand poised near my face.

"Do what?" I lean back on instinct.

"I'm just making sure you're okay," he tells me and waits before lifting my chin with a featherlight touch.

"This better not scar, Lucian." His words are rough, but not meant for me.

Jesus, it's like looking at a mirror image. Even their tattoos seem to match perfectly. "Twin?" I question when my mind tries to jump to some other even stranger explanation.

"Thank you for helping my brother," he says while looking down at my lips, or maybe it's my chin, but my belly does this heavy flop.

"You're welcome," I reply without hesitation.

"He told me you fell when he grabbed you, and I saw this on the camera." His thumb traces just below the cut. The skin is really sensitive, and it stings a little, but I ignore it.

"It was an accident. I didn't mean to make her fall," Lucian gripes, but his words aren't for me, they are for his brother. It sounds like this isn't the first time they've had this conversation.

"You should apologize," the man in front of me says while keeping me

trapped in his gaze. It's strange to be staring at a man who's done nothing but try to make my life hell and realize he's not the same person.

"I can offer to kiss it better," Lucian mocks.

I step back from the man showing me too much kindness. I'm not falling for this good guy, bad guy garbage. "You would much sooner bite me."

Lucian doesn't even try to hide the dark look in his eyes when he scans me up and down. "So many soft places," he says under his breath, but the insult about me being chunky still hurts.

"I won't say anything about your accident if that's what you're worried about." I cross my arms over my stomach.

"Tell me why you stopped," Lucian demands.

"What do you mean?" I ask, confused.

"Were you hoping you could finish me off or just rob me?"

"Are you joking?" I scoff harshly.

"Tell me why you stopped," he says a little louder.

"To make sure you were okay." I raise my voice to match his. "I wasn't trying to rob you. I was trying to get your phone for you so you could call someone for help since you didn't want me to. I should have run you over with my car, but not everyone is as heartless as you." I snap the last part out of anger, not that I would have ever even thought about actually running him over.

"Why would you care if I was okay?" he spits as if he still thinks I'm lying.

"Because it's the right thing to do." I toss my arms up in the air.

"What did you expect to get out of it? Do you think I'll like you now and be nice to you?" He makes his voice a little whiny as if he's implying that's how I sound.

I stare him dead in his face, and the features I thought were so handsome the first time I saw him blur until all I see is the nasty sneer he looks at me with. There must have been some small part of me that thought he would come to understand there's no reason for him to hate me. I'm no threat to him, but I realize how stupid that was now. I know what I am to him, he made it perfectly clear before he ever laid eyes on me. I just stupidly thought I could make him see reason.

"The only thing I will ever want from you is for you to forget I'm alive."

He takes one step forward like he might get in my face, but his brother blocks his path. "Thank you for stopping," he tells me, but he sounds sad.

“My brother could have died out there if it weren’t for you.”

I don’t have enough energy to give his words much thought because I’m too focused on finding an escape while he’s blocking Lucian. Just as I get near the staircase, someone grips my wrist, stopping me. I wrench my arm away and sneer, “Touch me again, and I will take us both over that ledge. My life is worthless, remember?”

Lucian’s eyes widen for just a second, then he steps back as if he believes I would drag him over the third-floor railing.

I stomp down the stairs, feeling so mad I could cry, but there is no way I’m letting him, or anyone else, think he hurt me.

I allow my anger to drive me right back to my classroom, where I shove the door open before dropping none too gracefully into my seat at the back of the class. Several heads turn to watch me, but I take a page out of Morningstar’s book and pretend none of them exist.



NOX

“That didn’t go as planned.” I voice my thoughts to my stubborn brother. If he weren’t my twin and we didn’t share a soul, I might want to punch him in the face for making Nova walk away the way he did after everything she did for us. When I saw her in the camera last night, I assumed she’d done something to him, but she saved him and he knows it too, even if he can’t admit it. His head is a fucked-up mess, and I can’t blame him for it.

“She’s infuriating,” he snaps as if he’s waiting for me to agree.

“You mean she’s not like the other sheep?” I counter and turn around to lean against the railing now that I can no longer see Nova on the main floor, storming away. “It’s killing you.”

“Fuck off, she just pisses me off.”

“Why?” I prod.

“Because she shouldn’t be here. *She* doesn’t belong here.” He’s adamant.

“Why not? Because she wasn’t born here? So the fuck what.” I shrug.

“The Umbras were dead. They had no heirs, no one to take on new roles when it was their time again, and I was this close to making that bitch submit to me, but then they pulled her out of the ether just in the nick of time. You don’t think that’s a problem?”

“They’ll have to prove her lineage. She’s either a founder or she’s not.” I’m not nearly as obsessed with taking everything from the Umbras the way Lucian is, but then again, most days, I don’t give a fuck if I live or die, so at least he has something to keep him going.

“Where did they find her? Who is she?” he demands as if I have an answer.

“You’re the one with a person on the inside,” I remind him.

“They are not fucking talking to me. I’ve tried to make contact twice.” Lucian pushes his hair away from his face in an unusual display of frustration. There’s not much that can get a rise out of him other than family business, but this girl does so without any effort on her part.

“Find someone else who can tell you about her,” I suggest.

“I don’t want anyone near her,” Lucian bites out through his teeth, and I know it cost him to admit it, so I don’t push him to examine why he won’t let anyone near her, especially since I know the answer. He already thinks of her

as his—or ours, to be more precise.

There is, however, something he needs to hear. “She’s afraid of you.”

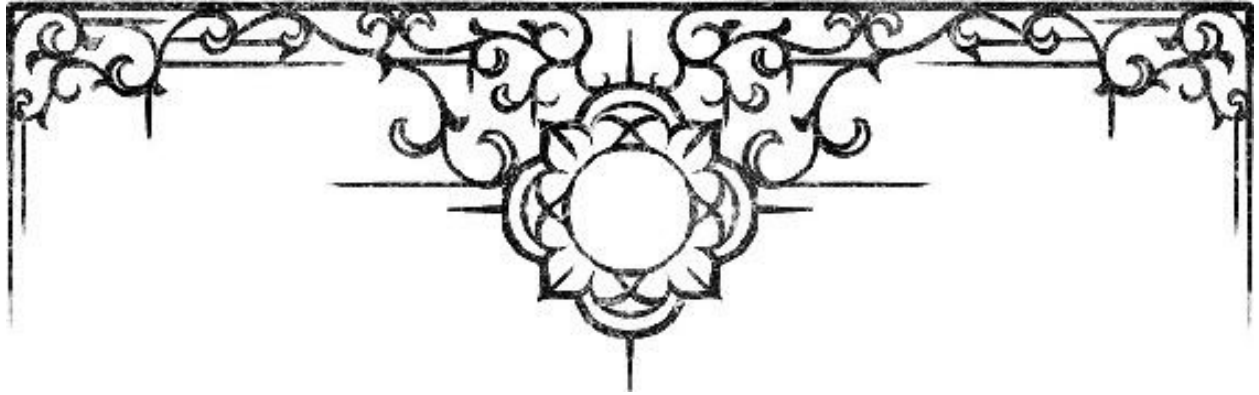
He scoffs and looks at me as if I’m the one who’s delusional. “The only time I’ve seen her remotely frightened is when she ran out of the study room in the library with her arm all scratched up, and I still don’t know what the hell happened in there.”

“You scare her,” I repeat, but I doubt it’s any use. Lucian’s not ready to admit some things, even to himself.

“I need to find out if she really is an Umbra,” he says, ignoring me like I assumed he would.

“What then?”

“Then I will know exactly how I need to use her.”



NOVA

*B*y Thursday, when I'm getting ready for my second shift at Hooker's, I'm about ready to toss in the towel and quit the college I was so eager to attend. I'm constantly looking over my shoulder, wondering when the next attack is going to come.

The only thing keeping me enrolled is the thought of returning home to my crappy apartment after getting a taste of what my life could be like, *and* the fact that I don't want to give Lucian the satisfaction.

I've seen him around campus a few times. Well, I think it's him anyway, and not his possibly more stable brother, but he ignored me like I asked for the most part. I'm not dumb enough to believe he has any intention of actually leaving me alone. I catch him watching me sometimes, as if he's biding his time to strike, and it's messing with my head, which is exactly what he wants.

After closing my room, I check to make sure it's locked, even though I know Alden has a key. I haven't seen my brutish escort in several days. For all of Rory's insistence that I have protection, the need seems to have dried up now that they know I'm not going to run away like my mother did. I'm still curious about what made her give all this up, but no one on the island seems to want to talk to me, let alone give me answers about the past.

"Headed out?" Astrid catches me breezing past a hall, and I backtrack to answer her.

"Yes, for a few hours." Her gaze slides over me, and the small sigh she lets out leaves me with the impression that I've disappointed her somehow.

"How's school? Making lots of friends?" Now she sounds hopeful.

"It's good, a big change, but I'm adjusting."

"That's wonderful to hear. It's been a while since an Umbra attended Cadieux. I bet they are all enamored with you."

She couldn't be more wrong, but I'm not going to burst her bubble, so I just smile and hope it doesn't come off as forced.

"Have fun." She waves me off as if she thinks I'm headed out to a party, then picks up her wine glass to sip it.

I make it off the island without any other run-ins, but that's where my

luck runs out. As soon as I park my SUV in the side lot, I spot a familiar physique. Tall, broad, covered in tattoos, and carrying a chip on his shoulder, Lucian Morningstar is hard to miss. I sink lower into my seat, hoping he hasn't spotted me and it's only a coincidence he's walking up the block. He's alone, which doesn't strike me as odd, but the way people seem to avoid him does.

Instead of watching him, I scan the people walking around on the warm night, and I'm surprised by how many people wait until he's past them before stealing a glance in his direction, as if they don't want to draw his attention. Does everyone know who he is, or is his presence just that visceral?

Once he disappears around the corner in the opposite direction of the bar, I slink out of my car and speed walk to get inside in case he turns around for some reason.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't more nervous today than I was my first night. Jimmy made it clear that my job here is contingent on me not making any waves, so I'm pretty sure he would fire me on the spot if Lucian walked in and said one word to me.

I didn't bother with a purse tonight. I have my small wallet tucked into my pocket, so I avoid the need to head to the back room and go straight to the bar. Mickey is perched on a stool, speaking to a man while he glances between the man and one of the large televisions near the ceiling.

Instead of interrupting him, I punch in, then check if the cooler needs to be restocked before taking a rack of dirty glasses to the washer in the back. He's still chatting when I return, but he gives me a nod in greeting.

I serve a few drafts and bottles before I have to intrude and ask him for a mixed drink. "Sorry to bother you." I smile at the man Mickey's seated nearby.

"No bother, darlin', what do ya need?"

"A Long Island."

Mickey lets out a long sigh. "Guess I need to get my old ass moving. We're picking up," he says, rising slowly to his feet and stretching a little before grabbing the stool and putting it near the other end of the bar.

We're nowhere near as busy as Saturday, but it's steady enough that my night goes by quickly, and before I know it, I'm cashing out at eleven.

"See you tomorrow, darlin'. It's only going to get busier," Mickey warns as I send a wave in his direction.

There's a welcome breeze coming off the water as I make my way to my

car. I'm a little tired from the long day and regretting how early I need to wake up in the morning.

Without warning, an arm wraps around me from behind, and a hand clamps over my mouth so hard, I can barely draw a breath. I claw at the fingers over my face, but a few angry words whispered in my ear stop all my fight, despite how hard I'm breathing. "Evening, little lamb."

My mind is going a hundred miles an hour, but my ability to act seems to have been sucked right out of me by Lucian's voice.

"Calm down. I'm not going to hurt you." I swear he runs his nose up the side of my neck, inhaling. I try to shake my head, but it doesn't dislodge him. Instead, he steps even closer to me, so I can feel him against my back. My thundering heart pounds out an erratic rhythm, missing beats, or maybe it's just going so fast, it feels that way.

"I want to talk, and I don't want any interruptions, even from you," he tells me as if holding me immobile and preventing me from speaking is a perfectly logical way to accomplish that. I give him a little nod, hoping if I'm agreeable, he will release me, or at least my mouth, since I'm afraid I'm going to hyperventilate.

When he doesn't budge or say anything else, I tap his fingers over my mouth, asking him to release his grip. A swell of panic begins to rise in me right before he finally drops his hand. I lean my head back, sucking in thirsty gulps of warm air with my mouth open.

His fingers stroke over my neck, and I realize I'm leaning against him, relying on him to keep me up while I regain control of my breathing, and there's nothing I can do to change that yet. It's like my body went through too many reactions, and now it's just too busy making sure I survive.

"Keep walking," Lucian says darkly, and I turn my head to see a couple of guys who were at the bar. They don't even make eye contact with me as they pass, and I think I hate them more than I hate Lucian. They have no idea if I'm in any real danger or not, but they do nothing, say nothing, as they leave me with the devil.

"You can...let me...go now," I pant as I raise my head off his chest.

"Why would I do that?"

"You said you wanted to talk," I remind him.

"You were all smiles in there, flirting with everyone." Lucian takes a step forward, and I'm forced to move along with him or risk being dragged.

"I was not flirting. I was working," I argue, even though I shouldn't need

to defend myself. “Did you come here to critique how I do my job?”

“I didn’t hear you complaining when that old man called you darlin’,” he chastises, moving deeper into the parking lot.

“I know you hit your head in that accident, but did it knock something loose in there?”

When his hand shifts up as if he might cover my mouth again, I lift mine to block him and say, “No!”

He pauses for a second, then whispers, “Nobody tells me no,” near my ear.

“Well, I do.”

“And it’s infuriating,” he grumbles.

“What do you want?” We’re getting closer to my car. The keys are in my pocket, and he’s so close to me, all he would have to do is touch the handle and the door would unlock. What if he really is going to kill me?

“To talk.”

“If you just want to talk, then why are you holding onto me like I’m your shield in a hostage negotiation?”

“Because I don’t trust you not to run,” he counters. Does he really think this is all okay in his head?

I’m looking down at the door handle of my SUV, trying to come up with a plan that gets me inside but locks him out, when Lucian turns me and pushes me up against the car parked next to me. I let out a little *oof* from the shock, which gives him enough time to open the door and push me into the front passenger seat of an unfamiliar black SUV.

I end up half over the center console with my rump in the air when I kneel on the seat, but he quickly slams the door behind me. I reach across the driver’s seat to slam my hand down on the door lock, but he just makes a face at me like he’s questioning my mental acuity before climbing in the car, forcing me back into my own seat or risk having my face too close to his.

The locks engage before a hushed silence falls inside the car. “Has anyone ever told you that you are exhausting?” I narrow my eyes on him. Despite everything he’s put me through, there’s some crazy part of me that can’t wrap my head around him actually willfully hurting me physically. I can’t even understand why he hates me so badly.

“Not until after I fuck them,” he counters crassly.

“Oh, give me a break.”

“You asked.” He shrugs.

“Look, I’m tired. Tell me what you want this time so I can go to bed.”

Lucian’s hands grip the top of the steering wheel tightly, making the leather creak in response. “How much do you know about the people you’re living with?”

“Rory and Astrid?” I want to make sure he’s not talking about one of the many people who seem to reside on the property.

He nods once instead of speaking.

“Why?”

“Why not just answer?” He turns to the side, leaning against the door a little. At least he’s not driving away and leaving me on the side of the road somewhere.

“Fine, if it will get me out of this car soon, whatever. I don’t know them very well, happy?”

“No, how are you related to them?”

“They are my grandparents. Why does this matter?”

“Where are your parents then?”

“Dead,” I reply flatly, and he flinches as if I surprised him.

“When did that happen?” He leans forward as if my answer is important.

“A few years ago.”

“What happened to them?”

“None of your business.”

Lucian stares me down as if I’ll crack under the pressure. When I don’t, he asks, “Where did they find you?”

A bitter laugh escapes me. “Under a rock. That’s what you said, right?”

His nostrils flare when he exhales loudly. “The Umbras only had one kid, Clara. Was she your mom?”

“Yes,” I say through my teeth.

Lucian lets out a heavy curse and turns to look out the windshield.

“Is that a problem for you?” I snark at his response.

“Yeah. I was told she died twenty-three years ago, and if I’m not mistaken, you’re not that old, so that means they lied to me.”

It’s probably the first real answer he’s given me. I think he’s just as surprised that he gave it up as I am by the way his mouth is pinched like he regrets saying anything.

I snort and shake my head. “If it makes you feel any less duped, my parents told me they were orphans and that we had no family.”

“Did you ever think that maybe there’s a reason for that, and they didn’t

want you here?" he snaps angrily.

"Oh wow, that never crossed my mind." I feign innocence before hardening my expression and my tone. "Have I answered enough of your questions, King Morningstar? May I go?"

"We can finish this conversation now or tomorrow." He glares at me as if he's pissed at both of us for considering making a concession.

"I work tomorrow." I reach for the handle.

"Call off."

"No."

"I could strangle you," he mutters under his breath.

"Been there, done that." I shove the door open hard. He's lucky he didn't park close enough for me to hit my own car, because that really would have pissed me off. His door slams, and he walks around to my side while I'm closing my door. I hit the lock, and he scowls down at me through the window.

"If you think a little glass is enough to keep me away from you, you're wrong, little lamb. I'm letting you leave." Lucian puts his palm on the window separating us, then adds, "I suggest you find your way to me tomorrow, or I'll come back for you, and I won't be so accommodating next time."

"You're insane," I tell him, utterly stunned at his skewed view of the situation. How can he think he's been accommodating?

"You know where I live." He turns his back to me and strolls to his car. My mouth is probably still hanging open when I start my car and drive toward the island on autopilot. His headlights follow me the entire way there.

I keep my speed low after passing the college. I'm nervous about having him right on my bumper on the isolated road, so I keep my eyes on my rearview almost as much as I look out the front to make sure an animal doesn't run out of the forest. When I slow to make the turn into the Umbra property, he speeds up beside me and stops next to my car.

"I changed my mind, we can finish our talk now," he orders with a tilt of his head to motion across the street.

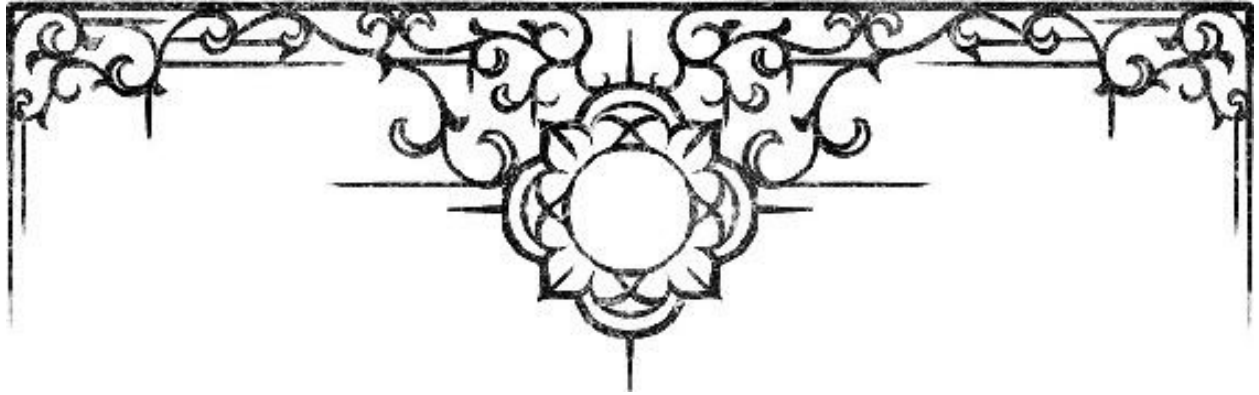
"No way, you'd probably bury me under your sewer system."

"I thought you were tough?" There's a dare in his tone, one that frightens me more than the threat of him hurting me.

"I'm also smart, pretty boy." With that, I hit the gas and speed past the gate to the safety of the estate. Lucian's car sits at the entrance for a long

time, waiting. Just as the metal begins to close, I see his headlights jump as if he's going to drive right through it, but then he turns the car around, and I watch his taillights disappear through his own gate.

I blow out a breath of relief and, if I'm completely honest, disappointment, which makes absolutely no sense. I want nothing to do with Lucian Morningstar.



LUCIAN

I knew she wouldn't show, and it still pisses me off. I warned her what would happen if she didn't listen, and now it's time to show her I always keep my word.

"Where are you going?" Nox asks, taking his face out of his phone for a brief moment.

"Out," is all I say.

"You're going to get her." He knows me too well. "Try being nice. Give her a little of that Southern charm Mom always swore by." He's lying on the sofa in the billiard room, where we spend most of our time, while watching me intently.

"She also said a good crack on the ass would straighten anyone out. Should I try that too?"

"If she's into it, I'm down, but I still think a less threatening approach might win you some favor."

"I want answers, not her favor."

"It'll be easier for me if you're a dick anyway." He shrugs, sitting up.

"What the fuck does that mean? Easier for you to what?"

"Tell me how it goes," he says and glides out of the room without giving me an answer.

"Nox. Nox! What the fuck, man?" I yell at his back as an idea takes root in my mind. Nox hasn't been interested in anything in a long time, but he was willing to go to the school and meet her. I assumed that had more to do with me than her, but maybe I was wrong. The way he touched her that day and seemed worried about her didn't have anything to do with me.

Could it be that she might be the one to wake my brother up and give him something to fight for so he will stop slipping away? I shove the strands of hope down. He doesn't know her, and he has only seen her once. I'm just desperate for something to bring him back to me, even if it is her for now.

I stalk through the dark house. I am going to get her, and when I do, she won't be leaving until I allow it.



LUCIAN

THE BAR IS PACKED, and the smell of food reminds me that I haven't eaten yet. I push through the crowd waiting to be seated and stand in front of the girl holding menus. Her eyes go wide when she sees me. I wasn't sure if she would know who I am, but I needn't have worried.

I about swallowed my fucking tongue when Nox told me it was going around on social media that she was spotted working here. It was almost unbelievable that an Umbra would be working in a townie beach bar, but I confirmed the truth last night.

I watched her from the beach, giving smiles freely to everyone who spoke to her and working her ass off in baggy shorts and that tight shirt that stretched across her tits. I don't know why she bothers with loose clothes, since they do nothing to hide her hips and ass. Hell, I caught myself watching the jiggle when she would lean over to clean the counter, which was why I was still there when she got off work.

I had no intention of approaching her when I went there, it was mostly to see for myself what she was up to, but I planted my ass on the sand for a few hours and watched her and the waves. Nobody even approached me. It was fucking bliss.

"I want a seat at the bar."

She snaps her head to the left to examine the stools, then she returns her gaze to me while biting her lower lip. "It might be a minute, but I'll find something," she replies as if I might just go knock someone off their stool and take it if she's not quick enough.

I nod once and lift my gaze, so she knows to get going. True to her word, she's back in under a minute to guide me to an empty stool at the end of the bar. Nova's face goes pale for a brief moment when she sees me approach. I pretend to ignore the man seated next to me, who leans to the side and eyeballs me, but I'm aware of his every move.

My lamb's hand trembles when she extends a bottle of beer to a man farther down the bar, and I get a thrill from knowing I'm the one causing it. The older man who kept calling her darlin' ambles over to me and tosses his towel up over his shoulder, even though it's clear I'm watching and waiting for his coworker.

"What can I get ya, fella?"

"I'll wait for her." I don't even look in his direction.

"She doesn't seem to be in a hurry to get down here." He leans his elbow on the bar and looks in Nova's direction as if he's admiring the view while rubbing in the fact that she's ignoring me at the same time. It pisses me off.

"Lamb." I don't say it loud, but it's enough to have her head snapping in my direction and her sea blue eyes slitting. "Don't worry, she'll take good care of me." The inuendo is intentional, even if it's misleading.

With a roll of her hips, she pivots and stalks toward me, giving the other bartender a silent signal to move along with a nod of her head. He waits until she's standing in front of me before saying, "Let me know if we've got a problem, darlin'."

"There's no problem here, Mickey," she tells him in a soft, unsure voice. He lingers, but I'm too busy staring at my lamb to give him any attention.

"I have a problem," I tell her once he's gone.

She ignores me. "This seat is reserved for customers."

I lean over the bar and keep my words pitched low so only she can hear me. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't haul your ass out of here right now."

"I'm working." She looks around. "You're going to get me fired." She says the last part under her breath.

I love leverage, and she just gave it to me. "What do I get in return, little lamb?"

Her shoulders rise sharply with her intake of air. "What do you want from me?"

I don't think it's a direct response to my question. It seems to be much too open-ended for that, as if she can't understand what I want from her at all, let alone what I want in the moment. If I gave her the real answer, that I want to own her, she would laugh, or maybe she would surprise me and sense the truth of my words, and she would run like hell. "I told you we need to talk."

"I can't talk while I'm working, we're busy." She's glancing all around, nodding her head and giving away smiles that these people don't deserve.

The fact that she's avoiding looking at me and that I don't have her entire focus almost has me reaching over the bar.

I let my eyes roam down her neck, imagining my fingers wrapped around her throat, forcing her to look only at me. "You're not giving me an incentive to let you stay, little lamb." I sound like a spoiled child, but she's making me feel neglected and shit.

"I'll meet you when I get off," she finally concedes, flashing her eyes at me briefly.

"Not good enough."

"I'll be right there." Her light voice filters past me, talking to someone else, and I know it's fake. I get the real her, raw and full of fight. "If you leave, *I promise* I will meet you when I get off."

"I'm not going anywhere, but I like the pleading. It's a good start. Give me a glass of Gentry."

"I can't pour liquor, I'm not old enough."

"Then you can pour it for me when I take you home."

"I'll get it," she snaps, then leans over the bar, getting all up and personal in my space. Her blue green eyes are finally where they belong—on me. "You have to promise to let me finish work and not to cause trouble first."

"Are you making demands, little lamb?"

"I'm asking you to be civil."

I suck in air through my teeth on an exaggerated wince, then answer, "I'll put as much effort into being *civil* as you put into taking care of me."

Her eyes flash with so much heat, I bet she would knock me flat on my ass if she had the chance. She's probably going to try to make me pay later, and I can't fucking wait. "Coming right up, pretty boy." Her smile is as sharp as her tongue, but I don't care. I have every bit of her attention, and I plan on keeping it.



NOVA

I don't know how one individual has the capability to piss me off so badly, but Lucian Morningstar knows every button to press. How he always seems to get me at the disadvantage shouldn't be surprising, since it's clear he's used to having a leg up in everything, but it baffles me that I'm so damned unlucky.

"Mickey, sorry to bother you. Can you pour me a Gentry? I can deliver it if that's okay."

"He giving you a hard time, Nova?"

"No, I just wasn't expecting him," I lie seamlessly.

"That's a Morningstar, right?" He flips a short glass over and reaches for the heavy bottle.

"Uh-huh," I reply.

"Be careful," he warns, meeting my eyes.

"I'm trying," I promise softly, then take the drink to the end of the bar.

"I'm not serving you any more if you're driving." I set the glass near his tattooed hands, noticing the thin, delicate cross on his thumb as he wraps his fingers around the glass.

"Anytime you're ready to stop serving me *here* and go home is fine with me."

I click my tongue at his words and move on to other patrons at the bar.

When I move to pass him several minutes later, he grabs my wrist gently and stops me. "Have you forgotten me already?" His voice is dark.

"No, your drink's not empty."

"I need food. What's good?" His thumb skates over the inside of my wrist in a soft sweep.

"I've haven't eaten here yet, but the burgers are really popular." My reply is soft, lulled by his touch.

"What else?" He keeps me trapped in his grasp.

"I can get you a menu."

He shakes his head. "I want you to tell me."

"This is only my third shift, so I don't know the menu that well yet."

"What would you order?"

"The kung-pow shrimp pasta," I answer.

“Spicy?”

“Maybe a little.”

“I’ll take that, and a beer.”

I slump my shoulders. I just told him I wouldn’t serve him any more drinks if he’s driving, but it’s just a beer, and I work for a few more hours, so he’ll have time to sober up. “Okay.” I give in.

His lips quirk as he finally releases me, but his touch lingers as he pulls away, making sure he brushes his fingers all the way down my hand. What the hell is he doing?

I make eye contact with Jimmy at the opposite end of the bar, and he gives me a scowl that almost rivals Morningstar’s, but I don’t have the urge to challenge him. Maybe it’s because he didn’t call me names the first time we met, or maybe it’s because Lucian just gets under my skin.

I put Lucian’s order into the computer, then keep my distance from my handsy neighbor while tending to all the other people seated at the bar, which is pretty easy since we are fairly busy. Mickey was right—it’s busier than yesterday.

“Here you go.” I slide the large bowl of breaded shrimp and pasta in front of Lucian, then pull a rolled up set of silverware from my apron.

“Looks good, want a bite?” He swirls up a forkful of pasta and skewers a fat piece of shrimp on the end before offering it to me.

“No thanks.” I shake my head in denial, even though my mouth is secretly watering. I probably wouldn’t trust him not to poison me any other time, but since I know where the food came from, it’s even harder to pass up.

He tilts his head to the side, then turns the fork to his mouth and eats the bite. It’s weird that I’m standing here watching him, so I pretend to wipe down the counter until he swallows, then I ask, “Good?”

“Not bad. Are you sure I can’t convince you to have a taste?” He offers me another bite, this one a little smaller.

“No thanks. I’ll be back to check on you in a bit.” The last part comes out from habit, and I finally step away from him.

The next few hours pass too quickly. With each minute I get closer to the end of my shift, I get more nervous about my promise to talk with Lucian. Thankfully, he’s given me some space to do my job, but I can feel his eyes on me every time I move, which makes me hyperaware, not to mention Jimmy seems to be just as interested in my performance.

When I eventually clock out, another waitress taking over for me behind

the bar since I only close on Saturdays, Mickey asks, “You all set? Do you need Jimmy to walk you to your car?”

“No, I’m okay.” I flatten my lips, trying for a smile.

“Ready, little lamb?” Lucian makes his presence known, not that I could have forgotten he was here.

“Yeah.”

“See you tomorrow, darlin’. Be safe,” Mickey reminds me loudly.

“That old man needs to find something else to fixate on,” Lucian mumbles as we walk side by side to the door.

“He’s not fixated on anything, he’s just looking out for me,” I argue.

“You’re none of his business.” He shoves the door open, waiting for me to exit under his arm.

“That’s rich coming from you.”

“Get in the car.” Lucian nods his head toward his SUV.

“I’m parked over here.”

“I know, but you can ride with me,” he counters.

“I can drive myself.”

“I don’t know that I can trust you to uphold your end of the bargain.”

“I told you I would talk with you, and I meant it.”

“Are you getting in or am I putting you in like last night?” He takes a step toward me as if to prove he’s ready to grab me and make good on his promise.

“Then you can ride with me. I’m not leaving my car here to get towed or for someone to steal.”

“Why do you have to argue with everything I say?” He looks more curious than angry, so I reply.

“Why do you have to be so mean and ornery?”

Lucian’s lip peels back in a sneer. “If I were mean, I would have gotten you fired tonight. Your boss was just waiting for an excuse.”

I can’t really argue with that, since I’m pretty certain he was. “If he did, it would be your fault.”

“I don’t care if you get fired.” He shrugs. “Why do you work anyway? Is your granny refusing to shell over the trust fund?”

“No, and I don’t expect her to,” I grit out through my teeth.

“And she hasn’t offered? The blood test must not have come back yet, otherwise she’d be buying you any way she could.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I turn to face him with my hands on my

hips.

“We can talk about it when we get back on the island.”

“Why the secrecy, and what do you know about my mom?”

“Come find out,” he says, walking backward toward his car.

If there was a way to make him leave without me, I don’t know if I would take it at this point. I want answers, and he’s the only one who seems to be giving me any, or telling me he will anyway. Besides, I know he won’t stop hounding me until he gets what he wants.

“Lucian.” I jog after him. “I don’t want to leave my car here.”

“I’ll send someone back to pick it up.”

“It’s my first car,” I admit. “Can’t you ask them to get yours?” *Give me something here*, I plead silently.

He watches me for a long second, and I fidget under his gaze.

“I’m driving.” He extends his hand for the keys.

I’m reluctant to give them up, but I eventually place the fob in his palm. “You better be careful.”

He smirks and folds his fingers over my little black heart keychain.

I’ve made a lot of mistakes since I opened my door for that lawyer a few weeks ago, but trusting him right now might be the biggest.

I don’t even look at the guard in the shack as Lucian pulls up to the bridge, centimeters from the gate blocking the entrance to the island. I’m too busy trying to catch my breath. He drives like he’s the only person on the road, or maybe it’s just that he thinks he’s the most important person on the road and assumes everyone else will get the hell out of his way.

I didn’t bother asking him to slow down. For some reason, I feel like it would have just made him go faster, so I silently gritted my teeth and held onto the door handle.

The gate lifts without the need to speak to the attendant, making we wonder if he took note of my car and plate the other day, or if it’s the fact that Morningstar is driving that allows us quick entrance.

“Where are we going to talk?” I ask, hoping he’s not really expecting me to go to his house.

He looks over at me. “At mine. I know my security is good.”

“We could go to campus,” I offer. Alden once implied that Lucian couldn’t hurt me on school grounds, and that sounds smart right about now.

“Scared?” He flashes his teeth at me while coasting down the road in the direction of our houses at a reasonable speed. It makes me even more

nervous.

When he slows and turns to the left, my heart starts thundering in my chest. “Why can’t we talk here?”

He hits some buttons on the box, and the gate rolls back slowly. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Says the guy who almost ran me over when I was walking.”

“Lie, and you know it. I was nowhere near you.” He sounds defensive.

“You revved your engine.”

“I changed gears.” I can’t really argue with him, considering I did overreact.

“You tripped me.”

“That was an accident. I didn’t mean for you to get hurt.” His tone is incredulous.

“You didn’t apologize. Why does it need to be here? Are you going to let me leave when I want to?” I turn to look out the back window as the gate closes us into the Morningstar estate.

“Not if that’s right now. You made a promise.” He glances over at me briefly before watching the long winding road. “It’s safe here, and there’s no one to interrupt us or listen into our...conversation,” he finishes as if there was something else he was going to say instead.

“Where’s your family?” Surely his parents, or even his grandparents, might be around.

“It’s just Nox and me. We have some staff, but everyone’s gone home for the night.”

I swallow as a big Victorian house comes into view. Unlike the Umbras’ estate, there’s no drive in the front. Instead, there’s a lush green garden lit up with tiny lights, making it look like something out of a fairy tale. The grass looks like plush green velvet with islands of plants creating an oasis among the heavy forest.

Lucian parks my car at the side of the house near a garage and a smaller entrance decorated with a covered porch hung with even more greenery.

Tiny shimmery shells crunch under my feet when I step out, but the opalescent color disappears when the headlights turn off, leaving only a lighted path to the house.

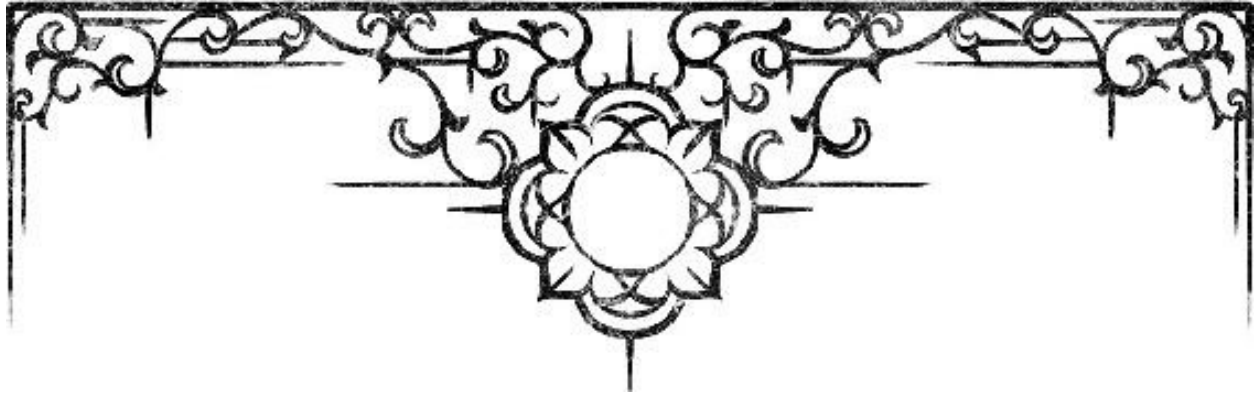
Lucian’s dark figure is standing on the edge of the drive, waiting for me, and I have the distinct impression that I’m being tracked, though I can’t make out his face or if he’s even looking in my direction.

“What happened to your family?” I ask the darkness.

“The Umbras killed them.” He says it so plainly, I must have heard him wrong, but as his words sink into my mind, I know I didn’t.

I swallow the denial and the questions burning on my tongue. *How? Why? Is that why you hate me? Will you do the same to me?*

“Come, little lamb,” he instructs, and I’ll be damned, I listen.



NOX

I launch myself off the bed when I hear the beep triggered by the opening gate. Lucian's home. Skidding to a halt, I peel back the curtain to look down at the unfamiliar car parked near the garage. Both doors open, proving she's at least walking in of her own free will... I hope so, anyway.

I dash to the game room to hide myself behind one of the hidden entrances. I've been thinking about what he would do with her if he actually succeeded in getting her back here tonight.

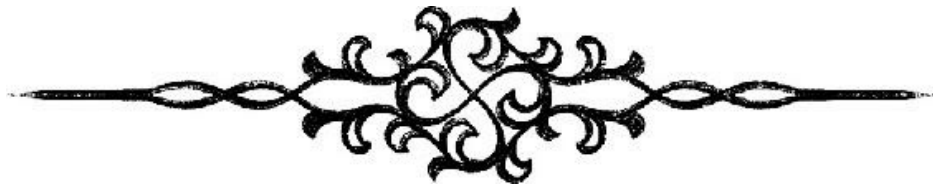
The fact that he's bringing her to the main house speaks volumes. No one comes here. When we used to have parties, it was always at the beach house or on the islet off the coast if things were going to get really crazy. I had a feeling he would want her here, but on the off chance he didn't, I knew I could get to the beach house through the tunnels.

Minutes pass in silence, and I start to question if I was wrong about where he'd take her in the house. Maybe they are downstairs. I can't fathom him taking her to his room, at least not yet.

Finally, my brother's voice hums through the wall, and I lean my head closer so I can try to make out his words. I don't feel guilty for eavesdropping, because he probably knows exactly where I am.

"You can sit down, you know," Lucian drawls. I wish we had cameras in the room. I bet he's already sprawled out on the sofa, taking up as much room as possible so she's forced to decide where to sit and how close she's willing to get to him.

Let's see where this goes.



LUCIAN

She's slinking around the room, pretending to examine everything, and I have no doubt she is, but she's also biding her time and trying to keep her distance from me.

"I'm here. Talk."

I let out a soft chuckle, and she snaps her head around to look over at me with suspicion.

"What's so funny?" she demands.

I rearrange myself on the center of the huge, black couch, and she watches every move as if she's entranced, or maybe she's scared of what I might do next. Either way, I like the way she's looking at me. "Do you know how many people have been in this house or seen this room?"

"A lot?" She shrugs off my question and resumes her stroll around my sanctuary.

I watch her get dangerously close to the place where Nox is lurking, but she has no idea he's there. The only reason I do is because I know him so well, and because of our bond. There's just some part of me that's always aware of him, like a phantom limb, and it's the same for him. Well, it was before our parents died. Since then, he's cut himself off from everyone, even me.

"Other than family and staff, no one," I tell her truthfully. "And here you are. Why do you think that is, lamb?"

I watch her throat move when she swallows and averts her eyes from mine. "Probably because you're going to kill me," she mumbles, but I have no problem hearing her.

"I'm not going to kill you. I want to use you."

"For what?" She's glaring again. Damn, why do I like her like this, frightened one second and defiant the next?

I chuckle again. She's not ready for the truth about all the ways I want to use her, even if fucking seems to be the first thing on her mind if her reaction is any indication. "What use could a man like me have for a girl like you?" I allow my heated stare to roam over her figure, feeding into her annoyance.

I like the fit of her shirt, since it shows off her tits, but I hate that she has someone else's name across her chest, even if it's just a bar. She finally

ditched the baggy pants too. Tonight, she's wearing skintight black leggings that stop just below her knees, and I didn't notice a panty line the many times I was checking out her ass.

Her chin lowers a fraction, but it's those sea blue eyes that get me when they pierce right through me as if I'm not even worthy of speaking to her. "That's what I've been trying to find out from you, *pretty boy*."

If anyone else on the planet called me that, or any other name that was meant to be an insult, I would end them, but when she says it, filled with disdain as if my looks are something bad, I take joy in the fact that she's admitting I'm handsome because I know it pisses her off.

"We can start with you helping me take down your family."

"Oh, just that?" she mocks airily.

"Sit down. I know your feet hurt." My tone is harsh, making my words seem like a dig instead of an offer like I intended. Oh well, I've never been accused of being nice.

She sniffs haughtily. "You don't know anything."

"Then why do you keep shifting all your weight to one foot?" I can see her toes moving around through the canvas of her shitty shoes.

"I'm not." Her brows furrow as she looks down, unaware that she has been telegraphing her pain.

"Sit down on your own, or I will help you." I lean forward to let her know I'm dead serious. I have no problem planting her ass on the couch, and it will be in a much different spot than she would choose for herself.

She moves so fast, she nearly backs into the sofa, picking the farthest spot from me like I knew she would. "Happy?"

"Not in the least," I deadpan, but it's a lie. I like making her bend to my will. It feels like a victory every time.

"Let's get this over with so I can get out of here." She tries to sound assertive, but we both know I'm the only one with the power here.

"In a hurry to get away from me, lamb? I quite like having you here, at my mercy."

"Knock it off, you're all bark." She actually rolls her eyes at me, and I'm on her before she can blink those pretty blues closed. Her gasp is involuntary, as is the flare of her pupils when I lean into her face.

"You want to feel my bite, lamb?" I lower my head, almost placing my lips on the side of her neck, but I don't trust myself not to bite her, and that would only be the beginning of what I want to do. She should pay for how

badly I want her.

“No.” She shakes her head in denial. I watch her pulse flutter on her throat, daring me to do something about it. I have to grip the back of the couch on either side of her head to keep myself from grabbing her, then I shove myself away just as abruptly as I arrived.

My intent was to knock her off-kilter to show her I’m more than words, but being that close to her and smelling her warm skin and not some shitty expensive perfume most women wear hits me just as hard.

“Don’t test me, lamb,” I warn softly, looking over my shoulder as I walk away. “I don’t have to like you to want to fuck you.”

She swallows roughly, but her full lips curl up in a vicious little sneer. The fear of the last few moments is already gone, and she’s ready to go toe to toe with me again, even if she knows she’ll lose.

Damn, why do I want her when I could have anyone else? Not only is it forbidden for the families to get involved in any way that would make those founding families more powerful than the others, but she’s the only thing holding the Umbras together. Without her as their heir, they would have had to forfeit their bid to hold the power seat in the future. As it is now, Rory already took Clara’s—Nova’s mother—place in line for that position, and that can only happen once, and Astrid has already served as president, which means death to their line.

I would have seen their fall in my lifetime and watched them die, useless and power hungry, while I took over everything, not for a few years, but forever.

Now the only way for that to happen is to get rid of my lamb, and I’m not sure I’m willing to do that anymore. *Fuck.*

NOVA

If I murder him, it would be justified.

Lucian lowers himself back onto the sofa in a relaxed sprawl. I, on the other hand, am so twitchy, I could climb the wall. Movement out of the corner of my eye snares my attention, and I see his mirror image skulking into the room.

I hope he's here to rein in his unhinged brother and not act as his coconspirator.

"We have company," he says in the same voice as Lucian's, but his tone is so different than his brother's.

Nox—I'm assuming that's his name, since Lucian admitted he's the only other person who lives here with him—splits the difference between his brother and me, dropping down on the couch way closer than I'm comfortable with. This was dumb. I glance between them, questioning how I let this happen.

I managed to stay out of trouble my whole life, even growing up in a crappy neighborhood that was nicknamed Shacktown because everyone who lived there was either dirt poor or looking for drugs—usually both—yet I couldn't make it a week on this island without making enemies.

"So what are we doing?" The brother looks between me and Lucian as if we're here for a movie and game night, though I do have to admit it would be the perfect place for that. The room is black, from the furniture to the walls, just like the majority of the house I saw on our quick jaunt up the stairs. Small touches of deep green, which comes mostly from plant life, can be found all over, along with soft shades of cream and gold to highlight the darkness, not to lighten it. Even the pool table across the room is done in varying hues and finishes of ebony. The uncovered windows are decorated lead glass, which fit seamlessly with the gothic aesthetic. I hate to admit it, but his house, mansion, whatever they would call it, is more awe-inspiring than the Umbras' estate. It really is like something out of a dream, or maybe a nightmare, considering the owners. *I really need to get out of here.*

"He was just about to tell me what he wants so I can leave." There's power in positive thinking, right?

"But you just got here," Nox replies almost as if he's worried I'll try to

leave too soon.

“She’s eager to get away from us, Nox. Can you believe that?”

“If you’re being a dick, I can.” His brother doesn’t pull any punches. “Is he being a dick, Nova?”

“Um...” Hearing him say my name and not call me some demeaning moniker is a little odd, so it takes me a second to recover. I don’t want to come right out and say yes, that his brother is a dick, either, because this could be a trap. I really don’t need to give Lucian any more fuel to not like me, even though he’s not worried about me liking him.

“You are.” Nox reads between the lines, or maybe he just knows his brother well enough to assume he’s always a dick.

“I really just want to go home. I’ve had a long day, and I need to get up in the morning.”

“For school.” Nox waves a hand dismissively. “I never go, you’ll be fine.”

“I highly doubt that,” I disagree.

“You’ll take care of it, right, Lucian? Show her you can be... considerate,” Nox urges his brother.

“She could do it herself if she spoke to everyone else the way she speaks to me.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I tuck my hair behind my ear, only to pull it right back out when I feel too exposed to their gazes.

“I’ve watched you pretend to ignore the sheep and act like you’re meek, but you’re not with me.” His words come out accusatory. I can’t tell if he’s mad because I ignore everyone else talking crap about me at school, or if he’s upset because I don’t let him get away with treating me like I’m the trash he accused me of being.

“I can’t argue with an entire school,” I grit out through my teeth, “and I wouldn’t need to if it weren’t for you. They follow your lead.”

“Show them who you are the way you showed me,” Lucian snaps.

I can’t make sense of why he would even care, so I don’t respond directly to his prompting. Besides, I haven’t backed down to any single person. It’s groups I can’t win against, so I don’t even try. I bring our conversation back to the reason I’m here. “Tell me what you want, *please?*” I offer the placation, but my tone is off, proving I don’t really mean it.

Lucian lifts his brows as if I surprised him, then finally answers, “I want to ruin your family, and I want your help doing it.”

“Why would I do that?” He alluded to why he would want me to do it outside, but I need to know more. Still, I can’t bring myself to directly ask why he thinks the Umbras are responsible for his parents’ deaths.

“Because I told you to.”

“Lucian,” Nox chastises softly, but it’s belied by the smile tipping his lips.

“That’s not a motivator for me.”

“I could make you.” Lucian lowers his chin, and his gaze darkens.

“You could try,” I counter, which results in Nox planting his hand on his brother’s chest when Lucian tries to get up as if he’s prepared to physically make me comply right this very instant.

“My brother blames your family for the death of our parents.”

“Why does he blame them? It doesn’t sound like you do.” I cling to the chance that Lucian is just delusional, and Rory and Astrid had nothing to do with their parents’ deaths.

“He blames them too,” Lucian mutters, sending a quick rebuke in his brother’s direction in the form of a glare.

“Tell me why *you* think they are responsible,” I urge, not certain we will ever get to the bottom of this with all the bickering.

“Our parents died of carbon monoxide poisoning,” Nox says softly while watching his brother for a reaction.

“It should have been the Umbras. Our parents never would have been at that cabin if it wasn’t for Rory canceling his attendance to the event at the last minute and pushing the duty off on them. It’s proof the Umbras don’t deserve to be in the seat of power, and if they hadn’t pulled your ass out of the gutter, they never would have had it again.”

“What?” They died of carbon monoxide, and Lucian blames Rory and Astrid?

“Your grandfather is the president, and that comes with obligations, but he pulled out, which meant my parents went in the Umbras’ place. They didn’t even have time to get their own accommodations, so they stayed at the shitty cabin your family picked, and there was a carbon monoxide leak,” Lucian spits out, but I can tell each word cost him.

“I know what it’s like to lose your family, so I won’t insult you with useless, ‘I’m sorry for your loss,’ garbage. It never helps. But that...that sounds like an accident,” I admit, knowing he’s not going to want to hear it.

Even though I don’t like Lucian, I know he must have cared deeply for

his parents. It's evident even now in the expression on his face. It makes me wonder if losing them is what made him into the bitter man he is today. Who was Lucian Morningstar before his life was forever altered?

"Who says it *was* an accident," Lucian retorts, his eyes growing more feverish by the second.

"Do you have any proof it wasn't?" I question softly, hating myself a little for doing it. I know how I felt after the crash, when the police were asking about my mom and if she had been drinking. I despised them for making me see the truth. The accident was her fault for getting behind the wheel drunk, and we were lucky it didn't happen a hundred other times. They made me see who was to blame for me being left completely alone in the world when I was barely seventeen, and it wasn't just my mom. My dad and I let her get behind the wheel, knowing she'd been drinking. It was probably because neither of us had the energy to argue with her again about how she wasn't fine, but I don't see how the Umbras are at fault here. It wasn't intentional or even due to neglect on their part. It was an accident.

"I don't have proof yet," Lucian grits out through his teeth.

"Is that what you want from me? To help you prove their deaths weren't accidental?" I'm incredulous, and I can't keep it from my tone.

"You're not asking the right questions, lamb."

"And what questions do you think I should be asking, pretty boy?"

"Oh, I see why you want her." Nox grins, and it makes me a little nervous. Lucian doesn't smile much, and when he does, it always seems to be at my expense. I can't help but think his brother will be the same.

"Why haven't they told you anything? Why did they keep you a secret from everyone else?" He tilts his head to the side, examining me. I wish I could tell if he's messing with my head or if he really knows more like he's insinuating.

"If they were trying to keep me a secret from everyone, why would they have me enrolled at Cadieux?" I fire back.

"They didn't whisper a peep about you until the day I found you at the college," he replies.

"I had just agreed to come a day or two before that, I didn't even know they existed, so why *would* they tell people about me?" I argue.

"But they knew about you," he counters, very sure of himself, and it's the truth. The lawyer said they'd been looking for and trying to reach me for a while.

“They didn’t know I would agree to come here.”

He snorts. “It’s actually funny that you think you would have had a choice. They need you.”

“What does that mean?”

“See? You’re in the dark about everything.” There’s a definite air of challenge in his tone to go with his smug sense of superiority.

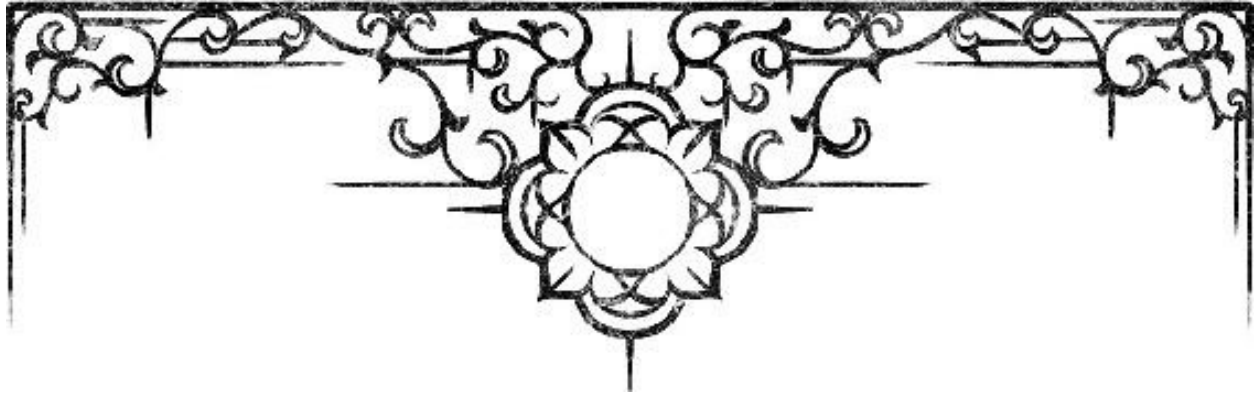
“Then tell me if you think you know everything.” I’m hoping the goad will work to get him talking.

“I think I like seeing you stumble along, lamb. It gives me pleasure. Besides...” Lucian leans back and looks at me from under lowered lids.

“Someday soon, you’ll come to me, begging, and I can’t fucking wait.”

“Then why the heck am I even here if you’re not going to tell me anything?” I toss my hands up in the air, exasperated with the entire situation.

“Because I wanted you here, and I always get what I want.” Lucian blinks lazily, unfazed and unhurried. He really is unhinged.



NOVA

I rise to my feet, and both of their eyes track the movement. It's almost eerie, considering they look so similar, yet there's a distinct manner about them that makes it easy to know which is which. "I could say it's been fun, but it would be a lie," I tell them in lieu of saying goodbye.

"You're not at all curious about what secrets they are keeping from you?" Lucian presses, but he's probably bluffing. He just admitted he's not going to tell me anything.

"Give me a reason to believe that you'll actually tell me anything or that I should even believe it," I counter.

"Nothing is free, lamb. What do I get in return?"

"I'm here, aren't I? I gave you my trust when I got in the car with you. How about a little reciprocation."

"Again, you didn't have a choice. I wanted you here, and here you are."

"There's always a choice, pretty boy, some are just harder to make than others." With that, I walk out of the room and head down the stairs at the end of the hall. I work desperately not to look over my shoulder to see if either of them will follow me, but I'm so anxious that my heart thunders in my chest, waiting for someone to grab me and throw me in a locked room or something. I follow the dim lights down the same path he took me through, barely taking my eyes off the space directly in front of me until I see the heavy exterior door looming twenty feet away.

My stomach does a summersault when I touch the handle and the knob twists, proving I'm not trapped in here. When I'm safely tucked into my car, my doors locked, I finally take a chance and look back up at the house. In one of the large upper windows, I see two dark silhouettes. The resulting chill catches me off guard, making me shiver in my seat, even with the balmy temperature.

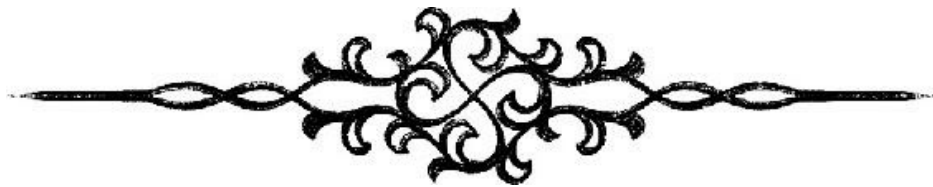
As eager as I am to get off their property, I don't speed to the gate. There's a big part of me that's worried they just let me think I'm getting away and they plan on keeping me trapped behind their walls until they decide to let me go.

I check my locks again before slowing to a stop near the iron barrier and

quietly plead, “Come on, open up,” while gripping the steering wheel and glancing in my rearview mirror. I know they must have cameras or a sensor of some sort, but seconds tick by with nothing happening.

I nibble the corner of my lip, debating if I should leave my car parked here and scale the wall to get out. Even calling Alden crosses my mind, but somehow, I think that would get me in more trouble with him, and maybe even Rory and Astrid.

I let out a little squeak and jump as the motor of the gate kicks on and slowly starts to open. I hit the button for the Umbras’ gate directly across the road, pushing closer and closer to the metal until I’m finally out of their territory. Too bad I don’t feel much safer, even after I’m behind another wall, surrounded by even more strangers.



Nova

I CONTEMPLATE SKIPPING class when I wake up in the morning, but I force myself to get out of bed and go through the motions. I can sleep in tomorrow, and I might just stay in bed all day Sunday as a treat to myself.

I’m mentally exhausted. Between school, work, and Lucian, I feel like I’m barely treading water, and the waves are getting dangerously close to crashing over my head.

I snap at the first person who speaks to me, which just so happens to be a guy from my English class who had the nerve to ask, “How long have you been a hooker?” I knew he was trying to be funny about the bar name, but it proves that the word is out about my job, making me dread my shift tonight more than I already did.

“Probably longer than you’ve been wiping your own ass.” My face flushes. I don’t curse often, it’s just never been my thing, so it feels a little strange and proves I’m in a foul mood.

“Huh?” The guy’s mouth is slack, as if he doesn’t get what I meant.

“He’s too dumb to get it,” a voice I’m becoming very familiar with says over my shoulder. My back stiffens. I usually have a pretty good sense about when Lucian is near—probably a primal instinct for danger—but Nox is able to get up close and personal, and I had no idea.

“Hey, Morningstar.” The guy who was just insulting me nods to the voice emanating from behind me.

“Fuck off.” He says it plainly, with no heat or inflection at all, but the guy gets up and changes seats without a word in response.

Nox lifts his leg over the seat and plants his shoe on the chair next to me, climbing over the row only to drop into the same seat with a huff. “It’s early as hell, Nova.”

“I thought you didn’t bother with classes.”

I feel him staring at the side of my face, but he doesn’t respond. Eventually, I have to look over to see what he’s gawking at.

“How’d you know it was me and not Lucian?” he asks the moment I meet his gaze.

“How could I not?”

“Nobody can tell us apart, hence why dipshit called me Morningstar, so tell me how you knew, or was it a guess because Lucian doesn’t have this class?” He starts to nod as if he’s answering his own question.

“It wasn’t a guess,” I tell him without another explanation. “Mind giving her the okay to get started?” I gesture to the teacher, who seems to be waiting for a signal from Nox.

He leans in so close that I can feel his breath near my ear. Without looking around, I know everyone is watching us, including the teacher. “Only if you agree to tell me how you knew the difference between us.”

I glance to the left when he pulls away and grit out, “Fine.”

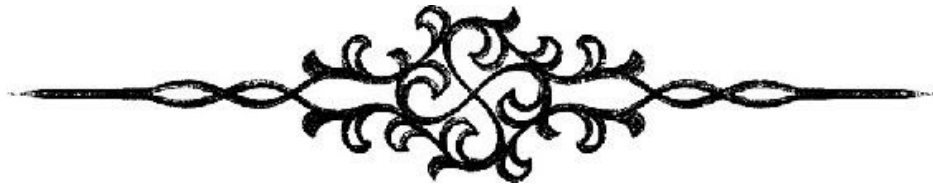
“See you after class,” he says, then he tells the teacher, “Go ahead,” before getting up and walking right out of the room.

Once he’s gone, I feel everyone watching me again, but I try to ignore it and focus on the teacher. I should have stayed in bed.

True to his word, Nox is waiting for me when I exit the class. He’s leaning against the wall directly across from the room, but he shoves himself off as soon as I step out. I watch him move closer to me, and a tingle of awareness settles on my skin.

“Nice try, pretty boy.” I roll my eyes and stroll right past him toward the Union. I didn’t promise to tell him, plus I’m tired of constantly being worried

about what he, or anyone else, is going to do and say to me. I just do not have the energy for their games today, and I have no intention of playing along.



LUCIAN

Motherfucker, Nox was right—we made eye contact for less than a second, and she knew. Even our family had trouble telling us apart at a glance, which we thought was hilarious, and it's also why almost everything about us, including our plainly visible tattoos, match, but she can see right through us.

I start to trail behind my lamb, allowing myself to get distracted with the sway of her hips as she sashays down the hall. If she hadn't turned the corner, I probably wouldn't have even noticed Bella Quade standing outside of her office, her arms crossed over her chest as she eyes me with open suspicion.

I know her family is eager for the crown, since she or her brother are next in line to be president after our tenure, but I have no plans of relinquishing the power once I have it. I shift directions and walk straight toward her. Even with all the fillers and shit in her face, her mouth goes slack, and she looks around as if there's someone who might help her.

“Morningstar,” she greets when I'm towering over her. I don't acknowledge her with anything other than my presence, so she starts to fidget. “Can I help you with something?”

“How's your brother?” I ask, completely disinterested in the answer, but eager for her reaction to me beating his ass.

Her lips pinch before curling into a sneering smile. “Well, thank you for asking.”

“I haven't seen him around in a few days.”

“No worries, he'll be back soon. Shouldn't a young man like you be in class?” She tries to use the fact that she's older than me against me, but that shit's comical.

“Nah, no point, but I do have more important matters to tend to. Tell Derry I said hello.” There's a twitch near her jaw, but that's the only outward sign that she understands my warning as I turn my back on her and walk away.

When I stroll through the Union, not spying my target, I get pissed that I allowed Quade to distract me. I'm tempted to ask all the sheep who are gawking at me where she is, but that would mean actually speaking to them. I need to put a tracker on her, or at the very least her phone.

While I'm walking toward the rear exit to see if her car is still here, I send

a text off to Nox, asking if he's seen her.

My phone rings in the next second. I think about ignoring it, and if it were anyone else, I would. "Hello?"

"She didn't come out of the class?" he questions after reading my text.

"Yeah, but I got distracted, and she got away."

"What?" He sniggers softly, and it does something in my chest. It's such a strange sound coming from him. I feel like it's been ages since he's found much joy in anything, even my fuckups.

"Yeah, and she fucking knew it was me before I even opened my mouth," I admit.

"I told you," he crows. "Did you get her to admit how she knows?"

"No, she walked right past me. Her car is still here though." I search the parking lot and grounds for her, bouncing my gaze over the students sitting under trees and on benches, and come up empty.

"You checked the Union?" he asks, and I can tell he's walking by the way his voice sounds.

"Yeah."

"I'll check the upper floors. You check the library," he instructs.

"Fine," I snarl, then hang up. I don't let anyone other than him tell me what to do, and even then, it grates on my nerves.

The moment I enter the library, I remember the last time I was here, and I know she won't be found hiding in the stacks. I need to ask her what happened that day in the study room and force her to tell me, but every fucking time I get around her, I get lost because I'm too busy pissing her off so I can stoke that fire that always seems to burn in her eyes.

I weave in and out of the shelves just to be sure, then head upstairs two at a time. In one of the study rooms, I find a guy fucking a girl who's bent over the table. I see red for about a millisecond before I notice the long black hair spilling across the wood table, not my lamb's honey blonde.

"Shit," he curses, pulling out of her and reaching down for his pants in the same breath.

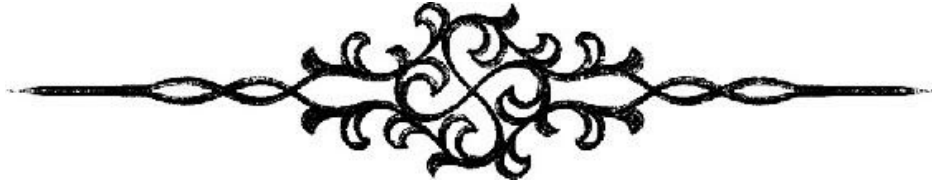
"Get out," the girl starts, but her words fall short when she realizes who's at the door, and suddenly, she doesn't seem to mind being ass up over the table.

I walk away without bothering to close the door, so I hear when she calls, "Come back," to which the guy spits, "Jesus, Ainsley."

"That was a Morningstar," she hisses, pushing past him as if she might

follow me down the hall to the back stairs, but when she realizes I'm not slowing, let alone stopping, she stays put outside the door of the room.

After exhausting all the areas she could be, I leave the library behind, but the image of my lamb bent over the table, looking back at me as I watch myself sink inside her inch by inch, is a sight I can't easily get rid of.



NOX

I know I'm in the right place before I even get up to the third floor. She's the only one around here who seems to cause a commotion everywhere she goes.

"And it takes both of you to tell me this why?" Her words greet me as I step onto the third-floor landing. This is the same area where Lucian introduced her to me. Not many people hang out here, which is why we chose it. In the back of my mind, I'm wondering if that's why she's here, because we showed it to her, but that thought disappears when I see Nova backed into a corner with two girls in front of her and a guy standing a few feet away, watching.

"What the fuck?" I don't have to work to sound like my easy to anger brother. I'm pissed just from seeing them teaming up on her, because that's what this looks like. Everyone turns to look at me, and that's when I see Grace and realize I was right.

Lucian and I have both fucked her on occasion, but we cut her off when she got territorial. I can't say I'm surprised she picked up on the fact that Nova has our attention, but I'm shocked she's trying to stake a claim, especially after Lucian warned everyone that Nova was off-limits.

Grace's eyes slit as she flashes me a smile. "We're just introducing ourselves."

"Is that what you were doing?" Nova laughs incredulously.

I watch Grace's full lips pinch. She probably wants to tell Nova to shut her mouth but knows she can't do that with me standing here.

"I thought you were warning me off Nox and his brother when you said, oh, what was it? 'Stay the F away from them, or else.' Did I get that right?"

Grace runs her eyes over me quickly. I bet she's responding to Nova's ability to identify me and trying to see if she's correct, but she would never be able to tell. She didn't even know which one of us was fucking her.

I stroll past the guy standing to the side, who looks like he'd rather become part of the woodwork than be here, making sure I clip his shoulder as I do. Instead of wasting words on Grace, I speak to Nova. "You left something at the house last night."

"I did?" Nova tilts her head, not realizing those few words would show Grace where both of them stand. Grace was never allowed in our house, and

she knows no one else was either. Mission accomplished.

“What was it? I didn’t have my purse.”

I look over my shoulder, making eye contact with Grace. “What are you still doing here?”

“I’d like to know too,” Lucian says from the stairs. He must have come up here when he didn’t find Nova in the library.

“Great, is there nowhere here that’s safe?” Nova mumbles under her breath, which makes me smile. She has no idea how true her words are.

“Brother,” I greet Lucian in lieu of saying his name and confirming which of us is which, a tactic we developed long ago.

“He asked you a question. Why are you here?” Lucian repeats my inquiry while joining me, standing in front of Nova. It creates quite the visual, and I’m not sure Lucian even realizes what a statement it is. “Actually, I don’t give a fuck. Go,” he tells her with a jerk of his head toward the stairs.

Grace stomps off with her backup in tow without so much as a word in response.

“What was going on?” Lucian spins and eyes Nova as if to assess her for any evidence of what happened.

“Just your girlfriend making sure I know she pissed on you first.”

“I’m not into watersports, and she isn’t my anything,” Lucian tells her.

“I don’t think she knows that,” Nova sings and drops into the green chair behind her. It’s then I notice her bag and computer.

He continues to badger her. “Why are you up here?”

“Why are *you* up here?” she retorts.

“Looking for you. You made a deal,” I interject before these two start arguing. I don’t believe it will go the way either of them thinks. Lucian settles into one of the other two chairs as if he’s sitting on a throne. I drop into the last remaining seat.

“Remind me what deal that was, Nox?” Nova plays coy.

“How you can tell the difference between us,” Lucian supplies before I can.

“It’s simple, anyone with a brain should know.”

“Then spill it.”

She looks Lucian dead in the eye and says, “You make my skin crawl, he doesn’t.”

I watch my brother’s eyes darken to the point where I actually think I might have to get between them, but he calmly says, “I think the word you’re

looking for is *tingle*.”

Nova lets out a peal of genuine laughter while her blue eyes nearly sparkle. I can tell by the softening expression on Lucian’s face that he’s not immune to her delight, even if he’s the one she’s laughing at.

“I didn’t know you have a sense of humor, pretty boy.” She’s still grinning.

“I don’t,” he deadpans in response, which makes her shoulders shake as she hauls her computer into her lap.

“So what are you threatening me with today?” Her voice almost sounds bored.

“No threats,” I say quickly, cutting off Lucian, who already had his mouth open to answer her.

“Here to do schoolwork then? Oh yeah, that’s below you.” She taps her short black fingernail against her lip, pretending to think. “What else could it be? You haven’t told me that I’m garbage yet today, is that it?” She manages to sound helpful while mocking him.

I bet this is making Lucian crazy. He’s never had a girl not be a simpering mess at his feet, yet she doesn’t even seem intimidated.

“Well, you are related to the Umbras, or so they claim.”

“Lucky me.” She lowers her head to look at her computer, and I can feel her pulling away.

“Why are you here instead of in the library? Isn’t that where nerds go to study?” Lucian is watching her closely, which tells me I should too. When I glance over, I see a slight shifting of her features right before her chin tips up just the tiniest bit in defiance.

“If I were a nerd, I wouldn’t need to study. Nerds don’t get placed in *remedial classes*.” There’s a sour note in her tone. It makes me think he said something to her about her classes, and that one must have hit home.

“Still, why aren’t you in the library?” he presses, ignoring the remarks about her not being smart.

“Not my scene.” She shrugs, but it’s forced.

“Does it have anything to do with you running out of the study room scared with your arm all scratched up?”

“I wasn’t scared,” she counters while blinking rapidly. “I may have been startled, but not scared.”

“What are you talking about?” I question Lucian.

“Ask her.” He doesn’t take his eyes off Nova.

“What’s he talking about?”

Nova’s eyes shift from left to right as she looks at both of us. I can see her mind working, but I have no idea on what. “If I tell you, will you leave me alone for the rest of the day?”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Lucian and I answer at the same time.

“Which is it?” she questions, watching us again.

“For the *day*,” Lucian concedes, but I can tell by his tone he has other ideas.

Nova flicks her tongue in her mouth but answers soon after. “There was someone in the room who grabbed me and tried to pull me in.”

“Who was it?” Lucian asks, leaning forward.

“I don’t know. It was dark, and all I cared about was getting away. They were gone by the time I went back.” She tosses her hair over her shoulder while admitting the last part, as if it bothered her to disclose that she ran away in the first place.

Lucian stands abruptly and grabs Nova’s wrist. I don’t miss her flinch, as if she thought he was going to do more than circle his fingers around her arm. “They did this?” he questions darkly, running the fingers of his free hand along some light red marks on her arm, then higher to push the sleeve of her shirt up, exposing little freckles all over her arm and a slightly yellowish bruise.

“Mostly, why?” She shimmies her shoulder, making her sleeve drop to cover the bruise while trying to dislodge his touch at the same time.

“Because I want to know whom I need to hurt. Nobody touches what’s mine, and what do you mean, mostly?” he asks, still all up in her space. I doubt he even realizes how possessive he’s gotten of her and why.

“The bruise was a result of me provoking you.” She’s glaring up at him with unrefined anger.

“What?” Lucian freezes as if he’s not even breathing.

“Forget it, it was an accident.” She tries to sit back in the chair, but there’s nowhere for her to go to get away from my suddenly nosy brother.

“What does she mean, Lucian?” I question, because she’s acting like he did it to her.

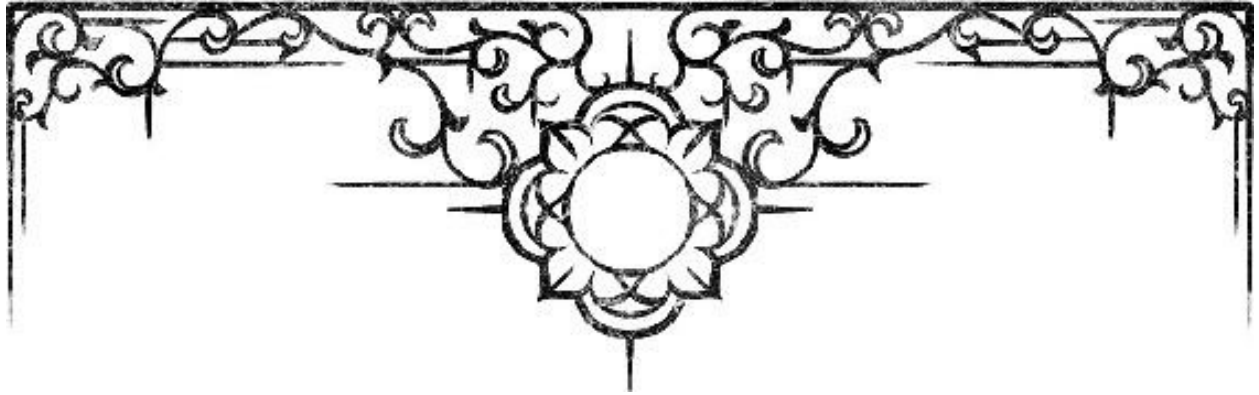
“You can tell me what happened, or I will follow you around until you do, or maybe I’ll just take you home until you’re ready to talk.” I know which

option he would like best.

“I told you it was an accident,” Nova grates out through her teeth.

“How did this *accident* happen?”

Her nostrils flare as she inhales deeply. She’s probably trying to decide if not telling him is worth the fight. “In the *cafeteria*.” The lilt of her voice suggests she’s trying to remind him of something.



LUCIAN

I replay our encounter in the cafeteria, but I know I didn't touch her, so there's no way I did what she said, and then the image of Alden grabbing her by the arm and pulling her out of the chair fills my mind. I didn't think anything of it at the time.

I might have been a little irritated that he took her away before I was done with her, but it never dawned on me that he could have hurt her.

"Alden did this to you." I crouch in front of her, and she seems to be shocked by the shift of positions, because her eyes are wide and leery.

"Not intentionally," she defends, even though it wasn't a question.

"Is this why he hasn't been around?"

"No, I never needed a bodyguard."

"Did you tell the Umbras what he did?" I'm a little surprised that my voice is as calm as it is, considering how pissed off I am.

"No, it was an accident. He didn't mean it."

"Why did you say it was from provoking Lucian if it was Alden who did it?" Nox chimes in. I almost forgot he was here.

"Because that's why he hauled me out of the lunchroom. I was *antagonizing* him, like usual," she says in a tone that makes it clear she's repeating something she heard.

"He said that?"

"Among other things," she mumbles, then tilts her head to the side. "Is he really your cousin?"

"Who told you that?" I scoff, dismissing the question. What the hell else did he tell her?

"You did, you called him cuz," she announces.

"No, I didn't." Damn it, I must have, and I don't even remember saying that.

My lamb narrows her eyes, then crosses her arms, covering up her tits, and I want to pull her hands down for cutting off my view. "Liar." The tip of her pretty pink tongue touches her top lip with her accusation.

"He's only related by blood. We don't claim him as family anymore." I give her a little truth since I've demanded so much from her.

“Why?” She quickly lowers her head and lifts her hands in surrender. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. It’s none of my business. Have I answered enough of your questions today, King Pretty Boy?”

“Hardly,” I grunt, then rise to my feet. It’s the first time I’ve ever lowered myself for a woman, and I didn’t even realize the implications until after. I need to fuck her and get her out of my system or get her off this damn island.



NOX

“Can I get back to work now?” Her question comes off a little like a dig, as if him speaking to her at all is an inconvenience. She’s not even aware that everything she does just draws him in more. Lucian has never had to work for attention or for people to bend to his every whim, but she bucks against him every chance she gets, and I’m enjoying watching my brother’s descent into her web. I also quite like knowing I will get to reap the rewards, because what’s his is mine.

“Why not?” Lucian shrugs. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Tonight? You said you’d leave me alone today.” She’s looking up at him with a pouty expression that I know would kill her if she realized just how sweet her appearance is.

“No, lamb, I said *day*. I would leave you alone for the day. I made no promise about tonight.” Lucian turns his back, a smile playing on his lips, and starts to walk away.

To his back, she calls, “I work tonight, pretty boy. If you get me fired, I’ll...I’ll...”

“Looking forward to it, lamb.”

Nova lets out a growl of frustration when she can’t come up with something to threaten him with fast enough. “He is infuriating!”

“And fiercely loyal and protective to a fault, all while having to bear the cross of being the ugly brother,” I mock as if it’s a tragedy. Nova erupts into a peal of laughter, meaning I hit my mark.

“Yes, the poor baby. I’ll have to keep that in mind the next time I want to poke him in his ugly eye.” When her soft laughter finally subsides, she adds, “I’d be really grateful if you could convince him to leave me alone tonight while I’m at work. I think he almost got me fired last night, and all he did was sit there.”

“You know he’s going to want something in return, Nova.” I lay all the blame at Lucian’s feet, but it’s also the truth.

She lifts her hand, exposing empty palms. “I don’t know what he wants or what I can give him. I even tried not arguing with him, but it’s impossible. He makes me crazy, and I can’t just sit there and let him talk to me like I’m garbage. I don’t even know why I care that he thinks I am. It infuriates me.”

“He doesn’t think you’re garbage, Nova. I can promise you that.”

“We will have to agree to disagree.” She glances down, and it’s probably the first time I’ve seen her truly vulnerable.

“I’ll get him to leave you alone tonight,” I promise, uncertain how I’m going to make good on it but knowing I’ll find a way, even if that way is kicking Lucian’s ass for putting those thoughts in her head. “You have to do something for me though.” Nova lifts her eyes, and a little of the fire she gives Lucian is in her gaze. “You have to tell me if anyone tries to fuck with you again.”

She clicks her tongue and waves her hand dismissively. “I can take care of myself from the run-of-the-mill mean girls.”

“Do we have a deal, Nova?”

“Fine, whatever. If you’ll keep your unhinged brother in check, I’ll agree to just about anything.”

“Oh, Nova, don’t tempt me. While I may not be as *unhinged* as Lucian, I’m still no saint.” She blinks those pretty blue eyes at me, reminding me of the sea off the coast on a clear day, momentarily stunning me stupid.

“I’ll text you later so you’ll have my number,” I tell her over my shoulder while walking away.

“Hey, I never gave you my number,” she says, which makes me laugh. She really has no clue how easy it is for us to get whatever we want.



NOVA

It took me a long time to relax during my shift. I kept watching the door, expecting Lucian to come stalking in, but Nox was true to his word and Lucian never showed up, but now that I'm about to walk out to my car, the nerves are back. I'm hesitant to walk out alone, yet I don't want to ask someone to walk with me. If Lucian is waiting for me, there's no point in bringing someone else into the drama. It would just embarrass me and put the other person in his sights.

"Night, Mickey, see you next week." I wave, hoping he can't tell how stiff my posture is.

"See you Wednesday, darlin'."

The reminder of having several days off is welcome. I can't wait to sleep in tomorrow. I push out the backdoor, then search the lot. My car is parked in the back row, as usual, but that's not what I'm looking for. I'm looking for a hulking shadow or his black SUV, only I can't tell the difference between his vehicles and the countless other black SUVs parked nearby.

When none of the shadows move, I finally let go of the door and head straight for my car. My headlights flare when I get close and hit the unlock button, but I should have waited. "Nova," comes a soft, feminine voice, startling me.

I spin with my keys between my knuckles, ready to face some of the girls from school, but it's not anyone familiar to me. It's a woman who looks like she's around the age my mom would be, but she's lingering in the shadows, so I can't see her that well.

"Yeah?" I don't release my grip on my keys.

"I hoped it was just a rumor that you were here."

"Sorry to disappoint you," I snark. "And who are *you*?"

"Who I am isn't important."

"Okay, so what is important?" I open my car door, and the light from the interior cuts off my view of her even more, but I want to be able to get away if this lady decides to do something crazy.

"That you shouldn't have come here. Your parents sacrificed everything so you'd never have to be here."

"You knew my parents?"

“It’s dangerous for you here.” She doesn’t answer my question.

“Why did my mom leave? Why is it dangerous?” I step out from behind my car door because I need to know what she has to say, but the rear door to the bar slams at the same time, pulling my attention away from the woman, and when I turn back to look at her, she’s gone.

“Wait, come back,” I call out, searching the darkness, but all I can hear is a few of the other staff members yucking it up as they head to their own cars.

“Nova, is everything okay? Is somebody bothering you?” Mickey asks.

“No, there was a woman I was talking to.” I look around again, knowing she’s gone.

“Well, be careful. Sometimes, they send a girl out to run a scam on tourists,” he says, searching the parking lot like I was.

“I will, thanks,” I tell him, then climb into my car. Maybe she’ll come back once they are gone, but when I notice Mickey just sitting in his own car, as if he’s waiting for me to leave so he can, I finally get going.

I’m barely focused on the road the entire ride home, my mind on the woman and what she could have meant. Surely it’s not about the Morningstars. I’m certain they aren’t much older than me, which means they probably weren’t even alive when my mom left, so what the heck could she be talking about?

The guard at the bridge raises the gate as I approach, proving it’s the car and not Lucian driving that allowed me quicker entrance to the island.

My phone vibrates in my pocket when I reach the gate to the estate. If I weren’t alone, I might be embarrassed about the way I jump, but I use the time it takes the metal entrance to peel back to look at the screen.

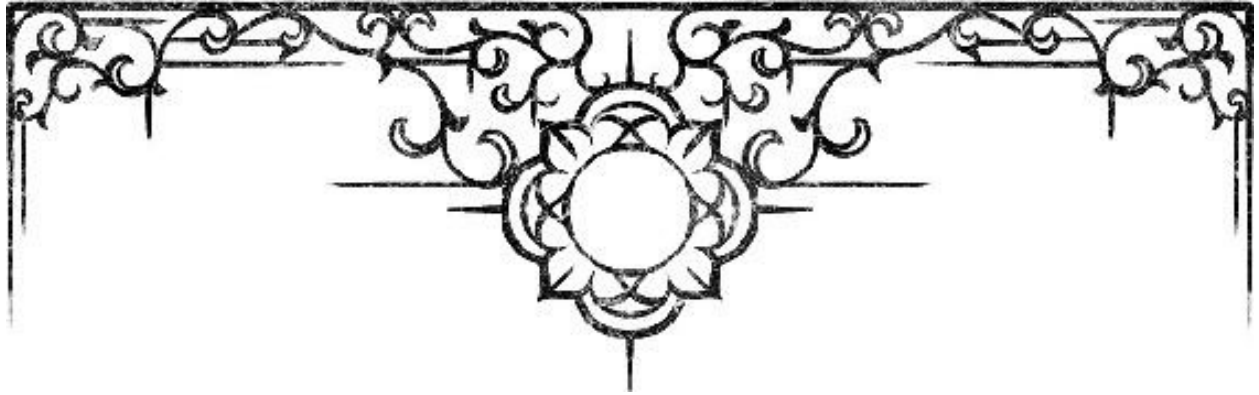
Unknown: Program my number so you can keep your end of the bargain. Night, night, Nova.

I glance into the rearview mirror, wondering if the timing of his text is a coincidence or if Nox knows I’m home. I’m thinking it’s the latter. I’m tempted to flip him off, but it seems childish. He probably wouldn’t be able to see through the windows, and he hasn’t really done anything to piss me off like his brother has.

As I glide down the smooth drive all the way to the coast of the island where the house sits, an eerie awareness settles in my stomach. The most reasonable answer to my question of why it’s dangerous for me to be here lies straight ahead. I knew before coming here that there had to be a reason my mom left and never looked back, but I never thought it was because she

was in danger here. I just thought maybe she didn't agree with their rules or something mundane, but Alden hinted that it could be more, and Lucian is convinced my grandparents had something to do with the death of his parents. What could they be hiding?

I look up at the house. Several of the lights are still on, even though it's pretty late. As I scan the windows, I notice a curtain to the left shifting as if someone was just peeking out at me. Now more than ever, I need to know why my mom left and stayed away. My life might even depend on it.



LUCIAN

“She’s home,” Nox says with his thumbs cruising along his phone screen. He must have been watching the camera feed at the gate. I was reluctant to leave her alone at work like he suggested, but he said she promised she would tell him if anyone fucked with her if I did.

There’s a part of me that wanted to say fuck it anyway and show up there just because I can—hell, I want to get her fired because she has no business working in a fucking bar, letting everyone look at her—but Nox’s reasoning of letting her start to trust us might work in my favor, because I need her to ruin the Umbras since I can’t just get rid of her.

Not that just making her disappear hasn’t crossed my mind, because it has, along with other thoughts like keeping her here, locked in my room, so I could use her whenever and however I wanted, which have been plaguing me since I laid eyes on her. Of course, my thoughts were a little more cruel then, but now I find myself wondering how many times I could make her come before she begged me to stop, or what her teeth would feel like sinking into my lip and cock.

“I texted her my number,” Nox adds as if he’s telling me as an afterthought.

At least he’s not holed up in his room or sleeping so much that I have to worry if he’s even eating and taking care of himself.

“How are we going to get around the no mingle rule?” He tosses his phone to the side, not expecting her to text back, or maybe he’s just distracting himself so he doesn’t keep texting her. His question finally registers, and I get irritated, not at him, but at the fact that we have rules at all. We’re the founders, we can do whatever the fuck we want.

“Cooperation between families is encouraged.” I purposely pretend not to understand his question.

“I’m not talking about cooperation, and you fucking know it. We want her,” he states with conviction.

“We want to fuck her.” That’s all I’m admitting right now.

“You want to own her,” he counters, reminding me that we don’t have any secrets, but when I admitted that, I wasn’t thinking clearly. It pisses me

off that he brought it up. “*I think* I might like to be owned by her.” Nox is actually smiling, which throws me for a loop.

“Jesus Christ.” I tip my head back and look at the ceiling. Sometimes, I forget we’re opposite sides of the same coin, but images of my lamb leaning over me with her hand in my hair, pulling my head up to meet her pussy while she grinds against me to ride my face, don’t seem so out of the fucking question.

“You like the idea!” Nox accuses. I can’t tell if he’s in my head or if he just knows me that well. Probably both.

“Not the way you do,” I defend lamely.

A pillow hits me in the side of the face. “Well, you better pull your head out of your ass and quit being such a dick then, or we might never get to find out what it would be like. Besides, she saved your ass. Who knows what would have happened if anyone but her found you that night.”

“Nothing—nothing would have happened because I wouldn’t have let it.”

“You couldn’t even fucking walk, let alone convince someone you weren’t drunk off your ass. It could have meant you losing the seat, and you know I don’t want it.”

“They can’t even tell the difference between us. Even if you had to take the position in name only, I would have fulfilled the duty,” I admit somberly. She did save my ass. Even after I was a dick to her and made her fall, she came to the house and asked for help.

“She can tell the difference between us,” he boasts as if it’s something special, and I hate to admit it, but it is.

“So what, I’m supposed to kiss her ass now?” I scoff.

“No, I’m pretty sure she likes fighting with you, even if she doesn’t know it yet, but she flinched when you reached for her, like she thought you would hurt her, and that’s not okay.”

“She makes me want to strangle her.”

“Not going to judge your kink, brother, as long as that’s all it is,” Nox draws, giving me a veiled warning.

“I hear you,” I respond, because I do. I noticed her recoil too, and I hated it.



NOVA

I'm in a slight state of shock Monday after my second class. Not only have I not seen the Morningstars, but no one has messed with me all day. There have been no snide remarks, no students stalking me down the halls, including Lucian, and no jilted girlfriends warning me away from their man. It's pretty nice actually, but I'm still waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I'm not really sure what to do with myself. I spent most of the day yesterday in bed or in my room, other than an awkward dinner with Rory and Astrid. Going back to the house sounds boring. Maybe I'll go change and hang out on the beach. The Umbras have their own private oasis on the island, but being so isolated doesn't sound all that appealing right now. I know from my experience yesterday that I'm just going to dwell on the lady from Hooker's, and I won't get any answers about what she meant that way.

I tried to ask Astrid about my mom to see if she would tell me why she left, but she got emotional, and I stopped pushing for details because I felt bad. Rory just eyed me the entire time like he was trying to pry open my head and examine my thoughts. Like I said, awkward.

"What are—" The rest of his words are cut off by my scream when Nox pops his head out from my backseat.

I swat at him and miss several times when he ducks out of the way. "What is wrong with you? How did you even get in here?"

"You left it unlocked. Did I scare you?" He's trying really hard to frown, but he can't keep the smile off his lips.

"You are as crazy as your brother." I lean back against my seat and let my heart rate drop so I don't have a heart attack.

"I got bored waiting for you. I was going to take a nap."

"The car is like two hundred degrees. You would die in twenty minutes." I start the car to crank up the AC.

"So what are we doing?" He leans forward between the seats, ignoring my comment about the heat.

"I don't know." I give a half-hearted shrug.

"Lies, I can tell by your answer," he accuses. Maybe I could use this to my advantage. He probably knows everything Lucian does, so maybe I could get Nox to tell me what he knows about my mom or her family.

“I was thinking about going to the beach,” I offer, turning to see him better.

“Sun, skin, and water.” He says each word slowly while running his eyes over me as if he’s imagining me wet and naked...or maybe I want him to be thinking about me like that, because that’s what I’m thinking about him.

“I’m sure you go all the time, but I really haven’t had the chance, plus the beaches back home are nasty unless you’re up north.”

“I know the perfect spot we can go. Where’s back home?”

“Michigan, are you sure you want to come?” Now I’m nervous about hanging out with him.

“I wouldn’t miss it. Will you let me take you to the best beach in SC?” he challenges.

“Is it far?”

“It’s just a little drive,” he says dismissively.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” he asks as if he’s surprised I agreed, which makes me leery. “You already agreed.” He changes his tone quickly, like he realized I was about to back out.

“Fine, but you better not be trying to trick me.”

“Do you have your suit?”

“Isn’t it too cold to get in the water?” I’m fine in shorts, but I notice lots of people are still wearing pants and even sweaters or light jackets, especially in the evening.

“Not where I’m going to take you.”

“Cryptic.” I mull the idea over for a few seconds. “I was just going to put my feet in, are you going to go in the water?”

“Yup, come on. Don’t leave me hanging.”

“Fine, I’ll need to run by the house to grab my suit,” I agree.

“I wouldn’t complain if you went without. I could even join you if that would make you more comfortable,” Nox offers with a charming grin.

“I’m not the skinny dip in the light of day kind of girl,” I tease, realizing I’m flirting with him.

“So if we wait until tonight?” he hedges.

“Are you trying to get us arrested?”

“Nah, we’d be fine.” He lies down in the backseat.

“What are you doing?” I question, assuming he would jump up front, not keep hiding in the back.

“Believe me, it’ll be easier this way. I’ll wait in the car while you run in and get what you need.”

“This feels weird,” I confess while leaving the parking lot to head to the Umbras. “Do you think Astrid and Rory would give you a hard time or something?”

“Probably not to my face. We’re the next to take over, but they might give you shit about being around me. Plus, there’s all the nonsense about families not socializing.”

“I didn’t know that. So they don’t want the founding families being friends?”

“They don’t want some of the founders forming alliances and overruling the others. It’s a shitty rule anyway. It’s been happening from the beginning.”

“So who made the rules then?” My heart is beating a little fast when I hit the button to open the gate for the Umbra property, like I’m worried they are going to know I’m smuggling Nox into their territory.

“The original founders came up with the creed.”

“The creed?” I question.

“Yeah, bullshit rules. I’m surprised they haven’t talked to you about this yet.” He lets me hear his doubt.

“I promise you they haven’t. To tell you the truth, I don’t even see them that much,” I admit.

“They probably figure they have a long time to indoctrinate you since you won’t have to rule for a while.” He says it so casually, so matter-of-factly, yet it still about knocks me over.

“What do you mean, indoctrinate me to rule?” I look over the seat and see him all scrunched up on the bench because he’s too big to be back there lying down, but he hasn’t complained once.

“Nova, you’re the next in line for the Umbra family.”

“Nuh-uh,” I deny like a grade-schooler.

“Uh-huh,” he argues right back.

“I didn’t agree to that.” I’m indignant and frankly a little freaked out. I don’t want to rule anyone, let alone this island.

“You have a while before you need to worry about it.”

“How long?”

“A couple decades,” he answers and wiggles around, looking for more room.

“This is... That’s crazy. I have more questions, but I’ll be right back,” I

tell him quickly. My mind is reeling, plus I can see he's uncomfortable.

I hop out of the car, leaving it running so he doesn't overheat, then rush through the door to get what I need.

"You're in a hurry," Rory says, causing me to skid to a halt in the hallway.

"I'm going to go to the beach with some friends," I tell him, offering up some truth.

"Which beach? Are you going to the mainland?" he questions.

"I'm not sure, but possibly. It's kind of spur of the moment."

"You'll be with other students from school?"

"Yeah." That's not a lie.

"Okay. I could send someone from the security team," he offers with a hopeful lilt.

"Please no. I have my phone and my own car. I promise to call if anything happens."

"If you insist, but please be safe."

"I will," I promise, then dash away before he has a chance to change his mind or possibly send someone to follow me.

"Sorry I took so long," I pant after climbing back into the driver's seat.

"It's okay, I might need a shoulder rub after this though. I'm getting a cramp."

I ignore his flirty tone and tell him, "Rory caught me when I got there and wanted to know if I wanted someone from security to come with me," I divulge. "Do you think I should leave, then come back in a few minutes to take you home?"

"I doubt he'll be watching the cameras. We should be good."

If I thought my heart was beating fast when my gate opened, it's thumping even harder now as I pull toward his. Nox finally sits up and leans through the front seat, right past me to push in a code into the box. His chest is touching mine, and I think I forget to breathe.

I'm pushed back as far in the seat as I can go, but it's no use, because I don't even gain an inch. When he turns his head to look at me, our eyes lock, and every bit of oxygen is sucked out of the car. Nox is gorgeous. He has the same light eyes as Lucian, but there's a softness to him, even with all the tattoos and piercings.

His eyes drop to my lips, and I lick them in response, which could be embarrassing, but he's watching my mouth as if he wants to taste me. He

starts to lean in, and static cracks through the speaker, causing us both to jump.

Nox pulls himself away from me and drops back into the rear seat with a huff. I have the urge to apologize, but I don't know what for, so I just keep my mouth shut and drive slowly up the road to the house. In the back of my mind, I'm wondering if Lucian is responsible for the interruption, and I don't know if I should be grateful or angry.

"Are you coming?" Nox asks, opening the rear door.

"I can wait for you here," I offer, not wanting to see Lucian just in case. I can just imagine what he would have to say about the almost kiss.

He opens my door from the outside. "I'm not taking no for an answer. Come on, Nova." It's not lost on me that this is something his brother would say and do, but the delivery is so very different.

I hit the button to turn off my car and exit with Nox. We go through the same door Lucian took me through and follow the same path up the stairs.

"Is Lucian home?" I ask softly.

"Not sure. Let's find out."

"No," I say hurriedly, but Nox is already pushing a door open to reveal his brother standing in the middle of a dim room, shirtless and damp. I can confirm that I was correct about the nipple piercings, and those tattoos don't seem to end at all. My mouth goes dry. I wish I could find him as unattractive as his attitude, but I don't, so I avert my eyes down to my feet.

"What are you doing?" Nox casually asks as he strolls into the room. I'm not sure I could ever get used to seeing them together. It's like my brain can't compute that there are two of them.

I want to inspect his room, see the things he keeps next to his bed, and find out if he has an altar to the devil in there, but I linger in the hallway so I don't draw too much attention to myself.

At least I can hope it wasn't him who interrupted us on the speaker. It looks like he might have just gotten out of the shower, which is an image I wish I could get out of my head.

"Nothing. What are you doing?" Lucian's voice is tight. He might be aggravated at his brother for bringing me here and leaving the door open, or he could just be being his normal dickish self.

"I'm going to take Nova to the beach."

"Not planning on inviting me?" Lucian asks deceptively softly. I peek over to see his rigid figure still standing in the center of his room, but he's

facing his brother. There's a massive skull on his back that makes me feel like he's watching me, even with his back turned, so I drop my eyes again.

"Why would I need to invite you?" I see Nox drop onto the bed out of the corner of my eye, then let my gaze slide over to Lucian again. "We're a package deal," Nox finishes, and Lucian's shoulders fall a little in what I'd guess is relief.

I have the opposite reaction. Nox never mentioned asking his brother to come along.

I debate just sneaking out and heading to the beach myself like I planned, but being alone is less appealing than it was before Nox invited himself to come with me.

"What beach are we going to?" Lucian walks across the room to a dresser, drops the towel that was around his waist, and reveals his bare ass—well as bare as it can be covered in even more tattoos. I twist away from the door and plant my back against the wall so I can't see into the room anymore. Is it possible he didn't know I was standing there, or does he just not care? I'm betting it's the latter.

I miss Nox's response, if there was one, then try to look casual when I hear their approaching footsteps.

"Hiding, lamb?" Lucian teases when he sees me, and I decide he got naked to shock me, and it worked.

"Nope." I even shake my head, which makes his lips curl up.

"Come on." Nox ignores his brother and directs me down the hall to the next door. The rooms are mirrored, just like the occupants. If the wall weren't between their headboards, they would be back-to-back. I'm actually a little surprised they don't share a room, but in a house this big, that probably doesn't make much sense.

Since I was actually invited into the room by Nox, I take a longer look around. The floor is dark wood, but almost everything else is black or a shade thereof. The curtains are open, unlike in Lucian's room, allowing the afternoon sunlight to stream in and highlight all the carved details of the four-poster bed and furniture.

"Have a seat. I'll be out in a minute," Nox says while grabbing something out of his dresser. At least he's not going to strip in front of me. I *think* I'm relieved.

The bed is the only place to sit, and I don't feel comfortable getting cozy in his sheets, so I just lean against the footboard, waiting for Nox and trying

to ignore the fact that Lucian is in the same room.

“How was school?”

I look over at him, a little surprised by the mundane question. “Fine,” I admit slowly.

“Nobody messed with you?”

“No, it was rather remarkable actually.”

“You’re welcome,” he says, breezing past me a little too close, so I feel his whispered words stir my hair before he sprawls on the bed.

“Why would I thank you?”

“Because I told them to leave you alone.” He lifts his arm and places it behind his head, stretching out and revealing a sliver of tattooed skin beneath his navel. I have to work not to look at his body. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing I find him attractive.

“Ah, King Pretty Boy has spoken and decreed that only he is allowed to harass me.”

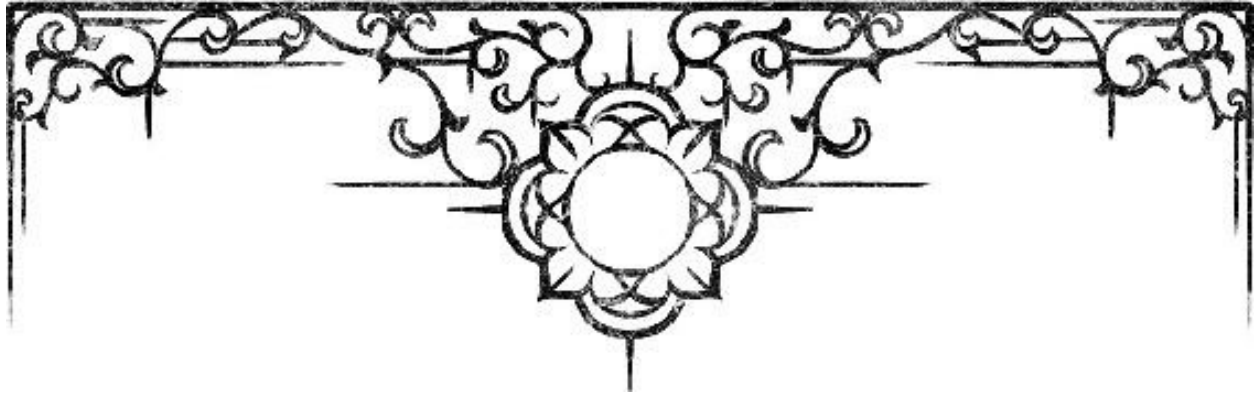
“Do you know what would happen to anyone else who addressed me as such?” His light eyes manage to look dark, even in the bright room.

“As king, I thought you would like it.” I shrug, purposely ignoring the fact that I call him pretty boy. He hasn’t stopped calling me all sorts of names, and I think lamb has stuck. At least it’s not as bad as Charity. I hated that more than nightingale.

“Know what I’ll really like? When I make you say my name while you’re begging me to—”

“Ready?” Nox has perfect timing, interrupting his brother’s remark.

“All set,” I say, sounding way too chipper because I don’t want Lucian to finish. I can already feel heat crawling up my neck with discomfort, which is made even worse by the fact that my thoughts about what he might have said were more along the lines of obscene flirting than an insult or a threat, but I have no experience in that department, and I feel like he’ll somehow know that just by looking at me.



NOVA

I'm the first one out the door and down the stairs, but before I can head for the door, Nox calls, "This way, Nova," causing me to look over my shoulder and see both of them coming downstairs in tandem. Nox is leading. He's wearing a pair of green shorts that hit mid-thigh and are slung low on his hips, and a black shirt I didn't get a chance to see when I escaped the room.

When they reach the bottom, Nox heads in the opposite direction, waving his hand for me to follow.

"Where are we going?" I shuffle forward a few steps but give Lucian ample time to get ahead of me.

"To the beach, but we need provisions."

I trail behind them through the house, making quick examinations of the rooms we pass as I do. There's so much more black, it's hard to believe the entire place isn't drab or flat. It's quite like the occupants—beautiful and hard to ignore.

Soft music filters down the hall as we enter a kitchen that looks like a cross between a witch's apothecary and a gothic church, but everything is black and gold. There are brass kettles and pots hung from the high ceiling by jute ropes over an island large enough to be a sacrificial altar, but the elegant black stone top only holds a golden sink basin and faucet, along with some crystal vases filled with floating flowers and fresh bouquets.

The large, arched windows highlight the massive stove that is the same color as the aged brass pots, while the fluted cabinet above is black and glass, showing off little bottles of what I'm assuming are herbs and spices and not eye of newt or lizard tails.

"Gertrude," Nox calls, and an aged woman with coarse white hair enters the room from the side. Her face is lined like a piece of wrinkled parchment, but her skin looks soft and supple.

"There's a cake," she begins, but her words die as her watery blue eyes land on me. She blinks hard several times, giving me the impression she's trying to make sure she's really seeing what's in front of her, then wipes her hands down an apron hanging over her sunny yellow dress that kisses the

floor. “And whom might this be?” Her accent is thick, but her words are clear.

“Nova. We’re here for snacks.” Nox hauls open a door that I would have assumed was more cabinets, but a light comes from within, proving it’s a fridge.

“The Umbra,” the woman hisses, scandalized. “You let her in the house?” She continues speaking in a foreign language I don’t attempt to label, but I don’t need to know what she’s saying to know it isn’t good.

Lucian actually laughs, which is even more confirmation.

“Gertrude!” Nox scolds, but the old woman doesn’t slow her diatribe.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough,” Lucian finally says, and the woman gives him the evil eye but shuts her mouth. I’m embarrassed for no reason, and it grates on my nerves that I allowed her to make me feel small and unworthy.

“You’d think someone your age would know not to judge someone because of a name,” I chastise, and her eyes pop wide.

Nox starts sniggering, and Lucian looks down at me. “Do you speak Russian?”

“No, but I’m not an idiot either,” I snap back. The old lady lifts her hooked nose in the air and pivots, making her dress flare out around her legs, revealing old brown boots.

“Always surprising me,” Lucian says under his breath, but Gertrude must have heard him, because her head turns in our direction to watch us.

“That wasn’t very nice, Gertie. We like Nova,” Nox censures softly.

“An Umbra?” she whispers harshly with a click of her tongue.

“*Кто не рискует, тот не пьет шампанского,*” Lucian states, and something willowy and soft inside me makes my stomach do a summersault, which pisses me off.

“Watch out for cyanide,” Gertrude replies. It’s pretty clear she’s talking about me poisoning him, but I have no clue what Lucian said to her. I’m sure it’s something equally insulting. It’s my own fault for even being here.

I chuckle, but it’s bitter and angry. “I am so sick of people and your judgments. You’d think I’d get used to it since it’s been going on my entire life, but nope, the sheer audacity shocks me every time. I’m too poor, too sick, too dumb, never good enough, and now, I’m too much of an Umbra. It must be nice up in that tower you live in.” The room falls so silent, the ticking of the clock sounds like thunder in my ears, or maybe that’s my heart pounding away in my head.

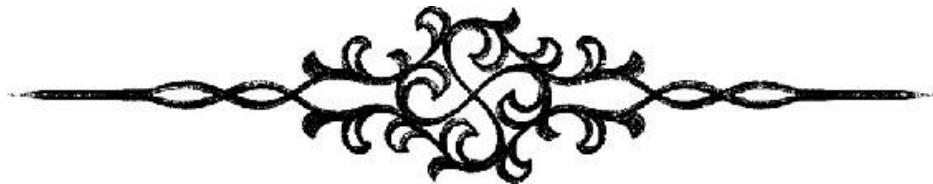
“I like her.” The old woman sucks in air around some missing teeth, making a hissing sound, then shoos Nox away from the fridge and says, “I’ll pack you something. Get away, get away,” as if nothing happened.

“We like her too,” Nox agrees, moving over to stand near enough that I can feel the heat of his arm brushing mine.

I’m still breathing a little heavily. I expected more of a fight, or for Lucian to start in on me, but he’s just looking at me with a strange expression on his face.

“What?” I finally ask, but it’s slightly hostile.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he tells me like I’m a naughty child who’s in trouble with my dad and he doesn’t want to say anything in front of the other grownups. I blow out a breath that sounds a lot like a raspberry, but neither of us say anything else.



LUCIAN

My fingers twitch with the desire to wrap them around her throat so I can feel the flutter of her pulse kiss my fingertips. I want to lay my lips over hers and claim her mouth, bite her lips while she struggles and moans against me.

Thank fuck Gertie is in the room, or I may have actually acted on those urges. I just don't know if my lamb would have tried to stop me or rip my shorts off first. Her blue stare is hot, like she was ready for a fight and doesn't like the fact that it was taken away from her when the closest person to Nox and me did an about-face and admitted to liking her. I'm pretty fucking shocked myself. Gertie doesn't like anyone. Hell, she barely tolerates me most days, but she's family. Not by blood, but by loyalty.

"You can just bring it outside when it's ready. I'll run back and grab it," Nox says over his shoulder while hauling our disgruntled house guest out of the room with him. Gertie sends out a blistering line of curses to his back and slams something against the stove.

"Well, go get him and be smart about it. I said I like her, but that doesn't mean I want her filling his soft head with ideas." I'm used to her insulting us while caring for us at the same time, so I do as she asks instead of arguing with her like I usually would just to have the upper hand. It would waste time that I don't have to spare.

I hear her before I see her. "Wait, where are we going?" My lamb is suspicious, and it's deserved. Nox told her he would take her to the best beach in South Carolina, but I'm sure he failed to mention that it's off the coast of the island and just so happens to be in our backyard.

"Right through here." He ushers her toward the wall of glass that shows off the pool we only swim in during the winter and the pool house. Beyond that is the shoreline of Cadieux, with acres of our own private sandy beach. We've never brought anyone here. This was our spot away from everyone, but I don't mind that he wanted to bring her here. I actually quite like knowing she's essentially at our mercy.

Off in the distance, I can see the cottage where we held our parties and the colorful furniture—that never really felt right but was what everyone expected—sitting unused and forgotten. We haven't had a party since the night my parents died.

I remember Gertrude banging on the bedroom door early in the morning, tears streaming down her wrinkled face, and I knew something was terribly wrong. I'd never seen that woman cry, I wasn't even sure she was capable of it, but the night before while I was drinking and getting my dick sucked by no less than three girls—at the same time—in an audition for whom I would fuck later, my parents suffocated to death, and I had no clue.

“Lucian?” Nox calls, a hint of worry in his voice as I turn away from the memories, making sure I'm wearing the same apathy that has gotten me through the last eighteen months while my brother grieves.



NOVA

My head is on a swivel as we pass a pool that has a waterfall and a slide with an attached hot tub, past what looks like a guest house, and farther still until all I see is sand and clear blue water.

I can see the mainland opposite the shore, but it's far enough away that we wouldn't have to worry about skinny dipping. I cram that thought down because there is no way I would skinny dip with Lucian anywhere around. He doesn't need that kind of fuel to hurt me.

I glance over at Nox as he pulls his shirt off over his head and drops it in the sand. A tingle of regret settles in my chest. I think we could have been friends in another life, but I know I shouldn't be here, and the reason why I agreed is all blurred. I told myself I would allow him to come so I could get answers, but I haven't even thought about my questions since I got back in the car with him after stopping to get my suit.

"Do you need to change?" Nox asks, running his eyes over me.

"Nah, it's a bit chilly." It's true, but it's also not the real reason I'm not swimming. He tricked me, just like I warned him not to do. If he would have told me the beach was his, I never would have agreed to go, plus the hulking shadow behind us means I'm keeping every bit of clothing I have on. Lucian would probably take pictures of me and send them out to the school in a mass text just to try to embarrass me. No thanks, I'm not that dumb.

"Come on, we can jump in the hot tub after a dip," he pleads sweetly, or maybe he has me fooled. Nox might be as big of a jerk as his brother and just playing a role. I hate that I have to question everything and everyone.

Life was a lot less confusing while I was struggling to make ends meet and riding the bus. I didn't owe anyone anything, least of all loyalty.

"Go ahead." I smile, playing along, pretending I'm not in the middle of an identity crisis and wondering how I allowed myself to get here again.

"I thought you northern girls had thicker blood," Nox challenges.

"Ha, you wouldn't make it a single winter in Michigan," I retort without much effort.

Nox tilts his head as if he's picked up on my mood shift. "She didn't mean anything bad, Nova, she's just looking out for us." He assumes I'm still upset about Gertrude, but there's a whole slew of reasons my disposition has

darkened.

“I get it,” I tell him. “Let me see if you really have the guts to get in the water.” I wave him on with my hands.

Nox doesn't hide his disappointment, but he doesn't seem to dwell on it too much either. Instead, he takes off running toward the water and hops into the surf. He lets out a growl of a sound made of heavy breathing and a shiver before diving in and swimming under the softly lapping waves.

When he pops up, he shakes out his dark hair and screams, “Fuck!” but he's grinning.

I walk a little closer to the water so my toes sink into the heavy wet sand, then plop my rump down where I'm out of the tide. The sun is warm enough to make me think that getting in might not be too bad, but Nox's lips are a little blue while he bobs around in the water, only keeping his head out.

“Come on, Lu.” He waves at his brother, who surprises me by streaking right past me and running straight for his brother. They tumble in the water, both coming up spluttering and spitting water out of their mouths. It's the very first time I have to work to tell them apart. Nox hops up and plants his hand on his brother's head, dunking him, but Lucian is quick to retaliate by scooping Nox up and throwing him back into the water.

I start to smile, then I wonder if this is more manipulation, and my smile flattens. I turn my eyes to the left, spying a cheery blue house with a bunch of sun loungers. I grapple with the colorful scene, wondering if I'm seeing someone else's property, but then I realize it's far too close to belong to one of the other families. It doesn't seem to fit with the Morningstars' aesthetic, but I can't deny it's there.

“Change your mind?” Nox huffs over me, dripping icy water on my sun warmed legs.

“No.” I shield my eyes so I can see him.

“Time for the hot tub then.” He leans down as if he might try to pick me up, and I scramble back out of self-preservation, getting to my feet. Not only is he soaking wet and freezing by the looks of his purple lips, but who knows what he would do to me if he was actually able to lift me, which I'm not convinced of anyway. I'm solid.

“I wouldn't hurt you, Nova,” Nox says, sounding bewildered and maybe even a little hurt. I still need to salvage this visit and hopefully get some answers, so I placate him.

“I know your game—you're just trying to get me all wet.”

“I bet you already are from watching us,” Lucian goads.

I grit my teeth, trying not to rise to his bait, but I lose the battle when I say, “Jealous the waves do a better job lapping at me than you ever could to get me wet?”

“Is that what you were sitting up here thinking about, lamb? Me lapping at you?” Lucian’s hand snaps in my direction, but I’m not fast enough to get away from him before he grabs the back of my neck tightly and pulls me closer to his face. My head is tilted up slightly from the tight grip he has on my hair. “It would never happen, because I don’t lap at pussy, I eat it—tongue, teeth, and mouth—but you can keep dreaming.” He shoves me away, and I stumble in the uneven sand, falling on my butt as I reach my hands out behind me to brace for the landing.

“What the fuck, Lucian?” Nox shoves his brother’s shoulder—who manages to keep his footing—then kneels down in the sand in front of me. “Are you okay?” He’s searching my face with what seems like genuine concern.

“I’m fine,” I say too quickly when the truth is my wrist hurts like hell from the way I landed, but there’s no way I would let either of them see that.

Using only my good hand, I pick myself up out of the sand again and brush my butt off. Nox rises with me and apologizes. “I’m sorry.” He sounds ashamed, but I’m not going to absolve him. He knew exactly what he was doing when he invited his brother.

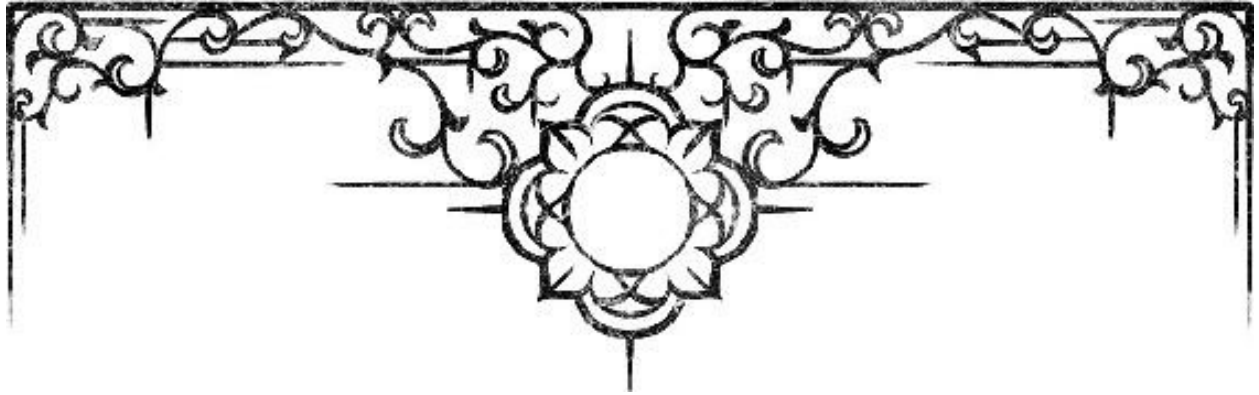
“I think I’ve had enough of the beach. I’ll see myself out.” I’m proud that my voice doesn’t crack, even though I’m so mad at myself and them that I could cry.

“Let me walk you,” Nox offers.

I put up a hand and back away. “No thanks.”

Something in his expression shifts, and he almost looks sad, but I don’t know him well enough to discern if that’s true. “Okay, yeah,” he agrees as he’s racked with a shiver.

I spin then, walking as fast as I can over the sand until I reach the manicured grass and walkway, never once looking backward.



NOVA

*M*y wrist is still sore when I clock in for my shift on Wednesday. I was tempted to call off, but I want to know if the stranger will return, and let's be honest, I don't get much interaction with humans, and I'm feeling pretty damn isolated. At least at work I can have a friendly conversation, even if it's fake.

Unfortunately, Mickey is far too observant and realizes there's something wrong with me a few hours into my shift. "You all right, darlin'? You seem to be favoring your right hand."

I smile. "Wrenched my wrist a few days ago, I'm okay though."

"Few days ago, and it's still hurting ya?"

"Not as bad as it was," I tell him honestly.

"Might have sprained it," he offers.

"It'll heal." I use my right hand when I grab the next bottle to prove a point.

"We haven't been very busy tonight. I was hoping you wouldn't mind heading out early," he says, and I know it's about my wrist and not because we're slow. Or maybe he thinks I'm not pulling my weight and wants to send me home.

"Whatever you think, Mickey, I'm good to work, or I can head out whenever you want," I agree.

"Let's see how the next hour goes." He pats my shoulder.

When Mickey makes his rounds again, I can see it in his face that I'm being sent home. "Go home and rest, Nova. I need you more Friday and Saturday," he tells me solemnly.

"If it's still bothering me tomorrow after school, I'll get it looked at," I lie. I don't need any more medical bills, and an X-ray could cost me a couple hundred bucks. I'll do some magic with an Ace bandage or a splint. He'll never know.

"Take care of yourself, Nova," he tells me as I clock out. I feel bad that the place is still pretty busy, but there's not much I can do besides get pissed at Lucian all over again. I haven't seen either brother since it happened, which is a relief.

Late that night, I started to think that maybe it was my own fault that I fell for not keeping my mouth shut, but I'm only mad that it was all a waste of time and I didn't learn anything, because there's no way I'm upset about what Lucian did. It's something I expected from him, even if he caught me off guard. At least that's what I'm telling myself.

I slowly walk to my car, giving the woman time to make herself known if she's here, but the only people I see are small groups and couples. Even after climbing into the driver's seat, I still don't rush to leave, but it's not like anyone is expecting me anyway. I barely even see Rory and Astrid. It's like they know I have questions and they are suddenly avoiding me.

The passenger side door opens, and I sit there stunned as Lucian pours his body into the seat. "You should really lock your doors." He manages to insult me while he's the one getting into my car without an invitation.

"Get out." I didn't know how mad I was at him until I saw his stupid face. At some point, I let myself believe he wouldn't hurt me, despite him telling me he would, and that's on me, but I'm not falling for it again.

"No," he states calmly without even bothering to look over at me.

"Fine." I fumble for the door handle and get out to leave him inside. I make it about ten steps from my car before he grabs my wrist and wrenches me around. I howl in pain, and he releases me, jumping back as if I burned him. Tears that I refuse to let fall prick at my eyes as I cradle my arm to my chest.

"What is wrong with you?" he accuses, but his eyes are wild.

"Nothing."

"Fuck you. You're lying."

"I'm leaving," I blurt out the words in a rush. I'm surrendering. I can't do this anymore. I just want to go home where I know what to expect and I can think clearly. It's like as soon as the words are out in the open, they take flight in my mind, and I have something to hold onto. "I'm leaving, okay?" This time I say it softer. "I'll go somewhere they can't find me, and everything will go back the way it was." There's a pleading note in my voice that hurts to hear, but I'm not going to pretend it's anything else.

"Is everything okay here?" a guy asks, startling me because I had no idea anyone was around.

"Yes, it's fine," I say quickly, not wanting to set Lucian off on him.

"Do you need help?" He keeps trying, and any other time, I might be grateful, but right now, I just want him to leave. Lucian is just staring at me

with an intensity that surprises me.

“No, please, just go. I’m fine,” I tell the man again, but I’m sure he can tell I’m not. I’m a long way from fine.



LUCIAN

It's only luck that allows me to see her leaving the bar hours before her shift is supposed to end. I have to jog across the sand to make it to her before she leaves, and I only made it then because it was like she was waiting for something.

"You should really lock your doors," I tell her with all sincerity. What if someone other than me got into her car with her?

"Get out." She breathes fire into the words, and it lights something up inside me.

"No."

I feel her staring daggers at the side of my face, but I can't look her in the eye because all I see is her sitting in the sand, staring up at me in pain and shock. I didn't mean to push her, I didn't mean for her to fall, but it happened, and I don't think I've ever hated myself more than I did in that moment.

When I tripped her by grabbing her leg, I convinced myself that it wasn't my fault because I was drunk and all kinds of other shit, but the truth is I was careless. My dad would have beaten me to a pulp. I almost wish he could, because maybe then I would feel better.

"Fine," she says and gets out of the SUV, practically running away from me. When I catch up to her, I circle her wrist, and she screams in pain as she spins to release the pressure on her arm. Her eyes are all watery, and her chin is quivering, but no tears fall.

"What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing," she denies, but she's holding her arm up to her chest.

"Fuck you. You're lying."

She winces at my words and cries, "I'm leaving." I try to make sense of what she means, but I can't. "I'm leaving, okay? I'll go somewhere they can't find me, and everything will go back to the way it was," she appeals, and I realize I've taken something from her. I've stolen her fight, that thing that makes her who she is. I think about the day she showed up here in ratty clothes that no one on this island would be caught dead in, but she held her head high, as if nothing and no one else mattered.

"Is everything okay here?"

“Yes, it’s fine.” She’s watching me and the older guy a few feet away as if she’s not sure what I’m going to do.

“Do you need help?”

“No, please, just go. I’m fine,” she reassures the guy I couldn’t give a fuck about.

“You’re not leaving, lamb. There is nowhere you could go to hide from me,” I tell her.

“I’m going to call the cops, buddy.”

“Just leave!” She turns and yells at the guy, and I see a glimmer of hope. That fire is still there, hidden under her pain and sadness.

“I’m sorry,” I confess, but the words feel like glass in my throat. It’s not that I don’t mean them, it’s just that I know apologies aren’t worth shit. Actions speak louder than words.

My lamb snaps her head around to look at me again. Her eyes are slits of suspicion. There’s something else under all that hurt, but I can’t name it, yet.

“I shouldn’t have pushed you. I won’t let you fall again.”

“Nox? No, no. I know it’s you.” She shakes her head in disbelief. I’m not going to lie, that one bothers me a little. It’s clearly much easier for her to believe Nox would come here and apologize for me than it is for her to believe it’s me. I can’t blame her. I don’t know if I’ve ever uttered the word to anyone outside my family before, let alone meant it.

“He won’t change, young lady, and it sounds like next time he might really hurt you,” the guy warns. I would like to hurt him for opening his mouth, but he continues, “You should get away from him while you can. There are places that can help you.” He delivers the last part while walking away. I suppose he thinks he’s done his duty. I’m just glad he left before I had to shut him up.

“You’re not leaving. I won’t let you.”

“Are you delusional?” she asks with complete sincerity. “Isn’t me leaving exactly what you want? Wouldn’t that solve all your problems?”

“No. What’s wrong with your arm?” I ask to change the subject.

“I hurt my wrist in a fall when some jerk shoved me.” There’s clear irritation in her tone, which is a hell of a lot better than the defeat from just a few moments ago, but it doesn’t make me feel any better. I’ve never been one to be careless with my toys, but I have been with her.

I look down and notice the slight swelling of her wrist. When I reach for her, she damn near jumps back. “May I see it?” I ask, barely unclenching my

teeth.

“For what? To make sure it’s broken this time?”

“Lamb.” My voice is soft, but it’s a warning, and she must hear it, because she slowly extends her arm while looking up at me as if she thinks I really will snap it. I cradle the back of her hand in my palm and see some bruising on her inner wrist. “Did you get this X-rayed?” I lift my eyes to hers.

“No.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because X-rays cost money, and I’m fine.” She pulls away from me, and I let her because I don’t want to grip her hand and risk hurting her more.

“Get in the car.”

“What?” she splutters.

“We’re going to get this looked at. Get in the car.”

“No, I’m going home,” she argues while tipping her head back to look up at me as I get closer to her. I bet she’s not even aware of what she’s doing. Most people wouldn’t hold their ground against me, but she does, even after I was careless with her.

I ball up my hands at my sides so I don’t give into the urge to pick her up, throw her over my shoulder, and put her ass in the passenger seat. “Give me what I want, and I’ll give you something you want in return,” I offer.

“You don’t have...” She reins in her initial biting response, then poses a question laced with curiosity. “Anything?”

“Within reason.”

“Examples.” She barter better than most of the other founding families, and they have years of experience.

“It needs to be reciprocal, even.” I reach up and tug on a lock of hair dangerously close to her tit. Her eyes drop to my fingers, but she doesn’t pull away.

“I want information,” she announces.

“Information is expensive, lamb. What else do I get?”

She steps back abruptly, forcing me to release her hair or risk pulling it. I immediately hate the distance between us. “Nothing. It would seem we’re at an impasse, pretty boy.”

“What information do you want?” I’m going to regret giving in so easily later, but when I step forward and she doesn’t retreat, I know it’s worth the sacrifice.

“I want to know what you know about my parents and the Umbras.”

“Okay,” I agree rather easily because I don’t know much about her parents, but I’m not going to admit that to her now.

“I want to know more about the founders’ rules or the creed, whatever it’s called.”

“Why not ask the Umbras?” I challenge, then give her a few seconds to mull over my question before adding, “Don’t trust them?”

“I don’t trust you either.”

“Yet here you are, lamb, asking me.” I almost whisper the last part in her ear, and I don’t miss the shiver she tries to hide.

I encourage her to head toward my car. “Come on, we have an appointment.”

“No, we don’t,” she argues pointlessly. “There’s no *appointment*.”

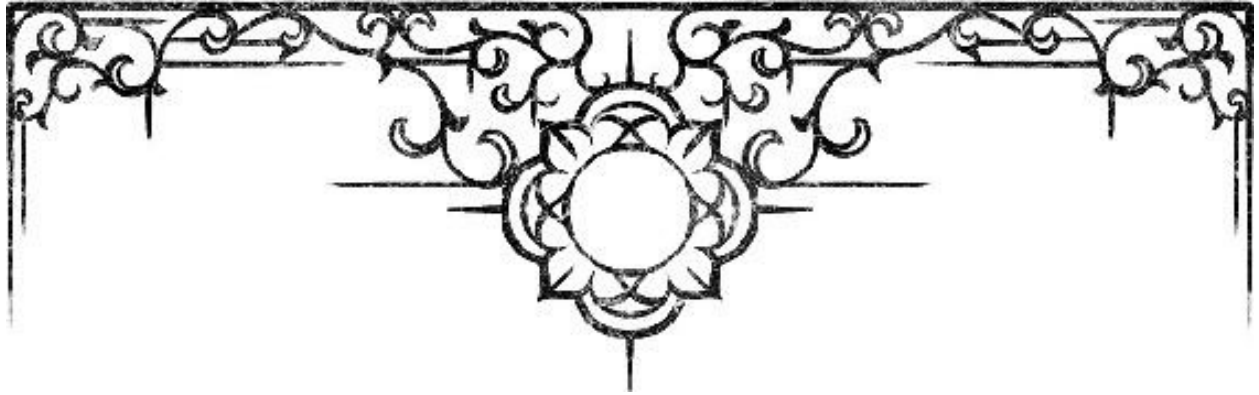
“Semantics.” I open the passenger door of my Bentayga and wave her in. It’s another first for me, but I want to make sure she doesn’t run off.

“Try not to slam my legs in the door,” she grumbles as she lowers herself into the seat. I bend down, putting my face right next to hers.

“Someday, I’m going to shove something in your mouth to keep you quiet.”

“I’ll bite it.” She’s glaring up at me with unrestrained rage, but that’s not all. Her nipples are hard, and her pupils are blown wide. She can pretend she doesn’t like me all she wants, but I know the truth. She probably wants me just as badly as I want her, and it’s killing both of us.

“I can’t fucking wait.” I slam the door on her shocked expression.



NOX

I knew I shouldn't have let Lucian leave. I also knew exactly where he would end up when I did. I hoped he would be able to fix the mess he got himself in, but I was fucking wrong.

Lucian: Meet me at Trinity Hospital.

Me: What the fuck?

It takes me less than ten minutes to make it to the nearest mainland hospital, and as soon as I arrive, I call Lucian. "I swear to fuck if you did something to her that put her in the hospital, you'll end up next to her."

"I called Dr. Amboni to look at her arm. Apparently, she hurt it when she fell the other night," he answers, ignoring my threat.

"And she's just now getting it looked at?"

"We're in radiology," is all he says before hanging up on me.

The only open entrance is the ER, so I jog up to the door and go to the reception desk. "How do I get to radiology?"

The woman seated at the counter gawks up at me. I'm used to it. Looking like I do and being covered in tattoos tends to draw attention. I usually don't give a fuck, but she's acting like I'm about to pull a machete out of my fucking pants and slaughter the waiting room.

"Imaging, X-ray." I knock on the desk to get her brain rebooted.

"Do you need to be seen by a doctor?" She moves a computer mouse around on the desk and breaks eye contact with me.

"No, I need to get to someone who's already back there," I announce impatiently.

"So you're here to see someone in the ER?"

I hate to use my name, but I'm this fucking close to telling this chick that if she doesn't get me back there, I'm going to call her boss and make sure she gets fired.

"Morningstar?" a guy says, holding open a heavy door.

I don't bother saying anything else to the girl before heading toward the male nurse who called my name. He blinks at me and shakes his head. He

must have already seen Lucian, which means he thinks he's seeing him again, or maybe he thinks he's going crazy.

"Weren't you..." He leaves the question open.

"Twin," I answer so he'll get his ass moving. I need to know if my brother was really telling the truth about her injury or if he really is unhinged. I never thought he would hurt a woman, but he's been filled with rage since our parents died and keeping it all locked away. It's probably my fault. He's been taking care of me, so there's been no time for him to deal with his own shit. I'm still going to kick his ass though.

"Man, you guys must be identical," the nurse comments, but I ignore him as I see Nova being guided out of a room with a wide door.

"Nox?" She tilts her head when she sees me.

Someday, I'm going to get her to tell me how she can tell the difference between us, but now's not the time. "What happened?"

"I can take you back to the room," the girl who's with her says, including me in her offer.

"He's being dramatic, as usual," Nova responds while we allow ourselves to be led to the room.

Lucian shoves off the wall in the hallway as soon as we turn the corner, and the girl in scrubs does a double take. Usually, I get off on this kind of shit, fucking with people's heads, but I don't have the time or the desire now.

"What did they say?" Lucian asks, watching Nova.

"Nothing, the doctor needs to read it," she responds with a hint of attitude in her voice.

"Is it broken?" He turns his question to the girl with us.

"I didn't see anything obvious, but the doctor will take a look at it and let you know. I'll make sure he has everything he needs," she says and heads back the way she came, taking the guy who brought me back with her.

"Did this really happen the other night?" I'm looking between Nova and Lucian.

"Yes." Nova sighs and enters the room Lucian was waiting near, then drops into a shitty green chair.

"You got hurt when you fell, and you didn't say anything?"

"It's not a big deal," she hedges.

"And she didn't get it looked at until I made her," Lucian adds.

"You didn't make me do anything. We have an arrangement," she argues softly as if she's too tired to fight with him.

“What arrangement?” I question my brother with interest, but Nova answers for him.

“I came here, and he has to tell me what he knows about my family and the founder crap.”

I smirk in Lucian’s direction, knowing how badly it must piss him off that she got something out of him. “Shut up. She screamed when I barely touched her.”

I raise my hands in surrender. I’m totally fine with a mutually beneficial trade, especially if it helps gain her trust. “Works for me.”

Dr. Amboni, our family physician, walks through the door in a pair of tan pants and a polo. He looks like he was pulled off the golf course to come here, but he probably just dresses like a yuppie under his coat all the time and I didn’t notice.

He inclines his head toward me and Lucian. Even he can’t tell us apart without asking. “Morningstar.”

Lucian doesn’t bother with a greeting. “Results.”

“Sprain. From the way you described the fall, I’m not surprised.” I glance over at Lucian, wondering if the doc knows he was the one who caused her to fall, not that he would care either way. He’s paid to keep his mouth shut and do what we ask.

“We’ll wrap it to help with the swelling and keep it immobile. You should be fine in six weeks.”

“Six weeks?” Nova cries out, clearly shocked.

“Could be four, but there’s some ligament damage.” Dr. Amboni gives her a little shrug.

“It’s not a cast though, right? I’ll be able to work?”

Lucian barely moves his head from left to right in denial, but the doctor sees it and reacts accordingly. “Not for a few weeks at least. Why don’t you come by the office the week after next, and we’ll do another X-ray to see where we are?”

“I’m going to lose my job,” she mutters morosely. I almost feel bad, but then I remember she shouldn’t need to work. I don’t even know why the Umbras make her.

“What should she take for the pain?” Lucian asks.

“Ibuprofen works great for swelling, unless you want something stronger.” The doc specifically addresses Lucian, even though he’s not the patient.

“I’ll take Tylenol,” Nova mutters.

“Bad reaction to ibuprofen?” Amboni asks.

“Bad kidneys,” she responds, causing Lucian and I both to say, “What the fuck?” in unison.

“Not your concern.” She glares before speaking to the doctor. “Are we wrapping this up or what? I need to get home.”

“Don’t think you’re getting off that easily, lamb. You’ll tell me,” Lucian cautions.

“Keep dreaming, pretty boy.”

The doctor chokes on his breath, spluttering to high heaven because he knows we would end anyone who thought they could talk to us like that.

“I want her full medical records in my inbox by morning.” Lucian bypasses Nova, giving his instructions to the doctor.

“You can’t do that,” Nova snarls, even baring her little white teeth like she would take a bite out of him if she could.

“Watch me,” my brother challenges while meeting her gaze. I don’t know if I should get the popcorn or become a referee, but when these two stop fighting each other, there’s going to be fire.

“How much apple juice would he have to choke on to get arsenic poisoning?”

“An inconceivable amount,” Amboni answers, seeming uncomfortable.

“Too bad,” Nova murmurs, causing me to chuckle.

“Make sure her contraceptive method is noted in the chart, along with her sexual history.” Lucian can’t let her have the last word.

Nova sucks in a gasping breath, but when her eyes narrow to slits, I know she’s not going to let that go. “Why bother reading when I can tell you right now? Since I’m a whore and sell myself for money or anything else I can get, it won’t surprise you to know that I have every venereal disease there is, including HIV. The warts are particularly bad though.” She turns her head to glare at the doctor. “If you give him so much as a peek at my records, I will make sure everyone knows you violated my HIPAA rights and sue you, along with this hospital.”

I highly doubt she’s telling the truth about having HIV or any of the other diseases, but I do know Lucian pissed her off pretty badly. “Can we get her arm wrapped up?” I interject before my brother can say or do anything else dumb.

“Yeah, yeah,” the doctor replies quickly, realizing how volatile this

situation is. “Let me find a room and gather what I need.” He slips out, leaving the three of us alone.

“I should make you strip right now,” Lucian seethes.

Nova calls his bluff, grabbing the waist of her pants like she’s ready to shimmy out of them. “Have you ever seen the blue waffle? I think my picture is still floating around on the internet.”

“Shut the fuck up.” Lucian shakes his head, a smug smile playing on his lips. He knows she’s lying.

Amboni pokes his head in the room. “We’re all set right across the hall.”



NOVA

I can't tell if the pressure on my arm makes it ache more or less, but it's annoying. The bandage goes all the way down to my palm, so not even a long-sleeved shirt would conceal it.

"Hey, Nox, can you give me a ride back to my car, please?" Even the tone of my voice changes when I speak to him, and it's not all on purpose, but I do love to piss off his pigheaded brother.

"It's not him you made the agreement with." Lucian peers down at me with his arms crossed over his chest. There's this moment of clarity that strikes me when he looks at me like this, showing not only his size, but the cruelty in his features. I shouldn't poke the bear. It's not the first time I've thought about this, but I'll ignore it just like I've done the other times.

"He probably would have told me freely, unlike you."

"Doubt that."

"Okay." I shrug like I don't care either way, then add, "But he's the one who told me about the creed in the first place, and I didn't have to give him anything for the information."

"His loss. If you don't want what I know, then that's fine with me." Lucian gives me the same indifference I was trying for, but he's somehow better at it. He drives me crazy.

"Fine." I stomp over to his car and wait, because he stays at the curb, talking with Nox and intentionally leaving me locked out.

When he eventually struts over, I'm leaning against the side of his car, hoping it pisses him off that I'm touching the paint. I push away from the door when he continues walking toward me. "What are you doing?" I'm instantly on alert when he grows nearer.

"I like making you uncomfortable." He leans in way too close. I want to back away, but I don't want to let him win, so I hold my ground. I hate to admit it, but he smells good, expensive, with a hint of citrus and wood or something.

He's so close that I can feel the heat of his body next to mine and feel his gaze on the side of my face, but I don't turn my head. If I did, we'd be in much the same position that I was in with his brother in the car, only Lucian would probably rather spit in my face than look like he wanted to kiss me.

“Are you going to move?” I question after swallowing. He is making me uncomfortable, damn it.

“You’re standing in front of the door.”

I realize then that his fingers are curled around the handle, and he is waiting for me. Flushing, I take a wide step to the left, allowing him to open the door. It’s not the first time he’s done it, but it is the first time when it wasn’t necessary, by his standards anyway. All the other times, he knew I would have tried to get away from him if he didn’t force me into the car.

I finally take a chance and look up at him once I’ve lowered myself into the seat. His face is relaxed. It’s not a look I’m used to seeing on him. The door clicks closed softly, and I buckle my seatbelt. I know from riding with him previously that he drives like a maniac.

Both of us are quiet for several minutes as he heads back toward the island. Once we make it to the bridge, I realize my car is still at the bar. I hate asking him for anything, but this is worth it. “Will you run me back to Hooker’s? I need to get my car.”

“It’s taken care of,” he tells me, slowing more than he did last time for the gate to lift to the island.

“What does that mean?” I question as we pass over the bump in the bridge that allows it to be cut off from the mainland.

“I already had someone take it back to the house.” He glances over at me briefly, probably because he wants to see if it pisses me off as much as he hoped it would. I think back to when I handed him my key fob and phone when I went back for the X-ray. It shows what a screwed up place my head is in that I didn’t remember either until just now.

“You let someone else drive my car?” I’m not happy, but I’m too tired to be more than that.

“I couldn’t leave you at the hospital alone and do it myself. I promise your car is fine,” he assures me, and it doesn’t even seem like he’s making fun of me.

I don’t know what to think or say. It’s like we’re playing the same game, but somebody changed the rules without telling me.

I get my first look inside the garage as the door rolls open. There are at least six cars parked inside with plenty of room for more. “Are all these yours?” I ask without thought.

“Ours. We share *everything*,” Lucian says before climbing out of the SUV. It takes me a second to follow him out, because my mind is too focused

on why he put so much emphasis on the word *everything*.

Nox pulls into the garage moments later in the same car I watched race out of the gate the night Lucian was in the accident. It prompts me to look around for the black sports car he was in that night to assess the damage, but it's not among the others.

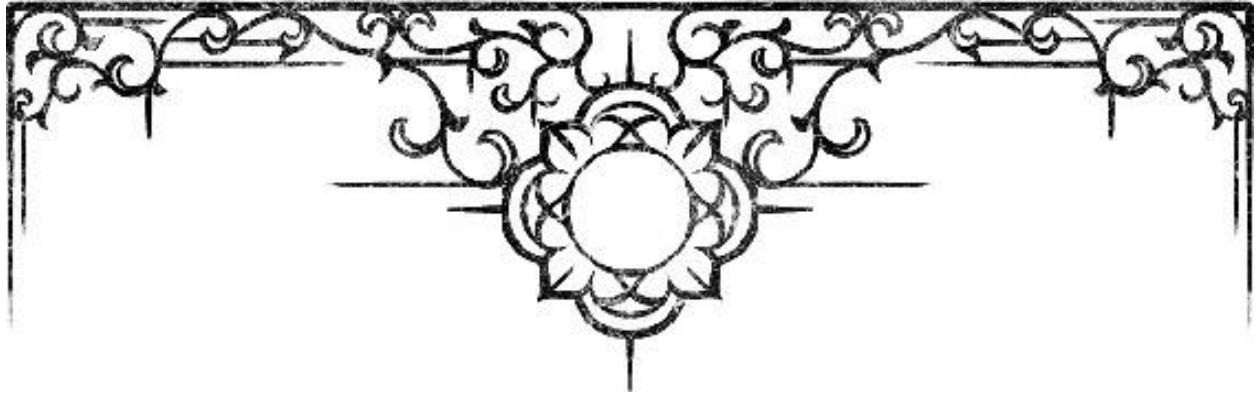
"Is your car in the shop?" I ask to make conversation as I wait for Nox to join us. I feel the tiniest bit safer when he's with us, though I have no idea why.

"What car?" Lucian seems confused for a second then recovers. "Traded it in. The replacement should be here in a week or two."

"Wow, it didn't seem totaled."

"It wasn't, but it was used, broken. Why keep it when I can have better?"

I don't bother trying to explain that just because something is used or broken doesn't mean it's not worthy of him. I would only be wasting my breath. Besides, it's none of my business what he does.



LUCIAN

I can't help but notice the way she has the sleeve of her shirt pulled down, covering as much of the bandage wrapped around her wrist as possible. I would be willing to bet she hates the show of weakness. I know I would. I probably would have told the doctor to shove it up his ass, just like I did when he said I had a concussion after the accident.

What bothers me more, though, is her comment about her kidneys. If Amboni doesn't have her records in my email by morning, I'll be paying him a little visit tomorrow. I'm tempted to demand she tell me now, but after seeing the way she shut down earlier and her threatening to leave, I bite my tongue, at least for now. I'll get my answers sooner rather than later.

"I'm going to get a drink," I announce, then break away from her and Nox to head to the kitchen. Gertie is long gone by this time of night, which is good. I don't want anyone else here to interrupt.

Because I'm not a complete asshole, I carry three bottles and a bag of chips up to the billiards room, then stop short when I realize it's empty. "That fucker," I mutter under my breath, looking down the hall toward our rooms.

Her soft, sweet voice carries to my ears before I breach the doorway of Nox's bedroom. There's no bite in her tone like there is when she speaks to me. "I just can," she tells him, so I linger in the hall to catch a little more of their shared conversation.

"Just tell me how, please. No one else can tell us apart. It'll make him crazy if I know and he doesn't." Nox tempts her with pissing me off. It's a good tactic, it might work.

"I told you, it's just a feeling. When he's around, my body knows I'm in danger. There's no other way to describe it. In the kind of neighborhood I grew up in, you learn not to ignore instincts like that," she admits.

I step into the doorway. Nox already would have known I was close anyway, because we know better than most about those feelings she was talking about. Most people don't understand how true our bond is and how we can sense each other, but I have a feeling she will.

"So what you're saying is I turn you on." I purposely belittle her confession because I love to piss her off. I can't wait for the day when I can

rip her fucking clothes off and fuck her against the wall while she claws at me.

“Nope. What I said before was accurate—you make my skin crawl.” She sends a suspicious glare at Nox as if she knows he coned her into talking while he knew I was nearby. She’s smart and gorgeous, which only makes me want her more.

“I brought you something, lamb.” My voice is pitched low, seductive and coaxing. She responds whether she means to or not by shifting her body just enough to stand directly in front of me. Her head tilts infinitesimally, and her lips part, creating the perfect little heart between her pouty lips.

“What?” She’s apprehensive.

Instead of making her walk to me like I planned, I saunter over to her, watching her head tip back as I get closer while she holds her ground. My dick is hard by the time I’m within inches of her. “I thought you might be thirsty.” I lick my lips, thinking about making her open her mouth so I could spit on her tongue and watch her swallow part of me.

Her eyes dip down as a flush covers her face. I lift the bottle of water, and the pink on her cheeks deepens a shade, proving her thoughts were as impure as mine.

“Is it poisoned?” She takes the glass and examines the cap to see if it’s already been opened.

“No, not my style.”

“You’d rather slit my throat while I was fully aware,” she concedes.

“Killing you hasn’t been part of my plan in a long time, lamb. I enjoy you far too much.”

“You enjoy my discomfort.”

“That depends on what kind of discomfort we’re discussing. Having your boundaries pushed can be rough, but it can also be incredible.”

“Yeah, we’re not speaking the same language.”

I can only smile at that. We both know she’s lying.

“Come sit down,” Nox urges her, which is a good idea, because I’m seconds away from seeing what she would do if I claimed her mouth.

She slowly backs away from me, as if she knows I’m ready to seize her. It’s amusing to watch her eyes dance between mine. Even when she’s steps away and turns around to head toward my brother, she looks over her shoulder, apparently not trusting me to stay put.

I wait until she’s seated on the couch and opening her drink before I sit

right next to her, making sure to keep her on edge. This little game makes me think about how much I'm going to enjoy bringing her to the precipice, only to pull her back until she's begging me to let her come.

Her hand trembles when she lifts the bottle to her lips and takes a gulp. I glance over at Nox. There's an unspoken conversation shared between us.

You're frightening her, he accuses.

And you're loving every fucking minute.

Not the point.

Isn't it? I lift my brow.

She's not.

Try again. Look at her, I prompt.

I watch Nox run his eyes over her, from her flushed cheeks and dilated eyes down to her arched back and the way she keeps shifting her thighs. Nox spares me one final glance. *Be careful.* I would roll my eyes, but he returns his attention to her, making it as pointless as his warning.

"I'm ready whenever you are." She fidgets under both of our gazes.

"How ready are you, lamb?" I whisper, and she gives me the side-eye.

"Ready for you to tell me what you know and keep your end of the bargain."

"Too bad." I sigh in feigned disappointment. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," she answers quickly. "Especially about my mom."

"You're putting a little too much faith in me."

"Lucian," she warns, saying my name for the first time. I don't let her see just how much I like it while also being conflicted that she didn't call me pretty boy.

"We don't know much about your mom, Nova," Nox tells her before I can.

I hold my hands up in surrender when she glares at me. "I never told you I did."

"Yeah, but you didn't tell me you didn't either."

"I'm always going to take the advantage."

"Not that I should be surprised," she mumbles. "What do you know?"

I think about trying to extract more from her before I tell her, but I decide to stick with my original deal. "I know when she left, she was disowned, dead in the eyes of her family and the founders."

"So she couldn't have come back if she wanted to?" She latches onto the

fact as if it gives her hope for something else.

“I wouldn’t say that, but it wouldn’t have been easy.” I don’t tell her the families would have demanded a sacrifice that I’m not sure her mother or grandmother would be willing to make. They would have had to forfeit something equally as valuable—like their term of power, a portion of their property, or something—and all that was contingent on the Umbras even allowing her to return.

“Do you know why she left in the first place?” she questions, hanging on my every unsaid word. Damn, I like having her attention on me.

“That’s family business.” I shake my head slowly. “But it may have something to do with your father. Some families still arrange pairings, and I can guarantee your father would not have been chosen.”

“Are you kidding me?” She stands up and sneers at me with disgust, as if I just told her I would be the one picking her husband. Even the thought of her with a partner enrages me just as much.

“I said it happens, not that I’m in charge of it,” I reply gruffly.

“That’s insane,” she argues as if she can’t believe it’s true.

“It’s business.” I widen my hands.

“Are you... Never mind, none of my business.” She spins away to start pacing.

I lean back and spread my arms along the back of the couch to watch her. Her eyes are lowered, but I can tell her mind is working overtime.

“I asked my grandmother if my mom was made to choose, and she told me no.”

“What exactly did she say?” Nox prompts.

She slows her steps and closes her eyes, thinking back, but more importantly, she’s trusting both of us, even if she doesn’t realize it. “She admitted my mom left to be with my dad, and I asked if she had to choose between being here and him, and she said there was no choice.”

“And you thought that meant she didn’t have to choose,” I surmise.

“Well, yeah.” She tosses her hands up in the air.

“I don’t think that’s how she meant it,” Nox replies softly.

“No crap.” She laughs bitterly. “So what was the point of bringing me back here?”

“I told you, without an heir, they would have died out. Your grandfather took your mother’s place. There are no Umbras left to take over besides you. They need you to keep the family name.”

She scowls. “Screw that. I’m not sticking around here.”

I almost tell her she’s not going anywhere, but I manage to rearrange the words trying to spew from my lips. “And let them win?” I goad, poking at the defiant part of her that bucks against me all the time. I find myself just as intrigued as I think about her dominating the other families rather than submitting to me. I’m not right in the head, but I don’t care.

“How would they win if I disappeared?” She cocks out a hip, scrutinizing me.

Shit, I hadn’t thought that through. “They would be able to keep everything that should be yours,” Nox offers.

“Like money? All I want is a decent place to live and a car. I don’t need some mansion on an island or any of the trouble that comes along with it.”

Her words are spoken with too much conviction not to believe her, but it’s still not easy. It’s been my experience that everyone cares about money and wants as much of it as they can get.

“Money makes those troubles go away,” Nox offers.

“Doubtful,” she replies dismissively. “Besides, I’m not sticking around here and letting them try to put me in some archaic arranged marriage.”

“We would never allow that to happen, especially if you’re working with us.”

“How could you stop it?” She allows me to hear her doubt.

“He’s next in line to lead the founders,” Nox tells her, but it’s not really an answer.

“They are trying to keep you in the dark. How would you know that the man they introduced you to was already hand-picked to be your husband? I’m sure he would be kind and charming at first.” My lamb makes a face of disgust at my words. “He could have swept you off your feet, and you would have been none the wiser that they were all using you, but now you know.”

“I would have known,” she argues lamely. “Is this why she said it was dangerous?” She spins away from me and begins pacing again.

“Who said it was dangerous?” I rise slowly, as if something could be threatening her now.

She spins to look at me, searching my face for a long moment before she finally says, “There was a woman. She approached me in the parking lot one night after work and said some things.”

Nox proves he’s just as invested in her response when he asks, “What did she say?”

“That my mom left and stayed away because it was dangerous here. What did she mean?” She bounces her eyes between me and my brother.

“Did she say anything else?” I question, needing more to go on.

“Not really. She ran away when someone came out of the bar, like she didn’t want to be seen. I was going to wait for her tonight, but…” She leaves the rest hanging.

“What did she look like? Did she tell you her name?” Nox prompts.

“No, and I don’t know, maybe fortyish with brown hair down to her shoulders. I couldn’t see her eye color because it was too dark. She had a long, flowy skirt on.”

“So pretty much anyone on the mainland,” I deadpan.

“Excuse me for not getting her identification before speaking to her,” she snaps.

I step into her space, and she holds her ground. “I’m starting to see a pattern here, lamb, and I don’t fucking like it. You allowed someone to put their hands on you at least twice that I know of, then you put yourself in more possible danger by speaking to this stranger in a dark fucking parking lot behind a shithole bar.”

“I didn’t *allow* anything. I took care of myself, if you remember correctly.”

“Then why was your arm all scratched up and bruised?”

“Why do you care?” She raises her voice and lifts up on her toes, getting closer to my face.

“I already told you. No one touches what’s mine,” I grit out so I don’t bend down and bite her fucking lip to mark her.

“I’m not your anything.” Her eyes are narrowed like little razors to match her tongue.

“Wrong, lamb, you are ours.” I smile down at her, but it’s not in kindness.

“You need your head examined.”

“Is that an offer?” I reach for my belt.

“Not that one, you pervert.”

“Oh, lamb, you have no idea.”

She swallows roughly at my words but doesn’t seem to have a comeback for that one.

“I’ll figure out who was in the library and rip their fucking hands off, then I’ll find this woman and learn what she knows.”

“I don’t need your help.” She tries to turn away from me, but I catch her

upper arm, mindful of my grip.

“Then you don’t want to know about the creed?” I feign indifference.

“That’s different,” she argues.

“No, it’s not. We work together or not at all, and it’s already too late for that.”

“Ugh, can’t you talk some sense into him?” she asks Nox.

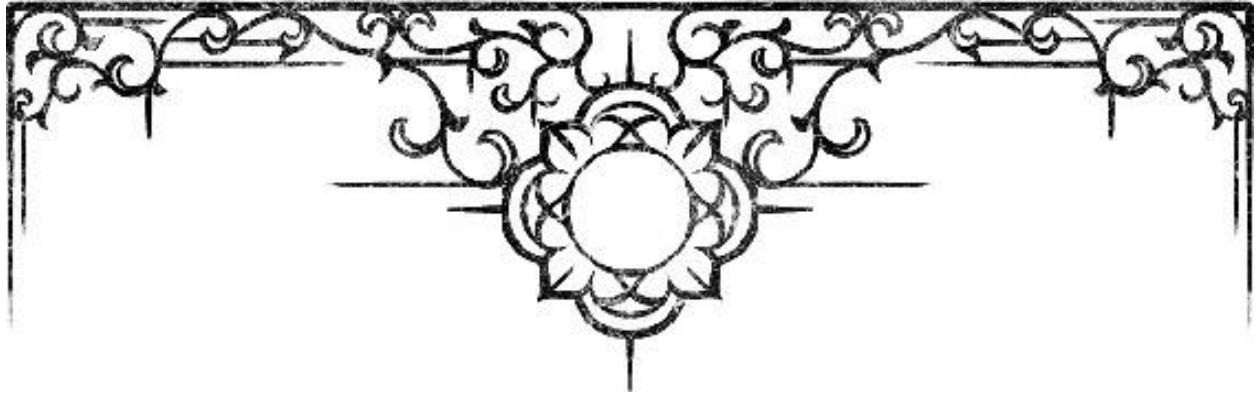
“He’s talking sense to me, Nova. You need help, and despite Lucian’s gruff delivery, we want to help you. Let us.” He seems so reasonable, I grin but drop it before she can look back at me.

“I should have known you two would work against me.”

“We’re a team.” Nox shrugs.

“And now you’re a part of it,” I remind her.

“Until you decide I’m not useful anymore,” she grumbles dejectedly.



NOVA

“Don’t fret, lamb. I’ll make a list to enumerate how many ways I want to use you.”

“You’re such a pig,” I tell Lucian with what I hope sounds like disgust. Frankly, his innuendos make me uncomfortable, but I don’t think it’s for the right reasons. I should want to punch him in the face, and I do, but there’s a part of me that’s curious about the things he says.

“You’re the one with your mind in the gutter. I was talking about getting revenge on your family for killing mine,” he replies, which embarrasses me even more.

I don’t have a comeback that wouldn’t make me look even more foolish, so for once, I keep my mouth closed.

“I’m more than happy to entertain those ideas. Want to crash in my room?” Nox offers, feigning sweetness.

“No, I have my own bed, thank you.”

“You’re really going to go back there and live with them?” Lucian crosses his arms over his chest and peers down at me.

“As opposed to...” I leave the question hanging.

“You can stay here with us. You don’t even have to sleep in my room, but the offer stands,” Nox proposes.

“That is such a bad idea all around. I probably wouldn’t live through the night, not to mention I think the Umbras would get suspicious when I didn’t come home.”

“You really think they care about you?” Lucian asks, sounding like he can’t decide if he wants to feel sorry for me or thinks I’m stupid.

I almost admit that, at one point, I’d hoped for that, but I’m not as dumb as he thinks I am or willing to confess the vulnerability to him, so instead I’m flippant. “Don’t worry, I’m well aware that I’m nothing but a tool to you people. I’m more concerned that they would find out you’re stalking me, and I wouldn’t be able to get the information I need. You did say we’re not supposed to team up or whatever, right?” I turn toward Nox for confirmation.

“There are rules against alliances.”

“Fuck the rules.” Lucian dismisses his brother’s response. I’m not

surprised, though, since he said something similar the first time I met him.

“Can I see these rules? Why do they even have them?”

“To keep everyone in line,” Lucian gripes, only answering half my question.

“To make sure one or two families didn’t completely take over.” Nox’s reply seems more reasonable, but it doesn’t tell me enough.

“Take over what, the school?”

“The island, the school, abuse our power on the mainland, all of it. Each family has one vote to cast for all decisions, but in the event of a tie, the current leader’s vote is worth two, meaning they can break a stalemate.”

“What are you voting on? Cafeteria choices? The mascot?”

“Don’t be naïve, lamb,” Lucian censures.

“Apparently I am, because I don’t know what else it could be.”

“Think much bigger,” Nox says.

“How about you just tell me?” Keeping up with these two is exhausting, not to mention I was tired before I even went into work tonight, despite the time off. I need to take better care of myself. The past few weeks have taken a toll on me mentally and physically.

“Those who control the money control the world,” Lucian says plainly, then drops onto the sofa.

“Cryptic much?” I accuse.

“Not really,” Lucian replies. “You want to know how a law got passed or how someone got elected? Follow the money trail, and you’ll find places like Cadieux College and people like us.”

“No way,” I scoff, looking between them and waiting for them to laugh, but neither of them does. “You’re joking, right?”

“No. Do you understand why the Umbras need you so badly now? You are more than their grandchild, you are their legacy, shaping future leaders of the world in the image they see fit.” Lucian sounds irritated by the entire thing, or maybe it’s because he’s explaining it to me.

“I’m not interested,” I say, not even sure if I can believe him. The thought of running the school was bad enough, but this... I can’t even comprehend what it would mean.

“It will be a long time before you have to worry about it, Nova,” Nox soothes, but it doesn’t matter. It feels like the weight of their expectations is already sitting on my shoulders.

“There are ways around it,” Lucian says, agreeing with his brother, but I

don't even want to think about it anymore.

"I should get going," I announce, backing toward the door.

"Nope, doctor's orders, you need to be supervised for the night," Lucian tells me while watching me with his chin tipped down. Even though he's sitting, it still feels like he's somehow looking down at me.

"He did not say that," I argue.

"Sure he did. Need me to call him so you can hear it yourself?"

"No, besides, he would say whatever you told him to say."

"Now she's catching on." Lucian's mouth curls in a cruel yet beautiful smile. I find myself wondering how often he allows people to see the emotion on his face. At school, he doesn't seem to speak unless he's being a jerk, which isn't all that different from any other time, but every once in a while, I wonder if maybe there isn't something under all the indifference he lets everyone see.

I blame my wandering thoughts on the fact that he told me he lost his parents. Since that night, I've felt myself softening toward him, even when I know I shouldn't. Then there's Nox. He makes it really hard not to like him, even though I know I'm stupid for feeling that way.

"Come sit down. I'll get you some Tylenol for your wrist," Nox offers as if to prove my belief in his kindness.

"I'm fine," I tell him, dismissing the offer.

"I promise I won't drug you."

"It's not you I'm worried about," I tease.

"I'm not going to hurt you, lamb. I'm far too fond of the chaos you create." Lucian lowers his lids, and I swear he meant that as a compliment. I'm so taken aback, I sit in one of the chairs across the room from the brothers and keep my mouth closed.

"You can see the TV better from over here. Want to pick a movie?" Nox extends his hand, already holding a black remote.

It's so dumb and reckless, but I want to stay. I want to sit on the couch and act like we're friends. I didn't realize how lonely I was when I was back home because I worked all the time and didn't give myself a chance to think about things being any other way, but here, where I was expecting to find a family that wanted me and not what I could do for them, I feel even more isolated.

"Come on." Nox motions me over as if he can sense that I'm wavering.

"I can't stay long." I preface my approach as if it's some sort of warning.

He ignores my comment. “What do you want to watch?”

I look around the room, knowing there’s only one acceptable answer. “*The Addams Family*.” I feel Lucian staring at the side of my face, and I can’t hide how much I’m enjoying his look of disdain.

“Funny girl,” he mutters under his breath.

“Maybe I should call you Lurch since you’re so fond of nicknames. It fits perfectly since you’re tall and creepy.”

When he reaches forward like he might grab me, I start to laugh and lean away. “I’m just kidding. You’re not that tall.” Nox bursts out laughing at my jab, and we both snicker for way too long.

“Try it and see how it works out for you.” Lucian sulks.

“Oh, come on, it’s not that bad. You call me lamb like it’s my given name, and we both know why.”

“We do?” He tilts his head, waiting for my response.

“To the slaughter,” I say, and that cunning smile returns. My stomach does this weird roll when he blinks slowly and shakes his head.

“Wrong, but I like that too,” he agrees.

“Why do you call me that then?”

“I’ll be right back.” Lucian rises from the couch and saunters out of the room, ignoring my question.

“I’m right, aren’t I? He’s just messing with me,” I probe Nox.

“I don’t think so, but you’ll have to ask him to be sure.”

“He won’t tell me,” I reply.

“He will if you ask nicely enough,” Nox flirts, and I try to act unaffected.

“What are we watching? I vote for a scary movie.”

“You like scary movies?” He seems surprised.

“Used to. I haven’t watched one in a while. It’s not that fun when you live alone in a crappy apartment and fear for your life when you walk home from work.”

“You walked to work?”

The question alone is enough to showcase the differences between us. I wonder if that’s what it’s like for them when I’m surprised by something in their world. “Rode the bus most of the way and walked from my stop, which wasn’t very far,” I divulge.

“I’ve never even had a job,” he says softly. He’s not bragging. If anything, he sounds disappointed.

“You’re not missing much.”

He turns to focus on me, locking those light blue eyes on mine. “When did your parents die? How did it happen?”

I blow out a breath. I wasn’t expecting that question, but somehow, it seems more palatable coming from him because I know he’s experienced the same kind of loss. “About three years ago, we were in a car accident.”

Nox sits up abruptly. “You were with them?”

“Yeah.”

“But you’re okay?” His face scrunches up a little.

“For the most part.”

“What does that mean?”

“I got pretty banged up and was in the hospital for a long time. I missed a lot of school, and my kidneys were damaged.” It’s tougher to admit the last part. Most days, I forget my life could change at any time, and the likelihood of having issues when I’m older is almost a forgone conclusion from what my doctors said.

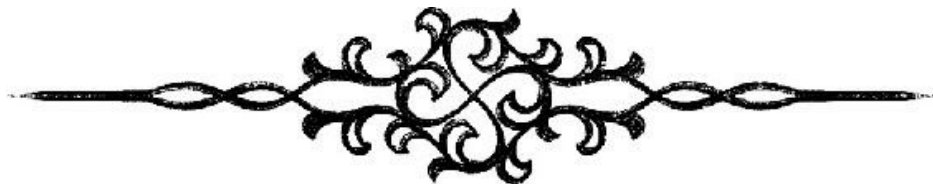
“That’s why you can’t take ibuprofen?”

“Yeah.”

“Is there anything else you have to watch out for?” Nox questions.

I shrug because there are a lot of things, like staying hydrated, watching my diet, and not drinking alcohol, but those things aren’t that big of a deal. I think he knows I’m uncomfortable, because he picks up the remote and settles back into the sofa before saying, “I’m glad you’re okay,” and leaving it at that.

I relax a little, happy that he’s not asking me for more right now, but even more relieved that Lucian isn’t around to demand it.



NOX

Nova scoots her legs to the side when Lucian eventually returns to the room and lowers himself onto the seat near her. I watch her chest rise and fall while she tries to peek over at him without him noticing.

I wish I knew what was going through her head as easily as I do my brother's. He was standing near the door, listening to her confession about her parents, after having returned from the bathroom, but instead of coming back in and possibly interrupting what she was saying, he waited a while after she finished to return to the room.

After several seconds of Lucian not doing anything other than sitting somewhat near her, Nova finally begins to relax, and my obstinate brother pounces as if that was exactly what he was waiting for. "I expect you to tell me if you see the woman again."

"What wom... Oh." Her eyes dip down to her lap. "I don't even know how to go about finding her. It's not like I can tell my work I need a couple weeks off, then hang out in the parking lot every night, hoping she will show up. I'm probably going to get fired anyway."

"You shouldn't be working there to begin with," Lucian decrees. I know it's going to piss Nova off, and I'm sure he does too. It's undoubtedly why he said it.

"Why not? Because it's a bar?" She narrows her eyes on him.

"Partly, but the fact that the Umbras are making you work sickens me."

"They aren't *making* me," she denies. "You might not understand the concept, but I earn my way."

"Oh yeah? How did you earn that Macan you've been driving around then?" Lucian's voice is dark with jealousy, but to someone who doesn't know him as well as I do, he would just sound accusatory.

"How did you get the cars in the garage?"

"I bought them."

"And where did you get the money to do that?" she pushes.

"From my bank account. Now answer my question."

"From a trust fund you mean, and that money was given to you, just like the car was given to me. But you know what? I would take it every time. That doesn't make me a whore or desperate. It makes me smart."

“You’re making a lot of assumptions, lamb. I haven’t touched a penny of my trust fund since I was sixteen, haven’t needed to, but in this particular instance, I’m more worried about what he’s expecting in return.”

“Nothing, he hasn’t asked me for anything,” Nova replies.

“Yet. But no matter, you’ll be riding with us from now on.”

She explodes. “I will not!”

Lucian looks up and makes eye contact with me. It’s my cue to step in. “Just for now, Nova. We need to make sure everyone knows you’re a founder, not to be messed with, and we don’t know who this person who approached you is. She could be dangerous,” I reason.

“No, I can take care of myself.”

“I thought you wanted to know about your mom and why she left,” Lucian tempts her.

“I do.”

“We’re the only ones offering to help, Nova. We *want* to help. Let us.” I hope I can appeal to her need to know what happened to her mom.

“So I have to let you take over my life to accomplish that?” She’s shaking her head. I can already tell he pushed her too hard, too fast.

“Yes. I told you, you’re either with us or against us.” Lucian doesn’t let up at all.

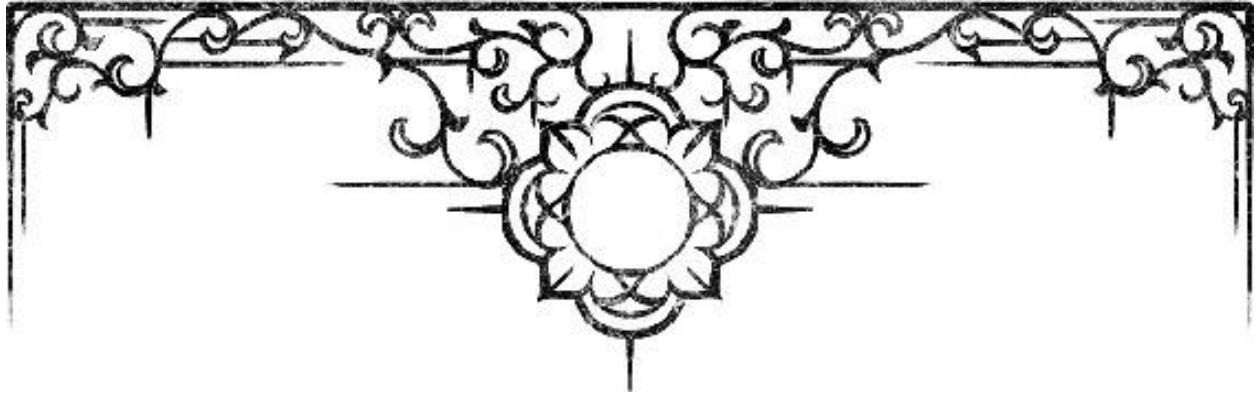
“That’s not what you said,” she argues, but I’m not sure what she’s referring to.

“I’m saying it now.”

She stares at him for a long moment, and I think she’s about to get up and walk out, but she doesn’t. Instead, she repeats an earlier sentiment. “As long as I’m useful.”

“If that makes you feel better.” Lucian shrugs with indifference before placing his arm along the back of the couch, coming dangerously close to touching her shoulder.

Well, at least she’s not leaving.



NOVA

I can't explain why I'm still sitting here, watching a horror movie about a group of people who create haunted house attractions and happened upon a location that seems to come with its own resident ghost. If I weren't steaming mad, I might admit that it's kind of creepy and I've actually jumped a few times.

I look toward the door for the fifth time. I need to pee, and I've been trying to work up the nerve to ask where the bathroom is.

"What's wrong?" Nox asks, tipping his head to the side.

"Where's the bathroom?" I ask softly, not wanting to draw Lucian's attention. He's been quiet since the movie started.

"I'll take you. I need to piss." The grump stands up and stretches. I look at Nox for help, but he just smiles at me encouragingly.

Reluctantly, I trail behind Lucian as he exits the room and heads down the hall. When he enters a doorway I would swear is his bedroom, I slow my steps, then peek into the darkened room.

I don't spot Lucian, so I assume he's already gone ahead to the bathroom. Glancing down, I look at my sock-clad toe teasing the threshold. I shouldn't go in. Actually, I shouldn't even be here at all, but I am. With a deep breath, I slide my foot over the wood and enter the room.

I'm tempted to turn on a light, but he would probably accuse me of snooping—which I am—or say that I was scared from the movie.

My eyes slowly adjust to the gloom, allowing me to see the outline of the drape-covered windows and the shadow of the four-poster bed. Awareness tingles down my spine, but I still jump when Lucian's voice sounds over my shoulder. "Are you following me?" His whisper almost sounds playful, but I know not to fall for it.

"I thought you were showing me to the bathroom." I work to keep my voice even since my heart is beating way too fast.

"How badly do you need it?"

He has a knack for making everything sound dirty, but the problem is, now that I'm up and moving around, I need to pee pretty badly. "I could always go all over your floor," I warn, even though I would never do that.

“Go ahead, watching you explain that to Gertrude might be worth it.” I feel his fingers brush over my back, and my breath catches.

“Is there one down the hall? I’m sure I can find it.” My voice is too airy, too affected, but my nerves and an embarrassing bit of excitement has me feeling a little light-headed. I start to turn to get away from him and out of the dark room, but his hand trails over my hip, holding me in place with a light touch.

“Too late,” he says while standing so close to me, I can feel him pressed against my back. I’m so still, I’m almost afraid to breathe. “I’ll need to collect payment first.”

“Payment for using the bathroom?”

“We can pretend that’s what it’s for, then you can keep pretending you don’t want me.”

“I don’t—”

“Don’t bother, lamb,” Lucian interrupts my denial as he eases my hair to the side so he can lean in and brush his warm lips against my skin. Before my mind can fully process what’s happening, he sinks his teeth into my shoulder. My body reacts on instinct, and I try to jerk to get away from the slight pain, but his hands are already locked around my hips, holding me still.

I open my mouth to protest, but he releases the bite and his hold on me before backing away. I spin on him, my hand already going to the spot where he sunk his teeth in. “What is wrong with you?” I’m breathing hard.

“I’d say quite a lot,” he admits without shame.

“You bit me.” I think I’m still in shock. It doesn’t even really hurt, but it feels as if his teeth are still in my skin.

“I know, it was foolish.”

I’m taken aback by his response, and my rebuke dies on my tongue.

“I underestimated how much I would like it and your reaction.”

“My reaction? I reacted to the pain,” I protest.

“Is that why you stopped breathing and tipped your ass back?” he questions smugly.

“I was trying to get away.”

“Sure, you keep telling yourself that, lamb. Now run along to the bathroom before I lay you on the bed and leave my marks all over your pretty, soft thighs.”

“You’re delusional,” I reply, but there’s no lying to myself about the way my stomach dipped at his promise. Why the heck would that excite me?

Maybe I'm as senseless as he is.

"You'll come around." Lucian isn't at all bothered by my outrage. "Bathroom is right behind you, or there's always option two." He makes a point of looking over at his bed.

I back away from him, only peeking over my shoulder to make sure I don't trip on anything so I can keep my eyes on him. Once the bathroom is just a step away, I pivot and push through the door, then I flip the lock and back away from the wood separating us. There's a part of me that's afraid to pee because I'm worried he's going to wait until I have my pants down and come barging in here to humiliate me somehow.

"Stop overthinking." I hear him clearly through the door.

"Stop talking and being weird," I retort. There's a thud against the door, but the handle never jiggles. I flip on the tap to mask the sound, then do my business as fast as possible before washing my one good hand so I don't get the wrap wet. It's not until I'm looking in the mirror, seeing my flushed face, that I realize how easy I am to read. I don't look pissed or even scared. I look like I just got off a carnival ride and I want to go again.



LUCIAN

There's something definitely wrong with me. I have to fight not to go find the key to the door or break the lock. She's only steps away, but it feels like she's too far.

The water turns on, and I force myself to get away from the fucking door because it's a bit much, even for me. I don't care if she knows I'm not right, but she doesn't need to know just how much she's affecting me. Giving her that much power would be a death sentence for both of us.

"What's taking so long?" Nox leans against the doorframe.

"I think she's hiding in the bathroom because she's scared." I say it loud enough so she can hear me over the running water.

"Scared of you turning cannibal on me," she says as she exits.

"Harmless nibbles," I counter.

"I bet you wouldn't say that if you were the one being bitten."

"Whoa, you bit her?" Nox's eyes flash with something. Maybe jealousy.

"I'm waiting," I offer, my arms spread wide, but I know my lamb. She lets her mouth get her in trouble, but there's no way she's ready to take that step yet. My cock is hard just from thinking about it though.

"That's probably a trap. You'd offer to let me bite you, then find a way to punish me for it." She snorts.

"I'm liking where this is going."

"And that's my cue to leave. I just need my keys." She actually puts out her hand like I might just shuffle over and put them in her upturned palm. Why am I smiling at that?

"No can do, lamb."

"What? Why?" She rolls that same wrist and plants it on her curvy hip. Yup, I'm going to enjoy marking her all over.

"I'm having the car swept for bugs and trackers. It'll only take a day or two, then you can park it, because I already told you that you'll be riding with us."

Her chin lowers, and those fiery eyes blaze at me. The anticipation of what she might say or do is eating at me like I'm an addict waiting for the next hit.

"Fine, just give me your keys then."

“I can’t, it’s past curfew,” I whisper.

“You are such a liar.” The way she enunciates the last word has her tongue poking out and touching her top lip.

Maybe I should have kissed her instead of biting her, but once she put that thought in my head, I hadn’t been able to get it out. I shrug, not denying her accusation.

“I’ll just walk.” She spins to leave the room, but Nox steps in front of her.

“It’s late, Nova. Plus, we know you’re safe here with us.”

“I’m safe at the Umbras’,” she argues.

“Do you really believe that?” I dig my claws into her deeper, making her doubt the family that never took care of her, that left her to die until they had a use for her.

“Yeah,” she says softly, but I can hear the hesitation in her voice.

“Are you sure that’s not just what they want you to believe?”

I shift so I can see her nibble on her bottom lip. I can tell she’s thinking about what I said, so I push her a little more. Manipulation is the least I’m willing to do. “There’s something that made you question your safety. You’re thinking about it right now. What happened?”

She looks over her shoulder at me. “Nothing compared to what you’ve done.” She almost sounds sad, and it actually bothers me, but I don’t show that. Instead, I give her the truth.

“I’m not the one who lulled you with pretty promises and lies. I let you see exactly how I felt about you.”

“Oh, you made it perfectly clear that you think I’m a gutter slut,” she scoffs bitterly.

“I wanted you to leave on your own, so I didn’t need to make you. Was I kind? No. I never claimed to be.”

She rolls her eyes and laughs without any joy. “You don’t even accept responsibility for yourself or your behavior and how it could affect other people.”

“I just did. I was real with you, and believe me, it could have been much worse.”

“I don’t doubt that, but does it really make it better that you held back a little and didn’t attack me or have someone else do it for you?”

“If you knew me better, you wouldn’t even ask that question. I don’t hold back. For anyone.” I’m probably giving her too much, but I’ll need to earn her trust at some point. My only other option is stripping her bare and taking

it, and I'm not convinced she wouldn't break in the process.

"So I should be grateful?" She shifts so she's facing me fully. There's a challenge in her gaze that reaffirms how much I want her.

"No, but you should see reason. I wanted you gone, now I don't. You're smart and tough, and you can see the truth in that, even if you want to pretend you don't."

"We want to help you, Nova," Nox reminds her.

"Why should I believe you?" Her eyes are locked on mine, so I know the question is meant for me.

"In reality, it doesn't matter if you do or not, lamb. We've decided you're with us, and there's no going back." I hold up my hand when she opens her mouth to argue, and she smacks her pouty lips closed to glare at me. "But... I'm willing to compromise. What will make you believe us?"

Her eyebrows furrow. I caught her off guard with that one. After a long pause, she confesses, "I don't know. I shouldn't trust you."

"See? Smart," I praise.

"You even admit I shouldn't trust you." She throws her hands up in exasperation.

"Not true. I admitted to you being smart. Trust shouldn't be free or easy, but we're trusting you too. I told you no one else has ever been here."

"In your room? Yeah right." She crosses her arms over her chest.

"In his room or in the house." Nox lends credence to my words. "We only allowed people in the beach house."

"But I brought you here and let you see where and how we live." In truth, it never crossed my mind to take her to the beach house. I knew from the moment I planned on bringing her here that it would be to the house.

"Why? It's not *that* creepy." She looks around my room with a keen eye.

"I don't give a fuck what people think, lamb. You should know that much."

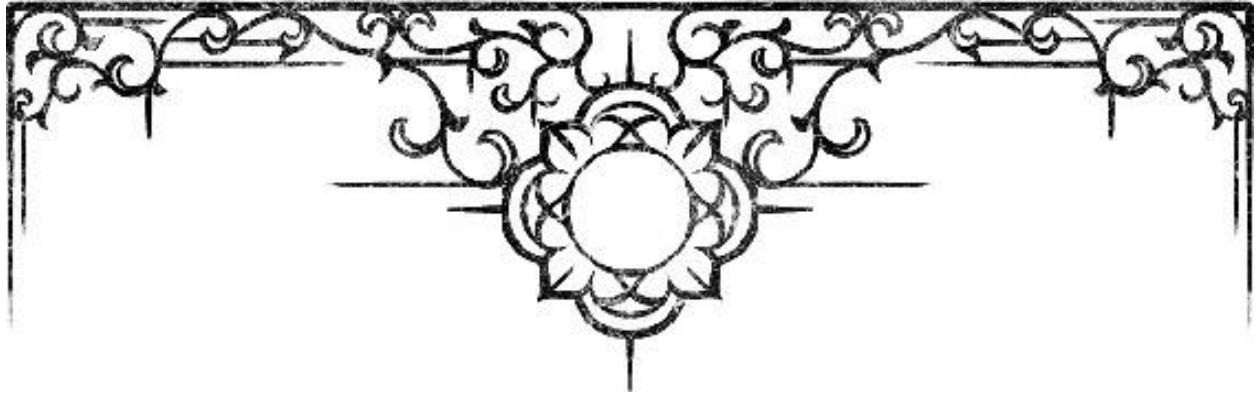
"I do know that, but why did you bring me here?" She's searching for a reason, something that will validate why she should stay, and I know I've already won.

I fight my smug grin but feel the corners of my mouth pull up when I say, "Because I knew I was keeping you."

She rolls her eyes and spins away from me. "Are we going to finish the movie or what?"

My eyes are glued to her ass as she saunters out of the room. I'm going to

have my name tattooed on her cheek. I bet I'll have to hold her down for that one. Now my smile is full blown. Good thing she doesn't look back, because she might see just how disturbed I really am.



NOVA

Despite what Lucian said, I am dumb. I shouldn't be here, not in this house, not even on this island. I should be back home in my crappy apartment, dreading my next shift and wondering if I'm going to make enough to pay rent and go to the grocery store.

The realization that I want to stay makes me think I should have my head examined. I knew I was lonely, but I never thought I would sink to these levels, yet here I am, in the house of the guy who called me names and humiliated me because he's making promises he won't keep, but I want him to. How can I know with everything in me that this is a mistake, but still want to make it?

"Here." Nox pulls a velvety black blanket off the couch and drapes it over my legs. The weight is welcome, even though I'm not really cold. The movie is winding down, and it's super late. I should be sleeping, considering I need to get up in the morning for school. I'm wondering if I shouldn't just stay awake and start walking home soon so I can shower and stuff, but I don't know how to get out of the gate, and I sure don't want to try to climb it. With my luck, I'd impale myself on one of those pitchforks.

"Thanks. Do you think you could give me a ride home before school?" I ask Nox.

He lifts his eyes over my head, checking in with his brother. After a second, he agrees. "Sure, we can give you a ride. What time is your first class?"

"Eight fifty-five, but I need to shower and stuff. It might be easier if you just took me home now."

"Nah, we've got you."

"What if Rory or Astrid ask where I've been?" I'm not sure they would. Heck, I feel like I rarely even see them at this point, but it could happen.

Lucian enters the conversation. "Tell them you were here."

"I thought we weren't supposed to affiliate. They are not going to tell me anything if they think I'm friends with the enemy."

"Are we friends, lamb?" I can't tell if Lucian's question is condescending or genuine.

“I didn’t say that,” I hedge, because it feels like a trap.

“I want to be friends.” He leans in when he says it, getting closer to me than necessary, and it messes with my head.

“Do you even have friends, Lucian?” I don’t mean it as an insult, but I could see how it would sound like one.

“Sheep can’t be friends,” he counters.

“So that’s why you call me lamb. I’m a baby sheep.” I’d actually gotten comfortable with the nickname, but hearing that he thinks I’m like all the other idiots bothers me more than what I thought the name originally meant.

“Nope.” He slowly shakes his head in denial, and his lips curl up. I should be worried, because when he smiles, it always spells trouble for me. “You want to know why you’re my lamb?”

I nod, because I don’t want to admit it out loud. That way I can deny it in the future if he tries to use it against me.

“How badly do you want to know? Enough to kiss me if I tell you?”

I glance over at Nox, not sure I heard Lucian correctly, but he’s just watching me as if he’s waiting for an answer. “You don’t want to kiss me,” I counter.

“The question is, do you want to know badly enough to let me kiss you?” he challenges, neither confirming nor denying my claim.

“You want to know how far I’m willing to go to get what I want,” I surmise.

Lucian shrugs lazily, and his eyelids lower. A warning bell goes off in my head and body. This Lucian is more dangerous than the one who’s willing to get up in my face. This is the Lucian who can be careless and not understand his own strength. The problem is, I don’t understand the warning, which makes it hard to heed.

My instincts are warring. Kissing him would be a disaster, but there’s a part of me that wants to know what it would feel like to be ruined. It’s just a kiss, right? It’s not like I’m agreeing to more. My stomach does this funny dip, like I’m turned on by the thought of what more could mean. That should be enough to have me running from this house, but it’s not.

“Tell me first,” I counter.

“That wasn’t the deal.”

“How do I know you’ll follow through?”

His lips part in a grin, showing me sharp white teeth. “I always follow through.”

“I’ll tell you if he doesn’t,” Nox offers.

“You know?”

“He’s my twin,” Nox says as if that should tell me everything.

“Fine,” I agree, hoping he can’t tell there wasn’t much reluctance on my part.

“Come here.” He notches his head back a little.

I shake my head. “You said you would kiss me, not the other way around.” I’m not going to lie, it feels good to tell him no. I like getting a rise out of him.

Lucian licks his teeth behind his lips, and my stomach drops into my lap.

Please don’t let me be a bumbling idiot if he really does this.

I lean forward to grab my water, and the moment I take my eyes off him, he strikes, grabbing hold of the back of my neck and bringing my face right up to his. Our eyes lock, and my chest rises and falls sharply. I brace for him to shove me away and tell me what a whore and a loser I am for falling for his joke because he would never want to kiss me, but it doesn’t happen. His light blue eyes dip down to my lips before he shifts his head and brushes his mouth softly over mine.

I’m so surprised by the gentle contact that I actually let out a little sigh that I would never admit to if grilled, but thoughts of softness evaporate when he roughly nips my lip then pulls me even closer so he can slip his tongue into my mouth. It’s not a kiss, it’s far too demanding for that. I’m breathless within seconds as butterflies erupt in my stomach.

He tastes sweet, like the lemonade he’s been drinking, with a bitter bite I’m not sure I won’t crave later. When he curls the tip of his tongue around mine, my body reacts, arching into him without any conscious thought to do so. The fact that he can make me respond to him, and that I want to curl into his lap and purr like a content kitten, is alarming, yet not enough to have me pulling away.

His hand on the back of my neck curls into my hair, and he grasps my locks in his fist, tugging my head back and opening my mouth more for his invasion. Later, I’ll wonder how he knows my body better than I do, but right now, I’m just trying to keep from being swallowed by his presence.

Lucian bites my lip again, and this time, it stings a little, but I still don’t want him to stop. He makes a deep sound that rumbles up from his chest and hums past my lips. My insides ignite with knowledge. He’s just as affected as I am, and that makes my clit tingle.

I pull back, breathing way too hard, but he doesn't release my hair, so I'm trapped staring into his eyes. Neither of us speak, but as the moments pass, I begin to brace myself for his inevitable laughter, but it doesn't come. Instead, his free hand comes up, and he brushes his thumb over my bottom lip.

"Tell me," I say softly, trying to keep some sort of wall between us.

He tilts his head so his mouth is close to my ear. My eyes slip closed when his warm breath teases me. "I call you lamb because no matter how hard you try to hide it, I can see just how sweet and innocent you are." His tongue flicks my lobe, and I inhale sharply as he sinks his teeth into the flesh.

Without warning, he moves lower, biting and sucking. I know he's leaving a bruise, but I still don't stop him.

After just a few seconds, he releases my hair, and I pull away from him too slowly. I'm embarrassed to look up because I know my face is flushed and the truth of his words will be written all over my expression.

"Next time I kiss you, it won't be on a bargain. It will be because you asked me for it," Lucian supplies, relaxing back into the couch as if nothing happened. I, on the other hand, could use a trip to the bathroom to freshen up or at least gather my wits.

"I'll take a trade, a bargain, hell, anything I have that you want. I'm in," Nox adds, making Lucian chuckle.

It lightens the mood just enough that I'm able to look up from my lap and pretend I know what's happening in the new movie that started.

"Your car will be here in the morning for you to go get what you need, then I expect you back."

"I have school. I'm not missing it."

Lucian turns his attention back to me, and I swear there's something different about him, but I can't put my finger on it. "I don't trust them or anyone in that house."

"They have answers, and I've already proven I'm willing to do what it takes to get them."

He bares his teeth, but it's definitely not a smile. "We will get the answers together."

"You still haven't explained what I'm supposed to tell them about you suddenly not wanting to kill me anymore."

"Tell them the truth—that you find us irresistible."

I snort. "No, really."

Nox actually gives me useful information. "Tell them we befriended you

and make them think you don't trust us, but it makes things easier at school. All the founding families have an...arrangement. We present a united front to others. They'll buy it."

"How do you know?" I press.

"Because they'll want to. They'll also try to use you to get information on us. The Umbras have been out of the loop for a long time, so they'll be desperate to get their hooks into the next leader, which happens to be me," Lucian divulges.

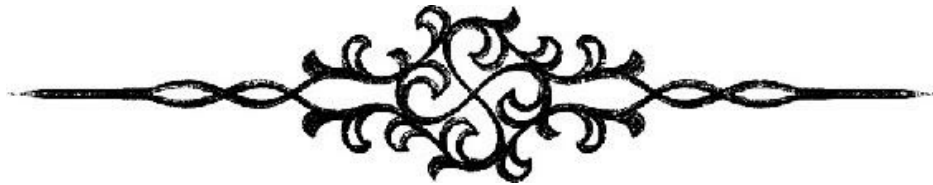
"I still can't believe you're going to take over as the president of the school."

"Among other things." Lucian nods once.

"When?"

"Not soon enough. It's late. You can sit here and pretend to watch this movie, or we can all go get in my bed."

I turn my head toward the TV and do exactly as he told me, because I have no doubt he'll try to push for the other option if I give him a chance.



LUCIAN

I watch her drive from the house with a strange feeling in my gut. She's only going across the road, then to school, but a part of me doesn't want to let her out of my sight. I like how she makes me forget about the things that have consumed me for the past two years or more. I also like that Nox isn't hiding in his room all the time.

I let the curtain drop and turn away, so I'm not tempted to follow her. I told her I was having her car swept for bugs and trackers, and I did, but I didn't tell her I would be installing my own. I open the app on my phone just to make sure it's working, and there's a little blip on the screen nearing our territory line. I did tell her about the gate access I placed in her car. She seemed surprised and a little suspicious, but I wouldn't expect anything less from her.

"I'm getting in the shower," I announce to Nox and toss my phone on the bed.

"Are we really going to school?" he complains, not even bothering to open his eyes.

"You don't have to. You can keep your lazy ass in bed and leave her to me."

"Fuck off." He slits his eyes. "You were ready to kick her off the damn island."

"Good thing we can rely on each other to knock sense into the one acting like an idiot." I slam the bathroom door and strip. My cock has been aching since I woke up this morning after only a couple hours of sleep. The room fills with steam before I even step under the water.

I lean my forearm against the glass wall, imagining my lamb on the other side, where I'd make her watch me fist my cock while she kneeled, looking up at me. Her eyes would try to stay on mine, but she would lose the battle and watch me stroke myself. Her lids would be heavy with the lust she would deny feeling. I work my palm up and down, twisting my wrist so the head of my dick brushes the cold, hard glass, and a groan hums up my throat.

My balls constrict, and I tighten my grip, moving up and down as my breathing becomes harsh, and I pinch the tip, feeling sticky pre-cum on my palm. If she were here, I would make her lick off every drop. My hips jerk at

the thought, and I know I'm going to come way too fast, but I don't try to stop the rising tide.

I lean my head back, pulling in cooler air as I jerkily fist myself while thinking about her.



NOVA

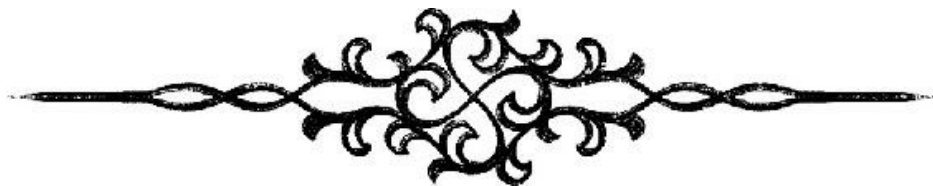
I should have known something was going to happen. My morning had been far too easy. I didn't see Rory or Astrid, and Bridgit ignored me as if she didn't even see me, which I've realized is the better option if you ask me. When she does talk to me, it's always strained, as if she thinks I don't belong here, or maybe I'm projecting.

I know my day is about to take a turn for the worse when I hear the bathroom door open and several sets of feet enter while I'm closeted in the stall. I hurriedly wipe and pull my pants up and wait, even though my mind is telling me to get out of the bathroom.

"Come out," a male voice says, and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. I don't know that voice, and it shouldn't be in here.

I pretend they are not talking to me and reach into my bag to search for my phone. It's on my mind to call Nox, since he made me promise I would, but while I'm still deciding what to do, the option gets taken away from me when the door is kicked open, and I narrowly avoid getting hit with the swinging metal.

There are five people standing between me and the exit, all wearing black robes with hoods to cover their faces. My throat tightens while my mouth goes dry. I don't even get a chance to say a word before one of the hooded figures rips me out of the stall and pulls me toward the group.



LUCIAN

“What the fuck?” Nox asks as we both see an ambulance parked at the steps of the building.

Dread settles in my stomach, but I’m telling myself to ignore it, even as I speed to the entrance and throw the car in park before it’s fully stopped. The loud clunk that happens draws a bunch of attention from the onlookers, but I don’t waste time with that.

“What’s going on?” I ask the first person I get close to once I’m out of the car with Nox right beside me.

“Someone got hurt,” the guy says lamely.

“I get that, you fucking idiot. Who got hurt? What happened?”

“A girl. Someone found her in the bathroom.” He backs away a few steps, and my gut drops again.

Nox shoves some people to the side as we hustle toward the school. The Union is pretty much empty except for some staff, but I spot Rory near the bathroom door with his hand in his hair.

“What’s going on?” I demand the moment I’m within shouting distance.

He turns his head, and his eyes go from worried to icy hard. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“I just fucking got here.”

“Stand back, stand back.” An EMT pushes the door open, and I see a stretcher getting pulled from the room, but my eyes are drawn to the blood on the floor, and I can’t seem to look away until Nox curses.

“Jesus, what the fuck happened? Nova? Nova!” He calls her name, but the person on the bed doesn’t move as she’s rushed toward the exit.

“Is she alive?” I croak out.

“Unresponsive. I knew I shouldn’t have let her come here.” Rory hangs his head in defeat.

My feet feel rooted to the ground, but everything inside me is swirling with rage. I just touched her last night and felt her warm lips and eager breaths. How could this happen? I glance around, and the buzzing in my head amplifies to a deafening level.

“Who did it?”

I don’t hear an answer, but there’s something shoving me forward. I look

over my shoulder and see Nox, red-faced and pissed, ramming me to get me moving. “Lucian, get your ass going,” he yells, and I skid forward.

“This is your fault.” Rory’s words ring clearly in my head. “I let her come, but you put the nail in her coffin.”

“Fuck you!” I scream, ready to rip his goddamned head off, but Nox wraps his arms around me and keeps shoving me back.

“We’re going to the hospital.” He keeps saying it over and over, but the words don’t mean anything. “She needs us.” That redirects every nerve in my body, and I stop fighting, stop thinking about revenge, and hope for something else.

There will be time to burn this place down when I know she’s okay.

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Albany lives in Michigan where she's happily married to her high school sweetheart. She spends most of her time juggling her four children's extracurricular activities, with her nose stuck in a book. When not reading you can find her writing her very own book boyfriends. Albany's passion is writing romance with real characters that are far from perfect, but always seem to find their own happily ever afters

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