



A DARK MAFIA STANDALONE ROMANCE

# RUTHLESS VOWS

M. JAMES

# Ruthless Vows

*A Dark Mafia Standalone*

**M. James**

PNK Publishing

Copyright © 2023 by M. James

All rights reserved.

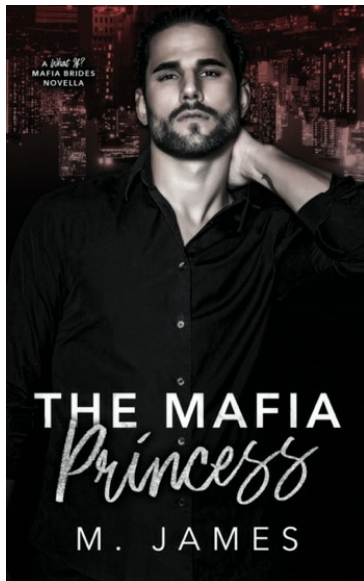
No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

# Contents

[GET A FREE M. JAMES BOOK!](#)

1. [Asha](#)
  2. [Finn](#)
  3. [Asha](#)
  4. [Finn](#)
  5. [Asha](#)
  6. [Finn](#)
  7. [Asha](#)
  8. [Finn](#)
  9. [Asha](#)
  10. [Finn](#)
  11. [Asha](#)
  12. [Finn](#)
  13. [Asha](#)
  14. [Asha](#)
  15. [Finn](#)
  16. [Asha](#)
  17. [Finn](#)
  18. [Finn](#)
  19. [Asha](#)
  20. [Asha](#)
  21. [Asha](#)
  22. [Finn](#)
  23. [Asha](#)
  24. [Finn](#)
- [Epilogue](#)

## GET A FREE M. JAMES BOOK!



Would you like a free book from me? [Click here](#) to sign up for my mailing list and get “*The Mafia Princess*,” a steamy arranged marriage romance that will set your e-reader on fire. Once you subscribe you'll also receive exclusive sneak peeks, updates on giveaways, and other exciting content!

## Asha



The small, chiming ring of the bell that lets me know that someone is waiting downstairs cuts through the low moan of the man strapped to the leather bench, momentarily distracting me.

“Asha—*fuck*—” he moans again as I deliver one more stroke from the leather flogger in my hand, his hips jerking rhythmically against the padded leather beneath him, as I watch dispassionately. *Just in time*, I think, glancing at the clock. He had five minutes left before our hour was done, and if he hadn’t come, he’d have had to get dressed and leave while still hard and frustrated.

*Not that there was much to stuff back into his boxers.* He’d had the smallest cock I’d seen in a long time, and I see a few every night that I work. It made my job—humiliating him while I delivered the punishment he’d paid for—easy.

I give him those last four minutes to relax against the bench while I set the flogger aside—someone else will come in and clean up and sanitize everything before the next client—I undo the leather cuffs holding his wrists and ankles to sides. He shifts, letting out a satisfied, languorous sound as he slowly starts to peel himself away from it, and I turn away, giving him a little privacy. Three more minutes, and I can go and see what it is that I’m needed for downstairs.

“Thank you, Miss Asha,” the man says as he reaches for the robe on the hook near the door, slipping it on. “I’ll see you next week.”



I give him a small, tight smile and a brief nod. He hesitates briefly, as if to say something else, but thankfully, he slips out without another word, closing the door behind him with two minutes to spare. He'll be headed to the hot tub or sauna next, or maybe just to the showers to clean up and dress before going downstairs to leave a generous tip and book his next session. I've never seen him here before, but he was clearly pleased enough to return, which will make Nikolai happy.

The Ashen Rose, the club where I work, is one of the Vasilev family's handful of sex clubs. That handful includes everything from run-of-the-mill strip clubs to higher-end versions of the same thing, but with girls that offer extras. Then, the Rose itself, which is one of the most luxurious sex dungeons I've ever worked in—I went through a few places of employment before being hired here. I've stayed ever since, mostly because this place allows me to be employed as a dominatrix, which I *far* prefer to working with a client as a submissive.

Here, unless someone *very* high-paying requests me to play that role, I generally refuse, and Nikolai has never said a word about it. Even when his father was the *pakhan* of the family, there were no issues, primarily since Nikolai has always been more hands-on with the businesses.

A good thing, since that meant when Egor passed, there was no real change in the day-to-day of the employees here.

With the session finished, I slip out of the room and down the hall to my dressing room, closing the door behind me and letting out a long breath, leaning against it for a moment as I close my eyes briefly. A *domme* session at least means I don't have to pander to the client—they're there to be degraded and talked down to—I don't have to allow myself to be touched in any way, but it's still exhausting. And I haven't really taken pleasure in it in years.

There's a message on my phone from Nikolai, letting me know what that notification from the bell was—he needs me to come down and meet him in the office when I'm finished. *At least it's not a surprise client*, I think to myself as I unlace the latex bustier I'd worn for the session, rolling my shoulders and letting out a soft sigh as I feel the compression from the corset release. I have one more scheduled tonight, but occasionally, if someone

important shows up unexpectedly, I'll be asked if I mind taking them as an extra client for the evening. I've been here the longest now of all the girls, and Nikolai trusts and relies on me more than anyone else here. There's an element of personal closeness in that, too, or at least...there was.

*Don't think about that.* I set the corset aside, slipping out of the matching pencil skirt and heels, and slipping on a long silk robe. My last client of the night is one I've seen before, one who has specific requests, but I have time to dress and get ready before he shows up. I loosen the tight French braid I'd had my hair in, running my fingers through it and letting out another sigh as I massage my fingers over my scalp. I'd give just about anything to go home right now—it's been a long week, and it's felt longer than usual. I'm running out of steam faster than I usually do.

*The job is starting to take a toll.* There was a time when I couldn't see myself doing anything else, but now, more and more often, I find myself thinking about what might be next. What else I might do, if I managed to save enough to start over.

But I won't be starting a new life tonight, and Nikolai is waiting for me.

He's in the office when I knock and push the door open, going through a small stack of what are likely new-client applications. The Ashen Rose is member-only, and membership is prohibitively expensive. Occasionally, it's possible to get a guest pass to the club, but only with a background check and a contract signed, making the guests liable for the behavior of anyone else they bring with them. Membership here is a status symbol as much as anything else.

"Asha." Nikolai smiles at me, using my stage name. He knows my real name, of course, but I can't remember the last time I heard him use it. It's as much a means of keeping some professional distance between us as anything else, especially now.

He's as handsome as always, in his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows and the first two buttons of his shirt undone, his jacket and tie draped over a nearby chair, his hair slightly mussed from running his fingers through it. *He has a habit of doing that*, I think inadvertently, and I feel a slight pang in my chest at the reminder that it's only one of the handful of intimate things that I

know about him. The kind of thing that someone can't help but pick up when they've become closer than just employer and employee with someone—even more than client and submissive, a role I was happy to play for him.

There were nights we spent together outside of the walls of this club, nights where we enjoyed each other without any of the power dynamics or kink—nights where I had, once upon a time, hoped that there might be something more to our relationship for brief moments when I forgot the difference in who we were.

But it was, of course, never going to happen.

Nikolai was always the heir to the Vasilev Bratva, and I was never going to be a *pakhan's* wife. My lack of innocence and inferior pedigree aside, I wasn't made for the life of a mob boss's wife. For one thing, that sort of woman needs to be malleable, and that's never been a word that could be applied to me.

"You called?" I flash him a smile, settling into one of the chairs across from the desk and tucking the heavy silk robe around my legs.

"I did." Nikolai glances up at me, and I feel a familiar flutter in my chest at those grey-blue eyes catching mine. I've seen plenty of expressions in those eyes—everything from stormy to soft—though I came to terms with the fact that our days together were over after he told me about his sudden engagement, I can't help that he still makes my heart race a little.

It's hard to get over someone you once cared for. I knew that better than most, even before Nikolai. And it's harder still to stop wanting someone. It doesn't help that so little arouses any kind of desire in me these days. Working in a place like this has a way of dulling the senses when it comes to sex, and it takes something special to make me *want*. Nikolai and I had that chemistry.

"Another client?" I glance at the stack of applications. "Someone specific you want me to take on?"

"Always perceptive." Nikolai chuckles, nudging the paperwork aside. "There's a new organization in town." He taps the fingers of one hand against the desk, looking pensive. "I'm concerned about it—I'm hearing things about

them that make me think they're upstarts, looking to get a foothold in a city that has very little room for new blood. And I'm not fond of the rumors I'm hearing about the leader."

"What's his name?" I try to summon some genuine curiosity, but I can't. He'll likely be the same as any other man who walks in these doors with either a power fantasy or the opposite—a need to shrug off the burden of power and be at someone else's mercy for an hour or two. I can't imagine there will be anything markedly different about him, anything to arouse either my interest or my desire.

"Matvei Kotov." Nikolai opens a drawer and pulls out a file. "I approved his application, since I don't want to make an enemy of him immediately. But —" he pauses, letting out a breath. "You need to be careful, Asha."

"Me?" I raise an eyebrow. Nikolai leads differently than his father had—Egor wouldn't have been concerned with making enemies, but he also wouldn't have worried as much as Nikolai does about the handling of the girls who work for him. No one was ever allowed to be *really* harmed, of course, but Egor would have allowed the boundaries to be pushed if there was a benefit in it for him.

"I'd like you to be the one who takes him on when he comes in." Nikolai pushes the file towards me. "You're the most capable of making sure he doesn't get out of hand while still pleasing him, and you might even learn something helpful for me." He gives me another small smile. "If you're willing, of course."

I glance at him, flipping open the file. It's not that I think Nikolai is playing on my feelings for him, exactly—I don't even know that he knows the extent of the feelings I once had—but I can tell that he's hoping I'll do him a favor and handle this. "He's paying well, I assume?" I ask wryly. The membership is the same for everyone, of course, but different girls have different pricing structures, and Nikolai likely would have led with mine.

"He is," Nikolai confirms, as I look over Matvei's description and photo.

He's not an unattractive man, not that it really matters to me. I can't remember having been sexually excited by a client in years, not outside of Nikolai, and I don't think he really counts. Matvei looks to be in his late

twenties or early thirties, with short, close-cropped blond hair and dark blue eyes, leanly built. He is certainly more attractive than the last client I saw tonight, but nothing stirs in me when I look at him.

I'm honestly starting to wonder what it would take to make me really want someone again.

I let my gaze drift down the form he filled out, scanning along the lines, and I wince when I see that he's requesting a submissive only. "You know I don't really like this." I tap the form. "Especially for a man you already have reservations about. I don't want to get on my knees for him while he calls me a good girl."

Nikolai chuckles. "I know." He takes the file back from me as I hand it over, letting out a breath. "I was hoping you might make an exception for me, though."

*I did make an exception for you, for a long time.* I know that's not what he means, though. He wasn't referring to the nights we spent in the room upstairs, me lashed to a St. Andrew's cross or cuffed to a spanking bench while he took out his frustrations on my flesh until we were both desperate. Every session ending with him fucking me until we were also both thoroughly satisfied. He's asking me to make a *work* exception, not a personal one. I shove away memories of his fingers hooking into a ring on a collar around my neck, dragging my mouth to his hard cock as he told me to open my mouth for him.

I miss those nights more than I should, especially when there's no chance of them ever happening again. I shouldn't feel that he was my last shot at actually being with someone who arouses me—I'm only twenty-six, for fuck's sake, not exactly an old lady—but lately, it's felt as if I'm never going to experience that kind of desire again. I don't even see anyone out in public anymore who stirs me. For a while, I even wondered if years of this work had caused my desires to shift towards women—it's rare for women to apply for access to the Ashen Rose—but a few dates proved that wasn't the problem.

It feels like something has gone to sleep inside of me and just won't wake up.

"I have two exceptions already," I remind him. "They each show up here once a month, and I put on the pretty lingerie and pretend that I like being

told what to do, because they pay you a *lot* of money and they tip me well. I *really* don't want to add a third, Nikolai. Especially one you seem to think is going to be difficult to keep from getting out of hand. I like the ones who pay me to keep them in line, not the ones who are trying to push my boundaries from the moment they step into the room.

"I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to do," he says quietly, slipping the file back into the drawer. "That's not my style, you know that—"

*Except in the bedroom.* I keep that thought to myself. It isn't going to help either one of us in this conversation.

"—and I've learned my lesson recently in involving others in my business when I'm not sure of the outcome." His lips press together against some thought that I can tell he's not going to share. I'm not sure what it is he's referring to, but whatever it is, it's a memory he doesn't like to think about. "It will be worth your while, financially, to do this. And I would greatly appreciate it. I'm not sure which of our usual submissives will be able to handle a man like this."

"Like what?" I frown. "I know you better than to think you'd allow someone in here that you truly thought would hurt us—"

"According to rumor—" Nikolai shrugs. "Like me, but more reckless, more careless. A man who enjoys bloodshed, but, unlike me, doesn't think about the consequences. I think the rules of the club will be needed to keep him in line. And you know how difficult it is, sometimes, for our submissives to remember that the rules are there for their protection."

I know what he's saying—that as a natural *domme*, I don't have that issue. I'll stop a session in its tracks, no question, if a client steps out of line. I don't care about their disappointment or their pleasure. They agreed to the rules when they walked in the door, and they're expected to abide by them.

Not every girl here has that kind of backbone.

I let out a long, slow breath. *Wasn't I just thinking earlier, that if I could bring in more income, I could set myself up for a different life?* More money means more independence, more choices, and that's all I've ever wanted for

myself. My life has never been easy, and for all of it, I've sought ways to make certain that I didn't need to depend on anyone other than myself. That was part of the reason why, even if Nikolai had ever asked, I wouldn't have married him. My life wouldn't have been my own any longer, if we'd *really* been together. My choices wouldn't have been my own. And I could no longer have been wholly myself.

That has always mattered to me more than anything.

If I have to put up with whatever bullshit Matvei Kotov wants from me for an hour or two a couple of times a month or so, isn't it worth what I'll get from it? I don't want to do this forever. If I please him, there's no telling how much profit I might be able to squeeze from him before he gets bored.

"Fine." I narrow my eyes at Nikolai. "But if he takes one step out of line—"

"Absolutely," Nikolai assures me. I don't even have to finish my sentence for him to know what I mean. "I approved his application to try and start off on the right foot, but I'll be quick to terminate that relationship if he causes problems. He needs to prove himself to me, not the other way around."

I nod, letting out a slow breath. "Does he have a session booked yet?"

"He's already bought in to the poker game this weekend," Nikolai says. "I intended to set you up as the prize this time. If he wins, that will be his first night with you. If he doesn't, you being there will whet his appetite enough that he'll be eager to book one. If it goes well, perhaps there's a business relationship to be negotiated between his organization and mine. If not—"

This time, it's Nikolai who doesn't need to finish his sentence for me to know where he's going with it.

"Alright." I shrug. "I suppose we'll see how the game goes, then."

"We'll see." Nikolai gives me another small smile. "That's all. Go enjoy your break before the next client shows up."

Back in my dressing room, I sink into the chair across from my vanity, leaning my head back and briefly closing my eyes. I know what game Nikolai was referring to—there's a high-stakes poker game run every few months at the club. The prize is always a session with one of the girls, a

different one chosen for each game, until we've all done a rotation. It's been some time since it's been me. It'll be just another night at work, except I'll be expected to put on a show for the men as they play, a distraction to throw them off and make the game more difficult. A throwback to the days when I danced on stage, except far more lewd.

And at the end of the night, I might be spending time with Matvei. *If I'm lucky, he'll step a little out of line but not too much, and Nikolai will rescind his membership.* I feel guilty for thinking it—Nikolai will benefit more from a good working relationship with this man—it's just another sign, as far as I'm concerned, that I need to start thinking about what my life looks like with a different career path. This one is wearing on me more than I should.

My phone goes off, the alarm reminding me that it's time to start getting ready for my last session of the night, and I get up reluctantly, shedding the robe. *Two more hours, and you can clock out, Asha.*

Just like any other night at work.



## Finn



**M**y first time sitting at the head of the Irish Kings' table goes just about exactly how I expected it would.

Cian O'Malley, one of the oldest members, glares at me from the moment I take the seat. "Just not done," he mutters, quiet enough to sound like he's grumbling to himself but loud enough for everyone around the table to hear it anyway, including me. "Not even Kings' bloodline, and sitting in the high seat. Should have been one of us."

That sort of attitude, of course, is exactly why Theo put *me* here while he enjoys his home in Dublin with his wife on an extended sabbatical, and *not* one of the men currently sitting around the table. He'd said as much to me when he'd told me about the responsibility he was handing over. Giving it to one of these men posed too much risk—namely that they wouldn't want to give it back when Theo eventually returns to Chicago, or they would try to install one of their heirs instead while he's gone. While the Kings are far from a democracy, of all the major crime organizations in the city, they're the ones most prone to a coup. What happened recently in Boston proved that all over again, and it's too fresh in everyone's minds for Theo to feel all that comfortable letting any of the more power-hungry members have a taste of the high seat.

He knows me well enough to know I have no such designs. Cian, however, among others, doesn't seem to have that same assurance.

“And how are we to know, lad, that you’ll give back the chair when Theo returns?” Geoffery McCallan, sitting a few seats down, voices that concern. “Not easy to give up power, once you’ve a taste for it.”

“I didn’t *want* to sit here in the first place,” I tell him evenly. “It’s a favor to Theo, who I respect and have worked for since I was old enough to be considered a man. I’m here to prove myself loyal and capable once again, and refusing to hand back the seat would be neither of those things.”

“Hmph.” Geoffery narrows his eyes at me, leaning back as I fiddle with the video call that will allow Theo to be a part of the meeting from Dublin—the first part, anyway, so he can make the same assurances I’ve been making since I sat down.

Cian is the first to speak when he flickers onto the screen. “You need to come back, lad,” he says without preamble, to which Theo frowns. Cian is sixty-five if he’s a day, and those two-and-change decades that he has on Theo make him think he’s allowed to refer to the younger man so casually, despite the difference in position. “Finn here is a capable man, but he’s no King. There’s a way things are done, and this isn’t it.”

“I’m capable of making changes to how things are done,” Theo says, pleasantly enough. He’s sitting behind his desk in the manor house outside of Dublin, and I have a moment’s envy, thinking of the house nestled away in the country. I don’t prefer the quiet of the countryside to the city the way Theo does, but right now, I’d take it, just to not be a part of this meeting. “I have things to do in Dublin, and Finn is more than capable of handling things in my absence.”

“When are ye coming back?” This is from Brian O’Halloran, further down, his accent the thickest of any here. He, too, splits his time between Chicago and Dublin—but he doesn’t occupy the high seat, so there’s no need to replace him when he’s gone. In a few years, his son will be old enough to take Brian’s place while he’s in Dublin.

Theo gets a pinched look between his eyes. “When I decide it’s necessary.”

“And if we say it’s necessary now?” Cian asks, a tone to his voice that I personally don’t care for, and from the expression on Theo’s face, he doesn’t either.

“Then I would remind you who is in charge,” Theo says evenly. “By my proxy, that’s Finn right now. So you will give him the same respect you extend to me.”

No one at the table is overly pleased by that. Not even me, really—I’m not sure I’m as capable as Theo is making me out to be, and I’m more than a little worried about failing him.

There’ve been plenty of times when I’ve needed to prove to Theo that I can do the job he’s entrusted me with. I’ve never been so concerned as to whether I actually can or not, as I am right now.

I wasn’t meant to lead—especially not a group of power-hungry, overly-arrogant men like this, all of whom are at *least* twenty or more years older than me, most of them far more than that. At thirty-one, I’m practically a child in the eyes of some of these men.

All I can do is my best, though. And as Theo logs off of the call and I turn my attention to the Kings’ table, that’s what I’m determined to do.

—

By the time I meet the boys out at the local pub for a drink, I’m sorely in need of one. My two closest friends, Allan and Flynn, are both waiting there for me when I arrive, at a round table near the back of the Lady Luck, a local bar that’s not quite a dive but comes close enough to feel like it. There are pool tables and darts, the usual mounted televisions showing sports, a half-circle bar, a smattering of tables, and a jukebox that sometimes works and sometimes doesn’t. All of us could afford to go somewhere better, but it’s a nostalgic callback to the days when we couldn’t, and we’ve all been coming here long enough that it feels homey.

I get a draft from the bar, a local beer, and join them. I can hear Allan from feet away, telling a story about a recent night at work—he bartends at an upscale place close to the river, where there’s a steady flood of people with too much money and not enough places to spend it. Flynn, who works as a bouncer, has an equal number of interesting stories, particularly since he works at one of the Vasilev strip clubs.

There's an understanding that I don't talk about my work, for the most part. Every now and then, I can let something slip—something that would happen working security for anyone, not just the most powerful crime lord in Chicago—more often than not, it's better to keep my mouth shut. Theo trusts me implicitly, and I would never want to do something that would change that.

“Finn!” Flynn waves me over, an expression on his face that tells me he's been waiting for me to show up to share something. “Pull up a stool, man. You're gonna want to hear this.”

“Johns getting out of line again?” I smirk, taking a sip of my beer. Flynn works at the Paradise Palms, a strip club that's known for having girls with a “secret menu” that can be purchased from once you're in the highly exclusive and highly expensive champagne room. It's one step down from the Ashen Rose, a place that *is* a sex dungeon and doesn't pretend to be anything else. Paradise has the front of being a dancer's only joint, but everyone knows differently.

“I got a pass.” Flynn grins at us like it's fucking Christmas, and he personally talked to Santa. “And I can bring two guests.”

I frown at him. “A pass? What the hell are you talking about, man?”

“A *pass*.” He looks at us like we're complete idiots, although Allan doesn't seem to have picked up on what's going on yet, either. “To the Ashen Rose.”

“What the fuck?” Allan frowns. “You can't afford to get in there. None of us could, not if we saved every goddamn dime we ever made.”

“That's what I'm talking about.” Flynn shakes his head. “Every now and then, the owner—that Bratva guy—he'll give out a pass for someone to get in for a night with a couple guests. There's a whole background check and a bunch of other bullshit, but he gave the boss at the Paradise one to give out to an employee. And *I* got it. Some employee of the month bullshit. I passed the check—because, of course, I fucking did. I'm the only guy there who has a squeaky-clean record—and sooo—” his grin spreads across his face. “I'm gonna get *in*.”

“Does the pass come with a girl?” Allan asks dubiously. “I hear those Ashen

Rose girls are just as pricey as the membership. Which is shitty, if you ask me,” he adds. “You gotta pay a yearly fee to just walk in the door, and *then* pay for a girl too? Seems like a scam.”

“And tip,” Flynn adds, to which Allan rolls his eyes.

I keep my mouth shut. I’ve got my own opinions about it—all to do with the girls deserving to be paid well for what they do and deserving far more than a generous tip for their services—but I don’t think it’ll go over well with my current audience, and it doesn’t matter anyway. I can’t afford a night with one of Nikolai’s girls, I know that. Theo pays me well, but not *that* well—even if I could, I’m not sure I’d like the idea of paying for sex.

“So?” Allan presses. “Does the pass come with a girl?”

“No,” Flynn admits. “Just admission for the night. But I’ll get to see them in person—and get this—they run this high-stakes poker game every few months, with a girl as the prize. Buy in, and you get a shot at exactly that. The prize is a session with whatever girl they pick for that game.”

I snort at that. “You gonna buy into a poker game? At a place like that? Hell, do you even know how to play poker, Flynn?”

“Of course, I know how to play fucking poker.” He glares at me. “But even if I couldn’t get in, the girl that they have up there for the prize? She puts on a show on the main floor while the guys play as a distraction. So even if I couldn’t play, I’d get to fucking watch.”

“And get a boner you have to go home and take care of yourself?” Allan frowns. “Doesn’t sound like a great night to me.”

“A boner I’ll get to take care of while thinking about a girl worth five thousand an hour whose pussy I got to see.” Flynn flashes him a lascivious smile, taking a deep drink of his beer. “Does that mean you don’t want to be one of my two guests?”

“Fuck no.” Allan shakes his head. “Not my scene. I like a bar with women I can take home. Or I did,” he amends quickly, glancing at me. “Before Caroline.”

I know, of course, that he’s not entirely telling the truth—which is why he

gave me the look. Flynn might not care about Allan's philandering, but I do. I think it's a shitty thing for a man to run around on the woman he's promised to be faithful to, which, in my opinion, starts when a relationship gets serious.

Allan, on the other hand, has always been one of those guys who thinks it's fine for him to have his fun until he puts a ring on his girl's finger. Which he's about to do with Caroline, and has spent the better part of the last month joking about how he won't be able to take girls home any longer, now that they're about to move in together and will soon be planning a wedding.

"I can't go to some sex club anyway," Allan says, finishing off his beer and waving to the one waitress circulating the bar. "I'd have to lie to Caroline about where I was. She'd never be alright with that if she found out, even if it *was* just to watch. She'd be worrying for weeks that I was picturing some girl at the Rose when I was in bed with her."

"Maybe you would be." Flynn snorts. "I've caught glimpses of some of those girls. You've never seen anything like them."

I finish my own beer, pushing the glass aside. "It's been a long day. Work was something else today—I think I'm just gonna head home. Make it an early night." The truth is, while Allan and Flynn have been my friends for a long time, the conversation tonight is leaning heavily in a direction that I don't enjoy. Most of the time, they're alright, but they've both got a misogynistic streak that rubs me the wrong way, and tonight, of all nights, I don't have a hell of a lot of patience for it.

"Aw man, I was hoping we'd make a late night of it." Flynn looks disappointed. "Allan here is gonna have to get back to his girl sooner rather than later."

"I might not have a girl, but I do have an early wake-up calling my name." It's a lie, but it's the only way I think I'm going to get out of here without taking even more ribbing from the guys. "Maybe this weekend? Something Friday night—"

"That's the night I got the pass for. Well, it's for one night this coming weekend, but I wanna go on the night that the game is happening. That way, I at least get the show." He grins. "Come on, Finn. You can be my plus one. Finn and Flynn, just like the old times. Except we won't be able to convince

any of these girls to go home with us.”

That *does* make me laugh. There was a time, ages ago, when we were roommates, when we’d hit on girls together with that line, introducing ourselves together as Finn and Flynn. It worked more often than you’d think, and we went home more than once with a couple of girls, high-fiving each other as we went off to our respective bedrooms. That was the better part of ten years ago, of course, before we got our *own* apartments, and I like to think I acquired better taste in women since then.

On the other hand, it’s been a while since I’ve actually taken anyone home—not that the Ashen Rose is going to be the place where I accomplish that. All the fun happens there—and it’s fun I can’t afford.

“Just come enjoy the scenery,” Flynn presses. “We’ll have some expensive beers, look at the girls, talk shit. See which lucky bastard wins the grand prize. It’ll be something different.”

“It would be that.” I let out a sigh, looking at Allan, who is busy ordering another beer from the waitress, while looking directly at her cleavage. *I need new friends*, I think to myself, feeling tired for the first time and even a little old, despite the fact that I’m a year younger than both Flynn and Allan.

“The pass comes with two free drink coupons for each of us,” Flynn presses, and I chuckle.

“Well, how can I say no to letting Nikolai Vasilev buy me a drink? Sure. Friday night.” *Hell, since it’s Vasilev’s place, maybe I can pick up something interesting for Theo*. They’re allies now, but that doesn’t mean Theo doesn’t like being kept abreast of what Nikolai has going on. He doesn’t entirely trust him, and I don’t blame Theo a bit, not after what Nikolai tried to pull. It’s because of Nikolai’s sister, and how much Theo adores her, that the alliance between the McNeil and Vasilev families has held at all.

“Hell yeah.” Flynn grins. “See you then, man.”

I pay for my beer, walking out to the curb where my motorcycle is parked. It’s a warm spring night, and I consider going for a drive, maybe even getting out of town for a day or two until I’m supposed to meet Flynn Friday night. I don’t actually have anything going on for a few days. With Theo in Dublin,

outside of Kings' meetings, and handling Theo's affairs here and there, I don't have as much to do as I'm accustomed to.

It's tempting. A change of scenery might be good for me—but I find myself driving back to my apartment, parking my bike in the usual spot, and heading up. I know before I even get to my door how the rest of the night will go—one or two more beers from the fridge, a shower, and a quick jerk-off before I go to sleep, then I'll pass out.

*Maybe going to the club isn't such a bad idea*, I think wryly as I unlock my door. God knows life has felt stagnant lately, ever since I came back to Chicago.

A night out in a place like that might be just the shake-up I need.



## Asha



For the thrice-annual Ashen Rose poker game, there's no latex and leather tonight. Instead, there's a box waiting for me in my dressing room, courtesy of Nikolai, who sent up what he wanted me to wear tonight. It gives me a small flutter that I shouldn't feel, seeing the box—there was a time when he gave me things to wear for his personal pleasure, and he'll see me in this tonight, too. But there's nothing intimate to it any longer, nothing personal. It's just a boss giving his employee a new work uniform now, and I know that's how he sees it.

It would be better if I pushed any other thoughts out of my head, too.

Still, when I take the silvery-grey lace out of the box, I can't help wondering what he'll think when he sees it on me. It's a gorgeous lingerie set—a sheer corset embroidered with blood-red thread and piped with velvet over the boning channels that sit just below my breasts, a balconette bra that matches made of silver-grey lace embroidered with blood-red flowers, and a pair of sheer panties in the same shade that curves invitingly over my ass, clinging to my hips. They split between my thighs, the opening hidden until I part my legs, a surprise for the players who won't see it coming until I choose to distract them. It suits me perfectly, a soft contrast to my pale complexion and dark hair and eyes, flattering the curves of my figure in a way that will make it *very* hard for the players to concentrate on their hands...or rather, anything but where they wish their hands could be.

I like to think I'm not overly vain, but after years of working in this industry,

it's hard not to be aware of my looks. I put in the effort to stay in shape, and the corset flatters my hourglass figure and full breasts in a way that I know Nikolai must have envisioned when he picked this out. *In a professional way*, I remind myself, trying to get used to the prick of disappointment I feel every time I think that. It used to hurt more. Now, it feels more like an irritation, a feeling I wish I could get rid of.

The last part of the outfit is the part I'd prefer not to put on—a slim grey leather collar with a silver ring hanging from it, a symbol that I'm playing a submissive role tonight. I buckle it on anyway, making a face in the mirror before I go back to my vanity to finish my makeup and find a lipstick that matches the red thread in the lingerie. *It's just for the night*, I remind myself. The other two men who pay for my submission won't be here for another two weeks. Until then, I have two weeks of nothing but men paying to submit to *me*, the role I feel most comfortable occupying. And tonight even has a little of that flavor, with the show I'll be expected to put on. I'll be the one with the power for the duration of the game, at least, teasing the men mercilessly until one of them has the winning hand.

*Maybe I'll get lucky, and it'll be someone I'm actually into.* The odds are low, but I'm trying to stay hopeful. It will make getting on my knees for whoever wins more tolerable—I'm sure that's where I'll end up at some point in the evening. They all want that, every single one of them.

Men are terribly predictable, I've found. And the ones who want me to submit are usually the type I dislike the most. The sort of men who buy into a game like this are even worse—but at least they typically tip well.

I cap the lipstick, slipping it back into my makeup bag, and take one last look in the mirror. *How long has it been since I've enjoyed sex for my own pleasure?* I want to say that I've enjoyed it with *someone* since Nikolai—but the truth is, I haven't. That last night together in his penthouse was the last time I remember someone besides myself actually making me come.

The memory makes my breath catch a little, and I reach up to touch the silver ring. I remember him grabbing a collar just like this, fingers wrapping around it, pressing against my throat as his cock slammed into me, dragging my mouth up to his as he groaned out his orgasm—

*Fuck, Asha. Stop it.* I feel a wave of guilt for thinking of him like that, so vividly. I've *met* Lilliana, briefly, when Nikolai showed her around the club—probably assuming his new wife would feel better about his evenings spent overseeing the sex dungeon he owns if she'd been there personally. She'd been calmer about it than I expected, not upset about Nikolai spending time here, friendly with all of the girls. I have no idea if Nikolai told her that he and I used to sleep together or not, but she was friendly with me, too, and I decided it was better to stay that way—not knowing.

And now...it does no good to linger on the past. I know that very well.

*So why does it feel so hard to let go of this time?* Nikolai was never going to be mine forever. I knew that from the very beginning. It makes me feel foolish to still think of him like this.

I've never been a foolish woman, and I don't want to be one now.

Downstairs, the floor is being set up for the night ahead. There's a small stage with a black velvet lounge for me—one of the stages the dancers typically use on a normal night—and in front of it is the oval table that the players will sit at, a gilded mirror on the other side so that the ones with their backs to me will still be able to watch the show. The bar is just to the left, gleaming mahogany with the bartenders already getting ready for the night, which will likely be a busy one. There's always the highest member turnout on the nights when there's a show, and Nikolai usually gives out a few guest passes for these nights, too, hoping to draw in new members.

That means I'm putting on a show for free for them, which always annoys me a little. But at the end of the day, I'll still be paid. It's money out of Nikolai's pocket, really, not mine.

I just don't like giving anything away easily. It makes me a good *domme*—it makes submitting so much more difficult.

“Asha. You look gorgeous.” Nikolai's voice comes from behind me, and I turn in my silver heels, my heart doing the usual flip at the sight of him. He's all business in a dark grey sharkskin suit, tie done up perfectly, hair smooth against his head, eyes dispassionate as they slide over me. But then again, they always are now. He hasn't looked at me with desire since that last night. Even the night he came to the club and told me about his engagement—there

was a little heat there, a memory of what we'd been, but Lilliana was on his mind even then.

I knew as soon as I saw them together that once she was in his life, there was no chance for anyone else. She swallowed up everything else when she was in a room with him, like all he could see was her. I've never seen him look like that with anyone—not even me. And I'm happy for him—for both of them. Nikolai deserves happiness.

There was a time when I thought I did too—long before him. But that's long gone, and now Nikolai is too. I don't know if there's a third time that I get to meet someone who makes me feel that way.

It seems like too much to ask.

“You picked a good outfit.” I force a smile. His gaze never dips below my eyes, and while I'm glad for Lilliana's sake—and for my friendship with Nikolai—that he's not tempted, it does sting a little. No girl likes to be easily forgotten.

At the very least, after seeing the two of them together, I have the reassurance of knowing it wasn't just me. The way he looks at her—he would have forgotten anyone, once she came into his life. The connection between them is undeniable.

Nikolai checks his watch. “You might as well get set up on stage. The players will be here soon, and then we'll start letting in guests. Some of them are already at the lobby bar. Grab yourself a drink if you want,” he says with a grin—he knows these nights aren't my favorite. But it's a part of my job.

I take his suggestion, going to the bar and getting a limoncello shot from Jason, the head bartender tonight. His gaze sweeps over me in an appreciative way—Jason prefers men, but as he once told me, you can appreciate art in a gallery without wanting to bring it home. It's flattering—he also once said to me if he ever was going to try sleeping with a woman, it would be me. He's never followed through on that thought—though if he did, I'd probably take him up on the offer. He's gorgeous—dark blond hair and hazel eyes, with a body to die for. Nikolai has often asked him if he wants to work here in a different capacity, but he's always insisted he's fine behind the bar, despite how much more money he could make.

“Sure you don’t want two?” Jason grins. “Been a while since you’ve been up on stage.”

“Don’t remind me.” I nudge the shot glass back in his direction. “Better not. It’s been a while since I’ve had anything other than a glass or two of wine at night.” I don’t usually drink at work. But Nikolai and Jason are both right—it *has* been a while since I’ve put on a public show at the club, and having a little something to take the edge off won’t hurt.

Still, I stick to the one shot.

I’m headed up the steps to the stage when the players begin to assemble around the table. I stretch out on the black chaise lounge, the velvet rubbing sensually against my skin, the soft pillows at one end propping up my back and shoulders so that I’m shown off to the guests on the floor at the perfect angle—my breasts pushed up and showcased above the corset, my thighs pressed together for now until I decide when I want to show off what’s between them. The music is beginning to pulse through the club, a soft beat that can just be heard below the low din of conversation as the guests begin to fill the floor, enough to set a mood without dominating it.

The show begins when the cards are dealt. I don’t know much about how poker is played, but I don’t need to. All I need to know is how to distract, and I’m good at that—at the slow build, the tease that slowly escalates until I’m doing things to distract the men that most of them won’t be able to ignore. The one who does—or who does the best job at it, will be the one who wins me for the night.

I see immediately that Matvei is at the table. He’s impossible to miss, though he looks more imposing in person than in his photo—not in physical size, but in presence. If Nikolai met him, then I understand why he’s concerned. There’s arrogance in his every movement, in how he holds himself, in the cant of his head and the way he speaks, and I can see that he’s a man who thinks a great deal of himself.

*God, I hope he loses tonight,* is all I can think as I shift on the lounge, rubbing my thighs delicately together, stretching like a cat on the velvet surface, running my tongue over lips that taste like the sharp bite of lemon alcohol. Not only does Matvei *not* spark desire in me, just the sight of him

makes me feel the exact opposite. He's the kind of man I'd go out of my way to avoid. If it weren't for the fact that Nikolai asked me as a favor, I'd likely back out of any night with this man, regardless of how well he might tip.

The rest of the men at the table don't do anything for me, either. They're all handsome enough, even one who I'm sure I've never seen before. I'm almost certain he must be one of those guests Nikolai occasionally lets in—he has a sort of nervousness about him that suggests he knows he's out of place here. How he bought into the game, I have no idea, but I'd be willing to guess he cleared out a significant amount of savings for it. I almost feel sorry for the man. I can tell just by looking at him that he's not going to win, that he's probably bet money he didn't really have to spend on the possibility of a night with me.

I roll over on the lounge, onto my hands and knees, arching my back as I lean slowly downward, giving the players an excellent view from behind. My thighs are still pressed together, hiding the secret there, but even without looking, I can feel eyes on me, distracted players who will lose sooner rather than later.

When I roll onto my back again, Matvei hasn't even glanced at me. I let out a small huff from between pursed lips—not because I particularly want him looking at me, but because the fact that he's not even slightly distracted means there's a solid chance he might manage to stay that way long enough to win the game.

Which is exactly the opposite of what I want.

Slowly, I slide my hands down my body, worrying at my lower lip with my teeth as I curve my fingers around my breasts, brushing over my nipples in the sheer lace, toying with the ribbons of the corset. It's a slow tease, one that I let build as I fluidly get to my feet and sway to the edge of the stage as if I want to get a better look at the players, letting a flirtatious smile spread across my lips for the ones who are looking at me instead of the cards in their hands.

The one who I'm sure is a guest can't keep his eyes off of me. But he has a good hand, from what I can tell, and he stays in through the first round.

A cocktail waitress is circulating before the second hand, passing out drinks, and as the table is momentarily distracted from me, I glance over to the bar.

That's when I see him.

There's a man sitting there, another one I don't recognize. I certainly don't know *every* man with a membership here, but I've seen most of them, at least in passing, and I feel confident I'd remember this one if I'd seen him before. Except I'm certain I haven't, because there's something about him that tells me this is his first night here, too, just like the nervous one sitting at the table.

In fact, if I were the one placing bets tonight, I'd bet that this man came here with the one who bought into the game.

Not *with* him, not like that—a friend, not a partner here to spice things up. The way this man's eyes light on me tells me his taste is for women. But he's definitely new to this. It shows in the way he talks to Jason as he orders another drink, casually, as if he and Jason are the same type of man, living the same type of life. There's no arrogance in him, no entitlement.

It's refreshing. Attractive. Just like him.

He turns to look at me with his glass in hand, and for a second, I forget that I'm meant to be going back to the lounge, turning up the heat on the tease. He's not my usual type—at least, I don't think so. But the truth is, I think I've forgotten what my usual type is.

This man has red hair with just a tinge of brown, styled messily in a way that only highlights the chiseled lines of his face, and a strong jaw dusted with brownish-red stubble. I can't see what color his eyes are from this distance, but I can see the interest in them as he looks at me, his gaze sliding over my lingerie in a way that tells me he's thinking of what I would look like with it off.

The difference between him and every other man here is that there's something else in his face, too—like he almost feels bad that he's thinking it. Like he's not sure if he's allowed to want that. It sparks something in me, the part of me that thrills to having the power and control in these kinds of situations. I could make this man beg for me, I'm sure of it.

Something tightens low in my stomach, warmth blooming through me in a way that I haven't felt in a long time, and my breath catches in my throat. The man is still looking at me, and I suddenly remember what I'm meant to be

doing, the show that I'm supposed to be putting on.

I turn fluidly but sharply on my heel, swaying back towards the lounge, and I can feel his eyes on me the entire way there.

I try to focus on the poker table as I go through the motions of the show. I slide my hands over my breasts, letting out a low moan that mingles with the soft beat of the music and the hum of conversation, arching and twisting on the lounge as if I'm full of a slowly building desire that's gradually taking me over, turning me into a panting, needy mess of sexual pleading. That's what the men at the table will want to believe, and it's exactly what I'm usually *not* here. It's what I haven't been in a long time.

But suddenly, I'm feeling a hint of it. A *real* hint of actual arousal, real desire, blooming through my veins and over my skin, and it feels good. It makes me want more.

It builds as I go, doing my best to keep my eyes off of the bar. I manage not to look that way for long enough that I don't even know if he's still there, but in my imagination, he is, watching as I gracefully push myself up off of the lounge and make my way to the front of the stage again, swaying to the edge and then smoothly turning away from the men. My fingers slowly undo the clasp of my bra, sliding the soft velvet straps down my arms, keeping my hands pressed over the full curves of my breasts until I slowly turn, revealing them to the hungry eyes scattered throughout the club, pushed up by the corset just beneath them.

Matvei still hasn't looked at me. I sway to the beat of the music, touching and teasing my breasts, running my hands over the corset and down my thighs, my fingers sliding up between them, a hint of what's to come. I still don't look towards the bar. If he's gone, I'll be disappointed. If he's there—

If he's there, I'm half-afraid I'll forget the routine I'm meant to play out. No one has lingered in my mind like that for a long time. It unsettles me as much as it turns me on.

I like to be the one in power, and someone who clings to my senses like that takes away some of that power.

When I'm stretched out on the lounge again, raising my arms over my head



to show off my breasts, arching my back, preparing for the moment when instead of taking off my panties, I'll spread my thighs and show the entranced guests the pretty picture of my pussy framed in silver lace, my head turns inadvertently, and I look towards the bar.

I tell myself that I'm looking for Nikolai, to make sure he didn't notice my distraction earlier, that he's not upset with me. But deep down, I know I'm looking for the red-haired man.

He's still there.

He's still looking at me.

My breath catches again as my gaze meets his. My hand slides over the brocade and velvet of my corset, down to the edge of the panties, my fingers hovering just above the apex of my thighs. The poker table has thinned down by now, a few of the players already having folded. I don't know where they are now—probably with a variety of the girls here tonight to help take the sting out of losing.

The only man here I can seem to think about is the one sitting there with a glass of whiskey in his hand, eyes intent on me as I slowly, *very* slowly, part my legs.

I slide one foot up onto the lounge, silver heel pressing into the velvet, knee resting against the back of it. The other leg slowly swings to one side, heel on the shiny floor of the stage, the v of my thighs wider and wider as the lace parts open, and I *hear* the low moan in the room as I expose my most intimate flesh to the eyes of the men scattered around the room.

I should be looking at the men at the table, enticing them, distracting them. But as I arch my back, showing myself off, I can only look at the man at the bar.

Suddenly, it feels as if I'm putting on a show for him, and only him.

And to my utter shock, I realize that I'm wet.

*Genuinely* wet, and not manufactured with some well-placed lube or saliva. I feel the rush of warmth, the dampness between my thighs, and the soft moan that slips out of my mouth is real. When my hand drifts lower, two fingers

slipping between my outer folds to slide over my clit, I'm so slick that my hips jerk with the sensation, the sudden sharp burst of pleasure that jolts between my thighs, making me moan all over again, a low, needy sound.

I've never *really* come on stage. I don't think I've ever really come with a client. It's always fake. It's hard to be aroused when the focus is on pleasing and performing for men I don't really want to please or perform for, men who I'm not attracted to, who usually have the exact qualities that I'd prefer to avoid. Submission often genuinely turns me *off*, except on rare occasions. Nikolai was one of those occasions—I can think of one other, though right now, I'd prefer not to. On a stage like this, usually, I'm too focused on the performance to really have an orgasm.

But right now, I think that by the end of the show—I will have come in public for the very first time.

Something about that thought frightens me and makes me want to stop it. It feels like a loss of control, and I slow the stroke of my fingers, dampening the pleasure. I feel my body's resistance to that, the *need* building deep inside my core, and my gaze meets the man at the bar again. He's looking at me with a sudden hunger that wasn't there before, his eyes frozen on me like he's never seen anything like me in his life, and I realize suddenly that if there weren't rules about it, if it wouldn't get him thrown out of this place and probably worse, he'd be on this stage right now.

*That's* the way he's looking at me. Like he's having to physically hold himself back from charging up here and fucking me in front of everyone.

*Claiming* me.

Making me his.

The kind of thing that would normally make me dry as a desert. But the expression on his face sends a thrill through me, my pulse beating faster in my throat, and without realizing it at first, I look directly at him, locking my gaze with his as I start to spread myself open with my fingers, displaying my most intimate flesh for the viewing pleasure of everyone watching.

When I first started to work here, that gave me a thrill—being watched, knowing that everyone in the room was aroused by me, *wanting* me. It was a

rush of power, a feeling that I held everyone in the palm of my hand, that I could make them do anything I wanted if I let them touch, taste—or even just let them believe that they might get to.

It wore off over time. Like any job that was enjoyable once but lost its sheen, I suppose—but this felt worse somehow, like a part of me had been rubbed away, erased, a part of me that I had once very much enjoyed.

This feels like coming back to myself. Like everything I forgot, I could feel comes rushing back in, heat flooding through me, pleasure shimmering over my skin as I arch into my touch, fingers rubbing against my clit as I moan and twist on the lounge, no longer just pretending. I close my eyes briefly, luxuriating in the touch of the velvet against my skin, the wet heat against my fingertips, but it's no longer the thought of everyone else in the room being aroused by me that's making me ache, that's tightening that knot of desire deep in my belly until I can feel my thighs tensing, the orgasm getting closer and closer.

It's just him. And when I open my eyes again, he's still looking at me, that hungry look on his face, as if he's never seen anything he wants more. One of his hands is on his thigh, fingers pressing into the fabric of his pants, the other hand tightly wrapped around his whiskey glass as he watches me, and it spurs me on, my fingers circling my clit in exactly the way I know I like, my breaths coming in small, shallow gasps as I feel myself getting closer to the edge. I've forgotten about performing for the room, forgotten that I'm on stage doing a job—about everything aside from the way his gaze makes me feel, and I roll my hips against my hand, *needing* that final push over the edge into the ecstasy of release—then I see his jaw clench.

I see the way he shifts in his seat, the quick, jagged motion of his hand raising his whiskey glass to his lips, swallowing it as if he *needs* the burn of the alcohol in his throat as badly as I need to come, and I know he's hard. I can imagine the thick ridge of his cock, pressing tightly against the fly of his pants, straining to be free, throbbing, and I can imagine how it would feel inside of me, filling me up, his hungry hands and mouth on my skin—

My mouth opens on a cry as a sudden rush of pleasure floods through me, my legs parting as my hips shudder and jerk, and all I feel is the bliss of release compounded by the heat of the unknown man's eyes on me from across the

room, seeing me come, and deep down I know I'm coming for *him*.

It also happened sooner than it should have, for the purposes of the show I'm meant to be putting on.

*Fuck*. I press my lips together, fingers still circling my clit as I come down from the high of the pleasure, hoping Nikolai won't be angry with me. I open my eyes, looking towards the bar, and I see the man still staring at me, a look of such intense longing on his face that it makes my breath catch in my throat.

It's been such a long time since anyone has looked at me that way, with such naked *need* in their expression. Not even Nikolai looked at me like that—*yearned* for me that way, and it sends another shudder through me as I suck in a breath, still idly touching myself as I force myself to drag my gaze away and refocus on the game in front of me.

It's almost over. I can see the distracted expressions of most of the remaining players, eyes watching me, flicking between my drenched pussy and spread legs, and their own hands of cards. I can see the disappointment in some of the men lingering near the table, the ones who have already folded, and I know what they're imagining. I know they're all thinking of what they would have done with me if they'd won, the pleasure they're missing out on. I feel that burst of satisfaction again, the rush of power, and then I see a man standing up from the table, and realize the game is finished.

Matvei won.

My heart sinks, the high of my climax quickly receding as I slip my hand away from my thighs, pressing my legs together. *Well, what did you expect? He had his head in the game the whole time.*

I tell myself, as I sit up, that there's nothing to be gained from being disappointed. I would have ended up spending a session with him regardless, so I might as well find out sooner rather than later what kind of client he's going to be. If he screws up, he won't get another night here, and I won't have to wonder what it's going to be like.

Without meaning to, I glance towards the bar. The red-haired man is gone, and there's an odd sinking sensation in my chest, a flush of disappointment

that makes no sense. It's not as if I were going to spend the night with *him*—I know enough about the kind of people who come to the Rose to feel fairly sure that he was a friend of the man who had the pass. He didn't have the attitude of someone who has the kind of money to buy time with me.

Which, ironically, made me like him more.

Matvei is speaking with Nikolai, and I sit up fully, swinging my legs over the side of the lounge. It doesn't matter where the other man went. I'm at work, and right now, Matvei is discussing the terms of his prize with Nikolai.

I do my best to push the red-haired man out of my head. I won't see him again anyway.

Right now, I need to focus on the client that Nikolai apparently needs me to handle.

## Finn



**T**ruthfully, I didn't expect much out of the evening. I thought we'd go, have a couple of free drinks, maybe buy a couple more, and then head out once Flynn was done ogling the girls and realized that the night wouldn't be more than just window shopping for pleasure neither of us would ever be able to afford.

And then Flynn takes one look at the girls walking around the room, and buys into the one spot left in the damn game.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I look at him, astonished. The truth is, I *do* know what he's doing—thinking he's getting a chance at something that would be beyond his reach, normally. But if *I* were going to bet on anything, it'd be that even the buy-in for the game is going to take every extra penny he has.

"This is a waste," I tell him flatly as he hands his card over. "When was the last time you actually played poker?"

"Like six months ago." Flynn grins at me. "It'll be fine."

"That was with friends." I shake my head. "You're just going to lose all that money."

"But what if I don't?" That grin is still on Flynn's face, and I shrug.

"Don't come crying to me after." I nod towards the bar. "Good luck, brother."

I'm going to go get a drink."

I have half a mind to just leave. I'd expected to spend a night shooting the shit with my friend, not sitting alone at the bar while he plays poker. If that's how he wants the night to go, he doesn't need me here to be his audience.

*Two drinks*, I tell myself, walking up to the bar and ordering a whiskey and ginger from the man standing there wiping off a glass. I figure I can head out after, once I've enjoyed the free drinks courtesy of Nikolai. I see him off to the side, speaking with a woman who has her back to me, and I wonder if he'll recognize me. We haven't spoken to each other much—the last time I saw him was when we rescued his sister from the basement she'd been chained up in by her kidnapper.

Neither of us liked each other much. But if I'm going to be running things for Theo, I'm likely going to have to deal with Nikolai more often.

The woman steps away from Nikolai, turning to walk towards the steps of the stage as the players begin to sit down around the table. For a moment, all I see is the view from the back—a lovely view. She has a perfect heart-shaped ass, framed in silvery lace panties that curve over exactly the spot a man's hands would ache to grab, her hair tumbling down her back in thick black waves. I feel a spark of curiosity, waiting for her to turn around as she gets up onto the stage, and a stab of foolishness immediately after. I'd told Flynn he was an idiot for the same thing, having an interest in any of these girls, all of whom are out of reach.

I don't particularly relish the idea of buying a woman, anyway. They're all here of their own free will—I know Nikolai runs upstanding businesses, or as upstanding as these sorts of establishments can be—but it still feels...tawdry. Taboo in a way that I suppose could be arousing to some, but just makes me a little uncomfortable.

I finish the whiskey, motioning for my second. *Just this one, and then I'll head out*, I think to myself—then I look back towards the stage, and she turns around.

*Christ, she's fucking beautiful.* For a moment, all I can do is stare at her. She's utter perfection in every way that I can imagine—a gorgeous pale face framed by all that thick black hair, dark eyes fringed with long lashes, full

red-stained lips that any man would die to have wrapped around his cock. The corset she's wearing gives her an even more curvaceous figure than I imagine she normally has, a narrow waist topped by breasts that would overflow my palms, and plush thighs that I can practically feel pressing against my hips. My cock twitches, swelling a little against my leg as I look at her, and I suck in a breath at the sudden, unexpected arousal.

It's been a long time since I've been so attracted to a woman that I've gotten aroused in public. The guys have managed to drag me along to ordinary strip clubs every now and then, and each time, I find the women attractive enough, but not so much so that I'm sitting there with a hard-on. Even the few times I've been convinced to buy a dance, it doesn't really get me aroused. It feels manufactured, so disingenuous that it's more of a turn-off than anything else. But this woman—

Everything about her *screams* sex, and there's a mysterious, seductive glint in her eyes as she stretches out over the lounge set up on the stage, arching and writhing against the surface of it as she starts to put on the show Flynn talked about. I can't tell if she's the kind of girl who would sink to her knees and beg to pleasure a man or the type who would tease and torment, but either way, I can imagine it would be an experience.

Maybe not an experience worth five grand, but—

The entire purpose of her show, of course, is to distract the players at the table. It's amusing to watch how quickly Flynn falls for it, his eyes flicking constantly back and forth between his cards and her as she gets up and sways towards the edge of the stage. I hope he has a good hand, because otherwise, I don't know how he's even getting past the first round.

She knows how to put on a show, that's for sure. I'm not surprised by it—I figured once she went up on the stage, she'd do the sort of striptease routine that is common to these kinds of places, making the game a little more challenging. It's no hardship to watch her, that's for sure—she might be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and when she teasingly turns around, unhooking her bra from the back, I feel my mouth go a little dry at the thought of seeing her gorgeous breasts bare.

When she turns around, they're every bit as lovely as I could have imagined.



She raises her hands up over her head, swaying teasingly to the soft beat of the music, and I unthinkingly rub my palm over my thigh, thinking of how her soft flesh would feel under my fingers. Her breasts are full and round, pushed up by the corset, dusky pink nipples soft against the creamy flesh. *I wonder what she tastes like.*

The thought flickers through my head before I can stop it, how her soft skin would feel against my tongue, if she tastes of soap and perfume, and I can imagine her nipple stiffening in my mouth, the moan she would make—

My cock twitches again, swelling uncomfortably, and I realize with a start that I'm on my way to having a full hard-on sitting here at the bar. It's not helped by the way she walks towards the lounge again, those full breasts swaying with every movement. When she arches backward onto the lounge again, her body twisting against the velvet in a way all too reminiscent of how she might move beneath me if I were there with her, she suddenly turns her head in the direction of the bar—I could swear she's looking right at *me*.

*Fuck.* Lust pulses through me, blood throbbing in my cock, and I watch, stunned, as she slides her hand over the corset, down her stomach, towards the apex of her thighs.

*She's not...*

That's too much, even for a place like this. I'd thought it would be a striptease, nothing more. But I watch, all of the thoughts in my head feeling as she slowly parts her legs, one silver heel resting on the stage as her thighs spread open—I realize those silver-grey panties have a split right where her —

*Oh god.*

Even her pussy is perfect. Soft and pink and glistening in the light from the stage, her fingers covering her clit, delving between her outer folds as she strokes herself slowly. I stare at her, stunned at the extent of the show she's putting on. Her back arches, her gaze still fixed on me as her fingers go still for a moment—

And then she spreads herself open with her fingers, showing off all of that wet, intimate flesh to the audience below the stage—including me.

I feel a sudden, throbbing arousal that jolts through me, my cock lurching to a full, almost painful hardness as I look at the gorgeous woman writhing on the lounge, fingers rubbing her clit again as she exposes her pussy to the sea of eyes watching her, and I can see that she's genuinely wet.

And she's still looking right at me.

I can't remember the last time I was this hard. A strange, almost jealous feeling sweeps through me. I want to get up and stride to the stage, grab her and drag her off of it so that no one else can see, push her into a dark corner, and fall to my knees in front of her so I can taste that sweet, wet pussy on my tongue. And at the same time, I want to go up there and spread her legs wider, shove my throbbing cock into her and fuck her while every man in the room watches, until—

There's a cool dampness in the fabric against my cock, pre-cum dripping from the tip, the throbbing increasing as my hand tightens around my glass. I've never seen anything so fucking hot in my life, never experienced *anything* like this. Every thought of leaving has flown out of my head as I watch her squirm and pant on the velvet beneath her, fingers rubbing faster over her clit, and I realize with a dim sort of wonder that she's going to come.

*She can't possibly—it can't be real, can it?*

*It has to be a performance.* I tell myself that as I watch her tense, her body arching in a way that tells me she's close to climax—real or faked. And the way she moves, the way her mouth opens, the pure pleasure in her face as her legs spread wider and she shudders, moaning loudly enough that it can be heard over the music—

It doesn't *seem* fake.

*This is her job, you idiot,* I think as I watch her, but I can't tear my eyes away. I've never seen anything as beautiful as her face when she orgasms, the way her perfect hourglass-shaped body moves, and all I can think about is how she would feel underneath me, how those legs would feel wrapped around my hips, her wet, hot pussy clenching around my cock as she comes for me—

Her gaze is still holding mine. It held mine the entire time, right up until the

moment she came and her eyes fluttered closed, and it feels like she *did* come for me, like all of this was for me—

My cock throbs dangerously, and I realize with a dim sense of horror that I'm very close to losing control myself. My cock is tangled in my boxer briefs, the fabric clinging to me with the wetness of my pre-cum, and I gulp back the rest of the whiskey, pushing the glass across the bar to the blond man standing behind it as I stand up abruptly—and a little painfully.

I know I'm not the only man in the room with a hard-on, and somehow that makes it worse. I feel that burn of jealousy again, a hot, angry feeling towards every man here that's hard for her right now, wanting her, and it makes no fucking sense.

I *know* it doesn't make sense. What makes even less sense is the anger I feel as I see the winning man stand up from the poker table, a smug look on his face as he looks up at the stage to his prize, and imagine her with him.

Even more so when I realize who it is—or at least grasp the concept, even if I can't remember the man's name. It's hard to think of anything at all with how my cock is throbbing, pushing every other thought out of my head except for how desperate I am to come as I watch the man walk towards Nikolai. The woman is sitting up, her legs closed now, and all I can think about is how she's probably still fluttering inside, her clit throbbing, how the heat of her would feel still squeezing around my aching length—

*Christ, I have to come.* I push through the crowd, not bothering to look for Flynn as I stride towards the sign for the men's room, trying not to think about how the leader of the new Bratva organization in town is the one who will be fucking her tonight. Theo and I talked about him just last week, about what difficulties he might cause—but every one of those thoughts flicks out of my head only half-formed as I stride quickly through the door and into the nearest stall, my hand reaching for my zipper before I even get the door fully closed.

I let out a hiss as my hand closes around my hard cock, my other hand braced against the wall as I lean forward, stroking quick and hard as I picture the woman on the stage. In my head, we're both on the stage, me straddling her as I push my cockhead against those plush red lips, the lipstick smearing over

my tip as her tongue—

“Oh god. *Fuck—*” I thrust into my hand, pre-cum smearing over my fingers as I press them beneath the tip of my cock, rubbing as I imagine her sucking me, those dark eyes wide as she looks up at me and moans around my shaft. I’d let her suck me almost to the point of coming, feel that throb in my balls as I thrust between those perfect lips—I imagine her hand between her thighs again, rolling over her clit, pleasuring herself as she takes my cock deeper into her throat, until I was so close that I couldn’t take it any longer and I’d pull free.

I squeeze my cock, panting as my hand stutters over the throbbing length, imagining myself parting her legs wide, pushing them up, her knees to the side as I thrust into her, all of the eyes in the club watching as *I* take her, fuck her, make her mine, until she’s moaning and coming around my cock, coming for me, and then—

“*Fuck, fuck—*” I hiss between my teeth as my cock throbs hotly in my hand, cum spurting in a sudden hot rush from the tip as my hips jerk forward, fucking my hand the way I imagine I’m fucking her, the orgasm feeling as if it surges up from my very toes, catching me off guard with the force of it. I haven’t come this hard from jerking off in a long time, and I groan low and deep in my throat as I squeeze my hand along the shaft, the last of my cum dripping out as I shudder.

Dimly, the world comes back into focus around me, and I feel a faint sense of shame as I realize what I’ve just done—jerked off in a bathroom while thinking about a woman who doesn’t even know who I am.

But even as I think it, I remember her gaze on me, the way she’d watched me as she touched herself, the way it had so clearly looked as if she came for *me*, and only me.

*It wasn’t real, I tell myself. She’s a performer. An escort. Nothing she does is real here.*

I should feel more confident in that than I do. And as I tuck my cock away with the faint burn of embarrassment still on my cheeks and zip myself up, I *absolutely* should not be thinking of some way to see her again.

It's a ridiculous idea.

And one that, as I leave to go and find Flynn, I can't entirely shake loose.

# Asha



“**G**et on your knees, bitch.”

I hate Matvei from the moment we step into the private room that I use for clients. He shuts the door behind him and turns to me with a look of cold arrogance in his eyes, his hand flicking carelessly towards me as he utters the command that I’d known he would.

A predictable man.

I can’t help pushing back. If he doesn’t like that, I’ll find out quickly enough. I narrow my eyes at him, tossing my hair back. “What if I don’t want to?” I ask in a teasing, sultry voice. Sometimes, men who want submissives also want brats, and *that’s* a role I can play without too much trouble on my part, even if I still dislike the part where I have to give in eventually. But I can resist for a little while, at least.

But Matvei moves towards me faster than I can blink, his fingers slipping under the leather of the collar at my throat and clenching around it, yanking me down to my knees. “I said *get* on your *fucking* knees,” he snarls, snatching me down hard enough that my knees hit the floor with a sharp jolt of pain. I clench my teeth against a whimper, glaring up at him, and his other hand knots in my hair, dragging my head back.

He’s not out of line entirely, yet. But he’s already close. *Fucking push your luck*, I silently dare him. *I’ll have you thrown out of here, and you’ll never darken the door again.*

I think he knows it, too. He lets go of the collar before the pressure against my throat can be too much, both of his hands in my hair as he steps closer. “Unzip me, slut,” he growls, and I can see the hard ridge of his cock behind his fly, thick and threatening. “Get my cock out for me.”

Slowly, I obey. I reach up, reminding myself what’s in it for me if he doesn’t push too far and we finish the session. My cut of my fee alone is a good payout, and then he’ll tip well—or if he doesn’t, Nikolai will send him a reminder that the girls expect to be rewarded for their services, and generosity is expected for the continued patronage of the club. If he continues to be *too* stingy, his access to all of the club’s services will be throttled. The men don’t have to tip extravagantly to stay members, but they do have to extend some generosity, or Nikolai considers it an insult.

“Good little slut,” he murmurs as I unbutton his suit trousers and slide the zipper down, my fingers reaching inside for his cock. “Wrap that pretty little hand around it and give it a stroke. Get used to it before I need your mouth.”

He makes it sound huge, and I bite back a snicker as I slip him free. He’s not small, exactly, but he’s nothing impressive either, nothing that I’d be worried about being able to wrap my lips around. An average-sized, decent cock, big enough to fuck a girl hard and satisfy her if that’s what she wanted, but not anything to be alarmed about.

*I wonder what the man at the bar looked like*, I think before I realize it, imagining the hard ridge in his pants, the way he must have throbbed as he watched me. He’d left so quickly—I wonder if he’s in the men’s room right now, stroking himself to the thought of me, and it’s not until I feel the sharp jerk of Matvei’s hand in my hair that I’m brought back to the present.

“Stroke my fucking cock,” he snarls, his hand twisting. “What kind of fucking whore did I win? I thought you were the best girl that Bratva asshole had here.”

“I am,” I hiss, forgetting myself for a moment. He lets out another growl of displeasure, suddenly dragging me to my feet by my hair, his erection swaying as he pulls me towards the leather spanking bench.

“I’ll teach you what that pretty mouth of yours is for,” he snaps, pushing me down over it and leaning down to strap the cuffs around my ankles as I grit

my teeth.

I dislike being restrained by men I don't like, and I dislike it from this man especially. *You have a safeword*, I remind myself. *He agreed to it when he signed the contract. If he doesn't abide by it—*

Matvei is walking to the cupboard where the implements are kept, and I wince as I wait to see what he'll pick. He looks through the assortment of floggers, paddles, canes, and crops for a long moment, before choosing a paddle with thin cutouts in it. *He knows what will actually cause pain*, I think grimly as he takes it out, rubbing the wood against his palm with a smile on his face as he walks towards me.

"These should come down, I think," he says, his fingers tracing the edge of my panties. "Or perhaps—"

His fist closes around the delicate lace suddenly, and I let out a yelp before I can stifle it as he tears them away, the fabric leaving an abrasion against my skin as it tears away. It's nothing more violent than others have done in the past, but something in my gut stirs uncomfortably at his touch, the way he is about it, some inner sense pinging that this man doesn't simply enjoy causing pain or exercising power as a kink. He doesn't just want to be aroused; he wants me to be afraid, *truly* afraid. Even here, in a place where there are rules and limitations and boundaries that he's supposed to abide by, his pleasure will come from making me wonder if he's really going to obey.

This is a man who obeys no one, and who resents being expected to abide by any rule.

And it does frighten me a little. More than a little, once he begins.

I try not to show it. I press my lips together as he brings the paddle down, trying not to let him see how truly unsettled he makes me. I let out small whimpers, let my thighs quiver against the leather in an attempt to give him the display that he wants, but I refuse to let him see my true emotions. He doesn't deserve to see anything true or real about me.

But that only serves to make him more angry.

He wants me to cry. He wants me to beg. And for the first time in my career, I find that it's not just a matter of not preferring to do the things asked of a



submissive. Everything in me screams back to fight this man. To tell him to fuck off, to stop touching me.

The trust between a dominant and a submissive is a fragile thing. A submissive trusts their dominant to obey their boundaries and not try to cross their lines, to yield when the submissive says their safeword. The dominant trusts that the submissive will speak up if those lines are crossed, not allowing it to go too far.

There are no lines here except the ones enforced. Matvei *wants* to push past my boundaries, to run roughshod over them. Outside of this club, I can't imagine what he does to women who end up in his bed, and I don't want to. He wants me to fear that he won't honor my safeword when I say it. It's not enough to cause pain and pretend to be in danger; he won't be able to get off unless I actually fear for my safety.

I suspect that's a part of his frustration, because, in a place like this, there's always someone to help me if things get too out of hand.

The paddle comes down harder than I've ever been struck in my life, and suddenly Matvei's hand is in my hair, dragging my head back so hard that I can feel that something will be strained in my neck tomorrow, pulling me into an arch almost beyond what my body can take. "Scream for me, little girl," he hisses, his fingers digging into my scalp, tugging at my hair until I'm almost afraid that he'll rip something free. Then he brings the paddle down again and again, beyond pain, beyond anything that's a game. I open my mouth—not to scream for him as he demands, but to utter the word that will put a stop to all of this.

I rarely use it. I've rarely had a client that pushes me so far as to need it, and I've *never* had a client refuse it. It's in the contract they all sign in black and white—refusing a safeword means having their membership immediately rescinded, no refunds.

"You're not even wet for me, you stupid cunt," Matvei hisses. "What kind of fucking place is this?"

Something hard suddenly shoves between my thighs, and for a moment, I think *he's* inside of me, and then I realize it's the handle of the paddle. No foreplay, not even lube to ease it, just the hard object shoved into me, and

Matvei spitting insults in the moment before I can speak the word that should put a stop to all of this.

“Pearl.” I choke out the word through a pained gasp and expect it all to stop. He’ll let go of my hair, release me, put the paddle away. He’ll leave, and then I’ll have a long talk with Nikolai about whether or not this man should actually be allowed to hold a membership here.

I certainly won’t be seeing him again, and I wouldn’t recommend that any of the other girls be asked to, either.

And then I realize that none of that is happening.

He doesn’t stop. His hand is still in my hair, pulling back painfully, his other hand still grinding the paddle against me. “You’re going to fucking come on this for me,” he snarls. “If you don’t get wet for my cock, maybe this will demean you enough to get some kind of response, you fucking—”

“Pearl!” I snap the word again, trying to twist away, but of course, it’s impossible while strapped to the bench. “That’s my safeword, you asshole!” The time to pretend at being submissive is over. *He’s going to let me go, or he’s going to wish he had.*

“I don’t give a shit about your silly little words,” Matvei growls. Pain blossoms through me again as he slams the hard wood of the paddle against tender flesh. “I paid for this—”

My fingers grope for the button. There can’t be cameras or microphones in the rooms for the sake of client privacy, but there are small panic buttons hidden on most surfaces, anywhere that a hand might be able to reach even while bound, for cases just like this. They’re almost never needed, but I’ve never been so grateful for their presence as I am right now, when I wrap my fingers around the leg of the bench that my hand is cuffed to and press the small button there.

The door bursts open seconds later, and I hear the low, rough voice of Damon, the bouncer on duty for me tonight.

“You’re going to need to step away from the girl, Mr. Kotov.”

For a brief second, I think Matvei is still going to refuse, and that this is

going to escalate. And then I feel his hand leave my hair, the intrusion of the paddle gone, and I let out a slow, relieved breath. I don't even care about my nudity or the position I'm in—I'm not a particularly modest or shy woman, and Damon will pretend he's never seen any of this.

"You'll need to come with me," Damon says flatly, as Meredith—our house mother, so to speak—pushes around him and comes to unbuckle my wrists and ankles. She exists here entirely to help the girls in moments like this or listen to them if they have complaints, concerns, or difficulties that they can't bring to Nikolai that require a professional ear. She's a tall woman with auburn hair that she keeps in a short, neat cut and kind green eyes, and she glances at me as she helps me up, eyes looking me over professionally.

"This is ridiculous." Matvei's voice is hard and angry as Meredith hands me a robe. "I won tonight. This girl is mine for another two hours. How *dare* you —"

"She pushed the panic button." Damon's voice is even, but I can hear the steel under it, and the anger. He despises anyone who handles a woman roughly, which makes him both perfect and terrible for this job—he's great if we need someone to help us out, but he's always vaguely uncomfortable anytime he can hear what's happening or hears any recounting of it. "Which means you didn't adhere to her safeword."

"I hadn't done anything to her worth stopping over," Matvei snaps, and Damon raises an eyebrow.

"I believe that's for Asha to decide. Which is the purpose of a safeword. Now, if you'll please come with me, Mr. Vasilev will want to speak with you before you leave."

"Nikolai Vasilev can go fuck himself." Matvei spits on the floor. "I was promised his best submissive. All I got was a girl with a smart mouth who can't handle the simplest punishment or obey the smallest order. This place is a fucking—"

"You're welcome to relay all of those concerns to Mr. Vasilev." The steel in Damon's voice is hardening. "But you will need to come with me now."

Matvei's head turns sharply towards me, his eyes narrowing angrily. "You're

going to regret this,” he hisses at me. “No one humiliates me and gets away with it. You understand that, right, you little whore? You have to leave this place eventually—”

Damon opens his mouth, but I speak before he can. “You wouldn’t know proper dominance if it bit you in the ass,” I tell him smoothly, my gaze fixed on his. There’s no fear in my expression or voice now, none that he’ll get to see. “And you don’t deserve Nikolai’s best submissive. Small wonder you didn’t get what you wanted.”

“That’s not for you to decide—”

“Actually, it is.” I give him a tight smile. “I might be paid to do this, but I choose my clients. I *agreed* to take you on. And now I’m ending that arrangement. I doubt you’ll be coming back here, *Mr. Kotov*, but if you do, it won’t be to see me. And I don’t recommend you approach me on the street or anywhere else, if that’s what you’re threatening,” I add sweetly. “There are rules here for me, too. They don’t apply outside, either.”

Damon is striding into the room by now, two other men following him as backup. “You can come with me easily or not,” he says, the threat clear in his voice. “But you will be leaving this room, *Mr. Kotov*. *Now*.”

Matvei takes one more long look at me. There’s a burning hate in his gaze that’s directed squarely at me, a tension in every line of his body that I can see simmering with fury. I keep myself very still, my expression blank, but I feel a small jolt of fear at the way he’s looking at me.

He’s not going to forget this. He’s taken this personally, and I have a sudden, deep feeling that he plans to make it my problem past tonight.

When he turns away, sharply following Damon out of the room, I feel my shoulder slump a little. “Are you alright?” Meredith asks me, her eyes narrowing as she appraises me, and I give her a small smile. “Is there anything you want to talk about?”

Before she worked here, she was a therapist, and it shows. She’s come in handy with plenty of the girls who need someone to talk to, but I’ve rarely used her services. I prefer to keep to myself and figure my own shit out, but that doesn’t mean I’m not glad to have her here at the moment.

“I’m fine,” I assure her. “I just need a few minutes. I’m going to go sit in my dressing room and calm down, and then I’ll get a ride home so I can shower and get some rest. No big deal. Nikolai will ban him, and he won’t come back. But if Nikolai asks you, even if Matvei hadn’t ignored my safeword—he shouldn’t be allowed around any of the girls.”

“Of course.” Meredith nods. “But ignoring it means he’ll be banned immediately. There’s nothing to worry about. He won’t be back.”

“I know.” I wrap the robe a little more tightly around myself. I know she’s saying it to comfort me, but if I’m worried about anything, it’s when I’m *not* at the club. I feel protected here, but outside—

*Outside, you’re still not helpless.* I keep a knife on my person and a gun in my apartment for exactly this sort of reason, and I won’t hesitate to use either on anyone who comes close to me. I *know* how to use them, too. But I tell myself, as I thank Meredith again and head to the privacy of my dressing room, that it won’t matter.

Matvei was wound up tonight; an arrogant and entitled man denied something that he thought was his by right, but he’ll forget about it soon enough. I’m just a girl—a girl whose real name he doesn’t know, and whose stage name he’ll almost certainly forget quickly enough. He’s not going to bother coming after me.

A man like him, as brutal as he is, has ambitions beyond harassing a single escort who didn’t please him.

It’s the better part of an hour before there’s a knock on my dressing room door. I’m back in my street clothes—black skinny jeans, ankle boots, and a tank top under a cropped leather jacket for the spring chill outside—but I’d waited for specifically this reason, because I assumed that Nikolai would want to talk to me.

“Come in,” I call out as I zip up my makeup pouch and slip it back into a drawer. The standard dressing rooms that the other girls use are typically a mess of makeup, hair products, beauty tools, lingerie, and heels everywhere, and it always makes me glad that I have my own room. I like the room to be neat when I arrive for work, so no matter how tired I am at the end of the night, I make an effort to clean it up. I always feel more relaxed walking into

a clean, neat space at the start of my shift.

“Asha, I’m so sorry.” Nikolai is already speaking from the moment he steps into the room. “How badly did he hurt you?”

“A few bruises, but nothing that won’t heal in a few days—”

“Take the week off,” Nikolai says immediately. “You need time to heal up —”

“No.” I shake my head at him, slipping my makeup brushes back into their bag. “I don’t want to sit at home and stew over it. All of my clients for the next two weeks want a *domme*, and I can do that, no problem. They won’t touch me. I’d rather just keep to my usual routine. Anything else is just going to make me feel worse.”

Nikolai lets out a heavy breath, but he nods. “Fine,” he says, although his expression doesn’t look pleased. “I don’t necessarily think that’s what’s best, but if you do, then I’ll defer to that.”

“Thanks.” I give him as much of a smile as I can muster. “I promise I’m fine. That’s what Damon and the other guys are for, right? And the panic buttons. It almost never happens, but you have all the precautions for if it does, and it all worked exactly the way it’s supposed to. I’m not upset, Nikolai. As long as he doesn’t come back,” I add, and Nikolai nods quickly.

“Of course not.” He shakes his head. “Ignoring a safeword is an instant ban. You know that. I’d never break that rule for anyone. Not even for information.”

“I hoped you wouldn’t.” I want to say that I’d *known* he wouldn’t, but I’m aware that Nikolai is more than just the man who runs this club. He’s a *Bratva pakhan*, which means his methods of doing things go beyond what an ordinary boss might do. There’s a side to him that I’ve never really seen and know very little about—just enough to know that it would have kept things from ever really working out between us. It also means that while I always hope Nikolai will do the right thing, I can never be completely sure.

“There are other ways to get information,” Nikolai says firmly. He steps completely into the room then, shutting the door as he walks towards me, and I go very still. He hasn’t been this close to me in a long time, and while I tell

myself it doesn't matter, having him within touching distance makes my breath catch in my throat, and my heartbeat quicken in my chest. "Asha, I—"

He lets out a slow breath, and I know he won't touch me. He's too devoted to Lilliana for that—the kind of love I really hadn't been sure he was capable of feeling, as harsh as that sounds. But it just took a certain woman to bring it out of him, I suppose.

"I know things used to be different between us," he says quietly. "We never really talked about it. I know what you felt was different, too—I'm not blind. I ignored it because I think we both knew there was no future in it. But tonight—"

"Nikolai." I shake my head, stepping away from him. "We don't need to talk about it. We really don't."

"It scared me, knowing you were in danger like that," he admits. "I think I cared for you more than I knew. It doesn't change anything, but I want you to know—"

"I know enough," I say as firmly as I can, because I don't want to hear anything else. I don't want to hear *what might have been* or *if I were a different man*, or any of that. "You love Lilliana."

"I do." He nods. "I'm not saying anything against that or that there could be anything between us again. Just, back then—"

He's trying to reassure me that it wasn't all one-sided, in the awkward sort of way that men like Nikolai have when it comes to talking about their feelings, as if that makes it better.

"We don't need to retread this. Especially not tonight." I force another tight smile. "It's better if we just leave it be, Nikolai. You're happy, and I've moved past it. We can leave it like that. Otherwise, it makes the job too complicated, you know? And I know you don't want to lose me." I say it teasingly, but I can tell from the look on his face that the humor doesn't exactly land.

I see the question in his eyes, *have you really?* He's wise enough not to say it, at least, and he just nods.

“I called an Uber for you,” he tells me. “I didn’t want you to have to deal with it tonight. It should be outside waiting for you by now. Get some rest, Asha.”

“I will.” I swallow hard, looking at him once more, at that handsome, chiseled face that I once knew so intimately. Whatever emotions he was trying to express before, they’re shuttered now, the cool professionalism firmly back in place. *Good*, I think to myself as I tell him goodnight and reach for my purse, walking quickly to the stairs. I don’t need more emotion tonight, more retreading of the past.

I need to blow off some steam.

On another night, I might have hit the twenty-four-hour gym that I have a membership at, but I can feel the soreness starting to settle in, and what I want more is a hot shower. So instead, I go down to the Uber that Nikolai was kind enough to call for me and slip in, leaning my head back against the warm leather seat as I’m driven home.

I’m already stripping off my clothes from the moment I walk in my front door—my jacket tossed on the kitchen counter as I pass by, kicking my boots off, tank top stripped over my head as I walk into the bathroom. My apartment is tiny—the kitchen is right next to the front entrance, a postage-stamp-sized living room, and the bathroom is situated right next to my small bedroom. It could be cramped or cozy, depending on the occupant’s perspective, but I like to think of it as cozy.

Right now, I’m just happy to be about to get into a hot shower.

I turn the water up as hot as I can stand, tossing my clothes into a pile on the linoleum of the bathroom floor, and step under the spray. I want Matvei’s touch scrubbed off of me, any hint of it, any lingering scent or feeling that he might have left behind.

Most nights, I come home and shower and fall directly into bed. I’ve gotten very good at leaving the club behind its closed doors, and not bringing any of my work home with me, so to speak. But tonight, it’s not just the clinging, gross feeling of being touched by Matvei that sticks with me. As that lingering sense floods down the drain, a feeling of relief taking its place, my thoughts drift back to the man at the bar before I realize where they’re



headed.

I've *never* fantasized about anyone from the club. Nikolai is the exception, but once again, he doesn't really count. I've never had a client that I thought about later, imagining other things I might do with them, other scenarios—or even replaying the scenes we played out in private at the club. I forget it all from the moment I walk outside the Ashen Rose—it's the only way to do this job and maintain some sense of self, I've found.

But I keep thinking about his eyes on me, the way his gaze roved over me, half-hungry and half-guilty, as if he wanted me desperately and felt as if he shouldn't. I can think of so many delicious ways to exploit that, so many ways I could make him beg for me, for all the wonderful, pleasurable, torturous things I could do to him. So many ways that I could strain that sense of self-respect that he so clearly has, and was so clearly struggling with.

I feel that clench of desire deep in my belly, my blood warming at the memory of his lustful stare, the way I could see him resisting the urge to walk up on that stage and do all the things running through his head. He'd been *gorgeous* too, the kind of man who, unless he has very specific desires, doesn't usually come to a place like the Ashen Rose. He wouldn't need to spend that kind of money just to get a girl in bed. A man who looks that good typically has a reason for buying a girl—and the clear discomfort I'd seen in the red-haired man's face is why I'm so sure he was with the guest at the poker table.

Which also means I'll never see him again.

I shouldn't feel the flush of disappointment that spreads through me at that—or let my thoughts wander to what might happen if he *did* come back. I feel myself tighten and throb at the thought of having him alone, seeing that hungry gaze close up, seeing that tension of need running through his body. I can easily imagine him bound on his back on the padded bench, stripped bare —

There's another flush of heat between my legs. I quickly shut off the water, reaching for a towel, suddenly eager to get to bed with that image still filling my mind. I walk naked into my bedroom, opening the drawer in my nightstand that has my assortment of toys, and glance over what's there.

*What does his cock look like?* I try to imagine the thick ridge of it, straining against his fly, eager to be set free. I choose one that's almost this side of too big, a cock that would be a little of a strain to take. I can imagine him tied down, that thick cock jutting up from his hips, lips pressed together as I tease him with my fingers, stroking the veins. *Beg me to take it*, I'd tell him, hovering over him, just close enough that my arousal would drip onto him, hot and wet, teasing him with how close the tight pleasure of my pussy is to the head of his cock, relief just out of reach. *Tell me how you want to split me open with your big cock. If you beg well enough, maybe you can put the tip in.*

I think he'd resist. I imagine that resistance, the guilt on his face at thinking of talking to me that way, of *wanting* it, as I kneel in the center of the mattress, hovering over the thick toy in my hand as I imagine it. He'd try not to say it, the pleading in his face so much worse when I just barely rubbed my wet pussy over the tip, enough to get that hot arousal all over his sensitive flesh, and he'd moan and writhe and try to thrust up into me, but he'd be tied down, unable to get his hips up enough to feel that tight pressure where he needs it the most—

The flood of desire that courses through me catches even me off guard. Lately, when I have played with myself, it's more to get to sleep than anything else. I don't imagine anyone in particular, not since Nikolai got married, and I feel guilty for remembering our times together that way. It's been more like scratching an itch, easing a need like eating or sleeping or drinking. But right now—

I *want* the man from the bar. I don't even remember his name, have no idea who he is or what he does or anything about him, but I'm aching at the fantasy of having him naked and at my mercy, that thick cock dripping pre-cum for me, twitching at every touch, those full, soft-looking lips of his parted on a plea for me to stroke him, suck him, fuck him. I imagine arching over him, rubbing my fingers over my clit the way I had on the stage, teasing him with an up-close and personal view of the show I put on tonight, rubbing those fingers over his lips so he could get a taste.

Some men want to be fucked by their dommes after a period of extended begging, others get off on the denial, on the just-out-of-reach tease that sometimes has them coming without ever even being touched. I don't know

which one he would be—hell, I don't know if he even *likes* that—but I imagine his pleading voice as he finally gives in, begging for just a minute in my pussy, that that's all he needs, and how I'd slide down *torturously* slowly —

I sink down onto the toy, gasping aloud as I clench around it, the fingers of my other hand circling my slick, throbbing clit as I take the toy in inch by inch, imagining the man's face twisting with pleasure, his body jerking against the cuffs holding him down, his hips desperate to thrust, unable to move. I imagine controlling every inch of his pleasure, sliding back up as I ripple over his length, hovering over him again with his cock glistening with my arousal, telling him to beg me again if he wants another stroke. I could torment him for a long time like that, one slow thrust at a time, letting him twitch and jerk helplessly in between, just enough pleasure to keep him rock-hard but not enough to let him come.

Maybe I'd let him, maybe I wouldn't. Some of it would depend on his specified desires, of course, but this is *my* fantasy tonight, and in my head, I get off of him, making him think I'm going to leave him like that, hard and throbbing, the veins on his cock standing out until he pants and begs, and then I'd give him my mouth, wrapping my lips around just the head and sucking until he screamed out his pleasure, bursting between my lips—

My entire body tightens, thrusting down on the toy as I tip my head back and cry out, my fingers rubbing quickly over my clit as I feel my orgasm course through me, a release I didn't know I needed until now. And the moment I come, a strange thought bursts through my head—the image of him looking up at me as I suck his orgasm out of him; words growled at me with a sudden force.

*Swallow all my fucking cum, and I won't punish you once I'm out of these cuffs.*

I've never gotten off on submission. Not like that. But the words claw through my brain, intensifying the pleasure until I'm rocking down onto the toy, clenching around it as I imagine him pulsing inside of my mouth, those threatening words pushing me to swallow every drop, licking him clean as he murmurs *good girl*, and I'm suddenly craving those hands on my body, running through my hair, those muscled arms pulling me into him as I wait

for him to get hard again so I can fuck us like we both need—

The climax ebbs, the pleasure spiraling away, and as I come back to myself, I feel a strange, startled sensation replace the bliss. *What is going on with me?* I slip the toy free, setting it aside for a moment to let my thighs stop trembling before I go and clean up, and I shake my head, trying to jolt the fantasy loose. After tonight of all nights, I don't know why I'm getting off imagining being told what to do. I *hate* being called a good girl. And I don't like cuddling, not even with people I see outside of the club. I like my space, my independence. I don't even like bringing dates over to my place; I'd rather go to theirs. I don't want someone else's cologne or perfume on my pillow, the scent of their skin lingering on my sheets, traces of them left behind. My apartment is my safe space, a place that is *only* mine.

Closeness creates more problems than it soothes. And I have never wanted anyone that close.

Most of all, I want freedom. Once upon a time, I had something keeping me held in place. And I know the cost of wanting that. Of *needing* anything other than myself.

It's too high. And I never plan to want or need it again.

## Finn



**T**wo days later, I'm still thinking about the girl from the Ashen Rose.

I'd never tell anyone else that. Allan and Flynn—Flynn especially—would never let me hear the end of it, and there's no one else I'd tell that I saw a girl for hire at an exclusive sex club and can't get her out of my head.

I *definitely* wouldn't tell anyone that I went home and jerked off again thinking about how her sweet pussy might taste on my lips, or that every time I've wrapped my hand around my cock since then, she's found her way into my thoughts, no matter how hard I try to think about something else. Jerking off is usually a once-a-night or every couple of nights thing for me, something to take the edge off so I can focus, but I've gotten hard more times than I have in years over the past couple of days. Pretty much every time she pops into my head, which is more than she should, considering I'll never see her again.

There's no reason for me to. I can't afford a membership, and I don't think Flynn's getting another guest pass. Even if I somehow managed to leverage some of the minor connections I have to get in, I can't afford her. She's going to stay exactly what she is right now—an unattainable fantasy, which means that thinking about her is a waste of time.

If only I didn't get off so goddamn hard every time. Jerking off is never as good as fucking, but thinking about her while doing it is damn close. Which just makes me wonder even more—

*Quit it, O'Sullivan,* I tell myself as I park my motorcycle in front of the building, steeling myself for another meeting. Nikolai will be at this one, as a part of the truce between his family and Theo's, since we're here today to talk about what to do about the upstart Russian who is nosing in on territory, trying to make a name for himself.

*Matvei Kotov.* Even the name makes him sound like a little shit, I think privately to myself as I tuck my keys in my pocket and stride to the elevator, shrugging out of my leather jacket as I do. Unfortunately, after being at the Ashen Rose, thinking of him also makes me think of that woman on stage—and thinking of them together causes a confusing, tangled flood of anger and arousal that throbs through me with equal strength.

*Stop being such a fucking idiot.* I have no reason to be angry at him for touching her. She was the prize for that damn poker game, and he won—no surprise, too, because from what I saw when I wasn't staring at the dark-haired woman, he had iron concentration and a hell of a poker face. Both of which are good things to know, incidentally, when it comes to discussing with the other Kings and Nikolai how we're going to stop him from becoming a real problem.

What won't help is thinking about her—or getting angry because he got to take her upstairs and I didn't, like I have any right to feel possessive over her.

Nikolai is already at the table with a handful of the other Kings when I arrive, some of the seats still waiting to be filled. He gives me a nod as I sit down to conference Theo in, and I wonder if he noticed me at the club last weekend. *Is there some kind of protocol against saying something?* I wonder as I bring up the screen for the video call. I don't know how that kind of shit works—I'm not in the habit of buying women, or of knowing people personally who I'd make that exchange with. Before that night, I'd only ever been to run-of-the-mill strip clubs. Nothing like the Rose.

“We need to talk about Matvei Kotov,” Nikolai says without preamble once everyone is seated and Theo is present on the call. “There's plenty of low-level crime organizations and gangs in this city, and I'd hoped he might just be another one of those—an irritation at times, but nothing to really worry about. I have reason to believe he could be a real threat in time, however—and that he's angling to be exactly that. I think we need to pay more attention

to what he's doing—gather information, maybe even have some of our lower-level men infiltrate. I have a gut feeling about this, and it's not good."

"Far be it from me to question your gut instincts," Theo says dryly, with a tone that suggests that while the issues between him and Nikolai might be resolved, they're not entirely buried yet. "But I'm not inclined to ignore your impression of this man, either."

"I think his ambition outstretches his reach," Nikolai says flatly. "And I think he's going to try to find some way to extend that reach as far as he can before someone puts a stop to it. We need to find a way to contain that sooner rather than later."

"I don't disagree," Theo says, sitting back in his chair contemplatively. "If things start to get too out of hand, Finn, I'll come back and take charge. But for now, I think you can handle this, aye?"

I nod. "Actually—" I press my lips together, thinking. "I have an idea. If it's all the same to you, I'd like to follow up on it and get back to you if it actually does have the potential I think it might."

There's a low muttering around the table—I know most of the men present aren't going to be too keen on the idea of letting me go rogue with an idea without having run it by them first—but at the end of the day, Theo's approval is all I really need. Anything else just keeps the peace a little better.

What I'm thinking is that the woman at the Ashen Rose might be able to tell me something.

Deep down, I know I'm looking for a reason to see her again. Business would be the *only* way I'd ever get in there, or be able to get any time with her. And deep down, I know with just as much certainty that it's absolute insanity that I'm this hung up on a girl that I saw for just a part of a night, whose name I don't know.

Hell, even if I went to see her at the club, I won't know her real name. I know enough to know how that works.

But I remember Matvei walking away with her, and I know how men that arrogant work. He might have run his mouth in that room, bragging to her, assuming that none of it would get outside of the club. Maybe even assuming

that she doesn't like Nikolai, that she resents working for him. There's no telling what might have been said in that room. And if I get a chance to talk to her, I might be able to get some information. Depending on how Matvei treated her, she might even be eager to give me something that could hurt him.

If she *really* doesn't like him, I might be able to get her working for us. Sending men in to infiltrate the organization and keep an eye out is one thing—there's information that can be gathered that way, things that can be picked up on, but it's a slow and dangerous business.

Putting someone we can trust in his bed is a whole other matter.

I feel that sharp pang of jealousy again even as I think it, that burning coal of anger deep in my gut at the idea of his hands on her—any man that isn't me, but *especially* him—and I push it down just as quickly. I don't know what sort of spell this woman manages to cast over men to have me wanting to punch anyone who comes near her, but it's absolutely ludicrous. I'm smarter than that, and if I'm going to pull this off, I need to behave like it.

If this works, I know Theo will be impressed.

"I trust your judgment, Finn," Theo says, cutting off the grumbling around the table. "If you think this idea of yours has merit, then follow the lead and let me know if it plays out."

I nod. "I appreciate the trust." I do, more than I can express, especially here. "I'll know pretty quickly if it's going to play out the way I hope."

When the meeting is over, following more discussion of Matvei's movements around the city and some other business on the table, I wait for the Kings to leave before I glance at Nikolai, who is finishing up a conversation with Theo. "I've got a favor to ask, if you don't mind," I tell him, trying not to let the awkwardness of my request show in my tone.

Nikolai glances at me as Theo ends the call. "What is it?"

"I was at the Ashen Rose a few nights ago. I've got a friend who had one of those guest passes you hand out now and then." I run a hand through my hair. It's awkward asking for entry into a sex club, no matter what the reasoning is. "I was wondering—"



Nikolai smirks. “You want to get in again? I’m guessing you can’t afford a full membership.”

He doesn’t say it like he’s being an asshole, exactly—more just like he’s stating the obvious. I’m not offended—no one can afford a membership to that place unless they’re stupidly wealthy—but I do feel a little heat creeping up my neck as I nod. Part of me wants to just go ahead and say why it is that I want to stop in, but I bite it back.

Theo has put a hell of a lot of trust in me, having me watch his seat and run things while he’s in Dublin with Marika. I want to prove that I’m worthy of that trust, that he didn’t make a mistake. Chasing a dead-end instead of doing things the more conventional way isn’t, in my mind, a good way to earn that trust if it proves to be nothing. But if I’m right, and the woman will be able to help, he’ll be pleased. If I’m wrong, then it won’t matter, and I can let it go.

That means letting Nikolai continue to think I just want a night at the club to get laid, though.

“The girls are expensive.” Nikolai raises an eyebrow. “I’m not trying to insult you. Just letting you know that getting in doesn’t guarantee you a session with anyone. You’ll have to figure that out yourself. Or—” he shrugs. “Have a drink and enjoy the scenery, I suppose. Just don’t hassle the girls. Not that you would,” he adds. “But it bears saying.”

“Of course.” I wait for a moment, before he nods.

“I’ll give you a three-night pass,” he says finally. “Maybe it’ll help me earn back a little more of that goodwill with Theo, waiving the membership fee for you for a few nights. I’m sure you’ve earned it.” He gives me a grin and a wink, then gathers his things, leaving me alone in the meeting room.

It takes me a while to shrug off the embarrassment—the entire ride home, actually. I tell myself that it’s for work and that it doesn’t matter what Nikolai thinks as long as I’m successful in my mission. If this woman is able to help, it might even save some lives—we won’t have to send any of our men into a potentially dangerous situation to pretend to be a part of the organization.

I don’t have any plans for the night, so once I’m home, I get in the shower and decide to head over to the Ashen Rose after dinner. *I should follow this*

*lead as soon as possible*, I tell myself as I get dressed. *Nothing to do with being eager to see her.*

I haven't lied to myself this thoroughly in a while.

Truthfully, I spend more time getting ready to go out to the Ashen Rose than I should. I've never been the type to wear a suit anywhere except a wedding or a funeral—and the latter depends on who the funeral is for—so instead I put on dark jeans, a light grey t-shirt and throw on my leather jacket, running a handful of some powdered hair product that I rarely use through my hair, giving it some messy texture. I trim my beard so it's short and neat, giving my appearance a thrice-over, and then shake my head at my reflection in the mirror.

"It's not like you're going out on a fucking date, you moron," I growl at it, and then turn away, grabbing my keys off of the side table by the door as I head out.

The Ashen Rose is different from any other place I've been. There's no line to get in, no crowd inside, no loud music spilling out onto the sidewalks. There are two huge bouncers at the front door who take my name, relaying it to someone inside, and then they nod.

"Go on in, Mr. O'Sullivan."

I walk in through the heavy wooden door, down a wide hallway with a gleaming wooden floor, to the hostess-style desk at the end in front of a second set of double doors. It strongly resembles a hotel lobby and concierge desk. "Mr. O'Sullivan?" the pretty blonde woman behind it asks me, dressed in what looks more like business attire than lingerie, except for the lace bustier beneath her blazer. When I nod, she offers me a polite smile. "You have a three-night admission pass to the Ashen Rose. Please check in here each night that you choose to visit us. Your pass comes with two complimentary drinks, as always. If you wish to book a session with one of our girls, you can see me or Dana on the main floor."

"I'm interested in—" I clear my throat, wondering if it's bad manners to not know the name of the girl I want a session with. But how *would* I know, exactly? It's not as if they have a menu posted."

She smiles at me and hands me a leather folio. “Here. You can sit over there if you want a moment to look at the options.”

“I—uh—” I open the folio, feeling awkward as hell. It feels wrong, choosing a woman to spend a night with out of a folder. Ordering dinner at a fine restaurant is more personal than this. No matter how much the dark-haired woman stuck in my mind, I think I’d be walking out right now if it wasn’t for the mission I’ve set myself on. This is stranger than anything I’ve ever done.”

Hell, I’m almost considering finding a different means of getting dirt on Matvei when I look at the first page and realize, to my relief, that the woman I saw is the very first photo. She looks just as stunning there—rich black hair rippling around her face, those wide dark eyes, red lips curved in a smirk. Her name is under the photo.

*Asha.*

“Her.” I point to it, feeling even more idiotic than before. “Asha.” It’s a beautiful name. *It’s not her real name*, I remind myself, pushing the folio back towards the blonde woman. “She’s who I came to see. If she has—”

“Space in her schedule?” The woman—I see *Callie* printed on the gold name tag on her blazer—smiles at me as if she’s used to this. Maybe she is. It’s all so businesslike; I’m having a hard time imagining sex at the end of it. This situation and the writhing, panting woman I saw on the stage seem to exist in entirely different universes. “Let me see. You’re wanting to book her tonight?”

I nod. Price hasn’t been mentioned—for which I’m grateful—but it also boggles the mind a little to imagine walking in here without a care in the world as to how much they’re going to charge my credit card for. Thankfully, the one I’m using isn’t *my* credit card, it’s the one that I’ve been entrusted with for Kings’ business, which this is. Equally as fortunate is the fact that even if this doesn’t pan out and Theo eventually finds out what I tried to do, he won’t be pissed at me for using funds this way. He’d probably find it amusing, honestly.

But I don’t want him to be amused. I want him to know I’m trustworthy. Smart. Capable of handling the responsibility he’s given me. Which means I’m desperately hoping Asha is the lead I think she is.

“How long do these sessions usually go for?”

“Depends on the client.” Callie has that same unmoving, pleasant smile on her face still. “The typical length is one to two hours. Longer sessions can be arranged, but Asha usually is too booked to accommodate that, except for very regular clients.”

I’m getting the impression that she’s in high demand, which doesn’t surprise me in the least. It makes me wonder if anything about Matvei’s win was engineered by Nikolai, to get him in the same room with this Asha, for the same reasons I’m thinking. It wouldn’t be the first time he tried some sort of machination like that to achieve his ends.

*A bit hypocritical to think of it like that, aye?* I ask myself wryly as I glance at Callie. “Two hours should be fine. Thank you.”

“Of course.” She turns to the tablet in front of her, opening a window with a few strokes of her fingers. “And a card we can keep on file for you?”

I hand her the card, and she swipes it before handing it back. “Do you have a preference for Asha tonight?”

I’m not entirely sure what she’s asking. I assume she means for lingerie, maybe, or specific makeup—a particular look or fantasy I might want her to play into. “Whatever she prefers is fine,” I tell Callie, and she nods.

“Very good. I’ll note that.” She looks at the tablet again, her voice as polite and smooth as ever. “Asha will be notified to meet you at the bar when she’s ready for you.”

It’s exactly like checking into a hotel room or making a dinner reservation, and I find the entire process bizarre. It doesn’t feel any less bizarre when she gives me two heavy black tokens for the bar for my drinks, and motions to the door. “Enjoy your evening at the Ashen Rose, Mr. O’Sullivan.”

The main floor is quieter than it was the night of the poker game. There’s a handful of guests at the bar, but I imagine most of them are upstairs with the girl they’ve chosen for the night. There’s a dancer on the stage where Asha performed for the game, swaying to the soft beat of the music pulsing through the air, and a few other girls walking around in various lingerie, speaking quietly to guests. There’s nothing raucous or loud about it.

Everything has an air of sophistication and elegance, right down to the twisting mahogany staircase that leads to the floor upstairs, where I'm pretty sure the private rooms are.

And if my guess is correct, based on what Callie said, Asha is up there with someone right now.

There's that jealous twist in my gut again as I hand the bartender one of the tokens and ask for a whiskey straight, and it makes me feel like an utter fool. I'm at a place where sex is bought and paid for, jealous over another paying customer's hands on one of the girls, a girl whose name I learned ten minutes ago. But the feeling remains, settled inside of me like a bothersome itch, nagging at me as I take the whiskey with a thanks and settle back in one of the leather stools, watching the room.

It's not nearly as entertaining of people-watching as I'd normally expect. The guests who haven't gone up to a room yet are either conversing at the bar—I think this place might double as an exclusive, private meeting spot for those who need a neutral place to conduct business that also has the best eye-candy of any place to get drinks—or are sitting on one of the various velvet or leather seats scattered in nooks around the main floor, a girl in their laps or talking to them. A handful of men are sitting near the stage, drinking and watching the tall, gorgeous redhead currently swaying against the gilded pole in the center of it. There's an air of luxury and refinement that makes me feel decidedly out of place, and also makes me wish I'd worn that suit after all.

I'm almost finished with my second whiskey when a smooth, feminine voice comes from a foot or so away. It's not light or musical, but warm with a bit of a rasp—not unlike the whiskey I've been sipping. I know it's her before I turn towards her, the sound of that voice saying my name making my cock twitch instantly.

“Finn O’Sullivan?”

*Christ, she's even more gorgeous up close.* She's wearing a long black silk robe, the collar open over her collarbones and her cleavage without giving me even a hint of the curve of her breasts, the wide sleeves resting on narrow wrists, the belt cinched around a waist that begs for a man to put his hands on it. I can see absolutely nothing of her body and only a little of her figure, and

somehow even that—just the sight of her swathed in black silk with her hair tumbling down over her shoulders and those red-painted lips making the shape of my name—is enough to have me half-hard sitting there.

“That’s me.” I toss back the rest of my whiskey—*fuck*, I’m going to need it—and stand up as best as I’m able with the beginnings of an erection pressed against my fly. “Callie said you’d find me when you were ready?”

“I did, and I am.” She smiles, perfect white teeth behind that smile. “Come with me, Finn.”

*God*, the way she says my fucking name. It feels like magic, like the burn of whiskey and the sweetness of dessert, melted sugar over my skin as she invites me upstairs with her. I can see why a man would hand over a credit card without bothering to ask a price. My mind is already racing with ideas of what might happen upstairs as I follow her to the stairs, my cock rapidly hardening to the point of discomfort.

*You’re here to ask her questions, not necessarily fuck her*, I remind myself—but the truth is that I don’t really have the slightest idea how any of this goes. I don’t know what’s going to happen when she gets me alone, and the endless possibilities have me as achingly hard as anything else.

Asha leads me to a room at the end of the hall, opening a door, and stepping inside. “My safeword is pearl,” she tells me as she closes the door, leading me further into the room. “Callie didn’t tell me that you’d noted one down.”

I frown, unsure why I need a safeword. Truthfully, I’ve never encountered anyone with something like that—my usual sex life isn’t *that* exciting—but I can see why it would be useful in a place like this. I just hadn’t thought to come up with anything.

“Um—” My mind races frantically. “Triumph.”

Asha raises an eyebrow. “Already thinking about the grand finish?” she asks teasingly, and I feel my cheeks heat. It makes me feel like an idiot, blushing like a teenager, but there’s a gleam in her eyes as she looks at my face, taking in the flush there, that makes me realize she *likes* it. Something about it turns her on.

Strange, but I’m not going to argue with it.

“Do you want a drink?” She gestures to the bar cart on one side of the room. “Callie says it’s your first time here. I can give you the tour.”

“Um, sure—” I hesitate, looking around the room. I don’t even know where to start. I don’t know what I’d expected—something similar to a hotel room maybe—but while there *is* a bed at the far end of the room, there’s also a number of different...I don’t even know what to call them.

“You *are* new to this.” There’s a hint of delight in her tone. “Alright, we have time. I’ll show you around.”

I hear a slight command in her voice that sends an odd shiver down my spine. I’m not normally one for being told what to do in bed—I have a boss in my everyday life, I don’t need one when I’m getting laid—but something about that whiskey voice saying it with such confidence sends another tremor of desire through me and straight to my aching dick.

“This is a St. Andrews’ cross.” She points to an x-shaped apparatus at the end of one side of the room, made of a smooth lacquered surface, with soft-looking padded leather cuffs affixed to each point. “A person can be cuffed to it facing forward or away, depending on what’s being done to them.” There’s that gleam in her eyes again, that shimmer of desire, and I swallow hard. I’d imagined her lips around my cock, the feeling of her legs pulling my hips closer, but I’d never imagined any of this.

*What did you think that the dungeon part of ‘sex dungeon’ meant?* This isn’t an ordinary brothel; I’d known that. But somehow I skipped over the dungeon part and just assumed that these girls did the usual menu of things that I’d done in bed plenty of times before.

I’ve never been opposed to a well-placed smack on a girl’s ass in doggy style, but this is far beyond anything I’ve even fantasized about.

“This is a spanking bench.” Asha motions to a padded bench—again with cuffs affixed to the legs. “Face-up or down, depending.” She points to a cupboard. “There are spanking implements in there and toys in the drawers—oral in the top, vaginal in the second, anal in the third. Cuffs and other binding implements are in that cupboard there, shibari ropes in the one next to it.” She looks at me, and even though her softly rasping voice is as calm about the entire conversation as if she were giving me a tour of her living

room, I can see that gleam still in her eyes. It makes me wonder if she's wet beneath the robe, telling me all of this, and my cock throbs.

"There are cuffs hanging from a moveable cage on the ceiling—" she points up to it, "and, of course, means of restraint on the bed. Although I find clients are usually least interested in playing on the bed—though, of course, there's exceptions."

"I think I might be *most* comfortable on the bed," I say wryly, and Asha smiles seductively at me, those red lips curling in a smirk.

"I thought you might say that." She nods at me, her fingers toying with the belt of her robe. "Go to the end of the bed then, and take off your shirt."

Her directness catches me off guard. I don't know that I've ever had a woman tell me what to do so clearly, and I find my feet carrying me in that direction before I can think twice. Something about the way she speaks compels me to do what she says, even though I'd probably have paused at any other woman telling me what to do like that.

I reach for the hem of my shirt, dragging it slowly up my torso, waiting for the soft sigh or hiss of breath that might indicate that Asha likes what she sees. I'm not a vain man, but I put in my time at the gym, and I like the idea of her being genuinely aroused by me.

When I toss it on the floor, there's still that neutral expression on her face, with just that shine of interest in her eyes as her gaze flicks down to my jeans.

"Well." She smirks. "Let me see what it is that's about to burst through your zipper."

There's something almost derisive to her tone, as if she's expecting nothing much, and I frown. *Is this what all the girls here are like?* I'd planned to ask her questions about Matvei before we got too far, but the situation feels like it's rapidly getting away from me, and I'm not sure how to regain control of it.

It's not an issue I've ever had before, and it makes me feel even more off-kilter than I might have otherwise.

And now I want to show her just to prove to her that my cock is worth



looking at.

I undo my belt with quick, deft fingers, dragging my zipper down, kicking off my shoes as I push the denim and my boxers down my hips, taking my time with it. I hesitate when just the base of my cock starts to peek out, wanting to tease her a little, but all I get is a roll of her eyes and a tap of her foot.

“I told you to take them off.” Asha strides towards me, her footsteps quick and deliberate. “Do you need me to do it for you?”

*That’s more like it.* There’s still that derisive tone in her voice, but at least she’s acting as if she *wants* to touch me.

“Sure.” I give her a cocky smile, leaving my jeans and underwear hanging off my hips, my cock on the verge of bursting free. “Come take them off of me, then.”

Her hands, which have been resting on the belt of her robe, suddenly undo it, pushing the silk aside. The robe opens, slipping off of her shoulders, and my jaw nearly drops when I see what’s under it.

Asha is wearing what looks like nothing but a mass of leather straps, covering her breasts and hips and thighs and pussy, and as the robe falls to the floor, my cock lurches, stiffening to a near-painful hardness as I stare at her, every thought in my head other than getting inside of her driven entirely out of it.

I’ve never wanted a woman so much in my life.

And this one is already mine for the night.

# Asha



I couldn't believe it when I saw him.

I really had thought I'd never see the red-haired man at the bar again. I'd been convinced he wasn't the kind of guy who would come here—or be able to *afford* to come here—unless he was with someone else. My fantasy from that night came rushing back as soon as I saw him sitting there, whiskey glass in hand, gaze roving over the room as he took it all in without seeing me at first—giving me a chance to take a closer look at him.

Callie had told me his name—Finn O'Sullivan. I liked the sound of it—I liked looking at him even more. I'd seen that he was handsome from the distance of the stage, but closer, I could see his trimmed dark red-brown beard and that messily styled hair, the high cheekbones and strong jaw, full lips that made me wonder what they would feel like pressed over various parts of my body.

Except he hadn't said what he wanted for the night—which, for me, means he's getting a *domme*.

*That* gave me a rush of arousal that I haven't felt in what seems like forever, and certainly never for a client. It was, for the first time ever, difficult for me to keep up the air of cool casualness as I approached him, saying his name from a little off to the side, wanting to see what happened when I caught him off guard.

When he looked at me—

*God*, it was that hungry look all over again, like he wanted to devour me without ever having seen much of me at all, his gaze flicking down to my cleavage and over my robe and back up to my face, and I wanted to get him upstairs.

I didn't realize until I got him in the private room just how new to this he is.

I'd thought when he didn't specify that he'd been told about me by someone, that he knew I played the dominant role unless specifically requested and approved otherwise. But the way he looked around at the various furnishings of the room—

Finn might have all the sexual experience in the world when it comes to day-to-day interactions—but he's a virgin when it comes to this. And that gave me a thrill like nothing I've felt in a very, very long time.

I enjoyed giving him the tour in an almost clinical way, pointing out everything in the room, dispassionately telling him what it could be used for, watching his eyes go round, and his cheeks stain with that flush that told me he was hard as hell and didn't entirely understand why. The night was already better than anything I'd had in a long time, and it was just getting started.

The only thing that confused me was his hesitation when I told him to go stand at the foot of the bed and take off his shirt.

It's not as if that's the most outlandish request. It wouldn't even be out of place in a normal bedroom. I saw him hesitate for that brief second, as if he wasn't sure what to do about it, but I brushed it off as him being new to all of this, unsure of his desires. *How is he going to feel about the rest of it?* I wonder, and I watch as he starts to slip his jeans off, hesitating just as the base of his cock comes into view.

He looks *thick*, every bit as big as I'd fantasized, but I'm not about to let him see the way my mouth waters at the sight of it and my body tightens, *wanting* a client for the first time. I just roll my eyes, pretending to be thoroughly unimpressed.

I didn't expect him to have *that* comeback when I asked him if he needed me to do it for him.

*Maybe he's a brat.* I reach for the belt of my robe, anticipating the look on his face when I slip it off. I'd chosen an outfit that I knew he'd have to be dead and buried not to like—a bra made of crisscrossing leather straps that come down past the band over my ribs, crossing to the curve of my waist, a gap between those and the high-cut leather straps of my panties, only a leather strip between my thighs to cover my pussy, more of the straps over my hips and down my thighs. It's an outfit that *screams* dominant, and from the way Finn's eyes widen when he sees me, I know he wasn't imagining this. I don't know *what* he'd pictured me in—silk and lace, maybe, but this is far beyond his imaginings.

I sway towards him, pausing just out of reach, my gaze flicking up to meet his. This close, I can see the hints of copper in his hair and beard, glinting in the dim lighting, and his eyes are a beautiful sea blue, wide and glossy with desire. He's all muscle, lean and taut beneath pale skin, lightly dusted with freckles over his shoulders and copper hair across his chest and abs, a faint line disappearing down to the base of that thick cock that's threatening to spring free any moment. "Is there anything you don't want?" I ask him, and Finn smirks at me, his gaze flicking down to my hands as if he's already imagining them pulling down his jeans.

*He really must be a brat, the way he's behaving.*

"Just don't stick a finger up my ass," he says with a chuckle. "I had a girl try that once, and I didn't like it much."

His humor is a little irritating. "Did you buy two hours with me and spend ten thousand dollars just to make fun of me?" In a flash, I have my hand around his cock, gripping the base tightly as I shove his jeans and boxers down with my other hand, leaving him gloriously nude in front of me. *Fuck*, he's gorgeous—but I don't let that distract me.

Clearly, he needs to be put in his place—and I'm just the girl to do it.

I feel him freeze when I grip his cock, his hips shuddering at my touch, and his lips part on a groan. "Fuck," he mutters under his breath, and I squeeze a little tighter, almost to the point of pain.

"Anything else?" I ask, and I can see from the look in his eyes that he's having a hard time focusing with me touching him.

I let go, and he looks as if he's about to complain before he shakes his head. "No," he says finally. "Nothing I can think of right now."

"If you're sure, then remember your safeword. Say it, and everything stops," I tell him, and he narrows his eyes at me.

"Aren't you—"

"Get on the bed," I snap at him, circling around to one side, eyeing his cock. It's jutting out in front of him, thick and hard, one vein throbbing up the length of it that makes me want to run my tongue along him and feel it pulse

—

*Holy fuck, his dick is pierced.*

I see the knobbed bar pierced through the head of his cock, a second one behind it through the skin of the shaft, and my eyes widen as I lose the attitude for a moment and just stare at his length.

I've never seen a pierced cock in person before. I've definitely never fucked one. And suddenly, I want very, very much to feel that thick, throbbing length thrust into me, those piercings rubbing over every sensitive spot inside.

Being a *domme* usually means no fucking though. I've only ever had a few clients request it, and it's always up to me if I want to fulfill that request or leave them wanting—they usually specify if they prefer denial over release in some other way. Finn, however, seems to have slipped through without most of the usual paperwork.

Which leaves tonight *far* more open-ended than I'm used to with a client.

But that's what safewords are for, and I have a sudden, deep-seated desire to leave him wanting tonight. Not necessarily because he'll want it, but because *I* want him to come back.

And I have a feeling that if I don't fuck him tonight, he will.

"You like my cock?" That smirk is on his mouth again, and he reaches down to run his fingers over the piercings, following my gaze. "Wanna feel what these can do inside of you?"

“I didn’t tell you that you could touch your cock. But I did tell you to get on the bed.” My voice has that same husky quality it always does, but the demand is sharp. Finn actually *flinches* a little before he blinks at me, moving towards the bed with an expression of such aroused confusion that it would have almost been funny in a different circumstance.

Right now, it’s just turning me on.

He stretches out on the bed, his chest rising and falling, taut abs flexing as his cock arches towards them, throbbing visibly. He’s so fucking hard, and I’ve barely touched him. I can see the desire running through every tensed muscle in his body, and my own answers it.

I’m wet. I can feel the leather clinging to me between my thighs, my clit throbbing against the slight friction of it as I move, and I grit my teeth, focusing on him. He paid to be here, and I intend to give him every bit of pleasure he bought—on my terms.

It feels good to be in charge again.

I reach for one of the padded leather cuffs, wrapping it around his wrist. His eyes go wide, and he blinks at me, but he doesn’t say the safeword, so I keep going. I see that round-eyed look again when I cuff his ankles, and I pause, waiting for him to call it.

He doesn’t.

I have absolutely no idea what is going on. *Is he here on a dare?* I’ve never had a client so clearly ignorant as to what I’m doing here and also so thoroughly aroused, and I can’t think of a clear scenario right now where those two things intersect. I don’t know what he expected when he came up here, but the scene has started, and he didn’t give me any clear ground rules. Until he uses his safeword—which he apparently didn’t even know he was supposed to have...I’m going to have to have a word with Callie—I have to trust that he’s enjoying this.

I step back, admiring my handiwork. He’s stretched out spread-eagle across the bed, cock straight up and throbbing. I move onto the bed with him, kneeling with one leg on either side of one of his, far enough away from his cock that there’s no chance of me accidentally touching it.

Slowly, I start to trace a path up his skin, touching him everywhere but his cock. Normally I'd do this to build up arousal, but Finn is already so turned on that I don't know how much more erect he can be before his cock bursts. I see his hands flex as I move up his body, tracing up his hips and scratching my nails over the grooves of his abs, his skin shuddering and twitching under my touch until he's groaning.

“Fuck, I'm so fucking hard—” His blue eyes snap open, looking at me, and *god*, I can see the same pleading look in them that I imagined. “My cock feels like it's going to fucking snap in two.”

“Want me to help?” I move downwards again, enjoying the way his gaze drifts over me, taking in every inch of my body encased in the leather straps. He tugs against the cuffs, his mouth twisting with tortured need as I hover my fingers over the tip of his cock. He's been leaking pre-cum since before he undid his jeans, most likely—his cockhead is shiny with it, his shaft glistening, the pearlescent fluid dripping between his thighs as his cock jerks and twitches towards my just-out-of-reach fingers.

“Yes,” he groans, his eyes fluttering closed again, hips arching up as he thrusts towards nothing. “God, just touch my fucking cock.”

“Say please like a good boy.” I scratch my nails up his inner thighs. “Want me to play with that cute little piercing?” My fingers hover an inch below his balls, which are tight against his body, and I know exactly how heavy and full he'd feel in my palm.

Finn narrows his eyes. “God, just—*fuck*, I need—” the words catch in his throat, like he has no idea how to respond and even less of an idea how to articulate what he wants, but I can tell he *doesn't* want to beg for it. He likes being called a good boy even less, I think—which I can relate to—but his cock doesn't seem to have gotten the memo. It throbs, more pre-cum leaking from the tip, and I'm itching to swirl my tongue around it and lick up the taste of him, toying with the piercing while I do.

What I want right now has absolutely nothing to do with my job and everything to do with how this man is making me feel.

*I'm* aching for him, and it's inconveniently distracting. I'm soaking wet, my clit rubbing against the leather of my lingerie in a way that doesn't feel at all

unpleasant, and I can feel the hollowness of my core tightening over and over, wanting to be filled up by every inch of the thick, delicious cock in front of me. And if we were in a different circumstance—

But *I'm* the one in charge here. And just as much as he turns me on, I feel a sharp, irritated annoyance with him, too. This is *my* room. *My* space. I'm supposed to be the *domme* here, and yet I'm not entirely in control of my own arousal, my own thoughts. There's a power exchange going on here outside of the normal realm of things, and I feel off-kilter, out of step with the usual pace.

“You need me to touch your cock.” I hover my fingers close to him again. “Say, please. Ask me to touch it.”

A low growl slips out of his mouth, and I feel it vibrate somewhere deep inside of me, my pussy tightening on nothing. *God*, I want to fuck him.

“Oh fuck—*fine*. God, just touch it, *fuck*—” He hisses the words out through his teeth, hips rolling, his cock swaying as he glares at me with clear sexual frustration. “*Fuck*—”

I don't know if I've ever seen a man so hard. I reach out, trailing my fingertips up the underside of his cock, all the way to the soft flesh just beneath the tip. The moan he lets out is almost pained as his cock shudders, his hips writhing again as his head falls back.

“God, I didn't know that could feel so good.” His eyes are closed, his body straining for more as I pull my hand back. “What—why did you stop?”

I smirk at him, still straddling his leg, fighting the urge to rub myself against his thigh. My own clit is swollen and throbbing, the slight friction of the leather enough to drive me a little mad with the constant pleasure that's never enough to do more than bolster my arousal, and I could grind myself against him, give myself the sweet pleasure of an orgasm—

*I could make him watch while I get myself off, and deny him.*

The idea has some merit. I keep it in my head as I watch him twist, looking at me with confusion.

“You begged for a touch. I touched you—”



“I—oh *fuck*.” He glares at me, and I see the tip of his cock flare, fluid that looks very close to *actual* cum starting to slide down his shaft. “God, I’m going to come without you touching me—*fuck*, don’t do that to me—”

His accent thickens as he speaks, an Irish burr that laps over my skin and makes me squirm with desire even more, wanting to tighten my thighs together, roll my hips against him, pull the leather to one side, and rub that piercing over my clit. I can only imagine how good it would feel, how quickly it would make me come.

“Tell me what you want.” I reach out, and his eyes close on another hiss of breath.

“Wrap your hand around it. Stroke me until I—*fuck*, I’ll come on your hand, I don’t care. Just stroke me like a good girl—”

My hand jerks back, and I laugh softly, deep and husky in my throat, as I lean back at the foot of the bed, spreading my legs so he can see the soft folds of my pussy with the leather between them. “You don’t call me that in here,” I tell him in that low, seductive voice, my fingers rubbing over the outside of the leather. “*I* call the shots in here. And now, because of that, you’re going to watch while I enjoy what you won’t beg for.”

Finn’s eyes go so round I could have almost laughed. I can *see* the struggle on his face. He doesn’t know whether to be pissed that I’m not touching him or aroused that I’m touching myself, or both. As I rub my fingers over the leather, pressing it against my clit, I know it’s going to be an effort for me to draw it out.

“*Fuck—*” he groans under his breath. “Oh god—”

His cock is twitching madly as I arch into my touch, the leather between my thighs clearly darkened from my arousal, and I can see that he’s struggling to hold onto his orgasm. When I nudge the leather aside, letting him see my wet, swollen flesh, my clit throbbing with the need to be touched, he lets out a groan of need so deep that I can feel it in my bones.

“I saw you up there,” he rasps, his gaze intent on me as I start to rub my fingers around my clit, circling it. “On the stage. Doing exactly that.” He licks his lower lip, and I can see him imagining what I’d taste like. “I’ve

never seen anyone look more beautiful touching themselves.”

I let the smile spread across my lips as I dip my fingers down into my entrance, letting him hear the wet sound, scissoring my fingers into myself as I spread my folds wide for his view, allowing him to see everything he’s not getting to touch or taste. Everything he might *never* get to touch or taste, depending on if he comes back, and I should know better than to feel that flicker of disappointment at the idea of never seeing him again.

“You wish these were your fingers, don’t you?” I tease him, sliding them back up to my clit, rubbing with more intent now. “Or your tongue. You want to know what I taste like, don’t you?” A little more pressure on my clit, my hips rising up, rocking inches away from his cock, and I can see it throbbing madly, the flesh taut around his piercing, so much pre-cum streaming from his tip that he’s made a mess of the bed. “God, I’m so wet. I bet it would feel so good around your cock. All that tight, wet heat—” I moan, rolling my hips against my hand. “Me coming around your cock—”

“*Fuck.*” Finn’s eyes are fixed on me, gleaming with lust, his body taut as a plucked guitar string, his cock straining. “God, don’t let me come like this, *please—*”

“You better hang onto it then,” I breathe. “Because I’m not going to stop until *I* come first.”

His groan fills the room, low and desperate, and that pushes me over the edge, the sound of his need, how *much* he both wants and doesn’t want—wanting to come and wanting to hold back all at once, and I tip my head back, moaning as I hold myself open so he can see every second of my orgasm, my pussy tightening on nothing as I buck upwards on a cock that’s not there, letting him imagine thrusting in me this very second—

“Oh god, just fucking touch me, *please—*” Finn’s voice is desperate, thick. “God, I need to fucking come—”

I pull my hand away from my fluttering clit, dragging two fingers drenched in my arousal around the tip of his cock, and he lets out a breathless moan. “Yes, *yes—*”

I want him in my mouth, and I decide that he deserves it for begging. I lean

forward, my hands on his thighs, my warm breath on his twitching cockhead, and from the agonized look on his face, I think he might come just from that for a moment before I finally dip my head, running my tongue over the swollen flesh and up to the piercing.

Finn's curse fills the room, followed by a deep moan, his hips thrusting as he pushes his cockhead against my lips. "Suck it, *god*, please—"

I shove my hands against his hips, holding him still. "Lay still," I warn him, lips and tongue moving teasingly against his flesh as I speak. I can taste his pre-cum, and he tastes *good*, good enough that I might let him come in my mouth. "You're not in charge of this," I remind him again, and he moans, twisting on the bed as he looks down at me helplessly.

And then I slide my lips around the tip of his cock, tongue toying with the piercing as I finally give him the suction he so desperately needs, and I see his hands clench as he jerks at the cuffs, twisting against the bed as his mouth opens on a groan of utter pleasure as I feel him suddenly start to flood my mouth with cum.

I want to swallow it. I want to sink my lips down further, take him in my throat, and swallow every drop of his cum. The reflexive thought startles me with the intensity of it, the way it makes me shudder with desire all over again.

But he didn't ask. He didn't even warn me, and I can't reward that. Not here, not when I'm the *domme*, not when he hasn't behaved at *all* like a submissive should.

I tear my mouth away from his cock, hearing him moan in shuddering protest as I stroke him instead, the spurts of his cum splashing over the sheets as he throbs and jerks in my fist, straining for the sucking pleasure of my mouth that he's been denied. "Why—oh *fuck*—" he moans as I squeeze the base of his cock, fingers rippling upwards as I stroke him with every bit of skill I possess, knowing it's still not as good as what I took away.

He's panting by the time he's finished, the last of his cum dripping onto the sheets as I let go of him, slipping off of the bed and going to undo his cuffs.

"God, that was—" Finn looks at me, that vague look of confusion still on his

face. “I don’t—”

“You have time left.” I glance at the clock. “If you want a little time to rest —”

Finn grimaces suddenly, sitting up and rubbing his wrists absently, his softening cock against his thigh. “I’ll just head out, I think,” he says suddenly, his accent still thick and rasping. “I—uh—thank you?”

He’s already up and moving around the bed, reaching for his clothes, and I can see that he’s nervous, unsure in a way that’s less charming than it was before.

I lean back against the bedpost as he gets dressed, watching him silently. He’s beautiful to look at, all taut skin and shifting muscle, his cock still impressive, even soft. I feel that throbbing ache between my thighs again, wanting him, and I let out a soft breath, finding myself almost wishing that I’d met him at an ordinary bar and not here.

*What would it be like to be with him without all of this?* The thought surprises me—it’s been so long since I’ve wanted someone so much, since I’ve really fantasized about taking someone home.

“I, um—” Finn pauses again when his clothes are back on, still looking at me hesitantly. “Thanks,” he says again in a rush, making a beeline for the door. I only just manage to keep back a laugh until he’s out of the room, leaving me alone with the better part of an hour still ticking down on the clock.

He was my last client of the night, too, so I can go home whenever I want. I don’t have to walk the floor like some of the newer girls are required to a few times a week, and if someone comes in asking if I have room in my schedule tonight, I won’t get in trouble for having gone ahead and gone home. As long as my regular clients are happy, Nikolai mostly lets me do as I please.

It’s one of the reasons I’ve stayed here as long as I have.

I find myself lingering in the room, though, sinking onto the other side of the bed as I undo the leather straps, peeling them away from my skin and tossing the lingerie onto the floor.

I stretch out on the bed, my fingers idly tracing down my skin. *Maybe he’ll*

*come back*, I think as I trace my fingers around my nipples, feeling them stiffen and wishing it was his hands on me instead. I know it's a ridiculous thought—he spent ten thousand dollars for me, not to mention the membership, and he clearly wasn't expecting what he got. I don't know *how* he ended up in that situation, but I don't think he'll be coming back.

But I wish he would. I wish he'd come back and beg for me to fuck him, plead in all the ways that a good submissive should, so I could feel what he feels like filling me up—

My hand slips between my thighs, fingers slipping into me, and I consider getting up and going to get one of the toys. I can't remember the last time I did this—masturbated twice in a day, and I can imagine setting up a thick dildo on the spanking bench to bounce on, or affixing one to the St. Andrews' cross, thrusting back against it and imagining Finn behind me—

I can't make myself stop, though. My hips arch up into my hand, wanting more, my breath coming in quick, restless pants as I imagine him on his knees, his mouth pressed against me, begging for the sweet taste of me on his tongue, his hand around his cock after he asked for permission. It's a sharp, thrilling desire to feel this kind of desire for someone who would let me be their *domme*. For a moment, I forget that he seemed to have stumbled into it by accident, that he likely won't come back, and let myself get swept up in the fantasy all over again as I thrust my fingers into myself, breathing in the scent of his cologne still on the sheets, imagining his hands and tongue and cock all over me.

And that piercing—

I come with a long, hoarse moan that fills the room, my pussy clenching around my fingers, his name almost on my lips as I writhe against the sheets, the orgasm pulsing through me until I see stars in the darkness behind my eyelids.

When I come down from it, I feel more than a little foolish. *He's not going to come back*, I remind myself, thinking of the confusion on his face. But he came back once before, when I'd thought that I'd never see him again.

But if he does, it'll be as a client. I won't have the freedom to do exactly as I please. And the frustration of that dims the pleasure at the idea of him coming

back.

*Isn't your life complicated enough?* I chide myself as I throw on my robe, leaving the room to go back to my dressing room and get ready to go home. I've only just started feeling better about what happened with Nikolai—there's no reason to let myself get wrapped up in something else complex and sure to make me feel worse in the end.

*Just put it out of your head,* I tell myself as I get dressed, putting my things away and cleaning up, the routine helping to clear my head. By the time I'm finished and calling an Uber, I feel a little better about all of it.

Whether I see him again or not doesn't matter. In the end, he's just another client—every time I've let a man closer than that, I've ended up hurt.

I have no intention of doing that again.

# Finn



I'm out of the Ashen Rose and back at my motorcycle with the keys in my hand before I realize that I didn't actually accomplish a single word of the business I went there to handle.

*What the fuck happened?* My body feels like it's still buzzing with the pleasure of the encounter—the strangest one I've ever had, and my head feels foggy. I'd gone up there thinking that I'd have a couple of hours to talk to her, maybe have another drink together in private, question her about Matvei, and then—who knows? I'd envisioned her with her mouth on my cock, but it hadn't been while I was tied to the bed, on the verge of a ruined orgasm while she played with herself in front of me.

I certainly hadn't expected her to be the one telling me what to do—definitely not like *that*. I've never had a woman be so—

Straightforward isn't even the word for it. Not demanding, either. *Dominant*. I'm always the dominant one in bed—not in a kinky way either; my flings aren't usually that exciting. I'm just—hell, I've never even really thought about it before.

Now, thanks to Asha, I'm wondering why the hell the way she acted had me both pissed off and painfully aroused all at once, and I want to go back and find out what it's like for a second round.

More than that, I want to know what it would be like to turn the tables, and have her be the one tied to the bed begging to come.

Just that thought makes my exhausted cock twitch restlessly, eager for a round two. And it can't be blamed—despite the fact that Asha barely put her mouth on me, it might have been the best orgasm of my entire life. I've never been teased like that before, pushed to such an extreme level of arousal, and I have the distinct impression that wasn't her finest work, either. She'd seemed confused by *my* confusion, as if we were both dancing around each other, unsure of what the other was meant to be doing. If she'd been focused and I'd known what I wanted—

A shudder runs through me, licking down my spine and straight down to my stiffening cock. I grit my teeth, reaching down to adjust myself—riding a bike with a hard-on is far from the most comfortable thing—but I'm already thinking ahead to whether or not I ought to go back.

The answer seems obvious. I didn't get anything that I went there for, and it will have been a waste of both time and Kings' funds if I went there and left with nothing but drained balls and no further information. *If I go back tomorrow night, I'll be able to try again.*

“You've got to keep your head on straight then, lad,” I mutter aloud to myself as I swing my leg over the seat of my bike, the engine roaring to life. “Both of them.”

I can only use the Kings' funds for so long before Theo will start wanting to know why, even as trusting as he is of me—I don't want to abuse that trust. Asha might be the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen in my life, capable of making a man feel in the moment that he'd do anything to have even just her hands on him—but I have a job to do. A job more important than my attraction to a woman who, I'm sure, would happily take my money and never see me again.

—

It's easier said than done, of course, when I do see her again. I'd planned to go back the next evening, but even with my guest pass from Nikolai, I'm not able to see Asha specifically again for four days before I'm able to be “squeezed in,” as the girl on the phone tells me, a turn of phrase that she means innocuously but instead gives me uncomfortable visions of what any



number of other men might be doing with Asha while I'm waiting to see her.

No matter how many times I tell myself over those days that it doesn't matter, that the only reason it should matter is that the longer it takes to see her again, the longer it will be until I can set the plans in motion, I find myself having to derail a train of jealous thoughts over and over again. It makes sense, of course—she's popular and in demand, Nikolai's most sought-after girl—but I've never had to wait on the pleasure of other men before while waiting to see a woman who I want. It's a distinctly uncomfortable feeling that I find I hate.

After four days of trying not to wish all manner of bad things on the men spending time with Asha, alternating between trying to distract myself and finding myself with my hand wrapped around my insistently aching cock everywhere I get the chance—in the shower, waking up, going to sleep—I finally have my second appointment with her. The eagerness I feel as I drive to the Ashen Rose and hand my motorcycle keys over to the valet is only going to complicate things, I know, but I can't help it as I walk in the doors, as if the spiced-candle scent of the lobby and the knowledge of what lies behind those doors has already Pavloved me into being aroused the moment I set foot inside.

This time, I'm greeted by a pretty redhead at what I've come to think of as the front desk, who checks me in and sees I already have a card on file and all of my information in the system. "Everything the same as last time, Mr. O'Sullivan?" she asks sweetly, smiling at me. "Or would you prefer to make changes for tonight?"

The way she says it, as if changes would be unusual, makes me realize that the men who come here must have girls they prefer, a sort of standard setup that they expect when they visit for the night. That sends another of those irrational throbs of jealousy through me, thinking of the same men visiting Asha week after week, asking for the same things, until she knows before they even arrive what they'll want from her that night. It feels almost intimate in a strange way, something deeper than a random exchange of money for sex, and I force a smile onto my face as I nod at the girl. "The same is fine," I tell her. I'm truthfully unsure of what I would ask for in order to change anything, and I don't want to feel even more out of place than I already do.

And anyway, I likely won't be back after tonight, if I get what I need from Asha.

*But you'll still get to see her again if this goes according to plan. Away from this place.*

The idea is more exciting than it should be.

I wait at the bar again, sipping a glass of whiskey, until Asha comes to get me. There's a flicker of humor on her face as she sees me, almost as if she's won some private bet with herself, but I see the heat in her gaze, too, when her eyes drift over me. "Back for seconds already, Mr. O'Sullivan?" she asks teasingly, and just the sound of her whiskey-and-sugar voice has my cock thickening, aching for the possibility to be inside of her.

I've never had a woman be able to make me hard simply by speaking before, but I suppose there really is a first time for everything. The jealous thoughts of what she's been doing since I saw her last fly out of my head for a moment, and all I can think about is her. It's as if she fills my every sense, drowning me in desire. I want her, and I have to remind myself that I have questions that need to be asked before any clothes come off, before I so much as touch her or allow myself to be touched.

"Are you ready to go upstairs?" She smiles flirtatiously at me. "You can bring your drink with you, if you like."

I swallow the rest of the whiskey in a quick gulp instead, letting the burn of it in the back of my throat distract me as Asha leads me towards the stairs and up to the same room that we used the last time. "Is this *your* room?" I ask her curiously, as I follow her inside. "You have one assigned to you?"

She nods. "It's more comfortable that way," she explains as she closes the door. "No wondering if anything's been moved or changed—it's all exactly how I like it. And the clients, well—" Asha gives me a smirk. "After a while, they start to get aroused the moment they step into the room. If they're not already," she adds wryly, and I see her gaze flick down to the front of my pants, where I'm certain she can see the outline of my swelling cock.

"Seems like you have it all figured out." This time, I walk over to the bar cart that she pointed out the last time, reaching to pour myself another drink.

Anything to slow down the progression of events, so I can think long enough to make sure I ask my questions.

Asha purses her lips. “Well, it’s Nikolai who decides most of this. We just work for him.” She hesitates. “Are you alright, Mr. O’Sullivan? Was anything not to your liking last time? We can discuss your preferences if—”

“You can call me Finn.” I turn towards her, taking a sip of the whiskey. “You did last time, after all. Is there a reason for the formality?”

Her tongue darts out against her lower lip—a nervous tic, I think, but one that turns me on a little more all the same. “You didn’t seem—all that pleased last time.”

I can’t hold back the sudden laugh, half-choking on my second sip of whiskey. “I came harder than I’ve come in years, Asha,” I tell her frankly, still chuckling despite the high points of red I can see starting to burn on her cheekbones. *She doesn’t like feeling that she’s being laughed at*, I realize, and at the same moment, I wonder if she let me see that at all. A girl in a job like hers must be an expert at keeping her true thoughts and feelings hidden, yet hers have slipped through. “I think *pleased* was an understatement.”

‘Unsure, then.’ She watches me, her dark eyes curious. “Like you weren’t sure what it is that you wanted from the experience.”

*I didn’t have any idea I was going to end up cuffed to a bed, if that’s what you mean.* I nearly say it, but I take another drink of my whiskey instead, setting the glass aside as I face her. “I won’t lie and say that I wasn’t hoping to end the night with a good orgasm,” I tell her frankly, “but that’s not the main reason I came here, Asha. I’m not accustomed to paying women for sex, and I don’t typically frequent places like this.” *I don’t frequent them at all.* She doesn’t need to know that, though—I have the distinct feeling that she’d be even more amused with me if she knew, and I don’t think I like the idea of that.

Her expression turns guarded in an instant as she looks at me, her eyes narrowing. “So why did you come here then, Finn?” She says my name flatly, some of that husky sweetness gone from her voice, although I can tell at least a little of it is her natural way of speaking. I can also see that she’s instantly put up some wall that I’m going to have to work to get past, now

that I've told her it's not just her charms I'm interested in.

"I was here the night of the poker game," I tell her, leaning back against the wall as I pour myself another two fingers of whiskey and take a sip. "I saw you go with Matvei Kotov at the end of it."

I can see the way her body stiffens instantly at that, almost involuntarily, as if she can't help it. "Our client sessions are confidential," she says slowly. "I'm sure you wouldn't want me talking to some other client about *your* predilections in bed, Finn."

*God*, the way she fucking says my name, even when she's irritated. Maybe even more so when she is. As much as I'm trying to focus on the questions I need to ask her and not the growing ache in my groin, it's difficult—especially standing here in this room, surrounded by all the accouterments anyone could possibly need for a night of pleasure. More than I need, that's for sure—I'd be happy just to have her under me on the bed on the other side of the room.

"You don't have to tell me personal details." I let out a breath, watching her carefully. "But your boss, Nikolai—he works with the organization that I work with. And we both have an interest in finding out more about what Matvei is doing."

Asha's expression is carefully blank. There's a foot or so between us, but it feels like a gulf, her arms crossing over the heavy silk of the robe as she looks at me. "What organization is that, Finn?"

"The Irish Kings." There's no harm in telling her that I can see. "I don't know how much you're aware of regarding what Nikolai does, but—"

"I'm aware of enough." She frowns. "He and I were—closer, once. He trusts me. Which is why I don't know that I should be answering many more of your questions, Finn. If Nikolai wanted those answers, wouldn't he be capable of getting them on his own? Or asking me, for that matter?"

I'd wondered myself why Nikolai hadn't leveraged Asha's night with Matvei into a means to find out more, the way I'm here trying to do. With just those few words—*he and I were closer, once*—I think I have my answer. He must have cared for her at one point, before Lilliana—maybe still does—and he

doesn't want to put her in danger.

That throb of jealousy pulses through me again, thinking of the two of them together. I've never been a jealous man with anyone, never cared enough to wonder all that much, but having another face to put to another man who's been with Asha, especially one I know that well, makes me feel like I'm burning up inside. The way she said it—he wasn't just an employer dipping into his own stash. There was something between them, and I have to fight the urge to cross that foot of space between us, knot my fingers in her silky black hair, and kiss her until she forgets the taste of his lips and only remembers the heat of mine.

*And why not? I think for one dark, surprising moment. You paid for this. She's yours for the night. Why not kiss her however you please?*

Asha sucks in a soft breath, her eyes flickering over my face, and it brings me back to the present moment. She's good at reading people, I realize—desire most of all. Of course, she is, it's her job to be able to do just that...and I think she could read everything I was just thinking a moment ago.

I have no idea what's going through *her* head, though.

“Nikolai and my boss are looking into other means of gathering information right now,” I tell her as calmly as I can manage, pushing all thoughts of Asha and kisses—mine or those from other men—out of my head as best as I can. “It was my idea to follow up with you, knowing you spent an evening with Matvei. Did he request you specifically that night?”

Asha purses her lips, her arms tightening where they're crossed beneath her breasts, as if she's trying to decide just how long to entertain this. “Nikolai chooses the girl who will be the prize for the winner of the poker game,” she says finally. “It's an event we do every few months. It was Nikolai's idea to have me be the prize this time, because Matvei would be at the table.”

“So you could get information from him?”

Asha snorts. “No. Nikolai wasn't setting me up as a *spy*.” She laughs. “Matvei is new in town, as I'm sure you know. He applied for membership here. Some of the talk about him made Nikolai wonder if he would be a good fit for the club, but he didn't want to antagonize him right from the start. So

he approved the membership and asked me to be the one to take on his first session—either at the game if he won, or after, if he didn't. He thought I would be the one most capable of handling him if it—went poorly.”

There's a hard edge to the way she says the last words that tell me, without even having to ask, that something about that night did go poorly. The jealousy burning in my gut twists into a knot of rage at the thought of Matvei hurting her, of *anyone* hurting her, and I feel my jaw tighten. I let out a slow breath, calming myself, but I want nothing more than to get my hands on him and wring his neck for having dared to touch Asha in any way that she didn't want.

“Did you hear anything that might be helpful for Nikolai, during the session?” I take another sip of my whiskey, shoving down just how much I don't want to hear about what Matvei and Asha did in this room—the same room where she tied me up and teased me, and made me come in a way that I'll be thinking about when my own hand is on my cock for a long time—and Asha shakes her head.

“He—” she pauses suddenly, cocking her head a little to one side as she appraises me, a sudden glint in her eye. “How much do you actually know about these sorts of clubs, Finn? What goes on here, I mean. You said you don't come to them often.” Her lips twitch, and I can see from the look on her face that she's beginning to realize just how out of my depth I am.

And she's enjoying it a little too much.

I try to keep my expression smooth, shrugging. “Enough,” I tell her, hoping that being purposefully vague will get her to change the subject, but it has the exact opposite effect.

Her lips twitch again, spreading from a smirk into a smile that tells me she's figuring it out far too quickly for my liking. “You came here last night to ask me these questions,” she says slowly. “You didn't know what to ask Callie for when you checked in, because you don't just *not come to these places often*, you don't come to them at all. So you didn't think to ask for what you wanted specifically. You just chose me, not knowing what I typically do—and you stumbled right into hiring a *domme* for the night.”

Her words are laced with laughter by the time she's finished, her eyes

sparkling with merriment. I feel a burn of annoyance fill my chest as I finish the whiskey and set the glass down, a touch harder than strictly necessary.

“I did come here to ask you questions,” I tell her flatly. “And you—”

“Distracted you?” She preens a little at me, tossing her hair to one side, her tongue flicking out against those red lips again, but not nervously this time. This time, it’s entirely fucking intentional, and she knows *exactly* what she’s doing to me.

My cock twitches, seeing her tongue slide over her full, plush lower lip. I know just how good those lips feel pressed against my sensitive flesh, and I want her to fucking do it again. *God*, I want her, and the situation is rapidly spiraling out of my control again. I’ve been half-hard since the moment she walked up to me at the bar, and even now, I can feel myself stiffening, my mind split between the conversation we’re supposed to be having and imagining all the things I could do to her in this room.

“I have half a mind to spank you, just for laughing at me,” I growl at her, trying to get the upper hand back, and Asha snorts, her eyes still dancing with that same laughter.

“You told Mari that you wanted the same thing. So you paid for a *domme* tonight, once again—and once again without realizing what you were doing, I think.” She bites her lower lip lightly, glancing down at my cock. “Maybe *I* should be the one spanking *you*, for not paying attention to your lesson last night.”

*Why the fuck does that turn me on?* I’ve never craved having a woman talk to me that way in my life, never fantasized about anything like that, but as Asha steps closer to me, closing that space between us so that she’s within touching distance, I’m suddenly very aware of the wall at my back, of how close she is, of the way she boxes me in as if she’s the one in charge—and clearly she thinks that she is.

She might actually *be* the one in charge, considering that one sentence has me hard as a rock, and I have no idea why.

Asha reaches out, trailing one sharp, black-painted fingernail down the front of my shirt. I wore a button-down tonight, and her nail catches on the edge of

one of them, tugging lightly. “You’ve never had a woman do that to you, have you, Finn? Cuff you face down to a spanking bench and flog that muscled ass of yours while you grind on the leather, wishing you were fucking me instead of making yourself come while I punish you?”

I hear her voice thicken, just a little, feel the faintest shudder of desire that goes through her, and I realize with a start that this is what turns *her* on. She *likes* this—I remember last night, that soaked strip of leather between her legs, the way she was so swollen and wet when she pushed it aside, her fingers rapidly moving over her clit as she made herself come.

*It’s not fake*, I realize with a jolt of lust so intense that it weakens my knees a little and hardens my cock beyond belief. *She really came last night. And maybe on the stage, too.*

But I’m not about to let her see just how inexperienced with all of this I really am—not if I have anything to say about it, anyway.

She’s already two steps ahead of me, though. I don’t even have to answer for her to know that I haven’t done that—I can see it in her face, in the teasing laughter in her eyes. “I bet last night was the first time you’ve been tied up at all. Have you ever had a woman tell you to take your clothes off before? Or are you *always* the one giving all the orders? You certainly seem good at coming in here and interrogating me tonight—”

I reach for her before I can stop myself, my hands closing on her upper arms as I switch our positions in an instant, her back against the wall as I crowd closer to her, our hips nearly pressed together, my cock so close to grinding into her thigh. I look down at her, my hands still wrapped around her arms—firmly, but not enough to hurt. “I haven’t interrogated you yet, Asha,” I breathe, looking down at her full mouth. “This isn’t how I go about interrogations. But if you like receiving pain as much as I’m starting to guess you like handing it out, we could try that.”

Truthfully, I don’t know a whole hell of a lot about that, either. When I think of *being in charge* in bed, I think about telling a woman exactly what it is that I want her to do, telling her what a good job she’s doing, talking dirty—any number of things that don’t include cuffs and whips and floggers and whatever else Asha has tucked away in all the drawers and crevices in this



room. But suddenly, the idea of having Asha tied down, seeing her pretty pale flesh turn pink under the burn of my hand as she squirms and begs—

My cock throbs, and my head spins with desire. There might be something to this place after all, but I don't know that I want to be on the receiving end of it.

For the briefest of moments, as I look down at her mouth and ache to take the kiss I've been thinking about, as I hold her there pinned to the wall, I feel her arch towards me. I feel her soften, feel that ripple of desire that goes through her again—and then I feel her stiffen, her gaze hardening as she looks up at me.

“You paid for a domme tonight, Finn,” she says evenly, holding herself very still in my grasp. “If you wanted a submissive, then you should have talked to Mari about that when you checked in. You'll need to let go of me.”

The way she says it all is so clinical, so professional, that it dampens my desire instantly. I let go of her—I would have anyway; I'm not in the habit of making women do anything they don't want to do—and step back, taking a slow, deep breath.

“I didn't come here for this tonight, anyway,” I say carefully. “I came here to make you an offer, Asha.”

She smirks, her arms crossing beneath her breasts again, but I can still see the quick movement of her chest as she tries to catch her breath. She can say whatever she likes—but what I just did turned her on. I know that for certain. “An offer I can't refuse?” she asks archly, and I laugh shortly, shaking my head.

“You can refuse if you like,” I tell her. “But I'm hoping you don't.”

Asha swallows hard, her gaze fixed on mine. “Let's hear it then,” she says calmly, and I take another step back, needing a little more distance between us.

“You said earlier that Nikolai wasn't setting you up to be a spy, when it came to Matvei. But that's exactly what I'm here to ask you to do, both for the Kings and for Nikolai.”

She flinches. She does her best to hide it, but I don't miss the tremor that goes through her. "Matvei isn't welcome here any longer," she says flatly, and I have a moment's hesitation. If he was kicked out of the club, then do I really want to put her in that position again? In that kind of danger?

*She's capable. Even Nikolai felt that she was. And he'll want her again.* The professional part of me, the part that came up with this scheme in the first place, can see the possibilities. If Matvei was forced out of the club, having Asha on his own terms will be even more tempting.

And I'll be there to protect her.

"You'd see him outside of the club. A private arrangement. I'd go with you as backup to keep you safe. A bodyguard. All good escorts should have one, right?"

"Most don't." Asha presses her lips together. "Which is why I'm grateful that I work here, within the safety of these walls." She pauses, then shakes her head. "No. If Nikolai really wanted me to do this, he could come ask me himself, but I would still say no. Matvei is a violent and cruel man. There's nothing that could get me to spend another evening with him." She lets out a slow breath, her arms tightening around herself. "Not many men scare me, Finn. But he did."

There's a vulnerability in her voice that cuts me straight to the core, undermining all the certainty I had about this plan. But I've come this far—and I've invested this much. I feel sure that if she could be convinced, the plan would work.

*This is her job, I remind myself. Now do yours.*

"I haven't told you how much I'm offering to pay."

Asha hesitates. "Fine," she says, a little snappishly. "How much?"

When I name the figure, I see her eyes widen, just a fraction. She's doing her best to not let her emotions show on her face, but she's not the only one capable of reading others, even if I have a harder time with her than most.

I can see the moment she reconsiders—and I find myself desperately hoping that she will say yes.

Not only for the job—but because I don't want this to be the last night I see her.

# Asha



I can't believe I'm even considering this.

*It's him getting into your head. It has to be.* This man seems capable of twisting me up in ways that no one else ever has—or at least not in a very, very long time. I can't decide if I want to throw him out of the room or let him throw me onto the nearest surface and do whatever he pleases with me.

It's the latter that scares me.

I still feel as if I'm vibrating from the touch of his hands on me, the way he'd so smoothly flipped us around, pinning me to the wall with just enough force that I knew that if he wanted, he could have had anything from me—even though he didn't take it.

He didn't even take the kiss that I could see he so desperately wanted.

The entire situation would be laughable if it didn't have me so confused—and in a way, it still is. This man came here looking to ask me about Matvei, and stumbled into being dominated by a woman for the first time in his life. All of his confusion last night makes perfect sense—and it both turns me on a little and makes me feel a hint of regret, knowing that was his first experience with it.

If I'd known, I could have made it better for him, more enticing. I hadn't really known what to do with his behavior, if he was there making a joke of me, or if he'd been playing games. But now I know that he simply hadn't

known what was going on.

He's clearly used to being the dominant one. He'd gone from being thrown off-guard by my attitude to smooth, sure confidence in one moment of switching the dynamic, which doesn't surprise me. What *did* surprise me was my reaction to it.

I'd wanted him to take that kiss. I'd wanted him to pin me harder against the wall, devour my mouth, pick me up and thrust that hard cock into me, let me find out exactly what all of him would feel like inside of me—every thick, long, pierced inch of him. If he hadn't hesitated long enough for me to get myself together, I might have let him.

*He's dangerous.* More dangerous than Nikolai was to me, because I get the distinct impression that this man doesn't have the kind of responsibilities that Nikolai does. He's not the heir to anything, I'd guess. He's the kind of man that I could have something with, if—

But I remember all too well what happened the last time I had that kind of hope. The last time I thought that something real was possible for me.

I should stick to the no that I gave him. But the amount of money he's offering—

It would be enough that I could quit after the job was finished, if I wanted to. I could leave the Ashen Rose and start some other kind of life, somewhere else. I could do whatever I pleased.

Surely I can manage a few weeks—months, even, if it came to that—of Finn following me around while I do the job that I come here to do most nights of the week anyway? He'll be with me in a professional capacity, working for the Kings, not like this—not a temptation that makes me ache. Surely, just having him there won't be enough to tip this over into something that it shouldn't be. I'm not that susceptible, not even to a man like him.

Especially since he doesn't seem to really want what it is that I prefer to offer.

“Let me think about it,” I say finally. “It's a lot to ask, even at that price. Matvei is not a good man. But I don't think you'd be asking me to do this if you thought he was.”

“That’s true,” Finn admits. “I think we all know he’s not. But I can keep you safe, Asha. I’m sure of it. And you’ll be well-compensated.”

“What else can you do for me?” The words come out before I really mean for them to: a defense as much as anything else, wanting to steer the conversation away from Matvei, and a decision that I’m not ready to make. “You’ve only been here less than an hour. Are you really planning on cutting *your* time that you paid for short again?”

I let that husky tone seep into my voice again, pushing myself away from the wall as I sway towards him, wanting control of the situation again. I want control of *him*, of his desires—and of my own, too. He makes me feel as if that control is slipping out of my fingers, and the fact that it turns me on more than a little when it’s him making me feel that way is terrifying.

Finn goes very still, looking down at me as I stop just in front of him. I reach out to hook my nail into the button of his shirt again, scratching my fingertip over his chest, the soft copper hair brushing against my skin. It sends a shiver through me that has nothing to do with my job, and everything to do with him.

*Dangerous.*

A slow smirk twitches at the corner of his lips as those blue eyes fix on mine, and I can *see* that he knows it. *Fuck*. He knows that he’s getting to me, that I want him—that this isn’t all just a game I’m playing because I’m being paid to. And there’s something in him that likes these games of power as much as I do—and also something in him that wants to be the one to win.

I can already tell that neither of us is going to give in easily.

“Let me be the one in charge, then.” His hand covers mine, warm and broad, squeezing lightly as he steps a little closer. “Forget what I told the girl up front tonight. You said as much yourself—I didn’t know what to ask for. Well, now I do. Let me do the things *I* want to do to *you* tonight, Asha. No tying me down to the bed, no telling me what to do. I call the shots in here tonight.”

For one brief moment, laced with the thick, sweet tension filling the air between us, I consider it. I think of the possibilities, of surrendering up that

control to him, of letting him give me commands instead of the other way around. His hands on my body, his mouth if I were good enough—the sharp sting of a cane or a flogger on my flesh, the torment of being restrained. His cock in my mouth, inside of me, filling me up, giving me everything that I’ve been craving since the moment I saw him from the stage.

He can see me thinking about it. There’s a heat, a need in his ocean-blue gaze that answers to mine. And I know, with a deep and frightening certainty, that if I give in to him, I’ll be his.

It won’t be for a night. I’ll want more. We both will—I’ll fall into something that will always be guaranteed to break my heart when it’s over.

Control in the bedroom is more than just sex. It’s control over my body, my heart, and my entire life that I’ve arranged in a way to make sure that I never give a man that kind of power over me again. Even when I take on clients who want me to submit, I choose the ones who won’t be a temptation to me. Who could never make me feel the things that Finn is making me feel right now.

Slowly, he lets go of my hand, his moving up to slide into my hair. Almost gently, he wraps the silky strands around his fingers, just enough to let me feel the tension at the back of my head. A sweet, hot, delicious taste of what he would do if I said yes.

A shudder goes through me, and I shake my head.

“No,” I whisper softly. “There are rules here, you know. You paid for a *domme*. So if you want that, Finn, then we can start. If you don’t, we can stand here and talk—or you can go home. It’s your choice.”

His hand lingers in my hair for just a moment, and I can feel the tension in him, see the set of his jaw, the way he’s fighting the lust throbbing through every inch of him. If I said yes, what would he do? My own body pulses with desire at the images flashing through my mind, the thought of rough hands and demanding lips, things I *never* crave and suddenly want more than I want to breathe—all because it’s *him* asking.

Which is exactly why I have to tell him no.

I step back, pulling away from his touch, and he lets go. His hand drops back

to his side, and all it does is make me want him more, because Finn would be a *good* dominant. He respects me enough to stop, to listen to my *no*, even though I can see the need shuddering through every inch of him. My gaze flicks downwards, and I don't know if I've ever seen a man so hard. His cock is an iron ridge, straining against the fabric. I know exactly how he would moan and lean into my touch if I reached for him now, the release he so desperately needs.

“Go lay down on that bench,” I tell him, my voice full of promise as I nod towards the leather bench. “On your back, Finn. Let me tie you down, and I'll suck your cock until you scream my name. I'll swallow every drop. Just let me do it the way *I* do things here.”

“You mean, make me beg for it.” His gaze is heated, frustration filling his eyes. “But you won't let me do the same to you.”

“This isn't a relationship, Finn.” I look at him flatly, that same frustration in my voice. “The only compromise, the only give and take here, is what we negotiate for.”

“Sounds a lot like a relationship to me.” His gaze doesn't shift from mine.

“Not the kind of relationship I'd get into.” I should put more distance between us, break the tension still shimmering heavily in the air, but I *can't*. I want to be closer to him, not further away.

“And what kind of relationship would you be interested in?” Finn's voice is deceptively smooth, but I can hear something else under the words. Something that warns me off like an alarm bell—not because I think he's being deceptive, but because the thought of him wanting something more than this—

“One where I'm in charge, and walking away a little richer at the end of the night,” I say it almost flippantly, like a joke, throwing up every fucking wall that I can in order to keep this from spiraling even more out of my control.

He looks at me for a long moment, then lets out a slow breath. “I think I got everything I needed for tonight,” he says finally. “I'll go ahead and go.”

“Are you sure about that?” I take a step forward, my hand settling on his belt, very close to where I know he's hard and aching for me. “*Everything* you



need?”

Finn swallows, and I can feel him tense again under my touch. “Everything I think you’re going to be willing to give me,” he says softly. And then he steps back, out of my reach again. “I’ll leave you my number, in case you change your mind about the offer.”

“The offer of a job? Or—” I leave the word hanging, teasing, because I have *no* intention of taking him up on his other offer. *Not even a little bit.*

“The job.” Finn’s voice has gone flat, as if he’s gotten tired of the game. “You can call me anytime if you change your mind, Asha. At least until we find some other way of dealing with the problem.”

And then he turns, striding out of the room before I can say another word.

I stand there for a long moment, my pulse throbbing through my veins, my heart racing. It feels as if he’s taken all of the air in the room with him, leaving me weak-kneed and aching with desire in a way that I haven’t in such a long time, a specific desire for *him*. One that I can’t possibly indulge in.

It’s tempting to take the edge off there, in the room, with all the toys and aids at my disposal I could possibly need. But I find myself wanting to wait, feeling that sweet burn of desire for a little while longer until I get home, and take the same toy out of the drawer that I’d used that first night that I saw him, when I was imagining what his cock might look like.

I’d guessed pretty well. I set the toy down on the bed, my heart pounding with an excitement that’s almost unfamiliar to me by now, imagining Finn there on the bed instead of the silicone substitute, still fully dressed, his fingers stroking the ridge pressed against his fly from the outside of his pants.

I can hear his voice in my head, that thick Irish burr, and I can imagine him telling me to strip for him. The t-shirt first—*let me see those pretty breasts, Asha, good girl*—and then his low, husky voice telling me to undo my jeans, to push them slowly down my hips, until I’m entirely bare for his hungry gaze, his fingers idly undoing his buttons as if he has all the time in the world to savor me while I stand there for his pleasure.

*Touch yourself while I watch.* I can almost see him there, envision those blue eyes sliding down my bare skin as I obey, brushing my fingers over my

nipples as I tease them to hard points, twisting and plucking at the sensitive flesh as shivers of arousal prickle over my skin. *Don't tease me, Asha; you know what I want to see.*

It shouldn't turn me on. That sort of thing *doesn't* turn me on, almost never—but when I slide my hand down my stomach, down between my thighs as I stand at the edge of my own bed, imagining Finn in it, giving me orders, I find myself soaking wet already. My fingers slide through the slick heat, gathered between my folds as I rub my fingers over my clit with a gasp, and hear Finn's reproving voice from the bed.

*Not so fast, Asha. You didn't let me come so quickly, did you? You're going to find out what it feels like to want to beg.*

I close my eyes, moaning as I force myself to slow the pace of my fingers. Dimly, I hear myself asking why the fuck I'm doing this, why I'm fantasizing about my own torment when I'm here in my bedroom alone, free to please myself however I choose, at whatever pace I'd like. I'd turned down Finn's offer of this earlier, the promise of a real touch on my skin, real pleasure from someone else, and yet I'm imagining it anyway, forcing my fingers to brush over my clit at a maddening pace as I look at the toy on the bed and wait for my fantasy to tell me to slip it inside of myself.

I can imagine Finn letting his shirt fall open, revealing that muscled chest dusted in soft copper hair, the darkening line of it sliding down beneath his belt, teasing a path to the cock that I'm suddenly desperate to see. I imagine his palm sliding over that thick ridge again, his eyebrow rising mockingly as he sees my gaze drift to it. *You want this cock, don't you? You know just how good it's going to feel. Be a good girl and ask to see it, Asha.*

"Yes," I whisper aloud to the empty air, my fingers circling my throbbing clit, feeling myself clench with empty need as I look at the thick toy, wanting it inside of me. "Let me see your cock, please."

I moan aloud at the imagined sight of him undoing his belt, sliding his zipper down, hand sliding into his boxers to wrap around his shaft and slide it free, all that thick length visible, pre-cum pearling at the tip, making the piercing there glimmer in the bedside light. *Do you want a taste? You'll have to ask for it.*

“Oh god—yes, please—” I whisper, my hips arching into my hand, that whisper in the back of my head still wondering what the hell has gotten into me. I crawl onto the bed, imagining myself between Finn’s legs, leaning down to brush my lips over his cockhead. I reach for the toy and slide my lips around it, getting the tip wet as if I really need it. I’m drenched, my fingers soaked, my inner thighs sticky with it as I grind against my fingers. “Let me—oh god, please let me use it, *please*—”

I’d never say these things aloud to Finn himself. I tell myself that, insisting it as I bring the hard tip of the toy to my clit, rolling my hips against it as I rub it back and forth, imagining that it’s the swollen, warm touch of his flesh instead, that piercing bumping against my clit with every pass. It would feel so fucking good—*god*, I want to know what it would feel like. I hold the toy hard at the base, grinding into it until it’s so slick that it slips inside of me without meaning to, and I go very still, imagining the look on Finn’s face.

*Bad girl, taking what you want without asking.* I imagine his hips rocking beneath me subtly, rubbing that thick, swollen head just inside of me, teasing me with the promise of more. *Beg for it all, and maybe I won’t take it away. Maybe I’ll give you every fucking inch.*

“Please—” I breathe aloud into the empty air, sliding against the hard toy, aching to take more of it inside of me. “Please fuck me, *please*—”

I can’t take it any longer, and in the fantasy in my mind, neither can he. Those strong, long-fingered hands grab my hips, dragging me down onto the shaft. I roll onto my back, imagining him pinning me down, the hard slam of his almost too-thick cock into me again and again, driving into me as deeply as he can go. I imagine his hand on my breast, sliding up to my throat, pinning me against the pillows as he fucks me hard, groaning my name—

My fingers swirl over my clit, my other hand slamming the toy into my pussy as I imagine him over me, pushing my legs backward, angling himself deeper still, and I cry out as my entire body suddenly tightens before I can think of whether I’m ready to come or not, clenching hard around the toy as I cry out, hips bucking upwards as I come hard, my entire body shuddering with a bone-deep pleasure. In my head, I hear him groaning, too, feeling the hot rush of his cum as his cock throbs inside of me, his body rocking against mine as he loses control, too.

It's not until I start to come down from the pleasure, still slowly stroking the toy in and out of myself to draw it out, that I realize I cried out his name at the end.

I snatch the toy out of myself, tossing it aside on the bed as I sit up, clenching my teeth hard against a sudden wave of emotion that feels very much like anger. *No one should have this kind of power over me*, I think acidly, swallowing hard. *No one should be able to make me fantasize about them like this*. I didn't even do this with Nikolai. I didn't go home at night and pick out a toy and fuck it, imagining that it was him. But then again, I didn't have to—because, more often than not, I was in his bed.

Finn is offering that. But what he makes me feel—

I know how dangerous that is. And I know that spending any more time with him, job or not, at the club or not—is a bad idea.

*The money is good*, I tell myself, thinking of what else he'd offered earlier. Spying on Matvei would be dangerous. It would mean letting him touch me again, doing things with him that make my skin crawl just thinking about them. It would mean letting a man I despise have control over me, just for a little while.

But at the end of it—

I didn't have an exit plan for this life—this career that I've chosen. I'm not so miserable that I'm going to lose my mind if I keep working at the Ashen Rose for a while longer. But the idea of having the freedom to choose to leave is tempting. Of being able to do *anything* I want without worrying about how I'm going to make ends meet.

I could travel. I could take a long time off and give myself a vacation until I'm ready to decide if I want to go back to this type of work or not. I could even look for a different place, somewhere that exclusively hires dominants, somewhere that I'd never be asked to submit to anyone ever again. Hell, maybe in time, I could start my *own* place.

If I wanted to, I could leave Chicago. I can see the world opening up for me, and all it takes is the money Finn is offering. Money that would take me much, much longer to accumulate just working at the Rose.

*Just do it, Asha, I tell myself harshly. You're a grown woman. If you don't want to fuck Finn, if you don't want to start something with him, if you know it's a bad idea, then just don't. Stop acting like this is the one thing you don't control.*

I ignore the tight, foreboding sensation in my gut, the warning that maybe I'm giving myself too much credit in this one situation—and I reach for my phone.

He'd left his number with Mari, telling her that I'd be asking for it. It's irregular for clients to give out their personal numbers, but I assured her that it was for a good reason, and she gave it to me after I told her that I'd personally take the blame if Nikolai found out and was upset by it. From what Finn said, they work together closely enough that Nikolai would have some idea of why I have it—or at least not be upset that I do.

The idea that Finn felt the need to leave so quickly that he didn't give me the number himself—that he couldn't handle being around me for a moment longer lest he lose control of his desire—has me flushed with arousal all over again. It *shouldn't*—once again, that's the kind of thing that usually turns me off, that makes me want to kick a man out of my bed instead of keeping him there. But the idea of Finn being overcome with desire because of me has my breath catching in my throat, my fingers trembling a little as I go to put his number into my contacts and make the call.

“Asha.” His voice comes over the line, thick and full of that rough accent that makes my pulse beat a little quicker.

“How did you know it was me?” I struggle to keep my voice even, to keep him from hearing the hint of breathlessness there. That's the *last* thing I want.

He chuckles. It's a smooth, rich sound, and I wonder what he'd say if he knew that I'm still naked, lying atop my bed with my thighs still sticky with arousal and the toy I'd used while thinking of him lying next to me. “I don't have so many people calling me at this hour that it wasn't a good guess.”

“Who else might it have been?” *Stop it.* I didn't call him to flirt, but it feels like I can't help myself.

“My boss, maybe. But he forgives me when I call him by the wrong name.”

That chuckle again. “You, on the other hand—well, I think we both know what you’d do.”

Desire flushes through me, hot and quick, burning over my skin. I know *exactly* what he’s saying, and it’s all I can do not to tell him to come over, or to give me his address, to let me show him what I’d do to him for that, and everything else I can think of besides.

“I didn’t call you for phone sex. I’d be charging you for that.” I clear my throat, forcing back that throb of desire. “I called you to say I’d like to take you up on your offer. The—the job. Matvei,” I clarify, before he can make some other quip. “We can meet tomorrow, if you like, to go over the details. I’m off work, if you’re free for coffee.”

“Sounds like a date.” There’s that rich burr in his voice, thickening a little, and I close my eyes. *How does he have this effect on me?*

“It’s not a date. It’s professional.” I take a deep breath. “If I’m going to do this for you—no more coming to the club, Finn. Our relationship has to stay *strictly* professional. Is that clear? I’m not going to fuck you while I’m working for you.”

“You haven’t fucked me at all,” he says, a hint of playfulness in his voice, but it vanishes almost immediately. “But, of course,” he adds, his voice suddenly firm and businesslike, as if that answer were always the obvious one. “Professional. I’ll meet you tomorrow—just text me the name of a spot you’d be comfortable at. I’ll meet you there. Would eleven in the morning work for you?”

“Sure.” I let out the breath that I hadn’t realized I was holding. “That’s fine. There’s a place called the Raspberry Leaf, it’s a tea and coffee shop. I go there sometimes on my days off—it’s a nice spot. I’ll meet you there.”

“Sounds good to me.” He hesitates for the briefest moment, as if there’s something else he’d thought of saying. “Goodnight, Asha,” Finn says finally, and then the phone clicks off.

I lower the phone to my lap, my hand still wrapped around it, my heart beating harder than it should. “Goodnight,” I murmur quietly to the empty room—and I know at that moment that I’ve almost certainly made the wrong

choice.

Finn is dangerous to me. Not only because I want him—but because he wants me, too. The hardest work I'll do for this job won't be getting information from Matvei.

It'll be keeping myself from falling into bed with Finn.

## Finn



I hang up the phone, slipping it back into my pocket, and stand there for a long moment, outside the back of the bar where I'd gone to have a drink.

I hadn't expected her to make up her mind so quickly. I also hadn't expected her to say yes.

*You're going to have to tread carefully*, I tell myself, flicking the ash of my cigarette out onto the pavement. She'd made a point of telling me to keep it businesslike—which she shouldn't have had to say, honestly. I'd been flirting with her from the moment I answered the phone, and I know better than that. This isn't the Ashen Rose, and Asha won't be working for me as an escort—at least not one I'm allowed to touch. That part of our relationship—such as it is—is over, and it was only ever meant to be a means for me to get her to agree to this.

I'm just going to have to deal with the fact that that means I won't get to touch her again.

*Put it out of your head*, I warn myself, blowing a mouthful of smoke out into the darkness. There are plenty of women in Chicago, beautiful ones, women who are good in bed and who won't tie me up in knots—literally and figuratively. Asha is a means to an end, a part of a job that I need to get done. I've assigned myself to keep her safe because I don't trust anyone else to do it, not when I'm the one who put her in this situation in the first place, but in order to do that, I can't be distracted.



Especially not by her.

I take one last drag off of the cigarette and toss it onto the pavement, grinding it out under my heel before I go back inside. *This is going to get us what we need*, I remind myself as I sit back down at the bar, motioning to Charlie, the man standing behind it, for a refill of my beer. There's no reason for me to feel as torn up about it as I do; no sense for me to be questioning if I should have asked this of her at all.

No reason for the thought of her with another man—especially Matvei—to make me feel that tight knot of angry jealousy deep inside my gut, causing me to clench my jaw, wanting to deck the man instead of handing her over to him.

*We need this.* A handful of nights where she's in his bed, doing what he pleases, and we'll likely have more information about who he is and what he has planned than if we'd sent some of our men in to infiltrate his organization, and with less bloodshed. Working undercover like that is a dangerous job, one that costs lives, and men like Matvei know to look out for that sort of thing. He won't expect us to send a woman in to try and find out what he's up to.

And anyway, I remind myself as I reach for the beer, it doesn't matter. Regardless of how attracted I am to Asha—how attracted she clearly is to me, regardless of how hard she tries to hide it—we don't fit. That was made very clear to me at the club tonight. I don't like being dominated, and she doesn't like submitting. *All we do is clash*, I tell myself. *She'd drive me insane in no time at all.*

I force the thought of the first night I went there out of my head, the odd arousal I'd felt despite how uncomfortable and out of place I felt, and focus on tonight instead. I'd shown her what I wanted, given her a taste of what I imagined doing to her, and she'd pushed me away. *If that's not a clear sign that we're incompatible, then what is?*

As if on cue, I feel the air next to me shift as someone sits down on the barstool to my right. "I don't suppose this is taken," a soft voice says, and I turn to see a woman in a pencil skirt and a sleeveless button-down red shirt sitting next to me. My gaze sweeps down her quickly enough to see the high

heels she's wearing, hooked over the bottom of the stool like she's tired of standing on them, and I have a pretty good idea of where this could go.

A damn good way to get Asha out of my head.

"It's not," I tell her with a smile. "And you look like you've been on your feet too long."

"I have." She brushes a dark lock of hair out of her face, returning the smile tiredly. "All day in court, and then depositions to go over afterward. I can't wait for the day when I get my own paralegal."

"You're a lawyer?" I raise an eyebrow. "I think you're supposed to be drinking somewhere nicer than this. A few streets up, probably."

She laughed. "I spend all day working with those assholes. You think I want to drink with them, too?" She smiles at Charlie, who's quick to come over.

"What do you want to drink, sweetheart?" He gives her a wink, and she rolls her eyes at him.

"Gin and tonic. Splash of St. Germaine if you have it. And two slices of lime."

Charlie whistles. "Sounds like you do need to go to that fancy bar a few streets up. I've got gin and tonic, but it ain't Bombay. And none of whatever the hell else that is."

The woman laughs again. It's a pretty sound, musical, but I find myself thinking of Asha's laugh, the way her smirk curls her red lips. Lips that I want on mine—and on every other part of my body.

Strange to think that I've had those lips on my cock, but I've never kissed her.

"Whatever you've got is fine," the woman says, interrupting my train of thought. "And his next beer." She flashes me another smile. "I'm Claire."

"Finn." I raise an eyebrow. "You didn't have to buy me a drink."

"I know." There's a hint of flirtation in her smile now. "But I thought you might buy me one, and I wanted to beat you to it."

“Can’t argue with that.” I take another sip of the beer I already have. “So—you come here often?” I grin at her, letting her know that *I* know just how ridiculous of a line it is, and she laughs again.

“Often enough. It’s on the way, and like I said, I don’t like drinking with coworkers—or other lawyers in general, really. But I’ve never seen you here before. And I’d remember,” she adds, that blatant flirtation in her tone again.

“I’ve been out of town for a bit. It’s been a while since I’ve really been out.”

“Oh? Where to?” She takes the gin and tonic Charlie hands her, one thin slice of lime sadly floating in it. “Out of the country? Or just out of town.”

“The country. Spent some time in Dublin for work.”

“What do you do?” Claire hides her wince as she takes a sip of the gin. “Must be exciting.”

“Sometimes.” I relax onto the stool, forcing thoughts of Asha out of my head. For some reason, sitting here flirting with this woman feels wrong—and just like my jealousy, it’s absolutely ridiculous. Asha isn’t mine, and I’m not hers. We’re not in a relationship—we’ve, at best, hooked up, and I fucking *paid* for it. I haven’t kissed her or fucked her—now she’s working for me.

There’s nothing in the world stopping me from taking home this beautiful lawyer, laying her back in my bed, and pleasuring her until she forgets all about her long day in the courtroom.

Nothing except for the fact that every time I look at her, trying to imagine taking her dark hair down out of the loose bun it’s still pulled into and running my fingers through it, every time those dark eyes look at me, every time her rosy lips purse around the edge of her glass, I keep fucking seeing Asha pinned against that wall tonight, looking up at me with a desire that she couldn’t hide no matter how hard she was trying to.

“I work security,” I tell her, finishing my beer and reaching for the one she bought me. It’s my usual line, an easy way to explain away my job. “Private security,” I add, which always keeps anyone from asking too many questions or getting suspicious when I can’t answer many of the ones that they do ask. “And you? What kind of law?”

“Business law,” she says wryly. “Not nearly as thrilling. Although—” she finishes the gin and nudges the glass back to the edge of the bar, pointedly not ordering another. “I can think of a place that’s a *lot* more exciting than either of our jobs...or this bar.”

I already know what the answer to the question is before I ask her what she means, but that doesn’t stop me from saying yes when she suggests another drink at her apartment. It’s a decent distance away, but it’s a relatively warm spring night, and I haven’t drank so much that I can’t take the bike. “I’ll meet you there,” I tell her. “Unless you want to try riding on the back of my motorcycle—but I’ll warn you, those heels won’t be great for it.”

“I’d give it a try.” She flashes me another of those flirtatious smiles, and the image of her on the back of my bike, that pencil skirt pushed up around her thighs, is enough to make my cock twitch eagerly. I was so fucking hard tonight at the club, just being in that room with Asha enough to drive me insane with desire, and I’d ended up leaving. Another shot at getting to go to bed with someone sounds like heaven right now, and I reach for my keys, nodding at the door.

“Let’s go, then.”

Claire’s a good sport about it, even though my bike isn’t the most comfortable for two, and it’s definitely not meant for riding in a skirt and heels. She wraps her arms around me as soon as I settle in front of her, her chin pressed against my shoulder as she looks over it, and I try not to think about what I’d give to have Asha back there, her fingers pressing into the leather of my jacket and her warm breath on my neck.

I’ve never been in this kind of situation before. I’ve never met a woman who filled my thoughts so completely that I found myself thinking of her when I was meant to be with someone else. It’s not fair to this woman that I do that, and if I can’t shake Asha out of my head, then this night isn’t going to go the way either one of us is hoping it will.

Claire’s apartment is exactly what I would have imagined it would be—a neat, small one-bedroom with well-kept plants and bookshelves, the kind of apartment that stays clean both because the person who lives there is tidy by nature, but also because they don’t get to spend as much time there as they’d

maybe like to. She shuts the door behind us, slipping out of the blazer she'd put back on for the ride here, and smiles at me.

"I just have wine. Is that alright?"

"It's your home. Happy to drink what you're offering." I shift a little nervously, feeling out of place. It doesn't help that my first thought when I walked in was to wonder what Asha's apartment looks like, as if I'd ever have any reason to see it.

She walks into the kitchen, fingers tugging her hair tie loose as she does, and all of that glossy dark hair spills out of the bun and down over her shoulders. I should want to run my hands through it, and I do—but I'm still thinking of Asha.

I follow Claire into the kitchen, and as she digs through a drawer for a bottle opener, I gently set my hands on her hips, bending to brush my lips over the side of her neck. My cock twitches, my body aching with frustrated desire. Still, it's not her I really want, and I know that even as I reach up to brush her hair aside, still slowly kissing the curve of her neck as she sucks in a breath and starts to turn to face me.

If I were a different sort of man, I'd stay here. I'd lose myself in the sweet scent of vanilla on her skin and the warm taste of her under my lips, finally ease the ache in my balls and have the pleasure of sinking into her warm heat—something I haven't gotten the past few days despite being saturated in sex.

But I'm not the kind of man to use someone for my pleasure. Claire might not want more than a hookup—we haven't gotten that far—but I know it's not fair to her to fuck her while there's another woman on my mind. So, with a little reluctance, I let go of her, stepping back.

She frowns. "Is there something wrong? We don't have to have that drink, if you'd rather—"

"I'm sorry." I know I shouldn't have let it get this far, and I feel guilty for leading her on even a little. "I shouldn't have come back here—but—"

"But what?" Claire's frown deepens. "Oh fuck, you're not married, are you?"

"No. Nothing like that. My life is just—a little complicated right now." I let

out a long breath, running my hand through my hair. “I’m sorry. Really, I am. I should—go.”

Claire sinks back against the counter, giving me a long, disappointed look. “Yeah. Probably.”

I want to say something else, something to make her feel better, but I can’t think of a damn thing to say that isn’t just going to make this all worse. I should’ve left the minute she sat down next to me at Charlie’s, knowing where the night would head if I didn’t.

The guilt eats at me all the way down to the curb where my bike is parked, and I feel the weight of it, mixed with all of the other complicated feelings I’ve been grappling with since I saw Asha on that stage. I’ve never had anyone make me feel like this, and to be entirely honest, I don’t know how to deal with it.

My life has been far from easy, but I’ve tried to counterbalance that by keeping the most difficult of emotions out of it. I haven’t always succeeded, but Asha is well on her way to making me fail yet again.

*Just get through it until we deal with Matvei*, I tell myself as I ride back to my apartment. *You can deal with not getting laid for that long; you’ve done it before*. Once that’s over, I tell myself, Asha will take her pay and leave, and I can get over her. She’ll do whatever it is that she has planned that made her think about changing her mind when I told her what I was willing to pay for her to do this job. Without her around, I’ll eventually be able to get her out of my head.

For now, though—

I know the moment I walk into my apartment, shedding my jacket, and head straight into the shower, that trying to spend a night with any other woman is going to be a lost cause until this is finished. I’m barely out of my clothes and under the hot water before my hand is wrapped around my cock, my other hand braced against the tiles as I picture Asha bent over in front of me. All I can picture is her dark hair wet against her skin, those red lips pursed in a flirtatious, eager smile as I push my aching cock into her and groan at the sweet, imagined sensation of her wet heat finally wrapped around me.

I don't need all of that other shit. All I want is her, naked and soft under my hands, the sound of that whiskey and sugar voice breathing my name as I make her come. Everything she does at that club—I don't need it to want her. I'm not envisioning any of that as my hips jerk forward into my fist, my cum hitting the tiles as I groan out her name, imagining her arching back against me and moaning mine.

All I see is her. And for the first time in a very long time, there's nothing else in my head.

—

I'm at the Rosemary Leaf at eleven sharp, looking for Asha as I walk into the warm, tea-and-coffee-scented air of the small shop. I can see why she said she likes it—it's a cozy spot, with dark leather chairs and wooden furniture, and a case of what looks to be homemade pastries and sandwiches to go with the drinks.

I spy Asha the moment I walk in, and my heart stutters in my chest in a way that I'd forgotten that it could.

I've never seen her in street clothes before, only that heavy silk robe that she wears at the club and the lingerie underneath it. Allan and Flynn would laugh at me if they heard me say aloud that I think she looks more beautiful in that moment that I first see her like this, dressed like an everyday woman, than she did in nothing but that assortment of leather straps she'd been wearing that first night at the club.

She's wearing light wash jeans and a white cropped t-shirt, her shiny black hair pulled up in a high ponytail, and what looks like no makeup except a thin dark line around her eyes and a dusting of mascara. Her lips are a soft rose shade without the lipstick she wears at the club, and I have a sudden, deep ache to press mine against them. I've never seen a woman's mouth look so soft and inviting.

There's a book in front of her on the table, and I take that moment to drink in the sight of her, knowing that as soon as she sees me, I have to be the professional she expects, and not the man standing here aching for a woman he shouldn't touch—and will never get to, to hear her say it.

It's tempting to just stand there and look at her, but I can't do it forever. I walk towards her table, clearing my throat as I approach, and Asha looks up. For one brief second, as she registers that it's me, I see her dark eyes widen, a flicker of desire that matches mine heating her gaze as she takes me in—dark jeans and black t-shirt, motorcycle boots, and leather jacket, my most comfortable clothing.

And then her face smooths over, and she gives me a pleasant smile that doesn't betray in the least what she might have been thinking with that first glance.

"Finn." She closes the book and slips it into her purse before I can see what it is that she was reading. "Right on time. What a good boy."

There's a teasing note in her voice, and I feel my face heat instantly—which irritates me, because I know it's *exactly* the rise she was hoping to get out of me. It's even more aggravating because the heat in my cheeks isn't the only thing rising at the sound of her husky voice saying those ridiculous words to me. The last fucking thing I want is an erection in the middle of this coffee shop.

"I see you already got a drink." I motion to her coffee cup as I sit down, an actual mug that she's only taken a few sips from, the foam still floating atop it. "Anything you recommend?"

"Depends on what you like." She reaches for it, and the sight of her lips pressed to the edge is enough to make me dizzy. She knows exactly what she's doing, too, from the way her dark eyes meet mine.

*You said we needed to be professional about this.* I want to snap it at her, growl out the words, but that would mean admitting that she's getting to me—which I'm pretty certain is what she wants.

She's going to be the death of me, I'm sure of it. And I'm starting to wonder if this was the right path to take after all.

"I'm a coffee man, myself." Hers smells like praline and vanilla, and all I can think about is that I'd taste it on her tongue if I kissed her right now.

"Let me guess," she says archly, rolling her eyes a little as she sets down her cup. "Black, like your soul."



“I wasn’t going to say that.” I narrow my own at her. “I like to think I’m a decent sort of man, actually.”

“You work for the Irish Kings.” She laughs shortly. “Anyone who works for those sorts of organizations can’t be a decent man. Not really. You can try, but they’ll always squeeze it out of you.”

*That* does earn her a raised eyebrow. “Is that what you think of Nikolai?” I ask curiously. “That he’s not a decent man?”

Her lips tighten, and I see the tension suddenly in her shoulders, sparking another of those idiotic flares of jealousy in me. Whatever passed between them, she’s not entirely over it, and I wonder if she thinks of him the way I was thinking of her last night, when I tried to go home with Claire. If he’s in her head whenever she tries to enjoy another man.

“I don’t know if this is a conversation we should be having.” Asha’s lips press together harder, whitening against her pale skin. “You offered me a job, Finn. We’re here to talk about that.”

“He’s your boss. You work for a man that you don’t consider decent?”

“I’m here considering working for your Kings, aren’t I?” She tilts her chin up. “All because you offered me money I couldn’t refuse. So tell me, Finn, how is that going to be paid out? A little at a time, or are you going to make me work in hopes of a lump sum?”

“Of course not. I hoped you thought better of me than that.”

“I don’t know you.” Asha’s voice is flat. “Go grab yourself a coffee, Finn, and let me think for a minute.”

I don’t know what to feel as I walk to the counter and order something off the menu, so lost in thought that I barely know what I pick. Part of me knows it would be better if she just refuses. Working with her would clearly be difficult enough, even without the added sexual tension, and that just makes it all so much harder—*literally*. I shift uncomfortably as I stand at the counter, wondering how it is that she can turn me back into a teenage boy unable to control his own arousal with nothing but a look and a purse of those soft, full lips in my direction.

But I don't want her to refuse. I want to spend the next days and weeks—hell, *months* if it takes that long—watching over her and listening to her smart mouth and outrageous flirtations and seeing those liquid dark eyes light up for even a second with the desire that she keeps trying to hide. *Maybe I am a masochist after all*, I think grimly as I take the cup of coffee and return to the table. Spending time with Asha is the sweetest kind of torture, and I suspect she's enjoying every moment of it. A part of me thinks she might enjoy tormenting me more than actually being with me, and *that* part wants to throw her over my shoulder and haul her straight back to my bed, just so I can show her how good it could be if she gave in.

I'm a better man than that, though—a better man than she thinks I am, and not one who would ever act on that kind of desire.

“Tell me how the pay works,” Asha says when I sit back down. “I want everything clear, out on the table, so I know what I'm getting into and what to expect.”

Her voice is flat, all business, her expression cool as she looks at me. I take a sip of my own coffee and try to fight a grimace—it tastes like berries and chocolate, far too sweet for my taste. I can't imagine why that's what I picked off of the menu for myself. I really must have been out of it.

But then again, Asha seems to have that effect on me.

“Every time you see Matvei, we'll pay your usual rate plus twenty percent,” I tell her. “At the end, when the job is done, we'll give you the difference of that from the amount I quoted you at the club—that part in a lump sum. And if you get enough information, who knows? Maybe you'll get a bonus.” I say the last part almost as a joke, but Asha raises an eyebrow.

“What's your idea of a bonus, Finn?” There's something sultry in her voice, and I know she's fucking with me again.

“That'd be up to my boss.” *God*, it's hard not to flirt back with her. But I've already seen just how quickly she can back me into a corner—both literally and figuratively—and I almost wonder if she's testing me, seeing if I *can* behave professionally around her. I'm determined to prove to her that I can.

“Well, I'll look forward to having that discussion with him, then.” She leans

back in her seat, pulling her cup of coffee closer. “How are we going about this?”

“You’ll contact Matvei on your own. You can come up with whatever reason you’d like for why you want to see him again, but let me know after you’ve spoken with him when and where you’ll be meeting him. I can meet you at your apartment to head over—”

“Not there.” She cuts me off abruptly, something firm and sharp in her voice. “We can meet somewhere else. Anywhere you like—just not at my place.”

That brings me up short a little. She clearly has a reason for not wanting me to know where she lives, and it makes me wonder what she’s hiding. But then again, she might not be hiding anything at all. It wouldn’t be so strange for a woman who works as an escort not to want men to know her home address.

“Alright then. I’ll come up with somewhere else. Anyway—the point is, I’ll meet you, and we go together to Matvei’s. He’s never met me, so he doesn’t know I work for the Kings. I’ll be your bodyguard, full stop. Someone you bring along to make sure that the johns don’t get fresh.”

Asha wrinkles her nose. “Don’t call them that.”

“What?”

“Johns.” She waves her hand. “I’m not *that* kind of escort. Not anymore. This will be the first time I’ve made an outcall since—”

She breaks off suddenly, her teeth sinking into her lower lip as if she’s realized that she’s said more than she meant to. “Anyway. So I’ll meet you, and you’ll be my security. Just you?”

I nod. “Just me.”

“And if he gets rough? If I use my safeword and he doesn’t listen?”

“Here.” I reach into my pocket, pulling out a flat box, and Asha’s eyebrow shoots up.

“Oh, Finn, you shouldn’t have,” she says archly, her voice faux-sarcastic and high-pitched, and I don’t know whether to laugh or not, considering the reason I brought this for her.

“I wish it was just a gift.” I hand her the box and watch as she opens it to reveal a flat, wide gold bangle. “There’s a sensor in the bracelet. Be careful how hard you press your wrist against something; if it sets it off, it’ll send a signal to my phone, and I’ll know I need to come in and get you—in the event that you can’t—”

I can’t even finish the fucking sentence. I should be more detached about this, better able to talk about the possibilities of what might happen, but just the idea of her being trapped, gagged, bound—unable to call for me for help or get away, has me seething with anger that feels difficult to contain.”

“If I can’t shout for you or you’re out of hearing range.” Asha nods, looking at the bracelet. She says it almost casually, as if my saying that to her is as normal as discussing our coffee order, and it makes me wince. There’s something in her face, though, a faint, drawn look that tells me that something about it bothers her more than she’s letting on.

“We’ve put things like this into jewelry before. It’s easy for a man to wear a signet ring, or even a faux wedding band with something like that in it, before going into a dangerous situation. Nikolai has something similar in a piece of jewelry for Lilliana, in case something ever happens to her. It was easy to have it installed for you.”

Asha smiles faintly. “Thank you. That’s very thoughtful, covering all your bases like that.”

I want to reach out and take her hand, tell her that there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to keep her safe. I know how soft her skin would feel under my fingers, but I want to know what it would be like to have her wrap her fingers around mine, to let me be more than just this to her. I want—

I can’t even begin to unpack all of the things that I want with her.

“We’ll come up with a name for me to go by,” I continue, “so he doesn’t hear Finn and go putting two and two together. Hell, I don’t know. Charlie.” I laugh, before realizing that she doesn’t know I’ve stolen the name of the bartender at my favorite dive.

I find myself wishing she did know. Wishing that she and I had those kinds of inside jokes, that this was a coffee date and not a neutral place to talk

about a job. Wishing that she'd tell me more about why she said she used to be a different kind of escort, instead of shutting down the way she had.

It's been a long time since I've wanted to know more about a woman like this. Since I've wanted more than just a few nights of distraction and then moved on. Truthfully, I hadn't ever thought I'd feel like this again.

And, of course, it's for someone who I shouldn't feel anything even approaching the way I do.

"Just you." Asha pulls her lower lip between her teeth again, and it's all I can do not to look directly at her mouth. "You're going to take on Matvei all on your own if he gets out of hand. Not to disparage your abilities as security or anything, but—" She looks more than a little dubious. "He probably has security of his own."

"I can manage," I assure her. "You're right that he almost certainly does have his own, but you can't show up with an entire team. That *would* set off some red flags for him. You'll be safe with me, Asha. I'll make sure of it."

She lets out a slow breath. "You can't tell me there's no danger in this."

"No, I can't," I agree. "In fact, I won't, because you'd know I was full of shit, and you'd walk away, and you'd be right to do so. But I will do everything in my power to keep you safe, Asha, and I wouldn't put you in danger that I didn't think you or I were capable of handling."

She looks at me for a long moment, those liquid brown eyes holding mine. "Why?" she asks finally. "Why are you so concerned for my safety? Why not just throw me to Matvei and see what you find out after? Let him do as he pleases?" She shrugs as if it doesn't matter, but I can see a keen curiosity on her face. "He might be more forthcoming, without restrictions to hold him back. Without the threat of anyone trying to stop him."

Just the thought of it has me seeing red. It's bad enough that I'm going to stand by while this asshole gets to be anywhere near her, that he gets to see that perfect body, have her lips and hands touching him. Bad enough that I'm going to go home thinking about that, when I desperately want her in *my* bed. The thought of him hurting her is unconscionable.

"No one hurts women on our watch," I tell her evenly, because I can't tell her

all of that. “No one in the Kings would agree to let you be harmed for information, at least not that I know of, and you best believe I’d have something to say if I knew of someone who would. That information is worth a lot, but it’s not worth your safety, Asha. Or any woman’s,” I add.

“That’s good to hear,” she says archly, but there’s a faint tremor in her words that I don’t miss. “So that’s all, then? I let you know when I’ve talked to Matvei, and then we make plans to meet?”

“It needs to be soon,” I caution her. “He’s making moves, and we need to know anything that he might let slip about what those are. Play to his ego if you have to, find out what will make him talk, and get him to trust you if you can. But this can’t wait long, Asha.”

“I’m going to be working on my days off, you know.” She raises an eyebrow. “But at least you’re going to make it worth my while.”

*I’d do a lot more than that, if you’d let me.* I keep those words locked tightly behind my lips, but it’s the hardest thing in the world to look at her, and not let a single flirtation slip out. If she were any other woman, I’d be halfway to getting her in my bed already.

But if she were any other woman, I don’t think I’d want her half as badly.

“You’ll be well compensated,” I tell her firmly. “And if at any point this becomes too dangerous, Asha, you tell me. You don’t need to feel obliged—”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.” She finishes the last of her coffee and reaches for her purse. “I’ll call you, Finn. As soon as I talk to Matvei.”

There’s a clear inference in her words that she’ll call *me*, not the other way around—that she doesn’t expect to hear me for any reason. Which is fine, I tell myself as she gets up and gives me a quick, tight smile before walking away, towards the door of the coffee shop, and I sit there and watch her go.

It’s business. *Just* business, and nothing else. What happened at the Ashen Rose stays there, just like any other client she sees.

But I can already tell that it’s going to be a hell of a lot harder to keep my head on straight while we do this job than I realized.

## Asha



I'm not sure I've ever met a man who manages to infuriate and turn me on all at once as much as Finn does—who seems to have an uncanny ability to make me genuinely *like* him at the same time. I felt like I had to leave when I did, because if I hadn't, I would have wanted to stay and keep talking to him. I might have said things that he doesn't need to know. Told him things about myself that I haven't talked about with anyone, even Nikolai.

*We wouldn't work*, I remind myself as I walk back towards my apartment. Finn doesn't have a yielding bone in his body, not really, and I'm not about to let him have the kind of power over me that he would, if I gave in to what he wants. Just being around him threatens the life I've carefully constructed for myself, and I'm beginning to wish I'd refused the job after all, for more than one reason.

But the money is good. *More* than good. By the time I'm finished with this, I'll have enough tucked away that I can make decisions that seemed years down the line for me before this. I can stay at the Ashen Rose until I'm ready to go, and then I can just—leave. I can plot out my life however I choose from now on.

Finn doesn't fit into that anywhere. If he were a different man, I'd just let him take me home and fuck him out of my system—but he's not. He's this strange mix of irritating and attractive and intriguing all at once. I know that if I let myself slip deeper into wanting him, it will only make my life far more complicated than it needs to be.

*You're finally getting over Nikolai. And before that—*

I clench my teeth, forcing the painful memory away. Having my heart broken twice was enough. A third time wouldn't be the charm—it might just kill me.

Instead, I force myself to focus on the job ahead, the steps that Finn laid out for me. Getting ahold of Matvei won't be an issue—I can get his number from the club, and I don't doubt he'll want to see me. Nikolai already told me that Matvei contacted the club after he'd been thrown out, asking to speak to me privately, to see me again, demanding that he be allowed back for another session with me. Nikolai refused him, of course, and I have a feeling that Matvei will be even more pleased for a night with me outside of the rules and restraints of the club.

A shudder goes down my spine at that thought. *Finn said he'll keep me safe*, I remind myself, but I don't know if Finn realizes just how dangerous Matvei is. I wonder if I should have told Finn what Matvei did, if I should have expanded more on what happened beyond just saying that he had gotten out of line, and that he'd frightened me. But surely if Finn and the Kings are investigating Matvei's activities in the city, they're aware of what kind of man he is.

Finn had told me not to wait long. I'm working tonight—then off for the next two days. My stomach tightens at the idea of getting Matvei's number tonight and calling him, but I tell myself that there's no point in putting it off. The sooner this begins, the sooner it can be over.

It's hard to focus on work, but I force myself through it, not wanting any of my clients—or, god forbid, Nikolai, to realize that anything is off. The last thing I want to deal with right now are questions from Nikolai.

Getting the number is easy enough. Callie is working the front desk tonight, and I tell her I need to look at a client's file. I find Matvei Kotov in seconds—marked as *restricted, do not allow to reapply*—and write down the number that he gave.

Easy. The hard part will be following through on it—and it is. Sitting on my bed hours later, my hair damp and loose around my shoulders after a shower, wrapped in my favorite well-worn, soft bathrobe, I look down at the sticky note I wrote the number on and my cell phone, and take a deep breath.



*Finn promised me protection.* I repeat that in my head as I pick up my phone, swallowing back the fear that coils deep in my belly, the memories of how things went that night at the Ashen Rose still present in my mind. The safest thing to do would be to throw the number away and tell Finn that I've changed my mind about the job. But for what he's offering—

I dial the number before I can stop myself, waiting for Matvei to answer.

“Hello?” His voice is deep, thick with his accent, and for a moment, I can't speak past the reminder of how that voice sounded, mocking me in the room at the Rose.

“This is Asha,” I say as confidently as I can, not wanting him to hear the tremor behind the words. “From the—”

“I remember you.” Even that has the hint of a threat, coming from him. “Your boss refused to let me see you again. Did he tell you I called?”

“He did. And about the—the refusal.” I swallow hard, desperately trying to keep the upper hand in this. “I was calling to arrange something with you privately.”

“Oh?” Matvei says it almost sarcastically. “Going behind your boss's back, are you? And I suppose you're going to charge me more than you would have at the Rose, for the pleasure of your *private* company?” He chuckles. “Whores are so predictable.”

I have to bite back every acid retort I want to make to that, to keep my voice pleasant, to entertain this absolute bullshit that I know is only the beginning of what I'm going to have to deal with when it comes to this man. “No, in fact—I hadn't planned on charging you more than my usual fee. I thought you might prefer to continue this arrangement—outside of the restrictions of the Rose.” My voice tightens on the last sentence, that cold fear snaking its way down my spine. I close my eyes briefly, glad that this conversation is happening over the phone and not in person.

“Oh, I would *very* much like that, *devochka*.” Matvei's voice is a low, dangerous purr now, pleasure evident in his voice. “You understand that you would be doing as *I* please, yes? I am not a man who likes to submit to a woman's pleasures. We would—pick up where we left off, when we were so

rudely interrupted.”

I know what he’s saying. And I know that he’s not going to entertain ideas of rules and safewords. If it goes too far, I’ll have to rely on Finn’s protection to keep me safe—alive, even.

It’s then that I know I need Finn to send someone other than himself to watch my back. Professional or not, Finn has feelings for me that go beyond the realm of this job, and I can’t trust him not to let those feelings get in the way of mine. We need to do this separately, as difficult as I know it will be to convince him of that.

“I think I have a good grasp of what it is that you want,” I tell Matvei smoothly. “When would you like to meet? And where? I have the next two evenings free, if that works for—”

“Eager little *kotenok*, aren’t you? So eager for my firm hand to put you back into your place.” His voice thickens, full of an excited lust that makes my skin crawl. “Tomorrow night, then. At a more—private place. I will send you the address.”

I swallow hard, nodding, before remembering that he can’t see me. “Tomorrow night, then. I expect the money up front, the same as the Rose,” I remind him. “And I’ll be bringing a man with me. A bodyguard.”

Matvei snorts. “If that makes you feel better, by all means, *devochka*. And don’t worry. You will see your envelope of cash before I lay a finger on you. I know how to pay my whores.”

“Ten p.m. tomorrow, then.” My heart is in my throat, and I feel sick, but I remind myself of the payoff. Of the absolute freedom I can enjoy if there’s no more reason to be concerned with money. “I’ll see you then.”

“See you then, *devochka*.”

The phone clicks off, but those last words hang in the air, heavy with foreboding. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry—I’m terrified of seeing him again, but it’s almost laughable how easy it was, how the man is so fucking full of himself that he didn’t even consider that my “bodyguard” might be someone spying on him...or using me to spy. I can see what Nikolai meant when he called Matvei reckless, but he’s arrogant, too, and clearly

thinks he's invincible.

Not a wise thing to think, in a city with men like Nikolai and Theo running things.

I still need to speak with Finn. I consider texting him, avoiding the complications that would come with hearing his voice, the way it would make me feel right now—but what comes next needs to be clear.

“Asha.” His thick burr comes over the line after the first ring. I sink my teeth into my lower lip, trying to ignore the way a shiver of desire replaces the fear I'd felt before, the moment I hear Finn's voice.

A part of me wants him to be there while I'm with Matvei. That part would feel safer—and that's exactly why it needs to be someone else.

“I called Matvei. Ten p.m. tomorrow. He's going to send me the address. And I told him that I would have a guard with me.”

“Good.” Finn pauses. “No issues? Nothing—”

“Aside from his general attitude?” I sink my teeth harder into my lip. “No, nothing in particular. But Finn—”

“Yes?” His voice goes softer, quieter, and I close my eyes. I can imagine him in the bed next to me right now, that voice murmuring close by. I have a sudden ache that I haven't felt in years—the need to feel broad, strong arms around me, a chest to sink against, and a shoulder to press my face into, someone to help bear the weight of what I'm feeling. I never had that with Nikolai. He always held a part of himself separate, as I'd always expected that he would. It's been—

Longer than I care to remember. Long enough that I don't want to let that need back in.

“You need to send someone else as that guard,” I say slowly. “Not you. Someone else can come with me, someone you trust.”

“Asha—”

“No. I'm putting my foot down about this. Not you.”

There's a long silence, and then when Finn speaks again, I can hear the faintest sound of hurt and confusion somewhere in his voice. "Why?"

"I don't want to talk about it. But pick someone else. I'm sure you have plenty of men capable of watching one whore's back while she goes to gather information for you."

I can almost feel his shock radiating through the phone as he absorbs what I said. "Asha, I—"

"Ten p.m. tomorrow. I'll let you know the address once Matvei sends it to me. We can meet—"

"I'll send you an address as well." Finn's voice is flat, faraway, as if he's thinking about something else. "We'll make plans tomorrow."

"Just remember what I said—"

"I heard you, Asha." He takes a deep, slow breath. "Goodnight."

He hangs up before I can, and I sit there for a long moment, staring at my phone.

I have a feeling that it's going to be a sleepless night.

—

I wake up feeling irritable and poorly rested, wondering how I'm going to get through the night with Matvei without letting my emotions show, as on edge as I feel.

Halfway through the afternoon, I get a text from Matvei, giving me an address near the river. I send it to Finn, who replies only with a different address, and I don't get a response when I ask him what sort of place, exactly, I'm meeting him at. That leaves me with the rest of the day to get through, the anxiety about the evening stopping me from managing to do much other than clean my apartment just for something to keep my hands busy, and then pick out something to wear for the evening ahead.

Matvei will want me in lingerie, I'm sure—something that seems softer, more submissive, not the leather and latex I prefer and feel sexiest in. I pick out a

pair of pale pink lace panties and a matching balconette bra, slipping a black ribbed cotton dress over it that stops at mid-thigh and shows off my breasts to perfect effect. I curl my hair and do my makeup lightly, opting for a rose-tinted lipstick instead of my usual red, and call an Uber to the address Finn gave me.

When the car pulls up outside of it, I see that it's a mechanic's garage—there are bikes parked inside, and more in the lot. I crane my head, looking for whoever is meeting me—then I see Finn, leaning up against his bike just outside of the front door.

*He's just here to introduce me to whoever he's sending with me for the night,* I tell myself, but as I get out of the car, heels clicking against the uneven pavement, I see the hard set of Finn's jaw and know what's going to come out of his mouth before I even get close enough to hear it.

I know a man who's about to argue with me when I see one.

"Who are you sending with me?" I ask bluntly as soon as I'm standing in front of him in the dimly lit parking lot. I see his gaze slide down the front of my dress before he can stop himself, lingering for just a moment on my breasts before falling to my legs and then the heels I'm wearing, and then quickly back up to my face.

Before I can stop myself, my hand shoots out, grabbing his chin as I step a little closer, too close for him to look down at me again. "Look at *me*," I hiss at him, the growing trepidation I have about the night ahead morphing into anger at the certainty I feel that Finn is making his own decisions about my protection tonight. "What was that about being professional?"

Finn's blue gaze holds mine, and there's something different in it, something hard and dangerous of his own that sends an entirely different sort of shiver down my spine. He looks at me for a long moment, his chest rising and falling with deep breaths as my fingers press into his jaw, and I feel the tension thickening between us.

"If I wasn't being professional, lass," he murmurs, "you'd be bent over this bike right now, with that pretty dress up around your waist. I've never thought about spanking a woman before, but I'd consider it, to teach you a lesson about telling me how to do *my* job."

A sudden heat washes over me, flushing my skin and pooling between my thighs, my stomach clenching with a fierce and unexpected arousal. “I don’t let men talk to me that way,” I hiss, and his hand comes up, grabbing my wrist as he tugs my grip away from his chin.

“Not unless they pay you, right?” His blue eyes are flinty. “And sometimes not even then.”

“*This* is why you can’t be the one who comes with me tonight.” I glare at him. “You really think—”

“I hadn’t even said anything about that, yet.” His lips are pressed tightly together. “You assume a lot, Asha.”

“Am I wrong?” I taunt, looking up at him. His hand is still holding my wrist, broad and rough against my delicate skin, and I *shouldn’t* be turned on by this. But my pulse is pounding in my throat, beating rapidly, and I suddenly feel as if I can’t get enough air. “Tell me that whoever is coming with me tonight is about to walk out here.”

Finn swallows hard. “You’re not wrong,” he admits. “I put you in this position, Asha. I don’t feel right not being the one to protect you—”

“I *told* you what I wanted! You arrogant, high-handed son of a bitch, *I’m* the one *being* protected, and I—”

My voice is rising, filling the lot, and his other hand comes up suddenly, covering my mouth. For one brief second, I have a vision of him spinning me around, pressing me up against the motorcycle, his hand replaced with his lips, and I *want* it. God, I want to know what it feels like for him to kiss me.

“Keep your voice down, lass” he growls. “This is our territory, but that doesn’t mean I want all our business shouted out for anyone to hear.”

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself down, and nod. My heart is still galloping in my chest, and I can hear the ringing sound of that Irish burr calling me *lass*, of his hand over my mouth, his cedar and spice scent filling my nose. I’m almost trembling with desire, and somehow it feels wrong, going to see Matvei with this kind of lust washing over me for Finn.

“We need to keep our distance from each other,” I whisper. “This is why.

What's happening right now is why."

He lets out a harsh breath. "Professional."

"This isn't professional." I should be pulling away from him, slipping out of his grasp. I should be angry that I'm pinned up against a motorcycle, Finn's muscled body brushing against mine, towering over me, boxing me in like this. But I'm not. I'm imagining what he just said, what it would be like to have him bend me over the bike in this parking lot, in view of anyone who drove past, pushing my skirt up as he thrust—

A shudder runs through me, and I see the faintest smirk curl Finn's lips. He knows what this is doing to me, and it's fucking *amusing* him.

That does make me angry.

I twist away from him, shoving him back as I move out of his reach. He lets me go, which is more than I can say for some other men, but I'm not about to let this go over him doing the bare minimum. "You really want to be there while I fuck another man?" I taunt, narrowing my eyes at him. "You really want to hear that? Be right there while you know that's happening?"

Finn pauses, his gaze catching mine with a sudden uncertainty that I wasn't actually prepared for. He reaches up, his hand pausing halfway before he runs it through his already messy copper hair. "I heard dommes don't always fuck their clients," he says finally, the words slow, as if he's recalling information he got from somewhere else. "That sometimes it's about the—uh—lack of gratification or whatever. Or that they have to get themselves off. It's about *not* getting to fuck you."

His voice lowers, that rich accent thickening as his eyes narrow. "I can't imagine being turned on by *not* getting to fuck you," he murmurs, his gaze raking over me once more, as if to grab one more glimpse of what's standing in front of him. "Not something I can imagine wanting. The opposite, actually."

Finn takes a step closer to me, almost blocking out the dim light, his hands rubbing against the sides of his thighs as if in an effort not to touch me. "You want to know what wouldn't be professional, Asha? Telling you right now how goddamn much I've been wanting to fuck you. How I haven't stopped

thinking about it since I left the Rose after that fucked-up orgasm you gave me. How right now, that's *all* I want."

I can feel myself starting to tremble. *I want it, too.* Something about this man is fucking magnetic, like he draws me to him with a word, a touch, just being *near* me. I need him as far away from me as fucking possible, before he gets me into trouble I don't want to walk into again—but that doesn't seem like it's going to happen.

Not unless I walk away from this job—and I have two reasons that I can't do that now. Not just the money, but now that I've made plans with Matvei, he won't let it go so easily. I'd be in more danger by standing him up than going alone with the plan.

I tilt my chin up to look at Finn, desperate to defuse the tension before this gets out of both of our control. "Matvei doesn't want a *domme*," I murmur, holding his gaze as I deliver the news that Finn clearly didn't pick up on. "He wants a submissive. That's what he wanted the night he came to the Rose. It's what he still wants. And he is *definitely* going to fuck me tonight, Finn. That's going to be the least of what he does to me."

The last words are whispered, despite my best efforts. I know Finn hears the hint of fear there, the tremor that runs through them, and I swallow hard. "You shouldn't be the one coming along," I murmur, and his jaw tightens.

"Like hell." He rubs his hand over the scruff of his beard, sucking in a deep, slow breath. "Maybe this wasn't the right thing to do. Maybe we should call it off—"

I laugh bitterly. "We can't do that now, Finn. The plans with Matvei are made. You think he won't come and find me if I stand him up? He's already been told no by Nikolai and had to swallow that. You think he'll stand for being told no directly by a whore who's already pissed him off?"

"I wish you wouldn't call yourself that." Finn reaches out, as if he's going to touch my face and pull me closer to him, but I step back, my heels unsteady on the pavement.

"Why not? I'm a high-class escort at the Rose, but right now, I'm standing in a garage parking lot, waiting to go to an outcall. You paid me for sex, and so



will he, and so will plenty of other men in the weeks to come. I am what I am, Finn. If you can't handle that, then you *definitely* shouldn't be the one watching my back." *Or any other part of me*, I want to say, but I don't. I stare at him, waiting for him to back down, but he doesn't.

"Call an Uber," he says finally. "I'll follow you on the bike to that address. But I'm not sending anyone else with you, Asha. It's me or no one. If something happened to you and I wasn't the one there to handle it—"

He breaks off, his jaw clenched tightly, and there's a sudden sheen in his blue eyes that makes no sense. He doesn't know me well enough for that. But I can see the determination in his face, and I know he's not going to take no for an answer.

"Fine," I bite out, turning away from him. I'm still throbbing from the acute awareness of how close he was, my lace panties clinging to the dampness between my thighs. I breathe in slowly, trying to push it away as I put in the request for an Uber. That, at least, ought to keep anything further from happening between us in the next ten minutes before it gets here.

Although with as high as the tension was between us, I'm not sure it would take either of us more than five.

I realize, as I look back to where he's standing, that he's put distance between us, too. His back is to me, one hand on the seat of his motorcycle, and at that moment, I think I'd give almost anything to see what the look on his face is, to try to have some idea of what it is that he's thinking.

And at the same time, I know it's better if I don't.

There's the sound of the Uber pulling up, and Finn turns to look at me, his jaw still tight. "I'll follow you there," is all he says.

Anything else that either of us might have said is drowned out by the sound of the engine of his motorcycle revving in the warm night air.

**Finn**

I'm a fucking idiot.



It's all I can think as I watch Asha step into the car, my throat and chest tight at the sight of her; how fucking beautiful she is and how much I want her.

I want it to be my apartment that I'm taking her back to, my bed, instead of going with her as she goes to someone else's.

*Especially Matvei Kotov.*

I don't know why I assumed he wanted her in any way but as a submissive. It's my fault, I suppose, for not knowing enough about all of this—about what Asha does, about what it is that men like Matvei would want from her. And now I might have put her in more danger than before.

*Did Nikolai want that from her?* It had been hard enough to force myself not to think of them in bed together with Asha teasing and taunting him the way she had to me, but the idea of him doing entirely different things to her, of him having her on her knees, telling her in that deep Russian accent of his, exactly what he wanted her to do to him and watching her obey—the thought of it makes my gut twist with sick envy that makes me wonder how I'm ever going to look at him in the same way again.

The address takes us to a house some miles outside of the city, an imposing-looking brick home with an iron-gated fence around it. I follow the car through the gates as Asha is buzzed in, and my gut tightens with apprehension. Matvei meant it when he said *private*—if there is trouble beyond what I can handle, it will take some time before anyone else can get

here.

I'm waiting when Asha steps out of the car. Her beautiful face is smooth and expressionless, and I want to say something to her, but I don't know what. I feel more out of my depth than I should, for being the one who is supposed to have her back in this.

She walks right past me without a word, and my heart slams against the walls of my chest, catching a breath of her perfume. I couldn't have said what it was, something floral and vanilla, but I know all I'm ever going to think about when I smell it is that moment earlier this evening, when I had her between me and the seat of my bike, and I almost thought that she was going to give in.

It's been a long time since I've wanted to kiss a woman so badly. Since I've wanted *anything* so badly. I forgot what it was like to feel an ache like this, to feel my pulse throb in my veins at someone else's closeness, that catch of breath in my throat.

And now she's about to walk into someone else's bed.

I wait behind her as she knocks on the door. I half expect some member of the household staff to answer, but instead, it's Matvei himself, wearing suit trousers and a light-grey button-down, his short blond hair combed back and his jaw freshly shaved. He doesn't even look at me, his gaze raking over her with a greedy possessiveness that makes my fists clench with unearned jealousy.

"Asha." He opens the door wider. "Come in."

The command in his voice is clear; it's not an invitation. I see Asha stiffen, her spine straightening, but she steps inside, and he nearly closes the door in my face before I put out a hand to stop it, my gaze meeting his.

"And who are you?" There's a deceptive pleasantness in his tone. I don't forget for a moment that he undoubtedly has guards of his own here, men who wouldn't hesitate to kill on his order. For Asha's safety and mine, I can't allow my own feelings to dictate how this goes.

"Asha's bodyguard." I offer him a tight-lipped smile. "While I don't expect to be watching the proceedings, I do need to be close enough to hear her if

she calls for me.”

“She won’t be in need of you.” Matvei goes to close the door, but I hold my hand firm on it, not backing down.

“I’m paid to do a job.” I keep my voice even. “You wouldn’t begrudge a man wanting to keep that job, would you?”

“Let him in, Matvei.” Asha’s tone is cool. “What you want from me doesn’t start until we’re in the bedroom—or wherever it is you’re wanting my services tonight. I told you I was bringing security with me. If you don’t let him in and within shouting distance, I’ll assume you’ve changed your mind, and I’ll go.”

I shouldn’t want him to push the point, to force her hand so that she walks out. He clearly wants her, and badly—I can see it in his hesitation, the way I can see in his face that he’s considering giving in to her demand, even though I feel very certain that he’s not a man who gives easily or at all. That desire will help Asha do the job I’ve sent her to do, will help the *Kings* in the very business that we’re on here—yet I find myself wanting to take her and leave, so this man never gets to touch her again.

“Fine,” Matvei bites out. “Come in.”

He steps back, closing the door behind me as I step into the foyer of the house. It’s decorated inside with dark blues and greys and creams, heavy dark wood and iron fixtures, a house with a stern and forbidding feel to it. Matvei doesn’t look at me again as he reaches for Asha’s elbow, leading her out of the foyer and down the hall.

“You’ll stay here,” Matvei barks out as we walk up a curving staircase and down a long, wide hallway with doors on either side, flat leather-topped benches against either side of the wall, and double doors at the far end. “Asha and I will be in that room at the end.” He motions to it. “I assure you, you’ll have nothing to do but sit here and listen to the sounds she makes.”

A cruel smile curves his lips, and I feel my jaw tighten. Asha’s face is utterly impassive, as if she’s clicked off some part of her. She turns away from me with barely a glance, her hand limp at her side where Matvei is still holding onto her elbow.

“Let’s go,” she says simply, and he leads her down to those double doors, neither of them looking back as I sink onto the leather-padded bench, my gut twisted in knots.

I hear very little for a long time, only low voices. And then, when enough time has passed, I start to wonder what they’re doing in there—the sounds that I don’t want to hear.

A masculine groan, Matvei’s low voice, a feminine cry that I know must be Asha’s. The impact of something against flesh. Her soft, pleading moan, and I know her well enough now to *know* it’s not real, to know that she’s playing the game, making him believe that she wants what he’s doing to her—but that doesn’t help the way I thought it would. It doesn’t matter that she’s not feeling actual pleasure—hell, maybe that’s worse. I can’t think straight enough to parse out whether I’d rather she actually be enjoying it, when just the fact that she’s in there at all is making me see red.

My hands press against my legs, fingers digging into the sides as I clench my jaw. I’d thought I could do this, that I could separate my feelings for her from the job we’re here to do, but *fuck* if I don’t want to go in there, press a gun to his head and pull the trigger just for him having put his hands on her at all. I don’t want him fucking touching her. I don’t want *anyone* touching her that isn’t me.

And I don’t have any right to feel that way.

He’s being loud on purpose, I fucking know it. Making sure I have to hear every grunt, every impact of skin on skin, so I know exactly what he’s doing—his thickly accented voice telling her what to do with his cock, so I’m forced to know when she has her lips wrapped around it, when he’s sliding his fingers into her, when he’s fucking her. It’s bad enough that I get up and start pacing the hall just to have something to keep me moving, because if I sit there for much longer, I *will* fuck this up.

There’s no way that I could have known I’d want her like this—but I should have found another way once I realized that I did. That’s crystal fucking clear to me now, but it’s too late. So I pace and sit, pace and sit, wondering how goddamn long this man is going to take to finish up—but of course, he’s going to wring every second that he’s paid for out of her.

Asha is, of course, a professional. I have my eyes fixed on my watch, waiting for the moment when I know she's supposed to be done—right on the dot, the door opens, and she steps out with Matvei behind her.

The look on her face is so blank that it tears at my heart. I can tell that whatever happened in there, it was more than her just zoning out and thinking of something else while Matvei fucked her. She had to be present enough to play the game of whatever fucked-up power exchange he wanted, and she more than just didn't prefer it. I can see from the way she looks past me that she hated every second of it.

It feels like I asked her to do something wrong. Like I'm a party to whatever he did to her that made her feel like this, and I grit my teeth as I stride down the hall to her, taking her elbow gently and steering her away from Matvei.

"Next week then, *devochka*," Matvei says carelessly, crossing his arms as he stands there and watches us go. "I already have ideas."

"Same day and time." Asha's voice is pleasant, smooth—almost robotic. "Goodnight, Mr. Kotov."

Matvei smirks. "Surely you can call me Matvei, *devochka*? After all, you still have my cum inside of you, *krasivaya devushka*."

My steps hitch, and for a moment, I see red. I can see myself drawing my gun, spinning in one fluid motion, and painting the wall behind him with his brains, and *Christ*, I want to fucking do it. I wonder if I can tell Theo and Nikolai that if Matvei has to die, I want to be the one to pull the trigger.

Asha gives him a bland smile. "I prefer to keep things professional outside of the bedroom, Mr. Kotov. Goodnight."

He says nothing, only keeps that knowing smirk on his face for the one moment that he's still in view, before I walk with Asha down the hall and out to the front door.

The moment we're outside, she yanks her arm away from me, putting space between us. "I'll pay you back at the garage," I tell her quietly, in a voice low enough that not even any security system could pick up on it. "So there's no chance of him seeing." I pause. "I already called you an Uber there, so we can talk once we—"

She's already walking away from me, towards the curb, where I can see lights starting to come towards us. She hasn't spoken a word directly to me since she walked out of the room with Matvei, and it makes me feel restless and irritable, wanting to find out what's going on. I want her to talk to me, to tell me what's going on in her head right now, and she clearly has every intention of shutting down.

I can't make decisions about how to handle the next time if she doesn't talk to me.

Every muscle in my body is tense as I follow the Uber back to the garage, pulling into a space in front of it and killing the engine as Asha gets out of the car. She still has that blank, shut-off look on her face, and I let out a breath as I walk to meet her, pulling an envelope out of my jacket pocket.

"Here's the cash for tonight." I pause as she takes it out of my hand and puts it into her purse, trying not to be distracted by the brush of her fingers against mine. "Asha—are you alright? I know tonight wasn't something you like to do, but you seem—"

"We don't need to talk about it." Her voice is flat, curt. "It's none of your concern."

I feel a flash of irrational anger, frustration that she won't talk to me. "We're working together, Asha. It *is* my concern if you're not alright. If something happened—" I force what Matvei said as we were leaving out of my head, how pissed off it made me. I need to think about her right now, what she might be feeling—but she's making it just as difficult. Her lips press together, thinning, and I can tell it's going to be hard to drag anything out of her at all.

"I did my job. That's all you need to know. He didn't say anything useful, so I'll go back again, but I expect it will be a few sessions before I have enough trust with him to be able to ask much without seeming suspicious." She raises one eyebrow, her gaze still flat as she looks at me. "Is that enough of a debriefing for you, Mr. O'Sullivan?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Asha!" I glare at her, the use of my last name the last straw that tips me over the edge. "You don't need to play these games with me. You can just *talk* to me. You can tell me what happened—"



“No, I can’t.” She tilts her chin up, letting out a slow breath. “I’m not going to detail what I did with Matvei, both because he still *is* my client, and because I don’t personally want to go into it again. When I get something relevant to what *you* want from me, I’ll share it. Alright? We don’t need to keep talking about this.”

Asha pauses, looking at me as I struggle to get my emotions under control, to think of how to have this conversation rationally. “The *games*, as you put it, are how I keep my life in order,” she says calmly. “And now, I’m going to go home. I’m very tired. Same time, same place next week.”

She turns to go, and I close my eyes briefly, struggling for patience. “Asha, let me give you a ride home. You shouldn’t be going back alone—”

“No.” Her tone is flat, the word sharply final. “I don’t want you to know where I live. My privacy is important.”

“I’m not letting you just get back in that Uber and go home alone!” I glare at her, huffing out a frustrated breath. “You’ve just spent time with someone that both my organization and Nikolai have flagged as a danger, someone who you yourself didn’t want to see again because he upset you, and you want to just go home without having someone to check and make sure—”

“It’s my *home*, Finn!” She explodes, spinning around to face me again, her eyes narrowed. “If I can’t feel safe there, then I might just as well go ahead and hang it all up, leave the city, and start over somewhere new. I am *not* going to just tell you where I live, and I am not going to let myself be made afraid to go home.” Asha turns on her heel, starting to go back to the Uber that she told to wait. I want to grab her elbow, pull her back, and make her listen to me, but I know *exactly* how furious she’d be if I did that. It wouldn’t be pretty, that’s for sure.

“Asha—” I call after her anyway, and she pauses briefly, halfway between me and the car. “I’m trying to protect you. I—”

“I’m not yours to protect, Finn.” She doesn’t look at me as she says it, her shoulders tensing, and then she stalks to the waiting car without another word.

I watch her for a moment as she gets into the Uber, the decision of what to do

warring back and forth in my head. She clearly wants her privacy—but I can't reconcile letting her leave without being certain that she'll get home safely. I'd never be able to live with myself if something happened to her—for more than just because I'm responsible for putting her on this job.

Everything I've seen of her has indicated that she's tough, independent, and stubborn—but there's something about her that makes me want to protect her...to take care of her, no matter how much I know she'd buck against it.

*Fuck it.* I swing my leg over my bike before I can stop myself—before the Uber can get too far—firing up the engine and peeling out into the road as I follow the car. She might not have been willing to ride with me, but I sure as hell can follow her and make sure that she gets into her apartment building safely.

She's in this situation because of me. Because *I* decided she was the best way for us to get what we needed without putting lives in danger.

Now, I'm not so confident that hers might not be after all. And I'm not going to let anything happen to her.

## Asha



I manage to keep the tears in until the Uber drops me off. I think, for a split second as I get out of the car, that I hear a motorcycle's engine—I spin around, looking down the dark street for any sign of a bike following me, but there's nothing there that I can see. Just the lights of traffic from the main road, and then the low darkness of mine.

I grip my keys in my fingers as I walk to my building, inwardly cursing Finn for making me worry at all. I know his heart was in a good place—he's asked me to do this job, and his job is security for the Kings. It makes sense that he'd be worried about making sure I got home safe, wanting to follow me, to ensure that nothing happened. If I'd let him, he'd probably have followed me all the way up to my apartment. And then—

My eyes flutter closed for just a moment as I put in the code to open the outside door, slipping into the pine-scented lobby of my apartment building and heading for the stairs. I don't want to be touched after that session with Matvei—but somehow, the idea of it being *Finn* touching me feels differently. It wouldn't even have to be sexual. I feel, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that if I asked him to lay in bed with me and hold me while I fell asleep, he'd do it, even if it meant him spending the whole night wanting me while nothing happened.

It's the kind of thing that could make me fall in love with him, I think as I step into my apartment and triple-lock the door behind me, tossing my keys onto the counter and contemplating a drink. But all I really want is a shower

and to go to bed—before I can even make my way to the bathroom, I feel the tears start to well up.

I close my eyes tightly, trying to hold them back, wrapping my arms around myself as if I can physically push the emotion deeper and lock it away, but of course, I can't. It wells up, everything I'd forced myself not to feel while I did what Matvei wanted from me tonight, and I sink my teeth into my lower lip, groping for the edge of the counter to hold onto as I start to cry.

It was almost too much. He'd been as pleased as a cat that caught a songbird that he'd gotten another night with me despite Nikolai's refusal to let him back into the club. It confirmed that Finn was onto something with his plan—Matvei would likely drop some useful information before too long simply because he won't be able to keep himself from bragging to me. He's an arrogant, reckless, spiteful man, and my skin crawled every time he touched me.

He could see that Finn didn't like me being there, too—and he'd exploited it. He hadn't suspected that Finn was more than a bodyguard, but I know he'd made sure that Finn could hear what we were doing, that his commands and sounds of pleasure could be heard well down the hallway where Finn was waiting. And what he'd said after—

“You fucking asshole,” I mutter as I pull myself away from the counter and stumble towards the bathroom, *needing* a shower, needing to get the feeling of Matvei's hands off of me. He hadn't come inside of me, not the way he'd made it sound to Finn—I'd never have let him fuck me without a condom. If he'd tried, I'd have immediately used my safeword, and if he hadn't listened to that, I'd have been calling for Finn.

He'd just wanted to piss Finn off. *Maybe I should have told Finn that it wasn't true*, I think as I strip off my clothes, leaving them in a pile as I step under the hot water. I'd seen how furious it had made him, the look on his face when Matvei had said that. I'd been too focused on getting out of there to say differently, and then once we'd gotten to the garage, too focused on making sure Finn understood that I didn't want to be followed home.

*You're worrying too much about him*, I tell myself as I stand there in the shower, letting the hot spray beat down against the tense muscles of my

shoulders as I press my forehead against the cool tile of the shower wall. Finn can handle himself—the less we talk about all of this, the better. I need to put space between us, to keep things as professional as possible, as distant as I can. Anything else will only lead to trouble.

Trouble that I'm all too familiar with.

Most nights, I can avoid thinking about it. Most nights, I can keep myself from remembering that awful night seven—almost eight—years ago now. But tonight, with all my defenses already lowered from the evening with Matvei and the ache for Finn thrumming through me, I have more than one reason to let the tears flow as I stand in the warm cubicle of my small apartment shower.

Finn's protectiveness is touching. The way he looks at me—makes my heart ache, every time. But I once knew someone else like that. I let someone else like that in—it broke me apart in a way that I'm not sure I can ever stand to feel again.

*Jamie.* I feel a fresh wave of tears, remembering dark curls and long-fingered hands and an easy laugh, a man too sweet for the world he'd found himself a part of. A man who wasn't hard enough or rough enough to withstand the kind of people that inhabit a world I've never fully been able to get out of since, even if I've kept myself on the fringes of it.

If I let myself remember him, even for a moment, it all comes flooding back. Neon lights in a St. Louis strip club, me barely eighteen and dancing for men twice my age, stuffing dollar bills into a Victoria's Secret g-string as I spun around a pole to whatever top forty hit the DJ had decided to play that night. Nothing like what I do now, none of the sophistication and elegance of the Ashen Rose, none of the exclusivity that I've earned while working for Nikolai. Just me and the rebelliousness of youth, running away from the last of a string of bad foster homes—then a boy only three years older than me at the time, dragged into the club by his biker buddies for his twenty-first birthday.

He'd been brash and stupid enough to follow me out back to where I was smoking a cigarette—a terrible habit that I'd dropped a few years later. He'd introduced himself as Jamie, and I'd given him my stage name at the time—

Garnet—a name that ended up changing many times over the years until I finally landed on Asha. He told me I looked beautiful, and I laughed—I'd been wearing a short denim miniskirt and a ribbed cotton crop top, my hair tossed up into a messy bun with pieces of it still sticking to my neck with sweat from the stage.

*It's strange, I think as I stand there in the shower, tears still dripping down my face, how little I remember of some of the years after that, and how clearly I remember that first night. Down to what I was wearing, the motorcycles in the parking lot, the empty liquor bottle I nearly tripped over when he kissed me.*

There had been an innocence to him that had kept me from telling him to fuck off and go back inside, the way I would have done with any other man that had the gall to follow me out back. Any other man would have come off as a creep, but I could tell that Jamie didn't realize he was breaking an unspoken rule. He just wanted to talk to me, and I was good enough, even back then, at reading people to know that he wasn't going to hurt me. If I told him to go back inside, he'd go—probably like a kicked puppy, but he'd go. And I found, as I contemplated it, that I didn't want him to.

“I don't ever come to places like this.” He'd blurted it out, like he was confessing something to me. I'd snorted, dropping my cigarette and crushing it under the toe of my high-heeled sandal.

“I'm a stripper, not a priest. I don't care if you do or not.” I'd crossed my arms under my breasts, waiting for the moment his eyes dropped to look at them, staring into my cleavage like every other man on earth. But they didn't. *He* didn't. He kept looking at my face like I was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen, and it made me wonder. “Why did you come here, anyway, then? Your buddies bully you into it?”

His cheeks had flushed, and he'd stubbed the toe of one of his heavy motorcycle boots against the concrete. “It's my birthday,” he said finally. “Twenty-one. They said comin' out to a strip club was mandatory. Big birthdays and bachelor parties, according to them.”

I laughed. “Nothing is *mandatory*,” I told him, rolling my eyes. “But as long as you're having a good time—”

“I wasn’t, really, until I saw you.” His flush had deepened, and he stepped a little closer, but it seemed less like he meant to and more like he was drawn towards me, like a moth to a flame that he’s afraid might burn him but can’t avoid. “You’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen.”

“Beautiful, or pretty?” I teased him, reminding him of his comment just a few moments before.

“Both.” He was blushing redder than any man I’d ever seen, and I decided to take pity on him. He’d tipped me well earlier, and he was still looking at my face and not my breasts, which was more than I could say for literally any other man who had ever walked through the doors of the club.

“What if I said you could have a birthday kiss?” I don’t know what prompted me to offer *that*. Most men would have wanted to squeeze a tit or get a feel up my skirt, but somehow I thought that this man—*Jamie*—would want a kiss over anything so crude. He looked so innocent, standing there blushing in the harsh glow of the streetlights, and I suddenly *wanted* him to kiss me. He was so out of place here, and I wanted some of that. I hated, sometimes, how well I fit in.

“I—” His eyes widened, and I noticed for the first time how full his mouth was, soft-looking in his deeply tanned face, that riot of black curls somehow even messier as he ran a hand through it.

I stepped back, leaning against the brick wall, as I raised my eyebrows at him. “You’ll have to come get it if you want it, birthday boy.” I winked at him, and as my gaze met his, I had a sudden, strange feeling that what he chose would change something. If he stammered and ran off, that would be it. But if he found the nerve—

It was clear that it took some doing for him to find that nerve. He swallowed hard, throat bobbing visibly as he looked at me leaning back against the wall—and then, as if he were afraid he would change his mind if he thought about it too long, he crossed the distance between us in three quick strides, his hand in my hair as he kissed me like a man who wanted his lips on mine more than he wanted to breathe.

I’d never been kissed like that. It shouldn’t have been romantic, standing out back of a strip club in one of the dingier parts of town, an empty Absolut

bottle nudging against the toe of my sandals and a dumpster within arm's reach. It should have felt filthy and tawdry and wrong—but the way he kissed me, it didn't matter if we were there or on a tropical beach, it would have felt the same.

“Tell me your name,” he whispered against my lips, but it wasn't a demand. It was a plea, a prayer, a whispered desire that flooded through me and made me forget everything except how much I wanted him suddenly, when a few minutes ago, I hadn't even known who he was.

I never told anyone at the club my real name. My boss knew it because of paperwork, but he knew better than to use it. No one else—not the bouncers or the other dancers or my best work friend who tended the bar, knew my real name. I was Garnet, and that was all.

But as his fingers threaded through my hair and I found my hands gripping the black leather vest he was wearing, pulling him closer as his lips ghosted over mine again, I found myself whispering it against his mouth.

I took him home with me. Birthday sex, I teased him, when we stumbled into the shabby apartment that I shared with a girl I'd found on an online listing, but it was more than that. I knew it from the moment he helped me out of my clothes, hands and mouth working their way over me like he was worshipping me, and when I rolled him onto his back and returned the favor, the sounds he made were like nothing I'd ever heard from a man before. It was all pleasure, raw, and with nothing held back from either of us, and I wasn't sure what he'd done to me. I told him as much when we were finished, his cheeks blushing all over again when he came back to himself and realized exactly how wild it had gotten.

I'd almost thought he might have been a virgin, and I asked him. I was blunt to a fault with him, almost as if I were hoping I could run him off, scare him away, because the sweetness of it all and what he made me feel terrified him. He didn't seem to belong with the crowd he was running with, didn't seem to belong in the grimy world that I and his friends occupied at all, and it made me suspicious. There was something more to it, I was sure.

Jamie had assured me that he hadn't been a virgin, though he admitted he hadn't been with many women before me. It was a Saturday night when he



ended up in my bed; I had the next three days free, and he didn't leave my apartment until Wednesday morning. By then, I knew how he'd ended up with the biker gang he ran with—it was courtesy of his brother, who had raised Jamie and dragged him into the gang by proxy. Jamie didn't seem to like it much; he didn't enjoy violence and found himself disliking a lot of the tactics the gang used on others. Still, he liked working on cars and motorcycles, and leaving wasn't really an option.

I know it wasn't, because, in time, I tried.

---

The water turns cold in my shower, jolting me out of the memory, my chest aching like I've taken a physical blow. I can feel how swollen my face is, my nose stuffy, and my jaw hurting from clenching it so hard, and I wonder how long I've been crying. How long I've been lost in memories from years ago, memories that most of the time I can lock away.

There's supposed to be a healing process to grieving, I've been told. Time is supposed to heal *something*, but it all feels fresh, every time I let myself think about it, about *him*. So I just don't.

I left St. Louis. I left all of that—our apartment, all of our little haunts that we went to together over and over, his grave. I walked away from it, renamed myself, and started a different life.

But I just can't seem to get away from the fucking underworld of mafia and Bratva and gangs that seem determined to infiltrate my life no matter what I do. Jamie wanted out—and I wanted out for *us*—but without him, it was too easy to stay with what I knew. If it hadn't been for Nikolai taking an interest in me at a club he saw me dancing at here, I might not be where I am now.

*The money*, I remind myself, as I get out and dry off, avoiding looking at myself in the mirror. With the money I'm making from this job—being paid double, essentially, plus a bonus—and what I'm still making during my nights at the club, I might finally be able to put this all in my rearview. I might be able to walk away from all of this bullshit for good, and give myself enough space to really start a new life.

A new name, a new home, a new city. A chance to reinvent myself all over again.

The only complication in all of that is Finn. He makes me feel things that I buried all those years ago, along with the only man I ever really loved. If I let them in—if I let *him* in, I'll just be repeating the past all over again.

If I was going to let myself love someone again—and that's a hell of a big *if*—it wouldn't be another man wearing leather and riding a motorcycle. A man who works for what is essentially just a bigger, wealthier, and better-organized gang, a man whose life is enforcement and violence.

The only way that ends is with me losing someone I care about again. A month, a year, five years from now, it would catch up with him. It always fucking does. Jamie's brother is dead now, too—I know, because I kept checking for obituaries for the rest of the gang members I knew well for years after I left. So are two of his best friends. A couple more are in jail. Being in that life—*really* in it, not just living in it on the outskirts and hustling as a dancer or an escort—means being locked up or killed eventually.

It was more than just knowing I'd make a bad Bratva wife that kept me from letting myself fall completely in love with Nikolai, from ever trying to convince him that what we had could have turned into more, and it *could* have. Until he met Lilliana, there was a chance. I know he felt something for me, too. But I wasn't going to marry a man in the Bratva—not even the man who stood to inherit it.

Knowing what I do about what happened to Lilliana and Nikolai's sister Marika, I feel vindicated in that decision, even if the loss of what Nikolai and I had still hurts. Finn would just be more of the same.

I need to finish the job, leave this city, and put him and the rest of it in my rear-view for good. *All* of this.

As I dig out a pair of soft sleep shorts and a tank from my dresser, I reach for the thin leather wallet buried in the pile of clothes, the real reason I went for this drawer, even if I want to pretend otherwise. It's soft and supple in my hand—worn down at the edges from being kept in the back pocket of a pair of jeans, and I hold it for a long moment, trying to fight the urge to open it.

*It's just going to hurt*, I tell myself, but everything hurts tonight—body, mind, and soul. What's a little more?

I know what's in there by heart. Jamie's driver's license, long expired by now, his handsome face scrunched up in the picture they took before he was ready. A two-dollar bill that I found in a parking lot outside the movie theater we always went to, that he swore was lucky. *Not lucky enough*, I think as I swallow past the lump in my throat, my fingers sliding past it to reach for the small stack of pictures tucked inside.

There's a strip from a photo booth at his best friend's wedding, increasingly silly pictures where we're both so clearly trashed. A picture he swore was his favorite of me, leaning up against the wall behind the club where he kissed me for the first time, in a black leather miniskirt and matching triangle top, my hair in that same messy bun. I hated it—I always thought I looked exhausted in the photo, unable to see past the clear bags under my eyes and the way my makeup had rubbed off a little by that point in the night—but he'd sworn he loved me like that, a little messy, a little undone.

I flip through them to the last one, the one that *I* love the most, the one that hurts the most to look at. His best friend Jesse took it, a picture of Jamie and I on his motorcycle, me clinging to his waist as I rest my chin on his shoulder and look out at the camera, both of us so clearly happy. Jamie had grown out a beard, and I close my eyes briefly, shoving the photos back in the wallet before I can remember how much I loved the scratch of it against my neck, the way the beard oil I bought him smelled, vanilla and cedar mixed in with the leather and smoke and engine grease scent that made up *him*.

I push the wallet back into the drawer, feeling the ache spread through me, missing Jamie and wanting Finn and hating Matvei all at once, the emotions warring inside of me until I feel so exhausted that it's all I can do just to put on the clothes I'd taken out and collapse into bed, hoping that I don't have nightmares about what happened tonight.

I can't afford to be this out of it. I have a week before I'm supposed to see Matvei, but I have to work in the meantime. A fresh wave of exhaustion crashes over me just at the thought. I burrow deeper into my bed, wondering if there's a way for me to plead sick for a night or two before I remember how much I'd be losing out on by doing that. I've never called in sick to

work the entire time I've worked for Nikolai, either—he'd know something was off if I did.

The best I can hope for is that I'll be too exhausted to dream.

# Asha



I arrive at work the next night expecting my usual roster—only to be stopped by Callie as I walk in, her face a little confused.

“Sorry, Asha, but I thought you should know—someone blocked out your next three nights for themselves personally. So you’ll be seeing just the one person—”

I blink at her. It would take a huge sum to do that—I have more than a few clients who would be capable of it, but no one who has shown the inclination to buy *that* much time with me. Also, it would mean—

“Someone shuffled my other clients around? Who on earth would Nikolai allow to do that—”

“It was booked a few days ago. He asked which days hadn’t been blocked out already, and—” Callie frowns, looking through her tablet. “It was that Mr. O’Sullivan. The new client. He must have really taken a liking to you, hm?” She flashes me a teasing smile, and it’s all I can do to keep my expression neutral.

You son of a bitch. It’s the most high-handed thing Finn has ever done in the brief time that I’ve met him, and as nice of a gesture as I know it’s probably meant to be, it pisses me off nonetheless.

“Must have,” I manage, heading for the double doors. “Thanks, Callie.”

I grit my teeth as I head for my dressing room, already pulling my phone out of my purse. It irritates me more because he's giving me exactly what I wanted—a way to get a break while still getting paid for it. But having the time blocked out means there won't be any tips left—and it also means I won't have any way to distract myself.

The moment I'm in my dressing room with the door closed behind me, I call Finn. He answers on the first ring, and from the smug tone in his voice, he was expecting my call.

“Asha? You must have gotten my surprise—”

“What the fuck do you think you're doing, Finn?” I hiss at him over the phone, sinking onto the chair in front of my vanity. “Blocking out the next *three* nights? Is your boss going to be happy about you using your organization's funds so recklessly? Surely there's a better use for them.”

“He trusts my judgment.” Finn's voice loses a little of its teasing. “You needed a break after Matvei, Asha. You might have refused to talk to me, but I could see it in your face. I'd already arranged this, expecting as much—but it made me glad I did it.”

“You just don't want anyone else touching me.” The words come out before I can stop them, words I hadn't really meant to say, and they startle me. Whether it's true or not, it's a topic that's better not brought up, and now I've instigated the conversation.

“And if that's the case?” Finn's voice drops a little, that rich Irish burr thickening. “What would you have to say about that, Asha?”

“That it's my job.” My voice is too flat, too tired, and I try to inject some teasing into it, something to lighten the conversation so he won't realize just how difficult last night was, how I still feel emotionally hungover from the session with Matvei and the memories of Jamie and the dreams—

I don't want him to *ever* know that I dreamed about him last night. That my sleep was full of thoughts of him pressing me back against his motorcycle in that parking lot, lifting me onto the seat and pushing my skirt up while he knelt on the concrete, hands smoothing up my thighs while I gripped his hair and told him just what I wanted him to do.

“You’re doing a job for me, too. You need to be able to focus on it, Asha. And I *know* that took a lot out of you—”

“You don’t need to worry about me. Anyway—” I let out a slow breath, trying to take the tension out of my voice before he has reason to think that he *does* need to worry about me. “I’m going to be bored out of my mind, sitting up here with nothing to do.”

“Don’t tell me that.” There’s a sudden roughness to his voice, though I can hear that he’s still trying to keep it light. “I’ll end up coming up there to see you, lass. Liven things up a little.”

My breath catches in my throat before I can stop it. I *want* him to come up and see me, and I shouldn’t. I shouldn’t want that—not any of it. I should be putting as much distance between us as possible—what I dreamed about after I fell asleep last night is proof enough of that.

“You’re not saying no, lass.” Finn’s voice deepens. “I’ve only had one drink so far this evening. I’ll be up there in less than a half-hour unless you tell me no—”

*No.* I try to force the word to my lips. “You’ll just end up frustrated again,” I tell him as lightly as I can manage. “You remember what happened last time.”

“Aye, I do.” There’s the sound of him swallowing hard on the other end of the line, and I can feel the tension radiating through it. *I* remember what happened last time, his body caging mine in against the wall, making me want things that I normally don’t, making my heart race and my knees feel weak. *Don’t let him come up here!* My mind shouts at me, warning me away, but there’s a part of me that wants to see him more than anything.

“You won’t get what you want, Finn.” That’s the truth, and we both know it.

“And what do *you* want, Asha?” There’s that teasing, husky note in his voice again, sending a flush over my skin, and I suck in a breath, hoping that he didn’t hear it.

“Some peace and quiet,” I tell him evenly, and he laughs, low and deep, my heartbeat quickening at the sound of it.

“Well, I bought you that, didn’t I?” That laugh again, making my thighs squeeze together and my pulse leap. “Goodnight, Asha.”

The phone clicks off, and the disappointment I feel makes my chest tighten, frustration of more than one kind warring inside of me as I drop my phone onto the dressing table.

One conversation, and I can feel the dampness between my thighs, the soft fabric of my panties clinging to my skin. A man’s *voice* shouldn’t get me this hot and bothered. *Finn* shouldn’t make me feel that way. But I can’t deny the steady throbbing between my thighs, an ache spreading through me that only has one solution.

Well, only one that I can allow myself.

*The night is bought out anyway*, I tell myself as I get up, stripping off my street clothes and changing into a black silk slip that clings to my curves. It’s not my usual *domme* outfit—not even what I would wear for one of my clients who wants me as a submissive—but there’s no reason for me to put on leather or actual lingerie when no one else is going to see me tonight.

The room is empty and quiet when I slip into it, smelling faintly of cleaning supplies. Everything is neat and orderly, ready for the night ahead—except there is no night ahead for me tonight, and there’s something freeing about that. I have hours ahead of me with nothing to fill them, and while the idea I have in mind isn’t going to take *hours*, it feels urgent enough that I don’t want to wait.

I tell myself that I won’t think about Finn as I open one of the drawers, looking for a toy. I tell myself I’m not looking for one that reminds me of his cock, that I don’t catch sight of a thick, flesh-colored dildo that matches his length and girth almost exactly, and take it out for that reason, feeling the desire deep in my belly clench and twist at the memory of what I’d fantasized about only a few nights ago. I want to replace the feeling of Matvei inside of me last night, but I’m not replacing it with a fantasy of *Finn*. That would be a terrible idea.

I don’t go over to the bed. The moment I look at it, I remember Finn tied up, a little confused as to what I was doing with him, and aching hard anyway. It all makes so much more sense now that I know he had very little idea as to



what it is that I typically do here. I go over to the soft-padded leather bench instead, adjusting the angle so that I can lay back against it, reaching for a bottle of something to lube the toy with as I settle my feet onto the cool wood floor on either side of the bench.

There's something a little hedonistic about this, using the time when I would normally be working for my own pleasure, and that adds to the rising, clenching desire that makes my breath catch as I lay back, setting the toy aside for a moment as I slide the slip over my head and recline on the padded leather entirely naked, letting my fingers graze over my skin.

Until that night with Finn, I'd never *enjoyed* myself in this room. It was a job, something to always stay a little detached from so that I could focus, so I could be what my clients expected of me, whichever way that went. But Finn hadn't had any expectations—or if he had, they'd all been wrong anyway, I think, with a small, bubbling giggle that catches on my lips and turns into a soft moan as I skate my fingertips over my nipples.

They tighten under my touch, and I tell myself to put Finn out of my head, to *stop* thinking about him, but it feels impossible. I can all too easily imagine what his rougher fingers would feel like on my sensitive flesh, how his broad palm would cup my breast, lifting, squeezing, the hoarse groan he would let out at seeing me splayed out for him like this. *He'd have me tied up*, I think, before I can chase the fantasy away, and it doesn't turn me off like it normally would. It makes my heart race a little faster instead, imagining being bound to the bench, spread out for him, that wicked smile behind his copper-colored beard as he decided where to tease and touch and taste first.

He wouldn't hurt me. At least, not unless I told him that he could, not *really*, and he'd stop if I told him to. *That* realization bursts through me with a startling flush of desire; the idea of being able to trust someone like that, and the danger of it is muted by the rising arousal flooding me, a fantasy that I can't seem to stop or hold back. I can't stop thinking about him, about all the possibilities of giving in to what I know Finn wants from me. I can't stop myself from imagining it, even though I *know* how strange it is that I'm picturing this, and not the dominance I usually default to.

*It doesn't matter*, I tell myself, losing the battle to the desire rising like a tide coming in. *He'll never know. You're alone. You can take the edge off and*

*then forget about it. Get it out of your system—*

My fingers trail lower, sliding over my clit, and I'm fucking *soaked* already. I don't even need the added slickness of the lube on my fingers and the toy, the sound of my fingertips against my flesh filling the room wetly. I feel my skin flushing with heat as I circle the throbbing nerves, teasing myself into a frenzy before I reach for the toy.

I don't hear anything other than that sound, my heartbeat throbbing in my ears, until a rich Irish burr fills the room, and I freeze.

“Christ above, *Asha—*”

# Finn



I knew before I ever left my apartment that I shouldn't take the bait. Not that she'd meant it that way—I think she was sending me a clear message when she said that I wouldn't get what I wanted if I did.

But what *is* it that I do want? That's the real question that I sit there pondering in my apartment with an open beer in front of me, wondering if I should go to the Ashen Rose and see her. She hadn't said no straight out when I'd said she was making me want to come up and see her—but she wasn't saying yes, either.

*It's been a push and pull from the start. And it'll continue being that way.* I know I'm not doing myself any favors by going there tonight. More than likely, I'll leave frustrated again, going home to an empty apartment and dreams of Asha that leave me aching.

And deep down, the fact that I still want to go tells me everything I need to know. That it isn't just lust that draws me to her—not just desire. That there's something about her that draws me for reasons that have nothing to do with the physical, and everything to do with who she is.

I want to see her, even if nothing happens beyond talking.

Just the banter over the phone has me aching to see her in person. It's been so long since anyone has made me feel like this, and it makes me wonder if a part of the attraction is the rush of it, the reminder of what it feels like to *want* and be wanted. And *god*, do I want her.

It's the fact that I'd push that aside to spend an evening with her that has me wondering just how tied up in knots this girl really has me—figuratively, that is.

If I wanted it literally, I think all I'd have to do is ask. *That*, she'd give me.

*I won't touch her*, I tell myself as I get up, pouring out the open beer and throwing the bottle away, reaching for my jacket and my keys. *I'll just go and see her. She said she was going to be bored.*

I know I'm grasping at straws, but I can't stop myself from going. I ride to the Ashen Rose, handing my keys to the valet, and head up to the room where I know Asha is without even bothering to stop for a drink. I haven't seen her since we left Matvei's, and I want more than anything to see that she's alright. That she's back to herself.

I'm not sure why I don't bother knocking. Maybe it's just that I already know there's no chance of her being in there with a client, or my eagerness to see her. Whatever the reason, I step into the room—and freeze where I'm standing.

“Christ above, *Asha*—”

I don't think I've ever seen anything more fucking beautiful in my life. She's lying back on the padded bench that she'd told me was for spanking, but that's not what she's using it for. She's entirely naked—the first time I've seen her bare with not a stitch of clothing on her—*fuck*, she's gorgeous. Everything about her is perfection, from the dark hair tumbling over her shoulders to her full breasts and narrow waist, the hips that my hands are suddenly aching to grab, and her perfect thighs spread open, her fingers working between the slick folds of her pussy, a toy sitting next to her glistening and ready for her to slide into herself.

I'm certain it's the fastest I've ever gotten an erection in my entire life, even when I was first discovering what all of that was. One moment I'm stepping into the room with a soft cock and every intention of just sitting and talking to Asha for the evening. The next, every bit of blood in my brain has shot downwards, my cock stiff and aching as I look at the vision splayed out in front of me, her face just as shocked as mine.

“Finn!” She squeals my name in a way that I’ve been dying to hear, that in any other circumstances, I would be *thrilled* to hear, squeezing her legs shut as she yanks her hand away, every inch of her skin flushing with an embarrassment that I honestly wouldn’t have thought she would be capable of feeling. She starts to push herself up from the bench, but I shake my head, every thought of keeping this platonic and professional fleeing from my head in the wake of the sight in front of me.

“Don’t move, Asha.” My voice is hoarse, a rough command that her eyes widen even more at, and she sits up defiantly, swinging her legs over the side of the bench, her arms coming up to cover her breasts. There’s a black silk slip on the floor next to her where she must have discarded it, and I think I’d give just about anything for her not to put it on again.

“Don’t tell me what to do.” She says it almost as a reflex, like she doesn’t really mean it, and I hover on the edge of pushing or backing off.

“What would you do if I did?” I raise my eyebrow, trying to still straddle that line, to not push too hard. “You didn’t say no to my coming here tonight. You just said that I wouldn’t get what I want. But I don’t think you know what I want, Asha.” My voice lowers, and I step a little closer to her, feeling my heart beat hard in my chest.

“Maybe I don’t.” She reaches for the slip, pulling it on over her head, and I feel a twinge of disappointment as it covers her up. “But I know you won’t do what *I* want. And it’s better that way, Finn.” Her gaze flicks towards the toy, her face flushing again. “Just let me—”

“I wish you’d kept going.” I hear the need in my voice, the raw, aching desire. “Just let me watch you. *Fuck*, Asha, I don’t know what you’ve done to me, but—”

“Oh?” She tosses her hair, and I can see the mantle of the game she plays slide over her again, whatever emotion I was seeing from her hidden under that teasing playfulness that I’m beginning to realize isn’t always authentic.

I wish she’d only ever let me see her as she is. I wish she understood that I like her like that, more than the playful, teasing seductress.

“You would have just stood there and watched?” Her gaze flicks over me,

and I see her resolve faltering at the thought, too. “Just watched me come without touching me?”

“If you tell me no, I’m not going to touch you, Asha,” I tell her in a low voice. “No matter how much I fucking want to—believe me, it’s a lot. I want —”

God, I can’t even say the things aloud I want to do to her. They all sound filthy in my head—would sound filthier on my tongue. I see her eyes slide over me again, as if she’s wondering what I’m thinking, and I want to tell her every single detail, if I could make myself speak.

“What if I tied you up?” Her voice has that whiskey-sugar sound again, licking over my skin, and I feel every muscle in my body tense with both desire and resistance all at once. “What if I *made* you watch?”

“You don’t need to make me.” I take a step back. “Just because I don’t want to be tied up and dominated by you doesn’t mean I won’t do what you want, Asha. There’s an in-between here—”

“But you want something else.” Her hands slide up her thighs, pushing the skirt of the slip up a little. “*You* want to do that to *me*. I know you do.”

*Do I?* “God, I don’t fucking know, Asha.” There’s a hint of frustration in my voice, courtesy of both my aching cock and the way she talks me in circles. “I never even thought about shit like that before I met you. I took girls home and fucked them and didn’t think much more about it. Exciting sex was—hell, I don’t know. Sex in the shower or up against a wall. And then I walk in here, expecting one thing, and you—”

I swallow hard, seeing her fingers sliding up her pale thighs, her legs spreading ever so slightly, and even knowing what’s beneath that slip, I want to see the rest of her so badly it hurts. It doesn’t matter if I see her bare one time or a thousand; I’m certain it’ll always make me feel the same way.

“I didn’t come here for this,” I tell her quietly, my voice hoarse with desire. “I came here just to see you. And then I walk in on you like that, and—fuck, you tie me up in knots without even having to use a rope, Asha. Just seeing you makes it hard to think.” I laugh wryly. “It just makes me hard. And if all I did was watch you—”

“What if I told you that you couldn’t come?” Her fingers inch the slip higher. “What if I told you that you could *only* watch?” Her voice is thickening, and I can tell this is turning her on. It only makes me want her more, knowing it’s as hard for her to resist this as it is for me. That no matter how often she says we have to keep our distance, that this is supposed to be business and nothing more, she’s on just as thin of ice as I am.

“That sounds like fucking torture, lass,” I tell her wryly. “You’d really do that? Lie there and touch yourself and get off on how fucking hard I was watching you, knowing how much I needed—”

“Maybe that *is* what gets me off,” Asha says archly. The slip is at the top of her thighs now, and I can catch a glimpse of her smooth pussy beneath the black silk. I’m aching to touch her, to taste her, everything that she’s denied me so far. “Maybe I like the idea of denying you while I enjoy myself. Thinking of how much you want it, how much power I have over what you do or don’t get to have.”

She stands up in one graceful movement, sliding the slip over her head, entirely bare all over again. My jaw tightens, my body throbbing with desire, and I know Asha can see it. It’s impossible to hide—especially as she sways towards me, every movement of her hips reminiscent of how she walked across that stage the first night I saw her.

Her finger touches the v of my t-shirt, her nail tickling the hair there. “Does that bother you, Finn?” Her voice is still smooth, careless, but I wonder if that matters to her. If she truly wants to know if it bothers me or not.

“A little,” I tell her honestly, and I see her flinch a little.

“Why?” She steps back, her hand dropping away from my chest, and I almost wish I hadn’t said it, if only so she wouldn’t have stopped touching me.

“This—back and forth, all this exchange of power and games, that’s not what sex is meant to be.” I look down at her, seeing a strange expression flicker over her face, and I wonder if I’m going to make her angry by saying all of this. “I’m not trying to say it’s—wrong or something...shit, Asha, I don’t even know how to explain what I mean. It’s not—”

“Not what turns you on.” She takes a slow breath, and it looks to me almost

as if she's struggling with her own desire, trying to think through it the same way I am. "I can't—we can't do this any other way, Finn."

The two of us stare at each other for a long moment, the air thick between us, tense with need. I want to touch her more than I want to breathe, every part of me throbbing with how close she is, bare and soft and entirely exposed to me, and I know that regardless of whether I let her do the things she wants to or not, she has a power over me that no one else has had.

She makes me want to give her anything...everything.

"Fine," I whisper hoarsely. "Then just let me watch you, Asha. Finish what you started when I walked in."

Her tongue flicks out over her full lower lip. "So you can think about it later, when you go home?" she taunts me softly, and I smirk at her.

"You might be able to tell me what to do in this room, Asha, but you can't tell me what I can and can't do when I go home." I take that step closer to her, my voice low, seeing the way she shivers a little when my accent thickens. "I'll be in bed tonight with my hand wrapped around my cock, thinking about what I see here. You're just giving me what I need for later."

I wait for her retort, for her to tell me to get out, but her teeth scrape over her lower lip instead, and I see her take in a slow, shivering breath. She steps backward to the bench, lying back on it the way she was before, and she motions to a padded strip on the floor just a few inches in front of it. "Kneel down there, Finn," she murmurs breathily. "While you watch me."

My eyebrows shoot up, and her mouth curls in a slow smile. "Do it, and you can watch."

*Fuck.* She's still playing games with me, and I know it's because she knows she's going to win this one. She's not asking me to let her tie me up or restrain me or flog me, just asking me to go down on my knees and watch her touch herself, and how could a man possibly say no to that? How could I tell her no, knowing that she's going to be turned on by it, by *me*?

It feels strange, sinking down onto that padded leather on the floor, but the sensation flees immediately when I see what's in front of me. She spreads her legs, her feet on either side of the bench, and I have a perfect view of her soft



pink folds parting, already slick from what she'd been doing when I walked in, and I know *exactly* what this is for.

All I'd have to do is lean forward, and I'd be able to taste her. My cock jerks against my fly, rock-hard and straining, my mouth watering at the thought of how easily I'd be able to slide my tongue over her, discover what she tastes like.

I've never needed to touch myself so badly in my life, and I know if I do, she'll stop.

"Good—" Asha breathes, then cuts herself off, remembering that I don't like that. Something about it is faintly touching—she'd remembered something that I did or didn't like, and she's not so deep into playing this game that she doesn't care either way. Her hands slide over her breasts, cupping them, rolling the nipples between her fingers, and I feel that throbbing pain of arousal again as I see her slick opening clench between her thighs, wanting to be filled.

*God*, I could fill her up. I want to pin her down to that bench, rip my pants open and fill her to the hilt with my cock, hear her scream with pleasure as I give her every fucking inch and fuck her until she comes hard around me. I can feel my fists clenching at my sides, struggling against the need to touch and taste and fuck, a feeling that has never been so primal, so overwhelming until this moment, with her spread out an inch away from me and yet so untouchable that she might as well be on another planet.

"*Asha*." Her name is a hiss between my teeth, and I see her lips curl in a smirk, one hand sliding down her flat stomach towards the bare, wet flesh between her thighs. "God, you're so—"

"Tell me." She murmurs it in that syrupy voice, sliding over my skin sticky-sweet, making my cock throb and twitch. "What am I?"

"You're so fucking beautiful. I want—"

I don't have to tell her what I want. She can see it in my face, in the glassy lust filling my gaze as it sweeps over her, watching her fingers spread herself apart so I can see every inch of her, wet and soft and hot. It's turning her on to tease me like this, to be so close to me and still deny me, and that ache

throbs through me all over again, until my mind is a fog, and I can feel my pulse like a steady drumbeat in my veins.

As frustrated as I am, I can't deny that there might be something to this. I've never been so aroused in my life, not even that first night that I was here with her. I feel like I've slipped into something past arousal, something past what could even be called need, staring at her in a daze as her fingers start to circle her clit. I see her back arch away from the leather of the bench, her hips sliding against it as she moves.

It makes me want things I've never wanted before. It makes me want to pin her down, hold her hands away from herself so her pleasure is mine instead, touch and taste her until she screams for me. I can feel myself trembling faintly with the effort not to reach for her, not to reach for *myself*. I see a slow smile curl her lips as she reaches for the toy next to the bench, her fingers still slowly stroking over her clit.

"Go ahead and touch yourself if you want, Finn," she murmurs, and the words hit me like a shock, my cock throbbing with eager agreement. "Give me something to watch while I get myself off."

*God*, it's torture seeing her slide the toy between her legs, seeing the thick silicone cock parting her folds when I'd give just about anything for it to be mine instead, but that doesn't stop me from undoing my belt with clumsy fingers, my hand feverishly wrapping around my length and starting to stroke before I even have myself fully freed, and Asha laughs, low and husky in the back of her throat.

"Slowly, Finn. You'll be done before I am at that rate."

There's a teasing, sing-song note to her voice that I know is a part of all of this, being *here*. I want so badly to hear what she's like when she's not playing a role, when she's not at work—if it were nothing but her and me in a bed together for the sake of pleasure and nothing more.

It doesn't stop me from, without even really meaning to, doing as she says. I don't know *how*, but my strokes slow, dragging over the length of my cock as I watch her push the toy inside of herself slowly, lust burning through me as I wish with everything in me that it was my cock sliding into her. I can see how tight she is, how wet, clenching around the inflexible length, and I want

to fuck her more than I want to breathe.

“You want me, don’t you?” she whispers in that low voice, as if there were any question of it, and I nod wordlessly, my hips jerking as my palm slides over the sensitive head of my cock. “What if I told you that you couldn’t come?”

“Christ, Asha, I don’t know if that’s possible.” I’m having to try my hardest not to come *now*, my balls tight and almost painful every time my hand brushes against them, the veins in my cock throbbing as I slide my hand up and down in a slow rhythm that threatens to push me over the edge every time my fingers touch the swollen head. “I don’t know if I *could* stop—”

“And if I’d punish you if you didn’t?” The last word comes out breathy, the toy pushed deep inside of her, her hips rocking upwards into the thrust in a way that makes me moan with longing. I hardly even hear what she’s saying—all I can think about is the way I can see her tightening around the toy with every thrust, the way her fingers press against her clit, moving in circles that I want to memorize so I can do the same things to her myself, if I ever get the chance.

“Finn?” She says my name and my gaze flicks up to hers. I can see that she’s still so much more aware than I am, not lost in the pleasure of it all, and I want to change that. I want to see her driven so mad with desire that she forgets everything else, that she forgets how to be anything but herself, without all of the artifice.

I don’t think I’m ever going to get the chance. Under other circumstances, that might have shattered my arousal, but I’m not sure anything could right now. I’ve never been so fucking hard in my life.

“*Fuck*, Asha, I need to come.” I nearly gasp the words, my hand stuttering over my cock, squeezing in an effort to keep from coming before she does. I feel almost delirious with need, the room filled with the sounds and scent of sex, and I want to know if she tastes as good as she smells. I feel saturated in it, drenched in need; I look at her with helpless desire as her eyes lock onto mine and her thighs spread wider, hips bucking up against her fingers and the toy cock as she smiles that rich, seductive smile.

“Come with me then,” she purrs, and it feels like everything explodes around

me.

I'm not sure I've ever come like that before—definitely not from touching myself. It feels like the orgasm ripples up from my fucking toes, a bone-deep pleasure spreading through me as my cock jerks and throbs, cum spilling onto the wooden floor as I see Asha arch and squirm, bucking against her hands, her gaze fixed first on my face and then on my cock as she comes too, her lips parted and every inch of her quivering in pleasure.

It's both the sweetest pleasure and worst torture I've ever experienced. I want to be on her, around her, *in* her, feeling all of it, not on my knees with my hand shuddering along my aching length as I watch her come apart just within reach of me.

She's so fucking beautiful, and I want her to be mine.

It takes a moment for the fog to clear. I hear the sound of Asha sliding the toy out of her, see the intensely erotic view of her swollen, flushed pussy around it as she slips it free. She shifts to one side, setting it on the floor, and I realize my cock is still achingly hard. I wouldn't even be sure that I really did come if it weren't for the evidence right in front of me.

"You can do one thing you want to me if I get to do the same to you." The words come out before I can stop them, borne of the unending desire still pulsing through me, making me feel like I'm somehow outside of myself. I've never wanted anyone so much. It feels like I might die if I leave here without getting to touch her. "Quid pro quo, Asha. I'll keep my word if you keep yours."

She pauses halfway to sitting up, her hand clutching the side of the bench, and I can see that same liquid desire still in her wide, dark eyes. No matter how she tries to hide it, she can't.

"What do you want to do to me?" she asks, soft and breathy, and I can hear the slow reluctance in her voice, how she's finally lost the fight with her curiosity.

It's a small step forward, but a step nonetheless.

My gaze slides down her body, slowly, taking in every perfect inch of creamy skin and full curves, my hands clenching with the desire to touch her. "You'll

stay right there,” I murmur. “And I’ll cuff you to that bench, and eat you out until you come as many times as I want you to. How does *that* sound?”

She swallows hard, her eyes widening, and I can see the need in her face. How long has it been since someone has pleased her for the sake of it? How long since someone has wanted *her* orgasm instead of theirs?

I’m offering, and I know she wants it, even if it means giving in to something that she said she wouldn’t.

“Alright,” she says softly, and for a moment, I’m not sure I’ve heard her correctly—but then she lays back against the bench, her gaze meeting mine. “I’m all yours, Finn.”

Asha

Fuck. I shouldn't have said that.



I see the look on his face when I say, *I'm all yours, Finn*, the moment of aching, yearning longing in his eyes before his expression clears, and all I can see is raw desire.

I'm not sure I've ever seen a man stay so hard after coming. It's like he never touched himself at all, his swollen length stiff and almost painfully veined in front of him, and as he stands up, I swallow hard with anticipation.

*What am I doing?*

It's been years since I let a man tie me up for my own pleasure. Not since—but I can't think of that now, not here, not with Finn. It's not fair to him, or to that memory, or to me even—because I can't pretend that I don't want the pleasure he's offering. Even with the caveat of letting him cuff me to the bench, even with conceding that, I'm buzzing with desire at the thought of what he says he wants to do to me.

He stands up slowly, reaching for the hem of his t-shirt. "You don't have to take your clothes off—" I start to say, and he chuckles, his full mouth twitching in a smirk.

"No, we're doing this my way, lass. And then you can do it yours."

He knows exactly what he's doing. He strips off his shirt, muscles flexing as the fabric slides up his chiseled abs and broad chest, revealing that strip of copper hair below his navel that turns into a thatch of it higher up, begging for me to run my nails through it and over his pecs, to the thick arms that

stretch over his head as he tosses the shirt aside. His hair is messy, falling in his face a little as he looks down at me, and when he hooks his thumbs in the waist of his jeans and boxers, I feel my mouth go dry.

His cock is out, there's no mystery there—but that doesn't change the flood of desire that ripples through me as I see his muscled hips and thighs, dusted with that same copper hair, framing his pierced cock as he kicks the rest of his clothing aside and stands there for a moment, bare as I am, his gaze enjoying the sight of me laying back against the bench as naked as he is.

It takes everything in me not to beg him just to come here and fuck me.

Slowly, he paces towards me, the look on his face hungry as his gaze travels over my body again and again, like he can't get enough. I wait for him to ask me where the cuffs are, what to do with them, but he doesn't. He crouches down by my ankles, and I feel the smooth brush of the leather as he wraps it around first one ankle and then another, his fingertips grazing against my skin, and my heart leaps in my chest.

“Tell me if it's too tight, lass,” he murmurs, moving to my wrists. His arm brushes against my breast, the barest touch, but it lights my skin on fire as I let out a slow, shuddering breath. I just came moments ago, and it feels as if it's been weeks. Every inch of my skin feels sensitive, aching, wanting to be touched, and now, as Finn cuffs both of my wrists, I'm entirely at his mercy.

I swallow hard as he turns towards me, his gaze meeting mine, sliding down to my mouth. “Can I kiss you, Asha?” he asks softly, and for one moment, I want to tell him yes. I want to know what it feels like to have that soft, warm mouth on mine, to feel his tongue slide into my mouth. I don't kiss clients, and it's been so fucking long since I've been kissed. Not since Nikolai. And Finn—

I think Finn would kiss differently. Gentle and firm all at once, warm and enveloping, and his taste—

I shake my head, a strange sort of fear rippling through me suddenly. *If I let him kiss me*—it feels like that would change everything. Like it would be the difference between...

*He has you cuffed to a bench, about to lick your pussy until you come for*



*him. What is the difference, exactly?*

I can't explain it. And I hate the flicker of disappointment that I see on his face before it smooths out again.

"Not that," I whisper. "I didn't agree to that."

"Alright." Finn nods, his hand brushing between my breasts, sliding down to the flat of my stomach. I feel my skin quiver and leap under his touch, my hips arching as I tug against the cuffs, wanting more of his hands on me. "All you have to do is say if you don't like something, lass. I'll stop. You never need to be afraid of that with me."

His hands slide up the sides of my breasts, cupping them, fingers playing with my nipples until I gasp, the pleasure prickling over my skin as I feel fresh arousal pool between my legs. There's a thrumming heat in my blood, arousal building quickly at the touch of his rough fingers, and when he lowers his head to kiss just above my breasts, his beard brushing against my skin, I let out a whimper of need.

"Mm, I like that sound, lass." His voice drops, a rich, deep sound full of that Irish burr, his hands dropping to my sides, down to my waist as he turns his mouth towards my nipple. His lips are warm and soft, his tongue hot as it slides over the peaked flesh, and I let out another whimper, squirming beneath him. No one has been this slow, this careful, in so long. I don't know if I want pleasure or pain or some mixture of the two, but I know I need *more*. I need so much more than he's giving me right now.

"Patience, Asha." His voice hums over my skin, his tongue trailing a damp line of heat to my other breast, sliding up the curve. I can feel every lick, every graze of his teeth as if there's a direct line to my clit, tugging at the ache between my legs as he lingers there as if he knows he's driving me insane.

His mouth *finally* drifts lower, down my stomach, his hands sliding to my hips as he kneels back down on that padded strip on the floor, right where I'd put him to tease and torture him earlier. Finn's fingers press into my hips, his eyes sliding hungrily between my thighs, my legs held open for him. I can feel myself clenching, my clit aching for his touch, and I have to press my lips together to keep from begging for him.

But that's what he wants to hear.

His lips trace one hipbone and then the other, and then he dips his head between my thighs, but not where I'm dying for him to touch me. His mouth brushes over the inside of one knee, his fingers grazing the outside of my thighs, and I tilt my head back, closing my eyes as I bite my tongue.

"You'll say please eventually, lass." There's the same choked lust in his voice that I feel, but now he's the one in the position of power, not me.

I should hate it. I should want him to fuck off, not to fuck *me*—because I've only ever wanted this when I've felt—

As quickly as the thought flickers through my mind, I shut it out. I can't feel that. Not for Finn, not for anyone.

Finn's mouth slides higher, up my thigh, dragging my thoughts back to the present. His tongue glides over my soft skin, making me gasp, my hips squirming against the leather, and his fingers dig into my thighs.

"Slowly, remember?" he teases me, and I glare down at him.

"Finn—" There's a warning in my voice as I narrow my eyes at him, but it's slightly undermined by the waver in my voice as his lips trace higher. "Remember, I get to...turn this around on you..."

He smirks, his gaze rolling up to meet mine as he sucks lightly at the very top of my inner thigh, and my words turn into a whimper. "I'm trying to remind myself of that, lass," he murmurs softly. "But it's so very tempting right now to just—"

Finn shifts, his mouth hovering over my pussy, and I can feel the warmth of his breath against my damp, swollen flesh. His tongue flicks out, just barely grazing over me, and I clench my teeth in an effort to not say every filthy, pleading thing on the tip of my tongue. I can feel the small muscles in my thighs trembling, my hips arching as his hands slide up to hold onto them, his arms brushing against my inner thighs as he slowly lowers his mouth closer to where I so desperately need it.

"Finn—"

“I like when you say my name like that, lass,” he murmurs. “All desperate and pleading. I didn’t think I’d want to hear you beg, but now—”

His tongue slides over my clit. Light, soft, a stroke that leaves me gasping and does nothing to sate the hunger throbbing through me. “I think I’d like to hear you say please.”

“Oh, fuck you.” I glare down at him, twisting, trying to arch into his mouth, but the cuffs keep me too close to the bench. I’m at his mercy, and he seems to have forgotten it at this moment, with the taste of me finally in his mouth.

“I would if you’d let me.” There’s that hoarse yearning in his voice for a moment, his lips brushing against my bare, soft flesh. “Right now. You can have anything you want, lass. Just ask—”

“Not anything I want.” I raise an eyebrow, and there’s a hint of a flush in his cheeks.

“Maybe not *anything*. At least not some of the things you’d do to me.” His mouth grazes over me again, and I close my eyes, hips rolling under his touch. “But I’ll make you come, lass. I want to hear you ask for it.”

His tongue presses against me again, a little harder this time, rubbing against my swollen clit as I let out a soft, ragged moan. It feels so good, mimicking the way I’d stroked my fingers over it earlier, and I realize he was paying attention. Even as overcome with desire as he’d been, he’d watched to see what I liked, and now—

When Finn’s lips fasten around my clit, I let out a high-pitched cry of pleasure, bucking uselessly against his mouth. His fingers press into the soft flesh of my thighs, grazing the spot where he left a love bite earlier. I moan, my breath coming in short, quick gasps as he sucks my clit into his mouth, the fingers of one hand coming up to brush my entrance.

“Finn, I swear—”

He pulls back, his lips glistening with my arousal, a smirk on his mouth. “You can swear all you like, lass, but until I’m done with you, you’re all mine.”

The way he says it, that rough burr scraping over my skin, sends desire

flooding through me. *His*. It sounds so good the way he says it, the promise of so much pleasure, and I can feel my resistance slipping, my lips parting on the plea that I hadn't planned on giving him. But *god*, I want to come.

"Please, Finn." I feel him smile against me when I whisper it. "Please make me come."

His eyes flick up to mine, the barest hint of victory shining in them before his mouth presses against me, lips and tongue sucking, swirling, sending waves of pleasure through me that build and build until I can feel my toes curling against the wood floor, my hands clenching, keeping me just on the edge, until—

I think I scream his name when I come. I don't mean to—but I can't stop myself. The pleasure is overwhelming, the wet, hot pressure of his mouth sending me into a burst of sensation that crashes over me again and again, making me twist and cry out, arousal flooding over his lips and tongue as he keeps working me through it as if he's never going to stop. I almost tell him *to stop*, that I'm too sensitive—but I can't breathe or speak, the pleasure cresting over and over, and it feels so good, just this side of pain.

And then, his tongue still swirling over my throbbing clit, he pushes two fingers inside of me, curling them as he starts to thrust.

I clench down on them hard, so, so close to begging for his cock as I feel the orgasm build again, from a baseline of pleasure that leaves me trembling as he works his fingers inside of me to the rhythm of his tongue against my clit. I can imagine how good he would feel inside of me, how good that piercing would feel, and I have to sink my teeth into my lower lip to keep from pleading for it.

Much like letting him kiss me, letting him fuck me would be a step too far. This is already further than we should have gone, but I couldn't resist any longer. Just a little pleasure, I'd thought, and now—

Another burst of sensation ripples over me, tearing me out of my thoughts, making me cry out his name as he adds a third finger, his mouth tightening on my clit again. I don't know how much more I can take, and I don't realize I've said it aloud until I hear Finn's dark chuckle against my swollen, sensitive flesh and see his ocean-blue eyes roll up to meet mine again.

“You’ll take as many orgasms as I want to give you, lass. And *then* you get your turn. After all, I did buy out the whole night.”

*And the next one, and the next. Is he going to come back for those, too?* I know I need to tell him not to. Three nights of this might be more than I can take without begging him for things that are only going to get both of us into trouble that we can’t get out of—even now, that doesn’t sound as bad as it should, not when those three fingers working inside of me in tandem with Finn’s fluttering tongue and sucking lips send me into another violent climax. My body bucks and twists against the cuffs, and I feel my lips trying to form the words *I’m coming; oh god, fuck, I’m coming again*, but I can’t actually say any of it. I can’t get enough air to speak, the words choking in my throat as I cry out, my entire body throbbing with a pleasure that feels too deep and all-consuming to be real.

But it is. And it doesn’t fucking stop. His face is buried between my legs, and his beard must be fucking *soaked* with my arousal. Still, he keeps licking, sucking, a fourth finger sliding into me and giving me an idea of just how good it would feel to be stretched by his huge cock instead, thrusting deep and hard as he groans against my drenched flesh like he’s still starving for me.

I’d forgotten what it felt like to be devoured like this. In fact, I’m not sure I’ve *ever* felt this...the way the orgasms start to bleed into each other, until I’m shuddering and trembling and moaning, the pleasure a rolling wave that ebbs and flows instead of building and breaking over me. My eyes roll back into my head, my thighs quivering, my clit swollen and so sensitive that every lap of Finn’s tongue sends me into a fresh paroxysm of bliss, and I can’t stop moaning.

Somewhere in all of it, as his fingers thrust into me again and I cry out, I manage to gasp out that I can’t take any more. “It’s too much, it’s—*please* —”

For a moment, I think that he’s not going to stop until I give my safeword, but with one more slow curl of those fingers inside of me and a lingering swipe of his tongue over my clit, Finn pulls back, settling back on his knees as he looks at my quivering body with what can only be called utter satisfaction.

He looks fucking gorgeous, kneeling there naked and still rock-hard, his beard wet with my arousal and his lips glistening. If I kissed him right now, I'd taste myself on his mouth. The thought has me clenching with need all over again, my gaze flicking down to where his cock is nearly touching his navel, the piercings glimmering in his head and the top of his shaft, making me want to beg for things I shouldn't have. If he rubbed that over my clit right now—

“My turn,” I whisper hoarsely, before I can say something I shouldn't, and Finn smirks, rising up gracefully to step over to me and undo my cuffs.

“I'm a man of my word,” he says gruffly, stepping back. “Tell me where you want me, lass.”

“Over there.” My voice is more unsteady than I'd like for it to be as I nod towards the St. Andrew's cross, and Finn smirks.

“I'm a bad Catholic, lass, but this feels downright filthy.”

“It's meant to.” I give him a devilish smile, gesturing as I sit up, giving myself a moment so I don't risk my knees going out from under me. “I want you facing forward. Back against it.”

“Yes, ma'am.” Finn winks at me, striding towards the apparatus, and I take a deep, slow breath, willing my legs not to shake as I stand up and watch as he follows my instructions to the letter.

He is, it seems, a man of his word.

He leans back against the X-shaped cross, his back pressed to it, his cock visibly throbbing. I walk towards him slowly, watching his gaze drag over me, enjoying the thought of what I'm going to do to him. He tormented me—but I can do one better.

*After this, he probably won't come back,* I think, and I feel a flicker of regret. But that's what I need. I need this to be as far separated from anything personal, anything that I could *feel*, as possible. I need this to be nothing but what I would do for a client, and the best way to remind him of his place, to make him want to take his desire elsewhere, is to leave him frustrated.

I cuff him, wrists and ankles, careful not to brush his cock. Finn is breathing

shallowly, every muscle rigid, and when I step back, I see his mouth twitch in a smirk.

“I thought this would turn me off, lass, but I think as soon as you touch me, I’m going to lose it.”

“No, you won’t.” I wink at him, retreating just long enough to sift through one of the drawers and pull out a thick plastic ring. Finn makes a noise deep in his throat as I sway back towards him, his eyes widening.

“What the—”

“You said I can do any one thing I want, yes?” I smile at him, and he frowns.

“I think the cuffing me to this counts as the one thing—”

“You tied me up and made me come as many times as you wanted.” I consider my plan, and roll the ring over and over in my fingertips. “Alright. I suppose cuffing you to this and telling you what I had planned next is the same thing—but this will make it so much easier for you *not* to come as soon as I touch you. So what will it be?” I step a little closer, my hand grazing his hipbone, painfully close to his cock. “Because *my* rule is that you have to promise you won’t come until I tell you that you can...*anywhere*.”

I can see Finn thinking it over, trying to figure out if I’m tricking him somehow, but the glassy, lust-filled look in his eyes tells me that he’s having a difficult time. I can’t blame him...all the blood in his brain has been in his cock for a long time now, and I can imagine he’s starting to feel more than a little foggy.

“Fine,” Finn grinds out. “Only because I don’t want to lose it three seconds into you touching me.”

“Very good.” I smile at him, dragging my tongue over my lower lip, and I see him suck in a breath. I can tell just how much he wants me, how much he’s *aching* to be touched, and the moment I pour a few drops of oil in my hand, sliding my palm over his throbbing cock in one quick stroke to make it easier to slide the ring over him, I feel his entire body jerk beneath my touch.

“Fuck! Christ, Asha—” He shudders, twisting. “God, it’s so fucking sensitive —”

“Just wait.” I look up at him sweetly, pressing the ring against his cockhead and starting to slide it down, over the veined shaft to the very base, twisting a little as I go. Finn lets out a strangled gasp that sends a flush of pleasure through me, and I settle the ring at the base of his cock, stepping back for a moment to admire my handiwork.

His cock is gorgeous. Thick and long and veined, the piercing through the head and the top of the shaft adorning it, and I reach out, brushing my fingers over the metal. Finn lets out another choked sound, his hips already moving as best as they can while he’s cuffed to the apparatus, but he doesn’t have much range of motion. He can’t thrust against my hand the way he wants to, and I can see that he’s already being driven mad by it.

“This is what gets you off?” he pants, shuddering under my touch. “Driving me...crazy...like this?” His hips twitch again as I toy with his piercing with my fingertips, pre-cum pearling at the tip of his cock, dripping down his already damp shaft. “Fuck—”

“Maybe.” I give him another wicked smile. “I like the way it sounds when you beg. When you *need* to come so badly that you’d say anything for it. Didn’t you like hearing that from me?”

Finn glares at me, but he can’t say otherwise. He’d wanted me to beg and plead, too, teased me until I was desperate to come. I watch as he twists under my touch, his jaw clenched against the pleas that I know will spill out of his lips eventually.

My hand closes around his shaft, sliding up over the swollen head, moving in slow, steady strokes that make him moan. “I’ve never played with a pierced cock before, you know,” I tell him lightly, letting my palm rub over the metal. “I like playing with yours.”

Finn tips his head back, groaning. “You can play with it anytime you like, lass. Just—oh *god*—” His hips jerk again, his cock throbbing in my touch. “Oh fuck—”

“Oh, no.” I slow my strokes, letting my fingers dance over his straining flesh teasingly. “I told you that you couldn’t come. And I meant it.” His cockhead is dripping steadily now, and I see Finn’s brow furrow, trying to figure out what it is that I mean as he tries to get more friction in my loose grip.



When I lean forward, flicking my tongue over his sensitive tip, the noise he lets out is almost primal.

“*God—lass—Asha—*” he moans, over and over, as I swirl my tongue around it, teasing the piercing, lapping up the taste of him as I loosely stroke his shaft, my hand dropping lower to toy with his swollen balls. His sounds of tormented pleasure fill the air, and it turns me on all over again, hearing him groan for me as I play with him.

I keep going for a long time, teasing him with fingers and lips and tongue, keeping him rock-hard and leaking pre-cum for me, until his entire body is trembling with an almost painful need.

“Christ, lass, I need to come so badly it hurts,” he gasps, his eyes opening as he looks down at me. His face is taut with lust, his eyes dark and glassy, his muscles straining. His cock is red and swollen, the veins throbbing, and I know if I slipped the ring off, he’d come with one touch.

But that’s not what I have planned for him tonight.

“I can see that.” I slide my finger up his cock once more, tracing the vein, giving him one more slow, sucking kiss on the tip before stepping back. “But not tonight.”

Finn stares at me in utter shock. I don’t think he fully comprehends what I mean at first until I undo the cuffs, turning away from him as the leather falls away. “You can keep the cockring,” I tell him carelessly. “It might be the only way you keep your promise to me. After all, you can’t jerk off when you get home, either.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, lass?” Finn retorts, his voice outraged, and I turn slowly as I slide my black slip back over my head, smiling at him with satisfaction.

“You promised that you wouldn’t come *anywhere,*” I remind him. “Not until I let you. So there you go. Don’t come. I know you’re *so hard*—but you can’t even touch it. And if you do—” I shrug. “I don’t think you’d lie to me. But if you can’t keep your word, I won’t let you touch me again.”

Finn knows good and well that I might not anyway. That I might get home and come to my senses, remember that we’re supposed to be *working*

together, not fucking. I expect him to tell me to fuck off, that this is ridiculous, that he made me come over and over, and I'm leaving him throbbing and unfulfilled.

He sucks in a breath, letting it out in a slow, shuddering sigh that I think has a curse buried somewhere in it, muttered as he exhales. But to my surprise, he nods.

“Alright then, lass. It's going to be a bit of an effort getting it back into my trousers. But I'll manage.”

I stare at him in shock as he crosses the room to gather his clothes, his cock still stiff against the ridged muscles of his belly, gleaming in the low light of the room. He looks like the statue of a god as he gathers his things up, muscled and hard and virile, his eyes sliding over me once more with undisguised lust as he slides on his jeans and t-shirt.

“I'll be here tomorrow night, lass,” he murmurs, reaching for his keys and wallet. And then, without so much as trying for another touch or asking for a kiss, he turns and leaves me standing there, staring after him.

# Finn



I honestly don't know what the hell I was thinking, agreeing to that.

Actually, I do.

I was thinking that when she was with Matvei, she had no control. She was powerless, clearly unsure if he'd even adhere to her safeword, since we had to take precautions just in case he refused to...my presence close by, the bracelet. I can't imagine how that must have felt for her, someone who typically prefers not to submit in the first place, to have to let a man she despises touch her that way. To have to allow him to order her to do what he pleases, to swallow her pride and obey him.

I couldn't do it. I can't even bring myself to let Asha dominate me the way she wants to, and I *do* want her. Just not—that way.

*Are you sure about that?* There's a voice in the back of my head taunting me as I walk uncomfortably down to my motorcycle, reminding me that I hadn't lost my erection when she'd cuffed me to that X-shaped thing. I hadn't so much as felt it flag in the slightest. If anything, I'd gotten harder—if that were possible—thinking about her touching me as I hung there helplessly, cock sticking out and begging for her to do anything she pleased.

Maybe I'm not as averse to all of this as I want to think I am.

Regardless, I wanted to give her back some of that power. I wanted her to get to feel in control again, back in that safe place that I'm beginning to realize

she likes to reside in. This world of power plays and kinky sex is new to me, but I'm starting to think it has less to do with her own pleasure, and more to do with the fact that being in charge makes her feel safe and independent. When she's in control, nothing can hurt her. No one can ignore what she wants, because she's the one calling the shots.

I'm not insensible to how much trust it took for her to let me cuff her to that bench. I feel vaguely as if I should be angry that she left me hard when I made her come over and over, but knowing what I do about her and Matvei and how it must have all made her feel, I can't be. I can't bring myself to be pissed off at her for wanting to reclaim some of what makes her feel safe and powerful.

Even if it's left me with a hard-on that fucking *hurts* all the way home.

It's the hardest thing I've ever done—no pun intended—not to immediately pull the cock-ring off and stroke myself to a quick, messy orgasm the minute I walk into the house. But if I see Asha tomorrow night, she's going to ask me—either way, if I tell her that I couldn't resist or if I try to hide it, it'll be a lie.

The only way to keep my word is to keep my hands off of my cock.

I'm so aroused that I'm not even sure I can get the ring off without coming just from the touch of my fingers, but I can't sleep with it on. I'm pretty sure having the circulation to my dick cut off all night is a good way to lose it permanently, and I can't think of many fates worse than that—so I opt to take a cold shower instead, gritting my teeth as I stand under the spray and reach for the ring, hissing through my teeth as I slowly drag it over my straining cock.

My toes curl against the tile, and for one moment, I think that's it. I feel the tingling in my balls, that tight unfurling in my abdomen, the throb in my cock, and I expect a spray of cum against the shower wall, my tortured cock letting loose at last. But when I open my eyes slowly, looking down, I'm still achingly hard, and I haven't come—yet.

But the shower also does absolutely nothing to ease my torment.

I'm not even sure how I'm going to fucking sleep. I end up going to bed

naked, the idea of trying to get my stubborn erection into pajama pants too frustrating to contemplate, and lie there for a long while staring at the ceiling and wondering how long a man can have an erection that *isn't* chemically induced before he's supposed to go to the emergency room anyway.

I've certainly never had this problem before, but I'm beginning to think that I'm going to have a constant hard-on for as long as Asha is in my life. Eventually, somehow, I fall asleep. But even asleep, all I can think about is her.

The dreams are odd and disjointed, but it's all her—her hands, her mouth, her body, rubbing over me in sleek, wet, sinuous ways, tormenting me with heat and wet, spit-slick pleasure, but never enough. She gets me so close, again and again, fingers stroking and tongue lapping and the soft, wet heat of her pussy closing over me for just one shattering moment—and that's the instant that I come awake gasping, my thighs wet and the sheet sticking to my skin. I realize with a flush of hot embarrassment that I've come in my sleep for the first time since I was probably sixteen.

*Fuck.* The first thing I think is that I'm going to have to tell her the truth when she asks, and that she'll tell me I lied. I won't get another night with her again—then I have an idea.

Before I can stop myself, I reach for my phone on the nightstand, flicking to the string of texts we sent last. Quickly, before I change my mind, I tap out a message and hit send, my heart thudding in my chest.

***Dreamed about you. So good I lost control in my sleep. I swear I didn't touch myself, but—you're just that good, even in my dreams.***

There's nothing for a long moment as I lay there, my body still tingling with remembered pleasure that's nowhere near as satisfying as it could have been, my cock still half-hard against my leg. Then I hear the buzz of my phone.

Just two words from Asha. ***Show me.***

I feel a flush of embarrassment at that. It's been years since I've sent a nude to someone, and even then, it was far sexier—in my opinion, anyway—than showing the girl I want to fuck a picture of my accidental orgasm. But it's what she wants, and so I flick on the bedside light, lifting up my blanket and

sheet to aim my phone camera at the sight of my cock against my thigh, cum spilled over my skin.

***See what you do to me?***

I almost can't believe I actually sent the picture. A part of me thinks she's going to be disgusted, even though she asked for it—I would be disgusted—but only a few moments later, my phone buzzes again.

***You were bad, Finn. You're going to have to be punished.***

I groan, letting the blanket drop back down over me, my phone clutched in my hand. *I could just not go back*, I think to myself, but I already know it's a lost cause. Whatever hold Asha has over me, it doesn't matter if my punishment is two more nights of my cock being teased into a straining fever before she sends me home to orgasm in my dreams; I'll still go back. I want her too fucking badly—and I've never felt arousal like this before, delicious and torturous all at once, maddening and better than anything I've ever experienced at the same time.

My phone buzzes again. I reach for it, feeling half-delirious with interrupted sleep and frustrated arousal. When I open it, I feel my cock instantly throb despite the mess still warm on my thighs.

It's a picture of Asha, stretched out in her own bed, her arm covering her perfect breasts. All I can see is her chin, her delicate collarbones, and the full shape of her breasts with her nipples covered, down to the curve of her waist, but it's enough to make me start to harden all over again—especially when another picture comes in, and another, and another.

Her flat stomach, just down to her hipbones. Her legs, bare and spread, but the picture stopping just shy of her pussy. Her entire, naked body, thighs pressed together, her nipples stiff and peaked, begging for my tongue.

And then one more photo, taken between her thighs, her fingers spreading herself open for me.

***Don't you dare touch yourself. But show me just how turned on you are from this, Finn.***

I don't need to touch my cock to take a photo of it. It's stiff as iron again

already, pressed against my abs, and I take a picture. Then another as pre-cum starts to drip from the head onto my stomach, sending them to her in quick succession.

***I didn't know I could get this hard again this fast. I need to come, Asha. Really come.***

I send her another photo, this one from above, letting her see all of me—my balls pulled up tight to my cock, my tense thighs. I'm amazed my balls aren't purple from the amount of time I've spent hard tonight, but they look normal, if a little sensitive. And a moment later, my phone buzzes again.

***Such a gorgeous cock. Shame there's no one there to play with it.***

I groan, looking down at it. The head is so swollen it's starting to strain my piercing, and I want nothing more than to reach down and give myself a quick, firm stroke, to touch it for a moment. Just a little relief—but if I do, I don't know if I'm going to be able to stop.

***I'm right here, Asha. I could send you pictures while I play with it. Let you see me come for you.***

It's a shot in the dark, but I have to try. Still, I'm not surprised when the text I get back is a firm *no*.

***If you're good and don't touch it, Finn, maybe I'll reward you tomorrow night.***

I groan, tossing my phone to one side and letting my head fall back on the pillow, closing my eyes. I'm not going to get another minute's sleep tonight; I feel certain of that.

—

It's a good thing I don't actually have anything planned for the next day. I spend the day doing errands and chores, trying anything I can to keep my mind off of my frustrated arousal, my erection receding for a little while, only to come back in full force the moment I think about going to see Asha. She's all I can think about, and I can almost forget that in a few days, she's going to be seeing Matvei again. I can almost forget that I can't buy out her nights

forever, that, eventually she's going to go back to work. That I'm not going to be the only man who touches her, who hears her teasing, sugary voice, who gets hard because of her touch. That other men will do the things to her I have, be touched by her the way I have.

When I do think about it, I feel that thick, angry jealousy, a possessive feeling that I have no right to and can't shake. It makes me want to take her far away from here, somewhere that only I can touch her, taste her, *have* her.

It's more than a little unsettling, because no one has ever made me feel that way. And of all women, Asha *shouldn't*, because she's never really going to be mine.

And yet, I go back to the Ashen Rose that night, because I can't stop myself from wanting to see her.

This time, she's wearing a short red silk robe the same color as her lipstick, edged in delicate lace that brushes along her collarbones and the tops of her thighs the way I want to brush over her skin with my lips and fingers. She raises an eyebrow as I walk in, poised and elegant this time, instead of splayed out with her fingers pressed between her thighs like the night before.

Just the thought has me aching the moment I see her.

"You were very bad," she purrs, swaying towards me, her long dark hair tumbling over her shoulders. "You need to be punished. You can't even keep control of yourself for one night in your sleep—"

Her hand is rising to brush over my chest, and I catch it in mine, holding her wrist just firmly enough that her eyes widen a little as I meet her gaze with my own. "So do you," I tell her, voice thick with lust, and I see her breath catch. "For teasing me so much, you little vixen."

I tug her hand down, pressing it against the front of my jeans. "Feel how hard you make me?" I rasp, enjoying the way her gaze darkens, that desire that she can't quite fight off filling her expression. "That hard cock is all your fault, Asha. It's been hard since last night, thinking about you. So what are you going to do about it?"

I let go of her wrist, not wanting to scare her, but her hand lingers for just a moment, pressing against the thick ridge. "We'll make that deal again," she



says softly. "One thing each that we want."

"You're going first again," I tell her, and she raises an eyebrow.

"You're going to make me come over and over again, and risk me not getting you off?"

I give her a slow, wicked smile, not unlike the one she gave me last night. "Wait and see," I tell her, and Asha's eyes widen a little as I motion to the bench. "Face down, this time."

Asha hesitates, and for just a moment, I think she's going to back out. But she nods, her fingers going to the sash of her robe as she walks to the bench, and as she shrugs it off slowly with her back to me, I see that she's wearing nothing underneath it.

*God*, she's perfect. She lies down, adjusting the bench so that she's flat on her stomach with her cheek pillowed against the top of it, her ass angled upwards. It's full and round and begging for me to run my hands over it, and her tongue slides teasingly over her lips as she lets me cuff her wrists and ankles again.

"What are you going to do to me, Finn?" she purrs, and I shrug.

"Wait and see."

This time, I stay clothed. I know it will torture her a little more, not being able to enjoy the view of my naked body and hard, pierced cock while I play out the scenario I have planned. When I walk to the cabinet where she told me the spanking implements were, I hear her soft, quick intake of breath.

"I thought you didn't like things like that," she purrs, and I shrug, opening it up.

"Maybe I'm becoming more open-minded," I tell her, glancing over to where she's bound to the bench, legs splayed open, vulnerable and exposed. "Having a hard cock off and on for nearly twenty-four hours will do that to a man. And it's good to try new things, isn't it?" I look through the implements. "This one, I think."

I take out a soft leather flogger, one that, to my inexperienced eyes, at least,

looks as if it won't hurt her too badly. I walk towards her, seeing her gaze follow me as I go to stand behind her, and for a moment, all I can do is look at her, hardly able to breathe from the way my chest squeezes with desire.

I have no idea if she's going to be aroused by this or not. She'd said submitting doesn't turn her on, not usually—and I can't think of many things more submissive than being cuffed face-down. Still, I see her hips shift on the bench as I slowly swing the flogger in the air, getting used to having it in my hand, and I'm not entirely certain that she's *not* aroused by this.

Her teeth sink into her lower lip at the first strike of the leather over her ass, and I pause, worried that I've hurt her. There's only the faintest pink tinge to her flesh, but *I've* certainly never been struck with a flogger before, and I have no idea what levels of pain it might cause. I peer at her, genuinely concerned—and then I realize that she's trying not to laugh.

“You'll have to put a bit more of your back into it than that,” she says with a giggle, twisting her head around. “You're supposed to be spanking me, not tickling me with a feather duster.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Oh? You want a bit more of a heavy hand?” There's a mischievous glint in her eyes that spurs me on, that makes this all seem more fun than serious, and I bring down the flogger again, harder this time.

“Oh!” Asha laughs. “I almost felt that.”

“Better watch it, lass,” I growl. “You know the kind of man I am. I've had a heavy hand with many a man who's ended up on my wrong side. Just trying to be a bit more careful with you, that's all.”

Asha tilts her head, her wide, dark eyes meeting mine. “I'm not made of glass, Finn,” she says softly. “Do it however you like.”

There's something in her voice, some underlying meaning that I can't dig too deeply into right this moment—I think even if I'd felt capable of it, I'm not sure that I'm ready to. I focus on the desire instead, on whether or not I really *do* want to take a bit of my frustrated arousal out on her, since she's allowing it.

I'm not sure how I feel about it until I bring the flogger down again, harder

this time, seeing her soft flesh tremble under the blow, red spreading over her pale flesh, and my cock lurches, throbbing at the sight. Her thighs quiver, and when I bring it down again and again, in quick succession, I can see the hint of glistening arousal between them.

Whether or not she'll admit it, this is turning Asha on.

It's turning me on, too.

I'd never thought of myself as any kind of deviant, but with Asha's permission, all of this takes on a different flavor. Seeing her bound there, her legs trying to kick out uselessly against the cuffs, her back arching and hips pressed against the leather as she starts to squirm, arouses me more than I would have ever thought. I can picture myself flogging her until her ass and thighs were warm and red, pushing my jeans down, thrusting into her wet, tight pussy as she cried out with pleasure, still cuffed beneath me as her heated flesh pressed into mine.

Just the image is almost enough to make me lose control.

"You're wet," I growl at her as I bring the flogger down again, her faint whimper making me throb painfully. "I thought you said you didn't like being punished like this, Asha."

She lets out a soft gasp as I drag the tails of the flogger between her legs, upwards over the damp, swollen folds, and she lets out a shiver. "I think you do like it."

"Maybe I just like it with you." Her teeth sink into her lower lip again, worrying at it as her body tries to arch upwards into the caress between her legs, another of those soft moans slipping free.

"Did you do this with Nikolai?" The question comes out before I can stop it, and Asha's eyes widen, her body stiffening.

"I don't want to talk about that." Her lips press together, and I instantly regret letting my jealousy get the better of me.

"You don't have to." I drag the leather over the curve of her ass. "I didn't mean—"

“This isn’t personal.” She makes another soft sound, squirming under the touch. “Finn—”

A sudden, hot anger grips me that I try to push aside, but I feel it clenching in my gut, sending a surge of emotion through me. *Of course, it’s not to her*, I remind myself. *This is her job*. But it doesn’t make it feel any better. And as I bring the flogger down against her ass again, watching her skin redden beneath the stripe from it, I want to make her beg for me. I want her to plead for me to give her the pleasure that only I can deliver right now, to want *me*. I slide it between her thighs again, in between every few strokes, watching her quiver under my touch.

“If you want to come, you’re going to have to ask for it,” I murmur, my voice low and rough as I bring the leather down over the tops of her thighs. “I can see how much you want it, Asha. Beg me for it.”

Her hips are squirming against the leather, twisting as I drag the flogger over her skin, and she twists around to glare at me. “I’m not begging for anything.” There’s a defiance in her tone that somehow only turns me on more, and it makes me wonder if this is what it’s like to be aroused by these games of power and control.

“We’ll see.” There’s a growl to my voice that I’ve never heard before as I bring the flogger down again, feeling my jaw clench with the surge of arousal that ripples through me. It makes me *want* to make her beg, to hear her plead, and I don’t know how I feel about that, exactly, deep down. It’s not something I’ve ever experienced before.

“I don’t think you *can* make me beg.” Her words catch in her throat a little, though, thickened with desire, and I let out a low laugh.

“What’s that, Asha?” I bring the flogger down again, stroking the leather upwards over her ass as it snaps against her skin, and I see her buck and twist. She lets out a gasp, her mouth opening on a cry as I snap it lightly against her inner thigh. I can see her arousal building, her pussy swollen and wet as she arches back towards me as much as she can with the cuffs holding her down.

It’s nothing but a game of wills at this point—and Asha’s is more than I’d bargained for. I tease and taunt her until she’s quivering and moaning, her

hands curled around the metal bars of the bench where her wrists are cuffed, her face flushed, dripping wet for me—and I *know* how she must be feeling, because I've been feeling that way since the night before. But she won't beg.

“You might as well let me up, Finn,” she pants, finally. I'm not even sure how much time has passed, only that the air is thick with tension, hers and mine, both of us turned on nearly past the point of being able to bear it—but she seems to be able to, better than I can. “I'm not going to beg.”

I swallow hard, my fingers clenching and unclenching around the handle of the flogger. My wrist is tired, and my cock is aching, and *I* want to come. I want to bury myself inside of her, drop all pretense, and fuck her until neither of us can think, but I know that's not on the table. That's never been an option, and it won't be now.

Frustrated, I drop the flogger, bending down to undo her cuffs in quick, sharp movements. “There,” I rasp, stepping back. “What now?”

Asha sucks in a slow breath, her fingers curling into her palms for a moment before she pushes herself up, her face settling into that seductive smirk that I both love and hate all at once. She's beautiful like this—but I want more. I want to know *her* outside of all of this.

“Your turn,” she breathes, standing up on what even I can see are trembling legs, and her hand curls into the front of my shirt, tugging me towards the bench. “Take your clothes off, Finn.”

“Do it for me, lass,” I retort, and her eyebrows shoot up.

“Still calling the shots? I thought you were going to *submit* to your punishment.”

My cock throbs, almost more painful than pleasurable by now, and I feel a sudden weariness with all of this. “God, Asha—*fuck*. I just want—”

“What? You want to come? Maybe I should let you, after tormenting you last night. But it would be so much more fun if—”

Her fingers are undoing my buttons as she speaks, and I feel that sudden wave of frustrated anger again, my patience with all of these games wearing so very, very thin. My hand comes up to cover hers, my fingers wrapping

around her wrist, and I move forward, backing her toward the wall on the other side of the bench as her eyes go wide.

“Finn—” her mouth drops open, her gaze fixed on mine, and I want to kiss her. I want to bend down and devour her lips, discover what they feel like against mine, soft and plush. I want to know the taste of her mouth, the hum of her moan against mine, and the need feels like an almost physical thing as her back hits the wall, and I cage her in against it, my frustration reaching a boiling point that I can only barely control.

“Maybe I’m not done with you yet,” I murmur in a hoarse growl, and Asha’s eyes fly wider still. She’s torn between arousal and fear—I can see it in her face, in the way she tenses without saying anything, hovering on the edge between seeing what I’m going to do and telling her to stop.

I can’t kiss her. I asked for it once already, and she said no. I won’t disrespect that. But there’s so much more—

“I want you.” The words slip out of my mouth, simple and blunt, full of the bone-deep need that she’s made me feel. “You’re driving me insane, Asha.” I slide her hand lower, down towards my aching cock, the way I had earlier. “I didn’t know it was possible to *want* this much. To feel this kind of need—Christ, woman. You’re making me feel as if I’m losing my mind.”

Her lips part on a soft, indrawn breath, her fingers pressing against the hard ridge of my cock, and I can barely take it. I’m nearly pressed against her, all of her soft naked flesh, and I desperately want my own clothing to vanish, to feel her soft and warm against every inch of me. I’m almost grateful that I *am* still clothed—it feels like my last armor against losing control entirely.

Asha’s hand wraps around my cock, tugging me closer, her fingers toying with my zipper as they slide upwards. “What would you do to me if I let you?” she breathes, and for a moment, I can’t speak, as if the question has shorted out something in my brain.

“I don’t know if we have time for everything I want to do to you,” I murmur when I can speak again, looking down at her. She’s looking up at me with those wide, soft eyes, hazy enough with desire that I almost wonder if she might give in. “I’d get on my knees and lick your sweet pussy until you come all over my mouth again, just like you did last night, fuck you with my

fingers until you clenched around them like you will on my cock. And then —” I shift forward a little closer, the space between us almost negligible now. “And then I’d pick you up, wrap your legs around my waist, and fuck you until you scream for me. I’d fuck you every way I could think of, for as long as I could. I can’t even begin to describe all the ways I want you wrapped around me, Asha, all the things you make me dream about—”

She swallows hard, her chest rising and falling in short, quick breaths as her other hand comes up to wrap in my shirt again, almost as if she wants to pull me closer and is trying to keep herself from doing just that. “If we did that,” Asha breathes softly, her voice almost trembling, as if she’s thought of all of this too and has been fighting her desire just as I have, “I wouldn’t be able to finish this job, Finn. You wouldn’t be able to let me go back to Matvei, and you know it. You wouldn’t be able to stand there outside that room, knowing what he’s doing to me, having even the *slightest* idea of it, and do nothing. The thought of him touching me, fucking me, being *inside* of me—it *would* drive you insane. You know it would. We can’t do this. And we—”

Her voice does tremble then, and she presses her lips together tightly. I can see her swallowing back something she was going to say, and it makes me ache inside.

“What, Asha? What is it?” I’m so close to her. I want to press myself against her, bare skin to bare skin, to touch and kiss every inch of her body, to be so much a part of her that she and I both forget where one ends and the other begins. I’ve never wanted to be consumed by a woman the way I want to be with her—or to consume someone in return. I’ve never known an emotion like this, and it’s as exhilarating as it is terrifying.

“I can’t.” She shakes her head, swallowing hard as she turns her face away. “We can’t do that, Finn.”

“But we can do something.” My voice is softer now, rasping with need, and Asha looks up at me. When she does, I could almost swear I see a glint of tears in her eyes, although I want to believe it’s not. I never want to see her cry.

She reaches for my other hand, bringing it up between her thighs, pressing my palm against her soft, swollen flesh so that I’m cupping her there between

her legs. “Make me come, Finn,” she whispers, and at long last, the pretense is gone from her voice for just a moment. “And I’ll do the same for you.”

Her fingers are already undoing my belt, drawing my zipper down, and I let out a hiss of half-pleasure, half-pain as she slips my aching cock free, her hand wrapping around it. Her head falls back as I part her with two fingers, sliding them along her swollen clit. She’s fucking *drenched*, dripping over my hand as she starts to stroke my cock with less teasing than last night—long, slow strokes that leave me gasping every time her palm rubs over my piercing and presses against my cockhead.

“Fuck, Asha—I’m not going to last long.” I breathe out the words, feeling her hips buck into my hand, and she lets out a low, soft moan as I curl my fingers into her, slowly sliding them into her hot, tight core. It’s taking everything in me to hold back as long as I can, and feeling her tighten around my fingers, hips rocking against my hand, makes me want to come so desperately that I don’t know how long I can hang onto it.

“Neither am I,” she whispers, and that almost undoes me then and there.

There’s something intimate about the moment, her naked against the wall with my fingers buried inside of her, her hand slowly working the length of my cock as I flatten my other hand against the wall next to her head, bracing myself as we work each other towards a climax. “I’m going to come on you, Asha,” I growl, bucking into her fist again as she rubs her palm over my cockhead, and I feel my pre-cum smear over her skin. “I’m going to fucking come all over you. And I want you to drench my hand when I do.”

“You can come wherever you want.” Her voice is low, breathy, catching on the words as I feel her grind against my hand. She’s so wet and hot, like drenched velvet inside, and I want her wrapped around my cock so badly that I can’t breathe. It feels like all the air has been sucked out of my lungs, and I don’t care. I don’t care about anything but making her come, about finally getting the release that I need, and if someone told me I’d die at this moment, I’d keep standing right here until we were both finished.

Something about her has consumed me, and I can’t bring myself to care.

“Come for me, Asha. Come for me—” I curl my fingers into her, rubbing, thrusting, grinding the heel of my hand against her clit as I fuck her with a



third finger added, wanting to fill her, make her feel how much better it could be with the stretch of my cock. “Come all over my fucking hand.”

Hers tightens around me, stroking faster, and she tugs me forward so that my cock is pressed against her stomach, rubbing against her with every stroke. “I’ll come when you do,” she whispers, her thumb pressed against the soft flesh beneath my tip, fingertips rolling over my piercings, fist sliding all the way down to the tight sac of my balls and back up again, and I can’t think, can’t breathe, can’t do anything except thrust into her hand until finally—

The sound I make when I come is barely human. I swell and harden in her fist, somehow gasping out a warning as her hand moves faster, stroking me just the way I need it. I feel the orgasm come up from somewhere so deep inside of me that I feel the pleasure down in my bones, in my teeth, in every part of me as my cock erupts over her soft skin. I feel her press my cockhead against her stomach, and I look down to see the white streaks of my cum shooting over her belly, her breasts, dripping down to her thighs as her mouth opens on a cry of pleasure to match mine. I feel her clench down hard around my fingers, her knees nearly buckling as she comes hard, too. My hips thrust forward, rutting against her belly the way I want to thrust up into her. I have the sudden thought of coming inside of her, fucking my cum into her so deeply that she’d never get the feeling of me out of her.

My cock spasms at the thought, more cum spilling over her skin as she lets out a moan, grinding down onto my fingers as she shudders and tightens around me, whimpering with pleasure as I rub her clit, drawing it out. I never want to stop coming. I never want her to stop. I want to pick her up and fling her on the bed a few feet away from us, slide into her, and stay there.

I don’t know how this is ever going to be enough.

“Finn.” Asha breathes my name, her grip on my cock loosening, her gaze meeting mine. Her eyes are shiny, glassy with pleasure, and I want to kiss her. I want to know what every part of her mouth tastes like. I’m dying from wanting her, *needing* her.

And she’s right. We can’t do more than this, because if I had her like that even once, *all* of her, I’d never be able to let her go. I’d never be able to let anyone else touch her ever again.

I wouldn't be able to bear it.

I stagger backward, my fingers sliding out of her, and I raise them to my mouth without thinking, licking her arousal off of my hand. Her taste and scent fill my senses, and as she lets go of me, I'm still hard. I'm not sure that I'm ever going to *not* be hard again.

Asha looks at me, her gaze flicking down to my cock, and for one moment, I think she's not done, either. And then she lets out a soft sigh.

"I think that's the end of the evening, Finn," she says. Her voice sounds full of something I can't quite pinpoint, almost full of regret, and I see her press her lips together, her eyes still shiny as she looks at me. "You should go."

I take one last look at her standing there, marked with my cum, her skin flushed and her lips bitten, her hair tousled around her face. She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, the woman I want more than anything else in the world—the only woman I know for sure I can't have.

"You're right." I somehow manage to tuck myself back into my jeans, drawing up my zipper, my fingers fumbling with my belt. "I should go."

I can't look at her as I turn away. I can't bear whatever expression is on her face—whether it's acceptance or a look of regret. It doesn't matter—if she wants me to go or if she wishes I could stay, it will hurt either way.

So I just leave.

# Finn



“Something’s going on, Finn. You need to tell me what it is.”

Theo looks at me the next morning from the screen set up in my living room—the closest thing *I* have to an office—his brow creased into heavy lines. “I trust you, you know that. But you’re doing something, and I think I need to have a little more information. Do I need to come back from Dublin?”

It’s not a threat—there’s genuine concern in his voice. “No.” I shake my head, running my hand through my hair. “Nothing like that. I need a little more sleep, but it’s nothing you can fix.”

“Are you sure?” Theo leans back in his leather chair, his expression concerned. “I think you’re capable of handling the Kings in my absence, Finn. But I don’t want to put more on you than you want to take on. If this is something you don’t want to be responsible for, especially with all that’s going on regarding this Kotov fellow—”

“I can manage it.” Something in me tightens apprehensively at the idea of Theo returning to take all of this off of my hands, a feeling that it somehow equates to failure, even though I know he wouldn’t look at it like that. “I—”

“Then I need to know what the plan is.” Theo leans forward again, steeping his fingers on the desk. “As I said, I trust you, lad. But I can see there’s something you’ve formulated, and I need you to fill me in. Nikolai doesn’t even know what it is that you’ve got cooking up there.”

“I wouldn’t tell Nikolai before I told you.” I run my hand through my hair again. I didn’t sleep well the night before; that much is definitely true. I had more restless dreams of Asha, waking up this time hard and unfulfilled yet again, aching for her in the bed with me. Nothing was stopping me from jerking off this time, but it wasn’t what I wanted. I ended up feeling hollow, the desire far from sated. “I do have a plan.”

“Alright.” Theo waits patiently, and I let out a slow breath. I hadn’t planned on saying anything just yet, not until Asha had something more definite for me, but I know when Theo isn’t going to budge. He’s not going to accept *wait and see*, and I can understand that. He’s across the ocean, having entrusted generations of work to me, and it only makes sense that he’d want to know what it is that I plan to do to keep it safe.

“Nikolai wanted to infiltrate Kotov’s organization with some of our men,” I say slowly. “It’s nothing we haven’t done before, pretty standard operations—but it’s dangerous for them. Normally, I would have gone ahead with that plan—but I saw something of Kotov that made me think there was another option.”

“Another option?” Theo frowns. “For getting information?”

I nod. “A friend of mine works as security at one of Nikolai’s other clubs. He got a pass to the Ashen Rose, and took me along. They had some poker game going on that night—something where the prize was a girl who works there, who was putting on a show onstage to distract the players.”

Theo chuckles. “I’ve heard of that particular show he puts on from time to time. And I’m guessing Kotov was there?”

I nod. “He won. He got the girl, and she spent the night with him—although it apparently didn’t go quite the way he wanted. Nikolai didn’t want him back at the club after that. He was pissed about it. I went to see the girl—thought she might be able to tell us something about him, but I also offered her a job.”

Theo’s eyebrows slide up, his mouth twitching into a frown. “You’re using her to infiltrate instead?”

I nod. I’m not surprised he picked up on it—I half wondered if he might

guess what I was up to before I'd had a chance to tell him myself. "She agreed to it after we met and talked. I gave her a bracelet with a signal button in it for security, posed as her bodyguard, and she set up a private session with Matvei. She's only been there once so far, so we don't have any concrete information yet. But I think it's promising—it plays to his ego that he's getting Nikolai's best escort to meet with him on his own terms, privately, after Nikolai refused him entrance again. He'll soften up with her soon enough, and we should get something worth hearing about."

"I don't know about this." Theo rubs a hand over his mouth. "Seems just as dangerous, sending this girl in there. And you haven't told Nikolai—"

"I wanted to make sure it would give us something worthwhile first. If it seemed like it was a dead end, I'd pull her out, and let you know that I'd had a hunch that didn't pan out the way I thought it would. I thought it might be better to test the waters, first."

Theo taps his fingers against the desk, considering. "The plan's already in motion, and I assume the girl is counting on getting paid, so I'm not going to say you should put a stop to it. She's agreed and knows the danger, aye?"

I nod. "We had a long discussion about all of it. I won't say she's not largely motivated by the money, but she's aware of the dangers it could entail."

"I'm sure you're paying her well." Theo chuckles. "At any rate, I trust you, lad. I know you wouldn't waste resources or follow a hunch blindly unless you thought it was worth the risk. And I trust you not to be careless with the lives of others. I wouldn't have put you in this position otherwise."

"I know you wouldn't have." I hesitate. "It means a lot—the responsibility you've given me. I know it can't be easy."

"It's easier with someone like you to entrust it to, lad." Theo lets out a long breath. "Keep going as you are, but keep me updated. I want to know as soon as he tells the lass *anything*, understood?"

I nod. "Of course."

The meeting turns to other, more mundane business matters, but I can't quite shake the feeling of worry that it leaves me with. I'd wanted something more solid to give to Theo when I told him what it was that I was doing, and the

trust he continues to have in me—while appreciated—leaves me with a weight on my shoulders that I can't shake.

I don't want to fuck this up. I don't want Theo to think that he was misguided, leaving all of this in my hands—for as long as I've worked for him, I've wanted to prove that his trust in me is well-placed. Proving that I'm capable has been all that's mattered to me for a long time—but it's no longer the only thing that matters to me, and that worries me, too.

I'm drawn to Asha. I can't deny that, or the feelings I have for her—more than I should have, considering the situation that we're in, working together the way we are. I worry for her and the position I've placed her in, and that means my decisions aren't going to be entirely made with a clear head.

Of course, she knows that too. That's why she drew that boundary last night, once again.

I glance towards the laptop sitting on my coffee table. Looking up anything about her feels like an invasion of privacy, but at the same time—

*Shouldn't I know more about her, given the situation?* She's working for me as a spy, looking for sensitive information that could change the future of both the Kings and the Vasilev Bratva—not to mention any of the other organizations in the city—I don't even know her real name. I don't know what she did before she came to work for Nikolai at the Ashen Rose. I don't know if she's lived in Chicago all her life or moved here later on.

I could try to ask her those questions, even frame them as information I need to know in order to work with her, but what I know of her tells me that she won't answer. I don't think she'd *lie* to me exactly—but I think she'd deflect, tell me that I didn't need to know, or find some other way to skirt around the questions. Asha is a master of keeping her secrets close to her chest, and while I can appreciate that—right now, it feels more important that I know who she really is.

I'm a decent hand with technology—nothing like some of the hackers Theo and Nikolai have worked with in the past, but I can track down someone if I need to. It's not hard to find Asha's photo on the Ashen Rose's website and reverse search the image—but what is startling is how very little there is about her.

It almost seems like she wants to be hidden. Like she wants to keep herself tucked away from the world. She has no social media, not even a hint of having ever had any. The only records I can find of her are official things like old addresses—which is enough to tell me that she hasn't always lived in Chicago—and a name.

A better hacker could dig deeper, find out all the personal details that Asha wants to keep hidden, but I'm not here to pry *that* deeply into her past. I just want...something tangible about the woman that I, despite my best efforts, have begun to fall for.

And there's something tangible on the screen right in front of me.

Her *real* name.

*Felicity Harlow.*

My lips make the shape of it, whispering it in the quiet air of my living room. It's a beautiful name. A name that I can imagine myself saying.

I wish she'd told me herself.

There's a moment of bright, painful regret that I dug even this deeply. I doubt Asha will take it well, if she ever has occasion to find out that I know her name, that I know that she used to live in St. Louis, that she passed through a handful of other major cities and stayed briefly before making it to Chicago, where she's been since. I can track that path with the photos of her at other clubs, and it's clear that she wasn't always the sort of high-priced escort that she is now for Nikolai. It doesn't matter to me what she used to do—but I feel as if it might matter to her that I know.

I shut the laptop, a bit more firmly than strictly necessary, frustrated with myself for being this torn up about it. I wouldn't have thought twice about digging into anyone else's past if I felt it was warranted, so I shouldn't balk at doing the same with Asha. *It's not as if she was ever going to tell me anyway.*

*Don't go back for a third night.* I know that's the first step in extricating myself from this. What would happen if I did, anyway? Another night of teasing, another night of Asha dancing around how much she wants me, taking out her frustration on both herself and me like it's a game, like I'm not

spending just about every waking moment wondering how it is that I managed to fall so hard and fast for this woman when there hasn't been one girl in *years* who has held my attention for more than a few nights.

I don't want the games. I want *her*, and she's made it clear that's not possible. The evidence of that was just right in front of me—an entirely separate life that she would never have told me about, an identity that I would have never known. Our relationship exists in that weirdly sterile room in the Ashen Rose and in the times when I take her to and from Matvei, and nowhere else.

It will never exist anywhere else, no matter how I feel. And I feel *frustrated*. It's the only word I have for it. Mentally, emotionally, sexually. Hell, *physically*, considering the fact that I haven't gotten a decent night's sleep since I met her, it feels like. And I can't seem to just pick up a woman and fuck Asha out of my system, if that poorly handled situation with the woman I met at Charlie's bar is any indication.

I simultaneously want her more than I've ever wanted anyone in my life, and I know that I can't get in any deeper. It's driving me crazy.

*She's driving me crazy.*

I decide then, looking at the laptop, that I won't go back to the Rose tonight. I've never felt like I needed to detox from a woman, but there's a first time for everything, I suppose.

There's no future for Asha and me—not even a brief one. The sooner I start forgetting her and remembering that, the better.

No matter how hard it might be.

—

Somehow, I manage to keep that resolution. And when I see Asha getting out of the Uber in front of the garage where I'm waiting for her like last time to take her to Matvei's, I realize that it didn't change a damn thing.

Seeing her still sucks all the air out of my lungs. She's wearing tight matte leather leggings and heavy lace-up boots, a loose black tank top made of



some slippery material hanging down to her thighs. I see a hint of black lace under the thin straps, peeking between the waves of her hair as she strides towards me. She's wearing that red lipstick, and the first thing I feel after that initial gut punch of remembering just how much I want her is a red-hot flare of jealousy at the thought of that lipstick smeared over Matvei Kotov's cock.

He doesn't deserve her. Hell, *I* don't deserve her, but that arrogant, upstart prick of a man is the last one on earth who ought to get to put his hands on her. But he's going to get the privilege tonight, and as many nights after as it takes to get the information we need—the worst part of it all is that I set this all up.

How this makes me feel is my fault, and no one else's.

"Finn." There's nothing sweet or seductive about the way she says my name when she walks up to where I'm standing by my motorcycle. Nothing to make me think that she's thinking about—or even remembers—that the last time we were standing here, the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife, that all I wanted was to put her over the seat and fuck her blind. Nothing to indicate that she's thinking about the fact that two nights ago, I felt her come around my fingers while she jerked me off onto her perfect, smooth skin.

*It's not personal.* Her voice slips into my head, reminding me of what she said that same night. Reminding me that she does that all the time—probably forgets it promptly, as soon as she leaves work to go home. Clocking it and clocking out—that's all it is. Meanwhile, I'll be dreaming about her hand wrapped around me and the sight of her biting her lower lip as she cried out for me for the rest of my life, it feels like.

"Are we leaving?" Asha's lips press together. "I told the driver to wait since you said to meet here. I don't want to be late."

I clear my throat, trying to push down the well of emotions, to make this all *just business*, the way it's supposed to be. "I want to reaffirm that you really want to be doing this," I tell her gruffly, focusing on what I talked about with Theo, and not how her standing in front of me, within reach of my hands, close enough to pull in for a kiss, makes me feel. "If you want to back out, Asha, we can figure something out—"

“I don’t.” Her voice is even more clipped and curt. “Can we go, Finn?”

Hearing that from her feels like a different kind of gut punch. But she’s right, and I know it. This was always supposed to be a business deal, and just as I chose to stay home last night to emphasize that separation, she’s doing the same now by putting this firm distance between us.

That doesn’t make it any easier, though. The way she’s looking at me, the way she sounds, it’s as if we never touched. As if we never did anything at all other than had a conversation in a coffee shop, and it’s hard to reconcile how that makes me feel.

“Let’s go.” I get on my bike, revving up the engine, and when I turn to look for her, she’s already getting back into the Uber.

Whatever there was between us, she’s doing her best to bury it. I should do the same.

Everything plays out just as it did before, once we get to Matvei’s. I follow her in, trying not to let the way I’m seething inwardly show on my face as he takes her by the elbow and steers her down the hall to that same room, with me following in their wake. I try not to think about what they’ll be doing for the next two hours, try not to imagine all the permutations of various forms of depravity that he might want from her.

I try not to picture him with her, and it feels impossible. Asha was right, of course—the more intimately I know her, the more I can envision the way she looks in the throes of pleasure, the way I can still feel the heat of her clenched around my fingers, the more I know of how it feels to have her touch me, the harder it is to stand here, pacing in the hallway, and endure knowing that Matvei is doing the same and more.

If I fucked her, I wouldn’t be able to stand it. The fact that *fucking* seems like too crass a word for what I want to do with her should tell me all I need to know when it comes to how I feel about Asha—or how much more distance there needs to be between us for this to work.

When I hear her muffled cry, repeated over and over, it’s all I can do not to burst in, grab him by the scruff of his neck, and shove his face into the carpet while I grind my boot into it. I can picture, vividly, every horrible thing I’d

do to him, every way I'd take out the awful rage I feel—not just out of jealousy, but out of the way it makes me feel to know that he's getting off on knowing that Asha doesn't really want to be doing this, and he's making her do it anyway. Those aren't cries of pleasure. But that means nothing unless she—

A signal cuts through my thoughts, a sharp, buzzing ring coming from my phone to the earpiece carefully hidden under the fall of my hair, pushed purposefully to one side to hide it.

Asha's bracelet.

I act on instinct. I'm headed for the double doors before I'm even fully aware that I'm moving, my hand going for my gun, every part of me focused wholly on getting to her. It's all that matters, all I'm thinking about. I have to get to her.

It's hard to fully register what I'm seeing when I burst into the room. Asha is hanging from a contraption like the one I was cuffed to at the Ashen Rose a few nights ago, her head lolling forward, her hair hanging in her face, sticking to her cheeks and neck damply. With sweat or blood, I can't be entirely sure, because the rest of her *is* bloody. Her skin is marked all over with welts and newly-forming bruises, blood dripping from a dozen small wounds, and I'm not entirely sure that she's conscious.

“Get her down from there.” I snarl at Matvei, who turns away from Asha, a thin, curved knife in his hand, his lips curling in a brutal smile. “She's coming with me.”

“Well, *I* haven't come yet, so I think not.” Matvei's tongue slides over his lower lip, and I see a spot of blood on his face. *Her* blood, I think, and I see an entirely different kind of red. His hands are covered in it too, and when he reaches down to slide his fist tauntingly over his cock, leaving it streaked with Asha's blood too, I lose control.

I've done plenty in my time as Theo's enforcer. I've dealt with enemies and ambushes, tortured men for information, and killed to protect him, myself—the organization itself. I've always kept my calm. But here—

All I can see is Asha hanging there and the man responsible for what's been

done to her. My vision narrows down to nothing but the two of them, the blood rushing in my ears, my heartbeat pounding until it's all I can hear, my teeth clenched so hard it feels as if they might crack. I want him dead. I want him to die slowly, and at the same time, I want to put a bullet through his head before he sees it coming, for the satisfaction of seeing the moment of shock before he hits the floor. I've never felt so violent in my life, so hungry for someone else's blood.

It almost feels as if I black out for a moment. I forget that I can't actually kill him, that it would have bigger repercussions than I'm authorized to deal with if I did, that Nikolai and Theo haven't said they want him dead yet. I almost point the gun and pull the trigger. I'm so fucking close.

Instead, I cross the room to him in two quick strides and smash the gun across his face. I've never committed any violence as satisfying as the feeling of the crack of bone under my hand, the feeling of his flesh giving way under the cold metal, and that momentary shock in his eyes that I'd wanted, that moment of realizing that he's nothing more than another arrogant nobody who thinks he can take over a table meant for kings.

Matvei staggers back, shouting for his guards, his own blood spilling from his nose and mouth now. I advance on him, quicker than he is, more equipped to fight, because I can tell already that this is a man who has relied on other men to protect him for all of his life.

"You're *nothing* compared to the men you want to be like," I hiss, striking him across the face with my gun again. As he staggers, I kick at his legs, sweeping them out from under him and taking him down to the floor. He grabs for my ankle, and I stomp on his wrist, hearing the bones crunch under my foot as Matvei shrieks. His right wrist, just in case he got any ideas about going for a gun of his own. "You're a cheap imitation. You're only being left alive because the man *I* work for needs to know what it is you've been up to. But this is the last night you'll get your hands on Asha. And when we've gotten what we need, I'll be the first in line to carve your dick into ribbons and make sure you never use it again—if you live long enough after that to even have the opportunity."

I want to do worse to him. I want to hurt him, slowly. But I have to get Asha out before Matvei's own security comes—I'm not sure she's conscious

enough to walk.

When I go to her, keeping my gun close at hand as I reach up to unbuckle her cuffs, she lets out a low moan. She falls forward into my arms as I free her, not quite the weight of someone unconscious, but close—I realize that she’s been gagged. There’s a hard ball shoved into her mouth, her lips split and puffy around it, buckled around the back of her head. I yank it free, faster than I’d like to, and throw it aside, wincing at the slime of blood and saliva on my fingers. I’ve had worse on my hands, but for it to be hers—

The feeling of her sagging in my arms, all of her weight crumpled against my chest, breaks something inside of me. Asha is the strongest woman I’ve ever met, fiercely independent and full of more fire than anyone I’ve ever known, and seeing her like this—

I want to gather her up in my arms and hold her close, and at the same time, destroy anyone responsible for reducing her to this, unable to take care of herself. I want to protect her, and also make certain that no one ever makes it so that I need to, ever again.

“Can you walk?” I ask her in a low, hurried voice, and she lets out another mumbled response that I can’t quite make out, the words slurred between her wounded lips. “Alright. Lean on me; we have to go. Quickly.” We don’t have much time to get out of the house, and as much as I don’t want to cause her more pain by half-dragging her out of here, I can’t take on all of Matvei’s security alone. It’s only his arrogance that ensured I didn’t need to just to get into the room.

I can hear the sounds of Matvei’s security before we get to the end of the hall. They’re coming from the other end of the house, and I pick up the pace as much as I can, keeping Asha close to my side with her arm over my shoulder as we hobble towards the front door. It’s slower going than I would have liked, and I keep my finger as close to the trigger of my gun as I dare, pulse quick and hard in my throat. If we can get outside, my motorcycle isn’t far. We’ll get—

There’s a sudden, sharp crack as a bullet barely misses my ear, embedding itself in the wood of the front door, splinters spraying away from it as I flinch to one side, my arms tightening around Asha. I hear footsteps getting closer,

shouts, and I twist around, firing blindly in the direction it came from as I move faster, almost dragging Asha now. “I’m sorry—” I murmur, hoping she’s lucid enough to hear me as I fire again, ducking as another bullet comes flying. “We have to get out of here, *now!*”

I feel her trying to get her feet under her, trying to move faster. A bullet nearly hits my hand as I wrench the door open, and I hear the sharp, cracking sound of a gun firing quickly as we duck out onto the front steps. I feel a burning pain as one grazes my leg, and I stumble, nearly falling with Asha’s weight leaning into me as I keep going, the distance between us and where I parked my bike closing with every passing second.

She nearly falls when I stop moving, and I know in that instant that there’s no way in hell she’s going to be able to hold onto me on the bike—and if anything happens...

I feel her shiver, trembling against me even more so than before from cold as well as pain, and I realize as the world comes back into focus around me that she’s still naked. It almost feels like a shock, her cool skin brushing against my hands as I try to think frantically of a solution. There was no time to grab her clothes, and even if I drape my jacket over her, if the bike goes down—it’ll tear her apart.

I can’t call for a ride—we don’t have time, and there would be too many questions. All of it races through my head as I look around for another option, and see a black SUV parked on the other side of the house.

*Fuck.* I grab Asha, swinging her into my arms and wincing at her moan of pain as I start to run towards the SUV. The shouts are closer, and I hear another gunshot as I round the corner, grabbing desperately at the handle of the car.

It’s unlocked. I snatch the door open, getting Asha inside as quickly as I can—just in time to see someone in the driver’s seat twist around.

“What the fu—”

I pull the trigger without thinking. He doesn’t even have time to finish the sentence before I put a bullet through his skull. He slumps forward as I drag my jacket off and lay it over Asha, who is curled in the backseat on her side

now, soft whimpers of pain coming from her lips.

Three men are coming around the corner, and I get one more shot off, dropping one of them in his tracks as I shut the door, yanking open the driver's side and throwing the body out onto the ground. The keys are in the ignition, and I start the car, slamming my foot onto the gas and heading straight for the two men aiming at the windshield.

"Hang on, Asha!" I call out to her over the noise, gritting my teeth as the SUV slams into the two men, jolting as I accelerate forward over them. There's more spilling out of the house now, onto the light-flooded driveway, and I hear the sound of gunshots as I floor it, careening out onto the street as Asha cries out in the back. "Fuck! I'm sorry, just hold on—"

"Not—home." Her voice is so low and choked that I barely hear her at first.

"What?" I twist around, looking at her for one brief moment before I veer onto a side street. "Asha?"

"Don't go—to my place. Anywhere...else. Don't want—follow." Her voice trails off again, thick and pained, and I nod, even though I'm not sure she can see it.

"I won't take you back there." It occurs to me to wonder how she knows that I know where her apartment is—if she saw me follow her home that night. If she did, it amazes me that she didn't tell me to fuck off immediately after that. It makes me wonder if she really does feel more for me than she let on, if she let that go.

But right now, all that matters is getting her somewhere safe.

I take her back to my apartment. "This isn't how I wanted to take you home," I murmur as I park the SUV in a back alley, getting her out as carefully as I can and cradling her against my chest, trying to inject some humor into a situation where it feels almost impossible.

"You're funny," she whispers thinly, and when she lays her head against my shoulder, it feels as if my heart is going to crack open.

I need to take care of the car—clean it out and dump it—but I need to make sure that she's taken care of first. I carry her upstairs into my apartment,

kicking the door shut behind me and double-checking the locks. Then I go straight to the bathroom, letting the jacket drop to the floor as I gently set her down and reach over to turn on the hot water.

“We’re going to get you cleaned up,” I tell her, brushing her hair out of her face. He didn’t cut up her face, thank fuck, but there’s bruising forming along her jaw, and her lips look even worse than I saw back at Matvei’s. The rest of her—

It’s all superficial—nothing that would permanently damage her or risk her life, but that doesn’t matter. What matters is the way I can trace every spot where he hit her, struck her, beating her with implements that I can’t identify—the way he clearly cut her, carving patterns into her flesh that I hope won’t scar. “I’m going to get you in the bath,” I tell her gently, careful not to touch her in any way that seems like anything other than strictly taking an inventory of her wounds. “Let me know if anything hurts too much?”

Asha nods weakly, and I lift her again, setting her into the warm water. I hear her hiss in pain as it washes over her, but she leans her head back, and I see the trail of bruises laced around her throat, where he must have choked her.

“I tried—” She swallows, her tongue swiping over her split lips before she winces. “Safeword—I think he knew—I was going to—use. Gagged me—glad I had—bracelet.”

“Try not to talk.” I touch her cheek gently, barely brushing my fingertips over her skin, trying to avoid the bruises. “You’re safe here. I won’t let anything hurt you. *Especially* not him.”

Asha nods—or I think she tries to. Her eyes stay closed, her hands limp at her sides as I clean away the blood, the water turning pink—it hits me then, how much she must trust me, to allow this. She’s been hurt, beaten nearly to unconsciousness, and she’s given herself over to my care.

My chest tightens, my heart aching with the realization. Words come to mind that I know make no sense, especially when I don’t even know the reality of who she is. I don’t know who Felicity Harlow is. I know nothing about her. But I can’t imagine she’s so much different from the woman in front of me now; all of her guards dropped, letting me care for her in a way I’d never imagined she would.



I just wish it had been for some other reason.

When Asha is cleaned up, I help her out of the bath, drying her off gently and finding a first-aid kit to take care of the worst of the wounds. Carefully, I help her walk to the bedroom, sitting her down on the edge of the bed as I dig out clean pajama pants and a t-shirt for her. Asha looks at me, her gaze bleary but a little more focused.

“Bet you didn’t think you’d be putting clothes *on* me when you finally got me in bed.” The words are a little slurred, but I can hear the humor in them, see the slight twitch of her wounded mouth before she winces.

“Funny,” I tell her wryly, bringing her the clothes. “Help me get this on.”

“This isn’t very—attractive—” Asha mumbles as I help her back onto the bed against the pillows, and I stare at her for a moment, utterly surprised.

The truth is, I don’t think she’s ever looked more beautiful to me. She’s gorgeous all made up, of course, in silk and lace or wrapped up in leather, but like this—

Her face is bare, her hair loose and damp, my clothes too big on her—and she looks lovely. She looks exactly like she would if I woke up every day with her, and at that moment, I can’t think of anything I could possibly want more.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” I murmur softly, reaching for a blanket to cover her up with. “*Especially* like this.”

I wait for her retort, for some comment—but I realize as I tuck the blanket around her that she’s already asleep, knocked practically unconscious by pain and exhaustion. I stand there for a long moment, looking at her, and then I turn towards the door.

I need to take care of the SUV. And then, once that’s done, I’m not leaving her side until I know she’s well.

## Asha



I have no idea how long I sleep. When I wake up, at first, I think it might have all been some awful nightmare. I have vague memories of Finn bursting into the room, of him and Matvei fighting, of the painful flight out of the house and the sound of gunshots—of Finn carrying me upstairs, putting me in a bath, putting me to bed. It all feels like the kind of thing that would happen in a dream, disjointed and foggy, without all of the pieces fitting neatly together.

But when I open my eyes, I don't recognize the room I'm in. I *do* recognize the smell of it, the faint hint of Finn's cologne and soap on the knitted blanket tucked around me, on the pillows I'm lying on. And when I try to sit up, the way I feel—as if I'd been beaten and then run over repeatedly—tells me that it wasn't all a dream.

It takes me several tries to sit up. I wince when I see the dried blood on Finn's pillow, likely from my mouth—I can feel how much it hurts when I move my lips even a little. The room itself looks like a bachelor's—a plain wooden bedframe and grey-toned bedding, a tall dresser that doesn't match, a couple of mystery novels on the bedside table. There's framed art of vintage motorcycles on the walls, and I look at them curiously, desperate for anything to take my mind off of what happened and the questions I have about it.

Finn saved me. Finn brought me home. Finn—

There's a knock on the bedroom door. I have only a moment to think about

the irony of someone knocking in their own home before I hear Finn's voice. I try to ignore the flock of butterflies that rushes through my stomach at the sound of it.

"Asha? Are you awake?"

"Yes." Even that small word hurts my mouth. The door cracks open a moment later, and Finn steps in, a bowl balanced in one hand and a cup in the other. His gaze sweeps over me, full of appraising worry, and he walks over to the bedside table, setting down what I now see is a bowl of tomato soup and a cup of water.

"Wasn't sure what you'd be able to manage," he says gruffly, sitting down slowly on the edge of the bed. His eyes trail over my face again, down to my t-shirt, and I remember with a flush of mingled embarrassment and strange pleasure that I'm wearing his clothes.

It's been a long time since I've gone to bed wearing a man's t-shirt. The last time—

A different kind of pain lances through me, and I close my eyes briefly.

"Hey." Finn's fingers touch the back of my hand. "If you want more sleep—"

"No, I've slept enough. I want to go home—"

"You really shouldn't, not yet—"

"I was about to say that I can't yet." I cut him off, my voice hardening a little. "Although I'd hope that you would listen to me and do what I ask, if I insisted. But I don't want them seeing where my home is, if anyone is watching me."

"I'm as certain as I can be that no one is," Finn says carefully. "And I'm not trying to undermine your agency in all of this, Asha. I promise you that. But if you'll trust me, I also promise that I'm trying to make sure you're kept safe as best as I can. Especially since—"

He trails off, but he doesn't need to finish the sentence for me to know what it was that he was going to say. He feels like this is his fault—of course he does. He asked me to take this job, he set it up, he planned all of this. And

yet, I still don't feel that he's to blame for it.

"I didn't have to agree to do this," I tell him as gently as I can. "Don't blame yourself, Finn; it'll just get in the way of figuring out what's really important."

He gives me a tight, sad smile. "And what's that, Asha?"

"You and Nikolai and Theo deciding how you're going to lay Matvei low."

Finn's smile eases a little. "We're on the same page about that, lass." His fingers rub gently over the back of my hand. "And I want you to stay here as long as you need, until you're better and you feel safe. I've got no expectations other than that," he adds quickly. "Whatever you need, lass, you have it. No strings."

There's a kindness in his voice that I haven't heard from anyone in a long time, and I realize as I look up at him that he's being genuine. There's no ploy here, no game to try to get me to fuck him if I stay here long enough. Just a soft look in his eyes that tells me he wants to take care of me—and it absolutely terrifies me.

*I can't fall in love with this man. I can't. I can't do this again.*

My chest cramps with the pain of remembered loss, and I slip my hand free of Finn's, knotting my fingers together in my lap. I can see how clearly he cares for me—I care about him, too. This could be the start of something that would turn into more—if we let it.

I reach for the glass of water, carefully lifting it to my mouth and trying not to wince when the cool glass touches my lips. "Did you sleep at all?" I ask, and Finn's mouth twists wryly. I can see the answer to my question in the shadows under his eyes, but I want him to know that I thought about it.

"A little. Mostly kept an eye on you. And then went to deal with the car I stole to bring you back here. Had to clean it and then leave it somewhere that it'd be less likely to be traced back to me."

"What about your bike?" I hadn't thought about it until just that moment, but I realize that there was no way Finn could have brought me back on it. I wouldn't have been capable of hanging on to him.

“Ah, well—” Finn’s face takes on a slightly darker expression. “No help for that, lass. I can’t risk going back there to retrieve it, and likely, they’ve trashed it already anyway. Don’t worry,” he adds quickly, seeing the expression on my face. “I won’t say it doesn’t hurt. I’ve got an attachment to it, but she wasn’t my only bike. I’ve got another one I like just about as well, and it’s time I put a little more love into it anyway.”

“You’re full of shit,” I tell him frankly. “And I’m sorry. I know what it must mean to you, losing your motorcycle over—”

“How do you know that, lass?” Finn asks suddenly, his eyes narrowing. “Wasn’t aware you were so familiar with how a man might feel about his ride.”

My stomach tightens instantly. I hadn’t thought about it before I spoke, hadn’t thought about what questions about my past that might raise for Finn. I’d just wanted him to know I understood, and I let my mouth run away with me.

“It doesn’t matter.” I set the glass down, reaching for the soup in an attempt to placate him. “I just figured something like that probably mattered to you.”

“Mm.” Finn gives me a curious look, but he drops it. I’m not sure *why* he drops it, exactly—he’s been more than willing to pry in the past—but maybe it’s something in my expression that makes him not press me any further. “I had to talk to Theo, too,” he continues. “He knows about what I’ve had you doing, lass. He and Nikolai want to talk to you as soon as you’re feeling better. Have a meeting about what happened and what comes next, if you’re alright with that.”

“And if I’m not?” I look at him curiously, wondering what he’ll say.

“Well—” Finn shrugs. “I imagine they wouldn’t be all too pleased about it, but I’d make sure that they didn’t hassle you. If you want nothing more to do with any of this, not even a debriefing, then that’s how it’ll be. And I wouldn’t blame you, honestly. After—” he trails off, but his gaze slides over my face and neck, and I know what he’s thinking.

There’s a long moment of silence, as if he’s trying to decide what to ask and what to keep silent about. “I don’t want to push you,” he says finally. “I’ve

seen a great many brutal things in my life, but what I saw in there—I can't imagine you want to talk about it anytime soon. But if you can tell me anything about what happened—”

I breathe in slowly, closing my eyes, trying to push away the sick feeling that rises up in my stomach at the memory. “There’s a lot of details that I’d rather not talk about right now, that’s true,” I say quietly. “But what happened, really—”

It’s hard to meet his eyes. But when I do, I can see the hurt in them, the guilt. There’s a strange sort of intimacy between us—two people who have shared a certain kind of pleasure but not gone all the way, in a circumstance that doesn’t allow them to be as close as if they’d met otherwise. Yet, I trusted my life to him. I don’t know everything about him, and he certainly doesn’t know everything about me, but I know something—I think, in some ways, I’ve glimpsed parts of him that I’m not sure if many others have. I know what he’s thinking at this moment, that it was all for nothing, that Matvei got out of control before I could get anything of use, that he’s failed. And I’m surprised by my own reaction—a sharp, clenching pain in my chest at the thought of him blaming himself for it.

“I gave him my safeword, and he ignored it,” I say quietly. “It’s not the first time—”

Finn’s head snaps up. “What do you mean?” he asks gruffly, and I wince.

“That’s why Nikolai didn’t allow him back. When he won the night with me at the poker game—he hurt me more than I felt comfortable with. I used my safeword, and he ignored it. There are plenty of safeguards at the Rose, so aside from how awful that feels, I wasn’t in any real danger. But this time—”

“Fuck.” Finn’s jaw clenches. “I’d never have let you go in there if I’d known that—”

“I thought I’d be able to manage it. I thought—” I don’t have any real excuse, other than that if I’d known well enough if I told Finn, he would have called it off. And the money was too good to turn down, to not take the chance.

He realizes it, too. I can see it on his face. “Do you really want to get out of this city so badly?” he asks quietly. “Why, Asha?”

“That’s my business.” I hate the words even as they come out of my mouth, especially after all he’s done for me, but I can’t open up to him. If I do, I’ll tell him everything, and then—

I’m so close to a precipice that will take us both into something we’re not ready for. That I’m not prepared for.

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly. “I should have told you. I should have let you know all of what the risks were.”

“I—” Finn shakes his head, taking a slow breath, as if he’s trying to wrestle his emotions under control. “God, Asha, do you have any idea what it was like to see you like that? To see the woman I—”

He breaks off, his jaw tightening again. “The woman I was meant to protect, like—that.” He swallows hard, and I have a sudden feeling that the way he finished that sentence isn’t what nearly came out of his mouth—and I don’t know how that makes me feel. I should be more terrified of that than I am, and that scares me all on its own.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper again, and he forces a tight smile.

“You’re the one who had to go through it, lass,” he says quietly. “It’s not for me to be upset. More than anything, I’m worried about you now. I want to make sure—”

“I’ll be fine.” I feel badly interrupting, but I don’t know if I can handle whatever is going to come out of his mouth next. It’s too much—the gentleness, the kind of care I haven’t had in so long, and I have the horrible feeling that I’m going to cry if he stays here much longer. “I just need rest, you’re right.”

I’m not sure if he believes me, but he nods, gently touching my hand once more before getting up from the bed.

“Shout for me if you need anything at all, lass. The apartment’s not that big, I’ll hear you.” He gives me a smile and then gets up, leaving me alone in his bed.

It's a week before I feel well enough to meet with Theo and Nikolai. I stay at Finn's for all of it, and as if there were ever any doubt, he's a perfect gentleman for all of it. He brings me meals, checks on me, and goes out to get pain medication for me, constantly there if I need help with anything at all—he never so much as hints at wanting anything in return. I've gotten a glimpse of just how brutal he can be in the flickers of what I saw that night, but he's gentle with me. I can still feel the tension between us—it's there every time his hand brushes mine or each time he brings me a change of clothes—but he doesn't so much as remark on it. It just—exists, and with every moment that there's a glance between us or that feeling of unresolved desire, I can't help wondering if I made a mistake by putting so much distance between us, by accepting this job at all.

But how could I have known he would be so different?

"You're sure you're alright to do this, lass?" Finn asks me as we get ready to go to the meeting, knocking on the door to make sure I'm—in his words—decent before he comes in to talk to me. With anyone else, I might have construed his behavior as lack of interest—he hasn't tried to catch a glimpse of me or touch me in any way that could possibly make me feel uncomfortable.

"I'm fine," I assure him. I'm not dressed precisely how I'd like to be to go to a meeting like this—in loose black joggers, my boots, and a stretchy black tank top that leaves my arms bare and is soft enough not to hurt the places on my torso that are still healing. But then again—they're the ones who want me there, not the other way around. They can take what I decide to give them.

"I'll call an Uber for you, but I'll be right behind you on the bike," Finn says as we walk out to his foyer. "I won't let you out of my sight, Asha."

"Actually—" I hesitate. "I was thinking I could ride over with you. If that's alright."

He looks surprised at that. "I—of course. Are you feeling well enough?"

"I think so." I bite my lower lip, wondering what's come over me. I haven't been on a motorcycle since Jamie, and all my memories of riding one are tied up with my memories of him. I don't know what I think I'm going to gain by bringing all of that back up by riding with Finn, but I don't want to go over to



this meeting alone. I don't want to sit in an Uber, thinking about what's happened, wondering what's to come.

Finn is the only person who has made me feel truly safe in a very, very long time. And right now, I want to stay close to him.

I think he sees that in my face, because he nods. "If you start to feel like you're not going to be able to hang on at any point, lass, just tap my thigh, and I'll pull over," he says firmly, reaching for a different leather jacket hanging on a hook on the wall. "Here, put this on. It'll help protect you from the pavement if anything were to happen."

I nod, slipping the jacket on over my tank top. It's too big for me, but it feels comforting, and it smells like Finn. I resist the urge to bury my nose in the leather as I follow him out of the apartment building and down to where his bike is parked, taking the helmet he offers me.

"It's not that far of a ride," he says as he swings his leg over the bike, the engine growling in the warm late-spring air. "We'll be there before you know it."

It's been a long time, but it all still feels familiar—the hum of the engine in the leather seat beneath me, the smell of hot metal and grease, the buttery feel of Finn's jacket under my hands as I wrap my arms around his waist. I feel him tense ever so slightly, and I realize with a small flicker of regret that I didn't ask him how he felt about this. He cares about me in ways that I've been trying to push away, I know that—now I'm sharing in something that for him, I suspect, is more than a little intimate. He wants me, and I'm not making this any easier on him.

"Hang on, lass," Finn says, his voice a little huskier than before, and then we're pulling out onto the road, my hair tickling my neck as the wind picks up around us, and I remember how much I used to love this.

It feels strange—like excitement and nostalgia and grief all wrapped up together. I don't know how well I processed my feelings about losing Jamie—I just ran from them instead—I don't know if this is how I'm supposed to finally face it all, but I don't have that feeling of wanting to escape from this that I thought I would. Finn *isn't* Jamie—they're two very different men—but the way he makes me feel reminds me of that time in my life, a time when

I thought I'd finally gotten all of the things I hadn't known to imagine for myself.

*And if you start to imagine them with Finn, they can be taken away just as easily,* I remind myself as Finn pulls up in front of the tall building that must house the Kings' offices. "I half expected a clubhouse in the back of a bar," I tell Finn teasingly as we get off of the motorcycle, and he raises an eyebrow at me.

"The Kings are the wealthiest organization in Chicago," he says wryly. "Hardly a 'back of the bar' kind of group."

"I see that." The lobby we walk through could belong to any fancy corporation, all heavy wood and granite and leather. I glance around as Finn leads me to the elevator, and we step inside.

"Theo is kind enough," Finn says as he presses the button for the top floor. "He has a reputation, but he's a fair man, and a good one, in my opinion. He's not going to force you to do anything that you don't want to do."

"I'd like to see any of them try." I look at Finn, and I see a flicker of something that almost looks like pride in his expression.

"That's my girl," he says, almost offhandedly, but it feels anything but to me. Just hearing it makes something tighten and warm inside of me. I'm suddenly very aware of the small space of the elevator, of how easily Finn could push me up against the wall, how many floors there are between now and our destination.

It's as if with one thought, the tension instantly rises in the space. Finn looks at me, his expression curious, and then I see that heat in my face as he, too, realizes what I'm thinking.

"Lass—" The word is almost a warning, spoken in that thickening Irish burr, letting me know just how close we are to something spilling over. We've spent a week in close proximity to each other, pretending that just two nights before I ended up at Finn's apartment, we weren't pressed up against each other in my room at the Ashen Rose, my hand working between us as he spilled all over my naked skin. As if we don't both know now what the other person sounds like when they come, when the pleasure gets to be too much,

as if we don't each know how the other sounds when they finally give in and beg.

"Finn—" My voice is breathier than it should be. He turns towards me, a heat in those ocean blue eyes that makes me shiver, makes me forget everything except how it feels to run my hands over him, how badly I want to finally know what it feels like to kiss him. After all of that pain, I want all the gentleness he has to offer, in every way—for a moment, I think I'm going to get it...at least some of it.

He moves towards me, almost as if it's outside of his own will, like I'm a magnet drawing him. I step back, and back again, feeling the wall behind me, and Finn follows, his hands landing well on either side of my head, as if he wants to ensure I have space even now. Space to escape, space to pull away, if that's what I want.

I'm not so sure that it is anymore.

"Asha." My name rasps over his tongue, and I have the sudden, wild urge to tell him my *real* name. To hear him say it the same way, to replace all my memories of him saying my name with a different one, one that actually means something to me. A name that only one other person has spoken with lust and love and sweetness and heat all at once.

I think I could have that with Finn, if I let myself.

I look up at him. I could ask him to kiss me. His mouth looks warm and soft and so very close. I could have almost everything I want, if I just ask him for it.

I feel sure that he wouldn't say no.

He's looking at my mouth like he's starving, like all he wants is a taste. Like he's been dreaming about this exact possibility, and suddenly, it's in front of him. I part my lips to ask. To say the words that I've been biting back over and over—*kiss me, Finn*.

And then the elevator rocks to a stop, and I hear the chime that tells us we've reached our floor.

Finn jolts as if he'd been somewhere else, and he's only just now reminded of

where we are and what we're doing here. He pulls back, a flush to his skin as he turns away, clearing his throat.

"We're—we're here."

I'm just as flustered as he is. I can feel the burn in my cheeks, the warmth flooding me beneath the leather jacket, and I follow him out of the elevator, trying to think about the conversation ahead, and not the way what just happened made me feel.

I'm not entirely sure what I'd expected for the meeting, but I'm relieved to see when we walk in that it's only Nikolai and Theo sitting there. Even though my stomach clenches with nerves seeing Nikolai, knowing I'm going to find out what he thinks of my being involved in all of this, I'm glad it's only the four of us, and not a room full of strangers.

"I wish you would have talked to me about this when Finn came to you with it." It's the first thing out of Nikolai's mouth, the moment I've slowly sat down in my chair. "I would have suggested you not take this offer."

"Even to get the information you needed?" I look at him, and I realize with a hint of startlement that I'm not sure if I believe him.

"You're not one of us, Asha. You're not a part of this. I would have hoped your better judgment would have kept you away from all of this, despite what was clearly offered. But now you are a part of it, unfortunately. But now you've *become* a part of it, despite what I would have hoped would be your better judgment."

Something about his tone irritates me. "Finn laid it all out clearly for me. I made an informed choice, Nikolai."

"I'm sure he did." That tone turns slightly patronizing, and that irritates me, too. "Regardless, you now *are* in the middle of this. Theo tells me that, according to Finn, you hadn't gotten anything useful from Matvei during the first session. Did any of that change in the second?"

I glance towards Theo, who is sitting there silently, watching the conversation keenly. He looks towards Finn once, and then back at Nikolai, and I'd have been hard-pressed to say what it is exactly that he's thinking.

“No,” I tell Nikolai simply. “I didn’t get anything from him. I think it would take more time to earn enough of his trust and for his guard to drop enough for him to share anything. I had planned to go back. But—”

“But the fucker nearly cut her to pieces.” Finn’s voice is a sharp growl that makes me shiver. There’s something angry and possessive in his voice, something that suggests he’ll kill anyone who tries to touch me again in that way. It would piss me off, coming from anyone else, but from Finn—

From Finn, it makes me feel safe. It makes me feel like nothing and no one will ever hurt me again.

“I came back from Dublin to see how this situation was going,” Theo says finally, his rich Irish burr that’s similar to Finn’s filling the room, but with considerable authority. “Once Finn told me what had happened, that is. I think it’s safe to say that this particular means of trying to find information about these doings should come to an end. I don’t want Asha harmed on our account, and it seems clear that further association with Kotov could be fatal to her, if we’re not careful. Not to mention, Finn got rather—violent with Kotov when rescuing Asha. Not that I blame you, lad,” he adds, and I remember something Finn said, while he was taking Matvei down to the floor.

*You’re only being left alive because the man I work for needs to know what it is you’ve been up to. But this is the last night you’ll get your hands on Asha.*

I have a feeling that Finn hasn’t told Theo he let that slip. And I’m certainly not going to be the one to say it.

“Even so, he might be inclined to let something slip if he thinks she can’t stay away from him. He clearly enjoys the sense of power he likes to think he has over her. In my opinion, it might be easier than ever to make him lose control of his tongue, if Asha plays along.” Nikolai considers, tapping his fingers on the table. “She could suggest that she wants to change sides. Instead of keeping it secret that she was working for us, she could let it slip that we sent her in. That she’s angry at us for putting her in that position, that she wants to help him. Pretend to be working both sides of it. He clearly has a low opinion of what she does—he’d believe that she’d do it, and he’s arrogant enough to think that she might prefer him over us. We’ll come up with a more thorough

story—something we did that really made her turn on us, and she can play to his ego.” Nikolai glances at me, smiling. “I’ve never known a woman more skilled at making men believe what she wants them to than Asha. If anyone can do it, it’s her. We could offer double what you were going to be paid before. On a night-by-night basis, and if it becomes too much—”

“No. Absolutely fucking not.” Finn interrupts Nikolai before I can even get a word out. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Finn—” Theo’s voice is a warning, but Finn ignores it entirely.

“No. Fuck this. You didn’t see what he did to her, what she looked like in that room. She’s *not* going back, not for any amount—”

“You said double?”

The moment I speak, all three sets of eyes in the room swivel to look directly at me. I have all of their attention—Nikolai interested, Theo still coolly appraising, and Finn looking as if he’s one moment away from exploding entirely.

“Yes. Double. And you can stop at any time, if Kotov’s behavior becomes too much—”

“Asha, you can’t possibly be thinking of doing this.” Finn’s voice has an almost desperate edge to it. “You can’t—”

“I can,” I say evenly. “And I’m inclined to say yes.”

“It’s only going to get more dangerous,” Theo cautions. “I don’t like this either, lass. Even once you’re done, if we don’t root out every single person with an interest in what Kotov has been up to—”

“I’m leaving Chicago, after this,” I interrupt. “So it won’t matter who might have an interest in avenging Matvei or coming after me for what I know. I’ll be gone.”

I hear Finn’s sharp intake of breath, but I don’t look at him. I’m entirely focused on the two men in front of me.

“You’re leaving?” Nikolai frowns at me. “You’ve been keeping quite a bit from me, Asha. I’m not sure—”

“You’re my employer,” I tell him coolly. I want to sever that tie between us, the memory of what we once were to each other, once and for all. “I would have let you know at *least* two weeks before I planned to leave.”

Nikolai says nothing, but I see the way his jaw tenses. Only Theo looks entirely nonplussed, and it almost makes me like him more, that he doesn’t have so much of an opinion about what I do.

“I’ll do it.” I see the way Finn flinches out of the corner of my eye, his mouth opening to say something, but I keep speaking before he can. “We can arrange when I should try to talk to Matvei again later this week. And I think different security should be sent with me. I don’t think Finn can handle seeing me with him again.”

*I can’t handle Finn seeing me with him again.* I can’t stand the look in his eyes, the knowledge that it’s hurting him to know what Matvei and I are doing. I care about Finn, too—us caring about each other can’t go hand in hand with what I’m doing here.

Finn’s shoulders go taut, his jaw tightening as he stands up abruptly, walking to the back of the room. I can feel how angry he is, how upset he is about all of this, but I don’t fully grasp it until the moment the meeting is over, the decision made, and he stalks out of the room without another word, the door slamming hard behind him. I see the look that Nikolai and Theo exchange, and I know what Finn is feeling. He’s blamed himself for this since the moment it happened, and I’ve only underlined that feeling.

But I couldn’t let him come with me again. I couldn’t ask him to stand by again—if he even would.

I shouldn’t follow him. It won’t help or fix anything, but it’s like I can’t stop myself. I nearly knock my chair over as I get up, mumbling excuses to Nikolai and Theo, trying to catch up to Finn as he strides away from me, ignoring the aching in my still-healing body. He’s in the elevator before I can catch up to him, and I curse under my breath, gritting my teeth as I turn towards the stairs. If I wait for the elevator to come back up, he’ll be gone.

Something about the thought of that—the idea that he might *leave*, that I could try to text or call him to talk after this and he might just ignore it, that the Finn that I’ve come to rely on without realizing it might just be gone—

makes my stomach clench and twist, and I hurry down the stairs so quickly that all of me is hurting by the time I reach the landing. Even as fast as I tried to take them, Finn is still almost at the door by the time I get there.

“Finn!” I shout after him, and he stops, his back still to me. “Finn, please talk to me—”

“About what?” He still doesn’t look at me. “What is there to talk about, Asha? You think that I don’t know that I failed? Not just you, but Theo too, my boss? You think that I don’t know that I’ve made a fucking mess of all of it?” His shoulders shake with tension, and I see his fists clench at his sides. “And then you say you don’t want me with you when you go back. Well, I don’t want you going back at all.”

“That’s not your choice to make—” I see him flinch at that, his head bowing forward.

“I saw what he did to you. I’m not going to stand by while you let him do all of that again. I *can’t* stand by, and it’s going to kill me just knowing that—” He breaks off, every muscle rigid, and I want to touch him. I want to comfort him, but I can’t. If I do, I know what comes next.

“You don’t understand, Finn—”

“You’re right!” He almost shouts it as he whirls to face me, his expression set in such hard lines that it’s almost frightening to see. “I don’t understand, Asha. But how could I? You’ve never told me a damn thing about you that means anything. You’ve never told me anything about yourself that isn’t part of this fucking persona you’ve made up to hide behind. You’ve never even told me your real fucking name. But then again, you’re so good at making men believe what you want them to, aren’t you?” He throws Nikolai’s words back in my face with a venom that makes hot tears burn at the back of my eyes, hurt lancing through me.

“Finn, I—”

“Don’t bother. I already know. Were you ever going to tell me, *Felicity*? Or were you going to keep it to yourself like you do with every other man that you let come on you in that fucking club?”

I feel my face flame red, anger and hurt flaring up in equal measure as I stare



at him, my mouth dropping open. “You looked me up? You *snooped* to find my name? I was willing to forgive the possibility that you followed me home that first night, but this—”

“I was working with you on a *job*! A fucking dangerous job, and you couldn’t even give me the courtesy of knowing who I was working with well enough to tell me your real fucking name—”

“You didn’t ask!” I’m shouting it now, following him as he turns away from me in disgust, stalking towards the doors. “You never asked—”

“Would you have told me?” Finn snaps, still stalking away from me, barely turning to fling the words back at me. “I don’t think you would have.”

“You’ll never know, will you?” I burst out of the doors after him, my temper flaring, and somewhere deep down, I know we’re both so close to saying things we’ll regret. But with the way he’s talking to me right now, I’m not so certain that I’ll ever get to speak to him again after this.

“I feel pretty fucking sure.” Finn digs his keys out of his pocket. “Go back up and talk to Theo and Nikolai, Asha. Make your plans to get all Kotov’s secrets for them. Take all the money they’re willing to give you. But I’m not going to be a fucking part of it. *Nothing* is worth seeing you hurt like that again—”

His words are cut off as he turns the ignition of the bike, a sudden explosive sound that’s not the engine shattering the windows behind me as I’m flung back onto the concrete, yards away from where I was standing. I feel the prickle of glass against my skin, the sting of dozens of small cuts, but as the world swims around me, all I can see is the flaming, twisting metal where Finn’s motorcycle was—and Finn’s body, crumpled on the curb in the opposite direction of where I’m laying.

He’s not moving. And all I can see is that my worst fear is happening in front of me, all over again.

# Asha



It takes me a moment to register the shouts as Theo and Nikolai burst out onto the sidewalk. My ears are ringing, and I can't entirely hear what they're saying, but dimly, I can hear my own voice pleading for them to go to Finn, to check on Finn. *He can't be dead, he can't be dead.* I don't know if I'm saying it aloud or only in my mind, but it's the only thought I can register, even beyond my own physical pain, as I look at Finn's body.

I want to get up and go to him, and I can't. *We were fighting. Right before, we were fighting.* It feels horrible, the idea that the last thing he ever heard from me was anger, that we were shouting at each other in the moments before he—

*No, he can't be dead.*

Nikolai is coming towards me, bending over to help me up. I look up at him with glassy, tear-filled eyes as he puts his arm around my waist, crouching down to help get me off of the sidewalk. "How bad is it?" he asks, his voice echoing in my ringing ears, and I shrug helplessly.

"I don't know." My voice sounds choked, thick. "My head—hurts."

"You'll need to stay awake for a while. Come on, Asha," Nikolai says gently. "We're going to get you somewhere safe."

"This was Matvei. It had to be—"

“I’m certain it was.” Nikolai helps me to my feet, and dimly, I see that Theo is shouting at security members rushing towards him, helping him with Finn. “Now—”

“I’m not leaving Finn.” I stiffen in Nikolai’s grasp, even though it hurts to move. “I’m not going anywhere without him.”

Theo turns towards me as the other men start to lift Finn up, carrying him towards a black van that’s pulling around the corner. “You don’t have to.” He looks at Nikolai, and then back at me. “I’m having you both taken to one of my safehouses. I’ll have one of my other men that I trust take care of Finn—”

“I’ll do it..” The words spring out of my lips immediately, without thought, and I see the curious glance Nikolai gives me.

“That’s not necessary, Asha—” Nikolai starts to say, but I cut him off.

“I’m not leaving him! “This must have been Matvei, and I’m not going to leave him while Matvei wants him dead—I need to make sure he’s safe. He kept me safe—” The words tumble off of my lips before I can stop them, more frantic than I mean for them to be, and Theo looks at me with mingled alarm and a hint of something else that I can’t quite read.

“Like Nikolai said, I’m sure of that as well.” Theo’s mouth is set in a grim line. “Don’t worry, Asha. You can go with him. I still want my own men watching over him as well, but it’s easier to keep you both guarded if you’re at the same safe house, anyway. And if you want to help care for him, I’m not going to stop you. Nikolai and I will handle Kotov. In the meantime, you’ll be paid the money you were promised. But we are *not* sending you back to him. That’s finished.” He gives me a look that brooks no argument, but I wasn’t going to. There’s nothing in my head now except getting to Finn.

“Alright.” I’m watching the van, seeing the men load Finn inside. “Are we going now?”

—

The safe house is some distance away—in another state, I think. It’s dark by the time we get to the small cabin nestled away far from a main road, the car

that I rode in following the van with Finn. Theo assured me that a doctor wouldn't be far behind, and all I can think about is the possibility that Finn might not still be alive when I get out of the car.

I'm opening the door before it even fully comes to a stop, tripping over my feet in an effort to get to the van. One of the security team steps in front of me, blocking my path, and I open my mouth to tell him exactly what he can do with himself before he gives me a tired look.

"Just give us some room, miss," he says. "We'll get him into the house, and then you can see him."

As much as I know he's right, it's hard to back down, hard to watch as they take Finn inside the cabin. This feels too familiar, memories that I can't bear to think about crowding in. I press my hand to my mouth as I start to follow them inside just as a door slams, and a man who I think must be the doctor gets out of a car, following all of us into the cabin.

It feels like a bad dream. The bedroom is upstairs—a sort of large loft overlooking the main floor of the cabin, and that's where they take Finn, laying him atop the bed made up with quilts. He doesn't move, and I see burns on one side of his face, his body so limp that it's hard to believe he's alive.

"You're his—"

The voice of the man, who I'm assuming is the doctor, startles me, and I nearly jump out of my skin, whirling to face him.

"A friend," I manage, and my chest clenches. I'm not even sure that that's what I am to Finn now, not after the argument we had. "I'm going to take care of him while we're here."

"Alright." There's no argument, just quick acquiescence from the doctor. He moves past me, up the stairs, and I hang back, terrified of what he's going to find and what he might say. Afraid that it's worse than even what I'm thinking at this moment.

The answer, by the time he's done examining Finn, is that most of the injuries are thankfully superficial. Once he regains consciousness, I'm told, he needs to be kept awake for as long as possible to watch for signs of a

concussion, and to keep the wounds clean and bandaged. “He might have hearing damage,” the doctor tells me as he packs up his things, leaving pain medication and the items I need to take care of Finn behind. “Watch for that. If anything changes—if he doesn’t wake in the next forty-eight hours or so, if he starts to run a high fever, if you see any signs of internal bleeding—call me. I’ll be up here as soon as I’m able.”

And with that—I’m left alone with Finn.

Not alone, exactly. There’s plenty of security here, Nikolai’s and Theo’s both, but they give Finn and me space, spreading out downstairs and outside. I sink down onto the edge of the bed, looking at Finn’s bruised and dirty face, and my heart aches.

“Finn?” I reach out, gently touching his hand, remembering the conversation we had just this morning in his apartment, the way he did the same thing, reassuring me. It feels like it’s been such a long time since then, like this morning was weeks ago, and tears fill my eyes, blurring my vision as I look down at him. “Can you hear me?”

There’s nothing—no response. The only sign that he’s alive at all is the slow, shallow rise and fall of his chest, and I swallow hard, getting up to go into the attached bathroom and get a washcloth to clean his face.

Gently, I clean the dirt and soot away, avoiding the cuts and bruises. Part of me is glad that he’s unconscious, so he’s not in pain, and at the same time, I wish he’d wake up so I could be certain that he’ll be alright. I wonder if this is what he did with me, cleaning me up after what happened with Matvei, sitting next to me while I was unconscious.

“I’m glad I can take care of you, too,” I say softly as I clean up the rest of him. The doctor removed his shirt, leaving him in just his jeans, and I have to force myself not to linger over the ridged surface of his abdomen and the smooth, muscled expanse of his chest, my fingers aching to trace patterns over his skin. All I can think is that he almost died, and I wonder if this is what he felt when he saw me in the room at Matvei’s. I can forgive him for how angry he was with me earlier, if this is how he felt.

“Just wake up,” I whisper as I set the washcloth aside, looking down at him. “And then—”

*Then, what?* I crawl into bed next to him, careful to keep enough space between us so that I won't hurt him. What could possibly come of this? I can't deny that I have feelings for him, and I know how he feels about me. It's been evident for a while now. But what does any of that matter?

Finn lives a dangerous life. I know all too well what that kind of life can take from us both. I see the evidence of it right in front of me, right now. I can't lose someone I love again.

The only choice that I can see is, once Finn is well enough, to leave Chicago like I planned. To leave all of this—including him—behind.

No matter how much it hurts, losing him would hurt so much more.

—

The doctor wasn't exaggerating when he said forty-eight hours. For the next two, almost three days, Finn is in and out of consciousness, half awake just long enough for me to get water, pain medication, and a little broth down him before he passes out again. There's no fever, and when I call the doctor, he says the flickering in and out of consciousness is expected, so long as he doesn't stay out entirely for too long. I don't know how to be certain if Finn has a concussion or not, but I describe his pupils to the doctor, and he seems to think Finn is alright.

I'm not so sure. In the moments where I do manage to grab small fragments of sleep, I dream about Jamie, about the horror that I saw, about the nights alone when he was gone—then it all shifts to Finn, to seeing him crumpled on the sidewalk, and I wake gasping and shaking, switching on the light to make sure that Finn is still breathing.

And I'm not the only one clearly haunted by some kind of memories. In his momentary fits of half-lucidity, Finn calls out for me sometimes—sometimes by Asha, sometimes by Felicity—but he calls for someone else, too, someone named Caroline. He mumbles the name, the letters blurring together, but when he's not reaching for me, he's reaching for her.

It hurts more than it should, hearing him call out for another woman. But what have I ever given him to make him want to call out for only me? All

I've done is tease and taunt and then withhold what he really wanted from me, because I'm too afraid to get that close to someone again. Even now, I'm terrified of what Finn makes me feel, and I tell myself over and over again that I won't let this go too far. I won't let myself fall in love with him completely. I'll take care of him, and then I'll leave.

Sometimes, I can tell that what he's dreaming about is more erotic than sweet. I managed to help him change clothes once security brought clothes and toiletries to the cabin for us both, getting him into pajama pants and leaving him shirtless so his wounds don't chafe—I catch more than one glimpse of his restless dreams arousing him, his cock stiff beneath the blanket as he restlessly moves in his sleep.

During those dreams, he always calls out for me. I don't know how that makes me feel. I've wanted him since the very beginning—but that's not a possibility for us. I know what would happen if we went that far. I know there would be no going back for either of us.

It's hard not to lose track of time. Nikolai and Theo both check in on us, letting me know that they have eyes on Matvei, that they're waiting for the right time to make a move. Security brings groceries so I can cook us meals, the doctor comes by to check on Finn and drop off more supplies, and the hours bleed into each other as I sit and wait for Finn to wake up completely.

When he does, my name is the first thing he says.

“Asha?”

I nearly drop the book I'm reading at the sound of my name lightly slurred on his lips, looking up to see his blue eyes half-open and a small smile on the curve of his mouth.

“You're here,” he murmurs, and this time I *do* drop the book. I'm out of the chair and crossing the room in an instant, crawling on the bed next to him. “You—”

“Of course, I'm here.” I want to touch his face, but I'm too afraid I might hurt him, so I reach for his hands instead. “I wouldn't have left you. Not after what you did for me—”

“Is that the only reason?” Finn's fingers close around mine with more

strength than I would have expected. “God, Asha, when the explosion happened—for that split second, all I could think was that I’d never see you again—”

I don’t have time to respond. His hands let go of mine, coming up to cup my face, and as he pulls me down to him, he kisses me for the first time.



## Asha



For a moment, I allow the kiss. I've wanted him to kiss me for so long, and now that his lips are on mine, I don't want it to stop. His mouth is as warm and soft as I thought it would be, and if any part of this hurts him, he doesn't seem to care. His hands slide into my hair, dragging my mouth harder against his, a groan rumbling deep in his throat as his tongue slides over my lower lip, wanting to slip into my mouth, to tangle with mine.

I want that, too. *God*, I want it. I want him, every part of me instantly aching to be closer to him, skin on skin, as close as we can possibly be. For the first time in a very long time, I don't care that he took charge, that *he* kissed me, that I'm not the one calling the shots at this moment. I don't care about anything other than the way his mouth feels against mine, the way he moans as my tongue brushes against his, the way I can feel the desire throbbing between us like a living thing.

And then I remember the other name he called out in his sleep, and I break away, severing the connection between us. I have my ghosts, too. But I want to know what his are before we take this any further.

He tries to pull me back in, and I shake my head, tugging away from the kiss.

"Asha—" Finn's voice is full of frustration. "Please, just—"

"You called out someone else's name in your sleep." I press my lips together, looking down at him. "Someone named Caroline. Who—"

A horrified look spreads over Finn's face, his cheekbones flushing, and he has the good grace to look ashamed as he pushes himself up a little against the pillows, wincing. "Fuck," he mutters, looking at me. "Caroline was—"

"Was?" I ask softly, and he nods.

"Was," he emphasizes. "She was someone I once cared for very much. It's been a long time—seven, maybe eight years. We were together for nearly two, and we had all the things that you'd think would make up a good relationship—not that I think you want to hear about those," he adds hurriedly. "I thought I was going to marry her. But I figured if we were going to be married, she needed to know the truth about what I did for a living. I'd kept it from her until then, thinking I was doing the right thing—keeping her safe and free from worrying about me. And then I told her the truth, planning to ask her to marry me right after, and—"

Finn takes a slow breath, and I know where the story is going. I let him finish, let him say what he needs to, because I can tell that it hurts him to talk about it.

"She said I lied to her. That she couldn't trust me, even though I told her she could ask anything she wanted and I'd answer it truthfully. That I wanted to spend my life with her. She walked out, and I never heard from her again."

"Shit." I breathe the word, sitting back a little as I look at Finn's tense expression. "I'm so sorry—"

"No, I'm sorry." His hand is still wrapped around mine. "I'm sorry you had to hear me calling out for her, when I don't really want her anymore. I don't know why that's where my mind went, but the only woman I would want with me while I was unconscious and hurt is—" He swallows hard, his fingers brushing over my knuckles. "Well—you, Asha."

"You can call me Felicity." I blink back tears, looking at him. "You called me that in your sleep. Both names, actually. Asha and Felicity. But I think—I'd rather you call me by my real name. I'm sorry I was angry with you—"

"You had a right to be. I snooped, like you said. I did it because I truly didn't believe you'd tell me the truth...but you were right in saying I should have asked. I *should* have. And I'm sorry I didn't."

We sit like that for a long moment. I brush my thumb over his hand, trying to find the words to tell him what I need to, to be as honest with him as he's been with me.

"I lost someone too," I finally say softly, and I see his eyes widen a little.

"What happened?" he asks. "If you want to tell me, that is—"

I nod, biting my lower lip. "His name was Jamie," I say quietly. "I met him in St. Louis. I'm sure if you were looking into me, you know I used to live there. I was dancing at a shitty club, and his buddies brought him there for his twenty-first birthday. He came to see me out back, while I was smoking—"

Finn raises an eyebrow, and I laugh dryly. "I don't smoke any longer, as I'm sure you've figured out. He—" I swallow hard, remembering that night. "I told him he could kiss me, as a birthday present. I wanted to know if he'd do it or not. And when he did—I knew I was in trouble."

"So you fell in love with him." It's not a question, and I'm sure Finn can hear it in my voice. There's no jealousy, just a quiet sadness in his voice that tells me he knows at least a little of how I'm feeling.

I nod. "I did. We were together for a couple of years, too. But he—"

Tears well up in my eyes, and I have to try hard not to cry, to finish the story. "You don't have to tell me now," Finn says quietly, and I shake my head.

"I need to. I want you to understand why—things have been the way they are." I take a slow breath. "He was in a biker gang. It was because of his brother—he didn't really want to be a part of it. But he wasn't given much of a choice. He was a sweet, kind, shy man—not at all the kind of person who *should* be a part of something like that. He loved the bikes and working on them, but the rest—he didn't want any part of it. And eventually, being a part of that life got him killed."

The last words come out choked, and Finn grips my hand tighter. "Oh fuck, Felicity. I'm so sorry—"

I sniff back the tears, giving him a wry half-smile. "We pretty much said the same thing to each other."

“Christ, lass—mine was just a breakup.” Finn pushes himself up a little more against the pillows, his gaze full of pained sympathy. “Your—this Jamie—he *died*.”

I nod, the tears spilling over a little at last. “I haven’t really been in love with anyone since. What I had with Nikolai—it came close, sometimes. I felt a lot for him. But I knew it wasn’t going anywhere. He and I were never going to be together like that, so I suppose, in a way, it almost felt safe to have some real feelings for him. It wasn’t possible to really fall in love with him, believe in forever, and then lose him. But—”

Finn’s gaze searches mine, and I see a faint hope on his face. “But what, lass?” he presses, and I look at him sadly, my chest aching.

“I could have felt that way for you. I knew I could have. And I had to keep that distance between us. If I didn’t—”

“Aye, lass. I thought there might be something like that. Not as bad as what the truth was, but I knew there was something. And to tell you the truth—” Finn’s hand finds mine again. “I wanted to think I could wait for you to come around. But not if it meant you going back to Kotov. I couldn’t bear that again.”

“I know. I’m sorry I was angry at you for it. I thought—” I swallow hard. “I thought I lost you.”

“I know, lass.” Finn gives me a faint, sad smile. “I thought the same.”

I want to kiss him. I look at him, and I want everything that I’ve been denying us both for so long. In the quiet silence of the cabin, nestled so far away from everything else, I don’t have the heart to hold back any longer. I’ve seen twice now how quickly everything that I care about can be taken away. As I bend down to kiss him again, I can’t bear the thought that I might have lost him without ever having had the chance to know what this was like.

He kisses me without hesitation, hands sliding into my hair to tug me down into the bed next to him, his mouth hungry and eager and sweet all at once. I feel his groan vibrate against my lips, feel the heat of his skin under my hands as he rolls me onto my back in one fluid motion, and my hands press against his chest, soft copper hair against my fingers as Finn looks down at

me.

“Say yes, lass,” he growls, his voice low and rich and thick and so full of need. “Say we’re not going to stop this time.”

“We’re not going to stop,” I breathe, looking up at him, and the look on his face tells me everything that I could ever need to know about whether or not this is the right decision.

There’s no games, no power exchange, nothing between us except for *us*. We alternate between fast and slow, trying to slow down long enough to savor each thing that feels somehow new, even though we’ve seen it all before. I’ve seen him naked, and he’s seen me, but undressing each other like this feels different. He slides my shirt up over my head, his hands moving over my breasts with something almost approaching reverence, as if he’s savoring being allowed to touch me so freely, without anything constraining either of us. My fingers hook into the waist of the soft pants he’s wearing, pushing them down his hips. Finn grins at me when I suck in my breath at the sight of his hard cock springing free, slapping against his abdomen.

“God, I’m so fucking hard for you, lass.” He kisses me again, firm and urgent, his tongue tangling with mine as he frees me of the bike shorts I was wearing and nestles between my hips, his hand sliding over my bare skin. “I want to take my time, taste every inch of you, but right now—”

“I know,” I whisper, my fingers pressing into the muscles of his shoulders as I arch upwards to kiss him again. “I don’t want to go slow, either.”

“Good,” Finn groans, his hand slipping between us as he angles his cock between my thighs, the tip of it brushing against my clit and making me gasp and moan with the sensation that sweeps over me. I’d wondered for so long what it would feel like to have that piercing rub against me, and it feels better than I’d imagined. I want him both inside of me as soon as possible, and for him to keep rubbing himself against me like that, teasing my clit with that metal ridge until I come. “We’ll take our time later, aye, lass?”

I nod wordlessly, kissing him again as he nudges the tip of his cock against my clit once more, making me cry out against his mouth as he slides downwards, pressing himself against my entrance. He’s swollen and thick, bigger than anyone I’ve been with in a long time—maybe ever. I moan as he

starts to push inside of me, and he stops, breaking the kiss as he looks down at me with concern.

“Too much, lass?” he asks, his voice gravelly with desire, and I shake my head.

“No.” I swallow, my hips arching up into his. “No, it’s good. Please, I want —”

He shudders as my hands slide down his back, legs wrapping around his as I pull him into me, and he slides forward. I’m drenched, so wet that he slips inside of me almost easily, even as large as he is, filling me up with a sensation that makes me moan and writhe under him as he sinks to the hilt and holds himself there for just a moment, eyes closing as he groans aloud.

“Christ, you’re so fucking tight. So wet—” His hips shift against me, rocking, his hands clutching the pillows on either side of my head as he braces himself. “Fuck, I’m afraid if I move, I’ll come.”

“It doesn’t have to be long, this time.” I lean up to kiss him, brushing his copper hair away from his face. “I’m close, too. Just feeling you in me—” I moan as he shifts again, his piercing rubbing against spots inside of me that I’m not entirely sure have ever been touched before, my legs tightening around him. “Please fuck me, Finn.”

Finn groans, his forehead pressed to mine as he starts to thrust in long, slow strokes that leave me trembling underneath him. “I’m not sure *fucking* is the right word for what we’re doing here, lass,” he murmurs against my mouth, his hips rocking against mine with each deep thrust. “But I’m going to give you what we both need.”

His thrusts speed up a little, one stroke at a time, until each is a solid meeting of his flesh against mine, hard and sure, his mouth slanted over mine. I feel his hands seek mine out, lifting them up over my head, his fingers intertwining with mine as the slow build of my climax rises with each thrust of his cock inside of me.

“You feel—so—fucking *good*—” I gasp against his mouth, and then he’s kissing me harder, and I can’t breathe, or think, or do anything at all except *feel*.

And it feels incredible. *He* feels incredible. There's nothing here but the two of us, nothing additional, nothing except pleasure, and I had forgotten how good this was. I had forgotten how it feels to be this vulnerable and feel this safe all at once.

*I love you.* The words spring to my lips, and I bite them back, before I can murmur them against his by accident. He thrusts again, deep and hard, his lips turning to graze my ear as he groans, his hips shuddering as he holds himself there for a moment.

"Come for me, Felicity," he whispers. "I'm not going to last much longer. Come *with* me."

Something about hearing my real name on his lips, rough and hoarse with desire, sends that final pulse of desire through me that tips me over the edge, the climax seizing my muscles and shuddering through the very depths of my bones as I arch against him and cry out.

I haven't come like this in so long. I cling to him as I cry out and shudder, my mouth pressed to his shoulder, his neck, and then to his mouth as I feel him thrust into me once more, his lips making the shape of my name as I feel him swell and harden inside of me, and then finally the hot rush of his cum as he comes hard, pinning me to the bed as he groans my name and holds me there beneath him.

The feeling of him coming inside of me, hot and hard, tips me over into another rush of pleasure as I throw my head back, feeling his lips on my neck as I cry out his name into the quiet of the room, forgetting to care who might hear us, forgetting about anything except for him and how perfect everything about this moment is.

He stays inside of me for a long moment, his lips brushing against the column of my throat, his fingers still intertwined with mine. "Felicity—" he breathes my name into my ear again, soft and reverent, his hips still shifting against me, his cock half-hard inside of me. "I love your name. I love how it sounds. I love saying it."

*Love, love, love.* He's not saying he loves me, not exactly, but I can't help but tense underneath him, fear spiking through me at the thought of *love*, of being so close to someone again, of having so much to lose. I think Finn feels it,

because he slips out of me, rolling onto his back as he pulls me into him, his arm around me.

“Don’t think about it, lass,” he murmurs quietly. “Let’s just let it be for now, aye?”

I nod, swallowing back the fear, the urge to get up and run, to put space between us that would make us safer, for all the hurt it would cause. I lie there against the warmth of his chest, his arm strong and sure around me, and I let myself be happy. I let myself feel safe.

I give myself something that I haven’t in so very long—and despite myself...

I find myself wanting to keep it. To keep him.



# Finn



When I wake in the early morning, I'm not entirely sure what was a dream and what's reality.

It all felt like a nightmare at first—the terrifying moment when I heard the explosion and realized what was happening, the hot pain of fire lancing up one side of my body, the impact of hitting the concrete, realizing I couldn't hear anything around me. I only vaguely remember Theo leaning over me, hands lifting me, the moment when they brought me into the cabin. I remember *Asha—Felicity*—fading in and out, leaning over me, touching me gently, tending to me, and I thought for sure that was all a dream. How could she have stayed, when the last words between us were so angry?

I dreamed of her so many times while I was unconscious, dreams that were erotic and tender by turns, dreams of her naked and breathless beneath me, dreams of her moaning my name, dreams of holding her in my arms and waking up to her next to me. When I woke to find her sitting across the room from me, I thought I must still be dreaming. And everything that happened after—

I wake up from dreaming about her again, her soft skin under my hands and her breath in my ear, the sound of my name on her lips. I wake up hard and aching for her, and when I wake to find her curled against me, softly nestled into the half-moon that our bodies make, it's hard to believe that I'm really awake.

That she's really here, with me, like this.

I try to resist the urge to touch her. Even if I didn't dream what happened last night, even if all of it was real, I should let her sleep. She's been through hell as much as I have, and I shouldn't—

But *Christ*, it feels impossible not to. She's next to me, soft and warm and as perfect as I remembered in all those fitful dreams, *naked* in my arms, and there's no thinking that it was a dream any longer, not when she's here with me like this.

I bend down, brushing my lips over her throat, and I hear her soft moan in her sleep. My cock twitches against my stomach, throbbing, but as I shift against her, my hand sliding down to cup her breast, I realize just how little strength I still have. I'm still healing, and while I might have managed last night, right now, my body is screaming at me that there's not much left in me.

“*Fuck*,” I murmur under my breath, feeling a wave of frustration as Felicity moves against me at my touch, her full, soft ass nudging against my cock in a way that makes me want to thrust into her hard and deep, staying there until we both come.

The thought makes me simultaneously hornier than I've ever been in my life and more exhausted than I can remember being in a long fucking time. I let out a low groan, every part of my body aching in more ways than one, and roll onto my back as I glare down at my cock, which is pearling pre-cum onto my abs, vein pulsing insistently.

It seems unfair that I finally have Felicity in my bed, and I can't do very much at all about it without feeling certain that I'd pass out on top of her.

She shifts next to me, turning towards me as the sunlight coming in through the window glints off of her glossy dark hair, spilling over my arm as she nestles closer. Her hand goes to idly stroke down my stomach, still half-asleep, and brushes against my straining, dripping cock.

Felicity's eyes fly open, and her mouth curves in a smile as she looks down at me. Her fingers are streaked with my pre-cum from where she nudged the tip, and with a wicked glint in her eyes, she slowly lifts them to her lips.

“Mm. I like how you taste,” she whispers breathily, her tongue flicking out

against her fingertips as she licks it away. I groan aloud, my cock harder still as I watch her.

“You’re going to be the death of me.” My head falls back into the pillows. “Christ, I want to fuck you more than I want to breathe—I think I might die if I do. I’m not back to myself yet.”

“What if you just lie there?” She smiles at me, that wicked smirk spreading across her lips, and before I can say a word, she shifts over my legs, her hands sliding down to stroke my hips as she leans over my cock. “What if—”

Her tongue flicks out, dragging a hot, wet line up the length of my cock, flicking against the straining flesh as she laps away the pre-cum at the tip. I let out a sound that’s half-pleasure, half-pain as her lips brush against the swollen head. “I think—I can manage that—” I whisper, my voice strangled with need as she traces another line upwards, her tongue following the pattern of the pulsing veins as she wraps her fingers around the base. “God, are you going to keep teasing me like that?”

“Of course.” Her lips twitch, and she presses them just below my cockhead in a firm, wet kiss. “You know I like that. It can’t all be sweetness and sugar like last night, can it?”

“Maybe not. *Fuck, Felicity—*” I gasp as she wraps her lips around the head for just a moment, sucking in a way that makes it feel as if electricity is shooting up my spine before she swirls her tongue around it, pressing it against the underside before she goes back to teasing, licking me like it’s summertime and I’m her favorite popsicle.

It’s exquisite and torturous all at once, the sensation sending prickling tingles over every inch of my skin, driving my arousal higher—it’s not enough to even begin to get me close. She knows it, too, dragging her fingers over my thighs as she licks, scratching the tips of her nails against my balls, teasing and building the pleasure by fractions until my thighs are trembling.

“You’re planning to kill me one way or another, aren’t you?” I ask, hips arching as she sucks on my cockhead again for just a moment before releasing me. “Is this what life is going to be like now?”

Felicity’s eyes flick up to meet mine, wide and startled suddenly, and I

realize what I just said. I don't know how to clarify without ruining the moment—if she stops touching my cock, I'm confident I *will* die—at the same time, I'm not sure that there's anything *to* clarify.

I don't want to be separated from her again. I don't want anything to come between us ever again. I want her and only her, and I know to the very depths of my soul that won't change. I want to find out what life with her is like.

And right now, I also very badly want to come.

She finally takes pity on me, just a little, sliding her mouth down over the tip and lapping up more of my pre-cum before taking me inch by inch between her lips, until I'm groaning at the hot, wet, sucking tightness of her mouth, fingers gripping the quilt beneath me as she hums against my length and takes me into the back of her throat. She's never sucked my cock like this, and I feel almost dizzy with pleasure, the need to come almost unbearable.

“Fuck!” I cry out as she takes me all the way down to the base, her nose brushing against my skin as I slip into her throat, her lips stretched around me, her eyes shiny with the effort. I've never had my cock sucked like this in my entire life, and I know in this moment that I'm ruined forever. I'll never be able to let another woman get her mouth on me without thinking of this, and I don't want to.

All I want is Felicity, forever.

Her hands press against my thighs as she swirls her tongue and slides her lips over me, pushing me closer and closer to the brink as I lie helplessly beneath her, my balls tightening with my oncoming orgasm. “I'm going to come,” I groan, breathless with pleasure. “Oh fuck, *Felicity*, I'm going to come in your mouth, please let me come in your mouth, *fuck—*”

I *feel* her smile around my cock when she hears me plead, and that's all it takes for her to slide me all the way into her throat again, her muscles tightening around me as she sucks hard, and I come apart at the seams.

I can feel myself pulsing over her tongue, shooting hot cum down her throat, filling her mouth. It's a primal kind of pleasure that makes me feel as if I've somehow marked her as my own, even more so than when I came all over her skin, feeling her mouth tighten and suck as she swallows down spurt after

spurt of cum, her hands braced against my thighs as she takes it all. Everything I have to give her, she swallows down. When there's finally nothing left for me to spill into her mouth, she runs her tongue over me until I'm gasping as she slowly slides her mouth off of my cock, smiling at me as she sits back.

"Was that good?" she purrs, and I look at her, eyes wide, hardly able to breathe.

"That was the best fucking blowjob of my entire goddamn life," I tell her honestly, and she bursts into laughter, falling back onto the bed next to me as she spreads her own legs shamelessly and slides her hand between them.

"Hey, now." I reach over, nudging her hand aside. "I'm not so weak that I can't take care of you like this."

"Oh?" Felicity turns her head, her eyes wide and dark and full of arousal. "Are you going to get me off, Finn?"

"Oh, you can be sure of that, lass." I roll onto my side, slipping my fingers between her folds, and I find her drenched for me. "Does sucking my cock turn you on?"

"Swallowing your cum does." She breathes the words, low and husky, and I feel my cock twitch as I slip my fingers into her, the pad of my thumb pressing against her clit. "I like how you taste. I like feeling you fill up my mouth, hot and thick—" Felicity lets out a moan, her hips arching up into my hand as I curl my fingers into her. "I thought about making myself come while I did it, but I wanted you to see me come. I was going to do it myself, but—"

She shudders as I thrust a third finger into her, rolling my thumb against her clit, finding the rhythm that I know she likes. "I like it better when you touch me," she whispers, her head falling back against the pillow. I can feel her tightening around my fingers, her orgasm building as I thrust my hand against her the way I wish I could fill her up with my cock right now. "I never want to stop making you come," I murmur against her ear, my other hand sliding up to tease and toy with one of her nipples as she squirms beneath me, breathing faster.

“I don’t want you to stop,” she moans. “Please don’t stop—”

“I won’t. Next time, it’ll be my tongue making you come like this.” My teeth graze her earlobe, sucking it between my lips. “Would you like that, Felicity? Me sucking on your clit while I fuck you with my fingers just...like...this—”

I thrust hard with each of the final words, my thumb rolling fast and hard over her clit. I feel her come apart against my hand, her mouth opening on a cry of pleasure as her arousal gushes over my fingers, her pussy clenching around me as she comes on my hand with a long, breathless moan that leaves her trembling as she bucks and writhes at my touch.

“I’m starting to dread having to leave this place,” I murmur, kissing her neck lightly as I slip my fingers free of her. She curls into me, her mouth finding mine, her hand against my chest as she kisses me sweet and slow.

“We’ll be here for a while, I think,” she says softly. “The last time I talked to Nikolai and Theo, they were still waiting for the right time to make a move. I think we have time.”

*Time for what?* I want to ask, but I don’t, as I kiss her again. The answer could be any number of things—time to enjoy each other before we have to go our separate ways, time to get our fill of each other, time to remember the reasons why we weren’t supposed to be doing this in the first place—I don’t want any of those things. What I want is *more* time with her, time even after we leave here, time for us to grow together and learn each other and find out how to make this work in a way that makes us both happy. I’m afraid that she doesn’t feel the same—I don’t want to know. Not right now.

Not when she’s in my arms, her hand sliding down to wrap itself around me again, her body pressed close to mine. Not when there’s so much pleasure to be had, so much closeness, all the things I craved with her for so long and finally have.

This doesn’t have to end yet. And all I can do, as she kisses me and I melt into her, is hope that there’s even the faintest of possibilities that it doesn’t have to end at all.

# Asha



I t's almost too good to be true.

For three days, Finn and I are lost in each other. We try not to give in every time we want to—both of us, I can tell, still feel as if we're supposed to be holding back, as if we're meant to keep trying to maintain that distance I fought for at first. But it's always a losing battle. We've opened ourselves up to each other, and there's nothing that can stop us from enjoying that to its fullest.

In the moments when Finn tries to bring up the future, I find myself silencing him with kisses instead, and that makes it impossible not to go further, too. I don't want to talk about the future, about the possibility of what comes next when we leave, about whether I'm still leaving Chicago, and, if I did, whether or not he would come with me. I don't want to think about any of it, because it raises too many questions I'm not prepared to answer.

Especially with the way he makes me feel.

Sleeping in the same bed makes it impossible to resist each other, too. For so long, I thought I didn't want anyone else in my bed, making sure never to bring anyone home, enjoying the space that was mine and mine alone. But now, with Finn, I find myself wondering if I'll ever be able to be happy sleeping alone again. Every night since that first night we gave in to our desire, I've fallen asleep in his arms, spooned against the curve of his body, or with my head pillowed on his broad chest, his arms around me, safe and

secure.

I want to stay like that, and it scares me and makes me happy in equal measure. I never thought I would have this again, but now that I have it, I have no idea how we can make it work. And having found it, I don't want to lose it again.

I have no doubt that by now, everyone in the house knows what we're up to. I can't be embarrassed about it, really—we're not doing anything wrong, and the security guards at least try to make themselves tactfully scarce. We get hints of what's going on beyond the cabin when we emerge to eat, the head of Theo's security especially letting Finn know what Theo and Nikolai are up to. They made one attempt to go after Matvei, we're told, but several of their men were killed, and Matvei withdrew to a different location outside Chicago, a mansion that's well guarded. For all his lack of connections, he doesn't lack money or the muscle to back it up.

Finn doesn't hide what's going on from me, to my relief. Theo keeps him apprised of the situation, and from what he's told, Matvei has leveraged what connections he does have among some of the smaller organizations in the city—upstarts, those who haven't had the success they want or think they deserve, those who resent the Vasilev, McNeil, and Mancini families for the success they have had in ruling the criminal underbelly of this city. "They resent it the same way Matvei does," Finn tells me as we eat dinner one night after he gets off the phone with Theo, twirling pasta around a fork. "They think they deserve to have more of a piece of it all than they do. Lilliana—Nikolai's wife—her father was the same. Matvei is positioning himself to be their leader, trying to unite them under his leadership in hopes that together, they can achieve what they haven't been able to on their own. Clearly, they didn't learn from Narokov's errors. But they're working on flushing out those responsible—leveraging threats, if need be. Theo and Nikolai will handle it, and they've spoken with the head of the mafia too, Don Mancini. There's nothing to fear."

I know he's trying to reassure me, but one day turns into another, it's hard not to feel restless and anxious—I know Finn is beginning to feel much the same, although both of us are all too easily distracted by each other.

"I feel guilty," Finn tells me the next afternoon, lying in bed next to me. "I



should be helping Theo. And instead, I'm here, recovering—it's hard to even be upset about it, because I'm here with you. I'd rather spend day after day in your arms instead of handling strategy and going after Kotov—even though bringing him down means you're safer. It's selfish of me." He runs his fingers through my hair, trailing them down the side of my neck. "I've never felt this way before, Felicity," he says softly. "I've never wanted someone so much that everything else seemed meaningless, even the job I've spent my life trying to prove that I'm capable of doing well. You take over everything. You make me want—"

I kiss him, cutting off whatever it was that he was about to say next, feeling him turn malleable under my hands, leaning into me with that need that's always so close to the surface. I know what he wants, because I want it too.

I don't have the answer for either of us.

We fall asleep in each other's arms afterward, exhausted and satisfied for the moment. And then, I'm awakened out of a dead sleep by a sound I, unfortunately, know all too well now.

At first, I hope I had dreamed it. I jerk awake in the darkness, sitting bolt upright next to Finn, and then I hear it again.

Crack! Over and over, the sharp sounds bursting through the air on the lower floor, the horrible, teeth-clenching rattle of gunshots—then shouts filling that same air, boots stomping as I hear them start to come up the stairs, and the horrible, sickening thud of bodies falling. Sounds I'm not as familiar with as the men here around me are, but I know them anyway.

My heart leaps into my throat, choking me with fear, and Finn is up in an instant, groping at the nightstand for his gun.

The door bursts open, and I scream.

The light flicks on, momentarily blinding me with the abrupt brightness of it, and I see Matvei in the doorway like some horrible nightmare, his men pouring into the room around him. For a moment, I think I must be dreaming, *hoping* that I'm dreaming, enough to dig my nails into my upper arms as I clutch the blanket to my chest, not wanting to give Matvei the satisfaction of seeing me naked again.

A smile spreads across his face as I stare at him, fear strangling me, making it hard for me to breathe. I hear Finn curse, hear the sound of a fist meeting flesh, and then I *do* scream as I see him being dragged down to the floor, his gun spinning away from him as Matvei's men hold him down, a heavy boot on the back of his neck and another pressed against his spine, more on his arms, pinning him down as he shouts my name.

Matvei stalks towards me like a predator, that awful grin still on his face. "I finally found you, *devochka*," he purrs, cracking his knuckles as he approaches the bed. He's wearing a pristine suit, pressed to perfection and tailored especially for him. It somehow seems ridiculous how much effort he's gone to in order to look like the perfect villain. Like he dressed for this moment, imagined it in his head.

"How many times have you pictured this?" I spit out, trying not to shrink back against the pillows, horribly aware that I'm naked under the blanket. "Did you practice whatever you're going to say next in the mirror? Recite your lines on the way here? Whatever it is, spit it—"

His hand shoots out, grasping my throat. It's too tight, cutting off my air, and I choke and splutter, twisting in his grasp.

"Felicity!" Finn shouts my name, and I can see him bucking against the men holding him in my periphery, slowly growing darker at the edges as Matvei squeezes.

"Felicity?" Matvei sounds pleased, but the sound of my name on his lips makes me feel as if I'm going to vomit. "Is that your real name, *devochka*? I'll enjoy saying it while I fuck you. Maybe it will emphasize what you haven't seemed to grasp yet—that you're going to be mine. I won you that night at the Ashen Rose, and you've tried to slip from my hands since, but you're never going to get away entirely, little *kotenok*. Not from me."

His hand loosens a little, just enough for me to get air, and he grabs the blanket, snatching it down to reveal my bare flesh. I force myself not to cry out, glaring up at him instead with every bit of defiance I can muster.

"You got me for *one* night," I hiss. "Not all of them. And anyway, why would you want to fuck me now?" I sneer at him, trying to squirm into an angle that will let me kick him right where it might give me a moment to

fight back. “I’m full of another man’s cum. Is that how you want me? Your cock covered in someone else’s release?”

It’s the only thing I can think of to stop him, at least for a moment, from where I know this is going, what I know he wants to make Finn watch. Anything to buy me time, to—

The slap across the side of my face leaves me reeling. Another, sending my head to the other side again, hard enough that it twists something in my neck, pain shooting down my spine. Matvei lifts me, throwing me back across the bed, my head hanging so I can see Finn’s horrified face as he bucks and twists against his captors. Matvei pins me down, the sound of him dragging down his zipper filling the room as I suddenly feel the cold metal against my neck.

“Try fighting me now, bitch,” he hisses, and I feel the bite of the blade. “I’m going to fuck you with this knife against your throat, and then slit it while I come in you. How’s that for me fucking you after another man, you used up cunt?”

Terror fills me, blinding and white, and for a moment, I’m frozen. This is far beyond me, far beyond any situation I’ve ever found myself in, and for a moment, I feel a flood of hopelessness. *This is it. This is how I die. Fucked to death by a man who I’d rather see in his grave.* It’s not how I saw my life ending, but for a brief and horrible moment, I don’t see a way out.

“Felicity! Felicity, no—” Finn is fighting desperately to get free, and I see the gun that was knocked out of his hands, inches away from mine. If I could get it to him—

I’m risking everything by trying it—by attempting the plan slowly formulating in my head, a wild and desperate plan that almost certainly won’t work, but is all I can think of. And if it doesn’t—

I’m going to die anyway. I know Matvei isn’t bluffing.

I might as well die trying to fight my way out of this.

For a moment, I let myself go limp. I let Matvei think he’s won, that I’m too terrified to fight back, and hope desperately that I can do this before he gets the chance to be inside of me again. Everything in me cringes at the thought

of that, of feeling him touch me intimately ever again. As his free hand shoves between my legs, his attention momentarily diverts as I feel the brush of his cock against my inner thigh and know he's lining himself up; I stretch out my hand and grab for the gun, my eyes meeting Finn's.

His gaze follows my hand, and he sees what I'm doing. One quick look, and I know he understands.

I shove the gun towards him with one hand, flinging it in his direction and praying he can get a hand free—and grab for the knife at my throat.

Everything happens in a blur. Matvei is poised at my entrance, about to thrust inside of me, his eyes glassy with lust and the initial pleasure of being so close to me, and he's distracted for just long enough. He never thought I'd try it—I can see that in the shock on his face when I dig my nails into his hand, twisting to bite his fingers, feeling the scrape of the blade against his throat as he lets out a shout and drops it—I grab for the knife, lunging upwards.

Gunshots fill the room, deafening me, and I can't turn to look and see if it's Finn shooting or Matvei's men, if my plan is working, or if I've just lost everything I care about for a second time. The thought that I could lose Finn, the possibility of it, sends a flood of adrenaline through me as I lurch up towards Matvei, my free hand grabbing his cock and squeezing with every bit of strength in me as I stab the knife towards his throat.

The room smells like smoke and blood, a haze from the gunfire filling it. I feel heat spread over my hands—both of them—Matvei's blood and cum spilling over my skin all at once as he lets out a strangled shout and bucks against me, his eyes wide with horrified shock. It's something out of a nightmare—*my* nightmare, but I'm one step away from victory, and I'm not going to let him get away now.

He splutters something unintelligible, and I feel my lips twist in a wicked grin, sneering at him as I jerk the knife upwards in his throat.

"I'm sorry," I hiss, leaning in closer. "Was that your safeword? I couldn't hear it."

I jerk the knife free, and as blood sprays over my hands, he drops to the floor.

The gunfire has gone silent. I'm afraid to turn around, afraid to see what's

behind me. I'm terrified that I'll see Finn dead on the floor, and I can't move. I can't look. I sit there, kneeling on the bed, covered in blood and on the verge of tears, and I can't look.

A hand touches my shoulder, and I scream.

"Felicity." Finn's voice comes from behind me, low and urgent, soothing despite the horror all around us. "Felicity, it's me. We're safe. You're safe."

*Safe.* Nothing about this feels safe, but hearing his voice, I believe it. I believe him. I twist around, desperate to see his face, to touch him, to know he's real. That he's not dead. That this isn't all the nightmare that it feels like.

"Did you—"

"They're dead." Over Finn's shoulder, I can see what he's talking about—the bodies of the men that were holding them down. The floor is smeared with blood, my ears are still ringing from the gunshots, but I don't hear noises from downstairs. No one is coming up, and I know what that means, my stomach twisting at the thought of it. Everyone who was guarding us is either dead or too injured to help.

"I have to call Theo." Finn's voice is urgent, insistent, his hands smoothing up and down my arms. "He needs to send cleaners, more security to help us with this. Just sit right here, alright? Don't move. Give me two minutes. Less." There's something soothing in the rhythm of his words, and I, who have never wanted to be told what to do in my life, find it suddenly a relief to be given instructions. My mind is foggy, blurred with fear and the awfulness of what just happened, but I can do what Finn is asking me to. I can sit here and not move.

So that's what I do. I sit there, frozen, my hands numbly trembling in my lap. I hear Finn's voice, talking to Theo, but it's hard to make out what he's saying from a few feet away with how horribly my ears are still ringing. I close my eyes, teeth sinking into my lower lip, trying to shut it all out—then his hands are on my arms again, sliding up, fingers tipping up my chin to look at the cut on my throat.

"I need to make sure you're alright. Fuck, Felicity—" Finn's voice is ragged as he looks me over, and I open my eyes, seeing the fear in his. "I thought he

was going to kill you.”

“I did, too.” My voice is high and reedier than I’ve ever heard it. “I thought we were both dead.”

“We’re not.” There’s a strange viciousness in Finn’s voice, his fingers pressing against my cheek, holding me there to look at him. “We’re not dead. He is. He’s fucking dead, and I’m glad. I’ve never been so fucking glad—”

“I am, too.” I realize for the first time that Finn is as spattered with blood as I am. “What about you? Are you hurt?” I reach for him, looking at his stained flesh, my fingers sliding down to the waist of the pants he’d only just managed to drag on before Matvei and his men burst in. “Are you—”

“I’m fine.” His hand is on my jaw now, his gaze searching mine with a fervent heat that I recognize, because I can feel it building in me, too. “Felicity, I—”

*We’re alive.* The thought slams through my head again, beating against it, and I feel a strange, clawing desire that matches what I see in Finn’s face. A reminder that we really are alive. A need for *him*—I can see that he needs it, too.

“I need you,” I whisper, my hand reaching up to touch his face, and before I can say another word, he spills me back onto the bed, his mouth crushed against mine.

I can’t get enough of him. There’s nothing sweet or gentle about it this time. This is fierce, possessive, *primal*; neither of us cares that we’re covered in blood or that there are bodies lying inches away from us. We fucking *survived*, and everything in me is clamoring to celebrate that. I can feel myself yearning for it, hear the pleas slipping out of my mouth as Finn groans and buries his face against my throat, his hand working between us as he pushes his cock into me.

“*Mine*,” he growls against my flesh, his teeth grazing my neck. Even if I’m not sure if that can be true, even if I don’t know what happens after this, I can feel myself reacting to the sound of it, to the feeling of his lips pressed against me, sucking, leaving a mark that anyone who sees me tomorrow will recognize. He sucks on my throat with a rhythm to match the pounding of his

cock inside of me, my nails digging into his shoulders as I cling to him, pleasure building inside of me at a rapid pace. I can hear both of our harsh breathing filling the air, the scent of sweat and heated skin mingling with the blood and smoke, and there's something wild in the room, something so fierce that neither of us could fight it if we wanted to.

"You're mine, Felicity." He breathes my name like a prayer, his hands hard on my waist, groaning as he fucks me hard. His cock fills me with every thrust, going as deeply as he can, sinking into me over and over again until I hear myself crying out his name, my skin glued to his with sweat and blood, every inch of me quivering with a bone-deep pleasure as I come apart beneath him and keep coming. Every slam of his thick length into me sends me into another spasm of pleasure, my moans filling the air, and I feel his hands wrap around mine, pulling them away from where my nails have dug furrows into his shoulders, holding onto me the same way I need to hold onto him as I feel him thrust once more and flood me with his cum.

He holds me there, throbbing inside of me, both of us breathing hard. I feel Finn's hand reach up to touch my cheek, and I open my eyes to see him looking down at me, worry wreathing every inch of his handsome face.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" he whispers, and I shake my head.

"No. Not even a little bit—"

The slam of a door comes from downstairs, and I jerk upwards in mingled fear and surprise. Finn wraps an arm around me, slipping out of me as he pulls me into his arms, soothing me like a nervous pet. "It's the cleaners," he says calmly, stroking my hair. "But we should probably get dressed, before they get up here."

I look around the room, at the scattered bodies, and back at Finn. It all hits me at that moment, the utter reality of what just happened, and I burst into tears.

When he gathers me in his arms, his hand still stroking my hair as he holds me close. "I've got you," he murmurs quietly against my ear, those strong arms wrapped around me. "I will always keep you safe, Felicity."

And for just a moment, as we sit there together in the middle of the blood-

drenched bed, I can almost believe that it's true.

—

It all feels different in the early morning light, standing in front of my apartment.

Nikolai and Theo filled us in on what had happened just before and after the attack. Matvei had men staking out the safe house for a few nights before he made his move, finding exactly the moment between guard changes when there were the fewest, and his men could slip in and take out those that were there. Nikolai is convinced that one of the other organizations must have arranged it—he doesn't believe Matvei was canny enough to have come up with such a strategy—and he and Theo are making a point of ensuring that with the head of the snake cut off now, the other gangs slide back into obscurity where they belong.

The look on both Nikolai's and Theo's faces when they said that was enough to make me glad that I'll have no more part in this. I could see that there's violence coming, a wave of it to ensure that those who allied themselves with Matvei are ground back into the dust, and there will be plenty of blood to follow. Blood that I want nothing to do with.

Matvei deserved to die, but that doesn't mean that I won't have nightmares for a long time about what happened.

Finn wanted to make sure I made it home safely, and I couldn't find the heart to tell him no. Truthfully, I didn't *want* to tell him no. I wanted him there with me, all the way up to the front door, and beyond it.

I want him with me always. But looking at him as we stand there on the sidewalk, all the horror of yesterday washed away and only the bruises and healing cuts remaining to remind us of what happened to send us there in the first place, I feel that old fear creeping back in. That old certainty that if I give in to what I want, if I tell Finn how much I want *him*, that it will doom us both. That loving another man who lives a deadly life will only result in my heart being torn out of my chest for a second time.

I know Finn sees all of that in my face. I wait for him to tell me what he feels,



what *I* can see written in his, but he just looks at me, and I see resignation replace the hope that had flickered there only a moment before.

“Ask me, Felicity,” he says softly, and I know what he’s asking for. I know what he wants—for me to ask him to stay, to ask him to be mine, to ask him for a future that we can piece together bit by bit, however we please.

The words are on the tip of my tongue. I think of how terrified I was when I thought I lost him. How the idea of finding him dead on the floor tore me apart. How all I wanted was for him to be safe.

It makes me want to ask him to stay. And it also makes me want to run.

I don’t know how long we both stand there. But for Finn, I can see it’s too long.

He takes a step back, his jaw tightening. “Goodbye, Felicity,” he says, and his voice is so hard, so full of hurt, that it breaks something inside of me anyway. It’s only then that I realize that either way, my heart was going to break. There’s no protecting it any longer.

If I ask him to stay, there’s at least the chance of a future together. A chance at happiness. But by the time I open my mouth to speak, he’s already gone.

I only just manage to make it into my apartment and into my bed before I dissolve into tears, the kind of choking, wracking sobs that make me feel like an empty shell by the time they fade away, leaving me with nothing to do but to fall into a restless sleep filled with awful dreams.

It’s dark when I wake up again. I jolt awake, thinking for a brief moment that I’m late for work, scrambling for my phone before everything clicks back into place, and I remember that I’m not expected at work tonight. If not for what happened, I would still be at the safehouse with Finn.

*Finn.*

My chest clenches all over again with pain at the thought of him, aching in a way that brings fresh tears to my eyes. *How long before I have to go back to work?* The thought brings a sinking dread, and it’s at that moment that I’m not sure I can go back at all, no matter what I promised Nikolai about a two-week notice.

For the first time in days, I check my bank account, and my stomach drops when I see the numbers there. Theo kept his promise. There's more than I'd imagined there—enough that if I wanted to, I could quit. I could leave.

I could start over.

*I can't stay here.* This city is big, but it's not big enough with Finn here too, not when I'm already desperate to see him again, my heart breaking every time I remember how things ended between us this morning. I reach for my phone, scrolling until I find our texts, my heart pounding in my chest.

Maybe I can fix it. Maybe it's not over yet.

***I'm sorry. I wasn't myself this morning. Can we talk??***

I sit there for longer than I'd like to admit, staring at the phone. There's nothing. No response. No sign that he's even read it. I wait and wait—and then, at last, I call Nikolai.

“Asha.” The name sounds foreign, startling. I miss hearing my real name on Finn's lips, and I realize with a start that it never occurred to me to ask Nikolai to use it. He knows it, of course—he hired me—but he's never called me by it. Only by Asha.

“Are you alright? You're home, aren't you? You can take as much time as you need. I don't want you coming back until you're entirely ready—”

I don't mean to cut Nikolai off. I really don't. But the words come out before I can stop them, clogging up my throat with how quickly they burst free.

“I can't come back. I'm sorry. I just can't.” I don't know what explanation to offer, because even I'm not entirely sure why. I don't know if it's Finn, or what happened with Matvei, or just exhaustion after so many years of dancing and escorting, a stuttering flame finally burned out. “I know I said I'd give you notice, Nikolai, and I'm sorry. But I can't come back.”

There's a long silence. “I can understand that,” Nikolai says finally. “Given the situation. I thought you might say that, honestly.” He pauses for another long moment. “You said something about leaving Chicago. Is that—”

He pauses, and I know what he's asking. I don't know if I was even entirely

certain until that moment, but when he says it, I am.

“Yes.” I swallow hard, forcing myself not to think of Finn, not to think of what I’m losing. Not to think of the unanswered message, the chance I had to keep him from walking away this morning.

Not to think of him at all, because if I do, I’ll break into a thousand pieces all over again, just like I knew I would.

“Yes. I’m leaving.”

# Finn



I know what happened between us was real. I know what I felt was real, and I know she felt the same. But in the cold light of day, she couldn't say what I needed to hear.

In the moment, it felt like standing up for myself to walk away, like preserving what I had left of my dignity. Now, after two days of missing her and two nights of dreaming about her, remembering what we shared together, right up to that last horrible night—it feels less like that and more like I walked away without a fight.

So fight for her.

The thought is in my head from the moment I left her there on the apartment steps—but I try to shove it down. I try to tell myself that I'm only setting myself up for heartbreak again, that Asha has shown me, over and over, that she isn't willing to try to take the chance again of loving someone.

I try to tell myself that I had my answer.

It only takes two days before I lose my resolve.

I'd told myself not to look at the message she sent me. That if I did, it would only make it worse. That I was only torturing myself, all over again, by not taking the message she gave me standing outside her apartment loud and clear, and putting her out of my head.

“What happens in the safehouse stays in the safehouse,” I mutter aloud as I stand in my kitchen, making breakfast, trying to go about my day as if my heart isn’t still lying on the pavement outside of her door. As if I wouldn’t have given anything for her to ask me what I all but begged for her to say—to ask me to come upstairs, to ask me to stay, to ask me to be hers as surely as I know she’s mine.

What if I tried? What if I did fight for her the way I wanted to?

The idea that comes immediately to mind is laughable. Ridiculous. The last time I tried it, I also ended up with a broken heart for my efforts. But my relationship with Felicity has been, from the start, nothing if not unconventional.

So why not try to repair it in an unconventional way?

*What’s the worst that could happen?*

I know the answer to that, of course. The worst that could happen is that she’s horrified by the gesture, or that she laughs in my face. The ending to this particular idea could be the exact opposite of preserving what’s left of my dignity.

But I’ve never been the most dignified of men, and in this moment, I know I would try anything—gamble anything, if it meant a chance at having her back.

If it meant a chance at having her for good.

Which is how, three hours later, I find myself pressing the buzzer for her apartment with a velvet box in my pocket and my heart feeling as if it’s about to leap out of my chest.

For a moment, I think she’s not going to answer. And then I hear her voice, low and sugar-sweet, coming through the speaker.

“Yes?”

“Felicity—it’s Finn. Can I come up?”

There's a silence for a moment that I feel almost certain means no. That she's not going to answer. That she's going to leave me standing here. And then, just as I'm starting to question if I should turn and walk away from this place for a second time, I hear the click of a door.

"Come on up. It's 308."

My heart is still hammering in my chest when I knock on her door. I'm halfway through the second knock when it opens, leaving my fist in mid-air, and the sight of her is enough to knock the wind out of me. She's wearing leggings and a loose tank top and no makeup, her hair up in a high ponytail, but she looks every bit as stunning as she always does to me. It's all I can do not to grab her and kiss her, devouring her mouth the way I've been dreaming of for two nights now.

"Finn?" Her voice is soft, questioning. I can't tell if there's hope or caution in it or both. "Are you coming in?"

I nod, stepping inside as she shuts the door behind me. She doesn't move to walk further into the apartment, and we just stand there for a moment, looking at each other as if wondering who will be the first to speak.

Her mouth starts to open just as I do, but it's too late for me to stop now.

"I love you." I see her eyes go wide as I say it, the words spilling out before I can think if that's what I want to lead with or not. "I love you, Felicity. I can't tell you exactly what moment that happened, but it's been a while now. Even with all the things I've lived through in my life, seeing you hurt was the worst thing that's ever happened to me. Thinking that I'd lost you—" I swallow hard, feeling the thud of my pulse, seeing the way she's looking at me, as if she doesn't know what to make of the man standing in front of her.

I feel certain that my heart is about to be shattered, but I can't stop now that I've started. I reach into my jacket, pulling out the small velvet box, and her eyes go wider than I've ever seen.

"Finn, I—"

"Let me finish." I reach for her hand, pulling her closer to me, and she comes willingly, her gaze searching mine as if desperately trying to understand what's happening at this moment. "I want to spend my life with you, Felicity."

You don't have to say yes right now—I understand if you don't. I know this is quick, and you might say you want to think about it, and that's okay—but I'll do whatever I need to in order to make you happy, lass. I'll even try to be okay with you working at the club—”

Her eyes go a touch wider, just for a moment, and then she bursts out laughing, a sort of shocked laugh that makes me step back for a moment, equally startled.

“This wasn't necessarily the reaction I wanted—”

“I'm sorry.” She catches her breath as I look down at her, and as I open my mouth to say something else, she reaches up and puts her fingers over my lips.

The touch sends a shock through me, down my spine, a reminder of every moment I spent in that safehouse buried inside of her, and every moment I dreamed about doing it again in the future. I want to grab her, kiss her, devour her, and my hand tightens around the small velvet box that I haven't even gotten a chance to open yet.

“I already quit, Finn,” she says softly, and it takes me a moment to register what it is that she's saying.

“You—”

“I quit the Ashen Rose. Two nights ago,” she clarifies. “I was—”

Her teeth sink into her lower lip, and she looks away for a moment. “I was planning to leave next week,” she says quietly. “Planning to leave Chicago, like I said. But now—”

Her gaze flicks back to mine, and I see hope in it—the same hope I know is reflected in my face. “I'm glad,” I whisper softly, reaching up to touch her cheek. The hope flares brighter when she doesn't pull away. “I don't know how I would have ever been able to stand the thought of another man's hands on you ever again. I would have tried to, for you—but I—”

“I know.” Felicity reaches up, her hand covering mine, pressing it against her face. “I wouldn't let any other man tell me that I was only his. But with you—it's different.”

Slowly, she turns her face, pressing her lips against my palm. “Everything is different with you,” she whispers. “And I want to prove it to you.”

The desperate thudding of my heart suddenly goes still in my chest. “What do you mean?”

She leans into me, her hand against my chest, her chin tipped up as she looks into my eyes. Her mouth is so close to mine, almost close enough for a kiss, and that quick pace of my heartbeat picks up again. “You can do anything you want with me,” she whispers. “Whatever your fantasy is, you can have it.”

I don’t know why it catches me off guard. Knowing her, it shouldn’t have. A throb of desire pulses through me as the words settle in, the enormity of what she’s offering—a blank check to do whatever I please.

“What I want isn’t all that inventive,” I murmur, stroking my knuckles against her cheekbone, brushing a loose piece of hair out of her face. “I don’t want you to be disappointed.”

“Nothing you do could ever disappoint me.” Her voice goes breathy and soft, a sound that I know now means desire for her. I know if I slipped my hand inside of her leggings, I’d find her wet for me, and the thought has me rock-hard in an instant, the need for her alive and well and pounding inside my veins.

“We’ll start with this.” I turn her, backing her against the wall, my body pressed flush to hers as I tip her chin up and let my lips hover just above her mouth. “Do you want me to kiss you, Felicity?”

“Yes,” she breathes, and I can’t wait a second longer.

Her mouth is as full and soft as I remember, plush under mine, the taste of her as sweet as it was before. I want to be inside of her more than I want to breathe, but I want this too, licking and nipping at her bottom lip, sucking it into my mouth, hearing her catch her breath and whimper as I do. I feel her arch against me, feel her hands sliding under my shirt, wanting bare skin against hers. When her hand drops between us to slide over the straining ridge of my cock, I wonder if I’m going to have the discipline to draw this out the way I want to.



“In such a hurry?” My fingers close around her wrist, moving her hand away. “It seems like you want to be punished, lass.”

“Oh?” Her eyes go wide and round, her lips parting, and I reach for her, lifting her into my arms and heading in the direction that I desperately hope leads to the bedroom. One door proves to be the wrong one. Her hands find my face, dragging my mouth to hers so urgently that we bump into the wall, teetering on the edge of tumbling to the floor as her tongue seeks out mine, her moan vibrating against my lips.

“The bed is that way,” she gasps, motioning towards a closed door, and I can’t get us there fast enough.

I manage to set the small box on the nightstand as I lay her back on the bed, my other hand reaching for her tank top to slide it off. Inch by inch, I see her perfect, bare flesh again, Felicity squirming on the bed underneath me as I slip it over her head and toss it away, reaching for the clasp of her bra.

“Tell me what you want,” she whispers, and I look down at her, gently pressing her back into the pillows as I reach for her hands.

“I’m going to tie you to the bed with my belt,” I murmur, fingers stroking the backs of her hands as I lift them over her head. She whimpers as I wrap one broad hand around both of her wrists, holding them there as I undo my belt, and I pause for a moment, looking down at her.

“You don’t have to do this, Felicity,” I murmur softly. “If this isn’t what you want—I love you without all of this. I want you even without it. It doesn’t have to be this if you don’t want it—”

“I do.” Her voice is high and breathy, and I can tell that she means it. “I’d tell you if I didn’t. *Please, Finn—*”

Hearing her beg is almost too much. It’s a different kind of sweet torture to see her lying there on the bed, her hands bound to the headboard with my belt, her breasts rising and falling with each gasp as I slide her leggings and panties down her hips, revealing her entirely, and knowing that I’m going to draw this out for both of us. I want to make it last, and I want to fuck her hard until we both come all at once, and as I gently spread her legs and lean over her to trail kisses from her mouth down to the space between them, my own

cock is aching with a need bordering on desperation.

“You’re going to come for me,” I tell her as I graze my teeth over her hipbones, holding her legs firmly apart, her already-drenched pussy spread open for me. “As many times as you can. Do you understand, Felicity? No holding back. As soon as you can come, I want you to drench my mouth with that sweet pussy. And then as many times after as you can manage.”

She lets out a soft, keening moan, nodding as I open her wider with my fingers, her delicate, drenched flesh on full display. “Say yes, Felicity, so I can hear you.”

“Yes,” she gasps, her hips bucking up into my hands. “Yes, sir.”

When I slide my tongue over her, she’s the sweetest thing I can ever remember tasting. I lose myself in the scent and taste and sensation of her, sliding my tongue over her folds, up to her clit, fluttering and sucking her into my mouth until she comes for me with a sharp, gasping cry, her arousal flooding over my tongue. I can’t get enough of it—the way she sounds when she comes, the way she gets so impossibly wet for me, the way she clenches around my fingers when she comes for a second time and a third, bucking against my face, crying out my name.

“*Please*,” she finally gasps when the third orgasm ebbs, writhing against my mouth. “I need you inside of me. *Please*.”

“I’m not sure how much longer I could have waited,” I admit with a hoarse laugh, leaning over her as I slip my hand between us, sliding the tip of my cock over her clit. Her hips buck upwards, seeking out the sensation, and she lets out another gasping moan.

“I’ve never been with anyone who was pierced before,” she whispers. “It feels so good—”

“Oh?” I rub my cockhead over her clit again, and see her entire body jerk and twitch beneath me, her lips parting on a cry of pleasure. “I think I’m going to make you come again for me like this, then.”

Nothing gives me more pleasure than hers. I could spend all night making her come apart for me again and again, seeing the look on her face when the pleasure finally grips her, when the sensation of my slick cockhead and the

metal piercing becomes too much, hearing her scream out my name. Nothing has ever been as good, and when I feel her pulse and flutter against my cock, drenched from a fourth orgasm, I can't stop myself from thrusting into her, faster than I'd meant to.

"Oh god—Finn!" Felicity cries out, arching up, and I kiss her hard, her arousal still covering my lips. She licks it away, her tongue tangling with mine, and the sheer eroticism of it has me throbbing inside of her, too close to the edge, as she jerks against the belt holding her to the headboard, bucking underneath me. "Please—I need you—"

"You need more?" I slide my hand into her hair, holding it a little tighter, tilting her face up to mine. "Harder, Felicity?"

"Yes," she gasps. "Harder. *Please.*"

I give her everything she wants and more. I thrust into her, over and over again, feeling the slick velvet heat of her gripping me tight and drawing me deeper, and I want to stay there forever. My mouth finds hers again, my hands wrapping around her wrists, and as I thrust into her once more, hovering on the edge of climax, I look down at her lust-filled gaze and ask her the question I'd been meaning to since I walked into her front door.

"Marry me, Felicity. Say you'll marry me."

Her eyes go wide, startled for a brief moment, and then a laugh sputters from her lips, quickly turning into a moan as I thrust again.

"This is insane," she whispers, her head thrown back, cheeks flushed, looking more beautiful than I've ever seen her as her eyes sparkle with desire and laughter all at once. "But this is the kind of relationship we have, I think—*oh!*"

She moans as I thrust into her once more, gritting my teeth against the oncoming climax. "Felicity—"

Her eyes open again, looking up into mine, and all I see in them is love.

"Yes," she whispers, leaning up to kiss me, her breasts brushing against my chest as she does. "I'll marry you."

A flood of emotion swells within me at the same moment that the pleasure does, the tightness of her body clenching around me, the heat, all of it overwhelming me as I thrust, kissing her hard, pushing her back into the pillows as I drive myself into her and come hard, every inch of my cock throbbing inside of her as I flood her with wave after wave of cum, my entire body shaking as I hold myself there, as deeply inside of her as I can be.

“I love you too,” she whispers as I break the kiss, looking down at her, still buried inside of her. “Even as stubborn and over-protective as you are, I love you. I’ve fallen for you when I never thought I could fall for anyone again—”

She sucks in a breath as I reach up, undoing the belt and freeing her hands, and then I reach for the box, opening it with one hand as I slip the ring free.

It’s rose gold, with an oval champagne diamond in the center, with smaller diamonds all down the band. Felicity’s mouth drops open as she looks at it, and I reach for her hand, slowly sliding it onto her ring finger.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispers, and I slip out of her, rolling onto my side next to her as I lift her hand to my mouth.

“Not as beautiful as you.”

“It’s going to be a long engagement,” she teases me, rolling towards me so her hands and chin are pillowed on my chest. “Even longer if you keep using lines like those.”

“It can be as long as you want,” I assure her. “As long as it ends in forever with you.”

Her face softens, and she leans up, pressing her lips to mine. “I want to be with you forever, too, Finn. Here, or anywhere else. Married or not, that will never change.”

She reaches up to cradle my face in her hands, deepening the kiss. I feel her pressed against me, pulling me down atop her again as she kisses me sweet and slow, and I can feel the truth of those words in every kiss, every touch, as I take her in my arms all over again.

I love her, and she loves me.

And no matter what, nothing will ever separate us again.

# Epilogue

## Asha



**F** or better or worse, ‘til death do us part—

I’d almost laughed out loud, saying those vows in front of the priest with Finn, with Theo and Nikolai and their families and a handful of other friends looking on. It didn’t take a wedding and vows said out loud for me to know that was the truth for us. We’ve already been through better and worse, faced down death together, long before I stood at the altar with my hands in Finn’s and swore to love him for the rest of my life.

I already knew I would do that, too. From the moment he saved me, cared for me, from the moment he showed me that I was worth more to him than his own life—from the moment he pulled out that ring and asked me to marry him in a way that would have made sense to absolutely no one except the two of us, I’ve known. I never thought I would find love like this again, but now that I have, I know I’ll do anything to never let it go.

It was a beautiful wedding and a wonderful reception, but it all felt almost redundant to me. I’ve been his long before we made it official, and he’s been mine. Looking down at the thin rose gold band sitting next to my ring now, it doesn’t feel so much like *finally* as *of course*.

“Admiring your new jewelry?” Finn leans over to kiss me, his hand brushing over mine as we settle into the seats on Theo’s private plane—his gift to us to take us to our honeymoon. First Ireland for Finn, and then Spain for me—Finn wanted the pubs and moors of his home country and to show me around, and I want sun and beaches and good wine. With nothing holding us back

from taking an extended honeymoon, there was no reason that we couldn't have both.

"I was thinking that it feels like it's always been there," I tell him softly, leaning up to kiss him again. "Like I've always been yours since we met. It just took some time to realize it."

"I've never been so grateful for anything as I am that you did.." Finn's fingers trail through my hair, his mouth a little more urgent against mine as he deepens the kiss. "And when we get to our hotel in Dublin, I have another gift for you."

"Oh?" I nestle closer to him. "Are you going to give me a hint?"

"Not even a small one," he assures me, punctuating the sentence with another kiss. "No matter how much you tease me into trying," he adds, as my hand slides over his thigh, fingers inching higher. "In fact, the more you tease, the longer I'll wait to give it to you."

"And what are you going to give to me?" I raise an eyebrow, tilting my chin up for another kiss. "Is it something big?"

"I like to think so," Finn says wryly, a glimmer of a smile on his lips. "But you'll just have to wait and find out."

—

I find out the answer almost as soon as we've dropped our bags in the room. Finn reaches into his, rummaging around for a moment, and then holds a box out to me. I take it from him, curious, as he starts to unbutton his shirt.

Inside is a pair of handcuffs, a small key, and a silk blindfold.

"Is this what I—" I look up at him, startled, and Finn laughs, shrugging off his shirt. It's enough to make my mouth go dry, looking at him, seeing every inch of his muscled torso on display for me, dusted with that copper hair that I love to run my fingers through.

"My wedding gift to you is letting *you* do anything you want to *me*." He grins at me, running one hand through his hair as the other goes to his belt.



“There’s a flogger in that bag, too, if you’re so inclined.”

I feel my eyes go even wider, and I clap one hand over my mouth, startled into laughter. “I didn’t think—”

“You let me do whatever I wanted with you—and have, since then,” Finn says gently, closing the distance between us. “Now it’s my turn. You can do anything you like, *Mrs. O’Sullivan*.” He says the last teasingly, his hands brushing against my waist, sliding the silk sleeveless shirt up over my stomach as he drops to his knees in front of me, his hands going for the buttons of my jeans. “I’m already on my knees, wife, so tell me what it is that you want me to do?”

“Mm.” A dozen ideas are already running through my head, each one more delicious than the last. “Is this going to be a one-night sort of thing, or will I have other opportunities in the future?”

Finn smirks. “I suppose it all depends on how the night goes. But I’ve heard you’re very good at your job. The best, really.” His fingers hook in the waist of my jeans, thumbs brushing over my hipbones as I slide my shirt upwards and enjoy the way his gaze follows it hungrily. “I’m eager to experience your—talents.”

I pull the shirt off, tossing it aside with my bra, and look down at my gorgeous husband, kneeling on the carpet in front of me, a wicked smile playing on my lips, one that I know he’s all too familiar with. “Since you’re already on your knees, you might as well make yourself useful.”

The groan that slips free as he tugs my jeans down my hips tells me that he’s enjoying this far more than he might want to admit. His mouth is between my legs in an instant, tongue parting my folds as he hooks one leg over his shoulder, devouring me as I wind one hand through his copper hair and grip it tightly, hips rocking against his mouth as he licks and sucks my clit almost frantically, pushing me towards a fast, messy orgasm. It’s not meant to be slow or teasing—he’s giving me exactly what I asked for, and it feels good. Finn is an expert at making torment out of pleasure, drawing it out until I beg for him, and this is a thrilling change.

His eager, hungry mouth tips me over the edge faster than I expected, sending me bucking forward, almost toppling to the carpet as Finn grabs onto my

hips, still sucking my clit as I moan and grip his shoulders, hips rocking against his mouth. I can feel myself throbbing against his lips, grinding against his tongue for every last bit of pleasure I can chase, until I'm sagging against him. Finn steadies me, his growl of pleasure vibrating against my skin.

He gets to his feet in one swift motion, his lips glistening with my arousal, and I nod shakily towards the bed.

“Remember our first night?” I take a trembling breath, trying to regain control of my balance, and my own arousal. “Take off your clothes, *Mr. O’Sullivan*. Slowly. Let me see just how hard you are for me.”

He obeys, just as I asked him to. Slowly, he unzips his fly, revealing first the end of that trail of copper hair, turning into a darker thatch, his sharp hipbones, the tops of muscled thighs as his hard cock threatens to spring free. When it does, nearly touching his navel, I step forward, wrapping one hand around his cock and enjoying the hiss of arousal he lets out as I stroke him slowly with a loose grip, nodding towards the bed.

“You’re going to let me cuff you to the bed?”

Finn nods, and I can see his breathing quicken. He wants it, too, even if he likes to pretend that being dominated isn't for him. Even if he likes to imagine that the first night wasn't every bit as enticing to him as it was for me.

“Then lay down,” I purr. He obeys once again, his mouth pressed into a sharp line, his cock pressed to his abdomen with frustrated desire—desire that I plan to torment into even more of a frenzy...and I do.

“I wondered what this would feel like from the first time I saw it,” I tell him teasingly, rubbing my finger over the piercing. “It’s fascinating, really, how good it makes it all feel—how much fun it is to tease you with it. Maybe we should get you another one. Just so I have something else to play with—with my fingers, my tongue—”

“God.” Finn’s head tips back. “Whatever you ask, as long as you keep doing that, and—”

His breath catches as I slide the piercing back and forth, his cock twitching

and throbbing under my touch. “For someone who claims not to like pain as much as I like giving it out—”

“The pleasure is worth it,” he chokes out, and I smile at him, leaning over to press my lips against his as I give him the brief pleasure of my palm twisting over his dripping cockhead.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to teach you all along, Mr. O’Sullivan,” I purr against his mouth, and he groans, breathless, as I twist my hand around him once more before letting go.

By the time I’m ready to give him more, Finn is a trembling, begging mess, straining against the cuffs—if I could see his eyes behind the blindfold, I feel sure they’d be rolling back in his head. I lean down, letting him feel the warmth of my breath against his cock, and he lets out a gasp.

“Oh god, Felicity! Please—for fuck’s sake, *please*—”

I reward him with my lips around his cock, tight and sucking, and the cry he lets out is almost inhuman with pleasure.

I can’t take it much longer, either. It was different before, but now—now that we’re together, now that I trust him completely, *love* him completely, it’s harder to torment him for so long, to deny myself for so long, too. I draw it out a little longer, just as much as I can stand, until I’m aching as much as I can see that he is—and then I tug the blindfold off, unlocking his cuffs.

“Your turn,” I whisper. “Fuck me the way you want to, Finn.”

I’m on my back in an instant, my legs wrapped around his hips as he thrusts into me hard, his mouth on mine with an urgency that’s punctuated by every driving thrust inside of me as his hands lock around my wrists, pinning me to the bed beneath him. “This is your punishment for tormenting me,” he breathes against my lips. “I can’t imagine you’ll do it again.”

“What? Tease you until I get fucked by your big, thick cock?” I pout up at him, and he kisses me again, more forcefully this time as he slams into me once more.

“You’re going to take my cum,” he growls, teeth grazing my lower lip. “Come on my cock, Felicity, so I can fill you up.”

It doesn't take much. Every stroke touches places inside of me I didn't know could feel this much pleasure, his piercing only adding to the sensation. I'm gasping, arching, enjoying the feeling of being held down and fucked by him in a way I never knew I could. "I—Finn!" I cry out his name, almost unable to form words, as he drives into me once more. I shatter around him, screaming out my pleasure as I feel his heat mingle with mine, his cock throbbing deeply inside of me as we come apart together.

"I love you," I whisper softly in the aftermath, as we lay tangled up together in the huge bed, our honeymoon stretching out in front of us, endless days and nights to spend together however we please. "And I trust you. More than anyone else in the world."

"I feel the same about you." Finn reaches up, brushing my tangled hair gently out of my face, his lips finding mine once more. "I love you, Felicity. And I will always protect you."

"I'm glad we get to do this together." I tilt my chin up, looking into his ocean-blue eyes. "Get away from everything, explore together, spend all of this time. I feel lucky to have the chance."

"So do I." Finn's fingers trace a pattern down my cheek, his thumb brushing lightly over my jaw. "I love you so much. I don't know what the future looks like, exactly—what we'll want later on...a house, children, all of that. But right now, this adventure is enough for me. I will always want you, no matter what our life looks like. And I'll repeat that vow every day for the rest of my life, Felicity."

He kisses me again, hard and firm, sealing it. "I liked our wedding vows," I whisper against his mouth. "But I like hearing it here, just the two of us, even more."

"I'll make sure to remember that." Finn pulls me against his chest, his legs wrapped up with mine, the two of us as close as two people could ever be.

As he wraps his arms around me, his mouth lingering on mine, every doubt and every fear I've ever had drifts away.

With Finn, I'm loved. I'm safe.

And I will always, always be his.

*Keep reading for a sneak peek of my next dark mafia romance, **Vicious Vows**! Or [click here](#) to begin devouring your favorite tropes now!*

✓ *Step Brother*

✓ *Dom/Sub Dynamic*

✓ *Arranged Marriage*

*Can't get enough of Finn and Asha? [Click here](#) for a bonus scene from Theo's POV.*

*And don't forget to [click here](#) to join my Red Hot Diva's reader group on Facebook for exclusive sneak peeks and giveaways.*

