

ARIANNA FRASER

A man with dark, wavy hair and a light beard, looking intensely at the camera. He is wearing a dark, textured jacket. He has several tattoos: a large, intricate one on his left chest featuring a winged figure and a sword, and another on his right hand. He is also wearing a dark beaded bracelet on his right wrist.

PERILOUS

A Dark College Mafia Romance



The Ares Academy - **Book Three**

PERILOUS - A DARK
COLLEGE MAFIA
ROMANCE

The Ares Academy Book Three

Arianna Fraser

STA, LLC

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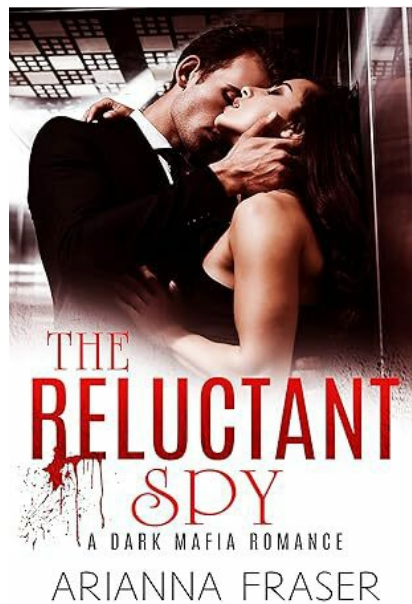
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To all of you! My friends, my readers, the people who red-line the hell out of my ARC copies. Thank you for enjoying these stories as much as I love writing them.

Here's to love, lust, and filthy, filthy men!

FREE BOOKS!



Join my email list and I'll shamelessly bribe you with free books. You can start by downloading your copy of [*The Reluctant Spy - A Dark Mafia Arranged Marriage Romance*](#) [here](#).

I'm too lazy to spam you, so you'll only see an email monthly for giveaways and new releases, like *Relentless - A Dark Scottish Arranged Marriage Mafia Romance* - live on Amazon on March 28, 2024.

PREFACE

Perilous - A Dark College Mafia Romance is set in the brutal world of organized crime. These twenty-somethings are not messing around.

As such, there is violence, detailed battle action, murder, explicit and delightfully detailed sex between consenting partners, and profanity. So much profanity.

If these things are not to your taste, please find something you might enjoy more, but I thank you for stopping by. Reading is meant to be relaxing!

Still here? Excellent! Grab a glass of wine or a bag of Cheetos and let's get started. As always, thank you for reading and supporting my stories.

~ Fondly, Arianna

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CHAPTER ONE

In which this is why we can't have nice things.

Mala...

“Your ankles would look good around my neck.”

“Oh my god! *That's* what he said? Why didn't you beat the hell out of him?” Tatiana leans against a light post, laughing uncontrollably.

“Because if I did teach the poor little lad some manners,” I said, “I would have lost my place in line for the bathroom. Priorities.”

“You must have been in a good mood,” Willow said dubiously, “you broke that Junior's nose and cheekbone last year for... what did he say to you?”

Rolling my eyes, I clarify. “It was Malcolm Tennant, and I didn't break his *cheekbone*. It was his orbital socket. He said, and I quote, ‘Sit on my face and I'll eat my way to your heart’.”

Willow spits out her mouthful of gelato, coughing as I helpfully pound on her back. “Warn a girl, would you? You can't just pop out with shite like that when I'm eating!”

The London night is lit up with hundreds of strings of lights crisscrossed overhead at the Summertime Festival at Southbank. The Costume Carnival night is a glorious kaleidoscope of masks and music, street performers, and dozens of food tents, and I'm eyeing the luscious-looking kebabs sizzling on the grill next to us while Willow composes herself. I know if I look over my shoulder, I will see two bodyguards trailing us. Close enough if needed, but not breathing down our necks, the way my security detail does at home.

“I think the worst one I ever heard was from this fuckwit at a club in Sydney,” Willow says. “He said, ‘Are you on your period because you're bloody beautiful.’ I should have punched him for that one.”

“That’s nasty,” agrees Tatiana, “Mine was from from a friend of Athena’s who said, ‘Are you Medusa? Because you’re turning me rock hard.’”

“Ewwww!” Willow drops her gelato cone, laughing too hard to notice. “Why are men such bloody wankers?” She’s the firstborn from an Australian family cartel.

“Not all of them,” protests Tatiana.

“We know,” I drawl, putting my arm over her shoulders, “you are in love with the ultimate specimen of manhood and beauty, Lucca Toscano. Oh, and will you thank him for the bodyguards? It was so nice to get rid of mine for the evening.”

Granted, Richard, my bodyguard, thought I had been safely bundled off to the Ares Academy with my two friends, but thanks to Lucca’s sleight of hand and the offer of two of his bodyguards, we had one last night of freedom together. A girl’s night. Lucca didn’t even pout about sending us out on the town and not joining us. He *is* the perfect boyfriend.

“Two bodyguards are more than enough,” she agreed, “we’re all wearing masks and in costume, we’re *incognito*.”

“Yes, so mysterious,” Willow laughs, “no one’s looking twice at the three girls in rainbow glitter wigs and booty shorts.”

I wince a little. The aforementioned shorts and matching bikini tops were her idea. I don’t even wear a bikini at home by our swimming pool. My father would have an aneurysm. Also, these shorts are riding up my ass and there is far more cheek showing than I am comfortable with.

“We do look like everyone else on this street, though,” I add, “and blending in is a skill we should be honing.”

“Good,” Willow says gleefully, “then we should all be holding the ubiquitous plastic cup full of rum punch like everyone else.” She’s stopped by a crowded stand, elbowing her way through to grab drinks for us.”

“Just one,” warns Tatiana.

“Just one,” I agree, taking my plastic cup. The warm summer night and the taste of the terrible punch and cheap rum make me feel like I’m at a college party. One in the real world, not at the Ares Academy where you wouldn’t

have to worry about someone drugging your drink, but possibly poisoning it.

“So this is regular people's life,” I ponder, linking arms with Tatiana.

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” she says with a melancholy smile, “because we are not regular people.”

Earlier...

“You have a responsibility to this family, do you hear me?” My father’s angry voice is loud, I pull the phone away from my throbbing ear for a second. His phone calls are always something to dread, but he was especially cruel today.

Sound sweet. Don’t give him an excuse to make this worse.

“Of course, Papa,” I said, ever the proper young lady. “Just as you say.”

“Then do not disappoint me, do you understand? I will not accept another failure like last year.” He’s coughing, but I can still hear him sucking on a cigar.

“I won’t, Papa. I know I came in third last year in the Spy Division, but-”

“Third!” he roars. “My daughter in third place? I did not raise you to be a loser, trailing other students! Better students!”

“They were seniors,” I attempted to explain, “I’m a junior this year, and I won’t allow anyone to pass me in the rankings. I *will* be first.”

“Let me be clear,” he says coldly, precisely. “I questioned you wasting four years at the Academy when I could have accepted one of several very promising offers for your hand. But I let myself be persuaded because this training would make you more useful to the family.”

Shuddering, I picture my cousin, married at eighteen, her white, terrified face when she saw the vile old troll to whom she’d been promised standing there at the altar.

“I *will* be of more value after graduating from the Spy program,” I promise rapidly. “No matter what alliance you choose to make, my skills will be useful. My first loyalty is always to the family.”

I would have promised him anything, just to escape the smothering confines

of my life in San Francisco. To get away from my family.

“See that you do,” he snaps, “it is bad enough that you are my best option after losing Michael.” There’s a bitter silence as he draws in a deep breath. “It should have been you.”

Currently...

“...you okay?”

Tatiana’s looking at me, concerned.

“Oh, sorry,” I laugh it off, “just drifting a little.”

“You sure?” Willow persisted, “Because you look like someone just shoved a stiletto into your kidney.”

“And you would know the look because you have, actually, shoved a blade into someone’s kidney,” I said, forcing a smile.

Willow looks affronted. “Only twice,” she says defensively, “and they both had it coming.”

“Most likely,” I agree, squeezing her arm.

I only have two years left at the Academy before my father owns me for life. It doesn’t matter what family he marries me into, I’ll be expected to spy on them and their allies. If I’m caught, my new husband will kill me.

And my father would dismiss it as “my failure.”

Two years, I think, and I’m going to make them count.

“Willow! C’mon,” I said, dragging Tati towards a band playing some kind of ska mix. “We’re dancing our asses off tonight!”

Checking behind me, I see the two bodyguards exchange a look of bleak acceptance.

The band is playing some disjointed version of “Mirror in the Bathroom” from English Beat and I’m laughing uncontrollably. Willow is skipping madly back and forth while two guys ska clumsily after her. Tatiana is dancing on one of the speakers and the two bodyguards are a helpless

constellation around them, trying to keep them in sight. I've always been better about disappearing into the crowd, so I doubt they even remember me right now.

Shouting starts up from the mosh pit in front of the stage.

“You bleedin’ cunt!”

“Motherfuckin’ bastard-”

“Go to hell you-”

“This is why we can’t have nice things!” I shout to no one and head back into the mess of flailing limbs, trying to get to Tatiana and Willow.

A huge surge of bodies knocks me over and I roll, trying to get out from under all the feet before I get stomped. I roll and roll and just as I get onto my feet, I am knocked backward. Someone’s hands are on me, yanking me up by my arm and they’re squeezing tight, hurting me and my other elbow goes up hard, knocking them across the cheekbone and I feel a satisfying ‘crunch!’ of the bone before they swing me viciously in a circle.

I kick out, hitting him viciously in the side of the knee but he barely grunts, stumbling slightly. There’s someone behind me too, he’s got a fistful of my hair and I throw my head back as hard as I can, wincing as a sharp flash of white light sizzles through my vision. I hit bone - something - but I’m pretty sure I hurt myself worse, because he can still lock his arm around my throat. The other asshole is trying to hold my legs and I writhe madly, trying to shake him loose.

Shit. This is real. They’re trying to take me.

Biting down as hard as I can, I sink my teeth into the arm that’s trying to choke me, tearing through skin and feeling him stiffen as he roars in pain.

He drops me, but the other one still has my legs. I hit the concrete hard, teeth clacking together painfully before it turns to black.

CHAPTER TWO

In which we meet a Scottish White Knight.

Cormac...

“When did we consider this a good time?”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, ya big fuckin’ crybaby. Look at this! All the hot women, the music? Normal people having fun?” My brother Cameron is grinning, but that likely has more to do with sucking down his fourth glass of cheap scotch than enjoying this sweaty, thrashing knot of partygoers.

“We’re not normal people,” I remind him. We’re standing on one of the risers in the VIP tent, looking out over the crowd.

“It wouldn’t kill you to try to act like one upon occasion,” he mumbles into his next glass of scotch.

Cameron’s likely not wrong, but I wouldn’t know how to act “normal.” Regular folk tend to be uncomfortable around me. Even waiting in line for a coffee, I’ll see heads turn and people step away from me. The blood I’ve shed and the bodies I’ve piled up have left some kind of a psychic stain on me, something others must sense when they edge away.

I’m not sorry for a single death I’ve caused. Not one.

“Aw, shite, someone’s throwing punches already?” Cameron complains.

Sure enough, the bodies in the pit turn into a tidal wave of idiots in seconds, surging over the dancers on the periphery and I sigh.

“Bleedin’ idiots.”

There’s a scuffle on the edge of the crowd closest to us; a girl’s knocked over by the tidal wave of assholes, but she’s kept her wits, she’s rolling free from the flailing arms and legs. A man seizes her arm and my eyes narrow. He’s

not trying to help her up. He's swinging her violently, keeping her off balance and I nod approvingly as her elbow shoots up, clocking him hard on the cheekbone.

"Are you seeing this?" I ask Cameron, "That bastard's trying to drag her away."

"Where?" He's searching the crowd, trying to spot the struggle.

A second man joins the first, grabbing the girl's legs and she's kicking violently as the crowd swallows them up.

Leaping off the dais, I shove through the yelling, staggering bodies, trying to focus on where I saw her fall. There she is, her shorts a bright flash of pink in the pushing, thrashing horde. She's still fighting, the brave little thing, her teeth buried in the bleeding bicep of one of the men. He's yanking his gore-covered arm away roaring in pain, the fuckin' jessie, the wimp, and drops her on her head.

Grabbing him by his shirt, I bash his skull into a nearby lamp post and he drops like a bag of dirt as I go after the other one, who's still trying to drag her off. His eyes widen as he sees me, my fists clenched as I stride toward them and the idiot drops her feet and stumbles, trying to chuckle as he gains his footing.

"Whoops."

I hit him on the left side of his face, enough to shatter his cheekbone and knock him unconscious. After shoving his prone form out of the way with my foot, I cradle the girl's head carefully, looking for injuries. Her silly glitter wig falls off, and auburn curls tumble free.

"Is she bad off?" Cameron may be tanked up, but he's already behind me, shoving back stragglers.

"She's unconscious," I said grimly, "let's get her to Doc Meyers."

"What, are ya' serious? You're just going to walk off with some stranger? Let me find a paramedic, they should have one around here," he offers.

"They tried to *take* her," I say sharply. "Rape. Trafficking maybe."

Sliding my arms under her shoulders and knees, I lift her as gently as I can. She moans, eyes opening briefly, looking up at me.

“You’ll be okay,” I say, “I’ll keep you safe.”

Blinking at me for a moment, she tries to smile before lapsing into unconsciousness again.

“You could have just left her at the A&E, you know,” Cameron grins at me insolently. “This white knight act you’ve got going on is a little weird for you, brother.”

“Keep yer eyes on the fuckin’ road,” I sigh, settling the girl against me. “That was off, far off. They weren’t just a couple of guttered bastards, trying to drag her off for a quick feel. They were taking her out of there.”

I must be mad, letting my supremely careless brother drive my Jaguar, but letting him touch this girl is unthinkable. My arms tighten around her again. I don’t know why I took her. Or why I didn’t drop her at the closest hospital. I never do anything on impulse, but when her eyes opened long enough to look into mine, I couldn’t leave her.

“You remember Doc Meyers’ address?”

He snorts inelegantly. “Please. I could find the man’s surgery in my sleep.”

Dr. Meyers is our local connection here in London for the kinds of injuries that can’t be taken to a hospital. Bullets lodged in flesh, knife wounds. And now, a swelling lump on the back of the head. I’m cupping her head just above the bump, feeling the silk strands of her hair slip through my fingers. She’s long and lean, with strong legs and toned arms, and the bikini top she’s wearing showcases some really spectacular breasts.

Groaning silently, I look at the window, willing my dick to go down. What kind of a sick fuck gets hard over an unconscious woman?

“Well, what a delightful surprise!”

Doc Meyers’ wife is an unnaturally sunny, happy person and the only human I’ve ever met who seemed genuinely pleased to see someone standing on her doorstep, bleeding on the tile. She pulls the door open, “What do we have here, Mr. MacTavish?”

“I don’t know who she is,” I said, striding over to the bed, “we found her fighting off a couple of drunken arseholes. She fell backward and hit her head

on the concrete, and regained consciousness briefly when I picked her up. The only injury I can find is the swelling on the back of her head.”

“Very good,” she says approvingly, as if I’d just given her a bouquet of roses, “I’ll just get the doctor. Put her down there on the bed, please.”

Cameron is moving restlessly. “Are you going to be good here? I was planning on meeting up with the Barclay brothers tonight.” He makes a show of looking at his watch. “It’s getting late.”

“Aye,” I say, hiding my grin. “But you’ll need an Uber.”

He looks stricken. “You’re gonna be with this girl for hours! Let me take your Jag.”

“Not a fuckin’ chance. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

My brother attempts to spark some pity with his puppy dog eyes but it only makes me laugh. “Fine,” he sneers, “I’ll pick up two girls tonight to make up for the fact that you won’t be getting any.” His glance darts to the girl, “Unless your tastes have gotten even more exotic.”

“Your faith in me is inspiring,” I said dryly, “I don’t molest unconscious women.”

“That’s good to hear.” Doc Meyers enters the room, pulling on some sterile gloves. “MacTavish, a pleasure to see you. This isn’t your usual injury that darkens my doorstep.”

Cameron disappears with a little salute and a grin as Meyers gently probes the girl’s head. “She’s got a sizeable bump here. You said she fell?”

“Aye, the music festival at Southbank. Fight broke out in the crowd and she got knocked over. Two bastards were trying to drag her off. She head-butted the one from behind pretty hard. The blood in her mouth was from him, he tried to choke her out and he dropped her on her head as she bit him.”

“Feisty young lady,” he says approvingly. “I’ll run a couple of scans to check for a concussion, and make sure we’re not missing anything.”

The girl sits up abruptly, eyes wide and batting away Doc’s hands. “Stop! What are you- who are you-”

“Miss, you’re all right,” he says kindly, “my name is Dr. Malcolm Meyers, you’re in my clinic. Cormac here saw you being assaulted at the festival in

Southbank and brought you here for immediate medical attention.”

Her gaze turns to me. “You- you helped me? You must have. I didn’t fight them off on my own.”

“Aye,” I smile warmly, trying to sound kind and not scary, “though you were doin’ a hell of a job on your own. You hit your head when that arsehole dropped you. You took a chunk out of his bicep.”

“Was it bad?” she asks hopefully.

I laugh, I can’t help it. “Oh, he’s going to need some serious stitching. The other one somehow went headfirst into a lamp pole, so he’ll be having a nice nap for a bit.” Leaning closer, I search her neck for bruises. “We can file a statement with the police if you like. I don’t want to scare you, but they intended to take you away, it’s certain.”

“That shouldn’t happen to anyone else,” she says fervently, “I didn’t see them at all though, they were behind me.”

“You make a statement about what happened and I’ll give a description,” I nod. “Doc can take a sample of the blood drawn by your savage little teeth.”

She laughed and flinched a little, putting her hand up to gingerly feel the bump on her head. “Wait. My phone, is my phone here?” Her eyes are wide as she looks up at me. “I have to call my friends, they must be freaking out! We got separated in the fighting.”

Her eyes are beautiful, pale brown, a toffee color with a dark grey ring around the iris, very unusual.

“Aye, your purse took the tumble with you,” I hold it up. “Your phone is in here?”

“Yes!” she says in relief, “Luckily I’m not one of those girls who keep their phone in their bra, it would have been trampled under a million drunken feet back at Southbank.”

Stifling another groan, I look away from her breasts, filling out that top so nicely. There wouldn’t be room for anything else in those little scraps of cloth.

“Thank you,” she put out her hand. “I’m Mala.”

“Cormac,” I say, noting neither of us offer last names. I gently shake her

hand, feeling her smaller one swallowed up in mine.

“I need to tell my friends where I am,” she looks at Doc. “Am I clear to go?”

He frowns. “I’d still like to get a scan to make sure we’re not looking at any internal injury, but I don’t need to run any blood tests if you’re willing to drink some juice and eat something so I know your blood sugar is back up.”

“All right, thank you,” she smiles, but she’s looking around the room, categorizing exits, I can see where her gaze lands each time.

“I’ll just get the equipment set up and I’ll be right back,” he smiles reassuringly. “Would you prefer having my assistant help you with a gown?”

Looking down at her little top and shorts, Mala groans. “I should have never agreed to this outfit.”

“Peer pressure can be a dangerous thing,” I agree with a straight face.

“I appreciate you bringing me here,” she says, “that was very kind of you. Why didn’t you just drop me off at an A&E?”

Fair question.

“Doc Meyers is my family’s physician, and he was close by,” I say. “He’s very skilled, and I thought immediate attention versus taking you to a busy hospital was the right call.”

She groans, covering her eyes as the moment she turns her phone on, it begins a frantic “*Ding! Ding! Ding!*”

“I’ll check in with Doc Meyers and give you a chance to update your friends,” I offer, and she nods gratefully.

As I leave the room I move to the left, out of sight and listen in, a habit born of long practice. I don’t know this girl and I still brought her to our private physician. My father will not be pleased.

“...I’m fine, I am. This guy pulled me loose from that crowd of drunken assholes, but I hit my head pretty hard...”

“No, he took me to his family doctor so I wouldn’t have to wait at the A&E, how sweet is that?”

“...His name is Cormac, and no, he hasn’t touched me inappropriately, for god’s sake, Tatiana! The doctor’s name is Malcolm Meyers, I’m guessing a

GP? Can you check him out?

“...Thanks, I’ll call as soon as I’m ready. I need to make a statement for the police, but really fam, I can take an Uber. Okay... Thank you. Tell Willow to stop being all angsty about this.”

Mrs. Meyers is back, holding a gown. She smiles at me happily. “I’ll just get her ready for the scan. Do we have a name?”

“Mala, and thank you.”

“Of course!” she says joyfully before walking into the room, humming.

Heading out to my car, I open the trunk and slide open a hidden panel, looking for my go-bag. Along with two pistols, extra ammo, a bulletproof vest, and my case of throwing knives, I keep a change of clothes. The dark green sweatshirt will probably hang somewhere around her knees, but at least she’ll be covered. The sight of her perfect tits in that top is extremely distracting.

I place a quick call to one of my men. “Giles? I need you to stop by Doc Meyers’ place within the hour.”

“Of course.” He’s a quiet one, never an inflection in his tone. “Am I taking someone home or dumping the body?”

“You’re going to flash a badge and play detective. You’ll take a young lady’s description about two pieces of shite who I want to be dead within the next twenty-four hours. They tried to drag her off and rape her.”

“On it.”

Mala’s already back in the examination room as I walk in. “That was quick.”

I hold up the sweatshirt. “You looked a little uncomfortable earlier.”

“Oh, my god, thank you,” she smiles gratefully. “This is the itchiest thing I’ve ever worn.”

I swallow down another groan as she pulls the sweatshirt over her head and performs the woman magic trick of taking off her bikini top underneath it and pulling it out a sleeve.

My mouth quirks despite my effort to look stern. “Feel better?”

“Much,” she sighs, before looking between me and her top. “Oh, that’s

awkward.”

Raising my hands, I shrug, “No judgment here. That’s female sorcery at its best, that is.”

She’s laughing, but her hand is behind her head, cradling the spot where she hit the ground.

“You can laugh it up in a minute,” I say, “let’s see what Doc Meyers is giving you for the pain first.”

“The patient is getting an ice pack and ibuprofen,” he says, appearing with a small bottle and a glass of water. “Your scans came back clean, and since your blood pressure is good, there’s no reason to keep you. I believe there’s a detective in the waiting room who’d like to take your statement first.”

“Thank you,” she smiles up at him warmly. “Um, I have my credit card in my purse, so I can-”

“No need,” I interrupt, “my family has an account with the doctor.”

Mala’s expression darkens. “I wouldn’t feel comfortable letting you pay for my medical bill.”

“I assure you, a quick visit and a scan isn’t much.” I’m lying. Doc Meyers charges a premium for good reasons.

I shouldn’t take this any further. I should bring her back to her friends.

“But if you’re feeling up to it, why don’t you buy me dinner?”

Mala is young, very likely too young for me. But sweet Jesus, she’s beautiful. Her auburn hair flares out around her shoulders like literal flames, and her toffee-colored eyes are sharp. She’s been watching all of us, and even though she’s sweet as treacle, she is on her guard.

She’s far too clever and observant to be just a drunk college girl out on a night with her friends. I want to know more about her. It’s been a long time since I’ve been so curious about a woman, and now that her glorious breasts are covered up, I can think more clearly.

Chewing her lip absently, she eyes me. “All right. I would love to.”

CHAPTER THREE

In which there are no names, no backstories, and terrible sheep jokes.

Mala....

When I regained consciousness, the most gorgeous man - no, god, man-god? - I'd ever seen was standing over me.

I've been rescued by a god.

Which one was the hottest god? Apollo, probably. Cormac is Apollo slumming it in human form. Though with that hugely muscled build, he could definitely be Ares, the insanely fierce god of War and namesake of my college.

He's a giant, at least 6'5 or 6'6, so tall he's blocking out the examination light which is a blessing because while I may not have a concussion, I have one hell of a headache. Long, dark hair brushing his collar and those eyes! Emerald green? Jade green? He's looming over me like a redwood, so it's hard to tell.

But he is *not* paying my bill. This private clinic is high-end, and I'm pretty sure I'm the only patient right now. Dr. Meyers has all the insanely expensive imaging equipment and everything I've seen between this bed and the CT scan is aggressively high-tech. Maybe he's a specialist?

"Here's some ibuprofen and an ice pack," the doctor says kindly. When he turns his back I slip the pills into my purse. I'm not taking any medication when I'm not even sure where the hell I am. The ice pack feels wonderful, though.

I glance up to see Cormac staring at me thoughtfully, his dark, straight brows are furrowed slightly. I've finished giving my pitifully limited information

about the attack to that expressionless detective, so snuggling gratefully into his giant sweatshirt, I ask, “Ready for dinner? Pick someplace medium-range and anything on the menu is yours, baby!”

He laughs, throwing back that gorgeous, perfectly shaped head and sounding a little surprised like he doesn’t do it that often.

“Sounds like I’ve caught myself a sugar mama.”

“Oh, I’m loaded honey,” I sass, “can’t you tell I’m a diamond heiress just by the look of these booty shorts and my glitter wig? Actually, let me just slip into the bathroom for a minute and brush the rest of the glitter out of my hair first.”

Cormac chuckles, gently helping me off the bed. “Are you sure you’re well enough for this?”

He’s Scottish, certainly, but his accent is more of a smooth burr than an incomprehensible string of syllables. We had a classmate from Edinburgh in the Spy division last year and we could only understand every third or fourth sentence he uttered. My gaze drops to his neck. There’s a tattoo peeking out of his shirt collar and suddenly, I want to see all of it. I want to trace it with my tongue.

“Absolutely,” I said firmly.

“Fish and chips,” Cormac says, returning the menu to the stunned waitress. I’m pretty sure she started ovulating the minute she laid eyes on him and how could I blame her?

“How about you?” she asks me, gaze still fixed on him.

“Um, I’ll have the Angus burger, thanks.” I press my lips together, trying not to laugh when her hand reaches out blindly for my menu.

There’s a little growl, and I realize it’s from him. He’s drinking his pint of Guinness and glaring at her. The poor woman comes to her senses and backs away.

“This place is beautiful,” I venture, looking around the little room. “How did you find it?”

The Angus is perfect, a little pub down by the Thames, unpretentious but

cozy, with wooden beams darkened from years of smoke and a beautiful old bar with a huge display of bottles behind it.

“I have business this way on occasion,” he says before taking another drink. I wait, but apparently, that’s all he’s going to share.

“I have a proposal.”

“Aye?” He’s watching me with complete focus, and it’s alternately flattering and a little terrifying. His eyes are jade green, I see that now, glittering in the candlelight.

“No last names,” I say, suddenly feeling brave. Well, probably more like reckless, but for one night I don’t want to be dutiful Mala Chandler. “No, ‘What do you do for a living,’ or ‘Where did you go to school.’ None of that.” I lean back, spreading my arms over the back of the leather booth. “I’m Lady Mala, a diamond heiress. Lovely to meet you.”

His full mouth quirks up in a half smile. “Lovely to meet you as well, Lady Mala. I am but a simple sheep farmer.”

Laughing, I try to give him a regal nod, “Very well, Farmer Cormac, you may share your meal with me.”

Pressing a huge hand to his chest, he bows his head. “An honor.”

The food is delicious, and our stories get increasingly ridiculous until I nearly spit out my white chocolate bread pudding as he spins a tale about training a squadron of sheep to take out a band of roving wolves. “The real trick is gettin’ them to hold the grenades, you see,” he says, ordering another Guinness, “no opposable thumbs.”

My hand’s over my mouth, trying to swallow my dessert without choking and I grab my water, finally getting myself under control. “What do you call it when a sheep leaps out at you?”

His brow rose, “I fear to guess.”

“A lambush!” I start laughing again.

He chuckles, most likely at how dumb I am. “Devastating, that one.”

“Sorry, I didn’t come prepared with more combat sheep-related jokes,” I said, still giggling a bit.

“Goddamn, you’re beautiful,” he says, his voice a touch deeper and that just turns it into a weapon. I can feel an ache burning in my center and my thighs tighten.

“You’re just saying that because you want my diamonds,” I squirm a bit under his gaze. He’s absently running a thick finger along his lower lip and all I can think of is how it would feel inside me. Nothing has ever been inside me, I wouldn’t dare not be the perfect, untouched princess my family expects me to be.

“I want you,” he says bluntly and I think a little whine escapes before I press my lips together. “Will you stay with me tonight?”

I think about how reckless it would be to spend the night with this gorgeous, brilliant stranger, about my responsibility to remain the pure Chandler Mafia Princess. Then, I think about what my father said to me.

“It should have been you, not Michael.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I watch that thick finger of his make another sweep over his lip.

“Yes.”

CHAPTER FOUR

In which there is so much sex.

Mala...

He shoves me back against the wall in his entryway.

My breath catches in my throat but before I can even exhale his hand is behind my head, keeping the sore bump there from touching the exposed brick.

We drove here in tense silence, one of his hands on the steering wheel and the other firmly gripping my thigh. He pulled into a parking space in front of one of those trendy industrial spaces that have been remodeled into condos and turned off the Jaguar, there was utter silence aside from the small tics of the cooling engine.

Taking my chin in his hand, he forced me to look at him. “Are you sure you want this, Mala? I can take you back to your friends and that’s the end of it.”

His fingers were rough against my skin and a thought fluttered through my mind. *He’s killed with these hands...* I shoved it away because tonight, I was someone else.

“Are you backing out, Farmer Cormac?” I managed, the words stiff under his grip on my chin.

The smile that spread across his face was dazzling- strong, white teeth that could tear and rend. It was avaricious.

“Oh, no Lady Mala, I am just getting started,” he said, biting my throat just under my ear and making me shudder. “Say ‘I want this’ and I’ll give you everything you need.” He bit me again, on the tight, throbbing tendon at the back of my neck. “And then I’ll take everything *I* want.”

Later, when I can regain the power of rational thought, the little whimper I let out will appall me. But here? “Yes, I want this,” I swallowed, watching his pupils expand until his eyes were like midnight, “I want you.”

Now, Cormac’s huge paw is cupping the back of my head, protecting me against the scratchy brick even as he’s pressing me into it so hard that I think it’s embedded in my skin. His tongue forces my lips open and runs unapologetically across my teeth, twirling and twisting with mine. I grip a handful of his thick, coarse hair as he sucks my tongue into his mouth like it’s a Jolly Rancher.

“*Cho breagha*, so beautiful,” he murmurs as he frees my mouth. “You taste sweet, like chocolate and virtue, Lady Mala.”

Stiffening, I look up at him. “What an odd thing to say, Farmer Cormac.” What? Do I *smell* like a virgin? Is there a certain taste or an odor? A flush of embarrassment paints my skin pink.

His jade eyes narrow and he sweeps my hair out of my face. “But then there’s these curls... like fire, they are. Devil or angel, sweet Mala?” His fingers slip from my hair and trail down my neck, stroking lightly over my collarbone and then pulling down the zipper of his hoodie. Slowly. Torturously as the rasp of his calloused fingertips scrapes against my skin.

Sucking in a deep breath, my stomach contracts against his fingers. “Tonight?” I meet his gaze straight on. “I’m both.”

His hands slide down to my ass, squeezing and gripping me and he hauls me up as I yelp and wrap my legs around his lean waist. Lacing my fingers around his neck, I kiss his beautiful mouth again and again, not paying any attention to where he’s taking me. I must be someone different tonight. I haven’t mapped out the exit points in this place, or potential weapons if things go sideways.

The only things I’m aware of are the feel of his mouth, his teeth tugging on my lower lip, and my acutely sensitive clitoris rubbing against his hard stomach, these ridiculous booty shorts are no barrier at all.

Stairs. He’s climbing stairs because the head of what feels like an alarmingly large cock is rubbing hard against my overtaxed center with each step and I’m afraid I’m going to come before he gets me into his bedroom.

We make it to a big, cool room, lined with giant paned windows looking out on the Thames. His bed is huge, unsurprisingly. I kind of expect him to throw me on it, but he's careful with me. Cormac lets me down slowly, making sure my clitoris rubs hard against his belt buckle. His hands go to my waist, squeezing me gently before pulling his sweatshirt off me. I take one unsteady step back, realizing my bikini top is in my bag and I'm bare.

My hands flutter up like frightened birds and he catches them, fingers loosely circling my wrists.

"Don't. Let me look," he rumbles, spreading my arms out and staring at me so hungrily it feels like a touch, pebbling my nipples and making me shiver. Reaching behind him, he grabs the collar of his t-shirt and pulls it over his head, and oh, *my god*, it's my turn to stare.

He's alarmingly tall and having to reach up to run my hands over his shoulders, wide and hard with muscle makes me realize this man *is* a god. His beautifully sculpted chest and the movement of his thick biceps under smooth skin don't belong to a mere human. I lean forward and trace the winged dagger on his chest with my tongue, the way I've been wanting to, enjoying the groan that rumbles through him and rising on tiptoe to trace where it ends on his neck. His skin tastes of salt and the sea and something dark - smoke from a burning building or a forest fire, something destructive - and I'm half insane with need.

"Do you want me to take over?" Cormac asks, slipping his thumb into my mouth. I nod, but it's not good enough. He leans down, hot breath against my skin, "Say yes, Cormac."

"Yeah-" my voice cracks and I have to start again. "Yes, Cormac."

"Good, because I'm starting with your wet little pussy." His forehead drops to my shoulder as his hand roughly cups my center. "I could smell you, all through dinner. I was hard as fuck." He squeezes me and I rise up on my tiptoes. "I wanted to slide under the table and eat you out while you finished your dessert like the demure little thing you are. Would you have liked that?" The heel of his hand pulses hard against my clit and two fingers push aside the thin cloth of the shorts and my undies.

"Oh! God..." I gasp, fingernails digging into his arms. He doesn't seem to notice.

“Ah-ah, you use *my* name when I’m touching you,” he says sternly, sliding one of those long, rough fingers inside me.

I am.

“Fuck, you’re so snug, *sionnach beag*, little fox. I don’t want to hurt you. I’m going to play with you a bit.”

I’m on the bed, shocked and staring up at the ceiling as my legs are over his shoulders. There’s a violent tug and suddenly those horrible booty shorts are flying across the room. There’s no time to object because his mouth is fastened around my pussy in some kind of filthy, filthy kiss and his tongue sliding through my lips. Grabbing two thick handfuls of his hair, I hold on, feeling like I’m flying apart and this is the only thing grounding me. His mouth is heat and silk, and his tongue joins his finger, driving up into me.

“Cor- Cormac,” I gasp, back arching and his thick forearm slams across my hips, pushing me back down. It feels like he’s sucking my soul from my body, his tongue and lips and teeth are too much and when he tugs on my clitoris, I scream. The shock that I could come so quickly, I’m so wet and my thighs are gripping his head and-

“Sorry,” I babble, “are you okay?”

He looks up and smiles at me, and his short, trimmed beard is wet. I can see it glisten in the light streaming in the windows and before I can be embarrassed, he’s kissing me and I can taste myself on him.

“Next time,” he murmurs, “I want you to sit on my face. I want to squeeze your lovely, round ass while you rub against my mouth.”

His voice is so deep that his words vibrate through my chest. I realize I’m still gripping handfuls of his hair and I try to relax my fingers enough to let go of it.

“Are you alright? Do you still want this?” Cormac asks, kneeling over me.

I sit up, raising my chin to kiss him again. “Yes. Please.”

Oh, here comes the sexy Scottish Laird version of Cormac, and he is next level. This mountain of a man is staring down at me, his jade eyes flaring and his jaw tight.

“Fuck,” he groans, kissing me hard enough to feel the press of his teeth

against my lips. His hand is in my hair, gripping it to move my head in the way he wants for the kiss. Pulling back slightly, his breath is still mingling with mine as his hand leaves my hair and slides down my throat. “Such a treasure you are.”

He grins with a pleasing level of savagery as he pulls open a drawer and takes out a condom. His jeans are yanked off in seconds and my eyes widen as I stare at his boxer briefs, the thin material straining against his cock. When he pulls them down, it hits his lovely, flat stomach with an audible slap.

“Hey, *sionnach beag*, little fox, relax,” he says soothingly, like he’s used to women freaking out when they see the size of his dick. It’s the first one I’ve ever seen. Out in the wild, I mean.

I’ve seen a couple of cheesy porn videos but he’s... I would not be in the habit of calling a dick beautiful, but his cock is. It’s thick, so hard, and the silky tip is glistening already and I want to lick it like I did his tattoo. He rolls on the condom too quickly for me to taste him and sits on the bed again, leaning against the headboard. “Straddle me,” he says, lifting me over him before I have a chance to do it myself.

“Bear down, like a bad girl,” he whispers in my ear, his hands on my ass and my hip pushing my center along his cock, getting him slick and just making me wetter. “You’re doing so well, grinding this perfect little pussy on my cock, aren’t you? I think you could come again like this.” His thumb taps my clit gently but I’m too overstimulated, it is so much and I dig my nails into his shoulders.

He’s big. He’s really, *really* big and I’m supposed to fit this inside me? “You’re going to rip me in half,” I gasp and to my shock, some dark corner of my brain thinks that is the best part.

“No baby, no it won’t,” Cormac soothes me, kissing my cheekbone, my neck, my lips. Reaching between us, he holds his cock up for me. “Slide down on it, slow or fast, whatever you need. We have all night.”

The silky tip of him notches inside me and I sink onto him. It burns and pulls and still I keep sliding down because we are both so wet and slick and I don’t see how there could be more of him but there is. My thighs are shaking and he takes my weight, holding me halfway onto his cock while I pant against his neck.

“So tight, little fox, you’re so snug around me,” he rasps, groaning with me as I slide down the last inches, pressed tightly against him, the crisp hair at the base of his dick tickling my clit. He just kisses me and kisses me, his fingers sliding between us and circling my strained entrance. His hips begin light upward pushes and I gasp when I realize there was more of him after all. When his thrusts get harder, he bounces me easily, twisting his hips to move deeper, harder. It aches where his thick, heavy cock hits my core and rubs roughly against my secret, sensitive places and I put my palm on my abdomen.

“I can feel you inside me,” I cry out, shocked and so turned on that I can barely breathe. His big hand presses on mine. “From the outside, I can feel you-” I come, gripping him inside me like I’ll never let him loose and the last sane bit of me smiles in satisfaction when I hear his loud groan, his swelling cock pressing against my clutching pussy and he comes, too. The heat and the electricity between us cycles back and forth and I feel like I’m on fire, burning at the place we’re connected.

So this is what it’s like...

When I finally come back from wherever his dick and that orgasm flung me, I feel his arms wrapped around me tightly, his dark whispers of how beautiful I am, how sweet.

Dear god. The man’s cock is *still* hard inside me.

CHAPTER FIVE

In which this is going to be the best year ever.

Mala...

“So you’re really not going to tell me anything else?”

Willow has been relentless since we returned to school. The frenzy of getting our luggage together and getting on the Toscano jet for the flight to Inis Mor didn’t leave any time for giggles and whispered conversations about my evening with my Scottish white knight.

We share a suite at the Ares Academy, one on the third floor with a spectacular view of the landscape surrounding the school. The huge, Gothic campus looms over the island's flat plains and sheer cliffs, an immortal granite edifice, one of the island’s historic treasures. It’s built like a fortress, with tall granite walls and four watchtowers. The Dean’s Building faces the huge iron gate and the rest of the buildings fan out behind it.

To call our suite ‘student housing’ is hilarious. We have a large common room with a little kitchen area, a massive fireplace, and floor-to-window ceilings. Willow and I were placed together our first year here, and while other students moved around to different lodgings like a game of Tetris, we’ve been perfectly suited to each other.

Willow is lounging at the marble counter while I plate up some food from the dining hall. Another thing you won’t find at a regular college is gourmet room service. On frantic test-cramming nights in particular, having dinner delivered to your room is a gift.

“Ooo, I want the swordfish,” she says, making grabby hands.

“Of course you do,” I laugh, “because I ordered that for me.” Still, I give her the demanded swordfish and take the pesto chicken for myself.

“You realize you’re going to have to give me something.”

“I gave you the swordfish!”

“No,” Willow says patiently, “something about this mystery man. Why he took you to an insanely expensive boutique doctor and-”

“I knew it!” I say, “A fancy private physician? He wouldn’t let me pay the bill, the overbearing ass!”

“Oh, you paid in other ways.” she leers.

“That is just... gross, Willow.”

“Oh, yeah.” She looks thoughtful. “Remember that I was raised by a family of arseholes and we defuse every awkward moment with poorly-timed humor?”

I toast her with my glass of wine. “This is true.”

“Now, one advantage of being raised by a family of arseholes is that I am not required to be a virgin princess.” She eyes me keenly, “But you are, mate. So he had to be something special.”

The night before...

Waking up next to Cormac was the most luscious moment of warmth and comfort and then, shocked awareness that I was no longer a virgin and the reason for it was currently sleeping behind me, his arm casually thrown over my waist and that huge body pressed against mine.

Also, that I was very sore.

After that first - amazing - introduction to his dick, I revisited it when he pounded into me from behind, looking out the window at the silent park across the street, and then with my ass perched precariously on the railing of his terrace. I did not know that an orgasm could feel like it was detonating every cell in my body, and that the feeling of his hard chest against mine, wet with sweat and the husky drone of his Scottish accent in my ear telling me how beautiful I was, could make me happier than I’ve ever been.

Even if it was just for one night.

I’d slipped out of bed, clumsily getting dressed and a dark little part of me

enjoying the ache between my legs. I pulled his borrowed sweatshirt back on. Burying my nose in the cotton, I inhaled deeply. It smelled like him. Something I could keep.

Hesitating at his bedroom door, I looked back at him, his lashes a thick fan on his cheekbones, his full mouth slightly open in sleep.

Thank you, I mouthed, too cowardly to say goodbye.

Tati answered my text instantly which made me feel terribly guilty since it meant she and Willow had never gone to sleep, but they were there to pick me up ten minutes later.

Currently...

“Wait, you never said goodbye? You just... scarpered off?” Willow’s staring at me, torn between outrage and amusement.

“It was never not going to be awkward,” I say defensively, “what am I going to say, ‘Hey, sorry about the blood on your thousand-dollar sheets, and no, I’m not having my period?’ It didn’t seem like the moment to explain it all.”

“You ran like a frightened little fawn,” she grins.

“You really are the worst friend, you know that, right?”

“Most likely.” Putting her hand on mine, she looks at me closely. “Here’s the important bit. Was it worth it?”

“God, yes,” I say fervently. “I knew it would be, just sitting across from him in that pub, having dinner. I knew it would be worth it. I’ll never regret it.”

“Then good,” she hugs me, hard. “Good. You deserve something happy, something just for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, please,” she scoffs, “like I don’t know you’re here, busting yer arse and trying to be perfect and uplift the family name? How you have to be the best in everything?”

“It’s not...” I flounder. “We all try to be the best.”

“Not the way you do. Like you’re going to burst into flames if you’re not at the top of the class.”

It should have been you.

“I’m going to bed,” I drain my glass of wine. “The first day is always a hellscape, you know that.”

Willow’s so pretty, a blonde, surfer girl with a deep tan, even in the dead of winter. She’s frowning at me, and I hate the concern I’m feeling from her. She’s a smartass, the life of the party. She shouldn’t be worried. Not about me.

Hugging her back just as hard, I whisper, “Everything’s fine. I promise. You don’t have to worry about me. However, me kicking your ass again in sniper rifle targeting? That you should worry about.”

“I take it all back, you’re a terrible person and deserve to suffer!” Willow smacks my arm affectionately. Of course, she was raised with brothers so her idea of a friendly smack nearly knocks me into the couch, but at least she’s smiling again.

“This is going to be a great year,” I tell my reflection in the mirror, pulling my hair up into a high ponytail. “A wonderful year with my friends.”

“This is going to be a fantastic year,” I tell Willow on the way down to breakfast.

“This is going to be the best year ever!” I tell Lucca and Tatiana, walking to the Armory.

“Welcome students. I’ll be your weapons instructor this year. Cormac MacTavish.” He’s standing in front of the cluster of students, wearing a tight black t-shirt and cargo pants. His gaze moves to each student as if memorizing them and freezes when he lands on me. I feel the polar chill of it from ten feet away.

You have *got* to be fucking kidding me.

This year is going to be so bad.

CHAPTER SIX

In which there are awkward conversations.

Cormac...

“Miss Chandler, a moment please.”

She halts as soon as I say her name, her back stiff. The other students eye her curiously though no one is stupid enough to linger. When the room is empty, she visibly steels herself and turns around.

“This is my third year here and I’ve never seen you before,” Mala says sharply. “I thought you were a businessman?”

Folding my arms, I lean against one of the ammunition cabinets. “I wouldn’t have fucked you if I’d known you were a student here,” I say coldly. “I should have known you were too young when you tiptoed out of my place instead of being adult enough to say goodbye.”

She’s torn between fury and embarrassment and I watch the pink flush light up her skin. Christ, she’s beautiful. Why did she have to be a student?

“Yeah, the whole ‘No last names, no backstory’ was a huge mistake,” she snaps.

“Regardless, I am your professor and nothing will happen again.” I must be cold and stern. Set the standard now.

“Oh, *trust* me,” she’s nearly purple with rage. “Nothing is *ever* going to happen.”

“I know,” I say impatiently, “I just said that.”

“No, I said that! Not a damn thing.”

“Exactly.”

“Fine!” Mala spins, striding out of the shooting range.

I let out a low groan, rubbing the back of my neck. I haven’t stopped thinking about Mala since waking up that morning to blood on my sheets and my cock. She couldn’t have been a virgin. She wouldn’t have jumped into my bed so enthusiastically.

Right?

I have a mission here at the Academy. There will be no distractions, including her.

Accepting an invitation to drinks with Dean Helen Alexis Christie does not mean a light evening of conversation. It is the beginning of a long, grim year that will likely end in several ugly deaths. I’m here to make certain none of the dead will be students.

The sun is sending out long, orange rays of light over the flat plains of the island as I join her in her office, two other professors are already there, nursing their drinks.

“Ah, Professor MacTavish, thank you for joining us,” Dean Christie says, smiling benignly. “This is Akihito Fukumoto and Laoise Fitzgerald, she’s new to the faculty this year, like you.”

“A pleasure to meet you both,” I nod politely. “My father sends his greetings, Laoise.”

She tilts her glass of Redbreast to me, “Do send my regards when you speak next.” Laoise Fitzgerald has a beautiful voice, smooth and rich, like the scotch she’s drinking. Like the Dean, she dresses more for comfort than fashion and has piercing, icy blue eyes. She’s a woman of many talents, so I’m sure it was easy for the Dean to place her on the faculty.

“Professor Fukumoto, it’s good to see you again.”

He rises to shake my hand, grinning. “As if I could forget one of my best students. I hear of you from time to time, though I suspect it is more myth and legend than fact.”

“I’m certain only the worst things you’ve heard were true,” I shrug.

He laughs, “That would not surprise me.”

“Please have a seat, Cormac,” the Dean cuts through the pleasantries, “what can we get you to drink?”

“I’ll have what she’s having,” I nod to Laosie’s glass of Redbreast.

After the Dean’s assistant makes my drink and hands it to me, he slips out the door without being asked. She’s trained him well. Knowing her, most likely with a cattle prod and a handful of kibble.

“I have waited for this meeting for nearly two years,” she says, relaxing back into her chair. “It may appear disrespectful to several members of our faculty and security staff to be meeting in secret, but trust is earned. After the events of this summer, my list of trusted sources has shrunk considerably.”

“How many students have you lost at this point?” I ask.

Her eyes narrow. “Twelve upperclassmen. Thirty-five incoming freshmen. I expected there to be more outrage among the families, but apparently, some of them were disguised well enough as accidents or rival gang attacks.”

“We believe that given the global nature of the murders,” Akihito says, “we are looking at involvement from as many as a dozen organizations.”

“Kill off the next generation of Elites,” Laosie nods, “less manpower and risk than going after the principals.”

“The intelligence we’ve gathered recently shows that this plan is too volatile,” the Dean says, “it’s coming to a head, the signs are there. Your job is to root out whoever might have already placed here at the Academy.”

“Have you found anyone yet?” I ask.

Her lips firm into a tight line. “Two guards, one was in my personal security detail. I left him alive. He and I have had a bit of a chat, but I have what’s...” she smiles, “left of him for you to question.”

“No time like the present,” I drained my glass, standing. “Akihito, Laosie, I’m sure we’ll work well together.” They both nodded benignly and continued their conversation over cocktails as if we were at a casual dinner party. The sort people in the real world enjoyed, where they talked about interest rates and B-list celebrities.

These two, however, were discussing several decapitated heads recently found in a ditch near one of the syndicates that we were targeting. Nothing

works better as a little reminder that we're watching them than a pile of decomposing soldiers. I expect that the Alvarez Syndicate will bow out of the alliance targeting the Academy's students.

Following Dean Christie's directions to the soundproofed rooms directly under her office, I can smell the faint, coppery scent of blood and a low moaning coming from the room at the end of the hall. She was renowned as an interrogator well before taking her position here at the Academy and it's clear she's lost none of her skill when I see the ruined form of the man sagging in his chains suspended over a drain in the floor.

Cracking my knuckles and rolling up my shirt sleeves, I glance over at the expressionless Dean. "You didn't leave me much to work with, Helen."

She shrugs, "Nonsense, I merely softened him up a bit."

The man is clearly strong, muscular. There are faded tattoos from the British military on his bloody skin, and several scars snaking up and down his torso. He's seen hard times before.

"So you're a tough nut to crack, eh Miles?" I ask, walking around him and viewing Helen's handiwork.

"Fuck off," he gurgles, spitting out an impressive amount of gore. I step back, letting it splatter at my feet.

"Tough, but not bright." Pulling out one of my favorite knives, I touch the tip, watching a single bead of blood on my fingertip. "The William Henry Spearpoint has a titanium blade, razor sharp. The serrated side is especially effective in peeling the skin."

Miles is staring at the blade. He's trying not to react, but his fingers are twitching.

"I think you know you're going to die. But I'm giving you a choice. A quick end, or a very, very long, agonizing one," I continue conversationally. "You will tell me who sent you here. You will tell me your orders. How long it takes is completely up to you."

After I make my first, long slice on the nerve-rich skin of his inner arm, I find that it doesn't take long at all.

Back in my cottage, I pace the little deck overlooking the ocean. Most Academy faculty live in the huge stone mansion next to the Dean's building, high-end apartments with every possible luxury. I have no patience for that, I don't want to live cheek-by-jowl with the others. My last roommate was here at the Academy ten years ago.

Helen lightly scoffed when I told her I wanted this place for myself. "You want to live in the old shepherd's cottage? It hasn't been updated for years."

"I prefer my privacy," I shrugged.

Looking around the stone walls and windows that rattle when the wind blows through the cracks, I'd still prefer to be here with a huge fireplace, and heavy, comfortable furniture meant for someone of my size, not some cheap shite that creaks when you sit down. The bed alone would be reason enough. A mattress long enough so that my ankles don't hang off the damn thing is rare.

Pouring a drink, I notice I didn't get all the blood off my hands while cleaning up after my "discussion" with the guard. The shower here in the cottage is big, but it takes a long time for the water to heat and I stand at my bedroom window, watching the waves crash against the sheer cliffs as I wait.

Mala.

She is going to be a problem. What are the odds that she would be a student here at the most exclusive college on the planet? I knew that night she was too sharp, too observant to be some standard girl partying her way through University, and it intrigued me even more. I should have asked more questions instead of thinking about how good she felt under me.

How she felt... goddamn it, the heat and silk of her pussy, how insanely tight she'd gripped my cock. I wouldn't have questioned the blood on my sheets, just assumed she was having her cycle. But she had been so snug, even though I took my time to get my dick inside her.

Steam billows from the bathroom and I force the thoughts from that night away, stepping into the shower to roughly wash and using a brush on the blood under my nails.

It's a shame I didn't take Mala in the shower that night, too. The image of her wet skin, gleaming in the soft light as I soaped her up... Groaning, I try to work the shampoo quickly over my hair, but the white suds spread down my

chest and remind me of when I took her from behind out on my balcony. As I pulled out of her, I could see our cum, white and dripping down the inside of her thigh.

The summer breeze off the water cooled the sweat beading on our skin as I ground into her, my balls pressing tight against her slick center. Her hard little nipples poked into my chest and I bent my head, pulling one, then the other into my mouth, sucking harder than I should, but she'd give a startled squeal and then a breathy little moan each time, her hips rising up to meet me.

Using my fingers to spread her wet lips I watched my cock split her wide, over and over as her sweet cunt struggled to hold all of me. I'm not a small man, and I'm careful with my size. With her, I didn't want to be. I wanted to pummel her, listen to her scream, and feel her writhe on my cock. "Go over, Mala honey." I sink my teeth into her shoulder. "Come for me."

She did, gripping my dick inside her like a velvet fist and the ripple of her walls along me made me come, too, spurting and groaning and rising on the balls of my feet to push inside her higher, harder.

My head is tilted against the shower tile and my fist gripping my cock, squeezing it with a groan as I come hard, spurting come into the hot water. "Fuck," I groan, pushing my wet hair back and finishing my shower. My cock is still hard enough to fuck a hole into concrete.

Mala's a distraction I cannot allow.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In which there are knives used as an obvious metaphor for sex.

Mala...

“Why do you hate Professor MacTavish?”

Athena is walking with me to our Small Arms Instruction, eyeing me curiously. Late autumn is already sweeping over the island and I zip up my hoodie against the wind.

“What on earth brought that up?”

“You’re just the happiest thing in the world until we get to the Armory Building, and then every day, you shut down like you’re on your way to your gynecologist for a herpes treatment,” she chuckles heartlessly.

“Oddly specific, but okay,” I said. “It has nothing to do with the... professor. It’s just midway through my classes and it makes me think of everything I still have to do before the day is over.”

I’m lying. I hate looking at Cormac, his gorgeous, stupid face, and his utter indifference. The effort required to project *my* utter indifference. Every time I think of his dismissiveness that first day, the mocking comments about being “too young” to handle our night together... The shame feels like a bucket of boiling water pouring down my back.

Then, there’s the irritation at his giggling entourage of groupies that follow the man everywhere like a cloud of mosquitoes. He never seems to notice them, but their shrill giggles pierce my brain like a buzzsaw. I’ve been buying new bottles of ibuprofen weekly.

“The only thing I’m looking forward to is the Leader’s Challenge.” I’m going

to move the conversation away from my dislike of our new weapons professor to the only thing the rest of the campus is talking about. “Though Liam’s pretty sure we’re all going to die.”

“*Such* focused leadership,” Athena rolls her eyes, “admittedly, Lucca doesn’t seem any more excited about it.”

I wanted to be on Team Toscano with her and Mariya, but Liam got to me first. Each student in the Leader’s division picks three students from the other majors at the Academy, the Spies - my division - the Assassins, and the Warriors. Liam’s a good guy and part of our little group, but his judgment isn’t always as sound as Lucca’s or Konstantin’s.

We pick out our weapons in the Armory talking about the Challenge and speculating about what our sadistic Dean is planning for us. “I haven’t noticed any construction around campus,” I said, picking up a Magnum Desert Eagle and three clips of ammunition. “Usually, there’s something set up to give us a clue about at least one of the tasks.”

Athena checks the sight on one of the handguns. “You know how fond she is of her surprises.” She eyes my Desert Eagle, shaking her head. “Why do you always get the biggest gun in the rack?”

“I’m trying to think like a guy, the biggest is the best, right?” I sneer. “I’d rather be using a knife, but you know men and their large, explosive dick extenders. Of course, we’re going to focus on the big, noisy weapons.”

“You don’t think small arms training is useful to a spy?”

Oh, come on.

We turn around to see Cormac standing behind us, feet planted and arms folded, and looking unreasonably hot in his tight black t-shirt. His biceps are nearly breaking free from the cotton confines of his shirt and I realize I’m staring at them like a starving person looks at pie when he irritably clears his throat.

“Miss Chandler? You were saying?”

“Of course it is, Professor.”

Oh, don’t I sound calm and collected?

“But in our particular discipline, stealth and the ability to move fast and

undetected seems more important than hauling around a wheelbarrow full of guns,” I continue. Oh, my god where did that come from? I’m going to be cleaning weapons as punishment until Christmas at this point.

He’s still watching me, his jade eyes narrowed. “What’s your weapon of choice?”

“A blade, of course,” I said promptly. There’s a stillness around us and the rest of the class is watching us avidly. Even his giggling fangirls are silent.

What I don’t say is that my brother’s Kershaw Stiletto is strapped to my ankle the way it always is. Some things you just don’t whip out in public.

Cormac’s brow is raised. Oh, damn it. He’s invested now. Striding over to the other end of the room, he passes the tidy racks of firearms and opens a huge cabinet that I’ve never seen before.

“Professor MacTavish has been redecorating…” Athena murmurs behind me.

“Pick one,” he orders.

It’s paradise. Over a hundred different knives in every size and shape, all perfectly aligned and blades gleaming in the overhead lights.

I want to pet them like kittens. I want to stroke the carbon handles, the ones inlaid with pearl or metal. I want-

“Pick one, Miss Chandler or I’ll select another student,” he interrupts my misty appreciation of such beautiful weaponry.

“Throwing or sparring?” I snap.

His head tilts. “Sparring.”

There’s a beautiful old bone-handled Scottish dirk, hanging in the cabinet. I pick it up, examining the blade, which is elegantly etched.

“This is Damascus steel, isn’t it?” I gasp, holding the knife reverently.

“Aye,” he’s right behind me, breath stirring my cheek and my knees are weak. “You know your metal. It’s a *Sgian Dubh* dirk.” He takes it from me, holding it up.

“Who knows their history of Damascus steel?”

Marco raises his hand. “It’s some of the strongest steel in the world, the way

it's forged gives the blade a pattern that looks like flowing water.”

“Aye, true Damascus steel blades are not only some of the sharpest, but their flexibility is legendary. The blade's ability to flex past its elastic limit and return to full strength is near impossible to duplicate by modern methods.”

Cormac takes the blade from my hands, twirling it expertly on the palm of his hand. The light flickers rapidly off the spinning blade and I am hypnotized by its beauty.

“...Miss Chandler?”

“I'm sorry-” I look up from the knife, blinking, “what?”

That smug bastard's face is nothing but polite inquiry, but I know he's smothering a grin.

“As I said, why don't we demonstrate a few basic feints?”

I can feel the blood drain from my face. Knifeplay? With *him*?

Without bothering to wait for my answer, he hands me the knife again and turns to the class. “In reality, knife fights are ugly; endless feinting until one opponent gets an opening. The best knife fight is a short knife fight.”

There's respectful laughter from the group, punctuated by some shrill giggles from Cormac's fangirls. My palms are humiliatingly wet and I have to wipe them on my leggings.

“Let's begin with some moves to disarm someone coming at you,” he continues, taking a stance. “Miss Chandler, attempt to attack me.”

My eyes narrow at the word “attempt” and I take a firmer grip on the knife, moving toward him slowly.

“First step,” he calls over his shoulder, “create distance between you.” His feet move with mine, it's almost a ballet between us and it feels so natural. I'm on the balls of my feet, attuned to his every movement.

“Keep your body perpendicular to the attacker,” he continues, “a frontal stance makes you more vulnerable. Miss Chandler, feint at me.”

My wide, terrified gaze seems to amuse him. “This is a real knife, Professor.”

He holds his hand up and waves me on with his fingers with that *smirk*, that arrogant stupid smirk of his and I do, leaning in on my left leg and slashing

low.

“Deflect your attacker’s arm as they strike,” he continues casually as if he’s discussing the weather. “Watch the trajectory of their arm and use both hands to grab their forearm first if possible. Use their momentum to pull them past you-”

The second I feel the heat of his hands on me, I stop thinking, using his planted feet against him, and with his hands out of the way, I can grab his shoulder and pull him in a flip across my back and onto the mat with a thump.

The room is dead silent. Even the fangirls aren’t giggling.

Cormac’s jade eyes flare and oh, this is not the time to be turned on by him but I am. So much. He’s looking me over slowly as if he’s never seen me before and I can feel every place his gaze lands on me. I’ve never had such a visceral response to a man, not ever.

“Excellent work!” He’s all smiles, up on his feet and looking pleased with me. “Miss Chandler makes a good point here. I was distracted by my verbal instruction. For you, it could be the sounds of traffic or footsteps. It could be shouting or screaming. Never let yourself be distracted when you’re engaged. Never expect someone to step in and save you.”

“Take it. Take it, Mala. Hurry. I don’t want you to see this part.”

My hand shakes and I’m back in the car, upside down, dangling from my seatbelt...

“Miss Chandler, are you all right?”

Cormac is right in front of me, his heated eyes have cooled into concern.

“I’m fine,” I manage, clearing my throat and trying to sound like a sane human. “I’m just fine. Anything else, professor?”

“Can you continue?” He’s still looking at me oddly.

Nodding firmly, I step back, taking my stance again.

“Good,” he murmurs, there’s a low tone of respect there and it warms me. “Class, we’ll show you the places to hit as hard as and fast you can. Remember, the best knife fight is...”

“A short one!” Everyone choruses together.

Good lord, I think, the man started the Cult of Cormac.

“Easy one!” he calls, pulling a knife off the rack. “The jugular.” He’s swept the blade across my skin close enough that I can feel the slight breeze before I can even react.

Sucking in a furious breath, I shout, “Femoral artery!” My knife makes a speedy downward move to his thigh, closer to his groin than I’d planned to.

His brow raises. “Axillary artery, the armpit is sometimes your easiest target because it’s not a place most opponents think to protect.” He kicks my feet out from under me and I land on my back. His thick thighs are straddling me and he yanks my arm up.

There’s a little shriek from someone in the crowd and we freeze, his knife lightly tapping my armpit, and my blade at his chest, perfectly positioned to slide through the ribcage and into his heart. I’m heaving for breath and my breasts are pressing into his chest. There’s silence and we realize not a single student is making a sound, utterly still as they stare at us.

“Get off me!” I hiss under my breath. When he doesn’t move, I press the tip of my blade into his ribs. He looks down, one brow lifted and nods in respect.

“Well done.”

He’s on his feet in seconds and hauls me off the floor like a bag of flour. “As you can see, this match ended in a stalemate, with a skilled move on Miss Chandler’s part. If you saw how she positioned the dirk, she could slide the blade through...”

Cormac is lecturing and I’m staring at his shirt. The dark color is masking it somewhat, but I poked him hard enough to draw blood and he’s talking casually and he flips his blade a couple of times, catching it by the handle without looking at it.

“Class dismissed.”

Students leave the practice room slowly, his little fans looking longingly over their shoulders and Marco blurts, “That was so fucking hot!”

“I am so truly sorry,” I put my hand over my mouth, “I didn’t mean to hurt you, that is completely unacceptable.”

“Hmm?” He looks down at his wet shirt, “Ah, well yeah, ya did, ferocious little thing.”

He pulls his shirt over his head and my knees nearly buckle.

I knew the man had a beautiful body, I’d run my hands and mouth over a lot of it that night. Seeing Cormac MacTavish’s chest in broad daylight is next level. The winged dagger that starts on his neck goes down to the bottom of his sculpted pectoral, and there’s another vividly colored one across his six-pack that looks like a family crest with a dragon curled around the center.

Sweet baby Jesus, at the hem of his cargo pants, just above his prominent hip bone, a tattoo of some kind of vine with thorns disappears into his pants leading to that perfectly defined V which points right to his generously sized...

For fuck’s sake stop it, Mala!

Oh, and then there’s the slice on his ribs that’s bleeding.

He absently presses his bloody shirt against it as he moves casually over to the door. “I’ll patch this up, head off to your next class.”

“No, wait!” My hands are waving in a ridiculous, appeasing sort of way. “I can stitch you. It’s my fault. Truly, I’m so sorry, I didn’t intend-”

“*Sionnach beag*, you little fox,” he says, cutting me off. “And so fierce. Go on to class, now. I have this.”

“I feel terrible,” I say helplessly.

Cormac’s expression turns chilly. “Don’t be a child. You’re going to have to be tougher than this if you want to succeed here. There will be injuries. You’re going to hurt people. Now go to class.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I hold it for a second. “You would know all about hurting people, Professor. Pick someone else for your next knife playdate.”

I turn on my heel and walk out of the room, refusing to look back. Would he still be watching me? Or focused on the slice I just made to his ribs? What the hell is wrong with me?

CHAPTER EIGHT

In which we meet The Dick.

Mala....

“There she is! The knife-wielding she-devil who nearly decapitated Professor MacTavish!”

That damn Konstantin is giving me a standing ovation at the dinner table, our friends joining in as I slink into a chair.

“Could you shut up now?” I hiss, “And I didn’t nearly *decapitate* him. We were just doing... a knife... uh... exercise for the rest of the class.”

Athena laughs loudly, gathering attention from anyone left in the dining room who might not have heard Kon. “Oh, I was there, my friend. It reminded me of some classic Greco-Roman wrestling at the end. If they had been nude and all oiled up, it would have looked like one of those ancient sculptures.”

Such a friend.

A clutter of Cormac’s fan club glares at me from a nearby table. Claudia Morris, a particular non-favorite of mine, is glaring at me, her heavily mascara’ed eyes narrowed. My father initially ordered me to become friends with her because he was interested in her father’s arms dealing up in Seattle, but it was instantly clear that Claudia knew nothing about the family business. I’m not even sure why she’s here.

“Maybe you need to transfer from the Spy division to Assassins,” Liam offers unhelpfully.

Willow leaps in to save me. “I knew you were good with knives, honey. But thank you for not murdering the professor because he is the pure definition of sexy as fuck.”

She smiles in a misty fashion. I can't hold it against her. Cormac *is* hot as balls, and after hearing his legendary backstory with his family's mafia, even the guys have what Lucca calls a "bro-crush" on him.

"Can you believe he saved eighteen hostages from those MacLaren fucks?" Jun says.

"I thought it was thirty," muses Lucca.

"On his own. A hostage rescue mission he handled by himself," adds Konstantin. "Cormac MacTavish has killed enough assholes to single-handedly populate an entire circle of hell."

"As soon as you men are done with your bro-crush circle jerk, maybe we can share what we know about the Leader's Challenge?" Athena has such a way with words.

Lucca's smile drops. "Not here."

He's got a point. Even though we're all technically competing against each other, if one of us knew something important, we'd share it with the rest of our group. Students have been hurt during Challenges. Very badly hurt.

"Miss Chandler? Dean Christie would like to see you in her office." One of the Dean's personal guards hovers by the table and my breath rushes out of me in a wheeze. No one wants to be called to Dean Christie's office. For any reason.

"Uh, okay."

Everyone at the table gives me whatever their approximation of a reassuring smile is as I leave the hall.

The Dean's building is quiet this time of night, with just a few students meeting with their academic advisors and the ever-present security.

"Miss Chandler, thank you for joining us." Dean Christie smiles at me pleasantly.

"Yeah, great to see you, sis."

It's my brother Richard, better known as The Dick to everyone who is forced to come in contact with him. He's lounging on the Dean's couch, smiling up at me malevolently.

“While we do not approve of family visits,” she says, “I understand this is an important one. I will give you two some privacy.”

I almost wish she wouldn't. When the door closes, The Dick's eyes narrow. “Sit down.”

Leaning against the armrest of the opposite couch, I look him over. Expensive clothes, nicotine-stained fingers, and my slimy little brother looks too happy. He's always hated me, but he hated me even more when I was accepted into the Ares Academy and he wasn't.

When Michael was alive, The Dick didn't try much with me. But after, when I was on my own, he'd tried to set my hair on fire once. He'd stolen my credit card, bought a car and crashed it, telling my father I was the one who'd done it, that I was such a shitty driver that he should take my license. Another time, he bribed one of his douchebag friends to try and grope me... it was never safe with him around.

“Why are you here?”

He pulls out his cigarettes and I frantically put my hands out. “Oh, my god you idiot you can't smoke in here! Dean Christie will use her table saw on you!”

Though that might not be a bad thing.

Sighing, he shoves the pack back into his pocket. “I bring good news. Dad and I have narrowed down your marital prospects to two lucky bachelors.”

“I have two more years,” I say, folding my arms to hide the tremor in my hands.

He shrugs, “Maybe, maybe not. Don Accardi is really interested in settling down and squirting out some kids as soon as possible.”

No! Not him. Enzo Accardi is close to fifty years old and looking for wife number three after the other two died under “tragic” circumstances. “It's going to be hard digging up information for our father if Accardi kills me.”

“Eh, you'd probably live long enough to give him a kid or two,” The Dick smiles at me nastily. “But back to business. Dad wants you to keep an eye on prospect number two.”

“Someone here at the Academy?” I frown, “Who?”

“Ronan Cox.”

Ronan would not be the worst match, he’s a smartass, but he’s always been nice to me. He’s from the Cox Irish Mafia in Boston.

“I thought Dad hated the Irish?” I ask.

“The Cox Mafia’s been making some moves into all those rectangular-shaped states in the middle of the country,” he says, propping his feet up on the Dean’s antique cherrywood coffee table. “They might be stepping on our toes. Since Ronan’s in the running for your hand, fair maiden, it won’t look too suspicious if you cozy up to him.”

He’s grinning at me, but I can see how much he hates me. I can practically smell it. “I’m hoping Dad goes with Accardi,” he says. “You won’t get to prance around your precious little college anymore. You’d have to actually do some work for the family.”

“Like you?”

Oh, shut up shut up do not engage...

“The fuck?” He’s up on his feet, fists clenched.

Shut up, shut up you fool...

“Who you think you’re talking to, bitch?”

“Dick, you’re not some badass rapper, so stop talking like it. You’re a rich white boy from Napa Valley and you do nothing but hang out in strip clubs and chain smoke,” I snarl, knowing that I’m going to pay for this but... there’s something about being on my turf that’s making me stupidly brave and forgetting that The Dick, my younger brother and eventual heir to the Chandler throne will make me pay.

His hand flashes out in a second, the signet ring glinting in the light. I pivot to the left, seizing his wrist before he hits my face and twist it up behind his back, enjoying his startled yelp.

“Oh, bitch- I was gonna be nice but now I’m convincing Dad to marry you off to Accardi. He’s old-school, he’s gonna beat the shit out of you on your wedding night, teach you how to be an obedient wife.” The Dick is chuckling and the sound of it makes me sick.

“You were never nice, *Dick*,” I emphasize, “but I’ll keep an eye on Ronan,

just like our father wants. And you'll do your best to poison him-" He jostles violently, trying to kick my leg out from under me, but I pull his arm up a little higher, enjoying his bark of pain. "And you'll do your best to poison him against me, just like you always do. Now get out. We're not having a fight in the Dean's office."

Letting go and stepping back out of striking range, I shake my head when he still comes after me.

"Now, now, that's no way to behave."

The deep voice is cold, clipped and I close my eyes. Cormac. Of course. In the middle of a humiliating moment with The Dick.

His tall form blocks the light from the antechamber to the Dean's office, casting his face into shadow, but I can tell by his solid stance that he's not happy.

"I'm meeting with Dean Christie in a moment," Cormac makes a show of looking at his watch, a nice stainless-steel Rolex, I notice. Good quality, unfussy. A lot like him. "I'm thinking she doesn't want to return to a brawl. So you, lad, should be on your way now that you've imparted the news to your sister."

"I don't have to suck your ass the way the kids here do," The Dick sneers, but when Cormac steps into the light, I see my brother's low lip quiver. Cormac's eyes are cold, and the tight set of his jaw tells me he's tempted to punch The Dick in the face. Of course, I've always wanted to punch him in the face, so maybe I'm projecting.

Shooting me a nasty glance, The Dick picks up his jacket. "Just do what you're told. I'm gonna enjoy telling Dad about what a bitch you were tonight." He rotates his shoulder unconsciously, and I smother a grin as he winces.

"I'm sure you will."

My face flushes a painful pink as he storms out the door. I'm humiliated that Cormac saw that ugly exchange, that he knows what my family's like.

"You're okay then?"

"Oh! Um..." I push my hair back, looking anywhere but at him. "Just fine.

He's... Nothing. I'm fine." I hate how closely he's watching me, noting all my micro-expressions that I should know how to control by now.

"My brother Cameron, he's an arse," he volunteers. "He's used to be a huge twat, but he's downgraded to an arse now that he's in his twenties. Maybe your brother will, too."

A shocked little laugh bursts out of me. "Did you call him a twat?"

"Aye. It was his nickname for a good decade."

"How many brothers do you have?"

"Three brothers, a sister," he says, walking a bit closer.

This is news. Even though phones and computers - anything with internet access - are forbidden at the Academy, I'm fortunate enough to be friends with Tatiana, who has her own Skylink account that gives us access through our highly illegal devices. I'd looked up Cormac on our first day, but there's surprisingly little about the MacTavishes, given that they're such a wealthy, influential family. In our world, not being able to access information about a family means they have power, and a lot of it.

"And you?"

Blinking, I realize he's speaking. "You haven't read my student file yet?"

His full lips twitch and I remember what it was like to kiss them. God, those lips...

"No, I didn't think it was a good idea. And you should be on your way back to dinner, young lady."

Aaaand, my fluttering hope falls flat on its face.

"Your dictates about my eating habits are unnecessary," I said briskly, back in control. "I need to be going now. Goodnight Professor."

My heart nearly freezes solid as I head for the door and realize Dean Christie is standing there. Her face is settled in its usual, pleasantly bland expression so I have no idea what she might have heard.

"Goodnight, Miss Chandler," she says, patting me briefly on the shoulder as she strides back into her office.

"Goodnight, Dean Christie." I hear the low murmur of their conversation as I

speed-walk out of the entryway.

CHAPTER NINE

In which The Leader's Challenge is even worse than Mala feared.

Cormac...

After watching that encounter, I don't know whether to fuck Mala or hug her.

Her brother's a cunt.

It's clear he's got some power over her, but she was magnificent, refusing to back down when he went after her. I have only one sister, Sorcha, and she's treasured by all of us. She's a wee bit spoiled, but I know she grew up feeling secure and confident that her brothers would always keep her safe. How long has Mala had to battle against that little bastard? From what I've heard, her father's even worse.

"That boy's a spoiled child," Dean Christie says, "his father threw such a tantrum when he wasn't accepted into the Academy. He doesn't have the fortitude and strength of his brother and sister."

"Aye, he tried to punch her." My lips press together for a moment and she catches the movement. "She had his arm jacked up behind his back and he was crying for his mama in seconds."

She smiles, a genuine smile of deep happiness, which is startling to see on the likes of Dean Helen Christie. "Good."

Walking back to the cottage after an exhausting meeting with the Dean, I take the long way around the grounds, circling the student housing. I know I hurt Mala with my chilly dismissal, but it was necessary. I could see Helen's

shadow on the antechamber wall as she headed back to her office.

I walk faster. I can't encourage her. It was irresponsible to be that soft with her tonight.

Mala and her friend Willow have a suite on the third floor, south side. I pass by that particular corner, slowing down. Their windows are brightly lit, one is open, and there's music, something from Billie Eilish. They're laughing, and then Mala passes by the window, leaning out a bit to shut it.

She's wearing my sweatshirt.

Whistling softly, I walk back to my cottage. There's something on my doorstep, a white card wrapped in a pink ribbon.

"For fuck's sake..." I sigh. It's a naked photo of a girl from my Assassins class, displaying her tits like they're melons on a breakfast buffet, along with an impassioned note telling me how much she loves me.

This is the third one this week.

The vision of Mala, her slender body engulfed in my green sweatshirt takes over my thoughts, washing the image of the girl's naked body away.

Mala...

I'm useless for the rest of the week, my thoughts ping-ponging from being underneath Cormac with our knives intimately attached, to The Dick and whatever poison he's likely pouring into my dad's ear. There's no one there at home to speak up in defense of me, now that Michael's gone.

On the day of the Leader's Challenge, I'm up early, drinking a painfully hot cup of coffee and staring out the window. The weather's not bad, it's sunny, but the ever-present ocean wind is whipping around the island.

Willow stumbles out of her room, already dressed for the Challenge in a black tactical suit and heavy boots, heading straight for the coffee pot. "This is going to suck," she moans, "I can feel it."

"There's the cheery, positive attitude that takes you far in life!" I say with a big, fake smile.

"Yeah, those are attributes that count for exactly dick in this world," she

sneers, gratefully taking the mug from me. “Ah, the sacred caffeinated beverage of life. I can face anything with caffeine coursing through my veins.”

Just before we part to head for our teams, I grab her, hugging her hard. “Be safe, please fam. I have a really bad feeling about today.”

“You too,” she sighs.

Every college in the world probably spends an inordinate amount of time trying to keep their students safe. The unofficial motto of the Ares Academy is: If you get hurt, you’re an idiot. If you get killed, it’s just as well that you’re dead and no longer wasting the Academy’s time. This is not a nurturing place of education.

There are four majors at the Ares Academy. For the Challenge, each Leader - who is almost always the firstborn in their family - is required to pick three students from each of the other divisions; the Spies, like me, who handle intelligence and surveillance for their families. There are the Warriors, who head up their organization’s soldiers and security, and the Assassins, who do most of the crime family’s dirty work.

When Dean Christie steps up to the podium in the giant stone courtyard, I groan quietly. She looks too happy.

“Welcome to the year’s first Leader’s Challenge!”

Professor Fukumoto tells us that we’re leaving the Academy grounds for the first task, which we rapidly discover is at the small airport on Inis Mor, where we will be jumping out of an airplane to discover - midair - which team member has a tampered parachute.

The first task is scary, but mainly because I’m worried about my teammates who’ve never skydived before. But we figure out who has the tampered parachute and make it safely back to the landing zone.

Lucca’s team is waiting for pickup too, and I hug Mariya in relief. “Everyone okay?”

“We made it,” she says, cracking her neck. “I barely managed to get Haniel in a tandem rig before our chute deployed. Have you seen any of the other teams?”

“Manuel Sanchez washed out. One of his people panicked and pulled their canopy almost immediately,” I say, “I heard of a couple of other teams, but no names.”

“They do so love to keep us in suspense,” she agrees.

Liam pulls us in for a huddle before the next task. “Who’s done any rock climbing here?” Looking around, I’m grateful to see most of us nod. “These fuckers have tampered with a belay device and a team member’s climbing cams. Any one of us can get popped off the line like bad tuna from a can.”

I cock my head. Liam’s “Irish-isms” can be very confusing.

“We double rig, yeah?” Liam continues, “Ya’ keep your eyes on each other. Strongest teammates at top and bottom.”

The sheer, endlessly tall cliffs are the thing that the Aran Islands are the most famous for, and they’re fucking terrifying. I can skydive, no problem, but the vertigo I’m getting from looking down as we start the descent is making my vision blur.

Pull it together, you giant ninny. They’re all counting on you.

Hammering my climbing cams into the rock, I groan a little. The cliff face is brittle, we need more of the metal anchors to hold us. Looking up, I see Cormac, feet planted wide and watching every move. He looks at me directly and gives me the faintest of smiles, and it’s enough to make me smile into the cliff face and hammer another cam in harder.

Only a fool feels safe during a Challenge. I *know* this and still, a cautious hope is rising in my chest that we’ll get through this task just fine, it’ll be-

There’s a huge popping sound, like a rain of bullets and then my stomach’s nearly torn up and out of my throat as I plummet fifteen feet. My rig catches me, snapping my back and head violently in a U shape. I dangle helplessly for a minute, trying to lift my head against the searing pain. My shoulder crashes painfully into the cliff face and my arms flail, trying to pull myself upright on the climbing line.

“MALA!” My eyes squint as I try to focus. It’s Cormac. “Steady on!” He’s pointing, what’s he pointing at? My brain is sluggish but I see, there’s a promising thread of granite to my left, much more solid. My shaking hands pull me upright and I pull out two metal cams, pounding them into the rock

with all my strength. My head throbs with each strike of the hammer, but I get them in.

Six of us fell from the tampered climbing cams and belay, leaving the other four to frantically hold the line. I'm first to re-anchor and I brace my shaky legs against the rock for the guy underneath me. Merrill's in the Warrior's division, strong as hell but his spine got the same jolt mine did, but with more weight.

"Hey, Merrill!" I shout down, "See the vein of granite?"

He holds a bloody thumb up. "Got it. Fucking cliff. Fucking challenge..." he mutters as he fits a climbing cam into a crack, "motherfucking Academy!"

Konstantin, whose team is next to us, calls down to Liam. "Are you okay?"

Liam's holding up Clara, one of the girls from the Assassins division as she struggles to right herself. "Aye, true grand!"

Liar.

We're not grand at all, but at least we're restabilized and continue the descent, trying to move faster. We're next to last now.

I never thought this could get worse.

While no longer dreading our eventual fall, now I have to watch and wait for my friends and their teams to take a hit. My back is on fire, and my vision is still blurring, but we're on our ascent.

The worst equipment failure is on Konstantin's team. They nearly lose Boris, who's swinging wildly by a single rope and then Kon, who goes after him.

"Keep fuckin' climbing!" Liam roars, "We can't help 'em."

He's right, I know he's right but I keep looking up, hoping that Cormac is helping them the way he helped me.

When the hell-climb is finished and we make it back to the top, we're in second place, just after Lucca's team. I lie flat on the rocky soil, petting it gently. I never want to move again.

Apparently, even the sadistic Dean Christie is capable of mercy. All the teams gather in the dining hall, trying to eat something while Dr. Giardo, the

sour Academy physician, makes the rounds, checking wounds and wrapping up the worst cuts and scrapes. My back is still on fire from being snapped nearly in half from that fall off the cliff face and I'm keeping an ice pack on my neck. The terror and adrenaline from nearly falling to my death has worn off, and every muscle is reminding me how much they hate me right now.

"Lean over," he snaps at me, pressing along my spine and ribs. "I saw you fall. Are you feeling any tingling or numbness in your hands and feet?"

"No." I flinch as he presses a little harder. *Such an ass.* "But do you have any Ibuprofen?" He sighs, deeply put upon, and shakes a couple of pills loose from his bottle.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I tell Liam, and he nods tiredly.

"I need to take a whiz," he groans, "but I ain't getting up for anything."

"Yeah, I'll sit at the other end of the table when I get back, then."

I barely stifle a shriek when I'm grabbed from behind and pulled into an alcove by the bathrooms.

"Are ye okay?" Cormac says hoarsely, "That fall, you could have snapped your spine in half." He's cupping my cheeks with his big, warm hands and I blink back a few tears. It feels so good, his strength and his concern. He rests his forehead against mine. "Can you continue?"

"Of course, my back hurts but Dr. Giardo checked me over." He rolls his eyes in disgust and I smother a chuckle. "Yeah, that man really hates practicing medicine. I wish your Dr. Meyers was here."

"Aye, so do I," he agrees. His rough thumbs are stroking my cheekbones and it feels like courage and comfort and maybe, I can handle this last task and it'll all be fine. "I'm proud of you, lass. That was a rough climb. You did well."

"Thank you for the help," I say gratefully. "Will you get in trouble for that?"

He snorts, "I wasn't the only professor out there shouting encouragement. In my four years at the Academy, we never had a challenge so brutal."

There are footsteps behind us and he reluctantly pulls his hands away. "Be strong and smart," he whispers. "You're almost at the finish line."

"Thank you, Cormac-" He cuts me off with a fierce kiss. Such a kiss, with

care and concern and a long-held need that makes my heart surge. He reluctantly pulls back, kissing the tip of my nose and silently slips away.

CHAPTER TEN

In which we learn that Cormac's interrogation technique is messy but effective.

Cormac...

"That isn't wise."

I turn to find Laosie, her sharp blue eyes watching me.

"What would that be?" I stand tall, looking down at her sternly.

"Don't you use that looming nonsense on me," she says coolly, "I can still have you flat on your back in two moves, you lumbering redwood."

Chuckling despite myself, I nod. "There have been no other inappropriate interactions here on campus. I was just relieved that..." I draw in a deep breath.

She leans against the wall, gaze darting over my shoulder to make sure we're alone. "Here on campus," she emphasizes, "this means you two knew each other before?"

"Neither of us knew we had this connection. It was a surprise to see her in class," I say. "I've done nothing that violates the standards of teacher and student."

Rolling her eyes, she nods. "That, I believe. You haven't fallen for the overly-displayed charms of your student fangirls, I've seen the folder of love notes you've sent to the Dean."

"I'm doing nothing to encourage it," I growl, "I dinna get these women, all the cackling and twittering."

"Just be careful." Laosie steps closer. "I know you're an honorable man, Cormac, it's clear though, that Miss Chandler is not a- what did you call it? A twittering fangirl. Remember that Helen is deeply unforgiving of impropriety

with faculty and students. I'd hate to see you missing a hand."

Growling at that, I move past her. I've had enough of holding back from allowing myself to feel for Mala. Our night together is never far from my thoughts, seeing her around campus, how her gaze studiously avoids mine... It's been torturous, a feeling that makes me even more irritable. I have self-control, for fuck's sake! She should not have this kind of power over my thoughts.

I'd argued against the scuba dive through the underwater caves for the third and final task, I'd fought Helen hard on this one but she had insisted. Instead of watching the signals on the screen from the tracker tags in the wetsuits, I would have rather been down there, keeping an eye on these kids.

"This is sloppy," I murmured to Laosie, "too many moving parts, this shite can go sideways in a second."

"I agree with you, this is the worst of her ideas," she says quietly, "and that's saying something after the apocalyptic potential of the skydiving task."

When the stretcher brings out Konstantin Turgenev from the underwater caves at the end of the third task, I'm almost happy. It gives me something else to focus on. Two students attempted to kill him, and the staff members set to observe that section of the caves went conveniently missing. There's going to be some very unhappy people tonight, and I'm going to get a workout.

"Where were you, Martin?"

The guard I'm questioning is tied to a chair, his face and chest are bloody. He's held out longer than I expected. His chin's resting on his chest and he's having a hard time answering me through the broken teeth.

"I told you, fucker." Yeah, a little slushy sounding. "I heard something in one of the caves branching off to the left."

"Convenient," I say, stretching. "And did you find anyone there?"

"It was my job to check," he mumbles.

"So you left your post right at the moment Turgenev was attacked from behind during the marked course his team was sent through?" I punch him

again, knocking the chair over. There's a grunt as he lands on the cement floor. "You can see where I might question your timing."

Martin groans, turning his face away.

"If you're done playing with your food, I'd like to have a chat with you." Laoise is leaning against the door, looking bored.

"Why don't you see if this can jog your memory a little." I punch Martin hard enough that a molar flies out of his mouth. "I'll be back."

Laosie follows me into the bathroom, leaning against the wall and waiting for me to wash off all the blood. "This is why I prefer non-physical interrogation," she says. "Your way is so unhygienic."

"You have information for me?" I sigh.

"You'd think these little bastards would be better about checking their gear. If they'd bothered to look, they could have disabled their trackers. We identified the two students who tried to knock Mr. Turgenev unconscious, Hwan and Dubois, they're both in the Assassin's division."

"Appropriate. Who had them on their teams?"

"Dubois was on Baptiste Fournier's team," she explains. "We've had our eye on him since his cousin Camille attempted to kidnap Tatiana Aslanova last year. Hwan was on Lauren Birch's."

"Does Helen want me to bring them in now?"

"No, she wants to hold off and monitor their devices for outgoing messages. Finn in Cyber Security says he can hack in fairly easily, and leave a keylogger virus. Do these kids really think we don't know they have electronics?"

"I thought I was being cunning when I had a phone on campus ten years ago. And agreed on monitoring Hwan and Dubois," I say, wiping some of Martin's blood I missed off my neck. "But I want a tracker on both of them. Have Dr. Giardo administer mandatory flu shots. He can inject a subcutaneous tracker in on those two without any suspicion."

Laosie gives me a deeply unsettling grin. "He is going to hate you so much for this."

"Giardo hates everyone," I laugh, "this can't make it any worse. Let's see if

we can get through the next couple of months without another attempted murder.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In which Mala is not putting up with this shit anymore.

Mala...

Christmas Eve...

I'm a fool.

I don't know why I'm attempting this. Cormac made it clear he would have nothing to do with me, but my freedom is slipping away, a year and a half left before my life belongs to my father and whoever he marries me off to. I know that stubborn Scottish dick wants me. Almost as much as I need him.

Willow, who under most circumstances could be the spokesperson for Adderall, is remarkably single-minded when it comes to sniffing out heartbreak.

"You're going to have to tell me who you're really dressing up for tonight because I know it's not for Mariya." She's lounging on my bed, eating the rest of my Red-Hot Cheetos stash from home.

"You're getting Cheeto dust all over your makeup," I said, finishing my lipstick. "Now hurry up. I have to go dress Mariya before she tries to do it herself."

"Makeup application is not her strength," Willow nodded, "remember her attempt at a smokey evening eye last year?" We both cringe hard enough that I can feel my spine compress. "But you're not getting out of telling me something. Who is all of this..."

She waved her hand, encompassing my short, silver dress and stiletto heels, "Who is it for? I never see you hanging around any of the guys enough to think you have any interest in them. Aren't you supposed to be making nice with Ronan Cox? Didn't he ask you to be his date tonight?"

I fluffed my hair in the mirror, ignoring her question. She's right. I've been instructed to get closer to Ronan, but I still turned him down. It's too obvious. Letting Ronan rub up against me while I'm yearning for Cormac is... gross. I couldn't do it.

Tonight, Cormac MacTavish going to *see* me. I won't let him look away this time.

On the walk over, Mariya slips her arm into mine. "We know *my* reasons for our date tonight, but what about yours? Are you sure about this?"

Back when we'd agreed to attend the dance together, Konstantin - her fiancé from her family's Bratva arranged marriage - was acting like a complete bastard and I had been seething from yet another round of Cormac's burst of heat and then his instant, chilly withdrawal and dismissal.

"Yes, I'm sure," I say, mouth tight and angry. "He'll have to show some kind of reaction, one way or another. And if it's a negative one, at least I'll know, right?"

"I wish you'd tell me who he is," she asks, concerned. When I don't answer, she squeezes my arm, smiling sweetly. "I'm pretty sure this mystery man is not going to know what hit him."

The abrupt change from the chill outside to the warmth of the Grand Hall is welcome; all four fireplaces are roaring, with evergreen swags draping the walls and an enormous Christmas tree in front of the windows looking out on the entryway to the Academy. This might be a formal night, but the Dean unbent enough to bring in a DJ instead of a string quartet this year.

Since only around twenty-five percent of the students here are women, there's huge competition for formal events like these. The faces of my fellow Spies hanging around the bar are hilarious; alternately outraged and disappointed.

"Well, that's just not fair!" Matt Carson's new this year, a blond surfer boy type from California. "Really? This is selfish, ladies! So many of us and so few of you." He's saying it with a smile and a nod to Konstantin, who's watching like he's swallowed his tongue.

"Sorry, but sometimes a woman just needs the soft touch of someone who understands her," I say, batting my lashes.

One of the guys with Matt makes a helpless little bleating noise as I kiss Mariya's cheek. Her face is turning an ominous red because I know she's about to burst into uproarious laughter, so I slide my arm around her waist and quickly pull her onto the dance floor. We laugh so hard that we're clinging to each other to keep upright.

"*Bozhe moy*, oh my god, that was hilarious," she wheezes, trying to wipe her eyes and keep my excellent mascara application from running.

"That guy from the Warriors division - Karl, I think - might have been crying a little," I add, pressing my hand against my stomach. My muscles are sore from laughing, but it's wonderfully freeing, and I feel lighter now, joyful.

"And now, we dance!" Mariya swings me in a circle and my hips swivel in a figure eight to the music. It's been so long since I danced, just for fun, spinning and laughing with my friends... It was that night in Southbank, in fact.

The night I met Cormac.

I know he's here, I can feel his gaze on me like a physical caress. Looking around the hall, I find him. Cormac's in full Scottish Laird mode tonight, tall and powerful looking in his kilt and black jacket, his hair swept off his face and he's gorgeous, damn him. He's in the left corner of the room by the bank of French doors leading out to the terrace, near some of the faculty but standing a bit apart. There's a little group of his fangirls edging closer, but he's ignoring them, drinking angrily from a glass of amber liquor. Probably Scotch. Something expensive and rare, no doubt.

He's glaring at me over his glass and I feel a vicious bolt of satisfaction.

Good.

The light's flickering off my silver dress and I spin again, waving my arms above me like seaweed and feeling invincible.

"You are both looking exceptionally beautiful tonight." It's Konstantin, looking handsome in his tux and giving us an elaborate bow. Leaning in closer, he murmurs, "You're playing a dangerous game, Mala. I don't want you to get hurt."

Mariya looks a little surprised. "Why? There's no harm in dancing."

Kon takes our hands, gracefully spinning us both out and in again. “It depends on who you’re dancing for.” His gaze flickers over my shoulder and I know he sees Cormac glaring. Leaning back, he gives me a reassuring smile, “I’m not here to cut in. I’m just concerned.”

Sucking in a deep breath, I manage to return his smile, “It’s okay, I need to freshen up anyway.” I give him my haughtiest look. “I suppose you’d like a dance with my date?”

He kisses my hand, laughing. “If it’s acceptable to you both.”

I squeeze Mariya’s waist and whisper, “Have fun.”

Cutting through the crowd quickly, avoiding any reaching hands or requests for a dance, I head for the ladies’ room. I’ll just take a breath and sit for a second. Maybe this is pointless. Maybe-

Well, this is déjà vu.

A hand goes over my mouth as I’m jerked into a side hallway. I stomp my spiked heel down and he moves his foot out of the way just in time.

“Ah-ah! Bad lass,” his heavy whisper sends goosebumps over my skin. “You’re playing with fire tonight.”

“I’m not playing anymore, Cormac,” I warn breathlessly. “No more of your kissing and warm little moments, just to draw back and treat me like a child. You either admit that you want me or you back off.”

He growls, *he growls* and I feel the vibration down my spine. “I’m in a position of authority over you, girl. These feelings are not right-”

“Stop,” I hiss, “just stop it.” I turn around with some difficulty and glare up at him. He’s got me pressed against the wall, a dark corner of the hall where it would be difficult to see us; his chest is heaving against my breasts and he slides a thick thigh between mine. “I have a year and a half left of freedom, and I’m not wasting it. If you want me, step up.”

“If I don’t, you’re going to give yourself to one of those unworthy little bastards?” His hands tighten on my arms and his thigh pushes up hard against my center. I wore these flimsy undies because they don’t leave a line under my dress, but I know he can feel the moisture starting to seep through the silk against his bare skin.

“It’s not an either-or thing,” I argue, flushing as his muscled thigh rubs against my center again. “I- I feel something for you. But you don’t get to play with my head anymore.”

His brows draw together in a thunderous scowl, I glare right back, even though I can feel the embarrassing rush of moisture drenching my undies. This smug bastard might be angry but he wants me. The defined musculature of his leg is rubbing against my clitoris, nearly lifting me off my feet and a moan escapes me.

His forehead drops to mine. “Damn you, woman. You’re in my blood.”

He yanks me off the wall and slides an arm around my waist, leading me rapidly down the hall.

CHAPTER TWELVE

In which there are so many orgasms.

Cormac...

Mala walks with me silently as I lead her through a set of doors and down a stairway.

“There’s a network of tunnels that run under the Academy,” I murmur, “I discovered most of them when I went here.”

“I’d heard rumors...” She’s looking at the dripping stone walls and dim lighting as I hurry her along, our footsteps echoing in the silence. When she stumbles over the uneven floor, I sweep her up in my arms, enjoying her startled yelp.

“Women and their elaborately useless shoes...” I grumble under my breath as she laughs.

She wraps her arms around my shoulders. “Where are we going?” The light scent of her- like honey and tangerines, like sunlight, envelops me and I groan. If I get any harder, my cock is going to lift my kilt past all decency.

“To my cottage.”

“You don’t live in the faculty building?”

“Christ, no,” I said fervently. Turning left, I trot up a flight of stairs and open the door, checking the exit to make sure no guards are milling about. “Living cheek-by-jowl with all those people? Never. I live in the shepherd’s cottage.”

“Cheek by what?” Mala’s laughing quietly and the movement brushes those spectacular breasts against me again. Pulling off my jacket, I wrap it around her shoulders.

“Almost there.”

The cottage is nearly hidden behind one of the greenhouses and the area is deserted, everyone is at the party tonight. I have the door open and Mala inside in a moment, pressing her against the stone wall to kiss her again, those full, juicy lips.

“Mmm... I don't have a bump on my head anymore, Cormac.”

I realize I have my hand behind her head against the roughness of the stone. “Force of habit, lass.” Pulling her hands up, I admire just how beautiful she is, her arms stretched up and elongating her torso, the thin material of the dress doing nothing to hide her taut nipples arching up at me. “I can still feel your sweet slick on my thigh,” I murmur, kissing along her jaw. “If I were to put my hand under this wee dress, just how wet would you be?”

She's brave, this one, putting her hand on my hard cock and squeezing it. “I'm sure you can find that out all by yourself.” I hoist her up and she wraps her legs around my waist, her wet pussy rubbing against the wool of my kilt. If I am not inside this woman in moments I'm going to die, it's certain. That little silver dress slides right off and she's on her back on my bed, her toffee-colored eyes looking me over as her hair flames out around her on the pillow.

“These have to come off,” I say, tearing the flimsy wet panties easily and putting them to my nose for a moment. Christ, the scent of her. I kept smelling my fingers the next day after she left my apartment, savoring the faint fragrance left by her perfect little cunt.

Kneeling over her, I run my hands down the silky skin of her thighs, parting them wide. I feel her tense, trying to close them and I tighten my grip, keeping her open to me. “You're too beautiful to hide from me, little fox.” My mouth is on her before I can say another word and yes, she is just as sweet as I remember, sweet and tangy and I slide my finger inside her, feeling those silky walls contract against me.

One finger and she's this tight...

I suck her hard little clit into my mouth and her hands come down to grip a fistful of my hair. Ah, she liked that last time, pulling my hair while she moaned and her thighs tightened against my head. Adding another finger, I chuckle against her wet lips as her hands tighten their grip.

It takes such a short amount of time to make her come, it seems she's been missing this as much as I have. The flavor of her floods my tongue and I curl

my fingers inside her, stroking for that rough little patch that set her off last time. She had looked surprised then, her beautiful face alight as I brought her off. As if she'd never felt that way before.

“Sionnach beag, my little fox. Were you a virgin?”

She stiffens and my hand slides up to rest between her breasts, feeling her heart pound. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me,” I answer honestly. And it does, more than I can say. I don’t sleep with virgins. I prefer bad girls. But with Mala... “Tell me.”

I slowly thrust my fingers inside her, drawing out her orgasm as she tries to keep quiet. Kissing her clit, I grind my stubbled chin against it and she comes again.

She’s incredible to watch in orgasm, a fucking biblical moment.

“Yes,” she ground out. “I was.”

My cock is screaming at me to shut the fuck up and bury him inside her, but I hold it together. “You could have told me.”

“I thought you would turn me down,” she says honestly. “After being attacked that night- oh, god, your fingers!” I’ve pushed them higher, stroking the core of her to find that delicate spot that can send a woman skyrocketing.

“I- I realized they could have dragged me off. I could have died without ever living. Living for myself anyway. I wanted...”

Her beautiful eyes are closed, she’s panting helplessly, still gripping my hair by the fistful.

“I wanted something for me. I wanted you.” She looks up at me and I’m consumed with need for her.

“You want me between your legs? Do you want me fucking your pretty pink pussy?” I growl, surging up over her, keeping her legs spread with my knees and pulling open my kilt.

Tearing at my shirt, studs popping from the buttonholes, she nods fervently. I just barely manage to remember a condom and she watches, wide-eyed as I roll it down my cock.

I tap the head of it against her clit. “Make me wet.” Mala arches her hips, rubbing against me as my dick spreads her lips, slicking me up with her wet

little pussy. “I’ll go slow, this first time,” I bite her earlobe as the head of my cock pushes into her.

Fuck me, but she’s tight. Circling my hips, pushing slowly, I whisper, “Relax. Let me in.”

“I am relaxed,” she moans, “you’re too big.”

This only makes me harder and I grit my teeth, sliding my hand down to palm her ass, moving her with me. “You’re strangling my cock, little fox. Maybe you *should* be in the Assassins division.” She laughs breathlessly, and it distracts her just enough that I can shove half my dick inside her. Pulling out, I growl, I can feel her tight walls clinging to me and I’m half insane as I slam into her, forcing her to take all of me.

“Ah! God, Cormac,” she moans, digging her fingernails into my back and I want her to, I want her to mark me.

“I’m going to shape this exquisite little cunt to fit me, only me,” I grunt, sliding my arm under her knee and lifting her leg higher, opening her wider and slamming back inside her. “Nothing could feel as good as being inside you, *Sionnach beag*,” I groan. She wraps her other leg around me, her heel digging into my ass and pushes up against me. “There you are. You’re enjoying it now, aren’t you? You’ll be sore, but it will be easier the next time.”

“Oh, I like it when you do the dirty talk,” she moans, shivering.

Pulling her arms over her head, I hold her in place, staring down at her beautifully flushed skin, her open mouth moaning for me and I shove inside her, harder and deeper and the slick grip of her pussy is going to destroy me.

“Come with me now, my bad girl. Come for me. Let me see you.”

The dim light in the bedroom makes her auburn curls flame bright and then her eyes, her beautiful toffee-colored eyes flare too and we’re on fire. Everything is heat and wet and silk and I shove deep, holding inside her. For a moment, we’re suspended, over nothing. And then we fall together into the flames.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In which there is conversation and Christmas Dinner.

Mala...

There's a giant, heavy body lying on top of me and I have no desire to move him, the weight and warmth of him are so comforting. Cormac's shaft is still inside me, and we're both panting.

I didn't know a man could come like that - make *me* come like that - and instantly be ready for sex again. He's thirty. Is this normal? The second time was greedier. He took me soft. Then he took me hard. I pulled on his hair the first time, but he wrapped mine around his fist, pulling my head back to kiss me when he slid into me from behind on the second. He spanked me. He called me more wonderful, filthy things, his bad girl, his filthy princess, his *Sionnach beag*, little fox.

To my shock, I came even harder the second time. Twice.

Sliding his fingers into my mouth now, he rasps, "Lick your pussy from my fingers." I blush wildly and do it and he kisses me, his tongue tasting me again.

Pulling out with a groan, he watches my face, and I can't hide my wince. "Sorry, I should have been more careful. You were a tight fucking fit. Hold still."

After pulling a quilt up over me, he disappears into the little bathroom, brazenly naked and I admire his perfect, sculpted ass as he walks away. Cormac is from a different time, I swear. With his intimidating height and that sense of barely contained menace, he looks like he should be a pirate, plundering a ship somewhere or one of those burly mountain men who disdain society and wrestle bears.

He's back after a moment with a warm, wet cloth, spreading my legs again with a stern look as I tried to close them. "Let me take care of you, lass."

The words hit me like a punch to the heart. When was the last time anyone said that to me? My mother died of cancer when I was only twelve, leaving me with my brothers and unloving father. I manage to hold still as he cleans me with a gentleness that I don't expect. But when he looks up at me with a smile, my stomach twists. He's too warm. Too kind and I can't let my walls crumble. Not yet.

"I have to use the bathroom," I whisper, trying to smile back as I make my escape from the bed. The door is closed and the water is blasting in the sink before I let myself cry. Tears at home earned me a slap across the face, I learned to hide them a long time ago.

By the time I compose myself and wash my face, the bedroom is empty and Cormac's plaid robe is laid out on the bed for me. Chuckling, I put it on, rolling the sleeves up so they don't hang over my hands, and wrapping the robe around me nearly twice to make it fit. I can hear him in the main room, dishes clinking and the wonderful smell of roast beef.

"I could never be a vegetarian," I say, walking into the kitchen. "I wanted to, back when I volunteered at an animal shelter, but I missed meat too much."

He offers me a juicy bit of roast, holding the fork to my mouth. "Try this."

"Omigod," I groan a little. I didn't eat all day, too nervous about the party and the roast's flavor explodes on my tongue, juicy, slightly smoky. Divine.

"The beef is from our farm near Cairngorms National Park," he says, slicing off another small bite for me before covering the roast. He opens another pot on the old stove where carrots and potatoes are simmering.

"Even for you, this is an enormous amount of food," I sit down at the farm table as he pours me a glass of wine.

"Fucking you into submission took a lot of energy and I'm starving." He watches me choke on my first swallow of Shiraz.

"You can get gourmet delivery service from the dining hall at any time," I manage to cough up the rest of what is a very good wine. "But you went to all this trouble? You must have started this roast before the party."

“I like to cook,” he shrugs, plating up the roast and vegetables, grilled mushrooms, and a pretty salad that I suspect he threw together just for me since he doesn’t take any. “I prefer to know where my food is coming from.”

“This is amazing, thank you for sharing your... dinner? Midnight snack? Early brunch?” I laugh. He has all my favorites here on the table and the only thing that would make it better is if he took his pants off again. Actually... wincing slightly as I gingerly adjust myself in the chair, maybe I need a little break.

“You have a surprising range of talents for a man who spends his time teaching students how to kill people,” I say. “Do you have any other hobbies not related to murder?”

“I play golf.”

“Really?” For some reason, that is the thing my brain refuses to accept, the vision of this beast of a man in plaid golf shorts, warming up on the green.

“What? Scotland is known for our golf courses.”

I smother my giggle with a bite of potato.

The rest of the food is just as spectacular as the roast, and we eat in comfortable silence as the falling snow tries to stick to the windows. The cottage is really just one big room, the kitchen on one end and a comfortable seating area with a big stone fireplace on the other, the tiny bedroom and bathroom wedged in like an afterthought. I did learn enough about the MacTavishes to know he’s a billionaire, like the rest of his family. But Cormac seems comfortable here, in a cottage far less grand than my own suite.

“I never told anyone about you,” I say abruptly, “not even Willow and Tatiana, who were there with me that night at the Carnival in Southbank. They just knew your first name.”

“Why didn’t you talk about us?” he asks, absently swirling his wine.

“It wasn’t...” I hesitate. “It wasn’t right. We were different here.” My thoughts get swirled in my muddled emotions, scattering before I can clarify. He was mine. In London, anyway. The memory is too important to open up to gossip and speculation. “Will you answer a question I’ve had for a while?”

“Aye. If I can.”

“Why are you here?” I ask. “You’re the first-born MacTavish. Shouldn’t you be working alongside your father, getting ready to take over the family business?”

“He dinna need me yet,” Cormac says, getting to pour a glass of Macallan. He holds it up, offering it to me and I shake my head.

“Your father doesn’t need his first-born’s help with the biggest mafia in Scotland?” I ask incredulously. “Some legendary people are teaching here, but this is where you come to impart your knowledge after living a full life of crime, when you smell like brimstone and the vaporized souls of your enemies. Not before.”

His steady jade gaze never leaves my face. “Dean Christie needed a weapons instructor, I’m just doing her a favor for the year.”

Such a poker face. Damn him.

Switching tactics, I ask, “Every guy on campus has a huge bro-crush on you. There are stories of your legendary prowess in battle.”

His brow wrinkles. “Bro-crush?”

Laughing at his expression, I say, “Everyone worships you. Honor and family loyalty are prized above all things here. To the people who matter, anyway.”

“Family is always first,” he says, and my stomach twists, remembering my father’s demands.

“So... so tell me about one of the stories, what’s real, what isn’t.”

He nods reluctantly. “It depends on what you want to know.”

“The hostages you rescued, they say single-handedly. You fought off eighteen guys, or a hundred or six thousand based on who’s telling the story.”

The light dims in his eyes like a shadow over the moon.

“There was a Triad who was angry because we wouldn’t allow them to ship human cargo through our ports. The fuckers thought taking hostages would improve their offer. They took my sister, who was out with my aunt and three little cousins. Just *bairns*.”

I held my breath, watching the sorrow and fury sweep across his face.

“I dinna do it alone, I had backup, but where those fuckers were holding them, there was only one point of entry. I took it. There were twenty-three men there. They were in pieces when I left.”

I can picture it, Cormac a vicious whirlwind of death, slaughtering his enemies with a lethal economy of motion, leaving a pile of bodies in his wake.

“Were...” I struggle to get a coherent question, “Were your people all right? They didn’t hurt them?”

“It depends on what ya think of as hurt,” he said, finishing his drink and setting the glass down carefully on the table. By the way his fists are clenched, I suspect he wants to throw it against the wall. “My little cousins still scream with nightmares. My sister won’t leave our family estate.”

Reaching out cautiously, I cover his fist with my hand, squeezing gently. “You can only control what you do after the emergency strikes, or the disaster, the attack. You saved your people. You brought them home.”

He looks up at me, his gaze flat and cold. “We dinna stop until that Triad was ash and bone.”

“Good,” I say fervently. I’m not by nature a vicious person, but I am happy that the people who caused him so much anguish are gone.

His gaze is different now, speculative as he looks at me, eyes narrowed. “Will your roommate be raising the alarm yet?”

“No,” I admit, “she knew what I wanted tonight, she just didn’t know with whom.” I’m an animal. I must be because even after that chilling story, the way he’s looking at me is setting my lower half on fire. “You’re going to try something on me, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he agrees, “most likely.”

“Do you- uh, should we clear the dishes first?” I yelp. The massive bastard lifts me up into his arms like I’m a child and carries me back into the bedroom.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In which happiness and tragedy go hand in hand at the Academy.

Mala...

While the rest of the students complain about the cold and never-ending snow, I drift through the next few weeks in a rosy bubble of joy.

Cormac taught me the tunnel patterns, which ones had security cameras, and which ones didn't. We take different routes each time to meet and I wear a big hoodie, pulled over my head and hiding my face. I change the way I walk through the tunnels, how I move.

The cloak and dagger part of our equation isn't as titillating as one would expect for someone in the Spy division. I don't want to know what will happen to us if we're caught. Rumors abound about the Dean's punishments for unapproved relationships, but I can't stop. I won't. And even though I know the secrecy pains Cormac, he still meets me every time at the door of his cottage, hands cupping my face and kissing me hungrily.

He wanted to keep away from me so badly, but he's drawn to me, too, like the tide to the moon and I'm so happy that he's not fighting it anymore.

"Your friends still haven't demanded to know where you're going?"

We're lying on a thick quilt in front of the fireplace, naked. Even though the wind whistles through the old window panes, the fire and Cormac's huge body combined feel like a blast furnace.

"Willow, Tatiana, and Mariya might be in the Spy division, too, but they value our friendship more than getting an answer," I say, running my fingers through his thick hair. "They know I'm happy, and they're satisfied with that."

I'm fascinated by his long hair. Though he seems so indifferent about it, pulling it back with an elastic when it gets in his way. It's a thick chestnut brown, silky and when he's inside me, I hold onto fistfuls of his hair like it's the only thing keeping me from flying away. I tug especially hard as I'm coming, I hear his low groan and I know he enjoys it.

"You know, if you're really that fond of my hair, I can just cut it off for you..." Cormac's long fingers expertly flip a knife, bringing it up teasingly.

"Don't you dare!" I gasp, "I will murder you if you cut a single inch, that's just-" The knife he's idly spinning is exquisite. It's obviously very old, with an elaborately carved bone handle and a blade and trim of Damascus steel. "Oh... it's so pretty," I sigh. "Where did you get it?"

"It was my *Seanair*'s, my grandfather's." He holds it up to the firelight so the flicker of the flames dances along the elaborately crafted steel. "He gave it to me before he died. It's been in my family for generations. It's my most prized possession." He watches me as I gently run a finger down the blade, feeling the tiny ripples hammered into the steel.

Someone pounds on the door and I jump, cutting my finger. "Shit," I hiss, watching the blood spill from the little slice.

"Go into the bathroom," Cormac whispers, cupping the back of my head. "Stay there. There's medical supplies under the sink."

Nodding, I slip silently into the bathroom and shut the door as I hear the impatient voice of Professor Fukumoto. "MacTavish, open up! It's important."

Oh crap oh crap oh crap Professor Fukumoto?

There could be no one worse to catch us, aside from Dean Christie. I know Fukumoto is just as ruthless.

Finding his med kit, I open it as quietly as I can, trying to wrap my finger while listening at the door.

"Lauren Birch is dead."

I suck in a breath of air so fast that it nearly chokes me and I close my eyes, focusing on my breathing.

Not Lauren.

She is one of the few women in the Leader's Division and she is amazing; strong, and focused. She picked me for a Challenge last spring and we won. I remember how she laughed and toasted the rest of us with champagne.

I hold onto my bloody finger and sob silently, waiting for them to leave.

When Cormac opens the door, I'm sitting on the floor, staring blankly at the wall.

"Oh, baby..." He picked me up, carrying me to the bed and rocking me like a child.

"What happened to her?" My voice is flat, my thoughts are flying through my brain, somehow not able to stick together long enough to make sense.

"She was attacked outside the student housing building."

"How?"

He pauses for a moment, and his arms tighten around me. "She was stabbed."

"That- okay, that doesn't make sense!" I writhe free from his hold and pace the little room. "No! Lauren's strong, and smart. There's no way-"

"She was attacked by three people," he cuts me off.

My back hits the wall and I slide down it, landing on the floor with a thump.

"How could this have happened?" I whisper.

Crouching in front of me, he rubs my arms soothingly. "Listen to me, you need to be smart and focused now, yes? Things are happening on campus that I can't explain right now, but I need you to be safe. No more going through the tunnels, you don't go anywhere alone."

Comprehension dawns. "You're not here just as an arms instructor, are you? My friends and I, we've talked about the rumors regarding the newcomers to the campus. This is part of it, isn't it? Are you here..." I flailed for the right words. "Undercover?"

He just stares at me, infuriatingly blank. "I'm going to walk you back through the tunnel. From now on, you won't go anywhere alone. Don't try to come see me."

"That's it?" My voice is embarrassingly high and needy but I can't stop.

“You won’t explain anything to me? Are you kidding me right now?”

“Stay aware of everything around you. Everyone behaves suspiciously at the Ares Academy, but-” he sighs in frustration, “but if you see anything out of the *usual* range of odd, you tell me. We’ll sort this out.”

“This is much bigger than just some questionable ‘accidental’ deaths over the summer, isn’t it?”

He cups my face with those big, warm hands and nods. “Aye.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In which there are speeches, a bonfire and whiskey.

Mala...

The next few days are hell. Everyone is spooked by poor Lauren's murder, and the easygoing formation of friend groups begins to fragment a bit, the ranks closing against the newcomers to the school this year.

In our little circle, we'd all talked about the alarming disappearance of some of the upper-classmen we knew who didn't make it back to the Academy this year. The incoming freshmen from unfamiliar families and syndicates. Konstantin and Lucca in particular have been focused on tracking the deaths and accidents that thinned our ranks.

But now that I knew - whether he would admit it or not - that Cormac was here as a... what? A spy? An enforcer? For protection? Whatever it was, it was clear that Dean Christie knew there was a genuine and serious threat against us.

“Oy! Mala!”

Turning, I see Ronan Cox jogging toward me and Willow. She arches a brow at me meaningfully. I had told her my brother's instructions from my father that night when The Dick made his unwelcome visit here at the Academy.

“Hi Ronan,” I say, trying to balance appearing friendly with having no desire to speak to him.

“How are you two holding up?” he asks, politely including Willow. “Ah, never mind. I can see from those weak smiles.”

My chest loosens up a bit and I can laugh. “So much for our inscrutable spy training, eh?”

“So, I have a thought.” He joins us, walking slowly toward the Armory. “Things are bad now, spirits are low. I’m thinking we should have a memorial for Lauren.”

I stop right there on the path and hug him. “That’s genius. That is absolute genius and you are so right! None of us got a chance to say goodbye, and maybe this would help draw everyone back together!”

“Yeah, that’s actually some heartwarming shite, Cox,” approves Willow.

“Good!” Ronan beams, and for a second, I think that maybe being married to him wouldn’t be so bad. Then the realization that I would never see Cormac again is acutely painful.

What am I doing?

“...you know Kon and Lucca will take no suggestions from me,” he’s still talking. “But you two are campus queens, and I’m happy to have you take this over. I can help if you need me.”

Willow animatedly brings up some ideas and I try to focus again. I won’t think about Cormac and the end of us. I can’t.

“Okay, I’ll speak to Dean Christie right after weapons practice,” I volunteer. “But you should get all the credit for this, Ronan.”

He throws a careless arm over my shoulders as we keep walking, and the unfamiliar intimacy throws me off. Has his brother spoken to him about a possible alliance, too?

“Eh, I don’t care,” he says, “I’m just tired of all the gloomy shite.” He peels off as we head toward the Armory’s entrance and Cormac is there, staring at us coldly.

Shit. He saw me hug Ronan.

I’m allowed to hug other people. Especially since he refuses to see me for my own “safety,” I think resentfully. Yet, as we pass him, I desperately want to smooth those frown lines on his forehead.

Waiting to speak to Dean Christie after class, it suddenly hits me how stupid it is to meet with her. The woman is hardcore, she’s Old Testament, the angel that you paint lamb’s blood on the door and hope she’ll pass over your

household and leave you alone. After that interaction with Cormac in her office, did she suspect anything? Did she wonder about me? What the hell am I doing here?

“Miss Chandler? The Dean will see you now.”

I’m going to die. No, you’re not! You’re a spy, for fuck’s sake! Act like one!

She’s sitting behind her desk, and for the first time, I see signs of disorder in her office. It’s usually rigidly spotless, with an empty desk and perfectly positioned furniture. There are stacks of paperwork crowding her workspace and three whiteboards tacked up on the walnut-paneled walls.

“Good afternoon, Dean Christie.” *Thank you god, my voice didn’t wobble in terror.*

“Good afternoon Miss Chandler, what did you need?” Fine lines are radiating from her eyes and around her mouth that I swear weren’t there at the Christmas party. Whatever’s happening, it’s getting worse.

“I won’t take much of your time, ma’am, some of the students wanted to hold a memorial for- for Lauren. The campus has been fractured by what happened, and we thought a memorial for her might help pull us back together.”

She’s just listening to me, no change of expression.

“It was Ronan Cox’s idea, actually,” I offer. “If you would approve the memorial, we’ll do all the work.”

There’s a painful silence that feels like it lasts six hours, but is likely closer to thirty seconds or so.

“That is brilliant,” she nods. “I’ll have the faculty pass the word around. Can you put it together by tomorrow night?”

“Absolutely,” I say gratefully. “I’ll just... be on my way then, thank you.”

“Miss Chandler?”

Oh, god I was so close...

Turning around, I force a smile. “Yes, Dean?”

“How are you doing this year? Any new pressures?”

I swallow with an audible clicky noise in the quiet room. “I’m doing fine, thank you.”

“I am sorry your brother isn’t here to share the year with you,” she says quietly. “Michael has been missed here on campus, but by no one more than you, I am sure.”

“I don’t want you to see this part...”

My nails cut into my palm as I squeeze it. “Thank you for thinking of him,” I manage. It’s her abrupt kindness, the surge of that memory, hanging upside down, covered in blood and broken glass... “Thank you for saying his name.”

She nods. “Of course.”

The next evening...

We will never be a normal student body. We’re the offspring of criminals, killers. But one of our own was taken and because of that, it looks like everyone has crowded onto the center square, a huge courtyard lined with carved granite benches and boxwood hedges in front of the Dean’s Building tonight.

The ever-present wind is whipping gleefully across the square, and we huddle together in our little groups, but the space between us all is a bit less tonight. I can taste the salt tinge of the ocean on my lips like a tear.

The sun is setting, sending out its last flares of red and orange over the flat landscape of the island when Dean Christie steps up on the podium. “This night is not about me, or the faculty. Lauren was one of you, and you should be the ones to speak for her. What we offer is a podium,” she smiles slightly, “whiskey, and a bonfire.” A cheer goes up from the students and as the bonfire roars to life, it seems easier to be together again.

Lucca stands up first. “Lauren is- was- one of only eight women in the Leader’s division. Watching her made me realize how much harder she was willing to work to prove herself. She shouldn’t have been required to. But she never let the assumed privilege of being a first-born give her an excuse to become entitled. She taught us all about humility, the responsibility of being who we were.” His lips tighten, and he takes a moment. “I’m committing

here and now, to never forget what she taught me.”

Tatiana and I are clinging to each other, listening to Konstantin tell a funny story about his and Lauren’s first year in the Leader’s division involving a mistaken identity and a live carp. I’m trying to follow the story when I catch a movement in the corner of my eye. We’re standing on one of the stacks of granite, so I have a better view of the surrounding area. One of the tunnel entrances is behind the Library, and it’s landscaped in a way to be invisible... unless you know where to look. I can see someone step behind the boxwood hedge, and there’s no reason for it unless they’re going for the tunnel.

I don’t recognize them, they’re not one of the guards or the staff. It must be a student I don’t know yet. Squeezing Tatiana, I lean her slightly onto Mariya’s shoulder. “I’ll be right back,” I whisper and step behind them, silently heading for that corner of the center square. It’s dark enough now that the bonfire is the only effective light, and it’s easy to go from one shadowy spot to another until I’m behind the Library.

Maybe it was Cormac, or some other mysterious soul but the door to the tunnel opens soundlessly, the hinges have been greased. Slipping inside, I halt for a moment, straining to hear footsteps or voices. There’s nothing, and I tiptoe down the stairs. This particular tunnel comes to a T and branches off to the left and right. The right turn leads towards Cormac’s cottage. Pausing at the junction, I still can’t hear anyone, which is a bigger concern. These floors are concrete and footsteps echo off the stone walls and ceiling.

Where could they have-

A hand slams over my mouth, smothering my scream. I slam my elbow back into their ribcage and stomp down on their foot, but they move it just in time.

There’s a pained grunt and then a whisper, “Stop, Mala! It’s me, goddamnit!”

“Cormac?” Angrily peeling his hand away from my face, I whirl around. “What the hell!” I whisper, “Creeping up on me like that? What’s wrong with you?”

He’s equally furious, pushing me into a little alcove and taking my jaw in one hand so he can whisper into my ear. “What are you doing down here alone after I specifically told you not to use the tunnels!”

“Because I saw a student slip behind the Library and use the tunnel. I didn’t

think anyone but you knew about this one, it's not one of the tunnels monitored by the security cameras.”

“So you thought the wise course of action would be to follow a stranger down the tunnel alone?” Now, he's really mad and he gives me a little shake.

“Are you daft, girl?”

Then, the dim lights lining the tunnel go out.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

In which there is dirty, filthy tunnel sex and no one is displeased about it.

Cormac...

“Shh! The tunnel lights are motion-sensitive,” I murmur, “there’s no one here but us. Now, at least.”

Mala sags against me in relief. “Okay.”

I’m trying to concentrate on the seriousness of this moment. I need to know who she saw, a description. There’s only a handful of people at the Academy who know about this tunnel and the hidden entrance, and if she didn’t recognize them, it’s an enemy.

Mala is leaning against me, her breasts pushing into my chest with every agitated breath. I breathe in her sweet scent of honey and tangerine and feel her warmth and I have missed her. The addictive feel of her rules me and it’s been three days since I’ve been inside her.

“You and Cox seemed cozy the other day.”

“Really? That’s the only thing you have to say to me?”

My hands slide down her arms, fingers loosely circling her thin wrists and drawing them up over her head. The move makes her back arch and I can feel her nipples, already hard, poking through her thin sweater. “Have you missed me, little fox?”

“I...” My bad girl is fighting it. “You know I have,” she finishes in a rush.

The little alcove I’ve pushed her into keeps us from the motion sensor lights and it’s pitch black. I can feel her soft breath on my cheek and those damned hard little nipples teasing me. Holding her wrists with one hand, I slide my

hand under her sweater, smiling as she sucks in a breath. Yanking down the cups of her bra, I gently twist her nipples and toy with her breasts, squeezing and stroking them.

“Cormac...”

“Keep your arms up.” I grab the nape of her neck and shove my hand down the front of her jeans, inside her panties, sliding my middle finger up inside her and hooking it hard against the little spot that I know will make her moan, gripping her pussy tight with my hand.

A tiny sound escapes her parted lips but she stays right where she is, heart pounding furiously.

“I’ve missed this perfect little cunt,” I whisper, enjoying her little shudder. “I’ve missed how it wraps around me so tight, the sweet smell of your slick.”

This is insane. I don’t care. My cock’s hard to the point of physical pain and the desperate way her pussy’s clamping down on my single finger tells me she needs me, too.

“You’re going to be quiet, my bad girl. You’ll take my dick right here in this dirty, pitch-black tunnel and when you come, you will not make a sound. Understood?”

A strangled gasp could be interpreted as a yes, since she’s nodding furiously against my neck and I yank her jeans down and off one foot, ripping those damn panties loose when they refuse to move fast enough.

“Unzip me,” I whisper hoarsely. I’m losing the power of rational thought. Of my duty and responsibility and the only thing that matters is cramming my cock into her as far as it will go. She’s shakily yanking my belt and zipper loose and I feel her small fingers reach in to pull my dick out, squeezing it, not gently, and I nearly come right then. My hand’s still wet with her slick as I grip her ass and lift her onto my cock, slamming her down and forcing her to take all of me in one vicious thrust.

Her teeth dig into my lower lip as she tries to stay silent and I brace my feet, rocking her slowly against the wall, moving my hips side to side, trying to loosen her up. When her teeth let go of my lip, I fuck her rough, filling her up, taking her cunt, *my* cunt and enjoying her nearly soundless moans, her breasts shaking with every harsh stroke inside her. She’s pushing back

against me, almost struggling, just to see if I'll keep her pinned there and I tighten my grip.

Mala's lips are moving soundlessly against my mouth and I realize she's saying my name like a prayer, over and over and I grind my cock in harder, rougher and uncontrolled. I've always been careful with my girl, but my greedier, untamed side is ruling me now.

Leaning down, I suck on her nipple hard and her thighs lock tighter against my hips, her heels digging into my ass. This isn't how I should take her, in a damp tunnel with the smell of moss in the pitch black. But the dark makes animals of us both, beasts with nothing else but the need to come.

"Be ready, little fox. You're coming with me now or not at all," I hiss in her ear. I give one more vicious thrust, pinching her nipple at the same time and she screams silently into the darkness, clamping down on my cock at the precise moment it swells, bathing her pussy in cum.

The harsh release of breath is the only sound she makes, my bad girl, my little fox.

Disentangling with her as gently as I can, I pull up her jeans and fasten them. "You don't wash tonight, do you hear me?" I whisper, cupping her pussy. "You don't wipe my cum out. I want you to lie in your bed tonight, wet and sticky, thinking about me."

"That's- you are so filthy," she's blushing, eyes huge.

"Yes," I agree.

Taking her back to the Library entrance, we both squint as the motion sensors turn the tunnel lights back on.

"Wait," she says quietly, "what about the person I saw coming down here? We need to see if they're still here somewhere."

"Lass, they're long gone. But I'll go through the tunnel again, both directions. Tomorrow I'm putting up surveillance cameras in all the tunnels that aren't set up yet. If I'm careful enough on placement, they won't know."

"So much for our surreptitious comings and goings," she tries to smile, but I feel her sadness.

Cradling her head in my hands, I dig my fingers into the fiery silk of her hair.

Don't say it. No false hope. I shouldn't-

“We’ll find another way,” I whisper. The look of happiness she gives me is worth the guilt.

I’ve just finished going through the tunnel again, looking for any signs of activity when the Dean calls me.

“Helen. Is everything all right?”

“I have someone for you to question,” the Dean says, “We caught them coming out of one of the tunnels.”

“I’ll be right there,” I say, cracking my knuckles. At last, a chance to get my hands dirty.

There’s another tunnel in the winding mazes under the campus that comes out into the basement under the Dean’s building. This one is well-secured and patrolled by the guards Helen trusts. One of them, Ivan, is standing in front of the interrogation room. Not the one furnished with the overhead chains and a drain underneath. This one has a metal chair bolted to the floor and an array of power tools. I suspect Helen keeps them there for the fear factor rather than regular use, but there’s no question that a good power drill with a long bit can be highly motivating.

“I don’t agree with this one,” Ivan says as I get closer.

“What do you mean?” Ivan’s one of the good guys, he’s been far more protective of the students than most of the security force combined.

“She’s a good girl,” he shakes his head. “I don’t see it.”

“Hopefully, you’re right,” I pat his shoulder and open the door.

It’s Mala.

She’s zip-tied to the metal seat, face white, but her jaw is tight and furious.

“Ah, there you are.” Helen rises from a chair by the door. “Let’s get started.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In which there are so many revelations.

Mala...

Cormac makes a much better spy than I do. Even with the shock of walking in on me, zip-tied to this interrogation chair, his expression never changes.

The Dean's been sitting in the corner, watching me, motionless like a bobcat watching a rodent in the underbrush. Not a word. I don't know if she thought that would make me break, but... she hasn't dealt with my father.

"Ah, there you are," she says, rising to greet him. "Let's get started."

His calm gaze moves from me to her, and he shuts the door.

"Dean Christie, I have been carrying on a relationship with Miss Chambers for close to a month. She has no responsibility here--"

"Wait, that's not accurate, I pushed--"

"As a teacher, the blame is mine completely," he carries on as if I'd never spoken. "I showed her the tunnel system so we could travel undetected from her housing to my cottage." His knife is out and slicing through the zip-ties in seconds and folding it shut, he helps me up.

"Are ye all right?" he asks quietly.

"Yes, of course," I nod firmly. Actually they tightened those zip ties pretty aggressively, but I'll live.

I think. I'm looking at the Dean's expression.

Cormac faces the Dean again, his arm protectively around my shoulders. "I will submit myself to whatever punishment you deem appropriate."

"I'm an adult and equally responsible," I add quickly. I can barely get the

words out of my painfully dry mouth but he is *not* taking the hit for this alone. He would never have given in if I hadn't pushed him.

The Dean checks her phone. "Professors Fukumoto and Fitzgerald are in my office. Let's join them, shall we?"

Now this feels really bad. I admire Professor Fitzgerald, she's made my class - The Psychological Elements of Torture and Interrogation - fascinating this year.

The office we enter has gone into full battle mode. The whiteboards are covered in scribbled information, and multiple monitors are mounted over bookcases and all available open wall space, showing every square foot of the campus and surrounding area. There are even a couple of aerial shots.

Professors Fitzgerald and Fukumoto are huddled over a laptop and she's drawing some complicated-looking flowchart, pointing at various spots when he disagrees with her.

"Sit down in front of my desk," the Dean orders.

The uncomfortable chairs. As a student, I'm used to them but I'll bet it's a bit of a comedown for Cormac.

I steel myself to meet the gaze of the other professors, but neither looks judgmental, just calculating.

"It seems, Miss Chandler, that we have no choice but to bring you into the inner circle," the Dean says coldly. "I would do anything to avoid involving a student, but you seem to have insisted on it, have you not?"

My brow rose. "I..." my gaze darts to Cormac. "I'm not sure what you mean, ma'am."

She sighs irritably, kicking off her shoes. "The Academy and the students here are under attack. You know some of it, the gossip network on campus is quite thorough. Cormac was placed here to monitor communication from enemy operatives within the Academy to their forces outside. We've tracked ten specific cartels, mafias, and the like who are attempting to destabilize the crime world by bringing down the elites who hold this madness all together."

"We're... the ruling class of criminals?" I ask.

"The Elites are a stabilizing force," Professor Fitzgerald corrected. "You've

seen the wholesale violence and stupidity of certain organizations. The elite families have connections in law enforcement and every branch of government. They work in agreement with a certain set of rules that keeps the unstable elements from killing civilians and causing crushing crime waves that the authorities are forced to address.

Faced with this kind of wanton idiocy, government forces are required to crack down, taking desperate, across-the-board measures that affect everyone. Order is threatened. Crime will always exist, Miss Chandler. But it can be so much worse than you can imagine.”

“I’ve seen a lot, Professor.”

I don’t want you to see this part...

“I know about your twin brother, Michael,” Professor Fitzgerald says gently, her icy blue eyes surprisingly kind. “Two years ago, just after your freshman year, correct?”

Shifting in my seat, I avert my eyes. “That’s not relevant here.”

“A car bomb flipped your SUV over,” she continues, why won’t she shut up?

“I don’t want to discuss-”

I can hear the high, harsh sound of glass scattering on the dashboard and as I shift, I realize it’s falling from me. Everything hurts.

Every inch of me.

Why is the world upside down?

Oh, it’s me. I’m still hanging from my seatbelt. We were going to a new club, Michael and I and...

“Michael!” I wheeze, “Michael, what’s-” Turning my head makes tears drip down my forehead. He’s still in his seatbelt, too. There’s a huge gash on his face, he’s covered in blood. “Oh, god don’t move,” I’m panting, trying to get my seatbelt to unlock. “I’ll get help.”

“No, Mal...” His eyes are open. “You gotta go.” He’s staring at something outside the shattered windshield. “I don’t want you to see this part. My- here’s my knife.” His shaking hand holds out his lock blade. “Cut yourself

loose.”

There are footsteps, I can hear voices, and we're on a hill. There's a rock holding the car stable, it must have stopped it from rolling all the way down. People are coming!

“Help is almost here,” I groan, “it's okay, see?”

I can hear men cursing as they slide down the hill, one landing on his ass. I jam my thumb into the seat belt lock. This thing, this fucking thing won't-

“Cut yourself loose!” The words sound torn from his throat. “They're not here to help. I can get out my door, I'm fine. Roll out your window, keep rolling. We'll meet at the bottom, okay?”

I'm mindlessly, obediently sawing at the strap, stifling a scream as I land on my shoulder. “Now you, Michael. C'mon-”

He's pushing me why is he pushing me? His poor bloody arm shoves me out my broken window and I'm rolling and I moan in agony as a boulder digs into my ribs we'll be okay we'll meet at the bottom I hear gunshots oh fuck I see the muzzle flash light up the night and then blinking red emergency lights coming up fast on the road next to me...

Why is Cormac holding my hands? Did... did I say that out loud?

He's whispering soothing words and the Dean and Professor Fitzgerald are speaking together quietly, giving us room.

“But Michael's was different. It was- it was those Irish assholes, the Ryan Clan. They did it.”

Cormac cups the back of my head again with his big, warm hand like he's trying to protect me from a fresh wound.

“My father's been after them ever since,” I'm trying to explain and he keeps looking at me with a kind smile. “He was so angry when I woke up in the hospital. They found me still holding Michael's knife. He didn't get out. Those fuckers shot him and my father was furious. He kept asking why Michael didn't cut himself loose, and...”

“I don't want you to see this part...”

“He gave his life for me.” I rub my cheek blankly. “It should have been me. Everyone says so.”

“Your jackass of a father is the only one who says that,” Professor Fitzgerald says firmly. “He wouldn’t listen to reason, he wouldn’t look at the evidence that it wasn’t the Ryans. You and your brother were targeted. Just like so many of the other sons and daughters.”

“My brother is dead because of these bastards?” It feels like I’m dragging a piece of glass from my heart as I say the words out loud, it hurts like hell, so much. “My father wouldn’t listen? He just went after whoever he wanted? He didn’t try to stop this fuckery?” The glass is out of me, and the pain is so much less than when it was inside, cutting me for the last two years.

“He wouldn’t hear a word of it,” she says coldly. “He mocked our ‘conspiracy theories,’ as he called them. Only a few of the Elite families know what’s happening, and they’ve all taken it seriously. Everyone but the Chandlers.”

“What can I-” I shake my head like I can force all my scattered brain cells back together in some formation that can create thought. “What can I do?”

“So, the Dean, Professor Fitzgerald, they knew you and I were together?”

Cormac is walking me back to my building, the sun is close to coming up.

“There are things that Helen knows that defy all logic or reason,” he says ruefully. “No matter how careful we were.”

“I’m glad she didn’t put a pitchfork through your hand,” I offer. It’s awkward. It’s never been hard to talk to him but now that I know all of this... We pause in front of my building. “What happens now?”

“I hate this,” he growls, running an impatient hand through his long hair, “I dinna want this for you.”

“They killed my brother,” I say flatly. “And now that I know that anyone - my *friends*, even - could be part of this sick alliance? I’m going to help you.”

“Be smart,” he says, squeezing my hands, “be clever.”

I smile. “Be a spy.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

In which interrogation can be torture.

Mala...

Walking to class that morning is a surreal experience. On one hand, the campus seems a little lighter, more people are smiling and talking to each other again. On the other hand, I can't stop looking around me, wondering who's betraying us all.

This is the Ares Academy. We are all from families who do horrific things. Everyone here is prepared to commit all manner of outrages to get ahead. But a systemic, years-long effort to wipe out the Elite families and the school that teaches us how to hold this insane world together? It means people I've studied alongside for years could be the ones who knew all along what really happened to my brother.

Meiying snaps her fingers in my face. "Woman! What is with you?"

Blinking my eyes, I try to focus. "I'm sorry, I was thinking about last night." No lie there.

"Yeah," she nudges me gently with her shoulder, "that was a good memorial. I especially enjoyed watching Konstantin's puckered face when he found out it was Ronan's idea."

"Why does he hate poor Ronan so much?"

"Because Ronan has made it painfully apparent over the years that he's hot for Mariya, even though she's been a perfect little lady," Meiying explains.

"Ah... I did not know that. Kon has always been a possessive lunatic, so that makes sense."

"Yes, fortunately, truly falling in love with his fiancée made him so much

less asshole-ish,” she agrees. “Now, let’s go see what kind of mood Professor She Who Sees All is in. I swear that woman’s gaze can drill into my soul.”

“Welcome, students!”

Professor Fitzgerald is in a good mood today, she’s smiling with a certain anticipation. “We’ll be conducting some practical exercises today in interrogation.” She’s striding the length of the lecture hall, looking at us, one at a time. “While physical pain and deprivation are effective techniques, they’re...” her nose wrinkles as if she’s stepped in something, “They’re often sloppy. Untidy. Accuracy when extracting information is key. Wasting manpower and resources on faulty data is unforgivable when it can be avoided. Your challenge today is working with the fact that the student you’re interrogating already knows that you cannot cause them physical harm. Well... unless you’re participating in one of the Leader Challenges, it seems.”

There’s a round of laughter at that.

“Now, we’ve already covered all the basics, the boring minutiae of a liar’s ‘tells.’ Talking too much, hardly saying anything, new behaviors, a complete shutting down. But the trick here is to create a framework to build on to read your subject. You cannot know how their behavior shifts until you know what to look for.”

Her pale blue gaze is still sweeping over the students, slowing when it lands on me.

“So we begin by asking questions to which we already know the answers. Let’s see... Miss Chandler and Mr. Magomadov, join me.”

I know Doku Madomadov a bit, he’s a year behind me and quiet, which is a quality approved of for a spy. He’s lanky and dark-haired, and he’s staring at me expressionlessly.

Okay, no friendly exchange.

“I’m giving you both a piece of information I expect you to extract. You are not required to answer your opponent’s questions honestly if you think it benefits you, but your responses may leave you at a disadvantage if it allows them to learn your ‘tells.’ Am I clear?”

“Yes, Professor Fitzgerald.” We answer together like a comedy team that

isn't really funny.

I open my folded piece of paper. *Have they killed anyone they were related to, due to betrayal of the family?*

What the actual... Just getting Doku to tell me this could be considered a betrayal to his family!

He reads his piece of paper, looking up at me. Putting it in his pocket, he raises a brow at me and nods. Thanks, pal. No pressure.

“Doku, your family’s from Grozny. That’s a gorgeous city.” I’m struggling to remember what I know about Chechnya. “The city was named after Ivan Grozny - Ivan the Terrible, right?”

“Thanks for the history lesson,” he says flatly. He’s got his arms folded, feet a bit apart, and looks perfectly happy to stand there all day. Most of the students from Chechnya stick together. Two main Chechnyan syndicates send their heirs here, but even if they’re rivals, they still huddle with an, “Us against the rest of the campus” feel.

“You’re Californian,” he drawls, sounding bored already. “Your twin brother used to go here too.” There’s a glint in his eyes, a small, satisfied spark.

I’m swept with a surge of fury so intense that I can barely breathe. Was his family part of this? Did he kill my brother? Was someone in his fucking syndicate the man who slid down that hill and shot my brother?

Taking a moment, I shift my stance, spreading my feet a bit, too. “Yes. He did.” I smile pleasantly.

“He’s dead now, though,” Doku adds indifferently.

Mother. Fucker. He took the gloves off early.

The fury fades and I can think. Letting him set me off this early by punching into my deepest wound is a rookie mistake. Doku’s older brother went here. But he was an Assassin. My thoughts are speeding, categorizing what I know about him.

“You have a brother and two sisters, right?”

“Yes.” Not a muscle has moved on this asshole’s face. Not a twitch.

“That’s got to be hard, neither you or your brother getting into the Leader’s

division,” I muse. “I guess your father has other plans for who will take over for him.”

There’s the slightest narrowing of his eyes. “You know nothing.”

I shrug. “I know that neither of you were considered leadership material here at the Academy, so...”

There’s a movement out of the corner of my eye. Musa Varayev is from the other Chechnyan syndicate. I’ve never liked him, and he seems to rule the rest of his group like he’s a prince, even though he’s in the Spy division, too. He’s leaning forward, tense right down to his clenched fists.

“I mean, I accept that I’ll never run my family,” I say, “the patriarchy rules even in this day and age.” There’s a ripple of bitter laughter from the women in the class. “But the Madomadov syndicate, it’s quite reliant on the bloodline, isn’t it?”

“Not particularly,” he says. He’s lying. The words came out of his throat like they tasted foul. “And you, your father is giving the leadership to your little brother, now that your twin is dead, correct?”

Now that I won’t let them dig into me, his words don’t hurt. I’m still watching Musa out of the corner of my eye. Why is he so upset about this line of questioning?

“Yes, he is,” I agree. The admission doesn’t sting as much as it used to. “But surely there was someone else your father was training as his successor?” A vague memory hits me, something Konstantin mentioned once about a Chechnyan syndicate war, an internal turmoil.

“Our family line is solid,” Doku says.

“But the death of the heir, the internal shakeup... that definitely presents a weakened front, doesn’t it? Maybe you needed some help stabilizing the family again? Outside support?”

The guy on Musa’s left is gripping his arm, fingers white. Musa looks like he’s ready to surge out of his seat and stab me. Michael’s blade burns in my ankle holster.

“Do the Madomadovs owe a favor to another family for removing your oldest brother?”

“You fucking bitch!” Doku spurts, heading toward me.

“Enough!” The professor’s voice is like a whip tearing through skin. “That will be all. Miss Chandler wins this exercise. While there was not a verbal confession from Mr. Madomadov, his visceral response was clear enough. You may both sit down.”

Doku and I don’t move, facing off against each other.

“Do you know what my question was?” he whispers. Musa, still seated, is slowly shaking his head. “Why did you run instead of trying to save your brother?”

Staring at his thin-lipped smile of pleasure, it looks like a snake’s, swallowing a mouse.

“Why were you too cowardly to kill your brother yourself?” I hiss.

I see his fist coming and I want him to try, I do, I want to cut this bastard who knows what happened to Michael, then Professor Fitzgerald is between us, grabbing his fist and twisting his wrist back at an odd angle. His knees buckle, and she steps back before he drops to the floor.

“Both of you,” she snaps. “Back to your seats. You will report to Professor MacTavish this afternoon for five hours of service as a disciplinary action. I will not accept this behavior.” Her cold gaze sweeps over the class. “From any of you.”

The lecture continues, and I sit down, Michael’s blade still burning against my ankle. I want to take it out, I want to gut Doku. Maybe Musa, too. Because those bastards know *something*.

“Take a breath,” Meiyong whispers. “Deep breath, let it out. Do it again. Don’t let that *Húndàn*, that bastard get to you.”

Obedying her, I can feel the feeling return to my hands and feet again. I didn’t even realize they were numb.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

In which we damn Cormac and his nipple-stiffening gaze!

Mala...

It takes a surprising amount of self-control to walk out of Professor Fitzgerald's somewhat explosive interrogation class, primarily because I want to question her about what just happened. I want to tell her about Musa's weird reaction. But no, I'm walking to "detention."

Oh, no! Not detention with Professor MacTavish!

If I listen carefully, I'll bet I could hear the wails of Cormac's fan girls all over campus, hysterical that they didn't know misbehaving was an option to get closer to him.

"So I'm stuck with you two arseholes all afternoon?"

Cormac doesn't look happy to see us, arms folded over his tight black t-shirt and the man looks edible.

"Yes Professor MacTavish," I reply. Doku seethes quietly, and I can practically smell his hatred from across the room.

Well, fuck you too, you treacherous prick, I think, keeping my gaze on Cormac.

"I can't have you doing the same work, since you look ready to skin each other," he says. "If there's any aggression between you this afternoon, I'll break both your fuckin' arms. I'm not tolerating it."

Why does that savage tone of his make me so hot? What is wrong with me?

"You." He points at me sternly. "Stand there."

“Mr. Madomadov, come with me. You will be disassembling and cleaning all the handguns in the Armory tonight under the supervision of Ivan.” I peer to my right and spot the guard, not quite hiding his amusement as Doku’s eyes widen.

“But... sir. There are over a hundred of them,” Doku sputters.

“Aye,” Cormac agrees pleasantly, “it will give you plenty of time to think about classroom behavior. Ivan will show you where the cleaning supplies are.”

They disappear into the Armory storage room, but not without a final look of hatred from Doku over his shoulder.

“As for you, Miss Chandler, you just canna stay out of trouble, can you?”

“I was simply following Professor Fitzgerald’s instructions,” I say defensively. “And there’s a lot to talk about because I noticed-”

“And you will,” he interrupted, “we have a meeting set in the Dean’s office tonight. After your disciplinary service.”

My undies are almost instantly drenched and I’m humiliated by my sheer neediness. However, I would like to point out that this beautiful man, towering over me, looking stern and hot as balls is talking about my *disciplinary service*?

Oh, god. Cormac’s nostrils are flaring and I know he can tell just how wet I am right now. “Ah. I see.”

His voice is so deep. Damn him and his deep voice and his nipple-stiffening gaze!

“You thought you would get special treatment because you’re fucking the professor? That you deserve to be spoiled?”

Well... I did have some visions of going down on my knees in his office, yanking open his jeans and... I see his arched brow and flush.

“No, sir. I didn’t. I am here for my discipline.” Oh, that sounds worse. “I mean, I’m here because I broke classroom decorum and understand I need to make amends and... uh...”

He grabs a big equipment bag, hefting it over his shoulder. “Come, Miss Chandler. You have work to do.”

The tunnel he takes me to is new, to me at least. It's cleverly hidden under a trap door in one of the greenhouses.

"Why do I get the feeling that our head gardener knows about this network of tunnels?" I ask. This one hasn't been maintained for a long time, stones have fallen from the walls, littering the walkway and the lights flicker on and off.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because so many of the entrances or exits are in or near his greenhouses or supply sheds." I touch the wall, it's seeping water through the cracks from the missing stones.

"Clever lass," he gives me a quick kiss. "And you are correct. Nothing happens on this campus that he doesn't know about. The man's devoted... twenty years, perhaps, to this place."

"You have a lot of respect for him."

"He's earned it."

Cormac's values fascinate me. We talk endlessly about "honor" and "courage" here at the Academy, and unlike most of the treacherous swine here who would sell their own mother for a position of power, he has both qualities in spades, and he shows respect to everyone else who exhibits them, no matter their position. I'm so tired of the wealthy assholes I deal with daily who think their daddy's money makes them better than everyone else.

Realizing that I'm just standing here, mooning over him like a simpleton, I briskly clear my throat. "Okay! I'm guessing we're down here to plant some cameras?"

His unreasonably square jaw and his slight smile are so sexy...

"Aye," he agrees, "but first, a training exercise." Stepping back, he slides a metal bar through the latches on the trap door, bolting it shut.

"Training exercise?" My voice has raised to a pitch understandable only to bees.

His narrow hips swivel as he strolls toward me, like a panther. "I have cleared this tunnel, the other hatch is locked as well. There's nobody down here but us, little fox."

A tiny, strangled noise escapes my slack lips.

“A good spy must know how to navigate any terrain silently. You canna count on the conditions to be favorable for you.” He circles me. “You may have to depend on your other senses. Your sense of touch. Your ability to listen. Can you move quickly and quietly enough to escape the hunter?”

His long fingers close around my throat from behind, lightly, I can feel his body heat radiate along my back. It’s chilly down here, and I want to curl around him like a cat.

“Ah!”

Grabbing a fistful of my hair, he yanks my head back. “You’re being soft, little fox. Soft will get you killed. You need to be quick, you must be clever. Can you do that?”

My breath is coming in shaky little exhales, the air feels charged down here, like the sky during a lightning storm. “I can do whatever I have to.”

“When the lights go out,” he murmurs, kissing down my throat, “you will run. You will find your way to the exit before I catch you and if you do, I will rip that shirt from you. Kiss and bite your nipples. I’ll cut your jeans off and I will bury my cock in your sweet, pink cunt. Fucking you until you moan my name over and over again. You’ll sweat and shake and after you beg me, I’ll make you come until you’re crying for me to stop, or for more. You won’t know what you’re saying but I will give you everything you need.”

His huge hand is cupping my center, squeezing me, pushing the rough material of my jeans against my painfully sensitive pussy.

“Wh- what happens if you catch me first?”

“I’ll give you a five-minute head start,” he promises, “that would be just enough time if you’re smart and keep your wits about you. You know where on the grounds we were when we came down here. Orient yourself. Picture the layout of the campus from where you are.”

His hand suddenly squeezes me tighter and I jump, yelping a little.

“But if you don’t keep your wits, little fox, I will run you to earth and I will take my belt off and spank you with it. I’ll spank you until your slick is running down your thighs, I will leave you on this filthy floor with your jeans around your ankles and I will not let you come tonight.”

Twisting my head, I stare at him over my shoulder. In the dim lighting of the tunnel, he looks like the Dark Lord of the Underworld, here to drag me deeper like Hades and Persephone.

Cormac checks his watch, clicking the timer. “Your five minutes starts now.”

The lights go out and I shriek, slapping my hand over my mouth.

“*Run, little fox!*”

CHAPTER TWENTY

In which there is so much chase kink.

Mala...

I'm off like a gunshot, racing down the hall as fast as my legs can carry me. My sneakers don't make much noise, but I need to hear just enough echo back to know where the tunnel turns so I don't slam into a wall.

There's no thought of why I am doing this. Why I stood there while he said all those scary, filthy things to me. Why my entire lower half is on fire right now. I have to focus on the image of the grounds above me and where I am. My hand reaches out in time to slap against a wall as the tunnel turns left. Reaching back quickly, I feel another wall to my right. Okay, so I can only go left.

Taking off again, I focus on my breathing, forcing my wildly pounding heart to slow down. There's no stopping the adrenaline though, feeling like electricity sparking and crackling under my skin. Left... I've turned south, I'm heading toward the greenhouse closest to the cliffs.

“Oof!”

My shoulder connects painfully with a corner, knocking me into the wall and there's another turn. Left. Ironically, I'm running almost directly under the jogging path that follows the cliffs on this side of the campus.

Still getting in my ten thousand steps... I think a little hysterically.

Keeping my fingertips tracing along the wall, I prepare for another turn. There has to be, the cliff edge must be maybe twenty feet away.

Then, I hear a metallic sound. Like claws scraping along rock. Not loud but it echoes through this empty tunnel and I stifle a scream. It's a thousand times more terrifying than if he'd just shouted, “I'm coming to get you!” like the

killer does in a horror movie. The metal claw sounds closer and I desperately press against the wall. There has to be a turn here, it should be-

The screeching sound is just behind me, just like he's right there and oh, thank you god there's the turn. It's to the right and I know exactly where I am and this exit will be in a tool shed just a few feet from his cottage.

I should hear the sound of his footsteps echoing off the walls, why don't I hear them? Something brushes against me- a hand? Was it a hand? I swallow down a scream and put on a last burst of speed, racing up the steps and slamming open the hatch, rolling out and free, on my back on the grass staring up at the sky, gasping for air.

When the shadow of an impossibly tall man blocks out the light of the moon, I hold my arms up to him.

Cormac...

Clever, *clever* little fox.

I could find my precious girl just by her scent, her tangerine-sunshine fragrance warped beautifully by fear and adrenaline, and the sweet smell of her slick. Mala's good, running nearly silently and makes every turn as if she could see them in the pitch black.

The darkness here in the tunnels is impenetrable. Midnight in a coal mine dark. But she races through like the creature she reminds me of, my little fox.

My prey.

I'm so hard that it's a miracle there's enough blood left in the rest of my body to keep up the chase, and I have never wanted her more.

There are a couple of times it would be easy to catch her. Running the tip of my knife along these old stone walls makes a terrible metallic screech. I let the ends of her silky hair slip through my fingers, but her sly moves and fierce determination to outwit me are sexy as fuck. She tears through the trap door and out of the shed in seconds, collapsing in the little garden there. Watching her chest heave as she lay on the grass, staring up at the night sky... Mala is perfection. She raises her arms to me, and my blood turns to fire.

Scooping her up, I have her inside my cottage and the door locks behind us in seconds. “My beautiful girl,” I groan, kissing her mouth, her throat, “so clever. So fierce.”

Three more strides across the room and I throw her on my bed, landing on top of her and spreading her legs, settling in between them. She’s still gasping for air as I yank her shirt off, gripping her breasts and squeezing greedily, biting and sucking her nipples through the lace of her bra. I can feel her hips pushing up against me, rubbing against the hard outline of my cock.

“You’ll wait for what I give you.” I push her back down so I can pull her jeans off. She’s beautiful, my Mala, with her heaving breasts and wide eyes, so turned on that her pupils have expanded enough to make her eyes look like midnight. Like the tunnel. There’s excitement in her gaze, and just enough fear to turn me into an animal again.

Her hands slide into my hair and I give her inner thigh a sharp slap.

“Did I say you could touch me?”

“No,” she moans, “I just-”

“Put your hands over your head and hold on to the headboard. Keep them there or I’ll tie them.” Based on the sudden flare of pink across her cheeks, I suspect she’d like that.

Flipping her over onto her stomach, I finally get rid of those panties and lick her from front to back, again and again with the flat of my tongue, growling like the beast I’ve become. I point my tongue and drive it up inside her, thrusting and tasting her before pulling back to push two fingers inside her. Then three.

“Too much!” Mala gasps out and I chuckle.

“Not enough, little fox.” Pulling her hips up, I slot my throbbing cock at her entrance. “Do you want this?” She tries to push back, to get me inside her and I slap her ass. “Beg me.”

Her hand flails back, blindly reaching for me, holding my thigh. “Please, Cormac. I need this. I need you. I’m begging you!”

She looks over her shoulder at me with her eyes narrowed and I laugh. With a sharp snap of my hips, I’m fully seated inside her. It’s always a tight fit with

Mala, but her delicious slick, her wet cunt always welcomes me in. I can't wait, I slam into her, over and over, both of us greedy and mindless and I wrap an arm around her waist to keep her from knocking into the headboard.

“Does it sting, little fox? Does it hurt just a bit when I'm fucking the hell out of you? Treating you like mine, and you'll do anything I say, won't you, because you need to come, my bad girl.” I groan in her ear. I can already feel the rhythmic little pulses inside her and I angle my driving cock against her G-spot, rubbing it hard. She nearly squeezes me out of her with that first orgasm and I sit back on my heels, dragging her with me and seating her pert ass against my crotch, squeezing an arm around her to hold her back against my chest. “I want you to come for me again.” I kiss the nape of her neck, flexing my thighs to bounce her on my dick.

Tugging on her nipples, I tilt my head back, trying to control myself. The unimaginable heat and tightness of her fiery little cunt is killing me. I can't come yet.

“Give me your mouth, little fox.” She turns her head for me, already searching for me and I kiss her deeply, my tongue toying with hers and breathing in all her frantic little puffs of air. Reaching down, I stroke her clit in hard circles, then roll it as she tightens down on my cock again. My fingers slide down to where we're joined, exploring her swollen, slick folds, flushed a beautiful dark pink, circling where her cunt is stretched tight around me.

We're both so close to coming that we're shaking. The feel of that heat and silk gripping my cock is too much. I can tell by her breathing that my girl is almost there. Almost ready.

I slap her pussy, not hard, but she stiffens and shrieks with a shockwave of pleasure so strong I can feel it. Slapping her clit again, harder this time, and then once more and we're both coming, she's convulsing against my cock, squeezing the come from me and I flood her. She's moaning into my mouth and I wrap my arms around her tightly, holding her up.

“No other man will ever have the honor of knowing what your pussy feels like,” I say hoarsely, “Only me. It will always be me.”

Her breath draws in like a shudder, like a sob and she wraps her arms over mine.

Mala...

Cormac holds my pitiful, limp body up in the shower, carefully washing the sweat and our combined slick from me. I let him run a soapy sponge down my skin as I half-doze against his warm, strong chest.

“My lips ‘r numb...” I mumble sleepily.

“Adrenaline rush and multiple orgasms,” he says casually.

“You doan’ have to sound so smug, ash... hole.” I can feel his chest shake with laughter as he finishes the shower and dries me, putting me on the couch in front of the fire, wrapped in a nice toasty quilt. He’s moving around the kitchen but I’m too sleepy to see what he’s doing. In minutes, there’s a grilled cheese sandwich and a bowl of stew in front of me.

“This is the classic American comfort food, yes?” He drops a kiss on top of my head.

“Oh, you are the sweetest man in the world,” I sigh happily, biting into the sandwich. The thick, crusty bread and sharp cheddar are perfect and I realize I haven’t eaten since last night. I’m tearing into it like a seagull going after a stale bagel and I’m not ashamed.

Cormac watches me eat for a moment with a little smile.

“Stop it,” I said, mouth full of stew. “You’re making me self-conscious.”

With a chuckle, he starts eating.

“What do you think Doku is doing right now?” I said, finally slowing down enough to view the scraps left on my tray.

“I’m thinking he’s in hour four of cleaning guns,” he says calmly. “Ivan likes you, so he’ll be riding him pretty hard.”

“What does Doku think I’m doing?”

“Wiping down every mat in the gym with antibacterial spray.”

“Oh, thank god I’m sleeping with the professor, then,” I say fervently. Those mats are disgusting. I mean, truly horrific.

Cormac laughs, but points his fork at me. “If you really misbehaved, you would be spraying and wiping mats as we speak. Fucking your teacher wouldn’t keep you from proper discipline.”

Unbelievably, my exhausted and sore center is tingling. He's got to stop saying "proper discipline" in that sexy Scottish accent. Forcing myself to pull away from my filthy thoughts, I blurt out, "This is important! In class today, Professor Fitzgerald had us conduct an interrogation exercise where-

"She sent me a message about the disciplinary action and explained what happened in the class," he nodded.

Staring at him, I try to force my brain cells back into some kind of functioning lump. He has to stop saying 'discipline.' He's killing me. "Uh... yes. But here's the thing. I don't know much about the two Chechnyan families who send their kids here, but I thought they were rivals. They certainly stick tight to each other here at school for syndicates battling for supremacy."

He leans back, lacing his fingers together. "Go on."

"My challenge was to find out if Doku had ever killed a family member who betrayed their syndicate," I explain. "Doku hit me right out of the gate with... Michael's death. I went after him by questioning why neither he or his brother got into the Leader's division. Here's the interesting thing. Doku started getting upset but I could see Musa Varayev - from the rival Chechnyan group - out of the corner of my eye. He was really agitated as the questions went on, to the point that the guy next to him had to keep him in his seat. Why would he be so upset at this line of questioning? I'm sure the professor told you the response, but it's clear someone else killed his oldest brother. Someone outside the family. It must be the Varayev family, which means Doku's people owe them a huge debt."

Cormac is running his fingers over his closely-trimmed beard, listening carefully.

"Then Doku, who's completely lost his shit by now, gets close to me and whispers, "Why did you run instead of trying to save your brother?" My throat closes up as the familiar shame floods me, but I breathe deep and push it away. "Musa was shaking his head, trying to get Doku to shut up."

Looking up at Cormac, looking so concerned and fierce, I ask, "How could he possibly know what happened to Michael unless his syndicate or Musa's were responsible? They have to be in this horrible alliance."

He leans forward, capturing my face in those huge hands and kisses me

soundly. “You are courageous, little fox. You’re strong. Most people would have crumbled after he hit you with your brother’s death. I’m so proud of you. I must take you back to student housing now. But first...”

He heads into the kitchen and returns with a spray bottle.

“What is-”

Cormac generously spritzes me with cleaning fluid.

“Eww, why did you do that?” I snarl, trying to get the godawful taste off my tongue.

“You’re been cleaning gym mats all afternoon, remember?” He winks at me and I seethe as he guides me out of the cottage.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

In which Liam proves he's the best storyteller on campus.

Mala...

I make it back to my room after rolling my eyes at many annoying comments about smelling like window cleaner, even from Willow, the heartless cow. Heading for my shower, I strip my anti-bacterial spray-drenched clothes off and step under the hot water, sighing in relief.

Then, I'm sobbing like my heart is being torn out. All these things I've done with Cormac, what has happened to me? I'll do anything he wants because he makes me feel beautiful and cherished. I want to feel good so badly. Ever since I lost Michael, my twin, my other half, that sliver of glass is my heart sat there, cutting and cutting until I couldn't feel much of anything. I've never felt like this, and I almost don't recognize myself, this happy person.

This should be terrifying me, I should be running from Cormac and everything we've done. But I'm so far gone. This giant, strong, powerful man has taken me to a beautiful place of light and sex, warmth and safety. I don't belong there and I should never have let myself relax into it.

It hit me tonight when he said those words, "No other man will have the honor of knowing what your pussy feels like. Only me. It belongs to me."

I wanted to live these last two years at the Academy to the fullest, with enough good memories and connections to last me for the lifetime of loveless duty that's waiting for me. But not this.

Whether Cormac meant those words or spoke them in the heat of the moment, I have no right to hear them.

Not from a man I don't belong to. Not from a man that I can never have.

The next morning...

“Oy! Mala!”

“Hey, Liam, how are you?” He slings an arm over my shoulders and I try to smile. My eyes are still swollen and raw from crying all night, but that’s what makeup is for. I used to put on my “happy Mala face” so effortlessly...

“You look tired. Were ya’ up all night hurling up cleaning products?”

“It’s not like I drank Windex straight from the bottle you ass! I just cleaned the mats.” Still, my shoulders relax a little. Liam’s always fun to be with, easy. Uncomplicated. Glancing up at him, I frown. “You’re looking like you’re the one who pulled an all-nighter. Or one of your usual ‘drink a bottle of whiskey and wake up in the bed of yet another unsatisfied girl’ scenarios.”

Liam stops us in the middle of the path, almost managing to look wounded. “That’s just mean-spirited, that is.” He smiles devilishly. “You don’t know ‘till ya take a ride.”

“You realize you’ve used this exact line on me like, twice a year since we were freshmen?” I force a little laugh, “I can’t decide if I’m more irritated that you’re keeping it up or offended that you can’t bother to come up with some new material. Really, a son of Ireland using that tired shit?”

He grins, “Ya got any good ones?”

My smile fades as I think about that night, Tatiana, Willow and I sharing terrible pickup lines. If we hadn’t gone there that night... maybe if we’d gone to a club, I would never have met Cormac. Never would have happily given my virginity to him. I wouldn’t feel this flare of agony every time I think of him.

“Never mind, I think ya need some cheerin’ up.” Liam launches into one of his epic tales and no one can deliver a laugh like this man.

“...So my feckin’ uncle - he’s a real geebag - sends me to Vancouver, yeah? Because where else would ya go for heroin than the Great White North? Heroin pure as an angel’s panties, he’s insisting so I’m on a jet headed for feckin’ British Columbia. And mmmm, I can just smell the Canadian bacon and reasonably priced medications!”

“Okay,” I wheeze, massaging my side. Oh, god I needed this today.

“So the head of the cartel, this gowl-”

“Wait, what’s a gowl?”

“Arsehole,” he explains. “He says ‘Oh, sorry. The shipment isn’t coming in until tomorrow, the boat’s been delayed thanks to stepped-up patrols by the feckin’ Canadian Coast Guard.’”

“Meaning these guys are sloppy if the Coast Guard’s already sniffing around,” I agree.

“Aye!” Liam says, slapping my shoulder a little too enthusiastically. “Sorry,” he says, rubbing my sore spot absently. “So, the gobshite says, ‘You go back to the hotel and relax, I’m going to send up some entertainment.’”

“Oh, don’t make me listen to your escort conquests!”

“No! It gets worse. This pink-haired lass shows up and before the door is closed she’s rippin’ off her dress and climbing up on me like a cat on a Christmas Tree, all claws and no style.” Liam pauses dramatically, waiting to see my shared outrage for his plight but I’m laughing too hard.

“Please stop, I’m cramping! I’m cramping!”

“Aw, lass. I knew yah needed some cheering up.”

“Did you throw her out of the room?”

“No. I dug her nails out my shoulder and it was good craic.”

“Wait,” I stop, rubbing my aching stomach. “Was that good?”

“The hooker was, the heroin was banjaxed,” he scowled. “I had to fly back to Dublin and tell my uncle his sources are shite and the powder was cut with everything from baby powder to my granny’s arthritis pills.”

“I’m sorry the trip was worthless but that storytelling was art. It was poetry,” I say, giggles still bubbling up when I pictured the Canadian escort climbing him like a cat on a Christmas Tree.

“I know,” Liam agrees modestly, “and now you’re smiling again, yeah?”

“You are the best,” I link my arm with his. “So I get the feeling you don’t like your uncle?”

“He’s a bastard,” he said, all animation drained from his face. “He’s running

the show until I graduate and so far, he's driving my Da's organization six feet under. Which is where I'm putting that weaselly fuck when I take over."

Wide-eyed, I walk with him silently. I've never heard Liam so angry. I don't think I've ever seen him angry at all. "I'm sorry," I offer slowly, "I can't imagine how hard this has to be for you."

"Just a few more months," he says, like it's a mantra he's been repeating over and over until the words have carved a furrow in his heart.

"Just a few more months," I echo. "And then you can kick his ass all over Ireland if you want. You'll get the organization up and running the way it should be."

"Thanks," he smiles, but it's tired, distracted.

We walk in companionable silence for a while. We're past most of the buildings, walking through the Barrens, a gigantic boulder field left over from glaciers that were here thirty thousand years ago.

"Mala?"

"Hmmm?"

"I saw you and Professor MacTavish yesterday." He's not looking at me, still walking slowly, arms linked.

"Well, yeah. I had-

"You were walking together, over by his cottage," he cuts me off, glancing around us, like he's looking for someone.

"I..." Do I admit to a relationship to throw him off the scent of anything deeper? Does he know what Cormac is really doing here?

"It's not my business who you're taking for a ride," he continues, "just... you have to be careful, you know? Someone else could have seen you. The Dean, she's pure evil wrapped in a pantsuit. I don't wanna see you hurt."

Oh, thank god. He just thinks I'm sleeping with the professor. I blush, looking down. "It's nothing. Nothing important. And too much of a risk, you're right."

Liam ruffles my hair. "This is me," he pauses outside of the gym. "You behave, yeah?"

“Thanks. You’re a good friend.” On impulse, I kiss his cheek. I see the pain flicker through his gaze before his practiced grin comes back.

“Yeah, I’m a feekin’ saint.”

He walks off with a careless wave goodbye as I watch him thoughtfully. Behind me, there’s a noise, a scatter of pebbles roll down one of the boulders, as if disturbed by a footstep. I spin around, looking through the field, but there’s no one.

We were walking alone in the Barrens. Liam could have killed me, if he was one of *them*. I never would have seen it coming. Or was he worried about someone else in the boulders, watching us?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In which everything falls to complete shit.

Cormac...

Looking back, this would be the day I would target as when everything fell to complete shite.

Mala disappeared. Everywhere I was on campus, she was not. I'd long ago gotten her number for the iPhone she was forbidden to have at the Academy. She dinna answer my texts, other than a quick, *I'm trying to figure a few things out. I'll report to the Dean with anything I learn.*

My girl may be a spy, but her 'tells' are all clear to me, even in text form. She's upset, and she won't ask for help with whatever's going on.

Not that I have any spare time.

"We have another dead student."

"Who?" I was on my fourth cup of coffee when Helen called.

"Morgan Wilson, Assassins division. He was stabbed, by at least two assailants." Her fury is vibrating down the line. These are her students, under her care. I know it's cutting deep into her.

"I'm on my way."

Striding through campus to the medical clinic, I see the anxious huddles of students, whispering, watching each other. The campus gossip network has been working overtime.

Laosie, with all her other stellar and (sometimes) dubious talents, is assisting Dr. Giardo with a quick autopsy. "See here?" she murmurs, "The blade entered at the base of the neck. Severed the spinal cord instantly."

"Quiet work," he says with grudging admiration. "No defensive wounds. I'm

going run a blood test for alcohol or drugs.”

“When you go to a college where there’s a full bar in the dining hall, I think the alcohol’s a given,” she shrugs.

Dr. Giardo spots me and scowls. “Well, something needs to be done about this,” he says, gesturing peevisly at Morgan’s body.

“Agreed,” I say, jaw tight. “What else can you tell me?”

“He was alone in his suite,” Laosie pulls me away from the autopsy to speak quietly, “his roommate was staying over in a girl’s room.”

“I’ll take them both in for questioning,” I murmur, “she could have invited him to avoid witnesses or he could have set Morgan up. Let’s pull in the residents of the suite next to his.”

“Meet you in the Dean’s basement in thirty minutes,” she nods, looking at Morgan’s body again. He was a big guy, sturdy. But he looks small and frail under the harsh examination lights. “What a feckin’ waste.”

“What do we know?”

Helen is rubbing her eyes, and there’s a carafe of coffee and a half-empty mug in front of her.

Pouring myself a cup, I crack my neck. My preferred angle to question a suspect involves a lot of looming ominously. It’s very effective but hard on my neck.

“His roommate and the girl were both scared shitless. I believe Kevin. He said Marie invited him over and one thing led to another. He looked too grateful to be lying.”

She snorts inelegantly. “And Marie?”

“Laosie is running through some material she found on the dark web, something about the girl’s grandfather. This is her first year and there was some question about her admittance?”

“Yes, her older sister was granted admission first, but she was in a serious car accident last spring. Marie was just as qualified, so we gave the spot to her,” Helen explains.

“Maybe her older sister wasn’t willing to do what Grandpapa wanted,” I say, stroking my beard. “I started a garrison in the storage area under the gym. We can hold up to thirty people there securely. I’m holding Marie and letting Kevin go. What about Liam?”

She frowns. “While the student building walls are quite thick, his bedroom is on the other side of the wall from Morgan’s. He would have had the best opportunity to hear a struggle. He claims he didn’t hear a thing.”

“Do you believe him?”

Helen arched a brow. “I terrified the boy, but he might have a backbone strong enough to withstand me. I’m putting him in the gray column.”

Our new system for ranking threats has ten students and staff in the black column. They’re all being quickly and quietly detained as we speak.

“Very well. I’m heading down to the gym to make sure the garrison is secure and ready.” Rising, I run my hands through my hair, pulling it back with an elastic. The movement reminds me of Mala, how much she loves gripping handfuls of my hair. Particularly when I’m inside her.

“Has Mala reported back to you?” I ask, “She mentioned something about trying to figure a couple of things out.”

Helen’s eyes are sharp as always, as if she’s attempting to drill into my soul before she answers. “Miss Chandler has not attempted to contact me. If I send someone to check on her, it could rouse suspicion.”

“No need,” I say, “I’ll keep in contact.”

“If this was a regular year, and you were in my faculty, I would have already put a one-inch diameter hole in the palm of your hand with my Dewalt power drill.” She’s standing, hands on her desk and nearly vibrating with the need to fire up that Dewalt. “You will look after that young woman’s best interests because it is clear that her family will not. But should said best interests include being away from you, I expect you to make the right decision.”

“Understood.” I nodded and took my leave. She was right. And there was nothing else to say.

Professor Zimmerman hurried up to me before I even stepped foot in the gym. His jaw was tight, he could barely get the words out in his fury. “We’ve

lost another student, Juan Muñoz. He's in the south weight room. I just found his body.”

I push through the students as Zimmerman orders them to return to their suites.

Juan is sprawled over a weight bench, throat cut and staring sightlessly up at the ceiling. He has defensive wounds on his hands. They must have come up from behind while he was bench-pressing. Even on his back, he managed to fight them off- initially, at least. It looks like the second assailant held him down with his own barbells.

With a sigh, I reach down and brush my hand over his lids, closing his eyes. Pulling out my phone, I call Laosie.

“MacTavish. What do you know.”

“We have another fatality. It’s time to call in the reinforcements. We’ll need at least fifty men.”

“With pleasure. This shite has gone on long enough,” she snaps. “They’ll be on the ground in three hours. You might want to prepare Helen.”

My gaze darts to the left, there’s a shadow wavering in the hall by a supply closet. Dropping the phone and leaping to my feet, I bolt down the hallway, seeing a quick glimpse of blonde hair turning the corner towards the exit. Putting on a burst of speed, I slam them into the wall next to the door, and they slump bonelessly to the floor.

Rolling them over with my foot, I see it’s a woman, Claudia something. She’s followed me around a lot, cackling with the other hens. But she wasn’t here for me this morning. Pulling her jacket open, I find the knife.

Splashing the bucket of water in Claudia’s face, I bark, “Wake the fuck up.”

She startles back into consciousness, spitting and shrieking like a wet cat. “Pr- Professor MacTavish, what happened? I was-”

Gripping her by the throat, I nearly lift her out of the chair she’s strapped to. “I have very little time. You murdered Juan Muñoz-”

“No, no it wasn’t me!” She’s crying prettily as if I could give a shite. “I was forced into this I never wanted to- they were going to kill me!” Her protesting

dies off and I realize my grip is a little too tight.

“If that’s the case, Claudia, help me.” I look deeply and intensely into her eyes and she melts. *Who the hell are these idiots recruiting?* “Help me stop them. You don’t want anyone else getting hurt. I know you don’t. This is your chance to prove it.”

“I- I don’t...” She’s still doing that fucking sniffing thing like I’m going to melt with her mascara-stained tears and I want to shake her head right off her body.

“You know. You do know and you need to tell me now. Give me names. You’re saving yourself or you’re going down with them. Who’s next on the list?”

Her face crumples. “Everyone.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

In which Mala is an excellent spy.

Mala...

Earlier that day...

Sitting in Tati and Mariya's suite, listening to Liam tell what he knew about poor Morgan's murder, I can't fight the sense of inevitability. Everything is falling apart. This invisible force, these bastards, they're going to keep killing until none of us are left.

"I don't get this," I said, biting my nails, "Dean Christie caught Kon's attackers so quickly. With Lauren, there was blood and the knife as evidence and still nothing? And now poor Morgan."

Even now that I'm on the "inside" of the investigation, my helplessness is real. Does the Dean really know who killed Lauren and she's been holding back, trying to throw a bigger net? I can't believe Cormac would be willing to do that, he's so protective. Losing another student today would kill him.

"It's the fekkin' newcomers, that's certain." Liam says angrily.

Konstantin, who has turned into the voice of reason, disagrees with him and they go back and forth. Looking around the room, I still can't force my mind to wrap around the concept that one of these people - my friends that I've known and loved for years - could be part of this death and destruction.

When Dean Christie calls us together that afternoon with the news of another murder, my spine finally stiffens. This is insane. That shadow I saw slipping into the tunnel the night of Lauren's memorial... that's how they're getting around. I know it. Only half the tunnels have security cameras, I know Cormac was wiring up the unsecured tunnels or locking them down, but if they have someone inside the security room, they could be tampering with

the footage.

I'm barely listening by the time she orders us to meet with our division academic advisors. The last murder was in the gym, which is set in the most open area on campus because the fields around it are used for training.

If you wanted to get into the gym without being seen in the early morning weight-lifting crowd... I close my eyes, going through the network of tunnels. After Cormac taught me to visualize what was above the tunnel, it made it so much easier to navigate all those blank stone pathways below. If I take the tunnel behind the Library, it ends at the toolshed. There's another entrance close to the Barrens, and I'll bet it ends in the gym.

Shuddering, I wonder, was there a person watching Liam and me in the boulder field? Is that how they got away?

Slipping away in the crowd of students is easy, and I'm moving through the first tunnel when it occurs to me that I should message Cormac right away. Even the thought of texting him feels painful, another connection I'm going to have to sever. I'll just get to the second tunnel and confirm my suspicions first. Besides, I know there are cameras in this tunnel. Someone monitoring the surveillance video has already spotted me.

Popping out of the tunnel's exit like a prairie dog, I look around for the next tunnel entrance. Moving behind the first boulder, I tap my foot around until I step on something hollow-sounding. There's the trap door, hidden behind some bushes and invisible unless you knew exactly what you were looking for.

It's when the door is shut behind me and I realize this tunnel doesn't have any lighting that it occurs to me that I am a complete fucking idiot. Cormac may know these tunnels like the back of his hand, but I don't think anyone's maintained this one in a long time. Switching on my phone's flashlight, I play the light over the walls. Tree roots are bulging in between broken stones and moss covers everything like a fuzzy green coat, and the smell of rotting vegetation and rank water is nauseatingly strong. Closing my eyes, I picture the topography. I'd be about twenty feet from the gym, with maybe one turn.

Keeping the light pointed down and walking as silently as possible, I don't even see the fist coming down until the last second.

Cormac...

“It’s time, Helen. You know this.”

“And you don’t know if your men haven’t been compromised.”

Laosie and I are standing in front of the Dean’s desk, and she’s furious.

“I never agreed to outside reinforcements!” She’s raging. “There’s a reason we haven’t called in assistance from the families. Can you imagine a dozen different organizations milling around the island, deciding that maybe one or two of the others are to blame?”

“Our people don’t belong to any of the families,” Laosie interjects calmly. “They are accountable only to us.”

Helen rubs her forehead. “Disperse them through the campus, I want at least one security guard we trust with each team, reporting back to me every four hours.”

My gaze flickers up for a moment as I see movement on one of the tunnel cameras. Frowning, I move in for a closer look. We moved all the security monitors for the entire campus - above and below - into the Dean’s office. There are only a few of the guards we trust to monitor them.

“Ivan, go back thirty seconds on tunnel eleven.”

There. Goddamnit, it’s Mala, walking alone in the library tunnel.

“Go to the exit,” I say, “do you see her?”

“Yes, she’s... right there. She’s out,” he points to another monitor. “She’s in the Barrens now. I should see her on the overhead camera in that area. She disappeared.”

“No, she didn’t.” I’m grinding my teeth in frustration. “She found one of the unmapped tunnels.”

Laosie smacks me on the shoulder, and the woman is capable of quite the punch. “If she found it, you jackhole, then someone else probably did, too.”

“Someone who could have used it to get into the gym building this morning without being seen,” I groan. “Send a guard to the east entrance of the gym, the exit is right around the corner. Try to call her.” Laosie is already grabbing her phone as I charge out the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

In which there is a knife fight in the dark and he'll never wear high heels again.

Mala...

I lean back just in time for the fist to go over my head and smash into the wall. The painful twinge from my lower back left over from the Leader's Challenge takes me a second longer to get back up but I'm driving an elbow up into their throat on my way, trying to use my momentum to crush their larynx. My phone's gone, spinning uselessly and its flashlight flickering over the wet ceiling of the tunnel, just quick glimmers of light moving over their body, not enough to see who's trying to kill me.

My elbow hits true, there is a strangled grunt and they fall against the opposite wall, just enough time to pull Michael's knife out of my ankle holster. Driving it into their thigh, I pull down as hard as I can. They hiss in pain but that fist is back, this time hitting me in the head, on my right temple and knocking me to the ground. They're grabbing my kicking feet, trying to keep me on my back and in the oscillating light, I see the gleam of a blade as they pull it from a sheath.

There is darkness and snarling, thrashing and both of us swinging our knives wildly, feinting, looking for an opening and I find mine first. Still on my back, I swipe my blade along their ankles, severing their Achilles' tendons and now, *now* they finally drop.

Rolling over, I grunt painfully, bracing my back against the wall, pushing myself up. They may not be alone.

My shirt's wet.

Shit.

“Nope, nope, nope...” I mumble, “No sitting back down. Keep moving...” Pressing my hand against my stomach where that son of a bitch managed to cut me, I keep my knife hand up and my back to the wall, watching the groaning man rolling back and forth, gripping his ankles. It’s a man, I can tell by his voice, choked with rage and pain. Clumsily stepping sideways, I head for the exit. I know it’s there. Probably ten feet. I want to go back for my phone but it’s too close to him and I don’t know how deep this cut is.

I hear a crackle and very faintly, someone’s voice. He must have an earpiece in. “Bitch is down here,” he croaks, “Mala. Cut me... knows the tunnel... hurry... *fuck!*” I step sideways faster on increasingly shaky legs.

Move Mala, move! Reinforcements.

My head turns from the sudden flare of sunlight blazing down another hatch. Someone jumps the eight feet down and it’s him. Cormac.

“Hey,” I manage.

“Gettin’ yourself into trouble, girl.” His hands are running over my stomach gently, trying to find the wound. Another man in a black tach suit climbs down. I don’t know him, but he’s got the stern face and close-cropped blonde hair of a soldier.

“Pull his comm and silence it,” Cormac tells him, “let’s see if we can still draw more rats to the cage. Cuff him.” The man nods and strides past us.

“He’s not going to run,” I giggle. This is fucking hilarious. “Not on *those* feet. He’ll never wear high heels again.”

That blow to the head may be worse than I thought.

“You’re lucky, he missed any vital organs. This is just a surface wound.” Dr. Giardo says, sounding displeased about it. He ties off the last stitch, glaring at me. I think he’s pissed off because Cormac insisted he inject me with Lidocaine before he started sewing me up.

“I’m sorry?” I’m not sure how to respond but apparently, that isn’t right, because the doctor gives me a final glare and stomps out of the room.

“He really has the worst bedside manner,” Laosie murmurs.

Cormac had carried me out of the tunnel and wanted to stay with me and my

refusal was almost violent. I can't. I can't let him take care of me again. I can never have him. I have to stop now before it kills me. My heart hurt worse than the gash in my stomach when he looked at me, so concerned.

"You- you need to go question that asshole," I nodded firmly. "I'll be fine."

Finally, reluctantly he left, but before I could cry quietly to myself, Professor Fitzgerald showed up, sitting next to me and talking in her calm, quiet way as the doctor irritably tended to me.

"He does, right?" I agree, "I've never seen anyone look so outraged as Dr. Giardo when someone gets hurt."

We're in one of the back rooms in the gym. It is the closest building to the exit of the tunnel - just like I thought - and the little space smells like old leather and dirty towels.

"I know this is hard to believe," she says, "but he actually cares very much about the student's health and well-being. That's why he gets so angry when someone gets hurt."

"Yeah?" I say dubiously.

"It is true, I assure you." She pushes back her dark hair, shot through with silver streaks. "You students are a constant source of stress, I think my hair will be completely gray by the end of the year."

"If we make it that far," I whisper.

Her gaze darts to the door before she leans closer. "You will survive this year," she promises fiercely. "We will not lose another student on our watch. Everything is indeed coming to a head, but this fight will be on our terms. There is a plan." She touches my shoulder lightly and I feel honored. Professor Fitzgerald is not a touchy-feely person. At all.

"As for now," she says briskly, "you will rest and then head back to the dining hall with the others. Whether Colin's message did or did not go through, if you show up looking perfectly healthy, they will question if you were actually in the tunnel, which takes the scrutiny off you."

"Agreed," I nod. The man who attacked me was Colin Morris, and Professor Fitzgerald told me they'd caught his sister Claudia earlier that day. "Do you

think he was with his sister when she killed Juan?” I hadn’t known Juan that well, he was in the Warrior’s division but he was a good guy, fair, and reasonable.

“She’s more than a bit flighty,” the professor says sourly, “I suspect Colin did the dirty work, which makes me approve of you even more for disabling him so handily.”

“It wasn’t that handily,” I groan as I sit up, pressing the bandage against my stomach, “but thank you. Does that mean I get an A in your class?”

“No.”

“Oh. I was just joking...”

“You received an A in my class when you outed the Chechnyans,” she said softly, icy blue eyes gleaming. “After *extensive* questioning, Mr. Madomadov and Mr. Varayev were quite helpful. Though we are about to run out of places to store prisoners.”

It’s hard to know how to answer that, so I just smile weakly. “First world problems.”

She chuckles lightly. “Let’s get you some pain medication and on your way back.”

After an ugly little scuffle in the dining hall with that asshole Baptiste Fournier picking on one of the newcomers, our group decides to take our meals to go and end up in Tatiana and Mariya’s suite. “There’s something so comforting about being here with you all,” I said, picking at my gnocchi. “Everything around us is so insane, but here in this room, it feels safe.”

“Agreed,” Tatiana gives me a hug which presses her knee against my bandaged stomach but I appreciate it all the same. She raises her can of Red Bull. “We have each other. To friends forever!”

“Friends forever!” We all chorus.

Please, don’t let it be any of them, I think, not them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

In which Willow is just happy Mala's lady garden is getting watered.

Mala...

The next day...

It's late afternoon and I am beginning to feel like one of the mushrooms growing down in these tunnels.

Cormac pulled me from my Spy duties - where I had been helping Willow with another round of cleaning and prepping guns - by claiming he needed an extra hand. Professor Fitzgerald waved me off without a word and when Willow eyed the two of us, I could swear a giant lightbulb appeared over her head.

"You *bitch*. He's *London* Cormac, isn't he? How did I not figure this out? He's been here the whole time and you never spilled? Oh, you owe me so much information tonight! Everything! I was just happy your lady garden was getting watered and you never tell me that *he* was your sexy as fuck gardener?"

"Will you shut up!" I hiss, "I know I owe you an explanation but please, hush!"

"You. Owe. Me." She jabbed my chest with a hard, pointy finger to emphasize the seriousness of my lack of sharing.

"Ow, okay! But not a word you little honey badger, please!"

She mimed zipping her lips shut and I trotted to catch up with Cormac. "What's going on?"

"Finn has discovered that these bastards have been tapping into the

surveillance video with an outside scrambler. They've been halting and looping footage to cover their people moving through the tunnels," he says. I can feel the fury radiating off him.

"Is there any way to retrieve any of the scrambled footage?"

"We can't wait," he says grimly. "I've got three other teams going through the tunnels. We're going to clear them all and lock them down, aside from two key tunnels we use for security personnel."

"What a nightmare. Oh, my god. Do you think they've booby-trapped any of the tunnels?" I feel nauseated. "Imagine how easy it would be."

"Exactly. We'll be wearing bodycams and we're on a new system the hacker can't penetrate, it switches frequency every sixty seconds." We stop outside the hidden exit by the Barrens. "I'm still quite impressed with your discovery of this tunnel, my clever fox." He straps the equipment on and we turn on our lights.

Clearing the tunnel is even spookier than I was braced for. With the ominous bulging in the ceilings and the smell of rot and decay, the old tunnels are terrifying. We're almost out of the second one when Cormac sees it.

"Ah, fuck."

It's a brick of C4 plastique explosive, neatly taped into a dark corner with a timed detonator already counting down.

"All tunnel teams, listen closely. We're looking for C4, check high and low, remote corners. They could be fitted with a timed detonator. Check for trip wires that might set the C4 off," Cormac is speaking softly, urgently into his headset.

"This one is set for ninety minutes," I show him, "we don't have much time."

"Pull in more teams," he tells the others, "we have seven more tunnels to cover and less than an hour to do it. Disable the C4 and bring it to the security building. Bolt the tunnel doors as you clear them. Weld them shut if necessary."

I hold my bag out and he gently pulls the detonator from the brick of putty.

"That's it?" I asked, "No tricky cutting of wires?"

"You almost sound disappointed," he raises a brow.

“No,” I say fervently. “I’m happy. We don’t need anything even more complicated.”

Another team is there to weld the door shut as we move on to the next tunnel. I’m keeping a light on the floor for tripwires while he’s scanning the walls and ceilings. “Time is running out, can you feel it?” I whisper, “There’s a clock ticking down somewhere. It’s tonight, isn’t it?”

Cormac cupped the back of my head, “Listen to me. I will give my life to keep you safe. But we must get these tunnels cleared. They can drop the entire campus if this C4 goes off.”

“Okay. Okay... how many tunnels are left?”

He listens on the comm, “Two more after we clear this one. We’ll take one, Jake and Van will take the other.”

My skin is ready to crawl off my body. We can’t run, we have to check every inch of this tunnel and the dark is stretching before us, the exit feeling further and further away.

“There it is!” I aim my light at the C4 taped to the ceiling, and his long arm pulls it down. “Pull the detonator,” I mumble like I’m reciting a recipe for sugar cookies, “Separate the C4...”

Cormac is gazing at me, his headlamp illuminating his attempt to quell a smile. “You think this is funny, mister?” I hiss defensively.

He kisses me quickly and it is the best fifteen seconds of my day. “One more, love. Hurry now.”

Following after him and trying not to trip, all I can think about is what he called me. He calls me little fox, bad girl, lass... Is love just another nickname, or does it mean more?

It can’t. My nausea is back. It can’t mean anything because I can never belong to him.

One more tunnel... just one more...

The sun is setting when we descend into the last tunnel, that constant sense of *hurry hurry hurry* pushing at me like a fist in the small of my back. This is one of the main tunnels that ends at the Dean’s building, into the basement there.

“Anything?” Cormac’s voice is tight and controlled.

“Checking for tripwires,” I reply, “two more turns, and we’re-”

A massive explosion shakes the ground above us, rocks dropping from the ceiling, showing rusted iron mesh that cracks just as quickly under tons of rocks and dirt.

I’m thrown forward on my face, scrambling to stand again, squinting through the clouds of dirt. My nose is bleeding and I absently wipe at it as I call out. “Cormac! Where are you? *Cormac!*”

The dust clears enough to show the tunnel collapsed into this section, blocking it completely, and I can only pray he’s safe on the other side.

“Feckin’ hell, Mala. Why did it have to be you?”

Squinting, I see Liam in front of me with two men I don’t know. And they’re all pointing guns at me.

“Liam...” I feel tears making tracks in the dirt on my face. “Liam, not you. You’re taking back your family, you don’t need these assholes-”

“There’s not gonna be anything to take back without them!” he shouts, veins bulging in his neck. He chuckles mirthlessly and holds up the brick of plastique. “The last C4, unless that feckin’ MacTavish found ‘em already.”

“We did Liam, we found them all. Please. You can stop now, you don’t have to do this!”

He’s backing away, wiring up the C4 with the detonator and the two men are grinning, aiming their guns at me.

“You knew my brother!” I scream, “You were friends! They were the ones who killed him please don’t do this!”

“Sorry,” he says.

And then he shoots both men in the head before they can pull their triggers on me.

My heart’s pounding in my throat and it feels like it’s choking me. “Thank you. It’s not too late. You just proved it.”

He gives me the most heartbreaking version of his rakish grin. “I can’t...”

There's a hole in his chest and a look of surprise as he stares down at it, then up at me. The man behind him steps out and grins. Baptiste Fournier.

"Motherfucking Fournier!" I hiss, "You fucking piece of shit!"

He's casually holding his Glock, kicking poor Liam's body over, rolling him away from the C4, the detonator still attached and counting down.

"I always hated you, Chandler," he chuckles indifferently. "I drank a toast when they shot your brother. It was six bullets, did you know that?"

"You're a fucking traitor, just like Camille!"

"You can sit down here and think about it, because you'll be here when I blow this tunnel," he says, still laughing like this is the most entertaining thing.

Fournier's weakness has always been his overconfidence. As he bends over to pick up the brick of explosives lying next to Liam's body, I pull my knife and throw myself on him, sending his gun flying. I'm graceless and awkward, but I knock him back and we both thrash, arms and legs kicking and punching but he's on his back and I just need one opening.

"There's a spot that causes instant death," Cormac told me during practice once. "The quickest kill is a blade in the left eye. There's a slight bulge in the brain behind the eye socket that makes it that much quicker to enter without your blade striking off bone. Always go for the left eye."

My arm drives up as hard as I can. Cormac's right. The blade goes in so easily.

I've never killed anyone before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

In which the world is on fire.

Cormac...

Grunting, I roll out from under a hailstorm of rocks just before a giant boulder hits the ground where I'd fallen after the explosion knocked me off my feet.

"*Malaaaa!*" I roar, but the piercing sound of gunfire and shouting pours down through the hole with the dirt and stones and I can't hear anything from behind the barrier between us. I know the Academy is under attack. I know there are people who need me.

Mala comes first.

Charging back down the hallway, I shout into my headset. "Team three, to the Dean's building, fire suppression and rescue. Team six, to the front gates for reinforcements. Team four, you're with the security guards, spread across the perimeter, don't let anything through, you hear me? You fucking hold it!"

The tunnel we'd been sweeping begins near the Academy security building, and my teams are pouring out the double doors, weapons in hand and moving to their assigned posts.

The campus is already a minefield; the team assigned to the last tunnel must have failed, it's collapsed, a snaking, smoking trench and I see one student, legs braced, trying to pull his friend out. I stop long enough to help him.

The fire flares up the front of the Dean's building, flames leaping three stories high and lighting the night around the rubble. The explosion demolished most of the building, but the back is still intact, and I let myself have one breath of hope. The tunnel exit is there.

Students are racing back and forth, but no one is panicking, I see Tatiana and Mariya climbing into the tower closest to the front, already coughing from the billowing smoke.

Ripping open the back door, I'm nearly shot in the face by Helen. "Woah! Friend," I shout, "not foe!"

One of the sleeves of her jacket is torn off and there are a couple of burn marks in the cloth, but her hold on that AR-15 is completely steady.

"Very well," she snaps, "on your way." She disappears out into the night.

Huge cracks are splitting the stone walls of the basement, but this part of the building miraculously remained intact, even the two-story glass arboretum above the basement. Three doors, there are three doors between me and Mala and she will be there. She'll be alive. I rip open the first door and charge down the next hallway, the cracks spiderwebbing the ceiling are ominous and still spreading as I run to the next door. This is the oldest substructure in the building, built nearly three hundred years ago. I don't know if it can hold against the explosion that just happened.

I'm through the second door and the iron one in front of me is bolted from this side. I can hear her, pounding desperately on the other side. If I hadn't made it through, she would have been trapped there...

Yanking out the iron bolt and nearly ripping the door off its hinges, I catch Mala as she falls into me.

"You're alive," she sobbed, "I thought you were crushed-"

Cutting her off with a desperate kiss, I run my hands down her shoulders, her body. "Are you hurt?" There's blood streaked on her face.

"It's just a bloody nose," she grabbed my hands. "Liam- it was Liam with two men. He had the C4 but-"

The lights flicker overhead and I take her hand, "We have to move. Where is he?" I'm dragging her back down the hall, watching the cracks above us widen ominously. A chunk of concrete drops from the ceiling with a choking cloud of dust.

"He's dead," she gasps, coughing, "he saved me. He shot the two men and then Fournier, fucking Baptiste Fournier was behind him, he killed Liam."

Pulling her through the next door, I breathe a sigh of relief; the cracks have stabilized here.

“...I- I have the C4, it’s here,” she pats the bag strapped over her shoulder.”

“Where’s Fournier?”

“I jumped him. I stabbed him. Left eye.” Her fury and heartbreak are slowly solidifying into shock. “He’s there. By Liam.”

Spinning her, I grip her shoulders. “Look at me. Mala, you did well. You were so brave, I am proud of you. We’ll grieve later, yes?”

She’s trying to focus on me, blinking the dust out of her eyes. “Later. Yes.” Swiping her sleeve over her face, she smears the blood and dust more but she nods. “What now?”

I love this woman.

Looking at her determined, beautiful, filthy face, I could not love her more. “Listen carefully, little fox. You are not prey. You are the predator now. We’re going to arm up, and you will shoot everyone you don’t recognize, do you understand?”

“Yes,” she agrees.

Pulling her to the closest exit, I tap in the combination for the lock on the weapons cabinet there. She sucks in a startled breath when I pull open the doors.

“Is that a Stinger missile?”

“Yes baby, it is.” Slings the launch gear over my shoulder, I hand her a rifle. “I know you prefer knifework, but this is going to be large scale. Take as many extra ammo clips as you can carry.”

She obeys me, coughing as a change of wind brings the fire’s smoke toward us.

Cupping her face, I kiss her soundly. “Stay with me. We’ll do this together. Remember, you are the hunter now.”

Gripping her rifle, Mala looks up at me with complete faith. “I’m ready.”

We open the door, and the world is on fire.

Mala...

Blackhawk helicopters are flying over us, strafing the grounds with thousands of rounds of bullets. Buildings are on fire. All four of the guard towers are lit up like noontime, firing at the helicopters and vehicles trying to break through the twisted remains of the main gate.

Cormac grabs my arm, pointing at the west wall, closest to the cliffs. "Cover me!"

Watching him at war is like... it is his art. He's gracefully loading the Stinger missile on the run as we're racing for the wall. Squinting through a cloud of smoke, I nearly lose him until I hit the wall with my shoulder and the haze clears enough to see him hoisting himself up. He points to a spot midway on the wall and my heart seizes as I nod. It's all open space, no cover, he has no fucking cover and just me for backup!

Looking over the other side of the wall, I spot three men running low. I don't know if they've seen Cormac yet but it's a matter of seconds. Spraying them with bullets, I brace against the kick of the rifle, gritting my teeth. Dirt and rock chips fly but all three are down. Running below him as he barrels down the top of the wall, I shoot two more men.

Cormac's kneeling down, putting the missile launcher on his shoulder. I can see which helicopter he's targeting, currently unloading its Gatling guns on the north and west towers, sweeping between them in a rain of death and the percussive noise of the bullets makes my ears ring violently.

Seconds later, the Blackhawk explodes with a roar like a wounded beast, flaming chunks of the helicopter are blown out over the cliff and into the sea from the force of the missile. Cormac leaps down from the wall and falls into me, rolling us several feet behind an outbuilding.

"You're fucking amazing," I gasp out. He grins, kissing me fiercely and we're up again.

"Front gate!" he shouts.

When I try to remember this night later, for months it will only be in flashes of light, blurs of color, and the never-ending thump of weapons fired. I follow Cormac. I shoot when I see movement and I duck when he pulls me down.

What I do remember clearly is the last helicopter, hovering over the Dean's building, tearing up the ground, windows shattering, and entire sections of surrounding buildings being reduced back to crumbled stone. Then the brightest light of all, reflected a thousand times in the glass of the arboretum. A single man lights up as his missile hits true, exploding the Blackhawk into a flaming rain of metal down on top of him.

The next morning...

"This was where he stood, I think."

Cormac and I are walking through the shattered remains of the arboretum; hills and valleys of jagged glass shards and the shredded remains of the trees and flowers the old gardener nurtured here.

I hiss as my hand brushes a piece of charred timber, still hot to the touch.

"Are you all right?" He takes my hand with a frown, placing a kiss on the reddened mark on my skin.

"It's nothing." I'm watching him greedily, memorizing his eyes, his beautiful face, shadowed in mourning for his friend. "I'm sorry, I'm ashamed to say that I don't even know his name."

"Karl Lawrence Brennan," he says with a strange little smile. "But he preferred Larry." Kissing the reddened mark on my hand again, he pulls me out of the glass minefield. "I'll tell you more about him sometime."

While scores of the enemy were killed last night, the only students who lost their lives were the traitors.

Poor Liam. I made sure that Dean Christie knew what he'd done for me.

Students, faculty, and staff are all moving through the rubble of the Academy, and trucks are already arriving with manpower and medical supplies. I'd seen Dr. Giardo earlier, shouting at two med techs that just arrived. That man's ready to have an aneurysm at this point. But here in the remains of the arboretum, Cormac and I are alone.

"I can't see you anymore." It bursts out of me like poison, dragged from me kicking and screaming.

"What do you mean?" He turns to me, still holding my hand and I pull it

away awkwardly.

“My father’s coming for me in a couple of days. He’ll be taking me home and you and I will never see each other again.” I try to sound firm and I know I’m failing miserably. The pathetic little quiver at the end of my words shames me. “This...” I gesture aimlessly, “Whatever this was is over. I’m going back to my world, you’re going back to yours. This has to end now.”

What are you saying? The desperate part of me is screaming. *You love him! Shut the fuck up!*

“That can’t be what you want,” Cormac says slowly, frowning.

“It doesn’t matter what I want.” I try for a caustic little laugh but it comes out more like a sob. “I know the rest of my life. It’s all mapped out for me and you’re not in it. I’d- I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone that we...”

“We fucked?” he says sharply. “That we fucked? Repeatedly? That you gave me your virginity?”

“Don’t be a bastard,” I snap, each word from his mouth is hitting like the bullets that missed me last night. These feel just as painful. “I’ll... I’ll handle it. But it would help if you didn’t...”

“Mala.” His hands are rubbing my arms gently and I turn my face away. “Why are you doin’ this? Do you not trust me to take care of you? You really don’t believe we are meant for more than this?”

Yanking myself away, I snap, “Take *care* of me? I’m not a fucking infant and I’m not yours, period. Take the hint, Cormac. You fucked a student, congratulations. I got my little adventure and bagged the professor. But we’re done now.”

He’s silent, staring down at me with his hands on his hips and he doesn’t look angry, he looks... compassionate.

“We’re done.” I walk away as fast as I can, breaking into a run when I turn the corner, sobbing like my heart’s been pulled from my chest.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

In which we learn that Mala's father is just as horrible as we thought he was.

Mala...

"I knew Dean Christie believes in the value of hard work," Willow says, leaning on her shovel, "but I honestly didn't anticipate that to include construction and disaster cleanup."

There are deep furrows in the grounds where the two tunnels collapsed and tents set up everywhere for those displaced in the attack. Willow and I are using a metal detector to locate one of the weapons lockers covered in rubble and dig it up. The smell of stale smoke is still everywhere; in our clothes, our hair.

"Her main concern is securing all the weapons, not something you want your average carpenter to stumble upon."

Students were leaving one by one as their families arrived with supplies and reinforcements to help rebuild the Academy and take their offspring home.

"When is your brother flying in to pick you up?" I ask as Willow glumly shovels another pile of ash from the weapons storage locker.

"Tomorrow, but Tom is claiming that we should stay for a couple of extra days for moral support," she sneers.

"I can tell there's a story behind this," I prompt, hauling away a piece of charred lumber.

"The pervy bastard has a crush on Dean Christie."

"Get the hell out!"

“No, I can’t because he’s making me stay so he can make a play for her while she’s ‘vulnerable’ at this moment of crisis,” she groans.

Wiping my filthy gloves on my jeans, I shake my head. “I don’t think the Dean is capable of vulnerability. Or fear. Or weakness.” I can vividly remember her shooting two men in the face - perfectly executed head shots - while bleeding from a stab wound in her torso.

“My brother’s a *drongo*,” she sighs, “biggest fucking idiot. He’s had a crush on her since he came here eight years ago.”

“Sorry,” I’m trying not to laugh as I give her a side hug, “maybe she’ll crush his fragile hopes quickly and decisively.”

My father’s due to fly in today, and that is not good news. Ordinarily, he’d just send my bodyguard out to get me. He probably wants to put in some schmoozing time with some of the other families here.

We pass by Cormac and one of his mercenaries on the way back to our suite. He’s just as gorgeous in jeans and work boots, and he nods briefly to both of us and it all hits me again, and the loss is so acute that it feels like a punch to the heart.

It doesn’t matter. It will hurt less when I don’t have to see him anymore.

Because my father will always find me at my worst, he’s the next person to step into my path. “Mala, what the hell happened to you? You look like you got spat out of a coal mine.”

He’s a distinguished-looking man, wearing an expensive blue suit, dark hair with a touch of silver at his temples, and the grim expression I’ve come to expect from him.

“I’m sorry Papa, I didn’t know you’d arrived.” An automatic apology every time to head off the inevitable lecture. “We’ve all been helping secure the most sensitive areas on campus.”

“I didn’t think it would include working like a day laborer,” he scowls, wiping his clean hands on his handkerchief as if he’d touched me. “Go get cleaned up,” he orders, “and meet me in the Faculty apartments.”

Willow and I walk in silence for a moment.

“I knew your dad was a major asshole, but that was an impressive display,”

she observes.

“Feeling better about having to deal with Tom lusting after the Dean now, aren’t you?”

“Yes, your day is definitely going to suck more,” she agrees cheerfully.

Once I’m cleaned up and presentable, I go in search of my father. He’s in one of the undamaged offices and he gestures to me when I hover in the doorway.

“Mala darling, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

A chill shoots up my spine. He’s never this nice. “My dear, meet your future husband.” He spins his laptop around so I can see the screen. “Enzo, my lovely daughter Mala. Mala, Don Accardi. You’ll be married next month.”

My knees buckle, and I sit heavily in the chair next to my father’s. Not *him*. My father can’t be giving me to this old bastard.

Fifty is a generous guess for Enzo Accardi or the man’s done some hard living. He has fraying silver hair, a huge mustache, and mean, dark little eyes that are looking me over.

“She looks a little young,” he says, and doesn’t seem unhappy about it.

“Mala is twenty-one, Enzo. Healthy as a horse,” Dad grins broadly.

My father just compared me to a horse, I think numbly. Next, he’s going to show off my good teeth.

“She’ll do,” Accardi grunts. “I agree to your terms, Malcolm. We have an alliance.”

That can’t be correct. I heard that wrong. I’m not going to be shackled to this horrible old-

“I’ll be seeing you next month, *mia cara*, my dear.” He leers at me horribly before my father spins the laptop back to face him.

“Mala, go get packed, we leave in two hours,” he says, not bothering to look up at the daughter he just sold off.

“Wait.”

He looks up, brows drawn together furiously.

“I told you to go pack.”

“Papa, I need to speak to you. Please give me ten minutes.”

He gives me a glare that promises retribution. “Enzo, let me just handle getting my little girl out of here and I’ll contact you when we’re in the air.”

There’s a muffled answer before he slams the laptop shut.

Begging’s fine. I’m not too proud to beg. “Papa, please. You can’t give me to that man. You know he killed his first two wives!”

He waves his hand impatiently but doesn’t look at me. “Those are rumors. You just do your job for the family and you’ll be fine. If we handle this right, you’ll have a son soon, and we’ll have enough information to get rid of Enzo at just the right time. I’ll take over to help my daughter in her time of grief and we’ll have both organizations in-house.”

“Do you care about me at all?”

Why am I bothering to ask this? I know the answer, but maybe I just want him to say it.

The storm’s gathering in his eyes and it explodes as he slams his hands down on the table. “What I cared about,” he shouts in my face, “is losing my son, my *heir*. You were selfish and cowardly enough to save yourself rather than your own twin! You put us in this position.” He calms down slightly, smoothing his tie.

“We’re not coming from a place of strength right now. We’re having some severe supply chain issues. We’re losing customers. My captains are not as confident about Richard as they should be. We need a strong alliance to keep those fuckers from getting any ideas.”

His sharp eyes are watching my expression, and his tone is softer now. “We can’t do this without you. Michael is gone, and your mother... do it for them. You owe it to Michael.”

My shoulders slump. He knows he has me.

“Now go on, go get packed. You have two hours.”

“*That* old fuck?”

Willow, Mariya, Tati, and Meiyong are clustered together, looking at a picture of my betrothed.

“You’re kidding, right?” Tatiana says doubtfully, “This guy is at least forty-five.”

Angling to look at the picture, I shake my head. “That’s his wedding photo with his second wife, it must be ten years old. Both his wives are dead.”

Throwing another sweater in my duffle bag, I scowl at Jun, who’s taking it back out. “Two dead wives and you’re meant to marry him? No.”

“I don’t have a choice. You know how this goes,” I say, rubbing my eyes. “My family needs this alliance. Losing Michael was a big blow to our stability.”

“Would you like us to kill Accardi for you?” Meiyong offers solicitously.

“Yes,” Jun warms to the plan, “I’ll poison the wedding cake. Don’t Americans have that thing where you feed him a slice of cake?”

“No, I think it’s that she smashes the cake in his face?”

“Even better,” Jun says happily. “I conceal a capsule in the piece of cake and when she smashes it in his face, it’ll release a targeted neurotoxin that-”

“I love you so much for this, because only at the Academy would murder be a sign of affection,” I say wryly. “But... you would all do the same thing. You would.”

“Well, I am,” Mariya says, “but Kon’s close to my age, insanely hot, and hasn’t killed any wives yet. See the difference?”

Hugging her hard, I whisper, “Some of us can’t be that lucky.”

They all insist on walking me to the twisted, battered front gates, and every step is precious, my last moments here with them.

“Don’t do this yet,” Willow whispers, linking her arm with mine. “Talk to Cormac. There’s a solution, I know there is.”

“No. There isn’t. I already told him goodbye. There’s nothing there, and there can’t be.”

Dean Christie is standing by the SUV, rather than my father.

“Malcolm is taking another business meeting,” she says, looking me over carefully. “He told your driver to get you settled on the jet and he’ll meet you there.”

“Thank you,” I nod. “I mean, thank *you*, Dean. Thank you for everything. For believing in me. For trusting me.”

She pats my shoulder. “Miss Chandler, I never doubted you. Off you go now.”

With a final round of hugs, I get into the SUV. The iron gates of the Academy shut behind me and my brief, giddy moments of freedom are over.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

In which we learn the path to true love and happily ever after starts with a big-ass jet.

Mala...

When the driver pulls up to a private jet, I stare at it blankly. It isn't my father's. He must have bought a new one. Standing at the bottom of the stairs, I look up at the open door. I can't see beyond the rigidly smiling flight attendant, which seems like a perfect metaphor for the rest of my life. I'll never know what's ahead of me until my cursed father decides it, and then my husband. Just thinking the word *husband* makes me ill and I sway a little.

"Miss Chandler?" The driver's at my elbow. "We are on something of a schedule and I am instructed to get you aboard as quickly as possible."

"Oh. Of course." I force my feet to get moving.

The interior of the jet makes me certain it's borrowed. As wealthy as my father is, this is beyond our means. The jet could easily carry fifty people, with huge, comfortable tan leather seats and gleaming walnut tables. There's a long galley kitchen and a full bar with an honest-to-god chandelier over the main seating area. I can see a conference room just past this section and I suspect the doors at the very end of the jet lead to a bedroom.

This is Russian Oligarch-level wealth.

"Miss Chandler, I'm Ian. Let me make you more comfortable," the flight attendant flutters around me. "May I take your coat?" I sit where he puts me and fold my hands in my lap. I can't think. My body is numb, which is probably a good thing because I am nowhere near recovered from the night of the battle and everything hurts most of the time.

Poor Liam.

There's a glass of sparkling water in front of me and I realize the flight attendant must have been back. I didn't notice. I can feel the engines rumble to life under me, massive ones. Faintly, I hear the pilot speaking about securing the doors and I frown. Where's my dad?

The jet taxis slowly down the runway and I'm half out of my seat. "Ian? Uh, where's my-"

A very tall man walks into the main cabin, and it's not my father.

"Cormac? What the hell are you doing here?"

"Shh, little fox. We're about to take off." He nods at the glowing seatbelt light as he seats himself across from me, pointedly clicking his seatbelt latch. He's dressed in a dark blue suit that has to be bespoke to fit those wide shoulders of his.

"Don't you shush me! Where's my dad?"

He's smiling at me pleasantly, man-spreading. I already know it's huge, thank you very much, you Scottish asshole. Averting my gaze, I watch as the jet gracefully takes off, Inis Mor shrinking behind us.

"Is this a kidnapping?" I ask, "Are you kidnapping me right now? I'm not sure my dad's willing to pay a really big ransom, just so you know."

"You are worth everything a man has, and more," he says inscrutably.

Burying my face in my hands, I'm not sure what is worse, the hell ride I was expecting with my father or this flight to where-the-fuckever with Cormac. Who I can't want. Who can never be mine. Who is sitting across from me grinning openly and I want to crack the champagne bottle Ian is offering him right over his head.

"Here, have some champagne," he says, holding out a glass.

"Only if I can pour it in your lap."

Cormac throws back his perfectly shaped head and laughs heartily, and I'm dizzy from the personality change. Where is the grim, focused man that until today, was sternly directing students and workmen back and forth on our decimated campus? The man who I'm pretty sure went out with a couple of his hit squads because he disappeared for forty-eight hours and returned with nothing but a cut on his forehead? Who is this relaxed, gorgeous bastard who

is still chuckling?

So many questions. I am dizzy from questions and he doesn't seem inclined to answer any of them.

Once a disappointed Ian has offered us a lovely dinner and been rejected, he freshens our drinks and retreats to the galley to mourn.

“Will there be the silent treatment all the way home, then?”

Glaring at him, “That depends, whose home are we speaking of?”

Cormac leans over and takes my hands in his. “Ours. Our home.”

My eyes well with tears almost instantly. “Don't be mean. Please. Even joking about something like that is just...”

His thumb comes up to catch the first tear on my cheek. “I would not joke about such a thing. Not with you, *sionnach beag*, my little fox.”

Hitching his trousers, he gracefully kneels in front of me. “Mala Lauren Chandler, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

My jaw drops and I'm sure I look remarkably simple-minded right now. I heard a bunch of words but they must not have been in the right order because what I heard can't be correct.

“Your look of shock is very flattering,” he remarks after a very long moment.

“You know I can't,” I whisper. “My father made an alliance with the Accardi Mafia. There's no going back on that.”

He leans closer, resting his forehead against mine. “If you could, love, would you? Would you run away with me and let it all burn to the ground, just to be together?”

Curling my fingers in his wonderfully silky hair, I promise, “From the bottom of my soul, you know I would. In any other world, I would run away with you and we could run a sheep ranch in New Zealand and I would be so happy.”

“Because you love me?” His voice is deeper now, his lips moving against my ear. The way I love you?”

Pulling back, I stare at him, shocked. “You what?”

“I love you,” he repeated patiently. “I love your stubbornness and your courage, your quick mind, and your kindness. And your knife skills turn me the fuck on.”

Laughter bubbles up but I slam it back down. “It was the stiletto in the left eye one, wasn’t it?”

“I was hard for days after that,” he confirms with a grin. “I love your loyalty and your belief in honor and duty, even though your fucking father does not deserve you. And your brother? Jesus Christ, he’s a mess.”

“Yeah, The Dick is awful,” I agree.

“Because I love your sense of honor and duty, I have created a new arrangement with your father and the Accardi Mafia.”

“How...” I’m gaping at him again, why does he want to marry a woman who can’t utter a full sentence?

“I’m going to get off my knee because this is the one I landed on after blowing up that Blackhawk,” he says politely, “but kindly assume that my proposal is still very much in progress.”

Smoothly sliding into the seat next to me, he takes my hands. “I gave your father something he’s very much needed, a new Atlantic shipping route for his weapons and the alliance between our families.”

“What about Accardi? The man is vile.”

This time his grin is positively evil. “I’ve had some information about the Accardi Mafia in my back pocket for some time, waiting for when it could be useful.” He paused, staring at my wide eyes. “It was quite helpful. Enzo was very gracious about releasing you from the proposed engagement. The blowback from some of these negotiations will not please my father, but since I’m set to take over the family business, he’ll get over it. Not because of you,” he says hastily.

“It’s because of my father,” I nod.

“Yeah, he’s an asshole,” he nods, too. I can’t even take offense at his honest assessment.

“But my father will love you, my entire family will.” Cormac gives me a wicked grin. “Especially my mother, because now she can stop dredging up

eligible women to throw at me.”

“You mean the constant sexual harassment doesn’t just happen at the Academy? That’s like a full-time thing for you?”

He looks irritated, more than self-satisfied, which makes me love him more. “It’s annoying as fuck.”

My laughter just makes him more irate, so I try to tone it down a bit.

“Back to my point, little fox. You can pretend it’s because I created an alliance with your asshole father and marry me out of duty and honor. Or, you can admit the truth, that you love me and would burn the world down to be with me.”

“I...”

Why the hell can’t I complete a full sentence?

“You were the only thing I ever let myself have,” I confess, “I knew I would have to give you up, but I wanted something beautiful to remember, someone good. I don’t let myself have things because my father always made sure to take them away. And then Michael was taken away, too.”

“Lass...” He kisses me gently on my forehead, that sore spot on my right temple, and then my lips. “I want to give you everything your asshole father ever took from you. I can’t give you Michael back, I’m sorry. But in his honor, I will love and care for you. That’s what he would have wanted, knowing you were safe and happy.”

“Is this real?” I ask, still trying to wrap my mind around the concept that I could have the man I love.

“Real as this ring.” Cormac pulls a small velvet box out of his jacket pocket and opens it. It’s a beautiful square diamond, a topaz yellow in an old-fashioned, simple setting. “This was my *Seanmhair*, my grandmother’s. My *Seanair* gave it to me before he died.” He brushes his hair back, looking the tiniest bit uncertain. “We can re-set the diamond in another setting if you’d rather.”

Laughing, I hold my left hand out. “It’s perfect. You are perfect. And I don’t deserve you.”

“This is true,” he agrees, gently slipping the ring on my finger, then settling

me on his lap. “I am going to kiss you, my bride, and then I’m going to fuck you in the bedroom in the back of my jet.”

I push away from him. “This is your jet? You lived in a stone cottage on the edge of campus that barely had running water and depended on a fireplace for heat and this is your jet?”

Cormac grabs my ponytail, wrapping it around his hand, yanking my head back to look up at him. “I told you, little fox...” He’s in full Scottish Laird mode now. “I like my privacy.” Kissing me and biting my lower lip, he murmurs, “And *you* might enjoy a little privacy while you’re screaming my name over and over.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

In which Cormac is so spectacular in every way.

Cormac...

She's fuckin' killing me.

That sweet little noise Mala made when I kissed her, half relief and half a sob and Christ, I can't love her more.

Hoisting her up in my arms, I stride through the conference room and kick open the door to the jet's bedroom. "This little dress is very pretty, but I'm going to tear it off you."

"At this point I would willingly light my clothes on fire if it would expedite the activity," she laughs.

The fabric tears easily, right down the middle and I take it off as I kneel to pull off her boots. Her blade is in a sheath in her left boot and I smile up at her approvingly. "That's my girl." Kneeling, her lovely breasts are perfectly positioned and I bury my face between them with a groan. The sweet scent of honey and tangerines fills my senses and I'm struck with an overwhelming sense of pride that Mala is mine. She belongs to me, and though she refused to ever believe it was possible, I belong to her.

Her slim fingers are in my hair, running through the strands as I yank her bra down to hold her breasts, squeezing gently, pulling her nipples sharply and when I bite down on one, her nails dig into my scalp and it makes me even harder.

"On the bed." Her quick movement makes me grin, and I take my time pulling off my suit jacket and tie as I watch her make herself comfortable on the pillows. My hands move a lot faster when my girl draws her knees up and spreads them with a wicked little smile.

I'm crawling up to her while kicking my pants and shoes off. It might not be graceful but nothing matters more than putting my face on that glistening pink pussy. Mine.

"Mine," I growl, licking her greedily, no finesse and all need and want. She tastes like sunlight, like my kryptonite. Burying two fingers inside her, I stretch her, stroking along her silky walls and drawing out more slick to play with her pebbled nipples and her hard little clit.

"Let me taste you too," she gasps out, and I realize I've been rubbing my cock against her leg. I'm hard enough that it's a miracle the skin hasn't split off my dick yet.

"Not this time, little fox." I move up her body, kissing her smooth skin, her breasts, and her throat. "You're going to let me do anything I want to your sweet, perfect body, aren't you? I'll tease you, taste and fuck you. I'll spank you and bite you and I'll love seeing my marks on you. I'll bind you, gag you with my tie so the crew can't hear you scream and I'll make you come, little fox. Over and over, and I'll make you glad you let yourself say yes."

She's shivering and gasping, the way I want her to. The way she does when I say dark and filthy things to her to make her wet. To make her need me. I catch the first moan out of her mouth, kissing her hard as I slowly sink into her, fists gripping the sheets to keep from pounding into her. I want to fuck her until everything is wiped from her mind but me, craving me the way I do her.

"The way you feel inside," I groan into her ear, "your snug, heated little cunt is gripping me like a fist." Pulling out halfway, I slam back in, kissing another shriek from her mouth, and again until her heels are digging into my ass and her fingernails are scratching their own marks into my skin. "Scratch away," I half laugh, half groan, "scratch your name into my back and I'll tattoo over the marks and make it permanent. I'll have my name tattooed onto your perfect skin, maybe pierce your nipples..." Her cunt convulses around me, nearly stopping me mid-thrust. "Oh, you like that, don't you? My bad girl. My perfect bride."

I split her apart and put her back together, fill and spread her so wide, so deep inside her that I can hear her gasp at the sting and groan a little, but there is no stopping, no moment to let her adjust because every part of her belongs to

me. Until she knows that, my sweet girl will never accept that I belong to her, too.

Rotating my hips, I start deep, rhythmic thrusts, my balls slapping against her ass and she's so snug that I can feel everything tighten inside me, the need to come in her is near unbearable. "You need to come on my cock, little fox. I'm close and I can't hold back much longer."

"I'm so close," she gasps, "I need to—"

"Come," I finish for her, "come all over me, soak my cock."

This time, she lets out a scream that even my kiss can't smother, and laughing, I don't want it to. "Just like that, my bride, exactly like that."

By the time I shower my exhausted girl and help her find something to wear after ripping off her dress, the pilot is politely requesting we return to our seats.

"That whole bedroom smells like sex," Mala hisses as we sit down. She flinches a little when her ass hits the seat and I can't contain a grin.

"It's meant to smell that way after a round, lass."

"But Ian will smell it!" she whispers, apparently still concerned.

"While I have *not*," I say clearly, "my idiot brothers have christened that bedroom many times when they've borrowed my jet. "I had the sheets and mattress replaced last month."

"Oh, that's gross," she agrees.

"True, but at least you know why Ian won't be shocked," I assure her, kissing her hand. Holding it up to the light, I watch the facets in the diamond glimmer.

"It's a beautiful ring," she sighs, resting her head on my shoulder.

"All the more beautiful because of the woman wearing it." Kissing her, I let myself sink into the moment.

The battle is over at the Academy. The students are safe. And Mala is mine, she's here. Right where she is meant to be.

"You did *what*?"

My father's face goes a deep crimson when he shouts and this is no exception. Fortunately, his office is sound-proofed and while the space is beautiful with mahogany furniture and priceless oriental rugs, I happen to know he keeps a roll of plastic in one of the cabinets to keep blood off the floor in the case of "messy meetings." My brothers and I used to say that "The Chief is remodeling," when someone was dragged in to meet their maker by way of my father's gun.

Pouring a glass of whisky, I hold it up to him in an inquiry. "I told you that you'd want a drink."

"I didn't think the next words out of your mouth would be that you've gotten engaged and given away use of all our shipping ports to that pompous idiot Malcolm Chandler! An alliance with that family? Are you mad?"

"Well, madly in love," I acknowledge.

A frown creases his bushy white eyebrows. "What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

Leaning forward, I rest my elbows on my knees and lower my voice. "Because, *mo cheann-feadhna*, my chief, my father, I love her. Mala is a talented spy, a brilliant woman, and the most beautiful soul you can imagine. She saved dozens of lives during the battle at the Academy. Her courage is unparalleled. I promise you, it is not that she's fortunate to marry into our family, I am blessed that she has agreed to be my wife."

He's rubbing the bridge of his nose and his face is slightly less red. "Do I want to know what you gave the Accardi Mafia to release her from the engagement?"

"Eh, that was a freebie," I say, taking a drink. My father's scotch was always fine, a smooth, smoky taste. "I blackmailed them."

"Always have a little something put away for times such as these, there's a good lad," he says approvingly. "Pour me a drink. I'm going to need one before we tell your mother."

CHAPTER THIRTY

In which there are panic attacks, awkward orgasms, and Cormac is a regular Heid-the-baw.

Mala...

The next day...

I'm sitting in the MacTavish Dowager House, which is like a mother-in-law suite in America except this is... not like that at all. This is an only slightly smaller version of the massive Georgian-style house across the gardens where the MacTavish Clan lives on an estate just outside of Edinburgh.

I haven't seen the inside of the main building because MacTavish custom states the bride-to-be stays in the Dowager House before being properly married. I have no idea if this is accurate but Cormac's mother has stated it and as near as I can tell upon a (very) short acquaintance, Elspeth MacTavish's word is law.

I'm in a magnificent suite of rooms that don't look like the decor has changed since the 1800's, but everything is beautiful; silk-covered chairs and couches in shades of blue, a crystal chandelier that looms above us, and an antique dressing table with a huge mirror where I can picture the lady of the manor powdering her nose, or whatever they powdered back then.

I can hear the murmur of staff setting up the enormous stretch of lawn behind the house, two white tents are already erected and catering trucks are parked close by. There's a harried florist shouting directions to his assistants who are setting up an arch and wiring dozens of flowers to it.

"How long has your mother been planning this?" I ask, flinching as the stylist named Doris vigorously brushes my hair.

Sorcha is the beloved sister and baby of the family, and she's currently

lounging on the couch, enjoying the commotion. “Um, I believe since midnight?”

They laced me into this dress too tightly, that’s it. That’s why I can’t breathe.

“Midnight?” I wheeze, “Cormac told your parents that he was getting married fourteen hours ago?”

She grins, pouring another glass of champagne. “You look like you need this.”

“No!” I wave my hand, dislodging a scatter of hairpins. “Sorry,” I say quickly. “Water. Give me water. Actually, just give me a minute, period.”

Doris, who is just trying to do my hair freezes, curling iron in hand. “Do you mean me?”

“Yes. Yes, please.” I press my hand against my stomach. “I... this...”

Rolling to her feet, Sorcha is pounding on my back in some misguided attempt at support and calling Cormac at the same time. “Brother? You should get your arse up here right now. Your bride’s gettin’ the shakes. I’d hate to see her do a runner.”

“I’m good.” I’m not. “I just... this is a lot.”

The door bursts open, making Doris squawk like a startled pigeon.

“Everybody out,” Cormac says, staring at me. ‘Everybody’ is his sister and poor Doris, but they instantly absent themselves and he shuts and locks the door.

I’m leaning on the silk damask couch, trying to catch my breath.

With a sigh, he turns me around and deftly unzips my wedding dress to find the corset laced tightly beneath it. “Has mankind learned nothing over the last three hundred years?” he growls, his long fingers quickly loosening the strings. “You have a tiny waist, lass. Why are they strapping you into this torture device?”

Sucking in a deep breath, I sigh gratefully. “Don’t ask *me*. Other than saying yes to your proposal, I’ve been pretty much out of the loop on everything in the last forty-eight hours.”

Lifting me easily, he sets me on his lap. “I had intended to make this a quick

and simple ceremony and then we'd have some time to get to know each other before I took over Clan MacTavish. I had forgotten the force of nature that is my mother." Taking my hand, he kisses my ring. "Don't let this put you off a future with me."

"How many chairs have they set up?"

He cranes his neck to look out the window. "It looks to be close to a hundred or so."

I start wheezing again.

"Shh... little fox, I have you. That would be just enough chairs for my immediate family, not the full clan, not to worry," he says soothingly, "inducting us as head of the clan is a different ceremony."

"You're not helping," I gasp out. "Your entire family has somehow managed to scramble into place in fourteen hours and..." Why are my eyes wet?

His rough thumb carefully wipes away a tear before it can run down my cheek. "You're missing your brother and your ma, aren't you? I canna bring them back, I'm sorry. But your side of the aisle will not be empty. And I don't just mean your father and the... what did you call your brother?"

"The Dick," I supply.

"Ach, that works," he agrees. "You will not be alone. You will never be alone again."

Cupping his face, I kiss him. With gratitude, and relief, with hope. "Thank you. For everything, thank you."

"Now!" He claps his hands, making me jump. "I just need to relax you and we'll get this *Latha na Bainnse*, the big day back on track."

Eyeing him suspiciously, I get off his lap. "What does that mean?"

Cormac stands, and I'm struck with the size of him again, so tall and broad, his huge shoulders filling out that *Argyll* formal jacket so nicely. "It means that I would be no kind of husband to be letting my bride walk down the aisle in such a state."

He stalks toward me, a filthy grin stretched across his full lips. Gently pushing me toward an open window, he rests my hands on the sill. "Look out there," he says in a husky whisper, his hands sliding around my waist as he

stands behind me. “Those are your people too. They’re making something special out there because my mother wants you to have a beautiful wedding even if I, her oldest son, is a... what did she call me? A bampot, a walloper, and then she finished it off by calling me a regular Heid-the-baw.”

“And that all means?” I ask, laughing uncontrollably.

“All variations of idiot, of course,” he says. I feel his fingers dip lower and realize this perverted, conniving bastard is raising my skirt. His hand pushes on my lower back and I feel his breath on my barely-covered center.

“What are- Cormac, stop!” I don’t dare shout at him, terrified that someone will look up.

“No one can see a thing, lass.” A thick finger hooks my lace undies and pulls them aside. “Just my sweet bride enjoying the sights and sounds of her wedding day.”

He’s got an iron grip on my hips and he’s put me in a position where I can’t move my hands without face-planting into the windowsill. “Don’t do this! Don’t!” His hot breath hits my pussy just before his lips and tongue do and I stifle a moan.

“Oh, I will do this, little fox, with your sweet tuft of auburn curls down here to tug on.” He does, and I jam my fist in my mouth as I feel his tongue drive up inside me. He groans, and I can feel the vibrations through my clitoris and I nearly come right then.

“Hmmm...” he growls, his thumb pressing down on my clit and moving in little circles.

A finger joins his tongue inside me and I whimper. “I can’t hold out, please...” Any form of language leaves me as his finger, wet from my pussy slides up to circle my ass, gently pushing just past the anxious pucker and inside me.

“Not tonight, but I *will* be taking your ass soon,” he says, biting my left cheek. “Now, be my bad girl and come for me.” His mouth attacks me and it’s greedy and messy and I come just as he ordered me to, swallowing down my screams, legs shaking and ready to collapse.

Cormac laces my corset - looser, thank god - and zips me up again, chuckling. “It’s like trying to dress a boneless chicken.”

“I hate you.”

Turning me to face him, he cups my face in his giant hands. “No, you don’t.” Holding my arms out, he looks me over in a slow and deeply flattering perusal. “You’re a vision, little fox.”

His mother came bustling in this morning with three different gowns. “This was the best I could do on short notice, dear. I believe any of these will fit you. Do you have a preference?” She was beautiful, Cormac got his jade-colored eyes from her and his steely demeanor. I couldn’t tell yet if she hated me or was merely indifferent about her eldest son bringing home a complete stranger to marry, but hopefully, I’d have time to soften her up.

The dresses were all lovely, but there was a simple satin sheath, champagne-colored with a long train that shouldn’t make sense but looked spectacular. Now that I’m all laced back in and zipped up, seeing Cormac leer appreciatively makes me just a bit like preening for him.

“Do you like the dress?”

“I’ll like it better when I get it off you, but you’re a bonny lass, you are.” Kissing me again, he leaves the room chuckling.

Sorcha strolls back in, grinning and Doris scurries back to her hair station, avoiding our eyes. “Ya feelin’ better?” My soon-to-be sister-in-law inquires solicitously.

“Shut up,” I mumble, my entire body on fire with mortification.

I’m all dressed and then some, my hair done in a complicated updo that restrains my curls except for the few that frame my face. I can hear the bagpipes cheerfully calling guests in from the front gate and the low murmur of voices below.

“Weren’t we supposed to start thirty minutes ago?” Sorcha checks her phone. “Cormac says to keep you off your feet for a few minutes, he says we’re running a bit late?” She snorts. “Nothing is late with my mother.”

Shaking my head, I look out at the full-blown masterpiece of a wedding laid out below us. “I believe you.”

“Aye,” she says, “she’s a mix of Martha Stewart and Mussolini.”

My phone buzzes and I see a text from Cormac. *Come down, little fox. I can't wait to make you mine. As I am yours.*

“No, no!” Sorcha says, frantically waving her hands, “No tears! I’ll never get Doris back up here in time. That sentimental bastard, making ya’ cry right before you’re walkin’ down the aisle...”

At the bottom of the stairs, I don’t see my sour-faced father. I see my family. My Academy family. Tatiana and Lucca, Konstantin and Mariya, and Willow, who surges forward to kiss me with Meiying, Jun, and Athena hovering close.

“We’re sorry we’re so late!” Willow says, “Cormac sent his jet for us. There was turbulence and then some other shite and we had to land at another airport and-”

“We’re here,” Lucca cuts in, smiling gently. “We would never miss this.”

Shaking my head and teetering between laughing and crying, I say, “I’m so happy... just... thank you. All of you.”

After a quick round of hugs, they hurry off to take their seats and I am left in the little courtyard with my father.

“I must admit, I didn’t expect this outcome,” he says, walking with me to the start of the dark green carpet runner that leads to the altar and Cormac. “But this is even better than the other alliances I’d considered.”

I rest my hand on his proffered arm, barely touching him. “Just remember your first loyalty. To your family. You owe it to Michael to give me every scrap of information you find about the MacTavish group. There’s so much here to explore.”

I can hear the greed in his voice, the anticipation lighting up his eyes. Not from his daughter getting married of course, but from the possibility of sucking the wealth and power from another family.

“There’s only one wrinkle there, Papa,” I say sweetly, eyes forward and hearing the first strains of O’Carolan’s Concerto. “I’ve already told Cormac all about what you’ve been ordering me to do. Initially, he wanted to feed you false intel just to play with you. But then...” We take the first steps out onto the carpet, pacing carefully, step, pause. “We decided that instead, I would never have to see you again.”

Step, pause. “Ever.”

White-faced and furious, Malcolm Chandler puts my hand in the warm one of my savage Scottish Laird and Cormac’s grin illuminates me, making me feel lighter than air.

“You are the most beautiful sight,” he whispers.

“I really love you,” I whisper back.

“Aye, how could you not?”

Oh, that cocky bastard.

EPILOGUE

In which there is the best of all possible combinations: dancing, cake and sex.

Mala...

During the wedding ceremony, Cormac and I drank from the Quaich cup together - a beautifully carved silver cup given to us by his parents. We had our hands bound with their family tartan in the handfasting ceremony. Then the bagpipes played as the priest pronounced us husband and wife, soaring joyfully over the rolling green hills of the estate, and when he cupped my face in his hands and murmured, "My bride," I didn't know a heart could hold this much joy.

I'd learned to guard the small doses of happiness I received in life carefully, storing them away to bring out to remember later when things were especially dark, to keep moving forward. But here, the day overflowed with happiness, the sheer flagrancy of it was impossible to keep up with and I stopped trying, letting it wash over me in waves.

We all danced to the music of the Scottish country band, drank to a dozen toasts, each bawdier than the last, and ate an insanely delicious wedding cake with three spectacular layers under white fondant and fresh flowers.

Mariya held out another plate to me, eyes wide. "Did you know there are three different flavors for the cake layers?"

"I had the honey lavender one," Meiyang said, offering me a forkful.

"Oh, sweet baby Jesus that's good," I moaned. "I ate the salted caramel one and didn't think anything could be better."

"You haven't tried this layer," Mariya said, putting the plate in my hands. "It's floral pistachio."

"Give me a bite of that," Willow stabbed at my plate with her fork.

They sent the men off to fetch more plates of each flavor as Cormac put me

on his lap. “You are never allowed to moan like that again unless I am inside you,” he murmured. He wasn’t that quiet about it, because Willow and Athena started snickering and when he kissed me, licking any remnants of the lavender cream off my lips, they all hastily deserted us.

“I should have done that sooner,” he grinned, “I’ve been waiting to have ye’ all to myself.” His lips were back on mine, thoroughly exploring my mouth until I was nearly boneless with need.

“Now, I must go handle something unpleasant,” he says, wrapping his arms around me. “Your father, to be precise. Now that he realizes you will not spy for him, he will be petty. He will wish to renegotiate our terms.”

“What does that mean?”

He must see the sudden spike of fear in my eyes because his soften and he kisses me again. “It means nothing. The deal is ironclad and absolute. I will give him some small concession and then guide him and your brother off the estate property and have them escorted back to their hotel.”

“I’m so sorry my father is an asshole,” I whisper, feeling the shame heat up my face.

“His sins are not yours, and we are still required to keep good will with your family as allies. But...” Cormac pauses and the dark look on his face makes my breath hitch. “When I get back, I’m going to be irritable. I’m going to be angry. And I’m going to take it out on you.”

The little whimper that escapes my slack lips would, at any other time, be acutely embarrassing.

“So, enjoy yourself with your friends,” he says, kissing down my neck, “because when I get back, I’m throwing you over my shoulder and taking you away to where no one can hear you scream.” Lifting me off his lap, he squeezes my ass and strolls away.

Before I have a chance to think, his brothers descend on me.

“I think you will agree, the new Mrs. MacTavish, that I should have the first dance since I saved you back at the riot in Southbank,” Cameron says, sweeping his hand low in an exaggerated bow.

“Wait, were you even there?”

The other brothers howl raucously as he looks deeply wounded. “Why lass, I was fighting off the rabble as Cormac picked you up!”

“Well then, of course, you should have the first dance!” I laugh as he sweeps me off onto the dance floor. I’d had dance lessons all my life, something my father deemed appropriate and necessary for a young lady of good breeding, but some of my favorite classes were for Highland Dance. I love the raucousness of the moves, the footwork, and the grace of it all. So I can keep up with Cameron and his endless chatter until the song ends and he hands me off to Dougal, who is also a giant like the rest of his brothers but with darker eyes and a kinder smile.

“Are you holdin’ up all right?” He chuckles down at me. “I know my family is a lot to handle, all at once.”

“Given the fact that I was apparently foisted upon all of you as Cormac’s new bride less than twenty-four hours ago, I think you are the ones handling it all quite well.”

“Ach, I’ve spoken to my brother many times while he was at the Academy,” Dougal says, deftly guiding me around another couple. “I handle certain tasks for him on this side.”

I am pretty sure I know what kind of tasks, but it doesn’t seem like the time to ask.

“He spoke of you often,” he smiles gently. “When he brought you here, it was not much of a surprise.”

“It was to me,” I blurt.

Dougal’s laughing so hard that when the youngest brother Lachlan swoops in and steals me away, I slip right out of his arms.

“So you’re the opportunist in the family, are you?” I grin up at him. He’s got a mischievous glint that I can’t help but appreciate.

“With three lumbering bastards older than me? You can be certain of that,” he agrees, twirling me out and back in again gracefully.

“And the best dancer too, I see.” The lights strung above the lawn are glittering and everything’s spinning a bit. I’m breathless and laughing but I don’t want to stop.

“Naturally,” he agrees, “but kindly do not mention this to Cormac. He’s of the firm belief that as eldest, he’s the best at everything.”

“This does not come as a surprise to me, I’ll happily keep your secret.”

“I can see we’ll be getting along just fine.” He cheekily kisses my hand and offers it to...

Oh, shit it’s Dad MacTavish.

“Hello dear.” He gently holds my elbow for a moment as I sway. “My sons are a bit boisterous, as you can see.”

“Thank you, sir,” I wheeze, trying to catch my breath.

“Would you like to have a seat, or shall I signal for a wee milder tune?”

“It would be my honor to dance with you, though I would be grateful for something slower.”

Cormac Sr. raises his hand and the fiddler in the band nods, starting a lighter, more leisurely reel. He may be a man in his late sixties but he’s as graceful a dancer as any of his sons.

“It’s a beautiful night for a celebration,” he observes, looking up at the clear sky, studded with thousands of stars and a sickle moon.

“I don’t know how to express my appreciation for how kind and welcoming your family has been,” I begin, floundering a bit as I try to think of the right thing to say. “Our instant engagement had to be a bit jarring.” I have no idea what Cormac has told his father.

“Ach, I knew my son would be bringing you home, sooner or later.” His smile is as kind as Dougal’s.

“How? How did you know?”

“He messaged me in January, asking me to send his grandmother’s wedding ring to him at the Academy.” His eyes are lighter green than Cormac’s, but they have that same sly twinkle when they’re amused.

“I... *what?*”

Oh, god here I go again, the woman who can’t speak in complete sentences.

“There’s my bonny bride.”

Cormac’s arms snake around me from behind as he whispers in my ear, chuckling when he sees the goosebumps rise on my neck and shoulders.

“They’re not from you,” I say crossly. “I’m just... chilly.”

“Ah, well, I feel certain I can warm you up.”

My world is turned upside down as he throws me over his broad shoulder, striding away from the wedding party as I attempt to kick him in the stomach with my pointy-toed shoes.

“Goodnight, all!” Cormac roars, waving a hand over his head.

“Oh my god, what is *wrong* with you?” I’m too dignified to pound on his back but I aim my spike heel right at his crotch, which he deftly avoids.

“Don’t damage anything you might be wanting later.”

“Are you kidding? You’re dragging me off like some Scottish version of the Yeti in front of your mom and dad and all my friends? You are so not getting lucky tonight!”

I stifle a shriek as he flips me back over, pinning me to his chest, my feet dangling. “Oh, yes I am, little fox. I have a lot of anger to take out on your sweet little cunt.” I’m still struggling for a reply when he puts me in a Range Rover, straps me in, and drives us through the iron gates of the estate as I hear the bagpipes and laughter behind us.

We’ve been driving for about ten minutes when I sigh, taking off my high heels and gratefully wiggling my toes. “Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“Aye. One of our hunting lodges, about an hour away.”

“Do you hunt? Honestly, you don’t seem like that guy, even though you lived like a grizzly bear at the Academy.”

He glances at me briefly. “No, I’ve spent too much time hunting humans. However, I might be tempted to find some prey this weekend.”

A lightning bolt of heat sets my entire midsection on fire. Why is that so hot? That should be scaring the hell out of me. My hand slides down to the garter on my left thigh, where I touch the gift the indomitable Elspeth MacTavish

gave me this morning when she and a grinning Sorcha woke me up.

“This has been passed down through the female line of the MacTavish clan for three centuries,” she’d said. “From mother-in-law to daughter-in-law to welcome her to the clan.”

“Ma’am, I’m so honored, but are you sure you want to give me such a precious heirloom?” I looked down at the slim white box, tied with a dainty tartan ribbon.

“Trust me, with a husband like Cormac, I’m sure you’ll have good reason to use it more than once,” Sorcha laughed, “right, Mother?”

Elsbeth’s pleasant expression didn’t waver as she said, “Don’t be fresh dear, or I will yank off your ear.”

Sorcha shut up and I hastily open the box. I don’t know if she’s joking about the ear thing but even in her late fifties, Cormac’s mother looks like she could take me.

“This is beautiful...” I gasped, lifting the dirk out of the box reverently. It must be at least three hundred years old, with a silver and ivory inlaid handle and an exquisitely crafted steel blade.

“A very wise MacTavish matriarch knew that the men of this clan were loud and infuriating and prone to bossiness. She also knew that a man strong enough to lead this clan needed a woman stubborn enough to keep him in line.” Elspeth rested her hand on mine. “Even if I had not heard of your courage in battle during the attack at the Academy, I could see it now. Take the gift, dear. It might come in handy one day.”

Winking at me, she stood and regally left the room.

“You should be careful, baby,” I smile at him sweetly. “Prey have can fangs and claws.”

Sliding his long fingers between my legs, he pressed hard against my pussy. “Bite and scratch as much as you like, little fox. I’m still going to be balls-deep inside you tonight.”

There is a beautiful hunting lodge with big, timbered beams and rustic

architecture, all lit up and welcoming us. Those are the only details I have as Cormac seizes me out of the car and races up the front steps as if I don't weigh more than the set of keys he uses on the front door. There are glimpses of a tall entryway, a room with a two-story fireplace... something that might have been a kitchen but he's taking the stairs to the second story two at a time and then I'm flying from his arms and onto a huge bed hard enough to bounce all the pillows off.

By the time I manage to sit up on the edge of the mattress, my alarming new husband has ripped off his jacket and shirt, and he pulls his kilt open with one hand and grabs a fistful of my hair with the other.

“Suck your husband. I have a lot of pent-up aggression to take out on you.”

This cock has been inside me, I know it can fit but right now, I question this. It's hugely thick and throbbing, with a glistening red tip that I'm licking before I even knew I'd opened my mouth. “I guess it's true what they say about what a man wears under his kilt,” I say breathlessly.

“Aye, his wife's lipstick,” he growls, and pushes his cock into my mouth.

Sucking in a gulp of air, I relax my throat, arching my neck and taking him deeper. The taste and feel of him... elemental like thick, hot meat and I swallow him past the point of coughing, all the way until my nose touches his flat stomach.

“Open your eyes,” he rasps, and I do. His jade eyes have darkened to pitch black, like midnight, like the tunnel he chased me through and I moan, feeling it vibrate along his thick cock that's choking me. I swallow hard, and when my throat locks down on him, he growls like a savage and it is wildly arousing.

Conrad pulls halfway out of my mouth, his huge chest heaving. “Touch yourself. I want you ready for me and I am seconds away from fucking you. Put your fingers inside that greedy pussy and make yourself wet.”

“You are a filthy-minded lust monster,” I gasp, but not disapprovingly and as I slide him back into my mouth, I swipe two fingers over my clitoris, shuddering at how intense it feels. I've never come very hard by my own hand, but knowing that he's watching me... I pull my wet fingers from between my legs and cup his balls with that hand, smearing my slick on them and squeezing him.

With a roar, he pulls away from my mouth and shoves me back on the bed, yanking my dress higher and plunging inside me.

It hurts. The first thrust when he buries that huge dick in me hurts like fire rippling through me and I scream into his shoulder. He drags his cock out and fucks it back into me, over and over until I'm sobbing with the need to come.

Flipping us over, he sits up and holds my hips, helping me ride him, rubbing hard against all my soft places inside and filling every part of me. "You're going to come with me, my sweet little fox. Come hard and scream. Bite me if you need to. Do it now."

His arms tighten around my back as his giant body below me flexes, driving up hard inside me one last time and I do both. I scream, and then bite his thickly muscled shoulder, hard enough to draw blood.

Cormac falls back on the bed, still holding on to me and I lie on top of him, cheek against his sweaty chest and we pant together. His hand, which had been stroking my ass pauses on my thigh.

"Is that a dagger?"

He lifts his head, pulling it out of my garter. Holding it up to the light, my beastly new husband starts laughing. "Now I know my mother likes you. She gave you the Matriarch's Dirk?"

"I didn't know it had a name," I mumble.

"I'll make you a deal," he says, voice low and intent. He pulls out his dirk from his belt, flipping it deftly. "I'll be using mine to cut you free from this dress so I can fuck you again. And later, we'll figure out something fun for you to do with yours."

He's already got my dress off me in four quick cuts before I can even object, and then the blade slices through my corset strings and I heave a sigh of relief.

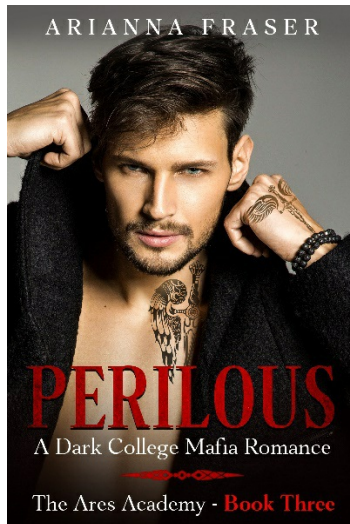
"That seems fair." Arching up, I bite him sharply on the same spot on his shoulder, the bite mark is deep enough to show a few beads of blood oozing through. "But this might not be the only blood I draw tonight, husband."

Cormac throws back his gorgeous head and laughs, full-throated and loud and I love him. I can't contain how much I love him and I kiss him as hard as

I can.

“Tha gaol agam ort, a dhuine,” I whisper. “Did I say it right?”

“Aye,” he says, eyes alight with tenderness, “And I love you too, sweet wife.”



Follow what happens five years later when Cormac and Mala balance their roles as heads of the MacTavish Clan, with the occasional rescue mission, and twins with a peanut allergy.

Read the extended epilogue [here](#).

Cormac’s hot brother Cameron is back in a story of his own in [Relentless - A Dark Scottish Mafia Arranged Marriage Romance](#) - Book Two of the MacTavish Scottish Mafia Saga, live on Amazon on March 28, 2024.

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A FAVOR, PLEASE?

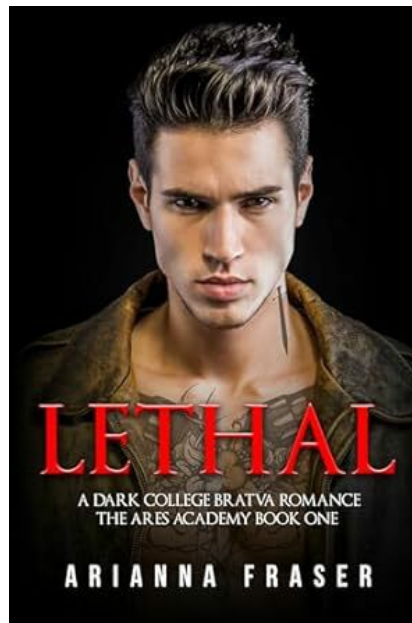
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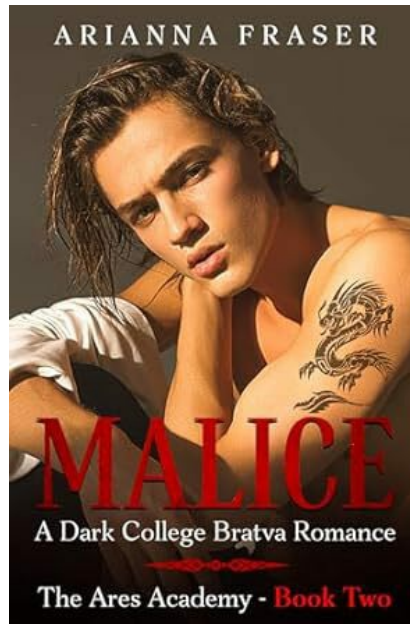
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Arianna Fraser



Working as an entertainment reporter gives Arianna Fraser plenty of fuel for her imagination when writing romance-suspense stories. There will always be an infuriatingly stubborn heroine, an unfairly handsome and cunning hero - or anti-hero - romance, shameless smut, danger, and something will inevitably explode or catch on fire. She is a terrible firebug, and her husband has six fire extinguishers stashed throughout the house. She is also very fond of snakes.

When she's not interviewing superheroes and villains, Arianna lives in the western US with her twin boys, obstreperous little daughter, and sleep-deprived husband.

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Have a thought? Wanna share? arianna@ariannafraser.com

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